

The Scuba Diver

Cate Desens

“Well, I don’t know about my whole life, but the strangest day I ever had that summer was the weekend after that kid drowned. Taken individually, no one event seems so unusual, but as a whole- well, I’ve never been able to make heads or tails of it. Even though I can remember the day so clearly- even though I was only sixteen, you know? That was, God, a good ten years ago now. But I remember the salty-sick smell of the algae blooms on the lake, and the oily black water. The thing is, after that day I never saw those two little boys again, or their uncle.”

My date paused and downed a good third of her Heineken, her throat bobbing once, twice. I was unabashedly attracted to her. She could sing, did, in fact sing, in an indie-whatever band with a buzzkilling name (Piss Pie) and she was the kind of long-hair, pierced pretty that I usually associated with floppy beach hats, paid vacations, and no interest in girls like me. My guard was up. She had canceled on me thrice- yes, thrice- before suggesting to meet me on a rainy Thursday night, with only a few hours warning, practically psychotic behavior. I had said yes because, shoot me, I was bored. Her only self-preservation instinct was that we were meeting at an all-night diner with a liquor license, across the street from the Oyster Club in sidewalked Northeast; not a brewery, and definitely not a bar. Now, we had only just tucked into the red vinyl booth at the window, and she was staring at her own reflection in the dirty glass, thinking about her hometown tragedies, presumably, and I already got the feeling that this night was going to end with me leaving alone, having wasted a lot of money and time. I was the fool, actually. What was I even doing there?

“You have to back up,” I said, reaching for my own squat ceramic mug. I had ordered decaf coffee to contrast her. It was bad, actually, but hot enough. The steam opened the pores on my jaw. “That’s

horrible that a kid drowned, I didn't hear anything about something like that happening in the Cities, but what do you mean you never saw the other kids again? Are we talking about a case of kidnapping here? Some kind of triple homicide-abduction?"

She took one more, reserved sip of beer. It was our first round. She was just Kim; I was just Lori.

"No, I just mean, they all left town after it was over," she said coolly.

What did she do for a living? Civil engineer, record store busybody, dogwalker? Probably not a receptionist, unless politeness was something she could turn on and off.

"Well, you wouldn't have heard about it, would you have?" she added, seeing me nonplussed. "It isn't anything special is it, happens every season? But it wasn't a kid, after all, who drowned, it was a teenager."

"Boating accident?"

"Boating accident. Day drinking, Fourth of July. It's telling," she said, looking at me like I caused boating accidents. "God, fine, I'll tell you the story, but I want uninterrupted talk-time."

She had incredible, arching, hairy brown eyebrows, two shades darker than her eyes, brown-green.

"Unless you want to tell a story first?"

"Um." I felt put on the spot. I was sitting regularly; she had her legs curled under her and was sitting on her hips like some kind of guru. "Sure, actually, I do have a story. And then you can tell your story?"

She nodded. "A story transaction."

"Do you want to hear the story about bikes or about my crazy aunt Sabine?"

"Can I ask further inquiries?"

"No."

“Sabine, then.”

“Ok, well.” I washed my mouth out with burnt decaf, acidic and lukewarm.

“She- my aunt- my father’s sister- was pregnant with her last child. But nothing was showing. She was five, six, seven months in, and no bump. She had two girls already. She knew she was pregnant, and she was eating anything she came across, really. But she had gained almost no weight. According to the doctor, her baby was developing fine, it was just in the first percentile for weight- at a high risk for miscarriage.”

“Did someone tell you this story?”

“No. I was there. She wasn’t showing. I was ten.”

“Alright.”

“Why?”

“Trying to picture it. Plus, you’re telling it kind of dry.”

I was thrown. “I am kind of dry.”

“Fair enough,” she said. She took another, impossibly tiny sip of her Heineken. I didn’t know what I felt. Peeved? Awake. My hands were fidgeting in my lap.

“You’re never going to finish it at that rate,” I said, nodding at her drink.

“I know.”

