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Final Paper

From Superior to Ontario

My classmates are complaining about the thick fog and rainy weather as we hike toward Lake Superior, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I love swimming in the rain, and the fog matches my mood. We reach the lake, and even though it's sixty degrees, half of us wade in. Once I am numb from the cold, I start to enjoy the moment, the choppy lake making my classmates and me bob up and down like buoys. I lie back in the water and relax, just looking at the gray sky and thinking. After this swim in Superior, we are heading south to gawk at Tahquamenon Falls, but floating here I can't seem to get myself excited to see them. Instead, I keep thinking of the long drive that awaits me after we get back from the Upper Peninsula—south down the east side of the mitten, past Huron and down to Erie, back home to the concrete jungle below the thumb.

I'm sick of the fresh air up here, but I have been enjoying the mental retreat—being the psychologist for all my loved ones takes its toll. It sounds a little self-important, but I feel like everyone back home is falling apart since I've been gone. My mom just declared bankruptcy a few days ago. (I blame her lack of budgeting and her need to keep up with the Joneses for this.) My best friend Mike called me crying a few weeks ago to tell me he got a ticket for drunk driving and that he thinks he might have a drinking problem. (I blame his frat boy roommate who solves problems with alcohol for this.) My friend Liala called a few days after Mike to tell me that she was just diagnosed with panic disorder and was on Zoloft. (I

blame Liala's stressful job as a police officer for this.) I went on the Internet last week and found a suicide note in my friend Terrence's LiveJournal, and later found out from his best friend that he did indeed kill himself. (I don't know who is to blame for this.)

We arrive back at the BioStation from Tahquamenon Falls around ten P.M., and I am on the road to Detroit by 10:30. After a dark and uneventful drive, I make it home at about three A.M. My mom helps me carry my bags in and then I run through the kitchen to the back of the house.

"NiNi!" I squeak in a high-pitched voice. My cat, Neo (who I affectionately call NiNi), jumps off my grandpa's bed, runs over with a cheetah-like gait and meows appreciatively.

"Aww, kitty. I missed you!" I say stroking him, then picking him up and squeezing. "You are The One."

My mom and I head upstairs to our bedrooms and I set Neo down on my bed. He curls up and purrs contently as my mom calls from her bedroom.

"So, what time is the funeral tomorrow?" she asks.

"One o'clock," I call back.

"You want me to come with you?" she calls.

"No, it's okay. It's just going to be a memorial service. I'll be fine," I say.

"They're not going to have a viewing?"

"Well, he wrote explicitly in his note that he wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered in Lake Michigan."

My mom leans in the doorway and sighs. “Well, if I’m not coming with you that means I have to be at work at seven,” she says, yawning. “You want the light out?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I say. “Night.”

Lying in the dark I start to get creeped out, thinking about my dead friend being in some sort of parallel universe, possibly standing right across the room watching me. I’m an atheist, so I don’t believe in that kind of shit—but still, you never *truly* know. I cuddle against one of my body pillows and sigh, trying to think of something else. “Fuck,” I say. “I miss Deryck.” I know it’s too late to call him, plus he’s too far away to come over and comfort me anyway, so I put my arm over Neo and cuddle with him instead.

I take a deep breath and follow my friends into the church, the heavy wooden door creaking as it closes behind me. I step up four stairs and open another door, revealing the huge chapel. I start walking down the aisle when a scent in the air starts to make me nauseated. It’s a smell I’ve smelled before, one that I could never forget: embalming fluid. My stomach turns when I realize what the smell is and why I smell it.

“Oh my god...it’s open,” I whisper, seeing the lid of the casket pulled back. I was expecting an urn and a memorial service, and I am not prepared to handle this. My mind races. *Why would they lay him out? More importantly, why would they open it? He shot himself in the head, for fuck’s sake. All he wanted was to be cremated. What the hell is wrong with these people?*

“Liala, I can’t go up there,” I whisper to my friend, the distant outline of a corpse in the coffin making bile rise in my throat.

“You’ll be okay,” she whispers, pulling me along down the aisle so I won’t make a scene.

