Camp: Sacandaga Stories

by

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camp (/kamp/)
noun

1. a place usually away from urban areas where tents or simple buildings (as cabins) are erected for temporary residence (as for laborers, prisoners, or vacationers) See: Adirondack Great Camps

2. A sensibility that revels in artifice, stylization, theatricality, irony, playfulness, and exaggeration rather than content. Coined by Susan Sontag in her short essay “Notes on ‘Camp’”. See: Queer Performance
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ORIGINS

Frank Daly stands on a strip of sand beach just wide enough for an Adirondack chair or a small rowboat looking out at the glass smooth surface of Sacandaga Lake. He can see clear to the other side. North Broadalbin, nothing more than a few purpling hills, seems close enough to touch. The hills demarcate the horizon, separating pink-orange sky from pink-orange lake. Frank sighs, grateful to see the lake unchanged after so long. He sits down on the rough-hewn rock wall at the edge of the small beach and slips his sockless feet from scuffed penny loafers, wriggling his toes into the cool sand. This late May afternoon has been warm, the kind of the day that would have brought him here a dozen years ago to sleep under the stars. He’d wake the next morning to swim in the lake. He turns from where he sits to see the rolling hills at his back.

To say the Mayfield Harbor Campground was run down would paint it in the best possible light. The “campground” for sale is now a balding hill, though still surrounded on three sides by dense woods of Adirondack pine trees, tall oaks, and maples. Rotten wood platforms, where tents had once safely stood, dot the hill in crooked rows. Tall grass and weeds grow between the boards of the platforms and in patches delineating areas where people had not walked in some years. The front row of platforms still encourages passage down the front of the hill to swim. At dusk, the setting sun still sets the rippled lake aflame with its reflection.

Frank had spent the afternoon wandering the terrain he’d known so well, remembering the man with whom he’d last been here. Herb’s strong jawline, his unkempt
curls, lake water dripping from his toned, tan skin. Frank hadn’t been here since just after
the end of the war.

* * *

Frank waded into the crystal green of Sacandaga Lake from the shoreline before
diving down into the muddy depths a few yards out. His skin, warmed by an early
summer morning hike through the woods, cooled as the lake water rushed over his taut
muscles. He bobbed in the water, fixing his grey-blue eyes on the man still standing on
the shoreline.

“Are you coming in or what?” Frank shouted, a grin spreading across his face.
Herb made a gesture Frank could only assume was obscene. “I’ll drag you in myself if I
have to!”

Not that Herb Glass would have minded Frank dragging him into the lake. He
pulled his clothes off too, and dove into the lake. Herb swam out to where Frank was
treading water, beyond where neither of them could stand, even at 5’10” and 6’
respectively.

“I’m always chasing you,” Herb grinned and shook the dark, wet curls from his
forehead. When they were boys, Herb had literally chased Frank around the schoolyard,
teasing him for his soft ways and his aversion to sports. Herb had been Frank’s biggest
tormentor.

“I know.” Frank said, suddenly serious. “I wish….”

“If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride,” Herb’s smile retreated to a
tight-lipped line. He paddled a short distance away.
Not much had changed in fifteen years. Frank was still fastidious in every way. His shiny black hair immaculately parted, eyebrows and nose hairs trimmed regularly. A shadow of stubble never appeared on his angular cheeks. His thin, soft hands had never worn the calluses his father and brother Carl had achieved in their carpentry business. His muscles had never been put to use fixing broken down cars, as had his brother Jack’s. Even now, though, he was out of Herb’s reach. Here for now, gone back to his wife soon.

After Herb had signed up for the army out of high school, Frank had married Jane McCarty. His brother Carl had set them up, but Frank found he earnestly enjoyed Jane’s company. He had never lied to her about his proclivities; that conversation had happened long before they ever walked down the aisle of their Catholic church. Jane naively believed they could work through the nature of Frank’s desires together. Frank wanted desperately to be a father, or else he would have considered the priesthood.

Each of the past five summers, since Frank had come back from the war with shrapnel in his leg and night terrors, the two men had gone off to rusticate together for two weeks, the sum total of Frank’s saved vacation days. They wrote letters the rest of the year, always to Frank’s work address, but here they could be alone together. In high school, their relationship had been entirely physical, but the years apart had given them a new kind of intimacy. In their letters and in these summer weeks, they spoke more truthfully than at any other time in the lives. If Jane knew with whom Frank spent his summer week, she never spoke Herb’s name aloud. Frank knew, though, her patience was growing thin for his secrets.

For his part, Herb lived a solitary life in a small cabin on his family’s property in Gloversville. He worked at the tannery like his father before him. Frank knew Herb
looked forward to this week most out of the year, but even he knew something would have to give eventually. Frank didn’t admit it aloud, but he had a difficult time believing Herb never found anyone to pass the brisk winter nights in his cabin.

It was Herb who had chosen Mayfield Harbor Campground. Far enough from their hometown of McKownville, New York and fairly close to Herb’s home, it was a secluded campground off State Highway 30. The whole campground could accommodate twenty tents on wooden platforms, but in all the years they’d been meeting there, they had only shared the campground with other people three times. The campground, nearly enclosed by the woods, provided all the isolation the world could afford two twenty-nine year old men who wanted to spend a week together.

Frank swam to the bottom surface of the lake, searching. He held his breath as long as possible before returning to the surface. He took deep, grateful breaths of oxygen and swam to Herb’s side. Smiling shyly, he presented his companion with a small, smooth stone. Herb rolled his eyes, but smiled despite himself. It was the best Frank could do.

When they’d exhausted themselves diving and splashing in the lake, they swam back to the narrow beach of the shoreline. They climbed the low, rough stone wall that divided the sand beach from the grassy hill beyond. There, they lay naked on their threadbare towels, eyes closed against the warm afternoon sun.

Herb extended his hand to the edge of Frank’s towel, where his hand rested. Each of the fine dark hairs on Frank’s hand rose at the heat of Herb’s hand.

“This is the last time I can come up here,” Frank said, his voice barely audible.
“Why?” Herb ran the callous of his thumb over Frank’s soft hand. He had already feared this camping trip would be their last, given his companion’s somber mood, but he wanted to hear it directly.

“I’m going for a job at town hall,” Frank interjected. “I can’t have anyone looking into my life and finding--”

“Me.” Herb turned his gaze to meet Frank’s. In all the years they’d known each other, Herb had never seen Frank cry openly. Now, he saw the man he’d known so long, so intimately was weeping. He propped himself up on his side at the sight, aching to shoulder some of Frank’s pain.

“It’s not that I want to stop seeing you.” Frank’s voice cracked. “It’s just, with the baby coming, I have to get a better job.”

The truth was he didn’t know if Jane was pregnant, but they had been trying. It had become so difficult, to keep his mind from Herb at home, at work. The trappings of fatherhood, he’d told himself, would surely distract him from seeing Herb.

“Be with me now, then.”

Frank, too, propped himself up on his side and leaned into Herb. The length of their bodies met. He brushed his lips against Herb’s and felt the scrape of scruff on his own cleanly shaved skin. Both men could feel the other’s erection. Herb smiled, sweet and sad, at Frank whose breathing was already shaky, before moving closer.

The men retreated to Herb’s olive green canvas tent, a relic of his army days, at sundown. They slept the whole night, cradled against each other, one sleeping bag below them, one above.
When Frank awoke the next morning, the morning sun too bright to stay sleeping any longer, he was alone. He scrambled up out of the tent and saw his car, a black Buick Roadmaster, alone on the dirt road below. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, Herb had slipped away, taking the minimal belongings he’d brought with him, and driven off. Frank was left with only the tent and the wide expanse of the lake. Frank slumped onto the tent platform and cried freely for the first time in his adult memory.

* * *

Frank missed Herb every day. It was heart-rending not to call him and plan a meet-up somewhere no one could ever find them.

The baby never came. Neither Jane nor Frank could bear another loss and they stopped trying after two miscarriages. Though their relationship ceased being sexual, their partnership was a tender one. Jane supported Frank in his career as he worked toward his current job of deputy town supervisor, and Frank’s increasing salaries had allowed Jane to go to nursing school. They dedicated themselves to being ideal second parents to their niece and nephews. Carl’s daughter, Kitty, and Jack’s sons, Clark, James, and Billy, had become the children Frank and Jane had never been able to have. The whole family lived on Daly Street, named for their father who’d built all seven of the houses on the short street when he moved the family from Brooklyn to the Capital District in 1930. Frank thought of his nephews and his niece now as he looked back at the hill of the campground. He surveyed the overgrown tangles of weeds and collapsing tent platforms.

“This could be something,” he breathed aloud.
Sitting at the edge of the lake, Frank thought about all that had happened in the nine years since he’d last been here: he’d become deputy to the town supervisor; his brothers had married and had children; Carl’s wife had died in childbirth; their father had died in a construction accident building a house in a neighboring town; their mother had fallen terribly ill. Even though the brothers lived in close proximity, life had sped up. Frank realized this land he’d loved for so long, had held up as an idyll, could be something new now: a summer retreat, a protective community for his family. A place where no one he loved would ever have to say goodbye again.

On Thursday night, Frank invited his brothers over after their children had gone to bed, to play poker and to propose investing in a small piece of property in the Adirondacks.

“Hi Frankie.” Jack came in through the screen door at the back of the house in his work shirt and heavy boots.

Frank was in the kitchen, pulling out clean whiskey tumblers from the cabinet.

“Come on in. Carl’s already in the back.” Frank handed his brother a glass and lead him toward the back room.

The room once envisioned as a child’s bedroom was now a den. Carl sat at the card table, smoking a Lucky Strike, the shuffled cards square in the center of the table. He was the oldest of the Daly men. His springy hair, once the same jet-black as their father’s was now mottled with grey. His face was deeply etched and his fingertips were yellowed by tobacco. A lifetime of hard labor and the death of his high school
sweetheart, Annie, had led Carl retreat into himself. He was not the loud and lovable Irishman their father had been, but a quiet, steady force in the family.

Jack closed the door behind himself before sitting down across from Carl and taking a proffered cigarette. If anyone had taken up the mantle of John Daly I, it had been Jack. As quick with a red-faced rage as he was with an uncouth joke and a hearty laugh, he had started Daly Auto with a small loan from his father and repaid it quickly. Jack had his eye always on moving up in the world. His wife Mary had come from a station above the Daly family and he was still trying to prove his mettle after almost a decade of marriage.

Frank set the etched whiskey glasses on the table and opened a window at the edge of the room. Jane was already sleeping and he didn’t want the smoke to disturb her. His brothers made small talk about work as Carl began to deal out cards and chips.

Frank felt a stir of nerves in his belly as his brothers laid down their cards, anteed up, and bet against each other. How to even begin? He didn’t want to let on how badly he wanted this plan to work. He poured a generous three fingers of copper-colored whiskey in each glass, neat like their father had taught them. If it’s decent whiskey, their father had said, don’t ruin it.

“Work’s been steady,” Carl said, his Brooklyn accent a little thicker than his brothers. “Dad left things in good shape and I’ve got a couple guys on board interested in expanding the business a little.” Carl had apprenticed under his father, but since his death, was now at the helm.

“What kind of expansion are you thinking?” Jack asked, studying his cards. “I have some contacts through the shop. All kinds of people come in.” Daly Auto had been
up and running on the main thoroughfare a mile from their neighborhood for nearly fifteen years.

“We’ve been working up near Saratoga,” Carl said, “but I think with a few extra guys we could handle more jobs in the Adirondacks.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, I know some guys up there.”

“I was just up by Sacandaga last weekend.” Frank cleared his throat, taking the opening.

“What were you doing up there?” Jack swigged from his glass.

Frank flinched a little. His brothers had met Herb a long time ago when Frank had tutored him in English, but had never known the nature of their relationship.

“I used to go camping at a place up there,” he said, steadying his voice, “but it was a long time ago. I just wanted to see if it had changed, I guess.”

“Had it?” Jack asked, bored already, and focusing on the ash of his cigarette.

“Oh, yeah,” Frank said. “It’s not even a campground anymore. Actually, the land is for sale.” Frank tried to study his cards, but the numbers and suits all blurred together. He worried his brothers could hear his heart racing. He couldn’t tell them why the place was so special.

“Is it a total dump?” Carl perked up and set his cards down, focusing his steely eyes on his youngest brother.

“It needs some work, but it’s in a beautiful spot,” Frank said. “Gorgeous view of the lake, surrounded by woods.”

“What exactly are you suggesting, Frankie?” Jack cut in. He’d never been one for idle chatter.
“Haven’t you seen those big family compounds?” Frank had prepared what he would say for days. Now that he was face to face with his older brothers, he felt like he was five years old, left behind on the sands at Coney Island all over again. “I want to build something special, a place for our families to be together.”

“Those places are for rich people, Frankie.” Jack said, with a dismissive swig of his drink. “We’re not rich like that.”

“You two own your own businesses,” Frank quickly replied. “And I work for the town. It wouldn’t be that big a stretch if we went in together.”

“I don’t know, Frank,” Carl admitted, though he seemed more open than Jack.

“Don’t you want a place where you can watch out for Kitty?” Frank knew that bringing up his niece and Carl’s single fatherhood would be a risk, but Carl’s eyes widened in response. Frank met Jack’s ice blue eyes. “Don’t you want a place for the boys to be boys? Can you imagine campfires, fishing, swimming, hiking – all of us together?”

Jack exhaled a plume of smoke and shook his head. Frank’s stomach fell at the prospect of the conversation being over already. He hadn’t even begun to fight for the dream of a summer home. He tried to meet his brothers’ eyes, but they’d both turned back to the cards.

“I want to see this place,” Carl said, breaking the silence.

Frank grinned, a little shocked. He turned to Jack.

“Goddamn. Okay. I want to see it, too,” Jack growled, and stubbed out his butt in the ashtray.
One Saturday a few weeks later, the brothers piled into the cab of Carl’s Chevy and drove north.

“Alright, Frankie,” Jack said. “You’re the guide.” He rolled up the cuffs of his denim shirt with oil-stained fingertips while his younger brother crammed into the middle of the bench seat.

Frank had a road map of New York State in his lap. “I’ll get us there.” Frank ran a hand through his thick black hair. “North on 87.”

Carl backed his truck out of the driveway and maneuvered them toward the highway.

Jack flipped on the radio and Elvis crooned back through the crackling speakers: “When I'm near that girl that I love best, / my heart beats so it scares me to death!” Jack grinned slyly at Frank.

Jack and Carl knew Frank hated Elvis, but they didn’t know why. Ever since Frank had seen the face behind “I Forgot to Remember to Forget” a few years earlier, he’d hated how the handsome face, the spit curl and tight jeans, reminded him of Herb. Frank stared out the windshield at the trees blurring by and realized he’d only ever felt “all shook up” by men who looked just like Herb Glass. He shook his head, as though to dislodge the memory, glaring as Jack turned the song up even louder.

“How much longer?” Carl asked, puffing on a Lucky Strike, ignoring Elvis and his brothers’ spat.

After they crossed over the bridge into Amsterdam, turning onto Route 30, Frank looked out the window for the first glimpse of the lake. Before the Route 29 junction, he could see the flashes of light through the trees. By the time they passed Vail Mills, he
could see the reflection of the morning sun hitting the water of the stream that fed the lake.

“It won’t be far now,” Frank said.

After a few minutes, he spotted the rotted wood sign on the side of Route 30 that in fading white paint read: “Ma fi ld Ha bo Ca pgr und.” A small “For Sale” sign dangled below the name.

“Turn here!” Frank called out.

Carl hit the brakes hard and wrenched the Chevy to the side of the road. They turned right off the main highway, down a winding, narrow, unpaved lane. Frank tried to imagine what this lake might look like to someone who had never seen it when they were young and in love. The “campground” was a dirt road dotted by small, disintegrating tent platforms. Surrounded by forest on both sides, Carl drove slowly down the hill of the narrow road. Frank leaned over Jack to look out the window.

After a half mile, the road leveled out and finally ended at a sand beach. Carl set the brake and the brothers piled out. Their boots crunched along the sand. The three of them walked down to look out over the lake. The water was misty in the cool morning air.

“Well, the lake looks nice, but this place is a fuckin' dump.” Jack turned to face the hill that had once been a lush campground.

“It’s not a dump,” Frank said, quickly.

