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Wisconsin

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My sister and her husband were hippies, but they were incredibly rich because my sister inherited about three million dollars when our parents died in 1999, and because she was twenty three and I was only eleven I moved with her from Chicago to the UP in Wisconsin, back to the town she went to college in. She and Sean built a house in the woods that took six years to finish, during which we lived in their friends' houses and I went to school with twenty-one kids in my grade, the size of my social studies class back in Chicago. I tried to tell my sister, Marion, that the school didn't have any computers, and in her mind I think she equated this with something quaint, like a one room schoolhouse in France with turtles and lavender surrounding us during recess, but I meant that it was poor. Half the kids in my class were from a reservation, and half of those looked permanently damaged by what happened to them at home.

"Do they still use a mimeograph? Do you get 'dittos'?" Sean asked me the next day after I told Marion about the computers. She told him everything I assumed was just between us, and our talks were like water, thin puddles underfoot that anyone could walk over. It was too different from my mother and me in the car after she'd pick me up from something, just the two of us in the night and the green light from the radio on our faces. She knew all the names of my friends and she thought I was very funny. A girl named Jessica was in girl scouts with me and was bothering me, spreading rumors about me. My mother would always ask me what happened with her during the meetings and I would tell her and I always wondered if it was hard for her to not go to the head scout lady, a woman named Ivy, and tell her to do something about the little bitch. I think now that I was telling her this stuff in a way that was trying to make her my friend. This was hard, because I always felt I needed to stay a little kid for her, more or less sweet and uncomplicated.

My older sister got married when she was nineteen to a guy none of us knew. She had a job at Banana Republic at sixteen and a car and older boyfriends and then she went to a school eight hours away in Wisconsin. I saw her twice every year, once in the fall when I went with my parents to Apple Fest, and once in June when she stayed in Chicago a week or two before starting her job back in Wisconsin picking berries. One summer she went to California.

After my parents died I stayed pretty innocent, drawn naturally to it as if it was my own idea. I was alone and left to myself a lot, the kind of kid who would go to the library for hours, or watch television. I napped a lot. My sister's friends left me alone. I did smoke a lot of pot once I turned sixteen because I guess this was the age my sister thought it was okay to start, and I slowly stopped doing homework and started staying home during school a lot more. My grades went down to C's for the first time since we'd moved to Wisconsin.

We were living in a house in the middle of nowhere with the parents of one of Marion's friends, and they had two horses, two cows, and about five dogs, and the friend lived with her boyfriend in the attic of a barn on their property.

Her name was Kelly, and they didn't have a toilet or running water in the barn, but I the view from the windows and the flowered sheets on their bed. It was winter when we stayed at these people's house, and I was sixteen and definitely already a pothead, but now I was becoming more outdoorsy because I had found a pair of skies in their garage that were Kelly's, and I would go out after school and for the hour left of daylight ski up to a church that was half an hour from the house. No one was ever there. I'd squat next to the building facing a group of tall pines and white birches and smoke a joint and listen to my headphones for twenty minutes or so, and then ski back home with the snow purple in the just dark with the sky the ceiling of a church.

That New Year's Eve Sean and Marion left the house early. I knew they were going to the hotel we lived in for the first month, the AmericInn. A girl named Shree worked the front desk that night and she had rooms ready for everyone and at midnight she would open the pool up for everyone and this was what they did every year and I stayed home. My bed was in the basement, about ten feet away from their bed. I sat on the bed and I looked at all the crap that was everywhere, too many people living in too small a space. I got stoned and tried to work on a paper on Indira Ghandi. I remember staring at a picture of her on one of the books from the library, her pink sari, her beautiful face. Midnight started coming on and I heard the parents upstairs in the living room watching TV and I imagined everyone drunk and stoned at the AmericInn, women with long hair in the pool, their breasts so white from the lights under the water. At eleven thirty I took off my pajamas and put on my clothes for the first time that day, put on clean underwear and fresh wool socks that were soft, and long underwear and jeans my sister gave to me and a tank top and a shirt and a sweater. I blew out the blue candle by my bed. I skied to the barn, which was about a mile away from the house because I knew there was another party there, and when I got there the wind was really going and I had to walk up the spiral staircase that was outside and rickety as hell and rusted and it leaned in the wind. The black sky looked more like the universe in the cold and it was the type of night where the stars were either close or far depending on how you felt. The stars felt far and beautiful.

