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Somewhere In Between

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SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

By

Amelia M. Gagliano

THESIS

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SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

This thesis by Amelia M. Gagliano is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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Amelia Marie Gagliano, December 30, 1986

ABSTRACT

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

By

Amelia M. Gagliano

“Somewhere In Between” is a collection of three short stories in which the settings accentuate the conflicts and emotions of each narrator. All of the locations featured are real, and I paid careful attention to detail in order to keep them faithful to the actual place. Many of the characters are based on either people I have met or people that once lived in the story’s setting. With that in mind, I have attempted to create very real people going through various emotional struggles which are reflected by the surroundings.

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2012

DEDICATION

For my parents, Mike and Diane, who brought me to Fort McCoy and Marie's Bay. And
for my dog, who inspired "Winter in Nome."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Winter in Nome.....	2
The Farm and the Fort.....	19
Keeping Afloat.....	31

INTRODUCTION

My M.A. thesis, “Somewhere in Between,” is a collection of stories told from the perspectives of three very different women in three geographically disjunct locations. Each narrator is in her late twenties and forced to come to terms with a life-altering event. What connects these stories is the way the setting functions, adding to the depth of the narrator’s conflict and emotion. I enjoy writing scenery and found that using such different places makes a character’s story that much more interesting.

The first story in this collection is “Winter in Nome.” A young mother spends the winter of 1925 and 1926 in Nome, Alaska, facing the remote beauty and the spirit of an isolated community through the harsh winter. “The Farm and the Fort” is a story that examines the relationship of a daughter and her deceased father when she returns home to a farm situated on the border of a live ammo base. And finally, “Keeping Afloat,” takes place at Marie’s Bay, a secluded fishing camp in Canada that the narrator visits with her family and, while there, slowly finds peace with her impending divorce.

Winter in Nome

By

Amelia Gagliano

A thick layer of snow covered the shoreline, and I could hardly recall where the land ended and sea began. I remembered the sound of the whistle that brought the town to a halt for a few moments on November 22, 1925, a little over a month ago. My husband, William, stopped filling the furnace and came to my side. The *Alameda* called out to us, reminding us that we missed our last chance to leave this utterly isolated place.

Everyone in town gazed at the steamer taking the last of our townspeople outside of the territory. Those not willing to spend a winter stranded in Nome had either left already, or were aboard the ship making its farewell call. A large black cloud of steam rose above it, and the bow slowly turned southward.

I felt abandoned at that moment, although I'd been given the option to leave. As I always had since marrying William, I chose to stay, to remain with William and our son, Billy. Every year, everyone in town watched in silence as the last ship turned away. Roughly 1,400 of us were left on our own in Nome until spring, seven months away. I imagined that boat every time I stood at the kitchen window.

Those of us who remained in Nome for the winter months formed a unique bond. We were the brave, the true Alaskans. Though I'd moved to Nome as a teenager, I was accepted by the community as more of a Nome resident than the folks who lived here for generations and left during the fall. It didn't matter that panic gripped my heart when the

last boat left. Everyone experienced that. Even though I knew we were stuck here on our own for at least four months, everything we needed was available.

Nome winters were beautiful. Snow covered everything in a thick blanket of white. The vast ocean was to our south and the rolling mountains stood far to the north and west, encompassing Nome. An opening along the eastern shore provided the only way out by land. Living so close to the shore brought long, cold winters, and short, cool summers.

Surrounding the town were void plains where the winds howled and lashed. At times, the wind was still, but it wouldn't be long before it would whip across the fields, bringing the temperature down even further. Clouds of blowing snow concealed the mountains, and Nome would be lost in a sea of white.

The holidays were here, and I prepared the turkey a simple way that William's mother showed me when I spent my first winter in Nome. She'd told me that nearly everyone in town used a recipe similar. "Jingle Bells" played on the radio while the turkey soaked in soda water and salt. Christmas was a town event, not just a family holiday. William and I used to debate staying, and his biggest argument was the holiday. He'd convinced me that Billy needed to grow up enjoying the season like the rest of the children in town.

When Billy got older, it became clear that he loved winter. As soon as he'd learn to walk, Billy spent hours playing with the sled dogs, burying his hands in their coats and giggling as they licked his face. I showed him how to make snow angels, and any time Billy was lying on his back, he would wriggle his limbs. With Christmas near, he spent his time preparing for Santa's arrival, behaving especially well.

On Christmas Eve, he sat at the table with *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*. At every picture he'd point to and say, "Santa." I ruffled his dirty blonde hair. It was past time for him to have a haircut.

We waited for William to return from the tree-getting. The nearest pine was nearly a hundred miles away, and he and the other volunteers traveled by sled dog to bring back the trees for the school, hospital, the square, and the hall.

I jumped at the sound of a knock at the door. When I pulled it open, a gust of wind and snow greeted me, and Eleanor, my widowed neighbor, stepped in.

"There's my boy," she said, scooping up Billy. He giggled and wriggled in her arms. "Are you ready for presents?" she asked him. He got settled with his book and didn't answer, still shy around Eleanor though she was my closest friend in Nome and visited nearly every day. She ruffled his head as I had, then lifted the lid off of my turkey to investigate and sniffed. She set the lid back on without comment, and I knew it met her standards.

"He hasn't put the book down all day," I told her, handing her a cup of coffee.

She took the cup and sipped, smiling a little.

"Billy," I said, "why don't you go play with your blocks in the living room, baby?"

"Okay, Momma." He turned and slid off the chair, stretching his toes to reach the floor. He padded into the family room, holding the book by the back cover. Picking a spot central to the mess of cardboard blocks scattered in the room, he started banging them together. Billy was a quiet and well-mannered boy.

"So, what brings you?" I asked, and she leaned forward.

“I was at the doctor this morning, dropping off a card. Anna Carleson had some sad news.”

“The nurse?”

Eleanor nodded. “The one who gave me an injection last year in the wrong limb. She told me the doctor has been downcast lately.”

“Because he’s lonely since his wife left?” Nome was surprised to see Dr. Welch’s wife getting on one of the ships to leave. Rumor said that she didn’t plan to return.

“No, not about that. Do you know the Eide family? The Norwegian Eskimos? Her husband is Outside and their child got ill.”

“I’d heard that Mr. Eide left because his mother isn’t well,” I answered. He was now an “Outsider” as we called anyone from Nome venturing out of the territory. His wife was known to act more like her Inupiat family, and he had taken to the lifestyle as well.

“Well, it turns out she wouldn’t let the doctor see the child again after his first visit, and the girl passed away.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” I said, looking at Billy. Losing a child at any age would be devastating, especially so close to Christmas. “Did the doctor know what was wrong with her?”

“The other nurse, what’s her name? The one from Kansas?”

“Emily Morgan?”

“Yes, her. Anna said that Emily had gone with Dr. Welch for the first visit and the two of them couldn’t be sure, though there were a dozen possibilities. They wanted the body, but Mrs. Eide had already done the traditional burial in the ocean.”

“That’s terrible. The poor child. Mr. Eide will be heartbroken when he returns.”

“Well, that got my spirits down, so I wanted to see your boy to lift me up again.”

“Just wait until you see what he’s wearing tonight at the celebration,” I said, standing and checking the turkey. “I made a green and red plaid wool outfit. The tie is just darling.”

