

The Reservoir

Bernice and Abby sit on separate railroad ties, legs splayed out over the pebbly dirt parking lot as the sun winks through the tall pines. Eagles Cottage has spent a lot of time planning for this day hike just for the rest of us, forty feet away, to be seated around a small rock that displays two ant-ridden Snickers. “Group” has been called at the discovery of the illicit candy. Staff holds all money, or should, so the extremely strong suspicion is that there is a thief amongst us.

Abby and Berne, for once, are not primary suspects. First of all, due to Mellaril, each of the poor dears have ballooned to over 200lbs. and almost surely would have eaten the candy bars on the spot; secondly, when Abby is guilty, she turns the table by having a fit, while right now she appears no more than deeply frustrated. She checks the dew steaming off the van hood and claps her hand off her thigh to send out a message that she is way past ready. When she catches me staring she juts her jaw at the mountain, mouths *Heather... Now!*

“Abby—can you keep still, please?” I call, doing my best to appear nonchalant and thus not up the ante. Should I challenge her more firmly we'd have yet another

incident to take care of, and once these hot spots gain momentum they can string out as maddeningly as viral pop-ups (or explode into something much worse). Abby pinches her ruby lips in a nasty kiss.

Other than myself on this trip are two other staff, Miriam, cottage psychologist, and Jack, lent to us from one of the boys' cottages for extra security. I myself am still smarting from a direct challenge from Miriam, but for now the three of us sit beside each other in a show of unified authority. "Sure is sad when people think they need to steal," says Miriam, her voice so exaggeratedly plaintive that a few girls roll their eyes.

Oneda translates: "C'mon you punk asses—someone just cop to it." Her eyes dart over at Marguerite, our recovering anorexic, and Cherie, our relapsing bulimic, without officially giving them away. "They ain't going to turn around and take us home over some ill-got candy anyways. *I'll* take your dang board-time!"

I wrap my arms around my shins and lean forward, doing my best to hide the fact that I'm as raring to go as the rest of them. "Well, we're staying put till we work this out. Go ahead, call our bluff."

Cherie and Marguerite shift in unison.

Miriam nods at me stiffly, the same stiffness with which, just earlier, as I waited outside the bathroom, she approached and said, "You know, if you're having trouble supervising Abby's final 'Good-Byes' you might ask 'What am *I* unable to let go of?' " Yes, supposedly we're all in therapy together here (though in staff meetings I've never heard any dark secrets or addiction admissions from Miriam), and the fact that I'm Abby's *Staff Rep*—her go-to counselor—should be testament that I'm already very much attuned to her (though Abby's recent expulsion from Sunny Days also means I ultimately

failed). To Miriam, lamely, I'd said merely, "Yes, well, as you can imagine, right now Abby isn't consumed with wrapping things up correctly as feeling betrayed—by all of us." But, I reassured her, she'd get her Good-Byes done. Every kid. Ten checks. "If not by today, then tomorrow by check out. I promise."

Now I look on as Miriam flags Abby and Bernice back over to our circle. When we'd debarked the van the two of them were the first ones out, parading around the lot, inner-tubes out front like bass drums, hollering out their intention to plop into the first body of water they came to, "Lake—or piss puddle." Clearly it's Miriam's intention to use this fervor for leverage. The two march over and sit down amongst us. Miriam shrugs. "So, what do you two think about all this?"

Abby glares at Miriam and mumbles, "Woulda told you before, you didn't kick my friendly ass out." Before Miriam can react to this, she adds, "Well, pardon my French, I think it's F'd up! We all know who did it—'least anyone with half a brain—so lets just string'em up and move along."

"Talk to your peers," reminds Miriam.

Abby shifts her bulk to face Cherie and Marguerite dead-on, takes a glance at the candy and clucks, "Bet you two are wishing you were ants just now." Then her mean face comes on. "Anyway, we all know you two did it. You shoulda' just scoffed the shit down right off. You didn't. Now's the time to cop a plea." The mean face disappears and on comes an evangelist's. "Let us be *Re-Leased!*"

All eyes turn to the accused who again shift in discomfort. Abby's challenge is getting under them. Until she lassoes her hand and chimes out again. "Let's get us going and hook up with some RE-EAL men. Capital *UMMMMM!*"

Everyone cracks up, Cherie and Marguerite included, and Abby grins at Miriam with huge satisfaction. Miriam, in her patched, denim, sixties-wear, which none of us have ever seen, shakes it off and regathers herself. "...Bernice?"

