

Thomas: To Live by the Lake

TO LIVE BY THE LAKE

BY

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Thomas

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I grew up in the mountains, beside a natural lake that covered about fifty acres. My father drowned in the lake a year or so after I was born, under circumstances that were never completely clear to me, and throughout my childhood my mother forbade me to go near the water. Like many of the families that lived by the lake, we had a pier, but after my father drowned, my mother put a chain across it, for my protection and the protection of anyone who might wander onto our property.

In the garage, there was a long green aluminum boat that had belonged to my father. It too was forbidden to me, and my mother kept it piled with old flowerpots, newspapers, a birdcage, and boxes of old magazines and books, anything she could think of to hide it from view. At times she talked of selling the boat, but she kept putting it off. I hoped she would never sell the boat. When I was very young I would stand and look at it for hours, memorizing the texture and hue of the paint, which was worn down and chipped away by many long-ago trips into the water. Sometimes I gathered up courage and touched the boat, and the bow felt cold like it still held the temperature of the lake water. I imagined what it was like to sit in the boat as it slid into the water. I could feel the oars in my hands, see the sky over my head while I drifted.

My parents had only been married for two or three years when my father drowned. My mother parted with most of his things easily. She got rid of his guns and fishing gear, his old Army uniforms and other clothes, but there were still pictures of him around. A photo from my parents' wedding hung above the stairs, and there were a few of his army, fishing and hunting pictures hidden away. I would eventually discover those, along with pictures of my mother's other lovers and friends, of her life before she came to live by the lake. There was also an old Army surplus cot in the garage, and I sometimes unfolded it and lay down on it. I would open his toolbox and go through it, taking out the tools, examining them and playing with them

carefully when I knew my mother was out of earshot.

I claimed even then to remember my father although my only memory of him came from a time when I was so young it may have been imagined. It was in the evening, and my parents were entertaining friends. They were in the next room eating and drinking. Maybe they were playing a game or watching television. All I know is that I heard their voices. I was in a playpen in my room, with a girl, the child of the people who were visiting. Hearing the adults, I grasped the mesh wall of the playpen and called out. The adults came into the room. I stared up at my mother, at the two people I didn't recognize, and at my father, the man who had to be my father, darker than my mother, with short dark hair. He stared down at me and smiled. He made his hands into fists and told me I had to fight. I shouldn't let anyone push me around.

No one was pushing me around, I wanted to tell him. It was just the girl and I in the playpen, and she was doing nothing, playing with some plastic stars. I called out because I was lonely for the people I knew best. Not because I was afraid.

Don't be a sissy, he said. I won't raise a sissy. He put his fists up in front of him like a prizefighter, and the others laughed. My mother laughed.

During the day, my mother helped me load my dump truck with gravel. She clapped her hands when I emptied it. When she waxed the floor, I rode on the mop. She pulled me across the hardwood floors. We got up early every morning, listened to the farm report on the radio, and ate breakfast. The house smelled of bacon and coffee.

By the time I was five or six, when my mother could no longer deny me playtime away from her, I'd slip into the woods, come to a place at the edge of the evergreens, behind the big rocks, where I could watch the lake. Mysterious items, trash and dead animals, lay along the shore. I longed to go closer and study them, but there was no place close to the water where I was

out of view of the house.

Sometimes even then, I dreamed about the lake, about riding in the green boat, but more often floating on my back. Whenever I submerged, I felt dizzy and disoriented, too weak to fight my slow descent under the water, which appeared gray in some places from shadows of clouds and birds and the moon. And worse, even scarier, were the shadows in the lake, darkening the water below the surface, hiding things that stayed down there, hiding the bottom. My arms and legs were dead weight, my body grew heavier, sank deeper, and I could not, with all my strength, lift myself.

My grandmother, who was tall and stern with thick glasses, came to stay with us, to watch me while my mother worked. My grandmother liked board games, but she accused me of cheating. When she read the newspaper at the kitchen table, I sat under the table looking at her long legs. When I rode on the side of the couch, on the edge, she saw me through the window. She came in the house and said, What are you doing that for?

