

Girl in the Distance

In the morning, while it's still dark, Ruby's father comes into her room and starts throwing clothes into a duffel bag.

"We're going fishing," he says. "Here, drink this." He puts a cup of coffee to her lips. She's never been allowed coffee, and through her confusion, she's flattered.

After they're in the car, she remembers the birds.

"Dad. Wait. Lucky and Himmel." she says, gripping the armrest.

"Fuck'em," her father says, but does a U-turn in the wide street anyway.

She pours enough seed into their bowls for a few days.

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"I guess the Northerns don't like the spinner," Ruby's father says, reeling in the skinny silver lure.

His face is dark as if there's something flying over him and casting a shadow. They're in a small boat on a large lake in northern Minnesota. Ruby's father had wished for a homey cabin on a lake weeping with fish, but because the departure was sudden, they took what they could get and ended up at a sterile resort on a lake filled with jet-skiers, whose presence scares the fish down to the lowest depths.

On the lake Ruby thinks about the day before, and she doesn't remember smooth unedited scenes, but instead fast-motion snapshots: her father slamming the freezer door shut just after her mother says it; her mother's face: sad, stiff and defiant; the way her own sneakers look moving slowly up the carpeted stairs. There's the quick scraping sound of her mother's chair against the kitchen floor, and a little later the heavy clunking of a packed suitcase from a high closet to a bed. Then it's slow motion: her mother, visible through the screen door, on the porch smoking, as a blue car pulls up, stops in front of the house, and then leaves again, with her in it.

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The sky suddenly and briefly pours rain, but Ruby and her father stay on the lake anyway, without discussing it. When the rain hits the water the drops look backward on the surface, like something star-shaped pressing up from underneath. Ruby hears the deep whirring sound of another boat and looks up. The boat, bigger than theirs, made of dark sleek wood, cruises slowly past, a row of fish hanging along the side, triangular gray heads pointing toward the sky, slippery thin tails down into the water.

"Howdy," the two men in the boat shout toward Ruby and her father.

"Jesus," her father says under his breath. "Where are we, Texas?"

But he smiles at them and says, "Looks like you two found the right spot today."

The men laugh, wish good fishing luck, and give a little salute as they continue motoring away. Then Ruby and her father are alone on the lake. No jetskiers, no other boats, no fish. Ruby's already stopped throwing her line into the water, opting instead to paint her toenails with some red polish she swiped from her mother's dresser before they left. Her father, who right now is not one for silence, decides to tell a story.

"I kidnapped you when you were three years old," he says, reeling in his line.

"Excuse me?" Ruby says.

"Your mother told me she was in love with another man. I guess I should be used to this by now-but anyway, she said her love for this other man didn't preclude her love for me; she said she loved us both. This was around the time when things like that happened. When some people thought things like that were okay. I could handle it-barely-until she went away with him for the weekend." He throws his line out again.

Is it the same man now, Ruby wants to ask, but doesn't.

"This was ten years ago," her father says, "it isn't the same man as now."

"What happened?" Ruby asks.

"While she was away for the weekend with this scumbag, I took you to a cabin at a lake near here. The plan was to continue on, to Canada maybe. I guess I didn't really know, but I just thought she didn't deserve you anymore."

Ruby can't imagine her father acting this way. She feels oddly proud of him.

"But then I realized I was being juvenile. I couldn't do it. We got back an hour or so after your mother did; I just told her we'd been at the zoo. She never knew we'd been gone all weekend. She didn't know that I'd planned to keep you and never come back."

"I don't remember it at all," Ruby says, painting a toe. A part of her wishes her father had followed through with the plan.

"You were a little afraid," he says. "I've always felt bad about that."

A slight chirping slips out from the trees at the edge of the water; in no time the noise ascends into a steady chorus. Ruby knows that if her mother were here she'd be able to discern the specific kind of birds responsible. Ruby and her father listen anyway, intently, as if the sound could tell them something important, and then there's something else, an unnatural, mechanical whining-another boat. Ruby had almost forgotten that they were on a lake. It's a boat like theirs, metal and rented, with the name of the resort-Rick's-painted in red, stenciled letters across the front. The family inside, all four of them, look like they're made of plastic. Their faces have that sheen, their hair that impossible lack of movement. The youngest boy waves: sloppy, fingers spread apart, wrist loose. Ruby glares as they pass.

