

## The Lost World of Ended Summers

They're at the far side of the lake on separate slabs of granite sloping into the water. Between them, wedged in crevices amid ferns and grass is an array of empty beer bottles. Another six-pack bobs in the water below in a cooler tied to their canoe's bowsprit. The lake is a smear of brilliance returning the flat blue and white of the sky with flashes of brown-black toward its center. On the drive out, she told him how it is the deepest body of water in the region, hundreds of feet at its northern end, and how in the 1920's a logging village thrived at its depths. Now it's just the two of them and the faint lapping of water on stone, the obliterating weight of sun and heat made all the more oppressive by the density of woods and brambles growing right to the edges of the rock behind them, hemming them in—no trail, no road, no clearance and nowhere to escape the sun.

He rubs his hands together to wipe away the dust and grit of granite dimpling his palms; shakes out his left hand to ease the cramping through his wrists. Changes position again so his legs don't fall asleep.

"Another?" he asks, and tips upright. He stretches and looks around for the umpteenth time for any shade or cover, anywhere to escape the sun.

"Some of those chips too, if you don't mind, yes please."

At the edge of the water he stands a moment peering into his shadow beside their canoe. Glimpses through it momentarily the dizzying tumble of gold and bronze-algaed rocks falling out of sight, beyond where any light can reach—empty brown-gold water all the way down. Once, this was a precarious rock ledge, he supposes; an outcropping at the top of a gorge or

precipice with a romantic, picturesque vista of quaint village-life below. Maybe some old-time young couple sat right here courting. Maybe he brought a guitar and sang songs for her to make her blush and slap playfully at him. Happier people. Unconflicted. Not duplicitous—true to their intentions.

“It’s a dead lake,” he says. “Right? Isn’t that the deal?”

He turns back to her, squinting against the light, bottle necks secured between fingers and his other hand out to brace against the rock for the scramble back. She’s got her shirt off and is wearing the stained, ancient Cargill feed cap he’d plucked from the rear seat of his father’s car as an afterthought—cover for himself, though he’d forfeited it instantly after docking when she asked. Moments ago, leaning under its shadow to kiss her, the corona of smells related to his father—aftershave, hair tonic and sweat mixed with motor oil—had combined with the familiar softness of her mouth, that humming noise she made at the back of her throat whenever she gave herself over, to such ill and distracting effect he’d felt ready to confess everything. Have done with it.

“Dead or dying,” she says. There’s a sarcastic note in her voice which he knows isn’t sarcasm exactly. She wants him to feel how she expects the worst of the world, but somehow cheerfully. It’s the thing about her that most enduringly reignites all his feeling for her. That sweetness and skepticism. “It’s the acid rain, right?”

“So weird.”

“On the plus side,” she says, “no bugs.”

There’s the kissing pop of her beer opening.

“True!” he says. “I think I saw some earlier though.”

She leans over the crevice between them to clink necks. “To life in ten or twenty more years, right? It’ll come back. Maybe not in our lifetimes, but...” Then shielding her eyes to see him better, “Did you forget my chips?”

“Oh. Right. Damn. Sorry.” He leans as if to get up again but doesn’t. In the distance is the sound of a chainsaw starting. Maybe a motorboat somewhere out there. So they’re not altogether alone. Of course. He shields his eyes, looking out. The whole horizon from one end of the lake to the other is such a scramble of deserted and overgrown inlets and coves he’s no longer sure where they came from or how they’ll chart the way back across the water to his parked car, the road out.

“Don’t worry, Marty,” she says.

“What?”

“I know this lake like the back of my hand. We’re fine.”

How is it she can always read him so easily? “I’m not worried.”

One side of her mouth puckers to a scowl. Plain skepticism. “Martin Elliott,” she says.

If he hadn’t called her last week to see about hanging out again before he left to go back to college. If the whole summer hadn’t already gotten so fucked up between them, if they’d stopped time somehow—like it’d been stopped for that village at the bottom of the lake—or hadn’t let it drift the way it had, stayed in touch, been more definitive; if he’d ever found a saner summer job, one with regular hours and more opportunity to meet somewhere halfway for visits, instead of driving all over the western edge of the state to play with Hank in his lousy country band, sixty bucks a night in an ongoing rotation of backwoods bars that looked to Martin more like shacks than any kind of public drinking establishment, three-four nights a week, never home before 3 AM, waking up later and later every day; if all of this hadn’t felt like giving in to a

