

KEELY BOWERS

The Secret of the Universe

Anna wasn't listening to Louis. He yelled something to her from the yard, but she ignored him and refused to look up. She was sitting in the sun on the dock reading a book called *Time and Beyond*, or trying to. She'd found it under the couch in the house they were staying in, among some other strange ones like *Fire in the Heart*, which was about real people who'd been struck by lightning and lived, and *The Lives of Medieval Women*, which just looked depressing.

Time and Beyond was about the beginning and the end of the universe, and, according to the jacket, was written in layman's terms for the non-scientist, but that was a lie, Anna discovered. She had enjoyed the first few pages, which said that all matter was born in the furnaces of stars. Lord, she thought. We are made of stardust. It's like magic. But now she was lost. There were terms like "protons and positrons," "neutrinos," and "antimatter," and the book said that buried somewhere under a giant mountain in Japan was a tank of water forty meters deep, the purest, most uncontaminated water, and that a group of scientists were waiting for something in this deep water to reveal to them the secret of the universe, but she didn't understand what

exactly they were looking for.

Agitated, she stared at the flat blue lake before her, at the glint of sunlight across its surface, and imagined how deep forty meters was. Maybe her mind was shrinking. Maybe if she knew someone she could have intelligent conversations with. She looked at Louis. He knelt on the hillside by the house, his ball cap pulled low to protect his head from sunburn, moons of sweat darkening the armpits of his t-shirt. He was trying to inflate a big inner tube, but the air pump wasn't working, so his movements were flustered and impatient. When he stood, his foot caught the edge of the rubber tube and he flailed his arms, dropped down hard on one knee and jerked himself up quickly. He glanced to see if she saw. She just looked back at the lake and let out a slow sigh because she'd been married 25 years and nothing ever changed.

Aaron and Shelly, Anna's son and daughter-in-law, were motoring around in the speedboat pretending it was theirs. Anna caught a glimpse of them every now and then when they swept past. Aaron drove, and Shelly posed on the bow, her legs stretched, her long, blond hair streaming on the wind like a movie star's. The last time they had passed, Aaron

had leaped up suddenly, yanked down his shorts, and mooned Anna. On a better day she would have thought it was funny, would have slapped her knees, but her mood had been sour ever since she'd arrived at this place, and her heart felt squeezed like a fist.

The vacation was an anniversary present for Aaron and Shelly, who'd been married a year this week. A year already! Time rushed by so fast that sometimes Anna jerked awake in the mornings thinking it had all run out. She woke with her heart clanging, her breath caught as if someone had shaken her, as if she must do something but she didn't know what. She didn't remember when this started, and for a while she thought it was hormones. She'd asked one of the girls at work who was a few years older if she ever felt like this during her change of life, but she just said, "Hot is all I felt, honey. I had to stick my head in the freezer."

Anna and Louis's anniversary was next week also, so the vacation was their own present as well, but she didn't think of it that way. They always just exchanged cards. Mostly she had wanted to spend time with the kids before they vanished behind the curtain of their own lives completely, and it was Louis's idea to come to Maine.

"It's supposed to be beautiful up there," he'd said. "Carl's giving us a good deal." Carl was a man Louis fished with, and this was his

place. Carl was a pharmacist who owned some drug stores and was supposedly rich, supposedly lost his Mercedes to his mother-in-law in a poker game, but Anna would never have guessed it from the looks of the house, which was cluttered to the ceilings with old boxes and busted toys and ratty old furniture that smelled like wet dog fur. Little black bugs in the flour, expired food in the cupboards, and she refused to put a hotdog or anything like it on the grimy, greasy old patio grill, where the charred remains of some previous cookout still clung to the rusty rack. Not to mention the bathrooms. Anna showered in her rubber flip-flops and made sure not to brush any of her bare skin against the moldy walls.

In the room she and Louis were sleeping in, three broken TV sets stared dark-faced and dusty from a stack in a corner. On the nightstand, someone's brush full of hairs and a container for soaking teeth. There was an unsettling smell in the room, as well. It was like worms. Louis thought she was crazy.

