

WOMAN BY THE LAKE

by Jeff Ingber

My paddle slices through the silver-blue water, creating ripples that the morning sunrays dance on. The monastery quiet is disturbed only by a squadron of buzzing flies and the splash of rainbow trout lunging at them. The canoe rocks melodically. The voice within me is calm.

As I pass the lush, abandoned island in the lake's center, a heavy wind announces itself. At first, it pushes steadily at my back, easing the work. Gradually, it shifts direction and strengthens, flapping the air like the wings of a trapped bird. White-capped waves roll underneath and shove the bow high enough to let water slosh in. I swing the canoe to ride at an angle, but the lake's heaving turns it into a bobbing cork. With fists of storm clouds racing overhead looking ready to burst, the only safe choice is to run with the waves and head for the nearest land.

I spot a pier with an oversized dock and then, amid the swaying branches of pines, a white gazebo with bright turquoise Adirondack chairs. Behind it is a two-story brick and stone house. As the wind pushes me closer, I'm able to make out a second-floor deck facing the water. Perched there on a lounge chair in front of bay windows is a woman.

The lake hauls the canoe hard against the shore. I hop into shallow water and pull the canoe onto a grassy bank specked gold by dandelions. The woman now is standing by the deck's front rail, peering down. What must she think of my uninvited arrival? I wave to her and then throw my arms in the air in my best imitation of a helpless buffoon. Reaching down, I grab a plastic bag that contains my cell phone and cash from a waterproof compartment. When I straighten up, the woman is gone from sight.

Has she run to warn her husband of my trespassing? Will he be irate? I can hustle to a main road and call for a cab, but I don't want to abandon the canoe.

A glass door slides open and the woman steps out. Petite and with wavy chestnut hair that's been brushed to a shine, she wears foam flip flops, denim shorts, and a light-pink cashmere sweater. She considers me as if I were a stray cat looking for milk.

"You could have called first."

"I'm really sorry about this. Never happened to me before. Once the wind dies down, I'll be off."

She places her tanned arms akimbo. “Don’t feel too bad. Last season, there were four boats blown ashore here. Has something to do with the way the winds gust in this area and that this property juts out. You live around here?”

“Kipling Lane. Other side of the lake.” I turn and point to a distant piece of land framed by low mountains, then realize how stupid a gesture that is.

Awkward silence follows. Finally, “Come on inside. I’ll put up some coffee.”

“I don’t want to bother you. I can wait here.”

“Nonsense. It’s going to pour in a minute.”

She flexes the muscles in her cheeks, and I sense a motive a touch more complex than mere cordiality. “Thanks.”

She extends her hand. “Karen.” I notice on her other hand an ornate gold-and-diamond wedding ring.

“Kyle.”

She leads me onto a brick deck and past a built-in fire pit framed by a pair of chubby rhododendron bushes. Slipping through the sliding doors, we enter a living room

with high ceilings and cathedral windows that top a stone fireplace. She offers me coffee in a “Go Jump In The Lake” mug, then kicks off her flip flops and plops onto one end of a couch. I take the other end.

I only want to gaze at her, but small talk is obligatory. “What a beautiful place. You live here year-round?”

“No, we have an apartment in the city. I stay here during the summer. My husband comes up on weekends. You?”

My fingers remain sweaty, despite the air conditioning, and I grip my mug tightly. “The city also. I take off work every other summer Friday to have a long weekend here. I share the lake house, and custody of my daughter, with my ex.”

I hear a rumble of thunder. The heavens, no longer separated from the earth, hurl staccato lightning bolts. Sheets of rain strike the glass doors like a cold knife. I grimace momentarily, realizing that I forgot to turn the canoe upside down. “What is it you do for a living?” she asks.

“I’m an insurance investigator. I mostly review case files for evidence of fraud.”

“What’s an example?”

How can I make this interesting to her, when it's not to me? "Making a claim for more than your damages. Fudging the details about how an accident happened."

A smile flickers from the corners of her mouth. "So, you must be good at detecting lies."

She thinks I'm Sam Spade-like. I loosen the grip on the coffee mug. "I like to think so. Sometimes I conduct surveillance. Just last month, during hunting season, I videotaped a guy who'd made a workers' comp claim haul a two-hundred-pound deer carcass out of the woods."

Karen uncrosses her legs and points her knees at me. "Sounds like it could be dangerous."

I lean forward. "What do you do, Karen?"

She considers her response. "I used to teach, but gave that up years ago. My husband's an attorney. Actually, the managing partner of a large law firm."

I let curiosity overcome etiquette. "Children?"

"No" Karen answers wistfully. "But I've got nieces and nephews I'm very close with. Two are coming here tomorrow."

“Must get lonely during the week.”

She bows her head slightly, and stills it. “I like being by myself here. It’s a beautiful cocoon. I take walks. Read. Bike ride. And rescue wayward sailors.”

My solitude lies in the shadow of the lightness of hers. “Lucky for me,” I respond, before nodding toward a grand piano that sits in a corner by a fireplace, gleaming like a polished coffin. “Do you play?”

She glances at the piano, appearing almost embarrassed. “Jerry’s the pianist.”

I survey the room and the view. “Seems like you have a wonderful life.”

Her response is muffled by a bassoon-like clap of thunder. Another coffee and an ample slice of peach pie later, the lake has finally tired of its rough play. The wind lightens and a rejuvenated sun reappears. “I guess I should be heading back,” I say. The words eke out of me with little gusto. I stand and reach for my mug and plate, but she waves me away. “I’ll take care of that later.”

Karen walks me to the canoe with a stately gait. Random drops fall on us from the elongated leaves of a willow tree that stands guard at the foot of the lawn. The rain-

scented air rings with the fluty calls of wood thrushes singing from their nests. We shake hands again. Her grip is soft, but lingering. "Karen, you saved me."

"I'm glad the lake brought you here."

I struggle to respond wittily, and lose the moment. I tip the canoe over, causing a gush of water, before settling in. "Can I ask you something?" I blurt out. "Weren't you concerned that I could be someone dangerous?"

