

LOST AND FOUND

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HOLDING it in his hand, he watched the light pool in the glass and run down the silver in brief, sparkling flecks. Someone from above called his name and he instinctively hid it his pocket, leaving the place where he had found it. He looked up into the fire tower. Some movement caught his eye – a white shape bobbing side to side then falling down. His aunt was waving her hand from the lookout post one hundred feet in the air. Beside her were five indistinct shapes – grey patches sitting neatly atop dark oblongs. His sister and their four female cousins watching from the shadows. He moved away to avoid the sun that glared in his face and casually returned his aunt's gesture. His hand returned to his pocket. It was still there.

The object in the pocket, the pocket, and the twenty-six year old man who wore it all currently existed in a puzzle-piece of flat earth made up mostly of patchwork farmland bearded by black groves of poplar and walnut, and the puzzle-piece was called Wells County. Wells County is in northeast Indiana, near the border to Ohio, south of Fort Wayne and southwest of Toledo. It's only notable town is Bluffton, the seat, but on its western side it fosters a small but respectable state park which is also of note. Its name, Ouabache, is the French rendering of the Indian word for the Wabash River (which transfixes it on its way to the Mississippi) and although the spelling proves a stumbling block to some, it is quite simply pronounced *WAH-bash*. In spite of this very simple program, the locals – even more so perhaps than visitors – delight in the somewhat dignified if erroneous pronunciation *wuh-BAH-chee*. It is far more likely that they have tried to extolify an otherwise mundane title with a touch of Indian gravity, and the custom continues on to the deep annoyance of the underpaid and underwhelmed rangers.

Amidst the sprawling, endless farmland – dotted with copses, and ribbed with sun-whitened highways, Ouabache State Park nests several manmade lakes, a collection of brooks, streams, creeks, and ponds, and a beautiful though not necessarily impressive stretch of Hoosier woodland networked by modest hiking trails and pocked with electrified campsites where lonely packs of campers nestle during the summer months while the raccoons grow obese and arthritic, and the beavers slip into the water along with the bullfrogs, box turtles, and green snakes. It has unassuming stocks of small fish and maintains a lightly populated swim park, but the two boasts that it is comfortable making lie in its bison park – a modern marvel during the 1970s when the all but extinct buffalo were first introduced – and its fire-tower, the delight of some children and adults and the terror of others.

It was from the peak of this great feat that the visitor's family was now scanning the landscape: the lake gleaming brassily, like a strange, tarnished mirror, and the bushy green woodlands fading to blue and grey near the horizon. The tower consisted of a tapered scaffolding of red-brown steel that ended in a wooden platform roofed with the same dusky material. Achieving the height was done by carefully marching up a flight of grey, wooden stairs that cocked in an ascending series of right angles, and shuddered with every footfall, sending the severest vibrations to the top flights, the worst of which were created by enthusiastic interlopers on those at the bottom. Like its counterpart in Babel, it was easier to digest from the ground, and brought escalating punishments to those who insisted on continuing the ascent. But the view gained from the top rewarded its worshipers enough to steel them for the even more harrowing return to earth.

It was vast and wide, and while it was simple, unadorned Indiana woodland, it provided something – itself simple and unadorned – to the restless nerves of the soul.

The visitor knew this because he lived in the county to the east and had journeyed up the tower once or twice before. He was, however, not an ambitious man and not an adventurous spirit. He preferred the earth, where things maintained their appropriate perspective: the sky was above, the trees ahead, and only the dead soil was below. In the most literal and appropriate terms, he was a grounded person. Shrugging off his family's entreaties to join them, he pretended to no longer notice and sauntered beneath the black arms of a slumbering beech tree. Here, while their laughter and shouts could still be heard rumbling off of the lake's surface, he reached into his pocket and removed it jealously. This is what it was:

