

# THE SUMMER SHE WAS UNDER WATER

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Black  
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Press

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**FRIDAY**

# 1.

“I think the car is on fire,” Eve says. Smoke tendrils curl out from under the hood of Samantha Pinski’s Volkswagen Jetta.

“It’s just overheating,” Sam answers. They are at the precipice of the soft, winding dirt road that leads up to her family’s cabin on the hill. She flips on the heater and hot air from the engine pours into the interior like batter into a pan. “We’ll make it.”

Tree branches whip the sides of the car on the narrow path as the sun shines and recedes repeatedly through the leaves. Sam thinks how much it would suck if her car breaks down right here, right in the middle of the road, blocking it for everyone else coming up to their cabins on the hill by the lake on Fourth of July weekend or at least for her brother Steve, who’s coming up later, and the look on her father’s face as he tries to fix it because he thinks he can fix everything although he will probably make it worse. And it will all be her fault because in her rush to pick up Eve she forgot to check the antifreeze at the gas station. Eve rolls down her window and blots her forehead with a McDonald’s napkin as Sam holds her breath, trying not to inhale the fumes escaping from the hood. But then they are on level ground, and the familiar red-and-white wooden cabin appears through the windshield before it disappears behind a cloud of smoke.

“Jesus Christ,” Sam hears her father say somewhere down the rutted, grassy hill, where the ground slopes to meet the creek below. She gets out with an old towel and touches the hood with it, searching for the latch. “Didja put antifreeze in it like I told you?”

She feels her father beside her, sweaty, emphysemic, grabbing the towel from her and wrenching up the hood in one motion. Smoke thins, and Karl Pinski materializes like a genie. He is hard and heavy across the front, like someone has stuffed a lead pillow under his shirt. The only thing that is soft is the lumpy flesh of his face, and his thick dark hair, combed back with Brylcreem, like a mobster’s. He chews at the filter of his cigarette as it burns close to his lips and leans over to pull off the antifreeze cap.

“I’ll look at it after lunch when it’s cooled down,” he decides, dragging on his cigarette, as the car hisses. “Driving a car like that—what the shit’s wrong with you?”

Almost twenty years have passed since Sam has been at the family cabin and the creek it overlooks. Eve has come, too, for the holiday weekend, but when she leaves Sam figures she will stay a few more days, maybe a week. Maybe the whole summer. She’s not teaching the mini-semester. She’s now single. Her plans feel pretty open, in a crossroads kind of way.

Sam looks down the hill at the old pontoon boat, which still floats like a soggy bread slice on the narrow waterway that joins the lake, along with the motorboat, always broken. Various inflatable tubes that somehow her parents had managed to fill with their shallow lung capacity litter the dock. Sam’s mother and Eve meet in the middle of the hill, Eve twirling her sunglasses casually between her fingers, her combat boots and fatigue jacket out of place next to Sam’s mother’s sandals and matching shirt and Capri pants, Eve nodding at the older woman’s monologue. Despite their differing views on fashion, Sam imagines Eve would be a good daughter for her mother, and vice versa. She watches as her mother touches Eve’s arm lightly, drawing her in, sharing a throaty laugh.

“Sam, do you need any help?” Eve looks over her shoulder. Sam pretends not to hear her. Already she has been excluded, reduced to bystander in her own family. She reaches deep into the trunk, fiddling with a duffel bag, until she feels Eve standing next to her.

“You okay?” She feels Eve’s hand on her back.

“Yes.” She smiles, slamming the lid. “I see you’ve met Mom.”

“Yeah, she’s met Mom.” Sam’s mother has lumbered up the fifteen feet of pine cones and gravel and grass. The hard, blue-collar features of her face are hidden behind her big sunglasses, her straw hat. She is holding huge bottles of suntan lotion and bug spray. “You better put some of these on, Eve. You look like you haven’t seen outside for the last twenty years.”

They join Sam’s father down on the dock, where an old, weather-beaten picnic table has been dragged. He sits anchored at one end, his own legs slathered with suntan lotion that rests in clumps on his leg hairs, his feet small in a pair of rubber sport sandals that Sam’s mother likely picked up at Kmart before the trip, along with a faux-Bahamas shirt and khaki drawstring pants. He inhales, looking at Eve, nodding his head.

“Eve, this is Karl, Sam’s father,” Sam’s mother says, like he is retarded, and everyone is quiet in acknowledgment.

“I think I got the boat figured out,” he says, addressing no one in particular.

“Oh yeah?” Sam’s mother sits across from him, tapping out a cigarette. “What was wrong with it?”

Sam’s parents are probably the last people on earth who smoke. However, they aren’t normal smokers. Sam’s father awakes in the middle of the night to have a cigarette; her mother has smoked while on the patch. There is nothing more visceral, more affected, more rewarding to her parents, she thinks, than sharing their lives with a good cigarette. It was a miracle every summer that they didn’t burn down the cabin with their smoldering cigarettes that lived like fireflies in every available ashtray.

“Duddin’ matter what was wrong with it.” He shrugs. “You wouldn’t know what it was, anyhow.”

“Do you need any more help with it?” Sam remains standing while Eve joins the smokers, pulling her own pack of Marlboros from her purse.

“What, you know something about boats now, too?”

“Jesus, Karl,” her mother butts in. “Can’t people offer you a hand, even if they don’t know nothing?”

“Why would that be helping?” He scrunches his face up at Sam’s mother, who shakes her head.

“Dad.” Sam touches Eve’s shoulder. “Eve is my friend from Baltimore.”

“So do you teach at Hopkins, too, Eve?” Sam’s mother asks.

“No. I don’t teach at Hopkins. I just work in a coffee shop.”

