

## Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water

Almost every summer you and your family travel to the Wisconsin Dells and take boat rides on the Wisconsin River. Stories bob and sink in the rivers of our lives. Even the Wisconsin River. You keep your own personal stories of the river close to you, close like your high school graduation ring, bright and blue as the sea. Yet not every story is bright. All stories, no matter how dark, glisten with lessons, and rivers—timeless emblems of time passing, time refusing to stand still—harbor many lessons. One of your rivers, the Wisconsin River, has much to teach you. So be aware. Think back. Right now. Admire the river and listen to the water's endless susurrus, voices of the past resurfacing, beauty redefined, your family reexamined. Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past.

How can you understand the outside world if you're not willing to understand yourself?

\*\*\*

Snaking through a dell of cliff cudweed, Lapland azalea, maidenhair spleenwort, and round-stemmed false foxglove, the Wisconsin River captivates people from all across the world. The longest river in the state, measuring 435 miles and stretching from Lac Vieux Desert in Michigan to Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin River once emptied into the Mississippi River in a frenzy of white-water rapids and foaming maelstroms. Dams were later erected, slowing the river. Wisconsin residents and summer tourists can now safely cruise through the water and take pictures of the Dells' sandstone cliffs and rock formations: Romance Cliff, High Rock, Black Hawk's Profile, Alligator's Head, Giant's Shield.

You marvel at all of this whenever you visit the Dells. The trees, the plants, the water, the rocks. They occupy a place in your mind that can never be destroyed. They are untouchable. Eternal because they are endearing.

And yet you know better.

You know better.

\*\*\*

A Duck emerges from a thicket of northern and southern pine trees and oak savanna. During World War II, GMC Truck Engineering constructed a single six-foot by six-foot amphibious cargo and soldier truck for the Army. Better known as the Duck, the DUKW353 passed inspection, and before the end of 1940, a limited supply of Duck vehicles were manufactured. The Ducks carried American troops across the Atlantic and onto the beaches of Normandy, mines erupting into craters of death.

Many of the surviving Ducks live in the Dells. Usually poor college kids, the Duck drivers recite the same speech during each preplanned trip through the river. While you anticipate the fun fact about the *invisible* ferns growing in the cool gorge adjacent to the river and while you anticipate the moment the driver, with eyes closed, descends Suicide Hill, you relish in the speech. It creates the illusion nothing has changed, that you and your family have remained immune to the adverse effects of life and time.

\*\*\*

Having eaten a group of tourists, the Duck growls and screeches at the edge of the river. You sit near the back and hold on as the vehicle, smelling of gasoline, plunges into the river, water rising and foaming. A cool mist coats your glasses in speckles, and a cold wave jumps into the vehicle and crashes into your shoes. While the summer sun roasts on your face and on your arm, your shoes squeak and squawk like bedraggled pelicans on the wet floor.

Meanwhile, the Duck drifts down the river and passes the roar and slap of motorboats cruising through the current. Their wakes tilt the vibrating Duck. But the amphibious creature glides onward, past clouds of mosquitoes swarming the water, past hawks and bald eagles circling the canopy.

Grandma Lolly vacationed with you in the Dells back in the early-2000s. She pinches your ears and kisses your cheeks and says how much she loved you. One summer, aged seven, you wear a brown T-shirt and relax in the passenger seat up

front. Grandma sits near the back row with Jessica, aged nine. A choker hugs Jessica's throat, her purple nail polish shining in the light. She wears a pink tank top. Grandma wears a blue T-shirt and a golden cross, her arm wrapped around Jessica as they smile for a picture. Mom takes the picture. Next to Mom, Dad gazes at the water and at the tree roots peeking through and hugging the sandstone cliffs, porous parapets etched with niches, the homes of birds and tree roots. Meanwhile, you watch the driver flip and yank the switches and levers next to the mammoth steering wheel, then you look out at the trees and the soft blue sky, brushed in white clouds.

The Duck continues to glide through stable waters, through a paradise beyond life and time's cruel touch.

