

Back to the Lake

Reed Peets

{ *Smoke* • Maggie Strickland • photograph }

I held it in my lap and stared at it like I was confused about what it was. But I had just seen what it could do. I sat there, enjoying the solitude, and playing it all back in my head. There weren't any cigarettes. I finally didn't need them.

It would be a shame to simply assign them a color and tack the word "beautiful" in front of them. It might be pretentious to think that I could explain them to you in any organization of words at all. Or maybe I don't want to; maybe I'll keep it to myself and hope you'll never notice them or how they make me feel. But if you forced me to, if you told me I could never look into them again unless I told you why, I'd say they're a comfortable bittersweetness that lulls you into forbidden dreams—beautiful, colorful dreams that end abruptly at the very moment you hope they'd continue the most. But the mirage keeps you going, and you swear to yourself that when you finally get there it won't be a mirage.


She broke the gaze and pretended to be interested in something among the crowd—at least I like to think that she was only pretending—as I tried to think of something to say that wouldn't end our tenuous conversation. What I eventually chose to say fell short,

an exchange of nice-to-meet-yous and we-should-hang-out-sometimes later and I was back to where I was before I got lost in the color and the beauty.


There's a feeling I get when I'm here alone. One that convinces me that she's in her own little hideout, thinking of me and wishing that I'd have the guts to do something drastic. And it seems every time I toss my smoke into the lake and walk towards the car I've made up my mind that this is the last time I'm here alone. That next time she'll be here with me and we'll both finally be content. But there's something sobering about the chime of the car door and the lights on the dashboard that seems to grab me by the shoulders and shake me into the same person I was before I came out here, so that when I get home the only evidence that I changed at all is a little more tar in my lungs and the remnants of gravel stuck in the wheelwells of my car.

"Where've you been?"

I heard it as soon as I closed the door, but I had known it was coming. I looked into her eyes like she was a child pitching a fit in the grocery store.



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“Work,” I answered.

She knew I was lying but I kept walking because I knew she didn’t have the passion to do anything about it. She was a pushover and I hated that. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I look around hoping to see a golf club stuck in the flat-screen, all my records in the fireplace, and divorce papers on the counter with a pen already clicked open. I know that’ll never happen—she might cry loud enough for me to hear sometimes, but she’s too in love with this cookie-cutter life I’ve given her to do anything for her own good. I just retreated to my spot on the couch and turned on that flat-screen so I had something to do while I ignored her.

In the morning, she was in the bedroom, but the door wasn’t locked. I don’t think she could ever lock me out of anything. I knew as well as she did that all she wanted was me. She wanted me to come barging in the door, professing my love and telling her I would never hurt her again. She desperately wanted anything but another lonely morning, but I knew I was a few kind words away from sealing the trap on myself once again. I grabbed a banana from the kitchen and tied my tie in the car as planned.

Her face seemed poised for a smile every time I opened my mouth to speak and I loved it. I could make whatever stupid joke I wanted to make because I knew that she’d laugh, or at least smile and tell me I was an idiot and we’d both laugh. It was calming, like I’d found that person they tell you you’re supposed to find. The one whose smile makes you smile, and whose frown makes you wonder why she’s frowning and how you can make it stop.

“Hey, I know you,” I said.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” she replied.

She smiled and called me a gentleman as I held the door for her. We talked, had that conversation you’re supposed to have when you see someone you’ve met before. I don’t think she caught the way I was looking at her. I don’t think she quite understood why I fumbled over the words I chose to say. I remember saying something as she left the store, something that made her smile and give me a little pat on the back.

My blinker was barely out of sync with the car in front of me and it pissed me off. On the passenger seat, there’s a briefcase and

on top of it, a spotted banana peel. The light was red, as it had been for the past four-and-a-half minutes, but I didn't care. You worry a lot less about the traffic when you find your car a lot more pleasing than your destination. At work you can sit at a desk and pretend it's your car, but there's always that one guy who wants to know if you saw the Cubs game last night and you just want to grab him by the throat and tell him you hate people like him. It's a lot harder to ask someone about the Cubs on the interstate.

I walked up the five steps on the left side of the duplex with my hands shoved in my pockets. I began to breathe a little heavier underneath my scarf as I rang the doorbell. I waited, long enough to make me suspect that I was at the wrong house, but when the door opened I realized that I was exactly where I needed to be. She always seemed to surprise me even though I thought I knew what to expect. It's like tearing open the wrapping paper to a Christmas present you wrapped yourself—you know what it is, but it surprises you when it's actually still there, as perfect as you left it. I walked her down to my car and opened the front door for her.

"Thank you," she said.

And I just smiled.

I tossed the banana peel in the trashcan by the front door. The man at the desk greeted me and asked how I was; instead of answering, I just recycled the question and faked a little smile. I made my way to my cubicle and sat and typed into the little box until it was time for me to leave. No one asked me about the Cubs (or any team, for that matter) so on the walk back to my car I chalked it up as a good day.

She asked me what I wanted from my life, and I told her I didn't know. She seemed disappointed, like she had already planned everything out and was expecting us to have identical plans. As I held her in my arms and my mouth pressed against the top of her hair, I told her I loved her. She said it back, but there was something about the way her words trailed off that made me think it was different this time. Everything always sounded so perfect when I played it back in my brain, but I felt like this moment would never fit.

"Sit down, I want to talk."

When I heard those words I reached for the chalkboard eraser in my brain and took down the mark that I had previously made. We've done this before. These little sob sessions where she's the one sobbing. She must think I'm so strong. These talks usually end with her apologizing to me, and me saying that it's not completely her fault. This one was no different. When it was finished, I retreated to the couch once again and figured in my head that this chat probably bought me a few weeks of uninterrupted stagnancy. I replaced that tally mark on my mental chalkboard.

I walked up the stairs on her side of the duplex slowly, my eyes following my feet as they climbed each individual step. This time I knew before she opened the door that I was at the right house. I stared at the wood in front of me and wondered what would happen if I rang the doorbell. I figured she had already noticed my car on the curb and was holding her breath in her room, hoping that I wouldn't have the audacity. I wondered if she'd actually come to the door if I rang it. If she'd seen my car there was no chance of it. But if she hadn't noticed, and she heard the bell, I knew that I would watch her eyes fill with disgust. I turned and left.

I sat on the couch and watched the talking heads on the television yell at each other. I looked at my watch and then at my wife's closed door. When I came in tonight, she wasn't waiting on me. She was behind that door, and I didn't even have to lie this time. I didn't have to silently admonish her for asking me where I was. I simply found my spot on the couch and waited until it was time for me to put on a tie again.

I sat there and wondered if anyone could hear me. I looked across the lake, watched it tremble under the moonlight, and decided that no one could. She was finally beside me, and I was finally content. I wondered if she looked the same as she did in my imagination. If what I had played over and over in my head was actually what was happening. If her eyes still made me feel the way they used to. If her smile made me smile. If she was mine. I decided that it was all true, all exactly what I wanted and needed, and I placed the muzzle in between my teeth, warm against my lips, and pulled the trigger. •