INTO NO MAN'S LAND

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INTO NO MAN'S LAND

RICHARD C. BACHUS

For Carol, my delight

CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Anyone who has spent much time in the military or in a military family usually organizes their memory by place — the string of posts, homeports, and countries that a soldier, sailor, or marine gets sent to. In this same spirit, this novel is organized into 13 Parts, with each part named for a geographical location — a location as specific as a house to as broad as an entire country. These part names are not meant to serve as datelines for the opening (or even primary) location of the action in each chapter. Neither are they always the most significant places within the terrain of each group of chapters. Rather, they are more like mileposts on the journey that the main characters are undertaking. I hope you enjoy the trip.

PROLOGUE

DAWN WAS A LETHAL TIME OF DAY. *The soldiers on both sides of No Man's Land expected raids every morning. But the gas attacks, bursts of machine gun fire, the artillery barrages, and the sniper bullets had become so routinely random, that the expected hour was as good an opportunity to attack as any other time.*

And so, Capt. Kurt Radtke climbed onto the fire step of an observation post a few hundred yards out into No Man's Land. It was still about an hour before dawn, but Kurt liked to scan the wires and shell holes before his eyes adjusted to the first faint morning light. The night position for Petty Post 4 (the official designation for the seven-foot-deep hole that Kurt and a platoon of American doughboys were standing in) lay out in front of E Company's main firing trench. From there, Kurt could not only see all the way to the opposing German trenches, but he could look back to his own lines to make sure that none of his boys' heads were sticking up above the parapet.

Even after twelve days of living in the trenches of Alsace-Lorraine, Kurt still hadn't gotten used to the stink of the front lines. The morning air was completely still, and Kurt could pick out individual smells all around him. Neither side had been able to reach the remains of the two German scouts that Kurt's men had killed with a volley of rifle grenades two nights ago. There was the stench of the Petty Post latrine to his left, mixed with the sharp odor of lime dust that was used to keep the flies at bay. And there was a particularly sour smell coming from under his own uniform, which he had worn continuously for almost a month now.

Kurt did not actually think much about these foul smells. In the past couple weeks, however, he had spent so many of his waking hours in darkness that he had become attuned to each sound and smell of the mile-long sector of the trenches that he was responsible for. He could navigate E Company's trenches at night using his nose and ears almost as easily as he could using his eyes during the day.

As the light gathered in the east, Kurt strained to see through the antenna-like trench binoculars that allowed him to look over the parapet without getting his head shot off. Kurt only had a few more minutes to look around before the "morning hate" began. This daily routine of grenade explosions, "blind" machine gun strafing, and rifle fire not only helped relieve the tension of the long night, but it was intended to ensure that no enemy raiders lay in wait for a dawn attack. Kurt's troops knew to keep their fire away from their own platoons that were occupying the petty posts and preparing to move deeper into No Man's Land, but the men in the petty posts kept hunkered down during the morning hate, just in case.

Satisfied that E Company's lines were secure, Kurt turned to his left flank, where Company M was holding the line. Petty Post 5 was four hundred yards to the north of Petty Post 4, and Kurt could see that Capt. Gansser's men were preparing to move up to the advanced observation post. A short burst of machine gun fire erupted in the distance, and the morning hate began on the far side of No Man's Land as the Germans cleared the ground in front of their main firing trench.

Kurt's men opened up in a split second, as he climbed down off the fire step to avoid getting hit by friendly fire. Kurt stepped under the steel-roofed canopy of the post dugout to check with Lt. Simons who had also been scanning No Man's Land for signs of trouble.

The roar of the firing drowned out Lt. Simon's voice for a few moments. And then, the morning hate trailed off into occasional dislike and random irritation. Capt. Radtke looked out from under

the dugout canopy and noticed that the clusters of remaining leaves on the two trees that still clung to life beside the trench quaked as if moved by a sudden wind. There was nothing natural about the force that moved the air, however. Flying dirt, shrapnel, and bullets ripped through the trees, and a few more fresh, green oak leaves fluttered down from the branches and into the mud at Capt. Radtke's feet.

