

ONE

The warm sun.

The cool breeze off the lake.

The weak scent of my father's aftershave.

I could not see him, but I could see his shadow on the planks as he guided my wheelchair down the wooden walkway toward the boat dock. I had never been, nor would I ever be, "daddy's little girl." We didn't have that kind of relationship. I would never be his little Kercy. I was barely a girl at all. Seventeen and I still showed no signs of ever becoming a woman. I weighed eighty-eight pounds. When hair grew on my head, it sprouted in tufts, so I kept my scalp shaved. My eyebrows appeared as nothing more than short sprigs growing helter-skelter above my eyes.

Our summer cottage occupied one of the thousands of private islands in the Soshone Island area of Georgian Bay near the St. Lawrence Seaway in Ontario. I loved it here. I loved how the too blue water came together with the horizon in some distant unreachable place. How the air was crisp and unspoiled. How the afternoon breeze made the boughs of the spruce and pines sway like tall, drunken fishermen.

My father didn't speak as he rolled me along, and as much as I may have liked to be, I was not privy to his thoughts. Decking boards creaked beneath his feet, even though his stylish canvas shoes made no noise on the weathered wood. Water crashed and sprayed against the rocky shoreline in front of our house. Our white skiff bounced in the waves, bucking against the mooring ropes as if trying desperately to escape. As we approached the end of the dock, bright whitecaps opened in the blue ahead, the boards beneath my wheelchair blotched with dried gull shit.

My heart shuddered, a bit faster now as we approached the last few boards of the long pier. No railing enclosed it and the thought occurred to me that in some final act of disgust my father might actually decide to thrust my wheelchair over the edge. I would land with a splash and for just a moment, my wheelchair might shirk its responsibility to sink. And for that brief second, I would look up at him from the water, the sun behind his head, his face in shadow, his final thoughts hidden from me. Then just as suddenly as I had glimpsed him for the last time, my chair would obey the laws of physics, become an anchor dragging me down. My father would watch, me seated in my chair, the wheels rotating slowly as I sank, until my face was merely a faint bluish smudge in the depths. And then gone. Would he be smiling? Would he be aghast? Or would he have already walked away? I always wondered.

"It's a beautiful day."

My father spoke these words with the flattened affect of someone pointing out a dead mouse. Stepping out from behind my wheelchair, he positioned himself beside me. He had the slight but sturdy build of a man who worked with machinery. The truth was, he had never worked a day in his life. Wealth was as common to him as breathing. Most days he just perused the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal until he grew bored. Then he would race off to Manhattan in his Porsche convertible for destinations unknown. Forbes magazines adorned our bathroom magazine rack, but I don't think he ever read them. He really didn't care about wealth, only the

freedom it afforded him. And he resented me for diminishing that freedom.

I stared at the water. My father stood post-still, a fishing rod in his right hand. I had never seen him fish, and didn't think he really liked it much, but somehow, he knew how to work the rod and reel. He prepared some kind of bait and had skewered it on a hook at the end of the line. A weight dangled two feet above the hook. I had no idea what the bait was, but it appeared to have been some kind of water creature at some point in its life.

"Do you want to try?" he said, mimicking a cast.

I didn't care about fishing either. "No, you can throw farther than I can."

"Well, Kercy, that's not really the point, is it..." His cigarette stuck to his lower lip, bobbing with each word. Using both hands, he grasped the rod firmly, flipped the bail open, then swung the rod back behind his head before whipping it forward with a *whoosh*. Within seconds the bait splashed some thirty yards away. The fishing line sliced the surface of the water back toward me as the bait sank to the bottom. When the line went slack, he handed me the rod.

"Hold on tight to the handle, Kercy," he said. "Both hands. Enormous fish out there, I'm told."

I wedged the butt of the long handle between my legs against the seat of my wheelchair, then placed my left hand above the reel and my right hand below. If a fish took the bait, I would have to use my left hand to reel it in, while steadying the rod with my right. I wasn't sure how that would work, having never caught anything before. I was at least glad for that, the part about never having caught anything. I was content to just sit and watch a few clouds crawl their way across the horizon.

"No matter what happens, don't let go of that rod," my father said. "You are strong enough to do this, right? It's important that you be good at something, Kercy, even if it is just fishing."

He took one last glance toward the infinite blue water beyond the dock, then turned and walked back to the skiff. We often went

through this ritual at the lake cottage, mostly when my mother was taking a nap. She was plagued by horrible migraines and often had to lie down in the late afternoon. My father, unable to escape our private island in his Porsche, found it unbearable to be around me by himself for very long. He would take our twenty-foot skiff and buzz around Georgian Bay all afternoon. I never knew where he went. Neither did my mother, but I don't think she cared. They had not really been that close after I was born. And she would be angry with him when she woke from her nap to find me sunburned and unchaperoned at the end of the dock. My father said the sun would do my complexion good, but it only turned me red, and blotchier than normal.

Craning my neck back, I watched my father climb into the skiff. He looked so handsome standing behind the center console, his smooth black hair, his straight back, fingers wrapping the steering wheel, like someone in a magazine. I often wondered what it would feel like for him to touch me, to touch my skin, my arms, my face. At times my body ached for him to hold me, to wrap me in his arms, squeeze me to his chest. My mother hugged me all the time and it seemed our bodies meshed perfectly into one another, that we were two pieces from the same puzzle. Would it feel that way with him? Maybe if I caught a big fish, held onto the rod, fought it to exhaustion, both the fish's and mine, and let the huge creature die in the sun on the dock, maybe then.... Would that prove I was good at something?

Gulls gathered and squawked when he fired the huge Evinrude boat engine. He undid the ropes and shot away from the dock. He didn't bother waving. The birds stalked his wake, hoping for a free meal of sculpin or goby stirred up by the prop. After the skiff rounded an island to the east, he was gone. For a moment I could still hear the distant hum of the Evinrude.

What was he hoping for with this fishing routine? That an enormous muskellunge would grab the bait and drag me into the water? At the tackle store in Elico, hanging on the wall, was a mounted musky over five feet long. It had weighed over sixty pounds, armed

with a mouthful of sharp teeth. I only outweighed that fish by twenty-eight pounds. I wasn't paralyzed, just woefully underdeveloped, without much strength in my legs. It wouldn't be much of a battle, with the huge monster very much at home in water, and me never feeling at home anywhere.

My father had been right about the day... it was beautiful. A couple of times I had dozed off. Luckily, I had not dropped the rod in the water. The front castors of my chair sat about a foot from the edge of the dock. That was too close. I carefully secured the rod butt beneath my left thigh, clamping my right thigh against it. With the rod steady and fixed, I released my grip on the rod handle and placed my palms on the push rings to move myself back from the edge. That's when I realized my father had not locked the brake on my chair after he handed me the rod. He must have forgotten.

I had just started moving the chair when the fishing line tightened, the rod bending toward the water. It could be I was snagged and my movement caused the reaction. Then the line jerked from the spool in short fits, the drag clicking. Seizing the rod firmly with my right hand, I used my left to set the brake on the left rear wheel. I was switching hands to set the other brake when the rod went crazy. Line ripped from the spool, the drag whining. I grasped the knob at the top of the spool, twisting it to tighten the drag and put pressure on the fish, hamper his freedom, the way my father had shown me. When I did, the rod strained and bowed against this new restriction. Something had to give... and it did. With the left rear wheel brake holding firm, the right front castor of my chair started to jerk toward the last board. The right castor was less than eight inches from the edge. The fish charged straight for deep water. The drag was too tight now, not giving the creature enough sway. With the rod held tight to my chest, my chair began to rotate slightly, pivoting on the locked rear wheel. The right castor was now within an inch of losing purchase on the wood. When I tried to loosen the drag, give the fish what he wanted—less resistance—he pulled all the harder, nearly jerking the rig from my hands.

