

## Night Swimming

I met Amanda at Foster Beach, the week after I turned seventeen, halfway through a three week stretch that would eventually be remembered as the worst heat wave in Chicago history. There was a stillness in the city during those three weeks, a breezeless, wooly air. The temperature never once dipped below ninety-five, not even at night. In our neighborhood, Mrs. Stanek, an old lady from down the block, died in the front room chair of her third floor apartment. Her windows had been painted shut, so the smell was contained for four days before anyone noticed. When they finally busted down her door, veteran firemen got one whiff and puked so hard that blood vessels popped in their eyes. They discovered that the wet rag Mrs. Stanek used in an attempt to cool herself had already dried up into a stiff gray mass and had melted into the rotting skin of her forehead.

That's the kind of heat it was—the kind that killed. Our house was red-brick, which absorbed the heat like an oven, but the only air conditioning we had was a window unit in my parents' bedroom, and none of that Freon ever made its way up the stairs into the attic where I slept. By nightfall, my room plateaued at about a hundred and five. Sometimes, to escape it, I climbed out onto the roof, a flat space above the bay window that jutted out from the back of the house. The surface was so hot that when my feet landed on it, they made imprints in the heat-softened tar. But I discovered that if I flung a milk-gallon of cold water out the window, the tar hissed and steamed, and the surface felt like cool, wet moss. Sometimes, I'd spend half the night out there in that heavy stillness, slapping away mosquitoes and thinking about things. Down below me were the crisscrossing streets of the neighborhood, and beyond the houses I could see the hazy glow of downtown to the southeast, and the Sears Tower rising above it all like a great, defiant middle finger.

One night, I discovered an old red Folger Brother's coffee can in a niche between the bricks. My older brother, John, had used our little jutting roof as his secret smoking lounge, love den, and escape route ever since he was in high school. When I reached into the can, I found an unsmoked Newport. It was brown and crinkly, the tobacco soaked through with dried rainwater. I reached back into my bedroom and felt around under the sill for where John kept his matches. In the sulfurous sudden light, the cigarette caught and I inhaled deeply. It tasted terrible—like bleached tobacco and stale Genuine Draft. But it smelled like John. He'd been dead for a little over seven months, and my mom had folded up most of his things and put them in boxes, where they sat in the basement labeled with his name, as if she believed he was coming back one day to collect them. The coffee can was the one thing in our bedroom that still belonged to him. I smoked the cigarette down to the filter, and when I finished, I flicked it onto the front lawn, where it glowed for a moment before burning out on my mom's peony bush.

The next day I met Amanda. She was standing near the concession stand, carefully removing the paper wrapping from a Neapolitan ice cream sandwich. The two friends she was with were high-school-girl skinny, with colt legs and concave stomachs. They leaned against a table in their skimpy bikinis, sticking their narrow butts out and elegantly dipping fries into a large squirt of ketchup. Amanda was shorter and heavier than they were, with soft, chubby arms and a little gut that stuck out over the rim of her bathing suit bottoms. I could tell by the way she stood with one leg crossed in front of the other and tentatively licked at her ice cream that she didn't feel comfortable standing around half-naked the way the her friends did.

I had gone down to Foster Beach with my best friend, Allen Healy, only to be told that the water was measuring unsafe levels of mercury and the lifeguards weren't letting anyone in the water. Well, those lifeguards had a near-mutiny on their hands from the hordes of sweltering people who stood before that cool, lapping lake, and a bunch of crimson-faced, sweat-dripping cops were called to patrol the water, clomping through the sand in their military boots and telling us we should all just go home. Soon, most of the people gave up in disgust and left, climbing back onto the Foster Avenue bus, which at least was air conditioned.

That's why the beach was sort of deserted, despite the record heat. Allen had gotten a clear view of the girls from nearly two hundred yards away, when they'd gathered up their towels and headed towards the concessions. He'd been circling closer ever since. Allen was working as a cashier at the Chicken Inn that summer, so he emanated a constant salty stench of fried poultry skins. He had the type of body where you didn't think he was fat until he took his shirt off, so when we went to the beach, he always wore a tentishly oversized black Bobby Jenks jersey, and enormous wet stains seeped from under his armpits. The sweat seemed to activate and amplify the chicken smell, and he had a small chin-strap of zits and a slick t-zone of grease down the broad part of his nose. But despite his physical shortcomings he was inexplicably and exceedingly full of himself, and sometimes, to my endless shock, this quality actually appealed to women.

Allen's technique with girls was one of over-familiarity. He acted like he'd known them all his life, and then, as they struggled to overcome their confusion, or their indignation, he insinuated himself into their fortresses and hunkered down. Now, as he zeroed in on the three at the beach, he strode forward to the table and helped himself to one of the skinny girl's fries.

“Hey!” she objected.