“It is a dump,” Carl said, clapping a heavy, calloused hand on Frank’s shoulder. “But I can see it now. Cabins where those platforms are?” He looked at his brother for confirmation.
Frank nodded, stunned Carl had seen his vision.

“Is it just going to be our family?” Jack asked, looking at Frank for answers.

“Because if it’s not, I think it has to be a membership association.”

Frank allowed himself to imagine beyond their family for a moment. “If it was an association, the dues could all go into repairs for the water lines and whatever else.”

“Septic tanks, I think,” Carl said. “Not water lines. We don't wanna have to deal with whatever town board we’re near here.”

“Well, you’d know better than I would.” Frank smiled from one brother to another. The excitement built inside him as though he’d inhaled helium. He felt a sense of buoyancy spread from one brother to another to another.

“Carl, you have a notebook in that truck?” Jack jabbed at Carl’s shoulder.

Carl rolled his eyes, but came back in a moment with a notebook and a pen. Jack sat down on the stone wall, at the edge of the grassy bank – boots in the sand – and designed a horseshoe shaped system of boat docks. He delineated a swimming area where children could swim in the lake, safe within the border. He showed his sketch to his brothers.

“Look.” Jack pointed to the various components of the diagram as he spoke. “The docks are anchored here on the sand, and that way we won’t lose any kids in the lake.”

“And there’ll be plenty of slips for whatever boats folks bring in,” Carl said, nodding out to the lake in front of them.

Nobody needed to say Frank’s vision had convinced. Frank knew and kept his mouth shut. As long as it all panned out, he would be able to come here for the rest of his life.
The sale of the land went through within six months; there hadn’t been any other buyers interested in a plot of land in the middle of nowhere with a tiny beach on largely undiscovered lake. The brothers pooled their resources and Jack, who’d always had a head for numbers, worked out a balance between in-kind labor and cash paid up front. Each brother had an equal share of responsibility. The three Daly men would pile into Carl's pickup truck and drive up to Mayfield and work at turning the once abandoned plot of land into an idyllic summer retreat.

It took just under five years to turn the Mayfield Harbor Campground into the Sunrise Harbor Campers Association. Carl built up his carpentry business and the new hires helped him build simple cabins where the former tent platforms had stood. Jack worked out the membership dues structure. As town supervisor, Frank worked up the plans and took on the responsibility of setting up the Sunrise Harbor Campers Association as an officially recognized corporation by the state of New York. Friends of the family were invited to become dues paying members and select their cabin of choice from the available options on the hand drawn map Jack had expanded as they finished building each cabin.

On Memorial Day 1959, Frank, Jack, and Carl – along with their families – woke early. They drove an hour or so north from 87 to 90 to State Highway 30 and turned off at a small brown wooden sign. Carl had personally carved and painted the sign, bearing the white letters “SHCA.” Jack’s white and wood paneled station wagon made its way down the narrow road followed by Frank’s Buick and Carl’s Chevy. Where once the hill had
been barren, new grass had grown in lush and thick. Small cabins of various colors faced the dirt lane all the way down to the bottom of the hill. The three cars parked in a line one right after another at the base of a set of wooden stairs Carl’s team had built into the hill.

“Here it is,” Frank’s hands shook as he slipped the keys from the ignition and turned to look at Jane. “Finally, you get to see what we’ve been working toward.”

She covered his shaking hand with hers. “It’s already perfect, Francis.”

He was “Francis” to her alone, his name their secret.

“I would never have been able to do this without you,” he said, the words tumbling out. He was rarely effusive, despite their closeness. Even now, he didn’t know what he meant—the camps or their life together.

“You already have, dear.” She smiled and patted his hand before reapplying her lipstick.

His dark brow furrowed in consternation. He searched her face in the compact she’d procured from her purse, for some sign of anger or remorse at their relationship, but found none.

They emerged to greet the others: Jack, Mary, and their yawning sons Clark, James, and baby Billy, Carl and his daughter Kitty.

“Let me get a photo of the guys in front of the cabins!” Mary squealed, her Nikon already in hand. The kids had already made their way up the bank to look out at the lake.

The brothers—Frank in his white polo shirt, Jack in his madras button-up, Carl in his permanent flannel shirt—stood at the base of the wooden stairs. Mary shook her brown bangs from her forehead and framed up the photo with the cabins behind them. The shutter snapped, immortalizing the brothers forever in front of their passion project.
“Looks great!” Mary beamed. “I’ll make sure everyone gets a copy!”

They unpacked their vehicles of suitcases, groceries, and décor items for the cabins, before making their way up the wooden staircase to the cabins. The brothers’ had selected three of the six cabins in the front row for themselves—to see the lake when they rose each summer morning and to honor the work they’d each poured into Sunrise Harbor. Jack and Carl had offered Frank the first cabin, on the far left, as a place of prestige, because he’d seen this vision all the way through. Frank opted instead for the second cabin, a simple brown A-frame, constructed on the place where he and Herb had last stayed. Jack had jumped at the opportunity to have the first cabin, the white clapboard. Carl had already set his eyes set on the third one – more rustic, with its rough-hewn detailing and open front porch.

For the first time since the cabin had been finished, Frank opened both the screen and the main door wide, allowing Jane to enter first. Nearly identical inside to the cabins on either side, theirs was a single story bungalow with a living room and kitchen at the front, a bedroom with two beds and small bathroom in the back, and an attic with a ladder that pulled down between the living room and the bedroom. Frank put his suitcase on one of the beds, and Jane’s on the other, before returning to the living room.

In the living room, Jane stood at the front window, facing the lake.

“So? What do you think?” he asked, coming up around to stand beside her.

“It’s just as lovely as you’d promised,” she said, with a small smile. “I think I’m going to read for a bit, if that’s alright.”

“Of course.”
As Jane settled into her book in the one of the Adirondack chairs Carl had distributed in front of their cabins, Frank pulled a beer from the bag of groceries they’d brought and took a seat at the Formica table by the front window. He watched his brothers bustle from car to cabin, unpacking their new summer homes, keeping an eye ever vigilant on their wandering children. The trees turned the afternoon sunlight to lace on the ground. Frank breathed in the clean air.

In the evening, Jack made hamburgers on a small charcoal grill for everyone who had showed up for opening day. Carl, with the help of his daughter and nephews, gathered sticks and felled tree branches in a large pile for a bonfire on the far edge of the grass—close enough to the water should any sparks fly up.

The sun met the edge of the water on the far side, purpling the hills of on the other side of the lake. Frank stood in front of the woodpile, facing the small crowd of family who’d made his dream come to life.

“It’s taken a long time and a lot of hard work to get to where we are today,” Frank said, his voice quavering. Even as town supervisor, he never had to give speeches. “This land was a deserted campground on a beautiful lake – and look at it now!

“With a full heart, I welcome you all to the Sunrise Harbor Campers Association, or “Camp” as I’ve lovingly dubbed it in my mind for all these years.” Frank pulled a white handkerchief from the pocket of his jeans and dabbed at the corners of his eyes. His family hooted and clapped in loud response.

When the applause died down, Frank took a match from Carl and, ceremonially lit the first stick of the bonfire. Carl and Jack, too, lit a few sticks at various points around the pile of kindling and logs. They all stepped back to watch the mound erupt like a small
flaming hill. Flames licked higher and higher into the night sky. As he stared into the fire, Frank could not help but think of Herb, even as the place they loved had been born anew.
THE FROG

“James Patrick, you are to put that book down,” his mother, Mary, called to him.

“But Ma, I'm almost done with this...” James protested. He looked up and saw her standing in the doorway of his bedroom, beautiful and far away in her sleeveless, white satin top and high-waist pants.

“I know you want to spend this beautiful day holed up in your bedroom,” she started, “but it’s summer vacation! I'm not going to let you waste it.”

This had not been the first time they'd had this conversation. Several days in a row now, she'd found him just as he was, lying on his back in an undershirt and shorts on the single bed in his small room, a Hardy Boys novel held aloft.

“Can I just read to the end of this chapter?” he asked, finger and thumb clutching the precious pages to show her how little he had left, knowing he’d already lost. On another day, she might have left him alone, but his father, Jack, had been working at the auto body shop all week and she was finally getting out of the house.

“Not today, James.” Mary smoothed down her pleated navy pencil skirt with her manicured hands. “I'm taking Billy with me to the salon and I would appreciate it if you would go outside and get some fresh air. Go find some of the neighborhood boys.”

Jimmy was glad he was too old to accompany his mother to her weekly salon visit and subsequent bridge game. Billy was only five, just a little too young to be left alone with his ten year old brother.

“Please go play ball?” she asked, weary.
Watching his mother retreat, Jimmy wondered what she wanted to be when she
grew up. He swung his legs over the bed and ran a hand through his thin, wispy hair
before pushing himself up and pulling on a baseball shirt and his dirty white high-top
Keds. He stared at the book still sitting halfway done on the bed. In one quick motion, he
tucked the paperback in the waist of his shorts like contraband and ducked out of his
room.

“Okay, Mom,” he said. “I’m heading out.” He brushed past his mother in the eat-
in kitchen on the way toward the back door, hoping to avoid a conversation.

“You know,” she said, “Clark would be out playing ball with his friends on an
afternoon like this, if he wasn’t working.” With her thin, manicured hand, she plucked
*The Mystery at Devil’s Paw* from Jimmy’s waistband.

“I know, Mom.” Sometimes Jimmy thought that when his mother looked at him,
she only saw the vague resemblance to his older brother. With a sigh, he twisted the
handle and opened the back door to the June Saturday before him.

Pushed out of the house, Jimmy liked to go next door to his aunt Jane and uncle
Frank’s. Where his father chided Jimmy for reading, Frank bought him books. Instead of
questioning why he knew the answers on *Jeopardy!*, Jane would quiz him on other trivia
factoids. His own parents didn’t see how reading nonstop, drawing, and listening to music
were going to help Jimmy make anything of his life. His aunt and uncle didn’t have kids
of their own, but when Jimmy was at their house, they treated him like one of the adults.
If he were especially lucky, Frank and Jane would take him and his brothers up to Camp
for the weekend, their summer home on Sacandaga Lake. Jimmy’s parents owned the
summer cottage just beside his aunt and uncle’s, but could never make it up as often
Jimmy wanted. Today, unfortunately, Frank was at down in the McKownville town office and Jane was working a nursing shift at the hospital.

Jimmy had a backup plan: an old, bent willow tree by the wide creek that ran along the far edge of the Daly property. He preferred to go there with a book in hand, but with his hands torn free of *The Mystery at Devil's Paw*, he slipped off his shoes and socks and climbed down to the water's edge. There, his narrow feet gripped the mossy wood on a log that had fallen into the water during the spring storms. Crouching down, he slid his slender, pale hand into the cool, clear water. He could feel little fish and tadpoles slip past his fingers, though they sped away in a blur before he could make out their forms. A slick creature bumped his knuckles and startled him, almost causing him to fall into the water.

Jimmy adjusted his footing to re-balance on the log and peered into the blue-green, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever it was he'd touched. He found nothing. He stood back up, wondering if he'd been out long enough to return home.

Just then, Jimmy heard a loud, guttural sound that sounded to him like his father after a few beers on a Friday night. His steel grey eyes searched for the source of the call and found a lily pad a few feet away. Perched there, looking weightless, hiding in plain sight in the greens and browns sat a small frog. The frog's throat expanded and contracted like a balloon inflating and deflating over and over again.

“Hello there,” Jimmy said aloud, and blushed for having done so.

In response, the frog sounded his call again.

Jimmy grinned, embarrassment forgotten, and crouched down to see his new friend better.

The creature's shiny black eyes peered back, wary.
Jimmy held his breath and tried not to move a muscle, worried he'd scare the frog away. He wished he had his notebook so he could draw the frog looking back at him, the sun shining off the smooth skin.

The previous summer, his Uncle Frank had taken him to Camp and for the first time, it had been just the two of them. Clark was working at the shop with their dad and his mother had stayed home to take care of a sick Billy. So, it was just Jimmy and his uncle for three whole beautiful summer days on Sacandaga Lake. In the mornings, the two of them would go swimming in the lake with an old friend of Frank’s, Herb Glass, who had recently acquired a cabin nearby. In the evenings, Frank would make a fire in front of their cabin and they’d sit out—Frank with a beer, Jimmy with a sarsaparilla soda—and watch the fireflies blink into being, shooting stars streaking the sky above. After Frank had cooked them dinner and they’d had their fill of s’mores, Jimmy, still smelling of campfire, would fall asleep in one of the single beds in the back bedroom, looking at an old photo of a family, trying to pick out which one was his grandfather.

On an afternoon not unlike this one, Jimmy and Frank spent hours fishing in his uncle’s canoe. The two of them sat in the canoe, fishing and talking about music and the news, watching frogs dive off the rocks and branches into the lake. Staring at this frog, Jimmy couldn't wait to get back to Camp, his favorite place in the world.

“Head 'em up! Move 'em on! Move 'em on! Head 'em up! Rawhide!”

Coming over the ridge of the creek where Jimmy had climbed down, he could hear some of the neighborhood boys scream-singing the theme to Rawhide.

“Halt! Who goes there?” a voice called down the bank.
Jimmy tried to stay as motionless as possible, fearing whoever it might be. If he could have made himself invisible, now would have been a time for that power.

“Show yourself, you yellow-bellied coward!”

Jimmy scrambled up the bank and found Matt Connors, Greg Lawrence, and Danny Mercer marching in fake formation, with large sticks as rifles in their hands. He wiped his muddy hands on his dungarees. Jimmy didn't like Matt and Greg, both now a grade behind after failing too many classes. Both of them had been bothering Jimmy for a while, pushing him into the snow in the winter, teasing him in the locker room.

Sometimes he sat with Danny on the bus. His school friends lived on the other side of the district, closer to Schenectady.

“An enemy approaches!” Matt called to his troops. Matt was taller than Jimmy and so thin his ribs jutted out from his concave chest. He whipped his head around, blonde hair newly shorn. “Never mind. It's just the sissy!” He glowered at Jimmy.

Usually, the boys played baseball in the open field Jack Daly called the North Forty – the northernmost portion of the acres the Daly family owned. Jack had been working so much he hadn't been around to order Jimmy, Clark, and Billy to mow the field with the new John Deere riding mower. The makeshift diamond was overgrown with weeds and the boys weren’t able to find the sandbags they'd hauled out to the field to mark the bases.

“Uh, what are you doing?” Jimmy asked, his voice a little shaky.

“Oh, what were you just doing?” Greg mocked back. “Playing with yourself?” Jimmy pretended not to hear, but frowned as Danny snickered behind him, still holding a stick rifle still in position.
“No, I was just…” Jimmy said, swallowing hard. “I found a frog.”

“Cool!” Danny exclaimed, but off Greg’s angry look, he seemed to wilt. “I mean, I guess that’s not stupid,” he covered.

“We like to see some dumb frogs,” Matt said. “I mean, since we can't play baseball today anyway.” He shot Jimmy a look like it was his fault the North Forty field hadn't been mowed.

Jimmy froze. He didn't want to show anyone the frog, especially not Greg who was twice Jimmy’s width.

“Well?” Matt demanded.

Jimmy turned and led the boys down the creek bank. At the creek’s edge, he pointed to where he'd seen the frog, grateful the lily pad was now empty of its previous occupant. He knew the frog had gotten the better end of the deal; at least he’d gotten away.

“I thought you said you saw a bunch of frogs,” Greg huffed.

“No, I never said that,” Jimmy muttered, stuffing his hands in his shorts. “I just said I saw a frog.”

“What about under this log?” Matt asked, pointing to the log where Jimmy had stood earlier, rocking it back and forth with a sneakered foot.

“Help me move it.” Danny pushed past Jimmy to get to the log. Matt and Danny crouched down on the creek bank and balanced as they rocked the log back and forth.

“You're doing it wrong!” Greg yelled, adding his hands to the log, flipping it with his ropy arms. The log plopped back down in the creek, splashing all five of the boys. Jimmy bit his lip to keep from squealing. Where the log had been sat half a dozen frogs,
stunned by their sudden exposure. “Yes!” Greg cheered. He snatched one with a meaty hand and held it above his head. The wet, green creature kicked out against Greg's hand with its long hind legs.

Jimmy tried to will the frog to pee on Greg's hand with his thoughts.

