

Dog Days

Riverwood

“Meg, that’s the ends of the Earth!” Melissa’s voice ricocheted through the cafeteria, her forkful of glazed carrots hovering midway between plate and mouth. For once I didn’t care if people stared.

I’d finally convinced her that it wasn’t an April fool’s joke. In less than two months I really was moving 400 miles away to a small town in northern Wisconsin.

I’d always liked that phrase—ends of the Earth. It sounds so remote and dangerous. Just the sort of place I thought I could lose myself and forget everything. Even the name, Riverwood—it sounded like a fairy tale sort of place. I imagined myself walking through a forest with deer and bunnies prancing around me.

“What am I supposed to do here with all these crazies,” she gestured around, “without someone to commiserate with, I’m liable to snap.”

Melissa wasn’t very good at hiding her disappointment, and I felt bad abandoning her, I really did. But all I could think about was how I could finally leave the old Margaret behind and start my life over. This was better than winning the lottery. This was a second chance.

Six weeks later, after saying our goodbyes and promising to write, I packed only the essentials—my bike, some summer clothes, three boxes of books and my pile of journals. Everything else I gave to Goodwill. Mom was okay with that, since it went along her new voluntary simplicity pledge.

Ever since sometime around Christmas, her vocabulary changed. She stopped talking about class action litigation, 401k's and profit sharing, and started using words like consumption, materialism and mindfulness. After 15 years as an attorney at Gibson, Straw, Clark and Myers, she said she wanted to make a major life change. She called it "downshifting." Apparently this included finding a cheaper way to live and getting rid of things she thought were unessential to our happiness. I didn't have a whole lot of happiness during that time, so it really didn't matter to me. She quit her gym membership, stopped getting manicures, traded in her Land Rover for a compact car, and finally, when there was nothing left to weed out of our now uber-simplified lives, she decided to retreat to the small town where her family had spent summer vacations when she was growing up. Her partners at the law firm questioned her sanity and accused her of becoming a "tree hugger" and getting "all new age-y", but she brought out spreadsheets and graphs to show them how much sense this made financially.

I think maybe she also did it for me, even though she would never come out and say it. But whatever the reason, I didn't care. For the first time in eight months, I actually had something to look forward to.

Mom and I drove due north, and the landscape of sprawling farms gradually gave way to stands of pine trees that I could smell in the air. Mom talked to me about our new house, a Victorian painted lady she was able to purchase for a third of the price of our town home in Chicago. She told me about the perennial garden in the front yard, the huge elm trees in the back, and how much I was going to love my new room in the second floor turret. I listened as I gazed out the window and occasionally nodded or mumbled an affirmative mmmhmm. I was imagining my new life in this place and my mind filled in

all the details that she didn't provide. I was just about convinced that it would be perfect when I remembered the harsh reality that would hit me in four months. I hated to ruin my fantasy but I couldn't resist asking, "What's the school like?"

"Tiny, compared to what you're used to," Mom said, "the whole town has fewer people than your high school in Illinois." I had been so caught up in despising my life in the city, that I didn't even know the most basic things about Riverwood. Mom seemed relieved that I was finally taking an interest in something and enthusiastically answered all my questions during the rest of the trip. "It's going to be a big change, Meg, for both of us," she said. She seemed a little worried that I would have trouble adjusting to our new life, but I think it was just a mask for her own fear. I wondered how hard this was for her. She spent the first 40 years of her life working her way up the corporate ladder, and now she was voluntarily climbing back down.

We rolled into town after dark, and the quaint streetlights that I could tell really were old, (not just the new-old look, like the ones in the suburbs) lit up the brick storefronts and awnings on Main Street. It's actually called Main Street, just like in the old movies. A theatre marquee on a corner lit up, one letter at a time R-I-T-Z and then blinked in red, white and blue and started over again. We turned left and tunneled through an arch created by enormous boulevard trees and drove two blocks down a dark and quiet street lined with grand old houses. I looked in awe at each one, wondering which one was ours.

"Way back when, they used to call this street Ritz Row" Mom said, looking out the window "that's not the real street name, just something the locals made up because of the opulent homes, and because the street ends at the Ritz theatre." The car slowed down

in front of a blue and white three-story house on the corner with an ornate porch and towering turret. “I always dreamed of someday living in one of these houses,” mom said, “and now, here we are.” The yellow glow of porch light illuminated the numbers 411 above the wooden front door. Mom smiled and said “we’re home!”

It was strange to associate that familiar word with a place I’d never seen before. As long as I’d remembered, home had been our townhouse in Chicago. Before the divorce, we’d lived in a two-bedroom rambler an hour from the city, but that was when I was a baby, and I had only the faintest memories of the white front door and wide green lawn.

