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Homecoming

THE DAY I returned to Templeton steeped in disgrace, the fifty-foot corpse of a monster surfaced in Lake Glimmerglass. It was one of those strange purple dawns that color July there, when the bowl made by the hills fills with a thick fog and even the songbirds sing timorously, unsure of day or night.

The fog was still deep when Dr. Cluny found the monster on his morning row. I imagine how it went: the slide of the scull's knife across the lake, the oar heads casting rings on the water, the red bow light pulsing into the dark. Then, sudden, looming over the doctor's shoulder, an island where there had never before been an island, the vast belly of the dead beast. Gliding backward, the old doctor couldn't see it. He neared; the bow-ball of his boat pushed into the rubbery flesh like a finger into a balloon; the pressure of boat versus skin reached a tensile limit without piercing anything; the boat checked its bow-ward motion, and jerked to stern. The doctor turned, but he was prepared only for the possible, and didn't at first know what was before him. When he saw the large and terrible eye still milking over with death, the good doctor blinked. And then he fainted.

When Dr. Cluny came to, the dawn had thinned, the water was shot with bars of light, and he found himself rowing around and around the bellied-up beast, weeping. In his mouth there was the sweet burn of horehound candy, the exact savor of his long-ago childhood. Only when a seagull landed upon the flat chin of the leviathan and bent to steal a taste did Dr. Cluny return to himself; only then did he skid back over the water to the awakening town, shouting his news.

"Miracle," he called. "Miracle. Come, quick, see."

AT THAT PRECISE moment, I was idling in the park across the street from Averell Cottage, my childhood home. For at least an hour, I had been standing in the depression that the town flooded in winter to make a skating rink, gathering what courage I could. The fog veiled my grand, awkward house, with its original cottage from 1793, one wing from Victorian 1890, and another from the tasteless 1970s, turning the whole into something more coherent, almost beautiful. In my delirium, I thought I could see my mother inside with a few lifetimes of family antiques and the gentle ghost that lived in my childhood room, all traced like bones on an X-ray, delicate as chalk.

I felt the world around me creak and strain, snapping apart, fiber by fiber, like a rope pulled too tautly.

Back near Buffalo I had had a glimpse of myself in a rest-stop bathroom, and was horrified to find myself transformed into a stranger in rumpled, dirty clothing, my once-pretty face bloated and red with crying jags. I was drawn, thin, welted with the bites of a thousand Alaskan blackflies. My hair, shorn in April, was now growing out in weird brown tufts. I looked like some little chick, starving, molting, kicked out of the nest for late-discovered freakishness.

As the night thinned around me, I leaned over and retched. And I still hadn't moved when, down Lake Street, there came a muffled trampling sound. I knew before I saw them that the sounds were from the Running Buds, a small, dear band of middle-aged men who jog around the streets of Templeton every morning, in all weather, in ice, in rain, in this fine-pelted fog. When the Buds came nearer, I could hear

gentle talking, some spitting, some wheezing over their footsteps. They moved out of the dark and into the glow of the single streetlamp on Lake Street, and seeing me in the park in my little depression, seeing, perhaps, something familiar about me but not quite recognizing who I was at that distance, all six of them raised their hands in my direction. I waved back and watched their thick bodies disappear down the street.

I FOUND MY feet crossing the street, heading up the driveway, passing through the garage doorway, and I opened the door to the mudroom to the smells of straw and dust and bitter orange, the smells of home. I almost turned around, returned to the car, waited for day. I hadn't seen my mother in more than a year: I couldn't afford the trip home, and, for the first time since I'd left, she hadn't offered to pay. Instead, though, I came in as silently as I could, hoping to have a few good hours of sleep before awakening her. I placed my shoes beside her white nursing clogs, and went through the mudroom, then the kitchen.