Next to Abby, Berne has pulled her arms all the way inside her sizable *Chris Brown and Rihanna* t-shirt. She glowers but doesn't manage to say anything.

"Well," coaxes Miriam, "doesn't the inner-tube mean you expected to be on your way somewhere beyond a parking lot?"

When Bernice finally speaks her voice is weak as a pull-to-speak doll's. "Am on my way."

Miriam nods as if she certainly hopes this to be the case. She is about to ask something more when suddenly, out of nowhere, Cherie blurts, "Okay—we did it! Satisfied?"

Relief coats Bernice's face as, like a starter's gun has fired, the rest of the girls spring to their feet and scramble for make-up packs, purses, and other hike-essentials. Technology has been barred except for Miriam's phone. Our procession unfolds like an accordion, crunchy brown leaves underfoot, vibrant blue sky cresting the rising trail. Abby and Berne burst out ahead, inner tubes around their chests so their arms bob to the side like robots; Cherie and Marguerite remain to the rear, lorded over by Jailer Jack. The gentle breeze carries the drifting tones of aimless conversations. Bertie is explaining something to Kristy about fashion, referring to "seams" and "hips," while Oneda tells Gloria that "Ramon, from Dobbins, can *jam*," which I hope refers to his basketball prowess. All is well for the moment.

I check my fanny-pack to make sure I've remembered rash creams and midday meds, then I jog ahead to tug gently on Abby's outstretched left arm. "Hey," I whisper, "now might be a great time to mosey up to someone and do a Good-Bye."

"I think you just said *mosey*."

"Don't be too smart for your own good, Ab. Please."

"I'm too smart to *mosey*, that's for sure."

"C'mon. You can start right here with your sidekick. Just pick a nice memory, honor it, and tell them you'll miss'em."

"Nice memory? You're kidding, right?"

"Oh come on. I have pictures of you in precious moments with every kid here."

"Pictures, maybe—but you wouldn't like the video."

"...Even Kristy. Bring up that time you did that dance step from *High School Musical*."

"Oh, fuck, now there's one to check *OFF*. And I was totally tongue in cheek."

"You were?" I say. Abby just shakes her head at me. "Oh. Well, then start with whoever you want." When she doesn't answer I say, "Ab..."

"*Got* it already, Betty Crocker!"

Betty Crocker, a low blow if there ever was one, but clearly there's no more I can say. I fall back along the trail and, predictably—just as she wants me to—recall the first time we ever met. On my first day of orientation two years ago, determined to take on the job with gusto, I'd nonetheless found myself a bit overwhelmed when I was sent to Eagles cottage for lunch. The girls all seemed so outrageous and full of performance and—my initial fear was that I'd be overlooked—glommed onto me as if I was a movie

star. Meanwhile, having been studying case files and clinical designations all morning, I was convinced that each of them were whirling gyroscopes, ready to teeter and slip from their delicate strings at the least provocation. When my mounting anxiety—an anxiety that has since leveled off but is still there—became unbearable, I ducked into the kitchen, which I thought was empty. There, broad backed and sobbing into the dishwasher, was Abby.

“You don't know shit about me—don't know *shit!*” she bemoaned the suds.

I was stuck, afraid to back away less she spotted me and thought I'd invaded her space, afraid to clear my throat for the same reason. The longer I waited the worse it was. Finally, I opened the door an inch and pressed it closed loudly, pretended I'd only just come in.

She spun around. “Who the fuck are you, Betty Crocker?”

“Betty Crocker? No. I'm Heather. I'm new.”

“I can tell from one look, Prom Queen, that you're uptight as a friggin' board. Marcelle—the cook—is saying *I* left these dishes, that bitch!”

I stood blankly, hypnotized a moment by the girl's rising beauty, the clear blue eyes, high cheekbones, dangerous Rubenesque voluptuousness. I looked on as she raised a plate like she was going to smash it. Plate still up, her expression totally changed; she calmed, smiled easily, and asked, “So? Counselor or kid?”