"I trust my instincts," she replies firmly.

Her words travel with me as I paddle. Just yards from the shore, I turn to catch a glimpse of her. She spots me, and raises a hand in an affable gesture that holds the promise I have entered a new world.

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After dragging the canoe into the garage, I check my phone and find a text from Stacey.

"Daddy, I made a new friend in camp. Her name is Isabel. She's sleeping over tonite. Did u go canoeing? Luv u!"

I text back. *“Yes, I went on the lake. Had an interesting experience. Have fun with Isabel! Luv you lots!”*

I’m about to put the phone aside when three flashing dots appear. *“What happened?”* my daughter is asking.

“It got stormy and I had to go ashore onto someone’s property”

“That’s so funny! Was anyone there?”

“Yes, a woman”

“Was she nice?”

“Very”

“Was she pretty?”

“Not as pretty as u!”

Then, as if someone else were writing the words, *“Or Mommy.”*

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Two Fridays later, I awaken to a gray-white ribbon of dawn. Although I barely know Karen, I have found myself thinking repeatedly of our fleeting time together, as if she were God's only manna for my hunger.

I wait several hours before entering the serene waters outside my dock. After swinging around the oval-shaped island, I straddle the shoreline near where I remember Karen's house to be. I'm rewarded with the distant sight of those turquoise chairs, contrasting starkly with the shower of forest-green pine needles bracketing them. Paddling with purpose, I see her lawn slip into view.

Karen reclines in the gazebo, reading on a Kindle and sipping from a mug. Once I'm within shouting distance, she calls out, "You take it black, right?" She disappears while I clamber onto an area near where box turtles and garter snakes -- some of the abundant life that the merciless winter cannot erase -- laze languidly on rocks. Soon, we are ensconced on cushioned wicker chairs. I notice her pedicured toenails are bright pink, offsetting banana-tanned skin.

"Glad you came back," she says cheerfully, acknowledging the bond the lake provides us.

"I can't blame the winds this time." I hold up my mug. "Meant to tell you the last time. Great coffee."

“It’s Indonesian. Called Kopi Luwak. Made from part-digested coffee cherries eaten and then defecated by the Asian palm civet cat. It’s the most expensive coffee in the world.”

I scrutinize her poker face daring me to take another sip. I set down my mug, failing the test of manhood.

“Really?”

Her low laugh is rich with sensuality. “It’s Dunkin’ Donuts.”

I take an exaggerated gulp before pointing to her Kindle. “What are you reading?”

“A trashy romance novel. It’s summer, after all.”

“Let me guess,” I say playfully. “It’s a modern-day version of *Pride and Prejudice*. The female protagonist, who walks around carrying a small white poodle, rejects a man she sees as cold and aloof, only to realize that he’s tender and passionate in his quiet way. And the love they feel for each other is the sort that comes along only once in a lifetime.”

Her grin is warmer than most people’s smiles. “Something like that.”

“What part are you up to? The dark moment, when private motivations are revealed and the relationship seems lost forever? The satisfying but ultimately sad resolution?”

She shakes her head with vigor, and winks. “The opening, when the man crashes his canoe onto the woman’s lawn.”

I focus on not babbling. “What will be their conflict? The hero and heroine come from opposing backgrounds? He wants kids and she’s sterile?”

Her eyes turn downcast, sheltering delicate tears. “I’m sorry,” I rush to add. “That was so stupid.”

She blinks, offering a gracious smile that displays teeth imperfect enough to be charming. “It could also be that he’s single but she’s happily married.”

“Touché.”

A slight breeze plays with her long bangs, uncovering part of her forehead. A ponytail exposes long-lobed ears adorned with diamond studs. “Kyle,” she says, suddenly standing, “would you like a tour?”

We journey through a three-thousand-square-foot house with a spa-worthy master bath, gourmet kitchen, yoga room, and wine cellar. Against one wall of the rustic-style living room are red oak shelves filled with poetry books and the classics. Every area is organized and immaculate, even the garage, where a high-end mountain bike hangs upside down. Underneath it is a golf cart ornamented with a bag of Callaway clubs, parked next to a shiny black BMW. The lounge chairs on her deck are our final destination.

“It’s all so perfect,” I exclaim as I settle on a chair. “Matched by the most gorgeous view.”

“Thanks. I love how the scene varies every day,” Karen observes. “The color of the water, how fast it’s moving, changes in the sun, clouds, wind, seasons. The combination is never quite the same. It’s like the lake always wears a different disguise.”

“The lake is like us,” I reply. “Calm and clear one moment, stormy and obscure the next.”

She locks her eyes onto mine. “Is that how you see people?”

In the face of her seriousness, I laugh. “That’s why I like that my house doesn’t have close neighbors.”

Karen peers into me. "You're such a hermit, yet you're here."

She is not classically beautiful, but her eyes are almond shaped, her nose is dainty, and her sweeping eyelashes velvety. I fight a compulsion to trace my fingers along her pouty lips before kissing them tenderly. She leans back, as if reading my mind and continues. "I suppose I'm the same. It's why I like books so much."

"My ex is a big reader," I reply. "She likes poetry, like you do."

"You noticed?" she says flatteringly. "But, of course. You're an investigator."

"I'm a poetry fan myself. In fact, I wrote one just the other day. Haiku."

Karen provides the correct response, as if I had begun a knock-knock joke. "I'd love to hear it."

I assume a Shakespearian pose and tone. "I love my lake house. Canoeing and lots of beer. But taxes are too high."

As she guffaws, a gray squirrel scoots noisily across the grass and up a tree. Perhaps in chase of a female. I once was told that the male squirrel, when not breeding, is solitary. "What happened between you and your wife?" Karen says cautiously. "If I may ask?"

The pain of divorce still runs through me like a thread of barbed wire. The events leading up to it play out continuously in my mind. “We were young and rushed into it. Didn’t realize how incompatible we were. After Stacey was born, Beth turned inward. Shut me out. Although I guess she would say the same about me.”