"How often do you smell worms, for Christ's sakes?" he had said.

"You know what I mean."

"It's just a little musty. It smells like a basement."

The bedroom window fan wouldn't circulate the air properly no matter what she did with the knobs, so she felt like she was

suffocating in there, lying under some stranger's sticky sheets. Last night she had thought of all the Stephen King novels she'd read which take place in Maine, and she had lain awake listening for the sound of footsteps out in the murky fog, but all she heard was Louis snoring up one wall and down the other. At home they didn't sleep together anymore so she didn't have to worry about it. She slept in Aaron's old room, had moved some of her clothes in there for convenience. In preparation for the trip, she had bought Louis some Snore-Cure nose strips, one of which he obligingly pasted across the bridge of his nose like a Band-Aid before bed, but he snored anyway, twice as loud even, so that when he'd padded into the kitchen this morning having forgotten about that adhesive strip on his nose, she didn't mention it. She let him drive into town for a newspaper with it stuck there.

Anna planned to take a sleeping pill to knock her out tonight and maybe every night while they stayed in this place, which, she was certain, was not *Maine*. The other office girls Anna worked with came to Maine. They vacationed on the coast in quaint bed and breakfasts overlooking Penobscot Bay. They went to Bar Harbor and Old Orchard Beach. That's what Maine was. A rocky beach and a crashing surf. A cold, salt wind and a lonely lighthouse veiled in fog. Rugged fishermen hauling lobster traps onto boats beneath a

stormy sky. Maine was not some stranger's musty house and clutter and false teeth container. It was not some little inland lake that looked just like any old place back in Pennsylvania that you would never drive ten hours to see.

Anna and Louis had driven up a day ahead of the kids, their jeep weighted down with groceries and supplies and all her high hopes. She had bought bulk-size everything: three pounds each of peppered bacon and honey ham and cheddar cheese, a gallon size can of mixed nuts, boxes of crackers and chips and a Texas sheet cake, Aaron's favorite. She had imagined the four of them cooking dinners together and toasting marshmallows over a fire and playing cards in the evenings. She had imagined a scene out of a movie, something like *The Big Chill*. But Shelly only ate leafy salads sprinkled with lemon juice, and Aaron was on a special diet because he was training for a marathon, and the two of them would rather go out on their own in the evenings while she and Louis sat on the deck chairs and looked at each other.

She dropped the universe book on the dock, and Louis walked out with the inflated inner tube in his hands. "Here it is," he said. "Float your fanny."

"Float your own fanny," she said. "No way I'm getting on that thing."

"Aaron wants me to pull him with the

boat.”

“They must be water people,” she said, referring to Carl’s family. “I guess that’s all they do around here is play in the water.” Across the lake was a long bank of quiet evergreens and a vacant boys’ camp, and not far beyond, the town of Carel, which consisted of only a few seafood restaurants, some t-shirt and souvenir shops, and a small food market where the cashiers were unfriendly to tourists and the fruit was bruised and expensive. There was nothing else but the lake.

“There are all kinds of water toys in the cellar,” Louis said, tossing the tube onto the narrow strip of beach.

“I know,” she said. She had seen them all. Floats, kayaks, water skis. A canoe and a sailboat, too.

“You could water ski,” Louis offered.

“Are you crazy?” she said, shading her eyes and giving him a look.

“You used to,” he said.

“I swear. That was a hundred years ago.”

She had water skied when she was a teenager, on the Allegheny River where she didn’t have to turn. She would glide straight and smooth and drop the rope when the boat began to circle. She remembered that feeling now, that fleeting moment right after she’d let go the rope, how she’d stay suspended and weightless on the silver water.

