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Weeki Wachee, 1980

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WEEKI WACHEE, 1980

Lynnie and her boyfriend Sean pitched his tent, twisting the aluminum tubes together, female to male, and knocking stakes into sandy dirt with a mallet. Pine needles had sifted into its corners from the last time it was used. Since they were in charge of dinner the first night, they unpacked pasta and Ragu with Parmesan cheese in a green can. They'd brought two six-packs of Mexican beer and some limes. They'd stopped for boiled peanuts, sold out of the bed of a pickup truck en route to Weeki Wachee, the Florida state park that featured an underwater theater with live mermaid shows.

Lynnie's mother had brought her and her brother Jake to Weeki Wachee not long after their father died. That year they'd seen many of Florida's attractions, from Silver Springs to Cypress Gardens and Weeki Wachee. Mom was anti-Disney World. She didn't appreciate that the newer park had siphoned guests from every other attraction in Florida. They'd gone to see pelicans at Cedar Key and manatees wintering in Blue Spring State Park. They ate Key lime pie in Key West and passed a huge mound of conchs at a roadside stand. With age, Lynnie put it together that it must have been easier for her mom to tour Florida than to stay home. Lynnie's main memory of Key West was sitting on a round bench encircling a tree and Mom realizing their chicken was undercooked. It was bloody next to the bone.

Now the days had begun their slow shrink toward fall. This was Lynnie and Sean's last free summer before college graduation. Jake and his girlfriend Averie would cook the next night. Averie was applying to grad school after having worked for two years, and Jake was on vacation from his job that had something to do with

computers. Since graduation, Averie had become more of a nature girl, more confident, talking at length about deltas and birds. Linnie liked seeing them back together. She couldn't say when she'd first met Averie—one year their family had gone to the same inn as hers for Thanksgiving—but Jake and Averie had dated on and off through high school and college. With Jake's other girlfriends she didn't make conversation, not to be rude but because she had nothing to say. On the contrary, Averie had always put her at ease, asking her who she had for English, making a joke, or offering, "I like your t-shirt," and Linnie would look down to see what shirt she was wearing since outfits weren't premeditated for her. Whenever Averie and Jake were broken up, he sounded philosophical: "Can't hate her—she's a part of my history." Linnie felt Averie was part of her history, too. At some point, when she'd seen the carrot peel scab on Linnie's shin, Averie had given her tips on how to shave her legs without bleeding. Averie had driven her to the mall to get her ears pierced. Linnie missed having another girl around.

Sean set up the cooking equipment and put water on to boil. It wasn't easy for him to accept that for camping they'd make do with Ragu, but he looked to be consoling himself by doctoring it up with thyme and onion. He warmed garlic bread in foil packets tucked into the fire. He'd spent the summer before this one biking in France and learning to cook, and he still wore a fanny pack from time to time. He lived off campus, and that first evening he put his hand on the small of her back to guide her into the kitchen for paella, Linnie felt the heat of his fingers under her thin shirt. While Sean cooked, the others scavenged for firewood, avoiding

the palmettos because of snakes. The park was designed around the spring, laid out with campsites in one area and, in another, the underwater theater, built into the bank of the spring.

“I told my parents you and Averie would share a tent, and Jake and I would,” Sean said over dinner.

“Why’d you need to explain it?” Linnie asked. But then Sean looked deflated, and she smiled at him—no big deal, she promised. She hadn’t meant to shame him.

“They asked about sleeping arrangements,” he said.

“I wish I’d thought that up about the tents for my mother,” Averie said. They all knew about her religious mother. Averie’s thin, ash-blonde hair lay flat with humidity. She was prettier with a little age on her, and she had a lot of interests in her early twenties that she hadn’t had before, for instance backpacking. She’d told them about the big weights she could carry on her back. She knew how to stay hydrated.

