

ONE

One August morning in 1956, Whit Whitman sat down to a breakfast of soft-boiled eggs and toast with his grandmother Trudy. They dined outdoors on the wide front porch of Lakeside Cottage. Whit's father had an early golf game that morning. His mother and sister had gone for a sail on the lake. Although he was only eight at the time, Whit would always remember what he and his grandmother talked about during their breakfast. First, Trudy had described her displeasure at finding the family cat on her bed when she awoke. She had thought it was her sweater and was alarmed when it sprang from her hands. Then they had discussed the weather.

"Isn't it cold for August?" Trudy asked.

"Not really," said Whit. He wanted to go sailing and was bitter about being left behind to look after his grandmother.

"Won't you and your father want to plant bulbs this afternoon? Or is it too soon for bulbs? Didn't we just plant the tomatoes?"

Whit answered in a dull monotone. It was a bit soon for the bulbs. The tomatoes had been planted in May.

"Oh, didn't we have the loveliest tomatoes last night?" Trudy asked.

"Yes, Gran."

“Weren’t they perfectly ripe, dear?”

“Yes, they were.”

“The roses, have they been cut back?”

“I don’t know, Gran,” Whit said, squinting out at the lake in search of his mother’s boat. (Here’s the point in the story where I always see the two white birches, gone now, against a flat blue sky, the lake spread all around them like a pool of shimmering silver.)

“It’s too soon to cut them back. They’re still blooming,” Trudy had scolded, as if it had been Whit who suggested cutting the roses back in the first place.

“Would you like to walk down to the garden, Gran?” Whit asked.

“No, dear, thank you,” Trudy said, “But, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll just go upstairs and die now.”

“Gran, not die,” Whit corrected her. “You mean, *lie*, not die.”

But Trudy had meant die. She walked up the back stairs to her bedroom. She used the servants’ staircase behind the kitchen because she found the carpeted front stairs harder to manage. Then she folded back the quilt on her bed, pressed herself against the cool sheets, and died.

“It was her time. She was eighty-nine years old,” Whit would explain years later, his eyes sparkling and sometimes streaming with tears in the telling. (Whit was unable to laugh properly without crying.) “Still, it was the way she did it—so polite. Well, she was a Farmington girl, after all. One doesn’t just die.”

Whit was my stepfather. My sister, Sally, and I grew up in his house, and we often begged him to repeat this story to us when we were little girls, usually interrupting him with demands for details.

“Did she really try to wear the cat?”

“Was her body stiff when you found it?”

“Did it smell?”

Trudy Whitman wasn’t the first to die at Lakeside. Her mother-in-law, Ruth, died here twenty years prior. According to family legend, Ruth had spent much of her ninety-third summer in bed because she had some kind of heart problem. One night, a rabid raccoon ate its

way through the window screen and leaped upon her bed, snarling and spitting blood-tinged foam everywhere. Old Ruth Whitman beat it to death with her book. Ruth didn't contract rabies from the animal, but instead, enjoyed several weeks of renewed vigor, dressing each evening for dinner with very little help from the maid. One night, after tasting her dessert, she said, "That German cook has finally stopped using too much sugar in the rhubarb. It's quite good." Then she astonished her family by appearing to forgo utensils and eat her pie from the plate like a dog. In fact, her heart had stopped. She had died, and that's just where her face had come to rest, there in the German cook's rhubarb pie.

Whit loved telling family stories, their general theme being that Whitmans are gritty and combative, they live long and then die when they're good and ready—not a moment sooner. So it must have come as a shock to him to learn that he had cancer at age sixty-five, though it was anybody's guess how he reacted, as he kept the diagnosis to himself until just a few months before he died. Then, he told only our mother, Joan, who neglected to inform any of us kids until after he was gone.

"It's what Whit wanted," she had said at the time. It seems that he didn't think he was going to die as soon as he did. Perhaps he thought the rules of cell division, malignancies, and whatnot, like so many other boring rules, simply didn't apply to him. Maybe he thought he could opt out of the whole cancer scheme that his doctor had laid out before him. In any case, he did die, less than a year after his diagnosis, leaving Lakeside in a sort of limbo.

Lakeside Cottage is still owned by the Whitman estate. It was left to my stepbrothers, Perry and Spin Whitman, but Whit requested that Joan be allowed to live here for the remainder of her life. It's all part of a family trust. Sally and I aren't part of the trust, being Maynards and not Whitmans.

