

Would You Look at That

One year, compelled by a sudden sense of having wasted most of his adult life, my father purchased a lake house up north. Though it possessed all the wonders of modern technology—indoor plumbing, a modest dishwasher, cable television—it still retained a sense of the rustic, an untamed wildness my dad himself shared in his later years. Plants from the unkempt garden crept up its sides and groped at the mossy shingles on its roof. A squadron of wasps had seized the gazebo out back. The woods, oak and birch and elm, formed a thick, impenetrable cluster around the property. When night fell, the porch light attracted a swarming cloud of moths that descended on the house in a constantly shifting brown veil of fluttering wings and bulging insect eyes. When morning came, there would be hundreds of them pressed against the glass door leading in, all unmoving, perhaps asleep. Sometimes I could find Luna moths dozing fitfully among the other rabble, these great green-winged giants surrounded by mundane brown peons.

Floral patterns and maps of local trails covered the walls inside. The pine-paneled basement had a rich wooden smell and cold tiled floor. Ladybugs could be found everywhere, resting in the windowpanes, climbing walls, journeying across the great flat expanse of the living room couch. My mother hated them. “All these bugs,” she would say. “We have to stop leaving that front door open. This isn’t a barn.” But my dad would just laugh. He loved that house.

The place came stocked with such renowned literature as the Farmer’s Almanac and Ed’s Big Bathroom Reader (the exclusive bicentennial edition). There was no internet. Every morning seemed to follow the same routine: a furious knocking shattering the quiet of my bedroom, my door bursting open, dad barging in with a toothy grin on his face in the morning light. “Rise and shine,” he would say as he wrenched the covers off me. “Who’s ready for a nice morning swim? They say water’s the perfect temperature right when the sun’s rising, it’ll wake you right up!”

The lake, a fifteen minute walk down twisting dirt trails constantly dappled with shifting patterns of sunlight, was the dominant attraction of our visits. Hills that swelled to distant, hazy mountains fringed its pine-cluttered edges. In its shallows twigs and swirls of brown dirt undulated to the beat of the current. Its muddy floor was bright with reflected light. The white, frothing tails of motorboats cut across its sweeping expanse, dividing it like acres of farmland, their loud motors droning out the chatter of birds and the gentle lapping of lake waves against the grassy shore.

I was young when my father first bought the house, maybe fourteen, caught in puberty's most awkward spasms. My voice cracked when I tried to joke with my older brothers. My lanky limbs were pale, spidery sticks. Acne had annexed most of my face. I remember late one night, after checking the house three times to be sure the rest of my family was asleep, I crept downstairs and stole a beer from the fridge. I brought it upstairs to my room and sat alone, wondering with each clandestine sip whether or not I was drunk yet.

My dad himself didn't drink much. A botched liver from his earlier years of drug abuse had put a permanent damper on his party days. His entertainment now came from prying his children away from the television and forcing them to enjoy the fresh air. Mom, on the other hand, loved her wine. She would spend hours inside gossiping with my aunt, plopped down comfortably on the couch with the ladybugs she so despised, a bottle of chardonnay always within reach.

Of all my days there, one Fourth of July stands particularly in my memory. It rained so hard the front yard turned to mud and the swollen lake devoured half the shore. My mother and brothers spent the day demonstrating their zealous patriotism through their excessive alcohol consumption, stubbornly locked inside, while my father, never one to be stymied by nature, dragged me down to the lake in the pouring rain to take me for a swim.

The lake mirrored the mottled gray of the clouds above. Rain hammered against its surface, turning its placid waters into a storm of ripples and foam. Dad charged into the lake headfirst while I stood at the edge of the shore, mud squelching between my toes, pale and shivering. He burst from the water, sodden hair plastered to his face, and grinned at me. “What a day, huh? This is the life. What more could you ask for?”

“You’re crazy,” I said, teeth chattering.

“What’re you afraid of, getting wet?”

Still hesitating, I dipped a toe into the lake. Despite the cold rain pouring down, the water remained surprisingly warm, as if all the heat of the day had fled into its depths to mingle with the weeds and fish. I took another step, and another. Water swallowed my ankles. My thighs. Then I was submerged, propelling through inky blackness, staring up through layers of murky water at a distorted gray sky, kicking and splashing and loving every second of it.

Since the towels we brought had become sopping wet before we’d even clambered out of the lake, we were dripping wet the whole walk back to the house. The rest of the family stared at us like we were brain-dead. But dad only grinned back at them. Nothing could stop his rampant optimism. “What a day,” he would repeat whenever he glanced out the window at the sheets of rain slamming against the grass. “What a day.”

The clouds parted after dinner for a brief hour or so. The moon was full, so dad of course forced us all to step outside and marvel at it. Jagged shadows and silver light covered the woods. Crickets chirped somberly from the brush. Moonlight capped the trees like snow.

“Would you look at that?” my dad said, grinning from ear to ear. “Would you just *look* at it.”

