

As Good as Buried

Friends told friends—said Keep it quiet.

Into the quarry, usually at night, went those things people didn't want even the garbage man to see.

Irene Stuart bought a bureau at an estate sale and switched the little orange price tag with an old lamp's tag so the man running the cash box gave it to her for \$75 less than it was worth. It sat in her entry way until, after four nights of fitful sleep, she had her sons load it into the back of their pickup truck and drive it to the edge of the quarry where, in the dark, it fell the forty feet and splashed and they were gone before the sound quit echoing off the quarry walls.

A week later, Irene's youngest son Nick hit their neighbor's dog. He wasn't supposed to have the truck out, had Miranda in the cab and they stunk like beer and latex, and before he knew where he was going the headlights were shining into the night over the edge of the quarry. Kirby in Nick's arms, hips and ribs loose. Then, his little splash on the water.

And so on. For years, parents whispering to kids, sisters to brothers, cousins, telling them where to put shame. There was a baseball mitt with the pocket cut out. A pregnancy test still in the box, still wrapped in plastic.

Miranda's mother, after hearing about Nick and the dog, dropped her husband's deer rifle into the water because after eighteen years of no venison, she was sure it wasn't deer he was after when he went north.

Over wine, she told her friend Beth and Beth that night drove out to the quarry and threw her daughter's little pink bike into the water followed by the training wheels her husband had just removed. In her pockets, she squeezed the nuts and bolts that had held them on. In the morning, she said My sweet, someone stole your bike. She hoped that this daughter would stay home.

Memories too. To those who were left behind, the quarry was a place the missing could always be. Strata of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. Because no one had ever touched the bottom, it was assumed that the quarry was so deep there was no practical way to search it.

There were dozens and dozens of old beer bottles and cans. Condom wrappers. Condoms. The rusted frame of a .38 with one spent shell. An old dinner table with YOU PROMISED scratched into the top. Rusty hinges, nails and pried open locks. Years burying years, stacking up and up. A reef of secrets rising somewhere near the surface.

We didn't know how near until Alice Wheeler jumped. It was her birthday, almost her birthday, she told her friend Sarah, her birthday in three hours and twelve minutes. Fifteen.

Fifteen and she'd never done anything wrong by her mother. Had hovered around her since her father left. Go out, her mother said, thinking of the romance novel a coworker had leant her. Of a hot bath and steam. Go where Sarah takes you. Please have fun.

Alice at the edge of the quarry with Sarah, her best friend. A girl who wouldn't laugh at Alice's purple one-piece even though everyone else had a two. Had a two in a color that didn't remind Sarah of something her mother would wear.

I've done it, Sarah said. Everyone else has done it. Alice looked up. Clouds scraping sky, sparrows flitting between pine tree branches. Then down at clear water, the black shadow of the drop cool looking and close, and then the surface reflecting back the sky so that, she thought, it would be a kind of flying.

Sarah would tell the others at school on Monday, Alice thought. Maybe they would want her to come back here late at night, have a drag off one of the Marlboros that Jeannie Mesko was always stealing from her step-mom's purse, always passing around. Talk of boys holding back the creeping dark. It wasn't such a long fall to the surface.

Her last words were You just drop? Unless she said something after Sarah jumped. Sarah took a deep breath, pinched her nose and jumped and Alice must have wanted so badly to be right behind her because when Sarah's head cleared the surface, Alice was gone—a hiss of bubbles, ripples sliding in with Sarah's ripples already fading.

Sarah thought Alice had chickened out. Had walked back home to sit with her mother. Again. Again to hear the one about her dad at the carnival, puking behind the Tilt-A-Whirl that even Sarah was sick of hearing. Again and again. Sarah swam to the low spot, muttering about who wore a stupid one-piece anyway and she hadn't stopped by Alice's house on her way home. She'd gone up to her room to work on an essay about Abraham Lincoln for summer school that Alice was supposed to help her with.

When they found her, it was with her left leg wedged between a bookcase and a trunk full of old copies of *Midwestern Living* with most of the pictures cut out. It was a diver named Rick who went home and called his mother and asked her how to make an omelet just to hear her voice.

Below Alice's knee, bone speared through skin. Bloodless, by then. Rick saw her, close enough to the surface that the sun played in her blonde hair. Arms spread, right leg bent. She could have been dancing, caught in a twirl. A face like she'd just flunked a quiz.

Old broken filaments of fishing line swaying, trailing algae, hooked into the dressers and lamps, the pile of secrets fading down into the dark; a pyramid of jumbled angles. The surface three feet from her fingertips.

Nights, Rick began to imagine that he was back in the water, looking at Alice Wheeler's face. Stuck between fourteen and fifteen. Her purple suit. He imagined that he could see, somewhere below her, glinting in the dark, the set of his mother's house keys he'd thrown in the night she'd broken up his date with Lynn; the silver fob with the Lord's Prayer engraved in it that he'd bought her years ago. Catching the sun.

He was thirty-four and it was bad enough having to bring a woman back to a house where his mother was asleep. It was another coughing fit and damned if she couldn't time them to the moment before a touch, a kiss.

The night he'd decided to put her in the home. Had dropped the keys and they'd hardly splashed. The water had taken them so easily, parted and slipped shut as if it had been waiting. I don't know Mom, where did you put them last? And, It's just that you keep forgetting things; we have to be careful. Finally, What happens when it's the stove? Wondering if her keys had shifted the bookshelf or the trunk just that inch.