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The Lake

It was the kind of place where they literally painted the grass greener, spraying it neon every few mornings; huge whirring machines driven across golf-courses spewed the American dream only a shade darker than a tennis ball. That August, I was there with my girlfriend Joan and her family, staying with them for the last time. We were in a rented house on the edge of a geometric, man-made lake. The lake was my favorite part and Joan's too. It was full of life despite the community planners' efforts: eroded dirt softening its perfect symmetry, mayflies humming above, its surface like a protective seal, huge swaths of reeds providing shade and shelter to an impressive array of animals-- squirrels and turtles, mice and mourning-doves-- who had been displaced by the sharp cleanliness of ¼ inch golf-course grass.

She took me to the lake for the first time after we'd been dating a little less than a month. When we were together we never stopped touching each other, my hand on her leg as she drove, her arm around me as we walked, we slept so close together our hair could have tangled together into one. We were long distance, spending each weekend together and each week apart. Every Monday morning I'd show up at school in a daze, eyes ringed with purple and hickies only half-hidden. I walked around with her in my pocket, her texts filling up my phone. Everything I did-- sleeping my way through math class, sitting quiet and the lunch table, washing the dishes clean after dinner-- I did while thinking about her.

She was the kindest person I'd ever met. I decided this a week into knowing her and I still think it's true, more than a year later. When I talked she listened so intently it seemed like she was taking notes, and I found out later she was-- whole folders in her notes app dedicated to things I liked, places we could go together. And we could go anywhere, because with her, the world felt open. People said yes to her-- National Parks guards let us in without a park pass, waitresses made us a table out of two chairs and a wooden crate. She moved through the world with a confidence in its innate goodness, and it responded by giving her what she expected. I just sat in the passenger's seat in awe.

We drove down to the lake in her car, a sleek black Acura with heated seats and so many safety features it was almost self-driving. She'd driven up to Virginia in it to pick me up and now we were retracing her steps, coasting back down the highway, which had already begun to feel familiar. We made out at red lights and got honked at when we didn't notice them turn green, I stuck my feet out the window and closed my eyes, my hand running through her hair.

The drive was long and we told each other stories. First, they were true ones about our lives before each other-- my first kiss on an unsteady roof in September, the time she walked up twenty flights of stairs to get to her hotel room instead of taking the elevator with her father after a fight. Then, there were made up stories, our voices rising and falling in pitch like waves cresting. "She walked into the water when she was sixteen and walked out again sixty years later, looking the same except for her hair, which had never stopped growing."

I liked watching Joan tell stories as she drove. I liked the way eyes stayed soft on the road in front of her and I liked the look of her hand on the steering wheel, balancing on top of it more than holding it steady. And I liked the smooth way she accelerated, the car responding so quickly and elegantly to her touch it was like nothing had changed at all. Our family car didn't do that. It let you know where it was going and how it was getting there, muttering as we drove.

When Joan and I arrived at the entry-way to the lake, it wasn't the place itself that surprised me, but the ease with which she moved through it. Her arm outstretched through the open window, we finished talking to the guard quickly. He opened the gates and we drove in.

She drove up to the house and we stood outside the doorway for ninety seconds, her parents waiting to meet us inside. We adjusted and re-adjusted my hair, me making it messy and full the way I liked it, and Joan smoothing it down again. I held on to her hand til her fingertips turned bone-white, letting go only when she turned the lock and we walked through the door.

The house was big in a dead sort of way, decorated with angular, stylish furniture and smelling of disinfectant. Her mother hugged me and her father shook my hand. We sat down to eat, Joan trading banter with her father the way an experienced teller at a casino deals out cards. I blushed a little, maybe a lot. When dinner was over, I helped wash the dishes. I scrubbed the wine-glasses clean and held them up to the light to check for spots. I weighed their strange heaviness in my hands.

Two days after meeting her parents, her house caught fire. We were sitting down to dinner, and I remember her mother serving me salad dripping with dressing, each leaf shrouded in vinegar. I was thanking her when Joan screamed in a voice higher and more wavering than I had ever heard. She was pointing at the flames which had, as we scraped our chairs down to eat, begun to make their ways up the wall. The grill had exploded.

I remember laughing when I first saw the flames shoot up. They looked fake in the way that bad computer generated animation looks fake—a little too vivid for the real world. They were brighter colors than I had ever seen. I remember thinking that even in tragedy, Joan's family lived in a different world than I did, a world of technicolor grass and neon flames.

We all were still for a moment. Joan's dad clenched his jaw then unclenched it, staring at the flames. Her mother didn't look at the fire at all, instead peering at each of our faces like a dinner table guest afraid of saying the wrong thing. And Joan still had her hand out, wavering, pointing at the flames as they grew higher and higher.

