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Trapped in the Forest

I feel like a stranger in my own home state. In four weeks I have visited a new Michigan. I have assessed sand dune succession, walked to an island and visited the childhood summer home of a famous author. The Michigan that I know is paved with concrete and suffers from an acute lack of wind. Summers are sweaty and winters are harsh. There is no forest to buffer the temperature of the urban landscape that constructs my one, true Michigan.

I grew up in an older suburban neighborhood of Detroit, Michigan. Nature has never been a natural part of my family's lives. A cottage practically in Port Huron is the closest activity to a retreat in nature that my family has ever experienced. Sure, my mom, sister, and I would take trips to national parks but would sleep in hotels or cute bed & breakfasts along the way. I would be willing to bet that my mom has never been camping in her entire life. I spent a majority of my childhood indoors reading or playing with my Lego blocks, which were fashioned into a fully functional city. I only went outside when I was forced to play sports on human constructed fields.

I hated sports at first. My only real talent was my speed. I could not kick or catch and was a liability to whatever team would eventually take me. I was a nerd, unaccustomed to outdoor life. Shirley saved me from living my life as an indoor recluse. Shirley was an au pair, a nanny from London, England, who takes care of children for a year. She was my very own *Mary Poppins*.

My mom had a hard time acclimating me to the real world. My dad left her for another woman and California when I was only two years old and my sister was only six

months old. As a single mother who also ran her own dentistry she worked from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. my entire childhood. My sister and I needed a caretaker. Thus, my childhood was spent with various au pairs, most of whom were crazy. They were anywhere between 18 and 25 years old and acted like an un-caged animal during their year in America. Shirley was the exception however and I would have grown up a spoiled brat had it not been for her.

Shirley taught me table manners and how to clean. The most important, lasting impact that she had on my life was getting me out of the house. Before I knew it I was riding around in a minivan, changing out of my basketball uniform into clothes for my Kung-Fu class. When Shirley first arrived, I preferred to read alone in my room. After only two months, my house was instead filled with friends every day.

There is one Shirley moment that sticks with me to this day. I went through my trouble child phase during Shirley's stay at our house. Thankfully I had someone like Shirley to deal with me. Before Shirley, my sister and I had been tortured with some really horrible au pairs. We went through four au pairs in a period of only 5 months. Some of them would hit my sister and me, one would bring over abusive boyfriends and another left because she claimed she was possessed by the devil. As a kid I liked to imagine that I had the power to choose my own au pair. This fantasy was strengthened by the departure of so many troubled au pairs in such a short amount of time. One particularly bad argument that I had with Shirley ended with her screaming at me, threatening to break both of my legs. I ran to my room, waiting for my mom to come home, thinking to myself that this was the evidence I needed to get Shirley fired as well. I sat in my room for three hours waiting for my mom to come home. Finally she walked in

the door slightly tired from working all day, but happy to finally spend time with her children. I ran down the stairs and cried out to my mother, “Mom! Shirley said that she is going to break both of my legs!” “Now what did you do to her to deserve that,” my mom asked. My determination was shattered. Shirley had won and was there to stay.

My growing fascination with the outdoors quickly turned urban. My love of music helped me establish a strong relationship with downtown Detroit. Throughout high school I was going to at least a concert a week. All of the good music venues are in Detroit and driving to the concerts helped me learn the structure of the city. I am naturally good with directions and am drawn to urban areas. Learning city grids is a hobby of mine and I get excited whenever I visit a new city. Along with concerts, I started visiting the city to eat at the eclectic, individually owned restaurants. I took frequent trips to the Detroit Institute of the Arts and would spend the warmer fall days on Belle Isle.