“Marriage is hard. Incompatibility is inevitable.”

“Our differences were serious.” I try to mimic her mischievous smile. “For example, what if I were your husband and I didn’t like romance novels?”

“I’ll refill your mug if you speak honestly.”

“I like cigars and the occasional joint. She likes chamomile tea and massages. I like ESPN. She likes the History Channel.” Her nonjudgmental expression gives me the courage to continue. “We couldn’t hear each other’s dreams. And, like you, I like to be alone...”

Karen looks sideways, lost in a thought that appears as a blade cutting through flesh. “Alone can be good only sometimes.”

“Being alone is best here. The beauty fills the solitude.”

“Ever feel a desire to share that beauty?”

“Only with my daughter. Stacey’s the one person I enjoy being in the canoe with.”

“Sometimes I worry that isolation can be dangerous.”

“How so?”

“We can fill the void with irrational thoughts and fears. I think that it’s only when we’re with others that we’re fully human.”

My heart is unbolted from its station. But there is a sacred line here, one that passion cannot cross. “I had an irrational thought this morning when I took off in the canoe.”

“That you would tip over?” A laugh spills out of her that ends with the cutest snort.

“That we would be sitting here talking.”

“Might you have that same irrational thought two weeks from now?”

Through the years, I have returned frequently to the lake in search of paradise. Now I have a growing notion that I might find something even better. "I believe so," I say gently.

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There are times when it all fits together – the pitching, the hitting, the defense – and the puzzle completes itself. Not tonight. The Mets are getting shellacked. My mutter of "Why can't you fucking learn how to bunt?" is drowned out by a police car's shrill alarm undulating four floors below. Then the phone rings.

"Hope I'm not calling too late," says Beth.

"Your timing is perfect. I was about to throw my beer bottle at the TV."

"Stacey's birthday is the day after Labor Day. You think it's okay to make her party on the holiday itself? Or will too many people be away then?"

"Nah, it's right before school starts. Parents will be home getting everything ready."

"But if it's really hot, they might want to catch a last day at the beach."

“Beth, please ...”

“Okay, but I want to do something a little more special this year. Maybe take her and a bunch of friends to an adventure park, and then have a sleepover.”

Tap a finger and the years have flown by. My baby is ten. “Beth, whatever you want to do I’m fine with.”

“Can you help chaperone? And...”

“Yes, I’ll chip in.”

Beth is practiced at hitting the pause button. With her, I’m normally partial to fast-forward, but I wait patiently.

“Stacey showed me her texts with you. Glad to see you’re making friends at the lake.”

“I’m a sociable guy.”

“Are you dating?”

“Nope. Why do you ask?”

“If you are, we should talk about how to explain it to Stacey.”

“How did you explain Jake to her?” For over a year, Beth has been seeing some bull-necked lug with a pretentious ponytail and a boxer’s face. No questions have been allowed from me.

“I’ve made clear to her that he’s not a replacement for you. That you will always be her only dad.”

Her words choke me up. I pretend to cough. “I appreciate that.”

“Kyle, can I ask you something?”

I sigh. “No,” I explain. “I don’t think the Mets can come back from a nine-run deficit.”

“Why did you tell Stacey that I’m prettier than the woman you met?”

Her unexpected jab catches me flush in the jaw. I hear a sound on the other end of the line that sounds like a snuffle.

“Once I got pregnant with Stacey, you stopped telling me that I was pretty,” she utters.

Liquid sadness pours deep into my heart. Or maybe it’s guilt. “I did a lot of stupid things while we were together,” I finally say. “And I didn’t do a lot of things I should have. I should have kept telling you how beautiful you are. I should have told you that every day we were together.”

We are the architects of our own misery. I hear sobbing, and then the line goes dead.

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I arrive at our next rendezvous to find Karen lazing on a blanket on the lawn. She wears a summer dress with a floral pattern, short enough to reveal the delicate skin of her thighs. Although it’s early, the sky is on fire, its gilded light turning us into silhouettes. Next to a shopping bag is an insulated picnic basket that offers a palette of summer colors. “Thanks,” I say. “But I’ve already had my morning muffin. Just looking forward to the poop coffee.”

“Nonsense,” she replies. “You should have a healthy breakfast.” She opens the basket and removes deviled eggs and a container of vanilla yogurt topped with berries, bananas, and raisins, and drizzled with honey. Plus, forks, napkins, and a thermos.

I point to her mug, decorated with red roses, which announces that she is the world's best aunt. "Is that true?"

"Last Sunday, I took two-year-old Maddie for a walk. She waddled up to every garage door. When she turned around, I would put my arms out and then she would too, and we would both start running to each other. She had the biggest smile on her face. When I reached her, I threw her up in the air and she screeched. We played that game until my back gave out."

Had I ever done that with Stacey? When she was that age, she loved throwing rocks into the water and then searching for them. A green-headed mallard drake circles and calls in a raspy, strangled voice. From behind the island, boaters emerge. One, in full fishing gear, soon drifts by, offering us only a nod, perhaps reluctant to cause any sound that would violate the holy spirit pervading this water amphitheater. A female swan, all white with a dab of black at the base of her orange bill, follows him and poses for us, displaying a thin, elliptically curved neck.

"Beautiful creatures," I observe, as the swan glides past us. "But they've got a nasty temperament."

Her wit is permanently on patrol. "Perhaps like some women you know?"

Since the divorce, casual hook-ups have been my norm. The last one had ended with a generic woman's terribly dark expression along with a stream of curses. "I guess I would put Beth in that category." I quickly add, "But only at the end of our marriage. Part of the reason I was drawn to Beth initially was her intensity. She had a natural energy. A positive one. I was never bored with her."

"After many years, it's hard not to get a little bored with a spouse, isn't it?"

"No, it was more than that. Somewhere along the line, she changed. All I saw was her lack of self-confidence. She was always worried about something. Never able to fully enjoy the present."

