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Refuge for Memories

I remember how the bronze SUV would grind to a halt as dad cranked the shift into reverse, trying to catch a glimpse of a diving muskrat. The creature made for a bastion of pale reeds standing tall at the edge of the murky stream. My brothers and I marveled at little wonders. Back then a nothing in the world was more impressive than a muskrat sighting in the refuge.

The Refuge was an enormous plot of muck. The place's official name was Montezuma Wildlife Refuge, it was named after some dead Indian who used to drink hot chocolate with chili peppers. In my mind it was simply called "The Refuge." I'm not sure why I assigned it the definitive title of "*THE* Refuge." Perhaps it was because, to me, this was the greatest refuge and deserved the title or it could have been because I had never seen another one. Whatever the reason for its absolute position in my mind, the land had truly earned it. In earlier years it had served as a simple family-fun trip. We would arrive at the great expanse. There was water, mud, reeds and trees as far as the eye could see. Except for a few acres of tree laden picnic grounds the refuge was mostly thick swamp so trekking through was out of the question. The only secure way was a thin path of gravel that snaked its way through the wet sod. We ventured along those twisting roads looking out through the windows of our massive SUV. Surrounded on either side by the stagnant stream that was saturated with dirt and life.

Musk rats cut through the water gathering sticks and mortar for home

renovations, red-winged blackbirds darted from reed to reed in rapid bursts of ebony and scarlet. The occasional turtle could be seen tending to their own affairs on their long log-boat cruise in the sun. If one ventured far enough they could even see the side-show attraction of jumping carp. Carp, the strange creature with the body of a fish but the lips of a man. But, the ruler of the refuge was the crane. He stood, regal in bearing, knowing his position as king. His silent vigil over the swampy domain was broken only briefly by the occasional flight on noble azure wings.

The wild life outside the truck was good, but the wild life inside could be hard to handle at times. As soon as we passed the muddy threshold the game would begin. My brothers and I would cram against the windows trying to be the first to spot an animal. It didn't matter what it was, if it breathed then it counted. Without fail dad would always sight the first animal. Funny how the creature would somehow disappear before any of us could spot it. This spotting put dad in the lead, a problem which had to be remedied. As the ride continued various animals would be called out and we would crowd to see it. All sightings had to be verified by at least two witnesses to count as a point (unless dad had spotted it). The game would continue through the whole ride. In the short stretches of land where animals were scarce, we would fill in the time with stories, jokes and laughs. Sometimes dad would even allow one of my brothers or me to drive. We couldn't reach the floor, so dad manned the gas while one of us took the wheel. The ride would continue until we came to a bent steel gate separating the refuge from a freeway. Then we would slowly meander to the end. Then all points would be tallied up and a victor would

be crowned. The champion's prize? A trip for ice cream of course, and since ice cream waits for no man we would all accompany the winner to the ice cream shop, get a cone (or milkshake in my case) and raise them in honor of their victory.

It was a good life, the life of a ten-year-old boy, a life still filled with wonder. However, as time sped on I had to grow in order to keep up with it and adulthood stole some of that wonder. Every year added a new responsibility and soon trips to the refuge didn't fit into the schedule. So it waited, untouched by my familiar presence for many years. In my absence I heard the occasional tale of an eagle sighting or owl nests, but I couldn't take the time to see myself. So, I would nod politely and remark in a cheerful way about how I used to go there all the time as a kid. A longing would stir in me, the waters of nostalgia would bath my thoughts and I would vow to visit that sacred place once more. But, life was still busy and like a fading promise to a forgotten friend the boyhood longings would be replaced by the busy, work laden, thoughts of a college student. It seemed that my refuge was destined to remain a memory, a good memory but a memory nonetheless. However, one day the waves of school papers were parted revealing a chance of escape to that lost world.

I had to create a panorama shot in photography class and the subject had to be a natural setting. Immediately I knew where to go. When the weekend finally surfaced out of the swirl of school, I loaded up my truck with a camera, a few jackets and my brother (a fellow adventurer into forgotten domains). The trip took less time than I had imagined and soon we set foot into familiar soil. The trees had shed their leaves in expectation of a soon-approaching winter and the grass was hallow

and dead.

I began my task of finding a picturesque scene for a panorama and my brother went off to in search of nothing in particular. I found an old observatory tower. Upon climbing to the peak of the rusting steps, however, I found no inspiration waiting for me at the top, just a stretch of lifeless swamp. A dirt trail along one of the tranquil streams procured a similar result. There was no life, there was no inspiration and there was no longer any reason to be there.

I met up with my brother and told him that I was ready to leave. I was ready, ready to leave this place that had lost so much of its enchantment. As I began to walk toward the truck I cast a forlorn look back at the refuge. I looked and saw my brother standing there glancing down at his itouch, cycling through pictures. I saw something unexplainable then, it was subtle and stirring. So, I brought up the camera and snapped five pictures of my brother against the backdrop of the refuge. After that we rumbled back home in the truck. I have since discovered the source of my refuge epiphany. The wonder that had dwelt within the refuge had not come of its own accord, my family had created it. I saw clearly in my mind why the specialness of that place had suddenly returned in the images I had taken of my brother. It was because my brother was in them. The scenery that memory had painted on the stretched canvas of my mind was not important. The people standing in that scene were the life of memory's masterpiece.