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MOTHER SUPERIOR

By

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Bachelor of English-Writing, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI, 2017

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“Emily’s Garden” has appeared in *Furious Gazelle*

“To Shrug” has appeared in the *Baltimore Review*

Prologue

The Lake Within

I am a fisherman. Every time I raise my arm to cast, I'm searching for an answer.

What is a lake?

I throw my lure at the lilies of my childhood, the sunken log of my crib. With every cast I hope the truth will follow it back, this little piece of me I offer to the mystery.

My earliest memories are at the bus stop, where a shroud of mist swirled about me and I listed side-to-side, six-AM eyes drooping while I waited for that big yellow ship to bust through the fog and open its doors before me. I was never a good sleeper, rarely felt awake, and when the bus would barrel along the shore of Long Lake, I'd rest my head against the foggy window and pondered how the water could sit so utterly still, yet churn the mist as if the fact the lake existed made reality tremble. I thought there must be something beneath the surface that shifted the air upon its waking, like my dad when he'd start the coffee pot with a hiss of steam, or the eruption of old truck engines across our village of fifty people or so, or a swirl of smoke bursting from the nighttime's remnant coals when I'd open up the woodstove and feed it the day's first log, as I'd been taught to do if I wanted to stay warm.

I always ran blue crayons down to the nub in my early days at school, drawing lakes. While I scribbled in fish or stick figures of my dad and me, I didn't notice then how my clothes reeked of smoke, whether from the woodstove or Mom's Marlboros burning away as she packed a peanut butter sandwich and waxy green apple into a paper bag that she shoved into my backpack. At lunch I'd nibble on these things, couldn't stand the way the apple always punched a bruise into the bread, left it the same color as the bags beneath my eyes.

When I ate, I did notice the full, colorful trays of food that sat before everyone else, that no one else's clothes hung from them like shrouds, that only my sweaters were speared a thousand times by the hair of four dogs – Axle, Shatzi, Dagger, and Tosha – whose barking chased me out the door each morning.

It's like my eyes never really opened for the day until school was over and the bus came back down the shore of Long Lake, where I'd hop from my seat and bounce before the opening door and amble to the house. My big brother, Steve, seven-years older and always busy, rarely followed behind me, always in an extracurricular, doing anything to stay out of the house. My younger brother, Nicky, would be waiting for me, three years younger and toddling amongst the dogs. I'd pat each of them on the head, throw my backpack just wherever and grab my fishing pole. If Mom was sober she might shout and stop me in my tracks from running to the neighbor's lakeside homes, but she almost always had her face planted in the dining room table, brittle plastic cup of vodka in her hand. So off I went to see those neighbors, watering lilacs in their yards or polishing the hubcaps of their cars. In those early days they let me fish in their yard because I was small and sweet I guess, a big eyed kid with a crooked smile who wanted to catch all their bluegill.

Those days, when I'd dangle my feet off a pier and kick at the water, watch the sunfish kiss at moths and wait for the twitch of my little foam bobber, a lake was unreality – an escape, a break of blue, a reflecting pool on the other end of a day of where I was stared at like an animal at school, where teachers patted me on the shoulders and always asked if I was okay in this tragic way that chipped at me like glass every time.

~ ~ ~

By eighth grade I was taller than my dad, six-foot-three almost overnight and in a constant wobble, always trying to square bony hips while cracking shins and knees on the school bus steps or quartered maple logs in the yard. Growing pains jolted me from sleep at night; it struck me that I should ask my neighbors, now that I towered over them, if I could do some work for them in exchange for continued access to their shore.

And so behind Larry and Linda's strangely huge home with the stained-glass windows, I cut their balding lawn and hooked perch who drifted around their personal man-made beach. I babysat Jim's little kid who climbed me like a tree and whispered some of the vilest things I've ever heard in my ear; and if I casted 45 degrees off the leftmost post of their pier, I caught a northern pike almost every time. In Mary Ann's yard I picked pinecones by the hundreds and hauled them in a tarp to the burn pile in our yard, and bullheads snatched my hook and shook their heads on the line as if they couldn't believe they'd been tricked again.

Adolescence passed this way. The days I couldn't fish – too dark after football practice, too cold half the year – I slunk from the bus and into our home. There, garbage was our decoration: bread bags torn by dogs or clothes gone moldy after sitting for months in laundry baskets beneath leaks in the roof. Plates and plastic cups lay about by the dozen, dust was thick as lacquer, rendered everything in grayscale. All night my ears would perk for Mom's stirring, my brothers and me and the dogs waited for the creak of the bed, her drunken footfalls, the toilet's flush, and the return. And then her half-waking moans of our father's name, who worked sixty-hour weeks as a marine mechanic, would make a pitstop home, then dash back out the door and not come back until dawn. Our stomachs bloated with hunger; we were little fish, light-headed all the time, pale-bellies floating us toward the sky.

When I was a teenager I thought this hunger sharpened me; I thought if I was in pain, I had access to a dimension others didn't. I could write my maxims in the constant slick of ash on our dining room table where Mom perpetually sat: life is basically horrendous, the future, of course, is futile, and every single person is stuck in the face with the fat hook of ego.

But I am a fisherman. By instinct, my body knew deeper truths stirred beneath the surface. Every fisherman has felt an unexpected strike – like on the back half of a retrieve, the perfect stillness we think we know explodes into endless droplets: little floating lakes all of themselves, infinite possibilities reflecting forever scales, fins, and big dark eyes. These strikes always made the pole jump from my hands, made something inside me unspool.

There was a girl who lived beyond the wildflower field behind our home – Savannah. Sometimes she was there at that bus stop with me, sometimes on cold mornings she'd slip her hand into my pocket and wrap her fingers in mine. Things started to happen quickly, but I suppose that's how it goes. Years passed and a few times a week she pulled me by the hand to her house, where her grandma and not her mother – long gone, repelled by Savannah's birth – cooked me meals of snow goose and fried spinach – shot and grown themselves – and sent me home with plastic containers of cheesy broccoli soup that I'd split with Nicky.

With this fuel in my fire my brain started working; at school, teachers pushed the uncut hair from my eyes and I started to see clearly. And while the yellow walls of our home still dominated my vision, in my periphery I started to see Dad on the sidelines of football games, or little pans of zucchini bread, kind of raw, the zucchini of which was supplied by Savannah's

neighbor Roland back in the woods, who couldn't read or write but told my mom exactly how his wife, long gone, used to bake the bread.

In my final summer at home, with college on the horizon, my new vision told me that a lake was the realest thing on Earth. It was the drip of water down my hands nearly sizzling on my arms on the hottest days of the year, those dog days that were anything but sluggish, where Savannah once caught a bass nearly twenty-inches long and screamed in a mix of joy and fear so long and loud it rings in my head still, right behind the waves of my laughter.

~ ~ ~

My family dropped me off on a hot sidewalk in Marquette, Michigan, a city of twenty-thousand that Lake Superior allowed to rest on its shore. I was the first person from Long Lake to go to college in a decade. Before me, my big brother. Before him, no one I was alive to know.

I shook there, on the sidewalk. Tears pooled in my eyes and some sunny-faced advisor ran up to check on me. He was saying something, but I could only hear the broken exhaust of Dad's old Buick rumbling down the highway. I wanted to chase after it.

Twenty-thousand people and the infrastructure to support them labels Marquette as a quaint little town, one that frequents "Must Visit!" lists for avid adventurers. But the year I graduated high school, Long Lake's population was nineteen people.

A one-thousand fold difference between this life and the last. By the pounding of my heart when I walked among the mass of students from class to class, it felt like even more. I'd learned to wash the smoke from my clothes, and the dogs had died years ago, their deaths each a bite out of my heart, but thready gashes adorned my sweater collars, dark stains painted t-shirts like a terminal disease. The only thing that'd changed from my elementary days was that now the

river of nerves in my skin told me when the flow was broken by the pressure of someone's eyes – a constant sort of rockslide in my tumbling waters.

What confidence I'd found in my sense of reality boiled off me on the hot campus sidewalks. I couldn't lift my hand in class; I didn't recognize the faint voice that came from me when I was made to speak. I wasn't myself anymore, and so when Savannah – a year behind me, her voice echoing familiar in her grandma's home – had a new edge in her voice on the phone, I knew it would saw through the thick line of our relationship eventually.

Which is to say: I lost her. We'd talk once a week at night, fight like dogs, and with the snapping shut of my phone I'd retreat to the infinite Lake Superior and reflect, a half-mile walk I'd only make at night, because to navigate the city by day left me standing at crosswalks, frozen. The county Savannah and I grew up in had no stoplights. If I had to drive in the city, I had to watch myself. Leaning forward until my back ached, I'd chug along in my '99 Chevy Prism, eyes so stuck on the stoplight down the block that I'd nearly run the one in front of me. I didn't know who I was becoming.

But I kept casting. I had my first real conversation with a man named Andrew who sat next to me in class. Andrew, who I would call a boy if he were 18 like me, but instead was 25 and from Detroit and told me stories of how gunshots in the night would shatter the glass of his dreams. He laughed when I replied by saying,

Uh, at home, sometimes I can't sleep because the frogs are real loud.

Andrew got me my first job on campus, where I showcased the new *Windows 8!* and our boss was a lion-haired man who claimed to have read *north of 2000 novels* and always seemed to be looking at something just over my shoulder. From him I learned that I shouldn't feel so weird

about myself. And from my classes I learned Descartes' *cogito – I think therefore I am*, and that Thoreau once said “*A lake is... earth's eye,*” and in world history and classes like it I learned that I wasn't really wrong back in the day: life *was* basically horrendous, and came to be in a manner as random and scary as it felt. Life inside the city dizzied me; and maybe that meant I had a better grasp on reality than ever before.

Time skipped forth and I learned that winter meant something different along Lake Superior. Snowbanks dwarfed buildings, condensation froze into second windows over windows, two-story waves swept grabbed two photographers and churned them away with sedan-sized chunks of ice. There was knee-deep slush, spinning cars, sheets of snow in squalls that left me turned around, wet-faced, and wondering where I just went.

Despite all this two people who change my life came through the doors of the university center and brought a swirl of snow with them. They approached the Windows 8 stand, where Andrew and I listed side to side, bored to oblivion. It's hard to explain, but it's like when I learned their names were Emily and Stephanie when they wrote them in prismatic colors on the touch screen, it's like I fell back to a lake in my mind, where I'd been sitting with my chin in my hand for months, and two splashes broke the water's surface.

In my next year Emily and I shared a class together – I recognized her at a glance but was too nervous to say a thing until she caught me on the staircase and said, *You're the Windows 8 guy!* I said, *I like to think I'm more than the Windows 8 guy, but yes,* and we laughed and stepped outside, where Emily's shoe came untied and she kicked up her foot and said, *Tie it?* I blinked at her, unsure which us was being weird. I shrugged, caught her foot on my knee, and bunny-eared

her laces. At the moment I tried some joke about how I could tie knots *pretty okay* because I was a fisherman. Emily smiled, said she loved to fish.

And so did Stephanie, who I found a few weeks later in the sky tunnel between two buildings on campus. Already winter teased the skies again and I shivered its grip off me in the hallway, where Stephanie sat on the single bench and looked out at the rosy-nosed people bobbing down the sidewalk like acorns in a stream. I said, *Stephanie, right?* and she looked at me, eyes a sort of green that made so much sense; she'd spent her life fishing a cove of Lake Superior, the greenness of which would bleed into your eyes if given enough time.

I would learn that they came from a village, had a sister – Hanna – the age of my younger brother. They grew up splitting firewood, stoking fires, picking wintergreen from the forest floor and chewing it on hikes. They showed me how to do that, and that first minty bite opened my eyes again and I started to see it everywhere – I wasn't alone.

I tutored English 109 and the world expanded before me; half my students came from Brazil and China and Japan and South Korea. They mostly wrote about missing home. They wrote about the scream of life in America, how our loud and huge everything either stunned or dazzled them. In my final year, a South Korean student left me with a bag of tea from her home; a gift set quietly by my hand after our final session, and prefaced only with a shy smile. When steeped, it turned my water into the color of the sun.

The other half of my students came from the little towns tucked in the woods all around Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They told stories of their first deer shot, game winning touchdowns, incredible fish they caught with their fathers. They wrote about lean dinners, working as of middle school, and about "friends" they knew who started drinking around the

same time. All their stories swirled within me – by night when I’d lie down, right behind my closed eyes I pictured their lives; I pictured mine.

Stephanie once told me about these puddles on a trail in the woods that led to Lake Superior. As a kid she’d always hop from root to rock around them – they were spring-fed and dark, deep enough to make you stare in wonder.

How deep were these puddles? Stephanie’s parents told her that they went *to the bottom of the world, at least*. They said this to protect her, but could it be that these little bodies of water really bring us somewhere else? If I dove in, could I end up back home, head bursting from the surface of Long Lake like a bobber being released? Or could I emerge in a lotus pond in Busan, where it’s good to know I have a friend?

I ask myself this because when I stared at a lake – Lake Superior or the little lakes it fed with its veins that pumped into the woods, which I would explore for years with friends – that’s where my thoughts of family and friends and what was real and what was not would swim together, little minnows sometimes congealed and kissing the surface en masse, with little wanderers poking beneath a lily or stirring up a pebble.

And these lakes were not always lakes – why not a cup of golden tea, puddle in the woods, cheesy broccoli soup sloshing in Tupperware, the pool of tears in my mom’s eyes when I told her that I wasn’t moving home after graduation, that Emily and Stephanie and a lot of my friends were going to stay in town, along Lake Superior. How hard it was to say that a tiny piece of me found a certain charm to rain on the sidewalk, that the electric thrill of passing beneath streetlights with Stephanie and seeing which ones zapped off was nothing like I’d ever felt.

One thing I haven't said is that in the four years I went to college in Marquette, and the three years I wandered the streets and shore afterwards, I visited home all the time. I killed my Chevy Prism with how often I visited; its final trailing inertia brought me into the patch of woods in the back yard where we parked all our dead vehicles. Twice a month, sometimes more, every break, and sometimes just for the day, I drove the hundred miles home. Oftentimes I'd pull up at night, where my car would shudder to sleep and I'd sneak in through the side room door, the only door without a tremendous creak. A wall of smoke would hit me – I'd stumble over moth-chewed clothes or garbage on the ground. Every time I visited home I spent one day cleaning, a morning drinking coffee with my mom, an afternoon in the driveway watching Dad fix a vacationer's boat, and evenings playing video games or fishing with Nicky, the falling sun or flickering television showing me the little changes in his face as he grew up.

But nighttime was for me. Even after I'd grown used to the city's energy, I needed the dose of perfect quiet, where I could stare through my open window into the actual dark. I never was a good sleeper, so for hours I'd try to piece together the shoreline of the lake. My only hint was the moon in the sky and its reflection in the water. When my eyes would flutter, I couldn't tell which was which. It all became a wash to me, moon and eyes and frog song.

~ ~ ~

The Lake Within will break before us and it's usually very still. It's almost always dawn, and mist will coat our canoe, aluminum with chipping paint. Here – take this paddle. It works despite the split in its blade. You might not see through this mist but the lake is shaped like Long Lake, and no matter how many places I see that will never change. What that means is there are two basins before us, each I guess like a football field in both length and width, though of course

they're round and the shoreline curves to a sort of pinch between the two that I guess looks like hips.

If we're starting from the north and working our way down, I suppose that places us in the heart.

If you'll paddle with me and look to the left, you'll see my brothers in a boat, Steve forever a teenager, Nicky forever four, waiting for me by the door when the bus would bring me home. Our four dead dogs are not dead but sleeping on a fallen tree – Axle, Shatzi, Dagger, and Tosha – legs akimbo, on their backs, tongues lolled out, and they are dreaming. Dad still has his rockstar hair from his 20s and he's pulling a pike from the pier – behind him is the cabin on the shoreline he always wanted. He holds his fish high in triumph.

Mom is lying on the beach. In sunglasses and kicked back under her umbrella, she crosses her legs and butterflies her arms behind her head. She looks pregnant with the daughter she always wanted.

Once I've startled paddling I can never stop moving. That seems to be the rule here – watch me jam the paddle's blade into the water, see how we're carried forth by the current of time regardless?

On our right you'll see a little party on a rocky beach. There are neighborhood kids playing guns with the driftwood – please excuse their pointed boughs of birch: they haven't got me yet. And then there's my friends. They paddle about in kayaks; some are floating on their backs. Most will wave at me as we pass. Some were what we call “more than friends” and their hair is wet and pulled over their shoulder. Their back is turned and they look into the woods; even if I call their name they never turn around, and I never see their face.

We're approaching the hips of the lake now and in the tree on the right Emily and Stephanie sit among the branches – they're fishing, their lines drop long to the water and are golden in the rising sun. Savannah leans against the tree on the left. She looks up from her phone; she smiles as we pass.

Now we're in the second basin. I guess this would be the womb. You'll notice there's no people here, but white lilies ring the shore. If you look close before us, there's algal blooms like the half-healed greenish bruises on my dad when he fell asleep in his truck, flipped it twice on one of his late nights, landed it on its wheels, and drove it home by squinting through the shattered windshield glass. I didn't know a thing about this until I visited once from Marquette; I flew into a rage in the living room, screamed,

How could no one have told me?

I never said my lake was pretty. On this end there are floating globs of decaying plants, brown and like piles of mom's vomit I'd wipe off the bathroom floor most nights. Among the white lilies on the shore there is a streak of red flowers like blood down a thigh. An old fish basket floats by, filled with skeletons of bass. I didn't always value life the way I should. If you see the glint of a pocket knife in the deep, just know I'll explain someday. It isn't there by accident, and neither are the thin white scars on my skin, not unlike what you'd find on a fish who's known the teeth of something mean, or the callous edge of man.

But I still love this lake within. I appreciate you coming with me. And besides - without the mess of weeds, what would the crayfish eat? And without them there's no cabaret of snapping turtles to make an archipelago with their heads, and without the leeches leaving love

bites between their eyes, I'm not reminded of the time I playfully bit Savannah on her arm, and she pointed at the crooked tooth mark and said *Hm, wonder who could've done this!*

It's true that sometimes storms will darken the sky and hail will ping our boats – in these moments I force my friends from the lake and send all the wildlife into a dive. But if you'll stay I'll unfold this umbrella for you. If you stay, you might see, as I often do, a shape on the horizon. It's either my dad in his canoe, which is like mine but even older. Or Emily and Stephanie in a rowboat, which cuts the mist and floats alongside me. Whoever it is, in their raincoat they'll tie a knot of rope beneath their seat and another under me. *We're going to ride this out.* While we wait, we might as well pick up our poles and cast.

I understand the answer a little more every time I raise my arm, with every flutter of my eyes, with the gentle bumps of our canoes. A lake is a place you go, and never really leave.

My mom clapped her hands over her ears as a timber wolf impregnated her dog on the back porch. It was all she could do. The year was 1982 and her husband, David, a cocaine addict among other things, had rented a wolf from a man in the Northwoods of Wisconsin to “use” over the weekend, then disappeared to go hunting with his brother. This left my mom alone amidst the yowls of her giant Alaskan malamute, Duffy, and the howls of the pitch-black, amber-eyed wolf named Buzzy. When she wanted to sleep, she turned a hose on the canines. This worked long enough for her to get into bed, but by the time she closed her eyes, the little house in Kenosha, Wisconsin was filled again with the screams of passion. And wet dog smell.

Two months later, ten puppies were born: half giant malamute, half timber wolf. For \$100 each, David sold nine of them to his friends who were in a machoistic heat of their own at the thought of owning a half-wolf dog. The first puppy born though, the biggest one, David kept for himself. He named her Tosha. Most likely he didn’t know that in Latin, the name translated to “Christ’s birthday,” or that in Russian, it meant “contentment.” To hear my mom tell it, David was anything but Christlike, and she was anything but content.

~ ~ ~

In the haze of the late 80s, my mom’s life changed. She gave birth to my older half-brother, Steve. She gave Duffy away to David’s brother. David ran around on her, did a lot of cocaine, disappeared to go hunting every weekend. Tosha grew huge and beautiful and wild. She bore the black and white markings of her mother on her face, the same barrel chest. Nose to tail, she was every inch as long as her father. She walked on paws as big as a grown man’s hands, demolished whatever she could grab with teeth like flooring nails. She bounded through the house, toppled coat racks and swept plates from tables with her tail. She ate the legs of every

chair, the seats and rearview mirror of my mom's GMC van, neighborhood rabbits and squirrels, and whatever she could reach or snatch with her huge body, her wolf-like speed.

But what she wanted to get her jaw around most was David's neck. When he returned from the nether regions of Kenosha, drunk or blitzed on top of his usual cavalier attitude, she stood in front of my mom, who stood in front of Steve, and growled. Her strength pounded through the room. Even David, in his perpetual stupor, knew to stumble right back out the door when Tosha's goliath form stared him down with the burning, amber eyes of her father.

It is usually obvious when one person should leave another. Figuring that out isn't the hard part. But to understand your worth, to take that step out the door and into a new reality, takes a push. Tosha's instinct – her literal animal instinct – was that push for my mom. She left David sometime in 1985, a wolfdog by her side and a baby in her arms.

~ ~ ~

In the early 90s my mom fell in love with a long-haired mechanic named Gary who moonlighted as a cook at the Brat Stop in Kenosha, where she was a waitress. Somewhere in the din of clinking plates and frying brats and flipping pancakes the two fell for each other. After shifts, they hopped in Gary's car – not a Thunderbird like he pined for, but loud as thunder at least – and jerked and jolted through lanes of traffic. One day, her face lit red by the glow of a stoplight, Mom confessed that she wanted to get out of the city. Gary snapped his head toward her and said, "I was thinking the same thing," then punched the gas through the green and let the engine swell.

Their escape from the city met with little resistance. Mom's dad, named Bob, but who we called Papa, was a 6'7" man who once put his fist through the ceiling while cheering for the Packers. He was just relieved that Mom got away from David, that he didn't have to step in and

crumple that coked-out goblin like a ball of tinfoil and throw him into the river. Gary's dad, also named Bob, but who we called Grandpa, always dreamt of someplace smaller, and he reckoned settling into that dream was now as simple as following his son and his mane of rockstar hair. Grandpa was only a little skeptical when my mom came to pick Dad up one day in a chewed-up van that carried a toddler in the front seat, and the biggest dog he'd ever seen in the back.

~ ~ ~

Life was better in Trevor, Wisconsin, population 8000. But it still wasn't quite right. Dad still had to drive into Milwaukee for work, where he assembled racecar parts on an assembly line. Once, a sliver of fiberglass sprang from the hood of a Pontiac and into his eye. The doctor dumped purple dye into the affected iris, tweezed out the colorful sliver, and said, "Oh, wow! Do you wanna keep it?" to which my Dad replied, "Jesus Christ, no," and which he took as a sign that he still had not found his place beneath the sky.

Mom toiled in a lab in downtown Milwaukee. She tinkered with chemical compounds meant to fight off cancer to the tune of \$8 an hour. She shook her head over vials and test tubes, yearned for something more fruitful.

Steve toddled off to pre-school. One day, he suplexed a kid: a trick he picked up watching pro-wrestling with Dad, no doubt. Mom chastised Dad about this, to which he replied,

"Well, let's get the kid a bigger yard so he can burn some of it off."

If "it" meant insatiable energy, Tosha needed the space more than anyone. She broke free from the square of lawn often and ran around with the punks of the neighborhood – the Doberman down the street, the wandering beagle, the scarred-up Labrador.

And as it goes, Tosha soon gave birth to 11 puppies. The father – or fathers, as canine anatomy allows – were nowhere to be found. But the puppies' mish-mashed appearances said it

all: squirming little creatures with the ears of beagles, snouts of Dobermans, frames of Labs, wriggled around on a pad of old newspapers about Reagan or the Challenger explosion while Mom and Dad scratched their heads. Mom felt the specter of David there in the room, laughing drunkenly at the aftershocks of that howling, passionate weekend he perpetrated all those years ago. Now, Mom and Dad looked at the quarter giant malamute, quarter wolf, and half mystery pups. “Hm,” they said. Eleven little wrinkles in the fabric of their future.

Torn between their good-natured desire for the pups to have good homes, the moral dubiousness about releasing quarter-wolf dogs amok into a shelter, the desire to rid themselves of the shadow of David, and Tosha’s blazing eyes suggesting the puppies not go anywhere, Mom and Dad decided to care for the pups until they could stand on their own, and then gift them only to those who knew of Tosha’s lineage.

Mom’s dad, Papa, took the calmest one. She had gentle brown eyes and a speckled caramel coat. He named her Schatzi, knowing that it was of German origin, like him, and that it literally translated to: “Dear Treasure,” but colloquially meant “Sweetheart.”

A good work friend of my dad’s from back in Kenosha took the wildest one, a strikingly white-coated creature with hazel eyes, and named him Dagger.

Mom and Dad, for Steve and Tosha’s sake, kept one for themselves. He was an awkward patchwork of black and brown and white fur, short in some places, long in others. His floppy beagle ears dominated his head, and his Labrador frame vibrated with excitement at all times. Steve wanted to name him Bob. When Mom and Dad told him no, that’s both of your grandpas’ names, Steve pouted and said, “Well, what about Axle?” Guns N’ Roses had sunk into his head in the same way they inspired the mop on Dad’s head, and so, after the famous Axl Rose, the puppy was named. The fact that our great grandfather was named “Axel” couldn’t be helped.

And it couldn't be helped either that after dispersing the rest of the puppies among friends, Mom and Dad longed for a bigger yard, fewer people, more distance from the city. Axle quickly grew to size and needed room to run. Tosha needed space from Axle because he drove her crazy. Steve was ready for kindergarten. Mom had a job offer in the Northwoods to write environmental protection grants on behalf of the Potawatomi. She wanted to get married by a lake, and my dad, still shy of 20 years old, was along for the ride.

And so in 1992, Mom, Dad, Steve, the half wolf Tosha, and the quarter wolf Axle, hopped into a chewed-up GMC van, and in search of peace and quiet, migrated north to a village named Long Lake.

~ ~ ~

The early days in Long Lake were spent in a cabin on the edge of the lake that the town was named for. Electricity buzzed through bare wires that climbed boards with measurements chalked on them. An outhouse, the only bathroom, creaked outside and housed pine snakes. But the lake's waves lapped onto the yard, and fishing was only a matter of a dozen steps and arcing a cast. Grandpa bought the project cabin as a getaway from Kenosha, but started to come to Long Lake every weekend with a truck full of lumber and the intention to make the place his home. Mom and Dad searched and searched for homes in the tiny town – population 200 – and like having to draft the snot-bubbled kid for your team before a schoolyard game of football, they glanced over and over one decrepit house that sat amidst a handful of trailers across the street from the lake, sighed, pointed, and said, “That one.”

I was conceived in that home. Mom shook her finger in Dad's face and told him not to say a thing about it when both Papa and Grandpa and friends from Kenosha adventured north to see their wedding on the shore of Lost Lake, shaded by the branches of the hemlock trees,

centuries old. While I slowly came to be, Mom and Dad stared down their new house like Tosha and Axle might stare down the raccoons or deer or foxes that frequented the yard: as a challenge. It was a race – in the same way one dashes around their home and tidies it to perfection to create the illusion they always live immaculately, Mom and Dad hoped to get the house into tenable shape and to settle into the community before I came into the world.

But the house reeked of creosote. A chimney fire, years prior, painted the walls with its toxic smoke, and the old couple living there figured that was fine. Dad unplugged the chimney with a flexible metal rod and a week of elbow grease. He hauled two dozen garbage bags of creosote to the dump, where the lady attendant eyed him warily – an outsider. On cold nights, wind rushed freely through the thin concrete walls, and Dad discovered that the house’s insulation was comprised of shredded newspaper that dated from the 50s, which could have been about Eisenhower or Sputnik. Mom discovered hundreds of cans of chicken bones in the basement. “For the cats!” the old woman before us explained. And indeed, cats still roamed the property, hunkered down in the barn out back, urinated on the side of the house (*“Did you know their piss literally makes you insane?”* Dad would say). But Tosha, wolf senses tingling, caught on to her family’s need and sent the cats packing with her famous, single, devastating bark, which made the whole town look to our side of the lake and cock an eyebrow.

Mom and Dad rebuilt our home without destroying it. It’s a luxury to destroy things and start fresh – it’s easy to reduce something to zero and simply re-create it in your own image. But that wasn’t the arc of their story. Every night, when the two wolf-dogs and a child from another marriage would need to be simmered down, Mom and Dad took the roiling mass of energy they found themselves with and settled it into a quiet image of their own, much in the same way that Long Lake, across the street, would sit still at night, no matter what the weather did all day. As

the family fell asleep, frogs sang all along the lake. Every star in the sky shone from the backyard, where Axle and Tosha could rear their heads back and howl in unison with the wolves who roamed the woods around their newfound home.

~ ~ ~

In their first Long Lake winter, while I was a month or so along in Mom's stomach, Mom and Dad and Steve bundled up and went to a festival in Eagle River called Klondike Days. The event, put on by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, was named for the Native American tribes and early pioneers who settled the area. As such, Mom and Dad ushered Steve along through knee-deep snow and wandered among stalls depicting the North American fur trade of the 1800s, a lumberjack competition, racks of venison that steamed over fires, and, because peace is hard to find, a familiar face, standing next to a series of cages. Mom approached him, and sure enough. It was the man with the wolves, the one David requisitioned seven years prior. And sitting in one of those cages, still huge, a pitch-black echo of her past framed against the snow, was Buzzy the timber wolf. Tosha's dad, Axle's grandfather. Mom's nemesis.