future he'd always halfway envisioned and dreaded for himself since childhood, his father's life more or less—if, if, if...but mainly if he hadn't spent the last set break of the previous night in his car smoking pot with Hank's underage maybe-girlfriend, Paula. An entire summer of studiously watching and avoiding watching her on the dance-floor, talking to her on set breaks, flirting, not flirting, trying to figure out what the situation was with her and Hank, giving her cigarettes—it was bound to lead *somewhere* by the end of the summer. Just...why last night? Like causing and then walking into your own bad dream. Even as the two of them made their separate ways to his car parked in the shadows at the farthest corner of the lot during the break between the second and third sets; even as the preparations for this meeting were laid when he chose to park there instead of closer to the loading dock, or laid further back, the night before when he'd mentioned to her in passing, *Hey yeah, I've got some weed—usually have a few hits in my car before the last set, come on out and join me if you feel like it...stuff's killer...just don't get me arrested!* he'd known exactly what he was doing. Known how this was going to wreck things for his day with Marlia and destroy all of his notions of who he was. None of which was quite real for him, however, until the chunk of the car door shutting and Paula's sudden nearness: those gangling knees and wrists right there in the dark of the seat-well beside him, jingle of bracelets and bangles on her arm, all of it suddenly *meaning* in a way it hadn't before—more than a teasing set of attributes he could kid her about, identify her by, like her cowgirl boots and the over-applied apple or strawberry fragrance that forecasted her presence coming outside on breaks with the clop-clop-clop of those boots, and which he smelled for hours afterward driving home. . . He was alone with her in the dark, in the stuffy silence of his dad's lousy old Mazda, the grinding tick-click of the second hand in the dashboard clock pulling the seconds along. In the burst of sulfur lighting up, her eyes loomed at him out of the dark. He cupped the joint and

anxiously sucked smoke as she kept lookout for fat Hank standing in the service entry, and handed off to her. Hank. Or, as the guys in the band sometimes called him, the *round mound of sound*. Voice as earnest, broken or greasy as any song required, always its understated country sentimentality as incongruous with Hank as that blond wisp of a girl trailing alongside him to and from gigs. More than once Martin had stood on stage beside Hank wondering who he was and how he kept going—how he was up there at all with the stage lights shining through the duct-taped patchwork face of his old beater guitar and the sweatband of his floppy leather cowboy hat soaked through with sweat—if he might not croak on the spot. And then he'd start singing....

“Yuck!” she said. “Tastes like gasoline! What the crap! What kind of weed is this? Did you buy this shit from my *uncle*?” Her uncle, he knew from previous conversations, was formerly a bass player in Hank's band. He'd quit in a fury when Paula started hanging out with Hank, a story Martin's heard in such varying and muddled detail, depending on whoever's telling it, he tended to zone out whenever there was another mention of the guy. Bob.

“Bob,” he asked.

Paula nodded. But he knew what she was doing. Trying to make herself sound like a pro, a connoisseur, someone older, been around it all her life, to compensate for the obvious outward signs of her unease and the fact that when she first took the joint from him she didn't seem to know how to hold it or what to expect.

“But you've smoked before, though. Right?” he asked.

“Duh!”

“Gotta ask. I mean. . . Kind of hold it more like...there you go. Nice big hit. Whoa.” He waited, instinctually having inhaled and held his breath with her. Exhaled. “Just remember, you don’t get off until you cough.”

She smacked at him with the back of her free hand. “Such an asshole,” she said, breathing out. And then came the coughing. He knew how that would feel. Like a blade drawn across her throat. There was the desperate rattle of breath going in through her nose as she waved one hand with a jangling of bracelets, trying to control the next spasm, probably picturing all the little torn and weed-clogged cilia in her throat and lungs in hyper-magnification (briefly he considered telling her about that, giving her this picture just to make it worse, as someone—who?—had done to him ages ago...such a cruel trick). Or not. She flung her head between her knees and seemed to be trying not to breathe at all now.

“What did I tell you? Might taste rank, but it’s for real.” More coughing. He put a hand between her shoulder blades. Patted her there. Left the hand just above her bra strap until he felt her lungs fill again and empty. “Breathe in nice and slow. Picture your cilia all happy and purple with blood and oxygen, nice and clean like little blue bottles or cauliflowers. There you go.” She was hunched into the seat well still, head almost between her knees. “Nice big breaths... You’re fine.”

“Such an asshole. Don’t laugh at me!” she said. Again she swatted him off. Faced him, tears having taken away some of her mascara, leaving gritty gray stains on her cheeks and one of her enormous false eyelashes drooping in the corner of her eye until she plucked it away and then picked off the other one to be symmetrical. “You’re laughing!”