“Averie’s mom didn’t want her here without a ring on her finger,” Jake said. He laughed, but he was too cavalier sometimes, and Linnie thought that insensitive. Maybe Averie would like to be engaged a couple of years out of college. Jake didn’t necessarily want to commit to one person, and when he talked about women, he always said he didn’t need or want stock beauty. He had said he could be himself with Averie. But he didn’t want to marry her, he’d told Linnie earlier that summer. He didn’t think their love measured up to Mom and Dad’s. Linnie understood him. She wouldn’t want to get married now, either, not before having more experiences, more history. Mom and Dad had married young, but

that had been a different generation. Back then premarital sex and cohabitation weren't allowed—even now they weren't officially allowed—and Mom and Dad had been too in love to wait.

Mom now showed hardly an interest in her children. She said food didn't taste good anymore. It was almost as if she'd decided to punish herself, to not enjoy any sensory pleasures if Dad was also unable to.

The moon bled blue tonight, floating in and out of shredded clouds.

“Pass the Parmesan,” Jake said. Sean handed him the can.

“Best Ragu ever,” Lynn timer said, and Sean looked satisfied while the others hustled to agree. They'd finished off the beer and sucked the meat from all the boiled peanuts by the time Lynn timer took out her camera because of the moon, the Sea of Tranquility a strong contrast tonight to the bright white lunar highlands. A cloud cupped the moon before trailing off in wisps.

“How's the photography?” Averie asked.

“I've got a new series.” Lynn timer told them about the box turtle she'd set under the blue plumbago in her mom's backyard, shot late afternoon when she could take advantage of shadows. She wished she'd brought her pictures so she could show Averie the turtle trapped in the pool, huddled inside its brown shell mapped with yellow starbursts, waiting for rescue. She'd lifted it out of the drain and onto the grass.

Soon even the combination of bug spray and campfire wasn't enough to keep the mosquitoes off them.

“I'm tired, anyway,” Averie said.

“I'm full,” Jake said.

They smothered the fire and locked the food in the chest because of raccoons. The couples said goodnight to each other. Sean spread a tarp on the tent floor, and they laid Linnie's patchwork sleeping bag from childhood on top of his state-of-the-art L.L. Bean.

Linnie knelt at the end of her bag and held the flashlight up to her chin. "Mwah, hah, hah," she said.

"Oooh, you scared me." Sean opened his eyes wide with "fear."

Linnie turned on her camping lantern, heavy with its huge battery. Its light gave Sean's chest and arms a warm glow. They changed into boxers for Sean and an oversized t-shirt for Linnie. She laid her head in the crook of his armpit. Sometimes she accidentally thought of him as a friend more than a lover. She felt his heart beating and didn't want to think about how vulnerable and excited he was.

"Mom brought us to Weeki Wachee once," she said. On that trip her mother had bought two mermaid plates "For Decorative Purposes Only." She had hung the plates above the stove until they grew sticky with dust, and when finally she hand washed them, the paint flaked off, the mermaids now only suggestions of themselves, "Weeki Wachee, Fla." nearly illegible.

"Was it fun?"

"My dad had just died of lung cancer, so no." Linnie moved her head onto her pillow and turned on her side to face him.

"I didn't put that together," Sean said. He looked like he was searching out sadness on her face, and she tried to hide it from

him as he traced the whorl of her ear with his finger. His hand smelled like garlic.

“Do you feel like you’re just about to be a grownup?” she asked. “Like when you graduate, you’ll suddenly be one?”

“No.”

“Me, neither. I don’t even like that word, ‘grownup.’ Or ‘adult,’ for that matter. It’s like the word ‘Mrs.’ I would never want to be called ‘Mrs.’”

“But don’t you think you’ll get married and have kids one day?” Sean asked.

“Why do you keep asking me that?”

“It’s a normal question for two people together.”

“Everything would be different if my dad were alive.”

“Why’s that? I mean, besides the obvious.”

“It shows that planning ahead isn’t very useful,” Lynn timer said.

“Are you saying we shouldn’t look forward to stuff?”