“Hey,” he said, smiling as he dragged the fry through the ketchup and stuffed it in his mouth.

“What, you just take people’s food?” demanded the other skinny girl.

“Where do you girls go to school?” he asked, ignoring the question and chewing with his mouth open.

“None of your freaking business.” That was the first one again. She hoarded her fries to her chest, guarding them from another attack.

“Fine,” he said. “You don’t need to tell me. I can figure it out.”

He looked the three of them up and down. Amanda, who hadn’t said a word, shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She’d put down her ice cream sandwich, and it sat on its paper wrapper, gathering soup.

“Well, first of all, you go to Catholic school,” he finally said.

“How do *you* know?”

He pointed at Amanda.

“That.”

All of us looked. Twined around her neck was the small brown curl of a scapular. She touched it now, self-consciously.

I could tell his attention to detail had impressed them.

“So?” said the first skinny one. She wasn’t giving in that easily, but she’d stopped guarding the fries. “There’s *lots* of Catholic schools in Chicago.”

Allen was unperturbed. He stroked the zitty nodules on his chin and pondered. Then he said, “Well, you’re not Alvernia girls—too classy. And you’re not Notre Dame girls—too white. And you can’t be Regina girls, because Regina girls are afraid of anything south of Devon Avenue. So that means that you go to St. Scholastica.”

When the three of them looked at each other and collapsed into fits of giggles, I knew that he was right. I had to hand it to him—Allen had moments of genius every now and again.

That’s how we got three St. Scholastica girls to agree to hang out with us on the hottest day of the hottest summer in Chicago’s history. Allen had stolen some vodka from his dad’s bar, so we spent the rest of the afternoon in the shade of his brother’s pick-up truck, chasing its sharp warmth with fizzy swigs from a lukewarm two-liter of 7-Up. It was so hot and bright out that it didn’t take long for the five of us to get pretty tipsy, and when the sun finally went down and the beach closed, an enormous moon floated above our heads and we finished the vodka by its light. By that point, Amanda and I were sitting next to each other with our eyes closed, leaning back against the hard metal of the truck that was still warm from baking all day in the sun. One of the skinny girls—the one who’d announced early on that she had a serious boyfriend—had disappeared, and I could hear the wet, sloppy sounds of Allen and the other girl French kissing nearby.

When I opened my eyes my vision began to spin, and, I realized, like you do suddenly, how drunk I was. I closed them again and it felt like all the particles of me were spinning away

and affixing themselves into the sky and the lake and the pebbles in the street. The only thing I was aware of was the warm pressure of Amanda's arm against my own and the patterns of darkness and light that filtered from passing cars outside into my closed eyelids. I steadied myself by stroking the soft skin at the crook of her arm, and then I was kissing her, and she was kissing me back, and I was telling her that I loved her, and meaning it.

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Before he got sick, my brother was a master at sneaking girls into our house. If they were the discreet type, he'd tiptoe them in the front door once our parents were asleep, and lead them up to our bedroom. If they were the loud, sloppy drunk type, he'd hoist them up from the backyard using a rope made of old pairs of our St. Sebastian uniform pants tied together at the leg. His preferred make-out destination was the roof, but when the weather was inclement, he'd take them inside to his narrow twin bed that stood just a few feet from my own. He had a strict policy, though: no sexual intercourse in my presence until I turned seventeen. I could hear him whispering this to some of the girls, who sometimes were downright pushy, that he had to be a role model for his little brother. When I heard him say these things, I remember laying with the covers pulled all the way over my head and smiling in the dark. I remember thinking that I couldn't wait to turn seventeen, when John would finally start treating me like a grown-up and taking me out with him on weekends and bestowing on me his extensive knowledge about women.

The worst day of my life was the January morning when the priest had come and we'd stood around John's hospice bed in the front room and we'd watched as the life slipped from him just as clearly as you'd watch a bird take flight from a fence. But I have to say that my

seventeenth birthday was almost as bad. There was so much that John had promised to show me about life, and now I would never know. On that day, the missing him was a real, palpable thing, a monster that crouched on my chest. I'd shared cake with my parents and aunts and cousins, then gone upstairs and put my fist through the wall in our bedroom closet. The hole's still there. I lay in his bed then, wrapped in his comforter despite the heat, and cried like the pussy that I was, holding my throbbing hand until I fell asleep and woke up the next morning when it wasn't my birthday anymore.

Somehow, I had convinced Amanda to come back to my house with me. Allen and the skinny girl had dropped us off, roaring away with the radio blasting, which I was sure must have woken my parents, and now that we were now standing in my dark backyard and looking up at the little roof, I couldn't summon the courage to try to sneak her inside. I thought about the uniform pants rope, still coiled in a back corner of our closet, but the thought of asking her to climb it seemed ridiculous.