"I get stuck in the past myself," Karen whispers, before abruptly changing the subject. "You realize, Kyle from Kipling Lane, that if we sold kangaroos, we could be in a children's jump-rope rhyme."

"Although my last name is Dumark," I reply. "Mix of German and Irish."

"I'm a mongrel myself. Including some Native American blood. Which helped me get into Cornell. My married name is DiCicco."

A balloon floats overhead, with colors that make it seem like a flying beach ball, followed by a child's voice yelling at it from the house next door. "Tell me about your

husband,” I ask. “I’m guessing he’s quite a special guy.” I speak these words hoping she contradicts me.

Karen replies in a tone that makes it clear I have pulled on the fabric of her life. She chooses her words carefully, and enunciates them slowly. “Soon after I met Jerry, I told my mom I felt that God had led him to me. Among all the billions on this earth.”

The floodtide of this revelation engulfs me with regret for her happiness, but I don a brave mask. I’m determined to keep this door open, whatever it does or doesn’t let in. The billowing clouds part, and a haze, both physical and emotional, hangs on us like a shawl. Ordinarily, this would shut me down, but now I find it comforting.

Karen seems to be hearing the same inner voice as mine. Almost imperceptibly, she sways her upper body toward me. To press her trembling mouth and quenchless, nubile body against me. To dive into my need. But no, it’s only to brush off a wasp on my shoulder. Our faces are inches apart, close enough for me to smell her sunscreen. And then, she gestures toward the water.

“Up for a swim?”

The implications of her question have me tongue-tied. “I’ve... got no bathing suit.”

“Not to worry.” She pulls from the bag a pair of blue trunks and water shoes.
“You’re not that far from my husband’s size and build, so hopefully these will fit.”

Karen removes her tank top and shorts to unveil a one-piece bathing suit that adheres to her slim, firm body like it’s been Velcroed on. She rises gracefully, like a budding flower, and saunters down the sloping path to the water, yelling back at me, “I promise not to turn around.” I witness her fleeting figure while pulling on the trunks, which are a touch big. Running toward the lake, I’m intoxicated by the view of Karen gliding through the water’s skin, letting it blanket her.

Arms wind-milling, I close the distance to her. The warmth of the water is comforting. When I’m a few yards away, I stand, feeling the clammy mud squish my feet. Then I dive underwater, in search of her feet. I surface beside Karen. She roguishly pushes me away and then floats on her back, eyes closed softly as if nothing in this immense, sharply edged world could ever harm her.

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That night I have a dream in which I’m at first strolling through a flower garden, then come upon rows of dark trees with broad, opaque canopies. Suddenly, from behind one of them, a young female voice calls my name. The tone is anguished, and I race toward it yelling, “Stacey, I’m coming.” But when I reach the tree, there is only blood. Then I hear Beth’s voice in the distance, sounding as if it’s coming from the

bottom of the lake, screaming, "Find her! Save my baby!" I wake up breathless, as if a bag had been placed over my head.

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I bring my favorite gal along on my next visit. As my daughter clammers out of the canoe in purple rubber sandals, with gold curls fluttering around her eyes, delightful approval spreads across Karen's face.

"You must be Stacey. You're such a pretty young lady."

Stacey nervously tucks a wisp of hair behind her ear, displaying a recent piercing. Her delicate face beams, showing barracuda teeth that soon will be fitted with braces. "You're pretty too," she declares, "like my daddy said you were."

"Oh, did he?" Karen ducks her head and peeks inside her picnic basket. "I think I've got plenty for three."

"My turn to provide food," I insist. I lift out of the canoe a picnic basket filled with breakfast wraps, coffee, and treats from Dunkin' Donuts, hoping they will pass muster with my health-conscious friend.

We are shaded by tree branches bowed humbly toward the earth. From the thickest one, an ornate white bird house in the shape of a chalet dangles.

After brushing a small fleet of garden ants from our basket, Stacey begins her meal with the snack, a cranberry muffin, wolfing it down as if she hadn't eaten in days. Karen nibbles on a slice of dark rye bread barely coated with fruit jam, no doubt of the sugarless kind. A dab of jam loiters on her finger.

Once she's finished eating, Stacey picks a stray dandelion and twirls it in her freckled fingers. I find it reassuring that Karen, despite her obvious wealth, feels no need to maintain a manicured lawn. Stacey points the sagging weed toward Karen's Kindle. "My mom has that too. She's going to buy me one for my birthday next month."

"That's wonderful," replies Karen. "And I believe you'll be turning ten. Such a nice age. What do you like to read?"

"I'm reading *Just Call Me Kate*. It's about a sixth-grade girl who is boy crazy. She really likes her brother's best friend."

"Do you like boys?" Karen asks, a question that ordinarily would cause me dismay.

"No," reveals Stacey in a stern tone. "I'm too young to have a boyfriend."

“I didn’t have a boyfriend until I was fourteen,” replies Karen.

“Did you kiss?” asks Stacey in an urgent tone.

“Yes,” Karen answers. “And you know what? He had bad breath!” Stacey’s laugh is contagious and I follow suit. “So, it was a long time before I kissed another boy.”

Karen leans forward toward Stacey, exposing more of the soft down of her neck. I feel girl crazy. “Stacey,” says Karen, “I heard that you went to camp this summer and made a new friend.”

“Yes. Her name is Isabel. We made a video together and put it on YouTube.”

“Did you? I’ll have to watch it later. What did you do in the video?”

“We played a Mozart sonata for piano and violin. She was the violinist.”

“Wow! Would you be willing to play something on the piano for me? I would so love to hear that.”

Stacey’s cheeks flush and her self-possessed air fades, as she wearily agrees. Once the meal is finished, we follow Karen into her living room. Seated on top of the

piano are several pictures. One is of young, blissful Karen in a flowing wedding dress, embracing a groom with deep-set eyes, white teeth, and a square jaw who appears enraptured with her.

