



A Once Recognizable Home

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Arrival

My dad pulled his truck surgically up the incline of the driveway, which was in desperate need of filling, then it made a turn behind a single file wall of poplar trees that grew in an uncanny uniformity on either side of it, and we were out of sight of the road. He drove along towards the house, which was actually a double-wide trailer with an attached garage, and reversed into the barn that sat catty-corner. We got out with a moan and stretched; I only moaned or stretched when I stood up because I had seen my dad do it for years. We walked up to the house and when we rounded towards the porch my grandmother opened the door and stood at the top of the steps, as she had done since before I could form memories. Her face was lined around her eyes from tanning beds and she wore a lime green shirt that she bought from a salon. Her hair, which she kept short, was a sun-faded auburn and pulled back in a ponytail that stopped at her bangs, as she had worn it for years, only now with slightly more gray streaks. She smiled down to me from her stoop with her eyes over her glasses and her mouth twisted up at one corner like we were in on some scheme together.

“Well, come on then, give your mamaw a hug.” A comfortable warmth washed over me and I walked up the stoop and hugged her, she swayed us side to side. “Ohhh, sugar-puddin, mamaw missed you.” she said, now looking up at me.

“I missed you too, mamaw.” She gave me one final squeeze and went to hug my dad.

“Well, hello son.” She said with her hands on her hips, in a sort of faux disappointment.

“Hi mom.” They embraced each other.

“Ohhh, I missed you too, honey.”

“I missed you. I brought my own beer this time!” He said, tilting the case of beer towards her as a way to get her to let us inside.

“Oh, well, you know Billy drinks Budweiser? I’ll make him drink them with you.”

“We’ll bring mine too, I’m sure we’ll run out.” He laughed, “Or I will.”

“Well, c’mon inside,” she wrapped her arm around mine, “Deborah’s still in bed, I think Vincent’s in the shower. You boys get something to eat, I wrapped up sandwiches, but you can go look inside the fridge, I know you’re always hungry, I’m gonna go get Billy.”

“Alright Mamaw.” She disappeared down the dark hallway that led to the backdoor and her bedroom and we sat our bags down in the living room and walked around to the kitchen. “Socks!” I called with admiration. My grandmother’s cat reclined between sleep, on its side with its head propped against the refrigerator, fat and old, he looked up at me and squinted with confidence. I saw the memories he had of me turn around in his mind; Socks was the last living pet of my grandmother’s from my childhood. His mother lived outside and had died or ran away a few years prior in a bad snow storm, now there were only a few barn cats, and none of them memorable. The childhood dogs of my grandparents had been long dead at this point, too, and having only visited a handful of times since their death, I still wasn’t quite acquainted with their not being there. I knelt down and hung my hand limp in front of Sock’s snout and he smelled my fingers cautiously before I ruffled his brow. He pushed his head further into my palm. “You’re a fat boy.” I lamented, and I could see him smiling beneath my hand.

I stood up and opened the fridge out of pure curiosity. I was dutifully and absently scanning the contents of the refrigerator when my aunt’s husband (who were both only a few years older than me) quietly slipped behind the open door and wrenched my nipple.

“Ahh, fucker.” I said emptily, jerking back and closing the fridge.

He laughed, “Hey kiddo.” He hugged me and when he did so I couldn’t help but notice that he was losing the hair on his head and getting bigger in the middle.

“Hey Vincent.” I slapped him on the back, standing a few inches above him. “What’s up?”

“Just got out of the shower. Gonna go see if Deborah’s awake yet.”

“Cool, are you guys coming with us?”

“Yeah if she wakes up in time.” With that he disappeared behind the refrigerator into my aunt’s room, which used to essentially be my room for weeks on end, anytime I’d visited my grandparents until I was too old or too annoying to stay in a room with her. My dad was busy sorting his beers between his cooler and the fridge when Billy walked into the kitchen.

“Well, waddya say, guys?”

“Hey, Billy.”

“What’s up, man?” He shook my hand with his right hand and pulled me in for a hug, his left arm lying limp between us, from what I had naturally figured was a war or work injury, but later found out had been softball related. “It’s good to see you.”

“Oh, not much, tryin’ to wake up. Good to see you too.”

“I hear that. Hey, Jason, what’s goin’ on man?” He hugged my dad.

“Oh, not much, tryin’ to fit as many beers as possible in this cooler.” He scooped up a bunch of ice and dropped it back on top of the beer.

“Well alright man, that’s what I like to hear. I got my cooler filled.” Instead of responding my dad smiled and pretended to be busy with his beer arranging, ducking and looking inside the cooler performatively as he shut the lid. From around Billy my grandma shuffled into the kitchen, quicker and more determined than any other woman her age, and poked me in the side, looking up at me through a huge grin.

“Mamaw has a surprise for you.”

“What?” I asked, already knowing the answer but playing along for her benefit.

She wrinkled her nose and brow at me and said, “Well, you just follow me outside, we’ll let your dad finish up what he’s doing.”

“I’ll be out there in *one* second, I need to smoke a cigarette anyway.”

“C’mon, honey bun, mamaw’s gonna show you her office.”

