

## A Pictured Weekend

The best twenty-four hours I experienced in Northern Michigan started on a delightfully sunny Saturday afternoon. After printing out some last minute driving directions my boyfriend, John and I set out for a romantic getaway to the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore in the Upper Peninsula. I had been looking forward to this trip for weeks and couldn't wait to begin my adventure with my partner in crime. Neither John nor I had ever visited the northern wilderness of the Upper Peninsula so this was going to be a new shared experience for both of us. We hit the road in hopes of catching sunset over the Mackinaw Bridge and arrived in Mackinaw City in no time. By this time it was close to dinner time and our bellies were growling with hunger so we decided to indulge on pizza and beer. Directly after dinner we made our way to the shoreline of Lake Michigan and strolled along the water's edge hand in hand.

I felt at home with the sound of the crashing waves, the wind in my hair and the sun on my face. Walking the entire way to Heritage Park located near the Mackinaw Bridge, we stopped to take some photos. There was a lighthouse nearby and knowing of John's obsession with the manmade structure, I snapped another photo of him sitting next to it. Looking at the height of the sun in the sky and then looking at our watches, we decided to go ahead and make our way back to the car and venture over the bridge. We didn't feel like sticking around and waiting another two or three hours for the sun to set and concluded that we'd rather get to our destination and see the sunset in the city of Munising. Satisfied with the decision, I jumped into

the car with childish enthusiasm. I was thrilled to be driving over the Mackinaw Bridge for the first time ever, knowing that the bridge was the third longest suspension bridge in the world, extending some eight miles long, connecting the Lower and Upper Peninsulas of Michigan. The Mackinaw Bridge was almost like a tourist attraction where each carful of passengers paid three dollars in order to ride. Once we were on the bridge I thought to myself how it was a good idea I drove across since the whole time crossing the bridge John was taking pictures of the view and would have done the same had he been driving

Not knowing much about the Upper Peninsula we felt like foreigners as we kept passing signs advertising Pasties, smoked fish and homemade fudge. John and I found ourselves lost in each other, enjoying good conversation and lovely sights. We hadn't seen each other in over four weeks and talked about everything we had missed since then. This made me think of how nature can bring people closer together and encourage growth in any relationship. Don't get me wrong; I love how my boyfriend and I met in the city of Detroit where our relationship began during our favorite time of year, Memorial Day weekend at the Electronic Music Festival. Now since time has passed we've begun to find each other taking pleasure in the simplicity and beauty of nature, going for walks in the Arb, camping and traveling to Lake Michigan.

Two or three hours later, and after the sun had already set we arrived in the city of Munising. I was surprised at the small of the town that was a supposed tourist attraction. We had a little trouble finding a motel that was both open and reasonably priced. Finally we pulled into the lot of a quaint motel with a neon sign that read "Vacancy." Walking into the lobby we were greeted at the door by a house cat of the privately owned establishment. A middle aged

man wearing a racing baseball cap and cut off tee suddenly appeared at the front desk. His hands were chaffed and dirty as he reached for his reservation book. "One night?," the man asked. We replied with a smile and nod and proceeded to ask him about any local bars or entertainment that might happen to be in the area. He told us that our best bet was to go down the street to another motel that had a lounge called Shooters. The place was called Shooters so why not give it a shot?

After a hot shower and a change of fresh clothes we ventured out to grab a few drinks and possibly some random conversation with the locals. We were slightly confused upon walking in because the place was empty and looked like it was closed. Thinking the night was going to be pretty calm and quiet, an actual wedding party quickly piled into the bar, whom were all a little rambunctious and obviously drunk. John and I entertained ourselves talking to these people for quite some time. We met all sorts of characters who shared all sorts of stories. Pat, the father of the groom was fueled with alcohol and ended up being the most entertaining of the bunch. Before things got too rowdy John and I made our way back to the motel to turn in for the night. Tomorrow was going to be a long day, especially for John since he had to make the long drive back the same day in order to be back at work first thing Monday morning.

We slept in for a bit and checked out of the motel by eleven so we could go grab some breakfast and get our day off to a good start. We took the bartender's advice from the night before and went to a nice place down the road called Sharky's. After a delicious and reasonably priced breakfast we headed down to the pier to make arrangements for a tour of the Pictured

Rocks. We had learned the night before that the best way to see the Pictured Rocks was by boat, which added to the excitement and romanticism of the trip.

The day was partially cloudy and a tad chilly, so as a born and raised Michigander I came well prepared wearing several layers and a baseball cap. As soon as we boarded the boat the captain warned the passengers about the less than ideal weather and lake conditions. Lake conditions were harvesting rough waters for travel, generating waves up to five to six feet high. The captain advised if anyone was prone to sea sickness to abandon ship now because there wouldn't be a choice later on. I instantly recalled to the time years back when I was thirteen and had got horribly sick on a ferry going from Cozumel to Cancun, Mexico, which was caught in the middle of a sudden storm. I told myself that Lake Superior it couldn't be that bad and plus this was the very reason we came to the U.P. There was no way I was going to turn around and go back.