Kurt waited a few more minutes to make sure all was quiet. When the leaves in the trees above the petty post hung quietly again in still air, he climbed back up to the fire step for a last look around.

For all the devastation of No Man's Land, Kurt was still surprised by the amount of life that managed to hang on in the half-mile-wide strip between the opposing armies. Not only were there still clumps of trees both in front of and behind the lines, but the few patches of undisturbed ground between the shell holes were covered with a mixture of yellow-flowered weeds and young stalks of wheat. Kurt realized that the wheat must have reseeded itself four times since the war began. No man or woman had sowed these deadly fields since 1914 — only the wind and the wild birds had cultivated what was left of these wheat fields. Indeed, all of No Man's Land had been fertile farmland before the cannons' shells and soldiers' spades tore it up.

Kurt thought about the acres of stump land around his wife's hometown back in Northern Michigan. Some of it was already starting to grow back into forest, and some of it had been cleared for hay fields and pasture. Now that the logging boom was over, some of that land could be had for just a few dollars an acre. Kurt planned to buy some of that land for Sarah when the war was over. It was worth a lot more to Sarah and to him than it was to the lumber companies, which were already closing down the mills and moving on to new forests. Kurt's mind drifted, and he thought how strange it was that the value of a particular piece of land could

rise and fall because of decisions made hundreds of miles away. Kurt imagined what it would be like if the human sweat and blood that soaked into an acre of earth played a part in its worth. How much would those stump fields in Northern Michigan cost if the lives and toil of the Ottawa Indians, the immigrant loggers, and the homesteaders were factored in? Who would be able to afford it? And what would one have to do to earn that land? If that system were used here in Europe, Kurt thought, what would this ground in Alsatian Germany cost after so much blood had been shed to buy it and hold it? Many wars had been fought over this same land. But in this war to end all wars, a group of Americans far away from their home turf were charged with the duty of keeping this ground from an enemy intent on reclaiming it. Capt. Radtke shook off a wave of weariness, and knew he would protect this fractured field as if it was the land he would someday buy for Sarah.

The smoke from the morning hate cleared almost straight up into the air. This was a good sign, Kurt thought to himself, because the Germans usually only used gas when the wind was at their backs. The only sign of movement came from an odd breeze that was rustling the grass that grew along the edges of the Petty Post 5 trenches. Kurt marveled at how quickly the wheat and weeds had grown since the last time he had examined Capt. Gansser's sector.

Suddenly, Kurt realized that he wasn't looking at odd winds and fast-growing grass. In an instant, he saw that Petty Post 5 was about to be ambushed by a German raiding party heavily camouflaged in grass. Kurt leapt off the fire step, grabbed a signal rocket from the dugout to call for artillery to fire around the edges of Petty Post 5, and sent a runner to alert his own men and to warn Capt. Gansser of the ambush.

"Sgt. Miller, get your crew back up on that machine gun and start strafing the grass along the edge of Petty Post 5," Kurt said. "It's crawling with Bosche!"

Before Sgt. Miller could take two steps, a single pistol shot rang out from Petty Post 5. As Miller reached the machine gun and Kurt got back up on the fire step with his trench binoculars, the grass along Petty Post 5 rose up as though the ground was exploding into the air. Kurt saw dozens of German troops getting to their feet, firing down into Petty Post 5, and tossing potato-masher grenades down on top of the Americans in the trench.

The platoon manning Petty Post 4 began to mount the fire step to shoot at the Germans who were 400 yards away, but a firehose stream of lead from a pair of German machine guns drove them back down into the trench. One private who was standing next to Kurt was knocked right off the fire step when a machine gun bullet glanced off his helmet. The German machine gun fire was so intense and precise that the men near Kurt couldn't even get their rifles over the parapet. Kurt gathered a Lieutenant and some sergeants together.

"Those guys are getting clobbered over there, Captain," Sgt. Swartz said. "And those damn gunners got us pinned down pretty good. Any bright ideas?"