“God, where was I? Oh, yes, my Aunt Sabine- who by the way never even reached 5 feet- is carrying what she calls “a ghost baby.” She’s seven months pregnant, living on Colfax down near 46th in a long wooden apothecary, practically, you should see the inside of her house, dried herbs hung from every threshold, cats climbing up the walls- but halfway through her seventh month her new husband calls me - New Spencer, I call him - and he says she’s gone missing, and I saw what do you mean she’s gone missing, and he says I mean I can’t find her, she didn’t come home from the post office, that was two hours ago, I

said what about your two girls, they're fine, he said, I've got them here with me, now can you help me look for her."

"Now pregnant women do all sorts of crazy things- that's part of the privilege of being pregnant- but wandering away from one's family- it isn't very *adaptive*, is it? Usually it's things like dipping pickles in mustard. Actually, that sounds kind of good."

My date- Kim- looked out the window again. I had decided that she, on the whole, like me, was not that interested. Had she just texted ten girls, then, to see who would take the bait? Meeting up at a diner on an unprompted Thursday had *hookup* written all over it. Maybe I should be drinking beer. I couldn't figure her out, listening to me but not really there, she had an air of resignation to her, one primly done nail with the white tip worrying one long, loose curl, the other hand atop the scuffed plastic tabletop, picking at a dried ketchup blob - the diner, yes, was gross- yet she was the one who had asked me out. She met my eyes- I was staring, my face got hot- and smiled, politely, like she got that alot. Was there something between us? I felt lonely, desperate, weird: I wished I had brought a deck of cards so we could play Hearts, maybe our hands touching over the cards, that would clear some things up.

A harried couple- stringy hair from the rain and grumpy- had slid into the booth behind ours. They had a lot of questions about the eggs benedict at this establishment. (Eggs Benedict? At night? Disgusting). The waitress walked away from their table rolling her eyes and muttering. An old cook swept onion peels into a pile with a toxic yellow broom and shouting *Si me quiería, porque dijo no ella*, plaintively, into the cloistered kitchen, from which perhaps advice would be dispensed along with mariachi music.

I realized that the silence had gone on too long at the same second that she beat me to it.

"What do you do for a living?"

Oh, I always nailed this one.

“I observe fluctuating populations of avifauna and simulate mating patterns under laboratory conditions.”

“You’re a birdwatcher.”

“No. Well, I’m a bird scientist.”

“Gotcha.”

“My main project right now is observing Lake of the Isles for Great Blue Heron activity.”

“Someone pays you to do that?”

“The U of M does.” I said, smugly.

“Lots of heron activity, then?”

“Oh yeah. Loads,” I said, taking another sip of decaf, surprised to find myself downing the dregs.

“So your aunt,” Kim prompted.

“Right. She’s *missing*. Terry and I looked in at her work straightaway, she’s an attorney, obviously she wasn’t there, hadn’t been in a few months, being pregnant and a mom already. We called her dad straightaway too, knowing that she has never gotten along with her mom. But he lives in Wisconsin, and anyway he hadn’t heard diddly squat. We started going round to her friends. Terry had called the neighbor over to watch the girls. It’s dark, plus- I forgot to mention this- a blizzard was coming down, it being- fuck what was it? You know how April is the snowiest month up here, at least it was? It must have been April because she was due in June.

“And- I forgot to mention this too- her car was still in the garage. She had walked to the post office- you know, Colfax down at the south end is so ‘burb-posh, all those boutiques within a half mile and mailmen tipping their hats to you- that sort of thing, it’s practically Edina- well, but how would she get

anywhere without her car? Terry's going out of his mind with worry, he's a war vet and tries to pick out the safest woman he could find and she goes off and does this, it's almost too much for him."

I stopped. "Ok, your turn. Guess- where'd she go?"

"She's with her family, obviously." Said Kim. And she took a tiny, mousy sip of beer, barely enough to cover the tongue.

"Well, like I said, her dad hadn't heard diddly squat."

"Siblings?"

"Four."

"Damn. Irish?"

"Yep!"

"Any around here?"

"Two brothers, one to the east, one to the west. And two sisters- her younger sister whom she tolerates but never loved who lives in Florida with a fleet of Airedales. And an older sister with whom she had a grave falling-out twelve years ago who doesn't live here but was, in fact, here for a spot of PD. Professional development. Teacher's conference," I said, seeing the look of confusion and irritation on Kim's face.

