

This Beautiful Place

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Life is short, though I keep this from my children.

Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children.

Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

- Maggie Smith, Excerpt from Good Bones¹

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>



Underneath the summer sun we lay, desperate for a place to call our own. Sure we had bedrooms, playrooms, and swingsets, places to separate from the hardness of childhood, which we'd soon find out was not hard at all, but we wanted a language. We wanted rules and we wanted to *be* the ones ruling. We trekked to the edge of our backyard where there lay a line of pine trees and shrubs separating ours from the neighbors. Here it was shaded, it was hidden by the pine trees and oak scattered around our own backyard. It was our place. My sister peeled back the arm of the biggest pine tree, revealing an opening that could fit two children, though my sister was tall and snapped a few branches to be able to stand comfortably. On the edge of the treeline, there were wild daisies that grew up from the earth in clusters, spread out among the untrimmed grass. We'd pick them and bring them into our place, and we'd call our place Daisylot. In the garage we would find furniture for Daisylot: our dad's old, paint-speckled step ladder, an old milk crate, and a yellow and white, low to the ground folding beach chair. Pine needles and tiny mushrooms blanketed the floor, my sister insisting that we also grab a broom to sweep up the "mess". Though the summer was hot and bright, the sun did not reach us here, it was always cool and damp on the ground below. My sister would perch on top of the step ladder, her long legs flowing down to the dirt. She would always bring out her sparkly notebook and pen to write down all Daisylot official business. I remember the day that we decided that pinecones would be currency, the smaller ones equaling one dollar, the larger ones twenty. She would create a dictionary of our language here, though I don't remember any of the gibberish now. Most afternoons in Daisylot were spent collecting apples from the apple tree to our left, collecting pine cones and interesting things we could find in the yard, or organizing our goods into piles around the inside of the tree.

One afternoon, my sister wanted to put on a show for our parents in the backyard. My parents dragged out fold up camping chairs from the shed and made their way to the play house where we would hope to entertain them. Upstairs, I would do the monkeybars down and back and down again while they applauded for me from the audience. The sun overhead was setting and my sister would perform the final trick of the night. Egocentrism took over at this moment for me, as I don't remember the rehearsing she swears she did for this moment. She chose to exit the back of the playhouse and scale the outside on the edge of the wood like a ninja, attempting to re-enter at the opening where our slide let out. Performance anxiety must've taken over in the moment because about two steps away from the slide, she lost her balance and fell to the ground. My parents rushed over to her, careful not to say "I told you so" until they evaluated her injuries. She fell so fast I remember replaying it in my mind. Up one minute, legs off the edge the next, arms flailing in the wind to catch her fall. She can recount the wind whipping by her ears as she landed, unable to catch her breath. She got away with no bone fractures, probably a couple of minor bruises. This wasn't the first backyard injury, and it definitely wasn't the last, as my dad gave her a piggyback ride all the way into the house. Some time shortly after that night we abandoned Daisylot for good, though I wonder now looking out from the kitchen window if I can still fit in the clearing we created all those years ago.



When Governor Rick Snyder switched the city of Flint's water source from Lake Huron, to its own Flint River, citizens couldn't have predicted that in ten years they still wouldn't be able to drink water from their tap². Ninety cases of Legionnaires Disease, twelve deaths, more

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<https://www.clickondetroit.com/consumer/help-me-hank/2024/04/18/10-years-of-flint-water-crisis-how-it-happened-where-things-stand/#:~:text=How%20Flint%20water%20crisis%20began,through%20misting%20and%20cooling%20systems.>

than one hundred-thousand without safe drinking water in their homes³. The untreated river water seeped into Flint's pipes, corroding with metals, creating the clay-like color and terrible taste that citizens became concerned about almost immediately after the switch. Above, hallways were coated in family photographs and school portraits. Refrigerators' fronts stuffed full of report cards, classroom artwork. In bedrooms, children slept with their stuffed bears and bunnies, the ones they received before they knew of time. Yet underneath all of this, in the foundation, poison. And it wasn't always like this. And it never had to be.