She and her father sit on the lake for hours, through rain, sun, and bizarre cloud formations of which Ruby tries to decide the shape: an old man with a beard, a large hunchy car from the '50s, a dog on a leash. The whole time her father's line doesn't move.

At dinner, in the enormous wood-panelled dining room Ruby is the only young person without two parents, her father the only man without a wife. With their matching red hair and freckles they are clearly related, but a fraction of a family. Their loss is politely overlooked, like a missing limb. They choose warm soft food, what Ruby will later call comfort food, for when you're hungover or heartbroken: mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, baked chicken.

"We will learn to fend for ourselves," her father says, a spoonful of orange macaroni heading toward his mouth.

Ruby pictures hunters and gatherers, foraging through overgrown jungles, machetes in hand, even though she knows her father just means laundry, paying bills, grocery shopping.

The blonde couple at the next table is eager and friendly, and Ruby's father is in the mood to lie. He tells them about a "prime fish spot" they supposedly found. He says the fish were practically jumping out of the water onto his line. He uses his hands as he talks, miming little fish mouths snapping at hooks.

"A snake handler," the woman says when Ruby's father tells the couple what he supposedly does for a living, "how interesting."

Ruby's father grabs his daughter's arm, holds it out as proof, "The little one even got bit once. You can still see the mark if you look close enough."

The couple leans in politely, looks at the pale underside of Ruby's unscarred arm. The woman smells like strawberries.

"It really hurt," Ruby says, nodding until her father lets go.

Ruby waits to see if the couple will ask her father about his wife, but they don't; perhaps some hybrid of anger and heartbreak is written on his face, the way she knows it is on hers.

After the couple leaves and it is just Ruby and her father again, he leans over to her.

"Listen," he says, "I've been trying to restrain myself from saying this, but the man your mother left us for is an idiot."

Ruby knows a few things about this man: she knows that he feeds his deaf bulldog scrambled eggs with spinach, and she knows from the time he ate dinner at their house the way he likes his steak: rare.

Ruby has forgotten that this resort is for vacations; right now the wooden room feels like a large grieving chamber. A few families stare at their food in silence. Women with bleached, puffy hair and tightly bound, heavily made-up faces allow men who drink too much to dominate conversations. And of course the room is smattered with horrible-looking wigs, which always makes Ruby think of illness.

During dessert Ruby spots the family she saw earlier on the lake. They eat chocolate cake and make toasts with tiny crystal glasses. They look happy, for the most part. The father's arm is slung sweetly over the mother's shoulder. She has a shiny, cheerful silver chain around her neck. The older boy, who Ruby thinks is about her age, focuses sullenly on the piece of cake in front of him, while the younger boy tells a story-as he speaks his hands move above his plate in awkward gestures. His parents gaze at him with loving smiles on their faces as if what he's telling them is pure genius. Ruby looks at them and thinks, Idiots.

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Ruby's mother had lied so much, her father said on the way to the lake, that by the end, it was her truthful voice that shook. The truth was full of halting pauses, a gravel road in her throat. Her lies were smooth, sparkling, precious, sliding out of her mouth like silk; and for some reason he swore he'd never understand, he held on to them greedily, hoarding them like rare or stolen gems.

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Ruby and her father share a room, with two double beds and a table between. She doesn't remember ever sleeping in the same room with him before, although she knows she must have. When Ruby wakes up in the middle of the night, her father has fallen asleep with the television on. In the buzzing blue light he looks like a little boy, his fingers still around the remote control. They don't uncurl easily.

The next morning, before 8:00 a.m. they're awakened by screams from the tennis court.

"I can't hit this ball worth beans!" yells a childish voice. Ruby looks out the window. It's the younger boy from the family. He wears yellow-rimmed, plastic sunglasses.

Ruby and her father are fishing again in less than an hour. She's learned over the past few months how to discern her father's moods, even from another room, and on the lake she watches her father go from sadness to anger as fast as a shark striking prey.

"I didn't want it to be like this," he says, gulping his coffee. "It wasn't supposed to turn out this way."

Ruby puts her foot over the side of the boat, her leg at an awkward angle, her toes dangling in the cold water. Her father threads a minnow onto a hook. He does it slowly, as if he's afraid to hurt the minnow, but anyone knows this slowness only prolongs the pain and hurts more. The thick hook, visible through the tender body, looks like a new vein. Ruby reaches her fingers into the water too, and the boat sways a little. She waits for her father to notice her, sprawled against one side of the boat, as if flung there by a large hand.