“I’m not!”

“Give it. Give me that joint,” she said.

“You’re sure you...”

Just a child. A kid. A little older than his twelve year old cousin, Bernice, maybe. No, he thought, she was older than that. Definitely older. But seriously fucked up in some way he did not understand. Ruined or even dangerous. A kid who was desperate not to be a kid and trying with all her might (and with everyone’s encouragement) not to seem like one. But still, a sweet, possibly deranged child. Eighteen? Could she be that old? Sixteen? Had he asked? If he asked, would he believe whatever she told him? She could be like eleven!

“How old are you anyway?” he asked.

She waved a hand at him. Sucked on the joint. Handed it back at him and exhaled. Foxy, composed, twenty-one again. “Age is a number. Why get all hung up on it. Are we getting married or something?”

“What?”

“So who cares?”

“Because it’s also like a fact. It’s...never mind.” He drew on the joint. He’d meant to say something about *legal age of consent*, but for now there was nothing to *consent* to, obviously, except smoking weed, which couldn’t be legal regardless of age, so. . . The sticky clock gears ground on in the silence. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked. And for no reason that he understood, he was revisiting a phone conversation he’d had with his dad weeks ago, maybe longer ago than that, closer to the beginning of summer—his dad asking about whether or not Hank used a contract for any of his gigs. *It’s important, Marty. Get ahold of one of those contracts*, he’d said. His dad was a Local 1000 union guy and got hung up on details like contracts and equity and solidarity. But this had felt to Martin like a conversation he wasn’t ready for or just didn’t give a shit about. *Maybe, I don’t know*, was all he’d finally managed to

say. *I guess he must? I mean, how would I know! I've never seen a contract. So does that make me like a scab or a goon or something? Am I supposed to care about this? Quit?*

He meant to objectify the situation and distance himself from her, focusing all of his attention on her mouth as she rambled on about the family of ducks she was raising out there on Hank's little rustic patch of strung together sheds and trailers and abandoned cars and campers (Martin had been there exactly once, for the sole rehearsal the band ever had, to his knowledge, months ago now)—the redness of chapped skin outlining it, the haphazard crookedness of her teeth and over-accentuated bow-like curve of her upper lip, the skin outlined in shiny lip gloss—*The one with the green neck is like definitely the boss duck, the alpha-duck, but then, oh, the other day, it was the weirdest thing, I went out there...* Like someone's idea of a mouth. A book illustration or diagram of a mouth. But then he got distracted trying to remember that aggregation of outbuildings, the shittiness of it all, and trying to picture her there. What did she do all day, all night, aside from feeding and babysitting ducks? Why was she even there?

He took the joint back and drew smoke, tasting her lip gloss in the wet paper. Passed it back again and watched her and tried to keep his focus on the words she was saying—the pucker creasing the skin between her eyes as she drew more smoke. The light from the cherry outlining her cheeks and then the cloud of smoke exhaled and barely visible through the dark, the molecules of her breath and spit mingling with burnt cannabis crystallizing in his senses, his nostrils, his brain. And finally the moment he was expecting and dreading and in that nexus of feeling probably causing to become more and more inevitable—her turning toward him with the smeared eyeliner and mascara now dried to streaks of coal on her cheeks and only her normal human-sized eyelashes to outline her gaze as she held his eyes, dropped the lids halfway and opened them again, smiling to make the invitation clear. “Hey,” she said. “So are we getting



romantic here Marty? Are you ever going to kiss me...” and even as he shook his head, *No, no I’m not*, here came the transport that was as physical as it was mental and temporal, the sound of her bracelets sliding and jingling together closer in his ear, a sound he knew he’d miss and never think of the same thereafter—the word *Pavlovian* echoing in his neural circuitry, from his Psych class earlier the same year, and then, *Ivan Pavlov was a Russian physiologist and physicist best known for his work with conditioning and responses*, those words cycling up reflexively, test prep from last fall and exactly the wrong (or maybe the right?) kind of conditioning for the moments that followed—as she took him by the ear and mashed her face to his. The pressure of her hands on his neck and ear didn’t let up. There was only the taste of lip gloss mixed with burnt cannabis, the wet sweetness of her lips open sucking and pulsating around his, drawing him further out of himself and making the skin along the back of his neck and shoulders prickle like he’d been too long in the sun.