She frowned at her body, at the stomach

roll she couldn’t suck in anymore and the fat tops of her legs. She had tried the grapefruit diet, the cabbage soup diet, a slew of different mail-order pill diets that zapped her awake at night and made her pulse stampede like a herd of wild horses, like she might explode. She had to finally quit those pills and get rid of the clothes she would never again fit into in this lifetime, and now she was wearing an old-lady-type swimsuit—the kind she swore she would never wear—with the skirt bottom and padded, foamy cups that soaked up water when she swam. She had to discreetly squeeze her boobs like sponges when she emerged from the lake. Well, at least she had a nice tan, she thought. And at least she hadn’t let her hair go gray. She dyed it Honeyed Chestnut. “I could never get myself up on a pair of skis now,” she said, still scrutinizing her body. “I’d look like a fat lady in a circus show. I’d look like Shamu.”

“I never really saw much in the sport,” Louis said.

“That’s because it doesn’t require helmets and shoulder pads.”

He didn’t respond, looked down at the water as if something had caught his attention there. A fish maybe, or just a slippery shadow. Since there wasn’t a working TV in the place there wasn’t much for Louis to do. No game shows or baseball or CNN. Since he preferred stream fishing to lake fishing, Louis was at a loss up here, stood around with his hands

pushed into his shorts pockets. He would never pick up a book to read, not in a hundred years would he pick up *Time and Beyond* or anything else because it didn't matter to him if people came from stardust or alien saucers or the almighty hand of God. He was never curious about things, she knew this, and it disappointed her still after all this time.

"It's really not such a bad place," Louis said. He sat down in the chair next to her. "You ought to see the fishing camp we stay at every April. This is a lot better than that."

"But this isn't a fishing camp," Anna said. "This is someone's summer home and they treat it like a dump. I couldn't live this way."

"Well, how do I know how Carl lives?" he said, crossing and uncrossing his legs. "I only fish with the guy."

"You don't even know what his wife does or how old his kids are and you've fished with him for how many years?"

"We don't talk about those things."

"You don't talk about anything."

"I think she's a teacher," he said. "Come to think of it."

"Yeah? What does she teach? You don't know. If it were me I'd ask questions." She wondered if the strange books she had found belonged to the wife. She wondered what kind of person would read about medieval women and people being struck by lightning.

"All I know is he told me everything we

needed was here," Louis said, turning up his palms. "Told me their friends and relatives stay here all the time and how it sleeps up to fourteen. Said we should write in the diary they keep on the mantle because everybody does, everybody who stays here and has such a goddamn good time. He said don't bring anything but a bathing suit and a change of clothes."

That didn't surprise her, for she was sure now that this Carl was exactly the kind of person who would wear the same clothes all week, and she would definitely write a few things in that diary. She would tell them what she thought of it all.

When Aaron and Shelly returned and wanted her and Louis to go for a boat ride and bring the tube, Anna couldn't bring herself to go. Aaron said, "It's a beautiful day, come on! We're on vacation! I thought you always wanted a boat."

She had wanted a boat years ago, it was true, but Louis had always said it wasn't practical and that they wouldn't use it enough. She didn't say any of this to Aaron now. She made her voice cheerful. She said, "You all go ahead. Be careful!" She watched as Louis climbed down into the driver's seat. He didn't say to her, "Come on, honey, it'll be fun." He didn't say, "You sure you don't want to come?"

Later, while Aaron and Shelly took a scenic

drive and Louis stacked logs outside for a fire, Anna invaded and rearranged the kitchen cupboards. She threw out stale cereal and boxes of old crackers and some kind of pink, melted candy in a bowl. She pitched bottles of rancid yellow cooking oil, the flour with the bugs in it, a sticky jar of crystallized honey, barely recognizable. She vacuumed furiously, every room except the basement, and worked herself into a lather. She looked at the heavy, gravy-colored curtains that blocked out the window light all around and imagined what she would do if this place were hers, how those curtains would be the first things to hit the garbage.

