

## To the lake again

*March 2005*

Janey was in the car and the car was in the lake again. She looked out at the cathedral columns of weed and the parallels of brown light and thought of nothing – no regrets, no concerns, no consideration. She was adrift beneath the surface of thinking and she had about two minutes of air – plenty of time. Plenty.

Water bubbled up through the carpet and poured in through demister vents, soaking everything.

Looking up through the windscreen, she saw the world above as a dinner plate, a porthole into a lighter brighter world.

And then the frowning face of her mother appeared, looking down at her as if she were down a well. 'I knew you'd end up this way. You were the kind of daughter that was always going to end up in a lake.' Her mother's mouth was pressed into a line of disappointment and unsurprise.

Janey began, 'How can you say that? I've always...well, I've tried.' But there was something about distance and all the water between them that stopped her. Maybe her mother was simply stating a fact, the sureness of a mother's foreknowledge.

Water bloomed around her feet and she smiled kicking about, splashing like a child out in a storm.

She looked up again. Her mother was still there but then her father, heavy and run down as always, took his wife by the shoulders and turned her away without even a glance for his favourite daughter.

Her sister Fel peered down for a moment grinned and tossed a pebble into the lens, causing it to wobble and flex and bend and tremble. Then she too was gone.

Janey raised a hand in half-hearted farewell but the view was already empty but for the long blue autumn sky fringed with the yellow of the turning trees at the lake's edge.

What is this, thought Janey, a parade of my life? I'm not drowning here – well, not yet anyway, although there was a twinge as the waters rose over her knees and spilled exuberantly into her lap. She turned to the passenger seat, where Hugh was frantically tugging at the seatbelt, a wild look in his eyes. Calmly she reached across and pressed his release.

Now he started shoving the car door, leaning into it with woofing noises and then he wound his window down and the lake poured in. 'C'mon,' he said.

'You go,' she said. 'You're crazy.' Janey knew it was just the fear in him talking. 'I'll be fine,' she said. 'Here.' She pressed the cassette into his hand. And then he was out and gone through the window, his stupid boat shoes coming adrift, his red socks vanishing upwards the last she saw of him. How funny that it was *that* Lucinda Williams tape. Janey didn't much like country music but the lorn voice and pained lyrics spoke to the empty dry blown places in her heart. She used to play it driving along, volume up to 10, windows sealed singing away about highways and yearning and gasoline and starting fires and by the time she'd get to Hugh's place she'd be feeling just fine.

How ironic. It was that cassette, or the reaching for it, that put her in the lake the first time. They'd been driving and careless, Hugh had tossed it into the

back. Later, according to the police report, while she'd been scrabbling about looking for it her knee had knocked the shift into neutral and the car had rolled on into the lake. Simple as that.

And what was Hugh in the driver's seat doing all that time? He was ogling her breast through the side of her top, that's what. Not that she minded but while he was busy perving and adjusting himself and talking earnestly about the future and their life together after he got his law degree they were rolling over the kerb, gone past the edge, heading lakewards.

That was then and this is now.

After Hugh had gone, the lake pushed in and lifted her up in her seat so that her face was up against the roof with the last few litres of air. Her limbs, her legs and arms and her hair were already free, moving in the run of the water. She was ready; now all she had to do was wait. He would come, she was certain. There, out in the lake the diver was already circling, watching out of range.

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The first time he was there all of a sudden, up against the glass. She remembers how he'd raised her up out of the car – that was exactly it, raised her up like salvation – and they'd travelled together beneath the waters. She remembers being still almost lifeless yet conscious and rising towards the daylight and, despite her body's air-hunger, she had hoped that they might never reach the surface, just keep travelling on. Then she was out of the water with the day glistening all about her. And the diver was speaking to her earnestly while she perched on the concrete lip shivering.

He was quite insistent: 'People think that something magical happens at the moment at which they step off the bridge. They think they'll be transported to some better place on angels' wings or that it's not really happening to them and they can just sit back and watch, like it's TV. That may be,' he said fiercely. 'But I haven't seen any of it. Just perforated eardrums and smashed-up bones and stalky eyes popped out of their sockets.' He talked quickly. At her, not for her to listen but to stop her drifting off into the seductive warmth of hypothermia.

Obediently, she nodded, watching him lying in the water half-in and half-out, his torso propped up on his elbows, his long legs still in the water as sleek and competent as a seal.

What are you? She had wanted to ask but stopped. What kind of question is that?

But it was this question that she thought about later – later when they winched her up in an aluminium stretcher bouncing off the cliff face – later in the ambulance wrapped like a chook in thermawrap – later in the ward while the interns asked their questions and measured her biometrics – pulse, temperature, vital signs, albumen in her urine and said calming things like 'You've had an adventure and 'You're all right now' as if she'd gone deaf or had become an imbecile.

