

Our Last Summer at the Lake

I tell her to take the gun out of her mouth. It is our father's weapon, the one he keeps in the drawer by his bed when we are spending our July at the summer house we have on the lake. He also has a shotgun under the bed. Our father says you can't be too careful.

Out our parents' window you can see the water shimmering in the afternoon sun. You can see the small sailboats and the pontoon party boats and the motorboats with the skiers being brought behind and you can see kids playing at the shore and paddleboats and even this far away you can hear the high-pitched whine of the ski-doo's as they skip across the surface. Our lake is a big lake.

"Tell me to do it," she says, "dare me to pull the trigger."

I can barely understand her. It is hard to talk clearly with a gun in your mouth.

"Pull the trigger."

"I'm going to. You know I'm going to."

I say our mother made pie this morning. I say we're going to have apple pie ala mode for dessert after dinner.

Kate's favorite thing in the world is our mother's desserts. She won't pull the trigger with pie and ice cream on the horizon. Besides, we are in our parents'

bedroom. Kate is a neat freak and making a mess is difficult for her. She'd rather not die than to bloody the upstairs carpet.

This isn't the first time Kate got our father's gun out the drawer and put it in her mouth. I've done it once or twice myself. The warm steel tastes like metal on my tongue. Sometimes we take out all the bullets except for one and we put the barrel against our temple and act like we are about to pull the trigger. But we never do. Kate almost did once. I thought she really was going to do it. We'd talked about it. Five chances not getting killed versus one chance getting killed seemed like pretty good odds. Sometimes we take out four bullets and leave two. We call it double Russian roulette. Double the pleasure, double the fun.

Neither of us thinks there is anything wrong with us putting guns in our mouths. Once you play at doing it once, you're going to do it again. Genuine thrills are few and far between in our household. It passes the time.

She uses her shirt to wipe the barrel clean. She gives me the gun and I make sure it goes where it was in our father's drawer, in the corner, behind the candles, clothes pins and prophylactics. There's also a small Gideon New Testament Bible. It's well-thumbed, stained. Some of the pages are stuck together.

There's no wind this afternoon, there hasn't been any wind for days, the sailboats out on the water aren't going anywhere. Almost the last of July, our summer vacation nearing its final stretch, our mother and father sitting on their picnic chairs they've taken out to the end of the dock. Tarp covers our boat, the

motor blades up out of the water, the hull bumping against the tires that are tied along the side of the dock. Our parents have their wine and cigarettes. Soon they will go inside and up the stairs to their bedroom and take a nap, or something else, and then one of them, usually our father, will cook dinner and we will eat as the sun is going down. We have pie ala mode for desert.

Our meals are quiet affairs. At dinner our food is on the table and we join our hands for the prayer. Our Heavenly Father, kind and good, we thank Thee for Thy love and care, be with us Lord and hear our prayer. Amen. Some nights Kate and I can hardly bear the sounds our parents make while they eat. The knives and forks scraping the plates, the chewing, the crunching, the smacking, the swallowing. Kate and I roll our eyes at each other as the noise goes on.

Our father will briefly break the silence. "Mm, good food."

Our mother will answer. "Yes, good food."

They will ask what we are giggling for. Why are we giggling at the dinner table? We should show more respect.

After dinner we will sit in the living room and listen to our mother read passages from the Bible. Sometimes I have to read. Sometimes Kate has to read. Our father is adamant about correct pronunciation. Say it like God meant it.

The television, even with its tin foil rabbit ears reaching high, is just shadows and ghosts and crackling words. The radio is worse. You might catch half a song before the static overwhelms the music.

In the house we are left to our parents' devices.

Sara and Bruce and Tom call us from down the shore. They have found a dead catfish with worms crawling in its eyes. Tom and Kate have kissed. Bruce and Sara have kissed. I haven't kissed anyone. They are all twelve and I am just ten and that makes all the difference. All my clothes used to be Kate's clothes, even my shoes and socks. This year she gets to wear a two-piece bathing suit while I have her last single-piece. It is stretched in all the wrong places.

Sara has a blackboard and a box of colored chalk at her house and we go over there and make pictures on the blackboard. We draw horses and mountains. We draw dogs and rainbows. When we draw a penis or vagina we make sure we wipe it right away. Her parents wouldn't like to find vaginas and penises on the chalkboard. That's what Kate and Sara call them, penis and vagina, as if they are proper young ladies.