"Bingo," she said. She seemed detached, uninvolved, still, sitting with her hands in her lap, occasionally reaching out for her beer like a frog for a fly, but I couldn't see how to bring her in.

"Apparently you have a good sense of intuition," I said.

"It makes sense if her pregnancy is going poorly that she seeks to repair relationships with significant women in her life that perhaps were depressing her subconsciously."

"Ok, lay off, Freud."

“It just makes sense.”

“I’ve forgotten to ask what you do for a living?”

“I psycho-analyze,” she said mischievously, “No, actually I do marketing and event planning for a gym. Which involves pushing buttons, psychologically, of course.”

“A gym that puts on events?”

“Yeah, dances, DJs, community nights. I do the music sometimes. Well, my band does.”

I had a hard time picturing her dancing. What kind of music could *Piss Pie* possibly signify?

“I bet this is in Northeast.”

“Well, yeah, that’s my neighborhood.”

“So!” I said, wishing I had something hot in my hands once more. “What happened is that my aunt’s sister- my aunt Fiona- a big, loud, pretty, blonde woman- had been driving around Colfax just wondering if she’d happen to run into Sabine, every day when she got done with learning how to be a better teacher or whatever at the conference. Without ever, I don’t know, texting Sabine, and asking to talk. Just- driving around. Buying trash newspapers. Telling herself she was running errands. I think Sabine told me that on the afternoon that Fiona picked her up- just picture it, flakes are coming down, it’s just after four o’clock under a shipwrecked sky- you run across your sister you haven’t seen in twelve years- well, to make a long story short, Fiona more or less kidnapped Sabine. She didn’t know she was pregnant. She just said, ‘get in the car,’ and Sabine- who had been hoping for something like this to happen even though she never expected it- protested, then got in, and they went out for steaks near the hotel where Fiona was staying downtown, even though they’re both vegetarians to this day. Legend has it that they both ate 12-oz T-bones, and before dessert had even come they had called their mother and told her to get down there too.”

“Can you expedite, please,” said Kim, “I want to tell my story before the sun comes up.”

“Right,” I said. She had snapped the mood. I had forgotten, for a second, that this was a date; supposed to be about nuance, layerings of first impressions, slow reveals of information, lasered attention on flaws in appearance. Apparently, I was an asshole.

“Well, after that night- it was like she never digested the steak fully, you know? It just stuck in her belly like a five-pound dumbbell. She kept it all on and kept gaining weight. As soon as she reconnected with her sister, she started gaining weight. She was only missing for a few hours, actually, since Fiona took her home after their second dessert. Then a few months later, when her water broke, she called her sister and waited until she arrived to give birth. Well, it’s not that she waited. It’s that she physically couldn’t give birth until both her mom and sister were with her in the room.”

“But her first two she didn’t need that?”

“No, well, you see, estrangement gets worse with time.”

“How’d they get in the birthing room? Usually nurses don’t let civilians in.”

“She gave birth at home.”

“Damn. I hate that. But I follow the logic. Disappearances are usually family stories, at the root.”

“Kind of an awesome turn of events, right? I mean, I never expected estrangement to have such a strong impact. But it all worked out ok.”

“Yeah, it’s weird,” she said flatly. Clearly, if stories were tests, I had failed to amuse her. I wanted to reach across the table with my words, capture her eyes, which were again, just now, taken in by the window, the splash and roar of a black truck moving in the night, the gutter wind, the peculiar, unsure, tepid rain, a finger of a line forming outside the Oyster Club, somewhere in the city a tower blue clock face pointing both hands up, with a bang a draft of cold air stealing in from the open door of the diner, the sick

smell of sweat and something coppery- something human- from the knots of clubbers sidling in - overlaid with the fried potatoes they were all ordering. The diner, oddly, was filling up. I felt more unmoored than ever, scratching at the metal table leg with one unsure calf. I was hamstrung, as always, by my utter inability to communicate; words are so foreign to a lonely body; she had not liked my story.

“Do you want more coffee, something to eat maybe? My story now?” Kim said.

