

Atlantis

“German short-haired pointer.”

Murray turned to Cal.

“Used to have one,” Cal went on. “Or Greta did. She hunted, you know. Greta.”

They were reclining in parallel lounge chairs on the deck of Murray’s parents’ cottage. It was early evening, a breeze beginning to roughen the lake out by Atlantis, the tiny island his mother – “the professor” - had so named. Closer in, near where they’d been swimming, the dog’s head just broke the surface.

“You getting cold?” Murray asked.

“You don’t care about the dog?”

“I don’t care about the wife.”

Murray stood, picked up their empties, and went inside. In the bedroom he hoisted his duffel up onto the unmade bed and groped through it until he came to his flannel shirt. He watched himself in the bureau mirror, pulling the shirt on and buttoning the lower buttons, adjusting the collar, then combing his fingers through his still-wet hair. His parents’ mirror, this was, rough-framed, reflector of who knows what all those summers ago.

On his way back outside he stopped to pull Cal’s windbreaker from the clothes littering the living room floor.

“Her name was David,” Cal said as Murray sat back down.

“*Her* name?”

“The bitch’s. Greta’s sense of humor.”

The dog, the apex now of a long V in smoother water, was nearing the shore. His quick coughs broke the silence and as he got closer they could see he had something - a ball, it looked like - in his mouth. Someone must have thrown it for him, probably from the dock of the cottage next door.

“Sure you’re not cold?” Murray stroked the back of Cal’s forearm and offered the jacket.

“You’re all goose bumpy.”

“Cutis anserina.”

“Cutest what?”

“Anserina. What we call them in medicine. Little erections, actually. Hair hard-ons. From back when we all had fur.”

“Cool.”

Almost a year, now, they’d known each other, since that autumn afternoon when Cal had wandered into Murray’s furniture-making shop, and still Murray didn’t know how to take those medicalisms of his. Were they information? Boasts? Both? He couldn’t imagine springing a “miter joint” or a “spline” on Cal when Cal commented on one of his pieces. But maybe that was the way it was to be with them, the roles relationships like theirs implied.

“You know those people?” Cal asked.

“Those people.”

“Yeah. Next door.”

Murray looked through the trees to where Cal finally pointed, but didn’t see anyone at first. “Millers, must be. George and Rose. Had that cottage forever. Way before us anyway.”

“They know? About you?”

“How would they? My folks don’t even know.”

“Cause *you* know, sweetheart. That’s how people know.”

What a very Cal sort of thing to say. A doctor, an intensivist he called himself, who handled the sickest hospital patients, Cal had learned to reduce that desperate world to residual truths, no matter the consequences. He’s brain dead and, sorry, but we can’t fix that. Guess I’m gay, Greta, and, sorry, but I’m outta here. With woodworking, on the other hand, there was just the wood.

“There he goes again.”

Murray looked: the dog, snout held high, was paddling back out past the canoe tied to the end of the Millers’ dock. And this time, through the trees, Murray could see by the diving board the one who must have thrown the ball – Kevin, the middle Miller. He was wearing yacht-club white pants and a striped shirt. And sitting on the board beside him, tan legs crossed, holding up a wine glass as if toasting the view, a young woman.

Fantasy fit for his mother, this was – man and woman on dock, setting sun, iconic calls of loons. Monogamous, those loons, she would explain in anthropology-speak. For life. Their first summer at the lake, when he was thirteen, she had packed picnic lunches for him and Sherrie, Kevin’s sister, to take to Atlantis. She had driven them the twelve miles to the movies in town, given them extra money, extra time, for sodas and talk afterward. Yet he’d often suspected that that fantasy might have been why – in the paradoxical way of fantasies - he’d wandered down to the Millers’ dock one night when Sherrie had turned in early. Might have been why, without a word, he had lain down next to Kevin on the smooth, still-warm planks. Might have been why he had stayed there pretending to watch for shooting stars, all the while thrilling to the close heat of a body so safely, so deliciously like his own. Why, finally, and most fantastically, he had reached

for Kevin's hand and triggered the punch that ended all contact with the Millers. The punch that still burned his cheek whenever the memory resurfaced.

