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For my grandfather
Three hundred feet from the waters of Lake George, in the vacation town of Huletts Landing, stood a massive hotel. It had been built in the 1880’s when Huletts first opened its shores to tourists and had remained open until the mid 70’s, when vacationers became more interested in renting the lakeside cabins that had been popping up left and right. By the fall of ’95, the paint was chipped and peeling, the windows and doors were mostly covered with plywood boards, and the porch steps were bowed and overgrown with grass. The long porch clung to the face of the hotel and looked out onto the water. Above the porch were two stories of boarded-up windows. The roof crested in three peaks like spiking lines on a heart monitor.

From our house you could just about see the back of the hotel’s roof. We lived then just above Huletts, on the side of County Route 6—the mountain road that was the only way in or out of the Landing. We were one of the few families who remained in the town once the summer ended. We were four. Dad, Mom, Skip, and Me.
The hotel had meant a lot to my family. My parents had first met on the porch of the old hotel in 1981. As children, Skip and I learned we could sneak in through a loose board; we spent hours upon hours exploring the hallways and rooms. I used to go up to the old attic when I wanted to be alone.

September 11, 1995 was the last day that I, or anyone, ever went to the hotel. It was the second week of a new school year and the first week had been less than spectacular. I was nine and had just started middle school; Skip was 14 and it was his last year in middle school. Skip and I had walked to a large gravel turnaround at the top of the mountain to wait for the bus. He was kicking at the gravel when I heard the motor of the bus wheezing up the other side of the mountain. I stepped back and hid behind a bush as it pulled up. Skip had boarded the bus and taken his seat before he realized that I wasn’t behind him. He spotted me in the bush and his eyes watched me the entire time the bus was turning around. Once the bus was out of sight I walked back down the mountain.

Dad was at work but Mom had stayed home with a headache. She’d been getting them pretty frequently. It seemed curious to me—though I didn’t connect the two—that my parents had also been fighting with increased regularity. Several mornings I’d woken up early to find Mom asleep on the couch.

When I got closer to the house I slipped into the cover of the woods so Mom wouldn’t see me and bushwhacked down to the Landing. Once I got to the edge of the woods, I dropped and ran the rest of the way to the hotel.

For the past week they’d been setting it up for demolition. I squeezed my body through a gap in the chain-link fence that surrounded the area and walked up to the giant crane that they had brought in the day before. It was mustard yellow and had what looked
like an enormous bowling ball dangling from a string. The walls of the hotel had all these brightly colored markings and stickers on them and the porch’s railing had already been removed. I sat down on the top step of the porch and tried to imagine the Landing without the hotel. I couldn’t.

“Rich people,” Mom had told me once, nodding to the giant building. “Rich people used to stay in that hotel.”

Mom used to stay there with her family long before she had met Dad. She called her family comfortable, but they sounded rich to me—they never had to worry about paying their electric bill on time.

The wind blew and shook the branches of the trees. A brown leaf skittered up to the hotel and snagged on the wood of the bottommost step. It was the first fallen leaf I’d seen that year and even though I always loved the colors of fall it meant the Landing would be empty for the next seven or eight months. I looked around. Most of the vacationers had already left; only one or two cars were still parked outside of their cabins.

Another gust blew and I watched the Lake ripple and crest. There wasn’t a single boat as far as I could see. I shivered and looked around one more time, then I went to the window with the loose board and slipped inside.

The lobby of the hotel was still and quiet. Most of the furniture had been removed but the check-in desk still stood tall and a large fountain made of stone lay dried out in the middle of the room. The room was vast and empty. I said “hello” and listened to my voice bounce around the walls.

Dad had been the first one to take me inside. He’d taken Skip and me up to the attic to see the bats, but by then, White Nose Syndrome had already wiped out most of
the Landing’s bat population. I remember there were only a handful of tiny black bats hanging from the ceiling. They were wrapped up tight like unbloomed roses and looked sickly and small. By ’95 there were no bats left. The demolition crew had cleared them out with the furniture.

I’d salvaged a wing chair from a room on the second floor. It was high-backed and regal looking, with faded floral-print upholstery and wooden legs carved to look like lion’s paws. It was ugly and heavy but I’d somehow managed to drag it up to the attic. I placed it in front of the window—one of the few on the hotel that wasn’t covered by a plywood board.

This was where I went on the day they planned to knock down the hotel. I opened the window and sat in the chair. The breeze blew in and smelled of changing leaves.

Mom was a Landing girl. Her family came to Hulett’s for two weeks every summer. They had done this since she was little—used to drive up from Connecticut in their Chrysler Imperial and stay in the massive hotel. Mom recalled the weeks spent at Lake George as the happiest of her young life. She would splash around in the water and build castles in the sand and explore the long hallways of the enormous hotel. Then, the year she turned ten, her father died and they stopped coming to the hotel. The next summer, the hotel closed for good.

Mom always thought that if her father hadn’t died, things would’ve turned out different. But her mother, whom she called Beatrice, ended up remarrying a man named Charles. For Mom, this marriage changed everything. Mostly, she looked back on her life fondly. But it wasn’t surprising that the things she treasured from her youth had all
occurred before the age of ten. “I wish you could have met him,” she used to say of my grandfather. “He would have loved you.” I used to imagine him taking me swimming and teaching me how to fish. But the truth is, if my grandfather hadn’t died, I probably wouldn’t have been born.

It was 1981 when Mom finally returned to the Landing. Beatrice had been married to Charles for a year and had finally convinced him to take a vacation in the place her family had once loved so dearly. They drove through the night and by the time they got to the Landing it was too dark to see anything.

The next morning, Mom lay awake on the cabin’s screened-in porch. She’d been up since 5, listening to the breeze blowing in off the Lake as it crashed against the wire-mesh screen. The Landing was just beginning to come to life at that hour. Birds stirred in the trees, and the Lake, it seemed, was just beginning to lap at the shore. She used to tell me that even the Lake had to sleep.

That morning she was feeling particularly resentful: of her father for having died, of her mother for having remarried, of everyone and everything for having kept her away from the Landing for all these years. The sun had barely risen but she decided she could no longer lie in bed. The walls of the tiny cabin were closing in.

(Tiny. That was what she had called it. She’d taken me to see it when she told me this story. It was called Cedar Grove, had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a nice porch; it was painted a clean white with bright blue trim; the Lake was right in the yard, close enough to lap against the back wall. Maybe compared to the hotel it was tiny, but compared to the house we lived in, it was anything but.)
Mom walked away from Cedar Grove with the Lake’s crashing to her left. The morning was cold and the sun was low in the sky causing the shadows of the vacation homes to spike across the road. She could just make out the triple peaks of the hotel’s roof over the trees as she walked. A smile rippled across her face.

The Landing filled her with happiness; she was so glad to be back. It had been nearly seven years since she’d seen the place and not much had changed. It was still beautiful and green and the Lake still lapped gently at the shores. But as she got closer to the hotel she realized something wasn’t right. The walls looked dirty and disheveled; the grass around the place was high and unkempt; some of the windows were broken or cracked and those on the first floor were covered with plywood. Nobody had told her they’d closed the hotel and when she saw it she felt like crying. She was about to turn around when she saw someone carrying what looked like an edge trimmer climb onto the hotel’s porch. It was a boy. He was shaggy-looking; perhaps rugged was the word. She stopped and watched him. He had placed the edge trimmer down on the porch and was using the top of the railing to pry the lid off a beer bottle. He looked young and muscular, slightly dirty. His hair was longish and slicked with sweat. He had a short beard growing that looked like dust from a distance.

She watched him for a while until finally he spotter her. His dusty cheeks spread into a smile and he places his beer down on the porch at his side. Then he cupped his hands and put them over his mouth. A shrill call escaped through his cupped hands and he opened and closed one of them, changing the pitch of the call rapidly. It was a strange sound—louder, more piercing than a whistle soft and urgent. It reminded her of a bird—an owl, or a loon.
She stood staring and when she didn’t move he called to her again and this time she went.

Mom approached the porch where the boy was sitting. He looked like a doll perched on the enormous structure.

“Hello,” she said.

“I don’t know many girls that get up this early,” he smiled.

She was taken aback by his blunt reply. “That makes me wonder how many girls you know.”

“You get to know one or two, living here,” he said. “Once the summer sun rolls them in.”

“You live here?” This surprised her. “Year round?”

“For as long as my father’s father can remember.” His nostrils flared—she’d learn he had a way of doing this whenever he said something he thought was funny or smart.

“I’d kill to live here,” Mom said.

“I bet winter would kill you first.”

She was stunned by the way he spoke. Where she was from in Connecticut, the polite, rich boys wouldn’t dare speak like this. But she was 17 and she wasn’t looking for a polite, rich boy. The way this rugged boy spoke and carried himself struck her as attractive, different.

“I didn’t mean to offend,” he said after a moment. “Just meant it’s no place for a pretty girl to be stuck once the snow hits.”

“We’re tougher that we look.” She walked up the steps and sat next to him on the porch. His name was Roger and he lived at the bottom of the mountain road that fed into
Huletts. Her family passed his house every time they went in or out of Huletts and she told him she knew it well.

“I used to stay in this hotel,” she said. “I always thought it was a castle.”

“My mother used to work here,” he said looking down at his feet. “Scrubbing floors for the kings and queens.”

Mom blushed. Most of her life had been associated with wealth and luxury, but she was tired of these things. And they weren’t what she thought of when she looked at the old hotel. She thought of her father, and the innocence of childhood. She thought of her former happiness that had been stamped out like a fire when her father died.

“I-I’ve gotta get back to work.” Roger stood up and went for the trimmer. “Grass isn’t gonna trim itself.”

Mom watched him walk down the steps. “Okay,” she said quietly. She was embarrassed and sorry. She wanted him to stay.

He turned around when he got to the bottom of the staircase. “Maybe I’ll see you later.” It sounded like a question and Mom smiled at this, nodded her head.

She thought about this question for the rest of the morning. Would she see him again? Did she want to see him again? Of course she did. She was excited by the idea of him and kept playing their meeting over in her mind, quietly reddening whenever she thought of what she had said about the castle.

By one o’clock, Mom was at the beach. The afternoon heat was beginning to swell. She was lying on her back on a towel, bathing suit straps looped around her shoulders. Beatrice was leafing through a magazine and Charles was sipping gin with his shirt off.
Beatrice put down her magazine noisily and looked over at her husband. “Isn’t this place beautiful, Charles?” she asked with an excited smile.

“It’s certainly charming,” he replied without looking.

Mom sat up. The thin straps of her bathing suit fell down and dangled near her elbows. She watched the smile melt off of Beatrice’s face. As unhappy as she’d been with her mother for remarrying, she still loved her and hated to see her crushed in any way. She was about to tell Beatrice how beautiful she thought it was and how happy she was to be back when Beatrice turned to her.

“Pull up your straps, honey,” Beatrice half-smiled. “You’re not a little girl anymore.”

Mom fixed her bathing suit and looked over her shoulder at the old hotel. The boarded up windows, the cracked, chipping paint. Charles had changed things. There was no getting around this. The memory she had of Beatrice in this place was one of laughter. She didn’t recognize the half-smile on the woman in front of her—at least not with the Lake in the background.

She decided she didn’t want to be on the beach anymore, surrounded by all of these happy families. She was about to stand up and walk back to Cedar View when, from behind her, she heard the soft whirring and clipping of an edge trimmer.

She turned to see Roger gripping the device near the tall grass that grew along the outer edge of the beach area. The sound was sweet and soft and mechanical. It calmed her. She turned onto her stomach and watched him work. He had changed since this morning. He had on dark cargo pants and heavy brown boots. His shins were flecked
with green. A damp white shirt was tossed over his shoulder and his skin was glistening with sun and sweat.

She closed her eyes and listened to the whir of the nylon strings and fell asleep in the warmth of the sun.

Later, she was on the porch of Cedar View watching the sun sparkle on the surface of the Lake. Beatrice was inside watching two pots of boiling water and listening to the radio. Charles was on the couch reading the New York Times. Mom was thinking about Roger. More specifically, wondering what her friends back home would think of him. Chloe Personette, her best friend, would surely disapprove.

“All men want the same thing,” she’d said more than once. “We can’t just go around talking to them because they have nice blue eyes.”

For the most part, Mom agreed with Chloe’s assessment. Her own experiences had proven that this was often the case. But she didn’t feel that way about Roger; she felt their connection was genuine and thought that maybe he, like her, desired more. Besides, his eyes were green.

Mom came in off the porch and peered into the two pots Beatrice had bubbling on the stove. Hot dogs and mac and cheese—a meal she would never prepare anywhere but the Lake. Mom smiled at this, wondered what Beatrice’s friends would think if they could see her now: blonde hair wrapped up in a ratty bandana cooking store-bought mac and cheese. It pained her to think that all of these people they considered friends would be so judgmental. In thinking this, Mom started to realize she was tired of the people back home. Sure, they were nice, but they were all lacking a certain something. She
didn’t know what. She started to think she’d been in New Canaan for too long, that she
didn’t really fit anymore.