Enrollment

I followed her outside and down the porch steps, feeling the prick of dry grass beneath my socks, vaguely aware of insects chirping all around me. My grandmother’s trailer sat atop a hill lined with trees so that, from the road, one could hardly see twenty feet behind them to her home. Her property stretched from the barn at the right of the driveway, a hundred yards left, and back many acres, gaining width the further it got from the road. She led me in the direction opposite the barn, to a six-by-six-foot makeshift hut, covered in a thin nylon screen to keep bugs out, that she and Billy had built. She ripped the magnetic door open and held the flap for me. The interior of their hut was lined with string lights, windchimes, little porcelain animals, signs, paintings, just enough to make it look well lived in but not quite cluttered. In the middle sat a short, water soaked wooden table, encircled on either side by two swinging benches suspended from the support banisters overhead. I hurried across the astroturf flooring and took the seat furthest from the door flap so Billy and my grandma could duck in.

“Oh my God, Mamaw.”

My grandma sat down slowly with a sigh, and catching her breath, said, “Well, it’s pretty cool ain’t it? This is my smoking shack.” I looked around again for her benefit, nodding my head in approval at every trinket. “I put a tarp above it so that when it rains, we just sit out here and listen. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah, mamaw. You built this?”

“Sure did.”

“You hook up the electricity too?”

“Billy did that.”

“Well, all I did was run an extension cord from the house.”

“Oh.” I said, noticing the cord under my feet.

My grandma started rummaging through a drawer inside the center table and said, "So, son, I heard your dad told you something about your old Mamaw."

"What'd he tell me?" I played dumb.

"He told you that your Mamaw is a pothead." She stopped digging just long enough to peer up at me from the drawer and give me an absurd look, then reemerged with a box that at one point held a model of a log cabin. "And you're eighteen now, and your papaw ain't here anymore to tell me otherwise, so, I figured I'd ask if you wanted to smoke with your old mamaw." She had a very earnest, sincere look on her face.

"I know, mamaw." I smiled my love at her. "My dad told me you were gonna try to smoke with me. Even after I started smoking, I had no clue you smoked. You hid it pretty well. I never smelled anything."

"Well, your Papaw didn't like it." Nodding her head, "Yep, I would have to lock myself in our bedroom if I ever wanted to smoke. That's why we were so strict about you guys being in our room. He hated that I smoked, but hell, I smoked weed when he married me, what did he think was gonna happen? He would tell me that I was a bad person for doing it, I told him 'So you can drink beer everyday, but because I smoke weed, that makes me a bad person?'"

"I thought Papaw used to smoke weed too?"

"Ehhhh, kinda-sorta, here-and-there." She squinted her eyes upward and twisted her open palm, "But he never really liked it, said it made him sick."

"My dad says that."

"It's because they're always drinking. Skinny men like you shouldn't mix beer and weed. He would say things like, 'Oh, you're gonna get Deborah taken away', he would blame me for Jason, back when your father was getting in trouble all the time. I said, 'Hell, I didn't know the boy for the first, what, fourteen years of his life', but I said, 'Fine, if you're gonna make Jason my responsibility, then fine, I'll fix him, and I'll be damned if I didn't.'" Wagging a finger, "And then Deborah came along, and GE moved your Papaw to Evansville and he was staying there, and Deborah only being a little over a year old, your dad had to pick up a lot of the slack around here, and he was a big help to me; he

really grew up in a short amount of time.” I nodded my head consciously, wondering if that was actually something to be proud of

“Well, do ya wanna smoke?” She held her chin up at me for emphasis, her hand hidden inside the box.

“Well, yeah, of course, always.”

“Well alright then, dude.” She had been calling people dude ironically for years. My grandma tore her hand out of her paraphernalia box and produced a joint; not a pretty joint, but it was fat, and especially so in the middle. When she flicked her lighter on my dad opened the flap to the shack and stuck his head in before his body. “Well, hello, son. We were just about to smoke this guy here, you sure it’s alright with you?”

“I don’t care,” he said convincingly, “I’ve been trying to get this little bastard to quit smoking weed for years. At some point I just gave up.” I laughed lightly and looked at my feet. My dad came around my grandma to sit on the bench next to me, and as he sat down my grandmother offered me the first actual hit of the joint, her cheeks big from exaggeratedly holding in smoke, she exhaled and coughed from deep within her stomach. I hit it a couple times and coughed out of habit.

My grandma’s face lit up, she nodded her head slowly, “Uh-huh, uh-huh, see, be careful, your mamaw don't smoke no ditch weed.” I laughed and exhaled harshly for her benefit.

“Yeah it’s pretty good, Mamaw.” I passed the joint to Billy who only took one hit before passing it back to my grandmother.

“Well, yeah it’s good! It better be, I had to drive to Ohio to get it.”

“Ohio? Why?”

“Well, because your Aunt Tonya hooks me up. I haven’t been able to find anything good down here for months. We have a few plants out back, but they’re a ways from blooming, ifin they ever do.”

“Tonya sells weed?”

“How else do you think she’s been able to live without a job for all these years?”

I laughed, "I never really guessed."

"So, son, have you talked to your mom lately?"

"Yeah, actually, I just talked to her the other day." My dad said, his face twisted up in recollection. "She's doing alright, she hasn't had a cigarette in about six months, I think."