Dr Lineweaver, the psychiatrist said, 'We're going to keep you in for observation.' And there unsaid amongst all the waving weeds of his words was the pleading: 'Please be OK, won't you? You've got no reason now – *to want to drown yourself* – have you?'

Janey had no time for any of this nonsense and lay in the bed looking at the ceiling thinking about the diver. She couldn't get past the contradiction between his lecture and the fact that he was really magic in three dimensions.

Later she slept –

– and woke to find the light gone and her sister perched on the end of her bed smoking.

'You've really done it,' Fel said, rolling her eyes. 'Mum's started freezing.'

'Jeez,' said Janey sitting up and reaching for a drag.

They both knew what that meant. Their mother started cooking and freezing meals – casseroles, soups, suet puddings – in times of direst emergency. They could count the times: when their father left the first time, when her brother was diagnosed and for two weeks before every Christmas. It was her way of coping.

'It was an accident,' Janey started. 'Stupid Hugh. He's not – ?'

'You lucked out there. He's home and is going on and on about the end of his legal career and what a fruit biscuit you are.' Janey thought that this was a bit of an overreaction but then Fel grinned.

'You haven't seen the papers, have you? She held up today's edition. 'Here, let me.' She read: 'A man and woman had a lucky escape from a late-model Gemini that rolled into the lake yesterday. Now get this,' her sister pronounced, 'The woman was found by the side of the lake *in a state of undress* and was taken to St Alban's hospital. The man has refused to comment.'

'Undress? I lost my shoes.' Janey grabbed the paper from her sister and reread the article. 'Shit.'

Fel chuckled and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling.

This all happened on a Monday; they let her out on a Tuesday with a box of Normacin (which she tossed) and her sodden handbag; she hung around home on Wednesday, rang work and told them she had a certificate until next week and went to a disaster movie on Thursday; Friday she borrowed Mum's car and drove to Hugh's place. 'C'mon, Hugh, let's go for a drive. It'll be OK.'

'It won't be OK. Do you know what this means? If I have a police record, then I can't practise. This fucks our plans, you know. I thought we agreed.'

Janey thought about their plans. For the five years they'd been going out, off and on Hugh had been talking about this stuff: what they'd do together, how he couldn't possibly commit to anything until he'd finished his studies, Yes, it was a long time but the sacrifice would be worth it. To the reborn Janey, this all seemed so flat, so two- dimensional. She pictured them living in a cartoon city: a smiling Hugh in a smart navy jacket holding hands with a dowdy cartoon Janey (how did this happen?). She closed her eyes and noticed how cartoon Janey had been drawn with a downcast mouth and was wearing socks and a lumpy green cardigan. In the next panel, Janey was turning away and the sun had come out and doves were circling above. But now cartoon Hugh was downcast.

'Is that it?' said the real Hugh. 'Things change? There's nothing else? An explanation?'

She knew it was just the anger in him talking. And there really wasn't anything else. The rest was just detail and she wasn't about to explain to him what had happened down at the lake. Instead she told him a story as she drove:

There's a tradition on the Greek islands, once a year at the Festival of the Epiphany where they celebrate St John's baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The local priest brings the crucifix down from the church, strides out onto the pier and throws the gold cross far out into the harbour. And all the young men of the town rush to dive in after it. Whoever retrieves the cross wins a blessing for a whole year. He's remembered in prayers every Sunday and the old women light candles for him.

It's an act of faith – imagine the cross turning in slow motion as it leaves the priest's hand. See on the priest's face for just a moment a look of doubt – what if it was lost? What if the divers couldn't find it down there among the oyster beds and the cloaking weed? And if the waters were murky or the tides too strong or the divers distracted where would they be? What is a church without a crucifix? Would the congregation sit there on future Sundays all staring at the outline on the wall where it had once hung? What kind of bad luck would certainly befall them?

Imagine the golden cross lying there on the seabed flickering in the refracted sunlight, a beacon to the worthy or the lucky. And through the depths the diver comes.

Hugh shook his head. 'Where do you get this stuff from anyway?' 'Here we are,' Janey said as they pulled up. The sun was brilliant on the water and they

looked across at the far shore, the marble buildings all in a row like headstones in a lawn. Then Janey turned to him. His eyes widened. 'You're not?' She grinned, dropped the brake and the car rolled forward. 'Here we go.'

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Now with the pressure equalised, Janey opened the car door and stepped out onto the floor of the lake. The mud sucked at her feet and held her shoes fast. A cloud of silt bloomed around her.

He's not here. He's not coming. She pulled free and took a step then another. Shoeless, she felt sharp shells and grit on the soles of her feet. Well, if the diver wasn't coming, she'd better find the way herself. She looked about and then started moving slowly through the lacustrine world, a place of mud and weed and drowned cars and bug-eyed corpses just beneath our world. Already she was moving with more confidence now, walking towards the brightness over there – walking and becoming as if these were the same thing.

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