“You’ll have to show me now, because I won’t be at the Eagle Hall tonight.”

“Oh, Eleanor, you can’t spend Christmas Eve alone. You keep me company when William is with his coworkers.” Eleanor handled being alone very well. Her husband died from the influenza, and she only seemed to feel his absence around Christmas.

Exactly eight years ago tonight, the first case of the influenza in Alaska had been discovered. On Christmas Eve of 1917, a young Inupiat from Nome arrived in Wales with a fever. He lay sick in his sled while his dogs brought him to the door of his home. Two days later he died. It hadn’t taken the disease long to spread, and entire families were lost in the year that followed. The Eskimo people called it “The Big Sickness.” Nome residents were still in mourning, especially during the long and lonely winters.

“You have to show,” I insisted. “Just think of what gossip you might hear. It’s been quiet this year.”

Eleanor scoffed. “There aren’t many people this season with gossip to spread. All the good ones left. Why did you stay this year, Sarah? Last year you said you wouldn’t.”

The previous winter had been wickedly cold, and trapped everyone in their homes for the majority of the season.

“William wanted me to. And Billy is getting old enough to remember what he does over Christmas. William wants him to have the same childhood experiences he did as a boy. And it’s beautiful up here.”

The door opened and my husband came in, as though talking about him had called him home. He kicked off his mukluks and pushed back his hood. His cheeks and nose were pink from the biting wind, and the snow melting on his parka told us that the weather changed as the night drew near.

“Did you men find any good trees?” Eleanor asked.

“We managed. They’re setting them up around town. The biggest took sixteen dogs to haul. You’ll see it tonight at the Eve party.” He pushed his black hair out of his face, smiling at me.

“Eleanor claims she’s not going,” I said, rising to pour him coffee.

“What? The ladies need their talk, you know.” He moved to the table, kissing my cheek and winking at me. We both knew she’d be there.

Billy ran to his father, and William lifted him high up over his shoulders. They wiggled their noses together. Billy squealed at the coldness of William’s.

“Twist my arm, the pair of you. Yes alright, I’ll go, if only to see the boy dressed up.” She headed towards the door, twisting her scarf tightly about her neck. “I’ll see you both tonight. The turkey smells great, Sarah. Bye-bye, Billy,” she said, and he flapped his hand at her.

“Is there much snow out by the trees?” I asked once she was gone.

“Not much more than here, no.” He leaned back in his chair and bounced Billy in his lap. “What did Eleanor have to say?”

“Mr. Eide’s child passed away.”

“That’s a shame,” William said, wrapping his long arms around Billy, hugging him closer.

After dinner and dressing, we headed to Eagle Hall. William was pleased with my turkey, which turned out better than the last couple years. Over the past five Christmases I spent in Nome, only the two most recent depended on my culinary skill. Before that, William’s mother did the cooking. William and I mushed with the dogs out to their cabin just outside of town. With the arrival of Billy, the passing of William’s father, and his mother leaving for the winter season, only the three of us sat at our table, soaking in the quiet before we went to town. I dressed Billy in his green and red plaid wool suit. He hated the tie and refused to leave it in place until we gave him a candy cane to distract him.

Nearly everyone left in Nome attended the Christmas Eve party, especially if they had children. The evening started a solid week of festivity. The hall filled with all of the children, nearly 200. William used to tell me stories of him and his friends’ troublemaking days at the holiday celebration. They would do things like add coal to stockings and tell the younger kids that Santa already made his rounds.

The pine tree the men retrieved stood tall near the fireplace, decorated with lights and tinsel. Presents were piled beneath it for children as prizes to the group games. Crepe paper hung all over the ceiling. Green, red, silver, and gold lined the beams, adding color to the log building. The children from the churches put on a play reenacting the

Christmas story, and the choir from the Inupiat church sang carols in their native language.

When William, Billy, and I arrived, we made our way to one of the long picnic tables set up and filled with families. We sat between Eleanor and William's boss, Mark Summers, the superintendent of Hammon Consolidated Gold Fields, the town's main employer. His daughter was fourteen and portrayed Mary in the children's play. The teenage boys teased her endlessly about her part, but hung on her every word during the performance.

"She's thankful for the break," he told us, smiling at her. "When the Christmas lights and decorations start going up, she loses all focus on school."

"I always felt the same way around Christmas," I told him.

The lights dimmed, and everyone quieted. The best part of Nome's winter traditions began. The sleigh bells rang, and the children let out a cry of delight. They ran towards the front of the building, kneeling and crowding together, holding hands to keep track of siblings and friends as they shoved and pushed to get closer. The room fell silent, save for a cough or two. Heavy footsteps came up the entrance stairs, and the doors swung open to reveal Fire Chief Conrad Yenny dressed in his Santa suit. All the children shouted in excitement.

Behind him stood two reindeer attached to a sleigh, being held back by two handlers. The animals strained in their harnesses. From his sleigh, Santa brought a bag full of stockings. He moved toward the children, his fake moustache twitching as he smiled and greeted them.

“Merry Christmas! I know there are many children gone tonight, home with that blasted cold going around, but for those of you here, I have gifts! Ho, ho, ho!” The children moved closer to him, reaching out to him for presents. He held up his hands to quiet everyone and begin passing out socks filled with goodies.

I looked around the room and noticed for the first time that despite the crowd, there were many single parents here, and a few families missing. I hadn’t been aware of a cold going around, but now it seemed that every child I glanced at wiped a runny nose or looked pale.

I took William’s arm. “Maybe we should take Billy home?”

He looked at me in confusion. “He hasn’t gotten his stocking. And the service starts soon.”

The hall was loud with chatter and laughter, and children ran around with their new gifts, showing them off. A half hour passed before the midnight chimes from St. Joseph’s Church rang. I made Billy leave his little friends and bring his stocking back to the table. The cracker jacks were enough of a distraction that he didn’t mind, but when he sneezed and rubbed his eyes, my instincts got the better of me.

“I’m taking Billy home,” I told William. Billy yawned as William looked him over and agreed. He would go to the service in our stead.

“Rest up, Billy,” he said, crouching to his level. “Tomorrow the fun begins.” He ruffled Billy’s hair and then stood. “I’ll be home after the service.” He kissed me and went with his co-workers to the church. I headed to the door.

Eleanor appeared beside us, smiling and red-cheeked. “Are you avoiding the church, too? Pastor and I got into a pretty heated debate last week. I thought I might go home and rest tonight.”

“I’m just taking Billy home. He’s wore out from all the fun.”

“Do you mind if I come with you?” she asked. She hid a yawn with the back of her hand.

“Of course not,” I said.

“I hadn’t realized so many kids were sick,” she said as we walked down the empty street.

“Me either. I hope Billy won’t catch anything.” Billy was asleep in my arms, his rosy cheek pressed against my shoulder.

“I imagine every other parent in there is thinking the same. It’s a shame.”

I nodded and we walked the rest of the way down the road quietly. At the church, the choir sang a hymn. The light dusting of snow sparkled in the low streetlamps. Some of the drifts were already reaching the second-story apartment windows above the shops. A dog team passed us, mused by the hardware store owner. He wished us a Merry Christmas and went on his way with a sled full of boxes.

The next week went by in a flurry of activity. William took Billy out a few hours a day after Christmas to enjoy the winter playground. I watched him closely for any sign of illness, but for days nothing came of it. He grew restless whenever I kept him in the house. The older children spent their entire days outside, skating and sledding and having snowball fights, and Billy would sit at the window, watching and pouting.