"Is that right? Well, that's good." Mamaw said, her eyes glossed over. "It's been about two years for me now."

"Yeah, I told you about her heart attack didn't I?"

My grandma's jaw dropped, "No." She shook her head and raised her eyebrows for further explanation.

"Yeeeah, that's why she quit smoking, it's probably been about eight months now, back in October. She had to have a *quadruple* heart bypass."

"My god." Mamaw replied, jaw still agape.

"Yeah. We went to visit her the day of the surgery. She told me, like when she woke up, she told me she thought she'd died. After the surgery, before she was able to, you know, eat regularly, she got down to about 80 pounds." My grandmother's eyes got huge. "And you know, my mom's never really been a big lady, but yeah, she weighed about 80 pounds at one point."

"My god," she repeated, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yeah. I'd say she's back up over a hundred pounds again, she's actually been going back to work some shifts at the Silver Bar. I think she's just getting sick of sitting around listening to Herb bitch all day."

My grandma looked over her glasses and shot a twisted smile at my dad, "Jason," she warned.

"It's true!" He said beneath a giant grin, "Hell, if I had to live with Herb again I'd pick up shifts at the Silver Bar for free!" I could tell by his face that, when he said this, memories of Herb from his childhood flashed through his mind, he looked down and to the left. "Actually I like Herb, he hasn't been as much of an asshole since he stopped drinking."

"I heard about his son. I forget, which one was it?"

"Fountain." He nodded and looked down respectfully.

“Mm-mm-mm.” My grandma shook her head, we all avoided eye contact for an appropriate amount of time. Within the silence I pulled a cigarette out. “Now, baby, Mamaw doesn’t care if you smoke weed, hell, I actually prefer that you smoke weed, but I can’t support that.”

“I know, I know.” Keeping my reply curt, as one always does when someone tells you to stop doing something you’re addicted to, “They’re like, *impossible* to quit, though.”

“Well, I know baby, trust Mamaw, she knows. You really oughta think about stopping, though. Them’s what gave your Papaw Artie emphysema.” She pointed at the cigarette. “Hell, I haven’t had one in about two years, I just hit one of these little vape things when I get a craving, it’s been holding me over pretty good.”

“Ahh, I just hate the vapes. Do you want me to put it up?”

“No, no, you go ahead, I ain’t gonna stop you, I just wanted to let you know that *I* don’t support it.”

“Well, I guess I’ll smoke one too.” My dad said, taking my cue.

And we sat there for a bit in comfortable silence, the occasional sound of puff and exhale, or of the one-off car that actually drove down my grandmother’s street. Out of the corner of my waking perception I heard birds whistling above us, and it reminded me of countless times in my childhood when, I would be sitting in the living room of my grandparent’s house, and my Papaw would call my attention to a blue jay or robin that landed on the back porch banister. I specifically remember him pointing out a robin to me, when I was about nine or ten, and had just read something or learned something new about robins and had a passing fascination for them (as children so often have when they first become aware of anything), but had never seen one in life before. I remember thinking that it was beautiful, that it was the brightest animal I’ve ever seen, and how much I loved my Grandpa for showing me beautiful things and for caring about me, maybe more than even my parents did, which was how I measured relationships as a child; weighted against my parents.

And now that I thought about my grandpa, I thought how strange it really is to be here, in what is essentially his house, without him. The older I got, the more I considered my grandparents to be the only constant in an ever-changing world. No matter how many friends I lost and made in a year or how many new ideas I had, when I went to my grandparent's house in Kentucky, among the humidity and the cottonwood, it was like nothing had changed; the same animals, the same trees, the same family wearing their hair the same as they always had. Time here started the second I pulled up that gravel driveway, and it stopped when I drove back down it. My grandparent's home presented an anachronistic quality to me-in that, everything inside the house was so indiscernibly familiar and evocative of a decade into my past, that, when I would return, I would become overwhelmed by a million memories, and the memories would become all that existed. But, things had changed at my Grandparent's home, that which once dwelled outside of time and ignored all laws of nature; all of the animals were dead, trees cut down, my grandfather wasn't here, in his home - he was in Florida, riding a motorcycle, living in a retirement community with a woman he got engaged to four months after divorcing my grandma. What used to be a relaxing distraction from the constant shifting unsurety of everyday life, became a reminder of just that everywhere you turned; time had caught up to us even here.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the sound of my Aunt's approaching footsteps. Deborah pulled apart the mesh door that was held closed by magnets and said, "So, are we going?"

"Hi, Deborah!" My dad said, almost at a sarcastic volume.

"Hi." She looked at him quickly and turned back to my grandma, "So are we going?"

"Well, we were waiting on *someone* to wake up." My grandma said, accusatory.

"Well, I'm up now, let's get a move on."

Remembrance

Vincent, Deborah, and I decided to let the old folks take care of gathering equipment and preparing the boat, and we started off towards the lake. The lake was a couple miles into my grandmother's property, which I had only gone to a handful of times as a kid, so I let Deborah and Vincent walk ahead of me. The trail towards the lake started in their backyard, hidden around and between a handful of dilapidated barns and coops, one of which still had a few hens ambling mindlessly inside.

"What happened to Goose?" I asked Deborah.