\*\*\*

Cambrian sandstone precipices, tributary canyons, and rocky gorges surround the river. Often found in the roots of oak and tamarack trees and often used as an ingredient in soda, tannic acid has tinted the river brown. Scattered beaches sprawl toward shallow waters. On the beaches children splash and sprint, sunbathers lie in the sand, and teenagers climb and jump into the water from the top of the surrounding cliffs. In collapsible chairs older men and women fling their fishing lines at the river and wave at the tourists on the boats gliding past.

How picturesque. Your memory of the place is like a canvas splashed with iridescent watercolors. You cherish the images. In your imagination the images are behind a glass pane, impervious to fire or ice or water or time. The images cannot, will not, change.

Though they have changed. The river itself has changed. You have changed. You, along a great many others, have erected in your mind a glass pane to protect the past, treating it like a relic that must never be touched. And yet sometimes glass panes break, and shards fall into the rivers of the past. What you do with the shards is up to you. Pick them up and learn from their rough edges. Or let them sink like shooting stars. Bright. Untouched. Forgotten.

\*\*\*

A teenager at the time, you sit near the front of the Duck. The driver steers the wheezing boat closer to cliff called Hawk's Bill. The top of the cliff juts and curves from the rock wall like the head of a hawk breaking free from the sandstone. The young driver lets the Duck coast while others snap pictures. The man in front of you looks at the rock formation and bends his head in confusion.

The Duck driver mentions that Hawk's Bill dons the cover of the summer 1964 edition of *Life* magazine. You later learn the magazine's motto: "To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other, and to feel. That is the purpose of life." Your imagination transforms Hawk's Bill into a marvel. If your gaze could feast upon the landscape, it would swallow Hawk's Bill first before quaffing the river dry. While you visualize the cliff as a screeching hawk, the confused man in the seat in front turns to the driver, and remarks, "So there wasn't anything better to photograph that summer?"

When the Duck passes the cliff, you glance at the man and shake your head in disappointment. Sometimes people see what they want to see; sometimes people expect too much from what they refuse to see; and sometimes people fear the future will steal the moment's sense of peace. They fear everything will change by the time they reflect on life, strung together not in years but in snapshots, perhaps in the photos your fellow Duck riders are taking right now.

Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past.

Maybe *time* and *change* share the same core meaning. Maybe to experience life involves embracing change. Maybe to appreciate time and change involves questioning the existence of perfection. Maybe your scenic trips on the Wisconsin River represent something more important than familial joy. What do you think?

You turn away from your family. And drown your senses in the landscape.

\*\*\*

In 2008, a tempest crashed into paradise.

Downpours raged on for days, beating against the trees and pounding against the surface of the river. Connected to the river, Lake Delton rose in fury and swelled against Newman's Dam. A breach appeared imminent. Chances of flooding brought

panic to those living near the river, lake, and dam. People prepared sandbags and raced to the lake.

Then it happened. Lake water and rainwater rushed over the shoreline near the adjacent highway, barreled down a grassy hill, devoured the trees and soil, and plummeted into the Wisconsin River in a cascade almost 200 feet wide. The stretch of land separating the river from the lake collapsed under the weight of the storm. The entire lake spilled into the river. Waves ricocheted against sandstone cliffs, uprooted trees, and stormed the beaches like armadas of Ducks careening in the air, in the underbrush, in the darkness of early-morning.

Hours passed. About 600 million gallons of water washed away, dragging three houses downstream, destroying the foundation of two others, damaging the nearby highway. The river was a muddy expanse of annihilating water.

Residents and government officials came together. The highway was repaired, the dam rebuilt to withstand more torrential downpours. Including marooned and crippled ships, flotsam was removed, the lake refilled.

By next year, all appeared well. Hawk's Bill appeared undamaged, posing at the bright blue sky. Yet a new sense of normalcy emerged from the flood. Time moved on. Life itself evolved, lessons learned and the Wisconsin River, a new place altogether. You came back to the river for vacation before service crews could replenish the lake. Dumbstruck, you stared at the wasteland. Then you turned toward your family. If life and time can molest a cornerstone of your childhood, what could happen to the people you love?