“Never mind what I said. I’m buzzed. I would honestly get out my camera and shoot the moon some more, but my head’s spinning.” She flopped her arm over his bare chest and crooked her leg over his thighs. Her libido had gone into hiding.

“Tell me something else about you,” he said.

She must have hesitated.

“Anything,” he said.

Typical Sean—so nice, so interested. She reeled back in time to Jake and her as kids, just far enough apart in age that they didn’t fight much, to her dad taking her to a turkey shoot, the shot that won her the camping lantern that lit the tent warm and

orange now.

“There’s my last clean-edged memory of him,” she said.

Sean pulled back from her to be able to see her better when she described the Natural Springs Inn and its turkey shoot.

“Not a real turkey,” she said. “A paper turkey, waiting to be shot across the spring. A man handed me a musket. I call it a musket, but maybe it wasn’t. This gun—in my memory it was made out of the same wood as our piano. It made me think of the Civil War, though I can’t tell you if it was a musket or a rifle or what. I was so grown up holding that gun. Grown up in the best way. I can still remember the weight of it in my hands, the delicate ring where I put my forefinger, and my dad telling me how to line up the two points. He was so excited when I shot the turkey.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” Sean said.

“A lot of my memories aren’t in focus anymore. I remember the way he was—his mood, for example—more than specific things he said. I remember what he looked like, of course, but him in stills.”

Now she saw him standing in his carport. He’d left behind a lot of lamps. A geode collection. None of the three kids had been attached to stuff like he had been. You can’t take it with you, Mom would say, and she’d try to convince them that Dad’s things weren’t Dad, but as she proclaimed this, she got a funny uncomfortable look on her face as if she wasn’t sure that was true. They all made efforts to clean out over the years, but mysteriously part of Dad did live through the lamps and the geodes. Besides that, he’d left architectural bits all over Jacksonville, mostly additions and renovations since they lived and he worked in an old part of town.

“I’ve almost forgotten his walk.”

Billy Joel was right—only the good died young.

It was too hot to touch, so she rolled back from Sean and folded her sleeping bag away from her. Summer was too hot. She liked the spring and fall equinoxes when the world lost its tilt. But then she called up his slightly knock kneed walk, making his body seem even thinner. Some of his words floated around in her brain. A lot of the words he had left her were quotes from his favorite architects. *A house is a machine for living* (Le Corbusier). *Bring the outdoors in* (he had enrolled them in a Montessori school, and he claimed Maria Montessori said this, though Lynn timer could never find a record of it). *I believe in God, only I spell it “Nature”* (Frank Lloyd Wright). *God is in the details* (Mies van der Rohe). She’d heard every one of these sayings multiple times by the time she turned 12. She wanted to live a quiet life in a cool house that was a machine for living, as her dad always made sure they knew Le Corbusier said a house should be.

“What?” Sean said.

“Nothing.”

“You look deep in thought.”

“Do you ever think about what kind of house you’d like to live in?” Lynn timer asked.

“No, never,” he said.

The frog ensemble swelled to a purr and mixed with the crickets scraping out a long-long-long pattern and then a short-short-short one. Sometimes the crickets and frogs sounded as if they were inside the tent.

“I’m tired,” she said. “Night.”

“I thought we’d—”

“I’m tired. I’m buzzed. My brother’s in the next tent over.”

“I understand,” Sean said.

The next morning the sun woke her up, her shoulder wet with condensation against the nylon wall. She unzipped their tent to find Averie by the dead fire.

“Go with me?” Averie was holding a clear plastic toiletries bag and swung her arm toward the bathhouse.

“Sure.” Linnie ducked back into the tent for her stuff.

They walked along the path, both still half-asleep, not talkative yet. Oxidized spots mottled the wall-sized mirror, while paint hung from the walls as if skin peeling after sunburn. Linnie picked a hair from her Old Spice stick.