But although I had expected Vi to be sleeping, she was sitting at the kitchen table with the *Freeman's Journal* spread before her, her profile reflected in the great plate glass door that looked out over the two-acre lawn, the lake, the hills. She must have had a night shift, because her feet were in an enamel bowl filled with hot water, her eyes closed, her face hanging above her tea as if she were trying to steam her features off. They were slipping that way, anyhow: at forty-six, my mother had the worn, pouchy skin of a woman who had done far too many drugs at far too young an age. Her shoulders were slumped, and the zipper in the back of her skirt was open, revealing a swatch of red cotton underwear and a muffin-top of flesh above it.

From my position in the kitchen door, my mother looked old. If I weren't already holding the pieces together with both squeezed hands, this sight would have broken my heart.

I must have moved or swallowed, because Vi turned her head and looked at me. Her eyes narrowed, she blinked and heaved a sigh, and passed a hand over her face. "Goddamn flashbacks," she muttered.

I snorted.

She looked at me again, her forehead creasing. "No. You're not a flashback, Willie. Are you?"

"Not this time. Apparently," I said, coming over to her and kissing her on the part in her hair. She smelled antiseptic from the hospital, but, deeper, there was her own smell, something birdlike, like warm and dusty wings. She squeezed my hand, flushing.

"You look horrible. What in the world are you doing home?" she said.

"Oh, boy." I sighed, and had to look away, at the thinning curls of fog on the lake. When I looked back, the smile had fallen off her face.

"What. The heck. Are you. Doing home?" she said, again, still squeezing, but harder with each word until the bones in my hand were crushing one another.

"Jesus," I gasped.

"Well," she said, "if you're in trouble, you'd better be praying." It was only then that I saw the crude cross of raw iron that hung heavily between her breasts, as if my mother had gone to the Farmers' Museum up the road and blacksmithed her own crucifix out of two hobnails. I nudged the cross with my free hand and frowned.

"Vi?" I said. "Oh, don't *tell* me you've become a Jesus freak. You're a hippie, for God's sake. Remember? Organized religion equals bad?"

She released my hand, and tugged the cross away. "That," she said, "is none of your business." For a long moment, though, Vi couldn't look at me.

"Vi," I said, "be serious. What's going on?"

My mother sighed and said, "People change, Willie."

"*You* don't," I said.

“You should be glad I do,” she said. She dropped her eyes, not yet remembering that I was standing there in her house when I should have been under the twenty-four-hour dazzle of an Alaskan tundra. I should have been blowing lichen off definitive proof that human culture existed there over thirty-five thousand years ago, some incisor embedded deep in the ground, some tool still glistening with seal grease, intact from the deep freezer of the steppe. I should have been under the aegis of Dr. Primus Dwyer, PhD, Barton P. Thrasher Professor in the Sciences at Stanford University, where in a few short months I was supposed to finish my PhD dissertation, and graduate, heading toward a life of impossible luminescence.

When I told my mother in my sophomore year that I wanted to focus my furious ambitions in archaeology, she looked bitterly disappointed for a moment. “Oh, Willie,” she’d said then. “There is nothing left in this world for you to discover, honey. Why look backward when you can look forward?” I talked for hours then, of the intensity of wonder when you blew away the dust and found an ancient skull in your hand, when you held the flint knives and saw the chisel marks made by long-dead hands. Like so many people who have long ago burnt through all of their own passion, my mother recognized mine, and longed for it. Archaeology would take me into the great world, into deserts and tundras, as far away from Templeton as I believed she had always wanted me to be. By now, her ego and a good portion of what inheritance she had left were invested in this dream: me as intrepid explorer of bone and potsherds, tunneling into the vastness of prehistory. Now, in the lightening dawn, she looked at me. A motorboat was speeding across the lake at top throttle, and its whine rose even to us, set two acres back on glowing, overgrown lawn.

“Oh, Willie,” said my mother now. “Are you in trouble,” and it was a statement, not a question.

“Vi?” I said. “I messed up big-time.”

“Of course,” she said. “Why else would you find yourself in Templeton? You can hardly stand to come back once a year for Christmas.”

“Goddamn it, Vi,” I said, and I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and rested my head on the table.

