

“Pin your ear to the wisdom post
Pin your eye to the line
Never let the weeds get higher than the garden
Always keep a sapphire in your mind”

Even in August, the earliest hours of her mornings in the cabin were cold. She would sit up in bed as first light encroached and swaddle herself in blankets, unmoving for minutes, watching the faint pluming of her breath. As if by fleeing the outside world, its false promises, its complications, so too must she have fled its heat.

She thought of herself in these moments, ludicrously, as a kind of monk, though had enough self-awareness, or self-consciousness, to mock the thought as it came. She did understand a need for austerity, for rigidity, for lack. The cold seemed to both extend from these thoughts and affirm them. When she'd spent enough time plumbing this biting silence she would rise, and plod from the cot to the folding table across the single room, where with her feet bare and cold she'd make coffee. The blankets swayed with her movements, brushed the upper ridges of her feet. August, and she could see her breath.

The first morning she flicked on the light when she awoke but in time found she enjoyed things better in the dark. In the dark, mornings here became a ritual. With the room lighted and her surroundings seen, the coffee machine was too new, too blatantly mechanical. Incongruous. In the dark this was not so. No bucolic ideal to be destroyed in the dark, when by ritual she would stand at the window listening to the machine gurgle and watching the world's stillness lift. Pressed close to the glass her breathing fogged the pane, imparted something of a pulse. When the coffee was done she'd take a mug to the dock and sit with her swaddled blankets and steaming coffee and sometimes a toe dimpling the stilled water, and wait. The sun climbing somewhere off to the east, beyond the endless pine. The lake, these early hours, was glass.

In those encroaching dawns she waited for the plaintive wail of the loons. The sound enveloped, haunted, a clarion call of three parts that raised the hair on the back of her neck and signaled, abstractly,

the moment she could drink her coffee. Most mornings she wouldn't see the birds at all, or only floating along the far reaches of the lake, specks in the abating darkness, but she held off drinking her coffee, without fail, until she heard them. The noise rushing off the placid surface of the lake struck her as so essentially wild it overwhelmed her. It grounded her to this place more than ever could the pine needles sticking to her soles, the towering isolation she felt. The loons—she had missed the loons.

On the fourth day she went into the shed, driven by memories of a bicycle from her youth. As a child she'd ridden it around the lake, a loop almost a mile and a half, and she had timed every lap, glad to have a tangible expression of her progress. Unlatching the shed's ancient door now she had visions of flying around the lake again, relearning the curves and banks she once knew, making some goal of timing herself. But when she was finally able to find and pull out the bike, leaning at the very back behind the cobwebbed relics of forgotten summers, oars, tackle boxes, discarded toys housed in cardboard, it was a small and rusted thing with a dragging chain and she gave up on the idea outright.

She let the bike clatter to the ground and grabbed the rake instead, thinking of a story from her grandmother. The wood handle was rough and splintered and she scanned the shed for gloves, a single sweep from where she stood, before heading down to the water without. Who needs gloves when she'd been going barefoot the whole time and plus so what if she gets a splinter, rough hands meant hard work. This was not hard work or work at all but she allowed herself the budding impression it might be. By the shoreline she leaned the rake by the handle against a tree and rolled the cuffs of her jeans to her knees and the rake clattered to the ground while she rolled them. She picked it up and took the final steps down to the water, calves bright with fresh exposure to sunlight, standing with her feet just beyond the reach of the lake's gentle lapping. At this point in the late morning the sun had risen high enough to confirm it was indeed summer, the predawn cold a distant memory, but the lake, as always, was freezing. Her shoulders shot up as she stepped in. The lakebed was a sandy loam that shifted beneath her weight and she burrowed her toes into it and flexed, with the tops of her feet still breaching the waterline. She stepped farther in, water halfway up her calves now, head bent, watching the minnows dart between her legs. As

a child she had tried to catch them barehanded. The rake loose in her hand by her side, she tilted her head back to inhale, feeling herself expand, marveling at how the only fitting name for the scent was crisp. She exhaled and hefted the rake before her. Bending slightly, she lowered the rake head into the water.

As soon as the tines sank into the lakebed the silt, disturbed, clouded the water. Her mother, years ago, had told her not to worry about this, that buried as it would be you'd never be able to see it anyway, that you had to go by feel. The rake head was completely lost to the murk. She pulled it towards her, undaunted, she had time, making sure the tines pushed deep, knowing how things in the lake might settle.