"Going after those two loons," Cal was saying.

"Where?" Murray pushed his glasses in tighter, the memory away.

"Those are loons, aren't they? By that little island? Divers, the Brits call them."

Hard as he tried, Murray couldn't make out anything, but he had no doubt they were there. He had seen and heard loons on the lake every summer he'd come, and he and Cal had heard their mournful warble the previous night. Not, Cal had said, a commentary on their love-making, he hoped.

"Better not be loons," Cal added. In a moment he stood. "Actually, I do feel a bit of coolth coming on."

They headed back inside, into the bathroom, and pulled off their trunks. Murray could see that, thanks no doubt to the chill, Cal wasn't stiff at all. That was a relief: he was still sore from last night, and anyway he wasn't finished with the loons.

"Better not be?"

"Yeah. For the dog's sake. Say, you look good in skin. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"Let me get us some towels."

When Murray returned, Cal was standing at the toilet. He shook off the last drops and flushed. The water pump rumbled behind the wall.

"Pointers aren't sheepdogs," Cal said, stepping into the shower stall and pulling the plastic curtain behind him. "They're bird dogs. Gun dogs. But they're still bred to focus. We were in England this time? Lake District?"

His words were lost in the sudden drum of water against the metal sides of the stall. This rustic shower was nowhere near as civilized as the big, Italian marble one in Cal's condo. There they could bathe together easily, talking and laughing in the billowing steam as they lathered each other with Cal's exotic soaps.

Minutes later Cal stepped out, his black hair pasted to his high forehead, water coursing down his torso, down his long legs and now slightly swollen member to pool on the linoleum. Murray handed him a towel and stepped into the stall himself. He washed quickly, expecting the curtain to be snapped back any minute.

"So you were in England..." he said as he began to dry off.

"With Greta. Last time we slept together. One of our better fucks, actually. Anyway, that part of England is wall-to-wall sheep. More sheep than rocks. Ever been there?"

"Never. Never left Orono 'til I was nine. When we moved down to Portland."

"Well, let me tell you, they're everywhere. And it's sheepdogs look after them. Amazing animals. Heat-seek right onto 'em. They say you're driving and you see a sheepdog crouched in a field you better stop quick, 'cause that dog might smash right into the car he's so focused on his sheep. Right into it. Bam! Like that."

Murray flinched at the smack of Cal's fist in his palm. "Impressive," he said, his cheek already burning.

They walked into the bedroom, straightened the bedclothes, and began dressing.

"Love that cedar attar," Cal said, tipping his head back and sniffing loudly. "But my point is – no pun intended - pointers aren't crazy as sheepdogs. Ours wasn't anyway. Got run over, but not her fault. That I know of."

"Sorry, Cal."

“Yeah. Shitty. ’Bout killed Greta. So, town for pizza before the main event?”

“Sounds good,” Murray said, though it didn’t, not just yet anyway.

When they walked back outside, the sky had gone indigo and starry. A crescent moon tilted low above the black saw tooth of the Canadian shore. Next door, lights flickered through the intervening leaves and the throb of a musical bass could just be heard. The dock was empty.

Cal strode across the yard toward the car. Murray held back, then walked to the far edge of the deck. He looked out across the lake. Even though it was a Saturday, there was no sign of life anywhere - no boats, no jet skies. Not even any lights on the Canadian side. It was a timeless northern Maine evening like the ones he’d spent there all those years ago: mother with a pile of galleys to edit, father with his flies and his Scotch, sister sequestered with her Harlequins. And he, whittling a chain out of driftwood, trying to remember, as link broke free from link, just what exactly had happened there on the Millers’ dock that night.

A splash, ripples, a silver V.

“Cal!”

“What?”

“C’ m’ere a minute.”

The car door slammed. He heard the slap of sandals on the deck, smelt soap as Cal leaned in close to look where Murray was pointing.

“Oh yeah. Him, all right. You got a ’scope or anything?”

Murray ran back into the living room. In the wicker basket by the chimney, among the board games, the lures and batteries and paperbacks, he found his mother’s old opera glasses.