I slid my right tennis shoe from the footplate and planted it on the dock, with little room to get footing. My impulse was to give the fish the rod and reel, let it fly from my hands and sink in the water behind the raging creature. *No matter what happens, don't let go of that rod.*

Cradling the handle in the crook of my right arm, I struggled to turn the reel handle with my left hand. I could feel my neck muscles straining, the right castor slipping forward. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I arched my back against the fish. I used every bit of strength in my right leg to find traction against the wood and push myself back from the edge. *You are strong enough to do this, right?*

Now I wasn't sure. Was I strong enough? Was I able to do anything right? *Don't let go of that rod!*

My mouth was dry and I was just about to give in when I heard my mother scream. "Kercy!" In the far margin of my vision I saw her running toward me from the cottage. I knew not to turn my head toward her, which would give the fish just the angle it needed. New resolve filled my arms and legs but the fish seemed to care nothing for my momentary confidence. It pulled harder than anything I could imagine and the right castor was now suspended in mid-air. If the left brake held, I would probably not tumble into the water. "Kercy!" my mother shouted over and over. "Let go of that damn rod!" It seemed now she was running in slow motion, her voice shrill with panic. I felt dizzy, unstable, and just when I knew the fish would win, the rod tip shot straight up, the line fell slack. The struggle was over.

In my jubilation, I turned to smile at her, holding the rod up like a trophy. *It's important that you be good at something, Kercy, even if it is just fishing.* She kept running toward me, her face still twisted in anguish. "Kercy!"

"It's okay, Mom! I'm okay!"

At that moment, the slight imbalance from my celebration caused my wheelchair to pitch forward and topple from the dock. The splash shocked me. I expected a moment, a pause, when everything stood still, like so many times before. But that didn't happen.

I was no stranger to drowning. I had drowned at least four times already in my life. My mother was proficient at CPR, bringing me back each time. And it wasn't because my parents were irresponsible, or that I was not a great swimmer, or that I was of slight build and weak; it was because I believed I could breathe underwater. Finally, at age nine, I was prohibited from going in swimming pools, lakes, or the ocean. I required supervision when I bathed; my mother no longer trusted me around water, even in the bathtub.

Regardless, I loved the water. I loved seeing with such clarity in this peculiar medium which desperately wanted to end my life. Before my first trip below the surface, I never knew the world could be so defined and colorful. When I was a young girl my mother would take me to the public pool near our home. I could read tattoos on ankles and calves as people swam by, could see individual hairs on men's legs, the colored stitching of women's bikinis, the color of their painted fingernails from the far end of the pool. Below the water my eyesight was vivid, while on land, blurry, vague and achromatic. One of my many birth defects.

My chair sank quicker than I did. For a moment I floated freely above the bottom. Suspended. What a wonderful feeling to have full movement, to drift unhindered, to cheat gravity ever so briefly. Then the colors came, beautiful fish and aquatic flowers and plants. Water was a miraculous place. One I could live in forever. But then it ended as it always did.

I coughed a few times and spit water from my mouth. When I opened my eyes my mother was kneeling over me, her hair stringy and dripping onto my chest. Her blouse was soaked, the material clinging to her bra. When she saw me breathing, she closed her eyes and seemed to be saying a prayer. Lying on the dock, I felt the boards warm against my back. I swiveled my head to find my wheelchair. I didn't see it. I looked at my left hand. The rod was clutched in my small palm. I hadn't let go of it, and wished my father could have seen me.

"Stay put, sweetheart... don't move," my mother said. She stood,

still wearing her red shorts, then dove back into the water. Unlike me, she was an amazing swimmer. She had a Master's Degree in Marine Biology and was also a scuba diver with Scientific Diving Certification. She never held a job as a marine biologist, but before I was born had volunteered on research teams, diving all over the world.

Like my father, my mother had come from wealth. Her great grandfather had started a timber business in upper Ontario at the turn of the century. Even though my father had no need for money, apparently her fortune had been a big attraction to him. That, coupled with the fact that she had been told she'd never have children because of a cramped-up uterus like mine. Freedom. Unbridled freedom. According to my mom, my father married her with the idea their life would be one continuous lark of traveling, exploration and adventure. And it had been—Africa, Greenland, Malta, Greece, Spain, Australia—until my mother, against all odds, became pregnant. They had even lived on the Isle of Capri for several years, but that all ended because of me. My mother had what the medical community referred to as a geriatric pregnancy, a term assigned to any woman who became pregnant after thirty-five. My mother was forty-one when I was born, which may have accounted for some of my physical challenges. But to her, my birth was miraculous. Not so for my father, who saw her pregnancy as an unforgivable deception.

I crawled to the edge of the dock. My mother was maybe fifteen feet below, grabbing the wheelchair. She looked like a mermaid, puffs of sand swirling around her as she pulled it from the silt. She moved like a spirit, like Yemoja, goddess of all waters. My mother spent time in Nigeria and told me about her.

When she surfaced holding the arm of my wheelchair, she kicked her legs to keep from sinking, wrangling the contraption up onto the dock. It sat on its side, dripping, and for some inexplicable reason I felt sorry for it. My mother grasped the edge of the dock, and with one swift movement, shot from the water, throwing her left knee, then the right, onto the boards. It baffled me, her physical prowess.

She stood, then used both hands to squeeze the water from her

hair. "Where's your father?" she asked, glancing toward the empty dock. "He took off in the boat, didn't he... damn him!"

"I held onto the rod, Mom."

She leaned over and hugged me, then kissed my head. "You did, sweetheart. You are getting so strong now. Let's get you into some dry clothes."

She helped me into the wheelchair. Even at fifty-eight my mother had the youthful beauty of someone half her age. It was no wonder my father fell in love with her. She was intelligent, vivacious, driven, warm, and strong. She was good at so many things.

As she turned my wheelchair back toward the cottage, I started reeling in the excess line. I'm not sure my father would see salvaging the rod as a victory, especially given that I hadn't landed the fish. Regardless, for me, a major triumph. My mother waited as I wound the handle on the reel. I couldn't tell if she was crying or it was water dripping from her hair wetting her cheeks. Once all the slack was out of the line, I felt resistance on the rod.

"Mom, I still have him!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Look at the rod. I feel the weight."

Reeling in faster, I was surprised the fish was not fighting. Had he died from exhaustion? Or was he too tired to struggle? Or had he just given up? My mother and I watched as it came closer. It quickly became obvious it was dead, its body spinning and twirling as it came closer. It didn't look very big, either, only a foot or so long. Now I was glad my father wasn't here to see this. He would probably laugh at me for how I had struggled against this small, insignificant creature.

When the sinker reached the rod tip, I lifted the dead fish from the water and held it over the dock. "What kind of fish is that, mom?" It didn't even look like a fish.

She went over to it, inspected it a moment, then grasped it mid body and pulled it from the hook.

"Is that a fish?" I asked. It was an appendage of some sort; the

bottom looking as if it had been bitten off a much larger creature. Blood dripped onto the dock.