My mother looked at me and then sighed. “Willie,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’m so tired. Tell me now what happened so I can get some sleep, and we’ll deal with it later.”

I looked at her, then had to look down at the table. I traced designs in the waxy residue of its surface. And then I told her one version of the story, vastly abridged.

“Well, Vi,” I said. “It looks like I’m pregnant. And it’s maybe Dr. Primus Dwyer’s.”

My mother held her fingers over her mouth. “Oh, heaven help us,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But, Vi, there’s more.” I said it in one exhale, in a great whoosh. I told her that I also tried to run over his wife with a bush plane, and she was the dean of students, and it was probable that charges of attempted manslaughter would prevent me from returning to Stanford again. I held my breath and waited for the knuckled sting of the back of her hand. Despite Vi’s hippie mores, it was not uncommon in my childhood for us to get to this point in our battles, panting and narrow-eyed, stalemated across the table. And once or twice, for my greatest sins, she did send her hand across to settle it all with a smack.

But she didn’t hit me now, and it was so silent I could hear the two-hundred-year-old grandfather clock in the dining room as the pendulum clicked, clicked, clicked. When I looked up, Vi was shaking her head. “I can’t believe it,” she said, pushing her tea farther from her with one finger. “I raised you to be exceptional, and here you are, a fuckup. Like your stupid fuckup mother.” Her face wobbled and grew red.

I tried to touch her arm, but she snatched it away, as if mere contact with me could burn her. “I’m going to take a few pills,” she said, standing. “I’m going to sleep for as long as I can sleep. And when I wake up, we’re dealing with this.” She moved heavily to the door. With her back still toward me, she paused. “And oh, Willie, your hair. You had such beautiful hair,” she said and moved away. I could hear

her footsteps on every creaking floorboard in the old house, up the grand front stairway, far away over the hall and into the master bedroom.

Only in recent years did such coolness arise between Vi and me. When I was little, I would play cribbage and euchre with my young mother until midnight, laughing so hard I never wanted to go to the few sleepovers and birthday parties I was invited to. My mother and I held an odd relationship with the town, as we were the last remnants of its founder, Marmaduke Temple, and direct descendants of the great novelist Jacob Franklin Temple, whose novels we read every year in high school, whose link to me would actually make a college professor burst into tears when I confessed it. But we were too poor and my mother was young, unmarried, and too weird with her macramé and loud politics, and so when we left the safety of our eccentric house, it always felt like Vi and me against the world. I remember vividly when I was ten or so—which would have made my mother my age, twenty-eight—listening outside her door as she wept for hours after being slighted in the grocery store, that one memory standing in for many. I dreamt at night of being so big I could march down Main Street, grinding our enemies under my furious ogre's feet.

Alone now in the dawn, I drank the rest of my mother's tea to melt the block of ice in my gut. Vi was wrong: I did want to come home. Templeton was to me like a less-important limb, something inherently mine, something I took for granted. My own tiny, lovely village with great old mansions and a glorious lake, my own grand little hamlet where everyone knows your name, but with elaborate little frills that made it unlike anywhere else: the baseball museum, the Opera, the hospital that had vast arms extending into the rest of upstate, an odd mix of Podunk and cosmopolitan. I came back when I had to, to feel safe, to recharge; I just hadn't had to in so long.

For a while I sat alone at the table, watching the crows fall into the vegetable garden, pecking at the heirloom vegetables that thrived every year under Vi's benign neglect. Then the motorboat that had gone out before zipped back, and soon more motorboats were roaring out into the lake like a vee of geese. Curious, I slid open the glass door and went onto the porch, in the warming dawn. From where I stood, the hills around Lake Glimmerglass looked like the haunch end of a sleeping lion, smooth and pelted. I watched until the motorboats came back into sight, collectively straining to pull something pale behind them, something enormous and glinting in the new sun.