“I’m afraid the piano may be out of tune,” Karen warns. “It’s been so humid lately.”

“That’s okay,” says Stacey. “I’m not very good anyway.”

“Nonsense,” responds Karen. “I’m sure you’re wonderful.” I picture Karen as Stacey’s second mom. Talking endlessly with her about the latest movies and Lifetime TV shows. Gossiping. Cooking together. Sharing those mysterious feminine secrets.

Stacey chooses the first movement of Mozart’s “A Little Night Music,” her favorite piece. With her right hand, she plays the ascending notes tentatively, her fingers curled delicately like the tendrils of a climbing plant. Karen listens intensely. The windows are open, and I imagine the sounds of the serenade carrying enchantingly over the lake, leading its inhabitants to stop what they’re doing. When Stacey finishes, Karen and I applaud violently. Stacey rises and takes a professional bow.

“I loved it,” proclaims Karen. “Now we need to celebrate.”

“Let’s sacrifice a sheep!” I proclaim, eliciting mock horror from the two females.

“No, with ice cream!” Karen retorts.

We sit at the kitchen table with cups of our chosen flavors, along with a pitcher of peach-flavored iced tea. Pinned magnetically to the refrigerator next to us is a stick-figure drawing of a woman holding a child’s hand, both standing next to a robin’s-egg-blue lake. Stacey’s ice cream scoop combination is strawberry and chocolate, which she swirls together and eats with gusto, prompting Karen to observe, mostly to herself, “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.” Stacey takes the statement as a compliment. After her final gulp, Stacey says to Karen, “You’re nice. Would you like to be my Facebook friend?”

Ah, social media. Where we do everything possible to show only the good parts of our lives. I am on Facebook, but only because of Stacey.

“Of course. I’d love that,” she replies.

Stacey touches my arm. “Can Karen come to my birthday party?”

“Sweetie,” I interject, “Karen spends her weekends here with her husband.”

Karen’s eyes moisten. She glances at me with a questioning look. Surprised, I swiftly nod my permission, giddy at the thought of Karen’s attendance. “Thank you so

much for inviting me,” she says, through lips that quiver faintly. “I’m sure it will be wonderful, and I would love to come. But first you need to ask your Mom if that’s okay.”

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Sunday night, there’s a text from Beth.

“I understand that Stacey invited your friend to her birthday party. U think that’s a good idea?”

I resist the urge to ask if she has similar concerns about Jake being there. *“She’s already met her, so y not?”*

“I suppose u r right. I guess it’s me who’s the problem”

“You’re a good mom, Beth. You’re right to worry about who Stacey meets”

“Thx”

“Gotta go”

“One quick thing. Found a box with some old baseball tickets and cards. U want it?”

“Yeah. Can u give it to Stacey to give to me?”

“Stacey has a sleepover at Isabel’s Wednesday night. Would u like to grab a drink and I’ll give it to u then?”

A month ago, I would have cherished this opportunity. But now...

“Sounds good. Two drinks even better”

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Beth and I sit at a dimly lit bar, noshing on finger food while reminding ourselves of how wonderful a child we’ve produced. I am finishing my third Corona before she’s sipped her second pinot grigio. Beth is such an alcohol lightweight that her eyelids already are droopy.

“There are things I should have told you,” she divulges, biting her lips and studying me with eyes that appear older than the rest of her. Her expression is familiar, and I brace myself. “What?”

“I should have told you what a great dad you are.”

Do we ever finish the task of completing ourselves? Our relationships? Her compliment is both gratifying and concerning. "What's going on here, Beth?"

"Nothing. I'm praising you."

Behind her words are dozens more unsaid. I feel an urge to speak some of them. "It's as if you want us to get back together again."

She was never comfortable with my directness. Yet another sign of our incompatibility.

"No, it's not that." Beth rubs the front of her neck as if feeling for loose skin. "I still love you, Kyle. But that wouldn't be enough to keep us together. We'd fuck it up again. It's..." As she takes a long swallow, I battle with whether to tell her that I still love her. But that I want a love that doesn't wound. Or at least I want to pretend such a thing exists. "It's that I can't stand the idea that you're with someone." she says. "And I shouldn't feel that way."

"Jeez, I'm not with someone. She's made it quite clear that she's happily married."

"You're so naïve. Why do you like this woman so much?"

Her female antenna is too good. This conversation is quicksand. "She gets me."

"How do you know?"

"She listens. She's comfortable with anything I say. And, she laughs at my jokes. Genuinely. You always forced it."

Beth touches my forearm suggestively. "You never thought I was fun enough, did you?"

My silence provides the answer. She finishes her glass and motions for another, whose content no doubt will race through her body like electricity. Beth's hand now is on my leg. "Is she better in bed than I was?"

"I wouldn't know. Is Jake?"

Her fingers traipse down to my inner thigh, hoping our boozy setting will wash away any sins. "Come back with me tonight."

"Why?"

"Just one last time. Make love to me and then tell me a joke. I promise to laugh."

And she did. Although we both cried afterward, mourning all that we had lost.

*

We sit on Karen's dock. I have become addicted to her coffee. No, I'm addicted to her.

I point to a hawk hovering above the island in search of prey, its wings appearing to brush the sky. "That a Cooper's hawk."

"You know your birds," she says admiringly.

The hawk glides away into a speck. I'm sensible enough now to refuse to build a relationship on lies, even trivial ones. I shake my head. "I just watched a video on birds of the Poconos. Found out that the male Cooper's hawk is much smaller than the female, which puts it in danger of being killed by her. So, before he approaches a female to mate, he has to first listen for a reassuring call from her."

Karen's chuckle begins with her eyes. I can tell her mind is working furiously to create the perfect witty response. But instead, she turns to gaze absentmindedly at the lake. Finally, she says, "We built the house five years ago. Ever since then, there's one thing I've been longing to do."

“Tune the piano?”