“This is all we’ve got,” he said, back on the deck.

Cal worked the focus wheel as he scanned back and forth. “Oh, there they are! Way the hell out.”

Murray took the binoculars, but he couldn't seem to orient himself until he took off his own glasses and pressed the eyepieces in close. There, beyond the silhouette of Atlantis, he finally saw them, two loons, their necks black quotation marks against the dark water.

He put his glasses back on. “The dog after them?”

“Nothing else out there.”

“What should we do?”

“Get pizza. Get laid. C'mon.”

“He can't swim all that way, Cal. And back.”

“He'll turn around. Or there's that island. What'd your mom call it?”

“I thought you were worried about the dog.”

Cal held out his keys and jingled them. Murray turned and saw the V's arms lengthen and glisten as the dog moved steadily away.

“You're so worried,” Cal said, “go next door. Their dog, right?”

But Murray already had his sandals off, his shorts.

The water, when he hit it, was colder than before. It stopped his breath, but he fought his way forward until with a gasp he fell into a rhythmic, splashless crawl. With each lift of his right arm, each suck of air, he strained to see Atlantis' skyline.

It was his mother who had taught him to swim, breathe out under water so he'd be ready for the next intake of air – Don't panic! – when he turned his head to the side. His mother who, once they started coming to the cottage, had made him do laps back and forth between two birch tree markers before he settled down on the dock to sunbathe or whittle or read. She'd said

comfort in the water could save his life some day, the way it had hers that time in the Indian Ocean. Another of her fantasies, but maybe she was right. He really should have kept in practice, kept in shape, taken up running and weights the way Cal had: already he was winded.

He stopped to tread water and scan back and forth across the surface. But no matter how he blinked and wiped his eyes, the world stayed a dark, moonless blur: no glasses. Now how would he ever find a dog in all these acres of water? And if he did, what would he do with him? Would he be able to drag him to safety? Would the dog fight, determined as Cal's sheepdogs to follow nature no matter where she led?

His panting eased; he could hear music over the slosh of waves, a faint shout.

"Here, boy!" he called, spending as little breath as possible.

He switched to breast stroke, parting the water in front of him in slow arcs. Each time he rose to breathe he stared ahead for some sign of movement, but there was nothing but the chop, the darkness, sudden veins of cold. All he could tell was that to his right now he was almost in line with Atlantis. Could the dog have made it there? If so, he was safe. If not.... He had to keep going, keep looking. For his own sake, it almost seemed, as much as the dog's.

Atlantis was as far as any of them had swum over the years, and then, at his mother's insistence, only in groups of three – one in trouble, one to stay with him, one to swim for help. Rule of three, she said. Find it with hunters, gatherers, warrior groups, corporations.... And the waters beyond were deep – 80 feet on the charts – the part of the lake where the big salmon lived, where his father told his fish story while he searched his tackle box for the heavy lead line.

A wave slammed his face. He coughed, afraid to inhale. Don't panic! Don't panic! Little breaths. Little pants.

Like the dog returning with the ball. The dog he didn't even know the name of, the breed of. Why hadn't he just done what Cal, residual truth Cal, said he should do – walk next door?

He had to relax. He let himself sink a couple of feet, then beat back toward the surface, hands feathering at his sides. An easy breath, another descent. Y camp. Skinny dipping. That slow bob up and down, warm, silky water caressing you everywhere. You could do it for hours. Up and down. Up and down. All those summer buddies. The pleasure of survival. The survival of pleasure. Though what did he know, back then, of either? What did they?

But the dog. Treading again he revolved slowly, blinked and spat. The shadow of Atlantis was there but out of place, moved somewhere behind him now when he wasn't paying attention. That's what she'd said: it moved, or sank. Disappeared into the depths of its own myth. Or, no, he'd swum past it, set a record he'd never sought or now she'd ever know.

In the distance a warble, an echo shivering in the air the way he now shivered in the water. Still just as far away. Were the loons alarmed, keeping their distance, luring like sirens?

