

# The Ballad of Cherrystoke

They sent my twin brother to the Cherrystoke School of Professional Crafts to learn how to make fancy acoustic instruments for a living, but he only lasted one week in that prison before he ran away, hitchhiked back into real life, and ended up at the lake resort where I worked, hoping to stow out with me in employee housing.

Slowly, I informed him I had a schedule now and didn't have time to be hiding runaways. But I'd missed him – I knew I had missed him when I saw him in my doorway, shimmering a bit, undefeated. I followed him around, kicking at the heels of his disgusting Chuck Taylors. Then I made him a pallet on my floor, a row of dank cushions covered by his own sleeping bag. I wedged it under a window with a million-year-old box air conditioner where he was sure to get a sore throat sleeping every night.

He liked history. He talked about Lake Revel being a manmade reservoir. It spread its seventy-mile shoreline over the North Carolina line – one of those pretty craters the Tennessee Valley Authority once poured all their efforts into. It happened back during the Depression, he said.

The fact of a drowned-out town lurking two hundred feet under that diamond water hadn't stopped anyone from vacationing at Lake Revel for the rest of the century; their affection for it was just encouraged and encouraged. I knew there was at least one dead church at the bottom of Revel, and on good days, off-duty days when my short-term memory came winking back at me, I would start to shiver during my afternoon swim, wondering suddenly what it might feel like, going all the way down and getting the bottom of your foot poked by a steeple. I hoped I would remember to tell my neurologist, who viewed any abstract thought as positive. The doctor wanted to see my imagination grow back on its own, uninfluenced by my confusion.

Shad was lucky to find me! Not everyone who worked at Lake Revel Lodge had their own room in the employee bunkhouse – you had to be an old-timer, having worked every season past the brink of sanity, or else you had to be like me; that is, viewed by management as having special needs.

The bunkhouse was an ugly building on short stilts, low and gray, with a line of rooms on each side. You either faced the parking lot, a bad scene with no hope, or else you had a view of the lake, not as good a view as the Lodge guests got, but a reasonable flash in between pine trees and the musky

buttonwoods, plus a tiny deck; you could go out there after your shift and catch the breeze. The lakefront rooms seemed like the better fate at first, except as summer wore on, they got soft and sad, rotting inward from all the mildew.

My brother was always talking about hopping trains, serious trains, freight trains – he had that addiction for bringing back the hobo life in all its miserable freedom. The bunkhouse was a freight car; at least it did its part to look like one. It looked like a freight car parked for good and going forever nowhere. Shad liked that. He could hear me getting better, bit by bit. “That sounded like the old you,” he said. “Combined with the new.”

I told him that his being there would definitely get me fired, and that he couldn’t make any noise of any kind, including and especially playing his great love, this old banjo he had, an SS Stewart older than the lake. So I sat on my single bed in my murky lakeside room, on top of this tea-and-cream-patterned blanket, *matelassé*, my mother called it, borrowed from my childhood bedroom – really my best possession – trying to write out some rules for him on the back of an envelope.

But I couldn’t keep my damaged brain on that task for long, and he was tactful enough to not mention it. And then everyone who mattered got hooked on the sound of his banjo, anyway. Shad played the clawhammer style, the desperate old minor-key ballads; since he was a fugitive, he made a point of being patient with anyone who called it bluegrass in ignorance. Somehow, he got management to give him an easy part-time job in outdoor maintenance, stuff like repairing the Lodge’s wooden deck

chairs and cleaning Kit-Kat wrappers and used condoms out of the reeds, and it wasn't long before he and I were in this together.

He was sophisticated, my brother. He mentioned the condoms with haughty distaste, which reminded me I had to change my behavior, now that I had a real roommate. Some of the college-boy waiters from the city, Kirk and Elliott and this jolly, giant, rosy-cheeked guy who seemed to be covered in Ds – his real name was Damon Doherty and his friends called him Deez Nuts or D-Dawg, nicknames I never understood – they still knocked on my door after the dinner shift, toting Bacardi and weed like a Disney prince would hold roses.

I wanted the sex; ever since I recovered from my accident, I felt that lush ache inside me almost every minute. Why would anyone want to go around any other way?

But something about it all was different now. The way the guys set their gaze upon me – you know that harsh smile men get, once their goodwill drains out? Their lowest eyes? Anyway, now that Shad was here, my brother here in my room, it was my greater pleasure to turn the others away.

“If you become a real freighthopper, you have to get a railroad-track tattoo to prove you're legit. You have to get it on your *face*.” That was Lacey, who worked with me in housekeeping. She'd been demoted from her server's position at the Lodge restaurant because she refused to shave her armpits for the benefit of diners' appetites. The sight of it had ruined morning waffles for an important lady from Atlanta. She saw the evidence when Lacey bent over her one morning in her work-issue green polo

shirt, during the breakfast rush, setting down orange juice for the lady's towheaded grandchildren.