And then the part he less liked remembering—finally withdrawing his face from hers, after untold minutes of kissing, trying to disentangle, back up, slow down, undo whatever had just started, saying, “Whoa, whoa there Nellie. I gotta get back in and play, tune up, get through another set...this is a very bad idea. A terrible idea...”

Again came the clamminess of her hands pulling him in and the unrelenting circular pressure of her tongue going around and around in his mouth.

“You don’t like it? You don’t like me?” she asked.

*Of course I like you, that’s not the problem...* The words echoed in his head. Had he said them out loud?

“What’s the problem then. Is something wrong Martin? Can I?” She dropped a hand into his lap, skimmed open the buttons of his jeans and slid her fingers in around the opening in his boxers.

“Hey, hey, really stop. Wow.” He covered her hand with his and pushed it back. And only as he fully detached and leaned from her against the door, still fending off her hands, seeing her face and registering her earnest desperation, did the weight of how completely wrong he’d been hit him—how badly he’d misjudged this situation. He was not the umpteenth boy or man or boy-man she’d followed out to a car for some casual hookup. He was the first. He was in fact probably the only one stupid enough to have taken her seriously, given her enough attention and still failed to see just who she was: a girl using the one power she knew herself to possess in order to spring herself from a situation probably so out of her depth, so dire...well, more dire than he had a frame of reference for.

“Paula,” he said. “This is just...”

She cut in. “Later? Can we get out of here together awhile when you’re done? Go for a drive or whatever? Please? Hank doesn’t care... I’ll wait right here! I really like you!”

He was the only one stupid enough not to have seen that what she wanted was a way to be sprung from Hank. And he was also the one least likely to be able to pull that off because he didn’t live here and in another two weeks he’d be gone, two states away, back at college. What could he do for her? He knew from past hints in conversation that returning to either of her parents was out of the question. Same for her uncle. She needed...he had no idea what she needed. Likely, she had no idea either.

“Sure, maybe later. But no, you can’t wait in my car! Christ. Come on.” He patted her hands and again pushed them together away from him. “Come on,” he said again. “Let’s go.” He

would not meet her later. He'd stuff his bass in its case, wind his cables and cram them in the back of his amp so fast, disassemble his pedals and effects and be the hell out of there...

Coward, he thinks now. Complete and utter coward.

He leans upright and makes his way to the canoe again. Again, there's his shadow thrown in the water at his feet, and this time floating on its surface is his own face. The puffy stoned and drunk slits of his eyes and the stupid know-nothingness of his face, rippled through with shadows; under that, the tumble of rocks to the bottom of the lake. What is there to *see* after all? If there was a way to turn himself into two people, he thinks. One who was there last night in the car with Paula, and one who wasn't; one who didn't dodge her beseeching looks and practically run to his car after the last number, who instead...well, he still isn't sure what he might have done instead. He tries to bring back his old-time courting couple, his picture of them as a way to help make this division, separate his ideal self from who he is—but nothing comes. No voice, no picture, no sound. Only the little flags of dead algae on stones, the lapping sound of water on stone and the certainty that everything in this lake is dead. He squats closer, really looking. The chilled air just above the water's surface has an iodine smell, a faint swampy murky smell. And before he can allow himself to think much more about this, he peels away his shirt. Stands back a second to kick off his shoes, throws a salute at Marlia—says, “Be right back!”—and dives in. There's the rush of cold as he goes deep, the ache of it in his temples and the rocks blurring by, one huge boulder just ahead, beyond which he can't make out anything, only more and more darkness the deeper he goes, down to where the rotten iodine and mud smell must originate. He can't tell her. He has to tell her. He'll never tell her. Why though? Anyway, he'd never cheat—it's not who he is. Though this wasn't *cheating*, exactly. Technically. Only, it was. Not cheating in the sense that he and Marlia are married or even necessarily dating, but cheating in the sense

that it betrays everything he thinks about himself in relation to Marlia. His best self. Anyway if it wasn't cheating, why can't he tell her? He rolls onto his back to see how far he's come—sun shattered across the surface of the water like a broken chrysalis—and goes laterally a ways further and down again until the ache at the pit of his lungs becomes unrelenting. Has he been down here a year or five seconds? *What if*, he thinks, and keeps swimming until the terror of never breathing again is too much. A suppressed shriek, a wild need to be alive.

He kicks his way to the surface.