~ ~ ~

Even the smallest of towns is not bereft of drama. Townsfolk drove by our rundown home with the unfinished windows, patchwork roof, hyperactive little kid, Mom with swelling stomach, rusted cars in the gravel lot, wolfdogs on chains in the yard, and frowned. Rumors of us having a captive wolf made the rounds – Mom wrung her hands with anxiety that Tosha would be shot when she got loose – a habit she maintained from her Trevor days. (Chains from Ace Hardware were basically yarn to her). Mom and Dad used to laugh along with jokes from their city friends about going to live among the rednecks, and now they couldn't buy a loaf of bread

from the single store in town – named “The Store” – without catching a look from the clerk that seemed to ask: “And who invited *you*?”

And then, under the leaking roof and the aspersive eyes of the townsfolk, amidst the wolf dogs and smoky walls, I was born.

Tosha slept beneath my crib until I didn’t need it anymore. Mom bought me stuffed animals and Tosha chewed the faces off them and puffed air into the holes where their noses once were. Such was her motherly instinct, her wanting for them to breathe. And she protected me, even from Steve when I grew old enough to be power bombed on the couch, and even from Axle, who never did understand his strength, and who would often bowl me over onto the wooden floor when I, never learning my lesson, stretched out my arms and called for him.

~ ~ ~

Steve used to play with a boy named Justin from across the lake. Justin was a little monster who everyone in town was correct to hate, but given the lack of kids that were Steve’s age in Long Lake, and the fact that Steve was “from that wolf house,” he had no choice but to play with him. So Justin would come to the yard, and he and Steve would play basketball with the hoop my dad bolted to the side of the barn. Basketball devolved into violence every time. The ball rolled slowly down the dusty driveway while Steve and Justin shoved each other and grunted like primitives. Tosha, in her old age, would lounge in the grass and just watch, having seen enough to know that boys just do this kind of thing. But Axle had a different opinion of the situation. He would strain himself on the chain and bark his sharp, ear-piercing bark. And every time, Justin would disengage from Steve, grab a toy baseball bat, and whack Axle between the ears. And before Dad could get outside and wring him like a towel, Justin would be on his bike and down the road.

Then, one day, Justin came to the house with a coffee tin in his hands. Written in his scratchy handwriting were the words “March of Dimes” across the aluminum. The terror of the town as always, he was going door to door and asking for “donations.”

So when Dad saw him on the front porch, he smiled, opened the door wide, and stepped out of the way as Axle blitzed out of the house, then chased Justin, who screamed for help and got none, up and down the streets of Long Lake for the better part of the afternoon.

In his own way, Axle looked after our family that day. Just after that event, folks told Mom and Dad in the bar or at The Store, “*We saw your dog the other day,*” “*He seemed like a real sweetie,*” “*He sure can run.*” People fell in love with his big floppy ears, his endless stamina, his constant smile. They waved at him and at us and even Tosha while we played in the yard. They waved, even if we didn’t have the money to patch up the house, even if our cars still rusted in the yard, and even when Mom’s stomach started to swell again.

~ ~ ~

News from Kenosha.

Dad got a call one day from his work friend back in the city. The puppy we had given him years ago – Dagger – had been shot in the stomach with a pistol while he rooted around in an alley. Dad’s friend, wracked with guilt, paid the veterinary bill that saved Dagger’s life, but said he couldn’t bear to keep him in that neighborhood anymore. He asked if we would take him in. Dad didn’t think twice. He had left the city because exactly that kind of senselessness seemed to surround him – because frog song beats sirens when you’re trying to sleep, and because even if country folk weren’t necessarily any kinder than city folk, at least there were fewer of them.

And so, once he recovered, Dagger was dropped at our door, where he reunited with his mother, his brother, and the very same people he saw when he first opened his eyes.

But after that first, sweet night of bedding down with his brother, Dagger and Axle remembered their quarter portion of wolf blood and attacked each other the next morning. They split each other's faces open and sprayed that wolf blood all over the kitchen. Even Tosha's giant bark couldn't separate them. But Mom knew to turn to the sprayer on the sink.

Dagger, gunshot survivor, was given free reign of the yard behind the barn. Dad built him an insulated shack with a heater whose extension cord we had to beware tripping over, especially as the leafy cover of the fall fell upon us. Whenever Steve or I would ask Dad if we could go back and play with Dagger, he would look back at the strikingly white, scar-laced dog, his perpetual defensive stance, his eyes the wild of the city, not the country we'd grown used to. He would shake his head.

~ ~ ~

Nicky was born on December 27th, 1997. While Mom and Dad were at the hospital, my grandma Theresa, who we called "Tooley," was tasked with watching us. Grandpa's cabin was now a house that had plumbing and surge protectors, among other modern luxuries. We loved to visit there, but Tooley didn't love when she'd visit us, and the feeling was mutual. Tooley was drunk and loud basically always, and Mom, as stress from work and childrearing piled up within her, would follow Tooley's example. And so even from the earliest days in the house, Tosha bristled and growled at our grandma's presence. As with David, she stood and smoldered in front of Steve and me.

But Grandpa was at work and Steve was ten years old and Mom was busy giving birth and Dad was busy getting his long hair pulled by Mom as she pushed my second brother out of her body. Tosha growled at Tooley, Axle sprinted laps around the house, they both snatched the little sandwiches that Tooley repeatedly made for me before I could even touch them. But it made

me laugh to see her, sober for once, go red in the face and scream, “Damn dogs! You damn dogs!” I pumped my three-year-old fists on the table and laughed at the spectacle.

“Damn dogs!” I shouted in glee. “Damn dogs!”

~ ~ ~

News from Kenosha.

“Papa died,” Mom told us through tears. “He had a heart attack.”

So many details from that time have rolled off the edge of my memory. But the mascara trailing down Mom’s face, the horror at learning that our own hearts could attack us – that stuck.

We knew that Papa had been slowing down. He’d been up to see our home in Long Lake, the quiet life his daughter yearned for, but in the constant flux of settling in, Mom hadn’t made it downstate to see him in years. Returning to Kenosha – for any reason – fell to the bottom of the priority list. It seemed counterproductive to reverse the exodus Mom and Dad worked so hard for, especially now that Steve was trucking through elementary school, and our walls still smelled of smoke, and the roof still leaked, and Nicky was only a year old.

Life in the woods had hardened Mom and Dad, but some things will always be harder. The loss of her father scratched the veneer of peace within Mom, and so she cried. She cried for months, she cried and her mascara ran the whole way downstate, even when Dad recounted how Papa had gotten to watch the Packers beat the tar out of the Patriots in the Super Bowl a year prior to his death, and how proud he seemed of our home in the woods.

Papa died in his home near the city, and though I couldn’t formulate much when I was four years old, I thought that sounded like a nice way to go. Maybe I thought that way because, as we were told, when Papa’s body was found, his dog, Shatzi, was curled up next to him.

That drive was my first time seeing a city, my first time seeing such grim looks on Mom and Dad and Steve's faces as they returned to the blaze of streetlights and roar of tires on the road. Nicky sat beside me in his car seat. His big blue eyes were fixed on Shatzi, who was crammed in the backseat with us three boys, and who returned the look with her big brown eyes that had seen too much.

~ ~ ~

Four wolf dogs. Three young boys. Two new parents. One 1950s farmhouse. For a few years, every single day was a typhoon. Dozens of eaten socks littered the floor, which was scratched of its stain and varnish by the claws of sprinting, fighting, jumping dogs, and the plastic tires of our toy cars. Stuffed animals without faces slouched in every corner. Every meal had to be held at chest height and eaten as fast as it could be stomached. Shatzi lived up to her name – she was a sweetheart, made soft and patient through years of living with an aged Papa – but she was still a quarter wolf dog, and like any good animal she attuned to the rule of her environment: mayhem. Perhaps made intelligent through years of watching Papa's beloved documentaries with him, she learned how to lift the lid off the garbage can and how to open the bread drawer with her mouth. She could tell when a door outside was unlatched – not uncommon, given how warped every door frame was – and knew how to nose it open, beckon to Axle, and bolt out the door. Tosha, as if to give us some fair chance of catching them, would erupt into her deep bark. Axle and Shatzi would sprint down the road, two blurs of color. Dagger would bark after them, wishing to join their escape, and Dad could be found peeling after them in his pale blue Oldsmobile, the interior of which had been eaten by Axle and Shatzi, in the tradition of their mother.

Us kids were a pack of our own. Steve's features grew dark, he began to fill out and resemble father. I grew lanky, dark-haired and light-eyed like Dad. Nicky's bright blue eyes, like Mom's, shone just below his faint blonde hair. Kindergarten fast approached for me. Steve stepped into middle school. Nicky babbled in his standing chair. Mom drank more often but still wrote grants to protect the forest around us, Dad disappeared more evenings than before but still fixed the cars and boats of our fellow Long Lakers. These were supposed to be our dog days. The easiest of our lives, a quiet stroll through the woods. But hounds from the past found their way into our home. The bustle of city life, we discovered, was just life. Still, this was home – and if it was less a structure we erected and more a grove in the woods where we trotted our circles, nestled down, and closed our eyes to the weather – so be it.

~ ~ ~

News from Kenosha.

A hospital nurse called my mom one day, asked if her name was her name, and Mom said, yes. The nurse told her she was listed as the emergency contact for a man named David.

“Oh, great,” Mom said.

“David is in critical condition,” the nurse said. “He's bleeding internally.”

“How the hell did that happen?” Mom asked. She ashed her cigarette.

“He fell,” the nurse said, “From a substantial height.”

Mom picked at the nurse for details the way an old dog picks at its bowl of food. Slowly, Mom revealed things she knew about David so the nurse felt more at liberty to talk. Yes, she knew he drank that much and that his blood would be gritty with the residue of drugs we could only imagine. Yes, his sexual history would give a wild animal pause. No, it's not a miracle he's alive. But it's incredibly unlikely, if that's what we're getting at.

The nurse eventually explained that David, drunk as ever, toppled from his apartment's balcony, spun like a duck shot in the air, then folded cartoonishly over the metal railing on the balcony of the apartment below his. His spleen popped like a balloon. The random Kenosha citizen who lived there found him blacked out and draped like a towel on the railing, his few strands of hair waving to the city, and called an ambulance.

“Well, I’m sure he’s fine,” Mom said. She hung up and sipped her mason jar of vodka.

~ ~ ~

Life in the woods had hardened Mom and Dad, but some things are never easy.

In 2000, Dad found Tosha cold and still, lying where my crib used to be. We were all floored. She'd been slowing down and going gray, as we all do. But we didn't figure she could actually die. We couldn't imagine our home without its matriarch, without that constant, huge presence to protect us.

Mom broke down every bit as badly as she did for the death of her father. Mascara ran in rivers down her face. She would try to compose herself: halt her tears, catch her breath. But she saw us kids crying, Dad digging a grave in the back, Axle and Shatzi pawing at the bedroom door, beyond which their mother was wrapped forever in a blanket, and would break down again. She was caught in a loop, as if cursed. A pall blew in through the thin walls of our home that day, and neither of our mother figures were there to sweep it away.

But that is what it means to settle into life. At least that's how Dad made it seem when he had us kids form a line, and one-by-one, pet Tosha's great head a final time. I remember how Steve's hand looked as it sank into her fur, how veins popped from it now, how tendons poked through skin. My hand was still so mushy, so soft. But Nicky's even more so. Time was blurring past us.

Axle and Shatzi licked their mother's face. Shatzi had seen this before. But Axle, who hadn't been without his mother a day in his life, was never the same.

Dad buried Tosha beneath the birch trees in the back yard. Dagger watched over him. That night, Mom, through tears, recalled the day she fell into labor with Steve. She said it was the strangest thing, but the moment her water broke, back in that small house in Kenosha, Tosha howled. She jumped on every piece of furniture and howled and barked her heart out as if she knew, before she could possibly know, what it meant to be a mother.

~ ~ ~

Not long after Tosha's death, Mom flipped her Jeep on an icy road while driving for work. The Jeep rolled twice and landed upside down. The violence of the crash twisted her spine, shattered her hip, dislocated her knee, broke her ribs, and took the seven-month bump in her belly that would have been my little sister. She would have been named Haley.

Forced out of work, piled with two-hundred-thousand dollars of medical bills, physically crushed, robbed of Papa, Tosha, and Haley, Mom could do nothing but cry.

For years she cried. Through mine and Nicky's elementary days, well into Steve's high school days, she cried. Mascara melted down her cheeks, became perpetual markings on her face. Axle and Shatzi whined all the time, crowded around her as she sat, stuck, in one chair at the head of the dining room table for entire days on end.

Dad found work as a marine mechanic, but though he worked all day, got home, and worked all night on the townfolks motors, it wasn't close to enough. Whatever the opposite of tripling is – that happened to our income. Steve had grown big, deserved more food than my parents could give him as he brought home perfect test scores, began football, worked odd jobs around town. As the innate, passive kindness of childhood bled out of Steve, he became ever a

model of defiance – of his biological father, his circumstances. He listened to Megadeth but attended Baptist church, crushed kids on the football field with cracks of pads that felt personal, yet read Nicky and me to sleep with our favorite book – *Go, Dog, Go!* He did all this while burning through whatever calories two slices of buttered toast, the occasional apple, and a single chicken breast or baked potato each day provided.

With our mother figures essentially gone, and Dad in a constant loop of work and avoiding the house, Steve adapted to the rules of his environment. Life seemed bent on leaving us with nothing, so he resolved to become everything.

“Look at that kid go,” Dad would say like he didn’t recognize Steve when he would take off on a run down the street with a pace like he was giving chase. “Look at him go.”

~ ~ ~

Somewhere in the midst of those lean, hungry days, Dad told us boys that we had to talk. This was unlike him, especially then. Where once our home had felt like an ecosystem, now it was more like a math equation. What path do we take through the house to not get sucked into Mom’s miserable gravity? How do we dodge Dad’s gloomy orbit? When do we feed Axle and Shatzi to keep them from pawing on bedroom doors all night – what do we feed ourselves so that we can sleep?

But that day, Dad seemed softer. He told us that we should probably sit down. It was the first time anyone had ever told me that. As I sank into the couch with my brothers, I saw through the open bedroom door that Mom was already asleep in her day clothes, though it was only about 4pm. We’d just gotten off the school bus.

“Dagger is pretty sick,” Dad said.

We all nodded. We had known that for a while.

“I think you should go say goodbye,” he said. And he left it at that.

So we did. For the first time in our lives, we were able to freely approach Dagger, not as a dare to each other, not to see if we could grab a football gone astray into his territory, but as a family. He staggered out of his house to see us. His wild eyes were flat. For the first time, up close, I saw the scar that snaked across his belly, the little ones that decorated his face from his fight with Axle and with other dogs in the alleys of Kenosha. We petted him, knocked our heads into his, whispered goodbye into his cold fur.

Dad passed by us as we walked inside. He tried to smile, but couldn't.

We all found separate corners of the house and hunkered down. We were afraid to see each other's grief, our confusion. We could tell Dagger was sick, but how did Dad know he was going to die tonight? Axle and Shatzi made the rounds, nudged us to see what was wrong. Even if we could speak to them, there were some things that were no use saying. We just petted them, gave them more attention than we had in years.

When a gunshot cracked the air outside, we all jumped. My breath caught in my throat. Axle and Shatzi barked. Mom stayed asleep.

The logistics of it still haunt me. The rifle hidden by the trees. The hole dug next to Tosha's we hadn't noticed. The bedsheet missing from the closet in the bathroom. Dad picking Dagger up – all the heavy lifting he was doing those days.

~ ~ ~

News from Kenosha. Sort of.

Mom got a call from a hospital in Florida. David had moved to Miami, changed his name to Flip, hopped on a motorcycle drunk as can be, collided with the concrete divider and went skidding down the freeway like a rock across water. He broke basically everything in his body.

“Well, I sure can’t help him!” Mom said with a drunken laugh into the phone. She hung up, mumbled about picturing David in a mummy cast, made herself laugh.

“Things can always be worse,” she slurred.

~ ~ ~

Steve was crowned Homecoming King. He was a regular on the honor roll, a captain on the football team. Some Fridays we’d go to his games, where under dewy lights he crumpled kids from the next town over. He enjoyed brief fame and a 15-yard personal foul when he suplexed a halfback and sent a sickening crunch through the air that made us all cheer. I remember looking down the plastic fence at the faces of parents, of little brothers like Nicky and me, and wondering what their homes were like. Why they cheered at bodies folded in half, the puffs of air that left their helmets like spirits escaping, like they died for just a second.

~ ~ ~

Axle had sprinted through life at full tilt, but hit a wall one day. He no longer leaped on counters or wrapped his chain twenty times around the pine tree when we let him out. Gone were the days we’d step outside to get him and make little circle motions with our fingers to show him to go around, go around, go around.

We all hit a wall. Mom drank every single day. Dad came home from work, changed clothes, got back in his truck, took off with hardly a word. Steve buried himself in extracurriculars, rarely slept. I ran face first into middle school, and Nicky was close behind me.

Axle was the only one in our motley crew of wolf dogs that Mom and Dad lifted into the air as a puppy and said, “I want this one.” Of course we loved all our dogs equally, but Axle was part of that original dream, the one that flashed in Mom and Dad’s vision under the traffic light in Kenosha. So when Nicky and I came home from school one day, and Mom, sober for the first

time in so long that her voice was like a stranger's, patted the couch and told us we should probably sit down, it was hard. When she opened the plastic tote that held Axle's body, still the slightest bit warm from the veterinary office, which Mom had dug into mortgage money to pay for, it was hard. Gone was the floppy-eared mascot of our home.

But such is life. Nicky and I didn't need Dad to tell us to dig Axle's grave next to Tosha and Dagger's, to dig it deeper than we thought was necessary, and then even deeper than that. We knew how keen the noses of wolves were, how they were closer than we thought. And then even closer than that.

~ ~ ~

Steve graduated from high school with high honors. He was off to Northern Michigan University on a cloud of scholarships that would float him through. With this event on the horizon, Mom was inundated with energy: whatever the opposite of hitting a wall is. She woke up one morning with a box of provisions and an idea: to go camping at Lost Lake, like we always used to. Dad sighed, said, "Well, whatever," which was the height of his verbal enthusiasm – but to see how quickly he found our old tent, bought his fishing license, patched up the holes in the canoe, and packed the car, he wasn't fooling us. He was as excited to go to Lost Lake for Steve's graduation as he was to go there for his own wedding. He flew down the wild dusty road to the campsite with us bouncing in the back like he daydreamed about all those years ago while he flipped brats and had fiberglass fished from his eyes.

At Lost Lake, Dad and I cast our lines along the lily pads. Nicky wandered among the old growth forests back on shore, and Mom simmered potatoes in a pan over the fire. Dad and I pulled smallmouth bass from the depths. Just before dusk, we carted them to shore, filleted them on the picnic table, set them on the grate to cook in the smoke. We ate dinner until we were full

every night. Steve came and went from the campsite to graduation parties all over the county. When he was there, us boys carved spears from fallen boughs, threw them down the hiking trail to see how far they could go. In the hot afternoons, we lounged on the beach, snatched frogs from the boat launch where Mom and Dad were wed. At night, we gathered wood and built fires hot enough to melt soda cans like paper. We stood around the fire, hollered with jokes and laughter, thumped our spears on the ground. No wolves were drawn to the glow of the flames, but coyotes did howl in the trees.

When the day came, we drove straight from the lake to Steve's graduation. Rosy from the sun and smelling of pine needles and wild grasses, we settled among the mass of parents and younger siblings, next to Grandpa and Tooley. We were giddy; there was a certain thrill to walking straight inside from the wild.

After Steve accepted his diploma, and when his friends – even Justin – flocked around him, his eyes, always burning with resolve, softened for just a moment. It made me think of those early, early days. Before something hardened within him. For just a second, I saw the Steve that I'd play with on the living room floor alongside a tiny, pudgy-faced Nicky, and Axle, and Shatzi, and Tosha, all bathed in the early light of a Saturday through the living room window. Which, if nothing else, Mom always kept clean – so we could peer out into the wild, so it could find its way into us.

~ ~ ~

Shatzi glowed beneath the Christmas tree, nestled where the presents had been a day before. A dear treasure.

The night of December 26th, Dad rocked in his chair and watched pro-wrestling on mute. He listened to Shatzi's sleepy breathing until it stopped. He sighed. While we slept, he brought her outside, chopped through the snow and frozen ground in the back, and laid her to rest.

The next morning was Nicky's birthday. We awoke, for the first time in our lives, to a house with no dogs.

"She died last night," Mom said as she dabbed away her mascara with Christmas napkins. "It wasn't on Nick's birthday. It wasn't on Christmas – it was just late last night."

Shatzi could have died there, on Christ's birthday – a testament to her mother's name. She deserved that place in the grand history of things. She watched Papa, Tosha, Dagger, and Axle disappear from her life. She watched Steve move away, though he was home for the holidays, home to watch her go. Shatzi was so calm, so wise, it was as if she knew what Christmas was, or at least could tell a special day from a normal one by the way we decorated our home in twinkling lights and brought a tree inside like the strange animals we were. And it was like she remembered Nicky's birthday, like she let herself go just short, on that innocuous 26th of December, so as not to cause a fuss.

The thing with dogs is that we don't know what they're thinking, but we know they're with us. Who could know if the way they scattered their fur into strange places – speared into balled up, outgrown sweatshirts, pinned into the seats of chewed up, long dead cars – was on purpose, was a way to bring our minds back to them as the years ticked on. Perhaps they left the grooves of their toothmarks in our cookware so we could think of them as the warped plastic pressed into mine and Nicky's palms when we cooked dinner for the family. Axle couldn't know that his chain collar would hang around the lamp in my bedroom, cast it shadow with the bright spots between onto the ceiling, or that Dagger would know that his shack in the back is now

home to the descendants of the rabbits he used to chase. But as we buried them with a pair of dad's socks – Axle's favorite to the end – and a chewed-up basketball – which Dagger used to mouth like candy – I like to think they understood the spirit of our odd behavior, our mementos.

That 27th of December, in that strangely empty house, we couldn't have known that Steve would go on to propel himself through college and take another swing at city life, settle in Minneapolis with his wife and golden retriever, Reggie, who is only as strange as he's supposed to be. We couldn't know that Mom would adopt an Alaskan Malamute and name her Haley, and that she'd fill our lives for years. We couldn't know that a reality TV star would become president, or that billionaires would race each other into space, or that David would keep crashing cars and falling from high places and crying to Mom for help, and that we'd all throw our hands up and laugh about it on the holidays.

No – I couldn't know that I would go through the same college as Steve on the same scholarships, bounce around a couple small cities myself to try and make sense of the world, but deep-down pine to find my grotto within the Northwoods someday. I couldn't know that Mom and Dad would swing up and down in their habits, that things could always get worse, but they could always get better, too.

But I could guess that someday I would want a dog. And I would dream to throw sticks into the lake for him, and remember, as he splashes back toward me, that we both came from wolves.

The Mortgage Man looms through the foggy glass of the porch door again.

“Come in,” I say. “I want you to come in.”

I open the old door, with its flaking black paint and swiss-cheesed screen, and it sways like a windchime in the autumn breeze as he steps inside.

“No, I don’t want your card,” I say when he reaches for his breast pocket, and “Wait right there a moment, I have to let the dog in.” I open the porch’s opposite door, also dangling, and beckon for Haley, a smiling Alaskan Malamute, who kicks up mud and red leaves as she dashes into my waiting hands. I undo the clip on her chain, and she bolts to the back door, rattling its brass doorknob. The Mortgage Man looks at me blankly. I ignore him and open the door to the kitchen, which Haley bursts through with a clatter of nails on tile, before hooking a left into the living room and disappearing.

The man and I step into the kitchen and he goes for his card again. “Honestly,” I say, putting a hand in his face: “That’s enough. I know you. You are with Carrington Mortgage, and your big red truck, from which you just took pictures of every angle of our house, is parked on the street. You’ve come in to tell us you’re foreclosing; you are going to act as though we’ve never talked before.” I pat him on the shoulder. “But I’ve seen you dozens of times – in my dreams and otherwise. So just come in. I’ll give you the tour. You can leave your shoes on. I know that, to you, none of this is real.”

There is a pattering of footsteps, and two little kids burst into the kitchen. They run directly toward us, and when the Mortgage Man holds out his hand to stop them, I laugh. The kids run into him, phasing through his khaki pants. “That one is me,” I say, pointing to the taller one, who is reaching for the cupboards, “And that is my brother Nicky,” I say, pointing to the shorter

one with shocking blue eyes, who rummages through the drawers. The Mortgage Man and I watch as Young Nicky and Young Me find a half-loaf of bread in a drawer, the wood of which is stained dark with the cigarette smoke redolent in the air, with the dirt in the grooves from our little fingers. Young Me drops two slices of bread into the plastic toaster, its white corners melted in little tears down the sides. The Mortgage Man and I watch Young Nicky open the fridge, filled with stains and spills but very little food, and grab a cube of butter and a couple green apples. There's a clattering behind us, and we turn around to watch Young Me standing at the sink, pushing aside empty plastic bottles of UV Blue vodka, rinsing a thin dust of ash from a mason jar before filling it with water, then beckoning Young Nicky over to the oven, where a chair sits. The two stand on it, little feet shuffling to make room, and they stare into the heat-warped mirror on the spice cabinet above the stovetop, laughing at and trying to make sense of their distorted images – the eyes stretched like putty, cheekbones swooping to their chins.

The toast pops. The Mortgage Man jumps.

“Anyway,” I say, clapping his shoulder, “That is basically the kitchen.” I wave for him to follow me into the dining room, and as we cross the tiles, we see the bathroom door slightly open in our periphery, through which we can see Pre-Teen Me, built like a scarecrow, staring ponderously at a stick of deodorant. We can see the mold climbing up the shower curtain, and lazy cobwebs in the corners. Pre-Teen Me realizes the door is open, and he closes it before we see anything else.

We walk through the kitchen to the dining room now, and as our figures pass through the haze of cigarette smoke, the Mortgage Man pulls a letter from his back pocket and tries to shove it in front of me. Without looking, I grab the letter from his hand and frisbee it into a milkcrate, which overflows with newspapers and other such letters near the woodstove that glows orange,

the radiant heat of which splits the stacked maple and pine logs on the hearth. My mom, her cigarette burning but seeming never to shrink, sits at the dining room table and stares out the window, maybe at the birds in the grass, or at the shining Long Lake across the street, beyond the neighbors' yards. Beneath her is Haley, who licks at the plates that my mom simply places on the floor when she is done with them.

At the far end of the table is Teenage Me playing a game of chess. Some of the pieces are replaced with random objects: there are batteries for rooks, a crayon for a queen. Across the board is another teenage boy, a little shorter, more filled out, with a head of brown, frazzled hair. "That's Chance," I tell the Mortgage Man. "I met him in first grade." There are pink, ring-like scars almost glowing on Chance's forearms. The Mortgage Man stares, and I say, "That was his biological mom, putting cigarettes out on his arms when he was little." The Mortgage Man blinks. "That's unfortunate," he says.

"Don't even get me started on his dad," I say, as Teenage Me shakes his head and buries his face in his hands as Chance checkmates him with a drained double-A on the back rank.

The Mortgage Man and I step past my dazed mom and take the little leap from the dining room to the office. This room is cold, too. Our breath puffs visibly in the air. In the middle of the carpet, Teenage Nicky, Chance, and Me, thin fighting gloves strapped to our hands, wrestle clumsily, throw wild punches, basically try to beat the shit out of each other. The Mortgage Man backs away from the scrum. I laugh a little and say, "Almost every younger guy around here, the ones in town and in the trailers in the woods, want to be prize fighters. Almost all of them on the school bus have said so. Isn't that strange?" Teenage Me buckles to an uppercut in the solar plexus from Teenage Nicky. "It's funny," I say, looking at the Mortgage Man. "It's like we're all angry, or something."

We turn to leave the office, but the outside door behind us opens, and a gust of air, and a wash of light, fill the room. Standing behind us is a teenage girl, holding a stack of clothes. She raises her eyebrows at the boys and says, “What are you guys *doing*?”

The Mortgage Man and I step out of the office, back to the warmth of the dining room. “That was Savannah,” I tell him, “She lives in the big house across the field.” As we walk back through the dining room, a Pre-Teen Me is wrestling on the floor with Haley, who has the big paws and oversized ears and high-pitched grumble of a dog not-fully-grown. My mom, with bright eyes and strong posture sits in her chair at the head of the table and watches and laughs. The chessboard sits on the end of the table, all pieces present and in-position.

When we enter the living room, it is suddenly nighttime.

In front of the buzzing, square television, my dad cradles a Playstation controller in his hands as he rocks an unsleeping baby in the wicker rocking chair. The console at his feet hums, spins a game called *Metal Gear Solid* hundreds of times a minute. Solid Snake, main character, presses flat to a metal cargo crate; on his left, a guard, white-uniformed and clueless, puffs a dozen pixelated breaths into the snowy air before turning around, walking away on one of his many predestined routes.

“That’s me,” I whisper to the Mortgage Man, pointing to the baby in my dad’s arms. This is our first year in the house, my first year anywhere. The unfamiliar cold of northern Wisconsin infiltrates through the unfinished windows, spreads goosebumps like a rash over my dad’s arms. A single, white-shaded lamp illuminates the corner of the room, casts the cracks of the floorboards and the ceiling in contrast to the moon through the window. The room smells of creosote, which sits, fuming and jagged, freshly evicted from the chimney, in paper bags strewn everywhere around the largely unfurnished house. Baby Me fusses in my dad’s arms as he

embodies Solid Snake, as he knocks on walls and leaves false footprints in the snow to distract the guards, as he procures a handgun and crawls through a ventilation shaft into the hangar of the nuclear-weapon disposal facility of Shadow Moses Island, near Alaska.