“Sean’s,” she said. “He forgot his toothbrush and used mine. God, we sound like an old married couple.”

Averie said she liked Secret brand deodorant. They leaned toward the mirror and brushed their teeth with sink water so freezing that Linnie’s teeth hurt. She was taller than Averie. Today she was wearing flip-flops, but she regularly wore ballet slippers as shoes—she owned pairs in pink, black, and tan to be more on the girl height bell curve.

“You think this is spring-fed?” Linnie asked.

“Cold enough to be,” Averie said.

Once done with her brief routine, Linnie sat on the bar of sinks, her back to the mirror. She watched Averie curl her hair. She wasn’t jealous of Averie. She didn’t look at beautiful women or bodies competitively, like fashion magazines implied and soci-

ologists claimed women did. She never saw a woman as a threat, judging her clothes, hair, or looks. Women weren't threats but were lovely. No surprise there were so many mermaids and few mermen. Averie sprayed either side of her wide forehead. The hairspray smell made Linnie think of the church retreat at the Sea Turtle Inn, where she'd lost her virginity, her hips pointy against his. His youth group was visiting from somewhere in the Panhandle. The bamboo nightstand table next to her had a dusty glass top. She remembered both twins—the other one a sister, unnaturally tan with teased hair that had an artificial green apple smell. She wrote them, and they didn't write her back.

Linnie leaned back against the mirror. "I've never used one of those," she said about the curling iron.

"I could teach you."

"Sure." She skidded off the counter and faced the mirror again.

"I wouldn't bother," Averie said, "except for my hair's so flat and thin." Shorter than Linnie, Averie stood behind her shoulder and parceled out a piece of hair. She trapped it in the curling iron, slid the iron to the end of the piece of hair, and rolled it up. "Tell me if I'm burning your head," she said.

"I've got a high pain threshold."

"Good thing." Averie unrolled the iron, leaving one side of Linnie's hair a tube wave. "Now you try it." Averie held her hand over Linnie's to demonstrate how the clamp worked.

When Linnie's thumb tired, she set the iron on the counter and patted her new hair. "Good enough." She pointed toward her head. "Is this an improvement?"

“You’re a natural kind of girl, more than a priss.”

“I don’t know if this is me, but thank you.” Then Lynn timer gave Averie a loose hug, as Southern girl-women do to thank each other or to say hello or goodbye, close enough for Lynn timer to smell Averie’s toothpaste and to feel a pull toward her that was more than a swelling of appreciation for help with hair, and then, without thinking it through, Lynn timer held Averie’s upper arms, muscly from backpacking—she smelled good—mint toothpaste plus some fresh citrus—and Lynn timer bent her knees, closed her eyes, and kissed Averie on the mouth.

Averie did not return the kiss—instead she stiffened and pulled back with a confused look. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, let out an awkward burst of a laugh, and then looked to be repressing any further reaction. They both faced the mirror. Lynn timer kept her eyes on her own new hair, dark and bloated against her skin, which was burned to tan, as she ranged around for words to explain away what had happened. She couldn’t find any. Sean was one of those people who kissed acquaintances hello on the lips—maybe she could explain it away that way. She had wanted to be pretty for Averie as much as she had for Sean.

“Sorry about that.” Lynn timer packed up her toiletries.

“It’s okay,” Averie said.

“I don’t know what that was.”

“It was weird,” Averie said.

“I know.”

They walked more than arms’ length from each other back toward the campsite. She had no idea where the urge to kiss Averie had come from. It scared her. They were too quiet, and she blurted,

“How about that moon last night?”

Averie started to say something. “Never mind,” she said. Her look was guarded, unfamiliar.

Why had Lynn timer brought up the moon, the female controller of tides? She hadn’t set out to make suggestive or romantic conversation with Averie.

In their absence the guys had started breakfast: little smokies and eggs. Lynn timer felt Sean’s eyes following her.

“You look great,” he said finally. “Wow.”

“It’s temporary,” Lynn timer said.