He started having tantrums and shouting at us. William blamed the boy's crankiness on being tired from all the celebrating and winter activity. I went along with that for a few days, grateful when school started up again and Billy didn't have to watch the children playing outside all day. He started sleeping more, for which I was thankful.

Five days into the New Year, things had returned to normal. The decorations around town were slowly coming down. I was in the process of pulling the advent calendar off the wall when Billy wandered out of his room, coughing and pale. He had been difficult the past few days, and I thought he might be coming down with the cold going around. Now I was certain.

"What's the matter, Billy?" I asked him, setting the calendar down. He held his blanket in his hand and rubbed his eye. I took pity and moved to lift him, running the back of my hand across his forehead to brush hair out of his face. My skin met his and I pulled away. He felt hot and damp.

It took me ten minutes to leave a note for William and to get us bundled for the trip to Maynard Columbus Hospital, the office of Dr. Welch. I carried Billy most of the way, and he made little protest.

When we arrived, the nurse led us to an examination room, and Dr. Welch came in shortly after. I always thought of him as odd. His bewildered frown, his wide eyes, and the rushed way he spoke worried me.

"How long has he had the fever?" he asked, and I shook my head.

"He's been irritable and short tempered, taking more naps than usual. We thought that the holidays took too much out of him."

He nodded, though it seemed as if he wasn't really listening. He looked over the sheet on his table before him. "I'd like to keep him here, if you don't mind. He has fever, fatigue, swollen glands, and sore throat, all of which I've seen a lot of lately, and I'd just like to observe him."

I could do nothing but agree. The best place for a sick child was at a doctor's hands. Dr. Welch didn't say much to me throughout the day, though the nurses came in and out. They promised the best care for Billy. They didn't meet my eyes very often.

I sat beside Billy and knit, or tried to entertain him if he awoke. The nurses woke him for dinner, and he threw a tantrum, his little face beet red. He threw the bowl of pudding the nurses offered, and I rushed to pick it up, apologizing.

"It's normal for sick little boys to be cranky," they told me, pushing me back to my chair and cleaning up the mess.

"I'm not cranky!" Billy yelled, and the nurses left quietly, smiling sympathetically. Three year olds weren't meant to be cooped up this way.

William came after work and we stayed as long as the doctor allowed before returning home. The house was silent without Billy, and William and I were restless. The little boy's presence could be found in each room, and every reminder made me worry about him, alone in his hospital bed.

The second day at the hospital was similar to the first, with me sitting at Billy's side and nurses coming in and out. Billy wiggled in his bed and sat up. The nurses gave him pencils and sheets of paper that he scribbled all over. I read books to him and he was

entertained by the characters in the stories. His color returned and he didn't cough all that often.

Halfway through the afternoon Dr. Welsh came in, still looking hurried.

"He looks a lot better today," I said, when it didn't appear the doctor would speak to me.

He listened to Billy's breathing, checked his pulse, and looked in his eyes, ears, and throat. "He does look like he's improved, yes. The fever hasn't broken, however. And his throat is still slightly swollen." Billy grabbed Dr. Welch's stethoscope and set it on his chest, which he puffed up. "The fatigue seems to have gone as well."

"That's mostly good news," I said, smiling and pulling my boys hands away.

"I don't want to jump to any conclusions, but we'll hope whatever he caught is just a cold and not the tonsillitis that's spreading around."

I thanked him as he went out and watched him enter the room across the hall. The door opened enough that I saw another child in a bed, older than Billy. Her face appeared bluish, and she had her eyes closed.

"Momma, book," Billy said, bringing my attention back to him. He had a story I'd read three times already.

I smiled at him, ruffling his hair, thankful he looked better. I started to read. The nurses came by hours later to tell me visiting time for the day ended. Billy slept peacefully and soundly. Leaving him for the night was easier the second time around.

I followed the nurse out of the room and she turned towards me when Billy's door was shut.

“Dr. Welch is pleased with his condition today,” she told me, a smile on her face. Her name was Bertha, I remembered. “If he stays like this or continues to improve, he may be able to go home tomorrow.”

Something inside of me unclenched, and I let go of the breath I held. “Are there many cases like his? Or similar?”

Bertha’s lips thinned and she glanced towards the room occupied by the sick girl I’d seen earlier. “There are a few others, though I can’t say how similar they are to Billy’s. All you can do tonight is pray for your son to continue to get better.”

I walked home, hope bringing a smile to my face. Gusts of wind had the signs and flags flapping, but the sun was shining. Icicles formed off the rooftops of buildings along Front Street. I hid my smile in my scarf. William would be pleased at the news.

“Will you come with me to see Billy this morning?” I asked William the following morning, and he agreed. “We might get to bring him home.”

“We’ll see what the doctor says,” he said. His optimism wasn’t as strong as mine.

We walked slowly, my arm through his. The wind calmed today for the first time since Christmas Eve. Dark clouds hung overhead, however, and I knew a bad storm was on the way.

The office appeared the same as every other day, though quieter than usual. I gripped William to me as we turned the corner into Billy’s room. Dr. Welch sat on the bed, looking into Billy’s mouth. At the back of his throat were greyish sores, and Billy’s neck was swollen. His face was red and his chest heaved with each breath.

The two nurses in the room, Anna and Bertha, rushed over to us.

“Can you just wait outside a moment?” Bertha asked, gently trying to pull us out of the room.

My husband stood firm. “What is it, doc?”

“I shouldn’t have second guessed...” He appeared to be muttering to himself as he examined the gray ulcers in the back of his throat. He shook his head and let Billy rest, then stood and faced us.

“I’m afraid this is worse than I thought. I diagnosed him with tonsillitis like the other children appear to have. But after seeing this, I can only assume it’s something else, something much worse. I fear diphtheria.”

We looked at him blankly. I couldn’t comprehend anything he said. “It’s an airborne illness that thrives in the membrane of a child’s throat and nose. It releases a sort of toxin, which explains Billy’s constant tiredness. The red swelling at his throat is the beginning stages of the ulcers you just saw.”

“What can you do about it?” I demanded. I didn’t care about the illness. I wanted my baby treated. William squeezed my hand to quiet me. It sounded as though Dr. Welch’s failure to properly identify the sickness made things worse for Billy.

“I only have an expired supply of the antitoxin. I was supposed to get a shipment this fall, but it never came. I never thought—but I don’t feel it’s worth the risk to use the antitoxin as aged as it is. It could be unstable, and I have no idea what effect it might have. There are some other remedies I have been trying which seem to be easing his airways. I have given him stimulants for his heart and I’ve been putting chloride of iron on the lesions to ease the swelling and make it easier for him to breathe.”

I looked at Billy. Difficulty breathing turned his lips blue and made his face pale.

Anna led us out of the room and to the waiting area. “Now, Dr. Welch is going to do everything he can to ease Billy’s pain, but he needs space.” I saw numerous couples throughout the room. They were all familiar to me, but I couldn’t make conversation with them.

For the entire day, William and I stayed in the hospital, looking in on Billy whenever we were allowed. As the day went on, Billy got a little better. The sores in his throat shrank slightly and he slept as peacefully as I’d seen him since I brought him to the hospital. His breathing eased.