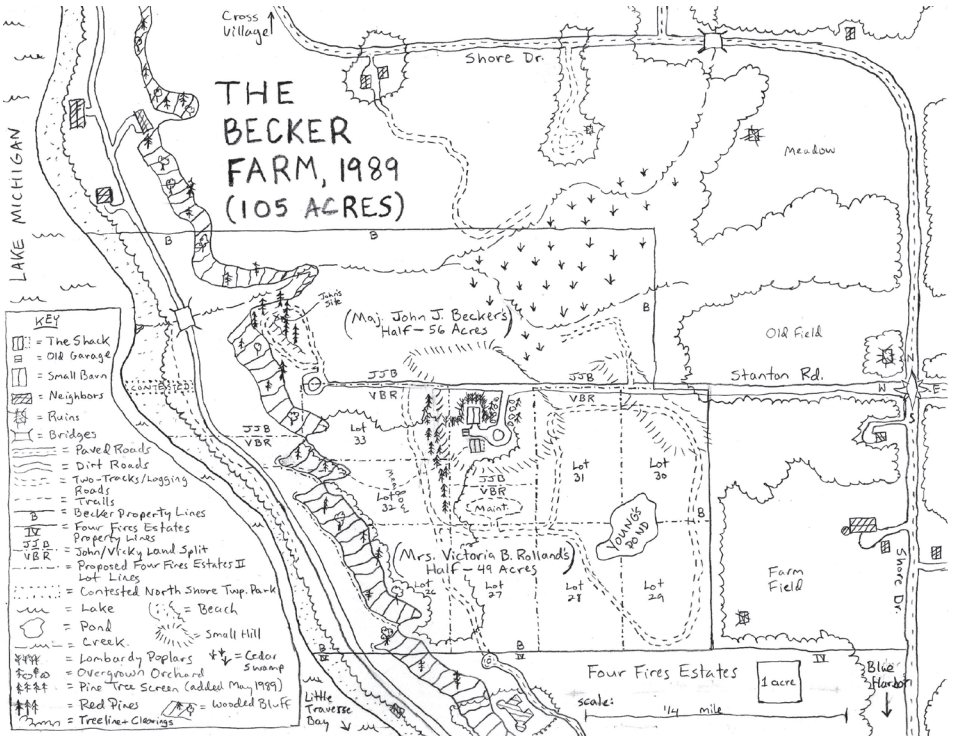
"Remember that old road farther out into No Man's Land that runs parallel to our main trench?" Capt. Radtke said, as the German grenades thudded from the bottom of the Petty Post 5. "There's still enough of a ditch on this side of that old road that we can get a squad over to Petty Post 5. We'll be able to crawl right up to the raiding party's flank and drive them off without exposing ourselves to the main German line. Lt. Simon's squad provides covering fire from here. The rest of you meet me up where that old road crosses our trench with half of the men from your platoon."

Kurt grabbed a box of rifle grenades to pass out to the squad, and headed up the trench to the spot near the old road. Kurt didn't actually decide to lead the squad, but he soon found himself scrambling out of the petty post trench and crawling on all fours towards

the beleaguered men of Company M. He had been out here once before, and recognized the large shell crater where they found the dead French soldier on Kurt's first full day on the line. As he drew closer, Kurt saw one big, grass-covered German fall face first into the trench, and another one throw his hands into the air and fall backwards into a shell hole. There were still some Yanks putting up a fight in Petty Post 5.

Kurt and his squad only made it about a hundred yards away from Petty Post 4, however, when he heard the shriek of incoming artillery shells. Even as Kurt called out to warn his men to find cover, a wave of fire and earth rose up in front of him. The last thing Capt. Radtke remembered from that instant was the ground that he had sworn to protect falling out of the sky and burying him.