Her expression turned dark. She studied it a bit longer, then tossed it as far as she could out into the water.

“Mom! Why did you do that? I needed to show dad!”

She turned back to me and knelt in front of my wheelchair, tears trickling down her smooth skin. She seemed to struggle for words. “I think it was the leg of a *necturus maculosus*. A mudpuppy.”

My eyes had been telling me it was some kind of arm with a hand, but my mind refused to accept it. “A mudpuppy? What is that?”

“A salamander. Let’s go to the house.”

“That was the leg of a salamander?” I said. “Jeez, he would’ve been like six feet long or something, right? And that’s without the tail. Do salamanders get that big?”

“Not usually, baby.”

“Mom?”

“What now?”

I pointed at her stomach. “You have blood on your blouse.”

She looked down and rubbed at it a second, then grabbed the push handles and started wheeling me up the walkway. My mind wrestled with all the intangibles. It was scary picturing something so large swimming beneath the serene surface. It would have been way bigger than those pike and musky mounts at the tackle shop. Could it eat a musky? Or one of those big pike? What did huge salamanders even eat? But then the most disturbing notion seized me: Something even bigger had eaten it. That’s why the fight ended. Now it made sense.

“Mom?” I grabbed the push rings to stop the wheelchair. “What would be big enough to eat a six-foot salamander?”

For a moment she said nothing. I twisted in the wheelchair to find her eyes, but with the sun behind her, she was in silhouette.

“Mom?”

“I don’t know, baby.”

She started moving the chair again so I released the push rings. If she didn't know, who would? She was a marine biologist. She had to know. She made dives all over the world. She'd seen creatures unseen by most people except in books. Others that may never have been photographed at all. She told me once that an estimated eighty-five percent of the Earth's species are still unknown. That seemed like a lot to me.

After helping me into dry clothes, she applied aloe gel to my face, scalp and arms. My new sunburn was starting to make itself known, but the lotion felt cool on my skin. We were eating lunch when I brought up the salamander leg again.

"I wish we could have kept it to show dad," I said.

My mom chewed her sandwich and picked at the potato chips on her plate. After lunch we went into the living room where she had a complete library; books of fiction, poetry, marine biology, anthropology, countries of the world, famous cities, and science. She sat on the cushy chair that she always read in and motioned for me to come over by her.

"Are we going to do lessons?" I asked.

"No, it's still summer vacation."

I rolled my wheelchair over and she helped me onto her lap. Once I stopped squirming, she opened the picture book on ocean life. "So much about our world we still don't understand," she said, flipping to pictures of colorful yet horrific looking creatures. "These are a few of the ones we know of."

"So, how big is that one?" Enthralled by this fish with enormous teeth, I couldn't help but imagine him chomping off the body of the salamander.

"He's only about 14 inches long. Does he scare you, Muffin?"

"No." He really didn't scare me at all. "How big do muskie get?"

"The world record is almost 70 pounds. You might have tussled with a new world record."

Okay, she was patronizing me now because she didn't want to talk about the mudpuppy anymore, so I dropped it.

Later that evening when she was cooking dinner, I heard the skiff return. From the living room window I watched my dad climbing out. He squatted down and spent a few minutes securing the boat to the dock cleats. When he tried to stand up, he wavered and almost fell over. He was drunk. He must have taken the skiff to the harbor, docked it, then got in our SUV and drove to the tavern in Elico. My mom was already pissed about him leaving me unsupervised on the dock. After dinner they'd fight the rest of the evening and she'd probably sleep on the couch in the living room, next to my bedroom. She had my room special built so I didn't have to deal with the steps.

My father came inside and went directly upstairs. Within a few minutes the shower came on in their bedroom, which was just above my room. The cottage was pretty amazing, out here in the middle of nowhere it seemed, an island among thousands of islands, but with all the amenities; hot water, flushing toilets, electricity. I loved it here. Way better than New York City.

I laid on my bed reading until supper time. When my mom came and got me she sat on the bed next to me. "Sweetie, I know you're excited about telling your father about your... your adventure today, but it is probably not a good time. Your father's been drinking and he will not be easy to deal with tonight. I don't want you getting into it with him."

She sat a moment looking at me, then: "Okay? You understand?"

"Yeah, sure. No problem. Do you want to play cards after supper. Or a game? Do you want to play Sorry?"

"We'll see, okay?" She leaned in and kissed me on the forehead, then on the nose. "I love you so much, Muffin."

TWO

My parents and I ate dinner in silence. After supper my father went outside to smoke. I helped my mom with the dishes. She seemed sad this evening.

She suds the dishes as if she hadn't heard me, then rinsed them and placed them in the rack. I was several dishes behind her now. When she finished with the last glass, she pulled the plug in the sink and grabbed a towel to help me finish drying.

"Are you looking forward to getting back to the city, Muffin?" she asked.

"Not really. I love it here."

She nodded. "I know you do."

She put the dishes into the cabinets while I put silverware in the drawer. When everything was done, she told me to get the Sorry board set up.

While I was doing that in the living room, my father came in the back door through the kitchen. I thought the fighting would start straight away, but I heard him go upstairs and switch on the television in their bedroom. Satellite reception wasn't always great at the

cottage, but we had DVD players for when it wasn't. My mom came in a few minutes later and sat opposite me at the coffee table.

"Are you green or blue?" she said.

"Yellow tonight."

"Then I'll be red."

After our first game she went to the kitchen and brought back Cokes and a bowl of potato chips. She pushed one of the glasses toward me.

"I'm green this time," she said. "Gotta change my luck."

"Sure, mom, like that's gonna help."

We took turns picking cards and moving our nubbins while the television played above us, sounding louder than it had earlier. I could tell my mother was trying to ignore it.

"You know we're heading back to New York tomorrow, right?" she said,

"Yeah." I moved my nubbin forward six spaces.

"I'm thinking of selling the cottage, Muffin." My mother picked a card from the stack.

I stopped and stared at her. "You can't. You can't sell it..." I couldn't believe she could even consider it. I was drawn to the summer lake house the way a salmon is drawn to the river of its birth. Every good memory I have in my life, and they are few, are connected to this place, the source of my greatest joy, my greatest hope. Maybe because it was remote and I never had to face many people. Interaction with others was not expected here. Trying to fit in wasn't necessary. Being a girl and not looking like one didn't matter on this island. Here... I was normal, no standard to measure against, the only place I've ever known true peace.

"You just can't, Mother!"

"Kercy, I didn't expect you to react like this..."

I splashed my hand across the board, sending the nubbins and cards flying through the air. I pulled myself up into my wheelchair and hurried to my bedroom, locking the door behind me. I couldn't stop crying. What hurt me most was the realization that my mother

had no understanding of who I was, what was important to me. How could she not? I expected that kind of disconnect from my father, and even accepted it, but not from her, not my mother. Never had I felt so alone.

After crawling up onto my bed, I hugged my pillow to my chest and rolled myself into a ball. My sunburn was starting to hurt again and my joints ached, especially my knees and elbows. How could I live without this place? How could I make it through the winter in the city knowing I would not be spending my summer here?

I guess I cried myself to sleep because when I woke, my room was dark. The blankets were pulled up around me and I was wearing my nightgown. My mother always respected the lock on my door, even though she had a key. She must have known I had fallen asleep and came in, undressed me, covered me, and turned off the light. I was about to roll over and go back to sleep when I heard the floor creaking above me. Someone was awake in my parents' bedroom. It sounded like my mom walking across the floor. The television was still playing, but when it switched off, I heard murmuring.

