

The car curved around the final bend in the trail, dust exploding as the tires turned, then softly settling back to the ground. As they entered the open area, a peninsula jutting out toward the lake, Patrick was jolted by the remarkable familiarity, how little the place had changed since his last visit. Straight ahead, a tall thicket of grass gave way to deep blue water, which was once again interrupted by a dense forest composed of gnarled oak, maple, and pine trees. Patrick directed the car to the sandy patch in front of the rustic cabin and pulled the shifter to put the car in park.

In the passenger seat, his girlfriend Emma released her seatbelt and opened the door, allowing the humid air to waft into the car. It smelled like a campfire. Even with the distant and irregular sounds of off-road vehicles, Red Rum Lake exuded an aura of abandonment and desertion. Rightfully so; Patrick had not been back to Red Rum in about eighteen years, the place too filled with painful memories and bitter remembrances. Even now, Patrick was hesitant to bring Emma to this place, haunted by the past misdeeds it had enabled. Emma's constant beseechments for a summer weekend get-away and the limited budget between the two, however, had forced Patrick's undesired homecoming.

Emma exited the car and walked to examine the small log cabin on the peninsula. Patrick trailed behind her. The couple stopped at the patio of the cabin, and as Patrick observed its run-down state, he was thankful they had thought to bring a tent in case the past eighteen years had aged the cabin as much as it had him. What was once a deep brown paint had aged after years baking in the sun, and was beginning to fleck away to leave patches of stark wood beneath.

"It's beautiful out here, Patrick," Emma said as she wrapped her hand around Patrick's. Nodding in agreement, Patrick's eyes were drawn to the barn behind the cabin. It was in similar shape, with paint peeling off and gaps between the wood paneling casting odd shadows onto the

grass. “I think once we get everything cleaned up and repaired, we could spend more than just the weekend here. Maybe even bring our kids someday,” she continued. Patrick hummed noncommittally, keeping his eyes averted toward the barn. Although he caught the hint Emma had been dropping with increasing intensity, his mind was still dredging up the past, and the memories were like an anchor pulling him back down into the swirling abyss of confusion, loss, and betrayal.

Patrick scrambled to come up with a response. “It’s actually not as bad as I was expecting. We might be able to get away with sleeping inside tonight.”

“Well, let’s head inside then and see what we have to work with,” Emma responded, and Patrick pulled out the rusted bronze key to unlock the door. He walked inside first, the interior of the cabin dark and the air stale. A thick layer of dust covered all the surfaces, and cobwebs clung to the corners of the room. Patrick paused to listen, thankful that he heard no scratching of mice feet or scuttling of roaches or other large insects.

Emma trailed behind, taking in the covered couch, small wooden table littered with stains, and loft above the kitchen. “Oh, I love the loft, it has so much potential,” she exclaimed. She walked around Patrick’s tensed figure, which had halted only a few feet inside the doorway, and reached for the face-down picture frame leaning inconspicuously against the wall.

Patrick noticed Emma’s slender hand reaching out for it. A shudder raked through his body, and Patrick jumped out in a feeble attempt to stop her from grabbing it. “Emma, wait—” But it was too late. She flipped over the picture and dusted it off with her sleeve. The frame revealed the faded yet smiling faces of an adolescent Patrick with his father and a woman standing in front of the very same cabin, with crisp new paint and window boxes full of blooming flowers.

Patrick's gaze fixed on the woman, just younger than Emma appeared now. Her narrow face and pale features stared out of the frame toward him. Patrick felt himself pulled into that gaze, his surroundings narrowing and compressing until the only thing he could see was the glint of a smile and dark eyes. Sounds echoed distantly in his ears. A car idled softly but was cut off with a sharp crack. Somewhere, Patrick heard a soft groan, and he spun around wildly to find its source.

"Patrick!" Emma's sharp tone cut through the confusion and darkness swirling through his head. Patrick came back to himself. He blinked in a daze, then furrowed his brows in confusion. He was positive he had heard a car, another person, but only Emma remained in the cabin and their car was still parked. He felt the keys in his pocket, their weight a heavy presence against his thigh.