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He's waiting for Marlia's face to do its trick, work its magic, reawaken all his feeling for her—the faint scar outlining her upper lip and making it look like the top half of her mouth was superimposed on her face from elsewhere, like someone else's lip inset within the original, the result of a long ago surgery to repair her cleft pallet. The permanently misaligned scowl which isn't skepticism but isn't *not* skepticism and to which he was instantly drawn both for its fierceness and vulnerability, and because it made her so difficult to read. Because you had to look past it to the arc of her eyebrows and the shifts in texture and tension in the skin surrounding her eyes to understand her expression—to know if she was happy, amused, angry. The mouth gave away so little, directed and misdirected perception. When he first met her he'd been late to band practice and hadn't had any names for the students sitting in a half-circle in the band room awaiting the arrival of Ms. Barrett, the musical director. New at this school as a junior and only two years to make any kind of connection with people there, he hadn't been sure he wanted to join at all. But it was a way, as his mother always said, to be a part of things. To know what's what and find a place for himself. *Your illusions may well be elusive*, Marlia was in the midst of saying, *That is generally the nature of illusions after all, but the word you're looking for here is not illusive or*

*elusive, it's allusive. So far as I know, illusive or elusive in this context would just be a misuse and not what you're trying to say at all. Tricky thing, the English language.* This was his introduction to her, those words from her illusory mouth addressed to another kid seated beside her, another redhead (later he'd learn the context for her remarks had to do with a character sheet for a game they played together with a group of friends), nervously gulping and nodding his head, saying *Yup, yup, Marlia the genius*—the flute in her lap (later he'd learn about her determination to marry her breath with its sound despite all warnings to the contrary—all cautions from instructors and professionals and friends that her embouchure would never work right; that it would always just be a problem, a nuisance, limitation), fingers tapping on the keypads. He'd heard those words—taken in the scolding tone, the friendly not-friendly expressions shaping her eyes, and he'd been hooked. Mesmerized on the spot. How did you ever know how to read a girl like this?

He's waiting for some part of all of this to bring him back around. To remind him why they keep doing this; why he still feels so much for her and why they keep breaking up and getting back together, meeting in motel rooms halfway between their colleges every month or so for a night, or a day and a night, staring into each other's eyes—bringing it all back, making each other real again. Why they can't let go but can't fully commit, why he can't move his love off her. She's worn the ankle bracelet of tiny white clover-shaped flowers he bought her when he left, three years ago now, some of the petals missing enamelized paint and the links of the chain connecting them bent in places, the extra length of it looped under and around the clasp, and seeing it in the hollows around her ankle bones, the little triad of beauty marks above that and the spot above her knee where she stops shaving, he understands the effort she's expended this day on his behalf. It makes him even sadder. Sorrier. He can't bring the feeling back.

He crawls up to lie beside her on her side of the rock, her face upside down in his view with that stupid Cargill hat shading and framing it, the spray of freckles and the red-brown eyelashes that always seem to him so naked, the fine arcing eyebrows. He can't read any of it. It's like her face has turned into a shaky half-representation of itself. The sun is too brilliant behind her maybe...or is she in a similar state? Concealing something and unsure how to be herself anymore?

"I may have really fucked up," he says.

"You mean forgetting my chips? Again?" She tilts her head, not quite smiling.

"Oh fuck. I'm sorry. I'll..."

"Forget it. It's OK."

Out with it, he thinks. "No. What I did... I got that kid, Hank's girlfriend Paula, I got her high last night..."

"You're still smoking? I thought you quit..."

"I never said I quit! I said I *cut back*."

Through the silence that follows he's aware of the sound of her working her ring finger or pointer finger against her thumbnail—flick, flick, flick—a nervous, distracted (and distracting) habit and way of redirecting her thoughts (she's explained). "Anyway," she says. "So you're smoking. So what. But I thought you said she wasn't his girlfriend. That's a little sick, don't you think?"

"*Yeah*. Duh. The whole situation is extremely sick! I mean, those bars and the shitty music and dragging that kid to show after show. What the fuck, right? I don't know if she's his *girlfriend* girlfriend or what, or if he's just like keeping her around to be on a power trip or something. I really can't tell... He weighs like four hundred pounds! He'd kill her if they had

sex! And then she just dances all night, like every night all night with different guys, coming and going, and Hank's *fine* with it. Whatever. I don't pretend to understand. So yeah I got her high last night."

She nods. Cocks her head. "And that's a problem because of Hank? Or because you're realizing that you smoke way too much weed, or because you were being an evil corrupting influence...?"

"All the above. Guilty."

"So?"

He shrugs. Closes his eyes.

"Anyway, I thought you said you *cut back*."

The sun is still blinding, red, two suns behind his eyelids. "I did. I said that. And I have."

Marlia re-crosses her legs, making his head bump up and down. "She has a right to smoke though. If she wants. Right?"