The muffled conversation soon escalated into a full-blown argument. Certain words stood out: "How could you...Kercy...You left her...She needs to be more...She's not a baby...You coddle her...She's just a child...No she isn't...Wheelchair...She was sunburned...She's always something...She almost drowned...What else is new?...Fuck you!...Fuck you!...You bitch!"

The shouting soon mushroomed into a barrage of swearing and screaming and slamming and noises I had no images for. I tried to bury my head beneath the pillow and pictured them standing toe to toe, shouting into each other's mouths, their eyes aimed at one another like guns.

Then it ended.

Loud footfalls hurried down the steps.

"Carter! If you leave..." my mother shouted, "Just know we are heading back to New York in the morning whether you're here or not!" Then silence, followed by the slam of the back door. It was only

moments before I heard the Evinrude fire up, then speed away. Not long after that, I heard my mother upstairs crying.

She was alone. I was alone. And I didn't like thinking that my mother and I would be better off without my dad, that life was actually more peaceful when he wasn't around.

When I woke, it was still dark outside. The house was quiet. I slid to the edge of the bed and pulled myself into the wheelchair. Rolling to the window, I saw the boat was still gone, but it was so peaceful out, the water like a sheet of black marble. The moon was just a sliver of light, as if some secret portal to another world was just beginning to open in the night sky. How could my mother ever think about selling this magnificent place? I wondered how my dad felt about it. In reality, the property had belonged to my mother's grandfather and had been in her family for decades. My dad had never shown much emotion about the island or cottage, or much of anything. He was hard to read. And where did he go when he took off into the darkness? How could he find his way around without hitting a huge slab of glacial rock? They were everywhere, lying just beneath the surface, and at times looked eerie, enormous boulders just a few feet under the water, like gigantic manatees, and with the waves rolling above them, they almost appeared to be moving.

My eyes were getting sleepy so I went back to bed. I was about to turn over and go back to sleep when I noticed someone standing near the door.

"Mom?" I said, pushing myself up on my elbow. The figure was vague and unmoving. "Dad?"

I sat up to get a better look. "Mom? Is that you?" The figure didn't move. Is that just my dresser? I wondered. But before I could question whether or not I was hallucinating, two other figures stepped forward and stood next to the first one.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I scooted backward against the headboard.

The figures approached slowly until they stood at the foot of my bed. They wore some sort of suits, it seemed, with strange shaped

helmets or something. Two of the figures came to either side of my bed. They made no noise, said nothing. It was still hard to tell what they were wearing, but whatever it was it appeared to be wet. I looked over at the one to my left, the one between myself and the door, the one blocking my wheelchair. I wanted to scream for my mom, but I couldn't. Not because I was suddenly mute or anything, but because it felt like if I did, something very bad would happen, that my mother might run in to help and they'd kill her. The figure on my left moved my wheelchair away from the bed, then came closer and grabbed my wrist. Its forelimb looked like the mudpuppy appendage I hooked that afternoon on the dock, only larger. But the same scaly digits, the same weird, pearly iridescent kind of skin. Or maybe it was a suit. If only I could see its face, or its eyes, but they were hidden by some kind of shiny shield.

Just then the one on my right side wrapped its digits around my other wrist, not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough that I was unable to move. Its touch was cold, damp and slimy. It wore the same odd headgear, the same shimmering skin as the one on my left. So transfixed I was trying to see past the shield covering its face I hadn't noticed that the being at the foot of my bed was holding some kind of instrument.

I was petrified... literally. I couldn't move, as if some invisible net had been placed over me, stealing my strength, my ability to fight back, making it impossible to resist. I screamed but no sound came out, as if the entire room were packed in cotton. The creature at the foot of the bed raised its forelimbs and gripped the helmet with its glistening digits and began to wiggle the head covering back and forth on its shoulders. As it lifted the headgear off, a kind of fluid flooded out, soaking my legs and the bed. That's when I saw its face. Its eyes were almost like a puppy's eyes, big and sad and mysterious. Its skin shimmered like the others, slick, like a salamander.

When it moved the instrument closer to me, I noticed the creature's smell for the first time, like decaying vegetation and silt from the bottom of the lake. Not repulsive, exactly, but not completely

fragrant either, with a presence of ammonia that burned inside my nostrils. I could not tell if the creature had a mouth.

An unexpected tranquility washed over me. I should have been frightened when the being slowly parted my legs, but the experience felt unthreatening somehow, a strange familiarity. A moment later it seemed that the creature had inserted the instrument inside me but I felt nothing. I waited, staring at it, trying to understand what was happening. That's when I saw its mouth, far back beneath its chin, opening and closing like some faulty contraption, the being struggling now it seemed, as if gasping for air, making a horrible sound, like something dying. From deep within its gullet came a guttural mewling and I wondered why the other two creatures weren't helping it. At this point, the struggling creature had become so strained it seemed unable to move, opening its mouth wider, gulping feebly, losing its connection to the world. The other two made a crackling sound, like crinkling cellophane. The being under duress, seemingly fortified by the curious noise, perked up and was able to focus again, its mouth relaxing into a more natural rhythm, its attention back to the instrument, as if monitoring or measuring something. That's when I felt a slight pinch inside me below the base of my abdomen, not pain exactly, just a sharp tweak that lasted only a second. It was shortly after that the creature removed the instrument and began to inspect it.

By then, though, the creature was battling its own physiology again, trying desperately to study the symbols flashing on the handle, its attention failing. Time was running out on this creature. When it finally succumbed to its inability to function, the other two released my wrists. Just then, as if a valve suddenly opened inside me, my once suppressed fear and anxiety sluiced through every cell in my body, churning unbearably in my chest. The pressure exploded from me in a deafening scream, a huge screeching ball of terror that ripped into my ears, reverberated along the walls of my skull. Then, as if my scream had possessed sufficient force to cause real destruction, a fissure opened in the ceiling above my bed. Other ruptures quickly

snaked out, the sound of cracking, the world sagging, crumbling, chalky gray chunks of plaster raining down, falling to the floor in great plumes of smoke and dust, casting the room in a dim, ghostly light. The powdery air sunk into my lungs until I started coughing, choking.

The beings ignored my outburst as the room disintegrated around us. They were busy trying to revive the one who displayed all the signs of dying, its frail limbs reaching out, its body slowly folding to the floor. At any moment I expected my mother's bed would come crashing down from above me. The room was clogged with unbreathable air as the beings wrangled the dying one's helmet back on. By now it was hard to see, everything cloaked in a gauzy, filmy gloom. One of the creatures cradled the lifeless one in its arms and carried it from the bedroom, while the other paused at the foot of my bed to pick up the instrument, then stood upright, debris falling past its hidden eyes, staring at me, upset maybe, or agitated. I screamed again with every cell of my body...

“Wake up, Kersey! Wake up, Muffin!”

When my eyes popped open my mother was sitting on my bed, holding me. “It's okay, Muffin, you were having a nightmare.”

I surveyed the room, the doorway, the window. The ceiling was intact above me, the walls aligned to a durable and predictable universe. I could breathe without issue. It was morning. After a few seconds I heard birds chattering, a breeze blowing cool air across my face, the warm light coloring everything in my room. My senses crept back slowly. My nightgown was dry. I pinched some of the material between my finger and thumb and brought it to my nose. The smell of Downy. I reached beneath the blankets and felt my underwear, then put my fingers between my legs. I was soaking wet. I brought my hand up. Blood covered my fingertips.

