

Old 45: A Collection of Short Stories

[Introduction](#)

[Upstairs Room](#)

[Rabbit In the Rain](#)

[The Parlor](#)

[Ferry Arrives](#)

[Souvenirs From The Coast](#)

[Old 45](#)

[The Smallest Panfish in Vilas County](#)

Introduction

This is a collection of six short stories and one poem. The stories focus more on moods, atmospheres, color palettes and settings than on characters and plots. Despite this, the same characters reappear. The stories are written in prose but are closer to poems. They are fictional, as in, they are not claiming to describe true people, events or places.

Upstairs Room

A summer night with no air conditioning. The brown carpet stings your feet, even if you have socks on. The carpet on the stairs leads you up to the room. This is the last summer your grandparents will go up those stairs.

The room is actually four rooms connected to each other. The front bedroom has a bookshelf overhead connected to the wall, a file cabinet with a desk phone, a small hiding cubby, and a door out to the balcony that can fit one adult on a good day. There is a curtain between the front bedroom and the middle bedroom. The middle bedroom is almost full by itself - two not-quite-adult-sized beds with a square bedside table between them, a spare mattress rolled up in the corner, a closet that no one has opened in years, and a small desk with a sewing machine and its requisite pillows, pins, and needles. There is a door between the middle bedroom and the back bedroom. The back bedroom has a big bed, a closet, a round bedside table, a rocking chair in the corner by the window and a bathroom next to the wall mirror. If an adult stands in the bathroom and reaches out their arms straight from their shoulders, they touch the walls - but there is still a toilet, a sink, and a small bathtub. Each of these rooms, except the bathroom, also has a baby crib in one of the corners.

Everything is clean and neat, but nothing has been new upstairs in forty years, except the Reader's Digest copies in the bathroom and the cobweb on the slant in the ceiling. Heavy cloth comforters on the beds are a pale white and split into threads. The metal folding table next to the sewing machine rattles whenever you empty your pockets onto it. When you want to leave the bathroom, you have to wrench the stuck door open. Even adults need to work at it.

You can go out to the balcony to see the backyard. There is green grass because it's summertime. A metal bench and table and chairs sit next to the house. Planters full of leaves as big as your head stack onto each other so they aren't on the ground. Towards the garage, there is a bin full of recyclables that will go out tonight. Farther back, there is a small garden with carrots or more flowers. A small bowl full of water for the birds marks the end of the yard. Then, a wood fence.

When you go to bed, you'll hear the train whistles and sometimes a car. Your brothers will be in the other beds. The television downstairs will be off. A cold touch on your cheek will wake you up tomorrow morning, and when you open your eyes, the room will be empty.

Rabbit In the Rain

Little Rabbit can see the rain. Not as it falls. It's too dark for that. But one or two houses on the street have porch lights that shine onto the puddles. Raindrops make little circles of light as they stop falling. The trees bob up and down as raindrops hit leaves and then slide towards the ground. Gutters rattle when the rain patters inside and down.

If a car goes by, it flings water up from the asphalt. Air gets thicker, mustier. Storming clouds fall apart overhead. A worry of going-to-rain breaks and drops into is-raining. A night turns black.

The recycling bin put out on a lawn this afternoon for pickup tomorrow is soaked through, but that's what rain does. There isn't much wind. Every house gets one maple tree, bright green or dark green or purple leaves. Some leaves carry raindrops to the sides of the tree. The grass underneath stays dry. And other leaves droop down under the weight of a raindrop or shake in the wind. They offer no protection from the rain.

Little Rabbit makes a run from one overhead shelter to another. It's the only animal of its size willing to brave the rainfall. Birds are huddled deep in the trees. If a deer thinks of walking along this street, it is not here now. This rain will sweep a rabbit down the street if Little Rabbit is not careful. But three boys cheer Little Rabbit on quietly from the porch.

The tree looks nice, but water slips through the leaves. The shadow of a recycling bin is solid, but Little Rabbit can't squeeze or dig enough to go under it, even if he were to tip it onto its side and onto its side again so it faces down. He has to hope someone's porch has enough overhang to give him shelter for the night.

A streetlight struggles to stay on and then goes out.

The Parlor

Jacket-tied boys and skirt-cursing girls run past the one railroad track that seems to crisscross all the others. This warm morning is slower, if only for the shortest and youngest to hurry up already. They all run. Street and sidewalk and smokestack and sky, all rough concrete rises on every side of the hill. At the top of the hill, there's a dairy parlor.

Sunlight covers the empty windows. An unlocked door. The bell. The parlor is cool, creamy off-white. Wide, but not deep (at least for customers). A small counter for the cashier overwhelms the first look inside. There are great turning, moving metal machines - some that stay cold, some that stir, some that just move the cream from one vat to the next vat - hidden behind a plain, undecorated door. Nothing in the back interests the kids more than the long double row of buckets in the front.