Getting out of the house gave me an appreciation for the world. All of the reading that I had done as a child could be replaced by real life adventures of my own. I became the leader of my high school’s Boys Forestry Club and organized various camping trips. The biggest event that the Boy’s Forestry Club participated in was camping on the lawn of the school for charity. The urban landscape of Washington Street in Royal Oak, MI is a poor substitute for the real woods. As a club we did manage to go camping around the area. My knowledge and perception of the woods was shaped largely by trial and error on the two or three trips that we took to various Metropark campgrounds. Southeastern Michigan is totally unlike Michigan’s Northern Lower Peninsula and Upper Peninsula though.

As an environment major at the University of Michigan I have decided to specialize in urban planning. I am drawn to human designed landscapes and population density thrills me. Instead of looking at maps, I want to design them. Whenever I am asked what my favorite city is I always reply with Detroit, Michigan. Growing up just 15 minutes from the city, I have a personal connection with it. My love of Detroit has caused me to focus only on the Southern half of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. This summer that I have spent in Northern Michigan has been really eye opening for me. The state of Michigan is much more diverse than I could have ever imagined and my entire perception of Michigan has shifted.

The transformation of my perception of Michigan began on June 21, 2008. I was driving myself to Northern Michigan for the first time (I had been a passenger on my previous visits). There exists a plane on I-75 that separates urban and rural Michigan. My nose introduced me to the plane. It was as if a switch had been flicked and suddenly I could smell the pine trees through the dull air conditioning vents in my car. The smell of the terrain was not the only noticeable difference. Flat, cleared farmland had been replaced with hills of trees. The forest was greeting me at the doorway to a completely different Michigan.

When I arrived at the University of Michigan Biological Station I was assigned a tin cabin that was nearly 100 years old and was closer to a shack than a cabin. I was living in the woods for two months. There are many differences between the city and the forest. The major difference that I have noticed is the drastic decrease in humidity. I always assumed that because Michigan was surrounded by the Great Lakes, humidity was a natural process in the entire state. The forest buffers the temperature much more

and it makes for a much more pleasant summer. The forest alone is not the only factor that makes Northern Michigan more tolerable than Southern Michigan in the summer. The winds from the Straits of Mackinac also contribute to cooling the temperature.

When thinking of traveling around Michigan I have always envisioned paved roads over flat lands ideal for farming. Consulting a map of the state of Michigan results in evidence to back up my vision. The urbanization of Michigan's Lower Peninsula stretches from Detroit to Kalamazoo and from Grand Rapids to Flint. This summer I visited the only virgin white pine stand in the Lower Peninsula at Hartwick Pines. Besides my last name getting confused with Hartwick by substitute teachers all of my life, I had always thought of the park as a cheesy family camping ground. Upon arrival the beauty of the pines pleasantly surprised me. As an old growth forest, Hartwick Pines is characterized by large gaps between the trees. The trees themselves shoot upwards of 100-150 feet into the air and the canopy is very dense. It is always dusk in the Hartwick Pines. Logging of the massive, majestic trees along with increased demand for agriculture and the rise of the automobile decimated the white pine population in Michigan. Human interference in nature changed the landscape so much that the original one was foreign to me. Hartwick Pines itself is a little eerie though.

Hartwick Pines is an example of Michigan's natural disclimax community. A disclimax is characterized by an environmental factor that prevents the community from reaching a climax. The particular environmental factor in Michigan's native forests was fire. Mature white pine, such as those found in Hartwick Pines, has fire proof bark. A mature forest with large distances between trees and a lot of dead organic material lining the ground is a perfect place for fire to sweep through. Periodic fires would burn the

beech and maple saplings on the ground and preserve the white pine forests. Nowadays, the Hartwick pines are like an amusement park. There is a paved path that leads through the woods to make walking through the forest easy. Numbered plaques tell the story of Michigan's logging past and give brief overviews of ecological concepts. Because of its heavy tourism and Michigan Department of Natural Resources protection, Hartwick Pines no longer experiences the natural fires. Human intervention is needed to preserve the disclimax community and park rangers spend various afternoons weeding the beech and maple saplings that try and out-compete the pines.