When the boat left the dock John and I looked at each other with excitement and slight apprehension. Our adventure together through nature began as the sun poked through the clouds as the boat drifted along the shoreline. We could finally start to see the beginning of the cliffs that were all sorts of earth tone hues. Rocks in shades of copper, gold, green, grey, all varying in color which appeared as if they were painted on the side of the cliffs. The captain informed us that the colors were actually caused from the weathering of the bedrock where elements such as potassium, phosphorus and silicon were released. Ecologists would say the release of these elements may not be useful in terms of energy for surrounding ecosystems, but it is a beautiful phenomenon that may be useful to the human psyche. The hue and

reflection of the water made the rocks look even more appealing to the eye, forming a rainbow of earth tone colors, all of which are John's favorite colors. Funny he didn't say anything probably because he was busy taking photos again from every possible angle.

Secretly John is like my own personal photographer which is something I have grown to appreciate over the years. As the boat chugged along the thirteen mile stretch of the Pictured Rocks National Shore, our attention became focused on extravagant and fascinating rock structures. A particular formation called Castle Rock actually resembled a castle overlooking the oversized lake. For a moment I thought how it would be such a romantic place to get married. The captain later informed us that a couple actually got married in that exact spot years prior, proving how a marriage can literally start on the rocks. Soon after that moment is when I started to notice the wind picking up speed, causing the boat to rock with more momentum as my stomach began to churn.

The further the boat traveled away from the bay, the angrier the dark water became. Forceful waves that grew almost six feet high, violently rocked the boat from side to side spraying the passengers on the top deck. I had never before seen water behave so wildly and didn't think I could get sea sick at my age. Unfortunately, I was in denial and thought it was simply something I would grow out of. Trying not to make a big deal about how shitty I was really feeling I remained rather somber and quiet as I tried to enjoy the beautiful sights of the Pictured Rocks. I quickly found myself caught in a personal dilemma as I tried to keep my composure and keep myself from vomiting. With every crashing wave I grew more and more nauseous while John continued to snap photos of me even though I didn't have the most

pleasant look on my face. I was pissed that I had drove over one hundred miles to see this place and I was going to enjoy it even if it killed me. I don't think I could have died from sea sickness but I slightly considered throwing myself overboard to escape the miserable and unpredictable situation I got myself into. I practiced some breathing exercises I had learned from yoga, which slowly began to make me feel a little better. Luckily I wasn't the only one who thought the trip was a little unbearable. While I found myself somewhere in between a dream and a nightmare and feeling sick to my stomach, the captain came over the sound system with an announcement, "Unfortunately, due to rough and unsafe weather conditions we are discontinuing the Pictured Rocks boat tour and will be giving a full refund for everyone aboard." We had only seen half of the tour, but that was all I could handle and was thankful that it was soon coming to an end.

My tension eased as the boat slowly turned back towards shore, struggling to fight the growing waves of Lake Superior. I tried to focus my eyes on the view in the distance hoping to distract my attention from the boat wildly rocking back and forth. Going back the same way we came, I noticed how the Pictured Rocks appeared to look entirely different from another perspective. My photographer continued to take pictures, capturing all that I missed from the distraction of my motion sickness. Growing anxious to have my feet back on dry land I continued my deep breathing to keep my uneasiness at bay. John could see the worrisome look on my face and tried to comfort me by wrapping his arms around me and holding me tight. Truthfully, his touch was making things worse and sent him to buy me a Sprite, hoping it would settle my stomach. After what felt like forever, John returned with a smile and a can of Sprite. I quickly opened it and took a small sip of the fizzy goodness. Almost immediately the tightness

in my belly began to ease while at the same time I noticed the waves of the water slowly calming down as the boat maneuvered closer into the bay. The figure of a lighthouse caught my attention from the corner of my eye as my thoughts grew optimistic knowing we were soon going to be close to the safety of land. John quickly grabbed my hand and led me to the back of the boat so I could take his picture next to the view of the manmade phallic structure. I had finally had enough pictures for one adventure at sea and sat back down with a sigh. At last, land could be seen on the horizon and the knots in my stomach began to loosen. When the boat finally docked I could not get off the boat quick enough to the familiar security of solid ground.