“How far do you think you can throw it?” Matt challenged with a grin, jutting his angular chin out at Greg. Danny laughed, assuming Matt was kidding, but from the look on Matt's face, Jimmy could see he was deadly serious. Greg's dark eyes glinted maniacally as he grinned back at Matt.

“The length of a football field, probably.”

“How 'bout over a house?” Matt pushed.

“Definitely over a house.” Greg nodded, all hint of joking gone.

“Danny, grab as many frogs as you can and put them in your shirt like this.” Matt flipped up his ratty white t-shirt into a pocket, pulled a frog from the muddy bank, and trapped it inside.

Jimmy winced at the struggling frog, grateful Matt hadn't said his name.

“You too, sissy,” Matt ordered thrusting a frog at Jimmy to make him wince again.

While the other boys collected startled frogs and stuffed them into their shirts, Jimmy took as much care as he could, placing the frogs into his shirt with care, giving them as much space as he could. Jimmy wondered if frogs accepted apologies.

“Whose house are we going to use?” Danny asked as the frog population on the creek bed dwindled. The frogs leapt, manic in their cotton confines, and the boys struggled to hold them close.
“Jimmy's,” Matt responded immediately. “He lives closest and, if he’s not there, nobody's home. Right?” Matt jabbed an elbow into Jimmy's ribcage as the boys made their way up the bank.

Jimmy gasped, the wind knocked out of him. He didn't have a choice.

Jimmy lived at 3 Daly Street, named because his grandfather had built all seven houses on the short street. It was a modest white Cape Cod-style house with twin gables that looked out over the road. Matt, Danny, Greg, and Jimmy now stood on the front lawn, gazing up at the peak of the house.

“Jimmy, go get a bucket and something to cover it,” Matt charged, glowering at Jimmy.

Jimmy took his time walking to over to the garage, trying to drag out this torture as long as possible. Inside the musty garage, he found the yellow plastic bucket his father used to wash the car, filled with a few sponges and a coiled hose. With one hand, Jimmy flipped the bucket over and emptied it of its contents. With the other, Jimmy opened the pocket he’d made with his shirt and let the two frogs fall into the bucket. Immediately, the mottled brown-green creatures attempted an escape. Jimmy was tempted to set them free, but knew he’d meet hell from Matt and Greg if he did. Instead, he pulled an orange poncho from the narrow wooden shelf below the window and folded it over the bucket. He held the contraption tight as he darted back to where the other boys stood on the edge of the walkway leading from the front door to the street.

“It’s about time, moron,” Matt said.
All three boys emptied their shirts into the yellow bucket. The collected frogs jumped futilely in their plastic prison.

“Okay, me first,” Greg said, plunging his meaty hand into the bucket to retrieve a squirming captive. He took several steps back until he was stood at the line where concrete walkway met the dull grey of the street before shaking his arms back and forth like he was getting ready to run. He took a deep breath as he made a swooping arc with his arm, bent his knees, and launched the frog—legs splayed—toward the apex of the house. He grinned at his empty right hand, triumphant.

Danny ran around the other side of the house to see if the frog had cleared the roof. A few moments later he returned, a dejected look on his face. “Didn't make it. I think it got stuck on the roof.” He elapped a hand on Greg's shoulder.

“Your turn, Matt,” Greg said, shrugging off Danny’s sympathy.

“I've got this.” Matt peeled the orange poncho back and reached into the bucket, and came out with a frog, desperate to jump from his grip. He clamped his other hand down on top of the first and clutched the slick creature even tighter.

Jimmy hoped the frog would slip free.

Matt, too, stepped back to the edge of the driveway. He hopped up and down a little, just as he always did when he got up to bat, closed his eyes, and wound up his right arm. The frog hooked wildly and landed with a sickening splat in the gutter. Matt's suntanned face looked crestfallen.

“Oh my God!” Greg spat out laughing, as he doubled over. “That was horrible!”

“You made Greg look good!” Danny cried, leaning on the mailbox for support, as he laughed harder.
“Fuck you,” Matt shot back. “I'd like to see you try it.”

“Fine by me,” Danny said.

He yanked a frog from the bucket and launched it over the house. Danny’s frog went missing and none of the boys could figure out where it had landed.

All three boys turned to Jimmy.

“Come on,” Matt jeered. “Are you gonna do it or what?”

Jimmy wracked his brain, scrambling for a way out of this. He liked frogs and he didn’t want to throw one over his own house.

“If you do this, Greg said, “you definitely won’t be a sissy anymore.”

“No way.” Danny agreed.

Jimmy swallowed hard. Was this worth not being bullied? It wasn’t his stupid fault that he was Gallant and not Goofus. He had watched his brother Clark pitch enough to know how to get the ball to go where you wanted it to go, but he had never thrown a frog. He closed his eyes and reached into the bucket, not wanting to know if the chosen frog was one he had carried over from the creek. The slimy creature wriggled in his hand, but he held it tight.

Looking around, he realized he needed a better angle. He stepped up onto the edge of the stone planter his mother maintained at the edge of the lawn and jammed his eyes closed. Swinging his arm back, he launched the frog as hard as he could. When he could no longer feel the slick of the frog on his hand, Jimmy opened his eyes and looked around at the three boys, mouths agape at the house.

“Holy shit!” Matt cried. “Jimmy did it!”

“Go on, man,” Danny called to Jimmy. “See if it landed.”
Jimmy walked ahead of the other boys toward the back. He made his way, shaking, across the front lawn in front of the big bay window. Nobody was home yet and, for that at least, he was glad. Behind the house was the fresh blacktop driveway his dad had resurfaced a few weekends back. As Jimmy neared, he realized he had done what the other boys had failed to do.

The rubbery stomach flattened against the concrete slab of sidewalk, red black starting to pool beneath the head, and the limbs bent into strange angles made Jimmy’s stomach turn. Seeing the frog dead now, Jimmy knew he’d made the wrong decision.

“That’s sick!” Matt shrieked as he came over to inspect the damage. “Good work, man!” He pounded his small open palm on Jimmy’s back and Jimmy flinched.

“Uh, thanks.” He took a deep breath, tried to hide his trembling hands. “It’s sad, right? That it’s just dead now?” Jimmy’s grey eyes searched Matt's for his own disgust reflected, but Matt twisted up his face and turned away.

“Greg!” Matt called out, as Greg made his way around the side of the small house with Danny trailing behind. “Greg, Jimmy thinks it’s sad.” Matt laughed.

Greg’s brow shone with sweat, despite the mild weather, dark half moons under his blue striped t-shirt arms. “You think it’s sad, Jimmy?” He huffed, a little out of breath, his sweaty brow furrowed. “Is it ‘sad’ if I punch you for being a sissy?” His face broke into a grin. Danny guffawed behind Greg, his perpetual back up with a greasy bowl cut.

Jimmy felt his face go hot, his ears getting redder by the moment. He thought they were going to stop calling him a sissy if he threw the frog, but realized now they had
never planned to do that. Given a pen and paper, he would have been able to write down a sharp retort, but in the moment, he was useless.

“It’s… it’s just a dumb game,” he stammered out. “That’s all. It was a stupid idea.” He spat on the street in front of him for emphasis.

Danny looked bewildered. “No way!” He yelled, a little too loud. “It’s cool! Look at that blood. Besides, you were the only one who got it over the house.”

Jimmy felt sick thinking about all the frogs that had been sacrificed that afternoon.

“Besides, wasn’t it kind of your idea?” Matt shoved Jimmy’s shoulder with an open palm. “You told us where the frogs were.”

Jimmy had hoped no one would say that because he knew it was true. Even though he’d been forced to show them where the frogs were, he’d still done it. He was responsible for a frog massacre.

“I don't want to do this anymore.” Jimmy shut his eyes and tried to make his voice lower. “Go home, guys.” He didn't want to see the dead frog on his sidewalk anymore. He didn't want to be called a sissy again and he didn't want any more frogs launched over his house.


“I thought you did a good job,” Danny said after the other boys had left. “I don’t think you’re a sissy.”

Jimmy nodded. “Thanks, Danny. I’ll see you later.”
After Danny left, Jimmy scraped the frog's remains into a hosta plant on the edge of the driveway with a stick. Jimmy, alone, retreated to the driveway at the back of the house to free the remaining frogs into the bushes on the other side of the property wall. He wanted to bring them back to their home in the creek, but he could already feel tears start to sting his eyes. He crouched down and peeled the yellow poncho back to see how many survivors remained. Three. He sat down on the back step, clutching the bucket, but turned when he heard approaching footsteps.

“Heya, kiddo. What's going on?” his uncle Frank called out from the edge of the driveway.

Jimmy tried to rub at his eyes, but Frank could tell he was upset. Frank was about the only person in the world Jimmy didn't mind seeing him cry, but he didn't want to tell him what had happened. He shrugged in response.

“What’s in the bucket?” Frank asked, crouching down next to his nephew.

Jimmy peeled back the orange poncho and let his uncle peer inside. “Frogs,” Jimmy said. “I was going to bring them back to the creek.”

His uncle nodded. “How’d you get them up here?”

“Some of the boys in the neighborhood wanted to play with them.” Jimmy didn’t want to lie, but he couldn’t tell the whole truth.

“I see.” Frank said. “Can I help you carry the bucket?” He stood and offered his hand to help Jimmy back to his feet.

Jimmy nodded. He led his uncle across the yard toward the North Forty and down the embankment to the creek. At the water’s edge, Frank pulled the poncho off and
placed the yellow bucket with care on its side, the plastic lip dipping into the water. They watched and waited as the frogs struggled back into the water.

Jim leaned back against the dirt, his uncle beside him.

“You know,” Frank said. “There was this kid who used to torment me in school. I was pretty quiet, liked reading more than sports. Sports were more your dad’s thing.”

Jimmy didn’t say anything, just watched the frogs as they swam away, readjusting to their life back in the creek. He knew his dad was more like his older brother Clark than he was like himself.

“I tried to tell him off once,” Frank continued, “but this guy just wouldn’t let up. Anyway, one night he came over and wanted me to egg some houses in the neighborhood with him. Stupid macho stuff.”

Jimmy turned and looked at his uncle, realizing how much like him his uncle must have been when he was Jimmy’s age. “What did you do?” he asked, his voice near a whisper.

“I did it. I even egged my own house.” Frank ran a broad hand through his short salt and pepper hair, a faint pink coloring his cheeks.

“Did he stop bothering you?” Jimmy fixed his grey eyes on his uncle’s blue ones, still thinking about the frogs.

“Not really. But he did start failing some of his classes and the guidance counselor made me tutor him.” His uncle smiled at the memory. “At first, I really wanted to punish him, give him the wrong answers, but I didn’t. Eventually, he told me about some of the stuff he had to deal with at home and I was glad I wasn’t mean to him.”

Frank reached out a hand and rustled Jimmy’s shaggy hair.
“Huh.” Jimmy mumbled.

“Let’s head back,” Frank said, wiped his hands on his jeans and picked up the yellow bucket. “Hey, know what that guy’s name was?”

“No, what was it?”

“Herb Glass.”

Jimmy lay in the single bed in the back bedroom of his uncle’s cabin, staring up at a small, framed photo of four men standing behind three seated women in front of a small, white house with a wooden door. One of these men in dark suits, Jimmy knew, was his grandfather. He had asked his uncle Frank about the photograph once long ago. This was the last remaining photo his uncle Frank had of that side of the family, the last photo taken of Grandpa John Daly.

The window was open just a crack to let the cool night air, and Jimmy could hear the soft, low tones of his uncle’s voice and the voice of Herb Glass.

“You’ve turned this place into something incredible, Frank.”

“I had to do it. I couldn’t let someone else buy this place up.”

“Mmm.”

“I just can’t believe you found a cabin to buy here.”

“I’d been looking for a little place by this lake.”

Jimmy’s eyelids grew heavy as he heard the clink of their beer bottles. He pulled up the quilt his aunt Jane had made and closed his eyes, safe in the knowledge that these two men would never let anything happen to him.
INTO THE WILDS

Even though it was neither the first nor the last time I’d been to Camp, even though I have pictures of myself as a baby floating in a baby-sized inner tube in the lake and photos of the time I don’t remember when I’m older, my clearest memory of arriving there happened when I was ten years old. Rubbing sleep out of my eyes, I saw the lake as if for the first time, the sun rising behind the cabins at my back. My big brother Neil was awake and out of the car before me, as soon as my dad switched off the ignition. I barely saw the blue blur of his t-shirt as he ran in front of the car, dashing toward the water’s edge. In a matter of moments, he was back at my window, opening the door, forcing me out.

“Red Rock!” he said. “Let’s go!” He grabbed my thin wrist and pulled me, stumbling, to my feet. Six years my senior, I couldn't resist his pull even if I wanted to, and I didn't want to.

We were off and running to the shoreline as fast as our skinny legs and PF Flyers could gain traction on the gravel. In an instant, Neil took a leap and landed on the red boulder, just barely sticking out of the sand. He reached out his hand again, this time to pull me up beside him. Below our feet, the red paint had chipped in parts, though the white numerals—each year’s date since Camp had been founded—were still visible. This was our tradition; we’d been racing each other to this rock for as long as I could remember. Standing on Red Rock meant we’d arrived and summer could begin.

Here’s where I want to pause. It’s here, standing on Red Rock, looking out into the lake that I feel a kind of stillness I have never experienced before. My whole world
has shrunk to the view before me: the lake, seemingly endless in its mirror-like reflection of the world above. What secrets do these waters have to tell? Who can I be, enveloped by the generations of my family who had come and stood right here. It all lead here, to me, standing on this rock, imagining worlds upon worlds, stretching out as far as the horizon line which feels light years away. Even with Neil standing beside me, I’m alone and small, at the same time bigger than I’ve ever been and connected to my family history.

Until this moment, the first concrete memory I have of looking out at the lake, Camp had existed as an imaginary place for me. It was the setting of all my dad’s childhood memories, the place my parents had honeymooned, the place my dad had learned how to dive and canoe. My dad had grown up with all the people here. Their parents had owned camps and now they owned the camps. Standing on the rock, feeling the water lap at the tips of my toes, I knew this had belonged to Grandpa and now Dad, but it’s was ours, too. We’d carry on these traditions with our kids.

“Neil! Grace!” Mom called. “Get your bags!”

At that, Neil and I turned to see our mother—sandy blonde hair glinting gold like a halo—at the top of the wooden staircase which lead to our camp. Dad was still at the base of the staircase, pulling grocery bags and the cooler out of the trunk of the station wagon. Neil rolled his eyes before looking at me, knowing I was watching him for a reaction.

“Race ya!” he yelled, before tearing off back to the car.

Laughing, I ran to catch up with him.
Dad had already taken our duffel bags—Neil's big and teal, mine a dark purple—out of the car and placed them on the bottom step of the wood plank staircase.

“Need help with anything, Dad?” Neil asked.

“Nah, you kids go up and help your Mom unpack.” Dad shut the trunk and grabbed the last of the grocery bags.

Neil and I slung our duffel bags over our shoulders and held the railing. It was a rule about these staircases, the railing always needed to be held. They were too steep, built into the hill as they were, and too many people had slid on them. Weeds poked through the space between each step. At some point, they would need to be replaced, but as I walked and held on, I loved how worn they were, like they'd been there forever and always would be.

Our family’s camp had the perfect placement, in the front row at the far left, at the top of the stairs. It was the first one built here and I was glad I didn't have to walk far to drop my bag; I had mostly filled it with books. The cabin was a simple, white clapboard bungalow, with three steps covered in Astroturf leading to the front door. Mom had already unlatched the screen and was busying herself in the kitchen, unloading food into the fridge. The front room contained the main square table, a brown wool couch, an old dial television with an antenna, and the sink, stove and fridge off to the left as you entered. The low pile brown carpet didn't show the sand invariably tracked in from the beach. My eyes were drawn to the clock on the wall above the couch – the clock itself housed in the belly of a brown plastic mother owl, surrounded by her owlets.

Moving to the back of the cottage, I caught a glimpse of Neil's black sneaker as it disappeared up the ladder in the bedroom. He had pulled the ladder down from the ceiling
to claim the attic room for himself. In the bedroom were two twin beds pushed against opposing walls with a small walkway between them and, at the foot of the bed below the ladder, a child-size bed which folded back into a chair. I dropped my purple duffel bag on top of the foldaway and headed back into the front room.

