

Standing in the Middle of the Hemisphere

The old sentinel pine across the lake was gone. That's what I noticed first. I have no idea why it was called a sentinel pine, but as long as I can remember it had stood there and that's what Dad had always called it. It had been a huge red pine, though I guess most people around here call them Norways. But whatever, it stood a good seventy-five feet tall. Much taller than the surrounding cedars and birches and stuff. I can't imagine why it wasn't cut when the area was logged.

And now it was down, laying in the lake, its naked black branches waving for help as it sank slowly into the muck.

It had been five years since I'd been to the cabin last. In the interim there had been school, a Ph.D., an engagement, lots of things, but the old place looked pretty much like I'd remembered it. Dad had built a new stone walk to the garage -- you know, he needs to have his projects -- but everything else was the same.

Joan came down the trail from the car and stood beside me in the autumn-brown grass on the shore. A red squirrel scolded us from the big oak tree behind us.

"Beautiful, isn't it," I said.

"Gorgeous," she agreed, looking at her wristwatch and then holding it up for me to see too.

"Yeah, I know. We'll go soon."

"Really, Honey, it *is* pretty, and I hate to be a rag, but if we're going to get to civilization in time to get a decent room, then we'd better go now."

Actually, she didn't hate to be a rag at all, it was one of her favorite tactics, but in this case she was right. There really wouldn't be any place to stay between the cabin and Green Bay, and that was quite a haul. I just hadn't been thinking about it.

Perch Lake Road is a lane-and-a-half sand track that the CCC laid down on top of an old railroad right-of-way in the thirties. The Wisconsin & Michigan, I think. It used to be lined with tall white birches, but every spring the county men grade a little deeper, catching a few more roots, and so now, as I pulled the Plymouth into the ruts, only a few of the big trees remained, leaning like drunks over the cedar swamp.

The car floated and swayed through the bumps and hollows of the narrow road and neither of us said anything. At the stop sign I turned left onto the asphalt, rumbled across the Milwaukee Road tracks -- they were rusted and unused now -- and swung south onto 141.

"I didn't like it," Joan announced, suppressing a yawn.

"Like what?" I asked.

"The college." She pushed the sunvisor over against the side window and squinted beneath it at the jack pine woods gliding past the car. "It was so . . . rustic," she explained.

"Oh." We had spent the morning and the previous day looking over Northern Michigan University at Marquette where I had been offered an assistant professorship. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind either, but I wasn't in much of a position to be picky.

It had been Dad's idea that we stop at the cabin. I hadn't really even thought about it. We were in upstate New York meeting Joan's folks for the first time when I got his call. I had just gotten done with summer school, finishing up my degree, and Joan and I were going to spend a few days up on Lake Chaplain at her folks' place and then spend a couple more driving over the top of the lakes to Marquette. Then down to see Mom and Dad — they hadn't met Joan yet either.

"It'll only be a few miles out of your way," Dad said. "Why don't you stay there for a couple days before you come home? The key's hanging under the eave of the shed, remember?"

And so that's what we had planned on doing, but the water pump crapped out in Canada and we ended up spending those two days in Blind River, Ontario. Chrysler isn't so big up there; I guess they had to get the new pump all the way from Ottawa.

Anyway, I called the people at NMU and told them we'd be a couple days late and I wanted to call Mom and Dad and tell them the same thing, but Joan said she needed to get back to Chicago and get things together for the wedding. So we just decided to spend an afternoon at the cabin and push on to Illinois that same day, or at least by the next day.

Coming down from the Upper Peninsula, I slowed way down as we drove through Pembine. The little town wasn't much different than the last time I'd seen it, really. The ranger station was boarded up; they must have consolidated districts or something. And Swede's Place was now Tully's Place. Tully had used Swede's "Place" sign and the lettering styles didn't quite match. Everything else was the same though. Those dark red hopper cars still rusted away on the siding outside the crumbling station, just as they had for years, and the neon sign still glowed feebly on the weathered false front of Caroline's Tap. The place hadn't seen a fresh coat of paint in at least the twenty-odd years I could remember.

I pointed out some places of interest from my past to Joan.

"That's where the Algonquin Hotel used to be," I told her. "We'd go in there sometimes for supper when I was a kid. I always got grilled cheese. It burned down about twelve, thirteen years ago, right in the middle of deer season."

"That's really interesting, hon. Do you know where I put my sunglasses?" She rummaged in the glove compartment. "I can never keep track of the goddamn things."

I considered pointing out the park where the Firemen's Picnic was held, the post office next to where Ingram's store used to be, the Pembine Warehouse that sold everything from watermelons to goat feed to used paperback thrillers. I could have told her about how the True Value hardware guy had been arrested for all the cabin break-ins when he tried to sell the sheriff a stolen outboard, or how the county supervisor's kid had to be sent to the detox center in Green Bay, but she hadn't found the sunglasses yet, so I didn't say anything.