~ PART 1 ~
THE SHACK


THE BECKER FARM, 1989 (105 ACRES)
LAKE MICHIGAN
Cross Village
Shore Dr.
Meadow
Old Field
Stanton Rd.
(Maj. John J. Becker's) Half – 56 Acres
(Mrs. Victoria B. Rollands) Half – 49 Acres
JJB
VBR
Lot 33
Lot 32
Lot 31
Lot 30
Lot 29
Lot 28
Lot 27
Lot 26
Maint.
YOUNGS POND
Farm Field
Shore Dr.
Four Fires Estates
1 acre
scale: 1/4 mile
Blue Harbor
Little Traverse Bay
KEY
= The Shack
= Old Garage
= Small Barn
= Neighbors
= Ruins
= Bridges
= Paved Roads
= Dirt Roads
= Two-Tracks/Logging Roads
= Trails
= Becker Property Lines
= Four Fires Estates Property Lines
= John/Vicky Land Split
= Proposed Four Fires Estates II Lot Lines
= Contested North Shore Twp. Park
= Lake
= Beach
= Pond
= Small Hill
= Creek
= Lombardy Poplars
= Cedar Swamp
= Overgrown Orchard
= Pine Tree Screen (added May 1989)
= Red Pines
= Wooded Bluff
= Treeline + Clearings

Chapter 1

AUNT VICKY'S LEGACY to her only remaining heirs is on its way. The United Van Lines shipping bill lists a cedar chest stuffed with four oval oriental rugs, a rocking chair, an antique desk, a dresser, and five cardboard boxes containing "personal effects."

The cab of my old red pickup is warm and dry, despite the snowstorm raging outside. As I sit in my truck waiting for the moving van, I'm thinking I should be grateful to get anything at all from Aunt Vicky. We weren't exactly close. Still, I can't help feeling that the old lady stiffed me.

The family property that lies just a half-mile down the road behind me is said to be worth about $750,000. My grandfather — Col. Joseph L. Becker — set it up so Dad and Vicky (Dad's sister) weren't allowed to sell the property during their lifetimes. As a result, the property has remained virtually unchanged for more than thirty years. Seven years of legal battles have somehow freed Dad and Vicky from some of the restrictions of the Colonel's will. Before they both passed on, they split the property and were preparing to sell all of Vicky's half and some of Dad's half once the remaining challenges to a clear title were eliminated.

The sheets of snow swirling just beyond the windshield have a hypnotic effect. My eyes don't know whether to focus on the flakes in front of me, the gust-strewn cloud of snow out in the middle of the intersection, or the ghostly tree trunks beyond that. Time also seems out of focus. I can pick a point

and see its detail, but the past, present, and future all seem to be before me at once.

Today is April 14, 1989 — exactly two years since Dad passed on. He would have only been 60 last month. Aunt Vicky, Dad's senior by eighteen years, outlived him, passing on this January, at 77. My sister, Sally, and I are doing all right under the circumstances, but the circumstances aren't getting any easier as a result of the three bequests from the previous generations of Beckers. Realtors, developers, and lawyers are circling overhead, but all we have inherited so far are legal problems.

Waiting around for bequeathals isn't exactly what I planned to be doing in my mid-20s. Just a few months ago, I was in the heart of *The Christian Science Monitor*'s busy Boston newsroom and on my way up. I was writing articles at a steady rate on top of my junior editing responsibilities. I was sitting in on staff meetings with Henry Kissinger and Jessie Jackson. And I was next in line for the investigative reporting seminar. I was looking forward to the future. This Northern Michigan farm and a need for someone to look after family affairs, however, has me looking back to the past. Things are starting to come to a head here, and somebody has to take care of business. With Sally down in Grand Rapids trying to steer through the rough waters of a troubled marriage and my mom starting a new career down in Florida, that somebody became me — the youngest, the prodigal son.

The death of Maj. John J. Becker, my father, couldn't have come at a worse time. He spent the last eleven years of his life working overseas, while the rest of his family lived stateside. He always supported us financially — even after the divorce — and we kept in touch every month or so. There were even visits every few years — both here and overseas. Dad's extended hiatus, however, was about to come to an end. Just

before he died, he was making arrangements to come home with his new fiancé, and Sally and I were starting to get reacquainted with him.

Aunt Vicky is another story. Her death—and the way she has treated her kin—has only increased the distance she kept from her brother's family while she was still living. I keep telling myself that Vicky had every right in the world to will the proceeds of her pending property sale to the people closest to her, but I feel that something is not quite right. Her father entrusted half of a special family place to Vicky, and now that it has become a sizable real estate fortune, Vicky is posthumously cashing it in for a final farewell to her best friends and favorite charities. The sale of Vicky's share of the land isn't final yet, but it feels like Vicky's half of the property has already gone to her estate in Tucson, been whittled down to next to nothing, and come back as old furniture and a few boxes of miscellaneous stuff. Not what the Colonel had in mind for his grandchildren, I imagine.