A wristwatch, androgynous and slender, with a silver plated band, a clean, postmodern face (the only hours represented were the quarters, 12 being a black diamond, 3, 6, and 9 being black dots), with two rectangular arms, and three odometers measuring the month, day, and weekday. 9,8,Fr. it said. This was the one drawback of the piece, for it was 6, 29, Su. Furthermore, he knew that September 8 was a Monday that year. And yet the arms were correctly positioned to 3:43. 3:44. He held it to his ear. *Shck-shck-shck-shck-shck-shck...* The gears shuttled dutifully forward, propelling the arms through time. He turned the watch over and looked once more at the inscription, traced in a floral, Florentine italic which announced "*Wherever you are will be my home.*" It was quaint and sentimental, unlike the visitor, who preferred the ground and the shade of old trees, never being one to play loosely with gravity. He admired gravity and preferred not to treat it presumptuously. But the italic legend caught his eye and wormed its way into his dormant imagination. "Who were you, I wonder?" He wondered, too, why he had so instinctively – without doubt, hesitation, or consideration – cast the wearer in the past tense. But of course, it was because they were no longer the wearer. Past tense. The joints between the silver links were black with dirt and tarnish, the band itself was nearly brown with age, and the glass face had been opaque and yellow before he had cleared it away with his thumb. It had hardly caught his notice except for the gleam of the back plate in the sun.

He turned back to the lake and his eyes fell on the tree where he had noticed it, a less than middle aged maple with the stump of a branch jutting through its grey trunk like an accusative forefinger. The amputation appeared to be due to lightning, which had left an angry black scar racing down the trunk and burying itself in the earth. It was on this peg – a white shock of dead tissue some five feet off the ground – that he saw the watch while his family first mounted the steps to the fire tower.

There was nothing at all attractive about it in that moment. It hardly resembled its true nature at all – more of a twist of dead grass than a discarded watch – and there was nothing about it to lure the eye of a man preoccupied with fellow hikers or the earthy smell of the lakeside path or the hum of the creation that teemed around him, bristling with life and death and evolutionary ambition. But the visitor was preoccupied with none of these things, and the soft, milky glint of the watch glass beckoned him through the limp shocks of grass that crowded protectively around the tree.

His hand is stretching forward and it passes along the bark – dry and deceased – where the electricity had scored the living vegetable flesh. It travels forward. Now his fingers have found it – they are crossing through the circle of the wristband – and they are clutching. They pull it to his face. What is this, eh? A watch. Something someone left? He is wondering who. He is thinking a swimmer, someone stripping to dive into the lake and they have forgotten the watch behind. They might have looked for it. But they haven't been able to retrieve it, and now he is

holding it, stretching it, chipping away the caked-on dust with a thumbnail. And now it is in his pocket, and now he is walking away. Funny, he thinks, that he should suppose it belonged to a swimmer. The lake is off limits to swimmers, besides which, it is revolting – lathered in black scum and green slime – a habitation suitable for fat frogs and weaving snakes and ghostly catfish. Not for anything human. Nothing human. He is closing his hand around it inside his pocket. He is hearing his name. But what a voice!

When his aunt caught sight of him, he was stooped over the lake with his hands in his pockets. Something stirred in the black water very much like a large fish. She remarked to one of the girls that it was a pity their father hadn't been able to come. He enjoyed fishing far more than any of them, and if the fish were really quite so large, quite so friendly, and quite so stupid, then he would have had a rare day plucking them out of the water. But she hardly thought he would have carted them off and dressed them for their dinners. There was something vaguely unclean about the thing she had witnessed breaching from the scum. Unwholesome. Hardly something she would care to eat, let alone take home with her. To take home such a thing! But it was no matter; the fish was safely in the lake, and her nephew was standing up and gazing out into its silver heart, where the scum receded, and the bald water ran deep and black.

They ran down to him – he wouldn't heed their calls – and finally she laid a hand on his shoulder. It seemed cold. But he turned.

The cousins flowed down the hillock like a parade of Russian nesting dolls: the Amazonian prima donna – a girl old enough to claim a monopoly on the comparative science of cosmetics, pop music, and boys, but too young to be allowed out of the house in her makeup without a maternal inspection and an inevitable scrub-down – led the other three who dutifully trailed after their elegant idol in order of age and thus height. The aunt and sister looked back to ensure that they made it down the slope without incident (the Amazon had demanded to wear wedges – rocketing her already precocious height – and there had already been three accidents). They streamed down – the younger girls desperately fighting to keep pace with the Amazon – and eventually circled around a picnic table where they broke ranks and swirled over the sandy earth and under the grey trunks of elms like pieces of paper eddying in a brisk wind.