I didn't answer because I wasn't sure myself.

My grandmother said I really shouldn't do that, and if I ever did, I should make sure to do it where no one else could see me. I should never do it in public. She patted my head and said it would be a secret between the two of us.

My grandmother talked about the lake while I was in bed, getting ready for my afternoon nap. She talked about swimming in the lake.

What's it like? I said, although I was afraid of what she might tell me.

The water is refreshing, she said. If it's hot outside, the water cools me down. I can sprinkle it on my arms and legs. I can lie still and float. I can swim.

At night, I dreamed about my father under the water. I saw his hair moving in waves above his body. I saw his gray, leathery skin. I ran to my mother's room, woke her up, and

she held me in bed beside her.

My mother always bathed me at the sink with a washcloth, but my grandmother lifted me into the tub. I sat between her legs while she filled the tub. The water was warm. When it began to rise around us, I started gasping for breath, but she sprinkled the water over my head, on my skin. Trust me, she said. She held me between her legs. She brushed her fingers over me, rubbed them between my legs. The water heated me up. When we got out, the water stayed on us. My grandmother rubbed me with the towel. She said I was not to tell my mother.

It's sad, her fear, my grandmother said. Your father, what happened to him, all of that is long over.

Despite my grandmother's asking me not to, I told my mother what she had said and done. It was in the morning, before my mother left for work, after more of my nightmares. My mother was putting on her make-up. I lay in bed and watched her while I spoke.

My mother said she couldn't do anything about it now. She was in a hurry to leave, but I didn't have to do the things my grandmother said. In fact, I should play in the woods as much as I wanted today.

I did as my mother suggested. I stood in the woods and watched my grandmother call me. When I was so hungry I had to return for lunch, my grandmother wanted to know where I'd been. She appeared worried and asked me to stay close to the house in the afternoon, but as soon as I'd finished eating I ran into the woods.

My grandmother left abruptly, after a tearful, awkward goodbye, during which she seemed to want to tell us something, to make a parting statement, but feared my mother, who might, at the wrong word, send her away without any goodbye. I was sorry and not sorry for what I'd done. It was what I'd felt I had to do, and I stood stiffly by my mother, holding her hand, as my grandmother kissed me and went away.

Who would look after me for the rest of the summer? My mother told me about the Crislips, our neighbors, a farm family who lived a couple of miles away in the direction of town. She told me about the Crislip daughters, the beautiful Laura, who was finishing high school. Laura and Mrs. Crislip would both look after me. The younger daughter, Ginger, was close to my age. We would be playmates. Mrs. Crislip was a warm woman, a real Christian, my mother assured me.

My mother said the Crislip girls were missing their father too. He had gone off and left them. My mother said I was not to point out this connection I had to them. It was a secret.

A man who worked the farm would be there. He was the uncle, the brother of the missing father. I would have to get used to using the toilet outside, and other things. All of it would be good for me, and I would be a long way from the dangerous lake.

The next day I met the Crislips. Their house was much older than ours, with big rooms, high ceilings, and a tin roof. The Crislips kept hogs, chickens, and a few cows. Aside from the outside toilet, they had other interesting things: a washing machine in the kitchen with two big spools that mashed the clothes together before Mrs. Crislip hung the clothes on the line behind the house, and a stove in the living room with a bucket of timber, or sometimes coal, sitting beside it. The Crislips had what seemed to me a big barn. Mrs. Crislip was a tall, freckled blond; she wore flowery farm dresses and called everyone honey. Laura, the oldest daughter, was a thin wispy redhead. Ginger was a year younger than I, with light red hair, almost blond, and very pale skin. The uncle was tall and thin, in overalls and a straw hat. He only grunted at me when our paths crossed. Mostly Ginger and I played *Shoots and Ladders* and other games, and on nice days we played outside.

