

October 2009

The Last Page: Magnetic North

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Melanie (2009) "The Last Page: Magnetic North," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 98: Iss. 3, Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol98/iss3/11>

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MAGNETIC NORTH

It was the last thing I remembered as the surgeon was putting me under. The IV was in for my wisdom tooth operation, and already I could feel my awareness dimming, reason and thought draining from my head as if he had pulled the plug that held in my brain. I heard him ask me where I was going to college. “Colby,” I told him. The room began to dim, my body buzzing with nerves and nausea, and through the haze I heard him say, “Colby? Where’s that?”

They have nothing but good intentions. They mean well, and I know that. But that makes the sentiment no less exhausting, whether scrawled on well-meaning congratulation cards or delivered with a smile in the produce aisle on a chance meeting.

“That place must be really small.”

“You’re just trying to get away from your parents, aren’t you?”

“Why are you going so far away?”

“Isn’t that in Russia?”

It’s not that my family and friends are ignorant. It’s just that they’re all a little too... West. My home in Denver, Colo., is somewhere around 2,000 miles from Waterville, Maine, and we speak different collegiate languages. Maine speaks UMaine, Bowdoin, and Colby. Colorado speaks Colorado State, CU, and Colorado College. So if I were to introduce myself as “Melanie Brown, attending Colorado State in the fall,” then there would be all manner of recognition and understanding. But I am “Melanie Brown, attending Colby College in the fall,” and the blank stares come rolling in.

Sometimes I wish I had simply stayed in Colorado. That I had applied to the well-attended, hulking state schools and never considered the far-off possibility of Colby College. By now I would have made it through the overnight orientation stay and toured the campus until I could map my path to all my classes. Come August I would be planning to make the hour drive to a familiar campus full of comfortable high school friends and a skyline that I’ve known for most of my life. No nervous fear of the unknown, no scrambling to outfit my wardrobe for a new climate, no emotional, plane-flight journey to a school where I am the only person I know.

Out of respect and a bit of respectful fear, I would never think to disrespect Mainers. But I think that the out-of-state kids, a significant majority of the Colby population, have something special about them. A resilience, a willingness to stride forward with the confidence of warriors and the visual perception of bats. We are one great horde pulled from across the world by many reasons to a common place, some of us without having even set foot on the campus. And at times, it’s hard to fall in love with a place like that. It feels like an eHarmony romance, as if I’ve committed myself for the next four years to an elusive profile, a collection of words and numbers. When we meet, will he like me? Will I like him?



Will I still feel the connection?

It’s a powerful thing, that devotion that drives us thousands of miles from our homes and friends and families to a new place. I’m scared, sometimes, to think that I’m about to commit myself and four years of my precious life to a campus that I’ve only seen on a cursory, hour-long tour. But, for whatever reason, I feel that pull, that sense that the fates have conspired and are sending me to the place I’ve been searching for. And it’s difficult to explain that connection to my aunt’s husband’s brother, who means well but is still convinced that Colby is an all-male school in Texas.

It’s all part of the experience. The trusting, the doubting, the second-guessing, the goodbyes and pains and tears. It’s knowing that I am one of 480 bold and blind, and that come September 1, we’ll all be together—students who know just what I mean when I introduce myself as “Melanie Brown from Denver, Colorado, and I’ve always just known that Colby is the place for me.”

No geography lesson required.

Melanie Brown '13 comes to Colby from Centennial, Colo., where she attended Arapaho High School. This essay was selected as the winner of an essay contest open to members of the bicentennial Class of 2013.