"He died like a year ago." Deborah replied from above her shoulder. Goose was the name of a goose that Deborah had had for over a decade. Goose was cursed from birth with a broken wing and a limp leg, yet it outlasted most of the dogs and cats, and other birds, that lived on the property.

"Wow, just a year ago?" I asked with a strange sense of pride for the creature, "How many chickens do you guys have now?"

"Five?" She said, not knowing the answer. At one point they had two coups, both full of hens and roosters and the lame goose, so many that they couldn't possibly hope to eat all the eggs, and my grandpa started incubating them for a while. The out of use coup, which sat caddy corner from the other, had been destroyed by a tree in a winter storm, and most of the chickens either died or escaped. I never asked, but I'm sure it left a bad taste in their mouth.

We hit the trail and passed the barn where the stray cats on the property lived and I told them to stop because I wanted to see them. When I leaned inside the open door, though, I saw no signs of life inside the barn, which was once home to twenty-odd strays, all fighting, running, and cleaning each other. I stood still as a tree so the sound of crunching weeds didn't drown out the pat of curious paws. Finally, a thin orange cat appeared from behind a rusty tractor (so old that

you didn't immediately know what sort of machine it was), but when I called to him, he jumped, turned to me, crouched down and held my gaze for a couple seconds, then ran back under a pile of old storm debris. I turned around in my disappointment and ran to catch up with Deborah and Vincent, who had gone on without me. They were teasing each other.

"You guys have two lakes, right?"

"We used to, now we only have the first lake up here. The other one dad sold."

"The people that bought it wouldn't care if we used it, though." Vincent reminded her.

"I'm not going on their property. You guys can, I'm sure they got guns, though."

"Well, if it's between me and Kobe I'll be fine, he doesn't look very fast." He flashed me a toothy grin. We kept on down the trail, which had become less of a trail and more of a skinny stretch of weeds from lack of foot traffic. Overgrown trees tunneled us in on both sides and often I'd have to duck or move a branch out of the way, sometimes just smacking them instead, out of boredom. Passing the trees to our left I noticed a clearing in the forest of tall ragweed, dark green wood surrounding it on all sides.

"Is that where we used to ride the side-by-side?" I asked, thinking of one specific instance in which Deborah and I were driving the side-by-side while my grandmother drove her four-wheeler around us.

"I guess so." Deborah snorted, "I mean, we rode it everywhere." She probably didn't have the same memory in her mind that I had.

"You guys still have the side-by-side?"

"I told mom she could sell it after dad left. She sold a lot of our shit," she emphasized with the wave of her hand towards their house indicating where their shit was, "I hadn't rode the thing in years, though." She kept her eyes on the trail. The tall weeds had made way for more dirt, which turned to mud and the spare clump of crabgrass. I felt a breeze lift the side of my shirt and the air felt cooler and smelled like water. Though I couldn't see it past the thick line of trees and

foliage to my right, I knew that we were at the lake when I noticed a familiar opening in the thicket ahead. We came upon a ten foot wide concave in the score of trees that led diagonally to the mouth of the lake with a pier sticking out of it like a tusk. No one remarked on or made a gesture alluding to the fact that we'd arrived, instead we stood away from each other and took in the smell and sounds of the green pond spread out and around in front of us, enframed by the low hanging branches of the Cottonwoods and the Maples and Oaks on either side. I walked around the mouth of the lake, and took a step onto the pier, which was more grey-green rot than wood at this point; the panels past the first few were all broken and splintered or not even there. I walked along the edge of the water basin, kicking rocks and looking for nothing in particular. I found a dry spot on the ground near the trail and sat down, laying a cigarette in my mouth.

“How long will it take them to get the boat ready?”

“They shouldn't be far behind us, we were the ones that walked.” Vincent remarked.

I brushed my hand back and forth over a patch of weeds and out of the heavy buzzing of a million insect wings chirping came the low hum of an all terrain vehicle growing in the distance. I leaned out from behind the treeline to see my grandmother riding bumpily down the trail on the same four wheeler from a decade into the past with a ten foot dinghy in tow. From my position on the ground she sat so high and confidently on the same piece of machinery that I had seen her atop of countless times for so many years that for just a moment I regressed morally to being a child and felt awe-inspired by my grandmother, who was the ultimate authority in my life for years; the parent of my parent. I smiled at her as she pulled the four wheeler and the boat past the opposite end of the opening to the lake and reversed them so that they could drop the boat. My dad and Billy appeared on foot from around the boat and got on either side of it. Vincent and I took their cue and did the same and as my grandmother continued reversing slowly the boat slipped into the water and the lake carried it the rest of the way. Billy stepped down into the boat from the pier we dropped it next to, the dinghy swaying from exhaustion, and held onto the pier.

“Alright, everybody grab something,” my grandma said, stepping over and off the four-wheeler with effort, commencing. They had packed various coolers and bags with other bags of food inside those bags, four fishing poles, and the log cabin box.

“Alright now, now ya’ll don’t go too far on this pier, half the wood on this side is rotted and broken.” Billy said, nearly sideways holding onto the pier from inside the boat. We all piled onto the boat and rushed to help my grandma into her spot at the stern. Billy pushed us off the pier and squeezed into the back to jump the motor.

