

High Hopes

Everyone told Lena to sell the house, but she just couldn't. Their home in Greensburg—where the girls grew up and the gerbils and fish were buried in the yard—had been sold as part of the divorce, and she let it go without much fight. The memories there were more bitter than sweet now. But the summer place on Lake Erie she wouldn't sell, no matter what. She'd wanted it so long, she was going to have it, even if it sat empty month after month.

She had wanted a summer place her whole married life, and it had taken that whole marriage to get one. When the girls were young, she and Jim had shuttled them from one set of grandparents to the other, to Disney World and national parks, but never to a place of their own, never a haven to relax and just be. The summer home had been Lena's hope for her family, her marriage; it represented the carefree happiness she wanted in their lives. Even as things with Jim were getting ugly, their conversations terse and filled with resentments, she had campaigned for that house, for them to have a place to get away. Even as her girls grew up and moved on to families of their own, she had wanted to bring everyone back to a place to believe in.

They'd bought the land, and things were better for a time. She and Jim spoke as a team to the architects and contractors, worked on designs and watched their summer escape be born. The summer before their youngest, Caitlin, went to college, it was finished, and the whole family

spent two weeks there around July 4th, swimming, eating hot dogs off the grill, relaxing on the porch. This was finally the life she'd hoped for, coming true. Then winter came and she couldn't hide from the chill and darkness when she and Jim were alone together, the girls all gone. By the time July 4th came around again, they were divorcing after thirty years of marriage.

"Surely you're not keeping that place now," her own mother had said when she went over the terms she and Jim had reached.

"Of course I am," Lena had told her, refusing to discuss it further. Her mother had sold everything and moved to a senior condo complex when her father died; what did she know about sentiment?

The girls were no better. They came together to her new apartment, a defensive line of persuasive power. They had planned ahead, Lena could see from the way they cornered her in her own living room. This was an intervention.

"Mom, I know you wanted that place," Christina said, "but there's so much upkeep, and it's so expensive. How can you afford the payments?"

"Mike and I have too much visiting to do with his family at Cape Cod," Eleanor said, switching her little Ava to her other hip. "We'll never get there."

"It's a five hour drive," Caitlin agreed, and she frowned at the loveseat Lena used for a couch these days. "Mom, if you sold it you could get yourself a nicer place to live, maybe some better furniture."

Lena shrugged and feigned indifference to their arguments. They had only spent one summer at the cottage as a family; how could they love it as she did? "I don't expect you to understand," she told her girls, rubbing the nubby arm of her loveseat. How could they understand—she had raised them right. They were sensible girls who knew that time together

was more important than any place or piece of furniture. How could she explain that the house was a person to her now, a fourth child waiting for her mothering touch? “I’m thinking I’ll go every weekend next summer, just me, to get away,” she told them. “You don’t have to come.” She reached for baby Ava, who was fussing and wriggling from Eleanor’s grasp. “I think my grandbaby wants to come, don’t you?” Lena smiled at Ava, the only eyes in the room not judging her.

She went to the summer house when the divorce was finalized and sat on the porch, defiant. It was fall and the air was turning cool, the wind off the lake rattling the leaves from the oak in the side yard, sending them scattered across the lawn. Lena pulled her jacket tight around her, drinking lemonade on the porch swing, pretending it was just a summer breeze. She listened to the stillness on the lane, the robins gone. Around her, the other cottages were already closed up for the winter. *The whole place is mine*, she thought as she sipped from her cool glass and pushed the swing back and forth with an outstretched toe.

The first time she had ever been to the lake was with Jim, the first year they were married. They had married just after college graduation in June and moved to Pittsburgh where Jim had a job waiting and they knew no one. Those first months were peaks and valleys of excitement and loneliness, new intimacies and isolations. So many moments, just the two of them in a small apartment near the universities—how hard it was to remember how that had been, before three daughters and the house in the suburbs, back when the television ran from after dinner til bed just to fill the space.