Hours later, near dinnertime, I walked around the waiting room, stretching my legs. The other parents had either left for the night or were in visiting their children. William was napping on one of the benches. I felt helpless, something I hadn’t felt since the *Alameda* steamed away nearly two months ago now.

A bustle behind the door leading back to the examination rooms caught my attention. Two nurses went by, their faces set in stony expressions. I went to the door and looked down the hall. They entered Billy’s room. William came to my side and pushed through the door.

“What’s going on?” he demanded as we rushed down the hallway. One of the nurses, Emily, the one who spent the most time with the doctor, tried to stop us.

“You shouldn’t go back there,” she said. My husband went to the door anyway, and I knew before I reached him.

Our little had boy spent his final moments with his doctor and nurses. Billy’s face was pale blue and his lips white. His neck was swollen and as wide as his face. From the door, I saw the ulcers invading his throat.

I fell into William. He held me close, his tears dampening my hair. Outside, the snow started to fall, and the wind picked up, rattling the window to Billy's room. I hated the winter. I hated the snow and the wind and the cold. Any part of me that ever found it beautiful was gone.

The hallway we stood in was still displaying Christmas decorations. I broke away from William, reaching up and tearing down a stocking filled with candy. A strand of popcorn and cranberry garland came down with it, and I felt comfort when the stale and dried pieces crumbled in my fists and the candy shattered on the floor.

The Farm and the Fort

By

Amelia Gagliano

The first brick gate of Fort McCoy appeared from behind a cluster of trees. I stopped for red flashing lights, signaling to allow an army convoy to turn. The camo-painted Humvees went right and entered through the gates topped with barbed wire.

The Weekend Warriors had arrived. They visited the live-ammo base nearly every weekend. We constantly heard the explosions and artillery rounds six miles away. Planes and helicopters would take flight, and tanks crossed the roads frequently.

I used to spend hours walking the large fields on my dad's property. The rolling hills gave the farm a picturesque look, and I loved to venture all the way to the end of the property, up the tallest hill, especially when the jets were out. They put on airshows for the locals, dropping flares and climbing and chasing after one another through the clouds.

Another twenty vehicles rolled by before I could continue through to my father's land, ten minutes from the base. The road cut through large flat fields of hay and corn. Cows stood in muddy pastures, slowly eating hay. Houses out here were large and white. Farm buildings were red and paired with a silo. Many were rotting away.

The long driveway that led to the house was lined by a fence made of old power-line poles. My dad had bought them from the power company when he first inherited the land. They came up to my chest, and I got my first broken bone on the third section, having a balancing competition with my brother, Nathan.

Three cars were parked in front of the house: my brother's Tahoe, Dad's old Dodge, and the funeral director's hearse. The gravel crunched under the tires as I pulled up beside the long black car. The funeral director and Nathan were talking in the kitchen. My car door creaked as I opened it.

The grey of the clouds masked my father's land. The small lake was dark without the rays of the sun beating down on it, casting reflections of the shores, trees, and sky. Broken stalks and old tractor treads revealed that the corn field had recently been harvested. Oaks and maples along the edges of the property held golden and burnt orange leaves. A turkey pecked its way across the hay field at the top of the hill, a black dot in a sea of dirty gold, unruffled by the *tap tap tap* of machine guns from the base.

When I was six, Dad still owned dairy cows, and the newest ones would look around curiously at the sound of guns. They grew accustomed to the shooting as everything in the area did. Early in the morning during milking, the "Reveille" sounded over the area. If the morning bugle call started before we were out, we were behind schedule.

I had only been late once, and my dad used a belt to punish me. Explosions shook the earth later that morning as soldiers tested grenades. I wished they would use bigger bombs and my dad's pails of milk would tip over.

"Jules, would you come and get the door?" My brother's voice drifted over the rustling of the wind. I propped open the storm door with a dusty patio chair, and then went inside to hold the main door.

The wooden floors creaked beneath Nathan's feet while he and the funeral director wheeled out the gurney. My father's body left the living room for the last time. I

let the door shut behind them, and a sudden silence filled the house. It felt off balance, as though the foundation shifted. I noticed all of the flaws that I hadn't before—chips in the glass table, peeling wallpaper, water stains in the ceiling tile.

Nathan walked back into the house, rubbing his hands on faded and holey jeans. The screen door slammed shut, rattling the frame, a sound that always made me jump. He looked around, eyes shifting from the muddy boots near the door where they always were to the corduroy chair, lighter in the seat and back from years of use.

Dad had purchased the chair from a friend at a rummage sale. It looked ragged before entering the house, but Dad swore it was the most comfortable thing he'd ever sat on. The cushion was worn and the fabric thin. When I turned eight, I wanted a big breakfast and brought him a cup of coffee while Nathan scrambled eggs in the kitchen. I was concentrating so hard on not spilling the coffee that I tripped over a Briar horse I left out that morning.

I was close enough to my dad that the liquid mostly landed on his chair. My dad jumped out of the chair and slapped me hard across the face. I staggered and apologized, vision blurred by tears and pain.

“If you wouldn't make such a mess, we would have perfect lives,” he yelled. He grabbed the toy horse and broke the legs off it, then threw the pieces at me and stormed out of the house. I sobbed on the floor until Nathan took me to my room. An old bomber plane made rounds, passing low over the fields. I stared at it while Nathan got me a bag of ice for my cheek. I stayed in the room for the rest of the day, picking up all of my belongings. The brownish stain was still noticeable on the chair.

“What do we do now?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if I meant now, or the week ahead, or for the rest of our lives.

“Make calls. We should probably call Grandma.” Nathan looked at me in a way that made me feel like we were twelve and five again.

“I’ll do it.” I told him.

While the phone rang, I tried to figure out the best way to convey the news. The only time I experienced this was after our mother’s death. Dad told me that she left us forever, and probably joined our uncle in heaven. He seemed angry, but my brother’s sorrow made me sad, and that’s how I figured out that she really was gone. My dad told me that she was gone and she was not coming back, no matter how much I blubbered over it. That she left us for good. I was only five.

At the funeral, Dad surrounded himself with his old military friends. Our grandmother took care of Nathan and I. We sat in the corner, holding hands as Mom’s sisters visited with us. They all lived on the west coast, so we hardly saw them. I watched as our dad laughed and told old stories with his buddies. I didn’t think he looked very sad.

Back at the house, I went into Nathan’s room with him and we covered ourselves in the quilt she made him for his birthday. He cried, and I rubbed his back like he did to me when Dad hurt me. It didn’t take long for our father to wonder where we were, and he came in and took the blanket.

“I want you kids to stop this crying. Nathan, go outside and fill up the tractor. Julia, go and pick up the house.” I wasn’t sure where Dad went after that, but I put the

clean dishes away and straightened the pillows on the couch. Through the window, Nathan stood in front of the tractor, watching a green helicopter fly low past the house.

Grandma answered on the fourth ring, drawing my attention back to the present. Her voice was proper, as always. She was probably settled down at the table for dinner with her obese shih-tzu at her feet. Once she figured out it was me on the line, she asked what was wrong. I paused, unable to say anything. She probably knew why we were calling. Nathan pulled the phone away and maneuvered me into a chair.

“He’s gone, Grandma,” Nathan said.