“It’s a great game,” I whisper to the Mortgage Man. “It was revolutionary, you know. For being the first game where you need to be stealthy, instead of just blowing everyone away.” The Mortgage Man only nods slowly in the dark. “It’s not that macho American shit,” I say. “It’s considered a quintessential piece of 20th century art.” The Mortgage Man only blinks. On the screen, Solid Snake sets a cardboard box over his head and waits for a guard to pass him by.

“Anyway,” I say. “Look,” and I point to the couch, where a young man lies flat on his back, blanket twisted around his body, which is stiff as a corpse. “That’s me,” I whisper to the Mortgage Man. He stands over my sleeping body, stares at my frozen form. “Like the real me, right now,” I whisper. On the TV screen, Solid Snake grabs a guard from behind and snaps his neck. The guard’s body drops to the snow, flickers three times, then disappears.

“Do you know what sleep paralysis is?” I ask the Mortgage Man. He shakes his head. I lean into his ear, and whisper: “In the old days, they called it ‘an intercepting of the motion of the voice and respiration.’ And that’s exactly right,” I say. “You cannot move – not even to shift your eyes from left to right. But you’re awake – your mind is awake, but because you’re paralyzed, because of the fear that comes when you can’t even twitch, you’re having a nightmare.” The Mortgage Man keeps staring at the sleeping me. “When people report seeing ghosts or demons in their room,” I say, “When they think someone has snuck into their home, it is often a symptom of sleep paralysis.”

The Mortgage Man blinks. “That’s unfortunate,” he says, without breaking his gaze.

“You get what I’m saying, right?” I say to him. Gunshots ping from the television. The first boss of *Metal Gear*, Revolver Ocelot, reloads his six-shooter.

“That’s you,” I say to him. “The monster I manifest in the worst of my dreams.”

Revolver Ocelot, in his scary voice, says as he spins the cylinder of his revolver, *“I love the smell of cordite...you know, that sulphury smell?”*

We turn from the living room and immediately Pre-Teen Savannah and Pre-Teen Me open a door to our right and run up the stairs, giggling as they pass through our bodies. I thought about taking The Mortgage Man up that twisting staircase, the steps of which had tufts of Haley fur stuffed into their corners. I could have told the Mortgage Man endlessly about the patches of drywall in our rooms that would crumble from the angled ceiling in a sudden heap, about the nests of little sweatpants and torn jeans I would make for the bats that sometimes swirled through the room, for the mice that skittered through the drawers and across the floor. I could have told him about the insulation from the edges of the window that spilled out in fine hairs into the dark, and how in my sleepest moments I’d sometimes jolt up in panic, thinking it was the hair of some monster, some intruder. But for all the times the Mortgage Man was the looming intruder, I felt he already knew.

I pat the Mortgage Man hard on the shoulder. I gesture to a slightly open door next to the door upstairs, my mom’s room, and lead him in there.

In her room, it is daytime again. Haley, fully-grown, rolls about on the bed, kicking up dust that dances in the gentle pressure of the sun. She stops her thrashing and looks at herself, upside down, in the vanity of my mom’s dresser. The Mortgage Man and I pass our ghostly feet through hundreds and hundreds of cigarettes and stained tissues that have overflowed from a wastebin

next to the bed. Cobwebbed pictures of Nicky and I as babies sit hang on the wall, thick brown insulation stains from the crack along the ceiling run down the image of our faces.

I beckon the Mortgage Man into my mom's closet. He joins me, and our legs phase through my dad's old hunting coats, my mom's old dresses. I point to a shelf over our heads. I watch the Mortgage Man's eyes search, search, and go huge when they land at what I'm pointing at. It is the only thing not covered in dust. In fact, it shines by the light of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The Mortgage Man takes a step back.

It is the gun. It is the handgun my dad grabs every time the Mortgage Man's red truck with "CARRINGTON" spelled out on the side comes around, the gun that he sighs before grabbing, the gun he holds at his side when he marches right toward the glinting lens of the camera in the Mortgage Man's hands. It is the gun that puts that truck in reverse and sends it flying down the road.

I turn and look into the Mortgage Man's wide eyes. I want to tell him so much. That, all my life, he was the shape that snuck through the door, that hovered over me in my bed when I'd be half there, and half not. As a kid and even now, I searched through every stack of mail for his company's yellow notices, that I've always grown nauseous when I see the name "Carrington." For as long as I can remember, he's been trying to evict us from our home. And I want to evict him from existence.

Instead, I take a deep breath, and I sigh it out. I say, "Let's get some fresh air." I gesture for him to follow me back through my mom's room, where now an Adult Nicky and Adult Me in dust masks shovel hundreds and hundreds of cigarette butts, nested in piles and piles of black ash, into paper bags with dust pans, and a Haley with grey in her fur takes two tries to jump on

the bed next to Mom, who sits upright, head tipped into her shoulder, tucked away into a dream of her own.

On the TV screen in the living room, Solid Snake stands over a bleeding Sniper Wolf, the legendary marksman loved by the wolf dogs scattered about the Alaskan island. They generate little pixel hearts over their head at the sight of her gasping body. In this way, she's the hardest boss to kill. My dad sets the controller gently in his lap as she says, in a cutscene, "...*okay hero. Set me free.*"

"You know," I say, turning to the Mortgage Man as we walk back through the dining room, towards the kitchen. "Those old games, the big ones, like *Metal Gear*, that tell a whole world-saving story, that render all those details – they used to be too big to fit onto one disc. At some point in the story," I say, "You'd have to switch discs. And the good games, they knew just how to time that switch, knew when to cut the screen to black so you'd be staring at your own gawking face in the reflection, you know? Right between the peak of chaos and the moment your character decides to fix it all."

We take one step further into the kitchen, and the bathroom door opens to our side. The light changes, and my Mom, younger, is there suddenly, opening the door to reveal Haley, no bigger than a bundled sweater, who toddles across the tiles of the kitchen and wanders into Young Nicky and Young Brandon's arms as they shake with joy. They bury their face in her thick fur. She looks at them with the big brown eyes of a doe.

I take a deep breath. I beckon the Mortgage Man through the back door, out to the porch, where we walk right through a downtrodden Adult Savannah, carrying a bundle of flowers.

We step outside into the crunching leaves of our shedding basswood tree. A clunking Oldsmobile pulls up into the driveway. Dad, younger, fuller, with dark, long hair, swings open

the driver's door, runs to the passenger door, and opens it up. He reaches in, and helps lift out my Mom, who is in a back brace, knee brace, and shoulder cast, whose blue eyes are squeezed shut from the punch of an airbag, which I know, but the Mortgage Man does not know, activated in a puff of dust when her Jeep flipped on an icy road, and she twisted her spine, shattered her hip, dislocated her knee, broke her ribs, ended her career, and lost the seven-month bump in her belly that would have been my little sister – a little girl she wanted to name

“Haley,” Teenage Me whispers from beside us, in the backyard, where The Mortgage Man and I turn and look now to see Teenage Nicky and Teenage Me shakily sink to our knees, and hug Haley's frail body, with her sparse hair and sunken eyes, the thin waist and inflamed hips of a long life. The Mortgage Man and I watch as my dad, who stands over us, pats us on the shoulders, then coaxes Haley to follow him.

The Mortgage Man and I look back and my parents are gone, and back again and the teenage boys are gone, too. There is only my dad and the autumnal wind and Haley. His handgun dangles from his fingers, he is crying for the first and only time I've ever seen. He takes her to the woods in the back, in the midst of a grove of birch trees, towering and beautiful and speckled black and white just like her. He sets her gently in that grave we dug, and he pets her between the ears before he stands up straight, wipes his tears, aims the gun, and sets her free.

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It is very still. It is very still on Long Lake in all of my dreams. The Mortgage Man groans, then blinks awake.

We float in the canoe that my dad bought from someone in the village that rings the lake, years ago, just after he and my mom had me, just after they bought the house. The canoe that Chance and Nicky and I learned how to seal shut with rivets, learned how to furnish with seats cut with a reciprocating saw and stained with the same old stain my dad used for the floors of our home. It was the very canoe I took Savannah on dozens of fishing trips with, that housed us as we pulled in the marvels of life beneath the water and let them go, the vessel that let us be one with the lake that we would see gleaming through the window when we would lie together in my bedroom, that we'd taste in the air when we went outside to pick crab apples in the yard or just sit in the dewy grass. The Mortgage Man and I float on an invisible current past my neighbors' yards, who live right on the lake, who Nicky and I cut grass and picked pinecones and raked leaves for as a kid in exchange for access to their pier. So that we could fish. So that we could dangle our feet in the water. We float past the big T-shaped pier that all the younger men in town put in together, a process that all the older men would watch while reminiscing about the times they were the ones in the chest-deep water, kicking their feet in the mud to find the poles to rest the pier's sections in. We float on Long Lake, as I do so often in my dreams.

"You know," I tell the Mortgage Man, "My dad, all his life, has wanted to visit Alaska." Red leaves drift from the trees around us, sway to the lake's surface. I huff a visible breath into the air. "But there was never the money. And he was too busy with us. With Mom after the accident, with scaring you off our street." I look at my hands, try to rub the cold from my fingers.

"Listen," I say to the Mortgage Man. "This is my home." The Mortgage Man nods, his expression blank.

“Maybe,” I say, “it’s true that it’s just your job to try and kick us out of it when the checks don’t come. Maybe you’ll lose your own home if you don’t take pictures of mine.”

The Mortgage Man nods again. “It is unfortunate,” he says.

I look out over the lake, at the mist on the cut of horizon, the trees going to sleep all along the shoreline. Little imperceptible fish kiss the surface, leave ripples everywhere. I sigh.

“It is,” I say. “It really is.”

And I push him out of the canoe.

I lunge and push him out of the canoe and he sinks into Long Lake, where maybe everything turns blue. Maybe after the explosion of bubbles he’ll open his eyes, and he’ll feel the exhilarating cold all over his skin, and the tiny fish like slivers of light will dash in every direction at his presence, and he’ll sink and the bluegill and perch will look at him ponderously, and the tallest weeds will wrap around his body and grab the slack of his polo, of his khakis, and the very water will taste of life, and bleed the ink from his business cards, and the northern pike and largemouth bass will be drawn to his commotion, will swirl about him as he sinks in deeper, until the purple loosestrife and thick stems of lilies enclose him in a watery forest, and he’ll only know up from down if he exhales a few bubbles to see which way they go. Maybe he’ll settle into the mud with the bullheads and crayfish and all the other scavengers, and maybe in that mud he’ll see years and years of things like dropped fishing poles or ice ladles, engine props and rusted tools and skipping rocks – maybe he’ll see the little pocket knife I would use to cut clean lines on myself when he’d come around often, the one I threw with all my might from that T-shaped pier one day when I decided I wasn’t afraid anymore, after Haley, the backbone of our home, was gone, and I knew it was my turn to fix everything. Maybe the Mortgage Man will land right next to that glinting knife in the watery blue, and maybe he’ll feel something.

Or maybe not. I don't know. What I do know is that I'll break my sleep paralysis with a start and a gasp as always, and I'll awake in the sunlight in the living room, and while I won't see the big red bobber of him on the lake through the foggy window, I will see the red leaves scattered on its misty surface and chuckle at the thought that it's him, exploded into a million pieces.

I know that I'll slowly come to, and remember that even though I passed out on the couch like I always used to, I'm a somewhat grown man now, home for a visit. In my drowsy state I'll expect for a moment the happy clatter of Haley coming to wake me with a cold nose. And though I won't quite get that, my mom, fairly steady now, in the dining room, with its walls now cleaned of the layers of smoke and ash and little fingerprints, will wish me "Good morning." I know I will stand myself up, and today, Nicky and I will do some cleaning. We'll gut every cupboard of every item in the kitchen – every chipped plate, streaked cup, stained mug, cracked bowl, rusted pan, peeling pot, warped sheet, skewed fork, dull knife, and bent spoon, we'll lay in piles on the floor. We'll save the best handful of these things and throw the rest away, bags and bags of fractured glass, tired metal, Tupperware lids to nothing. And when we get tired, we'll settle in and play games for the night, and the peace will sneak up on us. The gun in the closet will collect more dust, the knife in the lake will sink further into the silt. And of course, there will be a point in the evening, when the light of the falling sun comes through the windows and lights the house in that amber way, that I'll look, just look, at our patchwork home. A quintessential piece of 20th century art. We'll play games that night and feel grateful for the heat of the fire, the single strands of Haley fur hidden in funny places like potted plants, or beneath the legs of couches. And just before dark, I'll stare out of one of those foggy, front-facing windows, that thin barrier that keeps me warm and frames perfectly the lake, my very favorite place.

BREAKING NEWS:

Wolf Blitzer is Wolf Blitzer's real name.

I questioned this all my life. As a somewhat grown man now, I have fantasies where I grab my younger self by the shoulders and tell him this truth – tell him that life is odd, yes, but some things really are as they seem.

STATE OF THE UNION:

The first time I saw somebody drunk, it was my mom. Her eyelids drooped; they had this look like they were pinched by someone until their thumbs turned white. Her legs shuffled, she walked like they were tree roots. She talked upside down.

Mom made chicken breasts and baked potatoes for dinner some nights. Most nights she made nothing, but stumbled around the kitchen as if she could feel there was something she was supposed to be doing. When the chicken did end up on my plate, it was cold inside and slimy everywhere. Every bite was filmy, hot on my teeth, cold on my gums. Mostly raw. Still, I would eat it all, because I was starving, because I was nine years old, because the bingo balls in my head still jangled about, trying to find their place.

I wish I could tell my younger self the news: that stuff can make you sick. That's why I missed so much school.

“But the potatoes are always good,” the younger me might say. And I can't blame him. They were a solid foundation.

REGULAR NEWS:

Sometimes Mom was like the moms I saw on TV, and she would scowl like a statue when I asked if I could go outside. It was something – a flare of life. But mostly, she would twitch in the dining room chair at the head of the table, where she sat for 12 hours a day as if pinned by a beam of gravity. And so most spring and summer evenings I would run past her, out the door, and down the quarter mile stretch of street to the boat launch. I would kick off my laceless shoes and jump in the water. The algae would cling to my skinny legs, and I would chase the mother duck and the ducklings that always paddled about at the end of the pier. The ducklings always zoomed away, smooth, as if pulled on strings, and the mother would not. Flapping a crooked wing on the water, she choked on her quacks and flailed in the opposite direction of her babies.

This always left me standing waist deep in the water, a thin figure spinning marsh grass in his fingers, stuck between the split of mother and child, wondering what ducks were all about.

MORE REGULAR NEWS:

Wolf Blitzer was on the television constantly; his voice filled the room so often I thought he should be my dad.

“It certainly did underscore,” Wolf said, “In a shocking way, the lack of, uh, an immediate response... four years after 9/11...what happened in the, uh...immediate hours and days after hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast...”

I wished someone would let him out.

THE SITUATION ROOM:

Mom was splayed in a puddle of blood on the kitchen floor. I was thirteen. My little brother, Nicky, was frozen in the living room, his figure illuminated only by the bare, hot bulb in the wall-hanging lamp, which had fallen from its socket and hung by its cord, the way it always did when we'd close a door too hard, or drop something heavy. The splitting crash of Mom's skull on the cabinet pinned him to the couch and froze his hands, which held his fork of uncooked chicken.

Mom's blood spread across the tile, spilled over the edges of the grout. It was pure on the floor, where the tiles used to be light gray. I stood over her and remembered a time when they were a dreamy color and their perfect pattern calmed me, when they looked like sleep felt. But now they were dirt brown, decorated with cigarette burns, bits of dropped food smashed by our filthy feet, and now, Mom's blood, which flowed like a flood, which soaked into my socks.

I realized a lot of things about the kitchen when I peeled Mom off the floor. The walls and the ceiling were once white as snow. Now they were yellow, the same yellow that Mom's cigarettes painted our whole home. But it was the worst in the kitchen, where there was no ceiling fan to spread the smoke around, where spots spread like a cancer above the oven, the burners of which Mom used to light her cigarettes when her lighter would die. The kitchen was nice once. In a time I could barely remember, I used to sprawl on its cool floor on hot summer days.

But now from that floor I tried to lift Mom, heavier than ever because she was basically dead. Her body was a balloon, flesh displaced itself as I tried to get a grip. Her bulk threatened to bend my skinny spine. When finally I stood her up, her hair fell down in a wet slap on her cheeks

and neck, and the blood drained from the dirty strands and onto my shirt, and onto hers, and then onto the floor.

I was dizzy.

Dishes overflowed from the sink. They smelled horrible; a light-gray film enveloped the same dog-chewed plastic plates we'd been using since we were toddlers. I tried to budge Mom, tried to get her to even shuffle her feet, but she was stuck there by that beam of gravity again. Heat surged through me, and I grabbed her behind her neck, and started to drag her, like I saw on TV when Dad watched pro-wrestling. I dragged her through the filthy kitchen, past the painting of the woman, who stood thin and blue-dressed in a garden of bluebells and daffodils like Mom used to grow, then through the dark living room where Wolf Blitzer droned on the television, and into her bedroom. Like casting an anchor from a ship, I threw her onto the bed.

I stormed past Nicky and back toward the kitchen. I didn't want to show how him handling Mom sent jolts of pain through my knees, strange tingles in my spine.

I stomped into the bathroom and looked for a towel. But there wasn't one – there never was. I panned around, and Mom's favorite shirt, sunshine-yellow, the one she used to wear to important things, like community town-halls and her job, was draped over the bathtub.

I scrubbed up the blood with her shirt, hard as my little arms could, because I loved her enough to clean up her mess, but not enough to let her forget it.

LOU DOBBS TONIGHT:

Dad felt bad. He shook his head when he got home from work and saw the blood on my shirt. Silent, he draped his jacket, which always smelled of gas, over the dining room chair. His silence didn't bother Nicky or I – we understood where he was coming from. Every Monday

through Saturday of Dad's summer was a 40 mile-drive, a gruff greeting, a hot afternoon of heaving motors from vacationer's 14-foot boats down step-ladders to the oil-splattered, concrete floor of the shop, where he sucked dirty gas from tanks with the tubes most people use for their fish tank aerators. He cranked wrenches against threaded bolt after threaded bolt to remove an engine's cap, to replace this shredded belt, or that rusted sensor, and to make it all work. He did all this and knew the delicate puzzle of the machine was going to be dunked underwater, stored outside all winter like firewood, then towed back in with a locked up this-or-that, and he would have to fix it again. He knew his vertebrae would creak and his rotator cuffs would yank and stretch to the tune of twelve dollars an hour.

Then he would come home, and the rusted bells tied to the backdoor would ring, and his usual routine was a, "How's it going," and the hiss of the shower, and a stomping walk to the bedroom, a change of clothes, a "Goodbye," and the bells again, and there would be the roar of his '98 Chevy Silverado mostly made of rust, and the crunch of gravel, and the hum of pavement. Seven minutes – Lily Pad Road, gravel again, and he'd be at a place he called Camp.

Camp is a resort that Dad's friend, Tom, owns, where people from everywhere book months in advance to settle down for a week every summer to be close to Steven's Lake, to enjoy the amenities of not having amenities. Camp, to Dad, however, only consisted of the main cabin of the establishment, where Tom lived in the winter. Camp to Dad was not a resort, but a home, in which there were foosball tables downstairs, card tables on the deck. Tom and Dad and his friends made ribeye steak and homemade pizza and entire turkeys for dinner every night. On the front door hangs a sign reading "Tom's Last Resort." Dad is at work or he is there. If he slept, I didn't know it.

But the night after Mom's split her head open, Dad stayed home. He made Nicky and I chocolate-chip pancakes for dinner. They were warm and doughy, they filled up our cheeks. He flipped pancakes from the pan and onto our plates until we were sure we would puke them up. He told us about how he met Mom when they worked at a place called The Brat Stop in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a city to the south, and how he always wanted to raise us kids in a small town, but he remembered those city days. He could flip the burgers with no spatula back then, he said, and to show us anything is possible, he flipped a pancake with no spatula.

Dad was God that night. He got Mom to fall asleep and stay asleep by six.

He was back out at camp the next night, but that was fine. I felt lucky.

Something about the tranquility of that night made me think about this girl on the school bus who didn't even have a mom. So why should I be worked up?

BREAKING NEWS:

I figured out the duck thing one day while Mom's forehead drooped to the table, and she started snoring. The internet had come to our small town, and when it was too dark to gaze out at the blue mirror of the lake, I turned to the blue light of the computer screen. There I learned that mother ducks only act like they're hurt when they detect a threat, and I thought about clever it could be to lie – to fly away from the baby ducks so that whatever attacks the family will go for her first. Killdeer do the same thing. Mourning doves will dislocate an entire wing for this act. All such good mothers.

I thought then that if Mom was a bird, she was that toy dipping bird with the top hat that people thought were hilarious in the 1950s. She stoops over for a drink, straightens up, stoops, straightens, and stoops.

New Day:

The Girl with No Mom, who bounced between grandparents and so sometimes was my neighbor, who waited with Nicky and me at the bus stop, who looked at me every day with big brown eyes between the gap of the bus seat and the dewy window, extended her hand to me one day. I was stunned. I didn't know much about her. I only knew that she always wore new clothes, had a new backpack every school year. Her hair was straight and it shined in the morning sun, mine was a nest, certainly wasn't lustrous. But she held her hand out to me between the bus seats, and I took it. I stared at her soft hands with the nails painted blue, how they looked so strange against mine, which seemed always to house cigarette ash in the cracks of my knuckles. She made me feel strong – like there was another side to the world I hadn't yet seen.

Regular News:

I figured out the Wolf Blitzer thing one day. He was not trapped in the television set. He was a journalist and newscaster for CNN. He made three million dollars a year. He was probably happier than I gave him credit for.

I heard about 9/11 through the monotone of Wolf Blitzer. I heard about the launch of the Apple iPod and the Euro entering circulation and the invasion of Iraq. Mom drank like a dipping bird. Wolf Blitzer told us about water on the moon, The Boston Marathon bombing. As Nicky and I grew into our teens, we started to throw mom's chicken out and eat buttered toast for dinner instead.

“We have new high-resolution video of the oil leak at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico,” Wolf said one day. Jesus, I thought. That thing was gushing.

In Wolf we trusted. He was always there. Piece by piece, Nicky and I learned that the world made little sense. His suit and wire glasses calmed us, his monotone voice made it seem like someone, somewhere, must have a grip on the situation. If planes were bisecting buildings, pipelines were flooding oil into the ocean, if people bombed each randomly, there must be some greater reason. He made us believe that when things are hard, it was only because the good hadn't come yet.

Mom slurred all her words. She grew worse; she would make a sound, and I would shout at her like a dog. I did this as I sat in the living room rocking chair and ate my toast and watched Wolf Blitzer. I would never look back at her, and this helped somehow. Horrible things happened all over the Earth and there was nothing I could possibly do. To me, one of those things was right behind me, stooping her head to the table. Dad was out at Camp, beating everybody at foosball. He smacked the ball faster than anyone could see, his Snake Shot and Tic-Toc and Push and Pull grew to tournament-level, and the trophies that began to populate the shelf in the home-office, which Mom once fantasized about using every day before she lost job, and which instead Dad had filled with a foosball table, stood like monuments to his absence, to his happiness elsewhere.

Mom drank, her glass weakly tapped the table. Seven miles away a tiny ball slammed into a tiny goal. I sent texts on a flip phone to the Girl with No Mom. We talked about our days, gave play-by-plays of our nights, smudged the tiny numbers and letters from our keyboards. Nicky read constantly, and I looked over at him all the time, because his messy hair, the same blonde as Mom's, that draped over his eyes as he lost himself in some work fantasy, was the best thing in the house, and the next best thing was not even close.

BREAKING NEWS:

I awoke one night. It hit me that I have definitely heard Wolf Blitzer's voice more than my own mother's. My head falls back to the pillow like a meteor.

REGULAR NEWS:

It became very, very normal to pick Mom off the floor. Almost every night. Tendons popped from hands, veins ran in rivers down my arms as I grew.

I was getting so strong!

CNN HEROES:

I had fallen in love. I was convinced of this. I bought the Girl with No Mom a ring. It had two sterling silver hearts, colored two shades of blue. They were intertwined. One night, I sat in my room upstairs, listened to the hum of all that nothing-noise the house made, and I twisted the ring back and forth in my fingers. I thought about the girl's eyelashes, how we shared our first kiss in the stretch of woods between our homes. I was sixteen. The future felt like something I could hold in my hands.

Then, the familiar slam on the floor. That warm feeling within me steamed and went red hot, and then burst.

I ran downstairs. Mom was dazed, limbs akimbo on the living room floor, glazed eyes stuck to the yellowed ceiling. Nicky stared at Wolf's wrinkles on the TV screen. I grabbed her arms and yanked. Whether she came up with me, or her shoulders popped from her sockets, I didn't care. I screamed in her drunk face, very simply, that I hated her. She blinked slowly, the world occurring to her at the speed of dial-up internet.

“Mom,” I hissed. “I do not love you when you drink.”

I was very convinced of this.

In another blur, I stomped into the kitchen. I grabbed the six half-empty bottles of vodka from the cupboard beneath the sink, where I knew she hid them, and my guts blazed to think about how I hadn’t done anything about it until now. How I hadn’t been brave, how I’d been just as complacent of an older brother to Nicky as Mom was a mother to us, how the Girl with No Mom needed someone strong by her side, and not whatever I was.

But those days were over. I spiked each bottle on the ground like a football, each harder than the last. The glass sprayed off the ground and hit the ceiling, it bounced with little *tinks* and *thuds* on the dishes and the furniture. The vodka sprayed like it was pressurized, it painted my skin, it ran on the floor and rinsed it a bit cleaner.

I stomped back to the living room, where Mom swayed, her eyes still flat. Wolf Blitzer says, “Hundreds of thousands of dead as a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, uh, hits the country of Haiti.”

I told Mom, through my stinging eyes, shaking arms, that this was the last time. That I could love her on one condition: that she come back to us.

REGULAR NEWS:

The Wolf Blitzer Wiki said:

“Daughter: Illana. She is the only child of Blitzer who was born safe and sound.”

This was not written well – it sounded as if Wolf had multiple children, and only Illana came safely into the world. But I knew this was a mistake – Wolf Blitzer was not that kind of man. Wolf Blitzer was the kind of man who had one beautiful child, and that beautiful child now

had long chestnut hair and a symmetrical face and straight teeth white as snow and a career as the Beauty Editor of Family Circle magazine.

I envied that. The blue light of the computer washed over me, and I burned with envy.

I wondered if Wolf Blitzer's patience ever snapped like mine did that night, if anything in him had ever steamed and burst that way. I think if it did, it would have been when Andy Richter beat him soundly in Celebrity Jeopardy. But he handled that just fine, I'm sure.

BREAKING NEWS:

The outburst did something. Word reached Dad like a hot news story – he and Mom must have had a talk over coffee in the earliest parts of the morning, like they always used to before they parted ways to go to work. He started to hang around the house for an hour or so after work before he was out the door. He ticked the little red ball on the foosball table to practice, cracked it into the goal so hard sometimes that the lamp in the living room would fall.

As a family, if we ate meat, it was red, and now that I did the cooking, I burnt it on purpose. Nicky and Mom and I cleaned the kitchen floor and ceiling in weekly loops. Nicky and I swept away the grime and left bleach-white circles. Mom's hands shook, and really, she was just pushing the dirt around. But she stooped less. The sink was empty. Everyone's blood was inside of them.

Regular News:

Ducks swim like this: they paddle like hell below, and look like heroes above.

The Girl with No Mom and I watched the ducks at the boat launch one day. It was dusk, and we held hands. Our fingers locked the way the light fell – just barely. We didn't have to hold

each other tight to know we were there; we didn't have to watch the news that night to know the world outside that moment was so strange, was not worth thinking about.

Instead, we watched as the water parted in little waves around the duck's feathers as they swam, and while I was never really sure about love, right then, I thought – this is it.

I remember flicking basswood seeds as far as we could off our fingers, and blood pooling in perfect moons beneath our nails. I remember blue eighty-gallon plastic barrels, used usually by my dad to flush customers' boat motors, overflowing sometimes with minnows he would trap for bait. The suckers and shiners would swell over the barrel, and they would squirm down the river in the driveway before my brother, Nicky, and I would scoop them back up. Mom would look at us through the window, and she'd laugh at our toddling among the impromptu river. I can still see the boat motors and their flaking paint and rusting propellers leaned against the barn, and the leopard frogs that would bathe in the pool of rainwater collected in the footholds of someone's abandoned jet-ski, which sat in the back yard, entwined in thorny raspberry bushes, bleached basically white from years in the sun.

I remember how Savanah, the neighbor girl, would watch me and Nicky swordfight with the slashed limbs of firewood, watch us wrestle in the tall grass, watch us pick bursting-ripe crab apples and boot them into the woods, across the street, and into her grandma's yard with dollar-store plastic bats. One day, she sprang through the field between our homes, emerging into our yard with the petals and calices of iris and wood violet glued by the morning dew to her legs. She opened her cupped hands and dumped a dozen, sticky, fragrant, crushed crab apples into my outstretched palms, and said something like, "I think these are yours."