I don't get to draw penises. I don't get to draw vaginas. They say I am not old enough yet. As if I don't know how to draw them. I'm sure when I get to be their age they will have other things I can't do. It will be a perpetual exclusion.

Our mother has been doing a giant jigsaw puzzle all summer holiday. It takes up a whole table in the sewing room. The box says it has three thousand pieces. I think there must be more. There are pieces everywhere. Our mother won't let anybody touch her puzzle, not even our father. Mine, she says, all mine. The puzzle is supposed to be a puzzle of Sunday in the Park with George. That's what the cover of the box shows. The puzzle, so far, doesn't have a park or a George, and it's hard to tell if it's Sunday. She's beginning to spend more

time on it, trying to get it done before our vacation is over. She's hours at the table and we had better not disturb her.

Our father will sometimes clean his gun. He uses oil and a brush and a rag. He sits on his bed and whistles while he is cleaning his gun. Sometimes he will let me or Kate hold it. He says we should only touch his gun if he is in the room. See, he says, it's loaded, which is dangerous. Kate asks him if it is dangerous when it is loaded then why is it loaded. To shoot bad people, our father says. Kate asks him if he has ever killed a man. No. But our father says he would if he had to, if he was protecting his family. He says he loves us more than anything.

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There will be other unexpected events in my life, other than that summer. I will be sitting having my morning coffee out on my balcony down on Second Street and I will see a plane go into a world trade center tower and later another plane crash into the other world trade center tower. I will watch both towers collapse. As the dust settles I will call Tony and ask him to come with me to the Bahamas. I will agree to marry him.

I will have a meeting with the manager of a hedge fund, a woman considered one of the brightest minds on Wall Street, which does mean something, and we will be in her corner office that looks out over the Bay and the Statue of Liberty way down below like a little green eraser, and halfway through the meeting a seagull will hit the window, go splat, and stay there,

stuck, and both of us will pretend that a seagull squashed against a window happens all the time.

On the morning of my fortieth-sixth birthday my mother will call and say that she needs to see me. I say she could've have just mailed my gift, it would have been okay. She will seem calm and give no explanation and despite the fact that Forrest, my second husband, has a big party planned for my birthday that night I will go to Grand Central and take a train up to Tarrytown, where they have a house on the Hudson, and I will find my mother alone in her study. The shades are down. My father is in the kitchen, getting dinner ready. I can barely see my mother in the shadows.

"Allie," my mother says from her darkness, "What a pity, Allie, it was Kate who died."

She's been thinking that for years. She just chose my birthday to say it out loud.

I will be in Florence, having driven in from a summer rental in the Tuscany countryside. My daughter will be twelve years old, the same age as my sister was that summer, and she and I will buy a basket of flowers, we will run our hands across the stones covering the church and it will be like our fingertips are feeling the long ago past, and I'll remember that summer, when time itself seemed to turn and crumble, and I will look back and see that if things didn't happen how they happened I would be leading a wholly different life, maybe not exactly happy, but at least there wouldn't be so many ghosts and goblins

crowding the bridges and roadways, though you never know. It can always be a little worse.

Look what Kate has missed.

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Sara and Tom and Bruce are Kate's friends. I am tolerated, at best. I am not invited when they play show and tell behind the bushes. I watch the worms going in and out of the eyes of the dead catfish. Sara takes a stick and pokes one of the eyes out, spearing the eye with the end of the stick and holding the stick with the eye at the end of it and chasing my sister down the path by the water. Sara likes my sister in ways, back then, I cannot comprehend. It is below the belt, as most things are.

Tom likes Kate a lot. Sara likes Bruce.

Tom has a sister my age. She plays with Barbies. She plays with an Easy Bake oven. What can you say to that?

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Kate unhooks the screen door and we are out down the back steps into the darkness, the clouds heavy in the night obscuring moon, stars and constellations. A wind is in the trees and leaves flutter. You can hear the lake lapping against boats tied up to piers. Within seconds I have to reach out and touch Kate so I know where she is as we go through the woods.

"Is it loaded?"

"Of course it's loaded," Kate says, "why wouldn't it be loaded?"