Yawning, I wrapped my arms around my beautiful mother and turned to face the windows. I could see straight out to the hill that led down to the beach, and the lake beyond with the squared off horseshoe shaped dock my grandfather had built.

I was dozily leaning on my mother, as she arranged groceries in the fridge, when I saw a face at the window appear and then disappear. A moment later, the face appeared and disappeared again. The second time, I saw the face belonged to a girl about my age — light brown hair and dark eyes shining at me each time she appeared. I tapped my mother's shoulder.

“M-mom? Who is that?”

Mom stopped what she was doing and looked where I was pointing. We waited a moment and the face appeared again. Mom stifled a laugh.

“I think someone wants to meet you, Grace.” Mom put her hand on my shoulder and pushed me toward the open screen door. I leaned back onto her hand, so she was supporting my weight. “It'll be good to have a Camp friend.”

I remembered all the times Neil talked about his Camp friends and shuffled slowly toward the door.

Out on the Astroturf covering the stoop, I peered around the railing to see this mystery person. She was shorter than me, even if I hadn't been standing on that stoop,
and looked ready to jump up again to see into the window when she saw me standing there.

“Hi! My mom told me you were going to be here and I just had to meet you!” She spoke so quickly that all of her words ran together. She seemed to be in constant motion.

“My mom didn't tell me about you.” I shrugged, peering down at her.

“That's okay,” she said, beaming at me. “I'm Courtney Miller! My parents just bought the camp next door.” She gestured with her thumb at the camp next door. It was bigger than ours, and looked newer, rough wood painted hunter green.

She came around the side of the stoop and I stepped down to meet her. Suddenly, we were standing there, face to face, and I was too aware of how close she’d gotten. She was petite, like her bones were tinier than mine. She stuck her hand out and I clasped it in my own.

“I'm Grace,” I said, quietly, my face turning red.

“That's such a pretty name!” Courtney gushed.

“I hate it,” I said, too quickly.

“Oh. Maybe I can help you pick a new one!” She smiled up at me.

I couldn't help but smile back. I felt my words stick in my throat, so I nodded in response.

“Okay! I'll see you later!” Just like that she was off, running back to her camp.

Startled, overwhelmed, I sat down with a thump on the stoop. What had just happened? Even after she was gone, I could feel my head swimming, my heart thudding in my chest. I wanted to be her best friend, no questions asked, but there was something else, something entirely unlike any other feeling I’d ever had before. Courtney was the
kind of pretty that made everything seem possible: a new name, her friendship, a new life. I remembered my first grade teacher, Mrs. Steiner, how the light seemed to cling to her hair when she’d float around the classroom. The same giddy feeling, like bubbles rising in a glass of soda, filled me now, as then. But the lightness was tempered, kept in check by the sinking stone of my stomach. Like my body already knew I had felt something I shouldn’t. It would be years before I met any people who felt what I’d felt in that moment, two years before Ellen came out on her show and then in real life, five or so before I found words, a decade before I told my parents.

“Gracie,” Neil said, his face suddenly upside down in front of mine, his Walkman headphones around his neck. “What’s up, Doc?”

“What? Nothing,” I said. Something about voicing my hatred of my name aloud to a stranger made hearing it uttered an even more uncomfortable itch than usual. I got up, pushing Neil out of my face, and walked over to the other side of the picnic table in front of our cabin. There was a flat rock there, at the boundary line of our cabin’s property. I balanced on one foot and looked out at the lake.

“Who were you talking to?” Neil asked, making his voice do the whiny, high-pitched thing he did when he thought I liked someone. He came over and sat on the picnic table, even though we both knew our mother would scold him for it if she caught him.

“Her family bought the cabin next door,” I said, not turning to face him.

“Huh,” he said, nonplussed. “Dad wants to go for a hike in the woods, but I don’t want to go.” Neil had been spending more and more time on his own. I’d never felt our age gap as starkly as I was beginning to that summer.
“I’ll go,” I said. I was starting to feel antsy in the way I felt sometimes, like I
couldn’t get comfortable. Maybe the cool of dense trees would help.

“Who’s coming with me?” Dad called from the steps of the cabin. We turned and
he was in his salmon pink shorts, a Beatles t-shirt he’d had since before we were born,
and a hat from a restaurant in Cape Cod. Summer Dad was decidedly Fun Dad.

“Neil, off the table,” Mom called from the window. He had already put his
headphones back on.

“I’m coming, Dad.” I said.

It was easy to forget the woods were even there at all, with the lake and the magic
of the sun rising and setting each day. The woods were so dense, so monolithic they
seemed to have a life of their own, something strange apart from the comfort of Camp.
Having been back there as an adult, I know logically those woods are less than a half mile
squared. At ten, though, they still felt like an impenetrable wilderness. On the side of our
cabin was a small ledge made of slabs of slate that had been fitted together over time.
Beyond the ledge, the ground dropped off into a flat, grassy knoll leading to the woods
beyond. Straight ahead was a trampled patch, a clear entrance into the wilds.

I let Dad lead the way into the woods, resisting holding his hand for as long as I
could. I didn’t want him to think I was too little to go, to regret taking me with him
instead of Neil. Even though I wanted to be there and Neil didn’t. Still, as soon as we
were far enough into the trees that when I looked behind me I couldn’t see the outline of
our cabin, I took Dad’s fleshy hand in mine. If he smiled down at the top of my head, I
didn’t see it.
The paths of the woods were well trodden from decades of use, but Dad didn’t have a particular destination. He just wanted to hike the slopes and inclines, watching for rocks and tree roots, until we tired and turned back.

“Did you hike with your dad?” I asked quietly, wary of disturbing the soft canyon of quiet the woods had opened between us.

“Not really,” Dad said, holding a branch back for me to pass. “I used to hike with my uncle Frank, though, and his friend Herb.”

I thought about this for a while, about my dad not having the kind of relationship with his own dad that he had with me. I thought about how I didn’t know my uncle Frank, but I had met Herb, who had died when I was seven.

“Mom said Frank and Herb were together like you and Mom are together,” I said.

“It was a little more complicated than that,” Dad said. “But that’s about right.”

“And that’s okay?” I asked.

“It is okay,” Dad said. “It’s not always easy for the people involved or their family, but more love in the world isn’t a bad thing.”

Watching the light streaming through the trees, illuminating some and casting others in shadows, I took in what Dad had said. It was okay for two men to love each other. It was probably okay for two women to love each other, too. For a reason I couldn’t understand then, but feel all too keenly now, at that moment I thought of Courtney Miller’s face popping up in the window. I tried to remember everything I could about my dad’s uncle Frank to steer my thoughts away.

“What happened to Uncle Frank?” I asked. I could tell I was being too loud because Dad flinched.
“He died a long time ago,” Dad said after a moment. “I was about Neil’s age.”

“How?” I asked, unaware of any pain my question might have caused.

“He was in a car accident,” Dad said and the words all rushed together, like he was trying to tell me something quickly. “He was coming back to Camp from a beer run with my big brother—your uncle Clark.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“C’mon, I want to show you something,” Dad said, picking up his pace.

“What is it?” I asked, following in his footsteps.

“It’s one of my favorite places.”

I watched him push through the branches and felt embarrassed for having asked a question he didn’t want to answer. I slowed, kicking rocks and sticks that appeared before my feet as I walked on in his shadow. Just then, though, I saw a glimpse of tawny color through the greenery to my left. I stopped to get a better look.

“Dad?” I called, as softly as I could, though he had gone on twenty feet or so ahead of me.

“Yeah, Grace?” He stopped where he was, and turned back.

“What is that?” I stage-whispered. I pointed directly ahead of me, where I could see a brown and white pile.

Dad met me where I stood and looked into the brush where I was pointing. He shrugged, unsure what I could see that he couldn’t.

“What is what?” he asked.

“That, right there.” I pointed again.
As quietly as he could, he knelt down beside me to get on my level, so he could see what I saw.

“Oh my gosh, Grace,” he breathed. “It’s a baby deer.”

Looking at the tangled mass of limbs, some curled under and some extended, I thought its face must be buried in under a forelimb, hidden under the low brush.

“Is that Bambi or Feline?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper. Those were the only deer I’d ever seen before then.

“I don’t know, Kiddo.”

We stayed just like that for a long time, just quiet and breathing, my dad on his knees beside me, my head on his shoulder. Together, we watched the creature – so small and still – beautifully nestled into its protective tree branch covering. The deer still had not seen us or moved. The more we looked, the more we saw. Just below the forelimb was crimson splattered opening, an oozy liquid seeping out.

“Dad,” I said, quiet as I could manage. “Is it breathing?”

My dad swallowed hard and stayed quiet for what felt like hours to me. Too much time had passed.

“Dad?” I tried again.

“I don’t think so,” he said, finally. With slow and deliberate movements, my dad stood and took my hand, pulling me farther into the woods. “We should keep walking. I don’t want to lose too much of the day.”

He held my hand now to keep me by his side, protect me maybe. I thought I heard him mumble something about a ban on hunting.
The longer we walked, the darker the woods seemed to get, as though enclosing us even more tightly in its wooded embrace. I felt the gloom of the woods inside me, as though I’d been contaminated by the increasing darkness. My earlier embarrassment at asking my dad about his uncle Frank and now knowing I had seen a dead baby deer, even though I hadn’t known it was dead at the time, overtook me. The sight had been peaceful, beautiful until the knowing had tainted what we had seen. Herb had died and Grandpa Jack had died two years before, but I had never seen death up close before. The idea of death poured into my open places and filled me with lead. The smell of fallen leaves turning to mulch below my feet became suddenly overwhelming.

After a while, Dad turned to face me. “It’s just up ahead.”

I felt then like we’d been walking for a very long time, that it would be very difficult to walk any farther, let alone all the way back to Camp.

After a few more feet, Dad held back a low bough of a tree to reveal an inlet where the light broke back into the woods. From where we stood, a tree that had grown horizontally hung over a small, steep incline leading directly down into the glassy lake. Dad let go of my hand and sat on the sturdy trunk of the tree. I watched him, his ropy muscles and salmon colored shorts, as he moved carefully out to the middle of the tree. He sat there, leaning back on a sturdy branch, as though in a hammock above the lake.

“Come on out,” Dad called. “It’s totally safe.”

I didn’t want to tell him I was afraid of heights; I felt too old to be afraid. I tried to mimic his motions. I sat on the branch and used my arms and legs to propel me forward, crawling in a slow and steady way, like I’d done it a thousand times before. Finally, I made it to him and he let me lean against him for support.
I looked out at the lake below and in front of us, the woods behind. On the other side of the lake, I could see other small cabin communities. I could hear the motors of distant speedboats, Sea-Doos, jet-skis. There was evidence of life all around us. But here, sitting in this tree, we were above it all.

“When I was your age, I used to come out here all the time,” he said. “When my uncle and brother died, this is where I came to be alone.”

“How did you keep coming back?” I asked and wished I could retract it immediately. It was too forward.

“This whole place still felt like a second home to me,” Dad said, with a shrug. “Finding this spot was like finding a little place I could be alone around family and friends. Not coming back was never an option I considered.”

“Thanks for showing this to me, Dad,” I said. “It’s a perfect spot.”

“Well, it can be yours now, too,” he said, ruffling my dark oak colored hair with a calloused hand. “You could come out here and write songs like I did.”

We stayed like that, my dad and I, quiet and watching the lake until sitting on the hard bark became too uncomfortable. We shuffled back onto sturdy land and headed back.

The walk back to our cabin took no time at all. Our initial journey must have been a winding one, looping back on itself, I thought. In no time, it seemed, we were back where we’d started, on the soft, well-trod grass that led back to the rows of cabins. The sun was now past its apex and had begun its slow summer descent toward the lake.
On the approach, we could see Mom sitting in a faded Adirondack chair in front of the cabin, reading a book. The damp waves of her hair were drying in the fading afternoon light; it was clear she’d been for a dip in the lake earlier.

“How was the hike?” Mom asked, as we plopped down at the picnic table nearby.

“Not bad,” Dad said. He looked at me, as though to ask if I wanted to tell Mom what had happened on our hike. I pretended to look for chipmunks scurrying nearby.


“Playing horseshoes with some of his friends.”

I squinted, trying to see the horseshoe court on the hill that led to the water’s edge.

In a little while, Neil came back and he and I shucked corn for dinner. Mom made potato salad and Dad grilled hot dogs and hamburgers. After dinner, Dad made a fire in the pit in front of our cabin, identical to all the other fire pits in front of all the other cabins. We could see our neighbors down the whole front row follow suit, small fires licking up as the sun dipped low on the other side of the lake.

When the Millers lit their fire next door, Dad asked me if I wanted to invite Courtney over to roast marshmallows. I shook my head. There would be time to get to know her tomorrow, the next day, the rest of the week we were up to Camp.

I watched the fire rise and fall, the embers crackling and flying up, indistinguishable from the fireflies. Dad and Neil brought out the guitars they’d brought with them and played soft, quiet folk songs and Mom sang in her sweet soprano and all I could think about was how still the little deer had been.
If one thing had happened differently in the days leading up to that day, maybe everything could have been different. If I hadn’t been kissed on the cheek by Chris P. behind the soccer goal at recess, if I hadn’t then wanted to kiss someone that summer to get a better first kiss. If I hadn’t felt strange butterflies for Courtney Miller since I’d first met her. If I hadn’t felt a sting of envy at all the things Boy Scouts—like my brother Neil—were allowed to do that I wasn’t. If Mom hadn’t felt guilty for her long weekend hours teaching in the photo lab at the community college. If Neil hadn’t been so convinced of his own ability to protect me. But everything happened the way it happened and now one weekend up at Camp in 1996 is stock on a loop in my brain forever.

“Neil, are you sure you can handle this drive? It’s longer than you’ve ever driven by yourself.” Mom paces around our faded yellow kitchen, everything still exactly as it looked in 1980 when my parents moved in. Just past his seventeenth birthday, my brother Neil is desperate to drive the black Renault hatchback he has been promised up to Camp. My mother has always been an anxious person, but we have never driven up to Camp without our parents.

“Mom, I’ve got this,” Neil says, with a flick of his long brown ponytail. “We’ll be fine.”

On Friday, Mom packs us into the rust-edged car, our overnight bags in tow. The drive up to Camp from Albany is less than an hour, but it always feels like we’re in the car for days, even more so with Neil’s driving. As he drifts in and out of lanes, I hold
tightly to the nearest plastic door handle. Neil laughs nervously, gripping the steering wheel tightly. To put me at ease, he calls out all of the landmarks we pass on the way: The Tall Man (a giant wooden carving of a man outside a furniture store), the funny noise bridge (which makes the car rattle and hum as we drive over), The Beef Jerky Warehouse (next to a petting zoo), and the first glimpse we get of the Great Sacandaga Lake.

Camp is my favorite place—just a small cluster of rustic cottages in winding rows in a clearing amidst a dense forest, a lush green lawn with a playground and a beach volleyball court, and best of all, the lake. A place apart from the rest of our lives, our summer selves seemed capable of doing things our home selves could not do. I can feel the pride well up in me as we drive the long, snaking gravel road down to the front of the camps and ends just before the beach, directly in front of our simple, white Adirondack clapboard summer cottage. This cottage is oldest on the compound, built by my grandfather and his brothers.

It is just a single story cabin with a living room and kitchen at the front, a bedroom with two beds and bathroom in the back, and an attic with a pull-down ladder. Neil calls “dibs” on the attic room for the privacy, even though it is just a mattress on the floor and a ceiling so low you can barely sit up. I park myself on the brown wool couch and fiddle with the knobs on the television to find one of the five stations it can get as long as it isn’t raining.

If we’d gotten there earlier, I might have found someone to play with, but it’s after dusk and Neil is hard at work, lighting the pilot light on the stove and checking the septic tank. If I had been particularly lucky, Courtney Miller would have come over and
we could play Go Fish with Neil, but she’s not coming up to camp until tomorrow morning.

