

*Shore Leave*

The body of the lake appears round -- as if manmade -- and bordered by a battalion of thick trees, sleepy pines and heavysset birch. So precisely cut is the lake that it is natural to assume that the heart of it is flat, shallow -- primed for swimming across and not for exploring depths. But really, it stretches into coves and turns, and below, into hidden auguries and springs. There is no end to it when you are a boy, there are no limits. And if out and away from shore you turn round, you find its borders lost under the soft spell of remembering.

My brothers and I splash at each other on one of the sand ramps. We had rushed in head first. Our father stretches out on the grass beach. He has already swam across and back, has fulfilled his athletes need, away from us. He is disciplined like that. Our mothers are nowhere to be found.

We are getting warmed up, slapping each other. Warming the water. Alyosha, the youngest, keeps trying to get out too far and Maxim, the middle one, chases after him, drags him back into the shallower end, punishes him with a knuckle wedge. Our mothers are nowhere to be found.

“Boys, stretch. Don’t forget to get the ire out,” our father yells out from the grass. He is sitting upright and once he is finished with his distant inspection of us he lays back down, mechanically, his upper body folding slowly onto the grass blades, as if he is the lead hand of a clock rotating counter time.

I jump in with my brothers again, splashing. Alyosha swims under my feet and I tear him out of the water, as if he’s a salmon. Maxim should jump on him now so that we can both wrestle

him down, as our littlest one is a wild fish in need of taming. But Maxim stands out by himself and looks out over the lake, away from me, and so Alyosha swims out to him. I stand there alone, in the shallower end. Again I have to chase them. I have to work for something I should not have to. Something that should be mine, should have always been natural.

In these moments of lucidity, when I stand away from them, the striking likeness of our shapes and lines and muscle-tones speckles in the sun. When we dive, the sound of the waves, of the breakage, the disturbance we bring to the water, those contours exposed when liquid meets our molds, is the same for all of us. Water recognizes like, does not discriminate. It knows our shapes like it knows our father. I get angry at the water. Differences are there too but because there are two of them they do not notice, because they never stand out alone looking back at me, because they are never alone. They play with it, give to the lake and take away.

“Boys, swim now, swim hard! Do as I taught you,” our father yells and my brothers take their orders. They are like miniature olympic swimmers in the lake, like two pelicans in the sun, in the wake of each other, propelled and not struggling.

I follow them, fighting with the light and the blue -- like a land mass out of its element, I fall behind. I fall behind. I am not afraid of drowning but of falling behind. We cover the forest with the sounds of breakage, the grass shakes by the echoes of our strokes. Our strength is limitless. There is not a house, a foreign body, anywhere near, though I know that this is a place in another land -- in Russia, in the past that does not exist, in the nowhere. I lag behind because I have been corrupted by the sea, in another land. And then Alyosha stops and turns his head. I can hear a boys shrill voice calling back to me, a boys voice unbroken by age, unlike Maxim's and mine whose sounds were formed in the embryonic storms of our families, in all that happened at our births between their mother and mine.

“Nikita! Davay, davay. Za nami,” Alyosha yells. “Come on, come on. Follow us.”

I have not met him yet but I will in seven years when he comes to America to find me. They don't know about me yet. For now this is a dream for all of us, in the space that does not exist. Maybe this is where we first meet.

Behind me there is the sound of another body breaking the lake. This could have been his dream except that this dream knows things he cannot, like my anger. I think he will sweep me up and carry me forward to the clan, but he swims past me and onward to my brothers. When he is just in reach of them I hear, “Come on boys, forward, forward, do as I taught you,” and they all swim on while I stay behind still fighting with the saltless body of the lake.

Tim wakes me up. He is standing over me. “Come on, come on. Nick, come on. We're going.” I roll out and don't bother with brushing my teeth. I have a cavity that will soon need tending, so why even bother with furnishings.

Today we don't go to wake anyone else. We don't start with beer or pills. We rush out to Rory's car where the short boards are already loaded. One says *sandman*, the other *livin' it*, in runny red letters. These are Adem's boards. He had been crashing with us for the week. Tim and him surfed together when they were kids. Once in a while they would bring Rory along, and so they all have a history. Then Adem signed up and shipped out. This is his first visit back in two years. He is industrious and energetic. After his tour he says he will join the coast guard. With two phone calls he found his boards. Two for the four of us. He wants nothing in exchange. This is just a thank you for hosting him, though I promise to put him together with my guy because Adem is looking to find something special while he is on shore. “You know, just if it is convenient,” he tells me and slaps my back.

We all smoke a bowl on the way and listen to the *Chili Peppers* with the panels down, the Jeep bouncing towards A-1-A. We are shoeless and wear only swim trunks, a regular visit to the beach, exposed to everything. It is magic outside. Pure magic -- unconditional, not rooted in a here or there. A storm will roll in in two days and the forward winds have already reached the beach.

They know a secret spot near Lake Worth. It is a gem known only to the old timers, the kids who grew up surfing here. It is bordered by rock formations on each side, which are hidden in the depths of the water.

“We’re gonna initiate you,” Tim says.