Back in the car I reclined the passenger seat back, took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Even though our intended trip came to a short end I honestly didn't care what we did at this point, I just wanted to feel balanced again. It was late in the afternoon and thought a little food would do me some good after feeling beaten and battered from the rough waters of Lake Superior. We grabbed lunch at a local diner and ate in a nearby park along with the company of obnoxious seagulls who were wailing for our leftover food. I was finally starting to feel like myself again when John unexpectedly pulled out a few maps he had picked up from an employee working at the Pictured Rocks Cruises. I had completely forgotten about some of the neighboring waterfalls in the area and realized that our trip to Munising wouldn't be a complete disaster. With this in mind, John and I quickly coordinated a plan that would fit into our route back to the lower peninsula. I love how John is always considerably optimistic and keeps a plan B up his sleeve when plan A doesn't always seem to work out.

Back in the car again, we drove east in the direction of Munising Falls. On our way, I thought it strange to find a naturally occurring waterfall in the middle of urban neighborhood. We parked the car and followed the marked path cleared by civilization and continued towards the falls. I felt as if I were walking into the middle of a fairytale, where one moment you find yourself in the real world with houses, paved streets, and parking lots, now into a charming forest with brilliant wildlife, flowing streams, and organic smells. I was taken by surprise when I heard the crashing sound of the falls before they even came into view. Standing at the bottom of the falls was a breathtaking experience and my mind was in awe. The sight and sound of the crashing falls sent a rush through my entire body making me feel uplifted and rejuvenated, appreciating the moment for what it was, making me grateful to be alive. I could feel the coolness and power of the water as it rushed over the rocks and into the pool some hundred feet below. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the waterfall as I was lured into a faraway land where I felt completely at peace with myself. In that moment my mind was oblivious to everything except the sound of the rushing water. While I was caught up in the moment of purity in this natural wonder, slowly other sounds begin to filter through. A voice pierced my peacefulness, "smile". John was wildly snapping photos trying to capture everything with his camera. There are just some things in life that cannot be captured on film. True, pictures can say a thousand words, but they cannot always capture the true essence of what is before your eyes in a particular moment.

With the clock ticking and the hours of daylight soon fading, John and I continued our journey back. Now driving further east we found each other lost in conversation and ended up turning the car around several times in order to keep driving in the right direction. Minutes



later we found ourselves in another paved lot among several other tourists to see one of the most famous rock formations of the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Once we reached the manmade platform overlooking Miner's Castle a rush of exhilaration fled throughout my entire body, where only a small railing separated me from a mountainous cliff that stood thousands of feet above Lake Superior. The wind blew intensely as I peered down at the castle below with John behind me taking pictures. My mind wandered as I thought of castles only existing in ancient Europe and fairy tales and was taken back by the view that had been created by Mother Nature millions of years before. We strolled along the paved path holding hands and saw to additional views from the park in the sky and after a plenty of pictures walked back to the car so we could complete our last stop of the trip, Miner Falls.

Driving back the same direction we came, we turned down a dusty gravel road and questioned whether we were still traveling on the right path. Our question was soon answered after pulling into a dirt lot where a posted sign read 'Miner Falls'. We proceeded to get out of the car and followed the half mile long trail through the new growth forest, as the sun periodically peeked through the canopy. Growing disillusioned about the thought of our trip together soon coming to an end we wandered down the trail with a saunter pace, joking and laughing about the day's events. We passed by other couples and families on the way before arriving at the base of the falls and once again could hear the rush of water before it came into view. Once we reached our destination and before we could get a good look of the Miner Falls, a couple politely greeted us and asked if we could take their picture. We were more than pleased to carry out their request and the couple returned the favor and took our photograph as well. Soon turning my attention back towards the falls, I was overcome by the same

sensation that I had felt when looking at the falls I had seen earlier that day. With time running out, we proceeded the somber venture back to Pellston where we'd say our good-byes and talk about the next time we'd meet.

I have always wondered about John's view of the natural world that he so often sees through a camera lens. While I like to think we have the same view about several issues, I have begun to recognize how our perceptions differ when looking at the beauty of nature. When faced with the wonder and splendor of nature, I find I can sit and stare at its beauty for quite some time taking in all it has to offer, becoming more in-tune with my emotions. The beauty of nature is like therapy for me where I can meditate and focus on my breathing. Often times I find myself daydreaming about what life would be like with no worries or responsibilities, where I could forever be free to live in nature's simplicity.

John's appreciation for nature on the other hand, is broader in a sense, focusing more on the landscape and scenery as a whole rather than paying attention to the finer details. He has done a good deal of traveling between the Pacific and Atlantic, enjoying several road trips across country where the landscape changes before his very eyes. He has told me of his most powerful memories of long lonely drives down desolate western roads with mountainous desert horizons. He doesn't care so much for the details of a leaf or snowflake as he does the overpowering image of a mountain against a sunset sky that would make for a picture perfect opportunity. While our overall perceptions of nature may always vary slightly and forever be captured on film, it may always be the basis of a collective and growing relationship that we continually grow to appreciate.