She spent hours on these dredging expeditions over the weeks, working daily, raking through the muck, fingers on the handle attuned to the subtle resistance of anything solid. After her first time raking she swapped out her jeans for a bathing suit, noting, as if observing somebody else, she did harbor some pragmatism after all. When she finished raking a section she would step carefully through it, toes probing, the lakebed more compact, more clay, at these lower, scraped out levels. Anything she stepped on more solid than mud she pulled from the water. Mostly this was twigs, stones. These she would launch into the water as far as she could. But sometimes she found *things*, coins, bottle caps, beer tabs, a hammer, twice a pen—these pithy treasures she dropped in a bucket, for no reason other than they didn't belong in the lake. She had no use for them so she kept them in the bucket.

Her days took on a dreamlike monotony. Aside from her raking she read, she strolled the forest paths, she cooked for one, she let the dishes pile up. This is what she came here for, she told herself, to relax. She had talked to no one, didn't want to, couldn't – and this included, being so occupied with the task she'd undertaken, herself.

She liked occasionally to wander away from the lake and the cabins, deeper into the forest, where she could feel unwatched. Probably she wasn't watched when near the lake but she felt like she might be, or could be, which was sufficiently objectionable. The neighbors had never given her any reason for caution and she actually knew a few of them, from decades ago, but she heeded her voice of unreason because why not heed it. She had ignored the more primitive aspects of herself for some time—why not

indulge them, and escape others' sight? Largely she already had. And if, in that unmonitored expanse, she was to get lost, or was to get found by some wild and territorial animal, well. At least she'd go out unseen. She couldn't define the appeal but told herself she didn't need to.

Sometimes she was gone for hours. She trusted blindly her sense of direction and never came to regret it, trooping around the forest with only a vague sense of the path she took, the turns she'd taken. Invariably she found her way back. What these forays did for her exactly was unclear. She certainly could not have said. The singular word she could have given, if pressed, was *zen*. She'd never experienced the real unadulterated thing but imagined it felt something like this.

On these walks she kept an eye out for animals. This served dual purposes, curiosity and self-preservation, though she never came across anything exciting enough, a bear, a moose, to satisfy the first or endanger the second. A porcupine, once, and she followed it at a distance for a way and lost it somewhere in the ferny underbrush. Mostly she saw squirrels and birds and deer.

Once she did see a man. From his hobbled gait and the staff he leaned on she knew he was old, and she called out hello to him. The thought of conversation in general appalled her, but something in the anonymity of this meeting thrilled. He stopped and looked at her but said nothing. Maybe blind, she thought. She called hello again.

“Can I help you?” he answered.

“No, sorry,” she said. “I was just saying hello.”

“Hello, then,” he said, and turned and kept walking. When she could not see him or hear him anymore she stared on for some time.

She'd brought her cellphone with her, but after a few days when the battery died she didn't bother to charge it. Cell signals did not reach the cabin, she knew from experience. She thought maybe she should charge it for her trips into town to get groceries, hear some news of the real world, but ended up never doing it. Less a decision than a result. Was inaction a decision? The phone gathered dust on the

shelf it was placed on when she arrived.

For three weeks her seclusion remained intact, for three weeks she was allowed her pastoral bliss. She did not realize how precious the time had been until she was on the other side of it, looking back.

Cars driving these backroads were uncommon but not unheard of, so the engine whine belonging to the car that would shatter her tranquility barely registered with her as an entity until the noise, abruptly, ceased. It should have continued, a passing car's engine would have continued to whine. The halt piqued her attention. A car parking. White noise was just that until it ceased.

The list of possibilities was short. No matter who it was, it was someone whose claim of dominion over this place at least equaled her own, meaning she couldn't say, get lost, dickbag, I'm trying to be alone. Probably she wouldn't say that anyway but she preferred having the option. She stood from the musty armchair she'd been reading in and peered through the window. Two cars in the cabin driveway now, her rental Jeep and a silver BMW SUV. Brian. She came out of the cabin as he was throwing open the door to his car, waving with the free arm, shouting "Surprise, Cyn, it's me!" like saying it was him wasn't redundant.

"Hey, Bri. Thanks for the warning."

"It's good to see you, too," he said, chiding. "I thought maybe you could use some company."

