THE LAKE

She would go down to the water where it gently lapped against the shore and catch minnows and newts. She would watch them squirming in the net for moments before she threw them back. Sometimes she thought she saw the impossibly delicate bones of fingers in the net. But it was always just twigs. Other times she would briefly see a face floating up through the cloudy green water, staring at her, with a pallor more pronounced than anything she had seen or could imagine, and enormous blue eyes, glazed over and remote, lidless like those of some primordial fish. Or like those of a doll: staring, ever staring.

Because she was a doll, really, wasn't she? Impossibly pretty. Inhumanly pretty. And cold, emanating no warmth, exuding no empathy, just always taking everything in with her huge doll eyes and finding everything, and everyone, wanting. Sometimes when she took the boat out on the water she sat so still that the ducks would fly in and light quite close. It was as if she were an inert, lifeless thing, no more to be noted than the trunk of a broken tree thrusting up from the water, or a shard of stone cresting the water's surface like a sculpted artifact on a table top. She would float there, literally and figuratively, the ducks bobbing about to each side of her, their tails popping up as they fed, their silent concentration occasionally interrupted by their banter that could almost sound like laughter. She envied them the simplicity of their lives. Their minds were free of the pervasive, recurrent presence of Julie in all her forms: haunted specter, wraith, recriminating sprite from the depths. Their minds were free of guilt.

She'd met her right after they moved. Her shoulder-length blond hair, cerulean eyes, and full lips revealing the least bit of unnaturally white teeth beneath the curled upper lip were like so many of the impossibly attractive girls on TV shows. But Julie wasn't on a TV show. Julie was real. And her reality was so striking, so impossibly perfect, that it was as if everyone else was slightly out of focus beside her. Or, she thought, remembering her piano lessons, like discordant notes surrounding a single beautiful harmony. Julie was the blazing star at the center of the solar system of Northridge High. Both sexes orbited her, the girls with sycophantic titters at her every utterance, the boys with yearnings she seemed able to keep at a sustained level of manageable passion. She knew exactly when to add the additional log to the fire, when to just let the fire burn.

It had all started with her father's new job. Her mother had told her about her about it one morning at breakfast. "It will mean a lot more money for us," she said. Money had been a constant topic of conversation between her parents. She was sick of hearing about money this and money that. So maybe, she thought, the new job would be good. But then she learned that they would have to move.

"But I've just started at Pembroke," she said.

"I know, Annie, and I'm so sorry. Dad will commute until summer so you can finish your first year here. Summer's a better time to move anyway. There are more houses on the market."

And so they moved. To Northridge. And to Julie. "So you're the new girl," she'd said, tilting her head slightly as if to get a better perspective. Or, more likely, to strike another impossibly captivating pose that had frequently been rehearsed in the

mirror. She nodded, introduced herself. Two other girls were hovering, giving Julie's air of assurance and importance added weight. "What kind of name is Schindler anyway?"

"German, I think."

But that wasn't what Julie was getting at. No, she was more interested in where Schindler fell in her lexicon of acceptable names. Names like Williams and Thompson, her friends' names, which she emphasized as she introduced them. Or hers, Davidson. As for Schindler: "It isn't really like a name at all, is it? More like a noise." The hoverers tittered and the group dispersed. Laughter hung in the air like the acrid smoke after the explosion of a bomb.

The first time she saw the house on the lake her mother presented it almost as a bribe. "I know it's been hard, Annie, but look at your room. Isn't the view down onto the water just gorgeous? It's the best view in the house, I think. Won't it be great to get up to this view every morning? It will get each day off to a good start."

Right, she thought. The house was large, much bigger than the one they'd moved from. She wasn't sure why they needed all of the additional room. There were just the three of them. But it seemed important to her parents. And the talk of money, money, money largely disappeared. And that was good.

"Class," the teacher said, "please welcome Ann Schindler to Northridge. Ann just moved here from Millersville."

Students turned about in their desks, craned their necks, looked at her. In the front of the row on the far right Julie stared, eyes half-lidded and lips compressed, as if to say, "I've taken her measure." Several of the students looked at Julie, then back at her with diminished interest. Or at least so it seemed.

Later Julie stopped her in the hall.

