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EN 1010-16

22 August 2014

I Fell in Love with Wilmington, North Carolina

 Two summers ago, in July of 2012, I went on a beach trip with four friends to a small town called Wilmington, North Carolina. My best friend, Loganne, travelled to this location at least once a year, to stalk to film sets of a show called *One Tree Hill*. Although I myself had little interest in the show, it is also the location in which *Dawson’s Creek* was filmed, and it is located between the Cape Fear River and Carolina, Wrightsville, and Kure beaches. In addition to my best friend, Loganne, the other vacationers included her boyfriend, Seth; Seth’s best friend, whom I’d met only once briefly, Russ; and my and Loganne’s good friend, Nick. This single week at the beach changed my life entirely. During this vacation, I learned that we often find hope in the strangest places, I fell in love with a city, and I was inspired to write a story that morphed into my now three-hundred-page novel.

 My week in Wilmington taught me that life often offers us hope in ways we least expect it. In the month prior to this trip, Loganne’s father had passed away, and I came home to face a past I had been avoiding for two years. As we all arrived at the beach, we were each dealing with our own struggles: Russ, Nick, and I had all just ended relationships; Loganne had lost her father; and Seth, unbeknownst to Loganne, was carrying an engagement ring around waiting for the opportune moment. We all came from very different backgrounds and grew up in different ways; we all possessed extremely varying views on religion. Between the five of us, however, there was no judgment, no differentiation, and we formed and solidified friendships. Russ and I traded stories, advice, and comfort. Nick, the homosexual Democratic Methodist youth minister became best friends with Seth, the conservative Republican Pentecostal pastor. Loganne and I were able to spend more time together than we had in years. I realized I not only liked Seth, but considered him just as much a friend as I did Loganne. Through the unlikely friendships I saw forming between the five of us, I gained a hope I was lacking when I arrived. These friendships were a reminder that in the darkest of times, the strangest things can happen that make us believe again.

 Not only did I find new friendships during that week, but I also fell in love with the city of Wilmington, North Carolina. Wilmington is home to Screen Gems Studios, a studio that has filmed multiple films and television dramas. Downtown Wilmington, visible in the background of numerous Screen Gems productions, sits on the Cape Fear River and offers shops, restaurants, boutiques, and an array of interesting people. There are horse-drawn carriages, tour groups drawn by horse-carriage, ghost walks, and filming location tours that are constantly filling the streets. On certain days, one might see a street blocked for filming or a crew set up inside a bar or café with extras lining the sidewalks. Downtown is place where fiction meets reality, where I found myself able to stand in the middle of scenes filmed years ago and create my own scenes at the same time. We drove past houses belonging to *Dawson’s Creek* and *One Tree Hill* characters, bought coffee in shops featured on the shows, and Nick and I drank at bars in which our favorite characters had used fake IDs to obtain beer. I discovered the college town belonging to UNC Wilmington, home to one of the top MFA programs in the country. Just past the college, three beaches line the coast. Wilmington offers night life on the downtown river, college atmosphere in the center of the town, and beaches along the coast, providing an ideal setting not only for television filming, but also for a vacation. As we walked the cobblestones of downtown and swam in the Atlantic waters, I realized I had found the place where I ultimately wanted to settle down and spend the rest of my life.

 As I considered how odd our group of friends was, how magical the town of Wilmington is, I began to piece together characters and locations of my own story, which would expand into my graduate thesis project and eventually, a novel. I wrote about a group of five friends who discovered truths about themselves and each other on a beach trip to North Carolina and how going home from that trip altered their lives. I called it “Wilmington, Off-Script,” and I modeled it into six scenes, like a television episode, and one section as a screenplay script. As I developed these characters and their relationships, complicating the plot of the story more than it had been in reality, I realized I already had a story, about the death of Loganne’s father, that contained similar characters—likely because they were based on the same people. It occurred to me I could take these two stories and use the same characters and connect them to one another. I then took two other stories set in a similar small town location and connected those characters to these five. My collection of stories began to grow, all centered around the same group of characters, with these five based on my friends and this particular trip being at the heart of the book. By inspiring this particular story, this beach trip helped to shape my thesis project and the characters contained within it.

 When I left small town Virginia with my friends, driving to a small coastal Carolina town for the weekend, I had no idea the impact seven days could have on my life. I became closer to Loganne and Nick, and I formed friendships with Seth and Russ as well. Wilmington became a place in which I left my heart, a place I eventually moved to the following summer in order to take a class at UNCW, and a place that became a central setting in my novel. The trip inspired characters and a plot that shaped the stories in my collection, while also reminding me that like Wilmington’s streets, I can mix fiction with reality. This week changed my life in unexpected ways, and the experience taught me that we can never expect the next miracle, the next ray of hope, the next week that will change our lives.