The woods rise up on the other side of the main road, a copse between the shore and the smaller cabins on the other side. People rent these by the week, three, four rooms, families squashed together for vacation time. You can hear them yelling inside, you can hear their dogs growling and barking tied up to poles outside. This is where Tom's family stays. They live in Queens the rest of the year. He comes beside us as we come by, materializing out of dark air. He never talks about his family renting a smaller cabin and we never ask. Tom is a good guy. I want to kiss someone like him.

Sara is in the clearing where the woods give off to a grass field. Her parents have the biggest house in this part of the lake. It has three stories. The top story is empty, not even any furniture. The doors are locked, so we can't even play there. It's like a haunted house on the third floor.

Bruce couldn't come. Or Bruce didn't want to come. He would have been here by now if he was going to come. Bruce is always punctual. He has a Rolex wristwatch he was given for his eleventh birthday and it works fine. He looks at it and announces the time a lot. It's a Rolex, he says, from Tiffany's, my mother loves me a lot. We are all impressed, for a while, then it gets old.

Sara asks if Kate has it.

"Of course I got it."

We find the clearing where last week they left me in the open area while they played tag behind the bushes. You're too young, they said. I knew they

were playing show and tell, brief glimpses of bodily parts. I wasn't stupid. I knew what those things looked like.

How loud is it going to be? Is it going to be too loud?

Kate has Tom shine his flashlight so we can find the tree that has the witch's face in it. She wants to shoot the witch face. The night has a lot of humidity to it. I am exhausted and we've only just started. I imagine standing on the lawn by our summer house, holding the garden hose, drenching Kate while she keeps still, lying on the grass in her two piece bathing suit. We will each get a shot. It's been decided. Kate first, then Tom, then Sara, then me.

Tom shines his flashlight. Kate raises the gun and moves her feet apart to brace herself. She holds her breath and closes her eyes as she begins to pull the trigger. A deep, country quiet. The birds have stopped singing. Later she says she doesn't remember actually shooting, she remembers the noise, the racket, she remembers flying through the air. I see Kate being thrown backwards by the blast. And the noise going ka-pow, ringing, echoing in the night forest, and the four of us running, screaming, laughing, wow, wow, wow, that was loud. Loud. Loud.

We're back near the cabins before we stop to catch our breath. Dogs are barking like crazy. Cabin doors open and parents come out on the small porches and look around in the darkness for another gunshot, so they can find out the who and the why.

Tom wants to know when he will get to shoot it. It is his turn.

I don't know, we all say, I don't know, I don't know, it was so loud. God, that was so loud. We walk until we get near the docks by the bait shop, where we settle on the benches off in the dark.

Tom and Kate start kissing. Sara says she wishes Bruce was here. She asks if I want to kiss. She thinks it might be fun. She hasn't kissed many girls. I don't tell her I haven't kissed any girls, or boys.

It is mediocre.

Sara asks me if I don't know how to French kiss.

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There are people who understand this story and there are people who won't understand. Why didn't I call the police? Why didn't I go inside and wake our mother? They want reasons, reasons, reasons, as if it must make sense, as if I must supply incest, self-hatred, low self-esteem, a mental defect, a cry for help, as if life is a Hallmark movie of the week.

Phil, my third husband, knows not to bring it up while we are out with company. He knows how people are, how they need answers and conclusions, how once they start they have to find a satisfied ending. For the rest of the evening they will circle back to the story. It makes for a long night.

Of course there were clues. There are always clues, when you look back, like us hanging out our high rise apartment building windows far enough that one slip will mean you will get to find out what it feels like to fall fifty-two stories

down to the city street. You probably hope those fifty-two stories last a long, long time. You would want your fall to last as long as possible.

Things can happen to you. Some of them very good.

“Oh, you’re going to like this, you’re going to like it a lot.”

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We are as Christian as they come. Kate and I have matching crosses on chains our mother makes us wear every day. When we come home from church we have to go over what we learned in Sunday school, our mother giving us further instruction. Our father is in charge of monitoring our manners. We say yes ma’am, yes sir, we speak when spoken to, we even curtsy when we meet adults for the first time. People always tell our parents we are well-behaved, like we are household pets or something.

