

Change

Throughout the nearly six years of Finn's marriage, he had spent nine hours each weekday evening at work and nearly so long every Saturday at the lake. To this he treated himself for enduring another long, arduous week.

He dreamed of being an artist. This had never included living with a wife, two guinea pigs and a tankful of tiny turtles in a small house made from an old camp cabin two miles from such-and-such lake. It had an old Native name that Finn could and would not remember. Names made property. Nothing belonged to him. He'd refused to write a prenup but signed his wife's. She valued her things, namely the creatures in her care whose captivity Finn mourned. But she was as close to the sort of person he was that women ever got. They'd roam the house nude, grow out their body hair, burp and offer no excuse but still argue fiercely for "adopting" animals.

To himself, Finn's only admirable desire was to paint. He would portray his ideal world without the baser medium of language. But supplementary details always crept in to sicken him. Success as an artist would net trappings of fame: a dazzling-white, high-rise studio apartment whose picture windows opened on nothing but the evolving sky; a flight, inferior to that of birds, to Japan to roam footpaths around exotic temples, which of course he would later perfectly reproduce on canvas with the image still freshly branded in mind, no chink of clay or glint of sun omitted. Seducing nameless women from their glittering cocktail dresses, winding their sleek, waist-length locks around his hand while making love. Sometimes they still wore ankle socks, the material so thin that the gaps between their toes could be made out through it. Sometimes, here and there, they'd have small, elegant tattoos, discreet from all but lovers. Finn wasn't completely wild; he couldn't help but trace them lightly with his fingertips, signatures scarring anonymous skin.

By day the lake was clogged with beer-bellied speedboaters and chubby brats playing Marco Polo. On some weekend nights drunk teenagers flocked to the beachiest bits of shore. The inlet Finn frequented didn't interest any of them. There was nothing picturesque or even remarkable about it. It was nature as nature intended. This awed Finn. The sky was allowed not to be clear and all the colours of the rainbow but dim and foggy. Trees fell and were never hauled away. Beavers built dams that weren't torn out by river societies. Things were allowed to be inconvenient, ugly, dead.

Tonight, though, he was joined by human company. In silence at his left elbow stood his wife, Dustie. They hadn't spoken since leaving the house; even this had consisted only of her wondering aloud if she should call someone to watch the brood, and Finn looking sidelong at her with disgust. Nine years ago he might have been so tacky, brought her to the lake to loosen her panties, but he no longer needed to play such pretentious "moves." He wasn't quite sure why he'd invited her along. He'd been feeling typically lonely, but the emotion never prevailed in solitude here. Perhaps he'd simply felt that he should, that it was normal and beyond due.

Dustie didn't understand. She looked around at the loose twigs like she'd looked at the empty plastic cups following their wedding reception. Finally—but curiously and without disdain—she asked, "Why here?"

"Oh, I don't know," lied Finn. "The water doesn't rush here, it's calm. There isn't garbage everywhere. Mosquitoes aren't thick." With a shrug, he finished, "T's as good a place as any."

"Can we swim here, or're there leeches?"

"Leeches." One had once siphoned its dinner from the underside of his penis, which had felt surprisingly pleasurable.

"Fuck," Dustie cussed. Finn hated cuss words. He hated words. All of the beauty he saw still failed to spur him to paint. Having obeyed his unusual longing to bring her here inspired no words to his lips. He wanted to scrap the attempt and start over. He couldn't suppose what any of it had been for.

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Finn possessed deep admiration but very little knowledge of nature. This had greatly bothered him until he realized that nothing he couldn't discover for himself firsthand by sensation had to matter to him. Genus this and that; pft. Words. Ownership. He had never even told Dustie where he went on Saturdays; just responded, once when she'd asked, that he was going to be alone. If she had ever taken offense, she hadn't shown it. Finn wondered if she'd ever tracked him secretly to be sure that he wasn't unfaithful. He longed to be, but human society, damn it, had superimposed on him a guilty conscience. He envied animals for whom instinct was the sole dictator of behaviour.

At least society permitted him reprieve to stroke himself to thoughts of unconsecrated lovers, conceding to this "natural" male tendency. His most persistent fantasy began with meeting a woman here. She had long, tangled hair the colour of sun-kissed dirt and she was naked. So was he. Wordlessly they approached one another, fitting perfectly into one another's arms. Gracefully their knees bent until they lay in the boughs. He sipped dew from her lips and overtook her like rain drumming a jungle canopy. Afterward, she would stay with him, unashamed, not tucking in her round belly or hiding freckled nipples with her elbows. Unconcerned with the scent on her breath. This fantasy was his only one which continued beyond lovemaking.

In Dustie's pocket change jingled. Suddenly he thought of sinking to the lake bottom. Finn worked as a clerk in a post office. He hated loading the mail bags into cargo trucks every midnight. So many trees destroyed for babble. Oh, the weather has been *awful*. Oh joy, person one and number x will marry! Scribble scribble in chemicals or lead. Please write back. So much waste to bat back and forth across the globe while each day in the West fast food chains threw out tonnes of meat and people starved elsewhere.

Plunk. Dustie's arm arced through the air as if her hand meant to follow the flight path of the nickel. Finn stared. "Why'd you do that?" he asked flatly.

"Making a wish." Idiot.

"Water doesn't grant wishes," he said, "n' even if it did why the hell'd it want money for it?"

She frowned. "I don't no. It's tradition."

"It's waste," he grumbled.

"It's practically worthless."

"—to you."

"It w's just a nickel. Fuck."

Through oblivion like the coin his anger drifted. Just a nickel.

The following weekend the inlet was devoid of death, tainted. Finn might have fingered the river society if not for the pair of lawn chairs set opposite the made-over landscape. Finn gripped one, but it was futile. Already it couldn't be farther away.