My father grew up about two miles from where I did in Flint, Michigan. My grandparents live in a small, barely three bedroom home still heated by a wood burning stove that my grandfather fills a few times a day. I always say I can't imagine my father as a child, though his baby pictures and wedding pictures coat my grandparent's living room walls. The walls are filled top to bottom with everyone in our family. Untidy rows, crooked unmatched wooden picture frames, so many that I can't at this moment recall the color of the walls— probably white? And how did they get them up so high anyway? My father is nothing like his mother, and only a bit like his father in the way that they both have a simple nature to them. A calmness. “How did he come from that?” My sister and I often ask our mom, usually following a visit to their house where my grandmother parades around her dining room making us claim the items we “want” when she passes. “Grandma changed, you know” my mom always told us. She wasn't always so afraid of the world.

In 1961 my grandfather was seventeen years old, attending the same high school I did fifty-eight years later. He walked into Mr. Johnson's Algebra class and set his books and notebooks down on a desk and began chatting with his friends before the final bell rang for first period. Not one for school, you can imagine his reaction when asked to come up to the front and demonstrate an algebraic equation for his peers. In a calm fashion he told his teacher no, which you can imagine was not received well. Mr. Johnson raised his voice at my grandfather and told him he could leave, and never come back— something that he took quite literally. He marched down the narrow hallway, right passed the principal's office and took a hard left, pushing on the double doors and leaving the building, and never coming back. "That was pretty much it", he would always tell us, sitting back in his chair, a small grin on his face, eyebrows staying in their natural position. "My father told me if I wasn't going to finish high school that was fine, but I had to get a job. The next day I drove myself to the General Motors plant right off of Van Slyke and asked if they were hiring, which they were, then I worked a full day, went home for dinner and repeated the process for thirty years." My grandfather married my grandmother when she was twenty-one and they've lived in that old house ever since. My grandfather retired from the General Motors shop when he was forty-seven, shocking now knowing that my father is almost a decade older than that and tells himself every year it'll be his last one working. It never is.



Flint Michigan used to be a booming city, full of life and working-class families, at least that's what I've been told. It was home to the "Big Three" automotive companies— General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler which saw record breaking sales employing a majority of the city⁴. Imagining Flint as a city with movement and bright color is hard for me, as I've only lived there

in the post-auto era, the one that started in the 1980s with the movement of labor overseas. Eighty-thousand people were ultimately laid off from General Motors in 1980, several factories' production came screeching to a halt⁵. The source of revenue was snatched away from working hands, and going with it, the city's heart. When eighty-five thousand Flint residents moved out of the city, the blood depleted from its veins, leaving little for those that performed compressions in an effort to resuscitate it.



One of my father's first iPhone pictures was taken in 2011, I stand with my hand on my hip smiling brightly for the camera. I've got on a white shirt with red and blue fireworks streaming down the front, blue, cotton shorts to match. My hair was cut to my shoulders, bleached blonde and naturally wavy from the summer sun. I spent that entire car journey to Washington DC watching movies on my DVD player, dressing up my American Girl Dolls, and coloring pictures in the backseat. The photo in my dad's camera roll was taken on the first day of the trip, my eyes were wide, excited to see George Washington's Estate, the White House, and Ford's Theatre. That night we went to dinner at an Italian restaurant. I probably ordered spaghetti and meatballs, an irrelevant detail, but more than the meal I remember walking down the streets afterward.

The night time air was cool on my skin, I held hands with my mother looking around at the trees and beautiful flowers sitting perfectly manicured in their pots on the sidewalk. This place was really how I'd imagined it. I knew that Barack Obama was our President, our leader, and I knew before even entering the city that he would keep this place beautiful. I remembered the book that sat in my basket at home, *Of Thee I Sing, A Letter to my Daughters* by Barack

⁵ <https://thegrio.com/2011/09/26/flints-economic-fall-like-none-other-in-the-country/>

