

The Wake

Marta thought about fish the whole way up from Louisiana. Drifting in massive schools, turning and glimmering at the baseline of a cove ridged with foam. There was nothing familiar to her in that nowhere-land that stretched between New Orleans and Maine, so she passed the time by waiting for seafood signs to start cropping back up again, and by imagining flashes of color out of the corner of her eye.

Her best friend, Siele, was in the passenger seat. The car belonged to Joey, who was stretched out sideways over the backseat with his boots resting up against the opposite window. Being technically on their way to a funeral, Siele and Joey knew better than to make jokes and to flirt the way they usually would. They contented themselves with reaching between the seats and losing their fingers in the nets of each other's hands, finger-walking up each other's arms, passing tiny smiles every once in a while like notes that they didn't think Marta saw. They were in love, after all, and neither one of them had a dead mother.

As a teenager, Marta had used to drive her mother's car to Pemaquid Point and climb the rocks, down by the shores beneath the lighthouse where you didn't have to pay to get in. Her mother had come here from Ireland so long ago it felt like a complete fiction to Marta — the idea that her grandparents, whom she had never known, had dragged her then-young mother halfway across the world to get here, the idea that her family was rooted somewhere else entirely, somewhere she'd never even been and couldn't picture. She didn't figure the idea of herself belonging in Ireland any more than she belonged

here, but she liked the idea of her mother belonging there. Somewhere across that cold and enormous ocean was a place where her mother had actually been a child, had actually had friends and made sense to somebody.

On the best nights, Siele would come with her. They'd return late at night, sometimes in the early hours of the morning, and always her mother would be asleep, closed away in her room. She wasn't the type of mother who waited up or worried or even, it seemed, thought. A couple of times Marta considered telling her about the nights she spent alone at the lighthouse, thinking about building herself a raft and free-floating away to sea, waiting it out — whatever *it* was — until the lonely lights of another island appeared to her on the dark waves. Her mother might have listened, but she wouldn't have cared. Those last few years before Marta and Siele had run away, she'd been as good as deaf.

Siele and Joey did their very best to be respectful, but it was a long drive, and after a few hours Siele popped in a mixtape. She fell into a habit of suggesting a new road trip game every half hour or so, which she seemed to think might cheer Marta up. Marta always said she'd play but then didn't end up participating, paying attention instead to the way the road rushed and fell beneath them like waves, so Joey and Siele always won.

“We could play cards or something,” Joey suggested, after their third round of the alphabet game.

“No, silly, then Marta couldn't play.”

“I really don't mind,” said Marta. “I've been losing anyway.”

“It’s just harder ’cause you’re driving,” said Siele helplessly. “You can’t read the signs and stuff.”

“I better be able to read the signs, if I’m driving,” Marta said.

Siele leaned back into her seat, trying to find comfort against the ripped fabric. “I’m bored of games, anyway,” she said. “Let’s take a break for a while.” She reached down and pulled a lever, and her seat kicked back with a sudden jerk. Joey laughed in the backseat as she settled back, brought her legs up in front of her and stuck her feet out the window. She crossed them at the ankles.

“Alabama!” she called out as they crossed the state line, wiggling her toes in the air that rushed outside the Range Rover. “We made it!”

“We could get pulled over,” said Marta.

Siele looked at her, then shrugged and pulled her feet back inside. She rolled up the window. Out of the corner of her eye Marta saw her glance back at Joey and give a small smile, quick, a smile probably meant to be a secret between the two of them. As if he knew exactly what she was thinking, even though he was another person and that meant there was no way he ever could.

Marta had been there when Siele had first met Joey, almost six months ago now, at the movie theater where Joey worked concessions. Siele had gone with Marta to see *Hidden Figures*, and she’d disappeared halfway through to get a popcorn refill and spent the rest of the movie talking to Joey outside. She was Scully and he was a very stupid but charming Mulder, they watched action movies together, she hated pickles and he loved them, *et cetera*. They couldn’t get enough of each other.