It's not that I've got anything against those folks in Tucson, but I visited Vicky's neighborhood a couple of summers ago and it didn't look like any of her friends were down to their last six hundred bucks, like I am. All I can do is try to focus on Dad's half of the property, which will be divided between Sally and me and Mom. We can only hope there will be something left of the farm by the time the inheritance-tax collectors, the state bureaucrats, and the lawyers get done with Dad's estate.

Outside my pickup, the Lake Michigan winds are kicking up the snow into a mid-April ground blizzard. I peer through the swirls of white and gray and try to see the moving van that is probably still crawling up Shore Drive. I told the lady truck driver I would wait for her at this rural intersection with my headlights on.

The crossroads of Shore Drive and Stanton Road aren't much of a landmark — even to most of the locals. If there were a map to my world, however, this is where the four-pointed compass rose would be drawn. No matter where I am, I can usually get my bearings from my fix on this small point on the Earth. To the West, down the gravel section of Stanton Road lies the old farmhouse, which my family calls "The Shack." Since January, I've been calling it home. Just beyond the farmhouse, Stanton Road ends at the edge of a 100-foot-high wooded bluff that slopes down to Lower Beach Trail, then the beach, and into Lake Michigan. To the North, Shore Drive heads straight for a mile before curving toward the bluff and following its winding, wooded edge north to Cross Village and Wilderness State Park at the northwestern tip of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. To the East, Stanton Road is paved and as straight as a midwestern fence line. The eastern terminus of Stanton Road is only a few miles from here at the base of the high ridge that forms the western highlands of Pleasantview Valley. To the South, lies the small resort town of Blue Harbor, and four or five hours drive beyond that are the flat farmlands and busy cities of Southern Michigan.

We call the 105 acres and the small, rustic house that the Colonel bought in the early '20s a farm, but my people haven't been farmers since the turn of the century. Ottawa Indians and white settlers were the last to farm this land. When the snow melts, you can still see dozens of moss-covered rock piles at the edges of the meadows and even in the middle of the second-growth woods. The rocks attest to a back- and heart-breaking effort to grow crops here. Like most of the homesteads in Northern Michigan, the fields have long been abandoned for warmer places or easier ways to make a living. Winter can last for six months up here.

This property was meant to be a place where an old soldier and his wife could spend the last summers of their lives. It should have been a simple arrangement for the property to pass from one generation to the next, and from that generation to Sally and me. It should have been, but there hasn't been anything simple about the passing down of this property for more than three decades. It would be easy to just sign some papers, get what money we can, and walk away, but I, for one, have decided to stick around.

The rounded fingers of snowdrifts are already spilling into the middle of Stanton Road along the open field, so I'm feeling better about telling the truck driver to meet me here instead of trying to get a semi down the half-mile dirt road. When I talked to the driver yesterday by phone, we agreed to shuttle Aunt Vicky's things from the moving van to the farm house in my pickup.

I flick the high beams when I see the moving van crest the hill, and the driver downshifts through her gears as she carefully descends the gentle slope to the intersection. She turns her rig right and comes to a stop on the paved section of Stanton Road. That's east on my internal compass.

I climb out of my warm pickup, cross the road, and walk up to her idling Peterbilt tractor as she hops down from the cab while putting on a navy-blue, Michelin-Man-style down coat.

"You're brave," I said as I reach my hand out to greet her. "I'm glad you made it all right."

"You must be Nick Becker," she said, shaking my hand with a boa constrictor grip. "Good gracious, haven't you folks ever heard of spring up here?"

"We hear about it now and then. It must be nice."

Her nametag says Linda. She is probably in her mid-fifties, small and wiry, with a dark gray ponytail sticking out of the

hole in the back of her United Van Lines baseball cap. She has a western drawl, and I ask her where she's from. She says she lives southeast of Tucson, near the Mexican border in a town called Fairbank.