When I was inside the house, I avoided looking at the pictures of Mr. Crislip, the missing father. They were all around the rooms, much more on display than the pictures

of my father in my home, but the Crislips' pictures were very much like ours. Mr. Crislip was also in the Army. In their wedding pictures, he held Mrs. Crislip exactly as my father held my mother in our pictures. Mr. Crislip looked like my father in our pictures, looked like the man staring down at me in the playpen: stout and ruddy, with dark hair and eyes. If I looked at the pictures, when I dared to, it appeared that his lips moved, that he spoke to me, saying my name the way my own father would say it. Again and again, I asked my mother about Mr. Crislip, and she squirmed uneasily in the car the way I had squirmed when my grandmother, or others, had accused me of cheating at games. My mother repeated that he had left them high and dry, he had skipped town. She had known him. Well, she had met him once or maybe a few times. Was he ever in our house? No, not that she remembered. Had he known my father? Yes.

When the summer ended I began the first grade. In the afternoons I got off the bus at the Crislips' house and stayed with them until five o'clock, when my mother came home from work. Some afternoons in the winter, the uncle sat in the living room by the stove rubbing his long hands. I drew or watched TV with Ginger, or we played games. The uncle snorted and coughed. When he spoke to me I didn't understand him, but it didn't seem to bother him. He smiled or laughed, and I saw that he was missing most of his teeth.

Laura rarely helped her mother or looked after me, but some days she sat at the kitchen table talking to her mother. Sometimes I sat where I could see under the table. Laura's legs were long like my grandmother's and smooth without stockings. I watched her and went into the living room. I climbed onto the armrest of the chair. I lay across it, rode it, rubbing myself against the armrest. Ginger sat on the floor coloring, pretending she didn't see me. The back door opened, someone was coming. Although it was hard for me to stop,

I stopped. I climbed down and lay on the floor beside Ginger and pretended to look at what she was doing. One day while I was riding the armrest of the chair, I looked up and saw the uncle watching me through the screen door. He stared at me, smiled, and walked on.

At school I had a few friends, kids who had the same sense of humor as me, who liked science fiction and horror movies, who were also allowed to stay up late watching television, who read some of the same comic books and monster magazines. None of these friends rode my bus, but some of the kids who did ride it knew enough about me to call me names, to whisper stories that I was a bastard, or that my father had molested me and gone to prison, or that my mother had murdered my father, had hidden his body in the lake. My only friend on the bus was Ginger, and Ginger was not like me. But Ginger sat beside me every day telling me about her conversations at school, about friendships that were less than she believed them to be. Sometimes at her house I caught her cheating at board and card games. There weren't many games or toys at the Crislips' house, and many of the toys there were broken, the games suffered from lost pieces. Once I brought a pair of gold-framed glasses that had belonged to my great-grandmother to school for Show and Tell, and I couldn't resist showing them to Ginger that afternoon. She wanted to wear them, and we fought over them, pulling them apart. When I showed the broken glasses to my mother, she became so angry I thought she might black out, but she recovered herself. I still couldn't stay on my own in the house beside the lake, she said, and the broken glasses were part of the price we had to pay.

At night, I fought sleep and snuck into the living room because channel 27 broadcast monster movies between midnight and four. I watched *Son of Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*, and *Dracula*, but my favorite monster movies were *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* and its sequels.

Many days as I walked into the woods, I felt the pull of the lake and glanced that way, half expecting, maybe even hoping, to see the creature rising up from the water.

One day when Ginger was watching TV and I was riding an armrest of the chair, Mrs. Crislip came into the room. She grabbed me by the collar and lifted me up.

We don't do that, she said. Not in my house.

I sat down on the floor, and she kept watching me, her eyes blazing. Before it was time for my mother to pick me up, I walked out in the front yard. Mrs. Crislip watched me through the living room window. I waited and when I saw my mother's car, I ran to stop her before she turned up the driveway.

It was May, only a few weeks before summer vacation. In the car, on the way home, I said, This summer I want to stay by myself. My mother was quiet at first. I was sure she would react in the way she always had, and I was a little afraid of returning to the Crislips' house, but this time my mother said she'd think about it. I'm sure she'd known this moment was coming, had dreaded it since my father's death. When we arrived home, she led me down to the chained pier and repeated her fears and warnings. There is your father, she said. That is how he died.