Jabbering and yelping, they flocked around a brace of iPhones, absorbing themselves into the little tools and relishing their collection of portraits and landscapes. All the while he quietly ignored them and wondered what the humidity was. All around him, the chatter of life blurred into an abstract work of tones and vague harmonies: the frogs purring in the grass, the cicadas buzzing in the leaves, the mourning dove moaning an elegy in the old sycamore while a bobwhite, a whippoorwill, and a titmouse all prattled cheerily in a robust maple opposite. Crickets crackled under the picnic table, squirrels barked as they jostled up and down the sycamore's wrinkled side, and two small foxes slunk quietly in the yellow weeds that bordered the woodland, watchfully reconnoitering on the chipmunks and hares that would spring frantically from one meadow to another, from time to time. Amidst all of these symphonies – a winding blur of dissonance and harmony that wove from pitch to pitch – was the sound of human beings, hardly distinguishable from the titmouse and the frog and the cicada. Neither exalted nor diminished, the voices rose and fell around a larger tapestry of life.

Outside of its sphere, the visitor became absorbed in his own iPhone, researching the origins of his new watch. It was a strangely anonymous piece of machinery, having no observable trail on the internet. Only the inscription, with its saccharine, unoriginal sentiment, seemed to connect the bauble to real life. Frustrated by his inability to scrounge up more information on his new possession, the visitor quietly returned the phone to his pocket – opposite of that which housed

the watch – and sauntered off while his family clucked warmly to one another. The lake drew him to its side once more, and he stared quizzically into its murk. Nothing. It yielded nothing. Well of course it didn't – it's not as though a lake were a computer or a microfilm viewer. And yet he felt deeply compelled to search it, as if it was unquestionably connected to his little discovery. He somehow felt that with it he had acquired an inheritance – an inheritance the details to which would prove tremendously important to him in the future. He felt urged to unearth its origins, as though by taking it he had signed a very serious contract without being fully aware of its contents. It was a strange thought, and he laughed at himself, but it was a sense that was proving difficult to dislodge.

The sun continued to beat down on the human beings by the lake, even as it settled down the sky, deepening from searing white to boiling gold. But the day was undoubtedly waning, and none of the human beings had planned to sleep in the forest, so they started to gather their trash and pocket their trinkets. After some lazy milling around the rubbish bins, they formed a column (the Amazon leading the company of cousins, her nine-year-old lieutenant struggling to seem dignified and pert as she attempted to match pace, and the other two hopelessly tumbling after them) and filed down the gravel path to the parking lot. The aunt (walking ahead of the visitor and his female relatives) was talking to her husband on the phone, while she dodged the horn-like roots and glinting webs that encroached ambitiously into their tidy path.

"We'll be home soon, just heading out to the parking lot. Yeah. Yeah, oh, no, he had fun, too. Yeah, we'll have to tell Janice about it. I think she and Curt – no, no I think so. Oh, I don't know why you would think that. Of course! It could – well, yeah, sure. No, not really. I guess – yeah. Yeah, I'd say it was. Sure, sure."

She nimbly stepped over a branch that had plunged into the little path, holding the phone aloft, and brushed away a fresh strand of spider thread, before returning to the conversation.

"Well, all in all, it was a lovely day. We had all had a great time. I think we should come here without the kids. It's such a chilling little place... What? I did? I did not. I did. Ha! Well you know I meant to say cheerful. Ha! What a thing to say!"

At the end of the throng was her nephew. Men over twenty-five rarely enjoy being carted with their cousins on play dates, and he was eager to get back to his home, far from their voices and empty thoughts, where he could make some coffee, turn on the air conditioning, lock the doors, and read a book. All by himself.

They piled into the van. With the sun in her face, his aunt looked from under an upheld palm and counted dutifully.

"Okay, let's be sure we have everyone. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... Seven... Seven? One, two, three, four, five, six... Seven. Why... *Uhn, tuh, thr', f'r, fi', si', sev'*... Everyone!" she shouted, "stand *still!*" Her face grew grey and her eyes swam as if drunk, or suddenly having realized a horrible reality. Something passed from her face and it regained its resolve and its color. "Let's make sure we have everyone here. *Uhn, tuh, thr', f'r, fi', si'*... Six. Okay. Okay, good deal, people. Six it is. Everyone's in, so let's head out."