Fishing

The lake, as the bird sees it, would look more like a collection of fifty smaller ponds of various size, interconnected by short and narrow waterways formed between rising water banks thick with summer foliage; the sassafras trees that lined the shore stood tall and skinny and hung slouched, reaching towards the water, leaning desperately towards the thing that supported it, casting its shadow over the foliage below it, leaving the smaller plants yellow and brown. It was sunny and warm but we didn't feel either from the shade and the cool lake air twisting up at us. The boat was only about three feet wide, so that we had to slide past one another if we wanted anything from the other end, remaining conscious of our weight distribution. Not all of us could sit at the same time because there wasn't enough room for our knees, so I reclined against the rail standing up. Billy sat contemplatively stone-faced on the stern of the boat; he didn't crane his neck around us or over us, instead he looked through us, steering based on instinct and the small glimpses of landscape he caught between our movements.

"Now, we only found four poles, so some of us are gonna have to share."

"That's fine," my dad said, "I can just drink beer."

"Uph, Jason."

"I'm serious."

"Who's gonna show Kobe how to cast?"

"Who's gonna show me how to cast?" my dad said.

"Now, I know Artie took you fishin' plenty of times."

"I think he did once, I was about four."

My grandma shot burning intensity at my dad in the form of disappointment not just at my grandfather but also more closely at my dad for perpetuating the line of Stone men not teaching their children everything. She shook her head, "Well, look, I'm gonna teach both of you how to fish, since your Papaw couldn't be bothered with it." She was looking at me now, making an

absurd face for emphasis. “Alright, son, now look, it’s real easy, all you have to do is pull back, throw, and release, but when you pull back, you have to hold the line *here*, and while you’re throwing it, right before you get the pole past your head, you let go, and the line will release. Aim it somewhere in the middle, try not to hit a branch or anything.” She demonstrated for us as she explained. “Here, baby, you can use mamaws,” she handed me her pole, “just watch out when you pull it back that you don’t stick any of us with the hook!” She yelled in a way that, to an outside observer, made her sound angry more than emphatic.

“Thanks mamaw.” I studied the pole, twisting it in my hand to get a feel for the weight. “You gonna fish too, dad?”

“No thanks. I’ll watch you, though. And drink beer.”

“Suit yourself.” I took rigid form and held my arms extended with the pole in front of me, slowly moving my left hand up on the handle and pinching the line at the bottom with my index finger

“Alright honey, now just pull it back, but slowly.” I heard my grandma say somewhere off to the side. I arced the pole up and backwards, glancing over my shoulder until I could see the bait dangling behind me, then turned forward and took aim. I whipped the pole down in a cleaving motion, and released the line too late; the fly struck the side of the boat and bounced lamely into the water in front of us. Everyone started laughing, except Billy, who was busy relining his own fishing pole, and my dad, who was digging through his cooler, and would inevitably have his fair share of embarrassment before the day was through.

“Nice one,” Deborah observed, looking away from her phone.

“Okay, baby, so, not like that! Look, hold right here, and you have to pull it back,” she lifted her pole up slowly, “and, on the release, when the pole is right here, right behind your ear, you see, right behind your ear, then you let go of it, you see, because if you keep holding on to it,” she whipped the pole forward, the hook hit against the side of the boat, “it ain’t gonna go nowhere!”

“Okay mamaw,” I laughed to myself. I made sure no one was standing in my backswing, looked out across the lake into the treeline, took grip, swung,

released the line at my ear, and watched as it dropped daintily onto the middle of the pond.

“There you go, honey! Now, you just watch that little bobber, and when you see it move, you start reeling in like hell.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, there’s a bit more to it, but if you get a bite we’ll take it from there.”

“Okay.” I lowered my head to prepare for an intense staring match with the bobber, waiting for something particular, of which I did not know, to happen.

After looking at the unmoving bobber for a couple minutes longer than what was expected, my grandma told me that I might just have to recast it somewhere else. I reeled my line back in and looked at Billy, who was fishing, not in the center, but near the mouth, in clumps of reeds.

“Should I, like, try to get it more to the edge?”

My grandma paused, surveying the lake, “Well, if you make sure not to get it tangled up in a bush, yes. Fishing with a floater, you’re trying to catch fish closer to the top of the water, so around the edge is probably your best bet.”

“Okay, I see.”

“But you don’t have to worry if you don’t catch nothin’, babe, it’s your first time.”

“Oh, I’m gonna catch something.” I cast across the lake to the far side of its edge, just falling short of a bouquet of pale yellow reed.

“There you go, honey, that’s a good one, now just watch.”

I watched the bobber, maybe less intently than the first time, and after a minute or two, when it was apparent no fish were going to fall for it, I reeled in, and recast. And so it went. Vincent picked up the last pole and disinterestedly cast a couple times then put it back down. My dad sat in the same spot, opposite Billy at the bow, and opened beer after beer. I took his lead and reached into the cooler.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He asked me.

“Opening one of your beers.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m thirsty.”

“But you’re not twenty-one?” He added placidly.

“Dad, you just watched me smoke weed with my grandmother, it’s not like it’s the first beer I’ve ever had.” He shrugged his shoulders and gave in with little fight, knowing that he was only arguing to make a show for his step-mom.

