



A FADING HAZE

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Yesterday, a veil of morning mist along Lake Michigan lingered long afterward as though lashed to the coast and unable, or at least reluctant, to leave. Though less gloomy, the presence of a continuing haze generated an obscurity softening or screening the adjacent scenery like a palimpsest, even erasing general parts of terrain throughout the dunes. A cloak of overcast replaced any visibility beyond the nearly negligible chalk-white of a slowly rolling surf fading into a plain gray backdrop, a shroud of gathered cloud cover. The dreary conditions engulfing everything lasted until late afternoon before weakening and lifting. Small waves approached, sloshing onto the shore, staining the tan sand almost as dark as the wet and weathered bark on vulnerable beach trees. Much of the day's vague landscape appeared as if an image in an impressionist painting placed on a gallery wall, or the inkjet print of a noticeably out of focus and underexposed photograph, perhaps a shaky picture hastily and

impatiently taken, simply a snapshot too quickly composed by someone eager to experience more, excited to move on to see what lay ahead.

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By the time early evening arrived, the lake haze had faded away, dispersed by an increasing breeze wafting from the east—a rare wind direction in this season. The same scenes now seemed so much more distinct and detailed, as though the exposure and clarity levels had been lifted considerably higher on the available range during adjustments in the digital processing of a photo. Sharp-angled slants of sunshine slipped through diminishing ribbons of clouds. Heavens above the cleared horizon had begun to become spotted with fast evaporating ash-gray shapes. As these stray shadows of clouds found their way across the lake in a sluggish but synchronous movement, the broken overcast created a setting speckled with dappled light. Even as I walked alone on a favorite ridge trail with my bulky backpack over my shoulder, descending a steep dune hill and approaching the coast, I noticed two boats slowly crossing

in the distance—one motoring, the other with a pair of triangular white sails unfurled and beginning to billow, filling with whatever incoming wind would arrive—each traveling a different direction, both well-defined against their new blue background.

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Under returning sunshine, beige stretches of sandy waterfront had warmed somewhat and had become populated with a swarm of visitors hoping to enjoy what was left of summer. Some were sauntering along the shoreline. Little children were simply wading knee deep among small waves slapping at the sand. A couple of older ones threw beach balls that almost floated in the air like released balloons when tossed between them. But a group of others, likely high school teenagers, were adventurously swimming past the shallow water toward bobbing buoys before returning and drying themselves with brightly colored towels decorated in loud tones of primary hues, some displaying cola logos or bearing beer bottle images. On that slight incline of foredunes a bit farther inland and slanting

gradually toward the shore, scores of sunbathers had stretched their blankets, and all were awaiting a vibrant sundown. The day had changed so thoroughly that one would be tempted to wonder whether it had been inadvertently switched with a different day in another season due to the accidental flip of a calendar page turned by a sudden wind gust.

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Stepping along a winding path separating isles of green growth alongside it—clusters of ground cover displaying tufts of marram grass, tall blades that had lengthened during these recent hotter months—I turned through a few thin-limbed trees scattered among the dunes with their small leaves trembling slightly in the barely noticeable yet strengthening onshore air current. As I arrived at the shoreline, welcomed by the steady rustling rhythm of insignificant waves breaking softly on the sand in their measured clock-like pace, perhaps considered as chronicling the passing of time and awakening a sense of self-reflection, I then headed west. Searching for an isolated spot, an escape from the crowds, I wandered the

waterline, roaming around a quarter mile toward the setting sun, soon to bloom amid the brightening sky above the western rim. Wondering where to place my tripod, I rambled a while. The atmosphere along the water felt fresh and invigorating, invoking a sense of contentment and contemplation. Temporarily lost in reverie, I sought some spiritual revival through favored thoughts saved from the fog of recollection.

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Arriving along the shoreline, I had passed a young couple intimately linked arm in arm with one another and speaking French in a hushed tone, both wearing matching gold and white wide-striped polo shirts with solid color shorts, hers khaki and his black. At the border of the water on a thick oak limb of dried driftwood showing signs of going gray, they were sitting with their heads gently tilted together, facing the lake and gazing at the vast expanse in front of them. When I walked nearby, I could hear the woman's voice. Despite an apparent attempt to limit her volume to nothing more than a deliberate whisper, she needed to speak over the

susurrations of the insistent surf. Though I had once traveled to France long ago and had studied the language for two years in high school, as the quote goes in *Casablanca*, “I’m a little rusty.” Consequently, I did not understand all that she said, perhaps also partly due to her rapid speaking pace and the competing murmur of the incoming waves. However, her tenor seemed to express delight, maybe even excitement, as she observed the impressive changes of appearance growing in the sky over the horizon.

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Once again, I am reminded how I sometimes take for granted this local gift of nature, a sacred place where my wife, Pam, and I strolled on our first date decades ago during Easter weekend. On that mild mid-April afternoon with its temperature already in the upper-eighties, we felt the soft and soothing embrace of a spring breeze. Though unfortunately we have no photos of that day, I clearly recall details from the haze of my memory. As this was my initial visit to Lake Michigan, Pam introduced me to the site’s beauty. There, we paused on a sheer bluff overlooking the

greenish-blue surface and peered across the way toward the cityscape of Chicago buildings glittering on its far edge, squinting a bit in this suddenly intense spring sunlight following a winter of dark and difficult weather. Approximately thirty-five miles past those ring-billed gulls flying in looping patterns above the Indiana shore, circling overhead like white paper kites caught in sudden gusts of wind before abruptly swooping toward the water, millions of people moved busily though that city's streets, each citizen unseen by us, as if we were inhabiting another world. Pam seemed pleased to introduce me to scenery I'd never known before, now accompanied by memories only we would share.