Marta liked Joey fine. He was a graphic designer who loved cheesy things like sports, and he'd made an effort to get to know Marta, to include her in jokes. It was the way they sank so easily into each other that thickened in her head when she thought about it, a thought that drummed loud within her, betrayed, like electricity: the way two regular people, Joey and Siele, became fragments branching off of one another. He became Siele-Joey, and she, Joey-Siele.

At the beginning Marta had been smug, very secretly, without even herself knowing why. Back when Joey was still just *someboy*, wasn't yet a fixture in Siele's life and therefore in hers, she'd thought: yes, he's nice. But there are still some things about Siele that he'll never know or understand, even if she tells him: the way she has always dragged everyone else's gazes along with her like a magnet, the way she makes her own plans and tells you in the top of her voice when she doesn't like something. The way her house smelled in elementary school and then in middle school, after her mother finally stopped smoking, the way she always looked in the passenger seat on the way back from the coast at midnight, her tie-dyed volleyball shirt and her hair pulled back and tangled, her favorite ice cream flavor at Round Top.

Siele had even been there after the divorce when Marta was nine, the one day Marta had ever seen her mother cry. The last time she could remember making eye contact with her mother and seeing more there than a fuzz of unfamiliarity: when her mother had knelt down in front of her in the kitchen with her red hair frazzled and warm around her shoulders, not yet wiry and gray, and said, "It's going to be okay, Marta. I'm never going to make this mistake again."

The mistake, of course, was Marta's father, of whom they were well rid. And true to her word, she didn't — not that mistake, anyway.

Siele had been there then, and that was, or had been, something Joey would never know: the way they'd held hands and cried together in Marta's bedroom, the way Marta had known then and now that they would always be there for each other.

She was wrong, of course. Even in high school that had been the old Siele, Siele-Siele who'd never dated anybody for longer than a couple of weeks. It was out of the longing for that Siele that Marta had asked her to come along now, which she now could see had been foolish as she and Joey chatted up through the Virginias about work and moving in together, about what they would do once they got back. There was a *back* for them and it was glittery, it was forever. Marta kept her eyes on roadkill and the way it glistened face-up, beached, as she drove by.

"Hey," said Siele. "Joey, plug your ears a sec." When he did, she looked over at Marta from the passenger seat, her hair pulled back, and said, "Are you okay?"

Marta knew she'd been stony-faced and silent for most of the last six or seven or eight hours, however long it had taken them to get here. All the same she said, "Why do you ask?"

"You seem kind of quiet. Is it Joey? 'Cause we can ditch him whenever — like in a heartbeat. I'm seriously fine doing a mutiny. We can leave him in the parking lot of a Chili's, with nothing but a Clif bar and a shotgun with only one bullet."

Marta couldn't help herself — she smiled a little. In the backseat Joey was still dutifully plugging his ears, his forehead and nose pressed up against the glass of the

window like a child's, Ohio rolling blankly through his eyes. *Let's do it*, she thought, but didn't say. She wished Siele really meant it — she wished the problem were Joey at all.

“It's okay.”

Siele glanced back at Joey, then at Marta again. In a softer voice she asked, “Is it your mom?”

Marta thought for a second. She knew some part of her quietness did have to do with Siele and Joey, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was about them. She'd been third-wheeling with the two of them for months now, and her mother was the only thing new.

“Yes,” she decided, because it was the answer most likely to shut Siele up.

Siele looked impossibly sympathetic. “You want me to drive for a while?”

“No.”

She drove in silence and off the rolling highway her last visit home came to her, three or four summers earlier. Leaning over the cold black railing at the fish ladder in Damariscotta, watching the alewives with her mother. It was the first time she could remember seeing her mother leave the house in years.