The front room of the barn was dark and empty and high ceilinged. Sharp things pertaining to the farm hung from beams in the corners and there was a bucket with sawdust in it for a toilet behind a brown shower curtain. Nothing moved as I walked through the darkness towards the door, all four edges outlined in warm light. Nothing shuttled close to me or flew over my head, nothing whispered to me. I walked towards the door and through it and in the room there were about fifteen people sitting around, listening to music. A strong gust of wind blew outside and I looked outside and could see the lights from four or five farms in the distance, so tall was the barn.

No one spoke to me and I sat down on the floor between the sofa and a coffee table. Someone handed me a beer that was half full and I drank all of it in one swallow and handed it back to whoever gave it to me. I looked at my watch and saw it

was exactly 12:01. My thighs were twitching from the skiing, little electric pulses over my knees and higher up near my hips and I rubbed my hands over my legs and close to my butt. Someone handed me a pipe and after exhaling I really looked at everyone and saw that this girl Kelly was sitting on her boyfriend's lap in a chair to the right of me and she had a little brown bottle of beer in her hand over his neck and her legs all tangled with his and they were striped because she was wearing striped orange and blue tights and a little jean miniskirt I recognized from the summer when she'd wear it with boots and a tee-shirt and nothing else. Her boyfriend was thin and feral and looked like he could be gay but was so obviously into women I could see what Kelly or other women liked about him. He stared at me and she lolled her head up from his neck and rested it on his shoulder, her eyes open and staring at the ceiling.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked me, shifting his ass forward and pulling Kelly closer to him.

"The house."

I took off my hat and unzipped my coat.

"That's a long walk. Where's your sister?"

"She's at the hotel."

"Why'd you come over here then?" Kelly asked with a voice like an old man's coming from the bent back bone cage of her throat.

"Someone invited me," I lied and under my breath. Kelly ignored me, and once people started talking, flipped over on her boyfriend like a crab and started making out with him, her blond dreads sliding against her back as she moved her head.

Someone turned up the music and a girl gave me beers constantly and I took off my sweater and then my long sleeved shirt and it was still too hot in the room even though snow from the roof would blow horizontally across the windows and I knew it was cold outside, universally cold. Someone came up with the idea to build a fire outside and people started leaving in twos and threes. After awhile I needed to pee, so I went with a couple of girls down the rickety staircase, back outside without my coat.

The fire was roaring and almost everyone was standing around it, smoking cigarettes or joints. The guy that everyone knew was a freak, even by Ashland standards, was standing closest to the fire and was feeding it massive logs from the pile next to the barn. His teeth were black and he carried his shit in a homemade leather purse, made of some animal he'd actually killed, probably a rabbit.

After awhile I walked around the barn and found the south side where the snow wasn't piled so high against it and I took off my left boot and the left legs of my jeans and long underwear and underwear and squatted so low I could feel the snow just underneath me. When I was done I pulled everything up even though I was still wet. I was starting to shiver but I didn't want to leave the view of the black sky and glowing snow and through the thickness of all the beer I started planning on getting my stuff from upstairs and finding my skis, if they hadn't been already used for the fire. Marion and Sean wouldn't be home until the morning but I was drunk enough where I was looking forward to going really fast.

I found the skis lying in the snow next to the staircase where I'd left them. The staircase seemed sturdier than before and I leaned into every turn, the group of people and the fire underneath me like a net that would save me if I fell like a bed blanket from the top.

An older guy, probably about thirty, was sitting in the room on the floor and I walked around him to the bed where everyone's coats were. He was on the phone and I listened to his conversation and looked at the side of his face while I put on my sweater. He was sitting cross-legged and using an open book in his lap as an ash-tray.

"I'll tell you." Pause. "Because I want...I want to have something," he moved his hand back and forth, "that is just you and me. You and me. You are my privacy." Long pause. "You're right."