All nervous energy and new adulthood, she and Jim began taking weekend drives around the area—never planned more than a few minutes before. They would drive the Buick Skylark

Jim's dad had passed down to them out through the tunnels, picking exits that sounded odd or appealing: Ligonier. Bethany. Ohiopyle. Sometimes they'd spread the map on the kitchen table on Saturday morning, following the rippling line of the Ohio River or the shaded Appalachians and pick a destination, heads leaning over the page, Lena smoothing the folds of the map with her hand as Jim guided a finger along the jagged line of State Road 22 or the thick green rope of the Turnpike. If they went far, they'd find a Super 8 along the highway or stop and nap at a rest area until the rumble of a predawn truck awakened them.

Taking off with Jim those mornings felt to Lena like falling in love all over, the excitement of exploring their world together, the trepidation at what might happen. Once, they spent two hours pulled to the side of a country road as a storm rumbled through; another time, they got so turned around they drove the same wind of West Virginia hills for three hours, hungry and tired. But they also saw fiery sunsets behind the Poconos, towns of painted Victorians, deer drinking from a stream fifty feet from where they drove slowly by. And through all of it, there was just the two of them, sharing the mystery and discovery with no one else.

Wonder, Lena thought now, watching the lake wind rattle the leaves across the lawn. Marriage had been like that, when they were learning to live together, to build their life. Somewhere along the way, they'd lost their wonder. They got too tired for wonder, too busy for it, and instead of forging into the unknown together they went their separate ways.

Jim was the one who picked the route the day they first went to the lake. "You ever been to Lake Erie?" he asked, his finger swirling in the blue of it on the map. Lena hadn't been there. She had grown up in eastern Pennsylvania and spent her childhood summers in Cape May. "I went to summer camp there," Jim told her. She could see the fond memories in the way his eyes

searched the map, his finger coming to rest on the lake's southern shore. "Swimming, getting eaten by mosquitoes."

"Sounds great," Lena said, wrinkling her nose at the idea. Mosquitoes? Driving home in a wet bathing suit?

"It *is* great," Jim insisted. "Not the mosquitoes part, but it's late for them now. The lake. Here is this huge body of water, so vast you can't see across. But it's not... violent, like the ocean." His lips pursed with a forming thought.

"It's peaceful," Lena offered, but Jim shook his head.

"It's not peaceful. There are waves, and storms—one night we had a storm that ripped the screens right off of our cabin windows. But most of the time, the waves are just a gentle rhythm. Just so high. Just a breeze." Jim pulled his finger from the map. "I can't explain."

"So take me there," Lena said, kissing his furrowed brow. "Show me."

They spent the better part of the morning on the highway, leaving the rolling hills of Pennsylvania for the flat of northern Ohio, the sun drifting in the back windows as it crawled overhead. Youngstown. Cleveland. Finally, Jim turned off onto a two lane road, bordered by tall brown grass and scattered farm houses, shuttered orchard stands, their summer fruits now gone. Lena looked down the road for a hint of blue, a sparkle of sun on distant water, but saw none. Trees and tall grass and houses far ahead on the flat land.

"It should be just up here," Jim said, squinting at the windshield. He held the steering wheel tightly at two and ten. It felt to Lena like they stayed that way a long time, maybe an hour even, peering into the horizon, searching for a glimmer of lake, until finally the trees gave way to a field of blue.

It was hard for Lena to remember what the lake looked like to her that first time, just as it was hard to remember how it felt to ride in the car beside Jim and find him mysterious, his impulsiveness alluring. She remembered getting out of the car at the end of the road, the air cool against her skin. Following a narrow footpath along the edge of lawn abutting a small marina, boats bobbing in the afternoon sun. Mostly, she remembered the noise—how the waves had rolled in and back in a slow rhythm—like a baby swing or a rocking chair. The rush of water against rocks, against the sand had been so loud and yet deliberate, controlled in its slowness.