After she cleaned she boiled cinnamon sticks in a pot on the stove to hide the musty stink of the place. She tuned in to the only radio station that came in clearly out here, a country station, and sat down on the couch to take a look at the family diary. She read the very beginning entry, which was dated ten years ago and written by Carl's wife, whatever her name was. It said: *We've been here three days and all it's done is rain. Weatherman says some sun tomorrow, so we're hoping. Kyle caught eight bass this morning.* That was the end of the first one, not much of an opening, Anna thought, but she kept reading.

She read about a broken water heater, a fishing hook caught in Kyle's thumb, a lobster bake with Aunt Jean and Uncle Bert. Most of

the entries were as brief as the first and written by Carl's wife in the same, flat tone. There was one dated September 4th, which was today's date, and which only said, *Kyle ate birthday cake and threw up. Weather has been beautiful.* Lord, Anna thought. If it were her diary, it would be a lot more interesting. She would describe things better, like how Kyle got that hook in his thumb and what really happened at Aunt Jean and Uncle Bert's lobster bake, because surely something must have happened. Surely someone must have gotten mad at someone. Anna wouldn't just tell things plain like that, like a list of this and this and this.

She flipped forward to see who else had written anything. There were all kinds of names mentioned. Cousins and friends from Florida and Wyoming and other places. She found an entry by a girl named Marie, a French exchange student, who thanked everyone for a wonderful time and an unforgettable experience and hoped they would all visit her soon in a town Anna couldn't make out. The last few sentences were in French, she guessed, which she didn't know how to translate. Anna had wanted to have an exchange student stay with them years ago, had thought it might do Aaron good to have a foreign friend and learn about another culture, but Aaron and Louis didn't take to the idea at all.

She looked out the window at Louis sitting

down near the dock in the fire glow. The lake was invisible in the dark, black and immense behind him. He sat hunched over on the bench, gazing into the flames, still as a rock. She wondered what he was thinking of. She wondered if Carl sat down there by the fire like that poking it with a stick while his wife sat up here writing in the diary, but she didn't think so. She imagined the door sliding open and shut nonstop on its track and a roomful of loud, laughing voices. She imagined late night swims on warm nights, lives full of people, lots of Aunt Jeans and Uncle Berts. She put the diary back on the mantle and stood in the middle of the room listening to the crackly radio station and tried to remember loving Louis.

It was a feeling she couldn't chip loose from her memory. He came to read the gas meter. That was how she met him. In her mother's house in Rimer City, she was a senior in high school. Early spring and ice drifted down the river like broken plates, big as barges. She'd just washed her hair when he knocked at the door, had the windows open with the chilly air breezing in and smelling like new earth. Why wasn't she in school? Maybe it was some kind of holiday. She led him down to the damp cellar, watched him scribble numbers in a book. Back up in the bright kitchen the radio played country music on the counter. He said, You go to Freemont High. It wasn't a

question.

Do I know you? she asked him.

I've seen you, he said. His eyes were the palest gray, watching her with unflinching clarity. He wasn't nervous, didn't fidget with that company book or shuffle his feet or shift his eyes around the room. He stood before her in his green gas company uniform, calm as still water, like he already knew her.

He had seen her a few times, he said. He had seen her on the high school ball field twirling her baton. She was head majorette that year and practiced every day. She had liked that he remembered her. She had liked that he watched her from the gas company parking lot across the street without her knowing it.

And there was one night, a shadowy old memory, a small paragraph in the book Anna imagined was her history, so faint it might have happened to another person entirely. Dark woods and a summer night by the river. Black canopy of leaves and the scent of rain on the wind and they moved together secretly on the mossy ground behind the boathouse. It wasn't the first time but it had felt like it. Embracing, dizzy from wine they'd drunk, they had made love in the dirt while laughter at the marina restaurant rang softly like bells across the water. She couldn't see anything beneath the rolling darkness, but she had kept her eyes shut anyway and knew he did too. It had

happened, she knew, and it might have been why she married him, but she couldn't remember it with her skin, couldn't remember that man in the woods as being Louis.