Chocolate, chocolate mix-ins, strawberry, fruit mix-ins and sherbets, vanilla and custard creams. The display glass is wiped clean of any condensation. Labels are printed neat. Metal scoops rest in a warm, shallow vat of water to make even the hardest frozen ice cream softer. A dispenser of foam cups. Next to that, a tower of fragile waffle cones and plastic spoons. There is no conveyer belt or other mechanical movement shuffling the kids through. Only an expecting look of an adult behind the counter.

Footsteps patter on the linoleum floor. Despite the parlor's offered variety, the kids' quiet voices lace into each other with disproportionate calls for variations of chocolate.

The oldest kid is the last who picks up their scoop and hands off the crumpled paper bills from a jacket pocket. The dollars are from who-knows-which adult, can't tell the difference, they all dress the same as the kids, don't recognize any of them except mom and dad. "Scared", another word truer than "bored". Another play.

The room smells wet, like no matter what the sky outside looks like, the rain has just stopped – but sweet as sugar, too. The kids talk about the grass, the strange looks on the faces of adults gathered around potato salad. Their tongues ache from the cold. When ice cream drips down from their cones, their little hands grab napkins to keep the melting sugar away from their sticky fingers. They'll run in the grass, up and down this crest of the hill. The grass is different here because it's still growing. The sky is a creamy vanilla.

By the time the oldest kids have filled their stomachs with candy pieces, the whole lot of them has forgotten that hole in the grass from the morning.

Ferry Arrives

There's a lighthouse on the coast of Lake Michigan that watches the ferry arrive. The ferry belches gray smoke into the air as it gets closer.

But this is no change today. The lighthouse is gray. The flat water of the lake is gray. The sky is gray. The seagulls that dip from the sky into the water for a fish are gray. The fish are gray. The ducks floating on the lake are gray. The cracked pavement on the marina next door is gray. There are benches for sitting and looking out onto the lake. The benches are gray.

Only the wild grass between the pavement and the lake water is pale green, but it might as well be sunshine growing from the ground.

And then the top of the ferry is brilliant white. The ferry is full of people on the top deck and cars somewhere deep inside. A horn calls out into the lake air as the ferry turns towards the port. This heavy machine floats like a new cloud with no rain. The ferry arrives, as big as a building.

Souvenirs From The Coast

Acorns

Capsized paddle board and paddle

Firework smoke, gold and pink and blue and purple

Snail shells

Dragonfly kisses

Charcoal-colored sand

Ice, partly melted

Iced tea and lemonade

Moss

Crackly radio

Bratwurst and sauerkraut

Lake water

Foam pool noodles

Fresh peaches

Strawberries and powdered donuts and blueberries

Ants

Dog song

Smell of fish

Swimtrucks, still wet

Maple leaves

Low tide

Old 45

Train tracks lead out of town and onto the road, through tall grass.

There are bushy trees, too, to cover up the farmland a little from the road. But it's not the forest the way the lakes up north are the forest. Yellow and purple and pink and white wildflowers. Maybe there's alfalfa instead of flowers. Why do many of the farms have trees around them? Trees attract wildlife for hunting, have lumber for wood, have fruit when the fields are out of season, protect from the wind, fence off the fields from the road and mark a property line for the farm.

The station wagon passes by long acres of farmland. There are fields full of knee-high corn. This means the season is good. Sometimes there's rhubarb. Even fewer times, there is a hand-painted sign selling the last of the fresh peas at a discount from a recycle bin-turned-planter on a folding table. Only one mailbox on the main road, pointed towards a barn with a caved-in roof, boasts fresh blue eggs. But after that, there is nothing that looks like farmland. Trees rise on all sides until a final turn abandons the highway altogether.

Now the corn and rhubarb are tangled strawberry patches. The pea planters are piles of firewood instead. Boasts of eggs become big arrows pointed to bait and beer.

The boys and their dad have a fire in the fire pit tonight, roast marshmallows until they're dark gold and smash them into s'mores. We go home, no matter which direction we turn.

The station wagon goes into the northwoods for the Fourth of July. Grass and trees fall away to wooden docks and water.

The Smallest Panfish in Vilas County

Panfish are hungriest at sunrise. So, despite the early morning, the boys are almost ready to launch the pontoon. By the time Ron runs down the wooden staircase from the backyard down to the dock and Peter pulls the anchor up from the river mud, Erik has already packed a cooler of summer sausage sandwiches, soda cans, and bug juice. Erik lifts up a seat cushion full of rods and line and tackle and bait for a place to stash the cooler. Before the cushion comes down again, he pops open a bottle of bug juice – the sun is already warming up the river. The boy with the first fish has all summer for boasting about it.

Bug juice also means bug spray. Peter, the older brother, complains of the awful-smelling spray but only a little. It does keep the mosquitos away. But then the dragonflies leave too, so they don't sit on the surface of the water and bring hungry fish closer. Ron, the younger brother, refuses bug spray with a squirm and will whine later about the itch. Erik sprays himself and says nothing except a hope that it wears off soon.

