

The Chef's Lament
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Turning to the right, turning to the left, over to his back, onto his chest, he could not find a comfortable position because it was one of those nights when the crickets were not soothing, the stars were too bright, the moon too ominous, the air too humid, too thick, too hot, and the buzz of mosquitoes was piercing (even if they were not really there), and the loons—the loons!—called desperately into the abyss of night to anyone who would listen, and their sorrow twisted through the chef's body as he lay on his mattress atop that simple wooden box the headmaster placed solely to ruin his nights (obviously) and make the following day in the kitchen a continuation of this awake-nightmare, which made him want to leave Camp Washako for good (as if distance would let him slip into oblivion)—he could find work easily, because everywhere needed a chef skilled in the basics of vegetables and sauces and volumes and flours and herbs, yet something stopped him, as if the real solution lay in staying, in imbuing the place with the weight of his conscience, of his knowing, in telling the campers everything without telling them anything at all, in greeting the arrival of summer with a new smile, as genuine as possible: just think about the onions and garlic flitting about in the hot olive oil, and never about the first-day campers drawn to the shore of Lake Qualm, like the one yesterday, shocked after taking her sock and shoe off and dipping her foot into the water to discover how frigid it stayed through the beginning of June—was it not summer?—and then, too excited to care, her hand followed, seeing how the sunlight bent and broke it, dispersing it through the glassy water, the same way it stabbed through the chef's gut as he realized, watching her, that she did not know how to swim; his breathing shallowed and he took a first step toward her, but at Counselor Rick's first call she ran towards the cabins (obedient, as campers tended to be that first week) to find out which bed would be hers, and although the chef felt grateful, he simultaneously sank deeper into the well of remorse where he spent those sleepless nights, yanked down by the claws of the ugly beasts he himself had summoned years ago and had never mentioned to anyone, and then somehow the weight of responsibility gave him enough strength to pull himself back up to the kitchen where the first lunch of summer needed preparing: one hundred sandwiches for one hundred campers, one hundred borne by springtime's enterprise to discover the deepening greenness and thickening of the woods, the heavier hum of the wetness in the air, the coagulation and ripening of clouds.

Soon July arrived and campers witnessed the collapse of a bright day into a downpour, the thrashing and whipping across the surface of Lake Qualm and the ripple of purple and white in the dark sky at three in the afternoon just days after the solstice; they felt the preceding cracks and booms tremble in their chest and saw the cabins sway over their foundations while the chef watched the red line of the porch thermometer drop nearly twenty-five points in far fewer minutes, and finally the great splash of the splintering old oak into Lake Qualm gave way to the quieting of droplets into driplets and then into mist, which enshrouded the wooded shore and the gigantic stump left behind, and by then, only the chef remained on the porch to witness how Lake Qualm buoyed the immense mass of the oak as it drifted tranquilly across the surface against the sense of tragedy that overcame him: his mind inevitably rewound, and rewound, and rewound, and as others searched for

enough buckets to contain the dripping from the cabin ceiling, he was no longer on the porch, nor had he just watched the storm: it was the Saturday night years ago when Counselor Rick had left Camp Washako to attend the funeral of a friend, and the headmaster had selfishly gone into town (as he always did on weekends), all of which meant that the chef was thrust into both roles, and it was so late, so pitch black, and the day had worn him down so thoroughly that when he finally lay down in bed, the dense exhaustion quickly stole him away, and later (but how long?), the tinkling of giggles outside his window hardly brought him back, though he still remembers opening at least one eye, and thinking: campers—awake—but it was not enough to completely break the seal of sleep, in which he was once again fully enveloped shortly after the campers passed his window on their way to Lake Qualm for a nighttime swim, a plan that never registered in the centers of reason of the chef's brain, whose lower stems repelled it to maintain his sleep at all costs, until they no longer could: the shrieks of campers and the banging on his door wrenched him out of bed and back into the world of the awake, where he stumbled like a fawn until his extremities snapped into place and he found himself running to the shore with lead legs deadened by the prescience of death, his breath short as if he too were drowning, yet of course he was on shore and the camper was in the water, and finally, at the edge of the lake, he threw the lifebuoy to the limp body with what felt like all his strength, but it splashed far short, so he threw himself in, breaking the glassy surface of old Lake Qualm, which quickly settled after the chef climbed out with the body, and it appeared as if nothing had ever disturbed it, but the chef knew, and would forever know, that he *knew* before the campers had even passed his cabin, when he heard them undoubtedly, certainly, definitely, unquestionably—yet he did not get out of bed.

So many summers later, the old oak had finally fractured in the July storm, the loss of another witness (of some kind) to the fickleness of water, to the way Camp Washako had changed, the place the chef felt was an extension of himself, and he remained as tightly wound in it as the roots of the oak stump were in the loam of the shore, which he now approached slowly, with a new reverence, gained throughout the years after that night, slowly hardened out of the heat of anger that arose in him in the aftermath, where he found himself saying that he had been, simply, asleep: that he had not heard anything, which they reassured him was understandable; in other words, that he was not solely responsible, and it seemed to comfort him as he continued to cook and managed to fall back into the hard-etched lines of his day-to-day responsibilities, which were a foundation solid enough to make the days turn into years and thus survive the volatility of the venom of his withholding that coursed through him, ever ebbing and flowing, just like the arrival and departure of campers, just like the rise and fall of the sun, just like the green burst of leaves that crisped into autumn colors and drifted to the ground, just like the freezing and melting of Lake Qualm, just like the air that rushed into his lungs to stay but seconds and then flow out, and he realized that maybe all he needed to do was pay attention.