We pulled into the driveway under a huge elm tree whose branches were just starting to fill out with leaves. I walked around the outside of the house while Mom found her keys. White lilac bushes were in bloom under the windows and the scent filled the night air with sweetness. I closed my eyes and put my nose right up to the flowers and inhaled deeply. I’d forgotten how much I loved that smell. I’d forgotten how to enjoy a simple pleasure like a handful of lilac stalks. I wandered back to the front of the house, with my hands full of flowers. The front door was wide open and Mom stood in the front hallway. She looked surprised to see me encumbered like this. Her voice echoed off what seemed to be acres of hardwood floors. “So, do you want to see where everything is?”

I immediately loved the house. It felt huge and solid and ancient. I imagined there were secrets stored within the walls. According the real estate brochure, still on the kitchen counter, some rooms had been updated in the past 10 years or so, but in a “tasteful way that showcased its old-world charm.” Mom went crazy over the spacious kitchen and its dozens of cabinets. She’d always dreamed of having a big old kitchen like

she remembered from her grandma's farmhouse—it even had a pantry. “Well,” she said “now that takeout is a thing of the past, I guess it's time I revive my cooking skills.” I imagined the room filled with smells of baked bread and cinnamon, and people bustling about to prepare a huge meal. This was something I only knew from television, but I was sure it was going to become a reality here.

My bedroom was the best spot in the house, and I think that's why Mom wanted me to have it. She was doing all she could to get me out of my funk and this was just another one of her generousities that she hoped would cheer me up. The walls were painted in the faintest tint of violet—a color I would never have chosen myself, but somehow it felt soothing to my soul. The curved windows of the turret looked out over the corner of River Street and 4th Avenue. I stood in the circular room and felt like a princess in the castle tower.

Our furniture wouldn't arrive till the next day, so Mom and I laid out our blankets on the floor of my new bedroom. I fell asleep quickly, despite the accommodations, and awoke only once during the night, when I heard a train rumbling by a block away. At first I was afraid it had all been a dream and I was back in the city listening to the sound of another early morning commute. But once I opened my eyes and saw the rectangle of moonlight on the wall across the room, I was able to fall back into a contented sleep.

Simple, happy and normal. These were the three things I wished for my new life in Riverwood. I was sick of whispers behind the lockers. I wanted to erase my memory and make a new identity for myself. I craved genuine friendship, not just awkward sympathy. I wanted to know that the guilt and fear that lingered from that awful September day could not follow me here.

The thump of the heavy front door woke me at 8:30 a.m. I could hear the floorboards creak under Mom's feet as she walked through the house. It was a comforting sound to hear first thing in the morning. The sunlight filtered through the leaves of the tree outside my window and made little dancing circles on the hardwood floor. I stood up to look at the view from my room.

The south window of the bedroom was shaded by the branches of a towering elm, and the west window, at the front of the house, had a clear view of the river, behind the old sawmill two blocks away. Riverfront property like that would've been snatched up by developers for condos back in Chicago. But here in Riverwood, nature reclaimed the banks with little cottonwood trees and the old wooden buildings seemed to want to sink into the earth.

Mom walked in with two cups of coffee and a bag from the Riverside Bakery. She'd already gone for a morning walk and picked them up on her way back. "Ready for some of Riverwood's finest brew?" she asked as she handed me a styrofoam cup.

I took off the lid and looked into the oily surface. The smell conjured up the Ground Up Coffeehouse in Chicago, and I swear I could almost see a ghost in the milky liquid. Jason and I used to take the El Train to that coffeeshop because we liked the open mic. poetry reading nights. He's the reason I got hooked on coffee.

"C'mon, Marge," his image in the coffee cup seemed to say, calling me by a nickname he used whenever he thought I was being too uptight, "don't believe all those old wives' tales about caffeine stunting your growth. You need caffeine. It wakes up the brain!"

By now I was used to visits from Jason, mostly in the form of dreams and in strange little quirks of synchronicity. But this was his first visit in a cup of coffee. It must've been a good sign. It was the first time I thought of him since the accident when I didn't get a twisting feeling in my stomach.

I took a careful sip, obliterating the image, smiled and said "Not bad. How about we drink it outside?" Mom nodded, and I saw the relief in her eyes. At first she didn't approve of my coffee habit, but when she realized we could use it as a bonding ritual, she practically encouraged it. I could tell she was trying to draw me out and see what my mood was like. I know it wasn't easy living with me the past year, but she always respected my feelings, no matter how irrational they must've seemed. We ate our doughnut breakfast on the front porch step and waved back at our new neighbors as they strolled by and said hello.

"The moving van won't be here for a few hours," Mom said, "how would you feel about taking a walk over to the high school to get your fall registration out of the way?" The school year was over in Illinois, but there were still two weeks left of the semester in Riverwood. I was eager to get it out of the way, so I stood up and said, "let's go."

"Now that I won't have the long hours and forty-five minute commute," Mom said, waving at a car as we crossed the street, "I'll finally have time for a life outside of work. I can't wait to work on the garden in the front yard. What do you think about adding a fountain or a pond?"

Just having a yard was going to be an adjustment for me. "That would be cool" I said, remembering the elegant gardens in front of the mansions Jason and I used to walk

by on our way to Lake Michigan,. “Can I keep pet goldfish in there?”