Obama. I pictured Malia and Sasha walking their dog, Bo, down these very streets, passing the bay windows and the stone houses. I marveled at all of it. Looking at the windows of all of the houses we passed, I stared at a pile of gray blankets between two of the houses, puzzled as to what was there. All of a sudden I noticed a hand poking out the left side of the blanket, and my brain began to catch up with my eyes as I noticed two feet, the other hand, and hair poking out the top. Not expecting that, I jumped slightly, asking my mom what that man was doing under there. She told me he was probably sleeping there, probably living there for now. I didn't understand this, how in this beautiful place was there someone who had to sleep outside on the ground? Why wasn't Barack Obama helping him? Maybe he just didn't know, surely if he did he would invite this man inside and let him stay in one of the 16 bedrooms in the White House. After that encounter, I remember my mother explaining to me what homelessness was. How it happened to people and what it meant for their lives. I remember my pride for democracy being a bit shaken after that night. We walked through the monuments, I was still enthralled by their beauty, though in the back of my mind, that man was still there, reminding me that in such a marvelous and proud place, there was sorrow.



In 2016, two years after the initial water source switch, a State of Emergency was declared in Flint, Michigan. The impacts of lead-contaminated water fell much deeper than the infrastructure in homes, which as of 2024 were still not fixed⁶. Those that drank their tap water while the government misinformed them and told them it was safe to do so, faced health problems that are not erasable. Lead entered the body of over thirty-thousand Flint children,

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<https://www.clickondetroit.com/consumer/help-me-hank/2024/04/18/10-years-of-flint-water-crisis-how-it-happened-where-things-stand/#:~:text=How%20Flint%20water%20crisis%20began,through%20misting%20and%20cooling%20systems.>

where it was then distributed to their brains, kidneys, livers, and bones⁷. As a result of lead invading the bodies of Flint's youngest citizens, twenty-three thousand were found to have ADHD, dyslexia, or mild intellectual impairment⁸. I remember the day that my youngest cousin was tested for lead poisoning at age four. His mother drank her tap water while pregnant with him, before she knew, before any of us did. I will never forget the five children that attended the daycare I worked at in the summertime. All of the children have cochlear implants attached to their ears, the youngest completely deaf due to the consumption of Flint water. They didn't know, none of us did. The Flint Water Crisis went down in US history as one of the most harmful, preventable, environmental disasters of all time.



I have flashes of memories throughout my childhood, moments of an indescribable pride, a warmth, a safety. In some I'm cutting out magazine letters spelling "land of the free", pasting them onto poster boards for my fourth grade social studies project. In others I'm lighting sparklers in my backyard, tracing my name in the air and laughing with my family while red and blue fireworks boom overhead. One memory begins in my aunt's car, which was red and small at the time. My head is leaning on the car's window. I'm looking out at the fluffy clouds overhead, thinking that they look like cotton candy. There are huge, green leaves whipping by us on the highway as we pass. I stare at them and they make me carsick. My aunt has a CD player and in it, probably one of those old, children's CDs with catchy tunes of barnyards and sunshines. I remember hearing the tune in that moment, with my head on the ledge: This Land is Your Land. I imagined the Redwood Forests, and in my mind the leaves on the trees were red all year round,

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<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/lead-poisoning-and-health#:~:text=People%20are%20exposed%20to%20lead.%2C%20soil%2C%20water%20or%20food.>

⁸ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/04/09/flint-water-crisis-lead/478577002/>

trunks towering up above, higher than the eye could see. I looked out at the road and imagined it made of blue ribbon, I wondered what an endless skyway looked like. I dreamed up diamond deserts in my mind, shiny sand and I imagined the sandy hill my grandparents took us to climb in Oscoda each summer. That warm feeling swelled in my chest as I could confidently sing the lyrics, “this land was made for you and me”.



There’s more I could say on the good bones that reside, protected by our outer appearances. I’ve learned, as we all do, about the part of the world that is evil, about the part that makes you look up at the sky in the middle of the night, questioning into the void the purpose behind all of it. Inside all of us, there is structure, inside structure, there are homes, inside homes there are stories, and laughter, and fragments of moments that remind us of the goodness. And from what I know about goodness, it’s the warmth I felt in my chest all those years ago. It’s Flint police officers walking with citizens during the Black Lives Matter marches in 2020, holding each other, hand in hand. It’s finding yourself among the spread of photos on your grandparent’s wall, counting how many there are of you– for me there’s thirteen. It’s creating purpose out of pine trees in the backyard. It’s knowing that even in brokenness we find ourselves clinging to the idea that we can make this place beautiful.