"I'm not sure Hank would see it that way. I don't know. It just felt wrong."

"So did you fuck her?"

"Please." He keeps his eyes closed. "Not that I recall." Shakes his head. And then, because it is a shortcut past the weirdness of the truth—*no, but I made out with her and felt like a teenager again and I didn't hate it*—without being exactly an untruth: "Not even close." He closes a hand over the top of her foot.

So he's told her without telling her exactly. No, he hasn't told her anything. The shapes of his dreams behind his eyelids, his exhaustion, under the burning red suns is also the shape of her bare leg against his cheek. The smooth cool waxiness of skin. He presses his face there smelling her. Soap. Coconut. Sweat. Her fingers loop in his hair.

“Anyway, if he finds out, I’ll probably get fired. Big deal. I’m leaving in a couple weeks anyway, right?”

“Is he like the legal guardian?”

“No clue.”

“How old is she? Do you even know what the situation is there?”

Wish I knew, he thinks. The numbers for her possible age feel exhausting now—too exhausting to formulate or say aloud. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. *About the same age we were when we met; no, exactly the same age probably, which is why...* He counts up and back, the shape of each number gigantic in his mind and rotating three-dimensionally and also related to the shape of Marlia’s leg against his face. Is he high still or just exhausted? “I don’t know. I didn’t sleep at all last night,” he says, finally, blinking his eyes open and immediately closing them against the light. “Right? Let me just drift here a minute. I’m so damn tired.” The cold of the water feels as if it’s slipping away with his consciousness. Water everywhere drying on him, dissipating, tightening against his skin. “Just want to sleep.”

She traces with her fingers from his forehead to his scalp, gently tugging through his hair. “I have missed you, Martin Elliott,” she says. He’s not sure if he’s meant to hear this. If she thinks he’s already asleep. For a moment he very much likes the idea of overhearing her say things about him that he wasn’t intended to hear. *My dear Martin. My one and only. Vanity of vanities.*

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It was the summer he lived in his father’s empty apartment, took in his mail and answered occasional phone calls from sullen or pissed off ex-girlfriends, bill collection agencies and friends looking for long ago borrowed items—a practice guitar amp, Atari, banjo-uke, fishing



rod and tent—none of which (except for the banjo-uke which he later discovered at the back of his father’s closet under the tails of a seemingly never worn camel hair overcoat) were anywhere to be found in the apartment or his basement storage unit. All of those calls ended with some variation of upbeat apology and promises to get back. *Sorry, sorry, yeah, I checked there too. Definitely I’ll tell him you called. And what’s a good number to reach you?* Fed his cat and watered his collection of aloes, cactuses and one dusty overgrown spider plant in the front picture window. Every morning he fixed a pot of coffee in his father’s hissing Gevalia brew pot with its rime of gummy burnt coffee around the hotplate. He sighed and shook his head at the cigarette and spliff burns marking the counter where it sat amid stacks of old, unopened bills and where he’d witnessed his father’s wake-and-bake routine those few days earlier in the summer when he’d first arrived and his father had still been here, before he took off to play music on the Alaska ferries with his older brother Uncle Jimmy and their mutual best friend Marcos. Like old times, his father said. Like their own college days. *The tips, man! The chicks! Someday you’ll have to come with. You’ll see! Nothing like it!*

He had use of his father’s car too—the old Mazda with a busted hood latch and sticky accelerator. More than once he’d had to endure the glares and woeful looks of terrified motorists as he gunned past them in the Mazda and then immediately pulled to the shoulder ahead of them because the accelerator had once again stuck to the floor, the engine was revving like some kind of demon and there was nothing for it but to throw the car in neutral, fly into the breakdown lane in a cloud of gravel and dust, emergency lights flashing, undo the bit of wire hanger holding the hood down, and unjam the accelerator at its source. The first few times he was at least as terrified as the driver he was in the midst of passing, but nowhere near as scared as he was the first time the hood lost its clasp and blew open, suddenly obliterating his field of sight. Now dealing with

both of these things had become more or less second nature. They had become familiar in their way so that even when they happened simultaneously—racing engine, hood obscuring the windshield—he remained mostly calm and only a little pissed off. Threw the car out of gear, slammed on the brakes, navigated by mirrors into the breakdown lane, flashers on, and dealt with it. He even occasionally liked scaring passengers when it happened, by acting all cavalier and unconcerned. Like a ride-operator at an amusement park. *Oh that.* Acting, in other words, more and more like his father and feeling fairly certain that this was not a good thing.

