



Underneath, in the ground where we're buried, I assumed the three lakes around my home, Big Comfort, Little Comfort, and Lost Comfort, were all really connected—all one pool of black, subterranean cool. Above, they were as separate from each other as the moon from its reflection in their waters.

I always associated Big Comfort with the town where I went to school and where I worked at the Red Owl until I was sixteen. Little Comfort reminded me of my mother. I was baptized there with a placard around my neck announcing my sins—disrespectful to parents. But Lost Comfort always called to mind my father, Pitch, and his regular bar nestled on its far bank, the only thing that remained of a duck-hunting lodge and estate, once grand.

I drove the long, slow loop around Lost Comfort Lake—such as it was, shallow and weedy—until I reached the fork in the road. The reeds and cattails went on for miles along the ditch until some invisible border was breached, and then lake water surged from underground, overcoming the reeds, forming a true lake that stretched to a pine-ridged far bank. Left would take me home to the house—such as it was—where I'd grown up.

I stopped the car and rested my head against the wheel.

Inside the car was silent, bright, filled with light. I couldn't hear the wind moving outside, though it flattened the reeds and pushed the clouds across the sky. Without the sound, I felt disconnected, miles away from where I really was. The whole world moved on one breath. I stayed seated, fixed. It was disorienting. I closed my eyes and listened

to the sound of my own breath filling the car. Visiting day with Pitch usually left me feeling like this.

When I opened my eyes again, I found myself staring at my own hands, clenched white on the steering wheel. One at a time, I pried my fingers loose and let my hands fall uselessly down. The knuckles ached. I watched them sit limply in my lap. My hands seemed utterly separate from me, odd and severed things.

I flexed my fingers and swallowed hard. Only then, I eased back into motion, squinting out through the bright sun at the uberous, undulating green all around me. I turned right, not left towards home.

The right turn pulled me away from the reeds into the thick stand of pines that circled the lake. The carpet of pine needles softened the noise of the gravel crunching under the car. The sunlight filtering into the car turned slightly cool and green. Once I made the decision to take the right turn, I felt light, as if I were being deposited on my destination's doorstep by a current of subterranean water, totally outside myself, hidden in my own rocky earth.



The Lost Comfort Bar itself was a low, log structure with a dirt parking lot and shuttered windows. The last time Pitch brought me here, I was maybe ten. I remembered it was hunting season, with all the newly-killed deer hung suspended in the trees around the parking lot. I remembered watching Pitch's back disappear into the light of the bar and the feeling of being left alone among the butchered and the dead in the dark. It wasn't a feeling you forget.

I remembered how the deer spun slowly on their ropes, their tongues hanging from their mouths like obscene members. Their antlers clicked eerily against the branches that creaked with the heavy weight of the carcasses. The animals' stomachs had been slit and the guts torn out. The old guys stuffed sticks in there to hold the cavity open. The deer drained better that way.

Even though I had known they were dead, I didn't want their blank, flat eyes to see me. Still, I knew better than to follow Pitch into the bar. When his back disappeared completely, I locked the car doors and slid down in the seat as far as I could. Old Lee Ring, the bar's owner, terrified me. I didn't want him to find me in the car. He almost had once.

*The Patron Saint of Lost Comfort Lake*

The noise from the bar ought to have been reassuring. But something about the heavy tree limbs always dampened it to a low murmur, sometimes broken by a harsh laugh. It was like the noise Pitch made in his sleep when he drank too much—guttural and threatening.

Worse, the lake below would echo back the sound, and the trees collected it under their boughs. It didn't always seem as if the voices came from the bar. The murmur was both steady and all around me, seeming to come from the old cabins, the trees, and the deer themselves. Above the murmur floated Patsy Cline's voice from the juke box. Pitch's bar was the type of bar that played Patsy Cline, even then.



Still sitting in my car outside the bar, I checked my cell phone. My ex-husband had my daughter Reine for the day, but hadn't left any messages. I tucked the phone under the seat. They wouldn't be back from St. Paul until late. The little bit of wind I noticed earlier kicked up a small cloud of dry August dust from the parking lot. The bar's open sign wasn't lit, but the door was open. There were a few cars in the lot, including Ardell Ring's pick-up with a rusting box and volunteer fireman plates. Ardell was Lee's son. I glanced up at the trees. The deer were gone. Lee was gone and Pitch was in prison, but other than that, not a damn thing had changed since I was ten years old.