"Is that anywhere near Fort Huachuca?" I ask.

"Sure is. Fairbank's about 15 mile north of the fort as the buzzard flies. How do you know about a hole-in-the-wall place like that, anyway? Were you in the service, son?"

"No, not me. My father and grandfather were, though. My dad was a major in the Army. One of his few pieces of advice to me was to stay the hell out of the Army. I'm a freelance writer."

"Well, that sounds like an interesting job, but it still don't explain how you got to Fort Huachuca," she said.

"My dad's buried in the cemetery there. He died two years ago. My aunt — the same lady who left me the stuff you just hauled from Tucson — said my dad once mentioned that he wanted to be buried there. And she just died in January."

"I'm sorry to hear about your losses. I kind of wondered if that was the case when I saw that the shipment was coming from an estate," Linda says, as she climbed back up into her rig. "We get loads like that every once in a while, and no matter how much nice stuff there is, it isn't usually that much of a comfort to the family getting it."

We decide to back the moving van across the intersection onto the gravel side of Stanton Road. There is a clear stretch near the intersection where gravel still sticks through the hard-packed ice and snow. The traction looks good and the snowdrifts don't start until farther down the road where the woods give way to an old field. I watch for traffic appearing out of the swirling snow as Linda backs across the intersection.

With the moving van safely parked, Linda hops out again and opens the side door in the middle of the trailer. She turns

to me with a puzzled grin. "So let me get this straight. Did your people come from Arizona, then?"

"No. We actually came from right here and other parts of Michigan. It was just my aunt who ended up down there when her husband — another Army guy — retired. I guess Fort Huachuca was the closest Army base to Tucson. My aunt's husband is buried there, too. That's how my father came to visit the Fort in the first place," I said.

"I've been to every state in the Lower 48 myself, but you military folks sure do get around."

Linda told me about her family's little ranch in Fairbank along the San Pedro River as we transferred Aunt Vicky's stuff into my pickup. I could probably get everything in one load, if I applied full Becker packing power to the task, but the rocker is bulky and I have to bring Linda back to her truck anyway. If Linda is a professional packer, I am at least semi-pro. In my two-dozen years, I have moved more than a dozen times. Even after my father left my mother, sister, and me to civilian life when I was twelve, we continued to keep moving every two or three years, like we were trying to keep in practice or something.

With our combined experience, Linda and I have the pickup packed within minutes. Only the occasional "turn it clockwise," or "let's set it on this end" interrupts our conversation.

Linda's great grandfather was one of the first white settlers in Cochise County, she tells me. At one time her family owned about twelve square miles of some of the best high desert grassland in the state. Her grandfather had about 240 head of cattle before the Depression hit. Now, she lives on a 200-acre ranch with her brother and his family, who own a gas station/convenience store on State Highway 90.

"I don't remember too much of the scenery down there, Linda, but I do remember the mountains rising up to the south

of Fort Huachuca and the long valley stretching down from the highway to the fort. I'll have to get down there again and get a better look next time. Speaking of scenery, you probably didn't get to see much of Lake Michigan in this storm. Are you heading out of town right after you're done with this load?"

"No. I got a room at some fancy hotel between here and town — the Gazebo Garden, or something like that. I passed it on the way over."

"Well, I hope you get some sense of where you are before you have to take off tomorrow. It's pretty incredible around here, too," I tell her.

I feel a twinge of regret when I think that this traveler from the Southwest might leave here in the morning darkness without ever getting a good look around.

"Is this all part of your farm?" Linda asks, as we head down the road towards the farmhouse with the first load.

"No, this field belongs to some neighbors. Our property starts up ahead at the tree line. There's 105 acres. About 75 acres are up here on top of the bluff, and another 30 acres are down on the beach. We've got about 1,000 feet of beachfront down there. You wouldn't believe how nice it gets down there in the summer. The beach is sandy and, depending on the wind and waves, the lake bottom usually is, too. The sand is so clean it squeaks when you walk on it. And the water is clear down to 30 feet after a few calm days. This is probably the last big piece of undeveloped property left on the shoreline between Blue Harbor and Cross Village."