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We'd discovered a situation within a certain degree of solitude, a winding path hidden among dense oak woods on a dune hill rising high above the beachfront. Standing beneath branches already filling with foliage and lit by bits of brilliant sunshine slipping between green leaves quivering in an easy breeze, we watched a big dark barge, apparently newly loaded with

cargo goods and sitting low in the water, slowly cross in the distance toward its predetermined destination, though a location unknown to us. Huddled under that protective seasonal canopy of ridge trees, we certainly appreciated the cooling shade in such an unusually warm spring. Listening to an initial twitter of birds whose chirping could be heard as they scrambled from branch to branch somewhere amid the tangle of limbs above, we embraced and spoke in whispered tones words we felt necessary to convey our emotions. Leaning into one another, we witnessed the day's changing atmosphere as a couple of cumulus clouds shuffled past, their gray shadows sailing across the surface of the lake. Lingered longer than planned, we hesitated until the silhouetted ship drifted out of sight beyond the crease of the horizon, then we walked hand in hand farther along the twisting trail we'd yet to explore.

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Hiking here now often as a landscape photographer working to help publicize and promote the charm of the park, I frequently regard the

surrounding area with familiarity, much like an extension of my own back yard. Nearby residents sometimes see the immediate region merely as a weekend getaway for camping, while some tourists travel far from exotic locales wishing to experience its appeal. However, my interest involves preservation of compelling instances in the countryside with persuasive images. This evening I set my tripod in damp sand stained by a recent rogue wave that had spread up the shallow slope of beach at least three yards past the farthest reach of previous ripples. Hoping to capture the developing view with my camera, I observe another late fade of daylight beginning to intensify brilliantly, and I'm pleased today's sightseers will not be disappointed. Carefully, I calibrate the correct aperture and focal length settings to collect the best composition as well as to capture the complex array of colors I expect to combine, much like harmonizing instruments in a visual symphony.

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Perhaps aware of my more elaborate gear, camera accessory bag, and deliberate method of preparation, the Frenchman confidently advances toward where I've anchored my tripod. I estimate his age as somewhere in his early thirties. With the thick build of an athlete and quick strides, he rushes to my side. Holding his tightly gripped iPhone aloft in one fist, he points toward the faraway skyline with the extended fingers of his other hand, on which he wears a boldly ornate wedding band. In an accented but accurate English, he identifies himself as Luca, and gesturing by extending an arm behind him, he notes the woman's name is Teresa. Luca explains that they are traveling through America from New York to California in a rented car, intending to accumulate experiences in multiple states on a three-week honeymoon. Two webs of lines, like fine filaments, reach from the corners of Luca's eyes, while deeper creases have been set beneath, likely caused by a love of the outdoors, perhaps participating in sports. My imagination supplies visions of Luca playing soccer in summer and skiing in winter, and decades of squinting in bright sunlight. I congratulate Luca on his marriage and welcome him to the United States, adding a hope that he and his wife are enjoying their brief stay in Indiana.

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Apparently, Luca possesses trust in my photography ability, and he asks if I would be kind enough to use his phone to take a photo of the pair standing by the surf with that vivid tint of a rapidly shifting background starting to frame the lakeside landscape. I've had similar requests from other couples in the past; when I agree to his request, Luca strokes his chin with a thumb and a forefinger while giving a positive nod of approval as if pleased and envisioning an image of the finished picture. A grin appears from ear to ear beneath Luca's stubble beard, and subtle smile lines cross from his brow toward his temples. This facial expression appears as an additional sign of his reasserting faith in my expertise. Luca makes a half-turn of his torso and motions to Teresa with a flick of his wrist to come near, allowing his arm to stay extended as further assurance in his invitation to accompany us, as an usher might urge one forward to stride down an aisle at a gala event.

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Luca's wife follows him closely, though seemingly distracted, as they step toward the border of water, halting just a few feet short of the waves' range. Her wide eyes dart with mixed attention toward the horizon. The glowing sun, backlighting that highlights windblown strands of the woman's long blonde hair, is already beginning to disappear past the jagged skyline of Chicago. Teresa raises four fingers to a forehead peeking between wispy bangs with her palm facing down—as if offering a left-handed salute that might be mistaken as a misguided gesture of disrespect, but in this case is only meant to provide a makeshift visor against the gradual swell of glare in the air all around her. Her engagement and wedding rings side by side on one finger shine in the bright light. As she had approached me, she appeared at least a few years younger than her husband, maybe more, and now I believe I detect a slight touch of nervousness. She seems to be in a hurry for us to be done, either out of self-conscious shyness or eagerness for me to take the photograph while the time is right so as not to lose this ideal moment.

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Both look toward me with expectancy as they pose close together, he nearly a head taller than she. As if embarrassed, she seems to be blushing a little when the couple link arms again and offer wide smiles, waiting patiently for me while I attempt to create a pin-sharp picture. However, the pink tinge on her skin might simply be an incidental influence of the magnificent scenery suddenly ablaze. Spreading sunshine ignites the reddening sky behind them, its rouge hue reflecting on the silver surfaces of those distant spears of skyscraper roofs and crystal cubes of glass-sided high-rise offices in Chicago, though I know from such a distance these features will seem indistinct in the image I am arranging. A flood of sunset now flows over everything, filling the backdrop of the impromptu portrait with a dramatic flush of color like classic cinematic illumination showering a Hollywood set at the conclusion of some epic fantasy film. When the pair lean into a perfect fit with the top of her head resting easily under his chin, holding each other as though gently bearing a shared

burden by supporting one another's weight, I initiate a snap of the shutter button with a swift tap of my index finger, capturing the moment and preserving the memory.