“What?”

“Are you a coun-sell-or... or are you a *kid?*”

“Why, a counselor, do I look like a kid?”

“Who knows. So don’t just stand there, Betty, make use of those keys and get me some sanitizer!

“I’ll come back and talk to you when you’ve settled down,” I managed, recalling at least one tip from the orientation film.

Voice suddenly cordial again, she said, “Prom Queen, if it’s that you don’t know what sanitizer is... it’s the stuff you put in the dishwasher to get rid of all our cruddy germs. I need it, you have the ability to get it, and all due respect it’s your job.”

“Okay. But I told you—my name is Heather. I’m far from a Betty Crocker or a prom queen. And since I’m still in orientation, technically it’s not *yet* my job.”

“Way to use your scepter, Prom Queen. I’m Abby, Queen of Bees.”

“What does that mean?”

“Who knows, I just made it up, stop looking for so much *meaning*, we’re just kids here.”

It was good advice. At the time, I should have heeded it. Especially given that two hours later, following another round of films, I was suddenly handed keys to one of the vans and asked to take a kid to a last minute dermatology appointment at Kaiser. I was still struggling to make sense of the van’s dashboard when I was startled by a voice beyond the window. “Okay, gimme the keys, Betty, let’s go on the road trip of our lives.” She held out her hand, complete with arm rash. When she saw me look at it she said: “STD. *Shooting Toward Doom*. Just joking—who knows what the fuck it is.”

I’m not a very witty person, but I did my best. “In reverse order: don’t curse, and I hope that’s not truly how you see your situation.”

“There may be hope for you yet, Betty,” she mumbled with a small smile. “I’m sure from my file you know that my mom and me went on some pretty wild road trips. She finally disappeared with a truck driver, left me at a truck stop. Now she’s a lesbo. FYI, I don’t let nobody else call her that, only I can.”

“That’s terrible. The truck stop part. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been burned—but just right.” She wiggled her shoulders. “Toasty in’here. My fire *always* lit!”

Later on, Miriam confirmed the road trips. “We got her when she was ten. Abandoned on I-5. She was in high heels and had lipstick on. But it wasn’t her mother who left her—it was her dad, who she hasn’t seen since and keeps on a pedestal.”

Even now, walking along this dappled path, watching her, that image of her alone and dressed like that—and her fiery perspective—still possesses me. The balance between resilience versus slowing down, armor versus vulnerability.

“C’mon girls,” shouts Abby, her and Berne’s lead out ahead still holding for now. “We’re headed to the promised land!”

The trail through the woods is long and upward but we stick to it with gusto. After a mile, far below, the parking lot is an innocent gray oval, the Snickers probably long carted away by those ants. The path only continues to rise through the trees and out of sight. Though they hide it, Abby has begun to limp slightly and Berne is having trouble with her tube. When Abby catches me studying them she firms her lips and shouts, “Agua!” I nod distantly, pause, and look back at our divergent line.

Marguerite, as is her tendency, is working Jack, leading him by the pull-string of his hooded sweatshirt. Jack looks war torn with brambles stuck to his pant legs and wide

sweat circles beneath his armpits. I hadn't realized how big he is, but in the tunneled woods he seems to tower like a bear. "Do we have a plan?" he asks me.

"Why don't we break for snack?" I suggest to Miriam, and when she nods, I call Abby back. Abby returns with a front of impatience but I can tell she is relieved.

"Agua," she repeats.

Jack looks on up the path. "How far is this water, anyway?"

Abby shrugs. "I dunno... where is it, PQ?" she asks me.

A sudden parental-type chill comes over me as I look to Miriam, who is standing-by listening as she collects stragglers.

"Oh *nice*," says Marguerite, "no one even knows where we goin'?"

Miriam says to Abby. "You were talking about water when we boarded the bus. That was the first I heard of it."

Abby raises a hand in a profound stop sign, futilely trying to stop any more talk on the matter. "No-*ohh*. Nah-*uhh*!" But bewilderment works its way onto her face. "We were talking about it in Group last week—it was on the dang website!"

I meet eyes with Miriam then make my way over to her. I whisper weakly, "Now that I think about it, the lake photo may have been on the other site—"*Preparing for a Hike*."