But we couldn’t find the waitress: probably in the back hiding from the state of her life. Or running orders for someone else. But Kim was ready to begin her story. She had come alive, sitting up, rapping all ten white-tipped fingers on the tabletop.

So she began without the additives of fries or coffee. I sat back, relieved to be the listener. Time to see what she was made of. She took another tiny sip, arranged herself cross-legged on the booth, and began immediately in a preacherly voice.

“When I was sixteen I worked as a tour guide for a boat rental company on Bde Maka Ska and my job was to take paying customers out on the water and show them the bridges and tell them the depth at each location yada yah, indicate the loons and the rare goldfinches, but one day these two little boys came up, one bold and one timid and the bold one - he was probably ten and his name, God bless him, was Archibald - started waving a regular amount of twenties in my face, way more than he needed to pay for a simple boat ride, you know?”

“He insists they need to go for a ride. He’s practically crying. Well, it’s unusual, but it’s not against regulations, you know? Not like we had proper regulations. The whole operation was a shack, a putt-putt motor, and some diy-kayaks. And, here’s the weird thing. We also rent out scuba gear.”

“What? On a lake?” I couldn’t help myself, I was already drawn in.

“Yes. Actually, there were two places that rent gear for scuba in Bde Maka Ska.”

“Do you know how to scuba?”

“Nope. For that, you have to sign waivers galore and take a course and all that. But if someone wants to take gear from me, it’s, well, legal, if not advisable. Usually it was hustler bronzed dads prepping for their Florida trips who took us up on it. We offered this deal where for a *significant* down payment you can rent it all - tank, mask, fins, snorkel, wetsuit, light- for the whole summer. Our stuff was pretty old, but it was enough of a draw that it was a significant part of shack profits, I think. Not like they were investing in the shack. No running water for the staff, even.”

“For some reason the idea of scuba-ing in a lake is really creeping me out.”

“Agreed. Ships and bodies and muskies down there. I’m bringing us back to main thread.”

“Got it.”

“So when those kids came around I made a snap decision that it was O.K. to take kids out without a parent or guardian, as long as they’re wearing proper-sized life jackets. So I look around- no one else is waiting on the beach clamoring for a boat ride and my coworker, Sammie, is nowhere to be found, even though she was supposed to open. I was the responsible hire.”

“You don’t say.”

“I forgot to mention- it’s nigh 7:30am, god-damn early for kids to be out on mischief already. It’s still fishing hour, you know, mist on the lake, the sun coming up more orange than yellow.”

“And I recognized these boys- Archie the Older and Lewis the younger - because their daddy is the mayor’s man, minorly famous *and* was in some hot water at the time for canoodling with a D-list actress - their daddy’s a widower but *she* was already married - and, importantly, their house is on the lake, facing my shack of work. Many an evening I’d seen them out on the beach with their papa trying to catch frogs and / or fighting.”

“Who was she?”

“Some ditz from Disney Channel. Jaye. Well, money is money, so against my better judgment I take them out on the water with my skip-skip-cough motor. It’s gonna be a hot hot day, like I said when we sat down, it was July and the weekend before was the fourth of July and a teenager drowned and the legends of bodies under the lake were hard to get out of your mind with the water so oily and black.”

“I know what you’re thinking, and I didn’t stiff them. It’s twenty bucks a ride, ten bucks a head. Plus tip. Archie kept his money.”

“I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Then you’re naive.”

“Ouch. About the boating industry, though? Sure I am.”

“So I’ve got them in the back of the boat. At first they’re sitting together, jostling and being all sticky- but eventually little Lewis migrates to the side, dips his fingers into the oily black water.”

“Bde Maka Ska isn’t oily.”

“Well, first of all, it was, ten years ago, before pollution control became our new gospel, second of all it’s a cursed lake, used to be marshland, all the lakes in the South Metro did, and the White people damned up the marshes to make the land amenable to extraction. To make the lakes, essentially. White people *gave back* by renaming it its Dakota name: ‘Bde Maka Ska.’ It was called Lake Calhoun ten years ago.”

“That must be why people kept drowning in it.”

“Exactly! Exactly.”

I waved her on.