Anna read in *Time and Beyond* that it was likely that she was breathing in the very same oxygen atoms that Julius Caesar and Cleopatra breathed in ancient times. The atoms in the last breaths that escaped their lips might be entering her lungs at this very moment. She didn't understand how this could be so, but she was willing to imagine it. "Huh," she said aloud.

Shelly was sitting on a towel next to Anna, Aaron was next to Shelly, and Louis was on Anna's other side reading a newspaper. They were all lined up on the dock like people at a bus stop. Shelly's back was turning pink.

"Where're we eating tonight?" Louis wanted to know.

Anna didn't answer. She was still thinking about ancient atoms in the air.

"Are we eating out?" Louis asked again.

"I don't know," Anna said. "Do we have to think about that now?"

Aaron and Shelly were tossing around baby names. Next spring, Shelly planned to get pregnant. Every now and then between paragraphs Anna would look up from the book and suggest a name. "Sky," Anna said at one point. "That's a pretty name for a boy *or* a

girl."

Aaron let out a laugh. "That's a soap opera name. Or something you name your horse."

"So?" Anna said. "It's unusual."

"I like regular names," Aaron said. "Like 'Kevin' or 'Derek.'"

"Does breastfeeding make your weight go down faster?" Shelly asked her.

"Does what?" Anna said. "Lord. You don't breastfeed to get skinny, honey, you breastfeed because you want to." Shelly, who must have weighed about a hundred and ten pounds, was obsessed about her weight. "You've got nothing to worry about," Anna said.

A little while later Anna watched Aaron and Shelly as they kicked around together on a canvas raft. They lay with their arms crossed, their chins perched on their hands, their eyes peering into the water. Aaron was the kind of man, Anna thought, who would bring home bouquets of red roses and treat Shelly to dinners in high-up expensive restaurants that overlooked Pittsburgh and all its rivers of lights. They would be surrounded by people like themselves, people they had things in common with. Anna imagined their life together as a long smooth drive with lots to see along the way.

"Did you hear that?" Anna said to Louis when the kids were out of hearing range.

"They plan on having a baby next year."

"Yeah," he said, his eyes fixed on the paper.

"She better not starve herself when she's pregnant. She better eat more than lettuce." Louis didn't say anything. "Well," she said, "at least they'll go through the pregnancy together." She didn't hide her tone.

Louis looked at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"We didn't go to any Lamaze classes," she said.

"Did they have them back then?"

"You didn't even want to touch me," she said. "You'd flinch if I asked you to feel the baby moving. You'd roll away to the far side of the bed."

He shuffled his paper. "I don't remember that."

"You think I'd make it up?"

"Why do you want to bring up old stuff like that for?" he said.

"Because it's *not* old stuff. Because I don't know what that kind of love is like."

"That's how it is when you're first married."

"I don't think it was with us. I don't think it ever was."

His eyes held hers for a moment, and he cleared his throat.

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?"

"Well, what are we married for?" she said.

Louis let out a breath, and when his eyes shifted back to the paper she had to reach over and grab it out of his hands. She threw it over

her shoulder into the wind, and Louis jerked forward in his seat. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

"I want to know what you want. You have to *want* something. You can't just be this robot person you go around acting like, you have to have some *dream* of something."

"Peace and quiet," he said. "That's what I want."

She stood up with such force she knocked the metal chair onto its back. "Well I'll tell you what, mister. You can *have* it. You can read the goddamn paper till your eyes fall out. Peace and quiet. You'll get plenty of that when you're *dead*. A whole goddamn eternity of peace and quiet when there's nothing left!"

She trudged up the hillside, her head suddenly clogged with rage, and he followed her. Through the back door, up the steps to the kitchen where something was burning. The pot she'd left on the stove with the simmering cinnamon sticks, gone dry and charred black to the bottom of the pan. It was ruined. She yanked open the side door and flung the pan into the woods. "You want to know what I want?" she said to Louis, letting the door bang shut. "I want to see a lighthouse. I want to spit in the ocean. I want a time machine so that I don't answer the door when you show up to read the gas meter. I have a mind full of thoughts, and I can't tell you any of them."

