Essay: Choose Independence?

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Choose Independence?

by Patrick M. Wolfe

It wasn't always like this, ya know? There used to be a time when any young man or woman could take off from home, get a job and live a meager but unconstrained life. But now? You just can't do that anymore. Safely. Independence is getting more expensive everyday.

I began thinking about this the other night as a good friend of mine was giving me a lift home. From total silence, she mentioned how her sister ruined her family's dinner that night by stating that she was not going to college after graduating this spring. Instead, she had decided to move away from home, to the Quad Cities or Chicago or farther, and start a life of her own.

I looked at my friend and saw the true concern displayed there, but kept asking myself, "What's the deal? Shouldn't she have the right to make the decision best for her? Why are you so uptight about her moving on?"

As I closed the car door and shook my keys free from my pocket, the reason became clear to me. Standing in the doorway of my own apartment, with the answering machine blinking and last week's socks piled against the fish tank, this "freedom" that I had come to know was hard won and incomplete at best. At least I had college financial aid to rely on. Without it, I don't know what I would be doing.

In his book, A Place In Space, Gary Snyder tells his story of being young in 1952, "I was able to hitch-hike into San Francisco, stay at a friend's, and get a job within three days. With an entry level job, I found an apartment... I could afford, and I lived in the city for a year. Imagine trying to live in San Francisco or New York—any major city—on an entry-level wage now! You can't do it."

Myself... I didn't see anything but college when I graduated from high school. I was fourth in my class with straight A's and president of the senior class. College was the obvious choice, but, as it turned out, not the right one. It took just three semesters for me to flunk out. I wasn't ready to be on my own. So I made a choice. I packed up and went back home to live the Bohemian life from the bedroom I grew up in.

Like my friend's sister, I felt lost. For two-and-a-half years I jobbed around, pouring cement for construction crews, doing landscaping for apartment complexes, mixing sound for touring rock bands... anything I could find that would help pay off the bills I racked up from being young and dumb, with a wallet full of credit cards. The World was teaching me a lesson: Life is tough and expensive. I needed the money, and these were the only choices I had, right?

A few weeks ago, the Des Moines news rag, CityView, printed an article about the glamorous life of a local prostitute. Abandoned in a strange town, she was offered cash for sex and took it. But she was a "lucky one." She had gotten to the point of having safe, regular johns who just called so she wouldn't have to work the street. She'd paid her dues, the author said, and it really didn't seem all that bad. Just like Pretty Woman, ya know?

How many of you believe that crap?

Standing on the corner waiting for some piece-of-shit, pervert, freak to offer you ten dollars to blow him behind Kum & Go? Yeah, that does sound like a good way to make ends meet. Maybe that's what I should've done? Anybody seen My Own Private Idaho?

I haven't changed the subject here. Our sisters and brothers are making bad choices everyday, and the rest of us are just letting it happen. But not me anymore. I've learned some lessons, too, so I'm not naive. I know there are some people you just can't help. But that doesn't mean you quit trying.

So when I see my friend again, I'm going to tell her I know why she's scared and to hang in there and talk to her sister, so CityView won't have another feature in 2010. If you have younger sisters or brothers, I encourage you to talk to them and find out where they think they're headed. Maybe you can help them in ways you never thought of. And if the CityView prostitute is your sister, tell her I'm sorry. Tell her I'm sorry you weren't there when she made such a stupid decision.