Alewives, her mother had explained many lifetimes ago to a very young Marta and Siele, were fish. They lived in freshwater but spawned in saltwater, which meant every year they had to swim upstream, returning to the ocean so that they could breed. Many died along the way — looking at the fish ladder, where they sped upstream from pool to pool, you could tell there was a dead alewife wherever you saw a flash of silver underbelly. Marta would have been surprised for even one of them to succeed in

swimming up so far, let alone so many — but they did, of course, it was how the species lived on.

The water was so packed with alewives that it looked completely black, one great mass of fish that writhed and coruscated against the current as they made their way up. In this part of Maine, widows were entitled to two buckets of alewives per year.

There was no conversation really to have, so they were silent before the rushing water. Marta was cold. She knew by then that she didn't connect with people, in the same way that her mother didn't connect with people. She wasn't the type of person people needed, like Siele, and she wasn't going to be.

When her mother finally spoke, she sounded empty, the way she always did. A rubber wall — like if Marta were to not respond, it wouldn't make any difference. This was what it was between them, a back-and-forth of deciding not to respond. “Did I do something?” she asked, meaning, *something to upset you*.

“No, Mom,” said Marta. “You did nothing.” The cold was past her skin now, burrowing aggressively into her, nesting in her bones and staying there.

They stopped the last night at a bed-and-breakfast somewhere in northern Pennsylvania. Siele had found the place on AirBNB, insisting they might as well get one comfortable night in if they were road tripping all the way up to Maine, and Marta hadn't seen any point in refusing. She knew all Siele wanted was a night alone with Joey; it was kind of pitiful, she thought, how little they could stand to be apart from one another. Ordinarily she would have pushed this sort of meanness straight from her head, but her mother was dead and tonight she let it sit there.

The place was off a narrow forest road, far from the nearest town, and when they got out of the car and stretched, they could hear crickets singing their high-pitched summer song all around in the dense trees. Marta could feel the cool night grass through her sandals.

The place was run by a man named Clive, a gangly thirty-something-year-old with a beard tied in a knot under his chin. He wore a stained shirt that said LOG CABIN OUTFITTERS SINCE 1986, with a cheerful icon of a log cabin underneath that looked like it was probably available as Clip Art. He had a habit of glancing around while he spoke and starting sentences over halfway through, to revise. He reminded Marta of a man she'd met as a child, visiting a planetarium on a school field trip. The man had built the whole thing himself, carefully painted every one of the stars exactly where they were supposed to be, but he didn't entirely seem to know how to talk to other people, and the other kids in her class kept giggling when they thought he couldn't hear. Marta recognized this sort of meanness everywhere she went, including in the quick, furtive glance Siele and Joey exchanged when Clive first walked up to them.

Three big dogs greeted them when they walked inside, yipping and jumping up on them. Clive shepherded the dogs back into the kitchen and closed them behind a childproofing gate, then showed Marta, Siele and Joey up a narrow staircase and into the hallway where their rooms waited.

“Sorry about the dogs,” he said. “I was meaning to put ’em down.”

“Put them *down*?” Joey repeated, his eyes widening.

“Down for a nap,” the man amended. “Sorry. I meant put ’em to sleep.”



“That’s not — huh,” said Joey, and he grinned at Siele behind Clive’s back and stopped talking.

After Clive left them alone, they said goodnight and Marta slipped away from Joey and Siele, into her own room for the night. She turned off the lights and nestled in beneath the covers, curling her toes at the end of the bed where the sheets folded away. She could still hear the dim hum of the crickets outside. Marta loved night sounds: soft and enveloping, like being underwater. In the darkness she was reminded briefly of childhood sleepovers at her mother’s house with Siele — how at night the car headlights from outside would slip through under the shades and perform a show just for them, luminous spheres trapezeing like molecules over the walls.

She and Siele were roommates back in New Orleans, at least until their lease ran out the next month and Siele moved in with Joey. Somehow this level of proximity to them still felt strange to Marta. There they were, only a few rooms down the hallway at this very moment, doing — what? Sharing secrets, watching a movie? Falling asleep in each other’s arms?