The three of us spent the rest of that afternoon and hundreds of afternoons after that marveling at things like the metamorphosis of caterpillars in the leaves, the garter snakes beneath the old tires in the back and their skins among the garden, and the blackflies that gathered in dozens on the window screens, and the deafening hum of their retreat when we'd come near.

Sometimes, my friend Chance, a wild spirit, would visit, and do something like climb a thin birch tree until it snapped, or dig a hole beneath the apple tree as deep as his elbows.

If it was a weekend, my dad often came outside with the weight of a five-gallon bucket of water locking his elbow, grab a net, staple-gunned to a yardstick, and dip it into the giant blue barrel, swapping a few minnows from there into the bucket in his hand. I wondered what it was like to switch worlds like that, so suddenly. I'd ask him if he was going to Lake 17, and he'd usually say yes, and I'd always ask if I could go, and he'd say something like "I'd bring you, but the bugs would carry you into woods," or "Only if you carry the canoe," or simply, "When you're older." And he'd be gone, off to the lake so deep in the woods was never named, only numbered.

At night, sometimes he returned with a bucket of largemouth bass still cold from the lake to see Nicky and me curled up on the couch. Or, he would find us and Savannah in the back yard, where we would chase the blinking lights of fireflies, cup them in our palms, show them to each other like they were each a miracle, and then give them back to the night sky.

~ ~ ~

Years passed. Savannah and I made the mistake of looking at our friendship and asking, "What next?"

I worked for her grandma. The first time I saw a flat-screen television was at her home, where in the many acres I would cut dying trees from the backyard, pressure-wash the deck, mow the lawn to a perfect half-inch. For a long time, Savannah would help me, and it didn't feel like a job at all, working in the yard, our shoes dyed grassy-green, dirt playing in our hair, the stray paint beading on our skin. We kissed behind the tool shed, held hands in the mottled veil of the pine trees.

But one day she didn't want to join me outside. We were 18. I asked her why, and she only shrugged, sank to the couch, looked at her phone. I felt the heft of her absence in every shovel of dirt I'd fling into the woods, every bag of mulch I'd set on my shoulder. When I was finished, her grandma would hand me crisp tens from her wallet, and Savannah, who would once follow me on the short walk home, didn't break her gaze from her phone.

Those days, I'd sulk around the yard, kicking sticks. I'd putz about the barn with the crumbled leaves and scant light that worked its way through the holes in the roof, and I'd kick the rotten furniture that Savannah and I learned to hold hands on when we were ten. I'd crunch the dried cork and brittle plastic of my dad's fishing pole handles and think of how I hadn't seen him in days, how he hadn't fished in years.

It felt like every time I did see Dad, he was bursting through the door, throwing keys against the back wall and saying he hit a deer with his green truck or flipped his white truck or blew the engine on the Buick Century and had to run two miles home. My mom was never awake to say something in those late afternoons, but rather was out-cold, crushed by vodka and a medley of pills, limbs akimbo and basically dead, her bedroom door open so that Nicky or I would have to close it surreptitiously when Savannah did feel like visiting. It felt like a small funeral each time.

Sitting alone in the firefly-filled yard one night, it struck me that I felt like I was trying to look right and left at the same time, like it was splitting me in two to wonder whether Mom was a drunk because Dad was never around, or vice versa, and to wonder if the rumors I was hearing about Savannah, the rumors that would explain why she couldn't look me in the face, were true.

It was a cold morning in the fall when she said that we needed to talk. Images flashed behind my eyes then, like elementary mornings and her grabbing my freezing hands at the bus

stop, and a recess in middle school where she looked hard at me and said I had a funny spike of color in my eyes, and me asking, “What?” and her just saying that she loved me. I saw the train of a seven-dollar wedding dress at a garage sale bobbing in the grass when we were fifteen, and her holding it up, looking at me as if to say, “What do you think?” It all blinked before me like a trick of the light right before she said she couldn’t do this anymore.

I asked: “Is there something going on?” She only shrugged. And I’d known her long enough to know that in the space of that shrug was admittance, was the name of a guy from school that she looked at the way she used to look at me. There was a pause, a preternatural quiet. We hung our heads. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. And in my mind’s eye I could see him, his thick neck and his Ford Taurus with the Confederate flag decal on the back, and the rumors that zip around high school hallways filled in every blank in my imagination. I felt an incredible heat in my face. In my mind there was only her figure and his and the dissolved promise, both spoken and not, of the wedding dress in her closet and the intertwined grip of our fingers all our lives.

I closed my eyes. Sighed.

“You have no guts,” I said.

I fell back on my bed and crossed an arm over my eyes as she stood up and stomped out of my room, crying down the stairs and past my unconscious mom, past Nicky, past the apple tree and across that field in the cold fall air.

~ ~ ~

There wasn’t much of a spring in Wisconsin the next year. There was more of a vacuum between the snow and the warm rain, which Nicky and Chance and I found ourselves trekking

through, with my dad's aluminum canoe from the 60s banging into our hips, burning through our arms as we carried it down the path to Lake 17.

As we had prepared for our trip, my dad told us that the trail to the lake was such that, the last time he was there, 15 years ago, he could wheel a whole boat trailer right to the shore. Since then, protections were passed on the national forest – a rare, good thing – and as the three of us hiked, we could only close our eyes and duck our heads to the pine boughs and fingers of maple branches that choked the path to the width of one person. Beneath our feet we crunched years of compacted leaves; as we walked, the latticed canopy acted as home to the mosquitoes that hung in clouds of hundreds like particles of mist, and drank from us obsessively.

The conceit of our trip was to go to the lake because we were men, now. But, like men, there was an emotional truth that lugged us forward, but that we'd never verbalize – that really, when Savannah vanished, she vanished from all of us in such a way that we'd start to talk about old memories, then trail off when we realized she had been there – in such a way that I kept swearing I'd see her visage in the kitchen, or her name on the phone, or her silhouette beneath the apple tree, but that I couldn't remember the last time I said her name.

~ ~ ~

My dad had always told me that Lake 17 was the closest thing to magic he'd ever seen, and when, after five breathless hours, the four of us turned a final corner, and the opaque wall of needles and leaves gave way to a clearing from which we could see the perfect sky, no longer raining, reflected off the mirrored surface of the lake, I understood what he meant. When we set the canoe down, and stretched our fingers, and scratched our bites, we could see the medley of wildflowers that ringed the lake, the standing birch trees half-swallowed by its rising waters, and even from the shore we could see the bass and panfish in contrast to the white-sand bottom,

darting in schools between the beaver-felled logs and lazy floating leaves and lily pads as big as plates, their bulbs bursting yellow. It took one look for me to understand why he would disappear all those weekends.

We sat around the fire that night, and as the sun set and we listened to the frogs and the birds in the meadow and the wood hiss away in the flames, I tried to imagine why my dad no longer came to the lake. For the first time in a long time, I felt real peace, with the dew in the air soothing everywhere that was sore. I felt actually good as we passed around a can of beans and munched our campfire toast. I wanted to wonder where my dad was now going instead, but I think I knew – I think I knew by the tied-off plastic bag of clothes on his dresser, by the bottle of cologne sitting next to it.

I sat the empty bean can in the fire, and as I watched the smoke climb up its side, I thought then of how Savannah always used to say I smelled like my mom's cigarettes when I'd come to her house, and that she'd have to Febreeze the place when I'd leave. I wondered if someone was telling my dad the same thing.

~ ~ ~

The next morning, Chance and I paddled among the reeds and half-sunken trees of the lake, gawking at the schools of bass that would follow our canoe like dogs on a scent, not having seen enough people to know that we are no good. We told Nicky that we would catch lunch, and it wasn't long until we were setting hooks and screaming with excitement at the pressure of life on the ends of our lines, acting like the children we were pretending not to be.

We found beaver dams and their entrances beneath the clear water, we found an island only one person could stand on, we found an unmarked canoe sunk twenty feet underwater, and we watched as little fish darted in and out of it like a home. We found a cove that reached into

the woods, and when we followed it, we found ourselves drifting amidst the old-growth maples and the popples. Beneath us, plate-sized panfish hovered over the yellow pits of their beds, which they'd dug among the drowned grasses and tree roots. Everything seemed monstrous in this lake – from the bird-like dragonflies that lighted on the tips of our fishing poles to the cattails on the shore tall enough to cast shade over us. I'd get this sensation when I was there, like splitting the blinds on the window of what we call reality and peeking through to see something even more real.

On one fishing outing, somewhere between the hooking and unhooking of fish, Chance gasped. I looked at his wide eyes, and he gestured behind him to a patch of flattened weeds, where a loon lay, sleeping, with her head tucked beneath her wing. We realized we had been floating there next to it, maybe twenty feet away, for an hour or more.

Loons are famously monogamous. They let their young ride on their back. Their calls have been sorted into four categories: a “tremolo,” a “wail,” a “yodel,” and a “hoot.” And of course, they can dive underwater and visit a different world whenever they wish.

The sky began to darken with heavy clouds, but Chance and I were too enraptured by the fishing to notice. Eventually, the loon woke up, unfurled its neck, waddled to the edge of its nest, and started to glide across the water. Chance and I watched it go, then kept fishing.

Minutes later, the loon hooted. It hooted enormously, and before Chance and I could even think, a flash of lightning dominated my entire vision. Then, rain.

We paddled as fast we could manage across the lake, back to the campsite. The small hairs on our arms stood up straight with the charge in the air. Every crack of lightning ran a sword of fear through us both. Chance said he might shit his pants. I lifted my feet off of the

aluminum floor of the canoe and onto the wooden crossbar, built by my dad so long ago, as if that would save me from a direct strike. And was the loon still hooting?

We slammed the stern of the canoe into the muddy bank, almost tossing ourselves out. We dumped our catches for the day back into the lake, and, soaked through to our guts, dove into the tent, where Nicky was shivering beneath damp blankets, listening to the campfire sizzle away in a rhythm amidst the shaking thunder and strobe of lightning.

We learned later that the storm knocked the power out for a day in the surrounding towns. Its rain misted through the rain-proof tent. We could only laugh – we could only get wetter and wetter and pass around a can of jellied cranberry sauce, which we brought as a joke, and laugh at how the little bumps of our mosquito bites had matured into angry red welts all over each of us, laugh at how I had burned the laces off all of our shoes that morning while trying to dry them off, laugh at how we were so stiff from the hike that we couldn't bend and touch our shins, much less our toes, like we used to so easily just a couple years ago, in high school. I remember that I couldn't help myself, and I wondered what it'd be like if Savannah could be there, legs crossed under her like ours, trying to make room for each other, laughing at how it all hurts, and I could imagine her asking – are Nicky's calves bigger than yours now? And since when could Chance grow a beard? And Jesus – is that a mosquito bite on my eyelid?

When in the evening the rain and lightning finally subsided, we stepped outside the tent to see dozens of frogs, croaking on the rocks we sat upon, on the fishing bucket dropped hastily, on our shoes with the burnt laces, and in the firepit, which in the faintest way was still warm, despite being crushed by the downpour.

~ ~ ~

It was on the cusp of fall that Nicky and I found ourselves beneath a waxing moon, rowing along the shore of Lake 17 in a boat we'd found stashed in the woods one day with a registration tag from 1987 cellophaned to its side. Drooping reeds and tight-shut lilies flashed before us in episodes of light from our flickering headlamps. There was only one patch of dry land, which was hardly wider than the boat itself, that led to the only path from the lake back to the road. It was past midnight now, and we couldn't find it. We were stuck in the puzzle of aching shoulders, the thinking of knowing, the illusion that things are ever as they seem.

As kids, my dad had told us about the mystery fish he sometimes saw on Lake 17, and how he had never managed to catch one. It took Nicky and I numerous trips, but we had found them that day in a familiar corner of the lake, fitting my dad's description exactly – they moved in a school that looked like a flock of birds – they were something between a ray and a koi – they had winged pectoral fins, sleek backs, narrowed heads, beak-like mouths – they ranged from inches to maybe two feet long. Common carp came to mind, but I'd seen those, and they weren't native to the area. I kept telling Nicky these were something else. We got lost while I insisted we paddle after them, throwing them every bait and lure in the tacklebox only for it to be ignored or snatched up by the quicker fish. My eyes were so stuck to the water, I was so caught up with capturing this thing that my dad never did, that I didn't notice the sunset.

Now we rowed in circles as the night seemed, somehow, to grow darker than perfect darkness. I wondered if my parents would be worried – my mom wakes up often in the night, but maybe would think we were sleeping upstairs. I wasn't sure if my dad would even be home, but if he were, I wondered if he'd still be up, head propped on his hand, watching a movie from his youth. Absurdly, I liked the idea that even if he was in some strange person's house instead, he was at least still awake, doing the same thing.

Nicky said something about his shoulders killing him, and I said mine were too. We let ourselves float. We turned off our headlamps, and in the perfect darkness we could see only the sickle moon and the doppelganger of its reflection on the lake. I couldn't tell the sky from the water, up from down. I clamped my jaw shut. I didn't want Nicky to know about the panic spinning in my guts, my manic thinking about mystery fish, sunken canoes, forty-foot drop-offs, and how a boat can overturn as easily as a person.

~ ~ ~

Eventually, we found land. Around 2am, Nicky spotted the landing. We bundled our things and I followed him down the trail, and even in the non-light I could tell he was taller than me now. I had spent so much of our short lives worrying about whether I could make things at home seem okay when Dad would vanish for days, or when Mom was passed-out, pants-shit and drooling, or both, that I never stopped to consider how he kept me right-side-up, too, and how Savannah would do the same thing, how she would choose to spend time in our smoke-filled, dirty home rather than at her grandma's, who painted her room a new color every year, who made her three-course dinners, who took her everywhere, and with that realization, under that sickled moon, something inside me cracked. I wondered if Nicky missed her too, wondered if he wondered whether all those years were as real as the rustles in the dark leaves all around as we walked, as real as the way that the bird-like fish in the water swam circles in the lake I thought I knew.

It was four in the morning when we quietly cracked the door open to the house. Both of our legs were still unsteady. By our count, we'd been on the water for eleven hours straight. When we tiptoed into the living room, Dad was there, curled up on the couch, an old movie playing silently on the TV, which made us smile. Mom's bedroom door was cracked, and though

she had fallen asleep in her shoes, I think Nicky and I could feel, but didn't want to say, that we were happy that she'd made that decision to put them on that day – happy, I guess, that she must have gone outside.

~ ~ ~

It was spring when Savannah called me. I remember the air was cold, and the apples weren't quite budding on the tree yet. I remember that the barn had grown a shade darker with the winter, and it had started to lean. Nicky and I had made breakfast for the family, so it must have been the weekend when my phone rang with an unusual number. I was in my room when I answered and she said, "Well, hey."

She sounded the same. I sank onto the bed, mind washed. I probably said, "Well, hey!" But who knows. What I did know was that we hadn't talked for a year or more, that I could hear my own echo on her end, and that she told me then that she had tried to kill herself that morning. She was in the hospital now, and she got to have one contact, and for policy reasons they were listening in on the call, and that she just really wanted to talk to me.

An incredible heat rose in me. I asked her, "Why?"

Since the day in my room, it sounded like everything had happened. She'd met people who sounded either crazy or wonderful to me, she'd lived in a handful of places, had a handful of jobs, gotten the tattoos she always wanted, dyed her hair – all things her grandma would faint to know now. I mentioned this, and for the first time in a long time, we laughed together.

"You should see me," she said. "You wouldn't believe it."

I think I realized then that it's easy to only look at someone as if they're the subject of your telescope, of whatever vision is left when you close an eye and glare down the lens at what

you want them to be – parents laughing at the table, strange fish on the line, girl forever in the wildflowers.

I told her I was sorry for being so angry back then, and she laughed and said she was sorry about everything. We were both quiet for a minute, and in that minute, I knew I really was sorry. I didn't care about the kid with no neck, or what happened to him. I looked at the space next to me on the bed, at the door where I'd watched Savannah leave, and understood that it wouldn't be that way again. There'd be no more long hairs on the pillow, or bright chips of nail polish among the dust of the floor. And for the first time in a long time, my guts didn't burn up to think that way.

I asked her if she was okay, and she said, yeah. She said, besides wanting to nosedive off a bridge a few hours ago, she was good. We talked until the evening, peeling the ears off whoever had to listen in, I'm sure, as they heard us explain all the ways in which she flew out over the earth, and I folded into the lake. All the while we talked, I stared out of my bedroom window at the wildflower field, at the swerving path we'd worn through it that had grown in such a way to make room for us, that seemed to learn before we did that love was a thing that comes and goes, a thing that takes many shapes.

~ ~ ~

That Father's Day, I summoned the courage to crunch across the gravel of our driveway, bucket of minnows in hand, and ask my dad if he'd come to Lake 17 with me. He draped the oil-soaked rag in his hands over the lip of the blue barrel, once dark like a forget-me-not, now the color of the sky, and looked at the half-assembled boat motor. He did some mental wrenching bolting in his head, and he said, "You know what – sure."

*

When we arrived, Dad looked out over the lake. I felt like I was watching two old friends happen upon each other. Despite the pine needles speared in his peppered hair and the mosquito bites in a necklace down to the sweat-drenched collar of his t-shirt, I thought he looked younger, then. And I realized it'd been about a decade since we fished together at all.

~ ~ ~

“We used to camp here,” Dad said, pointing directly beneath us. We had launched the boat, and done a tour of the lake, which, he said, for the water having risen, the trail being so tight, he wouldn't believe was the same place if it weren't for the schools of fish that followed us around, which we caught and released with ease. He said this when we were near one of the beaver dams, floating in ten feet of water. Giant, crisscrossed logs and a scattered ring of cracked rocks, that must have once been a fire pit, wavered in my vision. A school of panfish darted beneath us, where I could imagine him, 20 years ago, building a tent of sticks to light a fire.

Dad stood up on the boat, scoped out the swaths of bass that flitted between the tangles of reeds and lily pads. He cast in an arc; the line shone thin and golden in the air, seemed to hang there for eternity, as if through telekinesis, as if his eyes were in the lure and he could home in on the fish and drop the lure exactly where it needed to go. Somewhere, a loon hooted.

Then, in that eternity, my dad stumbled. His ankles caught the seat behind him, and he lost his legs. In slow-motion, he dropped from the air. Line peeled wildly from his reel, and he landed on the edge of the boat, which dipped like a ladle and scooped water up to the tops of the seats, then sprung back and flung him into Lake 17.

My dad disappeared into a million bubbles. I gasped at how completely he disappeared. Absurdly, I missed him in those few seconds until the bubbles all burst beneath the boat and revealed him, baptized in Lake 17, his limbs akimbo underwater, one with the logs and the rocks

and the darting fish and the soup of our tackle and paddles and shoes. All the minnows I had spent the week trapping escaped into the lake, darted away everywhere.

The water swelled under my shirt. My dad surfaced with a frog-like push of his legs. His head broke into the air and he gasped, “I’m so sorry,” and I said “It’s fine, it’s fine,” and he said, “It’s not, it’s not, it’s really not,” and he grabbed our floating bait bucket, tossed it to me, and I started bailing the boat, gallons at a time, while he grabbed it by its stern and pulled it to the beaver dam.

~ ~ ~

We sat on the slope of the dam, wringing our shirts. The boat floated lazily on a log we’d tied it to. As the sun warmed our bodies, I kept imagining my dad underwater, the midday sun streaming through the lake onto his surprised face. I thought that, if I had a funny spike of color in my eyes, I got it from him. I thought about how we all trip, stumble, and fall. How we launch ourselves into worlds that aren’t our own.

I thought of how Mom, bright and happy, on a streak of days where she was in our world, and not sunken into some dark spot in her own mind, had told us to be careful. I thought of how Nicky said he’d stay behind and hang out with her, and how much he’d grown. I thought of how I’d have to dry out my phone and tell Chance and Savannah about what happened. I bet they’d find it funny; I bet they’d laugh at the thought of my dad and I sitting breathless and dripping wet on the beaver dam. I bet they’d laugh just as hard as him and I did, then, when he pointed into the boat, where, swimming in the yet-unbailed water was a single, baby bluegill, no bigger than the palm of my hand, who had been scooped up in the action of our tipping over, and who looked, so strangely, at peace.

It was the man on Railroad Lake with the crazy purple speedboat that plowed through its own wake and zipped to the dock where Chance and I stood, fishing poles in hand, that changed something in me. Perhaps he saw us go wide-eyed at his approach, then reel in our lines at top speed. As our bobbers bounced along the lake's surface, he probably saw us laugh, and he might have noticed my crooked smile, and the gap between Chance's front teeth. We were supposed to run the heavy gas line out to him by the time he reached the dock, but instead he had to watch as we strung up our poles, tossed them into the grass, unlocked the cash box, unlatched the pump, pushed a series of buttons, then, finally, handed the pump to him.

We had gotten the gas-pump attendant jobs from my dad, who worked at the marina, and whose eyes of course we felt the pressure of from up the hill where the workshop sat; and only two docks down from the marina was Chance's house, where perhaps the narrowed eyes of his dad stared at us disapprovingly. But when our job was to sit and sweat on the dock all day and stare out at people like this man with his open shirt and Oakley's as he did donuts on the lake in his twenty-thousand-dollar boats, we thought we should have some fun, too.

We grimaced when he took the pump with shaky hands and splashed gas in the water. It was hard not to stare at the ugly rainbow sheen that spread on the lake's surface. The man saw our faces and said, "Oh, relax," then grabbed a bottle of Dawn from one of his boat's many compartments and tossed it on the slick. It vanished. He laughed a boozy laugh, shoved cash at me, then buzzed away.

When he left, we cast our lines back out. But there was a shift, some sort of turning-over in our stomachs. Our bobbers twitched in the waves as we stared at where the gas had been. On normal days we might have laughed at that man, maybe mimicked his drunken stumbling. We'd

been taught by our fathers, life-long mechanics of all things that roll or float, that people like him were called “snowbirds,” who at the first drop of an orange leaf in autumn hop in their lifted trucks and tow their glossy boats back down to Florida. It was hard to take them seriously. They could play in the water all day, we thought, but they didn’t know the lake. They didn’t know about the cold that comes when they leave, about under-the-table jobs at 14 years old, about splitting seven dollars an hour between two friends, about teeth to crooked to straighten. It’s the difference between *being* there and *living* there, between owning the boat and fixing it, filling it with gas and burning it into the atmosphere.

And so when the man was drunkenly mumbling at us as we fumbled for the gas pump, I wanted to poke him in the sunburnt forehead and tell him to stop crying about it. Another thing we’d learned from our fathers.

But there was something about that slick of gas, and the way he made it disappear like a trick. Our bobbers twitched, but the thrill is gone. We couldn’t stop staring at the water; we couldn’t stop wondering where the poison went.

~ ~ ~

It was lunch time in second grade when I first heard Chance’s name. I was picking at the crust of a peanut butter sandwich mashed flat by the jaw-bending apple rolling around in my lunchbox when I heard some asshole named Austin say,

“Let’s tie Chance up in the soccer net during recess.”

But it never happened. Instead, that recess, the boys gathered up in the muddy stretch of grass behind the soccer field and played football. I played with them. I ran nonsense routes in the splashing mud and slammed my tiny body into other tiny bodies. Sometimes someone would

catch the ball, but the collisions were the point – the spinning limbs, flying bodies, quivering lips pinched tight.

When the bell rang, and we started to trudge inside, full of mud, I looked back at the stomped-over field to see Chance in the corner of the soccer net, scratching at the earth with a stick, as if awaiting his fate.

~ ~ ~

The knife squelched when Chance yanked it from the from the skull of the bullhead. We both winced. Chance tossed the fish into the lake, where it floated for a moment, then sank, nosediving to the silty bottom.

Our friendship was inevitable. Both gloomy, mostly friendless children, we sat next to each other in a middle school study hall in much the way that fish, with their vibration-sensing lateral lines, school together. We didn't say a thing to each other for weeks. Finally, I asked him if he could help me with an Algebra problem. He was the best in our class at math, so he jotted out the answer in moments in my notebook. I asked him if he wanted to do something with math later in life, and he said, "Yes, I want to be a mathematic guy," and I said, "A mathematician?" and he narrowed his eyes at me warily.

But still, a hook had been set.

By the time we were sophomores, Chance and I had been fishing together enough times for him to have learned my dad's personal rule, passed down to me: bullheads don't get to live. He told me that they were invasive, that they ate thousands of native fish eggs a day. This was true; in fact, it was true that an angler wasn't legally allowed to return a live bullhead to the water once one was caught. We felt fine about this in theory. But the practice – the splitting bone, the trickle of blood – bruised some tender thing within us.

Chance and I had traded several of our father's secrets during our fishing trips. Given Chance's birthplace outside of Dallas, I learned how to Texas rig an artificial worm so it wobbled underwater. Given our cold, murky lakes in northern Wisconsin, I taught him how to flutter a spoon so it reflected the sun like a wounded minnow. That day, we stood hip-deep and casted into the lake across the street from my house, Long Lake, occasionally kicking away the bluegills that swarmed our legs and nibbled at our dead skin.

In the quiet of that moment, I thought about the bullhead Chance had just stabbed. It was hard not to think about something you just watched die. I wondered though, as always, if it actually died on impact, as my dad promised they did. It seemed too good to be true; it seemed possible that in its waning consciousness it could hear Chance and I's muffled voices as we above the lake's surface. Perhaps it heard me wax on about the days when Dad and I would go fishing every weekend. Maybe it heard me tell Chance all about how the boat we used to use, like basically everything Dad owned, was a rescue of sorts, that while my dad couldn't unwarped the molding floorboards, or un-fade the black paint beaten to an ashy gray by the sun, he could flush the engine, swap the hoses, and make it live again. And maybe the dying bullhead heard all about how on Saturdays we'd hook the resurrected boat to the refurbished trailer, then hitch the trailer to one of Dad's many reanimated trucks. It might know how we'd get to the lake and float around the lilies, how we'd cast our lines with second-hand fishing poles, some of which my dad had been using since he himself was a teenager.

"But we haven't gone in years," it might hear me say as I zipped a cast as far as possible.

Maybe Chance's warbled voice echoed through the water and the bullhead learned that he hadn't gone fishing with his dad in years, either, except that who he called "Dad" was his great-uncle, and his great uncle was seventy-two years old, and he lived with his great uncle and

his great aunt because Chance's biological parents were crack addicts who used to put cigarettes out on Chance's infant arms. Would the bullhead feel the twinge in that deep place like I did, just then? Most likely it was too busy dying, or too busy listening as Chance explained that despite the many body-breaking years his great uncle had spent as a mechanic in the Airforce, he had to drive a school bus to keep the mortgage paid, and although the rattles of the bus, the jolts of the potholes in the dirt roads left him aching everywhere, that was hardly enough to keep the bills paid. Of course, the energy to fish had washed away. They lived right on Railroad Lake and had their own dock, but neither of them had wet a line in years.

Chance and I were quiet for a while. Eventually, a white orb appeared on the surface near us. We both squinted to see that it was the bullhead, belly-up.

Nostalgia, I think, sinks into the lake of one's mind much like a dead fish. It needs time to take on water, for its naturally buoyant properties to erode. It was in middle school, around when I met Chance, that it first struck me that Dad and I hadn't gone fishing in a couple weeks. I chalked it up to an especially busy summer at his job, and the start of me joining football.

But weeks did what they always do. They turned into months, then years, and despite my dad's constant work, still, we woke up some mornings to the electricity shut off, to the mortgage company's notices on the door, to new leaks in the ceiling. Still, I brought thin peanut butter sandwiches and single green apples to school for lunch. I grew taller, but despite all my football exercise, I gained no weight. Strange veins crept from my stomach into my hips, dark bags grew under my eyes and never left, colors burst in my vision whenever I stood up too fast. The boat rotted in the backyard. The pleather on the seats shriveled and split; the carpet on the floor turned into mold.

Chance and I watched the bullhead's body bob along in the imperceptible current. There was nothing to say. The bloated death of those times on the lake with our dads floated to the surface of our minds; those days were over.

~ ~ ~

For years, our football coaches smacked us upside our heads and called us retards. They pulled us by our facemasks like cattle, pushed us to the dirt during “drills” and cast their shadows over us as we scrambled to our feet. Chance didn't join the team until our senior year. I advised that he never join, but he thought it would help him get into shape, and get into the mindset of a soldier, since he had decided, like so many others in our school, to join the Army as recompense for his sinking GPA, and of course as a way to make money, to help his great-uncle keep the house on Railroad Lake.

And so Chance did suicide sprints and threw up the plastic-tasting water our coaches set up on the bleachers, just like the rest of us. He watched as the coaches singled our pairs of us on the offensive and defensive line during run-throughs and told us if we didn't scrimmage at “game intensity,” they'd make the whole team run. Austin, the asshole, and I often ended up under scrutiny, the one thing we had in common being that we fucking hated football, and thus we barely tried during practice. Still, we didn't want to make everybody sprint, so we cracked heads on a loop until the sun fell down. Some nights, I would get home and act strangely as my head buzzed; I would shut the lights off in the kitchen while my mom cooked, I would sit in the middle of a room and play with the dirt between the cracks of the floorboards, I'd call our dog by names of dogs we buried in the yard years ago. Chance reported similar side effects. A certain light washed out of his eyes. Bruises like imploding stars lined both sets of our forearms.

As a team, we beat all the schools that were poorer than us and lost to the schools that were richer. Teammates would scream and slam their helmets into lockers when we lost to teams with 60-man rosters, coaches with headsets, and towel boys who weren't just injured members of the team, crutching out to the field with off-white towels draped around their necks. When I looked at the 20 of us, and even further at the 12 or so that weren't failing half their classes and could actually play, I couldn't believe that they thought losing was the most frustrating part of being a football player. I don't know if Chance felt the same. I know that, like me, he didn't scream at our losses, or cheer for our victories. Perhaps, like me, when he slipped his shoulder pads on, the weight that fell on him flattened that tender thing inside.