"There are right and wrong ways to leave," her father says, throwing his line into the water. "I mean live, there are right and wrong ways to live. You can't just go around falling in love with everybody."

When her father's line starts pulling, Ruby brings herself to a sitting position. He reels in, arching the rod slightly. She wants this fish to get away, and it seems her father does too-she can tell he's not trying his hardest.

"This feels like a lucky one," he says, meaning the fish.

He brings in the empty hook, and Ruby pictures the fish slithering off in relief, toward the waiting others. In the past, when her father has caught one, he's always thrown it back, while Ruby turns her head, not wanting to see him pulling metal from a cheek.

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The second night, in her sleep, Ruby is on the lake with the older boy. The boy is on one end of the boat and Ruby's on the other, steering the boat easily, in loopy circles and eights. The sky around them is a grainy midnight blue, the way it is only possible in photographs. The water below is translucent--so clear that she can see the nicks and points of fish scales as they glide smoothly beneath. Ruby tells the boy about her mother; she tells him her mother isn't on this trip because she's at home taking care of Ruby's new little brother. She tells him how beautiful her mother is. She says all of the kids on her block are a little in love with her. The boy is silent. Ruby stands and walks over to him. The boat swirls in easy circles without her. She runs her fingers slowly through the air over the boy's curly hair, pinches the tips of blonde. She picks up one of his hands, touches it to her cheek. She wants to press her mouth against his, breathe in the air of him, stretch his skin around her.

"Can we go?" he says, his grey eyes bored.

When Ruby figures out that he means leave, she picks up his body and sets him into the lake, as tenderly as her father puts minnows on hooks.

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Ruby's father talks to another couple over breakfast. He tells them about a resort they'd gone to years ago, the three of them. He mentions Ruby's mother, says her name: Esther, says she's a tiny thing and always moving. He says she's like a hummingbird, which is so obvious to Ruby that she's surprised she's never heard him say it before. He tells them that the first time he took Esther fishing was right here, Leech Lake, fourteen years ago. The couple nods and smiles-even laughs in the appropriate places, but they don't ask the question Ruby knows her father wants to hear: where is she?

Ruby wants them to ask too. She has answers prepared. Her mother died in a plane crash, or she's in the hospital with some kind of very painful disease, or maybe they just forgot to bring her because really, she means nothing to them.

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Three months ago, when Ruby turned thirteen, her mother sat her down on the porch swing for a talk. Before she started, Esther took a drag of her cigarette and looked off into the distance for a long time. Ruby looked too, but there was nothing.

"I want to tell you something," Esther finally said, "about your future. About growing up. I want you to know that destiny is bullshit; you can be any girl you choose. You just have to picture her."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Ruby hated it when her mother said weird things.

"I know," her mother said, patting Ruby's hand. "It might not make sense right now, but it will."

Since then, Ruby's been stealing parts from strangers and friends, assembling them like pieces from a doll: an ear from that one, a waist from her, the diagonal space between eyebrows and nose from another. Ruby knows her mother wasn't talking about looks, but it's the easiest place to start.

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By the third day, Ruby is bored with going out on the lake. Her father volunteers to go alone.

"Your mother hates fishing too," he says, before he leaves.

After he's gone, Ruby picks up the phone, dials their number at home, and lets the phone ring empty. She calls three times, always hanging up when the answering machine comes on. Ruby briefly considers yelling into the machine to scare, or at least annoy Lucky and Himmel, whose cage is within hearing distance. But she decides against it; none of this is their fault.

The woods behind the building Ruby and her father are staying in are crowded and green. When she comes upon the older brother from the lake, it seems both by accident and intention. He sits cross-legged in front of a mound of leaves, sticks, and a glass soda bottle, lighting matches.

Ruby touches him on his shoulder.

"Hey," he says quietly, as if his project could stir and wake up at any moment. He holds a lit match between his thumb and forefinger, watching as it burns down. When it's almost to his fingers he blows it out and lights another.

"Why are you doing that?" Ruby asks.

He ignores her.

"What're you doing?" Ruby asks after a minute. She wants him to look at her.

"Nothing," he says, leaning back, "You want a smoke?" He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and holds it out to her.

"Nah," she says. "Thanks, though."

Over the next hour, he smokes a lot. Ruby finds out that his name is Christopher, he's fourteen, in ninth grade at a private school in Philadelphia, and the mother is actually his stepmother.

"She's pretty," Ruby says.