Hall and Oates were singing on the radio and Mom watched Beatrice moving her
shoulders subtly to the music. Mom went over to the radio and turned up the volume,
then jumped in front of Beatrice and started dancing.

“Nicole, what’s gotten into you?” she laughed. “Let me show you a thing or two.”

It was moments like this that Mom really liked her mother. She seemed wild, free,
more like the mother she used to know. They jumped and danced for the duration of the
song and when it was over they both stood in the kitchen laughing and trying to catch
their breaths. When the next song came on Charles said, “Can you please turn that
down?” and Beatrice walked over to the radio and switched it off completely.

Mom ate dinner quickly and quietly then left without helping to clear. The sun
was still out and the Landing was bathed in bright golden light. There was about an hour
before sunset and Mom wanted to sit on the porch of the old hotel like she used to with
her father and watch the sky and the Lake change colors.

She walked toward the hotel, or perhaps she ran, and when she got there she
found Roger sitting on the porch drinking a beer, in much the same way she had found
him earlier that morning.

He smiled when he saw her. “Now I know you’re following me.”

Mom cupped her hands over her mouth and blew into them hard but instead of a
whistle all she got was a sound like wind wet with spit.
“Come here and I’ll show you how,” Roger laughed. He opened a beer bottle with the edge of the railing and offered it to her. She hesitated but took it and sat down next to him; she’d only drunk alcohol twice before.

“Put your hands out and cover the fingers of the right with the fingers of the left,” he showed her as he explained. “Cup them together but make sure there’s no holes.”

Mom watched his hands as he did this. They were calloused and a little dirty.

“Now fold them together and bring the thumbs up straight. Put your lips to the top part of your thumbs, just above the knuckles, and blow into the space between them.”

Mom followed his directions and blew into her hands but again nothing but noisy air escaped.

“Here,” he laughed and put his hands in out in front of her. “Try mine.”

She pressed her lips to his thumbs; they tasted salty and earthy. She blew into them and a tiny whistle squeaked in his palms.

“I did it!” she shouted.

“That was great,” he said smiling.

Mom looked out at the Lake and tried to fight the huge smile that was spreading across her lips. She took a sip of beer and spilled some in her excitement. With the back of her hand she wiped the beer from her chin. “Are you finished with work?” She turned to him, hoping he didn’t see.

“For today,” he was looking out at the Lake and the mountains.

Mom watched him bring the beer to his lips and tried to mimic his casual movements. He turned to her.

“Do you want to see something?”
Mom nodded.

Roger stood up and walked over to one of the hotel’s boarded up windows. He looked around to see if anyone was watching, the he pried up the corner of the plywood.

“Come on,” he said.

She finished the rest of her beer quickly and walked over to the window. Roger held her hand as she squeezed her way in.

It was amazing how bright it was. Ribbons of dusty light poured in through the cracks in the boards and lit up the hotel’s old lobby.

“Look familiar?” Roger’s nostrils flared.

All of the furniture was covered in dusty cloth and the wallpaper was peeling in strips like dry hangnails. The place looked completely foreign, and yet, somehow, exactly as she remembered.

“They keep talking about tearing it down,” Roger said. “I don’t think they will.”

“I hope not,” she said in a near whisper. She looked up at the old ceiling and spun around the room in quick circles; the beer was making her feel giddy. When she stopped spinning her body dipped to the right but Roger caught her.

“You all right?” he laughed.

“I feel like I was here yesterday.” Mom walked over to the old check-in desk and rang the little bell. It made a deadened buzz. “Can still picture my father checking in.”

“What’d you used to do while you were here?” Roger’s voice echoed behind her.

She looked over at him; he was sitting on the bottom step of the wide staircase. “I used to sit in this lobby and just watch the people streaming through,” she walked over.
“I’d wander the huge halls, run up and down the flights of stairs. My father and I used to watch the sunset from the porch.”

Mom sat down next to him, their legs touching. “Did you ever stay here when you were a kid?”

“Only when both of my parents had to work,” he looked around as if trying to remember. “I was too young to stay home by myself so my mother would bring me here and keep me in one of the rooms that wasn’t being used. She used to pretend I was a customer. She’d come in knocking, calling me sir, asking me if there was anything I needed.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was,” Roger looked at her. “Until the hotel closed.”

Mom didn’t know what to say. It was obvious that the hotel had become a ghost for both of them. She felt connected to Roger in that moment so she leaned toward him and kissed his lips. She pulled away embarrassed and looked over at him shyly. He was smiling like a little boy.

“Come on,” he stood up and offered his hand. “I’ve still got to show you something.”

She took his hand and followed him up the staircase. Mom thought she would follow this boy just about anywhere at that moment. The top of the staircase opened onto a long hallway where the darkness spread out like thick black jelly in both directions.

“Where are we going?” she whispered.

“There.” Roger pointed to a door at the end of the second floor’s hallway. The door looked the same as all the others in the hallway. “The attic,” he said. They walked to
it and he opened the door, revealing yet another staircase, this one narrow and steep, with a frail wooden railing. There was a faint glow of dusty yellow light seeping under a door at the top of the staircase.

Mom followed Roger up the stairs and immediately noticed the stench. It was strong and sour, like expired yogurt. “What is that,” she asked.

Roger turned to her putting a finger to his lips. “Be quiet,” he whispered.

Roger opened the door to an attic. It was long and bright, high ceiled, like a church. The rafters were covered in thick black fuzz.

Mom walked to the middle of the room and looked around at the ceiling. It seemed to be moving, swelling. Her heart began to thump with the strangeness of it all. Then Roger slammed the door with both of them inside and the ceiling fell in. Or it seemed to. The thick black fuzz was flying all around her; it was a swirling cloud of screeching, flapping fruit bats.

“There must have been thousands of them,” she said when she told me the story. “I’d never been so scared in my life.”

She said it had been like a nightmare. She ducked and grabbed onto Roger. When she looked at his face she could see that he was smiling. He was looking around in the torrent of bats just amazed by it all. “Isn’t this incredible?” he shouted. And it was then that Mom realized Roger was trying to impress her, trying to show her a side of the hotel she’d never seen before.

No one had ever gone to such lengths for her before and she found it charming in a terrifying way.
“And that was how it started,” she’d told me. Mom wasn’t looking for love any more than she was looking for a roomful of bats. But she’d found both. The bats had taken her breath away and Roger had taken her heart.

They spent the rest of Mom’s vacation sneaking off together and by the time she was in the car driving back to New Canaan, she was already pregnant with Skip. Six weeks later she’d be following Roger’s loon call back to the Landing (a call I would learn to run to with an urgency only a son can conjure for his father.) Five years later she’d be giving birth to me. And fourteen years later the hotel’s walls would crumble.

The demolition crew showed up around ten. There were five of them, all dressed in jeans and flannel. They were standing around their cars, parked in a circle just outside of the fenced-in area. Their tires had been tearing up the grass for weeks and what remained was a muddied patch of green with winding brown strips of tread gouged into the earth. It made the Landing look dirty, run down, and these men were just standing there talking, not caring what affect they were having on the place.

I watched them from the window and listened.

“This winter’s gonna nail us,” a tall man in a beard barked. “You can feel it in the air already.”

“Bullshit,” another said. “It’s only September.”

“I sure as hell hope not.” This one had a hardhat balanced on his head.

“Practically broke my back shoveling last year.”

Their voices were loud and seemed to bounce around in the emptiness of the Landing. What struck me was the ease with which they discussed this matter, as if they
weren’t about to rip this historic landmark out of the earth. None of them had grown up in this place; none of them had grown up with this hotel. What gave them the right to tear it down? The more I listened the more upset I became. It wasn’t originally clear to me why I had come up to the attic that day, but now I realized, it was to try and stop them. But what could I do? There’d been no public outcry. There’d been no petition. Save the Huletts Hotel was a slogan that existed only in my own head. I was one of the few people to call this place home but my voice was too small to make a difference. The voices that did matter were those of the vacationers—the ones who wanted the hotel gone so they could build more houses. What connection did they have? Their parents hadn’t met here.

I felt something catch in my chest as I half hid behind the attic’s windowsill. My cheeks grew warm and tears welled in my eyes as I thought about the Landing without the hotel. I sunk down further below the window. If I didn’t want these men to see me before, I definitely didn’t want them to see me crying.

I was sitting on the floor with my back against the wall and my head in my hands when I heard Dad’s loon call. It was unmistakable. I stood up and leaned my body out the window expecting to find my father. What I found instead was Mom, standing cross-armed among the men of the demolition crew. Dad’s work boots clung, untied, to her feet and a large frown hung from her face. She turned to the men and spoke to them for a moment and then she walked through the opening in the chain-link fence, began climbing the steps of the hotel’s porch, and disappeared from my view under the porch’s awning.

I could hear her walking through the guts of the hotel. Heard the thud of her boots on the staircase and the slight wheeze in her breath when she finally got to the attic door.
She opened it and looked around. Then she walked over to me and sat down in the chair by the window.

“Big place you got here.” She smiled as she said this but I could tell she was annoyed. “Needs a little bit of dusting.”

“How’d you know I was here?” I sniffled and wiped my nose.

“A mother always knows.”

“Yeah right. Who told you?”

“Nobody.” She leaned forward in the chair. “The school called when you were missing from homeroom. I knew there was only one place you could be.”

“Well I’m not leaving.” I crossed my arms like I had seen her do outside. I was trying it on to see if I could have the same effect.

“Those men out there told me if that wrecking ball hits you it’ll fling you all the way to the other side of the Lake.” She moved her hand in a dipping arch as she said this. “You’ll have to swim back.”

I glared at her. “They did not.”

“Nicky,” she sighed. “Come on. What are you doing up here? This is dangerous.”

“I’m saving the hotel,” I said. “If I can stop them from getting rid of it, maybe we’ll all be happy again. Maybe you and Dad will stop fighting and you’ll stop getting headaches.”

Mom got up from the chair and sat down next to me. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed the top of my head.

“This hotel has nothing to do with all that,” she told me. “And no matter what your father and I do, we still love you very much.”
“But I want you to love each other.” I felt like crying again.

Mom hugged me to her chest. “It’s not that I don’t love your father, Nicky. There are just things in my life I wish I’d done differently.”

“Like what?”

“I was very young when I met your father,” she rested her cheek on top of my head. “I left my family when I was seventeen and came to live here. All this seemed cute back then.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Mostly I just miss my old life. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you or Skip or your father.”

She stood up and extended her hand toward me. “Come on, let’s go home.”

I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay with the hotel. But something in her voice compelled me to follow her. I took her hand and we walked down the old staircase and out through the loose board. She stopped at the top of the porch’s staircase and we took one last look at the Lake.

“I used to stand here and watch this with my father when I was your age,” she said.

I rubbed my face so the demolition crew wouldn’t know I’d been crying. Mom and I left through the fence and she led me back up to the house. She made grilled cheese and a bowl of tomato soup from a can and I spent the rest of the afternoon on the couch.

Skip came home from school and found me lying there. He covered me with pillows and lay across them. “Don’t ever play hooky without me again,” he said and tickled me.
“Okay, okay!” I squealed, laughing and fighting for breath.

He and I watched TV until Dad came home from work then the four of us walked to the Lake to watch the hotel come down. We watched from the shore as the wrecking ball swung into the walls of the hotel. The walls exploded upon impact, sending dust and splinters of wood flying through the air. I was sitting on Dad’s shoulders—though I was probably too big to do that anymore—and Mom was standing in front of Dad and me. He had his arms wrapped around her and she was holding herself.

In a week, Mom would be gone. But at that moment we were standing as a family, watching the walls of the hotel come crashing to the earth. How could we know this was going to tear us apart?
THE ICE STORM

In the fall of '97 we lived in a house halfway up the mountain—as we had the year before that and the year before that and so on—perched atop the vacation village of Huletts Landing. Below us were the vacation homes and the glistening green-blue Lake and above us was the forest thick with pine and white birch and towering maple. Across the road from our house was a river that ran down from the mountain, rushed beneath the road and cut through the Landing at a sharp diagonal until it emptied into the Lake at the south end of the Landing. The river ran past vacation homes and was rich with large rocks and long green-black fish that Skip and I would trap with dams made from the rocks. The temperature of the water rushing down from the mountain plunged early that year and we waded in it until the river slowed with cold and froze over—no longer emptying into but reaching toward the Lake hardened with ice. We walked and slipped and slid down the river until we came to the Lake and when we stood on its surface and
picked up our heads we found wooden boards nailed over the cabins’ screened-in porches and the Landing still and silent, blanket ed in snow.

Winter was the downside of living where we did. Huletts was a postcard during the summer months, practically vibrating with green and blue; there were people everywhere. But once the summer ended, everyone packed up their things got in their cars and left. Ours was one of the only winterized houses on the Landing. Aside from the Junkman up the mountain and the Borden’s down by The Point, ours was the only house with running water past September 1st. The other houses were vacation homes. The nearest town was Whitehall—where Skip and I went to school—but that was separated by a mountain and five miles of cracked, snaking freeway. When the snow came it brought fresh death to the Landing.

