Nature Lines

Elizabeth Shrimmel

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I was ten that summer and too old for the silly sing-song I had made up when I was younger. But it still helped to pass the endless hour's journey to Grandpa and Grandma's cottage—and to control the excitement that made me itch to grip my hands on the wheel. I was sure that if I could drive, I'd get us there much faster than my father, who seemed to be going deliberately slowly this Friday afternoon.

Labor Day weekend. The last weekend of the green Wisconsin summer. The last trip to the cottage before Grandpa and Grandma shut it for the winter. “Some folks close up the weekend before Labor Day,” Grandpa had once said with a snort. “But not me.”

The car rolled on. The westering sun glowed through the tall green leaves waving in the roadside fields.

Suddenly I sat up straight. We were turning off the main highway onto “J” Road, the final mile and a quarter before the cottage. On this stretch, the car's tires hit gravel just as we passed the boarded-up schoolhouse, stirring a tremendous cloud of dove-gray dust outside and a flurry of activity inside. My father, mother, little sister, and I all rushed to crank the windows before the dust cloud boiled in. Low-hanging branches swished the car's roof as we passed, streaking the film that blanketed the vehicle. We lurched in the road's ruts, and my knuckles whitened from gripping the handstrap. My foot twitched furiously.

There was the driveway—and the crimson cardinal perched forever atop the sign that read, A.T. Meisterhardt.

The car turned in slow motion onto the large grassy lawn. Almost before it stopped moving, I leaped out and raced across the grass to Grandpa, who quit pushing the hand mower and stood with open arms. I bounded into his sweaty embrace.

“We-e-e-e-l. Look who's here!” He chuckled and tossed me into the air. I flew like a little bird, but he caught me again and gave me another squeeze against his damp, white-ribbed undershirt. It smelled sweet, like aftershave and mosquito repellent and sweat. Then he turned to amble toward my folks and my little sister, his baggy brown pants flapping around his short legs.

And I took off running through the woods to see the Lake. Light flickered on the damp stones of the path and mosquitoes snipped at my face. Branches and leaves whipped against my bare arms. I burst from behind the veil of green, and there it was—Lake Michigan, flowing from one end of the horizon to the other in the late afternoon sun.

I felt all my hurry melt away.

The Lake's fresh breath blew full in my face. The smell gave the air a different quality, like wind newly washed by rain, or the breeze at the top of a mountain.