He sounded the same as when he called me all the times over the past five months, to tell me about the melanoma, to update about Dad’s condition, and to give news from the doctors. He’d spoken in a tone void of emotion, as though he couldn’t let his feelings interfere with the information. The last time Nathan called me had been different, his deep voice laced with worry.

“I don’t think it’ll be much longer, Julia.”

Dad had been diagnosed at the start of August, a month before I began my last year at UW, River Falls. I stayed there year-round to work with the equine training students and riding team, but came home that month. The cancer was in his brain, and a few days later we found out it was in his lungs. It took another week for the doctors to tell us that treatments were inconsequential and that he had about three months left.

Before Nathan called me with the news, my father and I hadn’t spoken for nearly five years. During my first and only hospital visit, I sat in the waiting room for nearly an hour before I resolved to go in and see him. He’d been admitted for a while, and Nathan practically begged me to come.

Dad looked pale and weak asleep on the bed. His cheeks were sunken in. The TV played the news silently; a banner of the breaking story ran across the bottom. Footage from a new prototype helicopter landing at Fort McCoy looped. I watched for nearly twenty minutes before Nathan came back, coffee in hand. A young and pregnant nurse followed him in with a tray containing water and a cup of pills.

“Is he still asleep?” Nathan asked me, giving me a one-armed hug.

“Since I’ve been here,” I told him.

The nurse woke Dad gently. “You should have woken me,” he said when he saw we were all in the room. His voice was deep with exhaustion, and he swallowed the pills with a wince and a curse.

“I thought you could use the rest,” I said, watching the nurse look over the charts at the end of his bed. The sounds of her performing her duties filled the room, and when the door clicked quietly behind her, a silence settled over us.

“The doctors are saying he can go home soon, and they’ll set up hospice care for him there,” Nathan told me.

“That’ll be nice,” I said, meeting my father’s eyes for the first time since I’d arrived. They were red and drooping.

“You don’t need to pretend like you care,” he said, turning away. I looked at him for a moment, thinking that he was right, and then I walked out of the room.

It took me years to realize that the best way to handle my dad’s frustration was to walk away. As a child, I tried my hardest to please him. By eleven I began rebelling. Nathan tried to keep the peace, but as I entered my teenage years, I went against our dad

as often as possible. Disobeying him was the only way I could get my revenge for the way he treated me, or so I thought.

At sixteen, I left for the first time. Nathan was visiting friends from high school who were in college. Dad and I spent most of the time ignoring each other. I stayed outside as much as possible, but in the evening the biting bugs forced me inside.

Our unspoken arrangement worked until I overcooked the chicken on the grill one night. The barbeque sauce took away the charred flavor on the skin, but it didn't trick him.

"How hard is it to make one meal properly?" He asked me, shoving the plate away. "That's all I ask for. One decent meal for all I've done for you."

I pushed my hair back and looked at him. "I'm sorry, all you've done for me?" Nathan kept me from making comments most of the time, but his chair was empty.

"Don't speak to me like that. I put a roof over your head and food on the table."

"I put the food on the table," I retorted, and he leapt to his feet, knocking the table over in the process. I froze. He grabbed my arm in his tight grip and hauled me onto my feet, twisting until I fumbled into him. Once I stopped struggling, he dragged me to the door and shoved me outside, slamming the door behind me.

The tears welled in my eyes, but I let the anger take over instead, turning and walking away. My arm ached and I had no shoes, but I was leaving. As I walked, I envisioned scenarios in which I got away forever. Engines in the tanks and Hummers thundered over the hill at the end of the property.

The walk took over an hour, and I went to Benny's Bar to use the phone. I was sure the soles of my feet were bleeding, but I ignored them. Inside, hunters in camo and soldiers in uniforms occupied the bar. I nodded at Benny, and he frowned.

"Julia, how did you get here?" He looked around for my dad. "Did you walk?" His eyes went to my swollen arm and then to my feet. "Jesus girl, what happened?"

I shrugged. "Locked myself out of the house. Hurt my arm earlier today. Can I make a call?"

He pulled the phone up onto the counter and I sat on a stool. The bar was sticky. When I got a hold of Nathan, Benny stole the phone back to tell my brother what condition I was in, and what he thought happened.

I ended up at the hospital with a fracture in my wrist. Nathan picked me up two hours later. At home, I went straight to bed. Nathan and Dad argued in the kitchen. The next morning we carried on as usual, like nothing happened.

When cancer took hold of our dad, I knew that I would never be able to tell him how much I resented him—that I never wanted to have children for fear of having some of his rage in me. I wouldn't be able to tell him that the gentle stroke of his hands on the cows' flanks made his blows hurt that much worse.

I planned on telling him all of these things—to say my final goodbye after graduating and making a life for myself without his support. It wouldn't be enough to drive away the nightmares or get rid of the scars, but at least he would know everything I thought about him. And then he died, and I was denied the chance.

Nathan hung up the phone and sank into the chair opposite me. He had been on the phone for a long time, and I blinked and rubbed my face; my hand came away wet. We were silent for a while. The grandfather clock chimed nine.

“What’d she say?” I finally asked.

“She’s coming over tomorrow and helping us with the final arrangements. Said we should probably just get some rest tonight, if we’re able.”

I nodded, realizing that I felt sorrier for my grandmother losing her only remaining child than I did for myself and my brother for losing a father. He and Nathan had established a *détente*, especially since I had gone. They had sweat together, lived together, drank together. Nathan would get frustrated and call me to rant about him, but I knew that he cared for the farm. If tending the fields meant living with the bastard, then that was what Nathan had chosen. I supposed the farm would be my brother’s now.

“I want to make a few more calls. Why don’t you go to bed?” he said.

It was still early, but if I thought arguing would have done any good, I would have. I hugged him close for a minute or so, and his embrace got tighter as the seconds ticked by. He had hugged me like this before, the day I got my first acceptance letter.

My grades through school were decent enough, but I had done terrible on the ACT test. Dad wouldn’t pay for me to retake it. Nathan had been positive I would get in to every place I applied, but I was sure they would reject me.

The first letter I received was from River Falls, the school I ultimately chose. I stared at the letter for a long time at the table, feeling a new emotion in my chest. I thought it might be hope.

Nathan walked into the kitchen about two hours after I opened the letter, and took it away to read it. He whooped after reading the first sentence, dropping it to the table and pulling me out of the chair. I could smell hay in his tee shirt as I squeezed him, and was surprised when he pulled me in tight.

“Oof,” I said, laughing breathlessly. I tried to pull back, but he held me close. I heard him sniff into my hair and tried to look at him. “Nathan, are you crying?” I asked.

“Oh, Jules,” he muttered, “I’m just so damned proud of you. And relieved. I know you hate it here, and I’m sorry I don’t do more for you, but I’m just so happy you’re getting what you deserve.”

“I don’t hate it here,” I said, sighing. “I just—” The storm door slammed shut and I jumped. Nathan pulled away and turned toward the sink. He wiped his face and turned on the faucet.

“What’s going on?” Dad asked, looking between the two of us.

“I got an acceptance letter,” I told him. “Into UW, River Falls.”

He looked at me for a moment, and then turned away. “Nathan, did you get all the hay cut in the north field?”

I grabbed the letter off the table and headed outside. Slow and steady rounds were being shot that day, constantly resonating across the land from the fort. I tucked the letter into a back pocket, and could hear raised voices from in the kitchen. Nathan was most likely defending me, but I was past caring.

