

The First Morning

By Johnnie Each
Prairie High School

*Winner of the 2021 Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle Essay Contest
from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature*

On the first morning, I wake up to the sound of rain. I love a good rainstorm, especially during the summer. The gentle pitter patter, the rushes and swishes and *rhythms* of it. It urges me to dance along to no particular music at all - just the steady beat of rainfall. This particular morning, however, I am not enjoying the storm from my bed at home. I'm lying in a cabin that smells of wet wood, cobwebs and dust – the smell of an attic in an old home – sharing a lumpy bed with my ten-year-old little sister. Our room has a single lamp that barely produces even a slight yellow halo, the cell service is dismal at best, and I know if I step out of bed I will feel the rough and scratchy carpet against my feet. But this cabin is still my home away from home.

Six miles south of Strawberry Point, eleven miles north of Manchester, lies Backbone State Park. It's not much, to be honest. Just a little dimple in the Iowa countryside brimming with steep, startling cliffs where you least expect them, and a muddy lake. But it's also familiar and comfortable and known. Even away from Backbone I can picture every step it takes to trek into the woods to cross the "troll" bridge. I can feel every bump and crack in the road that rattles my bike as I race my cousins to the park. I fully understand the ways of Backbone. Every year I fall into them easily, without hesitation.

Maybe Backbone feels like such a second skin because my family has been coming here for the past sixty-something years. My great-grandpa started the tradition on a whim and the family has faithfully returned every year since. I've stayed in this cabin for all fifteen Julys of my life – as a one-month-old newborn, a clumsy toddler, and now as a teenager. Over the years, Backbone State Park has just become a fond part of who I am, both natural and expected.

Even this sight in front of me is familiar; I watch my sister's chest rise and fall next to mine, her brow relaxed, her mouth agape. Our quilt has been pulled to her side of the bed, the tiny embroidered flowers curled in her small hands. She somehow manages to always claim the blankets while we sleep. Meanwhile, my exposed arms and legs prickle from the damp chill of the morning. It feels as if the rain has snuck inside my bones, trickling down my spine. I quietly slide out of bed, pulling on the old sweatshirt I wore last night. It still smells like smoke from the fire, and the pilled gray fabric envelops me, pulling me into its heady warmth.

Slowly, I creak open the door of our tiny bedroom and creep outside, careful not to wake my sister. I pass through the small living room and kitchen quickly, knowing the rest of my family has already started their day – my sister and I are always the last ones awake. I pull on my ratty tennis shoes, watching the rain drops lazily trickle down the front facing window. I stand up on my feet and finally yank open the perpetually stuck front door. The crisp morning air welcomes me. *Hello, sleepy head!*

Outside, under the cover of the deck, I take a minute to appreciate the sight of the summer shower. We always get at least one good storm during our stay at Backbone, and this morning I am not disappointed. Although I don't hear any thunder yet, the rain runs in rivulets down the wooden ramp like tiny, laughing streams. In the back, our brightly colored beach towels flap in the wind where they are clipped to the clothesline. Someone forgot to bring them inside last night. They look almost comically out of place against the solemn dark backdrop of the green pines. And yet, even the somberest looking pine seems to be alive this morning as beads of water collect on its needles and drip, drop playfully down the branches. Between their swaying boughs, I spot the dark blur of the lake; a moody and murky smear against the pallid sky.

Reluctantly, I tear my eyes from the forest and swing a leg over my bike. My old-as-dirt blue beach cruiser shudders and groans as I rattle down the boardwalk onto the slick pavement. My family's cabin is nestled at the bottom of the hill, but the cabin my grandparents (Nannie and Baba) usually stay in, is perched at the very top. My legs pump as I race up the road that is slowly decaying back into gravel and asphalt chunks. I pass three cabins inhabited by cousins and aunts and uncles, then I turn towards Nannie's. There's already a line of bikes awaiting me; soldiers properly kickstanded in a row along the sidewalk. I pass them all and pull onto the ramp in one smooth motion, leaping from my bike.

I hesitate on the deck and peer through the foggy window at the cheery, yellow hum of the cabin that awaits me inside. A batch of bran muffins cools on the stove, and sleepy cousins pull leftovers from the fridge to warm up in the microwave. My aunts and uncles chat on green futon couches, coffees in hand, listening to Baba tell a story while the radio contentedly plays a quiet worship CD. Nannie is stationed at the oven, pulling out cinnamon rolls. I walk in the door and morning greetings ring around me, pulling me close. Only one greeting sticks out.

"Good morning, Johnnie girl," Nannie says to me, smiling as sweetly as the icing she's about to pick up.

"Morning, Nannie," I reply. Her hands are worn and weathered, but her eyes twinkle and spark happily. There is no Backbone without Nannie and her quiet smiles and sharp teasing. Every July is a chance for her to sit and read romance novels, take pictures of the birds coyly flitting around the trees, and watch her grandbabies play.

I take my seat at the kitchen table, surrounded by my smiling, sleepy family. It is so very comforting to know what comes next. Eventually the rain will cease and we'll all go outside to admire the faded yellow sky, the only aftermath of the storm clouds. Then there will be creek stumping and crawdad catching, and throwing footballs at the small town public pool. Every night we'll all eat dinner together, swatting flies and swapping stories on the peeling green picnic tables. Of course, there will be the books of the week, passed around from person to person, along with that one bottle of gnat spray. Maybe a few late night Settlers of Catan marathons while discussing politics and theology. The moms will watch the littles chase geese out of the lake. We'll all trade backrubs and go canoeing with the uncles. All the ladies will take a day to go second-hand shopping at Turkey River Mall. The cousins will hang as many hammocks as we

can in one tree, while Nannie takes our pictures. We'll run in and out of the cabins, laughing and calling out so many "remember whens."

The older I get, the faster the world around me spins. I don't know what is coming next year, or even just tomorrow. So many large decisions loom in front of me. Sometimes I feel as if my entire future is balanced on a pin point that could tumble down at any moment. But no matter what, this is who I am. This is my family. Born, raised, and buried in rural Iowa. Story tellers, English teachers, engineers, and pastors. Over the years, we've grown and changed, but mostly we remain the same. We remain family, and every year we return to Backbone. This place, these people – they are the eyes of my storm.