She’s wearing a tank top and cargo shorts that reveal her lithe fitness. “Someone told me a story once,” she says lightheartedly. “About how FBI recruits used to be trained. They’re in a classroom listening to a lecture when, suddenly, a man with weird hair who’s wearing all sorts of crazy clothes, bursts into the room, lingers for a few seconds, and then runs out. The lecturer then asks his students to write down everything they remember about the man. The best agents will be able to write down dozens of things.”

I’d make a lousy FBI agent, being more of a ruminator than an astute observer.
“And your point?”

“You’re an investigator. So you should be able to figure out what I want to do. I’ll even give you three guesses.”

“Thanks, genie. And if I can’t?”

She giggles. “You must leave and never come back.”

I mull over past conversations, trying to remember everything Karen has told me she likes to do. And what she’s done lately. When I recall her story about a walk with a niece, the answer hits me.

“You want to walk around the lake. There’s no direct path, but I know how to do it.”

A walk presents a multitude of possibilities. She might stumble, and I would be there to catch her. Our hands or bodies might brush together. Our solitude within nature might lead her to become overwhelmed by passion.

But she shakes her head. “No, I’ve done that with Jerry many times.”

I really hate Jerry. And I can’t squander more guesses. “Can I have a clue?”

“Think about the tour of the house you took.”

What is she getting at? The beauty of the house? Its contents? Its karma? I replay the tour in my head as best I can. And then my phone vibrates and a text comes in from Stacey along with a picture of her in a new pair of shoes. “*I’m wearing them to camp today, Daddy!*”

As I text out “*That’s wonderful Sweetie!*” the reminder of Stacey’s visit here provides the answer. “You want to learn to play the piano,” I blurt out. “Stacey’s playing made you realize that.”

Karen nods her head. “Good guess. A very good one. But wrong. I have zero musical ability. I’d get frustrated quickly.”

I muster a serious expression. “I refuse to guess again, because I can’t risk being wrong.”

“You’re sweet. But as Jerry taught me years ago, no risk, no reward.”

Jerry’s scent, always present, now overpowers. I shift to contemplating what she means by “reward.”

“I’ll give you one more clue. Think about what’s in the house, and what isn’t.”

Her last three words are worrisome. How can I know what isn’t in the house? I perform a mental inventory. It’s taking a long time. Finally, she takes pity on me. “Focus on the garage.”

I remember the black Beemer, and the golf cart with the bag of clubs that appeared brand-new. Can it be a round of golf that she’s yearning for? Not likely, from what I sense of her. The garage was immaculate. A few power tools hung up neatly. Shovels and a snow-blower against one wall. There’s plenty of space for more items, should she choose to clutter it up. But what? I think about my garage, which you need a map to find your way through. And then the epiphany arrives.

“There’s no water-craft in your garage, even though you live on the lake. No rowboat, sunfish, canoe, or kayak. And your dock is fenced in on three sides, so you don’t own a large boat.”

Karen smiles appreciatively. “You are a good investigator.” She points wistfully to the island. “I’ve always wanted to explore it.”

I offer her a rueful grin. The rules of the owner’s association are strict in this regard. “We’re not allowed on it.”

She wags a finger inches from my face, tracing the path of an upside-down pendulum. “No risk, no reward.”

When we reach the canoe, Karen climbs in first, taking the front seat without asking, as if this were a routine between us. She and I are separated by a cooler of beer. For a landlubber, she paddles well, controlling the rhythm with only the occasional glimpse backward. This is a contrast from my rides with Beth, which tended to devolve into wobbly, scattershot journeys given her absentmindedness. I match Karen’s strokes while gazing reverentially at her figure. The lake lightly rises and falls around us.

The island, fringed by waves lapping against toppling shrubs, quickly approaches. I steer us around a bend, to a place that looks easiest to land. We run

ashore next to a prominent “No Trespassing” sign and pull the canoe inland until it’s out of sight of any passing security boat. She points to the cooler and then holds up four fingers.

Coronas in hand, we wade inland, on a narrow path that leads us through rioting vegetation, bushes filled with inedible purple berries, and tangled, thorny thickets that tear at our bodies. The lemon sunlight is diluted and the air is thick, like it’s been squeezed from a tube. A medley of butterflies meander slowly among pale-yellow wildflowers as if winding their way through giant buttonholes. As the island allows us into its bosom, we momentarily lose our way, and I am drunk with the notion that I will be here with her forever. Then the foliage disappears, rolling back like a green stocking to reveal a clearing that appears to have been used for camping in years past. Karen plops down and contemplates a Corona bottle.

“Shit, it’s not a twist-off.”

“Of course not,” I respond. “I only buy premium beer.” Before Karen can become annoyed at my snarky comment, I remove a bottle opener from my back pocket and toss it to her. She enthusiastically opens the bottle cap and begins gulping. I sit and follow suit.

“Did you know, Kyle,” she says, in a voice that is Mozart to me, “that in some parts of the world, there are lake islands so large they have lakes within them?”

I widen my eyes with appropriate astonishment. “And what if that lake is large enough to have its own island,” I say. “Then you’d have an island within a lake within an island within a lake.”

Her eyes, emeralds flecked with dots of cornflower, sparkle. “Kind of like a Matryoshka doll.”

“Exactly.” The scent of her skin floats toward me. I continue, “So I gotta ask. What does ‘The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream’ mean?”

She answers without a trace of the snobbery typical of bookish people. “It’s from a famous Wallace Stevens poem. There are debates about what that line actually means.”

“What do you think?”

“I think he’s telling us that we need to eat the ice cream now. Before time melts it away.” She blurts out, “Are you familiar with Walcott?”

I’m reluctant to display my ignorance, although the tenuous wisdom I’ve achieved from advancing age has convinced me that knowledge is largely useless. “Of course. I

always thought he got robbed in that first fight with Joe Louis. Should have gotten the decision.”

“Derek Walcott. Another poet. Sorry, I’m being pedantic, aren’t I?” She smirks, but kindly.

“Not at all,” I say. “It’s just that I’m a touch rusty on him.”