It was also the summer of his grand ambitions to become a better musician. This was before the haze of cigarette smoke and late nights driving home, sitting up later and later after gigs seeking some way to erase or negate the twang and thump of country refrains looping in his brain—George Jones, Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Ray Price, all of it good but too infectious, too repetitive—sometimes stopping at the local lake just outside town to smoke a joint on one of the benches there and waiting for the sun to come up, and then sleeping well into the afternoon at which point the day was shot. No time for practicing. Barely time for a jog through downtown and around the park. But before all that, for a few days anyway, maybe even a week or two, he'd made some progress. He'd brewed pots of coffee and pored over the book of jazz changes and jazz theory loaned to him by an older student with the last name Christ, who most times seemed to Martin more savior-like than real, as savior-like as his name suggested anyway, with his mane of blond curls and vengeful, haughty blue eyes and promises of setting Martin up with cool gigs if he could just up his game a little. Learn to play through jazz charts. *You're the groove-meister. But you need to know a little more than one-five-one, man! Come on!* A few pages in Martin hit a wall. Flat keys with cryptic markings and numbers to indicate chord extensions, no note names, no open strings, nothing familiar by which to orient himself, only the

half-steps between dots on his bass neck, and then the maddening difficulty of getting through more than a line or two before having to start all over again, and with zero retention between attempts. If-then sequences he could decipher but not complete—*if an Eb major seven leads to a G minor six and you're already playing the leading tone from the preceding chord... C minor six, got it got it...and it's acting as a kind of suspension passing tone, then what two notes come next? Fuck.* Later, he told himself. Later. Switched off his practice amp with a resonant click, the image of him and Christ together rocking some college party with a few other jazz cats—dark glasses, slick hair, wingtips, flying through crazy changes—receding further and further until it seemed to him mainly like fantasy. Someone else's dream...a dream from another lifetime.

Waking on the rocks, for a moment he has no idea where he is or how he got here. None of the surroundings are familiar. The day has gone from unrelenting heat and sun to early fall, the sky a lowering mixture of gray and black clouds. Marlia is no longer beside him. What woke him is the sound of her piling their stuff into the canoe, one paddle and another going in with a clang. "You're up," she says. "Good." Hands on her hips. She still has on his dad's old hat but she's put on her Bowdoin sweatshirt, shorts and sandals. A rain drop slashes him across the belly. Another on the bare shoulder. Distantly, there's a rumble of thunder. What happened to their day? What happened to the whole summer?

"Fuck," he says, and when he looks back at her she's poised with one leg on the rock, the other in the canoe ready to push off.

"I know," she says. "I was totally out of it too. Drank a few too many of those Mooseheads! We'll be fine. But we do need to get out of here now. Like right now. Front! Go to the front. I'll steer."

He clambers in, arms out for balance, and drops into position as she taught him, in the bow. There's a slight wobble and catch as she pushes off and positions herself, and then the sound of water moving under them. "Go!" she says. "Take it away!"

"Do you ever think..." he asks, once they've glided out. He wants to say something about the inky placidity of the water and the thickness of its color; how weird it is that there's only the water's surface tension and the shell of their canoe sliding along it now—shifts in barometric pressure causing smells of sulfur and iodine to eddy unpredictably around them—nothing more than this tenuous membrane of reciprocating pressures to separate them from the 1920's logging village, the lost world of all ended summers down there at the bottom of the lake. The way the water reflects the sky it's almost like they're paddling into space. "Like do you ever think..." he begins again.

"Shut up and paddle," she says. "It would help if you could try to be more even with your strokes. Draw left! I'm having a hell of a time here. Left. LEFT! Jesus. Have you ever been in a canoe before?"

The only other times he's been in a canoe are with her. She knows this. Why ask?

The wind comes up from one side hard and then moves behind them, pushing him forward on his knees, so he feels momentarily optimistic, buoyed beyond reason but still panicked. Raindrops dimple the water's surface with this new direction in air pressure and wind ruffles it into miniature whitecaps as a swirl of warmer air touches him from behind. There's another rumble of thunder and the clouds to their north flicker on and off.

"What the fuck," he says. "We're like a fucking lightbulb filament. Right? May as well just flip a switch, light us up out here. Christ. Could we be any stupider?" And paddling again, "What did we leave for? Why didn't we just stay on that rock and wait it out..."

“Martin. This isn’t helping. You have no idea how long that would have been, and there isn’t much daylight. Keep going!”