Around midnight, unable to sleep, Marta got up and left her room. She walked past Joey and Siele’s room and downstairs to the kitchen, where Clive was sweeping.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hi,” said Clive.

Marta looked around, taking in the yellowy patterned wallpaper, the fridge covered with old magnets that weren’t holding anything up. She knew she was acting strange, but didn’t care too much what Clive thought of her. The dogs were circling

around the room: one pacing by the sliding-glass door, another rubbing up against Clive's leg.

"Uh, I was about to take 'em out," Clive said. He seemed like he was waiting for her to say something. When she didn't, he asked, "You want to help?"

She shrugged.

She followed him out through the sliding glass, into the yard which was dark and sunken into the night. The moon drifted above them amid a spray of stars, neither full nor a crescent, just a big bright thing following their planet around and yet always looking still. It felt nice here, beautiful. The dogs trotted out toward the trees, loping around, sniffing at roots.

"Your friends seem nice," said Clive. He sounded unsure of himself but still perfectly amicable.

"They do." Marta sighed and pulled her arms up to hug her chest. It wasn't cold here, not like it would be in Maine, but still she felt the need to hold herself. Watching the dogs, she asked, "How long have you run this place?"

"Since my dad died," he said. "It's a few years now. I like it. You get a lot of local people who come here for long weekends, again and again. You get to know their faces and see them when they're all together and relaxed. It's a good way to see people. I mean, better than the grocery store." A grin broke suddenly across his face and he added, "And there's strangers, too — like you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "About your dad."

“Aww. I mean.” He waved a hand, and he was so thin, his movements so sudden and awkward, that his joints looked like they belonged on a puppet. His knotted beard bobbed a little when he moved his head. “It was his time.”

He whistled for the dogs and they came instantly, back out of the forest darkness they’d disappeared into so completely, and followed each other back into the kitchen.

“They really listen to you,” said Marta.

“I guess I feed ’em, don’t I? Things listen when you feed ’em.” He scratched one behind the ear as it passed him and smiled again, happily. “Not that you guys are things, are you?”

He headed back inside, and she followed him, sliding the door shut behind her. The light of this kitchen felt alone in the wide night of the woods, the only light burning for miles around.

One of the dogs followed her when she went back upstairs, a German shepherd, keeping close by her legs like a familiar. She found Siele standing in the hallway outside her and Joey’s room, bleary-eyed, bunching up the ends of her shirtsleeves in her fists. Marta stopped at the top of the stairs.

“Marta.” Siele reached up and rubbed sleepily at her eyes. “Woke up to pee. You okay?”

Marta didn’t answer. She might have, except that Siele had woken up to pee: She wasn’t really here to ask about Marta, didn’t really want to know. Siele was smiling one of her oldest smiles, one she was good at, the middle-of-the-night sort of smile that said *trust me* at sleepovers. As if she expected Marta to smile back.

A sudden gust of wind shook the old house, roaring in the eaves and then dying, and Marta remembered how nice it had been outside, with the stars and the trees. Out of nowhere she was hit with the urge to embrace Siele, as though they were teenagers again and there were no strangeness between them—to wrap her arms around her tightly and know again the smell of her hair, to do—something. To tell her something. *If not here, in the night in the middle of the forest, then where will you do it? And when?*

Then she came back to herself and wondered, *When what? What was I thinking of?* Her hand found the soft fur of the dog standing next to her and she scratched it, absently, behind one ear.

“Hey, listen,” Siele said, leaning one shoulder against the wall. “I’m sorry. I’ve just never really known someone to die before. I don’t know what to say.”

That’s because you’re Joey-Siele, thought Marta, and you’re not thinking about it enough to know. Joey-Siele doesn’t know me at all.