Sally lives in Manhattan now, but I live at Lakeside with Joan. I'm twenty-nine. I know—I'm a little old to live in my mother's house. I like it here, though, and not just because it's free, as my stepbrother

Perry is always hinting. I work at home. I have a blog, and I'm also thinking of writing a book about Laurel Atwood, or maybe I'll turn it into more of a memoir.

It's hard to understand what attracted Spin to Laurel, and vice versa, without understanding the Whitmans. You need the whole picture. I stupidly told Joan about the book idea the other day, and now she keeps insisting that she doesn't want me to write about her. "Go ahead, tell the story, just keep me out of it," she'll say, and then she'll remind me of the time she ran the Boston Marathon, or the time she won the regional women's amateur open tennis championship.

"Whit's marriage was over when we got together. People forget that," she'll announce suddenly, as if I had asked. "In any event, if you're going to write about me at all, I think it'll give a more rounded perspective if you include the fact that I went to Princeton."

"Okay, well, I'm really focusing on Whit now," I told her the other day after she offered another writing prompt involving her triumphant goal in a field hockey match sometime in the 1970s.

"Whit? What on earth has Whit got to do with it? He was already dead when Spin met Laurel."

I don't leave our property in the day much anymore, but when I do, I stay close to home. I often walk in the woods. I like wooded paths. I like the dark. I can go anywhere in the dark, I just don't go to strange outdoor places during the day very often. Fields, roads, parking lots, open places like that make me anxious. Vast indoor areas like shopping centers are tricky because of all the people, but at least there you can grab a wall or a railing or something. In open outdoor places, there's nothing you can hold on to, nothing to anchor you to the earth's surface. I was always a homebody, a "house mouse," as Whit used to say. I think it's just part of my nature, but over time it's gone from a quirk to something more.

Three summers ago, not long after Whit died, I stood on the

town beach of this lake one afternoon and was suddenly undone by its vast, yawning strangeness. I think that's when I first got this sense of needing to grab hold of something. The ground would have been fine. If I could have crawled back to my bicycle from the lake's edge, I would have. But there were people at the beach, watching me with all their eyes. I walked away slowly, looking down, each footstep placed deliberately, heel-toe, heel-toe, so as not to scuttle sidelong before the entire group like a crab with no shell. I walked back to the cool shade of the tree where my bike was resting. Once I caught my breath, I pedaled home.

Another thing—I don't drive, but I've always been able to ride my bike on roads that I wouldn't dream of walking along, especially during the day. Of course, at night, it's different. I can ride anywhere at night, as long as the weather's not too cold.

Joan says I need to learn to adapt. I think she's wrong. I think my problem is that I'm too adaptable. Have you ever seen a large cat fold itself into a tiny shoe box? Or the way a bat wraps its vast wings around its torso until it's no bigger than a prune? A grown rat can squeeze through a hole the size of a dime. I'm like that. I'm like a contortionist that way. I must have softer bones than most people. I can deflate myself into the tiniest recesses and be quite comfortable there.

"It's a beautiful day, Charlotte," Joan said this morning, "Why don't you go outdoors and enjoy the nice weather?"

I don't have to go out to know that it's a beautiful day. I don't have to walk on the grass to feel it cool and damp beneath my feet. We had a thunderstorm an hour ago, and the lake is almost black. In a moment, the light will shift and it'll be steely and blue. I don't need to go out to know that; I can see the weather from here. Now the evenings are getting warmer. I'll be able to walk down to the lake in the moonlight tonight. I'll watch my legs sawn off at the ankles, calves, knees, and finally the thighs as I wade into the dark water. When I'm cut off at the waist, I'll lie back and float like a spirit. I swim only at night now.

TWO

Not everybody has heard of Laurel Atwood—I have to keep reminding myself of that. Not everybody watches reality TV and reads tabloids. The funny thing is, when we first met Laurel, she acted as if she had never watched TV or read anything but books—important books, important literary *works*, as she liked to call them. And she didn't read magazines like everybody else. She read quarterlies. She was a writer. She had just gotten her MFA from USC and had received a six-figure advance for her first novel. Her agent had sent the publishers one chapter and an outline. That was all they needed.

Her accomplishments didn't sound so far-fetched when we first heard about them—the book deal, the training for the Olympic ski team, all before her twenty-seventh birthday. Of course, we didn't learn about everything at once. Laurel had a way of unveiling herself little by little. I think she tries to give herself a more human scale that way. Spin was always like that, too, before he met Laurel, but his motives were the opposite of hers. He wouldn't tell people about his accomplishments because he wouldn't want people to envy him. Laurel does.