He hauls on the paddle handle. Pulls and pulls. Forgets everything she told him about form and the different kinds of strokes, different ways of angling the paddle for various effects. The smell of rain descends heavily with a blast of cooler air and ozone and then it’s raining for real. Dumping. The skin on his bare arms is instantly goose-pimpled from the chill, and rain runs across his face and from behind his ears, into his eyes. When he turns to glance back at Marlia he’s not surprised that the Cargill hat is long gone. Blown off somewhere. She smiles gamely in a way he realizes might be somewhat insane. She’s enjoying this! The drama. “It’s not the worst I’ve ever encountered,” she yells. “It’s bad. But not the worst. Don’t worry. We’re close now.” Her hair is soaked and plastered to her head, no way of telling from it whether or not a lightning strike is imminent. Again and again the clouds to the north flicker with lightning.

“Close?” he yells back. The shoreline looks like an eternally receding black, watery jumble of rocks and soil and trees. Water inches up around his knees. “How much water can we take on anyway? Before we sink? We should go back. Do we have a way to bail this thing out? Jesus Christ. Should we stop and bail out?”

“Just paddle! I know what I’m doing. Take it away, take it away!”

And then, minutes later or maybe hours, like she’s worked some kind of magic trick, the inlet is in fact suddenly on their right, where it always is, the dark narrow opening of shallower water they launched from and a tailwind or current is pushing them sidelong into it. The wind eases as they angle closer to shore. Now he recognizes some of the shapes in the land—the little outcropping of rocks and beyond that the hummock of trees under which his dad’s shitty old car is parked.

“Keep going!” she says. “Don’t wimp out on me.”

They roll aground with a rattle of metal over gravel and sand, jump out and pull the canoe up behind them.

“See?” she says.

They flip the canoe and run for his dad’s car.

And as they sit out the storm, the light fading to a greenish and red tinged late twilight strobed with flashes of lightning, wicked peals of thunder closer and closer, and the rain still driving down, bringing twigs and small branches with it, rattling the loose metal of the hood, he feels more thankful than he has words to express for the worn out, comforting interior of that car. He looks at her and finally here’s all his feeling for her again. “Listen, listen,” she says, pushing back slightly as he leans closer. Their eyes lock together. Left eye to right eye, right eye to left eye. That smile, the mouth inside the outline of her mouth opening for him, drawing him into an unfettered intimacy he knows, even as he’s experiencing it, he’ll probably spend the rest of his life trying to recapture. “I wanted to tell you,” she says, she pauses, rolls her eyes, “but I wanted to wait until later. I’m actually...I’m kind of excited about it, but I took that offer for next year. You know. Scotland? I was on the fence all summer. Like you know, so but they called again a few weeks ago with another offer and I like...it’s just so good! And I knew. I *have* to go. Like really have to. So, but the thing is...the thing is I don’t want to keep you hanging on.”

He’s already shaking his head like this isn’t a problem. “No, no,” he says. “I’ll...”

“Let me put that differently. *I* don’t want to hang on while I’m gone. I’ve kind of...I’ve been over and over it and I’ve decided finally it’s just high time we let things go their natural course. Quit trying to be...” She touches his nose. “You know? Maybe in another ten years or whatever. Who can say.”

From the corner of his eye he sees that the sun is returning from behind the clouds and there's still afternoon daylight remaining. A few hours even. If they wait a bit they could maybe paddle out. Skinny-dip! Re-romance the day! Except that it's also a good deal chillier and somehow feels like fall. He sees one of Paula's giraffe-sized fake eyelashes stuck in the fabric of Marlia's headrest, caught and hanging there beside her like a dead bug or spider remnant. Until the light hit it just so, he'd assumed that's what it was—a moth or piece of a caterpillar. So it's a double, triple shift identifying it, bringing back the previous night and knowing more than just this unending half-in/half-out childhood relationship with Marlia and more than the whole stupid useless summer of being stalled out in every direction, engine racing and cutting out, and then suddenly just *over*, his youth is finished. Done, kaput. It isn't, of course! Such melodrama! But for the moment, hearing Marlia's words and seeing that fake eyelash stuck in the seat fabric, knowing he can't say anything to her about it without laughing or giving himself away, can't do anything to help Paula either, it sure feels like everything's over. "OK," he says. "I get it." He reaches around her for the catch to lower her seat and then lowers his beside her and draws her to his chest. There's the heat of her breath against his skin. The sound of her moving, shifting in the seat to be closer. The smell of her surrounding him. "So, but for now, let's just say there is no future. Let's just stay like this till we can't anymore."