"I assume that's a joke," she said flatly.

"Why would that be a joke?"

"If it's not a joke," she said, "I don't want the company." They stood facing each other with hands on hips. "But it is a joke, right, so it doesn't matter."

"I was planning on coming up before I knew you were here," he acknowledged with a shrug. "So, yes, a joke in that sense. But at the same time."

"You should've told me you were coming," she told him as he opened his trunk. "There's not much stuff here." He lifted his bag with a grunt and slung the strap over his shoulder. The trunk closed at the

press of a button on the car-key.

“How? I sent you a text.”

“You should’ve told Mom to tell me when I saw her. She must’ve known you were coming up here, right?”

“We can go into town tomorrow to get more stuff. Don't worry about it.”

“I was just in town.”

“I can go into town, then.” They entered the cabin, her first, him second, and inside he let his bag's strap slide from his shoulder to the ground with a dull thud.

“How long are you gonna be here?” she asked him. She faced him with crossed arms.

“How long are *you* gonna be here?” he hit back. Then, with a conciliatory smile, “Sorry, I didn't—I'm here for just today and tomorrow. Leaving Sunday morning. It was the only time all summer I could get up here.”

In no time they warmed to each other, falling into patterns familiar and cherished, the protective elder stoically tolerating the ribbings of the goaded younger, such willing martyrdom.

She mentioned his weight gain, humorously.

“Hey, sensitive topic,” he said, hand patting his stomach. “Lucy's been on me about it. I'm running every day I'm up here, in fact. In case she asks.”

“That sounds like a healthy thing you got there.”

He smiled and sat back. “You're just full of it today, huh.”

“What do you expect? My peace was unexpectedly intruded.” She smiled too and added, “It is good to see you, Bri.”

They played cards that night, and drank. Brian updated his sister on what he considered the essential facts of his life, job marriage kids, as if by recitation. Not much change in the past year. She

teased him the way he let her and they laughed together and talked about old friends and where-are-they-nows. He asked her what she would do after this, the Return to the Real World, and she admitted she didn't know. She wouldn't go back to her old job, she said, couldn't, because just imagine having to face everyone. They'd heard the story—no, they'd heard *a* story. He asked her what, exactly, the difference was. He knew the main beats of what had happened but wanted a first-hand account. This was his little sister, after all. Despite knowing the question was coming she managed to be caught off guard. She shook her head and laughed, once, the way she thought she would if it something minor, some surface-level insult. “I don't really...”, she managed, eyes on the carpet, before falling silent.

“Alright,” Brian said, hands up in surrender, “I'm not gonna make you. I didn't even bring my waterboarding stuff, so. Hey, look. It's okay. Forget I asked. Fuck him, who cares. Who needs him.”

They clinked glasses and drank to that: Fuck Him.

The next morning when she woke it was already light out. Brian was not there. She moved through the cabin feeling like a visitor, sipping the coffee he'd brewed. As always too strong for her taste but she drank it anyway.

He came back in dripping wet, asking her to throw him a towel. “I did my across and back,” he told her. This was the reason he made sure to get to the cabin every year, to do it, to swim the lake, three quarters of a mile all told. She'd never tried, figured she'd drown. She threw him a towel.

“Man,” he said, attacking his sopping hair, “you hear the loons this morning? I think they've gotten louder.”

“You heard them?”

“You didn't? I couldn't even sleep they were so loud. Finally I just got up.”

“No,” she said. “I didn't hear them.”

He sat in the armchair, feeling satisfactorily dry, and asked her what her plans for the day consisted of.

"I didn't have anything planned, specifically."

"Some ideas, then. What have you been doing this whole time?"

She shrugged. "Taking walks, reading, relaxing. That's what I'm supposed to be doing, right?"

"You're not bored?"

"There are worse things to be," she told him.

After a moment of consideration he said, "We have the bikes here, or what?"

"Only the little one I used to ride, and the chain is broken. You didn't bring yours?"

"The chain is broken?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Off, I don't know, whatever you call it."

He blinked. "There's a big difference."

"Go look at it, if you want. In the shed. It's too small to ride anyway."

Instead of going to investigate, he stayed seated. "There's horseshoes, somewhere," he announced.

"We can play horseshoes." He scanned the room from his chair. Behind it, when he stretched to look, was the bucket of lake treasures. He picked it up and looked in. "What's all this shit?" he asked.