I realize I'm starting to ramble, and ease off a bit. I haven't had too many visitors since I moved Up North, and this trucker doesn't need to hear my whole life story just for dropping a few things off.

The snowstorm is petering out. Although the wind is still kicking up snow devils, the cloud cover is breaking up overhead. Patches of blue appear and disappear from the gray-white commotion above.

I show the lady trucker the old fence line that marks the start of the property as we head into the woods. The mixed hardwood and pine forest is a quiet shelter from the gusty wind. The road through the woods climbs, then drops, then climbs again like a roller coaster as we near the farmhouse drive. To the north, the woods slope down into the dark cedar swamp that surrounds Cummings Creek. The creek lies about a quarter of a mile north of Stanton Road. On the south side of the road, the land rises higher to the flat apex where the farmhouse has stood for close to a century.

The farmhouse is barely visible from the road because of the dense second growth that has filled in what used to be an orchard between the road and house. Pines and spindly tall maples have grown up through the old apple trees. Some of the apple trees are long dead, but most have high, awkward branches shooting up into the new canopy. The apple trunks and main branches near the ground are black with decay. Amid the tall, straight, nearly uniform new pines, the old orchard trees look like iron sculptures left in an unlikely place. Only the gleaming-white new blanket of snow on both the pines and the apple trees seems to tie the scene together. Vertical streaks of snow plastered on the tree trunks show the direction of today's wind.

A beam of sunlight breaks through as we reach the end of the apple-pine tunnel. Fine specks of snow — stirred by the wind — catch the light and twinkle like shiny confetti floating down from the sky. The pickup bounces into the clearing that holds the old garage, the farmhouse, and the small barn, which

sit on a football-field-size hill that is the highest spot on the property.

The driveway ends in a circle behind and to the right of the house. Lombardy poplars rise out of the middle of the driveway circle. The poplars once formed a straight windbreak with a large alcove around the barn to keep the north winds at bay. I can still make out the original line of poplars as I pull into the circle, but new generations of poplars have undone most of the planter's order. The old trees, which were probably grown by an Ottawa farmer, sent runners through the topsoil. There are clusters of Lombardies all over the clearing — wherever the ground is not mowed or driven on.

On the west edge of the circular drive, a spur of the driveway leads straight ahead to the old garage, and then to the right, where the barn sits facing the house. I drive clockwise around the circle and pull up to what used to be the kitchen back stoop.

Even with a fresh layer of snow covering the frozen mud and the cinder block foundation, the back of the farmhouse still looks like a WW I foxhole. The clapboard siding is torn off and only a layer of old tar paper, the planks of wooden sheathing, the framing, and some turn-of-the-century wallboard separate indoors from outdoors. Except for the kitchen, The Shack isn't insulated. Between the edge of the driveway and the kitchen door, there is a five-foot deep hole with a concrete footing and block foundation. The new foundation outlines an addition that will bring the east wall of the house out another six feet.

The original farmhouse is a simple affair. The main part of the house is a two-story rectangle with a fieldstone fireplace running up through the middle. There's a shed roof covering the kitchen and small dining area on the back side of the house, and a covered front porch on the west side of the main rectangle.

"Doing a little remodeling, eh?" Linda says.

"We were. My dad and I and a carpenter friend of ours started to fix this place up about two and a half years year ago, but everything has been in limbo since my dad died. I hope to get the project going again this summer."

Linda and I take the cedar chest into the house first, and the planks over the hole sag from the weight of two people and Aunt Vicky's heaviest heirloom. Once inside, the warmth and wood-smoke surround us.

The kitchen is still intact. There are four windows in this part of the house, but it has always been fairly dark in here. The brightest things in the kitchen are the big propane-gas refrigerator and the wood cook stove with its white enamel sides. It was about five below zero when I got up this morning, so I had the cook stove going, as well as the big stove in the living room to take the chill off. My dad and I gutted the living room, so there is a heavy wool blanket tacked across the doorway to keep the living room drafts out of the insulated kitchen.

