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I Am Here

By Katie Pfalzgraff

The summer Caleb Winters met Sarah Powell was the last summer it was really and truly hot. The town didn't see a lick of rain. A deep, cracked dryness hung in the air. It was enough to make anyone crazy.

Caleb spent that summer bashing tin, drenching every t-shirt he owned with sweat during the day and diving into the clear glacial lake at night. That was the first summer after their parents died. Amber managed to lure vacationers back to their house with the promise of beer and waterfront. Strangers crawled around the house, leaving tacky stains on stairwells and sofa cushions. Caleb tried to schedule work to avoid tripping over passed out vacationers, but he wracked up too much overtime. So one night he stayed in the kitchen, pouring drinks and forcing laughter for the time it took to make a gin and tonic. She sat in the stairwell, her bare legs stretched out in front of her. Shorts rising to her hips. She said her name was Celeste. It was a name men fell for.

“Do you live around here?”

Tugging at the carpet with chipped red nails. “About a mile away.”

“Where're you from?” he said.

“Michigan,” she said. The light caught the scar under her left eye.

“I've lived here my whole life,” he said.

“My mother just moved here.”

“Do you like it?”

“Sure.” Draining her glass. “My boyfriend's waiting.”

To this day, Caleb can't remember her boyfriend's name, or where he was from, or whether he took one shot of gin like him or two like her. Maybe there was no boyfriend.

She talked to some tight t-shirt former lacrosse star for a while, swirling the straw in her glass. The star's name was Hugh Irving. She laughed at that same story Hugh'd been telling since

junior year, about the track team sneaking a cow into the honeymoon suite at the Kozy Kabin Inn. It was all bullshit. Cows can't climb stairs.

After Hugh slipped his number into the back pocket of her cutoffs, Sarah was alone again, left standing somewhere in the crowd of laughing, shouting people. When Sarah's laughter quieted, her mouth curved downwards. Caleb wanted to suck the sadness from her, like breath from her lungs.

"That's Sarah," Amber said, "she's a hostess at Kelly's."

"Do you have her number?" he said.

She didn't remember him when he called. Caleb from the party. Caleb, Amber's brother. Caleb, the one with the gin. She played with him. Asked after his sister, kept on about her college-going, rugby-playing maybe-boyfriend. And already there were two ways Caleb could disappoint her.

And then she said, "A bunch of us are going to Sylvan Landing tomorrow. Maybe you could join us."

Thinking back on it, Caleb should be able to pick out a moment. One moment when he realized that he'd love her forever. He should be able to name dates, hours, weather forecasts. Maybe in the morning he'll remember them. Maybe if he thinks about it a little longer he'll remember the feel of sand on her skin and the flick of her hair, sending droplets of water raining across the car window. But for now there are only the first lies she told him, and this:

"Maybe you could join us."

The phone rings. It must be past noon. Caleb wakes up late these days and lies in bed, awake but unmoving. Trying to connect his brain to his lower half, lying shriveled on unwashed sheets. When he rolls over, he sees that it's more like 3:00. And the phone keeps ringing.

"You haven't called in a week," Amber says. "What the hell have you been doing up there?"

"Sleeping."

"That was the deal, Caleb. You call. You always call."

Light spills through slats in the blinds. Caleb pulls the wheelchair closer to him.

"I've been busy."

"Busy? Busy with what? You don't leave the house. You can't drive a car." Amber's breath crackles on the other end.

"Christ, I thought you were dead."

"I'm alive," Caleb says.

"And I'm the last to know," Amber says, "we said when you got out of Ironwoods, we said I could go back if—"

Caleb places the phone on the bed, lifts himself onto the chair, and picks up the phone again.

"—I think I need to come down there. I shouldn't have stayed away so long. I think I should come up. This weekend."

"I'll have to check my schedule."

"Caleb."

"Don't come down." Caleb says, "It's nothing. I got caught up."

"You don't get caught up," Amber says.

"I got caught up," Caleb says.

"Whatever," Amber says, "I'm coming down there."

