

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

Think about an ordinary outing—a meal, a walk, a trip to the store—that unexpectedly reminded you of another time in your life.

Shiny

Everybody is shiny tonight.

Tizi and I are having dinner at the Glenwood, a restaurant across the road from Portage Lake. The temperatures are in the low 90's. Up here there's not much air conditioning. This restaurant used to be a house—a cottage, probably—facing the lake. The wide front porch, built for breeze, has been fitted with screens and transformed into the front dining room, on the back wall of which the house's front door and windows open to the inner dining room.

We're inside. Tizi has a window, I do not.

Every server coming from the kitchen has a sweaty glow. They wear white shirts that must have been crisp early in the evening but are now damp and slack. Despite the heat, the servers convey ease and pleasure. They shine and they smile, and they mean it.

When our server recites the specials of the evening he leans forward and declaims in a flat voice. He is tall and fleshy and looks like he might have played football in high school. It is a studied performance we must not interrupt.

Tizi, who in casual conversation celebrates local food of Northern Michigan, does the improbable: she orders crabcakes. Are you sure? I ask. Where is there a crab around here, I wonder. For me, the whitefish. Any sauce and accoutrement, I request of our server, leave them off. Just the fish, please.

This up-north heat reminds me of when I was a kid. The hot days we stayed next to Lake Missaukee. No one worried about ozone then. Canada was not ablaze, as it is now. Days under perfect blue sky my mother slathered Coppertone lotion on me and my brother; nights she squirted Solarcaine on our sunburns. We lay in bunks in the back of trailer, like boiled vegetables. Complaining, It's hot, it's hot. And my mother saying, Just go to sleep.

"That server," I say to Tizi now, "reminds me of my Aunt Alva."

"Which?"

"The one with the tattoo on the side of her leg."

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Tizi rolls her eyes. And she should. Aunt Alva was a dignified church lady who happened to make glorious pies. I amuse myself, picturing a tattoo on her leg.

“It’s the hair,” I say, “up like that. And a certain hollowness in her cheeks.”

“That woman could make a pie,” Tizi says.

Her crabcakes come in a puddle of sauce. She calls to our big server, who looms over her, apologizes, and takes them back. When they return you can see their soggy bottoms. Oh well, she says. My whitefish, on the other hand, is the thing itself. You can’t improve on a good piece of fish just out of the lake. Don’t even try.

There’s booming laughter at the table next to us. Everyone in the restaurant, despite the heat, is happy. All night shimmering women squeeze by us, going to the restroom. Why? I say to Tizi. The restaurant must have an effect.

No, she says.

The pies, her cherry, my mixed berry, are perfect. While we eat, darkness falls. A hundred miles north, the five-mile Mackinaw Bridge has already disappeared in the smoky haze moving south.