"Hey, Schindler, you like doughnuts?"

"Well, yes, I guess."

"My club is selling doughnuts for a fundraiser. Can I put you down for a box?"

"Sure."

"Good. I thought you probably liked doughnuts."

Only as Julie's tall, slender figure receded down the hall did she get it. Julie thought she was fat! For days she picked at her food and her mother fussed. "But you have always liked that pasta dish." Or that casserole. Or that stew. "Don't you feel well?"

"I'm fine."

"I'm worried about you."

"Then," she said, suddenly and impulsively, "why did we have to move here?"

Her father put down a fork full of food.

"We've been over that," he said. "It's pointless to discuss it further."

"It's hard for her," her mother said. "She had to leave behind all her friends."

"That's not the problem and you know it."

"For God's sake, Robert, leave it alone."

They continued to talk about her as if she weren't there. Sometimes she thought she wasn't. It was like when she was on the lake. The lake became her solace, her friend. She guessed her mother was right: the view down onto the water in the morning did get her day off to a good start. As she dressed she could look to where the water spread out to the far, dimly visible bank across from their house. She could see the ducks floating, bobbing on the rippling water, their lives so uncomplicated. One day she saw a great blue heron wading, slowly, ever so slowly, until its beak suddenly darted out to

seize a fish. When the bird loosed its great wings, it was almost as if they were giant feathered projectiles exploding from its body. She watched, fascinated, as the bird flew out over the water to the far bank. Ah, the freedom, she thought, the wonderful freedom.

The next time she saw Julie, she had her hair pulled back in a ponytail. There was nothing to distract from her perfect features, her high cheekbones, her finely sculpted nose. She held a hand lightly touching her lips, her long, delicate fingers slightly spread as if to catch an errant phrase. Julie's hands were beautiful. She had always thought her own were small, pudgy, short-fingered.

"So why did you come here anyway, Schindler?"

"My dad got a job here."

"I don't know why but I just see you as more at Pembroke."

"What do you know about Pembroke?"

"We play them in football every year. I don't think they've ever won. It's usually like 69 to 10 or something."

"I'm sure we've won."

"Oh, yeah? When?"

She didn't know. She didn't really follow football. Julie, on the other hand, dated Matt Connors, the quarterback of the Northridge team. She knew because one of Julie's hoverers told her. Or, rather, expressed incredulity that she didn't already know. "He's so hot!" the hoverer cooed.

"Never," Julie said. "You've never won. Never. It's like a two-hundred-to-nothing record or something."

Later, sitting in the boat in the middle of the lake, she realized that Julie had spoken as if she were still at Pembroke. But, more importantly, she came to terms with

the fact that Julie wasn't talking about an unfortunate football record, she was talking about part of the whole tapestry of failure and despair that was Annie Schindler. She was at Pembroke with the losers. She would always be at Pembroke with the losers. She hated Julie. Or, at least, she fervently wished that she could hate her. She hated her powerlessness to hate her.

Julie's invitation to the party at her house was a big surprise. Her mirror told her that she shouldn't go. It told her, candidly as was its way, that she was fat, that her eyebrows were too thick, her hair too coarse and brown, her eyes too small, her lips too thin. Her mother told her that mirrors don't reflect reality. Rather, they reflect its opposite, its mirror image. So if the mirror reveals aspects of you that you think unattractive, think the opposite. That is the reality, not what you see in the mirror. If the mirror says you're unattractive, you are in fact beautiful.

Julie, she knew, was beautiful in the mirror and out.

She met her at her door with tiny wisps of yellow hair framing her face. She seemed to be wearing a light coral lipstick but it was hard to tell. It was the color lips should be and, with girls like Julie, maybe were. A necklace with a single blue stone was framed against the V of white skin revealed by her open blouse. The stone was exactly the color of her eyes. She found herself feeling helpless, actually physically weakened. It was as if Julie emanated warmth, a heat that suffocated her and made her knees wobble.

"So, Schindler," Julie said, "who'd you bring?"

"Nobody, I didn't know—"

"Didn't I tell you? You were supposed to bring someone. Everyone else did. But don't worry about it. We'll find you someone. Follow me."