Yes, I would be careful, I promised. Yes, I would avoid the dangerous water. I would never go on the lake without her permission. No, I would stay away from it always. Period.

My mother hugged me, and I vowed to keep my promises. I stayed by myself that summer, contemplating the lake from a safe distance.

I was fifteen when my mother saw the uncle's obituary in the newspaper. We were eating breakfast, and my mother read the obituary to me, then handed me the paper. In the picture, the uncle was wearing a suit. He looked more haggard now, but had the same long, craggy face. I read the column quickly,

the list of the living and dead relatives, a brother living and a brother dead. I remembered the loose connection my mind had once drawn between Ginger's father and my own. It seemed silly to me, and yet I was still curious.

Didn't you say he was strange? my mother said. Sounds like he'd wrecked his brain with drink.

My mother gave me a judgmental glance. She'd started dying her hair, and she looked almost pretty, almost young, when she was dressed up and made up for work. By this time, I had confronted her numerous times about my father's disappearance in the lake. She'd said his body had never been recovered, then she said it had. I wanted to see his grave, but she claimed he had none. My father had been cremated, she'd said, his ashes spread over the mountains he loved. I wanted to see his death certificate. She had it somewhere, but finding it would take pains. She'd come up with it if I really needed to see it. When I pressed her, she would cry. Why was I picking at old wounds? My father was dead, and we were together, we were a family. Wasn't that enough? When I said I was going to write to the hall of records for his death certificate, she became so withdrawn and depressed, I promised her I'd leave my father's death alone. However, I spent hours in the town library reading newspapers on microfilm about the college student who disappeared, whose skeleton was found years later when the lake dried up for a season, and about the woman who was abducted from the Holiday Inn lounge, who was brought to a cabin near the lake, raped and beaten to death with a steel-toed boot. There were lots of unpleasant stories about the lake, but none that fit the name and the timeframe I was looking for.

My mother and I fought over matters that cropped up: my bad grades and cutting school. She complained about my roaming the woods and walking the road to town alone, about my coming home late. She was tired of hearing my excuses.

You want to talk about lame excuses, I said, but I didn't

carry it any farther. We both knew what I meant.

We've all made mistakes, she said. She said she ought to sell the place, move us out of there, away from the lake. It had been a mistake to stay so long.

We didn't speak for hours, sometimes days, moving through the house separately, knowing each other's patterns, and then, in the hallway, as we passed each other, she'd mumble something, and I would throw my arms around her, and we would both apologize.

One night, drunk and stoned, I took the sledgehammer from the garage and carried it down to the pier, which creaked with each of my steps. Glancing back at the house, at my mother's dark window, I raised the sledgehammer high above my head. I brought the hammer down, easily breaking the rusted chain. Stepping back, wobbling, I dropped the sledgehammer and it thudded onto the pier. I leaned on the handrail, which shifted with my weight, and vomited in the water. A catfish swam to the surface, and I stared down at it, then into the eddy where it dipped under. The water was murky, impossible to see into. A few dead ducklings had washed up along the shore, and their twisted, sand-covered bodies lay by the weeds and small flat rocks. The pier and the water swayed under me, gravity beckoned me to go lifeless, to crumple and fall.

In the morning, neither my mother nor I spoke of what had happened although I was sure she'd been aware of it even as it was happening, that she had perhaps watched me from the window of her bedroom, stricken with fear that I would fall into the lake.

After my mother had gone to work, I took the newspaper with the uncle's obituary out of the trash. I hid behind a tree in the woods and watched the uncle's burial in the small family graveyard at the back of the Crislips' property. It was early March. I watched all of the Crislips gathered together. The mother's long hair had turned gray. Laura, who was married, had put

on some weight. Ginger and I still saw each other at school and on the bus, and she looked almost identical to Laura when Laura was in high school. There were a few older people I'd never seen before, and there was a stout, dark-haired man who stood beside Mrs. Crislip; perhaps he was the brother of the dead uncle, perhaps the father of Laura and Ginger.