A sudden idea occurred to me, an idea, I thought, that John would have approved of.

"Do you want to go swimming?" I asked.

My next-door neighbors, the Hansons, were retired and spent most of their summer up in Door County. Their house stood dark and mute, the windows tightly drawn. The reflection of the moon floated in the middle of their above-ground pool, lighting up the blue inner walls.

I looked at Amanda, held a finger to my lips, then hooked my toes into the laths of their chain link fence and hoisted myself over. I landed barefoot in the soft grass, and she climbed over after me, quiet as a cat.

The neighborhood was entirely asleep—no buzzing of cars or tweeting of birds. All you could hear was the lapping of the chlorinated water against the lacquered sides of the Hanson's pool and the sighing of the water filtration system. I stripped off my shirt, and when I felt Amanda watching me, a strange feeling bubbled up inside me. I shivered, understanding that this particular summer would mean both the ending and the beginning of something; that it would someday weigh heavily in the measure of my life.

I went in first, swimming around underwater, coming up only for breath, and opening my eyes to watch the churning, pale legs of Amanda as she climbed in after me. She'd made me turn around while she took off her dress, which I thought was cute since when I'd met her she'd only been wearing a bathing suit anyway. I reached for her now, and was able to get a finger into the elastic band of her suit before she squealed, though it sounded far away in the air above us, and then she swam away, foaming up the water with bubbles that blocked my vision.

But I swam after her and reached for her legs again, and now she didn't protest. This time, she let her legs drift toward me and my fingers climbed up her legs and then I burst out of the water, breathing deeply, the peonies from my mother's bushes, the leftover charred smell of a smoldering grill, the chlorine. I was face to face with Amanda, and her dark hair was slicked back like an otter's, and her makeup had run down below her eyes in black crescents, and her eyes were two gloaming stars before me. I planted my feet on the bottom of the pool, toes groping for a solid foothold, and I cupped her face in my wet hands and kissed her, a big wet

sloppy, tonguey kiss, and she kissed me back expertly; all the shyness of the daytime, which seemed so long ago, was entirely forgotten. It felt as if we were the only people in the world. We were alone in the darkness and there were only two kinds of light. The streetlight in the alley was yellow and artificial and the moon shone soft and white and her skin was something in between, pale pink, and it reflected off the lights from the moon and the alley. We floated there, kissing, until the sky began to turn gray and that made the moon less white and the streetlights less yellow. When I pulled down Amanda's bra, the tops of her breasts floated to the top of the water and they were white, too.

"Someone will see," she said, crossing her arms shyly. But I gently drew her hands away, pulling them back into the water.

"No. They're still asleep."

"But they'll be up soon."

"No."

And I knew that they wouldn't be because I knew that the Hansons were in Door County and my parents would not get up before 8:00 mass and the night still belonged to us as long as the streetlights were still on. But it was not really even night anymore, and both of us knew it. Dawn was coming and it smelled like rain. We could see forks of heat lightning flashing in the sky beyond the trees and garages and houses. I wondered if it was going to rain and then I heard the low rumble of thunder, and then I began to hope that it would, because then Amanda and I would be there in this warm heated pool and the raindrops would come down and pelt the pool water, making tiny splashes, and our faces would be dappled with cold drops but our bodies would be immersed in warm, still water, and I love the way it feels when two kinds of water

touch you at the same time, one cold and moving and fresh and one warm and still, but both clean. Our towels, filched from the Hanson's pool shed, were tossed on the grass, and I began to dread the moment when we would have to wrap ourselves in them, when it really became daytime and the neighborhood woke up, with the purpose of taking the world back from us, because right now it belonged to me and Amanda only. It was dark, and secret, and ours.

When it's time to get out of this pool, I thought, everything is going to end, and I think she felt the same way, because now she pressed her wet head to my shoulder and I thought to myself it was the most tender gesture a girl had ever made toward me, more tender, even, than the kissing.

Lightning snapped across the air above us between long rolls of thunder, and then the rain swept in, pinging off the gutters and blacktop roofs and needling the water all around us. Amanda laughed and, using my thighs to brace her feet, pushed off across the pool, floating on her back, her hair twisting on the surface of the water. She opened her mouth and let the rain fall on her tongue. I circled the pool after her, kicking my legs. She turned to me, smiling, and then dragged me underwater where she kissed me with open eyes. We rose to the surface. I held her as I caught my breath.

"We should probably get out soon, huh?" she said, wiping smudges of mascara away with her fists. "I need to get home before my parents wake up."

The giddy happiness I felt at being there with her began to ebb away. It was over now. We wouldn't be able to get it back. She reached out and touched my cheek, as if to apologize, and her hand felt cold. She leaned in to kiss me again, but then her eyes cut to something that

was moving just over my shoulder and she jumped back with a splash, the hand on my cheek pushing me away. It stung as if she'd slapped me.