That snowfall marked the third winter since Mom had left. She’d dropped off with the leaves in ’95—gotten out before the snow hit—and for Skip, became another specter in the ghost town that was a wintry Huletts. He was fourteen when she left and I was nine. Now he was bitter and I was eleven.

All I knew was that she’d gone home to her family on the Chesapeake Bay.

“I thought this was her home,” I said to Dad when he told me this.

“Not anymore,” was all he said.

During this time I constantly imagined her coming back. Some nights I’d sit out on the porch and wait, watching headlights come down the mountain and drive past our house. I wondered if she thought about me as much as I thought about her. I’d picture her sitting on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay, writing letters to me in her head. Sometimes
I’d walk down to the Lake and wonder how hard it would be for me to swim to her. Not that I didn’t love the Landing. I just missed my mom.

“She’s never coming back,” Skip said to me one night. He had come home late and found me asleep on the couch outside. His breath smelled of booze—though I couldn’t name it then—and the air was filled with a late summer chill.

“How do you know?”

“If she was planning to come back, she never would have left in the first place,” he said and went inside.

When fall came I moved my vigil to the living room couch. It was warmer inside and I could still see the road from the living room window.

Then the snow came and I knew it would be another six months, at least, until she came back.

Skip and I had always stuck together during the winter months. You kind of had to. But that year he began spending more and more time on his own, roaring off on an old snowmobile he and Dad had picked at a yard sale and fixed up earlier in the year. I guess it was only natural; he was a teenager now and I was still a kid. But I took this slight to be a personal one, constantly wondered what I had done to chase my brother away.

This was when Luke and I became something of a team, and it sort of made up for my brother’s absence. Luke was a kid from school who lived further up the mountain, past the junkman and the beaver pond. It was a solid twenty-minute hike from his house to the Landing but he made the trek every day to hang down by the frozen Lake. He was just happy to be out of the house and we connected on this shared interest, spent most
days walking around the empty houses of the Landing pretending we lived in them, or
daring one another to walk out further onto the frozen surface of the Lake.

The surface was covered in a light dusting of powder and a gentle brush of your
hand revealed opaque white ice like trapped fog and thin cracks that went on for
hundreds of feet in certain places. The cracks were scary but when you wacked the ice
with the bottom of your boot or jumped on it as hard as you could it felt as solid as stone.
In this fashion we worked our way out to the middle of the Lake.

By January we’d made it to Huletts Island without hearing or making any cracks
in the ice so we figured the rest of the Lake was pretty solid. With this icy crust on the
surface of the Lake, everything was now in our reach. This opened an entire world of
adventure.

We trekked across the Lake to the steep shore at the foot of Deer’s Leap. The
sloping mountain face was a collection of fallen rocks and jagged boulders and we
hopped from rock to rock loosening one every so often, sending an avalanche of stone
and white powder down to the icy shore.

We went to the rope swing just north of Gull Bay where the trees were culled
down to the stump in a thick line reaching back fifty feet or so into the forested mountain.
The cold, knotted rope launched us through the trees and out over the bare surface of the
Lake and we had to hold on with all our strength and hope the other person would be able
to grab us when we flew back into the cover of the trees.

We came home from these adventures cold and red-faced, stung by the wind and
the snow. I was happy but the truth is, without Luke and the adventures, I don’t know
what I would have done. Most nights I sat in the living room with Dad as the darkness
grew thicker and waited for the hum of Skip’s snowmobile to pull up to the house. Some nights it didn’t come and my sleep was heavy with dreams of Skip: we’d be deep in the woods or wading in the river and then there’d be this flash or this shadowy fog rolling in and then it would just be me and no matter which way I went I couldn’t find my brother and I couldn’t find my way out.

One day Luke and I walked to the jumping cliffs a mile or two down the Lake and hiked to the top. Standing on the tiny flat ledge cut out of the rock, I could feel my testicles pulling up into my stomach the closer I got to the edge. I’d been up there a handful of times while the waves rolled blue beneath but there was something unnerving about the unmoving ice 60 feet below us. You couldn’t even tell there was a Lake under all that ice.

The Lake spread out white in both directions. The sky was clear to the north and we could see as far up the Lake as Silver Bay. The snow-covered ice was flanked on both sides by steep mountains of white with pockets of deep green pine. A hard wind was blowing up from the south end in short bursts and Luke and I grabbed onto each other whenever the trees at our backs began to whistle and shake. There were dark gray clouds heavy with snow and the wind was pushing them north, carrying the faint roar of snowmobile engines from somewhere down the Lake.

“That’s where my brother is,” I said, though I didn’t know for sure. Skip had told me about these huge gatherings on the Lake where they cut great big squares out of the ice and jumped them with snowmobiles and fat-tired dirt bikes. He told me maybe he’d take me there some day.
“Nah-uh,” Luke said. “He’s probably at the Trash House. That’s where all the high schoolers go.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s an abandoned lake house in the woods near Bolton Landing,” he pointed down the Lake. “They all go there and do bad stuff.”

“What kind of bad stuff?”


“Skip wouldn’t go there!” My stomach hurt thinking about it.

“I bet he does.” Luke yanked a twig off of a small tree that was growing near the cliff. He tossed it over the edge and we watched it somersault toward the ice. “My cousin said she’s seen him there.”

“You’re lying,” I shouted and pushed him halfheartedly.

“Hey!” Luke shoved me back, and my foot slipped. I had to grab a branch of the little tree to keep my balance. A shower of pebbles went cascading over the cliff’s edge. I sat down and held onto the trunk of the tree, crying and breathing heavily.

“Hey,” Luke said and knelt down next to me. He placed a hand on my shoulder.

“We’ll build our own snowmobile. And we won’t let him drive it.”

I stopped crying and wiped my nose on my sleeve. I could feel the chill of the stone through my jeans. I shivered and Luke started listing off the ridiculous features that our snowmobile would have.

“A popcorn machine,” he said. “A cooler filled with soda, and a TV in the dashboard.”
“One of those things that drills holes and tunnels through mountains,” I added in between sniffles.

“A cage in case we find a wolf or a bear so we can catch it and make it our pet.”

We laughed and our voices echoed throughout the Lake’s icy canyon.

This cheered me up, but as good as these things sounded, I would have given anything for just a seat on the ripped up vinyl of my brother’s shit Polaris. I thought about Skip and I hoped that, wherever he was, he was okay.

Luke and I sat there and watched a dark gray cloud roll up over the Lake. It came quickly and coated the bright blue sky above our heads and suddenly we were in it and it was snow.

The snow was falling fast and wet by the time Luke and I got to our separate homes, but by morning the snow had turned to rain and then to ice when it hit the ground, trapping Skip Dad and me indoors. The rain didn’t stop for five days. During that time we watched television, played cards, and drank hot Mountain Dew. But we didn’t talk about Mom although I thought about her. I kept imagining her preparing us hot chocolate and calling us her Wolfe-men.

On the fourth day of the ice storm Skip and I were watching television when the power went out. It happened so fast that I barely knew what was going on. Skip and I sat in the dim silence for a minute and then he grunted up from the couch and walked outside.

It was the middle of the afternoon so what little light the clouds allowed still snuck in through the windows. The house felt strangely still, like whoever was watching the earth that day had sat on the remote by mistake and accidentally pressed pause.
Dad was out in the garage sanding the edges of a canoe we’d been building. I was supposed to be helping—it was our project for the winter, something to help us look forward to the summer’s warmth—but since Skip was trapped in the house with us, I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible before he roared off onto the Lake again. Mostly we just watched TV with our mouths shut, but that was more than enough for me.

Skip came back into the house, trailing Dad, and they calmly walked to the circuit breaker. They toggled the heavy black switches with ominous clicks.

“Skip, I’m telling you, it’s not a blown fuse,” Dad closed the metal cover of the breaker.

“How do you know?”

“Look outside,” he pointed. “There’s ice everywhere. There’s bound to be a downed telephone pole somewhere on the Landing.

Skip slammed the circuit breaker with the palms of his hands.

“Cool it,” Dad said.

“You know how long it’s gonna take anyone to get up here to fix it?”

“So why don’t we fight about it?” Dad smiled.

I laughed at Dad’s joke but Skip didn’t.

“This isn’t funny,” he shouted. “We’re gonna freeze.”

I jumped up from the couch and started stamping around the room, eager to join my brother in his anger. I was testing it out, trying his rage on for size. Dad flashed me a look that told me it didn’t fit me quite right. I stopped my show and walked out to the porch embarrassed.
It was chilly out. The rain was coming down in noisy sheets and the world was covered with a slick shell of hard, clear ice. Just by looking around you couldn’t tell the Landing had been shut off—aside from our house it was pretty much always like that during the winter. But there was an eerie feeling to the place: the rain was coming down but there was a strange stillness, as if my body could feel the absence of electricity in the black power lines hanging like frozen, fat-bellied anacondas.

I could hear Skip and my Dad still going at it inside. The rain hushed their words but their intentions were clear. I kept to the porch and after a few minutes the shouting stopped and Skip came pushing past me wearing a jacket and a backpack. He stumbled on the ice when he left the dry cover of the porch but the anger and purpose in his momentum kept him on his feet. He disappeared into the garage and I heard the engine of the Polaris cough to life. Skip emerged from the garage and roared down the road cutting through the pouring rain.

I shouted, “Skip” and tried to run after him but Dad had me collared before I could take a step.

“Let me go!” I wriggled and fought. Dad held on until Skip was out of sight.

I turned around and swung a wild kick in his direction. It missed miserably, but I wasn’t really trying to hit him. I started to cry.

“Come on,” Dad said and hugged me. “I know.”

We went inside and Dad started a fire in the living room. He cooked a pot of soup over the flames and we tore hard chunks of bread off of an icy loaf. We slept on the couch that night because the rest of the house was too cold and in the morning the rain had stopped and Skip was still gone.
Dad was already up when I opened my eyes. He was standing over the kitchen table and had on the glasses he wore when he was working on something. The house was bright with sunlight but so cold I could see my breath. I was lying beneath two blankets and my teeth were chattering.

“S-s-still no h-heat?”

Dad looked over like he’d forgotten I was there. “Morning, slugger.” He turned back to whatever he was working on. “Want some eggs?”

I got up, wrapped myself in one of the blankets, and shuffled over to the kitchen table. “What are you doing?”

There were three longish pieces of wood laid out on the table before him. He picked one up to show me. “These are going to be the thwarts in our canoe,” he said. “They go across the width of the boat to stiffen it and keep it held together.”

He saw I was shivering under the blanket. “Go put a coat on and come help me,” he said and I ran upstairs to grab a coat.

When I came back downstairs, he was holding a frying pan over the low flames of the fireplace. There were four eggs in the pan but they had all slid into the middle and combined because the pan wasn’t hot enough to keep them separate.

“This is how the cowboys used to do it,” he said.

It took forever for the eggs to cook, but Dad held the pan up until they were done. He cut the egg mass down the center when they were finally cooked and scooped them onto two plates. We sat on the couch and each ate a half-moon of sunny-side-up eggs and
when we were done we went to the kitchen and got to work on the thwarts. The hours melted away with the ice outside.

Around noon the front door swung open and we both turned to find Luke walking into the house. I let out a little disappointed sigh, but I was happy to see my friend.

“I slid on my butt the whole way down the mountain.” Luke laughed as he walked over to us. “Whatcha workin’ on?”

I showed Luke the thwarts and told him about the canoe in the garage. Then Dad started to stack the thwarts and clean off the kitchen table. He told me to go play, that we could finish them later.

“Are you sure?” I stood, unsure of what to do; I didn’t want to leave him all alone in the cold, powerless house.

“Go,” he said.

I went upstairs and bundled up a little more then hugged him before I left.

“Do you think Skip’s okay?” I asked

“Skip’s his own man,” he said. “Be careful out there.”

Outside the world was sleek and shiny and dripping. Everything was coated in a thick layer of ice: the house, the trees, the garage, the road. It was already starting to melt in the sun but I’d never seen anything like it. I imagined the two of us on an alien planet, where dripping trees and earth that was silver with ice were normal.


We walked up the mountain, which was no easy feat. The road was slick and we kept falling and sliding backward down the road. It took almost half an hour to get to the junkman’s house at the crest of the road.
The junkman’s yard was normally strewn with trash: old cars, piles of furniture, boxes and crates and empty barrels. Today there were none of these things. In their places stood bizarre ice sculptures. Luke led us to a shed around the back of the house. He pried open an icy door and before my eyes was an ancient snowmobile.

“I saw the junkman dragging it into the garage when I was walking home in the snow the other day,” Luke said. “It may not have a popcorn machine, but I bet it runs like a beauty.”

It didn’t run. At all. It didn’t even give off the illusion of running. The junkman had stripped the thing of its engine so that the snowmobile was nothing but a plastic shell with a torn leather seat. We were still captivated by it, though.

We hopped on the seat and Luke grabbed the handlebars and started making engine sounds with his mouth.

“This is perfect. All we need is the engine.” He turned around and looked at me. “Let’s push it to the road. We can ride it down to your house and keep in it in the garage while we work on it.”