When the graveside service was over, when the Crislips all began their long walk back to the house, I stayed behind and watched the workers from the funeral home remove the tent and shovel dirt into the grave. When they too were gone, when I was alone with the chirping birds and the tall creaking trees, I walked to the grave to pay my own respects. As of yet, there was no stone for the new grave, but the one right next to it was shiny and slick, casting my reflection across another Crislip's name and years. During the service, the sky above our woods had cleared, and now the sun had come out. The air was still cold, but all around me a bright glare filled the woods, lighting the still, bare trees, casting a glaze on the stone in front of me, making my own image there translucent, rippled with gray light.

I saw Ginger on the bus, on the way home from school. Those days were windy and cold, and every day I wore a long gray raincoat I'd found in a trunk at home, and a black beret I'd found while I was rooting around a dumpster behind an apartment building in town.

I touched the shoulder of Ginger's denim coat.

Sorry to hear about your uncle, I said. For a moment she said nothing, just looked at me like she was thinking about it.

We saw it in the paper, I said.

She spoke about how they were coping with his death. He'd been sick for some time, but they'd been splitting up his work. Some of the farm work had been let go.

Things are fucked up at home right now, Ginger said. I don't like being there.

The bus shook as the driver took the turns along the lake road. We were coming up on Ginger's mailbox, her house and barn coming into view. I couldn't see another soul, not in the windows of the house or around any of the buildings.

Through the venetian blinds in my bedroom window, I watched my mom leave for work. I sat at the kitchen table and drank my mom's liquor mixed with soda. It was windy by the lake, and when I walked by the place in the woods that overlooked the lake, I watched the gray waves rippling far out and close in. There were small ducklings, lines of them, little more than dots, lowering their heads and bracing against the wind, against each cold wave.

In my fantasies, Ginger came walking up the driveway, into the house, her eyes outlined in dark eye pencil like an Egyptian goddess's. We went back to my bedroom, and I put on some music. I took my bong out of the closet, and we smoked and kissed.

You were a horny little kid right from the start, she whispered. You know what I'm talking about.

I could feel the blood rise to my face. She could feel it too, and she grinned.

Don't worry, she said. We were just kids, and kids don't know anything. Hey, your secret's safe with me.

While Ginger was riding me, her head back, her hair cascading, her throat arched and tense, we were also on the water, on the lake, the surface of the bed bending and rippling.

I went into the garage and stood looking at the boat, chewing my thumbnail. I reached in and lifted out a Chinese checkers set and a dented lampshade with a map of the world on it. There was a lot in the boat, all stuff my mom had never needed to save, magazines still in their paper sleeves, rusted and bent garden fencing that should have been thrown away, except that it was covering the boat.

After moving an old clothes dummy that had stood in front of the bow, I saw the name of the boat in faded white script. I'd never known that the boat had a name, and as I read it I tried to imagine my father saying it.

Seeing the boat so differently made the size of the room look wrong, like I was looking at it through the wrong lens, like I'd caught it at the wrong angle. I took a step back, my face sweaty and warm. I lowered myself to the concrete floor and lay down on my side. As I looked up at the light coming through the garage door windows, my vision narrowed. I was in the water, and my father, somewhere below me, grabbed at my legs. When he caught hold of one, pulling me under, I saw his pale, gelatinous body. His eyes were milky and still. Snakes and small fish swam in and out of his mouth, in and out of bloodless gaping holes in his face and abdomen.

Sit up, my mother said. She was kneeling on the concrete floor beside me, cradling me in her arms. She held a glass of water to my lips. I drank.

What happened here? she said.

I got a little weak, I said. I guess I didn't eat enough lunch.

She looked me over and glanced around the garage, at the boat and the things I'd removed and piled in the corner.

What's been going on here? she said, even though it was obvious.

I wanted to walk by myself, but my mother pulled me to her and held on tight like I might collapse.