Siele looked at her uncertainly, then down at the dog still standing by Marta’s side.

Without Marta realizing it, the dog had straightened where it stood. Its eyes were deep and black. It was very still, its sharp ears perking up and some of its hair bristling the way it would if it had seen an enemy, or something weaker.

“Those dogs kind of creep me out,” Siele said, and laughed a little. Marta still knew her well enough to know that the laugh wasn’t real. “How about that guy Clive? Am I right? Pretty weird dude, out here in the middle of nowhere. Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked then, as though she couldn’t wait to ask it.

“It’s not my dog,” said Marta. The dog was still staring right at Siele and hadn’t moved.

She nodded then, as if coming out of a trance. “Um, I’ll let you get to sleep,” she said, and smiled again, like they’d just had some deep and revealing talk and now they were even closer than before. She backed off down the hall. “See you in the morning,” she said, and slipped quickly through the door to her room — back to the safety and the darkness, back to Joey.

The dog seemed to relax as soon as Siele’s door closed, its ears dropping and hair settling back, and Marta reached down to pet it again. Then she walked slowly back to her own room. The dog followed her inside and she let it, and when she climbed back in under the sheets and the old quilt, the dog followed her there, too, and curled up to sleep in the darkness at the foot of her bed.

When they finally got to Maine, they set up shop in Marta’s childhood home, the home where her mother had died. Tradition spared her from having to reminisce too much; almost immediately they drew the curtains, dusted everything off, closed off the upstairs. Siele and Joey helped a lot, acting silent and respectful, dividing up tasks. Siele’s mother came and hugged all of them, amid a crowd of other friends and neighbors, people Marta hadn’t seen or spoken to in years and whose names she’d forgotten. They told her that they were sorry for her loss. She wasn’t sure what she’d lost exactly, or how long ago she’d lost it, but she knew what they meant, it was there: she felt it. She knew that she’d gone south to seek her fortune in a way, to seek a fortune that was different from her mother’s – and it hadn’t been there, at least not for her to find. She felt as though she’d

gone away to war and come back years later, only to realize the country she'd been fighting for had disappeared. It was a dizzying truth.

Somebody brought her alewives. They weren't the most appetizing fish, but she started preparing some anyway, the morning after the memorial service.

"Oh, yuck," said Siele, walking into the kitchen in her socks and sweatpants. "Those fish always kind of creeped me out."

"Go back without me," said Marta. She kept her gaze on the fish she was gutting as she said it: the dull glazed-over eyes, the limp scales opening up, clearing their way for flesh.

Siele paused. "What?"

"Take Joey. Go back without me."

Siele laughed her silly laugh, only, they both knew, because she didn't know what else to do. "Marta, come on. I'm not going to—"

"I want to stay," said Marta, and then she looked up, her hands still inches deep inside the fish on the cutting board but her eyes locking with Siele's. "At least for now. Someone's got to take care of my mom's house, sort out her affairs."

"That doesn't need to be you," said Siele, Joey-Siele, with predictable innocence. "Marta, listen. We can—"

"Siele, I'm staying."

Siele stopped. There was a hardness in Marta's voice and in her eyes that forced her old friend back, that said, *Stand down*. "We can – we can talk about this later," she said, and then hurried from the room, likely to find Joey. Because that was the way Siele was now: pushing things off until later, unhelpful, a match that only lit when Joey was

around. They were all the way back here in the house they'd both known as children, the town where they'd grown the closest, and here of all places Marta couldn't recognize her.

Marta resumed her gutting. Yes, she would stay. Maybe she'd even grow old in Maine, die alone in a cabin, have a funeral of her own full of complete strangers floating around like movie extras. She'd find her way soon enough and she would never, never, be anyone-Marta, she would be only herself, free and happy. She'd keep vigil over her mother in this way. Yes, she thought, tearing a wing of flesh away and uncovering the barren white bone of the alewife, yes. It was the least she could do.