I looked. It was a full moon, the same sort of full moon anyone could see if they bothered to glance out the window. Even then, the warmth of the lake still clinging to my skin, the damp

smell of wet earth and pine teasing my nostrils, I did not see what was so special about it. I thought my dad, his grin taut and wide as a skeleton's, must be going senile in his old age.

A year after the funeral I decided to go back. Calls were made, time off from work was arranged, a cooler of beer was packed, and then I was navigating the Maine back roads with my wife in our rickety old van. Back at home we'd gotten nothing but rain and mud for all of December, but up here, snow blanketed everything. White as far as the eye could see. We passed rolling fields like great blank slates, bare-treed forests weighed down by mounds of cold, rocky mountains whose cloud-tipped peaks were clenched by ice.

The house had changed more than I thought. The garden was dead, for one thing, all those creeping vines and gnarled strands of ivy withered and brown. And everything else was lost beneath the snow. White hid the house's peeling yellow paint, capped its weather-worn shingles, buried the gazebo out back along with the army of wasps that had once infested it. There was so much snow I couldn't even pull the car into the drive. So, parking in the slush-covered street, my wife and I trudged our way across the yard, lugging the bags up to the front door.

She was already having a bad time of it. "We drove all this way just to freeze to death in the sticks," she said, every word spilling out of her mouth in a tangle of steaming air.

I fumbled with the keys, cold stinging every exposed bit of skin it could find. I said, "Can you at least make an attempt to enjoy yourself?"

The house itself felt even colder than the outdoors. While my wife finished unloading the things, I tried to build a fire in the woodstove. What flames I could coax to life were feeble and

quick to die. On my third attempt to resuscitate the fire, my wife watched over my shoulder, hands on her hips, mouth curled in a frown. Her disapproval was like a tangible weight on my shoulders.

When I finally managed to get the fire roaring, we quickly fell back into our old routine: my wife propped up before the television, rum and coke in hand, her glazed eyes reflecting the dancing light of the set, while I just sat in a corner by myself sipping a beer. Even the isolation of this snowbound house couldn't distance ourselves from our habits, I realized. The patterns we had locked ourselves into had become thick as mortar.

At one point my wife glanced at the nearby window and noticed something that made her nose wrinkle in disgust. "How did all those things get in here?" she said.

"All what things?" I asked. I stood up and wandered over to the window. Then I saw them: countless ladybug husks scattered across the sill, dried and shriveled up, dead as the wasps in the gazebo and the moths in the woods. It seemed more sad than disgusting to me.

"Well, at least my mother would be happy," I said.

I finished my beer. She poured herself another rum and coke. Though the fire was giving off barely enough heat to warm the tiny living room, I felt hot, stifled, trapped in the claustrophobic indoors.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" I asked.

I might have just presented her with another windowsill of dead bugs. "Out there?" she asked, nose wrinkling. "Are you crazy? It's *freezing*."

"I'm going," I decided. "I want to see the lake."

"Well, enjoy your hypothermia, Mr. Rustic."

Outside, snow crunched beneath my feet and the cold pierced me. The path in the woods to the lake had been thoroughly lost beneath the snow, so I had to move through the trees like I was walking down the corridors of my own memory, thinking hard about every step, trying not to lose myself in the blur of white. Aside from the shrill whine of wind, everything was silent. No birds, no crickets. It felt like the first real silence I'd heard in years.

I emerged from the woods on the lake shore. Where once emerald grass sloped down to reach the lapping shallows there was only white. The lake lay beneath a sheet of ice. The wind was starting to pick up. Drifts of snow blew off the frozen water like ghosts. I stumbled down the hill and stepped onto the ice tentatively, for fear that it would crack beneath me, but that was an empty gesture—I've walked across floorboards less stable than that ice.

My footprints followed me out across the lake. I walked out farther and farther, shivering in the cold, watching the wind-whipped snow drift past me. There was an island about halfway across the lake, locked in on all sides by the ice, nearly one hundred yards before me. I wanted to go to it, but something held me back. I thought of my wife before the lambent glow of the television. I felt I shouldn't push on too far.

I stopped where I was, but just as I couldn't bring myself to go forward, I couldn't quite go back yet. I stood out there on that frozen lake for a long time. The sun started to set. The sky, previously a bleak mess of faded blue and gray clouds, came alive with color. All those ominous clouds hanging low in the distance turned from gray to gold, their undersides scorched red, their outlines rimmed with pink. The blue above me deepened into thick indigo, while purple seeped across the rest of the horizon to mingle with glowing orange. Distant mountains swallowed the sun. The dead winter world came alive with color. I could just hear my father exclaim, "Would you look at that! Just *look* at that!"

I looked. It was a sunset, the same sort of sunset that any ordinary person could see any day of the year if they just bothered to look out the window. But it seemed to me that there was something special about that sunset. I watched until the last smolder of gold faded from the sky, and then I started back the way I had come.