She finishes her bottle, flips it to the side, and then leans her sweet weight against me, removing the finger in the dyke between us. “He wrote,” she says, “that islands can only exist if we have loved in them.” I’ve noticed before that the inner side of one of Karen’s arms is decorated with a petite butterfly tattoo. That’s the one she slides around my neck as she pulls my lips to hers. Her luscious kiss holds back nothing. As her tongue probes mine, I lose myself in the wondrous taste of her face, which is warm with fire. Her breath feeds my lungs. I push aside her hair to enjoy the back of her neck, then her ear lobes, forehead, and cheeks. Attempting to devour each part of her. Believing that all other moments in my life have paled in comparison to this.

Karen responds with matching urgency, as if this day were her last. I begin to slide my hand underneath her top. We are Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr on that beach petaled with foam. I want her to tell me that she never knew it could be this way. That no one has ever kissed her like this. But when I reach her breasts, which I hope to

drown in, she stops me abruptly, in a manner that makes me feel there was a horrible profanity to my touch.

“I can’t, Kyle. I thought I could. I thought it’s what I wanted. But I can’t.”

I fight my unquenchable thirst. “What’s going on, Karen? What are you feeling? Just tell me. Please.”

“I know I’m confusing you. I’m sorry for that. So sorry. It’s just that…”

I take her hand and kiss it, making an exaggerated noise. Quicksilver tears flow as she shifts her body away from me, but keeps her fingers entwined with mine, neither of us willing to let go of what we can never have.

“Where do you think our soul goes when we die?” she says in a tone I find impenetrable.

“Why do you ask that? Are you sick?”

She shakes her head negatively. “Never mind. That was stupid.”

There is a rustling of something, probably a rodent, and chirping from a chickadee. But her breathing is all that I hear. “Nothing you say is stupid,” I tell her, my

voice as passionate as it can be. “I know you’re married, and I shouldn’t have let this go as far as it has. But I couldn’t help myself.”

“It’s as much my doing as yours.” She pulls her hand away from mine and fidgets with her necklace. “Can I have another beer?” she whispers.

She sips, while I pour the alcohol down my throat like it’s an open drain. Images cascade in my head of our bodies intertwined. How sweet her nectar would have tasted.

I finish my beer and throw down the bottle. “I think you’re beautiful, Karen. And wonderful. I’ve fallen in love with you. That may be wrong, but it’s true.”

She strokes my cheek. Her expression is inscrutable. “Thank you for telling me that. But be careful what you wish for.”

“I’ve never wished for anything more. Blind chance brought us together, and showed me what I’ve been missing.”

More tears trickle down, and she lets them paint her cheeks. Again, Karen kisses me, but this time it feels dismissive, like a goodbye caress. She rises cat-like. In a voice turned gruff, she commands, “We should head back.” My utopian hourglass has trickled out. Legs stiff and heavy as lead, I follow her to the canoe.

*

At night, when time moves more slowly, I gaze past black trees and grass toward the lights along the opposite shore of the lake, guessing at which one might be hers. All things flow to that ageless basin, yet it never fills. It is now an ocean between us made of broken glass, its shards flowing through my veins and stabbing my heart.

Pleading, fervent monologues run inside my head. To escape them, I text Beth.

“U were rite”

“?”

“Y would a woman who says she’s happily married show a clear interest in me?”

“You really need me to answer that? R u upset, or happy?”

“Both”

“Do I have to point out what a bad idea this is?”

“No”

“Be careful. Even if the whole thing is her fault, if her husband finds out, she’ll blame u”

*

Two Friday mornings later, the fog spreads over the water like a perfume. I hop into my jasmine Subaru, which smells of leather and pineapple air freshener. The four-mile gravel road to 21 Blackbird Lane is a tranquil drive that passes rust-colored barns and quaint cottage homes intermixed with colonials. It’s drizzling as I park a house down from hers. My face is dotted with droplets as I creep quietly up to her front door and leave a package on the welcome mat. In it is a traditional ten-piece nesting doll in a “lake blue” color that I’ve selected from the eight million different versions of Matryoshkas offered by Amazon. Underneath it is a note: “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole - Derek Walcott.”

I spent the rest of that day lounging somberly on my weather-beaten deck, filled with ache that not even a deluge of Coronas could remove. Every sound — cats fornicating, the rumbling engines of passing all-terrain vehicles, the wail of a distant house alarm — rang through me. None of them was the one I needed to hear.

The following evening, while I am pre-gaming with a glass of black sambuca, it comes at last: the sound of knuckles rapping energetically on the front door. I open it

tentatively to find a cheery Karen. She wears a silky, flowery sun dress, in contrast to my black jeans and T-shirt. “So glad you put your last name on your mailbox,” she says, and pecks at my cheek. “Can I come in? I bring presents.”

She takes in the minimalist décor of my A-frame chalet without comment, kindly avoiding any indication that my house, or my life, is insignificant. I find myself particularly pleased to see Karen outside her gilded cage. But I can never again allow passion to override the fact that she’s married.

We park ourselves on the living room couch. She’s holding a shopping bag and wearing lipstick, for the first time that I’ve noticed. Some exotic-looking orange-reddish tint that probably has an unpronounceable name. Karen pulls a wrapped box from the bag and hands it to me. “Can you guess?”

I shake the box and then close my eyes and concentrate as if I’m conducting a séance. “I’m thinking it’s the shrunken head of a Pocono Indian.”

“No, Colonel Kurtz, I don’t think there ever was a Pocono tribe,” she replies. I unpeel layers of bubble wrap and discover to my delight that her gift is a framed photo of Jersey Joe Walcott, lying on the mat after having been kayoed by Joe Louis in their second fight. “I went to three sports memorabilia stores to find this,” she says with emphasis.

“It’ll fit nicely in my den,” I respond. “Next to my autographed photo of Derek Walcott lying on the mat after having been knocked out by Wallace Stevens.” I tear off the wrapping of the next box, which is filled with Carrillo cigars. I twirl one in my hand approvingly. “Would you like a tour of my palace? The highlight will be a sink filled with dirty dishes.”