Sometimes I really wondered how I'd ended up with Joan. I'd look over at her in the passenger's seat, at her ears, her hands, her tawny eyebrows, and I'd wonder what the hell she was doing in my beat-up Plymouth. Maybe she wondered too, but I don't think so. No much, not then, anyway.

I had met her at Mark's place, at a party, when I was still an undergrad at Chicago Circle. The Trustees were engaged in a big campaign to get everyone to call it the University of Illinois at Chicago, but when I was there it was still Circle. Joan was a freshman at U of C. Mark had met her one snowy afternoon at the Art Institute and had been impressed with her looks. It takes nothing more with him. He'll invent everything else to his satisfaction and most people, after they've been around him long enough, will actually start to live his fiction.

I don't have that power of personality, and I guess I don't really approve of how Mark uses it, but when things were going slow sometimes I wasn't above helping him out with one of his leftovers. Joan was one of these, I suppose. I never really thought about it like that before.

We stopped at Lil's Truck Stop for supper. On the map, the little town it's in is a blue circle labelled Beecher, but basically it's just Lil's and Kelly's store across the highway. Joan picked out a table over in the corner by the jukebox after first streaking her fingers across the formica and holding them up suspiciously in front of her face. A little kid in a Packers sweatshirt was standing on his toes next to us, peering to see the top row of songs on the jukebox, rapping his quarter on the glass.

"They used to have great milkshakes here, Joan, and they always used to serve pop in bottles. I mean they never had one of the machines." She didn't raise her head from the menu and I just kind of petered out.

"That's great, John," she finally responded, flipping the vinyl page.

I rubbed my eyes and didn't reply. I looked out the window at the semis moaning by, rattling the screen door, headed someplace, going fast. Maybe that was it. Maybe when we knew where we were going some of this would work out.

I remember this one evening with Joan. It was during one of those weekends we used to have. I'd transferred out to NIU for my doctorate, Joan was still pissing around with art history at Chicago, and on Friday nights I'd drive in from Dekalb for the weekend. She had a place on Lakeshore Drive then, seventh floor. I remember it bothering me that Daddy was supporting her all the way from Boston

in a better style than I'd ever be able to, but after awhile I just didn't think about it anymore.

But this one night, we'd taken a blanket, a jug of gin and tonics, and some Dixie cups up on her roof and were just talking and looking at things, at each other. Behind us and to either side was the city, tall, somber buildings watching us with a patchwork of lighted window eyes. And in front of us was the lake, shimmering and infinite, tiny waves marching in from Michigan, crushing themselves uselessly against the breakwater.

"Did you have Legos when you were a kid?" Joan asked without warning. The topic had been politics or something.

"Yeah," I answered. "I used to build spaceships. What brought that up?"

Joan turned and grinned, her eyebrows raised, her wide eyes sparkling in the lights from the next-door building.

"Nothing," she finally said, "just trying to be spontaneous."

"You're doing well," I laughed. My arm was tight around her shoulders, squeezing away the chill of the April night and the fingers of her free hand idly traced little paths of warmth up and down the back of my hand.

"I didn't get any Legos when I was little," Joan murmured. "They gave me dolls and latch-hook rug kits instead, but I always got into my big brother's and chewed on the blocks so they wouldn't fit together right."

I laughed again, and then I felt Joan's lips on my ear, her hair on my neck, and her voice saying, "And do you remember how Legos fit together, John?" And then falling backwards on the blanket, my Dixie cup skidding sideways, gin glistening on black tar.

"I just love it up here," Joan said later, after a drowsy silence. "You can see everything."

"Kind of puts it all in perspective doesn't it?" I said.

"What do you mean?" She snuggled closer and a plane skimmed low over the lake heading for Meigs Field, its anti-collision lights flashing like Joan's question mark. What did I mean?

"I don't know, it's just that up here it looks like a model, a fake, like a Lego project. It's easy to understand that it's not real, that it's not what life is really about, when you're looking at it from this point of view."

"I don't understand," said Joan, and that was all. Her hand dropped to her lap and mine went cold on her shoulder. She refilled her cup and the conversation was over.

Down the shore at Meigs the plane touched down and taxied out of sight. Maybe its lights were still flashing, but I couldn't see them.

"What's the matter, Joan?" I asked.

She eyed me over the top of the menu. They weren't the wide sparkling blue eyes I had taken back to my apartment after Mark's party. They were hard gray slits, brimming with cynicism.

"I just can't believe you're so *into* all this," she said, and made a sweeping gesture that seemed to take in the diner, the town, the whole state. "You're worrying me, John. I thought this was just going to be a nice little vacation, but you're actually thinking of *living* here. Aren't you!" Her voice cracked at the end of that, and big tears began to well up in the corners of her eyes, once again big and blue.

I sat there for a minute playing with my water glass, trying to get oriented.

"Well, why not?" I asked, still not really up to speed.

"Why not?" she echoed in a barely controlled undertone. "There's nothing here. Nothing that we've known or shared or experienced. Don't you remember, John? Everything that we have between us was forged in Chicago, in the city. You can't just transplant that into the wilderness and expect it to grow. It'll only wither up. You're *making* it wither up!"