One day, somebody on the team found a video of the defensive coach's daughter on a pornographic site. She had graduated three years before us, and the rest, I figured, was her business. Still, in the locker room after practice, the team gathered around an iPod Touch to watch the video. They whispered "*Fags*" when Chance and I walked away from their offer to stand there and watch it with them.

As we left the locker room, hearing the team's collective shouts and perverse imitations blare through the wall, I remembered when we were all kids. I remembered bursting through the doors for recess, and tasting the first day of spring, of fall, of winter. The smell of a hot sidewalk, the promise of summer. Simple books, easy arithmetic. Forming letters, sounding out, reading clocks. Mrs. Kriegl in second-grade who would snatch us up on our birthdays and kiss us on the forehead – the chorus of "eww" from the boys. Where did it go? Trading cards and fishing stories, pockets full of acorns. Yes, we were always asses to each other – there were hidden shoes, nasty grins, kids tied in soccer nets. But there's natural mischief, and there's what we'd become – or what we'd lost.

Perhaps anger sinks into us like a dead fish, and rots that way, too. Perhaps it explodes into a mess of guts and we go septic when we realize we've lost something – something like comradery. By the time Chance joined football, so many things were clear. Of course our classmates were assholes, and of course we were poor and starving for more than one thing. But the poison of knowing that we'd outgrown days with our fathers, and now days with our classmates, and soon, days with each other, wilted away the tenderness within us, and left room for the only thing we'd ever been rewarded for feeling.

And it was anger that propelled Chance so hard into that lanky ball carrier on Friday evening that I thought he was someone else. It was anger pounding in his eyes when I pulled him off the flattened, wheezing body, and asked, “Chance, that was *you?*”

Anger, too, overcame me on the read-option play that earned me my only salvo of pats on the back from my coaches and teammates. When we drilled the read-option defense, my coach explained that the quarterback and running back would run parallel to each other to the edge of the line (a tiny school of fish) and the quarterback would “read” the situation, then have the “option” to keep the ball himself, or pitch it to the running back. My instructions, from the mouth of the coach with the daughter in the video, were: “No matter what happens, you *kill* that quarterback.”

So when he came wheeling around the corner, I hammered him at a full sprint, and we each made a sound like our souls left our bodies. I lifted him with the momentum, then slammed him to the ground. Something crunched. There was a sick sensation of something giving – it felt, and sounded, just like it did when I would punch a knife through a bullhead's skull. I stood up, dizzy, and the quarterback screamed. I'd heard that scream a couple dozen times throughout the

years. It silenced everyone – the drunk parents in both sets of bleachers, the red-faced coaches, all the asshole teenagers on both teams.

EMTs, coaches, and the quarterback’s parents ran onto the field amidst the eerie silence. All the players took a knee. From where I kneeled, I could hear only the occasional, quiet,

“Does it hurt when I do this?”

Steam rose from my body; my breathing slowed. I don’t know if it was the evening’s dropping temperature, or the waning adrenaline, but I was cooling off.

Everyone clapped when the quarterback walked off to his sideline. I walked off to my sideline, and there were the claps on the back from the coaches and my teammates and even Chance and even my dad, who reached over the plastic separator to set his heavy hand on my shoulder and say, “That’s what I came here to see.” In the midst of the clamor, from behind the visiting team’s bleachers, I saw the waiting ambulance pull away.

We won that game. As I carried my steaming shoulder pads to my dad’s truck, he told me he had gone to the concession stand, which is on the opponent’s side of the field, during the fourth quarter.

“Apparently,” he said, “You snapped his collarbone.”

He looked at me as if it were natural for me to say something in that moment. But I was quiet. I just remember being cold.

~ ~ ~

Just weeks before Chance left for the Army, and I left for college, I bought a broken original Xbox, the type that weighs almost twenty pounds, and a pile of old games from a classmate. The console was easy to revive; I grabbed a paper clip from a school assignment and bent it straight so I could press the miniscule “Reset” button that had been covered by dust. It

worked, and all night the television's pale light shone on our faces as Chance and I played a game called *Far Cry*.

We were supposed to shoot, stab, and choke each other's blurry-faced avatars to death in a race to 25 kills, or maybe 50. Instead, we entered a map editor mode. There, we escaped for a moment. We didn't blow each into bloody bits that clipped through the tree textures. We didn't slit each other's throats at 30 frames-per-second. No, instead we used the "smooth" tool to level the pixelated battlefield, then flooded it with shimmering water. We surrounded the water with hilly land, then populated the land with trees. In the corners of the perfectly square space, and on the shore of the perfectly round lake we'd created, we added houses. The houses, designed for a war game, had blown out windows, half-sunken roofs, broken bottles and dishes strewn about every room. There was no option to make normal houses – but sitting as we were in my living room with the sagging ceiling, the splintered floors, the foggy windows, we understood that all too well. And besides, we liked to envision this place as being retaken by nature – maybe it was somewhere we knew. Out of the eyes of our fathers and our coaches, our classmates and everyone else, we could grant ourselves the fun of imagining.

We finished this map, then launched our characters into it. We ran around the forest, up and down the generated hills and the decrepit houses. We fired bullets into the lake and laughed at the terrible splash animation. If we accidentally killed ourselves by bouncing a grenade off a wall, or falling from too high of a tree, our bodies simply flashed three times, disintegrating into the air of the forest we'd made for ourselves, then reappeared elsewhere. And so we were reborn, as perhaps all things are. A stabbed fish sinks, then floats, then sinks again. It turns into bones and then into everything –into other fish, waving plants, the water itself. So too goes our nostalgia for days gone, and our anger at their loss. The tender thing reawakens with a tiny

breath. They all swim around in our stomach, these things that come and go, just as Chance and I jumped around in those trees that night, and just as we would jump around in life.

There it was, the tap, the whisper of a nibble on the baked bean lanced by the thin hook, silver like polished steel. The bobber twitched, twitched, and with a wrist snap, the minnow – the pearly dace – danced in my palm. I flicked what was left of the baked bean into the water. There was a ripple, then a cloud of minnows who attacked the scent and destroyed the mirror of Whisker Lake.

I plugged the hook into the nostril of the pearly dace. I cast it deep into the lake. A trick my dad taught me. The line fell on the water as if drifting to sleep.

The fallen maple I balanced on lilted and swayed beneath my feet. Somewhere in the trees a bird made a noise I'd never heard before. I exhaled all my nervous breath when I remembered where I was.

My bobber twitched. The line grew tight, started to unspool from my reel, traveled like a spirit from my pole. This was it.

~ ~ ~

Dad's hunting knife was beneath the basswood tree, impressed into the earth an inch or so – just enough to dodge the chop of lawnmower blades, just enough for my dad to consider it lost forever. But as a barefoot, ever-wandering child, I nearly found it the hard way – stepping on its faded wooden handle rather than its rust-caked blade.

I showed it to my dad that evening, presented it on a paper towel across my hands like an artifact. His eyes widened to see it again. "Oh, huh," he said, before walking past me and sinking into the couch. Without looking back, he said, "I thought that'd be lying in my old deer blind, out at, oh..."

~ ~ ~

Whisker Lake. Named for its appearance after fires ripped through the Northwoods in the 1930s and burned the old growth forest around its banks to pokey black stubble. Every time I heard the name, I thought of my dad's face during deer season, how fast he transformed when he didn't shave for a week, when he traveled in a loop of early light and early darkness from our house to his deer blind. Whisker Lake was four miles deep into the woods. The only trail there was the one generations of deer had punched through the brush, and even that was obscured by the fresh snow of late November. It was the only place my dad ever went that I didn't want to follow; Whisker Lake scared me.

Every time I bumped my knuckles against the rusted knife, which sat for a decade in the drawer of my desk, I thought of that lake and my dad being swallowed by that dark, whiskered mouth in the woods. I thought of that first night I was convinced Dad wouldn't come home, the first of many nights Mom would spend spinning the numbers on the dial phone, her frantic voice rising in pitch as the hours ticked on, as the house grew cold without Dad there to stoke the fire. I thought of the way she paced, started to scream at any of Dad's friends who would pick up in the dead of night as the snow fell outside, thought of how she cornered and questioned my brother and me, in our single-digit ages, as if we could know where Dad was, as if we could say anything except that we were sure he'd come home soon.

And he did. Well past midnight, when Mom had exhausted herself with worry, and sat at the head of the table, shaking, asking us to stay up with her, his headlights bumped up the snowy road. We could all only stare at the door as he walked in, beard still frosted, his gun at his side, a deer, gut-shot and chased through the night, lying dead in the trunk of the car. He stared at us, we stared at him. Something had changed.

~ ~ ~

In the decade since that night, the night I'm sure that Dad lost his knife while carving the deer as it hung from the basswood, there was the advent of the cellphone, of social media, of a thousand reasons to know where he was on any given night. But he was a ghost – sometimes drifting into the house near dawn after a night at deer camp with his friends, though he had stopped hunting long ago.

~ ~ ~

As I grew old enough to burn nights away with girls I liked, old enough to light the driveway with my headlights in the earliest hours of the day, it dawned on me that there are very few reasons to be away all night, very few things a person can be doing where they can't answer a text, can't look anyone in the eyes the next morning. I learned how it felt to be swallowed up.

But some of my late nights were only spent around bonfires, talking about everything beneath the stars and the stars themselves with my friends, with people who were good for me. And that was all. Some nights were just that, and those nights I would lean back and stare at the sky and hope my dad, who I knew wouldn't be home, was at least only doing the same thing I was.

~ ~ ~

When I turned 20, the same age my dad was when he learned he would become a father, I had to go to Whisker Lake. Some magnetism pulled me to the deer trail, still clear through the woods. Branches and ferns snagged my shirt and shoelaces; I stepped carefully around baby maples while a can of beans and my tacklebox clanked together in my backpack. Dad's knife was secured to my belt.

Before the trip, I had restored the knife. I dipped the blade in vinegar, and after a few days, an amazing amount of foul-smelling crud sloughed off. I sanded the handle and the blade and blew the shiny dust into the yard. I stained the handle with the only wood stain I could find in our basement. It shocked me when I realized it was the same color as the trim around our windows, which I remember my mom and dad staining together when I was only five. Then, the day of the trip, I polished the blade until I could see myself in it, and reflect.

Despite the August heat, a chill ran through me when I saw Whisker Lake. I sat down on a fallen tree, opened my can of beans, and began to eat while I stared at the rippling water.

I knew that somewhere in the lake's perimeter I might find my dad's old hunting blind. But I hoped it was lost to time. Leaves rustled around me, and even if I was an adult now, a familiar fear shook me to think it could be the ghost of my dad with his dark beard, his silent manner, his mind cooking up whatever it was that ended those routine days of his presence in the daylight, the days when he seemed to have energy for us.

Time passed strangely at Whisker Lake. I poked around the loose bark of fallen trees with dad's knife, hoping to find a grub or worm to use as bait. I never did take up hunting, but Dad and I used to fish together as often as we shared meals. He never did say anything about fishing in Whisker Lake, though, as if there was some secret in its depths he didn't want me to see.

Evening snuck up on me, and with no bugs in sight, I turned to the can of beans. I had to catch something. I had to make something interesting enough happen that I could tell my dad about it the next time I saw him; I had to find a way to talk about Whisker Lake.

~ ~ ~

And this was it. I set the hook, felt the writhing life of whatever attacked the minnow run through the pole. I was breathless as I maneuvered the fish around the lily pads, the marsh grasses. I couldn't fail. I had to know what was in Whisker Lake; what was at the end of the line.

When the fish grew tired, I knelt down on the floating log and scooped it from the water.

A bigger minnow. With teeth. A pearly dace, as long and bright as a knife.

Final Trailing Inertia
Sea Lion Lake

Savanah,

I'm writing to tell you that my dad has decided to scrap the Prism. We need the money to fix the brakes on my mom's car, which isn't doing much better than this one, but at least still roars to life when she turns the key.

The wrecker is coming tomorrow. I thought I'd take inventory one last time, the same way you and I always used to before we disappeared into the woods. I miss that. I miss those summer days, those deep breaths between college semesters, when we'd circle the car over and over and ask: do we have both fishing poles? The bait? And did we remember lunchboxes? The coffee? Life jackets, the net, the paddles? I miss when life was that simple – when we had the time to double-check anything but grocery lists and work emails – when we could circle the Prism until we were sure the only things missing were you and I in the front seats.

There's so much to catch up on. I know I told you I'd write, and I know it's been years since I said that. But let me start with this. Let me start by telling you that in the 1999 Chevrolet Prism, bedded now in the tall grass beneath the birches and pines in my parents' back yard, thousands of ants trot about in a layer of ashes in the trunk, spilled from a bag I collected from the woodstove and left back there, in case we ever got stuck in the snow. An iron, a jack, and a handsaw rust together in a pile beneath the trunk lining. A smooth layer of dust smothers everything in the interior, from the final, blackened spark plug sitting in the change tray to the picture of you, half-folded and sun-faded in the center console, lying amidst a mouse nest of insulation and dried pine needles. Stains on the floor mark where I would throw spent bottles of oil and antifreeze, which used to bleed from the engine and all over the driveway, which, as I'm sure you remember, used to make me yank on my hair with frustration. The loose fabric of both

front door interiors hang from the frames and denote the many times I tried to fix the broken door handles. The faded paint on the button to roll down the window reveals my failure to do so, and tells the story of the dozens of times I would reach out my door, open it from the outside, walk around to the front, and open yours, too.

In the Prism there's a feeling of luckiness to be alive among the dry-rotted floors, the rusted frame, the tires smoothed from hours on dirt roads. In the backseat, there's a notebook. The notebook sort of scares me. I hear a tapping and there's a moth banging on the window, and I realize, sitting in here, that the sun is going down. The car smells like it always used to, only wilder. There are leaves on the floor, there's hair from my dead dog pinned to the seats, there's an ignition key beneath the floormat that only elicits clicks now. And there's quiet. And then one of my big sighs, which you used to make fun of. And there's the rustle of me opening the notebook. And in it is my name, written in your handwriting. Around the letters you've drawn flowers and trees and bumblebees and butterflies. I remember being embarrassed by this. Which, in retrospect, is embarrassing, isn't it?

I grip the steering wheel for the last time and I realize that inside the Prism there's love and music unsung and wanting and sleeping in the backseat. There's wild grass growing through the doors and tires melting into the earth and oil turned to sludge and gas separated by time. There's scratches in the paint from when we'd hoist the canoe on top. And there's still a stain in the backseat from the time I spilled a bucket of minnows and raced to Sea Lion Lake to let them go. Though I don't think I ever told you that story. But I should have. I only knew of that lake because of that time there with you, that time we caught bass by casting under the piers of the rich folks all along the shore, that time we flattened ourselves against the canoe's bottom so we

could pass beneath the bridge that connected one person's personal island to another. I can still feel how close we were, and the shadow passing over us.

I press the gas pedal and I remember the time the muffler divorced itself from the frame and skidded on the ground, and how I stopped by your place so your dad could pin it back in place with a bent clothes hanger. I remember a spray of power steering fluid and a small fire, and you and I patching the split hose with a roll of electric tape. I remember a dash to the Prism when the rain and lightning came from nowhere one day, and looking at your face, and rusty water dripping down the windows, and laughter.

It was just before we caravanned our cars from our hometowns to college together that I bought the Prism from my older brother for \$700, and it was that night I learned that a prism is a shape whose two ends are equal and parallel to each other, whose sides are parallelograms. I learned that a prism is a shape glass often takes for its ability to grab light and scatter it in brilliant patterns. And I think about the Prism then, and now, and later, of how it spent its life and 150000 miles running around, gathering light, and holding me. Holding us. Baked into its faded body is the glow of greenery along the highway, the sun through the dirty windshield, the blur of animals and people on the side of the road, the light of all those miles and everything that happened within them. I'm going to miss it.

It'll be impossible to see the gap of yellowed grass where it once sat and not think of you. Of how far away from each other we are now, of how moving on is natural, but will always hurt.

Still, I think when the time comes for the Prism to crumble, for its frame to give way and its paint to flake off and the glass to crack and splinter, when it turns to dust for the wind to carry around the world – I think it'll really have done its job then. It'll have scattered all of those miles worth of you and me as far as it could. You used to think my imagination was funny, but hear me

out. Don't you think, if a car could want something, that from the Prism's first sputtering start to its final trailing inertia into the backyard, that would be it? To carry us everywhere?

I watched a rainbow trout take the minnow in its mouth like a dog does a stick. I saw this in real time on the screen of my dad's underwater camera, which we lovingly called "the fish camera," as the lens was affixed to a faded bluegill replica that swayed in the undercurrent. I pulled my phone out of my pocket to take a picture of the fish camera's grainy, black and white screen, to capture the moment before I captured the fish. On its way out, the phone clipped my bulky snow pants. It slipped through my gloved hands. It slid on the ice-slicked floor of the shack, and, with the slightest *plop*, dove into the drilled hole. Speechless, I watched on the fish camera as the phone, still glowing, struck Lost Lake's bottom, spooked the trout, and kicked up a cloud of silt.

Things happen in life that you can only shrug at. My dad first told me this when he found me, maybe twelve-years-old, leaning like a limp fish against the basswood tree in the backyard, my heart freshly broken by a girl on the school bus. In that phoneless moment on the ice, I stared in disbelief at the screen of the fish camera. In its projected image I could see that moment with my dad again: the mottled shade of the basswood as the static in the screen, the crouching figure of my dad as the fishing line, the limp fish of me as the munched-up minnow, which hung by a fleshy thread from the hook.

But that had been years ago, that pep talk under the tree. And as a junior in college, I had seen a lot happen since then. I had seen enough happen that I knew to rise to my feet and hike off the lake. The excess heat in my face flushed to my heart as I trudged through the knee-deep snow. When my car sputtered to life in the frozen parking lot, I thought of those things I had seen: my dad snap his leg in half, lose his job for months, and fix boat motors in the frosted yard with his braced leg kicked up on a five gallon bucket to keep the bills paid. I'd seen him cut a

limb from the basswood tree and split it to size when a polar vortex ran us out of firewood and the cold turned the inside of our windows to sheets of ice. I'd seen him punch a hole through the slush in the lake across the street and scoop the freezing water into a bucket so we could force-flush our toilet when winter storms toppled powerlines. And he never once shrugged.

As my car slid left and right on the way home, I thought of a time when Dad had picked me up from high school after work, and we slid home much the same way. He had spent that day outside in the sleet, winterizing some vacationer's fifty-thousand-dollar speedboat. During that drive, he told me he hoped I wouldn't have to work like he did. He told me to go to college, to get a job where I used my brain instead of my body, to do something where I had the choice to stay inside when it was cold.

And when I got to the house, panting, and told him I'd dropped my phone into Lost Lake, at first he probably wanted to tell me to shrug it off, that it's only a thing. But maybe from the look on my face he knew that on the phone were records of texts from friends in college, pictures of me with all the people he had wanted me to meet, digital pictures of Polaroids of him and me with fish in our hands that I would stare at when missing home, records of phone calls to him and my mom and my brothers and with the people I grew to love from school, thousands of notes for stupid stories I wanted to write, thoughts I thought were profound, drafts of messages I was too shy to send to girls I liked, to new friends, to professors who scared me. On that phone was the record of the first person ever in his family to go to college – to strike out into a world where there might be the luxury of shrugging, someday. Maybe he felt that. Maybe he sympathized because when he was my age, he wouldn't have had the sense to back up his files either, or just enjoy a moment without photographing it, and that's why he said, "Wake up early. We'll head out there tomorrow."

*

Dad and I stood on the shore of Lost Lake, the same shore where he and my mom were married, the same shore from which my brother was baptized, the same shore where he taught me to skip rocks. In our arms were random tools and doodads from around the house including a mop, some duct tape, a minnow net, our roof rake, and our splitting maul.

We slid the ice shack off the hole and were careful to keep my jigging rod in place, as I had left the bare hook and line dangling there overnight to serve as a near-exact marker of where the phone would be. Around the original hole, I drilled three more holes, then punched out the interstitial ice with the maul. While I did this, Dad tinkered with something behind me – between the blows of the maul splashing the freezing water, I heard duct tape ripping, metal clinking. When I finished cutting the larger hole, I turned to see Dad brandishing his invention: the 20-foot-aluminum pole that was our entire roof rake, tipped with an ice ladle bound to the metal with duct tape.

Salvation.

I manned the fish camera, orienting it to capture a birds-eye view of the lake's bottom. After minutes of squinting at the image, I saw it. The rectangle of my phone, an impression in the silt. My dad, on the other end of the widened hole, started to feed the roof-rake-ladle into the water.

Dad shifted the ladle on the lake's floor. I directed him through the camera, which was powered now by one of dad's old truck batteries. The slightest slip kicked up silt, and we'd wait twenty freezing minutes for it to settle while we prayed the phone wouldn't be buried. The ice turned to slush beneath our knees.

The few, precious bright hours we had in winter days like that one passed quickly. The image on the fish camera grew staticky – the truck battery wouldn't hold out much longer. As much as the phone meant to me, I started to accept that I might never see it again, that all this was ridiculous. And besides, if I had no other choice, I could be content with the effort. The thought of all those memories locked away in a little box deep beneath Lost Lake's surface wasn't so bad. Knowing I would float over it in my canoe in the summer, that little fish would poke at it curiously, was something I could accept, now that we'd tried.

But that is not how my father operates. When I asked for his help, he could have told me to go online and click the "Buy Now" button on a new phone – but he knew that wasn't an option for me, because it was never an option for him. All my life, my dad might have told me it's okay to shrug things off and move on, but in everything he's ever done, he's shown me that that's not the only option.

And never was that clearer to me than it was in the orange, fading light of that day, when my dad slowly, carefully, pulled the 20-foot roof-rake-ladle from the water, and I was able to reach through that hole in the ice, up to my shoulder, and forget the cold, and forget everything except grabbing my phone from the caress of the ladle.

We laughed until it hurt, there on Lost Lake. With relief, maybe, or for the sheer nonsense of it all – but we laughed, loud enough, I'm sure, for the roaming rainbow trout beneath us to hear. And I laughed again, too, when after a couple of days in a bowl of rice kept warm by the fireplace, and after sitting in front of my car's heat vent on the ride back to college with me, the phone came back to life. And, as we all do when we're scooped from the cold, dark depths, and are loved, and are warmed – it worked just fine.

I knelt in Emily's garden for the first time years ago, just as Emily and Stephanie were moving into their new apartment – the first floor of a duplex, a beautiful place, close enough to Lake Superior to smell the water, to feel its chill on the wind as it snuck between the latticed streets, the lavish houses downtown, where Emily said it was a miracle, really, to have found the place at all.

Emily pointed to bare patches of soil in the garden, dry, pockmarked with withered grasses from transplanted seeds carried in the cheeks of, I'm sure, chipmunks and gray squirrels, who laid down roots and forgot them there. Emily told me there'll be a rosebush, a something-colorful here, something-tall there. I told her I couldn't wait to see it.

On the porch, Stephanie talked to my brother, Nicky, who's three years younger than me, five years younger than the sisters. They were both smiling, and the sun poured down on all four of us, and I remember thinking that I felt so lucky, then.

I first met Emily and Stephanie as a flash in my vision, really, two shapes against the blizzard outside who stepped through the doors of the University Center I was situated in, where I was advertising Windows 8, standing next to a high-table, holding a tablet "*thin as a dinner plate!*" and "*very fast!*" and "*has Paint!*" Or something like that. I needed Christmas money, needed money to make it home, and as I whispered to Emily and Stephanie, snow swirling on the linoleum floors from the door they opened to come inside and escape the blizzard, I didn't really feel very passionate about Windows 8. I gave them free sunglasses and book bags, and we drew flowers on the "*innovative touch-screen!*" of the tablets, while I told them about none of the features, except for all of the colors you could make if you slid your finger like "*this*" or "*that*" on the gradient.

I saw Emily again a year later, and learned her name was Emily by her telling me it was, which I think is so strange now. We had a class together, some sort of literature, and as I stepped down the stairs out of the building, she was there, in-step with me, and she said she recognized me as the Windows 8 guy. I smiled at that, told her that that job was no more, that it was really just a Christmas thing – and what I thought of, but didn't say, was how gut-wrenched and ruined I felt to come back from my first semester away from home to see my Mom dipping her head to the table while Nicky sat quietly with his homework in the other room, and the whole house stunk of cigarettes and something else I couldn't believe, and the dog looked thin and the tree wasn't there and Mom turned to me and slurred, "Oh, you're home." I didn't tell Emily any of this, and having had really known her for all of seven minutes at that point, I thought it was strange that I wanted to.

But no, instead we talked about something I don't remember, because I think I was nervous-what I do remember is stepping out the doors of the building and onto the sidewalk, blinding from the sun bouncing from its bleached surface, and Emily stepping into the grass, looking down at an untied shoe of hers, and smiling, and looking at me, and asking me if I'd tie it for her.

I did, of course, and I remember clumsily bragging about the strength of the knot by tying it into the fact that I was a fisherman, and I was good with knots, and that's how I learned Emily herself fished, and loved to, and I'm sure I mentioned that we should go together some time, but lord knows, really. I think I was nervous.

There are no sunflowers in Emily's garden, but I remember Mom telling me, one fuzzy morning in the front yard, an impossibly long time ago, that they sway to the motion of the sun throughout the day, ever-chasing the warmth. And I remembered that, then. Around that time,

Emily and I had, by some astral chance, entire days scheduled together, classes after classes, walks to classes that happened to align – and I’m sure any botanist or biologist or good friend would have watched us move throughout the day and understood that, in those days, she was the sun, and I was the flower.

It was an unremarkable afternoon when Emily, Stephanie, and I had an idea involving French fries, an empty plot of grass, and every seagull on campus. It went as expected, only more so – the thrown fry, hundreds of gulls, circling and fighting and screaming, eyeing, we were sure, the handful of fries Emily had in her hand, which she then tucked into sweatshirt pocket, before she, like Stephanie and I, sat down, slunk closer to each other, and hugged our knees to our chests to be as small as possible, while the sea of screeching white above us circled and raged. I thought then of an unusual flower, the Shameplant, *Mimosa Pudica*. I remembered it from one of my Mom’s plant books, remembered it because, at the time, it took something that could move, could react, to capture my imagination, I suppose, and that’s exactly what the Shameplant, or Touch-Me-Not, or Sleeping Grass, or Prayer Plant, does – recoil.

Three flowers are mentioned in the Bible – lilies, camphire, and roses. Emily and Stephanie were shy as kids, they told me, chronically quiet – to the point where fellow churchgoers were concerned for the goings-on at home. God forbid that got around, because it couldn’t be more wrong – I met Emily and Stephanie’s parents, and their little sister, and they had a beautiful garden and a badminton court in the back and chickens to keep the wood-ticks down and two dogs who Emily could make roll and play dead when she pointed at them and said, “*Bang!*” I walked around their yard with Emily and Stephanie, and well before she knew she’d move into that duplex with the garden out front, she pointed to her parent’s rosebush, tall as our waists, the petals red and full as apples, and said she wanted one of those, someday.

I remembered wanting to say something about my Mom's rosebush, rooted hard through the dried woodchips and into the flaky soil, resolute and defiant to neglect, barren, down to only thorns and skinny branches, surviving on just the rain and the sun, now. I remembered as a kid chasing garter snakes under that rosebush, and I remembered then that I always thought they were called "garden snakes," until a friend, much later, in college, would correct me, and ask how I could've never learned that. I remembered telling them that that's the only place I ever saw them, were gardens, so I thought it made sense – and it was somewhere in that conversation or the one with Emily, who was now quietly tipping the petals and peering at their veins, that I remembered crawling, bony knees soaking up marbles of dried soil, watching as a garden snake who was too quick for me took shelter beneath the thorns of Mom's rosebush, which I peered up into to see, nestled amongst the thorns, the smallest robin's nest, composed of a weave of pine needles, dry grass, my dog's fur, and one crooked cigarette butt.

My family's dog died on the same day Emily's family's cat died. Haley and Caesar, Bubbles and Boo-Boo, because there isn't an animal alive whose worth you can contain in only one name. My Mom was asleep when it happened, passed out, really, slurring her words since noon almost every day since Haley began to slow down. When Dad came home and saw Haley, panting, the round of her skull starting to show through her fur, he asked if she was getting any better. Those words swirled in the summer air that snuck through the torn window screen: a life in an answer, a thousand meanings – I told him, no. My Dad nodded. He stepped into the bedroom, where Mom slept. She didn't stir, had no covers on her, was still wearing her shoes when Dad grabbed his handgun, closed the door behind him, stepped into the kitchen where Haley lay, and I stood, watching two chicken breasts brown in the dirty oven, and scooped what

used to be a 90-pound Alaskan Malamute into one arm, stepped outside, laid her down amidst a grove of birches in the backyard, and shot her twice in the head.

The next morning, Mom asked Nicky and I if it really happened. Nicky and I had rehearsed this, had pulled the mattress from his bedroom into mine and slept the night there, had pitched the burnt chicken breasts, forgotten in the oven as we dug Haley's grave, had eaten cereal instead, like kids, and told her, yes. We could only watch the rest of that day as the August air swept through the house, bundling Haley's final hairs into clumps of fur, which Mom scooped into a Ziploc bag and slipped into a drawer in her bedroom.