I let go of Nathan and said goodnight. He dialed a number on the phone as I walked out of the room. Even with Nathan’s voice down the hall, the house was quiet. I

stepped into my childhood bedroom and looked at the Star Wars posters and various Lego creations scattered around. My brother's interests rubbed off on me.

The room hadn't changed at all. I lay back on my mother's quilt, counting the glowing stars stuck to the ceiling. I'd done this so many times as a child that I felt like one again. I used to make forts in my room with blankets and ropes, but I always made sure to leave one hole at the top so I could look at my stars.

Footsteps came down the hall, the floor creaking beneath their weight. I held my breath at the sound, forgetting for a moment that my father was dead. I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes.

A light went off in the hall, and suddenly it was pitch black. I turned over again, trying to get more comfortable and trying not to be afraid. I heard a crinkle of paper and pulled my pillow aside. A folded piece of paper with something thicker inside had been put there.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light from my lamp, and a photo fell from inside the letter as I opened it. I flipped the picture over. It was taken when I could still wrap my arms around the oak out front. I stand before it, smiling widely with a missing front tooth, my hands full of fishing gear and a pole and a fish smaller than one of the lures hanging on my father's fishing vest.

I looked at his face. It is wrinkled and tan. His large, calloused hands rest on my shoulders. His hair is dirty blonde and thick like my own, and he looks healthier—but anyone could have recognized the man who was carried out just hours before as the man in this picture.

The only difference would be the look on his face. He grins broadly and looks down at me with what I could only describe as pride. I spent years trying to earn this look on his face, and here it was captured in this photo. I flipped it over again, and in my young writing I'd written 'Best day ever with dad.' The 'e's varied between upper and lower case, and the 'd's were backwards like 'b's.

I finally looked at the letter. The thick paper was from the stack in the living room. *This is how it should have been.* The words were nearly illegible, rigid and scribbled. I set it aside and looked at the picture again, waiting to remember this day. It felt like hours passed before I gave up.

I switched off the lamp, looking up at the plastic stars. The picture and note rested on the table beside me, smudged with my fingerprints. Outside, the crickets and frogs chirped around the lake.

The base was silent.

Keeping Afloat

By

Amelia Gagliano

I stepped up and off the *S.S. Danio* and instantly lost my balance. The 15' fishing boat swayed with the waves as I tried to find my center of gravity on the pier.

“Easy there, sea legs.” Troy hopped from the boat to the dock. He lifted his dirtied hat off his head and brushed his hair back, sliding the cap back into place. Sun-bleached curls peeked out from beneath, twisting together in the wind.

“It’s been a while since I’ve gotten out of a boat,” I told him. Little wrinkles formed in the corners of his eyes when he grinned, and his teeth glowed white against his skin. The wedding band on his finger kept me from spending too much time admiring him—as did remembering the divorce papers sitting unsigned on my desk 650 miles away.

“The ride gets rough when the winds are up, and your body gets used to the motion,” he told me, lifting a sleeping bag onto the pier. “Just don’t fall in.”

On the other side of the dock, my parents and seventeen-year-old brother, Jake, fought to maneuver their boat around so the bow faced the lake. The four of us hadn’t all fit in my dad’s bass boat with a week’s worth of supplies, so I’d volunteered to ride with Troy and some of the larger items we brought.

“Why, hello there.”

The voice startled me, and I turned toward it to find an old hippie, or at least that was my first impression. He was tall and tan, with a full beard and a tank top with

stretched-out arm holes. He peeked at me over the top of his sunglasses. “Welcome to Marie’s Bay. I’m Twig, Troy’s dad.” I made an effort not to let my eyes drift down to his protruding belly.

“I’m Laura.” I shook his hand and smiled back at him. I saw my reflection in his glasses and twisted my windblown hair into a braid.

My dad stepped forward on the dock to greet Twig, three duffle bags hanging off his arms. The two men were roughly the same height, though Twig was easily twice Dad’s size. “We thought we lived in the middle of nowhere, but this place...”

Marie’s Bay is located in Ontario, Canada, on the north arm of Sturgeon Lake. We had driven twelve-hours from my parents’ house in Wisconsin, followed by a twenty-minute boat ride. This small chunk of land was as secluded as any place I’d ever been. No electricity, no running water, no cell phone reception, no cars. No civilization besides the few groups that would find their way here to catch some fish.

On the boat ride in, we’d seen an abandoned tent Troy said was the shelter for an old prospector who had either left or gone missing a few months ago, and a couple miles before was a resort with a sea plane docked out front. Aside from the plane, the last sign of humanity I had seen was a car parked on the side of the road about ten miles before the boat launch.

Some of the other guests staying at Marie’s Bay moved onto the pier. They were all men, and most of them held cans of beer. My watch read four in the afternoon, but judging by the flush on their cheeks, they had been at it for hours. Between all the guys in the group, everything managed to get to shore with my mom and me empty-handed.

We were led up the bank to a grassy and open piece of property. Trees and cabins were randomly scattered around. Each cabin had a fire pit and picnic table nearby. I saw two small outhouses with moons carved into the doors.

“Well, this will be your cabin,” Twig said, setting the cooler on the porch of a tiny cabin that reminded me of Little House on the Prairie. “There’s bunk beds in the bedroom, so you can each take your pick.” The cottage had a screened-in entry with a ragged couch shoved into the back corner. The door leading inside was wide open, giving us a glimpse of rough wooden floors, antique appliances, and a wood stove.

“Hey, Twig,” one of the other guys said, waving him towards a different cabin about ten yards from ours. “We’re thinking about heading out soon. You want to come?”

He waved his assent to them and turned back to us. “I’ll let you folks get all settled. We’ll be back in a few hours, and then we’re having a fish fry-up. You’ll be there?”

There was no question really, and we weren’t the type to turn away food anyway.

“You sure you’re going to go out?” my dad asked, looking towards the lake. The waves were still rolling in, and thunderhead clouds lined the horizon.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Those will never reach us.”

The first morning, my dad and brother got up and went out lake trout fishing before the sun came up. My mom and I opted to stay in our bunks. We promised breakfast to the early risers upon their return, so by nine we were up and cleaning the small kitchen and table, shoving the beer and soda bottles into bags and shuffling the cards scattered across the floor back into a deck.

A stove, sink, and a refrigerator lined one wall of the kitchen, and a single small folding table stood pressed up against another. Pipes ran from the wall to the ceiling and then throughout the room. These pipes contained liquid propane, or LP, which fueled the refrigerator and stove and lights. Mom took no time getting used to the kitchen, and only a few minutes went by before I realized I was little help. I left the cooking for her this morning, grateful for a break.

My ex-husband had always been the one who made breakfast on those lazy weekend mornings that we were both able to sleep in. We weren't chefs and spent most meals at a restaurant or getting takeout. Home-cooked meals were frequently more fun to prepare than to eat, always either overcooked or bland.

The kitchen in our first apartment had been similar to this one—small and colorless, but cozy. We moved to a larger place after finding out I was pregnant, and the kitchen, probably the size of this entire cabin, was mostly neglected. Something sounding close to gunfire drew my attention outside.

I went to the window to see if anything had blown up. As far as I could tell, there was nothing on fire. I slid my feet into a pair of Jake's ragged flip flops and went into the morning air. The dew on the grass made my feet slip in the too-big sandals, and the sun was bright enough to hurt my eyes.