In the kitchen half-unpacked boxes form a pathway from the bedroom to the refrigerator. First thing, Caleb grabs a tallboy of Kokanee and wheels over to the window. The sun casts shadows beneath the hills, and a mottled sort of light stretches across the lake. At the road, birds pick at the day-old corpse of a deer. A neighbor dog, big as a wolf, approaches, and the birds scatter.

It bothers Caleb that he can't remember whether Sarah wore a one piece or two. No, it wasn't a two-piece. He didn't see the scar on her stomach until later. When she lied to him about how she got it. Car accident. Near drowning. Bar fight. Not drunk on the roof of her mother's house.

But he remembered who was there. Alex Sanderssen, Molly Killeen, Lisa Lansing. He didn't like how Alex looked at Sarah, but it was probably just his imagination. Alex and Lisa are engaged. They drove in Alex's '88 pickup to the trailhead and hiked down. Rocks littered the shore, sliding and sharp on bare feet. Molly, who got her navel pierced in 8th grade, talked Sarah into diving off the cliffs that surrounded the bay. So Caleb went too. Through the clear water anyone could see

the sharp rocks rising below, almost touching the surface. But Molly hollered like hell and jumped, crowning from the water newly born, her hair slicked to her neck. And then Sarah. She looked back at him, wondering if he approved. Wondering if he thought she was dangerous.

“Going in?” she said.

“Ladies first,” he said.

“Pussy.”

Sarah rose to the tips of her toes, in the motion so familiar to him now. Her back bent like a bow. She didn't give him a second look before she dove in. A thin splash marked her entrance.

Maybe he stood there for a while. Looking down at the stillness of the water. Waiting for her to break through the surface. Thinking about turning tail and running. The other three laughing, skipping rocks across the surface. The absence was unbearable.

He doesn't remember jumping, but he remembers the water, cold after the sun on his dry skin. Light seeped through silt hovering near the surface. Sarah floated motionless in the embrace of the jagged rocks, her skin a bluish pale, like she was already dead. Her body limp as he carried her to shore. He pressed on her stomach and breathed into her lungs. The other three lingered at a safe distance. Oh my God what happened, Oh my God how long was she down there, Oh my God, should we call an ambulance?

She held on to death, not wanting to breathe. But he made her. Stroked her chest until she lived again. She sprang from his arms, gasping for air. Then she relaxed against his chest, and together they breathed easy.

He walked her home. Brushing the back of her hand with his knuckle. She jumped the fence at the Bloom house and he followed her, though he knew good and well that old man Bloom liked to take a shot at whatever he saw running through his field. But it was the way she moved through the fields like a dance. The way she swayed closer to him even though she never made eye contact.

Back on the old dirt road was a shaded spot where it felt

wet and cool. As if night had already come. Caleb stopped. She kept walking.

“How much farther is it?” he asked.

She put a few more yards between them before she turned around. And when she looked at him it was like she was taking his measurements. “Not far now.”

“I gotta go,” Caleb said.

“Okay,” she said. Digging her toe into the gravel.

“I mean I don’t want to start anything.”

“Okay.” Just waiting for him to do it.

“I mean I’m enlisted,” Caleb said.

“Like in the army.”

“Yeah, like in the army,” Caleb said. “I leave in three weeks, and I don’t want to start anything.”

“Is that it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” She closed the distance between them in a few steps. Pressing up against him. “But I gotta tell you, that’s pretty damn romantic.”

Amber arrives Friday. Two suitcases with her.

“Planning on staying a while?” Caleb says.

“Just laundry,” Amber says.

She walks in and begins to criticize him. The house is a mess, doesn’t he ever shower, where is all the food, Mrs. Reese is supposed to bring him food every Thursday. There’s no cereal, no orange juice, no goddamn laundry soap.

“I meant get your Fruit Loops,” Caleb says. Watching her stack boxes in one corner.

“You have to take care of things here,” Amber says, “I can’t come down here every weekend.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

Amber kicks the last few books into the bottom shelf. “We’ll have to go into town,” she says.

Caleb hasn’t been to town in a hundred years. It’s brighter than he remembers. Cleaner too. Someone started pruning the trees so the sun scours the pavement along the lanes, washing out the colors of concrete, house trim, roofing tar.

Amber leaves him at the postcard turn styles in the Super Drug.