And that's how I found myself running barefoot over the cold grass down to Lakefront Park, even as weary as I was at that moment. I went past our pool, now so thick with algae that it had become a frog pond, plunking with a thousand belly flops of terror when I passed. I went down the stretch of lawn, across the concrete bridge over Shadow Brook, trespassed over Mrs. Harriman's backyard until I stood in the road at Lakefront Park, and watched the motorboats coast in.

I stood under the bronze statue of the Mohican, the best known of the characters by our town novelist, Jacob Franklin Temple, and, slowly, others gathered around me, people from my childhood who nodded at me in recognition, startled by the great change in my appearance, struck silent by the solemnity of the moment. Somehow, none of us was surprised. Templeton is a town of accreted myth: that baseball was invented here; that a petrified giant, ten feet tall and pockmarked with age, was disinterred from under the old mill—a hoax; that ghosts lived among us. And we had been prepared for this day by the myths we'd always heard about a lake monster, the childhood tales around campfires in the summer camps on the lake, the small rumors filtered down. The town crazy, Piddle Smalley, would stand on a bench in Farkle Park wearing his pants backward—urine-soaked, which is why we called him Piddle—and shout about the rain-swollen April day when he stood on the Susquehanna bridge, staring down into the fat river, and something immense passed by, grinning its black teeth up at him. He'd shriek at the end of his story *Glimmey, Glimmey, Glimmey*, as if in invocation.

Most of Templeton was watching as the motorboats cut their engines and glided in. The *Chief Uncas* tourist boat groaned in the waves against the dock. The Running Buds climbed out with great gravitas,

old joints creaking, and secured the beast's tethers to the iron hitches in the walls at the lake's edge. And in those brief minutes before the baseball tourists in town heard of our miracle and came running with their vulgar cameras and shouts and poses, before the news trucks drove ninety miles per hour from Oneonta, Utica, Albany, there, in the long, peaceful quiet, we had a few moments to consider our monster.

In that brief time, we were able to see it in its entirety. The beast was huge, a heavy cream color that darkened to lemon in places, and was floating on its back. It looked like a carp grown enormous, with a carp's fat belly and round eye, but with a long, articulated neck like a ballet dancer's, and four finned legs, plump as a frog's. The ropes of the motorboat had cut into its skin, and the wounds were open to the day, still oozing dark, thick blood. I stepped forward to touch the beast, then everyone else did. When I placed my hand upon its belly, I felt its porous skin, its hairs as small and delicate as the ones on my own arms, but thicker, as if the beast were covered in peach fuzz. And, though I had expected the early sun to have warmed it, the monster burned cold, as if its very core was made of the ice some said still existed at the bottom of our glacial lake.

It was somehow clear, even then, that the monster had been lonely. The folds above its eye made the old face look wistful, and it emanated such a strong sense of solitude that each human standing in the park that day felt miles from the others, though we were shoulder-to-shoulder, touching. Later, we would hear that when the divers couldn't reach the bottom of our lake, they called in deep-sea pods to search for another beast like the one that surfaced that day. We would hear that, scour as they might, they couldn't find another beast like ours, only detritus: rusted tractors and plastic buoys, and even an antique phonograph. They found a yellow-painted phaeton in its entirety, the bones of a small spaniel inside. They also found dozens of human skeletons, drowned or dumped corpses, arranged side-by-side in some trick of current or metaphysics, on a shallow shelf near Kingfisher Tower, beside Judith's Point.

That morning, before I drew my hand away from the monster, I felt an overwhelming sadness, a sudden memory of one time in high school when I slipped to the country club docks at midnight with my friends, and, giggling, naked, we went into the dark star-stippled water, and swam to the middle of the lake. We treaded water there in the blackness, all of us fallen silent in the feeling of swimming in such perfect space. I looked up and began to spin. The stars streaked circular above me, my body was wrapped in the warm black, my hands had disappeared, my stomach was no longer, I was only a head, a pair of eyes. As I touched the beast I remembered how, even on that long-ago night, I could feel a tremendous thing moving in the depths below me, something vast and white and singing.