He watched her with narrow eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"There was a man at the 7-11 a while back," she said, her voice urgent. "We were at the gas pumps filling up, and this firefly glowed in the air above us, and he said, 'Look at that,' and we watched it flying around, and he said, 'That's the first firefly of the summer,' and I said, 'Maybe we should make a wish or something,' and he said, 'My mother used to tell us they're the souls of the dead, searching for their lost mates,' and I said, 'That's a beautiful story,' and then he finished filling and I finished filling, and he drove away down the road."

Louis leaned toward her, one hand on the counter, his head turning from side to side. "I still don't see what you're talking about," he said.

"Of course you don't!" she said. She paced in blind heat. "Here was this stranger who gave me something to remember in just a few seconds of time, and you've never said anything like that. You've never given me anything to remember like that."

The lines on his face deepened. "Twenty-five years," he said, "and you're telling me there's nothing to remember."

"I don't even know who you are!" she blurted out, and when the silence hit, she felt as if she'd let go of a burden she hadn't known the full weight of and now the sudden

lightness made her dizzy. Her bones felt hollow.

Louis watched her, the corners of his mouth turned downward, as if he were waiting for the next insult. But when he spoke his voice was low and curious. "That's a lot of wasted time," he said.

"Tell me about it!" was all she could say, and she couldn't look at him anymore. She pushed past him into the bathroom, shut the door behind her, and stood there. She didn't know what to do. She wished it were her own bathroom, her own shower at home with her lilac bath beads and clean towels and pearly blue walls with the daisy print. She wished she could step into the shower and let the water pour on her head for as long as she wanted, but this lousy shower stream was a slow trickle, and even Louis's Irish Spring wouldn't hide the god-awful smell in here, musty as a grave.

Through the bathroom window she saw the kids drying off in a narrow wedge of sunlight at the end of the dock, all that was left since the sun had slipped behind the house and the tall trees. In a few minutes they would come in to shower and get ready for dinner at the restaurant. They were stalling, Anna knew, waiting for things to settle down inside, glancing up uncertainly at the house and talking about it. When they came in there would be the awkwardness, everyone walking around quiet and cautious and speaking in

extra polite tones, but Anna wouldn't go out to eat with them. She would watch the three of them drive away in the Jeep, with Aaron behind the wheel and Shelly in the back and Louis up front with his eyes aimed at the road.

Alone, Anna poured herself a glass of red wine. She'd found it in one of the cabinets and decided to open this bottle rather than one that she and Louis had brought. It was a wine from France, and it looked expensive. She took a sip and it warmed her blood, tasted a little like the smooth, woody inside of a barrel and made her wish she had something exotic to eat with it, like escargot or caviar on a cracker, neither of which she'd ever had, or maybe some kind of fancy cheese. She settled for pretzels and cheddar and swallowed a whole glass of this wine before she opened the family diary to a clean page and thought of what to write.

She didn't have to think about it long. She was surprised, in fact, at how the words began to rush out, at how her hand tore across the page as if drawn by a will of its own, as if all the things it was writing down really did happen.

She said they spent all day on the water today, sunning and skiing and sailing beneath the azure sky. She said that after a little friendly encouragement, she pulled herself up on a pair of skis and recaptured some magical

moments of her girlhood when she skied around the lake three whole times without wiping out. Then she and Aaron took the sailboat out for a spin, she said, and coasted with the wind to the no-wake zone where they saw a white heron soaring with a perch in its beak, three ancient turtles on a log, some loons hiding in the reeds, and a green snake skinny as her pinky finger. She said that each night so far, they have prepared delicious meals together, like Bouillabaisse and Lobster Paella, which she learned how to make years ago when Sabine, an exchange student from Germany who also happened to be a chef in training, came to live with them for a year. She said that after these delicious dinners each night they have lain around the campfire telling stories and singing along with Louis's harmonica playing and gazing at the luminous heavens. She said she's awfully glad Aaron brought along his new telescope so they could all get a glimpse of Venus, concealed behind her veil of clouds, and fat man Jupiter with all his moons. She poured herself another glass of wine and said that last night they even saw the mysterious . . . and she had to think of a good name . . . Chrysanthemum Nebula. She went on to explain that a nebula occurs when a star blows itself to pieces, and then she described the mournful cries of the loons, which lulled her to sleep each night like a bittersweet memory. And how odd it is, she said, that