"This piece of shit," Twig said with a frustrated smile, waving a hand. "Morning, lady." He leaned heavily on the tractor, short of breath.

"If there are tractors, does that mean you have cars as well?" I asked, eyeing the machine. It looked old and somewhat pieced together. The trailer attached to it was in

even worse condition, covered completely by flaking rust. Along its shadow on the gravel was a perimeter of reddish powder. Who knew how long it had been sitting there.

“No, no cars. Snowmobiles in the winter, though. This tractor has been here since before I owned the place and we kind of took it and fixed it. And continue to fix it. It never actually stays that way, of course, but it gives us something to do.”

The trailer was empty save for a chainsaw. “What *do* you do out here?”

“Oh, well, try to keep things running. Fish, read, hunt. Drink and eat. Build stuff. The white cabin over there was the last project. It took three winters and a hell of a lot of boat rides.”

I looked toward the white cabin I knew Troy occupied. It looked like more of a house than ours, with a wraparound deck and windows that faced the lake. The plainness of the design was similar to a modular Brian and I had considered getting after we married. The modern and clean build of the house made it stick out next to the rougher cabins around.

“You built that?” I asked.

“Well, sure. I made most of the cabins here, besides Marie’s over there and the house. Right now I’m building a new Finnish-style sauna.”

I glanced at one of the two buildings he claimed not to have built, the shack that looked as though it were made of Lincoln Logs I played with growing up. It was set back in the woods, hidden in the shadows of the tree line. The wood was gray with age, the logs stacked up with a cross pattern at the four corners. Steel panels, orange with rust, made up the roof. Old tools surrounded the door, one of which was a round saw blade nailed to the side of the building for display with “Marie’s” painted on it in red paint.

“Marie’s?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am. That used to be a brothel before World War I.”

“Really? Who the hell would come out here for a brothel?”

Twig pointed toward a trail beyond the cabins. “That leads to the mine. Before the war, the miners would come out here and stay for years.”

The mine, Saint Anthony Gold Mine, had been one of Canada’s largest. Before Saint Anthony’s, the Algonquian and Iroquoian first nations occupied the land. The Europeans arrived and the land was prospected until the mine was set up in the most promising location, just a few miles from where I stood. Marie ran a brothel out of the oldest cabin, entertaining the miners from St. Anthony’s.

When WWI began, Canada sent large numbers of men into combat, including many of the miners. With so many men absent, the mine shut down. This, of course, dried up Marie’s cash flow, and she left. Twig’s grandfather purchased the land and decided to find another way to get the men back here.

A few years before we arrived, the mine had been demolished, but pictures scattered throughout the cabins showed six-story-high piles of rock and massive caves and holes with no end. One of the photos showed a young boy, Troy at the age of eight, standing at the mouth of a black hole, a stone clutched in his hand. Twig told me that Troy spent hours dropping rocks into the pits, waiting for the delayed *clunk* when it finally reached the bottom.

“Your boys are back,” Twig said, slowly getting into the tractor seat. “Tell Troy to come out and help me on the trail.” The tractor back-fired like it had earlier, shooting

out a puff of smoke and making a bang like a gunshot. I jumped at the noise, and Twig's laughter was drowned out by the roar of the motor as he rolled away.

“Laura, you should have seen it,” Jake said, coming up to me carrying a fish the size of his arm. “It was really weird fishing. We let the lure sink to the bottom and then when it'd hit, we'd crank it up slow, and a fish would bite like every time. And when we finally cranked it to the surface, the thing would be dead.”

By the third day, I finally found the motivation to get up and go fishing in the morning. My dad had rigged up his GPS so he could find his way to the fishing spots without Troy leading, and that morning it was just the two of us. As we left the shore, I watched the sand beach disappear into sudden blackness beneath the water.

“It just went from five feet to twenty feet,” Dad said, watching the depth finder as he trimmed the motor down. “The whole shore line is like that. Between islands you have to stay right in the middle, or you'll hit sand. It's really weird.”

I studied the GPS as Dad drove, steering the boat in zigzagging paths. A black line led from the waypoint he had marked “Home.” The line would randomly curve and wind through the wide open lake. “Is there some invisible obstacle course I'm not aware of?” I asked about ten minutes out, watching as we turned left and then right, instead of taking a straight path.

“Not invisible,” he said, and slowed the boat. “If you look out a little, you'll see a boulder.”

“We’re at like fifty feet,” I told him, looking out and doubting anything would be near the surface at this depth. Sure enough, about ten feet from the boat was a massive rock, probably the size of our cabin, lurking just below the surface.

“How did they learn where to go?” It fascinated me that Troy and Twig could get in a boat and maneuver through the entire seventeen-mile lake without running into the giant masses just out of sight.

“It’s crazy,” my dad agreed. “And if you were to hit one or stall, you’d be bumming.”

I tried not to think about that as we passed the islands and headed into a huge open area.

We used four inch long lures. Divers, my dad called them, and I got to use the lucky one. One cast didn’t go very smoothly, and the line caught. I heard a snap, and the diver did what it was supposed to do: it sank to the bottom. This time, though, no line could pull it back. I watched it disappear, feeling helpless as it vanished.

“Not the lucky one,” Dad mourned. “I shouldn’t have given you that pole. I knew it. The reel is all rusty from Florida.”

He blamed himself. I blamed myself. The fact of the matter was that the lure was heading to the bottom of the lake, and there was no way we’d be able to find it. I didn’t catch any fish that morning, but my dad kept reeling them in.

An hour later we followed the exact, carefully plotted course back, the boat full with our daily limit of lake trout. It was as Jake had said. The fish were dead by the time they reached the surface. They put up a hell of a fight at the bottom, but seemed to give up halfway, surrendering to the inevitable.

When we told Troy about the loss of the lucky diver, he gave me a hard time about it, and I promised to buy a new one, but he laughed and said he had plenty. “You lose them sometimes. You just have to let them go.”

Living with only LP, a lake, and an outhouse was surprisingly easy to get used to. All of the men kept teasing my mom and me about getting bored soon, and how we’d start causing trouble.

“Women never make the whole trip without creating a little drama,” Twig said one night, winking at me over the campfire. I laughed and saluted him with my beer while he salted his pile of fried fish. My family and the other guests had gone to bed, and Twig and I were the only ones still up, as far as I could tell.

“No, I’m good on drama for a while,” I said, still smiling. I honestly couldn’t imagine being able to cause too much of a fuss over anything here.

Twig looked at me, an eyebrow raised. “Do tell,” he said, settling back on his homemade Adirondack chair. It creaked beneath his weight.

“I’m going through a divorce back home,” I told him, surprised at how forthright I sounded.

“You’re much too young for that. And too pretty. Can I ask what happened?”

“Dad, have you no manners,” Troy sat down on an upturned five-gallon bucket and set a satellite phone down next to him. He smiled at me, shrugging his shoulders.

“Sorry, he’s slightly uncivilized.”

“I am not,” Twig said.

“It’s alright,” I said. “He and I had plans, and then something happened and they weren’t going to work out like he—we wanted. So he left.” That was truthful, if not the entire story. I didn’t want to talk about the miscarriage. It had taken Brian and me months to get over that loss. And then, when we had been ready to try to start a family again, I wasn’t physically able to.