“Let the boy drink.” Billy said.

I took a drink and leaned against the bow next to my dad, watching my family.

Deborah looked up from her phone for a second, at no one in particular, “Kathleen’s gonna come over.”

“Kathleen?!” My dad sat up, “I love her.” He said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, god.” Deborah said, uninterested in even offering a genuine reply.

“What? I do. I’ve always loved her.”

“Ever since she was fifteen and you were thirty.” I said, not looking at him.

He laughed, “Exactly.”

“Jesus, Jason. You leave that poor girl alone, now.” My grandma scolded with genuine annoyance in her tone for once.

He opened another beer.

We sat untalking for a moment. Billy cast, reeled in, and recast, not once taking a break from the game yet. My grandma sat her pole down and reached into a bag, bringing out her log cabin box. “Honey, do you know how to roll?”

“Yeah, mamaw.”

“Well, okay then, get to it, dude!” I opened up the box, and with great effort found all the necessary equipment for breaking down and turning weed into a joint.

I rolled a skinny joint out of habit, and my grandma ridiculed me, “What is that, dude? Is that supposed to get us high?” Even my aunt, who despises (and is supposedly allergic to) weed, laughed.

“I don’t know,” I was almost ashamed, “I’ll roll another.”

“Well, I’d say so!”

So I rolled another, and a third one, and her, Billy, and I smoked two of them. After the second joint I took a second to catch my bearings. I noticed for the first time we had reached a part of the lake larger and more open than previous basins; the banks blew in the wind far off in the distance that was trapped between the thick brush, so far that I was convinced I could see the lake meniscusing. The wind whipped up across my back and lifted my shirt and went through my hair, and it made me realize my brow was sweating. Vincent and Deborah were talking to my dad about something, my grandma was sitting on a camp chair in the middle of the boat, shoulders slouched, obviously high and lost in thought, also staring at the drink; Billy was doing much the same, except with a fishing pole in his hands. I leaned up from the bow and picked up a pole again with renewed confidence.

I threw out a handful of well cast hooks, landed in reeds, and didn't get the line tangled. I never so much as saw a ripple of the reflection of a fish, and, noticing how many bugs skimmed across the surface of the water, wondered if there even were any left. Billy, probably having a similar thought, put his pole down and twisted his right arm back to work the propeller again. He took us past two smaller ponds into an even bigger basin than the last we stopped at with a small island, green centered and wrapped in yellow grass, and an even smaller (comparatively) tree in the middle of it.

"Alright, son," Billy turned to me, "Y'see that island? Well that's what you're gonna wanna aim for."

"Okay." I held out my pole out of respect, not quite worried about fishing anymore but not wanting to disappoint Billy with my lack of interest, and aimed and released. Billy did the same. We circled the outside of the isle, taking turns releasing and reeling, robotically, out of stoned habit, lost in the motion of what we were already doing so much so that we hadn't even considered stopping. I became lost in the sport and the ripple of the bobber and the discolored spots across the surface that made it look two dimensional but was really a reflection of whatever was sitting just beneath it. The tree on the island looked sickly; bare and skinny from lack of sun or room for rootage, blowing with the wind and the

weeds surrounding it and my clothing all in unison. I became acutely aware of how the lakes movement pulled weakly on the bobber because it reverberated all the way up to the stick and my grip on it and I adjusted my shoulders to reassure myself that I was the one controlling things. Billy, out of sight of the vignette ahead of me, cast his fly next to mine in slow motion, and I thought; ‘What a shame it would be to hook a fish right now’, as I was perfectly content to be relaxed in observation.

Eventually, I broke out of my trance and noticed for the first time that the sky above us had turned from the light and bright morning blue to a pale overcast, hanging so low that it ceilinged the top of the treeline and bore down on us, giving the illusion of being inside of a dome, and I wondered how long I’d been fishing this one island. I turned back to my family, just remembering that I wasn’t alone with water and the insects and theoretical fish, who were all on their phones texting-except for my dad, who was calling his wife.

“So, what do you guys want to do?” I asked to pull them away from their screens, which they used to distract them from the boredom of watching someone else play at a sport, and directed their attention towards the sky.

“Yeah,” my grandma said squinting up, “I guess we’d better head in.”

“Yeah, Kathleens already at the house,” Deborah snorted a laugh, “she’s just sitting in our kitchen.”

“Alright.” Billy put his pole down in an imperceptible frustration, presumably from having not even seen any hint of a fish, and began pulling at the motor.

Disaffection

The first thing my dad did when we got back to my grandma's house was change his clothes at his truck. What he had been wearing got ruined when we were pulling the boat onto the trailer and he fell into the lake, getting up grinning (he was always the first to laugh at himself) a maudlin grin and flicking water beads from his hands futilely, 'At least I don't have to take a shower now.'

"That sucked." He said presently.

"Are you gonna be good to drive home?"

"Are you?"

"I don't know how to drive stick."

"Then I guess I'll be good."

We walked up to the house, hardly noticing the few scant raindrops that managed to find us, just as Vincent was walking out.

"You leaving?"

"I'm just walking to the barn."

"For what?"

"No reason." He liked to cultivate a sense of mystery.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just kidding. Wanna play darts?"