Everyone was pushing Lacey to make a stink about the discrimination, or at least to quit. It was midseason, so the attrition rate – that was Shad's phrase – was already pretty bad. But Lacey seemed jazzed about the fame. "I was only their morning drudge, anyway," she said. "I never got dinner shifts. No one could handle my personality."

The incident had loosened her self-regard. Here she was now, floating unasked with my brother and me, flirting and chirping in a raggedy string bikini, her updo sparkling with barrettes.

She was competing with the water. She absolutely was.

Shad said he was going to pack up Little Miss – that's what he called the banjo; he was quite ridiculous – and head west soon, and he just might have another tattoo, indeed, by the time any of us saw him again. Likely more than one.

He could sit cross-legged with a loose bag of American Spirit tobacco in his lap, poised like a golden egg between those knobby knees, and roll cigarettes without moving anything else around him. He was the little scrappy type and a terrific swimmer, even in the dark; he had knifed his way around the east bend of Revel, past the golf-club entrance and the tiny public beach and wrestled this old inflatable boat out of the bracken, a discarded commercial raft that would have been more at home on a river.

Shirtless but wearing ratty swim trunks, he seemed to be planted in the middle of the raft, keeping the balance like a forest gnome.

Lacey sat up on the prow like a figurehead. He let her.

The sun on the water would make you go drowsy and half blind, if you had a mind to submit. I curled myself into my portion of the boat, sitting crosswise to the others with my legs hung over the edge, my arms wrapped around my waist. I didn't wear bathing suits; I felt best in my cut-off jean shorts and purple T-shirt from Dixie's Dairy Bar down the road. The best place! Not a place but a *palace* – I thought of it as an ice-cream palace. Chocolate and peanut butter in one flavor. Mint-chocolate-chip. Raspberry cheesecake.

I couldn't taste well anymore, except for what was very sweet – something to do with my brain injury. The mixed-together ice-cream flavors were my favorite; I liked to try to sort out every lick.

I was calm, breathing slow, and when I opened my eyes, I saw a water snake bobbing toward us, coming between the twigs and tree litter in the silver lake wavelets. In my head I told the others about it, but by the very next second, I had forgotten to mention it – that was the core of my trouble.

I'd gotten hit by a car, from the back, during my daily run, ten miles from home. The morning sun was in the driver's eyes and I was running in the middle of the road, like any champion – it was pure misfortune.

They had to tell me what happened. I still had to take their word for it, because I remembered nothing. After a while, four weeks or so along in the rehab center, I did start to recall the beginning of my senior year, months before the accident. I suddenly saw myself, as though in a movie, storming queenlike

into a morning AP class in a new pair of platform flip-flops, my mind greatly loaded with drama.

After the car hit me, I had actually sailed through the air, witnesses said – I had tried to fly! Where I landed, headfirst on a country highway, was on my prefrontal cortex. It was the same place they gave people lobotomies. Someone told me this. Who? I didn't know, but I figured out what they meant: I would be dumb forever. Which meant placid to the point of vanishing.

It wasn't true, though. I was mostly placid, but I was mad a lot, too. The fury came in gusts so brief I don't think I ever spent it twice on the same idea.

I got mad about the quivering divot in my throat where the tracheal tube had been inserted, during my short coma. I saw it in my dingy bathroom mirror one morning, getting ready for a day of scrubbing pubic hairs down the drains of the Lodge's new garden tubs.

It was like it was my first time seeing it, although the accident was so long ago now – two years and more. I whapped the mirror with the back of my hand, to make it disappear. I said “fuck you” a couple times to my reflection.

But by afternoon, I had forgotten the hole. Really, they said, I had so much to be thankful for. The ability to walk. Life itself. They'd had to trepan my skull when my brain swelled, and after the surgery, starting in rehab, my hair had grown back a new shade, a different brown and wilder all over, and I liked it, especially now that it was long again. I often took wonderful care of it.

Maybe I was calm, but I wasn't dumb – I knew the attention I got now wasn't the same as what had been mine before. The anti-seizure medicine made my eyes dilated and spooky. Yes, I could walk, but I swayed to the right, and my voice, once it finally returned, was run down with slush. I couldn't make it sound like the thoughts in my head.

The first year of my new life, in my new slowed-down body, I grew gradually thicker, and now, in year two, I was thicker still. Sometimes I thought my flesh expanded while I slept. My bra started to make sore tracks against my ribcage, and my underwear got so tight I felt that it took my breath away. So I stopped wearing underclothes altogether; I sunk them in the lake and never thought about them. Some days I felt freer than I could ever express. I should have called Mom to take me to the mall for new stuff, but every time I went to pick up the phone, I forgot exactly what I needed.