Kindness always came naturally to Spin. He got that trait from his father. Whit was actually a very kind man, but he could come off a

little gruff if you didn't know him. I'd known him since I was two years old. That's when he and my mother got together. I didn't really know what was going on between them at first. Apparently, no one did. They somehow managed to keep it a secret for over a year. But in the summer of 1988, just before he turned forty, Whit Whitman fell in love with our mother, Joan.

Connecticut had a major heat wave that summer; people still talk about it. The Fourth of July fireworks were canceled because of the fire risk. Some people had their wells run dry. Lawns were brown, streams evaporated, and local farmers watched their tomatoes roast on the vine, but Whit's memories of those days remained vivid, if not entirely accurate, and in every one of them, the grass surrounding Lakeside was greener and the gardens more alive with color than ever before.

Whit had no recollection of any dry spell that summer because he was always drenched. His clothes clung to his damp skin all day, and each night, he'd leave his wife, Marissa, alone in the house with her drink, her book, and her disdain, and he'd stride, nude and "savagely alive" (his actual words), out across his lawn to the lake. There he'd float on his back, sometimes for hours. He'd search the sky for the Dippers, Big and Little, for Polaris, Orion's Belt, and the other twinkling constellations that had fascinated him in his boyhood. Now they fascinated him once again. Whit said there were times that summer when he felt that the muscles in his chest weren't equipped to sustain his swelling heart. His every waking moment pulsed with thoughts of Joan.

It was a thorny situation. Whit was the first to admit that. Joan, though still quite young, had Sally and me, and wasn't divorced from our father yet. Whit was also married and had his son Perry, who was then about seven. The thought that two families were about to be dismantled was agonizing to Whit, but the thing that tortured him most wasn't his guilt, it was the humbling knowledge that midlife affairs like his were so common. His love for our mother was anything but common. I know this because he would sometimes shout

this information, spittily, at Sally and me—especially if he was into his gin. His love for Joan was the most extraordinary thing he had ever experienced. Suddenly, all was illuminated. He had lived his life thus far as a sort of affable, obedient pet—First to his mother and father, then to his wife. Whit had always done what *others* had wanted him to do, not what he wanted. College, law school, marrying his first serious girlfriend, joining his father-in-law's firm in Manhattan (he would count these off on his fingers for us, like crimes), it had all been expected of him, and he fiercely resented the expectations of others.

Whit had never been in love before. He saw that now. His marriage to socially striving Marissa was nothing more than a dull, ill-conceived alliance. It was a sham; there was no other word for it. It had been from day one. Within weeks of his first tryst with Joan, Whit knew that life was shorter and more exquisite than he had ever imagined, and what was left of it, damn it, he would spend with her.

The surprise of Marissa's pregnancy, almost a year into the affair, complicated things, but it didn't alter the course Whit had set for himself. For the duration of his wife's pregnancy, he stayed in their town house on the Upper East Side. Two months after Spin was born, he moved out for good. He moved up here to northwest Connecticut, to Lakeside Cottage, where his family had spent their summers for four generations. Once we moved in with our mother, Whit had the house winterized so we could live here full-time. Perry and Spin visited every other weekend, certain holidays, and one month of the summer.

This house is huge. It's old and drafty. In order to cut back on energy costs, Whit would close the heating ducts in the boys' rooms when they weren't here, and he'd often forgot to open them until after they arrived on wintry Friday nights. So there were the cold beds and, over time, another kind of chilliness that developed between Whit and his sons, especially Perry. Marissa had remarried and remarried well. Her new husband, Peter Sommers, was wealthy, like Whit. Probably not quite as wealthy, but he actually worked. Marissa and Peter held

a certain contempt for Whit. Perry picked up this early on, and eventually he absorbed it himself.

Richard “Whit” Whitman (or “Idle Rich,” as Marissa had taken to calling him) was a little eccentric. But he wasn’t really idle at all; he just stopped earning his own money after he met Joan. He had to leave his job at his former father-in-law’s firm, but instead of starting his own practice or joining another, he retired and lived on the interest of an enormous trust that had been left to him after the death of his parents in the 1960s. Whit wanted to devote the rest of his life to the pursuit of things that *really* interested him. He was really interested in American history. To be more specific, he was interested in the history of American bluegrass music.

To be most specific, Whit was interested in banjos.