“It wasn't a dream, Mom!” Tears spilled from my eyes. “It wasn't a dream. It was horrible!”

My mom tried to calm me but I couldn't stop crying, remem-

bering their smell, their touch, the peculiar instrument. My mother wiped my tears and when I looked at her face she was smiling.

“Muffin,” she said. “You finally got your period. That’s so wonderful, baby.”

My period? I had been waiting for this day for so long, and now it was ruined by that horrid dream.

My mother grabbed some clean underpants from my dresser and helped me to the bathroom. I sat in the shower while she changed the sheets on my bed. I spread my legs a bit and looked down at myself, at the floor of the shower stall where a few drops of blood hit, a thin red trail flowing to the drain. Why had it taken so long? Then I thought about the creatures from my dream, their glistening skin, their salamander hands, the unusual instrument, like nothing I had ever seen.

After lunch, I was finally able to stop thinking about them. It was then my mother told me my father had not come back yet.

“I don’t know where he is, Muffin.” She busied herself clearing the lunch plates. “But we need to get back to the city. I hope he hasn’t taken the car.”

She stated the scenario without anger and such clarity that I figured she must have an alternate plan for getting back to the city.

“How will we get home?” I was half hoping she would say we couldn’t and agree to stay up here all year. We could buy a snowmobile and explore the Soshone Islands area in winter. Drive across the frozen lake, feel the cold sting of the snow against our faces. We could stockpile food and burn fires in the fireplace and read and do my lessons in the evenings. It would be so amazing.

“We’ll rent a car in Elico,” she said, putting the mayonnaise in the fridge.

“You know what would be fun?”

She looked over at me. “Uh, let’s see... staying up here all winter and buying a snowmobile?”

“Yes! Yes!” I was so excited she was thinking the same as me. “How did you know?”

“Because every summer you say the same thing when it’s time to go back.”

“What do you think?”

“I think, first, we have to call Ben and see if he can come pick us up in his boat.”

My mother never asked me about the dream, and I was glad to let it drop—the palpable quality of it was fading and I didn’t want to give it new life.

It was another beautiful sunny day and it seemed a sin to leave the island. Ben arrived just after four o’clock that afternoon. My mother and I had our things packed and she would pay Ben and his staff to winterize the cottage once we were gone.

“Hey there, pretty girl,” Ben said, as he tied his skiff to the dock. “Did you have a fun summer?”

“I did! What’s it like up here in winter, Mr. Bouchard?”

“Winter? Well, it’s really kind of incredible. You know, quiet, and everything covered in snow. You and your folks thinking about coming back up after we get ice?”

“I’m working on it. Maybe you could help me.”

Ben laughed and started loading our suitcases into the skiff.

“What’s the biggest fish in Georgian Bay?” I asked Ben.

Ben pushed the bill of his weathered cap back on his head and squinted up at the sky. “Hmm, let’s see. Well, you’ve got your Atlantic salmon and your lake trout, they get really big. Forty, fifty pounds or so. And of course, your muskies... but, I guess the biggest would be your sturgeon.”

“Sturgeon?” I had never heard of that kind of fish. “How big do they get?”

“I’ve never caught one, you see, but I’ve seen them a hundred pounds and more and six feet long.”

Six feet long? That would be taller than my dad.

“They’re prehistoric,” Ben said.

“Prehistoric?” my mom said, coming to the boat, not knowing what we’d been talking about.

“Sturgeon!” I said. “Ben told me they’re over six feet long and a hundred pounds or more.”

My mom seemed to study on that a moment. “That’s right,” she said, looking at me. “But they can get a lot bigger. White sturgeon can grow twenty feet long and weigh up to 1500 pounds.”

I couldn’t even imagine it. Twenty feet long. That was as big as our skiff. And weigh fifteen hundred pounds? I wondered how much a horse weighed. I looked up to ask my mom but she had turned her attention to Ben. “Any news?” she asked him.

“No ma’am. None of the staff has seen him.” Ben spoke in a somber tone. “Your automobile’s still in the parking lot, though.”

My mom regarded Ben, then glanced back at me before sending her gaze out to the water.

“Liam took the boat out after you called me but he didn’t have any luck,” Ben told my mother. “Possible Carter drove over to Kurry Sound?”

My mom shrugged and shook her head. She chewed her lower lip, looking back toward the cottage. I knew she was frustrated with the situation.

“I could call over there,” Ben added. “See if Carter might have stopped in for gas or a snack or something.”

“Carter would never go to Kurry Sound,” my mother said. “No taverns.”

Ben pulled his lips back and let his eyes fall to the water.

“Okay, so I guess we’re going back without him,” my mom finally said.

“Mom! We’re not waiting for dad?” I was surprised by how willing she was to leave him behind. “How will he get home?”

“He can rent a car.” She reached out to take my hands. “Come on, Muffin. Let’s get you in the boat.”

After I was in and seated, my mom handed me a life jacket.

“Do I have to wear this?” I said.

“Are you kidding! Put it on!”

Ben folded my wheelchair and placed it toward the front of the

boat, then used bungee cords to secure it. I buckled my life vest when my mom sat down next to me and gave me the look. She put her arm around my shoulders and hugged me.

As Ben pulled from the dock, I watched the cottage shrink away until it disappeared behind another island. Something sank in my belly. Over eight months I'd have to wait to come back. I tried to steer my attention away from my disappointment, toward Ben, and his boat, which seemed a lot faster than ours. He stood behind the center console, one hand on the throttle, the other on the steering wheel. I don't know how his cap stayed on his head; I guess the windshield was doing its job.

He cut around one island, then veered in close to another before shooting out toward open water. His mind must contain a map of every rock, every submerged hazard and underwater point in the Soshone Islands area. He didn't even have to slow down through Bell Letter Bay. That was the official name, but Ben called it Boat Eater Bay, on account of all the massive rocks just beneath the surface. My dad always had to idle through, which was why, most of the time, he just took the long way around Bell Island.

When we came out of Boat Eater Bay, Ben went west to an area I had never seen before. We drove around islands with no homes, natural places with incredible pitch pines and red cedars. The area was breathtaking and I was just about to say something to my mom when Ben cut the boat hard and headed for a distant island. When we reached it, he drove right past, toward an object drifting in open water. I had no idea how he even spied it.

As we idled closer it became obvious the boat was ours. Ben pulled up beside it and tied a quick knot onto one of the boat cleats. It was empty except for several crushed beer cans lying on the floor. Ben climbed into the empty skiff and looked around. He glanced back at my mother. She just stared at the boat, unaware she was squeezing me harder. She took her eyes to Ben and for a moment it seemed they were trying to communicate telepathically.

When my mother made no move to get up and drive our boat back to the harbor, Ben finally said, "We'll tow it back..."

"Thanks, Ben," she said.

Ben fixed a line to the bow eye of the skiff, then idled his rig forward until the rope between the two boats tightened, jerking his boat momentarily, our empty boat swinging around and coming in behind his. The rope was maybe twenty-five feet long. Ben eased the throttle forward until both vessels were moving smoothly across the lake.

It took much longer to get back than normal as Ben had to run half throttle the entire way. One of his employees came out to meet us at the dock, grabbing our skiff as it drifted in behind Ben's.