"Did you hear a single thing I was saying? You look so cute in this picture!" Patrick shook his head, still craning to look out the window toward the driveway.

"Didn't you hear that car?" Patrick was sure he had heard one, an older one evidenced by the slight coughs in the otherwise steady hum of the engine. His confidence plummeted, however, as Emma gave a slight shake of the head.

"The car's been off since we got here. I didn't hear anything," she replied, brow creased.

"Let's stop talking about this and go back outside. We can worry about cleaning a little later. Let's enjoy the day a bit, maybe go on a walk."

"It's so pretty outside, I can't wait to see what it looks like on the other side of the lake," Emma replied. She put the picture down on the table face-up and went back outside. Patrick took a step to follow her but still caught up in the flood of memories, retreated to pick up the picture once more. The young woman's face smiled back up at him, the same face he saw every night

while he slept, tormenting him in his dreams. Her dark eyes reminded him of his last night here over eighteen years ago, when his world was shattered. Coraline, this woman, the woman who raised him, ran away, abandoning Patrick and his father.

Patrick glared at the picture; even eighteen years later he still felt raw when remembering his dad explaining what happened, how Coraline disappeared in the middle of the night with her things and didn't come back. Unforgivable. Her abandonment still stung, and throbbed even harder whenever Emma brought up marriage. How could he risk the same thing happening to him again, or to his future children? Even so, if Emma ever tried to leave him—a hot rush of anger surged through Patrick, and he slammed the picture back down. A crack cascaded down the frame, splintering Coraline from Patrick and his father. Patrick gave one last glare to the picture, and hurried out the door beckoning Emma to follow him as they began to walk around the lake.

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“That shrub over there, the one we keep seeing, that's autumn olive. It's invasive. One time, my dad spent the whole day brush hogging them with the tractor. My job was to rake up all of the pieces and put them on the burn pile. We had a huge fire that night.” Patrick liked those memories. The happy ones, of him and his dad, even if that specific memory was of working all day. It was refreshing to remember how he was before.

“It was usually just the two of us. Fishing, swimming, stargazing when the nights were clear. Sometimes even Cor—” Patrick cut himself off, feeling the blood drain from his face as his expression paled then subsequently darkened. Suddenly, the shaking of the tree limbs high above their heads seemed louder, as if the wind had picked up speed in an effort to swallow the words before they could be spoken. Even the soft chirps of the birds seemed more shrill.

He felt corrupted; after the picture incident, he could not even say her name without a confusing spiral of emotions. But somewhere, deep down at the root of those memories, was a sense of absence. Patrick chalked it up to physical absence, as Coraline's exodus left him without a mother, but throughout the short time they had been at Red Rum Lake, he had already felt that absence festering, bringing to the surface a feeling like something important was missing.

"Patrick, I'm sorry about the picture before. You and your dad had such good times here I thought it would just be the two of you in the picture. I should have noticed who was in it and not mentioned it at all. But really, if I need to tip-toe around her, don't you think maybe you should try to do so as well?"

Patrick seemed to come back to himself, shoulders loosening and expression clearing. He halted, and Emma followed suit. With his hand outreached to firmly grasp Emma's wrist, Patrick said "You were right, I shouldn't have brought up the past. This is going to be a good trip, one of fresh starts." As he spoke, Patrick pulled Emma closer to him, trapping her free wrist with the restrained other. "You are what matters. I won't bring them up again. Let's keep walking."

The couple started forward again, moving forward along with a soft breeze murmuring while the leaves on the branches rustled, seeming like thousands of whispers just out of range. Only a few steps later the trek was interrupted as Emma tripped on a protruding root and crashed to the ground. Her body hit the earth, the sound of a pile of limbs bouncing off the dirt echoing throughout the trees. At that sound, Patrick's body stiffened, then seized up completely, and he collapsed to the ground in response, body splayed behind Emma's stumbled figure.