Courtney Miller is tall and tan and blonde and looks like she walked off the cover of *Seventeen Magazine*, which at eleven, I am too young to read, but do anyway at CVS when my mom waits for her prescriptions. I only get to see Courtney on weekends during the summer, but her Camp is right next to ours. She is twelve, a whole year older than me, but we don’t go to the same school and at Camp, a year means nothing. There are so few of us kids up to Camp in the summers that age is no longer defined by year or grade, but by “older” and “younger.” Neil was in the older group, our six-year age gap still enough to make a difference. If we were somewhere else, Courtney and I would never be friends. She is athletic and popular and I bring five books with me every weekend and climb trees to find quiet places to write. She look like a model and I look like a dope, but the only other girl in our younger group is Becca Stump and her cabin always smells like cat pee. We are temporary best friends, our friendship truly alive only in the waning warm days between June and August.

For dinner, Neil makes us a box of macaroni and cheese, a little soupier than Mom makes it. We eat quickly and don’t talk. I love being around him, but I know he’d prefer to spend time with the older kids. When we were done with dinner, we play two hands of Go Fish before Neil starts his chores: making sure the stove is off, washing dishes, sweeping. I watch him as he bustles around and know he is doing all the things Mom and Dad do, so he can drive us back up here alone again.
“Brush your teeth before you go to bed, Grace,” Neil says before he slinks up the attic stairs.

“You’re not Mom,” I shoot back with a roll of my eyes.

When he’s out of sight, I take my tattered copy of *The Outsiders* to the back bedroom and read until I fall asleep in the single bed.

The next morning, I wake up in the old fashioned room, walls covered in fake wood, and hear the percolator burbling in the kitchen. For a moment, I have no idea where I am. But then I see the old Doors of Dublin poster, the framed photograph of who I assume are relatives of some kind, and the Trac-Ball rackets hanging by the stairs, and I realize we’re up at Camp. Just me and Neil.

I pull on my orange one-piece bathing suit, jean cut offs, and a t-shirt and pad out to the front room, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Neil has cornflakes and milk out already when I join him at the table.

“Morning,” I mumble, pouring cereal and milk into a ceramic bowl.

“Good morning,” Neil says, sipping his coffee. His long hair is pulled back in a low ponytail and he’s wearing a Hawaiian shirt he stole from Dad’s closet.

From where we’re sitting at the Formica table, we can see straight out the windows to where the sun is climbing in the morning sky above the lake.

“Can I have coffee?” I ask, crunching my cornflakes.

“You don’t need coffee,” my brother says. “It’ll stunt your growth.”
After breakfast, Neil and I walk down to Red Rock – me with my notebook, him with his Walkman. Because the rock is embedded in the sand and the lake’s depth depends on the rains, sometimes the lake covers Red Rock completely. Not so this sunny Saturday; only the very bottom of Red Rock is buried in the sand. All of the white double-digit numbers of the years since Camp was founded are visible. Neil and I stand there, the cold stone under our bare feet, and look out at the lake like we always do. We don’t have to jostle for space on the rock, but he nudges me anyway and I slip into the lake. It’s only up to my ankles, but I still feign outrage, checking my precious notebook for water damage.

“What the heck, Neil? You could have ruined it!” I shoot him my best death glare and for a second he looks concerned.

“Oh, come on,” he says, seeing no damage to the notebook. “It’s fine.”

“Yeah, you’re lucky it is!” I huff off a few feet away to where the docks meet the sand before turning back around to look at Neil.

“Don’t go swimming alone, Grace,” he calls over. I know he just wants to protect me, even if he is annoying.

“I won’t,” I say, before turning back to the docks and walking away.

The docks are fitted together in a long squared-off horseshoe shape, flanked by protruding boats of all sizes. I like the small sailboats, sails tightly furled until they’re needed, better than the speedboats and party vessels. Jutting into the center of the horseshoe is one short dock with a diving board and a metal ladder. It’s safe to swim inside the docks. It’s early yet, before the real heat of the day, so I settle onto the far edge of one of the boat-less docks and put my feet in the water. Sitting here, looking out to
Paradise Point on the other side of the lake, I can almost imagine I’m here all by myself. I take out my notebook and pen and begin to scrawl lines I’d like to make into songs someday. I have an idea about writing a song about Neil going to college; I think about what life will be like without him all the time, even though I know that’s still a whole year away.

I write my messy sentences and lose track of the sun climbing in the sky until I hear the chatter of voices coming up behind me.

“Last one in is a rotten egg!” a boy’s voice shouts.

A moment later, a splash indicates he’s jumped in first.

I turn around and see Courtney Miller and Becca Stump are in line for the diving board behind Mark Pescal and Andy Delroy. Josh Delroy, Andy’s older brother, is already in the water.

“Come on, Grace!” Courtney yells to me over her shoulder when she next in line for the diving board.

I pull off my t-shirt and shorts quickly and leave them in a pile on my notebook. I run straight for the diving board and pike jump into the water after Courtney. Everyone else takes turns jumping in, splashing about, and climbing the ladder to do it all again, except me. I’m mortified my chest has started to protrude. I wish I could just have the flat chest and trunks Josh, Andy, and Mark have. Instead of jumping, I fill my lungs as deeply as I can and swim to the bottom of the lake to pluck stones and slick mud from its depths. Down there, I feel like I’m the lone explorer of some dark well.
After our fingers have turned pruney in the lake, we dry off on the playground. The structure is small, but solid. Wooden beams and posts connect the basic elements of slide, monkey bars, and swings.

“We should tell ghost stories tonight,” Josh says, swinging shirtless on the monkey bars of the playground. The other boys are playing HORSE at the basketball hoop nearby. “The guys are definitely in.”

Courtney and I are sitting up at the top of the slide. She hands me a square of cotton candy Bubble Yum and smiles her perfect white teeth at me. For all my desire for a boogie board-flat chest, “Josh Delroy” is the name she writes under “Future Husband” every time we play M.A.S.H.

“We should!” she chimes brightly.

Becca looks up excitedly when Courtney speaks from the swing where she’s sitting, twirling her mousy brown hair around a finger. She nods vigorously as Josh makes his way around to the slide.

“What about you, Gracie? Are you in?” Josh asks, walking up the slide in his bare feet. Courtney turns and raises her eyebrows to me. I shrug.

“Sure, Josh. Ghost stories,” I say, as he climbs onto the platform to sit between Courtney and me.

“Then it’s settled,” he grins. “We’ll meet down by the Old Road after the sun goes down.”
Neil cooks hot dogs on the stove for dinner, better than boiling them like Dad does. When they’re ready he cuts mine into pieces because I still hate the look of hot dog ends, even though I’m eleven.

“What did you do today?” I ask, nosy as ever.

“I took a walk in the woods and did some reading,” Neil says quickly. He gives me a look. I’ve followed him enough times to know the older kids spend their afternoons smoking cigarettes and making out in a makeshift fort in the woods. The ramshackle lean-to with its dumpster furniture is off limits without a personal invitation, but I know where the older kids spend their afternoons.

“Yeah, right.” I roll my eyes at him and look at my plate.

“What about you?” He’s not eager to talk more about himself.

“Well, a bunch of us went swimming and we’re going to tell ghost stories down by the Old Road tonight.” I smile widely at him. He raises an eyebrow at me.

“What about Mom’s curfew?” He and I both know our mother would never let me out after dark without him.

“Mom’s not here,” I say, finishing the last of the hot dog.

“Yeah, but I am.” He raises his eyebrows, thick and dark like uncle Harvey’s.

“Help me wash the dishes.” He stands up and picks up our plates and cutlery, dumping them into the sink. “If you’re out past 10, I’m coming to find you,” he hisses at me, barely audible over the rush of hot water. He scrubs and rinses, his stringy brown hair in his face.
“You definitely don’t need to do that,” I say. “I’ll be fine. You know these kids.” I take a wet plate from him and blotting it with the worn yellow dishtowel before placing it in the drying rack.

When he finishes his part of the dishes, he wipes his hands on his jeans and nudges my shoulder with his own. “Ten o’clock, Grace.”

I nod and continue wiping dry the rest of the glassware. I look over my shoulder to watch him pull down the attic stairs and ascend. I wonder what he’ll be doing tonight.

When I finish drying, I slip quietly into the bedroom and I pull from my backpack a hoodie and a book of scary stories and tug on my Keds. I’m out the door without saying another word and feel strangely free. It was warm in the sun this afternoon, but I can feel the cool summer evening breeze like a whisper through the trees, pulling me closer. I pull my grey hoodie on over my elementary school t-shirt—Parkwood Pandas—and wonder fleetingly if I should have changed. I’m grateful for the cover of darkness as I walk. At the bend in the main road, just before it turns toward the beach and the front row of camps, there’s a half wall made of stones that divides the main road from the Old Road. The Old Road was paved once, but the asphalt has since eroded and broken apart.

My friends are sitting on the stone wall, waiting for me, playing with flashlights which I only now realize I should have brought with me.

“Well, the gang’s all here,” Josh calls out, looking up at me from a conversation he’d been having with Courtney.

I feel my face flush with jealousy, but trudge along as everyone follows single file behind Josh up into the woods. The trail winds through the thick blackness to a small break in the trees where someone years before us rolled logs in to form a circle. We
shuffle around the circle, trying to figure out the best place to sit. Courtney sits beside Josh and looks up at me expectantly, patting the space next to her. I’m grateful and simultaneously wish our friendship were less a product of proximity. Or rather, that she looked at me the way she’s looking at Josh right now. His Hawaiian shirt – very *Ace Ventura* – is unbuttoned and I hope he’s cold.

“Alright, who’s going first?” he calls, shining his flashlight around the circle.

“I’ve got this book of scary stories,” I say, holding the book up. Everyone nods and Courtney shines her flashlight, so I can read.

I pick a short one, “The Little Black Dog,” and read in my best spooky voice about a man who kills a dog and then gets haunted by the dog’s ghost. My audience’s reaction is mixed; Becca is terrified, the boys are nonplussed.

Josh’s brother Andy tells a story about a couple on their honeymoon and creepy scratching at the door. Another boy, Mark, tells a story about a murderer in the woods, which freaks everyone out. Courtney moves in closer to Josh and his eyes catch mine for a moment; I don’t know if he saw me looking at Courtney, but he sees me now. He looks away quickly, back to the group.

“Guys, this is dumb. Let’s play Truth or Dare. Grace?” he says, looking at right at me.

“Truth,” I say, meeting his eyes.

“Oh, come on. That’s no fun. Sure you don’t want to pick Dare?”


“I can’t even think of a good Truth question. Courtney, help me out?” He nudges her with his shoulder and I seethe, watching her look at him.
“Gracie, what are you most afraid of?” She grins at me.

“You know the answer to that.” I roll my eyes.

“Yeah, but nobody else does,” she looks around and the group offers a communal shrug.

“Fine. I hate weasels,” I mutter. Some of the guys snicker. “There was a stupid book I read when I was little and I just hate weasels, okay?” My face pinks with shame and I tuck my shoulder length brown hair behind my ears. “Courtney, your turn.”

“Hmm.” She smirks. “Truth.”

“Oh, no way. You have to pick Dare,” one of the guys calls out, maybe Josh’s brother Andy.

Courtney looks at me and I shrug. “Okay, fine. Dare,” she says.

“I don’t have a good Dare for her,” I mumble.

“Dare you to kiss me,” Josh says, turning his sharp jaw toward her. She leans in and pecks his cheek and he looks right at me, daring me to say anything.

“I should get back. Coming, Grace?” Courtney stands up abruptly and raises her eyebrows. I shake my head.

“I think I’m going to stay out a little longer,” I smile weakly. I want to tell Josh off, but I can’t tell Courtney that right now. She shrugs and makes her way out, Becca trailing behind her.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the group to dissipate, bored without more girls to play Truth or Dare.

Suddenly, it’s just Josh and me.

“Why did you dare her to kiss you?” I ask.
“She doesn’t like you, you know,” he says, daring me to respond.

I blush. I already know that.

“You didn’t answer my question. What are you trying to prove?” I say angrily, mustering whatever guts I can.

“She doesn’t like you,” he says again. “But I do.” He dips his head down and I blush again, even though I know he’s lying.

“No, you don’t,” I say. “You like Courtney.” I hadn’t been scared at all when everyone else was around, but now my heart is racing because of the darkness and him.

“No. I just know she likes me,” he mutters. “I like you.” He looks up at me, earnestly.

“Um, I don’t know what to say,” I mumble. I don’t believe this boy, three years older, likes me.

“You don’t like me, do you?” he says, dejected.

I realize, flushing cold even in my hoodie, he actually wants a response, but I look away.

“I didn’t think so. You like girls, right?”

I wanted to punch him five minutes ago, but now I can’t stop my mouth from saying, “I don’t know. Maybe.” He is the first person I’ve ever told.

I watch him as he takes this in, his elbows on his knees, his hands in his sand-colored hair. After a moment, he looks back up at me.

“Have you ever even seen a willy?” he asks.

I swallow hard. I haven’t.

“I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.”
“Josh, are you serious right now?” I’ve imagined what it looks like more times than I can count, even stuffed a rolled up pair of socks into my underwear when I was home alone once.

He nods. “Yeah, why not?”

It’s just a game, I think. I don’t want to seem weak in front of him.

“Okay.” I take a breath.

“There’s a place up here.” He grabs my hand. Before I even realize what he’s doing, he pulls me to my feet and toward the trail. Only after we’re gone partly up the trail do I realize I’ve left my book behind on a log. I wish I had a watch or a flashlight.

The thicket opens up into a clearing, partly shaded and hidden from the trail. My hand is still in Josh’s and he pulls me a little closer to him. I pull my hand back quickly.

“I don’t know what to… um,” I try to look at anything else, but his green eyes, murky like pond water, won’t let me look away.

He moves both his hands to my arms, pinning my arms against my body.

My body feels like one giant heartbeat, pulsing hard.

He stands there looking at me for a minute and I wonder if I’ve made a mistake. “I’ll go first.” He unbuttons his cargo shorts and pushes down the swim trunks he’s been wearing underneath and lets them both drop to the ground.

I try to hold back a smirk, realizing how skinny he is, seeing what a strange jumble he has between his legs. I wonder if they all look like his, a small wrinkled, hanging pile with some sparse hairs.

“Okay. Now you go.”
I roll my eyes. “Okay, fine.” I un_snap the button to my shorts and hook my thumbs in my waistband, pushing them down to my feet with my underwear. I have less hair than he does, I realize.

“You look pretty in the moonlight, Grace,” he says.

My heart is racing so hard I can barely speak.

Josh takes a step closer and I want to move back. He leans in and smashes his lips against mine and it’s the first time I’ve ever really been kissed. I imagine Courtney instead.

“Josh, w-what are you doing?” I stammer. He isn’t listening to me at all. It’s as though someone has switched off the light behind his eyes. He moves his hands from my arms to my hips.

I try to move away from him, but he’s taller and stronger than I am.

“I just like you so much,” he breathes into my shoulder. “I want to see you closer…”

“What are you doing?” I pull away, but he wraps his arms around my body, using his full weight to counter mine. I can feel hardness between his legs pushing against me as he puts his hand under my shirt and hoodie. He kisses me hard.

“Don’t you want to know how it feels?” I don’t even know what he’s talking about. How what feels? He uses the leverage of his bigger body over mine and pushes me down onto my back in the dirt. I can feel little sticks and rocks digging into my back and legs. He kisses me hard again, bruising my lips against his teeth. He can hold both of my wrists with one hand and pin the rest of me with his body.
The weight of him on top of me makes me feel like I can’t get my breath. I struggle to push him off of me, but he’s too heavy.

“I don’t…”

He cuts me off. “Shh, it’s okay. This won’t hurt…”

He’s wrong. I’m already trying to think of something else, like I’m at the dentist and have to pretend to be just fine when they’re scraping my teeth and I can feel the copper taste of my own blood in my mouth. I am already gone, looking down at the scene from above, watching it all happen as though it’s happening to someone else. I just happen to be here at the same time, a bystander who can clearly see everything happening to this poor, stupid girl. I hate her for not being smarter, for not realizing she was in danger.

All I can feel is the weight of his body on top of my body, his hands on my wrists in the dirt. I can feel something poking me. He moves one of his hands from my wrist to slide down between our bodies.

“I just like you so much…”

When I feel the sharp pain and trickle of sticky liquid against the skin of my inner thigh, I know it’s my own blood.

I watch myself from above and I feel like a balloon that might float away. I am completely untethered. As me above and me on the ground watch each other, we are not here and neither of us feels anything anymore.

