

*A sunset cruise that should have been*

I watched as the dark orange sun peaked at us over its protective jagged line of pine trees. I felt as if it were keeping an eye on us, watching over us in some way. The melody of two giggling voices singing along to Arcade Fire's *Rebellion*, came from the bow of the boat, where two Converse-wearing, half-hipster girls sat, belting out lyrics and taking in the fresh air of Deer Lake. I had been waiting for this moment for what felt like decades; my close friend Shea had finally found time between her cancer treatments at Sloan-Kettering in New York, and made it to the lake for a long weekend with our mutual friend, and my dream girl, Lauren.

We exchanged satisfied glances as my buddy Jordan proceeded to yank down the line and bring his toe-side back roll to revert behind the boat. He always made wakeboarding look easy, but that was his job; he was good at it. Lauren's clumsy brown eyes flickered back and forth as he shot side to side over the wakes; she was constantly alluring me, and she didn't even know it. I caught myself wishing we were on the boat alone, and turned towards the opposite shoreline.

Jordan went even bigger this pass, throwing a whirly-bird followed by a blind toe-side seven. He hit the wake hard, heel-side, and executed what should have been an 'ole,' but he crushed on the landing. The balmy orange sun was sinking even lower into the tree line and I didn't have long, but it was my turn to ride. I was no Jordan when it came to wakeboarding, so I snagged a skim board and slid into the quiet, glassy lake. The water felt soothing—probably around 80 degrees—it was always perfect around this time in July.

I gave Jordan a thumbs up, and he yanked me out of the water. I had to be careful on the skim board, it isn't like slaloming or wakeboarding, where I'd lean into my cuts; it was more a constant combination of shifting weight between my toes and heels. I stood up, cut out, and hit the wake heel-side, just barley clearing the opposite curl. The warm water sprayed me with each cut as I whipped back and forth across the wakes and out into the flats. I was satisfied with my run, but distracted, so I hooked the handle with my elbow and took a little breather.

Even with the sunlight fading, it was easy to make out Shea's curves and smiling face from behind the boat. Her crystal white teeth were blinding and her dark eyes pierced straight through me—like they always did. She could take one glance at me and know instantly what I was thinking. As exposed as I was to her, it felt satisfying to see this girl without any tubes, IV's, or nurses surrounding her. She was free of her illness, at last for the time being—but that's all that mattered right now, just these few moments.

The sun had descended by now and nothing but a tarnished sky of pink, purple, and orange remained amidst the swelling clouds. I came heel-side at the wake one last time, cutting as progressively as I could. I stiffened my knees, popped, and allowed my body to fall behind me. The board skidded across the water as I yanked down the line tension and pulled my superman-looking release back in, plunging into the now dark lake. Shea and Lauren laughed at me as Jordan brought the boat back around, sipping his spotted cow. "Did you forget you don't have any bindings you idiot!" they teased. I told them I obviously did it on purpose and they laughed even harder; clearly I didn't make it look very impressive. I was always the

subject of their sarcastic dry humor; regardless, for some reason I can't put my finger on, I enjoyed them picking on me.

I stood on the back platform drying off as the boat spewed out the remaining water from the ballast tanks, causing little ripples in an otherwise dead calm lake. July weekends here were usually crowded, but we were the only boat on the water, and that's the way we liked it. Steely Dan's raspy lyrics eased through the polk audio speakers as we turned the bow towards home, slowing making our way across the lake. Jordan lit a joint and the girls relocated to the observers' seat as the temperature started to drop at what seemed like ten degrees a minute.

I exhaled, wishing that the four of us could stay out here forever. I was with the people I cared for most, on my favorite lake, doing what we enjoyed more than anything. It was relaxing journey across a jaded promise land of serenity and peacefulness. Beer-battered brats and whiskey sours awaited us at home, but of course, we were in no rush. We were on lake time. Jordan shoved the throttle down and we sliced through the wave-less chain of lakes towards home. The smell of Lauren's shampoo was infectious as her thick wavy hair danced in the wind. I wasn't sure whether or not I was imagining it, but her brown curls seemed to keep pace with each pluck of Win Butler's base guitarist. We passed through the red and green channel markers completely ignoring the snow-no-wake buoys; they were more guidelines to us than laws.

After making our way through a few more lakes, we'd finally reached home and Jordan cautiously eased the boat into the dock. Lauren grabbed her and Shea's towels as Jordan and I tied up. We headed up to the house, where dinner and

families were waiting. I mixed Jordan and I each a drink, and we took our seats out on the porch under a diamond dominated night sky. We bowed our heads and thanked the Lord, whoever he was, for allowing us all to be together on such a gorgeous evening. Mid-prayer I glanced up, meeting eyes with Lauren, but I quickly looked back down. "Shit," I thought. I didn't think she'd catch me, but who am I kidding, she knows me all too well. Now she was probably just waiting for me to try and steal another gaze. We met eyes again, this time a tad longer, and she looked back down—but not before I caught the innocent little grin she let spread across her freckled face. I smiled, and closed my eyes as I once again bowed my head.

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Looking back on that evening now, I recall the soft flicker of tiki-torches illuminating everyone's faces as my bloodshot eyes moved from left to right across the oval shaped table. A sickly feeling instantly overtook me as I finally realized whose warm, familiar face was missing. I remember looking back again and again, convinced that she had been with us all afternoon. She had to have been; how could I have memories of things that never happened? Regardless, Shea wasn't there. She was never there.

My eyes began to drown as Julie, Jordan's mom, concluded the prayer: "*and last but not least, please reassure Lauren and Brian that although Shea never made it to the lake before she passed away, she's here enjoying it with us now, and forever.*"