I told Emily that Haley went peacefully, and she said Caesar went peacefully, too. I didn't ask for details, and neither did she, but I think she knew the truth, and I knew the truth, and that she was shattered inside, and so was I – and in those shattered, messy bits of us was a recognition, a nest of knowing: knowing that we were odd as children, knowing that our oddness was for this reason or that, and that when we were around each other we didn't talk about those reasons, or about if there even were reasons, and instead just liked to sit together, to fish on the banks of a river off of Blueberry Drive and catch minnows and rock bass and watch a snapping turtle down the shoreline bury her eggs, and not take things so hard – and so I realized it when I watched Emily one day walk into Lake Superior, accidentally touch the hem of her shorts the water, and say “*oops*,” and smile and step in deeper and spin, and ripple the mirror of the lake while my Mom said on the phone like that she missed me, and the house felt empty – that Emily was telling me without telling me, every day, to appreciate the people in my life – the women, the friends, the mothers, the crying Dad walking into the house with the smoking gun, the little brother at home now for the summer, the passerby, the addicts – and so I think then it was the strangest thing, but the slowness of Mom's voice, the jumbled letters, while it hurt the same as

always, it was, for the first time, just a hurt – just pain, and not even – discomfort, a thorn, a barb in my finger, but nothing I couldn't pull out, look at, and maybe understand.

I knelt in Emily's garden just days ago, just as she planted the cape daisies I found for her and Stephanie's birthday along each side of the rosebush, which is beautiful, and in the midst of the tall flowers, the names of which I can never remember, but are in fact, very tall, *and* beautiful, and I didn't tell Emily about how last time I was home Mom could barely speak for the muscle-relaxers and UV-Blue in her system, or that wild grasses and dandelions have grown over Haley's grave, but I did tell her that the new dog likes to *boof* at the neighbors, and she told me that their kitten likes to sit in the window and make the strangest noises at the chipmunks, and it was quiet for a moment, and she told me that the flowers change colors depending on the soil, that's it's a gradient-thing, and I told her that I don't know much, but what I wanted to say was that I learned the biggest flower in the world was called *Puya raimondii*, or Queen of the Andes, and it was thirty feet tall and it bloomed 8000 white flowers, and I wanted her to laugh at that, and I would know it was a nervous thing to say, but I did think I could picture it there, towering over us and casting mottled shade, smelling sweet as we sat there, and Stephanie and their little sister were laughing as they navigated a tandem-bike they found for sale and fixed up together, and I thought about how I would show Nicky next time he was in town, and how it'd be something to talk about when Mom would call, asking how things were going.

One day my brother and I broke the surface of Dream Lake in hopes of snapping a catatonic haze brought about by weeks of searing heat. A couple years out of college, Nicky and I had fallen back to our home in Wisconsin's Northwoods, where we had lived all our lives. We never did acclimate to the sort of heat that melted the plastic worms through the lids of tackleboxes. Our canoe buckled and groaned until the lake took our weight and we glided through the pondweed, beneath which, to my surprise, bluegill and perch did not explode in every direction, like they have in every other lake I knew.

There was a certain pressure to this trip. Our summer had burned away, and we yearned to salvage it. Nicky and I were both online tutors working night shifts, and so we awoke in hot afternoons and lay down when the morning sun evaporated the fog in the windows. In the humid in-between we could manage an hour or so restoring our mom's garden or cleaning some corner of the house before the un-conditioned air made our heads swim. We resigned ourselves to stillness. We basically just waited to work.

At night we would open the screen door with its many holes and read through essays by furious procrastinators. Moths poured into the side room and glued themselves to the light of our laptops. If we had a dream, I suppose it was to someday close the computers, to blink away that pale blue light once and for all.

But we were nowhere near that day. So as a break we floated on Dream Lake and our dimpled lures glinted in the sun. No fish even kissed our bait. The homes of snowbird vacationers stared at us with their bay-window eyes. Dream Lake was not like the lakes of myth in the Northwoods. It did not sit so deep amidst the old growth that even the roar of eighteen-wheelers on the highway would dissolve into nothing before it reached us. No, instead Dream

Lake sat just on the end of a road bearing the same name. Its 62 acres shimmered there on the edge of my vision every time I drove by it in pursuit of those other, deeper lakes.

I had hoped that life would surprise me and the lake would live up to its name. But instead, Nicky and me pulled loose weeds from our hooks on every retrieve. The lake was only like a dream in that an odd detail struck me and gave away its presence – a Douglas fir that had always framed the shoreline had snapped at the base and landed in the canal of the boat launch, probably with a splash that sent dozens of frogs bouncing like springs into the lilies. It must have had toppled in the early June windstorm, the one that swept the heat into our lives.

By the time we circumnavigated the lake, we'd only gotten burnt. I sighed, picked up the paddle, and churned us to shore. Dream Lake was just another unremarkable thing drained of its life by season after season of unrepentant sun.

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I've always been a horrible sleeper. As a baby I rattled the bars on my crib and screamed until my dad scooped me up and rocked me to sleep while the TV screen played static. In my elementary days I could be found halfway down the staircase on weekends, listening to conversations with my parents' visitors until the break of day, if they'd let me. But most times, my dad would tiptoe to the stairwell door just as stealthily as I had snuck down the steps, and he'd burst the door open and send me scrambling like a dog caught with its nose in the bread drawer. My teenage years rolled by and every night I stared at the ceiling and listened to Hawthorne Heights on an Mp3 player. Its blue glow illuminated the cracks in the concrete, the stains where rain ran through dirty insulation and pockmarked the white paint, which over the years went yellow with smoke from my mom's cigarettes and the coughing woodstove.

That night after Dream Lake was no different. I logged on for work. I opened the screen door and smushed moths. I grabbed a glass of water and on the way back from the kitchen, I saw the TV playing *Deadliest Catch*. In the quiet blue light fishermen swore and sorted through crabs. I glanced over the back of the couch and saw dad there, passed out. He slept like a skydiver, arms akimbo in a hug around the couch, legs kicked up at the knees. He hadn't slept in bed with my mom for years. He had a lot of reasons, but this was one of them. A mechanic all his life, his every joint was tight as a hex nut. He needed space to sprawl. The bags under his eyes always struck me as a kid, but it bothered me that now at 26, mine were darker than his. It worried me, the way he mashed his head into the bare pillow. It was like he was trying to sleep hard, as if sleeping was like exercising in that the deeper you dig, the more you get out of it.

After my shift, the final session of which started with a student saying *Good Morning!* I lay down on a sleeping pad in the side room, the only room where we could get the temperature beneath 80 degrees. I stared at the ceiling fan. Tendrils of cobwebs waved to me as I performed the usual ritual. I squeezed my eyes shut and reasoned with myself. Just sleep. I opened them again and shrugged – it would happen when it would happen. I closed them again and yelled at myself internally, as if I was a football coach, as if sleep was the endzone and I only had to churn my legs to get there. I did this dance and

the light shifted, and I was in a bar. I was in a bar and I looked around to see faceless people, mannequins in dim light, all chattering like radio static. Through the big window behind me, a lake shimmered. Tears welled involuntarily. Through them I saw someone moving through the crowd, a dark shape. I gasped and gasped for breath, but it wouldn't come. It never did. I could never breathe on nights like that.

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The first time sleep paralysis sunk its hooks into me, I was 16. A senior girl named Brooke was on pace to break my heart and I spent the night squirming like a bug and thinking about the way she'd looked straight through me in the hallway that day. Despite the random nosedives and upward swoops of her interest in me for the last couple years of my high school life, this time it was apocalyptically bad, and I was convinced of it. So I squirmed there on my back and stared at the stained ceiling for hours

and the room grew bright. I tried to turn and see if the lamp had spontaneously come on, but I couldn't. I couldn't move one fiber of one muscle, I couldn't twitch a finger or draw a breath or close my eyes. Only my eyeballs could move, and I stretched my gaze toward my bedroom door until they hurt. Standing there, so tall that his face scraped the ceiling as he cranked his neck to fit in the room, was a man. He was huge. He wore, I think, a suit. His muscles filled it to bursting. He had no eyes, but he did have a red mouth, and it opened and closed like a machine. He took a step toward me. I tried to move. I screamed inside for my legs to kick and my arms to push me up and my throat to let me beg for help, but I couldn't. I could only watch as the man approached me and his mouth opened wide and his face scraped the ceiling. His shins kicked my bedframe and he leaned over me. Tears poured hot and free down my cheeks. He put a veiny hand on my chest and the pressure wiped my mind. He freed his face from the ceiling and began to drop his mouth toward mine. I stopped begging my body to move, and began to wish. I wished Dad would burst through the door and clobber this guy with the splitting maul as hot breath fogged my face. I wished I could close my eyes to what was going to happen next. I wished I could just twitch one finger, and

I did. My right pointer finger twitched imperceptibly, and in a rush that started from the pressure in my chest and outwards, feeling flooded my body. I sprung awake and cleared my bed

completely, the result of all my muscles activated and trying to burst forward for what felt like hours. I took one shuddered breath, sat back down on the bed, and screamed. It was a face-buried-in-hands, eyes-hot-with-tears, bolts-of-pain-in-the-back-of-my-throat kind of scream, a scream like I was scared to stop screaming, like I couldn't fathom anything but panic.

Brooke had gotten me a stuffed animal for my 16th birthday. A panda. *They're idiots*, I told her one day while we watched videos of them lounging around on the computers in the school library. *They're cute and sweet and completely stupid – I love it*, I had said. And on my birthday she had bounced down the hall with her hands behind her back and her red hair flinging in the air as she smiled. She had crooked teeth, not nearly as crooked as mine, but enough for me to know that when she did smile, she really meant it. And when she handed me the stuffed panda with its perfect, stupid, beady eyes, I suppose I was sort of paralyzed then, too. Not even my parents had gotten me anything.

After the paralysis I squeezed that panda. I cried into its black and white fur until my legs stopped shaking enough for me to stand. I wrapped my blanket around my shoulders and took a full minute to climb down the stairs, step-by-step, wobbling. As I opened the stairwell door to the living room, my dad sat up briefly, the glaze of sleep in his eyes. He pondered me for a moment before freefalling backward into his sleeping pose. My brother and mom, famously heavy sleepers, hadn't heard me. But that was for the best. I curled up on the other couch, across from my dad and sharing the wall with my mom's room. Even if they asked, I didn't know what I could even say.

I fancied myself a man then, freshly 16. A football player, beneath Friday night lights I pounded kids into the sidelines, sent them spinning into benches where their limp bodies exploded stacks of plastic cups. When someone hit me just as hard, I bounced back to life and

beat my chest. I had perfect school attendance and ripped through a day's worth of homework every study hall so I never had any to bring home. When I did get home I cut neighbors' lawns before descending to our damp basement to lift weights until I could hardly hoist a gallon of milk afterwards. I split wood all winter, I stoked the fire before dawn, I collected burns and calluses and bruises like bursting stars all down my hands and forearms, and I prided myself for the way they painted my skin. I loved the dark bags beneath my eyes, like my dad's. They were a sign that I knew the truth of life. That if I only moved constantly, nothing could hurt me.

But there I was. I trembled beneath the tent of my blanket, which I had pulled over my head. I clutched my panda and pinched my arms to stay awake. The light of the *Deadliest Catch*, a re-run, shifted through the blanket's threads. Dimly I heard the fishermen swear as they worked a perpetual loop the whole night through.

Never again, I thought. I'll never sleep again.

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“This affection is called Incubus or the Night-Mare, which is an Intercepting of the Motion of the Voice and Respiration, with a false dream of something lying ponderous upon the Breast... because the motion of the Muscles for the most part ceases in time of sleep, except the Respiratory Muscles, ... the failing of their Motion is first perceived by reason of the extraordinary trouble that arises for want of Respiration. Now the patient...not understanding the cause in that Condition, believes [themselves] to be overlayed by some Demon, Thief, or other ponderous Body being neither able to move... nor to Breathe.”

-Doctor Isbrand Van Diemerbroeck, “Of the Night-mare,” 1664.

In the tired weeks that followed my first paralysis I kept myself awake as long as possible in the side room by staring at the blue light of the computer. I opened the screen door and let the cold autumn wind blast on my arms to keep me alert. Those nights I learned that reports of hags and imps and demons plopping themselves on people's chests were common in the Middle Ages, where in recent times aliens with their glowing eyes would descend from ceilings and choke people out. Stress is a common factor. A lack of rest. Sleeping flat on one's back heightens the chances for the paralysis to take hold. But beyond that, there is no logic to this nightmare.

Page after backlit page soaked into my eyes as I read people's stories. Sometimes the looming figure was a husband or wife, Jesus Christ or a figure from the past. Details started to erupt in my memory. As a kid, I'd been haunted by dreams of a man in a red polo shirt, pulled tight over his stomach, who lurked over me. It struck me at some point that this was the man from the mortgage company, the man who left slips of yellow paper on our door handles that made my mom cry. This was the man who drove by the house slowly in his red truck and took pictures of our home as he prepared to foreclose. My dad would burst through the door of the side room and out into the driveway, his handgun glinting in the sun. The truck would spin its tires and rip up the road, back the way it came. Still, while the crumpled cash from my odd jobs and dad's 60-hour weeks stopped him just inches from signing a dotted line that would put us on the street, the pall that his presence laid over the house must have sunken into me.

The more I read, the more I simply resigned to never sleep. Of course, I failed. But still, for weeks I slept two to four hours a night on the couch, balled up sweatshirts wedged beneath me so that I wouldn't roll onto my back. Days passed in strange blurs. In the mornings I bolted in and out of my bedroom to pick out clothes, breathless at the thought of even climbing the stairs. At school, my head hit the desk every history class. My teacher clapped his hands next by my

ears and it might as well have been thunder. I shook in my three-point stance during practice and my coach would give me a shove and flip me like a turtle to show how unsteady I was. *What the hell is up with you?* he would ask, and on the ground I would blink slowly and say, *Oh. I dunno.*

Brooke, who lived in a house across the street from Fisher Lake – not far from Dream Lake – was sometimes waiting for me after practice in her checkered jacket, and sometimes not. When she was, she'd fall in step with me and hold my hand all the way back to the locker room. When she was in a phase like this, swelling like a wave into the beach of my life, she checked on me. She seemed to teleport down the hallway to find me in the mornings. She would poke her fingers under each of my eyes. I did not like this. She would ask: *did you sleep last night?* and I'd shake her fingers from my face and say, *yeah.* She'd pout out her lower lip.

You can't lie to me.

In one of the final games of our football season, we were slated to play North Dickinson, a school farther north and more remote than even us. We were a good team, oftentimes routing other schools to the point where we would stop displaying the score on the board, or the referees would run the clock at double time to get things over with. North Dickinson, a team of 16 huge kids, sons of potato farmers, was the only team who ever gave us pause. But we always seemed to stop them by a matter of inches, survive by a point or two.

That Friday night, the whole town surrounded our home field despite the pounding rain. Our names were announced in a staticky voice and we sprinted through a tunnel of our teammates. We pounded helmets together on the 50, said *Let's fucking do this,* and our friends and families cheered us on. Brooke, in her checkered jacket, and hair already soaked and bouncing in the air as she jumped up and down, screamed my name when I wheeled around to

look at the crowd. My dad was there. He shook his head at Brooke, smiled. I looked down at my cleats, the field's white paint already flecking them. Despite myself, I smiled too.

But the crowd was soon silent. On the first kickoff, North Dickinson's wedge formation cut through us like a scythe. With sickening crunches we folded the whole game through. We screamed at each other and the coaches screamed at us, but it all fizzled in the rain. North Dickinson was unrecognizable from the team we had beaten the year before by swatting away a pass in the game's final second. They had worked harder than us in the offseason; I could feel it. When a squibbed kick bounced into my chest and #44 cracked me so hard in the head my earpads came loose in my helmet, I knew. When their defensive end threw his full weight on my knee and it bent like kindling, I knew what it meant for a limit to break.

By game's end, a 36-0 rout, we all took knees in a circle. Rain bounced against our pads. My knee burned so badly I was nauseous. Our coach, famous for finding reasons to yell at us even after our most convincing victories, simply took off his hat, which bore our team's name. He gazed at its darkened cloth, and said, *Well, it's over. At least it's over.*

Brooke later told me that she found me after the game, but I don't remember that. It felt like the game's rain had seeped into my brain and I was underwater. Only flash images remain from the murky depths of that night: Nicky staring out the rainy truck window all the way home, my dad asking me why I was sitting in the middle of the dining room floor, and me flicking the lights off in the kitchen despite my mom making dinner for us on the stove.

I never got my head checked. But it would turn out that I tore the MCL in my left knee, and punched the ACL out of place. The MRI to figure this out was insured, but surgery and physical therapy to fix it was not, and so I would not go.

Rest, the doctor said as he strapped my leg in a full brace.

Rest, or it'll never be the same again.

~ ~ ~

It was horrifying, at first, sleeping. Only my bed gave me the space I needed to stretch out, and the only way I could sleep with the brace hugging my leg was by lying flat on my back. I did not like this. I would stare at the ceiling and my lips would quiver in anticipation for the oncoming paralysis – every night I was drowned by the fear of fear.

But I learned. Hypnic jerks from half-dreams of tripping down flights of stairs would leave me kicking out my bad leg and yowling into the night. Eventually I learned to relax, learned that the paralysis would not strike every time I was on my back, and that if I was quick enough to catch it coming, I could fight it off. Fighting was something I understood. This resulted in nights of half-formed illusions, my body tingly. A few times the muscled suit man or the rotund mortgage man would appear in the corner of my vision, and I would thrash through the paralysis like a bath of sap and burst awake, more than once screaming into my room for the poltergeists to *go fucking fuck themselves*.

At school, Brooke carried my books for me from class to class. Well known and loved by most of the teachers, she could get away with being late to her own classes to do this. While I lost the thread about whether or not we were together, this new infusion of pain into my life brought with it a certain clarity. I was human – very breakable. And so was Brooke. Like me, she grew up not quite on a lake, but across the street from one. Until that rainy Friday night she and I had never really learned how to talk to each other except through a slew of jokes and sweet nothings, but I understood a childhood spent peering across the road and dreaming of what it was like over there. I understood an empty bread drawer and a leaking roof and a stack of unpaid

bills. Like me, she grew up snatching frogs from the lilies. The letters on the keys of her first phone, like mine, were smeared away from the hours and hours of texting each other.

And so those days crutching alongside Brooke while she carried both of our books somehow made me feel more like a man than ever. We actually talked. About her upcoming graduation, whether she'd go to college. Her mom's drinking. My mom's drinking. Whether our homes would crumble without us. I teetered on my crutches, but I looked the future in the face for the first time. For the first time, I felt strong.

After school, while at first I stood loyally on the edge of football practice, crutching out to the team with a basket of water cups after sprints, I eventually just started going home on the bus. My weightlifting regimen gave way to simple leg stretches. I let myself bring homework home, took my time working out the problems. For ten to twelve hours a night, I slept. For what felt like the first time, I started to dream.

Of course, I'd always dreamt. People dream during all cycles of sleep – the fitful starts, the drooling depths, the jittery peaks. But most of the dreams I remembered from early in life were shallow. Simple things. There was a frog on Dad's head. I caught a purple bluegill. Nicky was a baby again. But the deep dreams, the dreams in the bubbly depths of myself, amidst the pondweed and flitting fish of everything I processed without knowing it: those were rare to me.

Until I started to sleep – to really sleep. I was so fascinated by the new dreams flooding my restful nights that I started to keep a dream journal as my ligament stitched itself back together. Like exercising, the habit came and went more than I liked. But in those days where I witnessed the joys of waking up slack-jawed and sweating, mind swimming with another reality, I felt lighter inside than I had my whole life. Time spilled forth, and I dreamt.

~ ~ ~ ~

Fall. "Teammates were idiots as usual"

Trash cans flipped through the air and spilled shreds of bloodied wrapping tape like leaves across the locker room floor. My paralysis struck here and there. It grew complex and the muscled man in the suit teleported me to the bottom of dog piles, where the shit talk and scratching nails felt so real I would shoot out of bed, grasping for the ball in the dark of my room. I admitted to myself for the first time that I hated football. I wouldn't quit, of course. I hated that even worse. Still, I never saw the muscled suit man again.

Winter. "Goodbye"

Brooke and I stood there before a foggy Fisher Lake and didn't speak. A first time for everything. Or maybe my brain burned through our words like sun through fog. A cruel compartmentalization. But it prepared me for reality. My final day on crutches Brooke set my books down for me one last time. *You better take care of yourself.* A sad smile. Even she knew she was floating away again.

Spring. "The house was as it was"

Walked into the house and it was overtaken by nature. Leaf litter on the floor and flower petals pasted to the TV screen. Old toys spilt onto the living room floor. I must've just missed myself. The weeks before I left for college my brain cycled memories of home through itself. As if to say: time to be a man and move on. But here's what you'll miss.

Summer. "Hooked a fish too big to possibly land"

Went to college on the shore of Lake Superior. Waves washed the beaches of my mind every sleep, salmon like sedans struck my lures off the break wall. I forgot again how to rest, but not how to dream. Lake Superior was more like Dream Lake than it wasn't – always around the corner, seeming empty but actually just too deep to fathom. Like city life. Like the lifetime of work I knew I had before me when I flipped my tassel.

Fall. "Heater exploded"

Giant hole sucking cold wind in my crummy apartment wall again. Suspect the heater with its constant ticking finally having enough. After college I found a place and started tutoring, saving. The friends I made in the city left one by one. I watched them go through the giant hole. No time to even wave. On my breaks I'd walk to the lake. Sometimes this was real and sometimes a dream. But always I'd look back at my building down the road and see my window, the only one lit up. I thought of a lighthouse. How its keeper is destined to always be at work.

Winter. "I watched the playoffs with a frog in my lap."

In deep winter my left knee still hurts me. Mornings start with a leg slowly stretched and then a snap like firewood. I'm only 24 but I just can't hop all I like anymore.

Spring. "I forced the mortgage man out on a canoe with me"

Pushed him overboard. At home, woke up in the living room. Dad snored on the other couch. I stared across the street at the lake, chuckled at the thought that the thousands of old leaves on the lake's mirror were mortgage man, exploded into pieces. I don't make much, but I am grown now. Between my dad and me, we'll never lose our home.

Summer. "Don't forget me when this is all over."

Sweltering morning in the side room, which was actually a bar. I was surrounded by mannequin people in dim light who chattered like radio static. A lake shimmered in the big window behind me and tears welled in my eyes. Through them I could see a figure pushing through the crowd, and if my body would have let me, I would have blinked twice to clear the tears and confirm that it was who I thought it was.

Hey, she said, as if it was just another game's end, or time for lunch. The mannequin people morphed into the familiar faces that I'd see on Friday nights, and scraps of their voices, their Northwoods drawl, swam into my ears. An amazing pressure filled my chest, and it was Brooke as she was then who hugged me as I am now. This was her graduation party. That's right - her parents owned a bar on Fisher Lake. Brooke had worked there since she was 13.

I don't remember many things about Brooke. The gap between that dream and the last time we'd spoken was longer than the total time I really knew her. So I don't know why she came to me that fitful morning. Perhaps I had seen her image on the internet, or

maybe while cleaning I had found the panda she'd gifted me, all dusty in my closet. Or maybe our cars flew by each other on my way to Dream Lake that afternoon.

I don't know. But I do know she used to come out this way – from her grove in the woods to mine. And when she did, we'd watch a movie with Nicky, or skip rocks by the pier, or gaze at the sky and hold each other's hands like heirlooms, like something we knew we'd touch once, then put away forever.

And those nights, in the driveway, she would hug me like this. And I would be paralyzed the same way. I had no idea how she could see my smoky, stained, cracking house, could see how I was so obviously a product of it, and still do exactly what she did then in the dream, and whisper – *I love you*. And, strangely – *Sweet dreams*.

I never read about anyone who said that the pressure in their chest – the intercepting of the motion of the voice and respiration – during their sleep paralysis was imagined like that. As a sweet dream. But it was there, for me, that beautiful pressure. It was as real as anything.

I broke the paralysis with a full burst of my body that lifted me from the sleeping mat and made the room shake as I fell. I'd been asleep for seven minutes. Seven minutes separated me from the day of the failed fishing trip and this one, from yet another day where life proved itself to be as bland as it seemed. But in those seven minutes, I'd been reminded to dream sweetly. I'd been reminded that the same way a place like Dream Lake unremarkably fills a spot in the woods, dreams themselves fill that reservoir in our heads we're too busy to gaze into. But that morning Brooke reminded me of the lovely things that swim there. She had reached through time to poke the spots beneath my eyes

and check on me. And though I'm sure she's busy, in this way she's always there to remind me why we must rest, why we must sleep, why we must dream.

I gasped for breath then, in the sweltering room. I felt like I'd been out for years.

My mom has heterochromia. One eye is green, one eye is blue. There are two sides to her, and when I was fourteen, I felt the brunt of both. In daylight she'd blur around our house in Wisconsin's Northwoods, stomping her unsteady stomp and jostling things out of place. A dozen times a day she'd grab a plate and nuke a single hot dog and eat it with her hands, or toast one slice of bread and shred it with cold butter, rough strokes of an unwashed knife. She'd set dirty plates at her feet and our Alaskan Malamute, Haley, learned to lick them clean. From beneath the sink she'd pull bottle after bottle of vodka. She'd pour this into brittle plastic cups so old they'd shatter with a squeeze. She'd sip and find a project. In the computer room she'd rifle through drawers and emerge with a ream of old documents from her days as an environmental consultant, a job long gone and replaced with nothing. She'd sit down with the stack and a pile of manila folders all ash-dusted from her cigarettes and smeared with ketchup stains or coffee long spilt. She'd sort documents with shaky hands until the sun went down.

In darkness she'd give up. Vodka liquefied her body and the sprawl of her arms would slide the paper off the table. The sheets would flutter to the ground, surround her chair like leaf litter. Even at fourteen, I could glean from the documents that there was no reason to keep them – old invoices, transcripts of emails. Detritus from her old life. Eventually her eyelids would fatten and she'd drop her head to the heat-stained table. If she stayed that way, snoozing with her forehead smushed into the melted lacquer, that would have been fine. But when she'd rise and stumble to the kitchen, all eyes were on her. My dad, my brothers, Haley and me would watch with quickened hearts as she balled a piece of bread in her hand and shoved it in her mouth. When she walked to the bathroom we'd perk our ears and wait for the deafening crash, the panicked yelps, the blood to rush across the tile and clean the filthy floor in its wake.

This was life. Monday through Sunday Mom would rise from the table and everything would stop. Fantasy novel heroes and video game characters would freeze before my eyes, mid-combat, while Mom swerved through the house – past the dining room woodstove and the slick of ash that surrounded it, through the living room littered with laundry baskets overflowing with suits and dresses and baby clothes from a time long gone. Even if she forced her way through the slush of cigarette butts that covered her bedroom floor and made it safely to her sheet-less bed, which was stained darkly with blotches whose smells pumped through the door and made me sick upon its opening, my heart still pounded in my ears. At any moment she could rise and at any moment she could fall. Her hip could break again or her other shoulder could come loose. Or maybe, finally, she'd crack her head on the vanity in her room, spray her blood on the half-sorted photos of my brothers and me. Some nights, I couldn't take the pressure. I balled my fists and whispered to myself

“Why don't you just fall.”

And that autumn when I was 14, she did. In the kitchen this time – she slipped in a puddle of her own spilled water and split her head on the sink. We ran the family drill. Dad threw four stacked coats off a dining room chair and dragged it to Mom. I helped him prop her up. My brother watched from the dining room and Haley whined and paced. We gave her the once over: yes there's a river of blood between her eyes, but no she didn't soil herself. All her joints were at the right angles. For that, I used to be thankful.

But something shifted in me that night. A rogue wave crashed through my guts. I shoved a rag across Mom's face and cleaned her blood like syrup from a countertop. She gurgled: “Sorry,” and I simply pointed back across the house and said:

“Go to your room.”

And after Dad dragged her there, he poked his head back in the kitchen and saw me standing there, fists clenched and eyes dashing left and right with the saccade of reading.

“You okay bud?”

For the first time in my life, I didn’t answer him. I was busy reading the story of our family in the pool of blood just outside the sink that overflowed with dozens of plates and cups and bowls coated in thin gray slime that smelled something like algae. I stared at the stove and its burnt oil splatter so thick the buttons were invisible. I watched nests of cobwebs sway in corners, dark and sagging from the smoke of burning food. On the fridge report cards from third grade hung slack and stained, and every handle of every cupboard festered black with the grime of our hands. The walls were yellow, and I didn’t need to look close to know that the little eyes and mouths on Mom’s mother’s figurines were smothered shut by the dust of time. I didn’t need to look to know my family lived in filth; but until that night, looking was all I did.

~ ~ ~

Pebbles swam by my feet and made a sort of music. Down the break wall the beacon light vanished in Lake Superior’s bursts and swells. I was five and the waves eclipsed me – I was five and down the street my mom got her brain buzzed clean by an ECT at the hospital in Marquette, a small city in Michigan’s upper peninsula. And as we waited Dad walked me down Presque Isle, walked me through the park and between singing kids on swings, beneath pavilions where sundressed moms hiked babies on their hips, pointed to ships down the coast and said,

“Look!”

And I looked. Soon I’d be in the backseat of our hot car, soon Dad would say “Hmm” for two hours and Mom would chatter over the hum of tires. With her batteries charged, I didn’t

know her. She'd make pancakes tomorrow and maybe the next day; she'd pick out clothes and hug me in the morning, then sweep me out for school. But then things would be normal again.