“Alright.” I am always suspicious, of everyone, and I don’t know why.

“Relax bro,” Adem tells me and slaps me on the back again. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Initiation brother!” Rory yells from the front.

“Bring it,” I say. Bring the storm.

I guess this is in exchange for everything I have taught them. I had initiated them into the world of the lost, just as it was done to me. Innocently, in brotherhood. The after-hours, the dealers, the hidden places with the windows blacked out. I had taken everything I learned from my last two years -- before we lived together -- and brought them into it. They feel indebted. They are still having fun because I am still just making the introductions. Or maybe this is what brotherhood feels like.

The water is cold but it wakes up every cell of the body, down to the history in the bones. I imagine this history oozing out of me while I tremor, and captured by the currents it washes up

on some distant shore out in the Atlantic. Waves roll on unlike the ones Florida is used to. The storm is making it's introductions. We are still having fun.

“When you swim out remember to keep the nose up,” Tim instructs me. “Drift close and wait till I make my move, then follow.”

I am a strong swimmer and expect this to be easy but out in the ocean I keep flipping over, gotten the worst of. Tim is encouraging, trying to get me back on a wave, but I see that he is getting frustrated. Rory is peddling near by, waiting to get onto the board himself. Adem is on shore, upright, leaning back on his knees, gaging this. Their generosity depends on my success.

I try again, again watching Tim catch the wave and then stop himself short of the zip-line so as to get back and check up on me.

“You don't have to do this,” he tells me. “This is a storm swell, not an amateur day. It takes a while. You don't have to prove anything.”

“One more time. Just one more try,” I tell him.

I focus with all my strength and anger. Just as I did when I used to run or play basketball. I would think of everything left behind. I would imagine everything taken. I would think of my father not teaching me to go on. I would manifest images of my half brothers and a life growing up in safety, in hands. But the water does not react as do concrete or hardwood. It absorbs my anger and returns it in unpredictable angles. It gives when it should take, and vice-versa. Again I fall from the board. My lungs fill with water and I come back to the surface. I see Tim far away, riding the wave, becoming a blip, riding forward and not looking back. Nobody is coming back for me.

We drive back as the rain is starting and we cannot get the top flap back on, so we shiver. But while they shake with the vibrancy of success, of having touched the hand of god, I fester in the punishment of the ocean, of my own hate having come back to me.

We do not board up the windows or stock up on canned foods. We will meet the storm with celebration and let it take its course. My mother calls the apartment just to make sure that we are prepared and I tell her that we are, that I have thought of everything, just as people are starting to arrive. I ask her if Dima, her boyfriend, is causing any trouble, if she is okay. She says she is and hangs up.

The music is blasting. Someone is doing lines in the bathroom and someone else is fucking in my room. I sit on the balcony, engage in some jokes but otherwise separate, on the verge of remembering nothing. Catharine comes up to me and touches my back with a coy softness. "Want to draw the stars with me?" she asks. "No. I am fine," I tell her. "It's just the storm." I am in a mood.

She is thin, as if her body is only a host. She wears torn hippy outfits but her high cheek bones, the long, sanded-blond hair, pull her together into an angel, into what I want an angel to look like. Years of proper breeding. She is suffering. Tim leads everyone out to do a 'walk about.'

Someone has mushrooms. "We gonna drop and walk around the golf course," he tells me. We live on the 9th hole. "We gonna open up the world, brotha'," he says, "come on."

"I'll come down in a little while," I tell him. I need to ride this out. No one else can help. When the apartment is empty I go in and stand at the center of the living room allowing the music, the techno bleeps and bops, to occupy every crevice of the space that it can take, then I hear something break in the bathroom. When I open the door Adem is on the floor, his nose

bleeding, but when I lift his head he comes to with a smile. "Great stuff, man," he tells me. I had given him the contact to my man and he has been snorting oxys like a champ for the past two hours. "Living, brother. Living," he says. He is fearless, I think. He needs no one. "I love it, man," he says to me. "Ain't life grand..." In two years I will hear, by rumor, that he dies while chewing his own handgun.

"You almost had that wave, brother. One more and you would."

"Do you want me to get you help?"

"No, no." He sits up "I'm good. Great. Living the dream. Want some?" he asks. "Want to ride the wave with me? I got you, man."

"No." I'm trying to keep it together. I try to keep it together without knowing where anyone of us is going.

On the shore I see the darkness of the devil. The servant at his knees. Sand and water punish my body and I cannot tell them apart in the dark. They will wonder where I went. In their 'walk about' they will return to the apartment. They will wonder where I am. Rory's car will be missing, one of the boards with it. Adem will still be living.

I step forward and forward, not sure who is calling my name. There is so little beach left. Just a disturbed black pool stretching out into the abyss, and I begin to run till there is no more ground and I am forced to peddle and peddle until all the rage, all the ire, is wiped from me, till the heart is shallow. Till I am only a speck in the black. Then I turn round and ride my first wave to shore, living, for that one moment convinced that there are no limits, no forward or back; that something is timeless and forgiving, that under the soft spell of remembering we are free.