Until Shad came, I didn't do much. I was glad to be on my own again, glad to have a job. I wondered if I would drive again some day, but besides that, I didn't want much. I ate with the other employees, in the Lodge's back kitchen, and I would get a ride to town sometimes for ice cream and snacks and to buy magazines and paperback novels. Back in my room, I would try valiantly to read them – but the endless lines of type were only arrogance; all the same and no meaning in them that would stick.

It could be ninety degrees, but I was mostly cold. I laid under my coverlet and watched VHS tapes on my crappy TV. Nature documentaries, or Disney movies with songs that soothed and tortured by turns. I would never run after cross-country trophies

again – I would never again dominate my peers. But I was here, and here was here.

The lake pulled down Appalachia in one rush – this lamenting purple-green sunset – before night folded in. It didn't even have to be a full moon. Once it was properly dark, my brother and I sat on our little deck and listened to the foxes sweetly threatening their own mates across the water, these harsh kitty cries. Later on, it was screech owls, and hard to tell the difference.

He rolled my cigarettes for me and lit them, keeping the flame low before handing them over. “That girl wouldn't last two seconds on a train – scared shitless of a water snake,” he said in his shallow hectic accent, a twang I falsely regarded as his alone. In my head I floated, sorting out the pool of his words. The way he said it, “futile” sounded like *few tile*. Like it should.

“Lacey,” I said, “is just a rich college girl.” I didn't know if she was or not, but I knew Shad hated rich college kids, and there sure were enough of them at Lake Revel Lodge, working the short season before they went back to their college lives. It seemed safe to assume.

He tightened his lips around his cigarette for a moment and sucked to make it glow hard. It was the same thing as his nod. His black T-shirt, it was so faded it looked like it was erasing itself.

I was awful to him, I called him a “No Count” because it was a funny, old-fashioned term, and he himself had taught it to me, taught me to use it against him. He was gold. I don't think he was ever awful to me.

He blew out his smoke in a show of rings. “You should have been a college girl yourself by now, right, Shivvy?”

Shivvy was short for Siobhan, which no one here knew how to pronounce because they didn’t have straggle-haired New Age parents obsessed with Celtic folklore, like we did. Shad showed the influence more. He had the knowledge of the old music, how it came from Ireland and Scotland to infest itself in the Southern mountains. He wore a Celtic cross necklace, this winking hunk of pewter.

Our parents wanted him to make money with a job that was dignified and artistic; that’s why they sent him to Cherrystoke to become a luthier. I thought it was nice of them – I didn’t have Shad’s capacity for resentment – I didn’t resent anything – I didn’t know how anymore.

When I was a baby, my mother could not keep clothes on me. All these Polaroids she showed me after the accident, squeezing into my netted hospital bed with me, trying to lure back the parts of my memory she thought were relevant – I was naked in every one, or at least shirtless, wearing bottoms puffed up like bloomers, defiant, holding someone’s wildflower I had yanked up by the roots. In one photo, I was maybe two, standing in a canoe in this same place, this very lake, with only a diaper on and not even a life jacket to save me if I fell in.

“But I like it here,” I said, remembering that my brother had spoken. “If I stay through closing I get this same room in the spring. Mom said I could come back.”

Shad ran his rough little hand over his bald head. My poor twin brother, he was only twenty years old and already his hair had fallen out. You could feel the tragedy of it inside him; surely someone had done it to him – I would never imagine he was to blame. “Genetic,” he sometimes said, refusing to talk about it otherwise.

I don’t think it hurt him as much as he might fear. He still had fierce cheekbones and these chilly important eyes. I had to remind myself to try and keep Lacey from liking him, and a couple of the other college girls, too, and even harsh old Dinah, the head of housekeeping, who used words like “cove” and “holler” and “y’uns” like no one was waiting around to dispute her. Dinah said she’d grown up with the old ballads; she said she was the real deal, and she wanted to sing along with Shad’s Little Miss after dark, smoking with us, her voice menacing and filled with grime:

*Well, they had not been at sea two weeks  
I’m sure it were not three,  
When she began to weep – She wept most bitterly.  
“Ah, why do you weep, my fair young maid  
Do you weep for your golden store?  
Or do you weep for your house carpenter  
Who you’ll never see no more?”*

Shad would let anybody who knew the words well enough sing along with the banjo; he kept playing and he kept his mouth closed. Now, alone with me, he curved his hand – they called the gesture a claw; I told him time and again it looked more like a

paw – and started his strokes, down, down, the *chuk chuk chuk* rising in between the notes like mist. He finally muttered the answer in his own voice. He sang:

*I do not weep for my house carpenter.*

*I do not weep for my store.*

*I am weeping for my tender little babe,*

*who I'll never see no more.*

I was cuddled against him, the twin *matelassé* coverlet stretched tight to fit around us. I wanted more and more in my lungs tonight and asked him to roll me another American Spirit, and some of whatever else he had.