I turned around and saw a big, fat, white possum hunched on the pool's edge. Its eyes were red and its long rat tail wrapped around its body. Its claws curled around the fake wood paneling of the pool deck. It didn't look at us, but its long, pointy snout dipped down, and a tongue, the same color as the eyes, darted out and licked at the water.

We couldn't do anything but stare. We were afraid to splash or move or startle it. A cold, sick terror gripped me and all the vodka from earlier in the night began to rise, like mercury, in my esophagus. My head felt gelatinous.

Amanda whispered something to me but the words got lost in the rain.

The possum's tongue was too short to reach the water, and the tail waved in a languid kind of frustration. The claws curled tighter around the pool edge and the round, dull white form inched forward. It leaned in and then, with the gracelessness an obese child, it clawed the air and fell forward, splashing into the pool.

Amanda screamed, and so did the possum—a horrid, bestial shriek of rage and anguish that sounded eerily human. It thrashed in the water, screeching steadily, its white fur saturated to an oily gray. Its panicked movements kicked up a feral, animal reek, like moldy bath mats and mushrooms.

“Do something!” Amanda wailed, clinging to my shoulders. We'd pushed ourselves back to the far side of the pool, as far from the screaming, drowning thing as we could. Its claws

were reaching out to the rainy sky, its mouth wide open, revealing a row of gleaming, pointy teeth.

My legs, underwater, felt wooden.

“It’s going to drown!” she shook my shoulders. “You have to help it!”

“Get out of the pool,” I commanded, my voice loud and falsely authoritative. She sensed, wrongly, that I had the situation under control, so she hooked her arms over the side and hoisted herself out, yanking her bra straps back into place and shivering.

“Eeeeeeeeeee!” the possum shrieked, and it was louder than the thunder and the rain and the pool filtration system. It clawed at the slick sides of the pool with such ferocity that thin red tendrils of blood began to thread their way across the surface of the water. I turned my back to it, not looking at Amanda, who stood there dripping, huddled in a towel, and launched myself over the edge and out of the pool.

“Are you getting a net?” she demanded.

I reached down for my towel and didn’t answer.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Shut the fuck *up!*” I screamed, punching the plastic side of the pool. My knuckles throbbed, and Amanda jumped back.

“So that’s it?” She stood in front of me, so that I couldn’t not look at her. “You’re just going to let it *die?*”

The possum's shrieking had tapered off into a pathetic, torturous whimpering, accompanied by desperate splashing. Just as I couldn't bring myself to look at Amanda, I couldn't bring myself to look in the pool either, and we both stood there dripping, listening to the splashing that was becoming less and less urgent, punctuated by intermittent gurgling. Then, the sounds stopped altogether. The rain drummed gently all around us and the morning had turned a milky gray. Amanda turned and walked over to the pool. I followed her. The possum was there in the middle, floating like a great white buoy. Its long, ringed tail floated uselessly on the surface of the water. Amanda, shivering, pulled her towel closer around her shoulders. She reached down, viciously scooped up her clothes, and stomped her feet back into her flip flops. She looked at me and the profound disappointment on her wet, pink face made me want to find a shotgun and blow the head off of every single goddamn possum in the city of Chicago, including—especially—the one belonging to the carcass that was already dead in the middle of the Hanson's pool.

“It was just a possum,” I tried weakly. “They eat garbage—“

But she was already walking away from me, in quick, determined feminine steps, so pretty and so proud, down the gangway between our house and the Hanson's, to find her way home in the rain, alone.

I thought about my brother and decided that he probably wouldn't have let it drown; no, he probably would've picked up the clawing, scratching, rabid thing and launched it over the side of the pool, where it would crash onto the lawn, shake itself off, and then lumber off, with the peaceful forgetfulness of animals, back on out to the alley as if nothing remarkable had happened in its little possum life. He would have scratches down his arms and he would tell and

re-tell the story at bars, at parties, expanding it, exaggerating it, gesturing, imitating that awful “eeeeeeeeee!” only the way he’d do it would be hilariously funny. The way he would tell it would be just right and the girl who’d been in the pool with him that night would say what a hero he had been and she’d look at him forever in just the same way that Amanda had looked at me for only a minute.

Still dripping wet, I hopped the fence and landed again in my own backyard. The dawn drizzle had broken the languishing spell of the heat wave, and soon enough fall would arrive, and with it my senior year. I would graduate, turn eighteen, and then I would go to college and graduate again, and then I would be twenty-three, and from then on I would always be older than my older brother ever was. But that morning, after I finally fell asleep out on the roof in the cooled-down air, I still believed that I would be seventeen forever; that it would be like the way I missed him, a thing unfinished, a beginning without an end.