When he’s done, he winces and rolls away from me. “You can’t tell anyone. They wouldn’t believe you anyway.” He pulls on his clothes, bolts upright and stares down at
me. This is my forever image of Josh Delroy: muddy cargo shorts, a Hawaiian shirt left open, flip-flops, standing over me, wiping his nose before he runs back to his parents’ camp.

My stomach wrenches as I listen to his retreating footsteps and my body flushes cold. I only now realize I’ve been crying. I know he’s right. Who would believe me? Turning over to my side, I try not to vomit on myself, bile and hot dog remnants pooling in the dirt. I wipe my mouth with my bare hand; gravel pieces still pressed into the back of my hand scrape my face. Lying there, I wonder if this is what it feels like to die. Above me, I can see the dark clouds moving swiftly across the sky, obscuring stars. The moon is half a silver dollar, but I want to see the half that is gone.

I don’t know how much time passes—ten minutes, an hour—before I feel like I can stand again. I push myself onto my shaky knees and pull on my underwear and shorts and feel the backs of my legs—raw meat. My white Keds are a muddy brown now and I’m surprised to see them still tied. Still intact.

*Just get back to the cabin. Stand up. Get back.*

Without Josh’s flashlight to guide me back to the circle, the woods are the darkest black I’ve ever been inside. My eyes can barely see my feet on the forest floor, taking tiny steps forward, barely moving at all. At every snap of twig and rustle of leaves, I flinch, terrified someone is just behind me. I am barely sure I’m on the right trail until I see a light just up ahead.

Neil is sitting on a log in the circle, small lantern at his feet, his head in his hands, my book in his lap. His head snaps up, hearing my crunching footsteps.
“Grace! What the hell? Where were you?” He jumps up and throws his arms around me. “Why are you covered in dirt?”

I am grateful for the cover of darkness, hiding the blood and the scrapes. I brush tears from my eyes and tell him, “I was climbing and I fell.” I cannot bring myself to tell him about the dirty thing. He’ll tell me I’ve done something wrong, that I’m stupid.

If he knows I’m lying, he doesn’t say a word, letting me lock the secret away and swallow the key. He just mumbles something about “getting me cleaned up” and we head back to camp, his Boy Scout lantern guiding our way.

In the bathroom of our cabin, Neil turns on the shower and sets out a towel on the toilet before leaving me alone. As my skin reddens under the force of the washcloth, scrubbing myself too hard to get clean, I can feel the memory of what has happened tonight receding like the tide.

I put on the softest clothes I’ve brought with me—an old t-shirt of Dad’s, a pair of pajama shorts, and a hand-me-down crewneck sweater from Neil. I climb into the empty single bed in the back bedroom, alone and exhausted. Lying there, I fix my eyes on the wall, on the oversized poster. The glossy poster depicts six rows of colorful doors: crimson, navy, and burnt orange, saffron, sea foam, grey, and hunter green. Along the bottom of the poster is a plain cream-colored band reads, in a Celtic font: The Doors of Dublin. I wonder if one of those doors will take me somewhere where I’ll feel clean again.

“Grace?” Neil whispers from the doorway. “Are you still awake?”

“Yeah,” I say, hoping he can’t hear how much it sounds like I’m about to cry.
“Can I come in?” he says.

I can see his shadow growing longer in the crack of light on the ceiling.

“Yeah,” I say.

He comes in and sits on the edge of my bed and is quiet for a long time.

“What happened tonight?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I don’t know whether or not to sit up, so I stay staring at the ceiling.

“Do you really not know?”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” I say.

“I could try to guess,” he says.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to try to guess?”

“Okay,” I say. I take a deep breath and hold it.

“Did you actually fall climbing?”

“No,” I exhale.

“Did you get in a fight?”

“No.”

“But someone hurt you?”

“Not… not no,” I say. I prop myself up on my elbows and wince.

“You have those scrapes,” he says.

“I know.”

“Can you tell me anything more?” he sighs.

“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know or you don’t know if you can.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I say. I can see his profile now, backlit by the light of the
hallway, the rest of him in shadow.

“What kind of hurt?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, was it like a rugburn? Or a punch?” he asks.

“Not like that.”

He is quiet again for a long time.

“Who was hanging out tonight?”

“Everybody.”

“But this was a specific somebody, right?”

I nod, but it’s dark and I don’t know if he sees.

“Was it Josh?”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.”

I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything.

“Gracie, you didn’t do anything. This wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know for sure.”

“I do. If you didn’t want to happen, it shouldn’t have happened.”

“Okay,” I mumble. I believe him and I don’t believe him.

“You should get some sleep,” he says, standing up. “We can talk more in the
morning, but I think we should leave early.”

“Okay.”
“Gracie?”

“Yeah?”

“Love you.”

“You too.”

Neil helps me pack in the morning and makes me a bowl of cereal. We usually make a big ceremony of leaving Camp, of going back to Red Rock and looking out at the lake. This time, though, we turn off the lights and lock the door and leave. I don’t say anything for most of the drive back to Albany. He puts an R.E.M. cassette in the tape deck and the upbeat jangle of the guitar feels like the opposite of my guts wrenching inside.

Just before we get off the highway, Neil turns the music down and looks at me.

“Hey, I think we should tell Mom.”

“I don’t know how,” I say.

“Just tell her what you remember,” he says.

“I don’t really remember,” I say.

He gives me a look like he doesn’t know how to tell me he doesn’t believe me.

“Maybe I can tell her what I know,” he said.

“Yeah,” I say. “Maybe.”

When Neil and I get home, we find Mom and Dad are in the family room in the basement of the house, forever freezing, but a welcome retreat on a hot summer Sunday.
“Hey, kiddos,” Dad says from where he was napping on the couch. “How was Camp?”

“Pretty good,” Neil says, looking at me.

Mom, too, looks at me, standing beside her big grey plush La-Z boy recliner. There’s something about the way she looks at me, like she know something has happened, that makes me start to cry. She pulls me onto her lap, even though I’m too old and too big, and hugs me to her.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” she asks, kissing the top of my dishwater colored hair.

“I missed you,” I mumble into her shirt.

I come back to my life different after that summer weekend at Camp with Josh. When my parents come to tuck me in at night, I pretend to already be asleep. I turn off my nightstand light when I hear their footfalls in the hallway, see their shadows under my doorway. They occasionally come in to kiss my head, tuck me in tighter, whisper “I love you. G’night, kiddo.” All the while, my heart races, hoping they won’t realize that I’m still awake. They never do. Other times, they open my door a crack and linger in the doorway. I can never tell if they can see my eyes open just enough to see if they are still standing there, but my heart races all the same. Why am I so anxious? Why do I want them to think I am still asleep so badly? I stop sleeping through the night. If I can get to sleep at all, I’m not usually tired until two or three in the morning. I stay up and clip photos and lyrics and quotes and striking images from magazines to pass the time. Mom gets me a hamster to keep me company and I stay up to make sure she’s still moving.
I also start spending a lot of quiet time by myself. I am lucky to meet my best friend Nora this year or else I suspect my time in Mrs. Warren’s sixth grade classroom would have been very different. My parents occasionally drop me off to school early on the way to work and I make a beeline for Miss Peters' classroom. Miss Peters is the new music teacher and choir leader. I think she was beautiful with her little silver oval glasses and straight blonde hair. She has a smile that lights up a room and I am wholly entranced. It helps that she makes me smile because I feel sad a lot. I don’t know why I’m so sad, but I know I feel less so around her. She has a kumquat tree in her classroom, which is the premise of my favorite joke; I think it is fate the old music teacher retired and Miss Peters took her job. I tell Miss Peters the joke, “I'm going to get a dog, so I can name it Quat. Come, Quat!” She laughs loudly and I feel funny like how Neil is funny. I make her a kumquat tree out of the kind of clay that can bake in the oven and tell her about the songs I’ve been writing. She offers to help me put music to my songs, but I don’t follow up. On Valentine’s Day, I give her a card. A few weeks later, she slips one in with my music quiz, which explains she hadn’t done Valentine’s for students this year, but she so appreciated my card. Miss Peters is a ray of something brighter just around the corner. If I focus on her, I forget about the sadness that has opened up inside of me like a dark well.
BECOMING GRAHAM

I only applied to Brooklyn University. I knew I couldn’t stay in Albany if I wanted to write. Being in New York meant access to real, live queer people. My best friend Jenny already went there and had a room open in her apartment; together, we imagined, we could build a home.

The night before I left, desperate to become who I was going to be in my new, open life, I locked myself in the downstairs bathroom at my mother’s duplex apartment. In the sink cabinet, I knew, were the clippers Mom used to trim her precious black lab, Luka, in the summer. I wiped the silver comb blade with an alcohol pad before plugging it in. In one move, I slipped off my t-shirt, my chest bare. I avoided looking at my pale skin in the mirror, embarrassed by my body even alone. I slid the switch up to its “on” position and felt it buzz to life in my hand. The vibration from the comb blade’s movement made my hand tingle. I lowered the clippers to my scalp and ran it slowly backwards over the length of my head. My brown hair, just above shoulder length, fell like dead leaves to the floor. It took all of five minutes to undo the straight, limp brown hair I’d had for eighteen years. I fell asleep running my hands back and forth over my buzzed head, exhilarated by the physical sensation of my new self.

The next morning, I wait in my room until Jenny shows up to move me to Brooklyn. I’ve said goodbye to my father the night before at dinner and have finished packing.

“Grace,” my mother calls up the stairs. “Do you want breakfast?”
I’m reading on my bare mattress and flinch at hearing my name through the door.

“We’re going to get Dunkin before we get on the Thruway,” I call back.

“Can you come hang out with me anyway before you leave, please?”

I stall, but I had planned for this. I pull on my Converse and a black beanie low on my head before heading down to the kitchen.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. She had poured a cup of coffee for me, too. The sight of her, sitting there in her rumpled denim shirt, her hair up a messy bun, hit me like a punch. I knew leaving meant leaving her, but it fell over me all over again.

“It’s not too late,” she says, setting the newspaper down.

“What isn’t?” I say, sitting and folding my hands around the mug.

“For you to stay.”

“I know,” I say. “But I have to go.”

“I know,” she says. “You’d never leave if you stayed.”

“I’ll be back,” I say, reaching out to hold her hand.

“I’ll be here.” She ran her thumb over my knuckles.

We sip our coffee and make small talk until Jenny rings the doorbell. Mom helps pack up Jenny’s truck, but it doesn’t take fifteen minutes because I don’t have much. After the last of my boxes has been fit Tetris-style into the trunk, Mom pulls me in for a tight hug.

“I’ll love you for always,” she says. “Come home any time.”

“I will.” Even as I say it, though, I know I’ll never live with either of my parents again. “I love you, too.” I pull back and kiss the crown of her frizzy brown-grey hair.
“Drive safely,” Mom says, squeezing Jenny’s arm.

“I will.” Jenny, with her untamed mane and ripped jeans, is not anyone’s definition of predictable, but she is a solid driver.

We pile in, turn the radio dial to Fly92 pop music, and wave wildly out the window. I watch my mother shrink in the rearview, dabbing at her eyes the back of her hand the farther we get from the driveway.

As soon as we pull out of the winding development, we stop at the light. I pull the beanie off my head and lightly hit Jenny’s arm with it.

“Holy shit!” she squeals, whipping her head to see me. “What did you do? I love it!”

“It’s the new me,” I say, with an imaginary toss of my lack of hair.

“Rad.”

* * *

I was sitting on the grand staircase of the Brooklyn University library with Jenny the first week of school when Charlie Duncan crash-landed in my life. This goofy, floppy haired kid approached us with a broad smile and a stack of neon green slips of paper. He was shorter than me; I could tell even though I was sitting and he was standing. Still, he seemed as though his personality was about seven feet tall. He had big dark eyes and a toothy grin and a reason to talk to strangers: he was flyering for Queer Union.

“Do you two want to come to the Queer Union meeting tonight?” he asked, more effusively than I’d imagined.

“How’d you guess?” Jenny smirked, taking the proffered neon green paper.

“How’d I guess what?” he asked, a little surprised at the retort.
“That we were queer,” I said, meeting his eyes.

“Oh, I… I didn’t know,” he blushed. “I just guessed.”

Looking right at him, up close, there was something about the soft line of his jaw, the slightness of his build I couldn’t quite peg. He reminded me of someone I’d known a long time ago. We stayed like that for a moment, holding each other’s glance, trying to figure each other out.

“Well, we are!” Jenny interjected.

“Then you should come tonight,” Charles said, recovering quickly. “The meeting’s at 6:30pm, in the Student Union building.”

“Huh,” I said. “Okay.”

“I’m Charles, by the way.” He extended a slim hand and I shook it with my own.

“I’m Grace,” I said.

“And I’m Jenny,” she said with a firm shake of his hand.

“Well, hope to see you at the meeting!” Charles said, before moving on to wheedle others.

Jenny immediately shot me a “don’t you start…” look, but saw my eyes were back on Charles’ dark hair as he asked others if they, too, wanted to come to the Queer Union meeting.

“So, are we going to go to the meeting?” I asked Jenny earnestly.

“Really?” Jenny asked, exasperated. “You know how to be gay. You don’t need a group for that.”

I’d been involved in the gay-straight alliance at our high school, but Jenny had never seen a reason for organized groups, sports, religion, anything. We’d met in the gay
section of our high school’s library during a lunch period and had kissed once before deciding not to ruin our friendship. We’d been best friends since my freshman year of high school.

“We could learn something,” I said, a plea in my voice.

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. She stuffed the Queer Union flyer into my hand.

“I have to go to class.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, standing. I hugged my friend and waved goodbye as we parted ways, her to a Psych 201, me to Creative Writing 101.

I couldn’t get Charles out of my head all through class. It wasn’t attraction, per se. Though I’d had my share of people who I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do or be, I didn’t think this was that. There was something about Charles I didn’t understand, but wanted to.

I met Jenny at the far end of campus that evening. Together, we walked through the athletics building, under the scaffolding of construction on a new building, and into the student union. The cinder block student union hall was subdivided into dozens of rooms of varying sizes, one for each of the school-sanctioned clubs. The sizes were dependent on how large the school thought the club’s membership would be at the time of its founding. Though Queer Union had been around for a long time, it met in a room about the size of an office. The cramped room, painted an oppressive fuchsia, had couches on both long walls and folding chairs at either end. Jenny and I got there early and sank into one of the thrift store couches. We watched the other meeting participants arrive; a mismatched bunch of oddballs, I thought.
Charles came through the door with an armful of photocopies, frazzled, his hair askew. He dropped his backpack in the far corner of the room and plopped down in a folding chair near me. Others piled into the room—guys, girls, people of indiscriminate gender—until all the couches and chairs were filled. Old friends hugged and whined about classes; Jenny kept her mouth shut, but I tried to introduce myself.

“Glad you could make it.” He smiled at me, but gestured to the whole room. Maybe to make it less awkward. “Okay, folks,” Charles said, bringing the room’s attention to him. “Let’s start by going around and introducing ourselves with your name, your major, your preferred gender pronouns. And your favorite ice cream.

“I’m Charles Duncan, the QU prez. I’m a Classics major. My pronouns are he, him, and his. And my favorite ice cream is Rocky Road.”

I was stunned. I’d never heard anyone introduce their gender pronouns. I suddenly didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know I had an option to give a pronoun other than “she,” but suddenly I wanted all of the options. The introductions went counter-clockwise, which made me last. I could feel my face getting hot, thinking about having to say my name, which I hated, and my pronouns—those dread indicators of something I didn’t really understand about myself—aloud. I barely heard anyone else’s name or pronouns over the pulsing anxiety in my ears, though someone said their pronouns were “Hey, girl!” Another used “yo, yo, and yo.” Another used “they.”

“I’m Jenny Matthews,” Jenny said. “I’m undeclared. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. And I like anything Ben & Jerry’s.”

And then it was my turn and I could only look at my hands.

“I’m Grace and I’m a Creative Writing major,” I said, the sweat starting to bead
along my buzzed hairline. “I don’t like pronouns, but I do like vanilla soft serve in a cone with rainbow sprinkles.”

Some people chuckled at my little joke.

“Hi, Grace,” the group said in unison. It reminded me of an AA meeting I’d seen in a movie once, but not in a bad way.