I return to Abby but can't meet her eyes. I feel terrible, like it's my fault. Before I can say a word her jaw drops and she checks back and forth between Miriam and me, hoping against hope that we're pulling her leg.

"Uh-uh... I'm sorry," she says defiantly, "but there better be some friggin' water around here, cause I got a swimsuit on underneath and sure haven't been, like a dog,

humpin' this mother *f*-ing ring up a mountain just for the fun of it!" Too pained to continue she bites her lip and stops.

Behind her, most of the other girls are titillated by staff's unbelievable ineptness. And, truth be told, thrilled by Abby's predicament. None of them would have gone near water anyway—it would mess up their hair. If they brought bikinis it was just for show.

I spread a blanket. Jack has been toting all the food in his backpack and is eager to unload. He sits down on a rock and from the top of the pack I lift out the snack bags. As I hand one to Berne, I whisper, "You told me to remind you of your declaration—carrots and celery first."

"Whatever," she snaps. "We've come *five miles* worth of calories."

I nod at the parking lot.

"Don't know about you... but that sure ain't the parking lot *I* left."

I feel the day slipping through our collective fingers, the negative pull like an undertow. It's then that I see Cherie turn and whisper to Oneda. I overhear only, "elephant on a pin," before both erupt into giddy laughter. I turn to see that Abby has seated herself on a narrow tree stump to sulk.

I send Cherie a sharp glare, but not before Abby grasps the situation herself.

"No-no. They're capping on me, I can feel it! Give them two bitches board time."

Sweetly, Cherie offers. "But Abby, we were only complimenting your, umm, *balance*,"

"Bullshit!"

"Abby, no cursing," says Miriam.

Abby digs deep and says, "...All I know is I'm finishing up my sandwich then going to find that Bigfoot. You know what they say about guys with big feet!" Then, "What are you eating, PQ, you twig?"

"Don't worry, I'll find something, Abby dear. Thanks for your concern."

The rest of the girls, draped about in their usual cliques, lapse into subdued stillness. They're tiredness makes me wonder if our hike may have come to its end. Cherie especially, despite her sturdy sarcasm, appears to be melting into her blanket; loose strands of muscle hang from her bones as she sits nibbling at the celery sticks meant for Berne.

"Then *don't* come! Fuck you too!" Abby shouts, shattering the stillness.

I turn to catch Berne's retort, a cold flick of the wrist.

I have no idea what has just occurred, neither do Jack or Miriam.

Abby is suddenly fully aroused again. "Fine—none of y'all deserve me anyway. Go ahead and *stay* here on your puny-ass butts. *Die* here!"

My insides tighten in fear that we have come to Abby's big blowout—her big flip off to all of us; a way out of her Good-Byes; a means to looking back upon her time at Sunny Days with nothing but wrath. Miriam merely sends out a sad expression for all to take in. She too appears to believe Abby is manipulating, though I'm not sure it's one hundred percent, or even fifty. There seems a wellspring of true panic in her eyes. The lower part of the narrow stump and ground around it is charred, and as Abby stamps around soot puffs into the air and clings to her fresh-laundered red sneakers and matching red skirt, but she is too wound up to notice.

"Abby, do me a favor and take a time-out," I tell her. "I'll get your meds."

Cherie chooses this moment to up the ante. “Let her rant, she’s all but a memory to us anyway. Good riddance.”

Abby stops and for a moment her face goes blank. Then she firms up for revenge. She begins to say something but at first nothing comes out. She kicks at the dirt and lets out a sort of squeal. Soot continues to stir up. The girls notice and start to giggle.

“Pigpen,” mumbles Oneda.

For the first time Abby notices the soot and quickly tries to brush herself off, but the carbon is on her hands too and each time she touches herself it leaves mark. Without fully realizing it she is covering herself with handprints.

The girls begin to howl.

“Looks like Abby finally met the black man she’s always pined for!” announces Oneda, which sets off the tumult all over.

Abby looks down and sees the extent of what she’s done. Her eyes and cheeks contort. “Fuck you! Fuck *all* of you!” She breaks for the woods.

“Abby’s been groped!” calls Marguerite after her.