She points to my Carrillo. “How about instead, you teach me how to partake.”

We recline on the deck’s two-person rocking chair, underneath an intricate spider web and a wall light painted with flies, drinking Jim Beam and smoking. I suck down my stogie quickly, smoke coiling upward in the shape of a tornado. Karen only puffs on hers sporadically, without inhaling. I pray she won’t notice that parts of the flooring are rotted through.

“I was inspired to write my own poem,” she declares. “Would you like to hear it?” I nod apprehensively. Karen recites plaintively, “She waits in sadness. Hoping for her hero to arrive. Then the storm brings him.”

What comeback does she want from me? To laugh appreciatively? To again profess my love? “What is her sadness?” I respond. “If you ask Stacey what the saddest phrase in the English language is, she’d say, ‘Back to school.’”

Karen doesn't laugh. "I think the saddest phrase in the English language might be 'If only,'" she says, and covers my hand with hers, relaying a womb-like warmth that nonetheless chills me with anticipation. "I've been lying to you since the day we first met."

My mind races. But I am clueless. Frustratingly so. "What was the lie?"

"I have no husband anymore. Jerry died in late February. Sudden, massive heart attack." I peek at her left hand to see that the wedding ring is gone. "It happened at work," she continues, carefully enunciating each word. "I kissed him goodbye that morning, not realizing I would never see him again. I lost so many of the years with him I was promised."

How hard it must be to divulge one's lies after creating the perfect cameo. To release the buried light. I am both saddened for her, and electrified. Karen is swiftly wracked with sobbing. I remove the cigar from her hand, encircle her with my arms, and kiss her forehead. "I'm so sorry." When she quiets, she searches through her purse for a pack of tissues. Then Karen rests her head on my chest. She smells of a fruity perfume. "I want him back. For one last embrace."

Is she ready to be with anyone else? There is a quiet now that even the trilling of the tree frogs can't shatter. "You asked me the other day what Jerry was like," Karen says faintly. As she struggles to speak further, her cheeks rise, producing an inverted

'U' wrinkle on the sides of her nose. "He was kind. Generous. Caring. We had no children. He meant the world to me." The savagery of Karen's grief overwhelms me, and I commit heresy by concentrating on her fragrance. Was it Jerry's favorite? "Jerry never much cared for the outdoors," she continues. "He agreed to buy property on the lake and build a house just to make me happy."

"What made him happy?"

"Work." She fights to avoid more pouting. "And me."

A half-moon hovers over the lake. As it spreads its silver glow, I stare at it while searching for the right response. "Jerry was a workaholic," Karen continues. "We didn't spend as much time together as most couples do. But I never doubted his love for me."

As with each of the living, Karen's symphony remains unfinished. "Are any of us promised anything?" I ask.

She shakes her head no, setting her hoop earrings in motion. "After he died, I wasn't looking for another man. Then you came along and I felt an instant connection, as if you had been in my life for a while. But I had it in my head that I shouldn't be with another man for at least six months. That's why, at the island..."

“I understand.” I stroke her shoulder. “I lied to you also when I said I didn’t want anyone but Stacey in my boat. I’ve been lonely for so long. Terribly lonely.”

Karen’s silky hand squeezes mine. “I knew that.” She blows her nose gracefully and looks up at me. “I have another candidate for saddest phrase,” she says. “It might have been.’ But I don’t want to say that about you. That’s why I came here.”

There is a bark in the distance, which sounds more like a fox than a dog. “Kyle, thank you for the doll. If I break it, will you reassemble it for me?”

“I’d do anything for you. If you ask, I’ll make the waters of the lake part so we can walk hand in hand through it.”

She offers her lips to me. Her kiss is succulent, its moisture flowing from deep inside. “That would be nice. But it’s not what I really want.”

There is a haunting stillness to this moment. “What do you want?”

Karen sits upright and sweeps her lustrous hair to one side, as if willing to expose herself for the first time. She points to a mangle of trees that offer a slivered view of the dark lake. “I want to spend tonight with you. And tomorrow, I want you to take me back to the island.”

*

As Karen and I enter the adventure park, the sky is a new shade of blue, one I've never seen before. A sign greets us, announcing that it offers the best climbing and zip-line experience in New York. I spot in the distance a roller coaster and Ferris wheel and, behind them, among scattered trees, a series of platforms connected by cable, wood, and rope to form bridges. Stacey and Beth stand nearby along with a half-dozen of my daughter's laughing and squealing friends. No sign of lug-head Jake. Maybe he's out of the picture now. Stacey runs up to us excitedly.

"Daddy, will you come on the zip line with us? Mommy doesn't want to."

My squinting eyes meet Beth's fierce ones. "Of course, honey. Just let me first introduce Karen to Mommy."

As we walk over to Beth, with Stacey following, I take Karen's hand. Half to make a statement and half for reinforcement. Beth forces a smile.

"You must be Karen. So nice to meet you."

"The same. Your daughter is precious. Thanks for having me."

Beth nods toward Stacey. "Thank Stacey." Beth bites her lip and then adds, "I'm glad you were able to come."

After a moment of tense hesitation, Beth adds, "Karen, I love your hair style." As the tension in me deflates, Karen responds, "There's a great place in midtown I go to. I'll give you the address."

My ex turns to me with a relaxed expression. "You were going to buy the tickets, remember?" She points. "The booth is over there."

As I take my place on the ticket line, I glance back to see the three females engaged in conversation. They are animated, chuckling about a matter that I likely would find insipid and humorless. Each with a separate agenda, yet united in ways that reach beyond my comprehension. I feel somewhat isolated, but enthralled by the love that binds me to them. Three separate types of love, each of which is sometimes fragile but often transcendent, coloring a monochrome world in its own unique manner. Although, if I'm honest, my bond with Karen is the one that, for now, holds me steady and keeps me afloat when the wind trumpets. In it, I hope to have found my safe harbor.