No one except Charles said much of anything during that first brainstorm. I kept coming back. Jenny didn’t because it felt too cheesy to her, but she promised to attend movie nights and other events. She was interning and working in the school store, so she didn’t have much time to hang out anyway. I liked being in that room; the confined space made me feel safe, like anything that happened in that tiny room was contained and protected.

Mostly, I liked hanging out with Charles. He was a Brooklyn native, I learned, and a senior thinking about Master’s programs. I started staying showing up early and staying late at the meetings, itching to spend a little more time with the cool older kid who had inexplicably decided to take me under his wing. He invited me out for coffee after a meeting and that became our routine. I’d come early to help him set up and after, we’d go for coffee.

Usually, he’d talk at me about life, pontificating about the ancient Greeks and Romans, but on a day in late October, he was suspiciously quiet.

“What’s up, Chuck?” I said, already sheepish at the dumb joke.

“Listen, Grace,” Charles said. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

Charles had told me plenty about himself, so for him to make a point of telling me something made my heart race. I bit the inside of my lip so hard it bled.
“I’m transgender,” he said. “And I think you are, too.” His green-grey eyes were set on mine.

“What is that?” I asked quietly, trying to be respectful. I had heard the word “transvestite” and even “transsexual” on shows like Maury and Sally Jessie Raphael, but this word—transgender—was totally new. I knew the acronym LGBT, but I’d never understood the T.

“It means I was born a girl,” he said. “But that’s not really who I am. Does that make sense?” He wasn’t embarrassed or scared, I realized. He was telling me because he wanted me to know something important, something that could help me.

I nodded. I could see my hands shaking as I tried to understand. I knew I liked girls, but I had never heard anyone say anything like what Charles was telling me. We had talked about how “gay” and “lesbian” weren’t words that fully described us; there was something missing. I readjusted the bandanna on my head and watched as Charles’ sharp, gaunt features softened in response. He reached into his backpack, rummaging until he found the book he was looking for, and handed it to me.

“I think this might help. I know it helped me when I read it.” He bit his lip, looking nervous about my reaction to the battered copy of a book called Stone Butch Blues by someone named Leslie Feinberg. The cover had a faded black and white picture of a person I felt instant kinship with. The person, the author I assumed, was striking in a suit and a brush cut.

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks for telling me.”

I devoured Stone Butch Blues in a day and a half. Feinberg’s semi-autobiographical novel about Jess Goldberg’s coming of age as working class butch who
decides to pass as male in order to survive resonated with me. In Jess, I saw myself. My mother had always told me I was an old soul and this person who grew up in the 1960s and 70s felt like they held part of that soul. The vivid descriptions of male passing brought to mind all my old desires of a flat chest, of stuffing a rolled-up pair of tube socks in my underwear as a kid. I didn’t even know there was such a term for someone who did not identify with their biological sex. A spark ignited inside me, stoked in equal measure by thrill and terror.

“I feel like someone wrote my life story before I got the chance,” I said, when I gave the book back to Charles. What I meant was that the book made me legible to myself. My kind of masculinity, an assigned female at birth masculinity, was suddenly part of something larger, part of something possible.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “I felt the same way.”

“I didn’t even know there was a word for that feeling,” I said, exasperated. “I just kind of always thought I’d grow up to be a guy, you know?” I felt crazy saying out loud the thing I had felt in my bones since I was little when I thought I’d grow up to be JTT or Devon Sawa.

“Yeah, I do know,” he said, nodding. “I know folks who had different experiences, but that’s how I felt, too.”

“Wait, you know other people?” I asked, shocked that there were more people who felt this way and that he could know them. If he could know them, I could know them, I realized.

“I know a lot of people,” Charles laughed.
“Yeah, but you know other people who feel like this?”

“There’s a whole group of us that meets at the gay center in the city,” he said.

“Wanna come with next Wednesday?”

“I really do,” I said.

The following Wednesday, I followed Charles from campus to the train, from the train through the doors of the LGBT Community Center in Manhattan, and into a spacious meeting room. On the train, Charles had explained there were three groups: a trans masculine spectrum group for people like him and maybe me, a trans feminine spectrum group for women who were assigned male at birth, and a third group for parents, partners, and families.

Charles sat right next to me and we watched and nodded to the dozen or more members who came through the door. Some had full beards; some looked just like me. Some had long hair, some buzz cuts. They were all different ages, races, sizes. I was in awe of their diversity. I hadn’t expected so many people.

The group was led by two people, an older white guy with a beard and a younger person of indeterminate race, age, and gender.

“Welcome,” the older white guy said. “I’m Harry.”

“And I’m AJ,” the younger person said. “This is the trans masculine spectrum group. Hopefully, you’re all in the right place.”

“We’re going to do introductions—names, pronouns, and what brings you here tonight—and then we’ll run through the agenda,” Harry said. “So, like I said, I’m Harry
and I use he, him, and his. I work here at the community center and I’m a co-lead with AJ.”

“I’m AJ. My pronouns are he and they. And I’m a volunteer co-lead.”

Slowly, fifteen or so people introduced themselves. Most used “he, him, and his,” but not everybody. Some used “she” or no pronouns at all.

I thought about my name as everyone spoke. My mother, unlike many, only chose one name before I was born. She knew with her enigmatic Jewish mother’s intuition I was going to be a girl. She also knew that when I turned sixteen I would hate my name, so she passed off the responsibility of naming me to Neil. Fortunately for me, he took the job seriously. He spent hours poring over names and slept with a baby name book next to his bed. Ultimately, he chose Grace, not for the virtue, but for Grace Slick, rock star. My middle name was chosen as a formality, my mother’s maiden name Schwartz: Grace Schwartz Daly.

But “Grace” never fit. I wasn’t graceful. I was awkward and gawky. The name was a hand-me-down shirt that was too tight in the shoulders and too short in the arms. Any time someone misheard or came up with another nickname for me, I could shrug the garment off, at least for a little while. I thought everyone hated their name. I thought everyone tensed every time it was called out in class, that everyone had the same sick feeling in their stomach when they had to introduce themselves. It was only now occurring to me that maybe this had something to do with my gender.

“I’m Charles,” Charles said. “My pronouns are he, him, and his and I’m newly on T.”

I didn’t know what T was, but I wanted to.
“I’m Grace,” I said, wincing. “I hate my name and I don’t know what my pronouns are. I guess that’s why I’m here.” I flushed beet red and Charles patted my knee. I looked over at him and he gave me a thumbs-up.

“Great,” AJ said. “So, today we’re going to brainstorm some topics for discussion over the next six weeks of our cycle.” He pointed to an easel with flipchart paper.

“If you were here last week,” Harry said, “or if you weren’t, we spent some time setting ground rules. Community responsibilities, we call them.” He pointed to a piece of flipchart paper, which had been taped to the wall: *One person talks at a time. Speak from the “I” perspective. Step back if you’re talking a lot.*

The people in the room suggested a whirlwind of subjects. Subjects I’d never even thought about: transitioning in the work place, coming out to family, sex with women, sex with men, surgery options, clothing, finding a friendly barber, testosterone and its risks. The list of subjects seemed endless, but hearing the concerns in the room made me feel less alone. Others, it seemed, were scared of the future. I wasn’t the only scared one in the room, even if my future might look totally different.

After the meeting, Charles and I took the train back to Brooklyn.

“So,” he said with a knowing smile, “are you coming back with me next week?”

“Yeah, I am.” I punched his shoulder playfully.

I kept coming back to the group every week, and every week I felt different about my life and its possibilities. A few weeks in, Charles was sick, so I went alone.

The topic that night was about transitioning in the workplace, a subject on which I had nothing to say; I kept my mouth shut unless I absolutely had to say something. A young high school teacher spoke up. He had close-cropped blond hair, jug ears, and a
face full of acne. He looked like he was going through puberty, even though I knew he
must have been in his thirties. Testosterone, a seemingly magical hormone, I had learned
could do that; injected or applied as a gel, it created a second puberty at the right dose for
“assigned female at birth” folks.

“I’ve been scared about telling my principal my real name,” he said, his voice
quavering. “I think it’s because I haven’t really had a lot of good male role models in my
life. I’m a feminist. It scares the shit out of me to be a dude in the world.”

A couple of the other guys in the room chuckled and nodded.

I sat, stricken. Until that moment, I had never connected my own history—one
particularly shitty boy, my mostly absent dad, my desperate clinging to my six years
older brother—to my gender anxiety. I couldn’t stop thinking about it for the rest of the
meeting. On the train ride home, I wrote in my journal:

*I realized today what I have been struggling to realize for years, maybe forever. It
came upon me slyly, creeping in as a stranger in the group talked about his experience as
a teacher. His discussion was, without question, groundbreaking for me.*

*I know deep in the core of my being the truth of my transgender identity; these
past few weeks have given me words for my lifetime of experience. But I’m terrified of
maleness. Maybe this is why it’s taking me so long to say I use “he, him, and his” as my
pronouns. Part of me believed I loved being an “other” so much I didn’t want to stuff
myself into a box that couldn’t fully encapsulate me. This is true still, in many ways, but
augmented by the truth of what follows. I am terrified of being the sort of man that men in
my life have been. This is why I struggled so much with my gender identity, wrestling
silently until my truth came bursting forth, thanks to my friend. This is why I have*
alternately loved and hated the idea of moving, shifting, progressing in my gender identity. I will not be Josh or my absent Dad. I will not, cannot be the man the men in my life have been. Who I am is not who I have been and not who I can ever be again.

That night, at home, I started to think about the real possibility of transitioning. I had seen guys in the group start hormones and heard others talk about surgery options. It was only now occurring to me I could do something about the way I felt inside. There seemed, at least from what I heard in the group, to be a trajectory, a path others had trod that I could take part in, or not.

At the end of the six weeks, the group started to feel like a makeshift family around a shared understanding of what it felt like to walk around in a body we knew wasn’t all ours, even if parts of it were. And it was like a family—there was plenty of bickering and annoyances, feminism and misogyny, weird cousins and loud uncles, all different, but all related in this bond. This community, these men and boys, gave me my first insight into what it meant to be a trans man in the world. They showed me how to assert myself, how to navigate the world in masculine ways, how to own my maleness. I observed how they acted and interacted with each other. I listened carefully to how they were learning to navigate new spaces: the teacher transitioning in the classroom learning how to reintroduce himself to colleagues and students, a softball umpire navigating his new role as a man on a women’s team, students like me, actors, dancers, therapists.

Like me, so many of these men had led lives that strongly biased them against men. Together, we strived to enact a masculinity divorced from anything we’ve been exposed to. We had all seen men, cisgender and trans, who had buttressed their own
strength with racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence. Too many of us had been on the receiving end of masculinity gone awry. When I was starting to steal swipes of Gillette foam to shave my hairless face in high school, my own working class father was working twelve-hour days at the auto shop. He had no time to answer questions about how to stop nicking my jaw. My masculinity felt borrowed and ill fitting at times, but it was easier to wear than the “girl-ness” which had never fit.

After the semester and the group cycle ended came Winter Break. Jenny and I lived in an apartment and didn’t have to go home at all if we didn’t want to. I didn’t want to, but Hannukah and Christmas were only a week apart, a miracle in an interfaith family. I spent the week shuttling between my parents’ houses, wearing hats, avoiding any discussion of what had captured my attention all semester.

Before coming back to Brooklyn, though, I slipped the old baby name book Neil had used to choose my name into my duffel bag. I had been thinking about the names I liked, names that felt like they could be mine. I’d run through each of the names in my family: Francis, Clark, John, Patrick, Neil, James, Carl, Oswald, Harvey, Lee, William, Edward. None of them worked. Heading south and seated backwards on the train—one of those window seats facing the rear of the car—I watched the Hudson simultaneously appear and disappear as the Amtrak train barreled down alongside the wide river. It was as though the places I’d been appeared before me as I realized I was already past them. I thumbed through the little book, *The Best Baby Name Book in the World*, tattered after nearly two decades of sitting on a shelf. It had originally been published in the early
1980s, I read. I wondered what new names had been invented since then. Would I be missing some key, perfect name?

I flipped to the G section and was gratified to see the names not subdivided by gender; I had been seeing gender divisions everywhere since September. A name that started with “G” might be easier for the people in my life to handle. It might make the transition a little smoother. Gabby, Gabe, Gage, Gale. None of these would work. I liked Gershom:

Gershom (male)
Meaning: Stranger
Origin: Hebrew

I remembered reading about the _gershom_ in Hebrew school before my Bat Mitzvah. My mother, I realized, would never accept me as a stranger. I wondered about my own name meaning and remembered a little framed placard I’d had with my name meaning in my childhood bedroom. I found my current name in the book:

Grace (female)
Meaning: Charm
Origin: Latin

My stomach flipped at seeing my own name on the page. I felt no charm. I read on.

Grady, Graham, Grant. I passed right by “Graham,” but my mind stuck on the single syllable with six letters:

Graham (male)
Meaning: From the Gray Homestead
Origin: English/Scottish

The meaning meant nothing to me, but the name could. It wasn’t far from Grace aurally or visually, but it felt like a new person all together.
The realization came slowly, as though when my back was turned, but with the persistence of a quiet truth: I could be a ‘Graham.’ I could make ‘Graham’ the person I am and the person I wanted to be. It was just a name, but I could decide what it meant. Nearly ten years after my first grappling with my name, as a child up at Camp, I practiced saying my name. I practiced signing it. I practiced being myself. I made ‘Graham’ my routine. ‘Graham’ became the person I constructed from the pieces of me that worked, picking and choosing as I went along, discarding the parts that had failed me. There would be so much more to my transition than a name, but my name was a place where I could begin to make a home.
GOODNIGHT, DAD

On the day my father died, I saw a man on the train who looked like the boy who sexually assaulted me when I was eleven years old. It had been almost twenty years since I’d seen Josh Delroy, but I could swear it was his face, now with a scraggly beard, on the B train bound for Coney Island. I was standing in the doorway, on the train heading home from teaching a creative writing workshop, and there he was, manspreading beyond the space of his seat, a lean guy with a ratty black t-shirt. My body flushed cold at the idea that it could be him, even as my brain registered the impossibility of the sighting. It's a disorienting thing to see a familiar face on a stranger. It had happened countless times with friends of mine, acquaintances, even students. But never with Josh.

When I got home, I went straight to my office, determined to write something about the encounter I’d just had, to immortalize it before it slipped from my memory. Sitting at the big oak desk, though, I could only stare at the word processing document open on my computer screen. I watched the blinking cursor flash on and off as I tried to figure out how to put down on paper what I wanted to say.

My cell phone, an anachronism ringing like an old rotary phone, saved me from the post-traumatic trip back in time. My brother Neil sounded like he’d been hit by a bus. We usually spoke on the phone every few weeks to catch each other up, but those calls were always scheduled days in advance. At 2:32pm, my public elementary school teacher brother should have been in front of his classroom.

“Hey, brother,” I said. “What’s up? Are you okay?” I shifted the phone to my other ear and closed my laptop.
“Graham,” Neil’s voice shook. “Are you sitting?”

I wondered where he was calling from, hearing no discernable sounds in the background. I pictured him pacing in his kitchen, my nephew Oliver picked up from daycare, my sister-in-law, Annie, still at work at the hospital.

“Yeah, I’m sitting,” I said. “What’s going on?”

I heard him swallow several times, like he couldn’t quite get the words to form. Immediately, I thought Annie might be pregnant again, an unplanned younger sibling for Ollie. It was an awkward pause, full of possibility. If we could have stayed in it long enough, we could have held space for all the possibilities in the world, a Schrödinger’s cat of pauses in the conversation.

“Dad’s dead,” Neil says, opening the box for both of us.

Suddenly, it felt like the world was falling away from me. For a few moments, I couldn’t hear anything at all. When the sound rushed back into my ears—the honking of cars on Eastern Parkway, a neighbor vacuuming, the ding of the elevator moving between floors in the hallway—I cleared my throat. Dad was not both alive and dead. He was only the latter, only gone forever.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I thought maybe not enough time had passed; if the two of us had stayed inside the pause of possibilities, maybe we could still close the box and put it back up on the shelf.

“He was in his office, going through papers,” Neil said, his voice full of tremble. “I guess he just keeled over.”

