I couldn’t look away. I was captivated by the way that the sand sparkled. The beach looked as if it had been coated with a layer of the glitter eye shadow that I wore in my preteen days. The rays of sunlight hit the sandy shore in such a way that light beams seemed to reflect back up toward the sky. As I looked out at the horizon, I could see the light blue of the sky meeting the dark blue of the lake as if they truly were two-dimensional and capable of meeting. The water glistened as sail boats bobbed through the frothy waves. As I took a relaxing deep breath, the wind coming off the lake seemed to make it easier to breathe. Pentwater took me away from all of the stresses and worries of reality. The feeling of sun over my entire body comforted me as I absorbed its warmth. The sound of children laughing as they splashed in the waves filled my ears as I walked along the shore and down the pier. Other bronze bodies were jumping up to spike the volleyball over the net down the way. The rest were peacefully snoozing away the day in bright-colored suits on nautical-patterned towels.

This small, lakeside town provided the perfect summer days throughout my adolescence. As the sun peered in the window of my bedroom in our summer cottage, I would wake up and change right into my polka dot bikini. There were only so many days in the summer, and not a minute could be wasted inside when the sun was shining outside. To prepare for the beach, I would slather myself in sunscreen while my mom filled a mini-cooler with drinks and grabbed a few towels from the large collection in our linen closet. My family and I would head down to the beach and pick an open plot of sand to claim as our territory for the day. We were surrounded by other beach-goers, but I hardly saw them as more than a faceless crowd. I was so wrapped up in my own relationship with Pentwater. I saw this place as mine.

Once my family had enough of the sun, we would pack up our site and drive back to our house to clean up. My mom and I would head downtown to go shopping through the small tourist shops, and my dad and brother would meet us later for dinner on Main Street. After dinner we would walk back down to the beach to get ice cream cones before the sunset. A crowd of tourists and locals gathered to snap photos as the last sliver of orange slipped beneath the horizon. When we got back to the house, we would start up a bonfire in our backyard and roast marshmallows until are eyelids grew heavy. Then we would head back inside to get some rest before we would do it all over again the next day. The season ran on a repeat loop but I loved how I lost track of what day it was here in contrast to the strict schedule I kept back in Metro Detroit. Even though the days repeated themselves, I left no impression on the people around me, so each new day I could be someone completely different. I didn’t live here. No one knew who I was, so I had no one to keep up appearances for either. It was refreshing to be in a place where my identity was malleable.

These summer days were perfect in my eyes. Throughout my middle school and high school years, all I did was fantasize about what it would be like to become a part of this town, but I was not much more than a tourist. I spent my weekends in Pentwater every summer since my family bought a house in the village when I was ten years old. My mom, dad, brother, and I would all hop in the car with the license plate reading “2LAKEMI,” and we would rush away from reality. We were constantly going, going, going- from soccer practices, to football games, to dance recitals, to piano lessons. It never seemed to stop. Then it did. As Friday afternoon came around, we all knew we were about to hit the pause button on our lives. The minute we got into the car, a calm swept over our bodies. I know it did mine at least. I put in my ear buds and clicked shuffle on my iPod, and the three-hour drive quickly flew by as the world I knew faded away. As we pulled into town, we drove around Pentwater Lake with the view of the Channel in the distance and saw the water tower ahead signaling that we had made it. Pentwater seemed to be an idealized summer weekend getaway. It sparkled and shined. This feeling of freedom from another life was all around me as I walked the streets.

I wished the weekends could last forever, or that I could be as lucky as the locals and actually live here full time. My second home sat opposite the local school that housed every grade K-12, and I’d look across the street and wonder what it would be like if I was a student there or a resident here. What if this was my reality? I let this idyllic place get the best of my imagination as I could see myself riding on the back of a convertible through the town during the annual homecoming parade, holding the hand of my small town hero, jock boyfriend as the fireworks went off on the 4th of July, and living out a simple existence in a town where everyone knew your name. As the end of August grew near, I knew it was time to say goodbye to no more than a fantasy. I used to wish on fallen eyelashes that summer could last forever. I never wanted to leave, but autumn leaves never failed to fall upon the town signaling that it was time for my family to return back to Metro Detroit. As we drove southbound down the freeway, I envied the locals who never had to know the feeling of looking into their rearview mirror and seeing paradise fade away into the distance.

When I was sixteen years old and a new summer began, my invisibility faded away as I started working at the Concessions on the beach in Pentwater. I had enjoyed the freedom that came with being anonymous, but I mostly liked it because each day it gave me the chance to define myself on my terms. With this new job, I had to have an identity but an identity of my choice. I had grown tired of playing the part of the invisible tourist. There came a point when I wanted to be someone, and I had a feeling that this summer would provide an opportunity for me to grow into myself. Perhaps, I was still stuck in a fairy tale world. I thought I was going to get this job in this magical place and play the part of the girl who rolls in from out of town and no one knows her name, but everyone wants to get to know her because she surrounds herself with mystery and intrigue. I had let this idyllic place get the best of my imagination. I was excited to integrate myself into the world of the locals. I could make friends and actually become a part of the place that I had grown so attached. I walked into my first day of work nervous, unsure of myself, yet hopeful. I wanted to be taken in with open arms. I wanted everyone to love me. I wanted to be someone new, but more so someone different than I was in my previous reality. I thought this job would be my second chance to define myself.

