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Swim for the Other Side

It was a beautiful boat.

In Indiana we'd taken it out almost every weekend. Jake did everything—he watched the wind, kept the sails full and his hands busy tying the rope into thick, sturdy knots. I mainly stayed out of the way as the boom swung port to starboard, the sail snapping crisply in the wind.

At night I still hear the water lapping against the boat, all around me.

I was there when he drowned. Though I try not to tell anyone. When I do, the same questions pass over their faces like clouds on a clear sky.

What happened?

In Chicago we'd found a two-bedroom apartment in Humboldt Park. One bedroom for us, one office to share. From the living room window, a view of the playground across the street.

We weren't engaged. (*Well, at least it's not that tragic*, people think when I tell them.) We probably would have gotten married. Maybe a year from then. Maybe later. Maybe he had a ring stashed away for the right moment. Who knew?

His mother flew in from Massachusetts the

weekend after his funeral to pack up his things. She rented a Ryder truck and drove his clothes—the smell of him—to the East Coast in one long drive alone.

She left his books, all the dry dusty paper. Left the two pieces of furniture we'd bought together one afternoon at Ikea. A sofa in bright red and a nightstand we'd argued over. In the end, he'd given me my way. And in the end, it was him who'd been right. Its cartoonish blue color had grown cloying after three weeks and I wished we'd chosen the brown.

She took the papers that mounded over his desk—bills, his address book, his computer. But she left the desk. It still sits next to mine, empty.

I tried to be out of the house while she packed. I didn't want to have conversations with her in which she held out something of his I remembered fiercely, asking, "Would you like to keep this?"

I wanted her to take it all.

Before she left, we had dinner together at the Italian restaurant around the corner. It was dark inside. Candle-lit booths and burgundy vinyl. We poked at our food, each of us pretending that we were here for the other one because *it just didn't look as if she were eating*. She told

me how much she'd always liked me, how she always thought Jake and I would end up together.

I felt proud, that pleasing feeling of being approved of.

Then I remembered that he was dead. That his body had been pulled from Lake Michigan early Monday morning during rush hour as cars passed yards away heading north or south on Lakeshore Drive, and that how she felt about me didn't really matter much these days.

He had this habit of putting his hand flat on top of his head when he was thinking.

Were you the stronger swimmer?

I hated talking about it. Hated being the girl whose boyfriend died, the receiver of patient nods, magnanimous gestures of kindness.

At parties now there are always people who haven't heard. "Where's Jake these days?" they ask when they see me by myself.

Sometimes I want to fuck with people. Once, I let myself. This guy, Bill, from Jake's graduate program who I'd always disliked cornered me in a conversation at a party three weeks after. It was the first time I'd been out since and somehow he hadn't yet heard.

He leaned against the doorway, a glass of wine in his hand. "So, how's your boyfriend?"

It was one of the things about him I'd always disliked—how he'd always referred to Jake as my

boyfriend rather than by name.

"Dead," I'd answered. A perfect solid stare I'd practiced in the mirror a hundred times. As I always imagined, it shut him up.

It's a cheap kind of power, I know. But it felt good at the time.

How did he drown?

The weekend after we'd moved to Chicago we'd gone to an art opening in our neighborhood. It had been a kind of joke—an installation of awful paintings the gallery owners had scrounged up at thrift shops across the city. We drank Franzia in plastic cups as we strolled around laughing at the paintings—"Torment of the Soul" and "Circus of Despair." Our favorite was a picture of two birds in a tree, their arms around each other in a kind of anthropomorphic embrace called "Love is Being out on a Limb Together."

"We should totally buy that," Jake said.

"Are you kidding me? Why would we spend money on that—they probably bought it for four dollars. Besides, we should spend our money on things we actually need, like bookshelves."

I was forever begging Jake to stop buying books. He seemed to bring home three or four a day. "And can you imagine having to look at that every day?"

"I'd tell people you painted it," he said.

How did you manage to save yourself?

The summer before we moved to Chicago we bought a kayak together—our first joint purchase, a kind of forced confidence in the relationship. At night we practiced rolling it in the pool of our apartment complex after the swimmers were gone. Lit with lights under the water, the pool glowed turquoise all around us.

He taught me how to dislodge from the kayak when it capsized, and how to roll it over together, like fighter pilots, a choreographed dance.

I'd been scared at first, imagining being trapped upside down under the water, my legs held tight inside the boat and panicking. But Jake was patient. He leaned to the left. I felt the boat tip as we went over, the rush of water. I opened my eyes as he pulled us over with the oar, and felt the cool summer air as we surfaced.

"Were you scared?" he asked.

Around us the cicadas hummed, the smell of chlorine stung my nostrils. I didn't answer.

People always say, "Oh, God. I'm so sorry."

Then you can tell they have about a million questions bubbling up into their mouths, ready to be asked. Some people ask. Other people don't. The weird thing is that I find that I like the ones who ask better.

The water that day was mostly calm. Later the wind picked up, and Jake thought we should **head back**. It was a wave that came out of the

blue that tossed us.

He was the stronger swimmer. And when I tell people this, they always want it to be extra ironic—like he was on the college swim team or something like that. A perfect ironic package.

We both swam for the shore. One minute he was behind me. The next, the water lay flat and endless over my shoulder, nothing to break the horizon.

The boat righted itself finally, tossed by another wave, a lucky trick that set it right in the water again. When I reached the beach, I crawled along the sand and turned around. I saw it from the shore, the crisp sail against the wide blue sky. I thought he'd gotten back on.

A month later, I found a report posted on the Internet. "Water-related fatalities in Lake Michigan, August 2002-September 2002."

Date/Time: September 29/5:50 p.m.

Water Body/County: Lake Michigan/Cook.

Number of fatalities/age: 1/29.

Accident type/Cause of Death: Capsized/drowning.

Boat Type/Size: Sail/17 ft.

Personal Floatation Devices: No.

Alcohol Involved: No.

Summary: Boat capsized during gusty winds and high chop on the lake. Victim and companion attempted to swim to shore.

I was the companion, thus not the victim. Thus, my feet found the solid pavement each morning, my hands the cool water from the

showerhead. And each evening, my tongue a full glass of wine.

Why did it happen? I couldn't tell you. Sometimes I imagine the tidy narratives: he'd eaten—yes! Less than an hour before! He'd never learned to swim and now here it was, back to bite him in the ass. He'd tried to save me, lost himself in the process. Selfless. Brave. Ready to give his life for mine.

Once, walking home on a dark street, menacing in its emptiness, he told me that he'd take a bullet for me. That he loved me that much. More than himself.

But I know that it's not true. That he wouldn't. Or at least, that I wouldn't.

The truth is, like everyone, we tried to save ourselves. Films are always full of moving scenes where the mother throws her own body over her child in the hail of bullets, where

endlessly big-hearted elderly ladies give up their seats on the Titanic's last lifeboat.

It wasn't like that. I swam to save myself. He tried to save himself.

Though that's not what I told his mother. She believes he was a hero. That he gave me the only life vest, though the truth is, there weren't any. It's best for her to believe this. It gives her someone to hate for living while her only son sinks beneath the water.

I couldn't have saved him. His eyes were a deep green just above the water line, the lake around us bright blue, and the water endless below. I watched the shoreline and its slow approach as I pulled myself through the water. Behind me, probably the top of his head was slipping below the water. Probably he reached out for me.