*He curled up into a tight ball on the rug, fibers scratching at his exposed arms but too paralyzed to pay any attention to the discomfort.*

*The sound of a sharp crack echoed, reverberating against his skull.*

*Sweat trickled down his temple, musty air tinged with exhaust swaddling him in its stale embrace.*

*Eyeline just above the dashboard, watching a body collapse to the floor then lay motionless and ignored.*

The flashes faded and Patrick blinked away the haze surrounding his vision. He lay on the ground, Emma kneeling next to him, her hand a warm presence on his shoulder. The forest was silent, trees frozen in an eerie calm, almost as if waiting to see Patrick's response.

“Are you okay? What happened? Did you trip too?”

“It was like one of my dreams...” Patrick murmured quietly to himself, too preoccupied with coming to terms with what just happened to directly answer Emma. The dreams had started a few weeks ago, after he and Emma had planned this trip. Always waking up confused and disoriented, Patrick felt no different now. His body shook with slight tremors cascading down his frame, increasing in ferocity as he pushed himself back up to his feet, and dusted off the dirt from his clothes. The leaves rustled above, as if craning to get a better glimpse of what was happening on the ground below.

Emma followed his movement up, appraising with narrow eyes. “It's hot out and you probably haven't been drinking enough water. Want to head back so we can take a break, then start cleaning?”

Patrick didn't know what had happened. Could it be dehydration? Something about the hallucination had seemed familiar. The answer was dancing on the edge of his mind, close yet completely out of reach.

“Yeah, let's head back. I want to have most of it cleaned out by dark.”

Patrick grasped Emma's hand and led them back to the cabin, the breeze blowing at their backs as if pushing them toward the cabin, telling them to hurry.

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Patrick and Emma rounded the corner, and the cabin came into sight. The sun was beginning its descent, although there were still a few hours until sunset. Light reflected off the glassy surface of the lake, and the stalks of grass waved. Whether in greeting or in warning, Patrick was unsure.

“Want to start inside so we don't have to sleep in the tent tonight?” Emma asked, seemingly eager to start the arduous process. Patrick pondered this for a moment, then countered.

“How about you start inside, then I can join you in a bit? I just want to check out the barn, see what's left inside and how much damage there is.” He felt that if he went inside right away, the walls would constrict, swallowing him up until he could never escape. Though dark, the open paneling of the barn allowing sun beams to reflect through seemed like a safer bet.

Emma nodded in assent, though the narrowing of her eyes told Patrick she wasn't happy about it, and they parted ways. Patrick waded through the weeds and tall grass to reach the barn. Up close, the darkness between the aged wooden panels seemed vast, holding boundless space that siphoned off into a dark abyss. Patrick went to the back door and pulled it open, the door groaning with age and the stress of being moved for the first time in years. Sunlight shone through the door, and he was greeted with the scent of musty air and the sound of fluttering wings. He waded past the piles of wooden boards, machinery, and an aged pontoon before freezing at the sight of a rusted car. It was a 1985 Ford Taurus. Coated in a thick layer of dust, it sat inconspicuously in the back corner. Patrick remembered his dad teaching him how to drive the old car, Patrick chauffeuring them around the lake time and time again.

An unexplainable urge overtook Patrick—he had to sit in the car. Like a robot controlled by some otherworldly force, Patrick trudged to the car, and tugged the handle. It was unlocked. The door creaked open, and Patrick, body trembling slightly, eased onto the seat. Like the final puzzle piece to a seemingly unsolvable project, Patrick’s memory opened like a floodgate, and he was lost in the current.