“We need detergent,” she says.

Caleb wheels through the aisles. Stopping at the magazines. On the cover of People is an exotic brunette: “HER DOUBLE LIFE!”

Beside him stands a sticky, purple-faced girl short enough so their eyes meet. Turning something over in her hand.

“How’d you get in a wheelchair?”

“I got shot,” Caleb says.

“Did it hurt?”

“Don’t remember.”

Caleb sees it’s Silly Putty in her hand, neon green. She keeps kneading it back and forth and the purple substance, a melted popsicle maybe, rubs off into the putty, turning it stone grey.

“But how d’you get in a wheelchair?”

“I was in the army.”

“No, how do you—” the girl grips the putty in her hands so it squeezes through the gaps in her fingers, “get in a wheelchair?”

“I can lift myself,” Caleb says.

“Oh,” the girl says.

“Where’s your mom?”

“Dunno.”

“Is she in the store?”

“Yes,” the girl says. She stuffs the putty in the pocket of her pink shorts and wipes her hands on bare legs. “Were you in Eye-Rack?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you shoot anybody?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you kill anybody?”

“Don’t know.”

“On the TV I saw the soldiers coming home in boxes.”

“Oh.”

“Did you come home in a box?”

“No. I came home on an airplane.”

A woman appears behind the little girl. Caleb's pretty sure he went to high school with her. Something about her reminds him of kissing in the bathroom at the Dairy Queen.

“Caleb? Is that you?”

He struggles to remember her name. “It's me.”

“Wow. Wow, I can't believe it's you. God, has it just been forever?”

She talks about some night he can't even remember, when a group of them set fire to old man Bloom's yard. He laughs along with her and counts the moments til she leaves him alone in the magazine aisle.

“It was good to see you,” she says. And she walks away without a second glance.

Amber finds him there. She has the laundry detergent she likes, Tide Unscented.

“Let's go home,” she says.

Amber makes dinner. Tomato sauce with lumps of ground beef and congealed spaghetti. The house smells like garlic for days.

“Have you thought about getting a job?” she asks.

“I'm pretty set.”

Amber starts clearing up, tossing utensils into the sink.

“All you do is sit in the house all day.”

“I could always go for a walk,” Caleb shoves off and goes to the window.

“Jesus, Caleb. All I'm saying is it'd be nice if you did something other than stay here and think about her.”

That night Amber takes the pictures of Sarah off the wall. There is one he took of her in a rowboat, her smile uneasy. Clutching the oars like a child clutches a pencil. Caleb had to coax her in with promises of a trip into town for a movie and dinner on the dock. Sarah hated boats. She loved to swim, but she hated boats.

Amber shoved the picture in a drawer somewhere.

He remembers the day after their wedding. The sticky hotel room with the lamp that blinked on and off. They thought

it would be more romantic if they drove into the city to do it, but neither of them could pony up for a nice hotel. That's when he mentioned he'd be leaving in two weeks. She acted like he'd lied. Like he hadn't tried to pull out as soon as he could. She stormed out and when she came back she her sweat smelled like gin and other men and she said:

“Go ahead. Leave your wife. She doesn't care. She can get off without you.”

He held her hair back while she threw up. That night he slept beside her, outside the blankets, making sure not to touch her.

When he left she was still sleeping. He left the car keys on the nightstand and bought a bus ticket. Amber picked him up and she didn't say anything, except some stupid remark about how she should've taken time off to see her baby brother married.

Amber left the next morning. Then the dishes began to pile up. He spent most of his time on the dock, throwing rocks across the glassy surface. And drinking. Bottles covered every surface of the house and sometimes he would try to fit just one more and they'd all come crashing down, littering the floor with shattered glass.

On his last day he drank too much and found himself at her door. The car was parked in the driveway, but her mother said she wasn't at home. She told him it would be better if he went away. So he lay down on her driveway. The cement burned his skin through his clothes and he felt dried out, shriveled.

When he opened his eyes, she was standing over him. Her face was pale and her hair was wiry. Like she was already dead. She nudged him with her foot and he could tell by the pounding in his head that he was no longer drunk.

“Let's go for a drive,” she said.