Julie led her down into a large basement room where music was playing loudly and people were laughing and drinking. For some reason, even though it made no sense, she was comforted by the impression that Julie could sort this out, make it right. In the midst of the room Julie put her arm over her shoulder, surprising her with the unexpected familiarity.

"Okay, listen up, folks. Schindler here is unattached. Any ideas for someone we could put in an emergency call to?"

Everyone seemed interested in the question. Even the couple in the far corner who'd been making out on the sofa had disengaged and were staring at her. For a moment she was flattered. Then someone suggested Marvin Cardwell who was taken to classes in a wheelchair. Another suggested George Morris, who seemed to occupy most of the time of the school's special needs teacher. Then there was Bill Bradsheer, who had recently been expelled and was awaiting sentencing for the assault of his girlfriend. "When he gets out of jail," the author of the suggestion noted, "he'll be perfect for Schindler. She needs a bad boy."

Julie looked at her with a sigh of resignation.

"I just don't know why I expect to get an honest answer out of these people," she said. "I tell you what. Barb Kendrick came by herself too. Why don't the two of you hang out?"

Only later did it occur to her that maybe the whole thing had been a setup to pair her with another girl. Did Julie think that was what she wanted? More importantly, was it what she wanted? Her father seemed to think so. He thought she'd had feelings for other girls in the past that were more than friendship. Was he right? More importantly, what were her feelings for Julie? They seemed more complicated than they should have

been. Julie had, in fact, given her very little reason to do anything other than hate her. Yet she didn't, at least not wholly, not all of the time. Was it possible to hate and love someone at the same time? Did these extreme emotions form some sort of perpetual circuit, going round and round and continually merging into each other? And, if so, was this the way everyone thought about things? Or was she somehow different?

The next day two things came together with an inevitability that seemed preordained. First, in French class they read "Ondine" by Aloysius Bertrand. It was a poem about a water sprite who seeks to lure a man into being her husband, "*et de visiter avec elle son palais être le roi des lacs*—to visit with her at her palace and be king of the lakes." The second thing was something she heard as part of a random conversation in the hallway between classes. "Can you believe that Julie doesn't know how to swim? I mean, I thought she could do anything." Of course there were many Julies at Northridge. But a quick glance at the parties to the conversation revealed that the speaker was Matt Connors. And how many Julies could there be about whom the unspoken assumption would be that she could do anything?

The next day at school she told Julie about her uncle the fashion photographer. "He'll be visiting me next week," she said.

"Really?" Julie said. "So what?"

"He's worked for all the big fashion magazines. He's made the careers of several super models. I'm sure he'd be happy to take some pictures of you."

Julie thought about that for a few moments, as if she'd never thought about being in the fashion magazines or being a super model but, once the seed was planted, hadn't taken long to germinate.

"Well, I guess, sure," she said, then more decisively, "I'd like that. But he's probably expensive."

"You're my friend. He'd do it for you free."

"Okay. Let me know when he's going to be at your place, okay?"

Her uncle's itinerary was completely in her control. Because her uncle the fashion photographer was wholly a creature of her imagination.

When Julie pulled up in her car—a cute little sports car, of course—she met her with the bad news that her uncle's flight had been delayed but that her mom was going to be picking him up at the airport in an hour. "It's such a nice day," she said. "Let's go out on the lake." It thrilled her to see the fear in Julie's eyes, then to see her unable to offer any credible reason for not going out on the lake other than that she couldn't swim and was afraid, reasons that she, of course, did not give.

"Do you have a life jacket?" Julie asked. "My mom says you should always wear one when you're going out on the water."

"I never wear one. Why would you need a life jacket?"

"Well, I mean, wouldn't it just make sense? If you have one."

"I don't think we even have one."

Her plan was to go out on the water and keep Julie there long enough for her to become wholly terrified, then bring her back. It wouldn't probably make any difference in their relationship but it would give her a delicious moment to savor and remember. And maybe it would change things. Maybe Julie would think, you know, maybe I've sold Schindler short, she can handle a boat, she's not afraid of the water. She didn't have high hopes for that, but maybe. But even without that she would have her delicious moment.

