

The Lake

by Curtis Smith

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I.

When the weather was nice, the fisherman and his girl spread a blanket over the shore's rough sand and watched the cargo ships cleave their way to the docks. The cargo ships' hulls weighed heavy with iron ore from Minnesota and pulpwood from Canada. The ships were dull-eyed and ugly. They didn't care how they looked. It wasn't important to them. The sun, warped and bloody from the city's pollution, sank into the water. The cargo ships faded to shadows then disappeared.

The fisherman and his girl built driftwood fires and sipped warm cans of Iron City. They studied the stars and the empty spaces between them. On the night they learned of her pregnancy, they returned to the lake. A storm was coming. Gusts of wind blew flat and strong against the pines. Over the lake, the thunderheads crept closer, billowing layers illuminated by the lightning they hurled into the heart of the lake. The waves chopped against the shore. With the air full of rain and electricity, it felt like creation itself.

II.

Tackle box in hand, the fisherman stepped from the shore. His breath, bitter with coffee—and as the day passed, whiskey—crystallized the moment it escaped his chapped lips. December through February, he could walk the shoreline and count the human links like himself that stretched from Buffalo to Detroit.

His boots crunched over the snowy ice, and the sun had yet to rise. Twenty winters had come and gone. Back home, his wife slept, warm beneath the covers and adrift in dreams she no longer confessed. They used to be in love, but now they shared something else, a knack for survival perhaps, but he was not certain. Their children had grown, their boy in the army, their girl a stranger. The

fisherman sawed a hole into the ice. Beneath him, the walleyes paraded in sluggish rhythms. The fisherman lowered his line and waited for the invitation that would connect their world to his.