"Put it in an empty slip for now, Gladys," he told the woman who looked to be in her thirties. When she drove off in our boat, Ben told us she was his daughter.

"Her and her boy, Jacob, fell on some hard times in Toronto," Ben said. "Hope they can work things out up here. She's been a big help to me. The boy's still having a rough go here, new school and all."

My mom and I climbed from the boat and I thought I might see my dad waiting for us by the car. Ben grabbed our suitcases and loaded them into a large wheelbarrow that a young man rolled out from behind the office. Ben instructed him to take the bags to the red SUV in the parking lot. My mom handed him the keys and he rolled our things up the plank.

"Thanks, Liam," Ben said.

"I'll be back for the rest," Liam told my mother.

"Sure. Thanks," she said.

When my mom finished with Ben in the office, we went to the car. Liam was bringing the last of our stuff.

"Need anything else?" he said.

"Thank you... for everything," my mother said, pressing some bills into Liam's palm. "Ben told me you went out looking for my husband this morning."

Liam gave her a sad smile and hung his head. He seemed to be struggling for some words to say, but nothing came.

THREE

When she got in the car and started the engine, she must have heard me snuffle. “What’s going on?”

“He’s never coming back, is he?”

She drew a deep breath and placed both palms on the steering wheel. She turned her head toward me. “I don’t know.” Her finger gently ushered a tear from my cheek. “Here... let me help you with your seatbelt.”

We drove in silence, the radio playing. I was asleep until the bright lights of the U.S. border woke me. The lines were short and it didn’t take long to get through. I wiped drool from my mouth and stretched.

“I have to pee,” I said.

“Yeah, me too.”

We passed over the border and stopped for gas and restrooms at the first station we came to. Back on the highway, I turned the knob looking for a new radio station. I was still thinking about my dad, about the last thing he’d said to me; *It’s important that you be good at something, even if it’s just fishing.* I thought about the mudpuppy appendage I caught, and the horrible dream with the creatures, how

their hands had looked like the appendage dangling from my hook. The images crowded out all my thoughts and I couldn't push them away. Weary from the long drive home, I reached over to find a new station on the radio, something loud and fast. Something to chase the horrible monsters from my head.

"I can't listen to that for the next several hours, Kercy," my mom said. "Find something else or I will."

I fumbled with the radio knob, the creatures standing around my bed. The smell of decay in my nostrils, the ammonia searing into my brain. The fluid pouring from its helmet. The creepy crinkling noise. My fettered wrists. Why couldn't I scream? I turned up the volume.

"Kercy, I'm not kidding," she said, shooting me looks. "Find something good or turn the damn thing off. I'm getting a headache here."

I punched the knob with my finger and the music ended. The tires on the highway beat a rhythmic noise into the car that fed my thoughts.

"Do human kinds of creatures live beneath the water up at the cottage?" I said, staring out the windshield at the highway, the yellow lines blinking past like glowing arrows racing toward the car. I wasn't sure why I believed they lived underwater; maybe because they looked slimy and wet.

"What!" my mother said a bit shocked, her eyes glinting unnaturally in the dark interior. "What are you talking about?"

"Creatures... kind of scary and weird looking?"

"No, of course not. Why?"

After a few excuses and lies about why I was curious, I finally told her my dream. It felt odd relating the details, because I could never really understand what they were doing, so it was hard to explain. But she had always been open with me about sex and everything else, even about her strained relationship with my dad, some of the problems they faced, how their love had faded over the years. After all, I had no friends, I was homeschooled, and really had no interaction with others; where would I get information about life and sex and relationships other than from her?

When I finished, she said nothing, then pulled into the next rest area we came to and stopped the car. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?” she said, turning the engine off.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Do you want pop... or chips or anything? They have vending machines.”

“A Coke sounds good? And maybe some Doritos.”

She dug through her purse and found some cash. “I’ll be right back.”

When she returned with my snacks, she wore the oddest expression, like someone who had witnessed a horrible traffic accident.

I popped the tab on my Coke and offered her a drink. She shook her head and I wondered why she hadn’t started the car yet. She stared out the front window, but not at anything in particular. Her eyes were fixed, yet unfocused. She reached over absently and took the chips from my hands and opened the bag for me, as if she’d heard me fumbling with the package.

“Mom? Are we gonna go?”

She nodded staring out the windshield, making no attempt to leave. Cold leached into the car. I asked her to turn the heater on. After wrestling the keys from her purse, she turned the ignition and switched the heater on, adjusting the fan to high, the rush of it drowning out the roar of the semi-trucks on the highway. After a few minutes the car was so hot I turned the fan to low and dialed back the heat.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Yeah, sure.” She put the car in reverse and backed out of the spot without checking the rearview mirror. A driver behind her slammed on his brakes, blasting his horn. The loud trumpeting seemed to shake her from her trance. She waved at the driver as if to say sorry, then put the car in gear and guided the SUV back onto the highway.

She didn’t say much the rest of the drive back to New York, mostly just asking me if I needed to pee, or if it was too warm or cold in the car. When we got back to our brownstone in Manhattan, she

helped me get my suitcase to my room and told me to brush my teeth and get ready for bed. When I finished, she came in to tell me good-night. She sat on the edge of my bed for a moment, caressing my scalp.

“Scoot over,” she said, then slid under the covers beside me. She pulled me to her bosom, then pressed her lips to the back of my head. I felt so safe when she held me, even though I sensed her sadness. It outweighed my own.

“Muffin. I love you so much. I won’t let anything bad happen to you...”

Summer floated through my thoughts with the hollowness of an echo; the past week, everything that transpired. The image of our empty skiff drifting aimlessly—abandoned in an endless loop of water and sky.

“Is dad dead?” I asked.

I felt a tear run down the back of my head. “Mom, are you okay?” She tightened her embrace, her lips still pressed to my naked scalp.

“Muffin, we are going to work harder on getting you out of that wheelchair.” Her words were soft, yet freighted with determination. Another drop ran down the back of my scalp and I pictured my bedroom filling with her tears, the bed slowly rising, floating like a raft, the walls crumbling away until we were drifting toward a big yellow moon.

“Muffin...” my mother said, her voice rife with sorrow. “I’m sorry. And I’m so sorry about your dream.”

About my dream? How could she feel responsible for that? I was uncomfortable with her desperation, like she owed me something she had failed to give me, or was going to disappoint me in a way that would be devastating for us both.

It turned out to be the latter.

And it was devastating.

From that night forward my mother and I would never return to the lake cottage together. A month or so after my dad went missing, she took a part-time research position at Rutgers University in the

Department of Marine and Coastal Sciences. For several summers after landing her new position, she made numerous excuses for not returning to Ontario; the research team was going to require her attention all summer... she had to write reports and get them published... they needed further research into the effects of decades of garbage dumping into the Atlantic Ocean...

“Can’t you work on them at the cottage?” I said.

“No Internet, Muffin. I need it for my research.”

My summers were miserable and hot and I longed for the pristine blue waters of Soshone Islands. Then it got worse. My mother ended my homeschooling and enrolled me in a private high school where I would be at least three years older than any other student in my class and woefully underdeveloped physically and emotionally. Then finally, as if my life weren’t already intolerable, she delivered the crushing blow.

“I sold it, Kersey,” she said, holding my hands in her lap.

“Sold what?”

“The cottage.”

“And you’re just telling me now!” I jerked my hands away. “How could you! How could you sell the lake house!”