“So I drove them around, adjusting the motor with just one finger, Archie’s clearly looking for something but he doesn’t know the lake and can’t figure out how to tell me where to go, it’s really funny actually, his mouth’s moving but only nonsense comes out- maybe up near the hill? He says? Maybe near where the turtles are? And we go on like that, bothering the fishers and octogenarians with our motor, the sun on our necks. The little one, Lewis, he’s probably six, a good gap between them, he’s beginning to buck and whine, We gotta keep going, says Archie, standing up in the rear even though I keep telling him to sit, all fierce and shading his eyes, To me it’s all, Oh brother, I bet he thinks there’s buried treasure out here somewhere.”

“Turn around, please, says Lewis, his voice rising at the end, and I look back at him sitting on the side with his eyes all dead but his voice all panicky and Archie talking like he was gonna kill his brother if he made us go in early. I’m thinking he probably has to pee and doesn’t want to say it in front of me.”

“Now I’m not liking this one bit because I’m no babysitter and I didn’t take this job intending to start and we’re really far from the beach, ‘going back’ would be twenty minutes. Plus I don’t really know how to calm kids down. In fact I think I escalated it quite a bit- yelling and not looking where I was going- and, well, too late I see a boat smack-dab in front of us and I kill the motor and the ricochet sends us rocking backwards, over our own waves, and we bump the other boat but don’t crash, you understand.”

“I understand.”

“A love tap.”

“All’s fair on the water.”

“Right you are.”

I was beginning to resent that her story was way, way better than mine, but despite myself I was drawn in.

“Except this boat is empty.”

“What?”

“Nobody in it.”

“What kind of boat?”

“Motorboat, like ours, nameless - usually you need a roof or a mast to justify naming your boat.”

“We sat there for a second and I realized that it is, actually, hot, and breakfast time, Lewis is right, the ride they paid for is up anyway. But I checked our boat for damages. Nothing, none on theirs either. I assume it’s a boat that didn’t get tied down right and floated out from a private pier? Whatever.”

“So I tell Archie, sorry we didn’t find whatever it was you were looking for, painted box turtles or whatever, but we’re going in.”

“Just then there’s a knock on the bottom of our boat. I thought it was a log. I felt the vibration through my socked and sandaled foot. Lewis- it’s too much for him - a single tear runs down his pinched rich-kid face.”

“Socks and sandals.”

“I’ll ask you to reserve judgment until the end of the story.”

“Continue, boss.”

She arched her eyebrows at me. It was the first time I felt a glimmer of actual sexual tension. The waitress came and refilled my cup.

“Want another one, dear?” She said to Kim. The ‘dear’ sounded strange from her- she was way too young and made up- lipsticked- to pull off a kindly librarian. Another group- all women, boisterous with orange eyeshadow, clearly in from the Oyster Club- sidled into the booth next to ours.

“Sure,” Kim said.

The waitress brought her another Heineken, already open, the tendrils of fizz still hissing from the mouth. She abandoned her first, pushing it over by the ketchup bottles, and as before, took two monstrous gulps, then wiped her mouth daintily on a napkin.

For some reason this habit disgusted me.

“What? Beer’s only good if it’s really cold,” she said.

“So- boat- kids crying- a sound?”

“A knock.”

“And then a gloved hand reaches over the side of the boat and closes over little Lewis’s head... crushing his skull and dragging him down into the depths... or so I thought. But no... Lewis screams bloody murder- Archie kicks him in the stomach- the hand releases its quarry, something dog-paddles to the other boat and clambers over (there’s a rusty tin ladder next to the motor.)”

“It’s someone wearing a scuba suit, looking like the cover of *Ten Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Seaweed strings caught on one cheekbone, the gas mask is really unsettling, you know, and the huge tank makes him look, well, huge. And the scuba diver removes his mask. Any guesses?”

“Oh! The boy’s father.”

“The boy’s uncle, Uncle Andy.”

“That’s cheap, I didn’t know they had an uncle.”

“This game, like all mystery games, is rigged in favor of the teller. So, the kids are relieved and, like, screaming about it, Lewis especially can’t believe what a prankster his uncle is. I take a look at Archie and it’s clear from the boy’s face that Uncle Andy was what he was looking for. He must have known his Uncle was going diving that morning? Saw him, perhaps his uncle was staying with the family at the house on the

lake and Uncle Andy left suspiciously early, that's what I think happened, some little boys are up at 5am just to watch their families and make note of the comings and goings, the weird ones, anyway."

