

## Where the Woods Meet the Water

James Lower

The wobbly, rusting gate at the mouth of Fire Drive 17 whined open, beckoning us to pull into that old familiar tunnel of southwest Michigan trees. I let the car's engine idle and hesitated. The girl I'll marry, Kate, and I had come for a few final keepsakes, one last look at my grandparents' cabin on the Great Lake, our family sanctuary high atop a bluff where the woods meet the water. In the coming months, the maple-red cottage in which we Lowers had spent the last fifty Augusts would be razed to the ground to make room for my dad and stepmother's retirement house, another one of our losses committed to the dunes along Lake Michigan.

"You ready for this, love?" Kate asked, something in those wide, sky-blue eyes betraying that she knew I wasn't.

"No, babe," I said, pulling us through the gate. "But I don't think I ever will be." More would be torn down than simply walls and windows.

When I was four years old, my mother, Jean, succumbed to inexplicable cancer in her neck, and we buried her a mile down the road, infusing her memory into the weathered red siding, the worn-polished hardwood floors, the glassed-in porch overlooking that beach of singing sand. Though the spirit of the place would always remain, I still had to make peace with all that would be reduced to rubble.

Kate and I followed the twisted dirt track as it sidled along, turned to the south and then followed the bluff for just short of a mile. To our left, deep gorges of forest stretched as far as we could see. And to the right, once the high, wind-blown dunes gapped and fell away, that vast horizon of cool waters glittered into view almost four stories below. I stopped at that car-length's spot where the road bottlenecks before a final fork, a pristine point from which to gaze at storms and sunsets. I rolled down the windows and cut the engine, and we listened to that gentle, breeze-blown lapping of the waves. I pointed up ahead to where our drive splits off, at the weathered driftwood sign hiding in the dune grass, a smooth continuous divot carved out to spell

'The Lowers.' When we lost my mom, our notion of this family tightened around the presence she left behind, my dad, my two brothers and me. We were four facets of a single stone, and at our core was that place, that cabin. With every wave that rolled ashore that day, my chest clenched a little tighter. At least there's this, I thought, listening, trying to take comfort in that sound.

Finally reaching the house, I parked in between the rusted shed and the cottage. It was a modest, one-story cluster of paneled rooms permeated by that sweetened musty smell of lake and forest air that's been trapped inside, nothing to stir it except the scurrying of the field mice. The cabin and deck that Grandpa built weathered the summer storms, the turning of the leaves, and bitter blizzards until spring explosions cloaked it in green, which was how Kate and I found it that day. We eased out of the car and shut our doors. The lake greeted us with a rustling breeze. That was when I'd arrived, when I started to smile, when I remembered that momma was always there, waiting, and at long last, I'd found her once again.

The screen door clacked shut behind us, resounding across bare floors bearing only dusty imprints of where furniture once stood.

"It's so empty," Kate said, sliding her arm around my waist as if to prop me up. She couldn't know how the lack of clutter only made the memories come alive, that time-worn togetherness playing out as an apparition only I could see.

I pulled her close, my new center, and felt myself clutching at the days to come as sobs for those gone by filled my lungs. There was nothing to be done. Those walls were leaving me, and in a matter of days, a collective memory would be all that remained of 'The Lowers' haven on the bluff.

Kate and I paced through the empty rooms. I ran my hand across the wood, the shelves and doorways feeling brittle and cold. The flood of lost days overtook me, and I surrendered to the cabin's dying breaths. In a language all its own, it let me go. And all I could offer back were tears.