We’re not a dog family, not any pets really, other than the fish our father has in his big tank in the living room, but especially not dogs, too fawning, too needy, too much fur, too much licking. We did have a guinea pig. That lasted about a week.

We do ride horses, every Saturday afternoon, taking a bus out of the city with our mother. She thinks girls should learn how to handle a wild beast. Kate thinks it is a way to teach us how to spread our legs. Which might be the same thing.

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Forty years after that summer I will go to my mother's funeral. It is a big deal. I didn't know that many cared for her. Rectal cancer. You have to like that. She will be buried next to Kate. Afterwards, I will stand in the kitchen and watch my father cook dinner while we talk about the weather. We talk about the Yankees. We talk about the stock market. It takes me time to realize my father is cooking dinner for one. He is a steak and potatoes man. He has one steak and one potato. He could share, but he's not a sharing man.

Before I leave I spend time in Kate's old room. Nothing has changed since before. I can't forget her. I can't forgive her. On the wall a Cross with a malnourished Jesus. On the other wall a Twila Paris poster.

On her desk our father's old church camp button: I Found It!

Kate used a black ball point pen to scratch an L between the N and D so the badge read: I Fondled It!

God, our father got so mad.

She has these Alfred Hitchcock books, already used when she got them, strange tales written for children, grotesque drawings of ghosts and goblins. There is a story about a wolf speaking to children in the darkness, bringing them near, to gobble them up, and there is a drawing of a tall wolf hidden behind an open door and he is standing up on his back feet and the paragraph beneath it says, Johnny could hear the light scraping of paw nails behind the door and said Mr. Wolf, Mr. Wolf, do I really have to come out to play?

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In the morning our mother has driven our father south to Andover so she can keep the car after he has boarded the train to spend two days at our apartment in the city. We, Kate and I, don't know it, and I won't know it for a few more days, hearing heated arguments downstairs, but our father has gone back to the city to end it with the mistress he's been having since the fall before last. They'll be together at dinner, during their second glass of wine, down at a Little Italy place, with red and white checkerboard tablecloths, and he will be just close to telling the pretty girl they are done when the maitre de will come and ask if he is him and say he has a call at the business phone.

Both of us don't think anything of it that our mother keeps going from the kitchen to the bar cart and back to the kitchen. Lunch is haphazard, tuna and crackers and grapes, jumbled together on a plate.

"She's snoring," Kate says coming outside after being upstairs, carrying our father's gun under her t-shirt. "Over here," she says, and I follow her behind the garage.

I say we're supposed to go out on the lake with Sara and her family on their boat. Our mother has already okayed it. We will stay out late and eat dinner on the boat and come home after dark.

Kate says I can go without her. She won't mind.

I ask her what she's doing, why she has brought out the roll of tarp our father keeps in the garage behind the fishing poles and tackle. We have no idea

why the tarp is there, it has always been there, we've never used it, maybe the tarp came with our summer place.

Kate says she doesn't want to leave a mess. She doesn't want to make a bother. This way they can roll her up in the tarp and put her in next Tuesday's trash.

I ask her why and she asks me to look at it this way. Her words bounce against each other, flowing in such a jumble it's impossible to follow, Jesus, heaven, angels, and the length of eternity before we are born, the length of eternity after we die, the length of eternity compared to our lifetimes. Looking back, it almost sounds like a Marx Brothers skit.

What she says makes perfect sense.

I help her roll the tarp out on the grass behind the garage. She uses stones to hold down the corners though there is no wind, the air very still. I realize Kate might kill herself. I am somewhat excited by this possibility. I will be witness to a family crime. People will respect me and feel sorry for me.

Kate doesn't move. She has her arms folded across her chest. She must be considering the ramifications. She takes off her tennis shoes. Her legs are spread a little bit apart, her feet on the tarp. "I am going to die," she says, saying it the same way you say I am going to take out the garbage. Nothing in me wants her to do it. If she asks me to help it depends what it is. I'm not planning on pulling any triggers.

She takes off her shirt and shorts, so they don't get dirty. She considers her bathing suit, maybe removing just the top, or both, but for some reason her being naked just doesn't feel right. As if it matters.

I say we're going to be late. We're supposed to be at Sara's boat in half an hour. We're having her stepmother's fried chicken for dinner.