“Oh.” Sam’s mother looks confused. “Do you know Michael?”

“Nope. Not personally.”

“Sam was supposed to get married to him, you know,” Sam’s father says. He is sanding some rust off a piece from, presumably, the boat. “I guess I shouldn’t be complaining. It’s not like we coulda given her a big fancy wedding or nothing.”

“You could have had it here.” Eve looks at Sam and smiles. “It certainly is beautiful.”

“That’s an idea. Right on the dock,” Sam’s mother agrees.

“What a logistical nightmare that would be,” Sam snorts. “Can you imagine trying to get everyone up that road? Where would they park? Where would they stay?”

“In little rafts and donuts—they could sleep on the lake under the moonlight,” Eve explains. “Boy, for a writer, you sure have little imagination.”

“It’s a moot point.” Sam turns toward the house. “Since I broke up with him. I’m getting a beer.”

“Can you bring the cooler down, Sam?” her mother instructs. “Put that pitcher of ice tea in it for me and your father, and whatever you girls want.”

Sam drags their bags through the screened porch and into the cabin. The cabin, two hours north of the Pinski home in Baltimore, has been in the family for generations, built pipe by pipe, before the road was laid, lumber and shingles and nails floated downstream on rafts in the Conowingo Creek during the days her grandfather and father and uncles had off from the steel mill. The cabin is a place Sam knows almost as well as herself; it has evolved, addition by addition, in the same way her limbs have grown awkwardly outward. A case for beauty could be made, for each, Sam considers, but only if one considered very hard.

Sam winds through the living room and two bedrooms, built one after another along the way, like a makeshift parade dragon—before reaching the last room in the back. Inside it a sliding door opens onto a deck that snakes along the front of the cabin, facing the vein of water. The room has been used for entertaining over the years—there is a padded bar from the seventies in the corner, along with her brother Steve’s elaborate stereo system that he lorded over her as a teenager in the late eighties. Various sofas from the Pinski home have found retirement here after their springs broke or their cushions started to reek or their patterns became hopelessly out of style. One of the sofas has a stowaway bed in it, and it is here where Sam has slept for most of her adulthood. The crocheted owl still hangs on the wall, as well as a Bananarama poster that she had put up in her teens. On the bar remain a few ancient, dusty, mid-priced bourbons and vodkas, along with a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps, its contents solidified. She can smell citronella but can’t find its source.

Sam stops in the adjoining room to leave Eve’s bags, the room she and her older brother Steve shared growing up. There are two beds, one of them in the loft, but no window. The fights over who got to sleep in the loft, even though it was the hottest and most suffocating place in the house, were legendary and started even before the Pinskis drove up to the cabin. Both Steve and Sam would corner their mother privately in the kitchen or in an aisle at the grocery store, pleading their case for the right to stay in the loft. Eventually their mother made up a calendar for the whole summer, breaking down the days that Sam or Steve would have it, but that did not stop them from bartering and trading—a McDonald’s

coupon for a free sundae from a classmate's birthday party, a handful of Bazooka Joe gum carefully stockpiled for such an occasion, and sometimes just the more traditional forms of negotiation—hair pulling and stomach punching.

Sam remembers the nights in the loft, dangling a thin rope, to which was tied an army figure or a recovered toy from the southern creek bed, down to the lower bed where Steve waited sprawled on top of the sheets. Sometimes he would be a bear, and his fist would devour the army figure or algae-spotted Barbie head while he growled, or he would be a tornado, grabbing the end of the rope and swinging the figure wildly into space. Sam would concentrate on the spinning object until it made her dizzy and she'd have to pull the rope up, lie in bed still for a few moments. Sometimes Steve would be quiet, listening to their parents fighting, their father breaking an oar on the kitchen counter, heaving the toaster oven against the wall. Steve's fists would ball, whiten, while the rope swung limply between them. Sam would climb down into his bed, mash herself into the corner wall with the spider webs and moldy wood, and those nights nobody slept in the loft.

Her mother has been assuring Sam for weeks that Steve is making the trip down from New Jersey, although Sam is not sure what is so different this time than, say, any Christmas or Easter or birthday for which he has never bothered. If he is coming, she is not sure what she will say to him. She does not even know whether she wants to see him. The past she thought she'd shed always seemed to slide down her neck and into the small of her back, her body tight, when she wasn't expecting it. Like when she was happy. Or when she was jogging or eating walnuts. Or when Michael proposed to her.

She knows one thing for certain: this time, Steve can have the fucking loft.

As she packs the old red cooler full of beer and iced tea she imagines him charming the women at the skunky New Jersey roadhouses where he ambles through "Nebraska" and "Born to Run" in Thunder Road, his Bruce Springsteen cover band, his voice rumbling and mucousy, his forearms shiny and sinewy and licked with sweat. Tramps like us, baby we were born to run. She thinks about his stupid Christmas and birthday cards, late, irregular, recycled. Why did he have to think about her at all? And her mother, always talking like Steve was five minutes away, down the street, ready to shovel the walk when it snowed. A perfect son. They wished. Over the years, Sam's family has wished many things about Steve.

They ranged from small wishes, like steady employment and calling more often, to larger ones such as healthy relationships with women and staying out of trouble with the law and kicking various narcotic habits he'd picked up here and there like change on the sidewalk.

But when her mother mentioned Steve might be visiting the cabin this summer, Sam sent him her book, the one she wrote about him. She sent him her words and she wondered whether he would read them, understand them, what he would say about them. It was possible that he would not show up, stupid bastard, or would be in jail, or off on "tour," or strung-out somewhere between Brooklyn and Trenton. But she had begun the last chapter, and it was up to him to decide how it ended.