“That’s enough!” shouts Jack, furiously.

There is sudden silence. Everyone—even Jack—is caught of guard as the violent male voice echoes through the woods. Jack’s face is wild, then it collapses. Belatedly, the mild sound of Abby’s escape toward the woods can be heard again. “I’m so, so sorry,” Jack says. “It’s just... how can you girls be so cruel to each other when you have so much in common?”

Jack’s anger has shocked me, too. For a moment I can’t remember my thoughts. I clear my face and try to think of something to say. Then I see Berne slowly get up and

follow in Abby's path. Mindlessly, she has grabbed her inner tube, which she hugs tight to her chest like a security blanket. "Wow, Jack," I hear myself say. "You really seem to empathize with Abby on this one, what's up?"

He waves me off. "Oh, save it, will'ya?" He nods toward Miriam. "—You sound like *her*." Then he shakes his head tiredly and presses himself to his feet. "I'll go after them."

From beyond the circle, Miriam watches Jack disappear. It's unclear if she heard him. "Whew, sure is a lot of sudden chaos. And here we are on this hike we've been planning for two months." She shrugs and raises her hands. "What to do?"

The circle is tranquil. No response except for the shuffling of feet, a few benign smirks. "It's just *her*," says Cherie finally, her voice sounding somewhat sincere.

"What do you mean?" asks Miriam.

"She craps on everything."

"Well, alright," says Miriam, drawing out the words, "what else?"

"*What else?* We need sumpn' to do!" says Marguerite. "We can't let her drag all of us down."

Miriam shrugs with opened hands to model full freedom of choice. "Well then—what?"

From her spot over by a tree, hardly seen, Kristy timidly raises her hand and waits to be called upon. When Miriam acknowledges her, there are immediate groans. "Well," she says, "since we're all sort of tired, we could always go back to that place we stopped on the drive out, pick more strawberries, *that* was fun."

More groans, from pretty much everyone except Miriam and me. But no one has a better idea. Miriam nods. Success. “Okay, I guess we have a plan.”

“You guys,” clucks Marguerite, “...always pretending you aren’t steering things when you are.”

The girls begin lazily pulling their things together even though there is still no sign of Jack or our lost ones. Since Miriam can’t very well go after them, I’m the only one left. I get up, cross the brush, but wait to enter the woods before I start to call out their names. The woods is mostly birch trees, peeling white trunks multiplying wildly. The leafy ground, dancing with the shadows of overhead branches, is dazzling. Ahead the forest descends, darkens, then rises again towards a distant cluster of rocks. I continue downhill, shout out “*Abbiieee*,” then again. I feel like I’ve been chasing after her forever—longer—and as I descend into the deep shade all she represents to me seems to invade my mind. For a crazy moment I’m poised between two realities, the darkened woods...and the long dark drive that descends from Sunny Days campus into town. There she stands, alone on the gravel shoulder beneath a streetlight, mascara running her face, wrist extended like an offering. Poised in her other hand is a large shard of glass. On the ground is a black pool of blood.

“Abby, stop, *please*.”

Once again comes the terrible grin followed by another lengthwise cut.

“Please, Ab... we can talk.”

“Oh yeah, right,” she cries, “then we’ll prance through the posies.”

An hour later, in the temporary-hold unit of Kaiser Psychiatric and a Haldol-induced haze, her words are dreamy, but not. “There’s no place for me. Anywhere.”

I try to remain hopeful, say to her, “Just yesterday—don’t you remember calling Berne *Auntie*, and Ramon from Dobbins *Dad*?”

Before she drifts off, she says, “Yes, so sad, that game. Think about it. Think about it. And I’m only eleven...”

And then I am somewhere else entirely. A woods much further away. The shortcut home from middle school I took when I still believed Albert Stoakley was my friend, my protector...

I begin to jog. The running gives me a dizzy sense of buoyancy and gets me quickly up the hill to the brighter cluster of rocks. Out of breath, I catch myself against a trustworthy boulder where the ridge flattens out into a sort of maze. The girls had to have come this way. “*Ab-biiiee! Berrrrnnne...!*” My voice deadens amidst the stone, so I walk forty feet to a clearing.