"She's a phony bitch," he says.

"My mom's dead," Ruby says.

He doesn't tell her he's sorry, the way she expects, he just nods his head wisely. Some of the trees seem to be shedding their bark, it peels off in easy clumps when Ruby touches it. She presses her hands to her sides to keep from doing more damage.

"Would you like me to take my shirt off?" Ruby asks.

He crooks his neck, looking at her from a few angles, considering.

"No, that's okay," he says, as if she was offering him an extra ham sandwich at lunch.

* * *

When Ruby was seven years old she walked in on her parents taking a bath together. Vanilla-scented candles made the ledge of the nearby sink glow, but for some reason Ruby didn't notice. And when she walked in and turned on the light, her parents didn't have time to think and stop what they were doing, which was just Esther kissing the back of her husband's neck, her legs stretched along the sides of his body, while he soaped and massaged one of her feet. After a second they laughed, and Ruby laughed, and then she just left without saying anything.

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Back at the room, Ruby's father sets down the phone as she walks in.

"Your mother's not coming back," he says.

Ruby wonders how he knew how to reach her. She wants that phone number.

"According to your grandmother, your mother's not even going to Denver. They're going to California, which of course makes more sense. Now your mother can fulfill her ridiculous oceanic fantasies. But the good news is, I've decided that we can call off the hostage crisis. We can go home."

"It hasn't been that bad," Ruby says. "I haven't been a hostage here."

"Yeah, right. But thank for saying that."

Ruby goes to the bed and sits next to her father, who holds his head in his hands. She strokes his back awkwardly, up and down in clumsy pats, as if he's a brand-new pet and she's just figuring out the correct level of affection.

"Don't turn out like her, okay sweetie?" her father says.

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The next day, while her father settles the bill, Ruby slips over to the tennis courts where Christopher plays doubles with almost his family. His white tube socks are pulled up almost to his knees. He passes the game with a raise of his palm and walks over to Ruby.

"We're leaving," she says.

"What the heck!" the younger brother yells. "Who the heck is that?"

Christopher kisses his finger and touches it to Ruby's lips through the chain-link fence. His father and stepmother look amused. His father turns away from Christopher, heading toward the parking lot to meet her father, she feels him watching. Will she remember him? She straightens her posture and continues walking. It is almost noon; the sun hangs high and vivid above. With each step, she feels herself moving toward someone else now, toward who she wants to be. Who is this girl?

* * *

In the car, Ruby's father is quiet, leaving the radio on even through teenage pop songs Ruby knows he hates. Sloppily painted wooden signs along the sides of the road offer all kinds of produce: apples, pears, pumpkins, squash. The actual sellers are nowhere in sight. If you wanted something, Ruby wonders, who would you ask?

"Isn't it too early for squash?" she says, just to say something. She doesn't have a clue about squash.

"When we get home, we'll go through her things, and whatever you don't want goes to the Salvation Army," her father says, turning down the radio a little.

The telephone wires along the highway are peppered with clusters of black birds, about the size of Lucky and Himmel. As Ruby and her father drive home, occasionally the birds rise and settle in a new position on the wire. They don't go far, but Ruby can tell their movements carry some kind of inherent wisdom. They are not random.

Ruby's mother saw a rogue parakeet once, in Minneapolis. She told Ruby it must have flown out of a cage. It had perched on a telephone wire with a group of wild birds, trying to fit in. Only the lime green of its feathers gave it away. It was bittersweet, Ruby's mother told her, exhilarating to see it outside, so high and cageless, but sad, because when winter came, the former pet would meet certain demise.

As the distance between the car and the house shrinks, the sky becomes a purply bruise; the air is still and swelled and moist, like just before rain.

"Looks like a storm," Ruby's father says, and turns off the radio, as if he'd rather try to listen to the weather itself.

Dark edgeless shapes pass quickly overhead. Ruby cranes her neck and tries, as she did at the lake, to make sense of them-but she can't; they're moving too fast. Ruby waits for the inevitable thunder, but the only sound is the steady beat of tires on the road. And then something is happening in Ruby's peripheral vision. The birds. They're rising in a sudden flurry, and scattering off into a million directions: like something exploding. She can almost feel the panic in their little, round bodies. Ruby's father doesn't seem to notice. She wishes she could help, wonders what they know. But then in seconds they've organized themselves into a thin orderly line, heading off somewhere unknown, somewhere Ruby hopes is safer.

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