What I remember most is how heavy the thing was. Even without an engine it was still a task for us to push the snowmobile across the ice of the junkman’s yard. We pushed it past his dilapidated house and weaved it through his intricate sculptures and even with the noise of the skis scraping across the ice he didn’t come out and try to stop us. I remember worrying, wondering if we’d be caught, but in my entire life to that point I’d only ever actually seen the junkman two or three times. The excitement of it all kept me pushing and by the time we got it to the road I hadn’t added to my tally.
Luke climbed onto the seat and got behind the handlebars. “Push until it starts going and then hop on.”

It sounded so simple and the blood rushing from my heart to my head just kept saying, go go go. I started pushing hard, my boots slipping on the icy road beneath me. I thought I was going to fall on my face but the snowmobile started to move and pick up momentum. I pushed until the road turned into the slope of the mountain and then I jumped on the back of the sled and wrapped my arms around Luke. I could feel my heart thumping in my chest; my body felt warm and damp with sweat. Luke’s hands were clasped onto the handlebars and he steered us through some winding turns, one, two, three, there were only four bends in the road between the Junkman’s house and my own.

We picked up more and more speed as we went and I watched the trees around us become blurs of brown and green and white. The wind was sharp and cold on my face and made my eyes water as we came down the mountain. We rounded the last turn and I could see my house and the garage coming towards us.

“Okay, slow down!” I shouted over the wind.

“I can’t!” I thought I heard Luke shout back.

We left my house in the dust and went barreling down the rest of the mountain into Huletts. At the bottom of the mountain the road turned sharply to the left to go into the village and beyond the road’s elbow were a few thick trees and the backs of several vacation houses.

“Stop!” I screamed.

Luke cut the handlebars as hard as he could and the snowmobile stood up on one ski for a second that stretched out into an entire lifetime before flipping over completely
and barrel rolling into the trees beyond the road. The last thing I remember is being up on that one ski, just sort of hanging there in midair. It gave me enough time to look around, to take in the entire Landing, the place that had been my home all 11 years of my life up to that point. The sky was blue and the earth was white and covered in ice and it all sparkled so brilliantly in the sunlight.

I woke up in a dark room. The only light was coming from a dimly lit monitor that tinted the darkness an eerie blue. My head felt heavy and full like a too-inflated basketball. There was this ringing in my ears so dull it felt like a memory. I tried to move but my body felt like one giant bruise. In trying to move I must have made a noise because a door opened and the lights came on.

The brightness burned my eyes. Everything was hazy and white, the way I imagined the inside of a cloud might be. A shape in light blue moved toward me. When my eyes finally focused I saw that it was a nurse. She wore a light blue shirt and had green eyes and freckles. Her hair was pulled back tight but looked soft and brown.

“Good morning, Mr. Wolfe,” she said. “Did you have a nice snooze?” Her voice was pleasant and sweet.

“Where am I?” I squinted and looked around the room. I was still having trouble seeing.

“Moses Ludington Hospital in Fort Ticonderoga.”

“How did I get here?” My head was pounding.
“Your brother brought you.” She nodded over at Skip who was curled up in a chair in the corner of the room, sleeping. “Must have been quite a ride over from Hulett’s.”

"The ice,” I said.

“Apparently he drove you all the way here on a snowmobile,” she said. “The roads are much better today.” My eyes followed her movements as she went to the window and pulled up the shade.

“Snowmobile,” I whispered. I was still confused and a little dizzy and it took me a moment to figure everything out.


“Who?”

She was walking over to the bed when Dad opened the door. He was holding two cups of coffee on top of one another, steadying them with his chin.


“You’re up!” He looked surprised to see me. “Luke? Oh, Luke’s fine. He’s home. Couple of bruises.” He set the coffee cups down on a table and came over beside my bed. He placed a hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll come back in a little while to check his vitals.”

“Thank you,” Dad looked up at the nurse.

She smiled at us with her eyes closed and backed out of the room.

Dad went over and shook Skip gently. He startled awake and looked around the room dreamily for a moment. A grin slid across his face when he saw me.

“Hey,” he said sleepily. “Speed Racer.”
“Shush,” Dad said.

“Dad, you shoulda seen this kid.” Skip leapt up from the chair and began reenacting the scene with his hands. “Dude was flying.”

Apparently Skip had just been coming up from the Lake when he saw Luke and I barreling don the mountain.

“Luke went sliding across the ice and the sled went ghost riding into a tree,” he said. “But you whacked your head pretty good when you fell off.”

I reached my hand up to my skull and felt a gauzy bandage.

“I put you on the seat in front of me and motored up here as fast as I could,” he said. “Never been so scared my whole life.”

He was smiling now and this filled me with warmth. It felt good to have the three Wolfe-men in a room together smiling and laughing. Dad had brought a deck of cards from home and after Skip finished telling the story the three of us played Golf and Rummy. They stayed with me all day. We watched TV and the nurse brought them trays for lunch; Skip practiced launching tater tots into my mouth with a plastic spoon.

Around 5 the nurse told us visiting hours were over. I didn’t want them to leave. It was the happiest I’d been in a long time.

“Don’t worry,” Skip said. “We’ll bust you out tomorrow.” He winked at the nurse.

“Okay, you two. Out,” she laughed.

She escorted them out of the room and I was back in silence for the first time since I’d woken up. The room felt bigger now and it got cold quickly. I felt lonely. The
smile on my face faded and I realized that I hadn’t felt that lonely since Mom left. I felt all over again what it was to be left and I started to cry.

“Nick.” The nurse ran in. “What’s the matter?”

Tears were streaming down my face, my nostrils were leaking; I couldn’t even catch my breath to respond. I just kept sucking in these big wet noisy inhales.

“B-b-bring them b-back,” I finally managed between gasps.

“It’s alright, honey.” She moved closer. Her body was right up against the bed’s railing. “They’ll be back tomorrow.”

“They’re g-g-gone,” I choked and cried harder.

The nurse leaned over me and placed both of her hands on my chest gently. A great calmness washed over me with her touch. “Don’t worry,” she cooed. “I’ll stay with you.”

I realize now that she was the first woman to touch me since Mom left. In those two years I’d constantly looked to Skip to fill that gap in my heart. I’d longed for his company and his approval but he’d been basically absent the whole time, wounded as he was by Mom’s abandonment. On that evening in the hospital as the nurse looked at me tenderly with her emerald eyes, I thought only of Mom and my brother, though both of them had left me in one sense or another.

I didn’t think once of my father, the man who just that morning had been standing over the dining room table in the cold and the dark, making sure that the thwart to the canoe we’d been working on all winter was measured perfectly. It had to be fitted just right, so that when the boat finally touched the water, it wouldn’t split and fall apart at the seams.
Was that her? Emily couldn’t be sure as she’d been too busy stacking that week’s special—freshly expired cans of Chef Boyardee—in a pyramid when the girl breezed by, but the hair, the outfit, even the walk. Emily was positive. It was the girl. The one Skip had left her for. She watched the girl tiptoe hesitantly toward the produce section, a lost lamb. Emily placed the last can on the pyramid and followed the girl into the cover of broccoli and spinach leaves, ready to lead her to slaughter.

She’d been thinking about it all week—ever since she’d first seen the girl and Skip together down by the Lake—playing over in her mind how she would get the girl alone, just spook her a little bit, explain you can’t just come waltzing into town stealing someone else’s man.

So Skip and her weren’t technically dating, so this was only the latest girl she’d seen Skip hanging around—he lived year round in the vacation town of Huletts Landing
and every summer a fresh crop of vacation girls rolled in—, this one had wandered into her lair and Emily was going to do something about it.

Emily walked up behind the girl. Close enough to see a pink bathing suit strap dangling just below the sleeve of her T-shirt. Cool it, she soothed herself. Be smart about this. She backed off and palmed a russet potato, pretending to rearrange the display. Then the girl turned around and almost bowled into her.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry,” the girl said backing up. “I wasn’t even looking where I was going.” She was holding a slip of paper. Emily could make out the words white unyum, chop meat, taco shellz. She looked up at the girl’s face; this was the closest they’d ever been. The girl’s eyes were huge and pale blue. She had freckles near the tops of her cheekbones so light they looked like they were under her skin. Her brown hair was curled with summer humidity, not in an unattractive way. Emily heard the roar of her own blood. She knew the girl was good looking, but she’d never had to stand so close to her.

“Maybe pay more attention,” Emily snapped.

The girl blushed and turned back to her list. It was ruined now. How could Emily possibly confront her after that debacle? Relax, she calmed herself. Think. There had to be a way to save this mission. She wasn’t going to watch this pretty little bitch skip out of her store and go back to, well, Skip. “Think,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said.

Shit. Had she heard Emily say that?

“Do you work here?”

Emily looked down at her vest and swallowed the urge to say something rude.
“What am I saying, of course you do.” Emily couldn’t tell if this was supposed to be catty. Was this girl playing at something, too? Was there any way she could have known who Emily was?

“I’m staying over in Huletts and my parents sent me with this stupid list.” She blushed again. This girl was a blusher.

“I’m sorry, where are my manners?” Emily forced a smile. “What can I help you with?”

The girl’s expression lightened. It seemed the mission was still safe. Maybe Emily could figure out another way to approach the topic of Skip if she helped the girl for a little while.

“Gosh, everything.” The girl’s voice was sweet and soft. Emily wanted to reach down her throat and claw out her innocent little voice box. “I’ve never even been shopping on my own before.”

“Here,” Emily took the list. “Let me take a look.” The list was neat and girl. Words were purposefully misspelled; one of the “i”s was dotted with a heart; there were doodles in the corners. It didn’t really surprised Emily but it bothered her.

“How do you like it over in Huletts?” Emily wanted to slap herself. What a stupid question. She was trying to confront the girl, not befriend her.

“Oh I love it there,” she sighed. “It’s so beautiful. Have you ever been?”

I grew up fifteen minutes from the fucking place, Emily wanted to say. I know it better than you do.

“People in Whitehall are no strangers to Huletts,” she forced a laugh. “It’s a pretty short drive.”
“You live here?” The girl’s eyes lightened. “It’s beautiful here, too.”

Was this girl stupid? Whitehall was a dump. The houses of the main road had junk all over their yards and the buildings were all so old they were crumbling. They had a famous lock on the smelly Hudson that cut through the middle of town and an old historic hotel on a hill that everyone claimed was haunted, but other than, Whitehall wasn’t much to look at. A few dollar stores and a McDonalds ands a pizza place that sold a decent but greasy cheese-bread. No, Whitehall wasn’t much, but it was her home and she loved it. She sure as shit wasn’t going to let some stuck up, rich tourist talk badly about it.

“Hello?” The girl waved a hand in front of Emily’s face.

Emily looked up. “Oh. Yeah. Born and raised.”

“That’s great,” the girl seemed to swoon. “There’s something so amazing about living up here in the mountains.” Where was this girl from? She was breathy and idealistic. Emily couldn’t tell if she was serious. But it didn’t matter; Emily had an idea.

“How long have you been at the Lake?” she asked. She grabbed a white onion and placed it into the girl’s basket to pretend that she hadn’t forgotten about helping her with the list.

“Just since last Saturday,” the girl said. “Barely a week. But we came up last summer, too. That was my first time here.”

“Where are you staying?” Emily asked.

“We’re renting this two-story cabin right off of the Lake.” Emily realized she already knew this. “I think it’s called ‘Del Noce’; they all have such funny names.”
Emily was still working out the details of this new plan to confront the girl. She was going to try to trick the doe-eyed thing into admitting who she’d been hanging out with, maybe get her to gossip about the cute, young guy she’d been hooking up with. Then Emily was going to slam her.

“I feel like I’ve seen you there before.” Emily feigned thoughtfulness. “Maybe down by the beach, or at the Soda Fountain at night.” In reality, Emily had only seen the girl twice. From afar. But both times Skip had been with her. The first time, she’d been lying on a beach towel, splayed out like she was some sort of Egyptian goddess while Skip stood over her talking. Emily had watched from behind a tree as Skip shifted his body between the girl and the Lake. The other time, Emily had just gotten down to the beach as the girl was climbing into a boat that Skip was driving. The two then turned and roared across the surface of the Lake.

“I don’t think so.” The girl’s brow furrowed as she mined her memory for an image of Emily. “I’m sure I would remember your face.”

Liar. Emily’s blood was boiling. She hadn’t noticed but she was sort of crumpling up the girl’s shopping list. She released her fist and smoothed the paper on her vest.

“Well, I’m there a lot.” Emily was thrashing around in her mind for something, anything to grab onto. Maybe she would just have to come out and say it. She tried to think of the best way…Listen you little bitch, I know you’ve been fucking my boyfriend. That sounded excessive.

“I don’t really know that many people there,” the girl offered. “It’s kind of just me and my parents. My cousin and her family will be up next week, but that’s pretty much it.”
What was this a chat among old high school friends? But wait. This was exactly what Emily had been looking for: a way back in.

“Huh, that’s funny,” she said. “I could have sworn I’d seen you with one of the locals. Maybe Maddy or Luke Smith or Tom Conrad.”