“*Ber-niiiiieece! ...Ab-biiiee! ...Jaa-ack!*”

My voice travels further this time. I step past a boulder and have to shade my eyes against suddenly brighter light. For a long second, squinting, I can’t figure out exactly what I am staring at, a great blanket of vibrant blue with dots on it.

The dots, I see, are boats. I’ve come to a waist high, manmade wall. Beyond it, a steep cliff. To my right are stone stairs that lead downward to a horseshoe of beach, packed with people, a spray of sudden, distorted noise.

Then I see them, directly below me, out in the water. Berne is inside her inner tube while Abby and Jack hold onto its rim. All three are grinning mischievously toward shore to where a group of older boys have only just debarked a bus and are stripping off their shirts.

Abby's lips move but I can barely sift out her words. Something about, *Real Men...* *Ummmm*, to which Jack tilts back his head, laughing, gags on some gulped water and begins to cough.

Then Berne spots me—I don't know how. From where they are, I must be hand-sized to them. I watch her nudge Abby and point. Abby sees me and without missing a beat, screams my way. "Hey, PQ, listen to this!" She raises her fingers and starts a count...

"*FUCK!*" shout Abby and Berne in unison.

And then again. This time, having cleared his throat, Jack joins in,

"*FU-UCK!!!*"

I stand there and nod and grin and wave back to them, and start my way down the stairs. In a few steps, I find myself hidden between some more boulders. The sudden cacophony dies away and is gone. I feel the frozen grin on my face. I stop, lean, press my weight again. The substance of stone. Is it supporting me? Or enclosing me? I wonder how much of me Abby has borne these last two years, now much juice I have squeezed from her. And yet she's all but gone for me now, headed off to a more secure placement, her last chance before a more permanent stay at *Napa State*.

I decide to turn back—this celebrative snapshot of Abby is too costly to me. There is a parking lot at the reservoir, which means I might as well return, inform Miriam and the girls of our discovery then walk back to the van myself and swing around. And this is what I do.

When I get back to the beach the rest of the girls haven't gone into the water or even changed into their suits. Miriam informs me that there has been an unsuccessful

interaction with the boys, who are from a prep school. Jack appears restored and ready to drive. When Abby and Berne finally return from the bathroom, dressed, it is staff who gets shepherded staff to the van. Abby takes a seat in the way back, as far away from me as she can get, angry, I presume, about my disappearing act. We don't talk again that night.

When I see her in the morning, I ask her again about her Good-Byes, but she shines me off. "Say *good-bye* to having leverage over me," she quips on her way out of the cottage, and I don't see her again until later, at her Final Discharge.

The meeting is very official, all the brass is there—Sunny Days' Director, its Chief Consul, its Chief Psychiatrist, the head nurse, her social worker (Miriam)—most of who Abby hasn't seen since her Intake. Since the school is no longer in control, Abby has dressed to the nines. For the occasion she has put on a skirt, heels and extra thick lipstick—so much that I can see the bright red slash from across the courtyard, where I sit, alone, in a much smaller room, awaiting my new Staff Rep kid.

Though the layout is difficult—when she begins to wave about a sheet of paper that must be a list of complaints, I can't pull my eyes away—it also gives me some needed distance. I've been informed that she's chosen to be taken from campus directly after the meeting, seeing no one. In the meantime, I see her moving lips and imagine her responses to the psychiatrist's official questions: *Why didn't you do your Good-Byes?* "Fuck good byes. Fuck you." *And did you bond with your Staff Rep?* "Talk-talk-talk, but all by the book, she never *said* anything. Same with Miriam there." *And what do you seek from your new placement?* "Shackles, baby. Bet you'd like to tie me up." I hear it, but I try to let it all go, close my eyes and let the words fade like lines of music into deep

outer space. I have to reset, prepare myself for this Maggie Sterling, tiny—4'8", blonde, a cutter, who last week tried to burn down her family home.

I get up to lower the blind and, though I know I shouldn't, take one final look. Abby has finished her rant and taken a moment to lean back in her chair and bask in her situation. I can't tell for sure, but the posture seems an almost perfect replica of what I saw yesterday when she leaned back in the water to call out to the sky. That moment is still fresh to her, she will tap it as long as she can.