The aunt climbed into the driver's seat, but she was no longer smiling. She had unquestionably counted seven twice. The sun had been playing with her eyes, but it was an odd thing to know that you are right when you are obviously wrong. But it was only a small thing, and it was unlikely to affect anyone other than her, she told herself.

He was happy to be the first dropped off. Something on someone's shoe was dreadfully rancid – a wad of soft dog shit or perhaps the putrefied stew of a mushy chipmunk's corpse – and he was pleased to distance himself from his demonstrative, effervescent family members. His

mother's suggestion that he emerge from his well-guarded solitude and enjoy a family outing in the sun and fresh air had been unnervingly misguided. The entire experience had soured him on the entire concept of family events for probably a good month or two. Until more of his cousins entered their twenties and developed a sense of propriety and personal space, he doubted Thanksgiving or Christmas gatherings would be anything but ghastly misadventures.

He walked onto his porch like a withered knight crossing his moat after a disappointing crusade, and pulled out the small collection of brass keys which would return him to the peace of solitude. The sky was still a wide swath of gleaming pink intersected by thin bands of electric yellow, but the far east was dark like spilled black wine spreading slowly across a colorful cloth. He flipped through the keys. Car. Work. File cabinet. Parents' home. House. He ran the blade home, to the hilt, and twisted it like a dagger in the intestines of a meddling enemy. The door gave and he stepped inside. The twilight atmosphere was compounded in his dark and breathless house, and he reached for a switch. His fingers struggled to find the familiar plastic board, and the nocturnal air pressed impatiently against his neck and shoulders. He thought he heard someone in the street call out to him.

He turned to look, but the street was under the purple murk of a century-old beech, and the streetlight was apparently either out or slow in turning on. He put his keys in his pocket and felt his new watch as he did. Still with him. There was the question again, soft and coy – almost coquettish – was it “can I come over” or “do you mind if I come, too”? Or was it “aren't you going to invite me in”? He wasn't sure – either about the words or about how he could have so many impressions of one muffled call. He stared back out to the street where the beech's shadow fell in jagged, dark wedges. Scanning the empty pavement he smiled dully at his mistake.

“Entrez-vous!” he scoffed, offering a welcoming hand into the threshold as he glibly bowed. He closed the door behind him with a scratchy laugh and found the switch. The bulbs ignited, jetting tremulous white light over the floors and walls, and he rapidly sloughed out of his clothes on his way to the bathroom. Before he pulled himself from his trouser legs, he extracted the watch. He held it to the light. “Wherever you are will be my home,” he read aloud. It gleamed energetically in the electricity, like a buzz saw eagerly awaiting the touch which will awaken its innate purpose to chew and cleave. By the time he had turned the bathwater on, converted it to shower, and crumpled the pile of dusty garments into a welcoming hamper, the sky was inky blue, with just a blaze of alarm-red skirting the horizon, punctuated at gaps by the black cones of pine trees, which stood out like vicious teeth in a red mouth. He stepped into the shower as the steam rose to the ceiling and smothered the mirror with white murk.

The visitor's aunt and sister were in the former's living room while the younger girls giggled sporadically in the basement, their shrieks slipping through the joists and floorboards like the smell of pies cooling on a kitchen counter, colonizing one room after another with fluid ease. His sister handed the aunt a ceramic mug in the shape of a grinning pumpkin. The contents were warm, whatever they were, since cinnamon-scented steam puffed from its crown like smoke from a cottage whose locked door and bright windows ward off the fears of a winter-ravaged night. The sister returned with her own mug and they turned the TV on to watch a movie from a previous decade while the girls downstairs roared and laughed. The sister was thinking about her husband who was coming home the next day from a short business trip to the coast. The aunt was thinking about her family around her. Neither of them thought about the visitor, who had been invited to watch the movie with them. His refusal, the aunt had thought at the time, was unmistakably resentful, and his attitude when exiting the van was like that of a delinquent freed

from a lengthy conversation with a scolding teacher. After mulling it over for some time she came to a conclusion: she would not invite the visitor to family events in the future. He didn't enjoy them – in fact he made them worse by his very presence. If he wanted to come to any of them he would be more than welcome. He could always drive separately. But he wouldn't, she reasoned. And she was right, of course. But as she siphoned the mug's contents and curled into the couch's crook she wasn't thinking of her nephew. No one in the house was. The black and white flicker from the television fluttered on the glass in the windows and picture frames like an insistent blizzard. The porch light glazed the siding in protective orange. The door was locked. The house sat safely on its corner and thought of nothing beyond its secure walls.

