

# 1

**Panic is not** an emotion. That's the first error that people make.

If you feel your heart begin to pound in your chest and your fingertips go numb. If your vision blurs and you have trouble getting air into your lungs. If suddenly the world seems to collapse into a single thought or collection of thoughts all related to the same thing, so that there is nothing else but that thing—as if you're seeing it all through a gun barrel. If you feel dizzy or nauseous and start to sweat. If the ground begins to slip away beneath you, and you think, *I'm dying. Right now, I'm dying*—then you know panic.

And you know what I felt as a boy when my head went underwater.

# 2

My students know my story. They know about the death of my first wife and older son; they know how it happened. I have walked into classes to find them passing around an essay someone found on the Internet or photocopied from the library. Sometimes they come clean—praising me for the work or congratulating me on the publication. More often the pages will slip into a folder or beneath other papers, secreted away like pornography. There is silence, awkwardness. They stare at me, not knowing what to say. When you find out that someone has lost half his family in an accident, the dynamics change. The ground shifts.

So they don't always know how to react—the ones who know my story—when I tell a joke or show up in class laughing at myself because the goggles and snorkel I wear while swimming laps have left bright red circles around my eyes and pink creases stretching back to my temples. “The really funny part of it is,” I tell them, “I’m terrified of water.”

# 3

My oldest and most enduring fear is of submersion.

In the early seventies, my mother and father started working at a summer camp for boys in Oakland, Maine, called Camp Manitou. The camp is set into a wooded hillside abutting East Pond, which is actually a lake, the easternmost in the chain of lakes that stretches all the way from Belgrade to Smithfield. Dad was the new athletic director. My parents arrived at the camp with two daughters—my sisters, Lisa, four, and Christina, two—and a boy on the way. I can imagine my mother, six months pregnant with me, living in a room without air conditioning or heat, in a building that tilted alarmingly to one side. The roof leaked. Electric wires were stapled along the walls. She could hear the directors in other rooms laughing over a game of poker, bringing girls in from the bars in Waterville, playing their music too loud and smoking marijuana late into the evening. A small bathroom contained a shower stall with a rusted floor. The laundry facility was a two-hundred-yard walk uphill on a gravel road. But my parents were young and poor. And with student loans and a single high-school teaching position to sustain them, any income was a blessing.

To my blue-collar father, Camp Manitou seemed like a five-star resort: basketball and tennis courts, baseball and soccer fields, three free meals a day, beer by the fire at night under the stars, water-skiing. When he was a boy, a real summer camp had been beyond his means—someplace wealthier families would send their children when the parents felt like taking a cruise or the kids were too great a burden. He'd heard about camp only from the "What I Did over My Summer Vacation" essays his classmates would read

aloud in early September. Camp was something he saw in brochures at the barbershop.

My mother was less enthusiastic about the experience. She'd gone to camp as a girl, so the novelty had passed for her, and she was not accustomed to roughing it or to the testosterone-filled atmosphere of two hundred boys and men living together. Thin and blonde, she had the refined good looks of a real New England lady, and though she'd never been wealthy, she had the manner of the rich—that set chin and taut-skinned regality. Her wedding photos remind me of Hollywood stills. But she managed. She adapted and, like all of us, came to love the place.

# 4

My parents were enchanted by the lake. Each morning the water, shrouded in mist, emerged into sunlight, becoming a glassy mirror for the firs that lined its banks, the blue sky, and the egrets gliding over it. It had a clean, sandy bottom near the shore and was home to fish, fresh-water clams, and all kinds of birds. By 9 a.m., the Boston Whalers' outboard motors would cough to life, then settle into a steady purr, and the fishermen would glide out, soon to be joined by water-skiers and sailboats. When storms came in over the distant Adirondacks, they came fast and fierce, churning the lake's surface into whitecaps. And when the rain came, it fell in heavy curtains of water, soaking the earth, bending tree limbs, hammering the tin roofs of the lodge and surrounding cabins, penetrating the water with the patter and ring of a thousand tiny cymbals.

On a clear evening, the sun would make a slow descent to meet its shimmering twin on the water's surface. And if the day were cloudy, its color would split, shatter, and break through in streaming shafts of red and orange, forming pathways of light toward Birch Island a half mile from the beach.

As night came on, the mist would rise again on the cooling pond, and you would hear the loons warning each other off or calling to their mates with ghostly, long-vowelled voices.

The truth is, I love to stand near the edges of lakes and rivers and oceans. My problem isn't hydrophobia. I can stand on the rocking deck of any boat without anxiety. I am an aquaphobe. I fear being *inside* the water. Surrounded by it.