\*\*\*

Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past.

Eleven years following the vacation Grandma Lolly took with you when were seven, she succumbed to bone cancer. Dementia weakened her, the river of memory and consciousness having become a wasteland behind her vacant eyes. She moved into an apartment she always wanted in town, but instead of living there, she ended up dying there.

Before her passing, her wrinkled cheeks sagged and bottom lip drooped onto her pillow. Stricken with fatigue, she never awoke whenever you, Mom, Dad, or Jessica stopped by. You could never have understood the agony in Grandma Lolly's mind during her last several months on Earth. You tried not to think about it—the imminence of her death and the grief to come.

Before she moved into her ideal apartment, she watched TV in the hospital. Your aunts and uncles visited her every day. One afternoon you, Mom, Dad, and Jessica stopped by. Grandma's head swayed with languor, her attention shifting from the white walls to the flurry of color and murmur of voices from the TV. Bundled in a white blanket in a bulging lounge chair, she looked into your eyes as you knelt before her. She could no longer pinch your ears to show you how much she cared for you. Still, you say, "I love you." She blinked and told you she loved you, too. Months later, she was buried across the street from where Dad still works. He visits her grave regularly.

Following Grandma Lolly's death, Dad suffered extreme back pain. The doctor told him his spinal canal contained herniated and squashed discs, caused by a lifetime of intense physical labor. He scheduled a day to have his back realigned. The surgery involved the insertion of a back brace, or intervertebral cages, onto his spine and the removal of the sore discs. He recovered, but his full mobility never returned.

Mom's mobility has suffered too. Diagnosed with a rare neurological disease called complex regional pain syndrome, or CRPS, Mom experiences burning and tingling all over her body. CRPS causes the neural pathways connecting the brain to the central nervous system to misfire, resulting in chronic pain. No cure yet exists for CRPS patients, but treatments do exist: technological advancements in pain management, more notably, a neural stimulator.

Unable to bend the fingers on her right hand—her dominant hand—she no longer can cook or write the same way she once did. Unable to stand for long periods of time, she sometimes limps and sways to catch her balance, her left foot sporadically going numb; once, her leg gave out in the living room and she fell face

first into the carpet, scraping her legs. Unable to hurry from place to place on foot, she avoids stairs and general inclines, fearing her legs may spasm or a stabbing pain may ride up her thighs or up the small of her back. She even stopped going to her physical therapy appointments; talking about the pain and enduring the physical exercises in front of the therapist drove her to tears. Jessica takes her to see a specialist in Bettendorf, Iowa, a little over an hour away from your hometown of Dubuque. But the specialist can help only so much.

Now married, Jessica left home and graduated college with degrees in Nursing and Biology. You seldom see her, let alone speak to her. You wonder whether she will have children and, if so, whether she will take them to the Dells to ride the Ducks.

But what about you? When will you leave your parents' house? Will you have children? Will you take them to the Dells to ride the Ducks? To have their shoes soaked? To share the story of how Lake Delton overflowed? What might you say? Maybe something like this:

Kids, look at the canopy, the ferns, the fish, the swimmers, the rippling waves, the sandstone walls, the rock formations, the Ducks. Remember the history of the Ducks, remember the men they carried. Laugh at the drivers' jokes; they recite the same speech every day; for the love of God, give them some credit. Appreciate what you have; you might not always appreciate what you have, but try to anyway. You might forget some parts of the vacation, as I had when I came here with Great-Grandma Lolly, your grandparents, and Aunt Jessica, but try to remember what you are feeling right now.

Fill your life with love and understanding.

Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past.

You will uncover much about life, about time, about yourself as you learn more about where you have been. Whenever I gaze at the Wisconsin River, I think of my family and how brutal and joyous life can be.

What do I see when I look outside?

Do I see nature or something deeper within myself?