When the visitor returned from the shower he changed into shorts and socks, reclining on his red-striped love seat with his feet perched on one arm rest and his head cushioned against the other. He closed his eyes and absorbed the lonely silence. He had turned off every light in the house except for the tall lamp in the room he currently occupied. It had four lights at intervals along its trunk, and was muffled in opaque white paper, giving off a dull, grey glow that could possibly be used for reading, but only with eyes pinched and book close. The lamp was positioned to the right of the doorway which led from the sitting room into the kitchen and thence to the rest of the house. Sitting as he was on the love seat, his back was to the doorway and to the light, and his face was to the opposite wall – some six inches from his feet. To his left was a coffee table, and on the coffee table were strewn a variety of utensils, books, papers, and gadgets. He reached to its cluttered surface to retrieve a book – *Into the Wild* – when something half-smothered and half-breathing caught his ear. What was it? A raspy, muffled chatter... He looked at the floor, aglow with scummy light. He set the book down. Something stiffened in his back and he felt his wrists clench for reasons he couldn't explain. But what was this? The watch. He pulled back a leaf of newspaper and there it was: *Shck-shck-shck-shck-shck-shck*... He smiled and plucked it up and let it dangle on his finger. Then he frowned. He had left it on the kitchen counter hadn't he? This paper was a week old and he hadn't moved it since last Sunday, hadn't he? But he had misplaced sillier things in his lifetime, and he twisted his mouth as if to say "oh well!" and laid the jewelry on his thigh where it caught the gloomy light, watching him. He wondered what it was about the piece that pleased him so thoroughly. It wasn't anything he would ever wear: while it was androgynous it certainly leaned towards a feminine taste. He didn't even wear watches or even own one. But it was as though a piece of his soul or spirit or brain was reflected in it – some common impulse, or shared trait. The impression he found most tangible was the idea that it was like meeting a kindred spirit and inviting them over to watch movies together in silence. He laughed at the strange idea and turned back to his book about another man in his twenties who valued independence and solitude. He hoped the story would end well — for them both.

He edged himself deeper into the love seat, edging himself into the crevice of the cushions like a man stealing into a cave to escape a rain burst. What a comfortable spot he had! He crossed his ankles on the arm rest opposite the blank wall and crooked his elbows beneath his ribs, pulling the book into his face as if he could disappear into it and leave the world of pain and reality. The windows were fastened, the door locked, the house dark, and the air conditioning purring thoughtlessly while it manufactured the 64 degree atmosphere. It was an escape, a sanctum. He regretted ever leaving his cozy solitude and damned his family for ever trying to excavate him. He pulled in lungs of air with the satisfaction of a lion in his den.

But what a stench! He coughed out the sour air and wrenched his face. Good God! The trash

had gone bad, of course. Another fact of life he loathed. Something he had pitched was surely fermenting in the ooze that puddled at the bottom of the black plastic shroud. It was a curdled, fishy mash, and the odor – though slight – was powerful. It wasn't as though the trash were in the sitting room (indeed, it was in the adjacent kitchen), but the small traces of stench that floated in to him were intense and stupefying. At that moment he began to wonder if he should take it out – the pungent flavor was like that of soiled diapers and bloated fish – at that very moment. But he decided to carry on with his chapter and conclude it before he lugged the bag out of his sanctuary and cast it out into everlasting night.