“Sure,” she said, “if we can find any around here. We may have to drive a couple hours to find the nearest pet store.”

I knew we were far away from the city, but I didn’t think about the stuff I took for granted, like malls. Maybe Melissa was right about the ends of the Earth. “Do you think the lack of shopping opportunities will eventually get to you?” I asked. Mom was the most sharply dressed lawyer in her firm, but she gave away most of her work clothes before the move.

“Actually, I’m glad I don’t have to worry about that stuff anymore,” she said, and she looked like she really meant it. She already seemed happier and more relaxed, and I looked forward to her new work schedule that would finally allow us to spend dinners together.

We crossed over the river to get to the school. I hesitated for a moment before stepping onto the bridge. Mom glanced over at me to see how I was, but she didn’t say anything. I tried to focus on the far bank, but my eyes were drawn to the water. It was calm and wide with little swirly whirlpools near the large rocks on the shore. A mallard floated under the bridge with six babies following behind her. Dragonflies buzzed near the surface. I saw my reflection and felt a tightness in my chest. I walked faster, only slowing down when I reached the safety of the other side.

The school was situated next to a wooded park with a nature trail that curved north along the river past the hospital, library and fire station. I could tell by the architecture that this was the newer part of town. A Phys. Ed. class in red t-shirts was

playing soccer outside when we walked up to the front doors. The office was just inside and a secretary at a desk greeted us. The principal came out of a back office when she heard our voices. She was nothing at all like surly Mr. Banks at my old school, who threatened me with suspension when I skipped a week after the accident. In fact she was probably his polar opposite. How could such different people end up with the same job? Her name was Ms. Fletcher. She had short blondish-gray hair and wore white canvas tennis shoes under a long tan skirt that looked like it might've been made of hemp. She stood up and shook our hands the moment the secretary introduced us. "Great to meet you, Margaret" she said as she looked me right in the eye and smiled. Both her hands embraced mine and I felt like she was greeting a long lost daughter. I wondered if Mom had told her why my grades dropped from A's to D's last year.

It turned out that she had once taught in Chicago during her younger years, and this connection sparked a lengthy conversation between her and Mom. I was used to Mom getting involved in exceedingly long conversations with friends and strangers alike, so I sat down and started filling out the pile of registration forms.

Student name—Margaret Boo Myers. I always flinched when I had to state my whole name. Nobody else had a weird middle name like mine. I was careful to never reveal it, even to my friends. If you asked Melissa what my middle name is, she'd confidently tell you that it's Beth. That's what I told her in sixth grade when we met and I've managed to keep the secret ever since. Mom tells me not to be ashamed of my name—it was bestowed on me to honor my great-grandmother, who went by that nickname her whole life. Maybe it wasn't so weird in the 1920's for a girl to have a name like that, but I wasn't willing to test the limits of compassion in my school companions.

I filled out what I could, and brought the rest of the forms home with me. Ms. Fletcher offered a tour of the school, but I didn't really want to even think about school yet, so I said I could wait until classes started in the fall.

By the time we walked back home, the moving van was parked on the corner. We spent the rest of the afternoon hauling things into the house and unpacking. Our pile of simplified possessions looked dwarfed under the 12 foot ceiling of the living room. Mom laughed and said, "Well, like Thoreau said, the secret to happiness doesn't lie in adding to your possessions, it is in subtracting from your desires." This must've been something she read in one of her books recently. One of the things Mom did allow herself was a very liberal use of her library card.

That evening I sat on an overstuffed chair in the corner of my room, surrounded by windows, and I filled the first four pages of my brand new journal with my first impressions of Riverwood. After the accident, Mom sent me to counselors and shrinks, but it was actually my English teacher who provided the most helpful therapy. Mrs. Micah suggested I start a journal to help me work through my feelings. She even let me skip some of my regular class writing assignments, as long as I could prove I was writing something. That was the only class I excelled in when the rest of my grades plummeted. I filled an entire blank book each month since the accident. I eyed the sealed box in the corner of the room. Their presence here made me remember too much. I picked up the box and hauled it up the narrow steps to the attic. It fit right in with the cobwebs and shadows.

I was tired from hauling boxes and my legs ached from walking up and down the stairs. The bathroom next to my room didn't have a shower, so I filled the big white

clawfoot bathtub with millions of bubbles and climbed into the warm water. This was the closest I'd let myself come to swimming since last fall. I sank down beneath the surface of the water with my eyes closed, held my breath and counted to ten. During swim practice I used to be able to hold my breath underwater for almost a minute, and now I came up for air after only a few seconds. It didn't matter. I wasn't planning on resurrecting my inner mermaid anyway.

It was a warm evening and the scent of lilacs filled my room. I fell asleep with the windows open. I felt enveloped in a world of quiet here. That night I dreamt that a huge iridescent dragonfly landed on my shoulder as I walked along a narrow trail surrounded by white birch trees.