there are no fireflies up here. Did you know, she said, that fireflies are the souls of the dead searching for their lost mates? Her grandmother used to tell this story, she said. So you should never put them in jars. It's bad luck.

She stopped writing suddenly and imagined running away with the 7-11 man. She might go there everyday until he drove up again, and she would say, what would she say? She would say, "I've been lonely a long time," and he would nod knowingly. His eyes were bright and sad, flecked with light like broken glass. Maybe he was a poet. He looked like that type, artistic and tragic. She might tell him about the underground water tank in Japan. He maybe had heard of it. He looked like that type, too, like a person who read a lot and knew things.

Wind breezed through the screens and brushed her skin like a whisper, and outside the window darkness blotted out the world. She closed the diary and set it back on the mantle, poured more wine into her glass, and stepped out the back door.

She touched her way down the splintery steps and walked toward the lake, tripped over the end of a kayak, caught her balance. She should have brought the flashlight probably, but then who cared? No one could see her. She was invisible. *She wore the night like a cloak*—she had read that line somewhere. She

could run naked into the darkness. She could dance around a fire. She could scream her lungs out and no one would notice.

She set the wine glass on the dirt and rolled up her pant legs. She gave the canoe a hefty shove off the bank into the lake. The muddy bottom was soft and weedy beneath her bare feet, cool as quicksand. A car door slammed, and she looked up. Louis approached the house, and the Jeep pulled away again. Aaron and Shelly must be going somewhere, sightseeing, she thought, or to a nice secluded spot to have passionate sex. That's what she would do if she were in their shoes. She watched as Louis stumbled up the porch steps and disappeared inside the house.

She climbed carefully into the canoe, then realized the paddle was back on shore and had to stagger back out to fetch it. The screen door slammed. Louis shined the flashlight on her from the balcony.

"Get that thing out of my face," she said.

He jerked the beam away, cut it off. "What are you doing?"

She was back in the lake now, splashing out to grab the boat. She steadied it, stepped inside. She heard his footsteps sweeping through the grass. "What are you doing?" he asked again.

"What does it look like I'm doing," she said. She was in the boat now, pushing off shakily to escape.

"You can't go out there," he said. He stood at the end of the dock, his light beam slanting across the lake surface, but he couldn't reach her now.

"Wanna bet?"

"It's pitch. You can't see and you can't row that thing. What if a boat comes, how they gonna see you? You didn't even take a flashlight."

"Just go read your paper," she said, paddling on the left, paddling on the right, like she'd seen people do. "Just go back to your peace and quiet."

She heard a splash, swung her head around. He had dropped the kayak on the lake and was standing in his shorts in the black, knee-high water. She turned to paddle again, but kept moving toward the left for some reason instead of straight out. Her arms strained. "Don't come out here!" she yelled.

"I'm coming out," he said.

"I'm leaving you!" she said.

"No you're not."

She paddled harder, but his kayak was swift, his paddle churning like a motor.

"Be careful," he called out. "That paddle's taped together."

"Great!" she said. "Just like everything else in this god-forsaken place."

"Where are we going?" he called out.

"We are not going anywhere."

"Anna," he said. She heard him laughing.

He starting singing, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" loud enough for a loon to cry out in response. Then he tried to imitate the loon.

"Are you drunk?" she said, her paddle paused in mid air. "You're *drunk*." She sliced into the water again, pulled and heaved until she got herself out of breath but kept on, exasperated and furious, her muscles burning, fire in her veins.

