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Essay 2

Hybrid Eyes

I couldn’t look away. I was captivated by the way that the sand sparkled as if it had been coated with a layer of the glitter eye shadow that I usually wore. The rays of sunlight hit the beach in such a way that light beams seemed to reflect back up toward the sky. The water glistened as the frothy waves washed ashore. As I looked out at the horizon, I could see the dark blue of the lake meeting the light blue of the sky as if they truly were two-dimensional and capable of meeting. The feeling of sun over my entire body comforted me as I absorbed its warmth. 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. Most of the people around me were smiling and laughing as they splashed in the waves. 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 neon-colored suits on nautical-patterned towels.

I walked along the sidewalk before the beach trying to spot a plot of sand untaken to claim as my own for the day. I finally found one and headed down onto the beach. I ditched the shoes when they started to slow me down, and my feet loved the warm exfoliation. When I made it to my destination, I took off my backpack beach chair and sat down my straw beach bag filled with sunscreen, sunglasses, and an orange striped towel. After I set up my site, I took a seat in my chair and pulled my phone from my bag. I realized when I saw my refection in the screen that I had forgotten to put on makeup and my hair was in disarray. Usually, this would have been the end of my adolescent life, but in Pentwater I was different. I didn’t live here. No one knew who I was, so I had no one to keep up appearances for. I didn’t care what these people thought of me. I had no reason to. I didn’t come to Pentwater to find guys (Although, I did love to admire their lean, bronze bodies as they played catch with a football.) or meet friends. I was here to relax. I was able to escape the superficial worries of what seemed to be another life. I was someone else- no longer that nerdy sophomore in high school. I could be anyone that I wanted to be. I had no identity here, and it was a refreshing change. I left no impression on the people around me, so each new day I could be someone completely different. One day of looking imperfect would not stick with me like it could in high school. This place offered the possibility of a different life, and at fifteen I wanted to be anyone but myself.

I have spent the 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 the hustle and bustle that Metro-Detroit forced on us Monday through Friday. We were constantly going, going, going- from soccer practices, to football games, to dance recitals, to piano lessons. It never stopped. But 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 could breathe in summer and feel happier. I wished the weekends could last forever, or that I could be as lucky as the locals and actually live here full time. The sunlight energized, the lake water refreshed, and the anonymity freed me.

When I was sixteen years old, my invisibility cloak 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, chipper fairy that frolicked down Main Street. There came a point when I wanted to be someone, and I had a feeling that this summer would be the one to change my life. Perhaps, I was still stuck in a fairy tale world. 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 was still 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 of walking down the street by myself was nowhere to be found. My job did not provide me with any friends to walk alongside but awkward encounters to walk around.

The year before I went off to college, I was still working at the beach store. Even though I had worked here for two years prior, I still felt like the new girl since the number of days I had worked were so few in comparison to my other coworkers who had worked full time when I was not. 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 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.

The beginning of the summer felt like any other summer though. I spent my days sun tanning on the beach like a tourist and my afternoons working at the store with the locals. I would go to work, do my time, drive home, fall asleep, wake up, and repeat the next day. The process became boring and lonely. Even for someone who had been an outlier in high school, I missed connecting to people. I felt closer to the place, but not closer to the people who made up the town. Eventually, I felt like I was going crazy without others around. On the days I didn’t work, I would find myself having conversations in my head with myself. I had a lot of time to write, but not a lot of inspiration. I was starved for companionship, for experiences to be shared with other people. I would go on Facebook and see pictures of all of the people I had left behind in my hometown. I didn’t miss the people exactly, but I missed having people there for me. I missed 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. She told me about how her ex-boyfriend hooked up with her best friend a couple of weeks after they broke up, and a lot about her estranged father and other family drama. 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 was kind of a tagalong, but she needed me just as much as I needed her.

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. 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. Plus, high school was a time of sober fun for me. I didn’t see the appeal in going out and getting wasted even though there was not much to do in my hometown either. Some kids had the same philosophy there as well, but here it seemed to be on a whole other level. “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. I was uneasy about joining in on this part of the nightlife at first, but I wanted to belong to this place to these people so badly. I started playing along like drinking was my thing too. I didn’t fool many people, but I tried to seem as cool as possible. “Being cool” seemed to mean taking as many shots as possible and still remaining upright so you could sloppily dance around in a smoke filled garage. I won’t lie. At times I truly enjoyed learning their culture as I felt like a part of the group, which is something I never really experienced in high school. I didn’t stick to one clique in favor of having friends in many different ones, but this summer being included and a part of something was nice. Even if “being included and a part of something” meant being chosen to be on the most popular guy’s beer pong partner.

In the mornings after these nights at the Shack, we would sometimes drive back to the beach before we had to go into work. The way that the sunlight hit the sand caused a blinding glare of light to travel up and kill my eyes. Not alone was the sand blinding, but 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. Work in a few hours later offered no better escape. I was growing as cynical as a local. I would most likely be swamped on a hot day like this in August with customers shouting: “Mint Chocolate Chip, Butter Pecan, and Grand Traverse Bay Cherry Fudge.”

“Cups or cones?” I would ask assuming that they meant size smalls.

“What?”

“Cuh- up or Co- own?”

They were all so out of it in their own little dreamland. I usually had to repeat myself more than once, because they were too focused on staring out the window to watch the color of the sky morph from light blue to lavender to pink to bright orange as the sun dipped into the lake. Bright orange used to be my favorite, so I could understand. But my patience was short. They were in no rush to make their order any easier for me to fill. It was their vacation now.

Sometimes customers would come in and want to chat. They would come into the store in their swim trunks and demand a small twist in a cone, which I would whip up and hand to them hoping that they would be on their way. I just wanted to sit in the back room at the food preparation table and read my book. Unluckily, one or two people a day would stand in the front in lick their ice cream and ask all sorts of questions. The most common one was “Do you love living here?”

“I only live here in the summer.”

“Where are you from?”

“West Bloomfield, Michigan… Metro-Detroit area.”

“What’s it like working here?”

“It’s really great. I can go to the beach and get some sun before I go into work. It’s a great job.” I lied. While the job did have its perks, I rarely had the energy to wake up in the morning, after working until 11 p.m. the night before, and head to the beach anymore before work in the afternoon. When I would get a few days off, I would try to enjoy the town, but it was different now. But not that different. Sometimes I fooled myself into thinking that this had become my hometown since I was invited to local parties, had clothes in a drawer, and could be recognized on the street by beach-goers, but I would never really be a local. Questions like this always reminded me of that fact. I had grown annoyed by the tourists too, but the funny part was that the locals would always think of me as a tourist.

“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. Becoming a local is not a possibility, but I cannot put my tourist sunglasses back on again either.