He dog-paddled. Another splash in the face. Down and up again. But with each drop his legs reached deeper into the cold; his arms grew flimsier. The disgust of slime, of scales and claws.

Fathom! That was the word, the word his father had used: I can't fathom it, Murray. I just can't fathom it. He had to rise. He had to have air, wherever that was. Handfuls and armloads of water and then finally lungfuls of pure darkness. He gasped and lunged, dragging the entire lake upward and forward, until, stumbling, he fell hard.

The tiny island had no real beach. When he and Sherrie had canoed there it was always a challenge to find a proper place to eat, some boulder, some broad tree root where they could sit, bare feet in the water, basket between them, and dole out the sandwiches, the chips and drinks,

cookies and fruit, his mother had so carefully prepared. This time, though, solid ground was proper enough. As his head cleared, he crawled from the rocky water's edge to a mossy rise, curled and hugged his shaking. His breathing slowed.

"Doggie," he whispered hoarsely, as if he shouldn't be overheard. Silence, but for the sense of distant music, of lapping. He sat up, then stood. He called louder, slapping his thigh, "Here, boy. C'mon. Good boy."

As if in answer, a faraway call. Cal? Should be Cal, but he wasn't ready to answer. Not yet. He was still listening. No rustle of branches, no panting, no tinkle of tags. The dog was still out there somewhere, driven, oblivious. No point in trying to find him again. That's the way of nature, what Cal would say anyway. The image of the dog's watery suffering and death would fade as all memories do.

He sat back down. Music, still, and light from the Millers', must be. A little more rest, and he might try to swim back. He didn't need Cal now. Just a branch, driftwood.

Not all memories do fade, though. Not that of Kevin's heat on that long ago dock. Of his fist. Sherrie's two-word note the next day – "I understand." His fear of talking to her again because what if she did while he didn't? Marcia, Lisa in the back seat of his mother's convertible, Will and Lance in the locker room, college lasting six months because there was only one subject he cared about and no professors, no courses, for that. No, not those memories. Their kind don't fade. They mustn't. What would be left of us if they did?

"Murray!" Cal's voice all right, closer, and closer to anger this time: "Murray!"

"Over here! The end!" He waved his arms over his head.

Dark motion on the water, becoming shapes.

“Jesus, man, we been looking all over.” Cal dragged the prow of a canoe up into the undergrowth. He grabbed Murray by the arm, then whipped off his jacket and wrapped it around Murray’s shoulders, embracing him in warmth.

“You were after the dog, Murr?”

Murray looked past Cal toward the voice. Whiteness glowed in the stern of the canoe: Kevin’s trousers.

“Yeah. Yeah. The dog.”

“Shoulda come over,” Kevin went on. “Like your friend here. Take the canoe. You could’ve....”

“Yeah,” Murray said again. “Guess so. You get him?”

“Who?” Cal asked.

“The dog. You get the dog?”

“Oh, he came back,” Kevin answered. “He always does.”

“They’re good swimmers, those pointers.”

“Yeah, Cal, so you said.” Murray pulled the jacket tighter around himself, waded over to the canoe and stepped in. It lurched at his weight, dropping him quickly onto the ribs.

Cal pushed off until the scraping stopped, climbed into the bow and started paddling.

“Get you back to the cottage,” he called out. “Warmed up. You’re hypothermic, you know.”

“Right,” Murray said. “Hypothermic. Get you every time.”

“Say,” Kevin said from behind him, “why don’t you guys come over for a drink? My sister Sherrie and a couple friends are up and....”

“Alcohol’s not such a good idea when....”

“Sure, Kevin,” Murray interrupted. “Could use a drink.”

The two men paddled in silent unison, the canoe thrusting forward with each stroke. Beyond the curve of Cal's back and the rhythm of his powerful arms, Murray could just distinguish the dark suggestion of shoreline, blurred light. How close they already seemed.

"By the way," Kevin called out behind him, "I'm Kevin. Kevin Miller. My folks' place, where we're staying."

"Cal," Cal answered over his shoulder, not breaking rhythm. "Cal Peebles."

Murray turned. "Cal used to be my lover, Kevin. How you guys been, anyway?"