After he finds the button that puts the motor down into the water, Peter sits at the wheel and backs the pontoon out of the dock as slow as the motor can spin. He only bumps the sides of the dock a few times. There's a whiff of gasoline along with the bug spray. The dock sits, a little turned here or a little bowed there from the watery sunshine. Ron pulls the buoys up onto the boat. And they go out, away from the cottage and onto the deep, open water.

After the boat turns to see the other cottages and the river opens wide, the engine grinds to a stop. Now that the boys are out of view of their dock, the boat can float along without much urgency past alder branches and Indian paintbrushes that grow close to the water. The wild grasses are tall enough even here that if the boys walked through, their mom would insist they check themselves for ticks, but the geese stay in the water in exchange. Oaks and maples stand deeper into the forest. Just the same way, the boys know they can't get the big fish they want from the dock. So they go past the cottages, the buoys and the bait shandy, even past the most daring canoes.

When the engine stops, the boys pick up their rods and open up the plastic container of dirt and nightcrawlers. Peter has the duty of baiting the lines because Erik can find the first aid quickest and Ron would squirm at a hook caught in his finger. So Peter ties a hook to the line, a careful tight pinch so the barbs don't find any sticking point before a new fish.

The boys know how to put a line with bait in water, but they are not fishermen. They cast with as much line as their rods have. They can do this because they have bobbers tied a foot above their hooks. Their lines whip back overhead and forward. They don't have the sense of where their line is. When they cast into the water, they cast into the places where fish are not. They reel their lines back in when they should wait for the fish to approach. Then they wait after the fish nibble but do not bite. They get their line stuck too close to the boat or too deep in the lily pads.

They've seen adults who cast a line and only hit fish. The bending line is part of their arm, that they can feel through their fingertips. The boys can only pretend the motions. They shake the line back and forth - really, this means to one side and to another. Then the fish shakes the line back and forth in response. And if he - any of them - invites the fish towards him, the fish falls off. The handle ratchets as it collects the line back towards his hands.

Peter knows a fisherman's agony - a wide, deep lake and no fish finding a hook - grows worse when the fish do find the hook and the rest of the line, bump and move the line but do not bite down. Because then, the fisherman knows how close he is and all strain on the line now cannot put the hook in a fish. The line spools back onto the rod for another cast, then falls with a whistle into the wind away from where Peter wants it. Peter grabs the other boys, pointing at a shimmer in the water he swears is a bass as big as his arm. They only see calm, greenish blue water. What good is a largemouth that doesn't close its mouth? Each boy knows it to himself - a sunfish is as good as a muskie or a trout now, as long as whatever is on their line is first.

Ron doesn't hope for a bass. A bass might swallow the hook and some length of line, a tedious, messy effort with pliers on a fish as big as his arm. But if a pike traps its lips on a hook, it's big enough to show off and easier to move. When Ron's pike arrives, it is not hungry enough to go for the hook. It eats around the hook. It doesn't wiggle free because it is never on. He reels his line in too quickly, with a startle. And Ron can see as the fish swims away it was really a muskie, striped and deeper in the water, instead of a pike.

The middle of the day is getting closer, away from breakfast time for the fish. Breeze is a godsend on the hot morning water, now closer to silver than blue. Fishing in the middle of the day is just for getting sunburned. Peter and Ron take a break for sandwiches and more bug juice, throwing crumbs at bullfrogs that are awake too early and breathe like grunting pigs. The two agree to use up the worm they have

left and head back. Casting dry will not catch any fish. Horseflies find the boat, despite the bug spray.

Erik takes his hat off and wipes sweat from his face before returning to the side of the boat. He has no bites yet. No bass, no pike, no bullhead or carp in the warmer, deeper water.

He casts from one side of the pontoon, then the other. He doesn't remember which is starboard and which is port. On the way, when there is a minute or so of choppy breeze that lists the boat, Erik's foot snags on the door hinge and his sandal strap breaks. Ron and Peter find duct tape right away. As long as the boy is on the boat, his sandal is safe.

Erik takes one more swinging cast, with his arm and shoulders and back as strong as he can throw. He waits.

A loon floats along faster than the boat. Chipmunks climb the river birches. High up in the canopies of the tallest trees, a bald eagle is nesting.

Then, one slow turn at a time, the handle calls the line back in. He waits, turns, turns again. The line scratches against weeds and flips lily pads to their bright red undersides. Whatever is on the line has to bite. But a bite isn't enough. Erik asks the fish - bite. Stay hooked. Catch the hook deep in your jaw so the deeper you swim, the deeper you go on the line. Carry the line but don't break the line. Pull the rod. Pry anywhere but free, and I will unhook you. I promise. I will get the measure of you and send you back to the water.

Boy and fish both hold their breath.

And the line bows into the water. Erik grips tight as he can, reels in, pulls. Turning and thrashing as it comes up from the water, Erik pulls a panfish smaller than his palm onto the boat.