So in that moment I soaked it in: Lake Superior. The greatest lake of all, the Northwood's big blue crown. I stopped atop a hill and peered through the cross of Presque's wooden fence and past the faded warning sign that said the ground ahead was unsteady. Its beauty made me bashful, and when I looked down to hide beneath the brim of my hat, my eyes would fall a hundred feet below, where water met land and sun met water, where a shade of green played that I couldn't believe.

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In two furious all-night binges I cleaned the kitchen. I pitched every dog-chewed utensil, scratched pot and burnt pan into the garbage. All night the trash can thudded, and my dad would wake up every other hour to check on me. He'd find me leaned over all thirty of our spoons spread out on the floor, watch me choose the top eight, then pitch the rest one-by-one. He blinked sleepily as I sharpened knife after knife, as I scrubbed the walls until old t-shirts or socks we used as rags fell to shreds in my hands. I sprayed Mom's figurines clean, and if their painted little faces came off with the grime, so be it.

In two days, the kitchen was unrecognizable. My hands were pruned as if I'd been swimming, a cold ache pounded through my feet to my knees. Mom would stumble to the cupboards in drunken evenings and just stare at the emptiness – like an actress without a line, she didn't know what to do when there wasn't an endless mound of dishes to plop around the house. When I was 14, I didn't know much. But I figured out that there couldn't be a mess if there was nothing to mess with.

~ ~ ~

On the shore of Lake Superior I picked through wave-smoothed rocks with my friends Emily and Stephanie - sisters. We were twenty-somethings in Marquette who had met in class. The sun warmed our blood faster than the lake could cool it; we dipped our arms into the water and plucked out pink granite and basalt, diabase and slate. They were much better than me at picking rocks. They always found gemlike stones that told the history of the lake with a clean and shining glaze. They lived near the lake, grew up in a village only a hundred miles from mine. I couldn't believe we'd been so close – they were the sort of people that made me question how I'd ever really known life without them.

We learned to live in a city together. They picked up on the clues much quicker than me, didn't tremble at intersections, didn't gawk at passing clouds of college kids like they'd never seen a young person beside themselves. Still, we found comfort in the small things, even if they were huge. We hiked together up wooded mountain paths where at the top the lake stretched like an infinite reward. We spent afternoons on the sandbar near Presque Isle where we watched the ore dock dump millions of iron pellets into ships so big that when I first saw them, I was primally scared. But when the ships would then float off, still glowing with red dust, and shrink into a mote on the horizon, the fear would wash away. The world was impossibly big. It was kind of exciting.

That day, us three had gotten takeout from the Rice Paddy, where a tiny Taiwanese woman named Aoy handed us our orange chicken and curries in a paper bag and said, as she does to all customers,

“Thank you boyfriend! Thank you girlfriend!”

We'd eaten at their apartment before we walked to the beach. Things like this were tradition now, but every time I took that first bite of orange sauce and crispy chicken, I was taken

back to the first time I'd had Rice Paddy - another sunny day by Lake Superior – my dad and my brother and I waited on my mom as she negotiated dosages of Lexapro or Zoloft, Cymbalta or Luvox. We never got takeout – never gas station snacks, did the drive through once or twice. I didn't know what was happening. Especially not when I took that first bite and flavors from another place lit up my entire mouth. The food was just so warm. I couldn't believe Aoy had cooked that for me.

I also couldn't believe myself in that moment on the beach with Emily and Stephanie when I pulled a rock from the sand, held it to the sun, and said,

“This one looks like a meteor!”

I was wearing my older brother's shirt, torn at the collar. The left leg seam of my jeans was sewed shut with fishing line. I was rough around the edges, but when the sisters looked at me with their eyes shining somehow every shade of green at once and said,

“Umm, that's a piece of asphalt,”

I couldn't believe that I didn't blush. Actually, I felt anything but embarrassed – I dropped the piece of roadway with a plop into the lake and laughed. Gentle waves kissed my knees and the three of us laughed until the music of it wiped my mind clean.

~ ~ ~

We called the closet at the front of the house “the cold room.” Its door was exactly between the dining room and living room, and through that door and after one stride was another door that led outside. The room was always freezing – Dad shoved towels in the door gaps so as not to lose precious heat from the woodstove to a useless space.

The cold room's mess spilled from the open door like guts from an animal. Within that mess I knew there were dozens of two-dollar bottles of vodka, a handful of the eight-dollar big

ones, and endless cigarette cartons. I'd seen Mom squirrel these things away in that room along with every cold-weather article of clothing anyone in the family ever owned. All her vices were closed behind that door – her smokes, her drinks, and the past.

I attacked the mess. Like a dog on a buried scent I flung years of winter clothes behind me. Mom's old business coats and dad's hunting jackets flew through the air, white dust puffed from them like the snow they used to catch.

It would have been easy to bag it all up – it would've taken an hour. But I knew that deep in the mess were board games and toys, gifts from aunts and uncles when visited, looked around the house, and asked if we had anything to do for fun.

Puzzles sat undone in their boxes, Battleship pegs speared plastic ships that floated through the sea of clutter – and deep down, somewhere, were four chess pieces. A light bishop and rook, two dark pawns. My dad loved chess, used to play every day with the neighbor kid when the house was in a state for guests. But along the way he'd lost these pieces from the set his mother had given him. He had given up on finding them. In their place drained double A's collected dust on the chessboard, learned to move on vertical files or just one step at a time.

I dug. Mom, glued to her chair at the head of the dining room table, stared at me, eyelids already drooped for the day. Here and there she'd yelp, "Wait," when I tried to shove a baby pair of snow pants or a palm-sized glove into a garbage bag.

"Why?" I asked. I shot her a filthy look.

"Don't," she said. She blinked slowly, like a reptile. It made veins pound in my neck.

"You better say why not," I said. My teeth chattered as I clenched my jaw.

"Just don't!" she shouted.

I blinked now, fast, stunned by the grenade of her voice. She hadn't yelled since I was small enough to wear the tiny clothes I had balled in my hands. She never had the energy. I only nodded. I set the clothes aside, started to form a "keep" pile. Mom said nothing when I swept heaps of bottles and cigarette cartons into the thirty-gallon bags. When I grabbed a tin box on a high shelf and it split open and rained sewing needles on my face, I ran out of the cold room holding the box with one hand and rubbing my eyes with the other.

"Oh, that was my mom's," she slurred.

Cleaning the house was not unlike a game of chess in this way: where impulsive moves met sharp replies, where there was no room to put *this* over *there*, where with every armful of clutter I grabbed I had to find the best move, and then a better one.

After a couple hours, I cleared a path of floor from the cold room's entrance to the exit outside. Haley, long claws clattering, saw this and started barking. She jumped on me, spun around, then bolted to the kitchen, where her leash sat on the refrigerator. I had washed it in the sink just days ago. The water had run black.

Haley was six years old then, but when she was a puppy, we used to take her on walks out the cold room door. And she remembered. That door had been sealed almost her whole life, but she remembered those early days – the click of the leash, the path outside, the blast of fresh air as she yanked us out of the house.

My lips quivered. We hadn't walked Haley, with her big brown eyes, in years. We just hooked her up to the chain outside. Haley who we'd adopted after our three old dogs died in quick succession; Haley who learned to swerve around the clutter that slowly choked our house; Haley who had watched me grow tall and thin and angry; Haley who bore the name that would've been mine had I been a girl – Haley who bore the name that would've been my little

sister's had Mom not lost her from her belly when she crashed her car on the job when I was four, and she didn't drink, and the house was spotless.

I looked again at the cold room, at the garbage bags about to split, the keep pile about to tip. There were two little circles on the unveiled floor I hadn't seen before. I unstuck them from the wood and rubbed them between my fingers – green pieces of felt. The bottom to Dad's chess pieces. I was close. Haley whined by the fridge and I gently shushed her. This was the move I had to make. Something had to give.

I sorted clothes and trashed the trash and balled up cobwebs in my hands, sloughed them off like snakeskin. I unscrewed the bulb in the fixture and it nearly crumbled in my hands; I installed the new one and light shone over things that hadn't seen light in years: *Scrabble* letters spelling nonsense on the ground, a fortune of *Monopoly* cash, guts and bones from a long lost *Operation* patient. I sorted and sorted and memories like a carousel played around my mind of times pulling *Sorry* pieces from Haley's tiny jaws or Dad laughing at how long it took me to count the score on fallen dominos.

And then within the wooden box my older brother had made in shop class, and beneath the sliding pile of *Pokemon* cards gifted to me in second grade by a kid who said, "You don't have any?" were the missing pieces. Rook, bishop, pawn, pawn. Haley pouted for attention, Mom slurred "What's that?" But I just stared at the pieces. They were clutching each other. They had been all this time.

~ ~ ~

My car smelled like crayons. It always did on hot days, an elementary redolence – something about the wax seals in old Volkswagens. I wasn't sure. The AC only blew hot oily air and if I rolled the driver's window down, it might never come back up. I found this out when

Stephanie, a mechanic at the time, drove to the edge of town to my new apartment in Marquette, and helped me prop the window back in place when it dropped into the door itself one day with a suddenness like bad news.

I baked in the black interior as I drove the final minute to my apartment, where I planned to park and walk another minute straight into Lake Superior, which shone on the horizon through my windshield. Stephanie was at the shop and Emily at the liquor store, so I'd have to wash the day off alone. Bags and bags of groceries in the back seat rustled to the thumps and deep iron thuds of the Jetta's shot shocks and the crackled road. My fishing pole bobbed against the seat; a spider web arced from the bent rod to the line itself. Dreams of casting it every day had washed away. Adult life was messier than I thought. I'd been driving all day to suck money from the bank so the realty office could suck it from my hands and the grocery store could suck whatever was left while the car's heat sucked the moisture from me. As the blue of the lake filled my vision, I wanted nothing more than to jump in, to be rehydrated and reminded why I lived there.

A bundle of shadows appeared from the woods on my right. It wasn't a crosswalk, but I knew it to be a desire path across the street to the bike trail that wound down to the lakeshore. I stopped the car, slid my hand down my sweaty face, then looked back at the road.

It was a mother. Holding her right hand was a little girl, maybe ten. And holding the girl's right hand was an even smaller boy. The mother's other hand eased a stroller down the crest of the sidewalk, and leashed to the stroller was a dog bouncing along, some mixed-up terrier. The mom wore a deep blue sundress, and the daughter the same thing, only polka-dotted. An oversized striped shirt hung off the boy, a baseball cap tipped over his eyes, and he lifted his chin to see in front of him. The mother's eyes caught mine through the dusty windshield. In her

dress, she became one with the lake behind her. She lifted her strolling hand and stopped everything. I blinked. She blew me a kiss.

My mouth opened with a pop. I bet I looked like a fish.

~ ~ ~

Smashed flat in a drawer in my childhood room was a folded sheet of notebook paper. On it was my list.

~~Kitchen~~
~~Cold Room~~
~~Bathroom~~
~~Dining Room~~
~~Living Room~~
~~Side Room~~
~~Basement~~
~~My Room~~
Upstairs Closet
Mom's Room

The strikethroughs were in different inks. High school pens and college pens and working pens. In my teenage mind I thought I'd clean the house in a week. But the waves of life swept me away and filth filled my vacuum. The sink overflowed with Goodwill mugs and the cold room dammed shut again. Haley died.

She died on August 2nd, the same exact day that Emily and Stephanie's childhood cat passed away. We talked about it on the phone with what little words we could manage.

Dad had walked Haley out back between his dead trucks and beneath a grove of birches. They swayed in the wind, light and dark just like her. He shot her twice in the head.

My brother and I shoveled dirt over her body, which Dad had covered for our sake with a bed sheet from my childhood. Mom was blacked out when it happened. She woke the next morning and searched the whole house like Haley herself used to when we would take off for

school. When it clicked, she couldn't speak. She wandered the house and scooped floating clouds of Haley's fur into a plastic bag, which she shoved into the drawer of her vanity.

I cleaned. As much as I could, whenever I was around. The basement took years, the side room's carpet filled the vacuum cleaner with a vortex of Haley's fur no matter how many times I went over it. I scrubbed years of smoke from the bathroom walls and gritty water painted my arms. I scraped a mound of Mom's congealed vomit from behind the toilet and puked twice myself. I dumped Drano down the sink and the smell made me choke; I tried to bleach the bathtub and made mustard gas. My lungs stung all day.

Around this time Mom went through a phase. I had just gotten my first credit card and one day I found it sitting atop the tuna can she used as an ash tray. Since I was in middle school cutting lawns for cash she had always snatched my wallet and gutted it if I forgot to put it under my pillow for even one night. It was always for the mortgage, but notices still swayed from our doorknobs. It was always for the lights, but they still flickered out. It wasn't until I could look at the mess she made of my monthly statements to see what I already knew: hundreds of dollars of *Marlboro Gold....UV Blue*. I emptied my accounts to pay the balance. I talked softly to Mom one day about it, changed my cards three times, left the old ones out as dummies. But her old diligence shone through; she always found a way. It wasn't until I stormed down the stairs after another morning obsessively checking my account, slammed my hand on the table, and said, "One more fucking time, I'm pawning these antiques."

I pointed in a sweep across the shelf that hung over the window. There were dozens of glass angels, which not long ago I had taken down, one-by-one, and rinsed of the cobwebs that draped from them like cloaks. I knew they weren't worth much, really. I'd seen some at thrift stores. But they were once her mother's.

I scrubbed the living room and dining room and painted them a honey-like gold. I ran a knife through the floorboard cracks and didn't recognize the place afterwards. I waited until Mom slept and threw away a box of her biology textbooks, a pile of home VHS tapes that a leak in the roof had saturated.

I had the rooms ready for when Mom's older sister came to visit for the holidays. My fingers creaked like door hinges afterwards, I burned holes in my socks with my pacing back and forth to the sink to dump five-gallon scrub buckets sloshing with water that looked like piss. Mom's sister Cindy was a marathon-running, life-long nurse with morals as rigid as her posture. Mom didn't want her to know that she smoked and drank, though with one step in the house it was obvious.

Cindy's three-day visit came and went, Mom didn't drink a drop. I didn't recognize her. She was cheery and she cooked food that wasn't burnt or raw. She cracked clever jokes and I laughed once or twice. This somehow burned me up.

When I heard the familiar plastic twist of a bottle cap minutes after Cindy's car vanished down the hill, I rose from the rocking chair. Mom walked from her room to her roost at the dining table, I walked into her room. A strange choreography. I grabbed as many little plastic bottles as my hands could fit. I tucked them into my arm like a child and stepped into the living room. I stared at her. She stared at me. My dad and brother froze on the couches.

I whipped the bottles one-by-one at my mom. They whistled in the air. Two pinged off her head and the rest exploded the food she'd laid out on the table for Cindy – crispy crackers with herbs baked into the flour, spread cheeses flavored with wine, pickled herring like their mom used to set out for the holidays. Little things she never got for us.

Everyone just blinked. I looked at their still forms with huge eyes. Lunatic in a museum. I understood then why little kids, when angry, sometimes just stomp their feet. They do not have the words for the enormity of what consumes them. My voice broke like a child's when I blurted,

“If you get fucked up one more fucking time, I’m telling Cindy everything.”

Mom just stared at me, both colors in her eyes shining through pools of dew that formed above her lashes. Of course she would. And of course I wouldn't. All I'd done was make a mess.

My room was a respite. I'd kept it tame since I inherited it from my brother, so when it came up on the list it only needed to be scrubbed and painted. I stripped the walls of its paintings of fish and posters of the Green Bay Packers, and beneath them I found love letters from my brother's old girlfriends written with Sharpie on the wall. I nearly died from laughter. A childhood friend and high school sweetheart of my own was in town; Savannah helped me renovate the room we'd spent all our teenage years within. We laughed at the writing on the wall and laughed at the weirdness of redoing my room only now that I was old enough to drink. She still knew my favorite color and handed me a brush. We fell asleep mid-effort and woke with our limbs all tangled, paint dried like freckles on our faces. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked at the dawn-lit room we'd changed from smoky yellow to ghostly white to forest green.

“It's starting to feel like you,” she said.

As I poked a brush clumsily to fill a hole in the concrete wall from some misbegotten idea to hang a basketball hoop in my room, the staircase creaked. Savannah and I shot looks at each other. The steps were slow, arrhythmic.

Mom creaked the door open and poked her head inside. Paint dripped down our brushes as we stared at Mom in wonder. I'd never seen her upstairs. I didn't think she could climb them.

But ever since I'd thrown my tantrum, she'd been doing funny little things like this. She started feeding the birds outside. She asked me about my job. These strange, normal things she did nearly made me trip mid-stride.

“Oh, it looks nice!” she said. She poked around the room with just her head, as if she felt it wasn't part of her house. My mouth just hung open.

Savanah raised her brows at me.

“Oh,” I said. I dipped my brush back in the paint.

“Thanks.” It came out as a whisper.

~ ~ ~

It's hard to steer a tandem bike. Thank god it was Stephanie at the bars while I pedaled like a mouse behind her. Emily and a couple friends we'd made through the years along the lake convoyed along us on their bikes, everyone's chains whirred away. We were off to Stephanie's secret spot along the shore that she'd found one day while at her new job working for the city.

We hitched the bikes to balsam firs and trundled through a layer of birch. I jumped in surprise when sharp grass stung my feet and a hidden beach unfolded. Stephanie smiled, unfurled a blanket with an emphatic snap.

“Here we go!”

The few of us cut a sub sandwich into hand-width slices and ate our dinner on the sand. The Rice Paddy had a two hour wait – Aoy had gone viral online for posting an update that said “Fuck yeah we open” during a polar vortex that froze Michigan and Wisconsin solid. Business was booming.

We picked and skipped rocks and gathered shattered glass bottles churned up by the lake or left there with a shrug. I pitched the smaller shards into the waves – they'd come back as

beach glass. I told myself in twenty years I'd pick them up and find a spot for them in my home when they smoothed their edges out.

We made tents and sculptures of the driftwood, Stephanie arced a thin branch back and tied it into a longbow with a length of discarded fishing line. In one picture from that day, our friend Chuck who worked at the bar smiles and waves on a rock amidst the spray of the lake. In the distance Stephanie stands, bow extended, a broken reed nocked as the arrow and pointed toward Chuck. I could see her smile even through the grain of my phone camera, even through the dust on the screen. In that smile, I could see what happened when we did our best with what we had; that if I only looked, I would be astounded by what I found.

As a kid I liked to spread my hand out before the lake so it seemed as if I could clench a fist and squeeze the water into a ball. But there at twenty-two, alone on my rock, I left my fingers splayed and watched the blue and green between the flesh and the little scars on my fingers from kitchen knives dropped or popcorn ceilings scraped. In those gaps of green and blue I saw the things that made a family; a dog with the soul of a daughter, an orange cat who used to nap on bedside tables. I saw jobs and money come and go, the sisters' folks finding their home in the woods and mine doing the same. I dropped my hand and looked to my left. I saw a bunch of kids trying to figure it out. I saw my family there, splashing in the waves.

~ ~ ~

The upstairs closet scared me. Every night in my youth I rushed past it to my room – Mom's wedding dress hung like a specter in the back and beady eyes of old stuffed animals caught the stairwell's bare-bulb light and threw it back at me. I didn't have the sense to tack an old sheet over the doorway until I was twelve. I didn't push that sheet aside until I was twenty-three, and once I did, I didn't know what to think.

The closet was fine. Of course dust smothered Mom's dress and Dad's old suit, suitcases for vacations that never happened and boxes of their dead mothers' things. But this was standard closet fare. The lightbulb likely half my age still flickered to life. Nestled deep among Mom's stuffed animals, almost as if the bears and rabbits and foxes shielded it from the dust, was a dog. A wolf-looking dog – a husky or malamute. A gift from her mother. I never got to meet that grandma – cancer ate her stomach before she ever got to hold me.

A folder sat askew atop a pile of records on a shelf. I opened it to find a portfolio of poetry. It was signed in the front with Dad's mother's name, probably from her high school years. I'd never met her either. She died when she was 40 – Schizophrenic complications.

Mom once said that the early loss of her and Dad's mothers helped bring them close together. She said this and looked at Dad, who looked up from his phone as if surprised to find her staring. He shrugged, made a funny face. The memory made me smile. I leafed through the grandmother's poetry. I could barely read her handwriting, almost as bad as mine. I scrunched my nose at the lovesick lines, the very loud rhymes, but I caught myself. I looked up again at the miracle of the ordinary closet. The lightbulb that still worked.

Maybe, our existence was not the occasion for our mess. Maybe life was not, by default, clean, and I needed to take a breath. Even one filled with dust.

And besides, I didn't mind the title of one of grandma's poems, written in love to my grandpa: "Time is Like a Stockcar Race."

Perhaps if it didn't exist, neither would I.

~ ~ ~

I was driving down Lakeshore Boulevard when Mom called. The break wall blurred by my passenger side. Lake Superior peeked over the jagged rocks. Misty today.

So you remember when we went to the hospital?

Her voice was slurred, but I did remember. It was a month or so ago – I was visiting home because my older brother was coming up. He was asleep upstairs in my room, Dad was on the couch, younger brother on the other couch. I leaned back in the rocking chair, stared at pre-dawn's shifting clouds. Mom was in her room. She moaned and squirmed on her bed, which wasn't unusual. Like me she was a bad sleeper, though we each had our reasons. Ever since the accident she spent an hour or two every night rolling in nightmarish haze and calling out for Dad, calling for my brothers, calling out for Haley.

But that night seemed different. Her moans didn't end in the familiar way, where as a kid I could finally peel my palms off my ears and convince myself to sleep. Instead they rose to wails and screams, so I swung open her door and said,

“Mom?”

Fresh blood slicked her bedsheets, she rolled in pools of it. Scarlet rung her waist. Her dirty blonde hair was wet and stamped onto her cheeks, pasted in her mouth. My breath shuddered to a stop; I froze there in the doorway. I couldn't stop staring at the lake of blood in the corner of her mattress, the trickle of it down the bedframe, the way it nosedived to a mound of spent tissues on the floor.

“Mom,” I squeaked out. “We're going to the hospital.”

She waved me off, slurred. “No, no.”

Heat flashed through my brain. I stomped my foot and the whole house shook. She looked up at me, mascara a river down her face.

I clenched my jaw, flung my arm and pointed outside.

“Get your ass in the car.”

Well, they found a growth and...

I had driven as fast as my old Volkswagen would go. The gravity of the curves pressed down on us; tires squealed and every gauge twitched higher than I'd ever brought them.

...Cancer.

Michigan's old timers sometimes call the lake Mother Superior. That afternoon, I didn't go to see it. Instead I laid on my couch, a hand-me down from my roommate's mother. The carpet was speckled with hair and crumbs to prove that I existed. On every surface in the living room my favorite rocks from the lakeshore were smothered of their luster by the dust. Dark trickles of coffee grounds ran down white plates with green flower edges that I'd taken from home. I'd stashed them in my room when I scoured the kitchen – I tried to toss the stack into the trash but couldn't. They were my parents' wedding gift.

I didn't want to see the lake; I didn't want to call Emily or Stephanie or anyone and try to make things better. I just wanted to lay on the couch like undone laundry, a spill of food, a stain.

After an hour I woke with a jolt to a sudden rush of coolness. I caught my breath and opened my eyes. All around me, mist swirled. It often did this; on certain afternoons the wind would push the mist right through the screen of my open window and it would settle on the couch. This mist seemed to peek over me like Mom used to when I was sick. It was as if the lake was resting its cool hand on my forehead.

~ ~ ~

I visited home often because I feared what would happen if I didn't. For a while I was right to feel this way – rooms I had left spotless would be a calamity two weeks later. But after Mom's diagnosis, something changed. Rooms I cleaned stayed mostly clean; Mom and Dad and everyone brought their dishes to the sink. This was something like stability.

It was hard to talk to Mom. Drunk or sober, day or night, she wasn't quite herself. I would glance at her from across the house and she didn't look back with that watery stare. She kept her head propped and stared at the birds outside. From far away, even her eyes looked dark.

On one visit, Mom wasn't home when I pulled into the driveway. I asked my brother if she ran to the store – the only place she ever went – but he said, "No, she's at EMT training." I blinked. I had no idea she was doing that.

"Huh," I said. My eyes panned to her room. The last vestige of our days in filth, the final item on my list. In all those years, she barely left the house long enough for me to so much as dust the spiders from the corners. I poked the door open, winced into the wall of ashy, boozy, bloody stench. At 24, I didn't know much – but I knew that mothers cleaned their children's rooms. So when I snapped a mask around my face and gloves over my hands, I didn't know what to think about what I was about to do.

Eleven industrial garbage bags thirty-two gallons deep were filled with this: thousands of butts of cigarettes scattered like pebbles on the beach, hundreds of eight ounce bottles of vodka shoved behind the mattress and under the pillows and in the dresser and the vanity and under the bed and in old clothes and in the nightstand, so full it burst forth with a deafening clatter when I touched the handle. Shovelfuls of bloody napkins, shit-stained sheets and dime-store novels wet somehow from the leak in the roof that spilled dark water stained with insulation down the walls like mascara. Tubes of lipstick dry as stone and a lamp whose bulb hung like a snapped neck

from the frame. A dozen Haley toys, a ball I thought I'd lost when I was eight. Water bottles, candy-wrappers, plates stepped on and cracked in half. Almost all of Mom's clothes, some stained black with my use of them as rags to scrub the walls. Four spent rolls of paper towel. Spider webs without the spiders – I'd flicked them out the window. They had seen enough.

I hauled these bags outside, set them next to Dad's truck. Through the years we'd come to talk less, as fathers and sons seemed to do. But without any words he'd come to learn that what lied inside these bags had no right anywhere near our home. He woke early on Sunday mornings and hauled them away.

I stepped back inside. My body ached, splatters of ash and bleachy water burned into my arms. Mom would be home soon. I hadn't done it all – hadn't even touched her closet. With my remaining few minutes I poked around in there. Bottles clattered at my feet; Dad's handgun sat atop an old sweatshirt on the shelf, a little less dusty than everything else. I was about to walk out of the room when my eye caught a folded notecard askew atop a pile of folders. In Mom's handwriting, shaky but unmistakably that of a former model student, a list read:

- 1) I am happily married
- 2) I have 3 boys
- 3) I live in Wisconsin
- 4) I just bought a new car

I blinked. It must have been a couple years old, when Dad bought her a rusted Mazda SUV with two-hundred thousand miles for twelve-hundred dollars from some retiree a couple towns over. Or it could have been very old, as old as me, the last time she truly did buy a new car. I slipped the note in my pocket, spun my mind on what it meant.

Mom came home. I heard her shriek from across the house when she opened the door to her room. It was such an unusual burst of energy I couldn't place its nature – when I peeked around the side room's corner, I didn't know if I should expect glowering eyes or a smile. She turned, and it was the latter.

“Oh, thank you honey!”

I stood there as she hugged me. I could tell from the sag in her purse there was a bottle within, one she'd stash in a spot I just cleaned out. She clutched the purse closer.

She talked then, just about her day. It was something she'd been doing more lately. It was spring and I was able to sit on the woodstove and swing my legs while she sat in her dining room chair and talked. I felt awkward. I stared at the blue jays outside, didn't say a thing.

“I was thinking about redoing my garden this summer,” she said. She ashed her cigarette. “Would you want to help me?”

I stared at my feet, socks still damp and gritty. The truth was I already had, maybe a couple years ago. It didn't surprise me that she hadn't even looked. I'd poked through the soil and pulled out the brittle plastic flower holders of times past. I tried to straighten the wire fence where the deer jumped through and only cut my hands. She used to grow cosmos and tulips and lilies – forget-me-nots dabbled by the fence line. But for a while she called it a compost pit and threw our scraps there. She never had the gumption to sort things out; egg cartons went with the shells, tinfoil with baked potato skins, plastic bags with rotten apples. When I poked through the garden with a pitchfork, I found it to be just another pile of garbage. I tried to smooth it out, but as I prodded, I poked something metal. A tiny vibration. I sifted soil with my hands and found what I had stirred up: a garden knife.

A wave crashed over me. My grip went limp. I dropped the knife and the pitchfork and took a dozen steps away.

I blinked and looked again. It wasn't the one. I shook my head to try to stop its swimming. It wasn't that knife – it wasn't the fillet knife Mom snatched from the kitchen drawer and ran out of the house with screaming, it wasn't the knife Dad had to wrestle from her hands as she cried mascara down her neck and tried to gut herself in the garden when I was four, and Dad was shouting, and Mom did things like once or twice a month while the hospital back in Michigan tried to sort her out.

I hadn't tried the garden since. The garden knife was probably still there, probably with a skin of rust that dulled its blade but left it jagged all the same.

That night, I laid in my childhood bed, green walls lit sort of blue by the moon. I held Mom's notecard over my head and tried to parse it out. In that space between sleep and waking, that space like water that takes our weight that loosens our mind and makes us realize things we can't in the tension of the day, understanding sunk into me like a hook into a fish. Mom's list of just four things – all just reasons to live.

~ ~ ~

A storm swept through Marquette. Another storm followed close behind. In many places we might consider it one occasion. "It stormed all day."

But Lake Superior tells the story more completely. When I lived near its shore, I learned to read the water. Sharp wind made sharp waves, but it was the long, low squalling howl off in the distance that made the water truly roll. This always happened between two storms.

Mom called me that day as rain pounded the window. I could tell right away it wasn't our usual script – Yes, I'm good. Yes I'm healthy. Yes, I'll visit soon.

She said:

I'm getting my first scan today...