“But still.”

Her eyes watered when Sean grabbed her hand.

After breakfast they followed the path toward the underwater theater, ordered their tickets, and bought gum shaped like oranges in the gift shop. They found seats. Right away Sean put his arm around Lynn timer, and Averie nudged Jake to put his around her, like she was in some couples’ competition or, worse, protecting herself from Lynn timer. It wasn’t as if they lived in California or New York City. They weren’t from Miami or Key West but were thirty miles from the Georgia border. It would be 35 years before same-sex marriage would be legalized in Florida, years before AIDS and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell would wax and wane in the news, and decades before gay couples would hold hands at Jacksonville Beach and not be quarantined in the windowless AJ’s and Coral Reef bar. In 1980 Jacksonville, Catholics were religious diversity and all the Jewish people lived on the South Side. There were only five Black students in her high school and no Black members in the golf and

country clubs. Secret clusters of little old ladies nominated debutantes, and tattoos on the middle to upper class did not exist. In another 20 years, several of her high school classmates would come out as gay. But in 1980, no one had come out in her high school. Nor in her small Southern liberal arts college. She'd had a little internal question about the occasional gym teacher or church worker with men's haircuts, sports jerseys, never married, living alone or with a roommate. But she was nothing like them. She knew that things were very different in places like San Francisco, but here androgyny was under suspicion.

Soon the first mermaids swam into view behind the thick glass, using hoses to breathe. Disappointingly, they didn't have tails but were swimmers Linnie's mother's age with legs and feet. They advertised Florida orange juice, pretending to drink it. In one of Linnie's science fair projects, she'd found the Vitamin C levels practically nil in store-bought juice compared to fresh-squeezed, and Linnie had a fleeting appreciation for her mother's having always squeezed their juice fresh. The mermaids made her think of her mother swimming freestyle in her cotton suit, made before Lycra or rayon, or whatever the quick-drying fabrics were, her car seat invariably wet after the drive home from the beach.

Now young mermaids swam out wearing tails—finally!—the sun casting a fishnet latticework on their shoulders and breasts. Some combination of ballerina, gymnast, and swimmer, they lifted each other into patterns of bodies both geometric and organic. Linnie thought of her mother's mouth in a kumquat-sized "O," her tanned arms with their hint of alleged Seminole, hinging easily at the elbow. Since Daddy died, her mother had hardly swum at

all. Every mermaid pointed her toes.

The mermaids' hair flowed, suspended in the water, Earth's master hairstylist. Linnie sneaked a look at Averie, whose curls had relaxed in the humidity. She was worrying about what Averie thought of her, fretting she'd lose this friend and afraid Averie would tell the guys. She didn't think of Averie as a gossip, but she wondered if she ought to ask her not to say anything back home. She eased her camera and telephoto lens out of their big bag, opened a new box of film, and spread its tail over the sprockets. She closed the back of the camera and bent over it to muffle the loud crunch the advance lever would make in the amphitheater as she forwarded the film to one. If only she could reverse advance the day, unfurl its film from its sprockets like some time machine back to before the moment in the bathhouse with Averie.

It was easier having her camera in front of her face than it was to keep her expression natural for the others. One mermaid lifted another, her hand on the small of the other's back, which was so arched that her rib cage looked like wings. Bubbles rose from both of their lips. Someone should design a quieter shutter. Her father would have appreciated that thought. Two more mermaids sat at the mouth of a great shell and made looks of horror when a male sea dragon appeared.

Jake was whispering to Averie now and not watching the show. Averie took Jake's hand, the one that was over her shoulder, and pulled it further in around her. Meanwhile, over a crackling loudspeaker, a voice educated them about the Weeki Wachee River: the cypress, the egrets, the family of peacocks, the Underwater Grand Canyon, and the mermaids fighting the current in this, the

deepest spring in the United States. The scratchy voice informed them that Weeki Wachee translated to “little spring” or “winding river” in Seminole, and that the swimmer in the opening scene of *Jaws* had been a Weeki Wachee mermaid.