The girl seemed to chew this over. Maybe she’d taken the bait.

“Mmm.” She made this little noise while she thought. Emily wanted to kick her.

“No. I don’t recognize any of those names.”

Come on. How hard was she going to make this? Emily was trying her best to keep her expression flat.

“Oh!” The girl lit up all of a sudden. “Maybe you know Skip!”

“Skip Wolfe?” Emily tried to say this coolly but her heart was racing. She wanted to jump on the girl.

“Maybe,” she said. “Hmm…Skip Wolfe…I’ll have to ask him his last name.”

Emily winced at hearing the girl say this; she didn’t even like his name on her lips.

“There’s only one Skip,” Emily said. She didn’t know what to say next. She was freezing. She’d prepared in her head for days but now that she was staring right at the girl—now that she was close enough see her own reflection in the girl’s fucking pupils—she didn’t know what to do.

“I’ll have to ask him if he knows you.” The girl smiled. Fucking smiled. Was this a game? Was this her side of it? Emily was trying to read her expression, checking for sarcasm, anything.

“He knows me,” Emily blurted out.
The girl stepped back as if bitten. Emily looked away for a minute pretending she’d been called. She’d backed this girl into a corner but it was the corner of a broom closet. And Emily was stuck in the corner right next to the girl.

“H-how do you guys know each other?” the girl asked after a moment.

Emily thought about this. She had to answer properly to regain her footing. She needed to get back on top of this thing. Besides, She still didn’t even really know if anything had even occurred between Skip and the girl.

“Oh,” she said and relaxed her body. “We’re just friends. Went to high school together.”

The girl seemed to relax a little, too. It was fun, having this control. The girl seemed so sweet and nervous, like she didn’t have a clue. And Emily could play with that but she had to be careful. She’d almost given her self away a few times and she still didn’t even really know what she was going to do when she found out the truth.

The only thing that was really true was that Skip had stopped coming to see her. For the past couple months he’d been coming over while Emily’s parents were out. They’d fool around on the couch and then he’d go. Emily knew he didn’t love her but she thought maybe he could. If girls like this would stop getting in the way.

Three weeks ago when summer had begun Skip had told Emily he couldn’t see her anymore. When she’d asked why he said he just couldn’t. But she knew the truth: it was because the summer girls would all be coming to the Landing. It was the same thing every year. The boys of Huletts would ask you to keep them warm all winter but once the snow melted and the flowers started fucking sprouting they’d disappear.
The week before, Emily had made the mistake of drinking too much and calling Skip. “What’s so good about them? she’d slurred. “What makes them better than me?”

“They don’t work at Price Chopper,” he’d said and hung up.

Emily had pretended like she’d been too drunk to remember what he’d said. But she couldn’t forget. She played it over in her head every day.

“Skip’s so sweet,” the girl announced. “I met him when I was here last year and he just made me feel so comfortable. It’s hard when you’ve never been to a place before.”

Wait a minute. They’d met last summer? This had been going on for over a year?

“He’s been showing me around the Lake a little this summer,” she went on.

“There are so many beautiful places. He showed me this little waterfall in the woods near his house. And yesterday he took me in his boat to this rope swing up north.”

This caught Emily off guard. What could it mean? Was he really just showing her around? He’d never taken Emily anywhere. They hadn’t even been out of her living room. Emily looked at the girl and tried to picture what kind of girl she was. She didn’t seem like the kind of girl to fall for Skip’s tricks—he had a knack for lulling the girls of the Landing into sleeping with him; it wasn’t exactly a secret. But this girl seemed so innocent. And it sounded like Skip had taken a genuine interest in her. Plus, the girl had called him sweet…Emily started to wonder if they were talking about the same boy.

She looked at the clock. They’d been standing there for a while and she wondered if anyone had noticed. Nobody had come looking for either of them. Emily felt tired. She’d only been at work for an hour but this conversation was exhausting. She wanted it over.
“So has he tried to kiss you yet?” Emily stared at the girl. She was done playing games.

“What?”

“Has he put the famous Skip Wolfe moves on you yet?”

“No,” her voice inflected upwards. She screwed up her face as if to say why would he have?

“He hasn’t?” Emily hadn’t expected this answer. It was the one she wanted but now she was confused. Why hadn’t Skip tried to kiss her yet? What was so different about her? What was so special?

“To be honest, I was actually starting to wonder about him,” the girl said. “He’s so sweet to me; he doesn’t even touch me when we’re together. I was thinking maybe there was something wrong with me.

“Maybe we are talking about two different guys,” Emily said. The Skip this girl was describing didn’t sound at all like the Skip that Emily knew.

Immediately, Emily was back at the beach watching Skip talk to this girl. Skip was standing over her as the girl shielded her eyes from the sun. He shifted in front of her, Emily had thought, to block her view of the Lake, to make himself all she could see at that moment. A classic Skip move, Emily remembered thinking. But now she saw the girl drop her hand from her eyes; watched her mouth the words thank you. Skip had smiled. Not just any smile. Not his usual leering smile. It was genuine and kind. Skip liked this girl. Emily could see that now. She shuddered as she thought of this.

“Are you cold?” The girl asked. “I’m sorry we’ve been standing in this produce section forever. It really is quite chilly.”
“I’m fine,” Emily said rubbing her goose-pimpled arms.

“Well, you know Skip better than I do,” she kept going. “What do you think? Is he just nervous or is he not interested?”

Emily’s head was starting to spin. She thought she was going to throw up. She couldn’t figure out why Skip hadn’t even tried anything with this girl. It didn’t make any sense. She heard Skip’s voice again in her head: “They don’t work at Price Chopper.”

Emily wondered if the girl worked in a supermarket. Then she realized the ditzy thing mentioned she’d never even been food shopping before.

But Skip hadn’t even kissed her. Hadn’t even tried anything with her. As far as Emily could tell, all they’d really done was talk and explore the Lake together.

“I don’t know,” Emily muttered. “I really have to get back to work.”

“Oh,” the girl said. “Well I could still use your help finding the stuff on that list.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve really gotta go.” Emily walked backwards into a lemon display.

“I’ll see if I can find someone else to come help you.”

“Ohay,” the girl said to her. “Well you should come over to the Landing some time this week. Skip said he was going to take me to some jumping cliff. I’m sure he’d be happy if you came along with us.”

Emily could no longer see straight. Her head was pounding and she just wanted this girl to shut the hell up.

“My name’s Maeve, by the way,” the girl called out.

Emily left the girl standing there. She ran back to the front of the store, brushing past the Chef Boyardee display, and hid herself in the employee lounge. The room was empty and the lights were all shut off. Emily slumped down with her back against the
door and pulled her knees into her chest. She sat there in the silence trying to calm down her breathing. Then she noticed the crumpled shopping list still balled up in her hand.
On a Monday night in late August, Skip Wolfe fell asleep in his bed with a lit cigarette between his fingers and black tar heroin coursing through his veins. His father found him passed out in the billowing smoke, pulled him from the bed, and doused the smoldering mattress. Skip woke up on the floor the next morning. The air smelled curiously of smoked meats. He sat up slowly and once he was finally upright, he found his father sitting in a chair in front of the room’s closed door. He was bent over with his elbows resting on his thighs. His brown eyes were pointed right at Skip.

“How long?” Roger asked in a low voice. “How long’s this been going on?”

Skip brought a hand up to his face and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He could still feel the buzz of his high in his fingertips. “How long’s what been going on?”

Skip watched his father grab something off of the table next to the door and hold it out for his son to see. It was a syringe. Roger dropped it to the wooden floor. It rolled forward slowly, then spun back and stopped as if unsure of which way to roll.
“How long?” Roger said again. Louder.

“A few weeks,” Skip winced. The sound of his father’s voice rang in his ears.

“Does your brother know?”

Skip looked toward the wall that separated his younger brother’s room from his own. He pictured his fifteen-year-old brother finding him instead of his father. He didn’t like this thought so he pictured him sleeping soundly instead.

“Does Nick know?” Roger snapped.

“No. And he’s not gonna find out.”

“You’re right. Because this stops today.”

Skip moved to get to his feet.

“Did I tell you to get up?”

He sank back down and looked away.

“Dammit, Skip, this isn’t you. This can’t be you,” Roger said. “And if your brother ever found out about this…”

Skip switched off. He couldn’t listen to his father fumble with the right words to address his problem. Skip didn’t have a problem. He had a solution. The problem was that summer was over. The problem was that they lived where they did. Huletts Landing was a place that died when the summer ended. It was a vacation village on the waters of Lake George and when the earth tilted on its axis, the vacationers boarded up their screened-in porches, climbed into their luxury cars, and fled.

The Wolfes however, had nowhere to go. Unlike the others, they weren’t just on vacation. They lived just above Huletts on the only road that went in or out of the Landing, and had been there for three generations. Skip had been there for twenty years
and had gotten used to waving goodbye to people from his bedroom window. He’d even watched his mother climb into a car and drive up and over the mountain.

The chair’s legs scraped against the wooden floor as Roger moved it away from the door.

“I’m giving you two options,” he said. “You can either work with me every day so I can watch you, or I’m sending you to Arizona to dry out at your Uncle Jimmy’s.”

Roger opened the door. “The choice is yours,” he said and walked out.

Skip didn’t need to dry out. He wasn’t an addict. And there was no way he was going to live on some cactus farm with no way to score. There was also a third option that Roger hadn’t thought of: the “fuck you” option. But when Skip looked at the wall of his brother’s room again, he knew he had to try. So every morning that week Skip woke with the sun, got in the truck, and slept for however long it took to get to that day’s job.

By Friday, Skip could no longer sleep. He and Roger were driving to a job in Silver Bay and the pickup’s constant movement was causing his skin to slip away in certain places. His eyelids had been the first to go. The more he stared at his flesh, the more panicked he became, so Skip fixed his gaze out the window and watched the landscape drop away instead.

It was the end of summer and the trees outside the speeding truck were just beginning to hint at a change. Every so often in the blur of green his eyes would snag on a flash of orange or red. Skip watched the speeding colors and did his best not to shake.

It had been five days since he’d last used. At first, it hadn’t been so bad. He’d been going to work with Roger, fixing up old cabins around the Lake. After work he’d
spend time with Nick. They went walking in the woods and fished out in the middle of the Lake. The late summer air seemed to keep his head clear.

Then, Thursday night, things got bad. It had started as a small itch inside of his fingertips. Then it became a feverish warmth that spread across his body like a wildfire. Sometime around 2 A.M. he got up from his soaked sheets, walked downstairs, and quietly dialed Holy Derek from the landline. He whispered some directions and hung up. Then he lay on the couch in the living room and waited.

The sky was lightening with twilight when Skip stepped out into the street. It was quiet, still. Vacationers had been packing up and leaving in droves all week; only a handful remained. By next week they’d all be gone. He turned and began walking down the hill into Huletts.

The Landing was a small place. On a map, the roads took on the image of gnarled hand—each curling finger ending at the Lake’s rippling shore, with thin veins connecting the ring finger, middle finger, and forefinger. Between the thumb and the forefinger lay the sandy beach where families went to swim and sunbathe. Cottages lined each of the roads.

Skip passed these cottages as he walked to the beach. Most of them were empty, one or two had a car parked on the grass outside. They had grown with Skip, as Lake George became a more popular vacation destination. When he was born, most of them were two bedroom cabins. Now many of them were bigger than his house. Roger had had a hand in building almost all of them.

The beach was empty and neat; the sand lay flat, undisturbed by the buckets and shovels of summertime toddlers. The tide rolled in slowly and gurgled lazily as it raked
the shore. Small waves slapped and sucked against the underside of the wooden dock jutting out into the dark blue water. The sun was just beginning to rise over Elephant Mountain and it tinted the sky a watery pink.

Skip took off his shoes and socks and walked across the sand to where the beginning of the dock met the beach. He crouched down and shoveled his hand underneath the wooden planks. He ran his hand over cold, wet rocks until he found a plastic bag, slightly wet and gritty with sand. He pulled his hand out and shoved the bag into his jacket pocket. Then he sat on the dock with his feet in the water and watched the sky change colors.

He could still feel the water from the morning on his feet as he sat in the passenger seat of the speeding truck. They felt cold and started to buzz with numbness. He began stamping his feet against the floor of the truck and became so focused on getting the blood back into his frozen toes, that when Roger started speaking, the voice cutting through the silence startled him.

He picked his head up as if he had been shaken out of a dream. It took him a moment to orient himself; his ears felt heavy and full of thick liquid.

“I said what do you want to do?” The sun was shining through the windshield and Roger was staring right into it, scanning the road ahead. “What’s your plan?”

Skip formed the word “plan” in his mouth, feeling his lips stick to and peel off of his teeth as he did so.

“You’re twenty now. You’re out of school,” Roger said. “The world, it’s your oyster and all that.”
So far, Skip hadn’t though past lunch. Or where his next fix was going to come from. School felt as far away as Minnesota.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m glad to see you trying, Skip,” Roger said after a moment. “It’s a really ugly world you could’ve gotten yourself into. I’ve known guys…”

Rogers’ voice sounded distant, distorted, like he was trying to talk to Skip underwater.

