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Imogene

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Imogene

God how my sister hated those mosquitoes. Imogene slapped her thigh, the muscle shuddering beneath her skin. I watched her thigh redden from her hand, the outline of her longest finger and the thumb rising.

She said, "Have you ever tried to live inside a hurricane for five years? Jack was like a hurricane. He took his time to enter my life. He had time to form, and I stood watching, knowing where he was headed, and then he swept me into his life. In the past five years, I've stood at the very center, the calmest part of the hurricane and watched him twirl around me. You know though, even hurricanes lose their momentum."

My sister Imogene hated the smell of the river more than the mosquito piercing into her flesh. The smell of the fish stuck to her clothes, like a perfume, and she could smell it on her hair late at night when she was about to fall asleep. She would turn over in her bed to avoid the smell but it would follow her, never leaving her: bass. Soaked moss hardened on her boots. Her wet socks, brown from the riverbank, slung over the windowsill.

She said, "Jack needed me too much. I can't be needed so much. I was gone one day, to work for Christ's sake. That's all. When I came home, he kissed me before I even walked down the hall stairs. He said he missed me. My God, it was only a day. One day. I didn't need him. Not like that. Not like he needed me. My God."

She would sit in my deck chair, slapping the mosquitoes that crawled on her skin, testing for thin flesh, searching for warm blood. She would move slowly, crossing her legs at the ankle. The crickets played on the riverbank, calling to one another, while we sat with another rum and coke, another cigarette. She would shake her hair in the night air in hopes of cleansing it of the smell of the river, and then she would tell me more about Jack.

She couldn't fish, but she needed to go to the river—to watch it slip between rocks, to watch it drown everything it touched and then slide past itself. She cast and she reeled too quickly, her patience gone to wherever Jack was then. She would stand on the riverbank, the rod forgotten at her side, watching the river carve through the land with slender fish cutting through the silver water like lightning.

She said, "Isn't she gorgeous? The fish. Look at her. Look at the way she shines when you hold her up to the sun. Look at the glitter of the water. Feel her flop beneath your hand. Watch this muscle beneath her fin. Smell her. Put your finger here. No here. Feel her gasp."

I have lived in this cabin for six years. I have stood on this riverbank and fished everyday, without fail. Jack has never been to the cabin. Only my sister Imogene comes when she wants to see the river again.

She smoothed the scales of the fish, her finger reddening. The fish was cold, dry, dead for hours. Her hands were glazed with dried river water. Her hands smelled.

She watched a shape in the water. The furry shadow waving on the rock below it. My Imogene, how I adored her always, the way she could watch the fish levitate, suspended in cold water, and never really see it.

She said, "Jack is not the problem. I am. I don't know how I feel about him. I just know that I do."

She left that Sunday night, after Jack called asking her to come back. The time of her car flung mud. I watched the tail lights until she turned the bend, and then I pivoted on my toe, walked up the front porch steps, my pack of cigarettes in one hand, her abandoned fishing rod in the other. I stayed inside the cabin for the rest of the night. When Monday's sunrise finally came, I wrote to her about the colors of the river, the smell of the mud, the sound of the morning crickets, and then I fell asleep.

Erin Lott '96