"I don't understand," I mumbled. I was still clearly behind Joan somewhere in the conversation, and I was clawing my way through something thick and murky to catch up. "I never really thought about the city much," I continued. "I mean, I never really thought I was part of it. Stuff like Mark's parties and the weekends we spent at your place, that was all just temporary, just transitory. This is what's real, Joan. Not just here, I mean, not just northern Wisconsin, but . . . *outside*. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"No! I only know that I hate this, all of it!" she answered, quick. And then, after a dramatic pause of a second or two, she pushed her chair back into the jukebox and dashed for the door. I could see her through the dusty Venetian blinds pounding on the window of the Fury and then leaning against the fender, facing the highway when she realized I had the keys.

The little Green Bay fan was still at the jukebox, and as I brought my gaze back into the diner, I saw him staring at me wide-eyed, his quarter clenched fiercely in his grubby fist. I stuck a couple singles under the A1 bottle and walked out into the gravel parking lot.

The first summer Joan and I were apart — she was in Europe with her parents and I was working third shift at Micro back home in Freeport — she sent me this photo her mother had taken of her. It just showed her standing on the Kurfurstendam in West Berlin, grinning for the camera, a pair of sunglasses holding back her golden bangs. Behind her, all around her actually, were crowds of people — Berliners, tourists, just hundreds of people. The picture was grainy and over-exposed.

On the back, Joan had written a line from one of her favorite songs in red marker, something from some English band I can't remember now. The line was, "In the city there's a thousand things I want to say to you." I'd never really thought about what she'd meant.

We left the diner forty-five minutes ago, and Joan hadn't said a word since, choosing instead to stare fixedly out of the window. The little towns came and went like marks on a ruler as we tooted south on old 141. Amberg, Wausaukee, Middle Inlet, Crivitz, Pound, Coleman. I'd always liked this stretch when I was younger. On the way up to the cabin it meant we were almost there, and on the way back home the towns were close enough together that we really seemed to be making progress, even though it was actually the slowest part of the trip. It wasn't like that now. Joan still looked out the window, her elbow on the armrest, her hand in her sandy hair. No progress here.

South of Coleman, but before Lena, on the right side of the road, there's one of those little turnouts that the state maintains with a brown sign that says "geographical marker." Usually the signs say "historical marker" like the one a little further south about the Great Green Bay-to-Madison Auto Race, but this one was different. I'd never stopped at it, and as far as I can recall, neither had Dad, in all those years. Maybe he and Mom were doing it now, now that Steve and I were gone.

I hit the blinker and veered onto the gravel. The marker itself was just a little triangle of granite stuck in the dirt, flanked by a carved-up picnic table and a lidded green trash barrel. Three big spruce trees brooded over the back of the marker to remind you that you're still in the North Country, but a beanfield lay behind the trees. It had been in sunflowers the last time I'd been by, I think.

Joan gave me a searching look as the car rolled to a stop. It was the first I'd seen of her in miles, and I could tell that she'd been crying into the window.

"I want to see what it says," I said. "It could potentially be more interesting than the pop bottles at Lil's." I smiled broadly and was relieved to get a little snort out of her that didn't seem to shelter any animosity.

I unfolded myself from the car and stretched a bit, looking across the beanfield into the low September sun. I kicked a bottle cap up to the base of the granite marker, and then squatting to pick it up, read the brass plate. Its inscription was simple, something like, "This monument, lying at latitude 45° North, is exactly halfway between the Equator and the North Pole." Imagine that, in a Wisconsin beanfield. Somehow I would have thought it would have been a lot further south, like in Tennessee or somewhere.

I must have been looking at that rock for a long time, because I heard the car door open and then Joan was standing beside me.

"Well, we're here, dear," I said, pointing at the marker. "We don't have to unpack until after we eat if you don't want to."

A sardonic half-grin from Joan, one of her favorites.

"You're here, John, just you. I'm still on my way home." There was a long pause, during which I considered the blue-gray of the granite, the sighing of the traffic behind me and the iciness of Joan's tone. Then she continued, "You can come if you like."

I took a pause of my own, drawing in a slow, deep breath like you do before you jump into cold water. “But you really don’t care much do you, Joan?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe not,” Joan said, with utter calm as the water closed in over my head. And then her arm was around me, her soft body was molded firmly against mine, and I could feel her warmth through my sweatshirt.

You know the feeling when you’ve got one foot in a boat and one foot on the dock, how once it starts to drift it doesn’t matter how hard you try to keep your legs together you just know you’re going to fall in? I pulled Joan closer, tighter, and she just kept drifting away, inevitably.

I turned my attention back to the monument. It seemed vitally important somehow at the moment. Why was it on this particular highway? Surely there wasn’t a marker on every road that crossed the 45° line. And there I stood, in the middle of the hemisphere, pondering, while everything fell apart.

— Craig J. O’Neill