You could call it an obsession—most people did. He played the banjo. He collected rare banjos. Eventually, he built banjos—beautiful five-string banjos that he carved by hand in a workshop he had set up in a shed behind the old boathouse. Until he became very sick, until those last few months, you could find him working in that shed almost every day except Sunday. Whit sold many of the banjos he made. He had a little mail-order business, and eventually enthusiasts from all over the United States sought his instruments. He was a bit of a legend in the banjo community, but, well, it was the banjo community. It barely existed in the Northeast. In the grand scheme of things, I guess, it barely existed at all.

The Whitman money is old family money, mostly steel money. Whit’s uncle Leander Whitman was the ambassador to Sweden during the Eisenhower administration. A John Singer Sargent portrait of Whit’s grandmother used to hang over our living room mantel. Perry took it after Whit died because (he said) we never lock our doors. We don’t lock the doors because we don’t have much crime here, and even if had, nobody would have known it was an important painting, because you could barely see the thing. On the mantel below it were always stacks of books, gloves, old dog collars, banjo strings, and guitar

picks. Whit hated throwing anything away. He hated new things. He always drove the most beat-up car in this town—a rusty old Volvo. He was very thrifty, and so was Spin, at least before he met Laurel.

Laurel, we learned from Spin, was also a member of an important American family. Her great-great-uncle was Ernest Hemingway. Laurel grew up in Idaho. That's where her family is from—Ketchum, Idaho, where Hemingway lived at the end of his life.

In fact, Idaho is where Spin first met Laurel. Spin taught science and music at Holden Academy, the boarding school here in Harwich, and it was during Christmas break of last year that he was skiing at Sun Valley. He and Laurel first met at a lodge at the top of the mountain. She was with some old friends of his from Dartmouth. I don't know how she knew the Dartmouth group; I don't know how Laurel manages to insinuate herself into everything, she just does. Apparently, the friends wanted to hang out in the lodge and have another beer. Laurel and Spin decided to get in a little more skiing before the lifts closed. Spin had just bought one of those helmet cams, and he turned it on for their first run together. I've watched this video so many times that I have almost every second of it memorized. I keep looking for clues. Sometimes I find them.

For example, the other day, I realized Spin says something right after the two-minute mark. I called Sally immediately. It was several hours before she called me back.

"Look at two-oh-four," I said.

"I can't," Sally said. "I'm at work."

"Write it down. Two minutes and four seconds. It's right after she comes flying out from behind the trees and almost collides with him. He says something."

"I'm not watching it anymore."

"I thought it was just a sort of grunt. For the longest time, I thought he was just grunting, but he says something. He says a word, I'm certain."

"Okay." Sally said. "Listen, Lottie, stop watching it."

"I can't."

“Yes, you can. It won’t change anything.”

“Also, at the beginning, she turns and flashes that smile at him. But it isn’t really him she’s smiling at. It’s the camera, up on top of his helmet.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sally said. She was smoking a cigarette, I could tell. She told me she had quit.

“He was always so cautious, that’s what gets me,” I said. “We used to make so much fun of him. I mean, I know he’s a great skier, but the way they were speeding through those trees. They were flying. He would never have done that without her, he was trying to keep up with her.”

“Okay, stop now.”

“Just call me after you look at it.”

“No.”

“Watch it when you get home. See if you can see what he says.”

“No.”

After we hung up, I watched it one more time.

It starts with just some shaky whiteness. Spin is messing around with the camera, fastening it to his helmet. Then the world swings into view as he lifts the helmet up onto his head. He’s near the ski lift. You can hear the whirring of the motors, the clanging of metal, all those muffled sounds in that rare air at the top of the snow-covered mountain. For a second or two, there’s a glimpse of the steep white slope below and the wooded valley beyond, but then he’s turned away from the slope and facing Laurel.

She’s bent over, brushing something off the top of one of her ski boots for the first twenty or thirty seconds, and then she whips her head up and smiles at the camera. She’s wearing goggles. All you can see is a silver helmet, the blue-tinted goggles, the long, wavy blond hair, and that perfect smile, and somehow you have it all. As many times as I’ve watched this, I’m never prepared for her beauty in that instant, when she faces Spin and we see her for the first time. It’s the moment when I feel I can see her most clearly, when I can finally see her for who she really is. But the strange thing is, you really can’t

see her face at all. What's most noticeable is the reflection of Spin in her goggle lenses. There he is, twice, smiling from each lens.

"I'll race you down," Laurel shouts.

"Okay, you start," Spin shouts back.

"Oh, you think I need a head start?"

"You might," he says.

And then she turns, stabs the snow with the tips of her ski poles, and she's gone.