Joan broke the stillness, running ahead of me, yelling directions to her parents. We grabbed phones, computers, jewelry. Someone called 911. I stood dazed and quiet, the fourth player in someone else's tragedy.

We drove in three separate cars to the same place-- a friend's house a few blocks over. Joan and I went to the third floor to sit in a dark room and she lay her head on my lap. We sat like that for hours, watching sitcoms on a huge tv and talking to each other. I waited for her to open herself to me and when she did, looking at me with melting eyes, I held her until she stopped shaking.

Once the burning house had calmed into hot ash and smoke, Joan and I went back to the house alone, where we stood surrounded by thirteen fire trucks. Neither of us were wearing shoes, we were holding hands so tight you could see the contours of the bones in each of our knuckles. Joan was desperate to go inside. She said she needed to get the medications we'd left in her room. It had been the one place in the house that wasn't destroyed by fire, and stood lonely among caved in ceilings and sheets of air where wall should be. Joan said she needed to get my school notebooks; I would need them come Monday morning. She needed to get my hoop earrings, my books of poetry, my toiletries bag. Really, I think, she needed to see the damage for herself.

She had been so in control earlier, giving orders to all of us as calmly as if playing a game of strategy. She had walked in long, cold strides and no one seemed to notice her bare feet or the tremor in her hands. But now that the damage was done and her parents were gone, she seemed to retreat into herself. Her voice was quiet and she spent a lot of time staring at a point right past me as I spoke, as if she was reading something on the air behind me.

She pleaded with the firefighters to let her in. She begged them. As she spoke, she kept glancing towards the house. She pressed her hand into mine so hard she left crescent-moon marks on my palm from each of her nails. The firefighters spoke of structural instability, of the searing-hot walls, about legal necessities. She just stood there arguing with them and I stood with her, still watching.

I waited until she took a breath and then spoke in calm, cold words. I don't remember what I said to convince them. Maybe it didn't matter and it was just the way I stood calm and smoke-stained, refusing to look away. Or maybe

they just had better things to do than argue with two teenage girls who wouldn't go away.

Either way, they let her in and I felt the heat on her feet like they were mine. I stared at the house, my heels filled with tiny shooting pains. She walked out five minutes later, ash streaked on her cheeks, her skin warm to the touch. Still shoeless, we walked away in silence. We must have been a strange sight-- our hands held together as we stumbled through the golf course grass, leaving behind the smell of smoke.

Almost a year later, we went back to the empty lot where the house used to be. It was our last weekend at the lake before we'd go to far away colleges, and we wanted somewhere we could be alone. We walked through the skeleton of the doorway, still observing the entrance to a place that no longer existed, and we walked past the bits of rubble that had never been picked up. We were still holding hands, loosely now, and we went on tip-toe, trying to avoid the jagged bits of rock which were constantly, irrevocably scattered around the empty lot, seeming to grow back each time we cleared them away.

The ground was naked and gray. It stuck out in the neighborhood, a gash in the earth surrounded on either side by trimmed lawns and sprinkler systems. It refused to be made over, and so Joan and I accepted it as it was and learned to smile at the neighbors with their worried, furrowed brows.

That night, we walked through the lot and to the dock on the edge of the lake. We spent the night there, smoking bowl after bowl and speaking to each other softly. We ate dry ramen crushed between our fingers and slept with our limbs tangled together. We made up names for constellations we could barely see; we squinted through the light pollution. "Look, that one's a wave. That one there, if you follow my finger you'll see it."

"Which wave?"

"The one God parted for Moses."

"Do you see the jellyfish?"

"Where?"

"Next to it. That little cluster of stars."

"Which jellyfish?"

"The one that stung my dad the summer he was seventeen."

"Oh, I see it."

"You're looking the wrong direction."

"No I'm not. It's beautiful."

As it got dark we stretched out on the dock and lay together, feeling the lake move beneath us. Next to her, I had trouble differentiating between my hands and her hands, my feeling and her feeling. This happened whenever I got high with her, forgetting where the boundaries of my self ended and hers began. But it happened other times too. She'd call me hyperventilating and my chest would ache like someone had carved something out of it. Someone would call my name and she'd turn her head as if they'd addressed her, ready to answer whatever question they asked. We weren't always like this, usually delighting in the ways our different selves bumped up against each other. But it was the mode we reverted to in crisis or late at night, the feeling of knowing someone so well and caring for them so completely that your identities can slip in and out of each other the way flames flicker into one.

Late that night, I decided to swim. I took off my clothes and jumped, ripples gathering around me like the lace train of a wedding gown. The lake was so bright that night, reflecting the light of the houses and the stars and the small white moon, that I was almost surprised when, upon jumping in, the water around me didn't glow. I was expecting millions of tiny embers, bits of flame that had escaped from the burning house so long ago and found a home in the lake. But the water was just water. And so I swam, my body moving through the warm dark like a spark traveling down a fuse.