She held my teary gaze, and although I could see the hurt in her eyes over having to disappoint me this way, I didn’t care. It felt like someone had reached inside me and ripped out everything that mattered, every piece and fragment that held my sorry life together in this fucking wheelchair, in this stinking fucking city.

I wanted to scream my hatred, cry my devastation. I wanted to swear, protest, break something, kill something... her resolve maddening, solid, immovable. She would endure my wrath without defensiveness or argument, without an utterance or attempt to placate my outrage, lovingly absorb everything I could hurl at her, everything I could dish out. And when I finished, she would hold me to her chest and let my tears wash over her, wait for my misery to pass, wait for some sense of peace to fill my frail body, wait for calm to restore me.

“I love you, Muffin,” she said, after I had wailed and shook a good

long bit in her arms. After a few more minutes, she turned to me, her eyes discolored with worry.

“I want you to promise me something, Kerby,” she said solemnly.

I looked up at her, wiping slobber from the corner of my mouth.

“Promise me you’ll never go back to the cottage... ever...” she said.

“Even after I’m dead, Kerby... don’t ever go back.”

FOUR

It's been twelve years since my father vanished from our skiff in Ontario. Thinking about it now, I realize it must have been very difficult for my mother to have sold that place all those years ago. I didn't know her reasons for selling it. Maybe the memory of my father's sudden disappearance had been too hard on her. Or maybe it was something else, like worry over me drowning again; maybe she was scared of losing me to the lake. I would realize many years after her death, that something happened to her at the lake house which had forever changed the orbit of her life... and mine.

When my mother died a year ago, I inherited her entire estate. Learning how much money I now had, I immediately started chasing my dream of purchasing the cottage back, ignoring my promise to her about never returning. Even though my life had changed tremendously since those days, and New York City wasn't quite as repulsive to me as it once was, I still ached to be back on the water. It took a bit of wrangling but three months ago I purchased the lake house from the couple who bought it from my mother, as well as a new twenty-foot skiff.

It was every bit the way I remembered it. The owners had redeco-

orated, new paint, a few additions here and there, but my mother was everywhere; the kitchen window overlooking the lake, the entry hall closet, the back door leading down to the dock from the kitchen, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the living room. I pictured the lounge chair where I nestled in her lap while she read to me, the floor where we sat at the coffee table and played games, the walls hung with paintings she'd collected from traveling the world. I missed her so much.

"Here, Kercy, I'll take the tray," Gerald said, leaning over the kitchen counter to kiss my neck.

"No, you go on down to the dock. I'll be along in a minute. I just want to slice the cheese. Take that flashlight."

He smiled and kissed my lips.

"Here, take these with you," I said. "The stars are amazing tonight."

He grabbed the two beer bottles and the flashlight and walked from the kitchen. We'd been going out for only a few months and my doctoral work was taking a huge hit since we'd met. But I didn't care—all I wanted to do was spend every moment with him. Gerald was the only man, or boy, I had ever been with, sexually or any other way. Relationships were new to me, but so far, it was wonderful.

The air was crisp and clear when I walked from the back door of the cottage. I could hardly believe I now owned my most favorite place in the world. When I reached Gerald, I set the tray of food down and sat next to him. I was about to tell him we might see the Aurora Borealis when I noticed his distress.

"What's wrong?" I said.

It seemed to take a moment for him to wrangle his thoughts. "Something was out in the water. Something huge." He pointed to some vague spot in the seamless night. A moment later waves lapped at the shoreline, the wake rocking my 20-foot skiff moored to the dock.

"A boat must have gone by," I said. "It's like that all summer long,

the waves crashing against the shore, the boat rocking. Not so much at night this time of year, but people still—”

“No, Kersey. I would have seen a boat. Or at least heard it. And whatever it was didn’t go by... it just came up, and went back down.”

I tried to smile, unsettled by his grave tone. I got up and sat in his lap and put my lips to his. It was probably a boat too far from shore to hear, impossible to see in the absolute blackness once the sun was gone. Even so, it was a bit odd for September, especially at night. Not many people came up this late unless it was to winterize their cottage and pull their yachts from the water. The weather was fickle, sometimes turning frigid overnight, and most people were done with the islands by early September.

He took his attention back to the water. “What could possibly be large enough in this ecosystem to cause that kind of disturbance just by surfacing?” Gerald said, not so much to me, but to his own professorial mind. Gerald was a geologist with an emphasis in Earth Sciences at NYU. That’s where we met originally, in his class. I was taking it as part of my doctoral work in Anthropology. My interest focused on how a changing Earth affected evolution in a technological age.

The waves subsided just as he finished his sentence.

“Lots of huge fish prowl these waters,” I said, knowing that no fish—not even the shy bottom-hugging sturgeon—would cause such an event, but I didn’t want to keep badgering Gerald about it being a boat. “Maybe a moose.”

He looked over at me. “Moose don’t swim underwater, Kersey.” Now he looked disturbed, not so much at me but maybe over the dwindling possibilities which could explain such an anomaly. For the past few months all we’d done was laugh, have sex, and hang out with Netflix, or play games. Nothing had gotten serious before, except for our conversations about climate change and its effects on society. We even discussed writing a book together some day. But our conversations, no matter how grave, always devolved into sex or cuddling.

Gerald and I had driven up to the lake two days earlier, and had

been having so much fun, taking boat rides, making love, cooking together, but he was heading back to New York in the morning. I planned to stay for the next couple of weeks and try to get caught up on my doctoral work. But I hated the turn our long weekend was taking.

“Hey, it’s getting chilly,” I said, making up an excuse to go back inside. I rarely ever got cold. “Let’s take our snacks and beer to the house, light some candles and take a hot bath together.”

He looked over at me, then back at the water. “Yeah, it probably was a boat.”

Gerald was in the kitchen melting cheese for a fondue while I was upstairs running our bath. Standing next to the tub, watching bubbles form as the water filled, I found myself in a full-blown life review, from birth to now, how far I’ve come from the day I was born. I remember everything about my birth, including the seven and half months leading up to it. When my mother was happy, a feeling of joy spread throughout her womb, informing every microbe of my small organism swimming inside her. When she caressed her swollen belly and softly sang to me, every ounce of me flushed with love and warmth. When she was scared, my world constricted and became troubling and cold. In the seventh month I was overcome with dread. My time inside her was coming to an end, I could sense it. It was too soon. When the contractions started, I heard my father’s murmurings, hurried and frightened. Anxiety coursed through me, both my own and my parents’. We were all new to this miracle. We were all evolving. My parents had expected another month or more to prepare. I had hoped for an eternity within my dark, watery home. I would not be able to breathe in my mother’s world—I knew that with certainty—and she would be lost to me forever. And when her final contraction forced me from her womb, my months of comfort came to an abrupt and jarring end.

The first words I heard upon entering the light world were, “Oh my God, what is it?” They were spoken by a nurse who was immediately dismissed from the delivery room by the attending physician

who raced to start my lungs. It would be my first CPR. My father was quiet, but my mother's voice, which I had grown to cherish and rely upon, was reassuring and gentle. "Breathe my sweet little Kerby, my little Muffin." The doctor handed my wretched little body to her, every cell in it struggling for life, not in concert, but against each other. She held me to her and pressed her lips to my chest and at that moment I filled my lungs with air for the first time in my life. I felt like I would explode. Pain shot through my body, through limbs and parts I was not yet aware of. I wasn't so sure that this life everyone was fighting so hard to save was worth the excruciating torture I was subjected to.