Late afternoon, the guys wanted to check out the newly opened Buccaneer Bay, and they all four went to the white-sand beach. Linnie wore her ancient swim team suit, a green and white Speedo with a pattern that made her think of pieced-together family crests, each about one-and-a-half inches wide. She'd always gotten a gradual tan under the white parts of a Speedo. One year her suit had been striped, and she'd tanned in stripes. She hitched up her suit on her thigh to show Averie this summer's tan crests. When Averie laughed awkwardly, she regretted having done so.

Averie wore a striped bikini with wooden rings at the hips and between her breasts. She squeezed a pool of baby oil into her cupped hand and used two fingers to spread it around and under the edges of her bikini. Tans were important in this state, but Linnie didn't care enough to mess with baby oil to attract the sun. Averie already had a good base, what with her rare tan skin/blond combination like a Scandinavian. She struggled to reach the middle of her back.

Linnie knew not to help Averie with her back. She lay on her towel and closed her eyes, everything red behind them. She had lost all ability to make conversation or to interact naturally with Averie. She heard Averie turning pages of a magazine. After a while, she propped herself up on her elbows to look for the guys, who'd been riding down the water slide. She should have done that

with them instead of laying out. She recognized both their walks as they approached—Jake flat-footed and slouched—maybe he was trying to take up less space in the world, same as she was. Stocky Sean walked erectly to gain height. She made it a point not to look at Averie. The slide would have been more fun than this. Jake stopped and shook his dark head like a dog, the way he always did after he'd been in water.

“I'm afraid Jake and I are headed for a break-up again,” Averie said.

“Why do you say that?”

Now Linnie looked. Averie shook her head, her eyes light and dark brown like bird's eye maple. Linnie was relieved she was speaking to her, and yet she wondered what Averie was doing. Was she testing her, saying aloud whatever random thought floated across her consciousness to see what kind of reaction she could get? Averie would know Linnie was loyal to Jake—but then she was loyal to Averie, as well.

When the guys were back, “We ought to get dinner started,” Averie said to Jake. The tops of his shoulders were already burning. He agreed about dinner, and their two figures receded down the wooden boardwalk that led to the campsite. Linnie sat up on her knees.

“I was watching you earlier.” Sean flopped down beside her. “I'd like to see that tan line.” He reached for her thigh.

“Don't.” Linnie held down the leg holes of her suit. She didn't want him to touch her. She didn't deserve him, anyway, not when she had half-longed for a girl who belonged to her brother, not when she was tanned with these crests like scales.

“You’re sweaty.” She dabbed at a rivulet that drained from his temple.

“I’ve got something to ask you,” he said.

Her knees ached. She hoped this didn’t mean he knew about Averie. Maybe he was going to ask something innocuous like what she really thought about last night’s dinner or how often she thought they’d be able to see each other the last week of summer. And yet the way he had said *something to ask you* had given her body a dropping sensation, like chills after sunburn. She’d be good now, she’d do as he asked—she would be the good girlfriend and sister and friend and pretend she was free of unconventional urges. She regretted snapping at him about the tan line.

Sean dropped to his knees, to be her same height, she assumed. He unzipped the cargo pocket of his swim shorts and held out a small round object, which she soon saw was an alligator twisted into a ring, its snout kissing the tip of its tail. That was cute. That was funny. Sweet of Sean to think of her at the gift shop, though he shouldn’t have wasted his money. But no matter how much of an amusing oddity the ring, Sean looked serious as he said, “Will you marry me, Linnie Byrd?”

Linnie had a surreal focus on his lips and teeth as he formed those six words. This was unexpected. This wasn’t right. She forced a smile. “I’m very flattered,” she said.

“Lately I’ve felt you slipping away,” he said.

“I haven’t supported myself yet. I’ve never lived alone.”