I also had only crossed the Mackinac Bridge twice before this summer. Crossing the bridge is my favorite part about traveling to the Upper Peninsula. It is probably the budding urban planner in me that gets excited about the structures symbolic human dominance over nature. Personally, I just think that bridge itself is gorgeous and driving over it makes me feel like I am driving on top of water. In the middle of a trip across the bridge I often find myself spacing out and using my peripheral vision to look at both Lake Michigan and Lake Huron simultaneously. Seeing both of the lakes at once is an experience that can only be experienced at the Straits of Mackinac.

The word Mackinac intrigues me. It comes from an Algonquin Native American word Michilimackinac meaning "the jumping-off place" or "great road of departure." The Native American's trails ended at the Straits of Mackinac and crossing them was uncommon. European settlers used the area heavily for trade. In particular, fur trapping, fishing and overall beauty of the area attracted the settlers. Visions for the Mackinac Bridge were initially inspired by the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York in 1883. The visions lasted 74 years before the two peninsulas were actually bridged.

Ferry's carried out the purpose of transporting cars between the peninsulas all the way until November 1, 1957. The bridge spans 26,372 feet and is 522 feet tall. It can be seen looming over the Straits of Mackinac at least 4 miles South on Interstate 75.

Visiting Lake Superior was also integral to the change in my perception of Michigan this summer. I have always praised the Great Lakes but had never visited the greatest lake until I was 21 years old. My family cottage on Lake Huron enabled me to gain an early admiration for the Great Lakes. The cottage itself is extremely comfortable and could easily be mistaken for a house. It is supplied with Port Huron city water and has paved roads leading to it along with electricity year round. My family's access to the Great Lakes was largely enabled by human intervention. I was sailing Lake Huron by the age of 10. My absolute favorite activity in the world is to ride on the front of my family's 1969 Boston Whaler. Laying on the front with my head out over the water makes me feel as if I am flying.

Lake Superior is unlike any other lake in the world. I have not only visited Lake Superior for the first time this summer, but have visited the lake a total of four times in the last month. I am absolutely infatuated with it. My English professor, Keith, told me that there are only two roads and railways and maybe a few native villages between Lake Superior and the North Pole. I like to stand on the shore of the lake, look north and imagine no human life between the North Pole and me.

Lake Superior was named *le lac supérieur* or "Upper Lake" by French explorers in the seventeenth century. It is the largest freshwater lake in terms of surface area. The surface area itself is larger than the entire state of Maine. There is enough water in the lake to cover all of North and South America with a foot of water. It is easy to accept

these facts while standing on the edge of Lake Superior. There is absolutely nothing except expansive water when looking out onto the lake. The only place in Lake Superior that I have visited is Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

Visiting Pictured Rocks was instrumental in shifting my perception of Michigan. There is absolutely no other place on Earth like Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Calcium, iron, manganese and copper all drip down the crumbling layers of rock that form the cliffs and caves along the lakeshore. The minerals form dark black streaks, billowing red shapes, blue and green spots and white streaks in the rocks. It is definitely a place to have a camera handy.

Exposure to Lake Superior opened my eyes to a Michigan that I had been blind to before. I was trapped in the bubble of Southeast Michigan and the Metropolitan Detroit area. I had exposure to the Great Lakes through my cottage near Port Huron, but Northern Michigan is an entirely different experience. The lifestyle, terrain, vegetation, animals, food, and even the culture differ drastically from those found near my home in Royal Oak, Michigan. I was talking to my best friend, Danny, on the phone the other day and was making plans to visit him after my stay at the biological station is over. While chatting with him I slipped up and said “Yah” with an Upper Peninsula accent. He pointed it out to me and told me that it was time for me to come home. As new and exciting as Northern Michigan is to me, I prefer the urban landscape of Detroit. I like knowing that Northern Michigan is only a few hours away though if I need an absolute escape from the city. Hopefully the forest will always be waiting for me just a short drive North on Interstate 75.

Sources

Lake Superior – Wikipedia entry

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Superior>

Mackinac Bridge – Wikipedia entry

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