She walked me into the living room, to the couch. She said I should lie down, but I wanted to sit up. She brought me a cold soda from the refrigerator and I held the can to my face.

God, I was a fool not to get rid of that boat a long time ago, she said. I'm going to sell that damn boat as soon as I can. I know people who'd want it.

It was my father's boat, I said, as though this might mean

something.

We don't need it, she said. We don't need anything or anybody else. She closed her eyes a moment. We should have gotten away from here a long time ago.

About two in the morning, flashlight in hand, I followed the path through the woods, past the sewage plant and the salmon farm, under electric fences and beside stables of snorting horses, yards of barking dogs. The wind was blowing a fine snow. Standing at the edge of the Crislips' property, looking at the house, I felt like I was tripping, like I had fallen out of kilter with everything, and the miles I'd walked through the woods seemed like nothing, a sleepwalk.

The ground was rough. There had been plowing before the cold spell. Stumbling along the hard rows with the house bouncing between the ground and the sky, through the snow, I saw the dead uncle striking the ground with his hoe. We glanced at each other, knew each other, but didn't speak.

When I came to the back door, I stepped up on the concrete block step and opened the screen and the back door. I went in. Engulfed by the sudden heat of the house, I shut the door softly behind me. The old washing machine with its wringer was gone, and the kitchen had been painted. There was an electric stove and a dishwasher.

I left the kitchen and walked along the dark hallway. At the end of it there was the door to the front room, the living room where I'd lay on the floor playing games with Ginger, where I'd ridden the furniture until Mrs. Crislip had caught me.

The house smelled of damp laundry and heater ducts. I came to the door to the front room and pushed it open. I stepped into the room, which was lit by a floor lamp in the corner. Ginger was sitting on the couch next to the wall, and there was a man sitting beside her, kissing her. He sat pressing himself against her, and she stroked the back of his neck. One of her legs was stretched over his thigh, pulling him

against her. A liquor bottle, plastic cups, and a bong stood on the coffee table in front of the couch.

When Ginger saw me, she pushed herself back from the man. The man turned and looked back at me. He was the man I had seen in the woods, and he rubbed his face and glared at me like he couldn't believe I was there. Ginger looked at me dully like she barely knew me, like I was some strange memory or hallucination. Her eyes seemed too small for her head. She was barefoot, in the same jeans and blouse she'd been wearing on the bus.

The man jumped to his feet. He was wearing a white undershirt and khaki pants. His paunch sagged over his belt. He was twice as big in the chest as I was, but no taller, with thick arms and short dark hair. His small eyes were burning me up.

Footsteps above us, and then Mrs. Crislip, in her robe, was on the stairs. What the hell is going on? she said. She glanced at me, seeming to recognize me.

The man said something about an intruder and struck me twice in the face with his fists. I lost my footing. A door opened, and I saw a crib in a room, children in it, watching us, stone-still with their hands in their mouths. Then they disappeared into the swirling rooms, the swirling wallpaper, and the swirling heat.

The man grabbed the back of my coat and shirt. He yanked at my collar. He let go and struck the back of my neck so hard I thought my neck would break.

Ginger never moved, never left the couch. Mrs. Crislip grabbed hold of the man and held him back. I could hear them fighting as I moved in slow motion down the hallway, my hands touching the wall for support.

In the kitchen he caught up to me. He slapped me across the top of the head and pushed me down on the kitchen floor, face first. I hit my forehead hard against the linoleum.

Mrs. Crislip got hold of him again, and they rolled and

fought on the floor. I took hold of a kitchen table leg and pulled myself up. He had her pinned down on the floor, and she was scratching his face. I grabbed the wall, then the door-frame. I pushed myself outside, and the screen door slammed.

The cold air and the fine snow felt good stinging my face. I held my hand over my right eye and stumbled away from the house, toward the tree line. I stumbled off the path and fell to my knees in the shallow snow and leaves. I lay down behind a stump, held my hand over my bad eye, and looked back at the house. Someone, a blur, came out in the yard, searching for me. I heard Mrs. Crislip calling, saw her leaning in the doorway, and the blur went back inside.