Liala doesn’t understand. I’ve never been to a funeral that went right. I went to my first one when I was eight-years-old. It was for my great-grandma, who died at a ripe old age. That was the first time I smelled embalming fluid, since the funeral home in Kentucky was hot and my ignorant Southern relatives insisted on laying the body out for three days. After the service at the cemetery, my family stuck around as the casket was lowered into the ground, and a green mat was put over the hole—they didn’t want to actually bury the body until we were gone. We were about to leave when my grandma remembered that she had to give something to the preacher. She handed the token to me and I started to run across the cemetery toward him. Being a kid, I didn’t realize there was a hole under the green mat, and I stepped on it and fell six feet down on top of the casket. My dressed shoes clanked against the metal as I screamed and tried to jump out. I haven’t been in a cemetery since I got pulled out of that grave.

The second funeral I went to was for a friend of my grandmother’s. We were at the viewing, and I was standing with my grandmother and one of her friends while looking down at the body. It was incredibly hot at this funeral home, even hotter than at my great-grandma’s service, so the smell of the embalming fluid was even worse. As we were gawking at the body, the fluid started to leak out of one of

the eyes. Of course, as a ten-year-old I didn't know any of this, so I started freaking out. "Granny, Granny," I said, pulling on my grandma's sleeve, "I think she's crying." My grandma, who had been talking to the other lady, looked up at the face, screamed and fainted. The other lady ran down out of the side door, and I stood there in shock, until the funeral director slammed the casket shut and took me to the drinking fountain.

The last funeral I went to was my grandma's. She died a few years ago, when I was eighteen. She wanted to be cremated, but of course, being melodramatic like they always are, my relatives insisted on having a viewing of the body beforehand. I tried to convince my mom that I wasn't going to go, but she told me that would make me a disrespectful brat, so I reluctantly drove the ten hours to Tennessee for the service. As soon as I walked into the funeral home, the smell turned my stomach. "Oh god, Maggie," I whispered to one of my relatives next to me, "that smell is making me sick. I can't go up there." She turned to me with an air of sympathy and shook her head. "Honey, there ain't no smell," she drawled.

Liala and her boyfriend Brett are in front of me as we approach the casket, and I don't try to get any closer. I know I can't handle looking down at the body, but I do it anyway, even though I'm not sure what makes me look, morbid curiosity or social obligation.

All I see is that Terrence doesn't look like Terrence, his face is more pointed—probably completely rebuilt because there are two undertakers guarding the casket telling everyone not to touch the body. His eyes are obviously sewn shut

because you can't see his eyelashes. His face is caked with powder, and his expression is angry. My face gets hot, my stomach contracts, and I turn away, walking quickly down the aisle, hoping no one notices. I push my way down the stairs and out the side door before throwing up behind a secluded tree.

I compose myself then walk around the side of the church to go to the front door and wait for Liala. My friend Eric is standing on the steps outside and notices my flushed face. "You alright?" he asks. I nod shakily. "I have some Xanax," he continues. "Would that help?"

I shake my head and he shrugs, pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

"I'll take one of those though," I say, pointing to the pack. He lights one for me and I inhale, exhaling a giant cloud of smoke loudly. "Better," I nod.

"I guess you can't really handle funerals, huh?" Eric asks, taking a long drag.

"It's the smell, you know, the embalming fluid. And how fake the body always looks. It makes me throw up every time."

"I'm glad I can never smell it," he says, shaking his head. "That really sucks though."

"Yeah," I sigh. "Most people cry at funerals—I vomit and chain smoke."

Eric laughs.

Liala comes out of the church looking worried. "Why'd you run out? You alright?" she asks.

"Yeah, I guess." I lie, not wanting to worry her.

"Just take a deep breath. It's all over now. Just try to remember good memories of him instead of that mess," she says. "Come on. I'll drive you home,

Brett can take my car.” Her feeble form of comfort is futile, and I realize there is only one person who can make me forget what I just saw. I light another cigarette as I resign myself to what I have to do.