"Where are you going?" he yelled out.

"Away," she said.

"Honey," he said.

"Don't 'honey' me."

"Sweetheart," he said.

When she'd rowed to the middle of the lake, he was still stuck to her tail. She was weeping, but she didn't want to be. She'd been happy when she was making up stories, and he had to come back and ruin it all.

"Slow down," he said. "I can't row this fast on the Captain's Seafood Platter."

"I swear," she said, "only you could stuff yourself at a time like this."

"It was good," he said. "Lobster and scallops. Those skinny french fries you like. You missed it."

"I tell you I'm leaving, and you talk about food."

"You can't leave me in a canoe," he said.

"It's not funny," she said, trying to breathe. "It's not a joke."

"What if I tell you something memorable?"

"Oh sure. Like what?"

She stopped paddling and watched him. He stared sideways as if he might find his answer on the dark, tree-lined shore. Finally he said, "Loons mate for life."

She let out a breath. "That's not memorable," she said. "That's just something you heard on the Discovery Channel."

He didn't say anything more.

She set the paddle down to rest her arms. The night was still and windless now. Headlights flickered in the trees along the far lakeside but she couldn't hear the car engines. The lake was calm and smooth as bathtub water, the world poised and silent, the sky a black bowl of stars. It was more sky than she'd ever seen. "Did you know," she ventured, "that we come from stars? Did you know that's where all the atoms around us came from? The atoms in those trees and the fish and in us? I'll bet you didn't know that."

Louis didn't answer. She wasn't sure he'd even heard. He had drifted away, and she could barely see him out there. He was a shadow in his boat, hunched over with the paddle resting across his knees, his head tilted back to take in the sky, and for a moment she tried to strip herself of years. For a moment she tried to see him once again, standing before her in her mother's kitchen with his book of numbers and his pale eyes of gray light, watching her with such mysterious

familiarity. She tried to see herself as he had seen her, a high school girl twirling across a green field, tossing her baton into the high blue air, a silver beam flashing in the sky and twinkling down into her hand. And again in the sky and again, like a line cast, or a mad hope. What happened to those lovers under the trees by the river and the secret breaths that passed between their lips, she wanted to know. Could they be breathing that same oxygen at this moment, the way they did the atoms from the breaths of those ancient people she read about? She wanted to think that maybe they could be, even if they never again saw in each other such passion and mystery, and even if she could never tell Louis about any of these things.

"Which one?" Louis said suddenly, startling her.

"Which what?" she said.

"Which star do we come from?"

She looked up, considering, wiped her damp eyes with the back of her hand. "Well," she said. "I don't know." She tried to think of the name of a star but only knew the North Star, and she didn't know which one that was. She said, "Maybe from somewhere in the Swan constellation."

"Where's that?" he said.

But she didn't know where the Swan was, or any of the other ones either, except for the Dipper, but then everyone knew that.

"Is there a loon constellation?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she said.

"There's the Big Dipper," he said.

When she looked back at Louis he wasn't looking at the sky anymore. He was gazing down at the water. "Hey," he said. "Anna, look." There was something in his voice she didn't recognize. "Look. Look at that."

"What," she said, shifting in her boat and peering over the side, thinking he was playing a joke, trying to scare her.

"Don't move," he said. "Be real still."

She waited while the ripples cleared and the surface stopped its trembling and, slowly, before her eyes, another universe appeared.

"Do you see them?" he said. She held still. Beneath the surface of the lake the faintest pricks of starlight gleamed and burned like whispery sparks inside a crystal ball. "Look," he said. "Look at that."

"Lord," she said, astonished. They floated together, ten feet apart. They didn't breathe. Between them and on all sides the lake was a wide, black mirror, and light years beneath them fish glided invisibly through constellations and darted past distant galaxies in silent flashes like quicksilver. Their fins were star-edged wings, and the Milky Way was a dark and glittery river of light. 