I stayed put until there seemed to be no more movement in the house. The snow had stopped falling, but I didn't feel like walking the trail back through the woods. Hunching, I pushed open the shed door, went in, and closed the door behind me.

Something smelled rank. After a few seconds I was able to make out the shapes of the old tools, a few sacks of fertilizer, and rusted beer cans and bottles scattered on the floor. I poked around with a stick and found a decomposed opossum among the filth in one of the corners, and I kicked it out the door. I eased down on my knees, which ached like everything else. I laid my head down on a burlap sack.

When I woke up, Mrs. Crislip was leaning over me. The shed door was open, and the sun was up. Mrs. Crislip wore her housecoat. Her lip was cut, and there was a bruise on the side of her face. Somehow I was still wearing my beret, and some of the blood on my head had dried, pasting the front of my beret to my forehead.

Let's get you inside, Mrs. Crislip said. You think you can walk?

I sat up. My face and neck throbbed, but now I could open my bad eye a slim, bloody crack, although doing so made the

pain worse. I could see a big, brown bump in the right side of my vision. I stood, Mrs. Crislip helping me. She must have figured my being there had something to do with Ginger, that I was one of her secrets.

You're lucky you ain't dead, she said.

The more I moved, the more I ached, but it felt good to move.

The grass was still damp, but the snow was gone. When we got close to the house, almost to the door, I stopped, and Mrs. Crislip said it was okay, they'd gone. She led me to a bedroom, bare and neat. The bed had a white chenille spread. Mrs. Crislip ran water in the bathtub and helped me undress.

You want me to call your mother? she said.

We don't see each other in the morning, I said. She'll think I've gone to school.

There was a mirror on the back of the door, and as Mrs. Crislip helped me out of my clothes, I stared at my shaggy hair, my bruised face, almost unrecognizable, and my undernourished body. I looked like a corpse that had washed up on a beach somewhere, except for my erection from Mrs. Crislip's handling me. She acted like she didn't notice it. She gave me a towel, led me into the bathroom, and steadied me while I lowered myself into the warm water.

After my bath, Mrs. Crislip made me a fried egg sandwich, which I ate ravenously, even though my head ached when I chewed. It was afternoon when I started walking home. I was sore all over, and the soreness made me very aware of every step and movement, of ordinary things: the tall bushy evergreens lining the road, the bend just before our house, our driveway, and our house perched on the low ridge above the lake.

A car I'd never seen before, a two-tone Buick, was backed into our driveway, and a man I'd never seen before stood at the garage door looking in the window at the boat. The man, who was stocky and wore glasses and a cap, didn't even notice

me as I walked up the driveway past him and the house, across our backyard to the lake and the pier. The late afternoon sun was behind the clouds. Nobody was on the lake, not even any ducks, and the water looked still and gray like smoky glass.

I was standing by the pier when my mother's carpool driver let her off at the bottom of the driveway. I heard her speaking with the man in the driveway and heard the door to the garage open. In a few minutes, the man's car started. He drove away, and my mother opened the door to the house and went in, probably thinking over what she was going to say to me, how she would break her decision, for she had made up her mind that we needed to sell the house, to move as far away as possible, as soon as possible. She would have been happy, or so she believed, to pack and leave before nightfall.

As she did every evening, my mother walked through the house to the kitchen, where she took the bottle of gin from under the sink, the tonic bottle and ice from the refrigerator, and made a drink at the counter. Going to the back door, to the deck, she glanced down at the pier, saw me, and dropped the glass she was holding.

The way my mother looked, frozen and transfixed, standing over the broken glass, sent a warm wave through me. I have gone over my memory of that moment again and again, searching her expression. At times, it has seemed to me that she did not know me at first or that she was refusing to know me. Other times, I have believed she thought I was someone else, someone she was surprised and pained to see again after so many years. Either way, from what she saw, she concluded I was now lost. Even our leaving would fail to save me.

I stood where I was, by the lake. My mother turned, without speaking, and went back inside the house.