As I struggle to pull back the blanket with my foot, Linda can't help but notice the big galvanized washtub sitting in front of the cook stove. Next to the washtub is a tray table with soap, shampoo, conditioner, a razor, and a small metal camping mirror. Traces of wet footprints trail across the wood floor to the kitchen table, where my bathrobe and sweater hang off the back of a chair. The kitchen table is strewn with newspapers, a pile of notepads, books, and a little 512k Macintosh computer. A printer sits precariously on one of the kitchen chairs with continuous-feed computer paper hanging over the back of the chair. The kitchen is doing quadruple duty as a cooking area, dining room, washroom and office.

Linda is polite enough to only say, "Cozy" as we pass into the living room. We set the chest down. Linda stretches out a

kink in her back and takes a look around. With the walls gutted, the skeleton of the farmhouse framing is exposed. The old dark 2X4s are actually two inches by four inches, unlike the skinny stuff you get from the building center these days. The room is bare, except for a pair of fifty-five-gallon drums that have been converted into what Dan the carpenter calls a double-barreled stove. He installed it himself a decade ago when my dad let him live out here for a few years. Dan had lots of friends and for most of the '70s and into the '80s; The Shack was kind of a commune.

The double-barrel stove is just one of the artifacts left over from that era. Wood goes into a door cut into the end of the bottom barrel, which sits horizontally on steel legs. The top barrel — attached to the bottom barrel by another set of steel legs and a short section of stove pipe — is for trapping the heat and dispersing it into the house before the hot air is drawn up an unfinished chimney of cinder blocks. There are little steel tabs sticking out of the cinder-block joints. Dan never quite got around to putting the brick facade around the cinder blocks. He did, however, get Dad to install a phone line and electricity a few years ago, which have come in handy for someone who makes his living making calls and using a computer.

Linda sees the steep, narrow staircase leading upstairs to the two small bedrooms, and takes in the bare living room. Her grin seems to say she's been through renovations like this before. Then, her jaw drops.

"Holy Cow," she says, as she gets her first look at Lake Michigan through the windows. The Alberta clipper that blew the snowstorm down from the Arctic has, just as quickly as it came, blown the clouds and snow out of the area. It may still be snowing a few miles away, but here at the Becker farm, the sun has burst across the land and lake.

"Want a better look?" I ask Linda, as I open the door to the front porch. She follows without speaking.

The front porch, which is filled with wood for the stoves and fresh snow drifts, looks out over the flat yard of the farmhouse hilltop. The yard drops off sharply to an open meadow about two hundred yards wide. The sunlight makes it almost painful to look at the bright snow-covered meadow. The snow on the field is riddled with drifts that show the patterns of the spirited jig the cold wind has been dancing to since last night. The trees that grow on the side of the bluff have started to fill in the clearing my grandfather cut for his lake view, but there is still plenty of lake left to see.

Today, Lake Michigan is alive. To the left, the edge of the ice sheet covering Little Traverse Bay is being ground and splintered by loose chunks of ice. White-capped waves are hurling the chunks against the edge of the sheet, making more chunks. Even at this distance (it's about a half mile to the water) I can see the waves swelling under the floating pieces of ice like a white bed sheet unfurled across a bed. The waves seem to slow down as they pass underneath the frozen flotsam near the edge. Even over the clamor of the wind, I can hear the ice groaning and cracking. The radiant white of the ice sheet to the left is being challenged by the cold, dark blue and foaming white of the open water to the right. Stray ice floes dot the open water. They may have broken free from the heavy ice anchored to the beach up shore, or they may have come from the ice pack around Beaver Island northwest of here. Massive waves are sweeping in from the northwest almost perpendicular to the shoreline below us. The waves are loud enough to compete with the wind for attention. The cobalt-blue sky is now free of clouds. Lately, I've noticed that the colder it gets, the richer the blue in the sky becomes.

We can see for miles in the clear air, which has been scoured by the winter wind. About six miles south across the mouth of Little Traverse Bay, is Charlevoix County, I tell Linda. And those islands way out there to the west are the Fox Islands. Beaver Island is just out of sight to the right.

"I never imagined it would be so big," Linda said. "I always thought is was just a big lake, and that you could see across it. That's like the North Sea out there."