My mother sobbed silently. My father left the delivery room. I was grotesque. Partly from being premature, but mostly from defects; syndactyly causing webbing between my fingers and toes, an abnormal fontanel which resulted in the top of my head being swollen and ruddy, my dismal, turbid complexion, and not a single hair anywhere on my body. My left ear was small, ill-formed and folded over the ear canal, closing it off. With my disfigured body still slick and wet with amniotic fluid, and my protruding coccyx bone like some prehensile creature, I had the appearance of a newt.

The first 28 months of my life were spent in the hospital. Surgery after surgery. Removing the webbing. Healing the gap at the top of my skull. Skin grafts. My mother holding me in the evenings, trying to calm my crying. Reconstruction. Stitches. Her tears and unwavering attempt to make me feel normal. Painful recoveries. Painful discoveries. Lung surgery. Open heart surgery. Bone grafts. Hundreds of thousands of dollars for experimental procedures. It was as if I had been designed for a different world.

"God, Kerby, you are so beautiful," Gerald said, coming up behind me. I was standing next to the tub, staring into the water, unaware he had come into the bathroom. He reached down and turned the water off, then wound his arms around my waist from behind, my naked body reflecting in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. He slid his palms up my ribs, tenderly

kissing my neck, his fingers dark against my pale skin. I looked at him in the reflection, then let my eyes fall down over my own body, at my full round breasts, beauty I would never have believed possible and would never take for granted. My legs were my biggest miracle. They were shapely and full of form now, even though the muscles beneath the skin still lacked the consistent strength for tennis, or waterskiing... luckily, I didn't care about any of that.

Pulling the clip from my hair, I watched my lush auburn curls cascade down the sides of my face, over my shoulders. My second greatest miracle. It was only a few years ago that my scalp was still a desert terrain, random tufts of growth. I was now forever done shaving my head and wearing hats.

The operations performed when I was a baby had helped, certainly; but still at twenty, my body had yet to mature. I was weak and horribly scrawny, unable to support my weight. Because of the wreckage of my legs, doctors told me I would never walk. And with my ill-formed uterus, like my mother's, they said it would be impossible for me to conceive.

Gerald took my left earlobe between his teeth and bit gently. I bent forward, gripping the edge of the tub and Gerald's fullness filled me. I loved having sex with him and I think I could have gone for weeks without ever leaving the bed. Of course, it was affecting my performance in the doctoral program. I should have cared, but I didn't. And every time we made love I secretly thanked my best friend Cindy; if not for her, I would never have known the sexual intimacy I enjoyed with Gerald.

When Gerald orgasmed, he melted into me, using my hips like handles, pressing his abdomen hard against my bottom. I had yet to orgasm ever and had no idea what it would be like, but if it was more pleasurable than this I figured the unbridled ecstasy might kill me.

Turning in his arms to face him, I couldn't help but notice the fatigue pulling at his features. "Wow... you look rough," I said, smiling, his eyes half-open, his face haggard in the candlelight. "Are you already too old for marathon sex?"

“I’m starting to wonder...”

Gerald was thirty-five, had been married for two years, no children, divorced by twenty-five, and even though I couldn’t bear to ask how many women he’d been with, I figured the number was large. He was a beautiful man, with dark green eyes and smooth skin the color of dark caramel. Gerald brought a mature and sensual pace to our sex while I treated it like a carnival ride, a tilt-a-whirl I had a whole roll of tickets for and wanted to use every one. Even so, Gerald didn’t seem to mind my insatiable desire.

We snacked on toasted pita wedges and cheese fondue in the tub. When Gerald finished his beer he told me to turn around. After soaping my back, he started to gently massage my shoulders. “Please don’t take this wrong, Kercy, but... I’m not sure I like this place,” he said.

“What?” I spun toward him, splashing suds and water onto the floor. “It’s incredible up here?”

Gerald suddenly seemed morose.

“I know Cindy’s coming up tomorrow,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s safe up here, just the two of you...”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were falling in love with me.” I was just trying to be clever and lighten the mood, but when the words left my lips I felt so stupid. I flushed with embarrassment. This was uncharted water for me. It was obvious I didn’t possess instincts to navigate a relationship. In so many ways I still felt very crippled. Gerald didn’t know he was the first man I had ever been with, and I had never wanted him to know for fear he might think I was freakish and unlovable.

“I love you, Kercy.”

For a moment I just sat twisted toward him. Had he said that? Without giving it too much thought, I spun around on my knees sloshing more water and suds over the edge of the tub. I knotted my arms around his neck and couldn’t stop kissing him. I had been in love with him since last semester, from the moment I walked into his classroom and saw him standing at his desk. But we barely spoke

then. When I ran into him during winter break at a cafe near the university, and he asked me out, I wanted to tell him how I felt, but Cindy told me to chill and take it slow. “Don’t wreck it before it starts,” Cindy had warned.

Was I about to spoil everything now by telling him?

“I love you so much,” I said, and just then remembered he was leaving in the morning. The thought emptied me and I wasn’t even sure I could be away from him. In Gerald I had found something I never believed possible and didn’t want it to stop for a second, much less two weeks. There was so much I wanted to know about him, so much I needed him to know about me. But I wanted to ask Cindy first. I was in over my head.

“You okay?” Gerald said.

“Yeah, yeah... I’m more than okay.”

How wreckable was this love? I wondered. How much could it withstand? Psychologists stress that children are not to blame for their parents’ break ups, yet I was pretty certain I had caused the demise of my own parents’ marriage. Even as a newborn, I had felt my father’s disgust over me, as if I had been proof of some inferior gene he never knew he possessed. And coming from a wealthy and successful family, my father wasn’t sure how to present me to relatives, so we avoided those kindred connections altogether, eventually moving from our home in Connecticut to New York City. Maybe my father figured that grotesque things had a better chance to thrive in the Big Apple, that the city was more accepting of anomalies... or maybe he secretly hoped that it would destroy those things that were unsalvageable.

While I was still in full-body hug, nearly ready to take him again in the tub, Gerald said, “Aren’t you afraid?”

I eased the shifter back on my libido for a moment. Was I supposed to be afraid of love? Is that what he was asking? “I guess a little. Are you?”

He seemed confused. Was that the wrong answer? Maybe I

wasn't supposed to be frightened of it. I wanted to ask for an adult timeout to go call Cindy.

"So, you are afraid to stay up here?" he finally said.

Realizing that love didn't have to be scary brought me a moment of relief. But the lake cottage wasn't scary either. It provided me the greatest peace I'd ever know—but it seemed that he was more comfortable thinking I was frightened of the place. That was odd to me. But there was so much I had yet to tell Gerald about myself—my inability to conceive, my many birth defects, my lack of experience with other men, my odd belief that I could breathe underwater—and I didn't want to start lying on top of all my non-disclosures. But I felt I had no choice.

"Well, sure. It's pretty remote, but I'll be fine. And Cindy will be here, so..." I said, knowing I had just told him another lie. Cindy had texted me and said she'd be a few days late, that she wouldn't make it up until Tuesday or Wednesday, but I couldn't tell Gerald, not now. He'd refuse to leave, and regardless of the fact that I would be thrilled if he didn't go, I knew I'd get no work done if he stayed.

"I don't want you to worry," I said. "I'm going to be just fine."