As she rowed out into the lake she felt more at peace than she could ever remember because she was, for once, in control. She hadn't been in control when they'd moved. She hadn't ever been in control when Julie had been in her presence. Looking back, she realized that she hadn't even been in control at Pembroke. Even there she'd been bedeviled by urges and tendencies and distractions that made her friendships fragile and difficult. But now she was in control. This new aura of power surrounded and strengthened her, put more resolve into her strokes with the oars, made her posture on the seat of the boat resolute and confident.

Julie was huddled at the opposite end of the boat.

"This is dumb," she said, scowling. "Let's just go back. I can come back later."

"My uncle is leaving tomorrow morning."

"He's not even here yet."

"He's a very busy man. He's just taken a moment out from his busy schedule to see us."

"Well, I can wait for him back at your house." She was nearly ashamed at herself for savoring Julie's palpable apprehension. "Anyway, I'm cold. I want to go back. Now."

Julie's new vulnerability nearly made her feel sorry for her. And, pouty and petulant, she was even more beautiful. But there was such an arrogant manner of entitlement about her, even when she felt uncertain and afraid, that this blunted these other impressions and drove her to resist Julie, even to torment her. As she had these thoughts, she noticed something slowly forming at the corner of Julie's nose. It was an incipient bubble of snot. Almost as quickly as it appeared, she sniffed it back up into her

nostril with a tiny, unobtrusive sound, followed by a languid blink that held for moments before her eyes re-opened as if to affirm a denial of such an unseemly moment.

She wasn't prepared for Julie to become a child, a little girl, but that quickly she did. True, she was an impossibly difficult little girl, spoiled rotten, self-absorbed, deficient in—if not bereft of—compassion, but still a little girl. And, too, a little girl suffering under a constant pressure to maintain perfection, a pressure that molded her as surely as her own pervasive inferiorities had made her who she was. Annie Schindler's nose could run whenever it wanted to. She was unsure about a lot, but she knew that her nose ran. Julie's, apparently, did not. Maybe she didn't crap either. It would explain a lot.

Suddenly she laughed.

Julie demanded indignantly to know what was so funny.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing. Let's go on back. I can see you're cold."

"I told you I was, genius."

That was when the great blue heron erupted from the reeds and flew off with an indignant *braak, braak, braak*. They'd gotten surprisingly close and the big bird's sudden presence was so dramatic that she impulsively stood up in the boat and pointed. "Oh, look," she said. That was when the boat tipped over and the two of them went into the water.

Julie screamed, floundered, calling out finally what she already knew: "I can't swim."

Looking back through the years she still could see so vividly those next few seconds. She should have saved Julie, still wasn't sure why she hadn't. She had her, was moving her toward the overturned boat which they could have clung to until they could

turn it back over or hang on to and kick toward the shore. She would have saved Julie if suddenly, inexplicably, she hadn't slipped loose from her grasp. She simply couldn't hold on to her. She had never understood why. And when she had plunged down into the water to grasp Julie again and pull her toward the surface she proved even more slippery and intractable. Clearly, she wasn't meant to save her. The years had confirmed, repeatedly, that she was meant to bear the burden of guilt for being so impossibly mean and spiteful. For she had lied to Julie and taken her out on the lake for no good reason. She had done it to scare her, to lord it over her. And she had paid the price ever since.

It had, of course, simply been a tragic accident. Any questions about her judgment quite vanished when she responded to Julie's mother's emotionally fraught question about whether she knew that Julie couldn't swim by noting tearfully, "Everyone thought Julie could do anything."

After her father's fatal heart attack, her mother stayed in the house by the lake for years, growing increasingly feeble but refusing to leave. After her death, the house came to her, the only child. She thought of selling it but could never bring herself to put it on the market. She couldn't avoid the thought that she needed to stay near the lake or it would somehow betray her. If she tried to sell the house, she thought, the lake would emanate menace to a prospective buyer, like the houses in all of those stories haunted by grotesque murders or tragic accidents. Exactly how the lake would do this she did not know. Perhaps others looking down into the water would see Julie's face there, as she did. Or Julie would materialize from the water like Ondine. Ah, if she only would. She would embrace her, hold her close, tell her how sorry she was. She would tell her she loved her right down to that little bubble of snot.