A car pulled up to the aunt's house. Two men exited the vehicle, and their laughter clattered off the houses and pavement as they mounted the porch. One rang the bell and they spoke in unmuffled tones while they waited. The door opened and an observer standing under the trees on the opposite block would have seen the two men being wrapped up in arms pulling them inside. The observer would then hear the voices grow distant and hushed as the little group slipped rushed across the threshold and the wooden and screen doors were closed and bolted. The porch light was extinguished. Only the streetlamp's green-yellow light intruded onto the lawn and eaves, and only a thin splinter of orange light seeped between the living room curtains to suggest the warmth and calm in that place. In all other respects it was a castle – a den for hibernation during the winter that swallowed all green and life outside its remote boundaries. Within the hour the sliver of orange had gone black, and by one in the morning the house was doused in warm sleep. The moon and stars were tucked in beneath colorless clouds, and unconsciousness seemed to pass over the town and the world and the cosmos.

The visitor had fallen asleep some time near midnight, but the building stench of the garbage had shaken him back to wakefulness. He was glad, too. His dreams had been wild and abstract – of evasion and discovery, of pursuit and capture – and the tangible sight of his apartment went far in relieving him of the anxiety. But the casual step on the kitchen tile restored all of his misery, and set an electric surge through his nerves and veins. It was a wet, floppy tread, like that of a person who steps naked out of a shower when they think that they are alone in a house. Four quick, unmuffled flaps assured him that it hadn't been an isolated incident. There again. But there was something else in it. Something heavy and leathery, like his visitor was dragging a drenched beach towel – more than a beach towel – behind it. There it was again. The steps were awkwardly paced, as if they were feet at all, but what?

The lamp was still the only light in the apartment, and its anemic, milky glow was blocked from intruding into the kitchen, which was a solid rectangle of unbroken black, but it hardly would have mattered: the host was incapable of turning his head. He wanted to! If he could only rally his courage and lean his head even a few degrees to the left so that he could peek in the direction of those fumbling, infantile movements he would, but he couldn't. He kept his eyes riveted to the beige wall, while his head sat frozen, some eight or ten feet away from the kitchen doorway, fixed and immobile like a moth paralyzed by a spider's venom and is left strung to her web while she waits for her appetite to build before draining him in her hunger. There was a violent tumble, as of a drunk person attempting to stand from a floor where they had been crawling. He felt his stomach blushing with terror at his vulnerability; it warmed and chilled in pulsations as blood gushed to his organs amid his brain's directive commands: fight or fly, defend or defect. But his heart was cowardly, and he refused to look at it. It might look back at him. But what? *What?* Why did part of him seem to understand what was happening while the other – the majority – was just as eager to believe it to be a raccoon who had broken through a

window screen in pursuit of the rancid trash? And couldn't it be? But raccoons do not have mushy, squeaky flesh that rubs against linoleum like damp rubber, and garbage does not smell like that. No. Not even rotten bacon, which he had smelled once, or spoiled milk, or putrid fish rotting on a riverbank, both of which he had encountered on multiple occasions. The mockingly sweet, fetid stench – like the mash of vomited fruit punch and meat – was distinct from the wholly bitter or sour stench of rotten food. Sweet. Sugary. Syrupy. But how valiantly he had to brace himself to prevent the gases from purging his stomach! It seeped in stronger now, and there was another fleshy flop, and another. Hands. They were hands. His visitor was crawling on their stomach. But there: a long, awkward squeak – another – and now a series of scuffling slips and stumbles, but moving forward. Was it on its knees and crawling now? He suddenly realized that it was directly behind him. Look. Look! *Look!* He urged himself to face it, to resist it. But he couldn't, even as he shivered and bristled with gooseflesh, even as his fingers grew numb and trembled, his neck was locked in place, and no will power could inspire him to so much as move his eyes from the point on the wall where they were fixed.