“I’d like to know that we’re together, that you’re part of my future.”

“Pretty unusual to get engaged before graduation.” She

stood up and shook the sand from her towel. Sean's jaw clenched, and she kept her eyes on it, almost compelled to see the hurt she'd caused.

"Is that a 'no?'" he asked.

"Just a 'not yet,'" she said.

Then he looked so disappointed that she turned her back on him and ran. When she heard his solid footsteps behind her, she about-faced and took him by the forearms. "Please don't follow me. I need a minute alone."

Now his eyes looked unfocused on the distance.

"It's not you—it's me," she said. There was a reason some breakup lines became clichés—because they were true.

She took off again, running barefoot on the sandy soil littered with pine needles and yelling in pain when she trod on a pinecone. But she kept leaping for pinecones as if they were stones across a river. She welcomed the distraction and deserved the pain. She passed palmettos and the stadium, crashed through some weeds, and dove into the mermaid pool, which was so cold that the breath nearly knocked out of her. She had no investment in her beautiful stroke but jerked through the water as fast as she could, trying to warm up but unable to. She was like one of those long-limbed insects skimming the spring. She couldn't hear her heartbeat or her breath for the water that rushed from the spring at gallons per second.

Was she shortsighted? Sean was a good person in love with her. He was *nice*, a word she hated whenever it was applied to her. He would be a smart long-term choice, a man for the future. He could save her.

She tried to swim all in one plane like a mermaid, legs sealed together in butterfly kick toward the cave. The crystal clear water was nothing like the warmer Atlantic—no Sea of Tranquility, this cold water. She never warmed up to comfortable, and as she scrambled out of the water, trying to catch her breath, she realized the mermaids must have been freezing. They must have trained themselves to smile like that.

The sun was setting, sky pink, and dinner nearly ready by the time she made it back to the campsite. Maybe Sean had asked Jake to explain her.

What is it with your sister? Sean might have lobbed at Jake.

She couldn't explain herself, and her brother wouldn't do any better. For a second she thought from Averie's expression and a searching look from Jake that Sean had told them he'd been rejected. Maybe Averie had even detailed the moment in the bathroom, revealed Linnie's mention of the moon. But no, dinner unfolded without any reference to the proposal or the bathhouse. Jake brought up *The Incredible Hulk* pilot where the Hulk comes across a father and daughter camping, and that segued into several unoriginal ghost stories. Soon they were debating whether or not marshmallows were food. Sean, energized by this argument, said they absolutely were not food as he thrust one into the fire. Everyone was acting normally, eating marshmallows raw and cooked. Linnie finally realized Sean wouldn't have told Jake because of pride. With a throe of sadness for him, she knew that he was still pursuing her, that she was slipping away, and that he had no idea what her problem was. She moved over to his log and twisted toward him. He stared at either his marshmallow or the fire as if it

were most fascinating. She watched his marshmallow catch on fire. He brought it toward him and blew out the flame. Averie said she couldn't take the mosquitoes anymore, and she and Jake kicked off their shoes outside their tent and went inside it.

"You okay?" Lynn timer skated her hand over Sean's thigh. She closed her eyes and focused on her lips on his, making the kiss as sweet and loving as she could, as passionate as possible, but it was intellectual—she was overthinking it, her tongue in search of something she could call truth.

"Where'd that come from?" he asked. She shrugged. He slid the blackened skin from his marshmallow and ate it, then offered her the middle. She said yes, please!

"I'm glad they don't know about this," he said.

"Me, too. I'm sorry."

It wasn't his fault that she was abnormal—and she was so sorry for him.

When his chin dimpled with emotion, she pulled him toward their tent. She pressed her body to his. He was backlit by the camping lantern, his face in shadow. The world was tilted as much as it ever had been, the light behind her closed eyelids more burnt orange than warm glow. The sex wasn't bad for guilt sex, and with the effort to keep the others from hearing. She hoped through that thick glass she'd gotten the mermaids on film.