"Now, from the second I saw Uncle Andy he gave me the creeps. He took off just the diving helmet and mask and his hair, although he had been underwater, for some reason he had slicked back with copious oil and he was wearing some kind of contact lenses to make his eyes truly, impossibly, electric blue, but combine that with three days' beard and the rest of his body still armored in a wetsuit and he's got his tank on, he looks like a corrupt king, all rolls and intense gaze, and he calls the boys over to him, and I pump the motor and pull us up parallel so they can get in his boat, I'm thinking I'll just drop them here- oh look, a guardian for these annoying kids- and head back to the shack, where the next customer probably is shading their eyes and stomping their feet."

"Then I noticed he brought something up from the lake with him. A Sperry leather boat shoe, fairly intact. Men's, by the looks of it, worn by someone easy-going who wasn't planning on getting off the boat. Yet their shoes ended up in the water. What was Uncle Andy doing under the water, anyway? Amateur detecting?"

"How'd he get scuba gear?"

"He must have rented from our rivals."

"Right."

"So Archie's talking to his uncle all serious and looking at me once or twice like he wants me to go away. He's reaching into his pocket, he's got something to show his uncle."

"Hey, how bout I just leave these two with you?" I said to Uncle Andy, in my Good-Morning Customer Service voice.

“Just a second, please,” said Uncle Andy, turning his back purposefully so him and Archie have some privacy, but I’m clever, Lewis didn’t think fast, I imagine it’s hard to think when you have a headstrong older brother, he’s still in my boat because no-one told him otherwise, and I ask him, What’s your brother got? Trying to be friendly yet sly, and Lewis whispers, A diamond, a diamond ring, Oh, I said, casually, my heart racing, Where’d he find it, He found it in our yard last night, underneath the big trees, he thinks its.”

He literally gulped. “He thinks its Jaye’s.”

“So he’s giving it to your uncle?”

“Yes, he’s giving it to Uncle Andy so he doesn’t have to tell Daddy he found it, Makes perfect sense to me,” I said, and indeed, Uncle Andy was pocketing something and petting Archie on the head.

“Uncle Andy will give it back to Jaye and Daddy won’t ever know, that we know, that Jaye is married already.”

Oh, these poor kids, I thought to myself, too sheltered to even know what goes on in the newspapers. The wind was picking up.

I checked my watch: almost 9:30am. I noticed, too, a jagged cloud front moving in, ugly and uneasy like a monkey about to snarl. The dull sitting-around heat was gone: in its place, an urgent wind: I was used to the weather changing in twenty minutes, having lived here all my life, but it was time to get off the water.

“Get back in, Archie, we’re leaving,” I said. “You should get off the water, too,” I said to Uncle Andy, “looks like we’re due for a morning storm.”

Andy clapped a gloved hand on his nephew’s back, which kept him from leaving, on purpose, I don’t know.

“Can’t see anything, down there, boys,” he whispered. “But I felt but couldn’t see all the fish around me, communicating, the light falls short of anything, even the bottom... Bde Maka Ska is 87 feet deep, you can’t see the bottom til you run right into it.... all that soft mud and you run into it like a pillow, it just embraces you... things sink so fast in the mud. Sorry,” he said abruptly. “I’m going back down. You get out of here, now, I’ll catch up with you later.”

“He’s going to dive with a diamond ring in his pocket?” I, Lori, broke in.

“Just wait,” said Kim.

“You’re going back down?” I said to him. He was already putting his helmet back on, had it tipped back on his forehead, and the look in his ice-blue eyes made me shiver, it was a look that told me to back away, man, back away...”

“Get my nephews back home, will you?” He said to me, a perfect stranger.

“Uncle Andy, are you looking for that kid’s body,” said Archie, but he said it like a sitcom line.

Uncle Andy winked and put his helmet back on. I coaxed Archie back into my boat: the clouds were coming down fast and I realized, too late, that we might have to beach somewhere closer than the shack, we might not make it home. I tugged the motor. Sometimes after sitting awhile it won’t catch. Lewis had his fingers back in the oily water, looking worried. “They haven’t found that kid’s body,” said Lewis, “And he died with a gold chain around his neck.”