The highway curved around the lake, sometimes climbing into the hills above, sometimes reaching almost to the shoreline. Under Sarah's control, the car careened around bends, making Caleb sick.

They came to rest on top of a hill a few hundred feet above the water. The sun was beginning to set and shadows

began to obscure the view. Sarah climbed over the guardrail.

“Get back here,” Caleb said, “Sarah, you’re drunk.”

“I’m not that drunk.” She eased her way down the steep hill. Stumbling a little.

“We need to talk.”

“Come down here.” She was laughing. Deep gasping breaths. “Come down here and save me.”

Caleb climbed over the guardrail but stayed in place, holding himself steady.

“You’re no fun,” she said. “I married a loser.”

He heard a splash and he knew that she had jumped in.

“Sarah.” He couldn’t make anything out in the shadow of the hill.

“I’m here. Wouldn’t want you to have to come down here and be with your wife.”

She swam into the setting sun, naked. She didn’t bother to look back. She just dived beneath the surface, leaving only the waning light dancing across the water.

The next morning, Amber makes French toast with apple butter. That used to be his favorite, and he pretends he minds. Because she put her life on hold to come down here and save his. Or maybe just because it’s not worth the effort.

“I was thinking we could go down to Sylvan today,” she says.

“I can’t get to the water.”

“I could wheel you.”

“You and what army?”

“Well how about you go outside at least,” Amber says.

“All you ever do is look out the window.” Like he’s insulted her. “It’s a beautiful fucking day outside.”

“News to me.”

She goes to her room and slams the door. Caleb turns to the window. Clouds gather at the place where the hills bend to allow the lake to spread. Dark and laid thick with rain. Or maybe snow.

Caleb opens the door a crack. Cold air washes in. There’s a wind that he didn’t see from inside. He throws the door open

and pushes himself out. The air, fresh and cool, catches in his lungs. The light feels foreign on his bare skin. Dead grass crumbles underneath him.

On the dock the wood is soft, flaking. He slips off the chair and crawls to the water. Lying on his back. Pressing his hand on the surface. It's frigid this time of year, too cold even to wade in.

It was about this time of year. Maybe a little earlier. It doesn't take long to drown in cold water. The muscles seize and impair the drowning reflex. Wasn't that what they said? Her drowning reflex was impaired. It didn't help she was drinking, they said. As if somehow that exonerated God.

His hand has become numb to the cold. Water washes against his wrist. But he keeps it in. Thinking. The time they drove to the south end of the lake. Hopped the fence at the Landing. Got drunk, swam naked. The day they decided to get married. He's sure it was his idea. She just said it first. And she laughed and said, hey, wouldn't it be fun? But she wasn't smiling. She laughed until she couldn't breathe, but she wasn't smiling. Not really. Maybe he never really saw her smile. Maybe that just wasn't something she did, along with telling the truth and rowing. He can't remember now. But he said yeah, sounds fun, let's do it Monday.

Caleb was in the hospital when he found out she was gone. Amber had come to take him home. She just said that Sarah was dead. He knew the rest of the story without having to ask, "Her parents already had her buried, but they're waiting for you to hold the funeral," Amber said.

"They didn't cremate her?"

"I don't know what they did."

He said something clever then, like "Helluva way to meet the folks," but really he was trying to picture Sarah in the ground somewhere. Stuck in a box, never moving again. Instead he saw her drifting along the bottom of the lake, washing out to sea.

"We tried to reach you," Amber said, "I didn't know what happened to you until a few days ago."

"How long has she been dead?"

“A couple weeks.”

He didn't believe her. To this day, he's not sure he believes her. He's sure he would've known. Felt something. Some kind of absence from the world. Life should've stopped.

He imagines the feel of the water washing against him. Grabbing him, holding him. Like it holds her. Sinking beneath the surface to where light no longer passes. He imagines her swimming past the sloping hills, her breath catching in her lungs.

He turns to see Amber standing at the doorway.

“Caleb?”

“I'm right here,” he says. “Still alive and everything.”

“It's freezing out here,” she says, climbing down to him.

“Come inside.”

Across the bay two old men hunch over fishing poles. A heron dives for a fish.

“I'll be right in,” he says.