"Sure." I turned and took the same path back towards the truck and the barn, wondering if Vincent was originally going to the barn to play darts by himself. The barn was nearly twice the size of the home, and was filled with industrial farming equipment, though neither of my grandparents had ever managed more than a couple chicken coups.

"Have you ever played darts?"

"Yeah, a good friend of mine has a board and we play sometimes. I'm pretty okay."

"301?"

“Sure. You can go first.” I stepped aside as Vincent stepped up and made three throws that were all much better than I had expected and realized that I must’ve caught him on his way to his nightly darts training. We shot back and forth in that fashion, switching every third dart, in what I thought was uncomfortable silence; though Vincent gave no impression that he was uncomfortable, I had the sharp realization that this might have been the first time Vincent and I had been left alone together in the three years he had been married to and five years he had been dating my aunt. Mostly, Vincent seemed to regard me as something of an annoying little brother but without the warmth and familiarity that comes with the title. I would stay at my grandparents house for weeks on end as a kid and, as an only child, my cousins (and my aunt of a similar age) were the nearest substitute for a siblingly relationship I had, so I was all the more desirous to keep these bonds tightly wound the older and further away from everyone I became. I wanted him to like me and for something, this game of darts in this example, to build an emotional bridge between us and it wasn’t until many years and lived experiences later that I realized that some people can’t or don’t want to or don’t feel the need to be open emotionally, often from how the girl or boy were treated by their mother or father, respectively-this didn’t occur to me at the time, and I had always just taken his detached coolness and refusal to go past surface level conversations with me as indifference or possibly learned irritation from my aunt towards me that she kept to herself. Most of the conversation during our game of darts revolved around the game itself, “Oh, nice one”, “Shit”, “Oh, nice one (ironically)”, though we smiled at each other genuinely. It was a resounding defeat, from what I remember, he beat me so handedly that I refused his offer for a rematch; “Double or nothing,” he said, even though the first game hadn’t had any stakes. I told him that I’d embarrassed myself playing sports enough for one day and walked inside, ready to tear myself away from the wanting air of the game.

When I walked inside the house I found Deborah and Kathleen sitting in the living room at a corner from my dad who was far into the couch and leaning

his head backwards and angled towards them because he had drank too much to care about holding it up anymore.

“Hi, Kobe.” My dad said almost ironically.

“Kobe!” Kathleen smiled at me and got up from around the couch to give me a hug, which my aunt hadn’t even done when she first saw me that afternoon.

“Hey you’re supposed to be hugging me, not him!” My dad said, again, supposedly ironic.

I rolled my eyes and hugged her back brotherly, “Hey Kathleen,” I noticed the familiar sprawl of papers and laptop angled at 35 degrees to indicate only a short break, “You doin’ homework?”

“Yeah,” she sighed and dropped her shoulders, “How’s school going?”

“Actually, I kind of dropped out last semester.” I was hesitant to fess up to dropping out because, as a nursing major, I knew intuitively that Kathleen put great purpose into institutions and the rule of norms (Kathleen was then, and probably still is, a virgin, as she was want to tell anyone when sex was the topic of conversation); even if I weren’t necessarily embarrassed about dropping out, she would’ve instinctively been embarrassed for me, which would in a turn around way have made me embarrassed.

“Kobe!” Her jaw dropped, “But you liked school!”

“I’m pretty sure I did at one point.”

“Kobe, why did you do that?” She asked rhetorically, scolding me half-heartedly.

“Relax, it was just business school.” I waved her concern away

“So, what are you gonna do now?”

I shrugged, uninterested in answering a question that had been asked of me every bit of ten thousand times throughout my life since the age of six. In fact, the very notion of choosing a direction and listing goals and laying out a path to achieve them and organizing every moment and foreseeable milestone for the next twenty years, was the very reason I had become disinterested in finishing my degree, which I was and am currently only six credits shy of; college had devolved into yet another bureaucratic institution that was to be impassionately

overcome instead of, what I had originally considered to be, a transformative coming-of-age experience to be enjoyed. Not only was I, and my classmates, going through the motions, but I started to notice that my professors were as well, and after having so many instructors that were wholly disinterested in the practice of molding the next generation, their disillusionment began to rub off on me. I went to a community college, and I became acutely aware that the staff must have felt the same underlying insecurities that all of the students had learned by subconsciously comparing ourselves to our peers that went off to universities. Also, I began learning economic theory and had acquired a better understanding of the world and western civilization and its history in relation to capital, and had become disgusted with not only business and the accumulation of wealth, but in the entire system and all of its institutions therein, and had decided that business school and business majors and entrepreneurship within a scholarly context were the greatest propagator of capitalism in America; even at a community college, the culture of business school became so perverse to me that, if I had to learn one more theory about human motivations from a manager's perspective, I would jump off a bridge. Not caring to explain any of this to a nice southern girl who was studying to become a nurse, out of fear that I would possibly afflict her with the same disease I had, I replied, "Whatever I want, I guess," or something similarly noncommittal.

She smirked sideways at me, "I believe in you, you're smart!"

I smiled, not really putting any significance in the compliment; I'd been called smart my whole life, so had most people in my family, and it hasn't kept any of us from toiling away in obscurity.