“But anyway,” I continued quickly, “my parents thought getting away for a while would do some good. It’s so peaceful up here and it’s been great.”

I gave Troy a small smile, then looked at the fire. “His loss,” he said quietly.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear,” Twig said, very sincere. “Sometimes it just doesn’t work. I’m glad you were able to come as well. You look good—more rested than when you first got here.”

I laughed, both at him and myself. I hadn’t seen myself in a mirror recently, but hopefully he meant that the dark circles under my eyes were starting to fade.

When we weren’t fishing, my mom and I read, napped, or played cribbage. Dad and Jake snorkeled, cleaned fish, explored the mine, or tried hitting the raft with golf balls from the beach. Troy and Twig often went to cut trees, sometimes with help of the other guys. Twig drove the tractor down the trail and Troy sat in the trailer, and would wave as they disappeared into the forest.

The most exciting part of the day was planning dinner. After our noon nap or reading in the shade, my mom and I would sit on the porch and brainstorm. Every meal turned into a well-thought-out, multiple-course feast. We always had fish, of course, even for breakfast.

My mom and I came up with a routine so we could stay out of each other's way and yet both participate in the meal-making. Finally, at twenty-eight, I was starting to enjoy cooking. Hauling water from the lake to boil and do dishes even felt gratifying.

We swam both for fun and hygiene at Marie's Bay. Any sleep lost by staying up with the campfire or by waking up before the sun rose was always made up for. Naps were frequent, usually during the early afternoon when the temperature rose the highest. And yet none of us got bored. Even Jake didn't complain, though he had cheated and brought his old Game Boy and a seemingly endless supply of batteries along.

The nights alone could be enough to convince someone to stay here forever, and forget technology. The stars were so bright they seemed more like mini suns rather than dim pinpricks against a black backdrop. My family took to swimming at night. The water didn't seem as cold when the air was cool, and there was a thrill to swimming in blackness above and below you.

One night, our normal routine was put off by high winds, so my mom and I sat inside, trying to teach each other card games. Most of mine were drinking games I learned nearly ten years ago that seemed extremely stupid without a roomful of drunken college students and booming music. My mom's games were various types of poker she had played with her uncles growing up.

"You have to see this," my dad said, coming onto the porch and gesturing for us to come out. Jake had already turned in, a little seasick from fishing in the evening when the waves had started.

"What, is Troy skinny dipping again?" my mom asked.

"Oh my God, is he?" I asked, peering out the window.

Dad laughed, but shook his head. “No, just come out here.”

We stepped out in rain jackets and slippers, following him towards the clearing of trees. “Look,” he said, letting his head fall back.

Giant streaks of green filled the sky, and my mom gasped. I had seen the Northern Lights once before, but they had been very dim then. These were blue and red, and the most vivid were green. It seemed like someone had poured their glow sticks into the sky, and the fluid was dancing with the wind, twisting and blending together.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I said a while later, when the lights faded and our necks were sore from looking up. My parents each hugged me, and I felt young again.

“We haven’t seen them that bright in years,” Twig told us the next morning. “It is things like that that keep me coming back.”

He took an empty LP tank from me. It was gas day, and our last full day at the resort. Troy and Twig ordered a shipment of gas every month or so and swapped out the empties for full tanks.

“When do you leave?” I asked him. I had been under the illusion that he stayed year round.

“Well, come November it gets kind of boring. Sometimes I’ll hunt or snowmobile in the winter, but usually I go to Minnesota and live with Troy. We come up here a lot through the winter to snowmobile or ice fish, but it’s too hard to keep the heat in with LP. And cutting enough firewood to last the winter is a pain. So I go, right about when I get sick of being here, and then come back when I get sick of being around people.”

I smiled a little. “Do you get sick of guests?”

“Oh, no. The people who are willing to stay up here with no electricity know what they are getting into, so it’s no bother. Plus you pay, so it’s good for staying alive, you know? I’m not a complete savage yet. I still need my LP and my outhouse.” He thought for a minute. “It’s taking a lot less to get me to want to come back, though. I barely last a month without needing to get back up here.”

I nodded, understanding. His chainsaw and tractor easily aggravated him; I couldn’t imagine him living with cars and traffic.

“It’s just people, you know? I like to be out here, away from everyone. Hidden almost.” That was definitely true of the place. Even though he could come and go, there were times when he was absolutely alone. Maybe he preferred it that way.

The last morning was busy. We packed all of our stuff into boats, finding more than we had come with. Fish filled our coolers, and the boats looked as if they were more cramped. As usual with a vacation, the week went too fast, and when it was time to go, no one was ready. The other group was staying another week, and my dad called them lucky bastards at least three times. I had to agree.

“You’re all packed already,” Troy said, getting into his boat.

I looked at my stuff. “Actually, I was just thinking about unpacking. Think your dad would let me stay for free?”

He laughed. “I’m sure he would, if you promised to keep cooking for him. It’s hard leaving, though, I know. Next week’s my last one, and then it’s back to normalcy. Back to working for money and paying the bills.”

“Responsibility.” I handed him my pack, thinking about what was waiting for me at home. An empty house and silence. It didn’t seem like much.

“Yeah. It’s easy to forget all of that out here. You just kind of hang out.” He frowned. “It’s nice at first, but it gets dull and lonely after a while.”

The boats were all overflowing with gear, and Troy and I were much more tightly crammed this trip. The only evidence of our stay was the pile of bottles and cans we left behind around the fire pit.

We said our goodbyes to Twig, and the rest of the guys were going to follow us out and go fishing for walleye. Troy also said he wanted to show us something cool before we left.

The resort got smaller as we motored away, and then we turned a corner around a point and it was gone completely. I felt the stress creeping back, and shook my head, sliding my sunglasses over my eyes. Troy scanned the shoreline, mapping out our path to whatever surprise he had in store.

“I hope you know we’ll be back,” I told Troy.

“Oh good. And then you can get me a new lucky diver.”

“Don’t think I’ll forget.”

The trip was a little longer than it had been when we first came in, but when we got to the fishing spot, it was worth it. It was shaped like a bowl, with one small river-like entrance. Huge walls of stone surrounded us, towering nearly twenty feet above the water level. On top of them were lines of pines. The walls went straight down into the water, and the bottom wasn’t visible from the boats.

“This would be a fun place to cliff jump,” Jake yelled from his boat, and Troy nodded. He waited until my dad’s boat was closer before directing our attention up.

He pointed out a section of rock halfway between the water and the ledge. On a section between orange moss and the sharp edges of stone were reddish orange lines. It took a couple of seconds to spot the faded petroglyph, but my eyes finally separated it from the vegetation of a similar color.

A man was drawn on the stone. He was a small dot on the wide canvas, and that he lasted this long astounded me.

“There used to be another man up there when I was little. He was very faded, but you could vaguely see his legs and head.” Troy said, using his hand to shield the sun as he gazed up. “A few years passed where I didn’t get up here and that’s when it weathered away completely. This guy’s a lot clearer than he was next to the other faded one. The image is stronger.”

“I wonder why,” I said, looking up again.

Logically, I knew the way the water flowed down the rock face after a storm and how the wind and snow hit the surface would cause one to outlast the other. Or maybe the materials the natives used to draw were more permanent.

For the moment, while looking up at the solitary man, I imagined that he was just resilient, and could manage just fine on his own. Maybe he was even better off.