“How preposterous,” I said, still priming the motor, getting a little anxious (I was sixteen, remember.)

“They haven’t found it because they’re not looking in the right spot,” broke in Archie, but that was just his theory, he, a boy of ten, had no way of knowing such things.

“You shouldn’t have given Andy the ring,” said Lewis.

“He’ll give it back to Jaye, alright.”

“He likes her. He’s looking for more stuff to give her.”

“They can’t both like her.”

“Yes, they can.”

The boys were starting to get pissed at each other, rightfully so, the existential implications being discussed were almost unfathomable, and I was going to end up with tears on my hands, or a lawsuit, but just then the motor caught. We turned away from Andy’s little rowboat and made it ten, twenty, third yards out, it felt so good to move with an electric feeling of relief, the wind pushing us back towards the bays, away from the air of evil that surrounded Andy’s boat.

Uncle Andy broke the surface behind us, I slowed down despite myself, he was moving slowly, he hauled himself up his ladder, he had in his hands one link of a monstrous chain... he took his helmet off and threw his hair back, all alone in that oily lake with the riotous clouds gathering around him... he looked, for a moment, as powerful as he must be to those two boys... he looked like a wizard, he looked like a phantom, and I hated him, he repulsed me.... in his hands a single chain link, but must have been two feet long, part of chain that could have encircled the neck of a giant beast... what could have possessed him to bring it to the surface, I don’t know...it was evil stuff, he examined the chain and threw it back to the lake with a ‘Poohey!’ I swear.”

“They found the teenager’s body later that day. No chain on him, even though his mother swears he always wore it. It was a gold rosary, see. I think Uncle Andy found the body and alerted the police. I brought the boys home. They said nothing to me, hardly muttered a thank you as they got out. But they had that good exhaustion feel hanging about them.”

“The really weird thing is that Uncle Andy drowned just a few weeks later. Drunk. In his bathtub. I think he was cursed. He had given Jaye the rosary, see, trying to get her to fall for him instead of his brother.... but she rejected him outright. He had done the same thing before, fallen for the boy’s mom before she died and left their dad a widower... he was very attracted to whatever his brother liked, you see.”

“Wait, do you know this for fact or are you making it up?”

Kim stared at me: there was that cold, I-can’t-believe-you’re-interrupting look again. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

She continued as if she hadn’t heard: “Anyway, I decided, because of that, that the tourist industry wasn’t for me, I helped the old woman who ran the shack sell it at the end of the summer, she never liked the business anyway, too smelly. No lost love for either of us. The end,” she concluded, proudly, and folded her hands primly, like she was waiting for questions.

“But did you make up the end?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you made up the part about Uncle Andy, the amateur detective, robbing and dying.”

Wordlessly she flicked open her iPhone and googled *Andrew Hout death*. He had indeed drowned in a bathtub.

“But the part about him falling in love with his brother’s wife?”

“You don’t trust me to read between the lines and make an educated guess?”

“I guess. You tell a good story.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath. “It’s late. Let’s leave?”

Apparently, anticlimactically, her purpose was accomplished. There was work in the morning to consider. She paid; we left; just like that it was over.

She left exactly one whole Heineken on the table, split between two bottles. We had sat for about ninety minutes. My breath stank of coffee.

Outside, it had stopped raining and the damp air was a pleasant shock, the asphalt shimmering with greens and purples as we oscillated under the awning of the diner. She said, looking at the street, then looking at me, “I had fun. Want to go on another date?”

No, I thought: it had only been an excuse for her to talk, and I felt outdone and inadequate. But the giddiness that surrounded us made me stupid and cruel. “Yes,” I said. It was the only mistake I made that night, and the worst one of all. She nodded, like she had achieved something. “Well, I’m just around the corner. You going to take an Uber home?”

She was getting rid of me, I realized: the next date was a consolation prize that neither of us had to collect. We didn’t kiss or even touch. I had taken the bus to Northeast. I took a car home. I waited for her to text me. She never did.