

Degrees of Freedom

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Silver Lake, New Mexico. I pull a trout out of the water with all the flair of a magician materializing a bouquet from thin air. I am fixated on this living comet, the droplets of water streaming behind it. It lands in the bottom of the canoe, the fire of its gills pulsing, the same thumping rhythm as my heart. I scoop it up with both hands, fling it--still hooked--back into the lake, as if it were water filling up the bottom of the boat, threatening to sink us.

My uncle catches the line, cutting his hand and cursing me. "You do the stupidest things sometimes." He guts it on a canoe slat, the gills still flexing. When he's done, he wraps a handkerchief around his hand, then grabs the oars and turns the prow of the boat toward the shore.

I stare at my reflection in the water, twirling a tendril of hair around my index finger. I wear my hair in a ponytail--the way my mother used to--with little wisps loose at the sides. The boat slows. He pulls up an oar, resting it over the water, the paddle flat in my reflection. The bucket of fish heads sloshes, watery blood spattering my jeans and tennis shoes. I see a stone to the side of the boat, step out.

Things often appear as we think they are, not as they truly are; the gnarled black elbow of a tree branch can look a lot like a rock. I sink to the bottom of the lake. I don't move. I just hang there like a tiny sea horse embryo, my feet tangled in the bottom grasses. I watch minnows and mosquito larvae dart away from me, bright as neon tetras in the tank of a tropical fish store.

Mother liked the rows of tanks and the cool blue darkness. She handed the baby to my sister, checked her reflection in the glass. I watched her face in the side of the tank, the cichlids darting behind her eyes. She divided her ponytail, pulling the two halves apart, the band scooting down, close to her head. She touched her cheek, took her lipstick from her purse, her face moving closer to the tank as she outlined her mouth. Then she took a tissue from her bag, folded it in half and bit down to blot her lips. She saw me watching her in the side of the tank and smiled. She moved her hand toward the glass, flattening her palm against it. The cichlids darted around the outline of her fingers, hungry and confused. My sister handed her back the baby and they strolled on through the cool darkness. I put my hand against the glass, but the fish didn't even notice.

There is a disarrangement of the water above me and a tugging on my head. My uncle pulls me out of the lake by my hair. I should get back into the canoe but instead I flail away, sloshing through the reeds toward the shore, into my father's arms.

My uncle brings the canoe closer and I hear him yell, "What in the hell were you doing?" His feet kick the water apart as he runs through the shallows.

She did the right thing," says my father, "if she'd panicked it would have been worse." I'm slippery in his arms, my clothes covered in dark green muck. "You're okay," he says as we sit on the grass, my uncle's long shadow enfolding us. "You're

okay.” On the distant horizon of the lake the sun is closing its bloody eyelid. “Give me your wet sneakers and go change your clothes.”

Inside the tent my sister is asleep on top of her sleeping bag. She isn’t really sleeping. She’s just been lying there most of the afternoon, eyes closed, and silent. I don’t particularly want to speak to her either, except that I need to borrow a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt.

“No.” She doesn’t even open her eyes. Her clothes are in a backpack at the end of her sleeping bag. I mull around my side of the tent, touch her backpack with my foot.

“Don’t even think about it.” She sits upright, grabs her pack, puts it under her head, then lies back down.

“Girls, dinner.” My father is at the tent flap. He looks in, sees my sister with her eyes closed and me, still dripping. “Why haven’t you changed?”

“I didn’t bring any clothes.”

“Why not?”

“They were dirty.” He looks past me at the far tent wall as if he were suddenly engrossed in watching TV. My sister opens her eyes. Outside I can see the tent fire, my uncle’s fist wrapped in a white handkerchief, holding a black skillet.

“Borrow a shirt from your sister and come eat.” He puts the tent flap down slowly and I hear his hand, smoothing the nylon corner into place. He returns to the fire. My sister takes off the sweatshirt she’s wearing and throws it at me.

“You already had this on. I don’t want to wear it.”

“I’m not giving you a clean one. You smell.” She stands up to unzip her jeans.

“I have to wear your dirty jeans too? Can I at least have a clean bra?”

“I don’t have an extra bra. Go without.” She kicks her jeans across the tent floor, then gets inside her sleeping bag in her underwear.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Not hungry.” She closes her eyes. I look around the tent, still holding the sweatshirt. I want to walk out to the campfire, sit down and eat, maybe even smile for my father.

“Have you seen my lipstick?”

My sister sits up and stares at me. “Look, you used a whole damn box of Kleenex on the way up here. NO. I haven’t seen your lipstick, and cut it out. She’s gone. Period.

Gone.” She flounces back down on her sleeping bag, zips it up to her neck, and closes her eyes.

I’m not getting dressed either. I lie down in my bag, staring at the outline of her nose. She has my mother’s nose. Outside is the sound of sizzling fish, the tapping of plastic plates. I pull the band from my hair, let it fall damp around my shoulders.

“Girls?” My father is at the tent door again. I can see his feet, the bottom of his trousers, and my sneakers curling up by the circle of fire stones.

“I don’t think we’re hungry, Dad.” He waits at the entrance, then turns back to the fire. My hair smells like rotting leaves in a rain gutter and my face itches. I should have told him my face itches, should have said something more, but we all move differently now--slower than before--as if we were underwater, weighed down by the heavy drape of wet clothing.

The campfire is pressing shadows against the tent wall. My uncle opens a beer and he and my father start drinking. They are talking, my uncle is talking, and we are awake, but not really awake, hearing their voices unwind. There is nothing in their conversation, nothing that can bring us from our separate sleeping bags, until my uncle says, "You know, things like this happen. At least the girls are safe."

I hear my father sigh, not the way my mother sometimes sighed after finishing her ironing. I think his teeth are clenched because his sigh sounds like air leaking out of a tire. I imagine him getting shorter, sinking where he sits with a beer in his hand.

"Thank God they were thrown clear."

I want my uncle to stop, but he has us all now, and he's reeling us in on his words.

"I've had a few close calls myself--speeding cars trying to pass. They come out of nowhere."

I'm holding my breath, wondering if my sister is going to open her eyes. I hope she is really asleep this time, and that the blue shadows swimming the side of the tent will wash over us, leave us submerged.

"You know, once the girls are back in school it'll be better. They'll be with their friends again and they'll get back to normal."

My sister's sleeping bag crinkles as she rolls toward me. "Great. You and your stupid lipstick." The air is cool in here. Her breath leaves her mouth and drifts through the air like cigarette smoke, the discarded ember of her words landing inside my sleeping bag and burning me. She rolls away, scooting her bag closer to the side of the tent.

I pull my sleeping bag zipper together over my head. I never realized before, how soft the inside of my bag was. I've always slept in my clothes when camping--like my mother said--to prevent mosquito bites. The inside of the bag is flannel, fuzzy, like the blankets she used to wrap my baby brother in. It's warm and dark, the way I imagine space would be if I were an astronaut flexing my fingers toward the stars. Somewhere in this universe of dark sisal, there is the spinning butane cartouche of my mother's wrecked sedan, and my sister and I in parallel flesh, spinning away.