She hadn't told me much about the cancer. She didn't call much these days at all.

I think I'm done drinking.

I didn't know what to say. I knocked my head into the living room window. If I closed my eyes, it felt no different than the window at home.

I keep doing this to myself and it's getting old and it's so expensive and...

She went on about the price of vodka. What it amounted to each month, how much that was in loaves of bread or boxes of cereal. I'd done all this math myself. I knew.

And honey...

She was quiet for a long time. No, she wasn't. She was crying. She had her head in one hand and the phone on the table in the other. I'd seen this a thousand times.

It's so wrong how I treated all of you.

I recoiled from the window. Now she cried openly into the phone, her static voice an atonal coda that made me pace my apartment like a lost dog.

"Mom," I tried to say. But the squeak in my voice made me sound like I was a kid again. I almost clapped my hand to my mouth, as if surprised he tried to jump out.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

I don't remember how I ended the conversation. I think I just hung up. The rain had died and I walked to the beach, where with the practiced smoothness of wiping a counter and wringing a rag I kicked off my shoes and peeled off my shirt and threw my keys into the pile. I waded into Lake Superior. The Northwoods' crown, the great blue mother. If I raised my arms

and cupped my hands to the sky, I could hold a storm in my left, and another in my right. One that went and one still coming. I stood up to my waist, but the odd, smooth, rolling waves washed all the way up my chest. The heartbeat of the lake. It rinsed away my dust. It washed right through my guts. Lake Superior hugged me tight, and let me go, the way a mother might before tucking me in to sleep, or sweeping me off to school. It bubbled around my body, made a different sound than it would if I wasn't breathing inside it. I closed my eyes, and this sound, it turned into a voice. So familiar. It said: remember I'm just downstairs. Remember your family down the shore. Tomorrow's a big day. Do you need this little sheet of paper? I found it in your closet. You've written down and crossed out every room in your house. Boy, your handwriting's a real mess. On the back I think it says you do not need to forgive just yet – you've written this in quotes, but there's no attribution. I wonder how many people have told you.

Beneath all that there's one last thing – a shopping list with just one item. It says:
remember to buy seeds.

Backpackers with their customary slouches stuck both thumbs to their temples and flared their fingers wide as they walked the wrong way on the trail toward us. Their eyes popped from their heads and they mouthed to us, *moose*.

And they weren't kidding. Another minute down the trail, and a bull moose big as God stood before us. From thirty feet away it dominated the path with its barrel chest, its legs thick as the black spruce that framed the trail and bowed beneath the reach of the bull's antlers. All five of us crouched down. It was just instinct, and we weren't alone. Another gaggle of backpackers, laden with 40 pounds of food and gear, hid behind shrubs.

Not even a half hour had passed with our feet on the strata of volcanic rock that is Isle Royale, the least visited National Park. It is an island 45 miles long and 9 miles wide that sits like a fishing bobber in Lake Superior; it is northern Michigan boiled down to its essence.

We watched the moose hold its ground and devour the shrubbery for twenty minutes or so. Chase, Tim, Matt, Katie, and I were college friends – Chase and I were roommates, Tim and Matt friends with Chase, Katie married to Matt. Not terribly interesting. But, I thought as we ceded the path to the bull and turned back for a different route, I liked that about this trip. It was domestic and ordinary, the kind of thing 20-somethings do. As a child, I had accepted that this kind of trip would never be for me, what with my family twisting like a gut-hooked fish in the murky depths beneath the poverty line.

No, when Chase came to visit me in Marquette, Michigan, the small city on the coast of Lake Superior where we had gone to college, and where I had fallen in love with the lake and decided to stay after graduation, I didn't expect him to invite me to Isle Royale. A friend of his

from the suburbs of Detroit had cancelled at the last minute and declined a return for her \$300 seaplane ticket to the island. *Find someone else*, she said.

What Chase didn't know was how I dreamed of Isle Royale. I had always wondered what it'd be like to do things other kids seemed to do – hop in mini-vans to Florida for the winter, visit some aunt with a lake house in Washington – but everything about my surroundings kept my imagination tame. Childhood winters in Wisconsin's Northwoods were spent splitting maple and feeding it to the woodstove. The only family I really saw was Grandpa Bob a mile down the road, and usually he was wagging a half-finger (chopped by a wood splitter) at me for not mowing his lawn straight enough. But in the same way a fish in a bowl might gaze at the lake across the street, but eventually realize its best bet was to learn to love the plastic plants swaying over its head, I accepted my place.

But I wanted Isle Royale. When a cloud of scholarships and loans floated me to Marquette, I spent my days along the rocky shores of Lake Superior gazing at the heartbeat beacons of its lighthouses and wading into its swelling waves. I was overtaken. In the lake's unbroken horizon I saw how big the world could be. In private moments on the shore I would let slip a laugh of excitement when waves would explode over the break wall that protected Lakeshore Boulevard. It was as if a sliver of my childhood self would escape me.

And when in a lecture I learned that Isle Royale floated out there – the jewel of the lake, the truly wild version of the shore that I stood on every night – I yearned to see it. It was only a bonus that it was one of the rare, closed loop ecosystems in nature, that it embodied predator and prey, wolf and moose, growth and regrowth in a way that's fascinated scientists for decades.

But while the island lies only 56 miles from the shore of Michigan's upper peninsula, it may as well have been a trip over the ocean to get there. I had graduated college and found an

okay job and a place to live in Marquette. I made friends and subsisted on more than buttered toast and apples like I did in my youth. But while I could glimpse Lake Superior if I craned my neck out of my living room window, my place, again, began to feel like a fishbowl. I looped between work and waiting for work. And despite that, by the time I would have bought a plane or ferry ticket to the island, plus the stack of fees and permits, and the backpacking gear and food, I would have to return and sleep on the lakeshore, rent unpaid, lights switched off.

But there I was. A borrowed backpack dug into my shoulders as we trekked up the granite slopes of Isle Royale, and Lake Superior shimmered all around us. Our destination for the night was the Lane Cove campground – an eight-mile hike. Chase and I, as we organized our gear on the rug in my apartment, had joked that if we *were* lucky enough to see a moose, most likely it'd be a dot across a lake, perhaps a blot between a sea of pines. So our running into one almost face-first just minutes off the bone-shaking plane had us excited. We hiked fast, jumped from rock to rock, chattered until our lungs ran dry.

At least for a while. When we came upon a signpost pounded into the earth that told us we were still miles from Lane Cove, we were panting. Ideally, we'd live out our six-day, 50-mile crossing of the island like the wildlife around us: moving from first light to early evening, then full of food and asleep by the earliest dark. But as we trudged along, dusk blew its dark breath across the cloudless sky.

Nothing's easy when there's forty pounds on your back. Our calves burned as we churned up the slick granite cliffs, our shoulders pounded beneath the bouncing weight of our packs, we sweated through our clothes in the mid-August heat until evening came and reminded us that it is never truly warm in Michigan. Headlamps came out and we cooked through half their batteries on the first night. All chatter stopped and the air among us went weird while we twisted

and turned through the dark forest with its hidden traps of gnarled roots and freezing springs. Chase and Tim were experienced backpackers and friends since high school. Matt and Katie, first timers like me, were college sweethearts. The first duo saw this trip more like a mission, the second more like a vacation. I was a strange fifth wheel bumping between them.

Still, though my head swam and bruises painted my shoulders already, I was giddy. I suspect I've always been like that, light-headed and holding in a laugh, floating over a situation and oblivious to the intricacies of the tension around me. But the whole thing just seemed funny; the epic flight in – my first flight ever – where the island and its ring of emerald water had us all jaw-dropped and chattering. And then there we were, hopping along the path like grumpy toads.

We limped into Lane Cove at 10pm to find all the campsites taken. We huddled beside another post in the earth at the intersection of three trails, scavenged for the flour tortillas and hummus in my bag, and ate just that until we were bloated and garlic-breathed. Everyone smiled despite themselves. We then slunk to the corners of the campsite and pitched tents inches from the lake and placed our leftover hummus behind a floating log in Lake Superior's water to keep it cold for the night. I couldn't help but laugh at it bobbing there, and Tim had to shush me as we crawled into his tent. Though we had messed up on the first night in every way imaginable, I fell asleep clenching my already sore gut, trying not to giggle.

Isle Royale's ecosystem is considered a closed loop because nothing ever comes to or leaves the island. It is self-sustaining. But there have been exceptions. In the 1940s, a bitter winter froze Lake Superior solid, and a bridge of ice formed from Canada to the island. Wolves crossed and learned to leap on the native moose. With the ice bridge forming rarely as the climate warmed, the wolves never left.

I felt right at home on that island, in that loop. Back in Wisconsin it was rare for someone to have a vehicle that could make it more than a few hours round-trip. I killed two cars even in my 200-mile trips to Marquette and back. Practical limits became instinctual limits, and leaving hardly occurred as an option. So I felt that this place understood me. And in the coming days I swore to myself I would learn to understand it, even if I only found my way there because some girl from outside Detroit shrugged away her ticket. Even if she was from a completely different world than me, I hoped she knew that she was a force in the elements – that she built a bridge, and it appeared at my feet.

~ ~ ~

I awoke at dawn next to Tim, who stared at the ceiling of the tent as if waiting to be activated for the day. A sheen of morning dew rolled off the canvas as we punched our sleeping bags tight into our backpacks, took down the tent, retrieved our food from the refrigerator of Lake Superior, and met up with Chase at the intersection of paths, where he and Tim tapped their feet until Matt and Katie, bleary eyed, joined us.

Twelve miles of switchbacks up wet, crumbling granite hills and through thick new-growth forests, kept perpetually trimmed by the island's army of two-thousand moose, stood before us and our next campsite, McCargoe Cove.

What a day's worth of splitting wood would do to my body held no candle to the pain that thrummed in me then. I was scared to look at the skin of my shoulders, where it felt like the bruises must have resembled blotches of night sky. But my sweat-soaked shirt stuck to me like paste, so it wasn't an option anyway. We each had 64 ounces of water bouncing in bottles on our hips, and within the first mile I felt I could drink all of mine and more. But as we climbed higher and more inland, Lake Superior, our filtering source, faded from view.

Perhaps to keep their minds off the aches and the pains, Matt and Katie talked about their plans to move to Arizona, where Matt hoped to fill a teaching shortage and Katie hoped to become a radiologist. It was an extremely normal conversation – I was fascinated. Though Matt grew up somewhere near me, and somewhat like me, his ceaseless faith in God, plus Katie, led him by the hand away from his troubled home and onto the straight and narrow. As my feet slipped up a muddy incline, I grumbled to admit that that trajectory sounded sort of nice.

Tim talked about his girlfriend back home, his college graduation on the horizon. He was on the path to become a physical therapist. Strapped to the side of his backpack was a muscle massager that I wanted to say looked like a sex toy, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. We entered the shade of the new growth forest as Chase talked about a tempestuous romance. He was off to veterinary school at St. Kitts, an island off South America. He was anxious about putting two and two together – his resolve toward his dream, his shifting relationship.

Whoa, Chase said suddenly. He stopped dead, then pointed into the woods.

Just at our side, twenty feet away, stood a moose in the marsh. A small bull, it worked its jaw around a bouquet of bog rosemary and leatherleaf. We glided past it like a whisper.

I appreciated the interruption. It was starting to feel like it was my turn to talk about my trajectory, what life looked like, post-island. I felt ridiculous as we trekked through the grabbing branches and sweating leaves – because the truth was that I was where I was, and I was doing what I was doing, because of Lake Superior. Because I just liked it. Because when I saw how it reached forever over the horizon, I felt for the first time like maybe life didn't have a cap on it, that it wasn't futile to look onward, that it's more than a closed loop – like maybe there were places to go out there. But that seemed like a strange thing to just blurt out. So I kept it to myself that I swam the loop of my life because my crummy apartment with the ticking heater was only a

couple hundred feet from the beach, because when I worked my tutoring job all night from home I could hear the ore boats unload their hauls and the shipmen yell their commands. When the mist of the lake blew through my open windows in the morning, when my car would disappear beneath the lake effect snow, I felt like I was part of something larger than myself. And I wasn't alone.

Stephanie was the one friend I knew who might love Lake Superior the way I do. I thought about her as our group took a break in the mottled shade and popped sweet bursts of dried pineapple in our mouths. I'd known her for six years by then, had met her one day when I worked at a stand in the university center as an ambassador for Microsoft Windows 8, just doing anything to scrape cash together. She'd opened the glass door to the building with her sister, and they brought a swirl of snow with them. I showed them the magical world of Windows. We drew flowers in prismatic colors, we wrote our names with our fingers on the touch screen.

The next year, I ran into Stephanie in a sky tunnel that connected one building to the next. We waited there between classes every Tuesday. I learned that Stephanie and her family loved to fish and had lived near Lake Superior all their lives. Her grandpa dove for shipwrecks and she knew how to scuba dive. She painted beautifully, she walked with me on the beach and we picked rocks together. We watched old westerns at her place. When the winter's freezing rain knocked my car window into my car door, a thing I didn't even know was possible, she helped me pin it back up. We often went to a bar called the Ore Dock with friends and always ditched out by ourselves. We would stare at the actual ore dock and the moon as it shimmered in Lake Superior on its calm nights, and most times we talked about nothing, but sometimes about why we were there, where we were going, what we were doing. We did this for years, job to job, dream to dream. Just before I left for the island, we stood there and talked about how she was

putting two and two together, her work for the city and her mechanical skills, to apply for the National Parks Service. I told her I was applying to writing schools. A jabbering kid, I'd always loved to tell stories – and though the thought of leaving Marquette and her and the lake froze my blood, I was warmed by the thought that I would never get in anywhere, but that trying gave the illusion of moving forward. Calling it a “Masters of Fine Art” felt like a betrayal to our small-town upbringings, but eventually I laughed nervously and called it what it was. I couldn't keep that detail from her – she was my best friend.

I thought about Stephanie and how she'd love it there on Isle Royale, and miles melted away. Though bruises bloomed down my arms, I didn't notice the pain as much as I did the conifers that swept the sky, the clouds that listed by, the squirrels that leapt from tree to tree and cheered us on as we went.

When finally we slumped our bags off, this time at 4pm at a campsite all to ourselves, we didn't hesitate to dive fully clothed into McCargoe Cove, a tendril of Lake Superior. We then stripped to the essentials and hung our clothes on a line. We filtered water, filled our bottles, drank them, and filled them again. The filter didn't need to do much; Lake Superior, if you ask some folks, is best consumed as-is. We made quesadillas with roasted peppers and leftover hummus, then we leaned against our bags, let them bear our weight for once. For hours we just stared at the sky while our bodies melted into the earth.

Doing nothing can be the most incredible feeling.

~ ~ ~

In the predawn glow Chase tapped his foot at the wooden post with an arrow pointing us toward our next destination: Hatchet Lake, six miles. Matt and Katie ran around camp and gathered their instant hot chocolate packets while Tim and I took turns rolling his muscle

massager over each other's backs. This opened fresh gates of pain that made us buckle and groan; our arms went limp and hung like snapped branches from our bodies. Between Matt and Katie's breakfast ritual and Tim and I's groaning, Chase could only shake his head.

Miles passed beneath the trees, through which Lake Superior made an appearance and then vanished again as we wound through the trail. A chat about politics flared up and died down – *it's all hogwash*, Chase said, which summed up everyone's feelings pretty well. Eventually, we came across a sign that read: "Minong Mine." The epigraph described how Isle Royale was once a rich source of copper. It provided history of how Native Americans had worked there as miners before the island was bought by the government, and how remnants of the mine could still be accessed just down the side trail it pointed toward. We agreed to check it out.

The cart tracks, rusted, poked through a layer of copper-dusted shale that shuffled beneath our feet. We all squeezed into the musty cavern, doubled over. Sunlight burst through the holes in the earth above us, and everyone looked like a shadow. We stood there in the depths of the island, and I thought about the Native Americans who shoveled endless carts full of copper perhaps in the exact spot I stood. I imagined blood and sweat and the ships they would load, wondered how it must have felt watch the times when the vessels would be torn like paper by the island's granite rocks, or tossed on their sides by the lake's great waves, and sink.

It was hard not to think of futility then as we shuffled around each other, us shadows beneath the earth trying to find room to breach the surface. The copper on the lake floor, the blood in the water. Our earlier talk of politics – dead wages, flying costs of living – fizzling out into shrugs. Something about stepping over those broken-down tracks broke Isle Royale's spell on me for a moment, and I thought of the future. How my job, like everybody's, sucked my soul

away. How I was dragging my feet on the trail forward, how I feared I would settle like an old fish on its side as the same water swirled in an eddy over and over me.

After the mine and a few quiet miles, Hatchet Lake shimmered before us. We all dropped bags to the tune of popping spines and shoulders. Clothes came off again and we jumped into the water. There was something humbling about being in a lake on an island that's in a lake. Minnows crowded around my feet and picked at the dead skin, and I felt smaller than ever.

We made camp. I unpacked my fishing pole and a card box full of tackle. Spoons and spinners soared through the afternoon air and into the rippling surface while everyone let the lake's water cool their aching bodies. I didn't get a nibble, though I held out hope I'd hook into a brook or rainbow trout, something with colors turning rich for the approach of fall. I wanted to take a picture, have something to send back home, something to send to Stephanie. Though we had both started fishing when we started walking, all the trips we had taken together had been much like that evening on Hatchet Lake, where for hours we talked and threw lures like thoughts from our bodies without interruption from so much as a nibble. I could probably do that with her forever. But maybe it would be nice to prove that I could, indeed, catch a fish.

Whoa, Chase said. I looked down the shore, where he was washing dishes.

Floating in our cooking pan, amidst the detritus of our flavorless couscous dinner, was a minnow, accidentally scooped up. It was a shiner – our only catch of the night. I laughed as Chase let it go and it swam in confused circles.

At least we can always laugh. If the Minong Mine had cast a pall on me, Hatchet Lake somewhat lifted it. Maybe life is futile and we don't really end up anywhere, I thought as our

couscous minnow joined its swarm of friends that wriggled between my toes. But maybe that's the best thing about it.

~ ~ ~

I awoke to the silhouette of a wolf spider, big as a mouse, clinging to the outside of the tent just above my head. Mainland Me might have jumped. But island Me flicked it off the canvas and watched it bounce into the juniper.

Eight miles sat between Hatchet Lake and Lake Desor, our next destination. An amazing amount of animal scat lined the first stretch of trail. There were piles of moose crap wide and tall as tree stumps, rabbit droppings scattered by the kick of boots, fox poop decorated with feathers, tufts of fur. We inspected the more ambiguous piles closely.

I heard the rangers have only seen two wolves this summer, Matt said.

He voiced what we were all thinking. The tale of Isle Royale wolves is a famous and woeful one. As we climbed a ridge and Lake Superior showed its face again, we shared what we picked up from bits and pieces of hearsay and news articles. Most of what I knew came from a talk a researcher from Michigan Tech held once at the Ore Dock. His topic packed the bar to bursting; everybody wanted the full story on the legendary wolves of this island.

Isle Royale's ecosystem counts on tandem swoops of two S-curves: moose and wolf populations. Ideally, the two rise and fall in turns: wolves chase down moose until they run short on food, wolves die, moose resurge, wolves replenish, and on and on. Ice bridges form once in a while, and fresh wolves flow in to find the cornucopia of moose, ensuring genetic diversity. In 1980, the last year of ideal balance in recent history, there were 50 wolves to 700 moose.

In the spring before our trip, there were 2 wolves to 2100 moose.

The wolf population nosedived from the 80s onward after a visitor's dog brought canine parvovirus to the island. The fate of the wolves since then is best traced through the story of Isabelle, the legendary wolf who clung to life despite being a stray from the two ragged packs that remained on the island in her time. I thought of her as we hiked, wondered if we walked or rested where she once might've swept her tail over the snow and curled into a ball for the night. I imagined her amber eyes scanning the horizon for the ravenous, inbred male wolves who thought of her more as food than a companion. The *Star Tribune* features a picture of Isabelle sitting alone on a snowbank amidst a spray of her own blood, post-brawl. I stumbled upon it dozens of times when I first fell into the Isle Royale rabbit hole, and it always hurt me.

The article's first line reads:

"Isabelle, the wolf that last month crossed a perilous ice bridge between Isle Royale and the mainland, was as unlucky in death as she was in love."

And it's true. In 2014, for the first time in her five-year life, an ice bridge formed from Isle Royale to Minnesota. Isabelle took her first tentative steps, then an instinctive sprint away from the lonely island to find a mate on the other side. And though I liked to imagine Isabelle found love in the great wilderness on the mainland, I knew that she was found dead in Grand Portage, Minnesota. A pellet gun had fired a little ball of copper or steel between a crack in her ribs. It entered an artery, swam into her heart, and that was it.

"It's unlikely the person who shot her was trying to kill her," *Star Tribune* says.

But who knows, I thought as we took a breather at the top of a ridge, hands on knees after the steep climb. Life could be cruel. In the distance, we saw Canada. A haze of smoke rose from the pine trees that looked like teeth gnawing on the sky. Wildfire. I knew that wolves and moose alike sizzled in the flames, turned into ash and then into everything.

We pushed forth. We snatched blueberries on the fly and descended into the swamp, where boardwalks squelched into mud that splattered like paint onto our skin on the way to Lake Desor.

Matt and Katie walked hand-in-hand away from our campsite to Lake Desor's beach. Chase, Tim and I stayed back. At first, I tried to write letters for my people back home, but I scratched out whole pages and instead leaned on my backpack like the other two. We tried to throw pebbles into an open pocket of Katie's hammock, missed most of our shots. We talked. School and work and the eventual big boy job search – girlfriends come and gone and when to get married, if ever. The best trail map forward. I offered mostly shrugs to the conversation, focused, as ever, less on the arc of my life and more on the arc of my thrown pebbles.

Later, we joined Matt and Katie on the beach. Lake Desor was huge, its horizon faded and misty. I cast lures into its still surface to no result, but soon leaned the pole against a sand-smoothed tree. Everybody chatted down the shore about something that was only noise to me, and I started picking rocks. I'd adopted the habit through Stephanie, though her approach was more refined than mine. With eagle eyes she'd stop suddenly in her tracks, bend down, and snatch up a piece of quartz or beach glass hidden amidst thousands of pebbles. She'd scoop water from the lake and cup it around the stone. We'd both appraise its potential luster if it could only live forever in the pond of her hands.

I lacked Stephanie's skill, her magnetic eyes. Instead I laid two fistfuls of candidate rocks before me, poked them as if they'd each behave differently, then skipped the unremarkable ones into Lake Desor. It struck me that I might be the last person to ever touch those rocks, that their glances on the surface and leaps in the air might be the last anyone ever sees of them. As such, I chose the ones I'd keep carefully. Some things really do come and go.

That night was a cold one. Chase, Tim and I shivered together in a two-man tent, each of us mummy-wrapped in our sleeping bags. We laughed when we heard Katie slide into her hammock, her voice go *What the?* and then a cascade of pebbles hit the dirt.

When Chase and Tim started snoring, I tried to remember the letter I'd written and scratched out and re-written to Stephanie that afternoon. I think I'd asked her if she'd come with me out there someday – and that I thought the rock I'd picked for her looked like Michigan, and that we'd seen moose, but no wolves.

And in the haze of sleep, a wolf ran through my mind. Isabelle. How nervous it made me that a creature like her could make the leap from place to place only to fall prey to something as stupid as a stray pellet. If only she'd found another wolf to run with sooner, I thought. She could have disappeared into the woods. Isle Royale could have floated on in her memory.

~ ~ ~

The next day we quietly breezed through six miles of old growth forest that sat between Lake Desor and Windigo, the harbor on the other end of Isle Royale, where in two days the seaplane would pick us up. Our bags were half their original weight and our venting about our paths in life had sated our nerves. At least mostly – which seemed as good as it would get.

At Windigo we found a campsite on a river where Lake Superior poked through the island and its waters ran red with clay. We found a spot with a shelter, a miniature cabin with a front-facing screen wall. Where on our first night we ate scraps of a dinner and camped inches from the water like raccoons, now we'd moved up in the world, arrived early, found a sunny spot with a fireplace outside and walls to keep us warm.

Perhaps we'd entered our golden years.

Later we played Euchre and laughed at how the half of the deck we used was filthy while the other was perfect. We held our hands to the evening sky, observed the dirt in the cracks of our knuckles while the fading sunlight shone through the splits of our fingers. Our lake water baths left us not-quite clean. Later, we all crouched and stared at a moose who stood amidst the river. A huge cow. She dunked her head into the water, kept it there for a minute at a time. I snapped a picture as it lifted its head and snorted out an explosion of the red water – something to show Stephanie.

After a while, it turned toward us.

“Oh god, Tim said.

We all jumped, then slipped our way up the river’s muddy embankment before bounding across the campsite and into the cabin.

The moose, pouring water and draped with vegetation, followed just feet behind us. We were jaw-dropped and stunned silent as it stepped over our bags and through the campsite. She wasn’t giving chase. She simply wasn’t worried about what lied in her path. We all laughed once she left. How I envied her.

~ ~ ~

The next day was not terribly interesting, but I liked that about it. I liked that we lounged the day away in a sort of retirement we worried we’d never have. We rented canoes and rocked our way across Lake Superior, took a spin around the archipelago and paddled like mad for the shore when we saw float planes descend and kick up wake that would have flipped us. At the harbor’s general store we sipped bad coffee, chatted with the jaded teenage clerk who said, *honestly, I didn’t think I’d get this job.* At the visitor’s center we read all the plaques and gazed into the lighthouse’s old Fresnel Lens, which reflected its own light endlessly. We admired the

replica wolf who howled forever into the skylight above him. I got choked up when the workers put a ranger hat on a little girl, and from beneath its tilting brim she recited the Oath of Isle Royale with her squeaky voice, not yet fully formed:

*I promise to preserve the beauty of the island,
I will protect the plants and animals that call the park home,
and I will keep Isle Royale in my heart forever by sharing it with others.*

~ ~ ~

But it was the next morning that I loved. It was the most beautiful morning of my life when we awoke at the edge of a campsite that we shared with some kind and wine-drunk Minnesotans on a satellite island – a sort of warm-up for our return to civilization. Before we'd even rubbed the sleep from our eyes, a moose emerged from Lake Superior and walked so close to us that we could smell its misty fur. Chase and I hopped in one canoe and Tim and Matt and Katie in the other. We paddled through the dense fog toward the main island, near shipwrecks and over trees that took their time sinking into the silt. We paddled and Chase and I lost the others, but it didn't matter. Lake Superior was calm. The entire lake for as far as I could see was a mirror. In all my hundreds of walks to its shores just to say hello, I had never seen it that perfect. The sun came up and of course a rainbow broke through the mist and arced over us. The light refracted off every hanging droplet and washed us in gold. We docked on shore and early waking fishermen gave us good morning nods. It was our final day and soon, we'd be lifted into the sky and taken back home. The thrum of society beckoned. We five would go our separate ways again. But somehow, after that morning, I felt calm.

On the plane I watched Isle Royale dissolve into Lake Superior's horizon. But I didn't feel like I was going anywhere. I'd drunk from its lakes, eaten its berries. Even if I was too

nervous to speak them, I'd aired my anxieties for everything to come at least to myself. And for now, they'd vanished into the trees. And that was good enough.

~ ~ ~

One year later, in early August, I sat in the parking lot of my apartment complex with Stephanie. My car, my new car, was packed. In that year, she and I had done all our usual things and some new ones. We'd fixed my old car when I returned from the island and the very next day life the water pump ruptured, bled coolant all down the street, and nearly seized my engine on Lakeshore Boulevard. We replaced the pump and crackled timing belt with a new one, cut our hands on all the little metal things. I remember a band of clean skin that shone through my oil-slicked hands after I removed a bandage she'd wrapped around a jagged cut on my finger. When I feel torn up somehow, I look at that scar still and remember that I know someone who will patch me up.

We got coffee at a place that opened downtown called The Crib, named after fish cribs, where trees are dropped in bundles beneath a lake and become homes. We joked about buying submarines to explore Lake Superior's floor and said *But really, we should go sailing someday*. We rode a tandem bike together to a secret spot by the lake, where we used driftwood to build sculptures. We camped in a trailer built by her grandfather on the edge of Indian River, and again in my tent down Blueberry Lane, where we tuned an old FM radio and caught signals from the clear night sky. We watched movies. She still liked westerns, and they grew on me.

So it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be when we sat down at The Crib and I told her that I was accepted to a writing program in Montana. It helped that she had just gotten that job with the National Parks Service, and would be leaving the city herself, though not quite so far away. And it was something like serendipity that her sister had gotten a big promotion, and that

my younger brother graduated college, and that this all happened in that year since the island. Our closed loops opened. Bridges formed, and we took them.

I'll miss you, I told her, staring into my coffee. As close as we were, we didn't say things like that too often. We were products of the Northwoods, after all.

And though she returned the sentiment that day, I was still embarrassed in the parking lot when we stood and hugged goodbye, and I couldn't find the words to say. There were no jokes to crack, and I realized that maybe life wasn't futile if I chose to do more than laugh at it. So instead, as she walked away, backwards and waving, I blew her a kiss. So much of the process of leaving my lakeside haven revealed to me just how short the world is on the things that matter. Patience for those who tremble on the phone with landlords and car dealers, support for people taking their first steps on an icy bridge to somewhere else, and ways for one friend to say goodbye to another. Ways to say I love you, and be safe, and I'll be back. And because I wrote and scratched out the words in my mind so many times in that moment, all I could do was just blow a kiss before Stephanie got in her car.