“How are you feeling today?” Roger asked.

“Okay,” Skip lied. He opened and closed his mouth stretching his jaw with the movements. It was the first time he had spoken today and the muscles in his face felt like they were dancing.

“It’s probably not easy,” Roger’s voice echoed in Skip’s head. “But it’s important that you try.”

Skip looked ahead. The blue hood of the truck kept swallowing up the cracked pavement. The faded lines in the center of the road became a school of thin yellow fish darting down the road in ordered pairs.
“I know what it means not to try.” Roger’s eyes were still focused on the road ahead, as if part of the whole process of driving some place was really wanting to get there. “I should’ve tried harder to keep your mother around.”

Skip didn’t know what his mother had to do with any of this, but his head was starting to throb so he rolled down his window and let the late summer air rush in quickly and noisily. It was warm and smelled of fresh leaves and pollen. Soon the leaves would turn and the air would be filled with sweet decay.

It had been a good summer. He and Nick had spent their days in the sun and their nights in mischief. Skip had worked at the small bar where vacationers spent their evenings. He’d made money, gotten drunk and stoned. He’d met a girl with a pretty Irish name.

Maeve. She was younger—maybe by three or four years—but she made Skip feel like a fourteen-year-old. It was the way her blue eyes watched him as he spoke, like they were searching for clues, trying to piece together the truth. It was the way her hand would come to rest on his shoulder or his cheek, warm, gentle. It was the way her voice had of calming him. He’d only known one other girl like that…Woman. Skip had known a lot of Landing girls, but none of them had ever stuck in his mind after they left.

The thing that struck him most was how much he thought of his brother when he was with her. She was only a year older than Nick, and Skip constantly caught himself thinking about how good she might be for him, about how much more Nick could use her gentle touch and her caring words. It was for this reason he never introduced the two. It was purely selfish. He wanted his younger brother to need him, Skip, more than anyone else.
The night before she left Skip stole a canoe from the beach and rowed her out to the middle of the Lake. They watched the moon rise up over Spruce Mountain, then he kissed her in the blue-yellow light.

“I’ve never met a boy like you,” she said.

“That’s because you haven’t met my brother.”

She left the next morning and six days later Skip shot up for the first time.

“Your mother would have loved this house.”

Skip picked up his head. Suddenly they were parked in front of a two-story lake house, all brown wood and columns. The house was old and enormous. The steps of the front porch extended down to greet them. He didn’t know when they had gotten there, but there they were.

“I wish I’d had the presence of mind to put her in a place like this,” Roger said softly. “Maybe then she would have stayed.”

“What are you talking about?” The words came out harsher than Skip had wanted.

Skip was fourteen when his mother packed up her bags, like she’d only been on vacation, and went home to her parents in Maryland. That was how it had all started after all; Roger had met Nicole when her family was vacationing on the Landing in the summer of 1982. As the story went, the two fell in love, and at some point during their two-week tryst, Skip was conceived.

Roger opened the door and got out of the truck. “Come on,” he said. Skip got out and followed Roger around the house.
The house was set back into the woods and was surrounded by trees. The backyard, however, was clear of trees and sloped down into the Lake; a few-hundred feet of knee high grass and buxbaum sedge separated the place from the cool, clear water. Jutting out onto the surface of the Lake was a dilapidated boathouse.

The second floor of the house had a huge wooden balcony looking out onto the Lake. When Skip looked up, it appeared to be swaying, though at the moment there was no wind. He wondered if he was dreaming. He dug his nails into the back of his neck. They felt as if they were vibrating into his flesh.

“That’s what we’re gonna be working on today,” Roger pointed to the balcony then began walking back to the front of the house. Skips feet felt like they were stuck in mud but he followed as best he could. Roger stopped at the steps leading up to the porch and stared.

“She lived in a house like this before she came to live with us,” he said. “I only saw it once, but it was made of brick and had these beautiful white columns. The driveway was a horseshoe with a crowded patch of tulips in the center. It was September and she was six-weeks pregnant with you. I had just driven four hundred miles and I parked my car in the goddamn street because the driveway was too pretty and walked up to the house.”

Skips thought his legs were going to give out. He took a seat on the bottom step of the wooden staircase and tried to focus. He wished Roger would stop speaking; his voice sounded like a thousand mosquitos buzzing.

“Her stepfather was standing at the top of the steps when I walked up to the place,” Roger continued. “He wouldn’t let me into the house. Told me me I wasn’t fit to
raise a child, much less to take care of Nicole. Just kept telling me I wasn’t good enough for her and never would be.”

Roger stopped speaking and stared at the front door of the lake house like he was watching his memory play out. Skip thought he looked tired, sad.

“I must have stood out there arguing with him for an hour when your mother finally came bursting through the front door,” Roger said after a moment. “She ran down the steps of their giant wraparound porch, practically tripping over herself, and fell to her knees at my feet. She skinned ‘em up pretty bad. I knelt down and held her, she was crying and shaking, and only after that did the fucker let me inside.”

Skip’s vision was starting to pulse so he pointed his eyes up to the sky. It was almost noon and the sun bobbed in the middle of the bright blue sky.

“Was the only time I ever met the man,” he heard Roger say. “But everything he did and said made me feel like shit, reminded me I was no good. I drove back to Hulett’s that night with your mother asleep in the passenger seat and just kept repeating what he’d said to me, wondering what the hell I was even doing, wondering if I really wasn’t good enough. I repeated those words every day until she left.”

Skip’s head felt light and loose, like it was attached by a string.

“I wish I’d have done things differently. I wish I’d spent less time thinking and more time trying to keep her happy, trying to show her that I was good enough.”

Just then two pickup trucks roared up to the house and parked on the grass next to Roger’s. He walked over and greeted the men who got out of the trucks.

Skip was relieved that Roger had stopped talking. He had become aware of a very dull itch, one that felt as if it was growing with each passing second. This was an itch that
he knew couldn’t be scratched with his fingernails. The itch, he realized, was coming from deep within the lining of his veins. He clutched at the bag in his jacket pocket.

Skip and Roger were up on the balcony; the other two men were down below measuring and cutting fresh planks of cedar. Roger was on his belly, slid between a gap in the old railing vacated by a missing post. Half of his body was dangling over the edge and he was attempting to yank out an old nail from the underside of the balcony.

Skip had been trying to hammer the same nail for some time now but kept missing. The thud of the wood caused him to flinch more with each miss. The hammer began to feel heavy in his hand so he let it fall to the floor. He slid down into a seated position with his back against the cabin’s wall.

The balcony felt as if it were shaking. But maybe it was just him.

“What made her even come back?” Skip asked. He watched Roger shimmy back through the posts, flip over, and sit facing the cabin.

“Sorry?”

“Mom,” Skip said. “What made her come back with you in the first place?”

“I told you, it was the bats,” Roger smiled. “You should’ve seen her face.”

Before the Huletts Hotel had been taken down, the Landing had been famous for its fruit bats. They flew around in hordes at night, eating mosquitos and frightening children. During the day they slept from the rafters of the hotel’s attic. The year Roger met Nicole, the Huletts Hotel still stood tall. It was a massive 90-room palace built in 1915, out of use since the early 70’s.
Roger had taken Nicole into the old hotel one morning. He brought her up to the attic, and once they were both inside, he slammed the door. The bats fell from the ceiling and flew around them in a swirling torrent. Roger always said this was the moment that Nicole had fallen for him (he’d taken Skip and Nick to see the sight just before they bulldozed the hotel in ’96, but by then White Nose Syndrome had already knocked out over half the bat population).

“I may not have had money, but I had bats,” Roger said.

Skip just stared at his father and the smile on Roger’s face slowly dissolved.

“She was seventeen,” he admitted. “She thought she needed a change in her life. She was looking for something new, and found it in this place. In us.”

“Then why didn’t she stay?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying about trying harder,” Roger said. “Maybe if I’d have tried harder she wouldn’t have left.”

“What’s with all this shit about trying harder?” Skip put his head against the wood of the cabin and looked to the sky. He had a wicked headache.

“I didn’t try to make your Mom’s life the best it could be. She loved you guys but at the end of the day, she wasn’t happy with me. She even wanted to take you with her when she left.”

“Trying has nothing to fucking do with it!” Skip shouted. “You could have tried all you wanted; she still would have left. Everybody leaves this place.”

“You’re missing the point, Skip.”

“Then tell me.” Skip squeezed his eyes shut. “What the hell is the point?”
“At the end of the day I became everything her stepfather thought I was. Not a single day went by that I felt like I deserved her, that I felt like I was good enough.”

Skip opened his eyes. The sun seemed to be throbbing in the sky. Even though it wasn’t hot out, Skip was sweating profusely. His stomach hurt.

“That doesn’t have to be you, Skip,” Roger was pleading with his son. “You don’t have to become the person you think you are. You don’t have to be an addict.”

“I’m not a fucking addict!”

Skip practically yelled this. The table saw below them stopped its screaming for a moment, then went back to work.

Skip’s heart was racing. The blood felt hot in his veins.

“I need to eat something.” He wouldn’t look at Roger.

“Fine. There’s a sandwich in the truck.” Roger wiped his face then slid back through the opening in the railing.

Skip walked down to the cooler, grabbed the brown paper bag Roger had packed him, and headed for the old wooden boathouse. He clutched at the bulge in his jacket pocket. His mouth was dry and his heart was thumping.

The wood of the boathouse was in even worse condition than the balcony he had just been standing on. The whole thing seemed to be slanting into the water. The pillars holding up the roof were green with algae and fuzzy with rot. In one corner of the ceiling, a dock spider as fat as a plum, sat in the center of a sagging web.

Skip looked out across the Lake. The water was calm and flat. There were no boats. Summer was truly over. From where he stood he could just about make out Hulett’s Landing. It was a small, speckled cove at the foot of the easterly green Adirondack wall.
Skip sat down against the front-most pillar and looked over his shoulder. He couldn’t see the cabin or the balcony—the roof of the boathouse blocked them from view.

Skip removed the small plastic bag from his pocket. Inside it was a lighter, a spoon, a syringe, and a tiny lump of shiny tar wrapped in a square of cellophane.

He looked back at his home all the way across the sparkling water. He’d driven an hour away but he was still right there. His mother had left. Maeve had left. But Skip? He could almost see his house from where he was sitting. How was that fair?

Skip rolled the lump of tar around in his hand. He’d told Roger he wasn’t an addict. Had practically screamed it. Yet here he was, hiding behind a rotting pillar, about to fill his itching veins with the stuff.

He wanted to throw it all into the Lake. He wanted to watch it sink to the bottom of the Lake and be done with it. But even the thought of it made his chest tighten.

He thought about what Roger had said on the balcony. He would’ve given anything to be back up there with him. He thought about Nick. If only Nick were here right now. If only he would canoe into view right now… Skip tried to move, tried to drop the lump of tar from his hand but he was frozen. There was only one movement his body would allow him to make and that was to place the tiny black mass into the spoon and melt it all down. So he did. He held the lighter under the spoon and watched it transform into a small, murky puddle. It wasn’t clear and beautiful like the Lake in front of him and he hated it for this. But still he sucked it up into the syringe. Still he stuck the needle into his arm and pushed the plunger. He watched the murk disappear into his vein then he lay back against the sloping floor of the boathouse.
Skip could just about make out the cabin the way he was laying. It peeked out from beneath the ceiling of the boathouse. It was upside down. The balcony was hanging in midair and Skip watched Roger walk across it. He watched this as he waited for his muscles to fully slacken: Roger standing at the edge of the balcony, shouting something down to the men below. Then Skip watched the balcony drop; watched his father’s body come crashing to the earth.

His eyes widened. He tried to scream. He managed to turn onto his side and reach out an arm as if to grab ahold of his father. Then he stopped. A warm wave washed over his body. He pictured Nick. He was in a canoe, rowing across the Lake. He was standing up in the canoe rowing and shouting. Shouting that he was coming. That everything was going to be okay. Then Skip’s eyes drooped shut.
LANDING GIRLS

In the summer of 2004 the waters of Lake George became a sort of haven for Luke and me. Skip was dead and we were all still taking the pills that we thought had killed him. We were 18. We had just graduated. The eternal summer sun had just risen over Elephant Mountain and something in us was determined to ride it down to the bottom of the Lake.

Skip had been in the ground for a year and all I had left of him was the skeleton key Mom had given him, which he used to wear around his neck. I was still living at Dad’s place on the side of County Route 6, the long anaconda curve of a mountain road that led to the vacation homes of Huletts Landing. Dad had fallen from a roof two weeks before Skip had died and left me to take care of Dookie and the house. I ate cereal almost every meal of the day and Dookie took dumps on the kitchen floor (I let him out plenty but the mutt seemed to resent Skip’s absence). Even though Luke hung around pretty often—fighting Dookie for the couch any night he got too stoned to head up the road to his own place—the house felt empty and haunted. I wanted to spend as much time away
from it as possible. Luke’s father had an old bowrider so most nights the two of us would jump in the ’77 Cobalt, pop some co-pilots, and take a cruise.