Just then Billy came from around the corner of the hallway that led to what had once been my grandparents bedroom, "Kobe," he said, waving me over discreetly, though everyone in the room turned to him.

"What's up Billy."

"Come here, I wanna show ya something." I followed him out of the door to the laundry room that once housed my grandparents' dogs, out onto the back porch, where my grandmother was already waiting.

“Well, whaddya think, dude?” She asked without turning to me, instead staring judgingly at three indiscriminately placed potted plants, the tallest of which was just a head above me.

I walked forward, making a show of studying the plants, twisting my face up in inquisitive ways, “Woah, mamaw, how old are they?”

“Well, this big one, we’ve been growing her for about five months, the others a few months old.”

“He,” Billy said, “they’re all males.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” I said, relieved Billy had brought it up; the plants were skinny, and, being males, would never yield any worthwhile flower, but would be good for pollinating a viable female plantling. Even still, though, I feigned being impressed for my grandmother’s benefit. “What are you guys gonna do with them?”

“Smoke it, dude, waddya think we’re gonna do with ‘em?”

“We’re gonna have to get some females growin’ first, though.” Billy replied, obviously he’d explained this to my grandmother before.

She nodded along, “Speakin’ of which, we still got that joint you rolled for us on the boat?”

“We should, unless Socks smoked it when we weren’t lookin’.”

“Pfft, and he would too, the little shit.”

Departure

My grandma, Billy, and I were in the kitchen, all of us stooped over the island in the middle. We smoked the fourth joint then my grandma rolled another and we smoked some of it intermittently since my grandma kept letting it go out, which was fine with everyone involved. We sat there in a stoned stupor, not really talking or looking at each other, listening to the television in the living room and the imperceptible conversations my dad and the girls were having; sometimes I'd hear a laugh from my dad that I could tell, from its cadence and volume, meant he had just said something perverted to Kathleen.

"Jason, you leave that poor girl alone in there, now!" My grandma went to hit the joint, looked at the burnt end when she realized it wasn't lit, put the lighter to it, and then blew it out when it caught fire.

"What!" He yelled from the other room, sounding guilty.

"You know what!"

I walked into the living room and sat down between my dad and Kathleen, who was trying her best to stay busy with her homework.

"What are you writing?"

"I'm doing a study on human anatomy!"

"Hey! I know about the human anatomy!" My dad replied.

"Jason!" Kathleen squealed.

"Jesus Christ, Jason." Deborah, added.

"But it's summer break?" I chose to ignore my dad.

"Yeah, I decided to take summer classes this year, too." She sounded embarrassed.

"You know it's okay to take a break sometimes."

"Well, I'm going to finish my graduate program early this way."

"Hey, I *never* finish early!"

“Oh, my God, Dad.”

“JASON!” My grandmother yelled from the next room, “Am I gonna have to come pull you offa that girl?”

“What?” He asked innocently.

“*Whaaaat?*” she shot back, mocking him.

“I didn’t even know you were going to grad school.” I said continuing my conversation with Kathleen.

“Yep! I graduated two semesters ago!”

“Oh, man, yeah, that rocks, congratulations.”

“Thanks, Kobe! It’s been really hard,” she paused to glance at my dad, who seemed to be asleep, “but obviously, very rewarding.”

“What time is it?”

“Uhhh, almost 9:30.” Kathleen tilted her laptop towards her awkwardly to read the clock at the bottom.

“Oh, my god- Dad! Dad!” I walked over to my dad who was laying across the couch in a way that made him look deflated and skinny and shook him.

“Hnnnnuuuh.”

“Dad, we have to go. Dad. It’s almost ten o’clock. Dad.”

“Uhhhh, Kobe. Let’s just stay the night.”

“You have to work in the morning. Dad, c’mon, get up.”

“Nooo I’ll just call in.”

“Dad, I want to go home. C’mon. Dad.”

“Oh my God. Fine.” He stood up immediately, seeming mad but not as mad as he was tired. We said our goodbyes and left unceremoniously. Pulling down my grandmother’s gravel driveway sharply, bouncing at every bump. It was fully raining now, my grandmother’s street pitch black, though I could still make out a few of her neighbors homes with familiar exteriors or positionings relative to the road thanks to the light reflection off of raindrops, everything in front of us was covered in refracted yellow headlight. One home in particular stuck out to me because the only part of the home visible from the street was the roof, being covered by a hill that sprouted up roadside and disappeared quickly. When we got

to the end of her street and at the stop sign I studied the various spray paintings on a long abandoned shack off to the right, which prominently featured a 'KKK' tag and I remembered once coming to visit my grandparents with one of my dad's black friends and his friend looking at the tag and saying under his breath 'Where the hell are you takin' me?' My dad and I didn't speak for a while, listening to the sound of his truck raging against the hills of central Kentucky and the rain pelting it, every now and then lightning would strike and the inside of the cab would light up and I could see the drunk, somber expression on my dad's face.

"Are you okay?" I asked finally.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I don't know. You look mad."

He didn't say anything.

"Why do you have to be weird to Kathleen?"

He still didn't reply.

We drove the rest of the way home in silence and by the time we got home the rain was a distant memory, the night air was quiet and heavy with rain that evaporated the second it had hit the hot concrete of our driveway, having been baking all day.