"Two bullets," she says, dropping the others on the tarp. "Double roulette. Double the fun."

She puts the barrel in her mouth, pulls it out, saying she wishes we had a camera. She thinks pictures, photos for the family album our father keeps up to date. A final photo. I go inside and find our mother's Instamatic.

She poses. I take pictures. She's a secret agent, she's a desperado.

She settles and takes a deep breath.

She says, "I accept the Jesus as my Lord and Savior."

"Ready," she says, reinserting the barrel. I think she says, "One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and go go go."

The gun clicks.

"Holy shit, holy shit, that was intense," she cries. She's leaping and hopping all over the tarp. She bangs a fist against the garage. "Allie, you got to try this, I'm mean you really have to."

I say no.

"I'm telling you, I'm telling you, I'm telling you, it really is incredible."

I say no.

“I’m telling you, it will blow your mind.”

I can’t help it. I have to try. It’s a once in a lifetime event.

The gun tastes like rust in my mouth.

I’ve tried twice more as the years have progressed, progressed?, waiting for the click. You hear a click, you hear a click. If you don’t hear a click, what do you hear? Do you hear the bang? Do you hear anything?

Kate is right. There is nothing like that moment as you pull the trigger. Nothing else matters as you pull the trigger. It is what the Hindu call moksha, what the Buddhist call nirvana. I will be briefly drawn to the sedentary religions during my late twenties.

“My turn again,” Kate grabs the gun from me.

I say we’re pushing our luck.

“One more time,” she says. “Luck has nothing to do with it.”

She says again that Jesus is her Lord and Savior. She asks me to wish her well. She tells me to tell everyone goodbye. She says Tata to me.

She smiles at me before she puts the muzzle back in her mouth. I am almost, but not quite, envious. She smiles the smile of someone belonging where she should.

What does she hear? Does she hear the bullet screaming up the barrel, the bullet hitting her skin, entering her brain? Does she feel her consciousness explode? Do those last multi-milliseconds last an eternity? Or is it like blowing out a candle, with the lingering smoke? Or is it a calm, crisp, nothing?

Since we are Christians, and we were, then Kate has gone to the light and she is already in heaven where she can adore God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost for all of eternity and it will never get old.

I take a picture. I take another picture, just in case I screwed up the first one. I leave the gun in her mouth. It looks better that way.

I use the garden hose to wash away the blood and brains off the tarp. The cool water, as it arches, makes shimmering rainbows. I roll up her body in the tarp. I roll her up like she is an enchilada. A burrito. Crepe Suzette. Kate enchilada, burrito Kate, Crepe Ka-Kate. There is some blood on the side of the garage and I damp a towel from the hose and try to wipe away the stuff off the wall. I do my best, but the blood smears everywhere, turning from red to pink. The garage is a light yellow, so it shows everything.

Of course I expect our mother to come running out of the house, her arms over her head, screaming and yelling, and maybe she will trip over the garden hose and fall head over heel and I will try not to laugh. I wait, but she doesn't come. I gird myself for neighbors, surely they will show, after hearing the gun shot. I will need to explain. I wait, but they don't show either.

Her mouth, I guess, acted as a natural silencer. The gun wasn't nearly as loud as it was the other night.

I leave her there and go out looking for Sara and Tom and Bruce to tell them what's happened, explain it to them, describe it to them, but when I make it to the dock they're ready to go out on Sara's parents boat and they tell me to

come on and board. I tell them Kate is not feeling well. We have a great time. We sail and swim and eat chicken and it isn't until later that an official boat pulls up and there are whispers and Sara's stepmother comes to me and says something has happened at home and I need to go back with the officers.

It turned out a neighbor's dog found Kate and began chewing at the tarp to get at her and then another dog and another dog and pretty soon their barking and growling and fighting over my sister's corpse got to be so much that my mother finally had enough and went outside to see what was going on. She had to call the police to get the dogs off of Kate's body. They did a lot of damage, quite a bit.

I've never heard so many questions. The questions go on for days, weeks, but what can I tell them? Don't they understand?

Why did I roll her up in the tarp? I have no idea. It seemed like the thing to do. I mention burritos. I talk about enchiladas. They don't seem to get me. They ask why I am talking about Mexican food. I've forgotten to mention the crepe suzette. That is French, like how you kiss.