*Just one lap around the lake, Patrick thought to himself. Dad will never know. He snuck down the stairs and gently opened and closed the front door before scampering towards the barn. He reached the car, the one his dad taught him to drive earlier over the summer, and wrenched the door open. Crawling inside, he ripped the keys from his pocket and turned the car on, the light hum of the engine reverberating throughout the barn. Just one lap, then he would go back to bed. No one would ever know. As he prepared to shift the car into reverse, Patrick overheard the faint sound of his dad’s voice coming closer from outside—if he got caught, he would be in trouble for sure. Thinking quickly, he rushed to turn off the car before throwing his body down onto the soft carpet of the driver’s side floor. Shaking with adrenaline, he heard the old barn door scrape open. His dad’s voice echoed throughout the barn, but the blood was pumping in his ears, making it difficult to detect individual words. Why would his dad be talking to someone? Him and Coraline should both be asleep.*

*Patrick lifted his head just above the dashboard in an attempt to see who his dad was yelling at. It was Coraline, standing in front of his father, hands displayed in a defensive manner and mouth moving slowly in indecipherable words, a stark contrast to the aggressive tones of his dad. Patrick remained frozen, watching as his dad lashed out in anger, using both hands to shove Coraline. Coraline’s head hit the wooden wall with a sharp crack, immediately dropping to the*



*ground in a crumpled heap, releasing a faint groan as she slid down. Numbness started first in his chest, spreading to his fingers and toes as his whole body was enveloped in its cool grip.*

*Patrick watched as his dad released a sigh and grabbed a shovel. On the sandy floor of the barn, he began to dig. One foot deep, then two. Trembling, ice running through his veins, Patrick raised his head higher above the dashboard, to see if Coraline was okay. Her eyes rapidly shifted under the lids as a trail of blood ran down her hairline. As David Holmes reached a depth of six feet, perspiration sliding thickly down his neck, Coraline's eyes fluttered open, connecting with Patrick's through the windshield. He stared into the dark orbs, never breaking eye contact even as they were eventually pulled out of sight as her body was deposited into the grave. Patrick's numb body collapsed back to the floor of the car, absolutely frozen save for tears trailing down his cheeks.*

Patrick's chest heaved with the stress and overwhelming emotion rushing through him. Acid crawled up his throat and he retched, sick at the thought of what he had witnessed. Was it true? Had his father, the man who let him grow up thinking Coraline had abandoned him, been the culprit of his loss and betrayal? Emotions coursed through him, their weight a heavy presence. He inhaled, exhaled. His heart still raced, refusing to be calmed. In anguish, Patrick released a primal scream, full of raw pain and despair, yet the sound was swallowed up by the vastness of the barn, echoing off the high rafters and leaving him alone once more. He screamed again, and again, beating his fists against the steering wheel, his body convulsing against the walls of the car. Glass shattered as he punched the driver's side window, shards embedding in his knuckles. Releasing one final scream, he threw his body onto the driver's side floor, curling in the fetal position, body heaving with panting gasps. His breaths ripped through his chest, air seemingly stolen before it even entered his lungs. Blood dripped sluggishly from his hand, its

sting nothing compared to the one circulating throughout his head. Tension slunk its way into every pore of his head, aching in time with his pulsing breaths.

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Patrick exhaled. Like when he was a child, he slid his head up, just above the dashboard. His eyes peered over the top, toward the back corner where he now knew Coraline's body lay. Airborne dust particles floated through the sky, illuminated by the lowering sun rays peeking through the cracks in the wood. The dirt lay inconspicuously, no trace of the previous atrocities.

Patrick exited the car, limbs stiff. He walked at a lethargic pace to the corner, halting just in front of Coraline's final resting place. He stood putting back to the car before disconcerting images overtook his senses.

*He lay splayed on his back, limbs unceremoniously piled where they had landed. To the left and right, dusty dirt, somehow packed tightly enough to protect against collapse, surrounded him. His eyes gazed forward, eyelids blinking at a sluggish rate. What happened? The disconnectedness faded as his body was pelted with sand, dirt, and small rocks at intervals slower than his gasping breaths. They buried him, encasing him in a tomb of dirt. His father's laugh rang in his ears, piercing his head.*

Patrick's hands gripped his head as he came back to himself, having dropped to his knees in front of the grave site. Perspiration dripped down his temple, decorating the ground as Coraline's blood once did years ago. He stared down, ground undisturbed and hiding cruelties no longer forgotten. With a grunt of pain, frustration, and sadness, Patrick rose, grabbed a shovel, and began to dig.