I quickly learned that working at the beach store wasn’t magical. Pentwater might have been my fantasy, but it was the locals’ reality. I didn’t get a chance to define myself as I quickly fell into an outsider role. Everyone already had their friends from school that worked here, and I always felt like the odd one out since everyone else worked during the week as well. Only being here on the weekends, I could hardly keep up with the small town gossip that was already hard to understand. Who was Courtney? And why did everyone care that she went out with Scott last week? It was a struggle to form bonds with people, who quickly labeled me as that rich, city girl who was trying to be apart of something that would never truly be hers. When I wasn’t at work, I walked around town with the burden of wondering if I was passing a past customer or one of my coworkers. I no longer felt comfortable being out in public. I felt eyes instead of sunlight all over my skin. The peace that I used to find while walking down the street by myself was nowhere to be found.

The year before I went off to college, I was still working at the beach store. Even though I had worked there for two years at that point, I still felt like the new girl since I worked far less days than my other coworkers who worked full time when I was only part time. However, this year would be different. I had decided to live in our summer home for the entire summer to work more hours and make more money. I was also seeking independence from my parents, and once again I could redefine myself but now as someone who could make it on my own. No longer a weekend getaway, I would quickly start referring to this little white house with the burgundy shudders as my home. The sand colored sectional against the sea foam blue wall would become my bed on nights when I didn’t make it into my room after getting back from work late. I would eat my meals in the kitchen that we called the fish bowl since windows wrapped around the room so that everyone could see in. I was becoming more visible and less the invisible tourist. My clothes were in drawers here now, and on rare occasions when I had to go back to my hometown, I would pack a suitcase to go back to my actual house. As this house transformed into my residence, Pentwater was becoming my reality. However, I began to miss feeling like someone would be there to notice if I passed out on the dark wooden flooring and died next to the sectional couch one night.   
 Slowly but surely, I started to inch my way into the inside circle. I made a few friends at work, but one friend in particular really opened the door to more. Melissa would probably say that she made me in that town, which is true to an extent. I was a nobody. She made me a somebody. She was my boss’s daughter. The male customers loved her. She not only had piercing aqua eyes and perfectly tanned long legs, but she had the confidence to make her irresistible even though she wasn’t a super model. We started talking about school, boys, friends, family, and eventually I realized that we were more than coworkers. We were friends. Our daily exchanges had gained depth as well as breadth. She started inviting me places with her, and I saw these invitations as opportunities to finally become the insider that I wanted to be. I never had plans, which made me an ideal option when she needed a companion for a day at the beach or a night out at a house party.

I thought this place full of beaches and cute, little shops would be enough to keep the locals happy year round, but they saw something different when they looked at this place that I saw full of wonder. I learned that the crowds of faceless beach-goers that I zoned out were seen as annoying intruders in their town. I thought the simple life on a repeat loop was relaxing, but they thought of Pentwater as boring. My place of escape was a place that they longed to escape from. Drinking was the best way to escape their boredom. All of my coworkers and most of the other locals I knew were often saying that they had nothing to do here, so they drank. The town was small. It was bland. What was here to do but get drunk? I thought of going to the beach, shopping on Main Street, getting a good night’s rest, but they didn’t see the town the way that I did. “Going to the Shack” meant going to Jim’s cabin to drink all night. “A bonfire with a few friends” was girls passing a fifth of Vodka around a fire in someone’s back yard.

The way that the sunlight hit the sand caused a blinding glare of light to travel up and kill my eyes. Not only was the sand blinding, it was burning my feet as I walked over to our usual seats by the volleyball court. The fresh air off the lake reeked of a dead fish down the way. Kids being knocked over by the waves were shrieking in a deafening pitch in the lake. The grizzly bear or guy – it’s debatable – a few feet over from me on the beach was snoring as loudly as any hibernating bear. Going to Work in a few hours offered no better escape. I was growing as cynical as a local. “Ugh. Tourists…” I grumbled as I walked into the backroom at work after an especially annoying customer would not leave the front of the store. Chris, a guy a few years younger than me, smirked as he overheard my mumbling. “What?”

“Well, you kind of are a tourist.” Tourist had a negative connotation in my head now, and I was appalled by the insult. He must have been able to tell, because he asked: “How do you think of yourself? As a tourist or a local?” I didn’t really know how to answer his question. I was both. We bought our summer home to escape from our busy life, but now this had become my busy life. I couldn’t sit on the beach undisturbed. Eventually, someone I had met in the past few years would approach me. I was no longer anonymous. The beach no longer had the same luster that it used too. I saw it through too many lenses at once. I could still see the faint sparkle through the eyes of the girl who first started coming here on weekends as a pre-teen, but I could also hear the annoying chatter of the tourists through the annoyed ears of the local.