This was a strange time for me. High school was over, my brother was dead, and my father was stuck to a bed in a rehab facility forty miles away. I was lonely and confused but it was summer and the Landing was lousy with beautiful girls on vacation. Living where we did we spent our whole lives waiting for summer to roll around, waiting for the ice to thaw and the Landing to come to life again. Eight months out of the year we were stuck on that lifeless mountain but now it was summer and Luke and I weren’t wasting any time.

Huletts was a small place; there were five roads in total and they all ended at the shores of Lake George. The vacation homes dotted the roads like turtles on a log. They were expensive and brightly colored, named ridiculous things like *Twin Cedars* and *Idle Hours* (one was named *The Rainbow House* and its cabin walls seemed to change colors every year). Summer families showed up in May and stayed until Labor Day; arriving in roomy cars weighed down by the bags tied to the roof.

They were pleasant people—families for the most part, with some money to spend and some time to kill. They came to Huletts because it was different from other lakeside vacation spots—the houses were all so close together that it felt like a little town, there was a weird sense of community among the vacationers. They’d play tennis together, or volleyball, or hit nine holes of golf. They’d gossip at the lakeside marina that served as a general store. At night they’d walk their kids to the ice cream parlor for a scoop and would walk back later to the small bar that was right next door. During the day, they all arranged themselves on the sand of the Landing’s singular beach.
That summer, Luke and I spent most of our days prowling that beach, talking to the Landing girls. They were young, excited. Eager to talk to us for the most part. They were 16, 17. Freshly rebellious. Most of them were on vacation with their families, looking for any excuse to sneak away, to do something bad.

We had a way with them, Luke and me. I mean, we weren’t bad looking, but it wasn’t our looks that attracted them. We were mountain boys. Rough and tumble. We got into fights. We drank and swore. We ripped across the glassy waters of the Lake in Luke’s father’s boat. It didn’t matter that half of these things weren’t true. They thought we were bad characters and that was all that mattered.

We would tell the girls to meet us back on the beach at night. Sometimes they would show, others they wouldn’t. What we wanted was to get them out on the Lake. Show them the darker side of things. Most of the time we couldn’t get these girls to do more than drink a couple of beers with us and make out on the dock. But some nights we’d convince one or two of them to hop in the Cobalt, pop some co-pilots and stay out until sunrise.

There was no shortage of places to take these girls; the darkness of the Lake was at our disposal. Some nights we’d cruise as far south as Log Bay, whipping through the islands of The Narrows—snaking around Black Rock, Fork, As-You-Were, and Big Burnt. We’d speed through the Mother Bunch Islands and “thread the needle” at Dollar Group, pushing somewhere around 25 miles an hour through a ten-foot strip of dark, shallow water.

Other nights we’d drive the boat up north to the rope swing near Gull Bay. The darkness of the night added a pulse-quickening intensity. Visually, you weren’t quite sure
if the thick, knotted rope was sending you splashing into cool water, or a bottomless black abyss.

Once in a while we’d cruise over to Rattlesnake Point looking for a party. If some locals were getting together we’d see their campfire from a distance; the flames reaching up like a tiny waving hand. That’s where we’d all been the night Skip died. We hadn’t been back since.

Whenever Luke and I were lucky enough to lure a couple of girls onto the boat we’d keep them out until sunrise—until the Lake appeared to be on fire with the morning’s pink light. Then we’d cruise back to Huletts to drop off the girls. Luke and I would tie down the boat and head back up the mountain to Dad’s. Some mornings I felt bad, thinking about them stumbling home, getting the third-degree from their worried parents. But most mornings I just slept in the warming glow of the pubescent sun. Every so often I thought about Skip.

He had taught me everything I knew.

“The trick is not to fall for them,” he told me. “See, the thing about the Landing girls is, they’re always the ones to leave. It isn’t worth it to get attached.”

“What about Mom?” Our mother had been a Landing girl.

“Do you see her anywhere?”

I resisted the urge to point to the skeleton key around his neck. She had met Dad the summer she turned 17. She fell for him and ended up moving up to Huletts.

“She lasted fifteen years.” I shrugged. She’d been gone for eight, now. Left with two bags in the fall of ’96 and never came back.
“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “They always go home when the summer is over. Her summer just lasted a while.”

And he was right. The girls of the Landing always left at the end of the summer, went back to their ordinary lives. Maybe they thought occasionally about speeding across a lake with the arm of a mountain boy draped around them, but they all had homes to go back to.

Sure, they were beautiful. But even now I can’t figure out what set them apart from the other girls we knew. We all had girlfriends over the mountain in Whitehall but once summer rolled around we forgot about them. There was just something about the girls of Huletts Landing. Every so often one of them will saunter toward me across the sunlit beach of a dream. The sharp scent of their tanned bodies and wagging ponytails is enough to startle me awake in the dead of night, make me forget where I am.

Skip fooled around with the girls of the Landing like we all did. But he kept them at a certain distance. As clear as it was that he didn’t want to fall in love with any of them, I think he was also afraid to. He was afraid of loving another person that would eventually leave him. They all made him think of Mom in that regard and he resented them for that.

Skip did everything in his power not to fall for one of the Landing girls. Then one summer he did. I never met her, but it was all over his face. You could almost see those little cartoon hearts floating out of his mouth whenever he opened it to speak or sigh. He spent all of his time with her. She was around for three weeks and then she was gone—she took everything Skip had to offer then got into a car with her family and drove away. Two weeks later Skip was dead; he’d been soaring on co-pilots and had crashed a boat
into the dock at Rattlesnake Point. As much as I hate to admit it, I could never shake the thought that the two events were inextricably linked.

That was at the end of the summer. We buried Skip while the leaves were starting to change. The rest of the vacationers cleared out once the trees were all bare and Huletts fell silent again. Winter came, the village shut off the water, the surface of Lake George froze fifteen inches thick, and Luke and I stayed put.

I missed my brother but his death hadn’t really changed all that much. Luke and I kept looking for girls. Kept popping pills and cruising. We’d taken a page out of his book and had spent most of the summer avoiding falling in love but it didn’t stop us from taking Landing girls out on the Lake at night.

One night toward the end of summer I walked down to the dock to meet Luke. When I got there he was already standing at the end of the dock, flanked by two girls I couldn’t recognize. The night was dark but the moonlight was bright and as I walked up closer their features became more distinct.

“These two wanna pop some co-pilots and go for a little ride,” he told me.

He introduced us, said he had bumped into them on the beach earlier that day. They were pretty girls, cousins whose families were renting one of the bigger cabins on the Landing. One of them was stick-thin and wore a hooded sweatshirt half-zipped over a white tank top. As vividly as I can recall her outfit I can’t seem to remember her name. The other girl had on jeans and a loose gray T-shirt. Her hair was shorter and wavier that her cousin’s and she had these huge blue eyes, as clear as Jolly Ranchers. Her name was
Maeve and as many times as I’ve tried to forget that strange Irish name, I don’t think I ever will.

“Hey,” Luke said. “You gonna untie the boat, or what?”

I hadn’t realized it but I was just kind of standing on the dock, staring at Maeve.

Luke started the engine and let it idle. Then he opened the little compartment in the back where the life jackets were stored and pulled out a backpack. This was where we kept any illicit materials we may have had on us.

I unraveled the lines from the dock cleats and stepped into the boat. The girls were sitting up front on the cushions of the bow. Girls always loved sitting up there. There was a certain thrill to having the spray form the Lake mist your face after crashing through a wave or another boat’s wake.

Luke took a sandwich baggie of white pills and a bottle of vodka out of the backpack. He popped one of the pills and chased it with a healthy swig of vodka.

“Do you have any idea who that is?” I asked quietly, nodding toward Maeve.

Luke said, “no idea,” then he handed me the bag and the bottle and turned the boat’s nose out toward the center of the Lake; the motor gurgled noisily in the water. I swallowed a pill along with my urge to say more and took agulp of vodka, wincing as I offered both up toward the front of the boat.

“So what is this stuff exactly?” Maeve asked as she leaned over to collect the bag.

“Speed,” I croaked.

“Why do you call them co-pilots?”
“Because even though we’re flyin’.” Luke closed his eyes and yanked the steering wheel from left to right. “We can somehow still operate this fuckin’ thing.” The girls laughed from the front of the wildly zigzagging boat.

“How fast does this thing go?” the cousin asked.

“No clue,” I told her. “Speedometer’s broken.”

“That’s reassuring,” Maeve said and swallowed a pill. I watched her as she lifted the bottle of vodka to her lips. Her skin was glowing in the moonlight.

Luke howled and pushed the throttle hard, lifting the bow, and the two girls perched on it, three or four feet out of the water. The boat planed out after a few seconds and I could hear the girls laughing in the warm night air. Black water sped by beneath the boat like hot fluid pavement.

We headed north cruising through the Waltonian Group islands toward Blairs Bay. We whipped through the islands of the group winding around Temple Knoll, Asas, Lenni-Lenape, and Flirtation. Then Luke spun the boat 180 degrees. You could almost feel the girls’ stomachs tighten. He arrowed back down through the islands and then sped over to the cover of Blairs Bay. The girls screamed with delight.

Luke cut the engine and we drifted in the middle of the pitch-black bay water for a minute while the girls caught their breath and swallowed the lumps in their throats. Once our wake cleared, the Lake was silent and still.

“Holy shit,” Maeve said.

I was still staring at her; my head was starting to spin.

“Ever been out on the Lake this late?” Luke asked.

“Not like that,” the cousin responded. “What’s next?”
Luke turned to me. “Agnes?”

I shrugged, not knowing how to respond. All I could think about was confronting Maeve.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“One of the state owned islands near Huletts.” He picked up the vodka bottle and unscrewed the cap. “Has a lot of campsites and a 20-foot jumping rock.”

“Let’s go!” The cousin snagged the bottle out of Luke’s hand and put it to her lips, watching him seductively as she took a sip.

We passed it around in the darkness of the bay then Luke started the engine and pushed her south toward Agnes.

Agnes was one of those places that was always hit or miss in the middle of the night. You’d either get a bunch of college kids with roaring fires and a couple of kegs or you’d find a handful of dark tents and smoldering embers—vacationing families spread out asleep across the island.

That night the island was dark and quiet. We pulled up to a dock on the south side of the island and as I hopped out to tie our lines Luke went to the backpack for reinforcements.

“Where is everyone?” the cousin whispered.

“Who cares,” Luke said booming. He was walking back to the front of the boat with a six-pack of beer. “Less people the better.”

“Where’s the jumping rock?” Maeve asked, looking off into the trees.
Luke cracked one of the beers, which sneezed foam into the night air. “On the other side of the island.” He took a sip then tossed me one, handed one to each of the girls.

“I want to see it.”

“Sure,” Luke said. He sat down in the bow and put his arm around her cousin. “Nick’ll take you.”

I was standing on the dock staring at her again. When she looked back at me I snapped out of it. “Let’s go,” I said and started walking.

The moon was high in the sky and gave the island a blue-yellow glow. We walked through the trees sipping warm beer. It was strange, having the island so empty. I wondered if I was imagining it and my thoughts started to race. I let her go in front of me so I could watch her.

“How long has your family been coming here?” I asked, trying to calm my thoughts. My voice sounded loud and unnatural.

“Just the past three summers,” she said, though I already knew this. “Have you lived here long?”

“My whole life,” I said. A flailing pine branch raked my cheek crazily.

“Wow.” She exhaled. “What I wouldn’t give to live here all year round.” She stopped and looked around, tilted her head up toward the treetops.

“Why?” I had the sudden urge to tell her how cold and harsh the winters were. Or to explain how lonely the Landing felt after everyone boarded up their screened-in porches and headed home. I found it hard to believe that Skip had never mentioned this.

“Because this place is paradise.”
“You wouldn’t last a winter if you tried.” This came out harsher than I’d intended. Vacationers were always romanticizing the place based on its beauty. Sure, it was pretty, but a person can’t survive on beauty alone.

“Who says?” Her response echoed around the island.

“I don’t know many people who have,” I told her.

“You have.”

“It’s a fluke.”

She looked at me and laughed. I shrugged in the glow of the moon then started walking again.

We passed a few campsites and then the trees around us began to thicken. The light from the moon and the stars grew dimmer under the cover of the leaves but by then my eyes had already adjusted. I was leading her through the trees when she grabbed my hand.

“I can’t see a thing,” she said. “How do you know where you’re going?”

“I don’t know, I just do.” Her hand was warm and the shock of it felt foreign and electric. “We’re almost there.”

After a few minutes we emerged from the trees and were standing on the edge of a cliff looking out onto the moonlit water. A light wind was rustling the trees to our backs as the dark lake rippled in front of us. I looked down at her hand. It had ben sitting in mine for so long that I couldn’t really feel it anymore.

I looked up at her; she was staring down at the dark water. My chest started to tighten and I knew I had to ask her: Did you know my brother loved you? Do you know that now he’s dead?
Instead, I said nothing and after a moment she turned to me and asked, “how far
down?”

“About twenty feet.”