“I have to go,” I shout to my grandpa, frantically throwing a suitcase into my trunk. “Tell mom I’ll be back tomorrow-ish.” He follows me out the door, yelling a feeble protest after me, but I am already in the car, music blaring, tires squealing as I gun it out of the driveway. I drive down I-94 through downtown Detroit, deciding to avoid the tunnel—I’ve seen enough darkness lately. As I drive up onto the Ambassador, it reminds me of the Mackinac, another suspension bridge that I crossed not 24 hours earlier.

As I reach customs, an officer waves me up to the booth, takes my birth certificate and driver’s license, and sternly asks, “What’s your purpose in Canada?” *Good question*, I think. I must be nuts to drive this far on a whim, and going through customs is making it hit me all at once. Still, I have to go.

“I’m visiting my boyfriend in Toronto,” I answer, hoping he won’t pull me over and search my car like they always do. He hands my identification back to me and studies me for a second. “Have a safe trip,” he says, opening the gate for me to pass. It was almost as if he knew I was having a shitty day and didn’t need the hassle.

I take a deep breath and start the drive through Ontario, pausing once for gas and to call Deryck for directions. I think a lot. I listen to entire soundtracks from Broadway shows. I end up getting lost because I am so into singing songs from

Spring Awakening. Through the entire first act I am lost in reverie, but when Mortiz shoots himself at the beginning of act two I am reminded of Terrence. When Melchoir sings “Left Behind” I start crying so hard I have to turn off the radio. Without the music to distract me, I realize I missed the exit onto the 403. It makes me cry harder and I feel like I’m totally fucked.

I pull over and call Deryck, who calms me down by telling me I can take highway 3 south to the 403 and be back on track. I finally make it into Toronto, the city of terrifying traffic circles, and find Deryck’s apartment building.

“I thought you were fucking with me when you called for directions here,” he says, laughing. “I guess you really need a vacation from nature, eh?”

“I need a vacation from everything,” I say, hugging him.

We go out to dinner and walk around the city for a while. I act “too touristy” for Deryck—pointing at all the landmarks and begging to go to the CN tower—so he decides to give me a driving tour of Toronto. I look out the window at all the buildings, and then I turn my head and notice a body of water.

“Is that Lake Erie?” I ask.

“No,” Deryck says, laughing. “That’s Lake Ontario.”

Is Toronto really that far east? I ask myself. Of course it is. You’re just completely out of it. Whatever. It doesn’t matter. This is perfect.

“We need to pull over at some beach,” I say.

“There’s Waterfront Park, it’s about fifteen minutes from here,” he says, completely confused.

“That’s fine,” I say. We follow a winding road into the park and then drive down to the beach. I run across the sand and toss my sandals off my feet.

“What’s gotten into you?” Deryck yells to me, watching me pull up my jeans and run toward the water. “Wait! What the hell are you doing?”

I run into the lake, turning back toward the shore to look at my bewildered boy.

“Don’t you get it?” I yell back to him. “This is the only Great Lake I haven’t swam in yet. It’s like providence. It was 24 hours ago that I was swimming in Lake Superior. How many people can say they’ve been in Superior and Ontario in the same day?”

I wade out further, and dive under the water, soaking the rest of my clothes. Satisfied, I walk back in, ringing my hair out, as Deryck stands there aghast.

“Nature has made you a nut,” he says, as we sit down on a park bench near the shore. “Really. What’s with you? I mean, I’m happy to see you, but where did you get the money to drive all the way here? How can you afford it?”

“I can’t,” I say. “I’m being financially irresponsible.”

“It’s not like you,” he whispers.

“Well, maybe I just missed you a lot, or maybe the Great Lakes cleansed my soul, or maybe seeing Terrence today made me realize that experiences are all you really have in life.”

We quietly laugh at how cheesy I sound, but then we stop for a minute, just staring out at the black water.

“So, which one is your favorite?” Deryck asks, breaking the silence.

“Which what?”

“Which Great Lake?”

I look around—the gorgeous city behind me, the gorgeous lake in front of me, the gorgeous boy beside me—and I smile.

“This one,” I say, grabbing his hand. “Definitely this one.”