The beach had been rocky, she remembered, and had little purple and white spiraled shells dotting its edge. This was before the zebra mussels came and spread across the shore end to end, or the aftermath that returned to rocks and sand. The water was greener than she had expected, revealing the long, mossy seaweed that clung to the rocks in the shallow water.

She remembered how Jim had pulled her into his arms as they stood on the wide planks of a boat slip at the marina's edge. He tucked her head beneath his chin, a habit of those days, and they had gazed out at the sun limning the rippled water. The air had been mildly fishy and lacking the salt spray Lena was used to from the ocean. She had looked out over the water at the distant, tree-thick islands in the lake, with Jim encircling her.

What was it she thought she had understood about him then, as they watched the lake together? Lena remembered feeling so close to him as they listened to the boats creak, bobbing in their moorings, and the waves lapping the boards beneath their feet. She couldn't remember now what it was she thought she knew then, some fanciful superstition that they would be okay, that it would always be like this or return to this in the years to come.

High Hopes, she remembered. They had watched a sailboat pull away from the marina. She had forgotten that—the name scripted on the back: High Hopes. She and Jim had watched its sail unfurl, watched it labor against the gentle tide into the distant sun.

There was no sun left on the water now, the lake gray with the vanishing light. A lone coast guard vessel trolled the landscape, its green lights riding west to east and back again. Lena rocked the porch swing in time with the waves. What was it she felt she knew that day with Jim when she first saw the lake? High Hopes. Connection. Husband, wife. Land, water.

She finished her lemonade. There was no denying the approaching winter now. The chill off the lake rattled the leaves from the trees. The moon rose steely over the water and the lights of Kelleys Island twinkled a goodnight kiss.

She went home the next morning after having tea and toast in the eat-in kitchen, gazing out the back window at the leaf-strewn lawn. She shut the heat off, turned off every light, made sure each door and window was shut tight. She locked up and drove away, a final glance at her summer house in the rearview mirror as she pulled away.

Her phone was ringing when she walked in her apartment door. “Mom?” Her daughter Christina’s voice. “I’ve been calling you all day. Where were you?”

Lena set her overnight bag on the floor and stood there with her coat still on. “I’ve been at the beach house,” she said simply.

“I was worried. You didn’t answer your cell, I kept calling and you never called back—“

“I’m sorry, Chris. I didn’t have my phone on.” It was warm in the apartment. Lena began unbuttoning her coat.

“You went to the summer house? Wasn’t it cold?”

“It was,” Lena admitted, “but it was beautiful there.”

The pause on the line buzzed with her daughter’s exasperation. “Mom. I wish you’d quit insisting on keeping that house.”

“Well, I’m keeping it,” Lena said.

“But we won’t go there, Mom.” Lena began to protest, but Christina stopped her. “You know we won’t.”

“We could,” Lena said, but she wasn’t so sure. Things were so different, so far from the home and family she had imagined that first day she saw the lake, far from even the dream she had tried to build in the house itself.

“Everything’s changed,” Christina said, her tone gentle.

“That’s true.” Lena kicked her overnight bag out of the entryway and shut the door.

“You have to sell it, Mom.” Christina was the oldest, always practical, often right. Lena sighed into the phone, and Christina knew not to push it any further.

After she hung up, Lena made herself a cup of tea and sat looking out her kitchen window. Her apartment was on the second floor and she could see cars turning into her complex at the gate below. She tried to focus on the sound of the cars speeding by on the street, but the sound turned to the waves at the summer house. The headlights became the fireflies darting by on the lawn. Her kitchen clock ticked, the echo sounding like footsteps on the porch. But the house itself? She could picture it, shutters closed tight, bracing for the winter wind. It sat empty and dark, closed even to her now. She would have to wait for the spring thaw, to see what opened, and what could be released onto the waves.

End.