She let go of my hand and set her beer down on the rocky surface of the ledge
then started pulling her T-shirt up over her head.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going in.” She undid her belt and started shimmying out of her jeans.

“Aren’t you?”

I stood for a minute just watching her, starting to wonder if this was what she had
been like when Skip knew her. I was curious now. I wanted to know what Skip had felt
when he was with this girl. I wanted to experience it for myself. My heart started to race
and I couldn’t tell if it was the drugs or just my excitement. I set my beer down next to
hers and stripped to my boxers. Stepped to the edge of the rock, feeling the cool,
smoothness of it on my bare feet.

“Back here,” she said. “I need a running start.”

She took my hand and we backed up to the tree line then she looked over at me.

“You swim with that necklace on?” She picked the key up and held it in her hand.

“I never take it off,” I told her.

She shrugged. “On three, okay?”

“Okay,” I said. I could see her shaking.

“One…” I watched her as she counted out loud. “Two…” She was staring at the
edge of the cliff. “Two-and-a-half…” She looked at me and smiled nervously. “Three!”
At that we both started running. When we got to the edge, at the very moment my feet left the smooth rock, she let go of my hand and I could hear her squealing, “I can’t! I can’t!”

I hit the water and the surprising coolness of it burst through my veins. I could hear her laughing when I surfaced.

“I’m sorry!” she was shouting. “I’m sorry, I got scared.”

“This was your idea.” There was a small smile on my face. “Get in here.” I slapped a hand against the surface.

Her body danced on top of the rock in an attempt to convince herself to just do it. I remember how much smaller it looked as I watched from the water.

“You just have to do it,” I said. “You can’t think about it so much.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Do it!”

Okay!” she shouted and ran off the edge screaming the whole way down.

Her body made a small splash and she came back up quickly. “Oh my god,” she said breathing hard. “I’ve never done anything like that.” She was trying to tread water but was so excited that she kept sinking, taking big mouthfuls of water.

I swam over to her and she wrapped her legs around my waist, put her hands on the back of my neck. She weighed next to nothing. “That was amazing,” she said and pressed her wet lips against my own. Her mouth was sweet and warm, like lilac sugar. As I waded there, holding up the two of us, I pretended I was Skip. I felt a certain evil thrill keeping this from her, exploring her mouth with the tongue of a boy who had once loved her, and was now dead.
She pulled back and looked at me, as if considering something. Then untangled herself from my body and swam back toward the rock.

“How do we get back up?” she asked. “I want to go again.”

I showed her where to place her hands and feet to scale back up the face of the rock. We jumped a few more times. I tried a backflip, which Skip had taught me, but I went around too many times and smacked my back on the tight surface of the water. When we were done swimming we climbed back up and got dressed, sat on the edge of the rock finishing our beers. My head was buzzing. I turned to Maeve and opened my mouth to speak but she beat me to it.

“Thanks for a great last night.” She was staring off into the darkness of the Lake.

“What?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Where are you going?”


When she said this everything came rushing back. The anger. The emptiness. The reason I wanted to get her alone in the first place—so I could grab her by the shoulders and shake her and say, Just give me back my brother goddamn it. Give me back my brother and we can start over. We can do it right… But I didn’t know where to start and my head was beginning to spin so I just stared at her. That’s when I heard footsteps charging through the woods behind us. I turned around to see Skip emerging from the woods.

“Guys,” he said panting. “We’ve got a problem.”
When we got back to the dock, we found Maeve’s cousin leaning over the edge of the boat dry heaving.

“What did you do?” She ran over to the girl.

Luke looked at me. “I didn’t do shit.”

She was rubbing the girl’s back and holding her hair, speaking to her in a voice that was too low to hear. After a moment she said, “Come on, we’ve got to get her back.”

Luke and I stood there in a daze.

“Nick!” Her voice was piercing and urgent. It shook us awake and we jumped into the boat. Luke started the engine and drove us back to the Landing. Maeve sat with her cousin up in the bow, she sat with the girl’s head was in her lap, stroking it the whole way. When we got to the dock I helped them out of the boat and offered to walk them home.

“No,” Maeve said. “I think she’s okay.”

I nodded.

“Sorry, Nick. Come find me tomorrow before I go.” She pointed to Del Noce, the two-story cabin where her family was staying.

I said I would and watched them go. Then Luke and I tied down the boat and walked back up the mountain to Dad’s. When we got there we sat down on the porch and cracked the last two beers from the six-pack.

“Crazy night,” he said, taking a noisy sip.

“That was the girl,” I told him.

“Which?”

“Skip’s girl,” I said. “The one he was with right before he died.”
“That was her?” he slurred. “How do you know?”

“I just do.” I took a long pull at my beer.

“Did you say something to her?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t,” he said sleepily. “Just stay away from her.”

I didn’t respond. Just finished my beer. We sat in silence for a few minutes, then I heard Luke snoring. I walked inside and went upstairs to my room. It was stuffy and warm and I opened the window to let in some air. The birds were just beginning to stir.

I woke around ten. The sun was streaming in and my legs were damp with sweat. I kicked off the covers and walked downstairs. Luke had moved to the living room couch and Dookie was curled up on the pillow by his head—he’d left a turd the size of a baked potato on the kitchen floor. I stepped around it, poured myself a bowl of cereal, and walked out to the porch.

The late morning air was hot and kind of sticky. The cushions of the porch’s couch felt damp and feverish when I sat down. My head had stopped spinning sometime while I was sleeping, but I didn’t feel quite right. I couldn’t stop thinking about last night, what I didn’t say to Maeve. I wasn’t sure how anything I could say would help, but here she was, leaving again. I wondered if she ever thought about Skip. If she had any idea what had happened to him. Any idea what she’d done.

I finished my cereal and walked the bowl back inside. I placed it in the sink and tried to grab the boat keys off the kitchen table as quietly as possible.

“Nowhere.”

“Nicky. Just leave it alone man.” He sat up. Dookie grunted in his sleep. “What the hell is talking to the girl gonna do?”

“I don’t know,” I turned away. “But I can’t just let her walk out of this place again.”

“She doesn’t even know what happened to him,” he called out. “You’ve gotta stop blaming this girl.” At that I walked out the door and started down the road to the Lake. I didn’t know what I was going to say, but I knew where I was going to take her: Rattlesnake Point. I was going to let the place where Skip had died do most of the talking.

*Del Noce* was a tall eyesore of a cabin plopped right across the street from the Lake. Four SUVs packed the gravel driveway so I knew I hadn’t missed her. I stood in front of the house, wondering which window was hers.

“Nick,” a voice called from the shore behind me. It was Maeve. She was sitting on a brightly colored towel with her legs extended into the water. She was wearing jean shorts and a bathing suit top. She had on these big, dark sunglasses. When I got closer she took off her sunglasses and squinted at me. She looked tired or hung over or both.

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

“Not sure,” she said. “Parents are still asleep.”

I held up the boat keys. “Let’s go for a ride.” She stood up and wrapped the towel around her body then we walked over to the boat.
The water was lapping gently against the end of the dock. The sun was high in the sky, making the bright blue water. I helped her into the boat then untied the boat and started the engine.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” was all I said and pointed the boat down south.

Rattlesnake Point was a flat stretch of grass that jutted out into the Lake across from the Mother Bunch islands. There was no shore at Rattlesnake Point, the edge of the land just shelved off pretty much straight down. It must have been about 40-feet deep.

We pulled up to Point and I cut the engine. Someone had driven six thick, wooden dock posts into the earth lining the coast to serve as makeshift boat ties. They had once belonged to the dock that Skip had destroyed. Nobody had rebuilt it.

I looped the bowline around one of the posts and helped Maeve out of the boat.

“Wait a second,” she said, looking around. “I’ve been here before.”

“You have?”

“I think so.” She walked out a ways, watching where she stepped. “Less enchanting that I remember.”

She had a point. The grass was overgrown and empty beer cans and bottles lay scattered throughout. The stones of the fire pit were charred and crumbling. Several decrepit picnic tables stalked around randomly in the grass. Their wood was scarred by knife-carved obscenities. For all the nights I’d wasted there, I’d never once seen this place up close in the daylight.
I watched Maeve walk to a picnic table and run a finger along the deep gouges. She did this thoughtfully as though she were tracing the hieroglyphs of some ancient ruin. I was struck by this. By the gentleness that she leant to this task. For a moment, I watched her and started to forget why I’d even brought her there. I was ready to get her back in the boat and turn around to go home when suddenly she spun around and threw her hand over her mouth.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “I know who you are.”

“What?”

“I knew I recognized you,” she said. “I knew it. I just couldn’t place you before.”

“What are you talking about?” I was positive I’d never met her before. How could she know who I was?

“You’re Skip’s brother,” she said.

The blood in my body ran cold. I didn’t know what to say.

“You’re Skip’s fucking brother,” she repeated, hand still over her mouth. She was looking at me like I was a photograph of him. “Did you know who I was?”

“I guessed.”

“How?”

“He talked about you a lot,” I said. “Don’t know many girls with a name like yours.”

“What’s going on Nick?” She started backing away from me. “Why did you bring me here?”

I moved toward her.

“Stop,” she said. “What are we doing here?”
I stopped. The dizziness from the previous night began to wash back over me. To be honest, I didn’t really know what we were doing there. I just knew I had to bring her. She needed to bear witness.

“Skip’s dead,” I told her.

“I know that,” she said. “I found out after it happened.” I watched her move to the other side of the picnic table. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“See those posts?” I pointed to the shore behind me. “They used to belong to a dock. Skip drove a boat into it.”

“Why are you telling me this?” She was shaking.

“Because you were the last girl with him,” I said.

“And you think that had something to do with his death?” Her voice was wavering. “Nick, I want you to take me back.”

“After you left he fell apart.”

“Nick I want to go back,” she repeated.

“I’ve been trying for the past year to figure out why my brother did what he did.” I said. “I don’t know how else to explain it!”

“You think he crashed the boat because I left? That’s madness.” Her eyes were wide and full of fear. I’d never seen eyes so blue before. “And even if it were true, what was I supposed do, stayed forever just in case that happened?”

“I don’t know!” I shouted. “But if you loved him you could have done something.”

“Love?” she said. “Skip and I had fun but I didn’t love him and he didn’t love me.”
“If he didn’t love you then what made him kill himself?”

“How should I know?” She said. “How do you even know he meant it? He was a fucking addict.”

“A what?”

“An addict, Nick,” she said. “Skip was a junkie.”

“What are you talking about?” My legs felt weak. I knew Skip had tried heroin a few times but he wasn’t an addict. We all did things like that. Popped pills, smoked a little pot, drank on a weekday morning. But none of us were addicts.

“I caught him shooting up one day last summer. I told him I didn’t want to associate with that sort of thing and he told me he’d stop. He stayed clean until I left but who knows what he did after that. He was probably strung out when he crashed into the dock. I mean, you and Luke drive around high on fucking co-pilots all the time. If anyone should understand this it’s you.”

I thought back to that night. Tried to remember what he looked like. Had I mistaken heroin for heartbreak?

“No,” I said. “That’s not true.”

“Nick, I’m sorry you lost your brother,” Maeve said. She walked slowly back to my side of the picnic table. “But I had nothing to do with it. I swear.”

I sat down in the long grass of the Point and tried to picture Skip on that August night, the last time I saw him alive. What other strung out moments had I mistaken for something else? Through my shirt I felt at the key hanging around my neck. It felt heavy and dead in my hand.
Maeve walked over and knelt down beside me. “Can we please go back now?” she asked quietly. “Please?”

When we got back to the Landing, Luke was standing at the end of the dock. He helped Maeve out of the boat and then he climbed in.

“Move,” he said and pushed me out of the driver’s seat. “I told you to leave it alone.

Luke pushed the throttle and brought us out to the middle of the Lake. He cut the engine and we bobbed in the waves under the heat of the sun. He got up and went to the backpack stashed under the stern seat. Pulled a tightly rolled joint out of a zipped-up pocket.

“So what the hell did you say to her?” he said, sitting down and kicking his feet up. I watched him stick the joint between his lips, flick a lighter.

“Nothing,” I said.

He froze, hands cupped around is mouth, lighter flame dancing. “Bullshit,” he mumbled, joint wagging from his lips.

I shrugged. He took a few hits and offered it to me.

“I’m good,” I said.

“Suit yourself.”

We sat there in silence, bobbing on top of the Lake. I was staring out at the water but couldn’t stop thinking about what Maeve had told me. Certain things made so much sense now. Others didn’t.

After a few minutes I asked, “Was Skip an addict?”
Luke just shrugged, “Aren’t we all?” He finished the joint and tossed the roach behind him into the Lake. “Offerings to the Lake Goddess,” he said. We drifted for a while and then I heard Luke snoring. He was always falling asleep.

I leaned over the edge of the boat and looked down into the deep green water. It must have been 50 feet or so. Couldn’t even see the bottom. I stared into it for a minute then clutched at the skeleton key hanging around my neck. A gift, passed down from all the people who’d ever left me. Then I closed my eyes and thought of Maeve in her car. Wondered what Maryland must look like this time of year.