It’s late July and the warm summer air fills my lungs. There is something about the fresh scent on Saddle Lake that makes me feel like a calmer, milder version of myself. I love Michigan at dusk. The tree line slices the multicolored sun in half and a bright reflection of the pleasant pinks and oranges bounce off of the motionless water to meet my eye. There is a subtle hint of burning timber in the air that relaxes every muscle in my body and soothes my mind. Most families have left the lake to go in for dinner or rest, and everything is still. The only ripples in the water come from our own boat the “Smoker Craft”. I’ve always thought it ironic that my grandparents, the only people in my family who smoke, decided to buy this particular boat. My grandparents bought our cottage in 1980 as a summer retreat from the city. It has since been host to teenage ragers, birthday parties, countless Christmases, Thanksgivings, family reunions, and most importantly, some of the best memories I have experienced in my seventeen years.

I was born in Chicago, Illinois and have been raised in the same house on the Southside my whole life. But I have grown up in Michigan. When I was young, the cottage was a place to learn. I learned how to swim in the clear waters, patiently fish by the muggy swamps, drive on the open roads, and live symbiotically with the world around me. As I have grown older these waters have transformed into a location of deeper reflection. I often remember times past, running around with my grandparents and cousins. My grandfather is a big reason why I feel so connected to this place. And when he passed that connection only grew deeper. I remember sitting on his lap on the swing outside, sucking on a cherry tootsie pop that could barely fit in my mouth, while he recounted the time he was shot in the chest by a Native American on one of his many very dangerous adventures. Or one thanksgiving that I was so small, the turkey was bigger than me and he sung a song about it titled “Gobble-Lanna”.

Since as early as I can remember, the cottage has been a gathering place. Friends and family came together, away from the city hysterics, to relax and simply enjoy each other’s company. Many sleepless nights and eventful days with the people closest to me have led to irreplaceable experiences that have shaped me into the young women I am today. My ideals, beliefs, understandings, and opinions all have some root in my experience there.

As we pull into the pier I hear familiar sounds of the dogs playing in the water, my aunts and uncles sharing stories on the deck, and my grandmother announcing that supper is ready. The familiarity fills with me with an overwhelming sense of comfort and satisfaction that I know this will always be a safe haven, a paradise in my reach, a place with my signature written in all the crevasses and a utopia for my thoughts to wander and memories to flourish.