It was only now that he felt a cold grip on his wrist. The watch was strapped tightly to him, and it clattered excitedly away, like a dog who scrambles at the first sound of its master's car approaching down a side street. *Shck-shck-shck-shck-shck-shck!!* Then a plop. Muffled and dry. A hand falling heavily across the kitchen threshold onto the Berber carpet. The sitting room was swamped with a gassy stench, and for the first time he heard the visitor's phlegmy chortle as it gained him. He pleaded with himself, with God, with It, but he could not face that which crawled so industriously toward him. Something that might be a knee scratched slowly across the carpet, then the sound repeated itself, and the choked noises it made – a muttering, squawking, chatter composed of garbled words, but seeming to exude a sense of self-congratulation, encouragement, and giddy anticipation – were undeniably poised directly behind his head. "*Home, home, back home. Thug. Brute. Won't get rid of me. Nope, nope! Staying. Back home, home, home...*" He wanted to reach for the watch, to rip it from his arm, to turn against the crawling, mushy thing lurking behind him, and to hurl the clucking device at it before pushing it down and running for the door, but he didn't and he couldn't. Two sounds – like those of a cat who digs its claws into upholstery before clamoring up a piece of furniture – announced that it had grabbed onto the loveseat arm rest. And yes, there was the shadow. The beige wall suddenly went dark. But what thing was this!? The shadow was not a perfect silhouette, but the outline was not that of a human person. Not a living human person. And then the shadow began to descend, and he felt the first drop of water hit his forehead as it hung over him. The host felt his visitor's long, mud-encrusted hair brush across his left cheek, and before he could retreat into the black avoidance of his closing eyes, he saw the hand – mottled blue and purple flesh, drawn tight into the bones that broke through it at the knuckles, where the skin was slushy, black, and unbleeding.

The lake at Oubache State Park is commonly agreed upon by locals and visitors to be beautiful. Punctured by dark islets populated with shaggy patches of underbrush and tightly-formed poplars and elms, it sparkles in its broadest spaces and glowers underneath the bushy trees that form along its shallows. The islets are used by canoers for picnics, and some of the larger ones – still hardly large enough to be called islands – are provided with wooden picnic tables. The wood is grey and rotting, and the bolts are rusted orange, but couples are occasionally still spotted hauling baskets out of canoes, paddle-boats, or skiffs, and unpacking sandwiches and glass Coke bottles from their provisions. The lake has a history of attracting couples. Some are platonic

friends – retirees, fathers and sons – who come for the feeble fishing. Some are young people who have just begun dating. Others have been married for some time. But it is common in any case to see a pair sauntering along the banks, crossing it in a skiff, or perching on one of its stalwart islets. Sometimes, on misty days, rangers have seen less appealing strollers, lone figures that hobble and totter. In the half-perverse, half-serious way that rangers seem to adopt when approaching local folklore, they have told me that the lake has had a checkered history with the lovers who frequent it during the months between June and October.

They did not tell me of drownings or murders or bodies that floated to the surface after a thaw, or of jealous wives or bitter husbands, of strained separations or threatened divorces, nor of early morning rendezvous at the lake – a spot with fond memories of an optimistic courtship – nor of men leaving the park with dark, nervous faces. They did not tell me of investigations into disappearances near the park, searches that only included the lake when stench began to bubble from the dark waters between the shore and one of the scraggly islets. They did not tell me of women desperate to maintain their abusive relationships, of presents given, or of presents abandoned near the site of a revolting crime. They said nothing of bitter spirits said to wander shorelines, or parts of the lake and shore which sensitive people tend to avoid, or areas where some become nauseous until they flee to higher ground and refuse to return, or anything at all about coaxing voices floating through the tarry water like a call being made from behind the curtain of a steamy shower, or of hands being offered in gestures of frustrated desire, or of the heads or shoulders – ghastly to imagine – which might be presumed to follow. They said nothing about any of these things, and why should they? There are newspapers and microfilm and search engines for that. The rangers said nothing about the man who was found curled on his couch four days after his heart had exploded, or the watch which the police found and collected – a responding detective recognizing it as being a piece of evidence in a cold case which had gone missing from the archives – or the way that the throat was passionately wrung and the head viciously knocked in post-mortem, or the agonizing stench that lingered throughout the house – a stench far worse than that to be expected from a four-day old cadaver in a house chilled by air conditioning. Instead, the rangers said that the lake has a checkered past, that it is not wise to visit it at dusk or dawn without someone else with you, and that yes, there are lots of rumors about some of the events that have been connected with it. The ranger looked at me pleadingly after I had tried to extract a more full account, and with that I closed my investigation. I turned my car around and left the park, and he returned to his hut. Although it was not yet quite dusk, I saw him turn on the light.