"Just, stuff from the lake. I've been trying to find Grandma's ring."

"...I'm not sure what that means."

"Grandma's ring. Mom's told the story a million times."

"Right." He sounded unsure.

"She dropped it in the lake? The night Grandpa proposed."

"Right, right," nodding now, vague remembrance.

"They used to look for it when we were kids."

"You've been looking for it?" he asked. "Now?"

"Yes."

"She lost it fifty years ago."

"Forty. But what does that matter?"

“How have you been looking? Just, a shovel?”

“I used the rake, Sherlock. You don't remember Mom and Grandma doing that?”

“Sort of, I guess. I haven't thought about it in a long time.”

“Well.”

“You're not going to find it,” he told her. “With a rake? Come on. if it's even still there it'll be so far down.”

“It's not about finding it, really.”

He bit his lip. “Well. As fun as that sounds, Cyn,” setting the bucket between his feet and standing, “I think you're on your own for that one.”

“Fine by me.”

“I think I'm gonna fix the bike,” he said.

“It's too small to ride.”

He looked at her. “I'm gonna fix it.”

He left for the town, to buy tools. She changed into a bathing suit and told herself she'd go down to the water, to rake again, but couldn't motivate. She kept thinking he'd get back while she was doing it, and though she couldn't say why the thought was enough to stop her.

“Glad to see you've made progress,” he said when he came back, fistfuls of plastic bags. “I got you something. A few somethings.”

She dropped the cards. “Tools? To fix the bike? Happy day.”

“Oh, I got tools. But some other stuff, too. Check this out.” He dropped the bags in a heap on the ground and rummaged through them. “Here's the first thing,” he said, hand jammed into a bag, holding the first something. “It's not really for you so much as the cabin. Just a small little whatever.” He pulled the item from the bag and threw it across the room to her. She missed the catch.

A plush toy loon lay on its side. “A loon?” she asked. She looked at him. “Why'd you buy this?”

He shrugged. "It was ten bucks. I knew you liked em so I figured I'd get it. Squeeze it."

She reached down and squeezed the toy. There was something hard inside it and when she applied pressure it let out a muddled recording of a loon call.

"Cute, eh?" Brian asked.

"It's the greatest gift I've ever gotten," she said, and tossed it back to him. "You know we have the real thing out there, right?"

"Well this one won't wake you up every morning. Anyway. Come out to my car, I have something much cooler to show you."

He led her outside. His trunk was already open and he stopped proudly before it. "You know what this is?" he asked, nodding at his purchase.

"Tell me that's not a metal detector."

He grinned. "Waterproof and everything," he said. "This thing's legit. None of that rake bullshit, this'll get the job done."

He brought the metal detector down to the water. He sat on the edge of the dock with his feet hanging in the water and pressed buttons while she watched from the shore with crossed arms. The machine needed batteries and she retrieved them from the trunk of his car because in his excitement he'd forgotten to bring them. With the batteries in place it beeped happily to life, and he slid into the lake with the water barely coming to his knees.

"I'm gonna call Mom," she said. "She'll want to know." They were sitting at the kitchen table. "I can't believe you found it so quickly." She fingered the ring, working it over, probing the dulled inset diamond. It weighed very little.

"You were never gonna find it with the rake," he said. "It was like two feet down. Never would've happened."

"I guess so." She slid the ring in her pocket. "Let's take a drive so we can call Mom."

“What?”

“She'll want to know,” she repeated.

“No, sure, but the drive,” he said, confused. “Why would we do that?”

“To call Mom.”

He looked at her as if figuring something out. After a beat he said, “You know we get service now at the end of the dock, right?”

Brian stayed until Sunday morning, as promised. He took the ring when he left to give to their mother and left her alone in the cabin. The next day, Monday, she woke before dawn and swaddled herself in her blankets and rose, to cold bare feet and pluming breath. In hours it would be warm, and yet. They had finished the last of the coffee the day before and she walked down to the dock empty-handed and stood and waited. No coffee to justify the need but she waited all the same. Coming gray in the east. At last they called. She stood listening to them, the loons, their threnody. What death being mourned here, on this stilled morning lake? To watch the sun rise over a darkened world is to become intimate with the color blue. When the sun broke the treeline she took a knuckle to the corner of her eye, and turned to go inside.