“Fuck, Neil,” I said. I couldn’t help but think of the poor new guy at the shop – some young kid trying to become a mechanic – who had to find my seventy-one year old
father face down at his desk, a cigarette probably still burning in the ashtray. It made hate my father for smoking and want a cigarette at the same time.

“They think he had a heart attack.” Neil was definitely crying now.

I wished I could force the tears, but my eyes were suddenly drier than they’d ever been. They were the Sahara of eyes, emotionless and unfeeling. Twin numb orbs in my face. I wondered when the last time was I had seen Neil cry. It could have been when the family lab, Wiley, died over a winter break when Neil was in college, because I couldn’t think of another moment. I wished I could close the distance between Columbus, Ohio and Brooklyn, so I could be sitting on the couch with my brother, as he delivered this news.

“Who called you?” I felt like I was ten years old and my older, cooler brother had been given all the information and I’d been left in the dust. I didn’t ask if I was the last to know, but I wanted to.

“I guess the kid who found him called for an ambulance,” he said. “The hospital called Uncle Bill. Uncle Bill called me.”

It had been a long time since either of us had seen our uncle Bill, Dad’s younger brother Billy. I thought maybe the last time was at our mother’s funeral nearly six years prior.

“I’m going to fly to New York tomorrow,” Neil said. “We’re going to have a lot to deal with.”

“Right, right,” I said. “Of course. I’ll drive up tomorrow.”

“I love you, brother.”

“I love you too, Neil.”
* * *

Around ten, my wife Adelaide woke me up and I was forced to relive the conversation with my brother, relive my father’s death, relive telling my wife. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and sat up. I pulled myself up out of the bed and into the kitchen where Addie had toast and coffee waiting. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her wavy, strawberry-blond hair.

“You have to take care of yourself, Graham,” she said, kissing my forehead. “Make sure you eat, okay?”

I held my wife by the shoulders at arm’s length and looked her straight on in her big, amber eyes. I knew she knew the pain of this loss; my father had loved her like the daughter I’d never been. Still, I didn’t know how to say then what I was feeling. Neil and I had become orphans because my father worked himself to death.

After breakfast, I packed clothes enough for a week, unsure how long I’d be gone, unsure how long everything would take to get figured out. Addie carried Avi down to the car to say goodbye, both of us adults grateful we’d made the decision to get a car after our four-year-old daughter was born. I hugged them both closely to me and soothed Addie’s worries that she should accompany me. I didn’t know what lay in store and the idea of grappling with my daughter’s needs and my own felt too overwhelming to manage. I’d call when I got to Albany, I promised. I’d let them know about the arrangements as soon as Neil and I found the will. When I felt as sure as I possibly could that Addie was okay with me going alone, I kissed the blonde heads of my little family and tucked myself behind the wheel of our Subaru.
On the drive, I tried to remember all that I could about my father. I’d just seen him over the holidays, not six months ago, but the memories came in fits and starts. The slightness of his build, his surprising muscles. That thing Neil always said: Dad had done just enough working out when he was young to get fit and had done just enough ever since to maintain his physique. I tried to remember the last thing I said to him or the exact timing of our last conversation.

When I could not recall any more, I pulled over at the Plattekill travel plaza halfway to Albany to scan my phone. Last Tuesday at 2:34pm. Right, I thought. Dad wanted Neil and I to promise to come up to the lake for his birthday. An idea I had immediately discarded. Had he been okay when we spoke? I couldn’t remember. I bought a pack of cigarettes at the gas station, though I’d quit when Adelaide was pregnant, and got back in the car.

The radio hummed with white noise as I drove between station areas; when it cleared, James Taylor was singing, “I’ve seen lonely times when I could not find a friend, but I always thought that I’d see you again.”

It was nearly 2 o’clock when I turned off the highway into Albany. The familiar turns tugged and pulled for my attention. That Starbucks used to be a Taco Pronto. Grandpa Daly built that house. I used to sneak down to that Dunkin Donuts all the time in the summer. 3 Daly Street was still the modest, white Cape Cod style house with twin gables it had always been, looking out over the short road. When Neil and I were kids, our Daly grandparents had lived here, but after Mom and Dad got divorced, Dad back moved into his childhood home.
Pulling around the house, I saw Dad’s 70s era Ford truck in the driveway, a red Mini Cooper just behind it. I pulled my Subaru on the street and steadied myself. Opening my car door, I could smell the tar melting again in the early May morning. Dad must have recently resurfaced the blacktop on the driveway, leading to the back door of the house. I left my things in the car and stood at the back door for a moment before I realized it was open, the screen door bringing warm spring air into the stuffy house.

Inside the house, I found Neil eating a bowl of plain cornflakes – like we were kids again – standing at the kitchen counter. He smiled a small smile with a mouthful of cereal, swallowed and hugged me close.

“Hey, Neil,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Terrible fucking circumstances,” he said. “But I’ve missed your dumb face.”

“I haven’t even processed it,” I said.

“I feel totally numb still. I couldn’t eat on the flight.”

“Hence the cereal,” I shrugged and pushed past Neil to sit at the dining room table. From my seat, I watched him chew. I was surprised to see the grey in his hair, thinning on top like Dad’s. How long had it been since we’d been alone together?

“Hence the cereal.” Neil finished up his cereal and put the bowl in the sink. “I just got in.”

In the middle of the mid-century oval oak table my grandparents had always had in the dining room sat the clear plastic medical bag of Dad’s belongings from the hospital. I stared at it intently, as though it would jump if I looked away.

“Uncle Bill didn’t know what to do with this stuff,” Neil said, gesturing at the clear bag. “So, he came by after everything yesterday and left all this for us.”
I picked the bag up from a bottom corner and its bulging contents spilled out from its plastic handled opening. Dad’s warped and worn black leather wallet, his wedding ring (why he still carried it in his pocket after the divorce I’ll never know), a pack of Lucky Strikes, a Zippo, loose change, a pair of jeans, a ratty plaid button-up, grey tube socks with holes in them, a cracked leather belt.

“Shit,” I said, surveying the items.

“Seriously,” Neil said, joining me at the table. He fingered the wedding ring, turning it over in his hand.

Seeing all the belongings strewn out before us, Dad’s whole lifetime seemed reduced to rubble.

“Do you know what he wanted?” I asked, the words feeling disrespectful in my mouth, even as I tried to imbue them with something more.

“No really,” Neil said, the silver band still turning end over end in his long fingers. “I don’t think he wanted to be buried, but I don’t really know.”

We waited a while to search the house, just sitting there at the dining room table, trying to process the gravity of our new orphan status, but it didn’t take long. In the front bedroom, off the living room, Dad kept a small office. He had his father’s big mahogany desk, unmoved since 1940-something, in the place of honor in front of the window, a black Remington typewriter still in the center of the desk. By the phone, though, a modern model to replace the twisted, corded wall phone, was a little roll top desk. Next to our grandfather’s desk, the roll top looked quite small, but that was the desk Dad actually used; the metaphor in the stature wasn’t lost on either of us. Inside the roll top
was Dad’s most up-to-date will, typed on that old Remington. Neil and I couldn’t get over that Dad had left it so accessible. Had he imagined himself to be nearing the end? Had he gotten better at preparing for his aftermath? What was worse, though, was what Dad wanted.

Dad didn’t want to be buried in the Jewish cemetery just outside of Albany like Mom had been; he wasn’t Jewish and had been terribly claustrophobic, even though they’d planned to be buried together when they were younger and still married. He’d made a special note that he didn’t even want a funeral. He just divided the whole estate in half before noting: “I ask that my sons, Neil and Graham, have me cremated and spread my ashes in the Great Sacandaga Lake, from the vantage point of the farthest dock that my father built for the Campers Association.”

Neil and I read it a hundred times. Aloud. Silently. To each other. To ourselves.

I had always planned to go back to Camp, to go back to the place Josh had ruined for me, but in my imagining, it had always been a solo trip. A trip where I would drink alone and smoke a few packs of cigarettes and reckon with my own trauma. The need had slow burned inside for a long time, but I’d never imagined being there with my dead father’s ashes and my brother.

“I cannot believe this is what he wants.” I sipped the whiskey Neil had poured for us just after the sky dimmed and leaned back on the couch.

Neil sat in Dad’s brown corduroy swivel easy chair, still in the same spot. Thankfully, Dad had let Neil give him a flat screen television where the old console television had been and he graciously accepted the offer of a new plush couch where the old yellow polyester one had been. All told, though, the living room still felt the same.
“It makes sense,” Neil conceded. “He never stopped talking about it. It was the site of all of his favorite memories.”

“And my least favorite,” I mumbled, swigging from the rocks glass.

“I know.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been there?”

“Twenty years,” I said. The words fell hard and Neil knew why. I didn’t have to tell him; Neil was there.

It took a while for everything to happen. Because Dad died on a Thursday, we couldn’t have him cremated until Monday and we had to wait another day for the remains. Together, we decided we’d just take care of everything all at once; once the ashes were ready, we’d drive up to Sacandaga and give our father the departure he wanted. We called our respective spouses and made plans to stay through Tuesday.

In the meantime, Neil and I were stuck at our father’s house. It was a two bedroom, with a basement rec room, but we wound up sleeping in the twin beds that my grandparents had once slept in—which they would push together or apart, depending on how amorous they’d felt—that Dad had slept in for the past two decades.

That first night, after we’d found the will, we lay in our respective beds, quiet for a long time.

“I still can’t believe Dad would ask me to go back there,” I said, unable to stop the words.

“What do you mean?” Neil propped himself up on his arm to look at me.
“I mean, he knew that’s the sight of the worst moment of my life,” I said. “Didn’t he?” I couldn’t remember the last time the two of us had been alone in a room together, let alone when I had actually said what I was feeling to Neil.

“Maybe it makes sense.” Neil rubbed at his temple, looking tired already. “Like he thought it would be good for you to go back there.”

“No, Neil. It doesn’t make any sense!” I wished I could stop talking, but even though the acid had started to rise in my stomach, there was something that felt sickly pleasant in yelling at Neil. “Dad couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that his perfect getaway was my nightmare.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dad never once tried to talk to me about that weekend,” I said.

“Oh, you know how he is.” Neil said, rolling his eyes before he caught his own slip into the present tense. He looked mortified for a second before he recovered. “I mean ‘was.’ You know how he was. Dad couldn’t talk about anything meaningful. TV shows, the shop, books, music. Those were in his wheelhouse.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And apologizing to his son—if and when he could handle dealing with me as his son—was not in that wheelhouse. Do you know that he tried to make me go back there when they were getting divorced? Just the two of us up there.”

Neil turns over on his back and stares at the ceiling for what feels like a long time.

“I didn’t know that,” he said softly. “You had to deal with a lot alone. I mean, I wasn’t here for any of the crazy shit. What else?” Neil looks genuinely open and I can feel my resolve crumple.

“You missed a lot.” I mumbled. “Maybe too much.”
“I know I did. College, married, traveling. I didn’t even see you graduate, let alone when they were really going through it with the divorce. I didn’t want to be here for that.”

“Well, the prodigal son has returned,” I snorted.

The next day and the day after blurred together. We’d try to force each other to eat, alternating between clearing out Dad’s cabinets and leaving to go to anywhere else so we didn’t have to stay in the house. We also started the slow process of sorting through Dad’s belongings. The only real debates were over Dad’s record collection and his shelves of books. In the end, we haggled over our favorites and divided the rest in half.

In the office, Neil found a small oak box engraved with Dad’s initials and asked me if I wanted it.

“What if we use that for the ashes?” I suggested. “Instead of some hideous urn.”

Neil was unusually agreeable.

On Tuesday, we picked up the ashes from the crematorium at the hospital wearing the best clothes we’d brought with us, which were just button-up shirts and rumpled chinos. Neil drove Dad’s truck, so Dad could have the ride to Camp he would have wanted. The drive up to Camp is less than an hour, but it always felt like we’d been in the car for days, even more so on that day. We were both shocked that the landmarks we’d always taken note of on the drive were all still there: The Tall Man, the funny noise bridge, The Beef Jerky, and the first shining glimpse between the pines of the Great Sacandaga Lake. Some things, we reasoned, stayed put in small towns.
We stopped at a gas station in Gloversville to pick up a few packs of cigarettes and a case of beer. Twenty minutes later, Neil turned off the main highway and headed down a narrow gravel side road. If he hadn’t looked up the directions again, we would have missed the turn completely. There used to be a sign that marked the area—a painted wooden sign Grandpa Jack and his brothers had put up when they first founded this place—but it was long gone. I steeled myself for the triggers and flashbacks I’d battled since the last time I was here.

The Sunrise Harbor Campers Association, with some minor changes—a new house here, a tree knocked down there—was the same small cluster of rustic cottages in winding rows in the midst of dense forest. I could feel the anxiety ratchet up inside me as we drove the long, snaking gravel road down to the front of the cabins and ended just before the beach, directly in front of Dad’s camp. It looked exactly the same as always: simple, white Adirondack clapboard.

Neil parked Dad’s truck and we brought our bags up the wooden staircase Dad repaired a dozen times after Grandpa Jack built it into the hill. The small paved area, the wooden picnic table, the brick and stone fire pit in front of the camp all looked just as they did when I was twelve, my last time here. Some of the modern camps are two and three stories, but Dad never wanted to change this first one.

Neil and I dropped our bags in the back bedroom, on the twin beds.

“We’re actually fucking here,” I said, surprised to hear my own words aloud.

“We are. Are you okay?” Neil stood beside me, looking out through the front windows at sun drifting down from its high peak in the sky.

“Yes and no,” I said.
“Which is which?” Neil asked.

“It hurts less to be here than I thought it would,” I said.

“What did you think would hurt?” Neil looked at me, surprised.

“Everything. I’ve had nightmares about this place for most of life. But everything has stayed the same and I’ve changed.”

“Yeah, you’re a grown ass man, now.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And a dad.”

“A better dad than we had, maybe.”

“I don’t know,” I conceded. “Maybe he was doing the best he knew how to do.”

“Maybe,” Neil said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Maybe you’ll do better.”

When the sun started to set, we made our way back down the wooden stairs, over the bank of the lawn, down the beach and follow the lengths of dock in various states of disrepair bobbing up and down in the cool and shining water. We walked out to the center, where the dock formed the three sides of a rectangle behind us and sat down at the farther point out in the water, letting the water shift us back and forth.

We were quiet for a long time, as we sat on the dock that extended out the farthest into Sacandaga Lake. He had leaned back, palms flat on the dock supporting his long and lean torso and I had leaned forward, my fingernails picking at loose splinters on the underside of the wood. He lit a cigarette and handed the pack to me. We sat there, smoking our feelings into the spring evening air, as the sun sank in front of us: orange and purple over the Adirondacks, setting the lake on fire with pink and gold. We’d lose the light soon.

“I think we have to do it now,” Neil said quietly.
I wasn’t sure how long we had been sitting there silently, but when he spoke, it felt like he had taken both of our fingers off the pause button. My eyes followed his to the small, lacquered oak box between us.

“How do we even do this?” Even at thirty-six, I looked to Neil for answers.

“I think we just stand up and say goodbye.” Neil pushed off on his hands and stood slowly, his body cracking and popping as she moved. He extended his tanned hand and I took it, grateful for the contact, and stood beside him for a moment before stooping back down to pick up the wooden box.

“Can we open it together?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

We each held the box with two hands, sharing the task of opening the hinged lid. As we slowly lifted the lid, I was startled to see the grey white ash still had solid pieces of bone fragment inside. My stomach flipped at the sight.

“I thought it would all be ash,” I said.

“Me too,” Neil said. “Is it okay if we don’t touch it?”

“Yeah.”

Instead, we lifted the ashes and turned the container toward the water. I was grateful that in the moment there was no wind, no air at all moving on the lake that might force the ashes back in our faces. Instead, the greyish white dust and bone fragments scattered all along the surface of the water.

“What do we do with the box?” Neil asked.

I gently pulled it out of his hands and, grasping it tightly with my right hand, swung it backwards before launching it—overhand—into the great Sacandaga Lake.
“Goodnight, Dad,” I called out to the darkening water. It didn’t know how to say goodbye to our father and it didn’t feel like a goodbye yet. Standing there, with my brother, the ashes of my father sinking below the darkening water, though, I wasn’t afraid to be in this place anymore. Even still, I knew I’d never come back.