She's fast, skipping along the tops of the moguls. It's a little hard to see here, because it's so bouncy, but she's wearing a bright yellow parka, and we never let her out of our sight, perched as we are on Spin's head. He's finally gaining on her when, suddenly, she cuts into the woods. He cuts in after her. This is the great part. This is the reason Spin sent us the video the same day that he took it. It makes your heart race. He's carving little lines into some deep, untouched powder, speeding down a steep, heavily wooded trail. It actually looks fake in parts. Sally noticed that when we first saw it. It looks animated, like a video game, the way the trees are whipping past.

First they're in among the evergreens and you can hear Spin laughing. He quietly curses once, when he snags a branch with his arm. He stays up, though. He's behind her, and then he's not; she cuts out of sight and he's slaloming his way around the trees. The evergreens are gone. The trees now become just trunks; they're in the deciduous trees now. If they had stopped, Spin would have been able to identify each tree for Laurel. He can tell a maple from an ash, just by the pattern of the bark. Even in the dead of winter, he knows one tree from another. He can closely estimate their ages; he probably would have if they had stopped. But they didn't stop. Spin must have regretted that gentleman's head start he'd granted her. We all laughed about that, later, when we watched the video together. He had underestimated her.

Suddenly, she flies out from behind some trees on the left of the screen and almost hits Spin. This is the 2:04 mark I was telling Sally about. He says a word, and then he's skiing very fast behind Laurel.

“She waited until we got to the bottom to tell me she was on the U.S. Olympic team,” Spin told us a few months later, when we all watched the video together.

“Short-listed,” Laurel corrected him. “I wasn’t on the team. I was short-listed. I tore my meniscus during the trials.”

So modest.

Spin definitely says something around the two-minute mark. I don’t know why I hadn’t noticed it before. I watched it. Then I watched it again.

“I’ll get you,” he says. Or maybe it’s “Look at you.”

It’s really something, seeing the world from Spin’s perspective. I think that’s why I keep watching it. You can hear his breath in that video. You can see the tips of his skis pointing left, right, left, right, then straight down the mountain.

Spin always made everything look easy. You should have seen him play tennis when he was a kid. You should have seen him play the guitar or the banjo. Spin made the varsity hockey team at Holden his freshman year, but he’d been skating here on the lake with us from the time he could walk. That’s how I like to think of him now—the way he was before he met Laurel. Out on the lake. Often alone. Practicing stick handling and shooting, his hockey stick snaking along the ice, flicking the puck this way and that. There’s a calmness that’s specific to a frozen place such as a lake, or a ski slope. The cold air traps sound. A skater’s edge on crusty ice sounds like the only thing on earth. I can still see him now, gliding backward, skates crossing one over the other so effortlessly. And that thin amber light you get here on the lake on winter afternoons. On weekend mornings, we always had pickup games in front of the house. The loud clacks of the hockey sticks, the triumphant cries, the angry objections and laughter, Whit’s roaring protests. We haven’t played hockey on the lake in years. Kids play at the other end of the lake now that we’re all grown-up. The ice freezes here first, but nobody skates on this side of the lake anymore.

When he was at Dartmouth, Spin wrote his thesis on the negative

effects of invasive species on New England lakes and ponds. He did much of his research here on Lake Marinac. He majored in environmental sciences, with a minor in musical theory. He was the only one of us who was truly gifted musically; the rest of us had to work at it, even Sally.

The afternoon of Whit's funeral service, after everybody had finally left our house but the family, Sally kept playing the same melody on her violin. It was Bach, or something grim like that. Over and over and over again. She and I were sitting on the porch swing as she played. I put my hand on the body of the violin for a moment. My intention was to get her to stop, but then I felt the long whine of the bow running through the instrument and into the tips of my fingers. The vibrations went all through me. I felt the pull of the bow across the strings and wished I had learned the violin or cello. We spent a good part of the afternoon like that. Sally weaving the bow up and down, me with my hand cupping the body of the violin. It was Spin who got us out of our funk, when he brought out one of Whit's banjos.

The banjo is a happy instrument. Even if you play along with a sad song, as Spin did that day, the rolls that accompany the chords do something. They add humor. Soon Spin had Sally on some other melody altogether. It was a Celtic-sounding thing. Some kind of reel, one of those fiddle and banjo songs you hear on Saint Patrick's Day. They went round and round with it and were becoming extremely amused with themselves. I walked down to the lake and dove into the cold water. I swam out to the float. I could hear their song from there.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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