We were drinking hard. I cried a little, when I thought to do it. Shad talked about spending the winter in Mexico and bringing me back a bleached-out animal skull from the desert, if I wanted one.

This made me gasp. I told him I wanted to feel the top of his little bald head – I had never done it yet! He laughed, but only at my eagerness, and said I could.

I made a point to pause, needing to do it right. I pulled my whole soul into gentleness. I took my left hand out of the blanket, the hand that worked best. I pulled it out like a brave snake and touched him. I turned my fingertips into tiny bugs, trailing back and forth over that skin-covered skull, careful not to leave behind an impression. How could anything be so hard and soft at the same time?

"I guess you shave it now," I said when I was done, tucking my hand back in my blanket. "You look better that way, no hair at all."

"I agree with you," he said. "But it's not recent. I started shaving my head when you were in the hospital, Shivvy. Remember? That time when you were bald like me."

I did remember, when he reminded me of it. I asked him to tell me the story of our family.

I called Shad my twin brother, although to be honest, we weren't related by blood. But if you were able to ignore the past and just line up the facts as they were, the surface miracles, it all worked. Both of our birthdays were in January. He was five-feet-eight-and-a-half inches tall, and so was I. Weirdly, this made him seem short, although I was considered tall – I had been the second-tallest girl on the cross-country team.

Our names started with the same sound, *Shhh*. We were both allergic to penicillin.

My mother met Shad's father at a New Year's Eve contra dance in the Piedmont when we were both sixteen, about to be seventeen. Before this, we had grown up as only children, but it was clear that this *brother*, as I was being forced to consider him, had suffered way more from that particular condition. He just didn't seem to have a will of his own. I could see he was only trying to be like his dad, even listening to the same old music.

He was a copy, and I was a star. I pulled down all As with almost no effort at all, and I would get an athletic scholarship,

too – it hadn't happened yet, but my coaches were optimistic. I had picked out my colleges, my favorite and a couple of backups.

I wore my makeup thick and hot to contrast with my plain little mother, who never did anything to improve herself. I was proud of my sharp tongue; it had brought me friends in swarms.

"Let us behold this curious spectacle: I call them Thing One and Thing Two," I'd whispered one night to Mom, who was from the north and had a big education, though you wouldn't know it from her life choices.

I draped one arm around her little poky shoulders. I swept the other arm theatrically at the sight: these two sudden, unlikely males in our own ceramic-tiled kitchen, making salad and vegetarian lentil stew for dinner. They were as alien as a mouse you find in your cupboard.

Mom *tsked* at me. She left me and went over to her new husband. Their love had been instant and absurd; they got married at the courthouse and she wore a flowered dress that brushed the floor. He handed her a knife, blade end pointed away from her. They chopped tomatoes together for the salad. Raising me, she had been practical. Now she was off in heaven.

No, not a mouse at all – it was a possum, just a little baby. It crept in our sliding glass door one night, abandoned by its mother or lured by our crumbs, and curled itself up in Shad's bedding. He said he had dreamt all night about an Irish banshee struggling around him, trying to get herself free, her wings caught in the sleeping bag.

When the idea of a wild animal finally occurred to him, he unzipped the bag quietly and there it was, silver-furred and quite spiteful, clinging with its naked pink feet to the red-and-black flannel. It opened its mouth and hissed at us.

“I didn’t know they did that,” he said, stroking the possum’s foot. I was afraid he would begin collecting whole litters of stray possums, because his backpack – this bulky thing that rose higher than his head, when he had it on – it was filling up. He’d hitched a ride into town with Lacey and had stolen some items from the Army/Navy store, a few things necessary for survival on the trains, which were not, he told me, always the friendliest places. We were still at Lake Revel Lodge, but I wasn’t sure he had a job anymore.

“I wonder where the mama is,” I said, laying spread-eagle on my bed in my green polo shirt and khaki pants. I was already dressed for work; I wore a watch and I had two alarm clocks to make sure I got to my morning shift on time. Management had recognized me as the only employee who had made it so far through the season without once being late.

It had come August, the month when a great storm split the lake every afternoon, leaving behind not a chill, exactly, but the promise of news from another direction. The out-of-town college kids were working their final week. The crew shrank but got rougher, older waitstaff coming in with experience from hell – fey, desperate men with sad stories and swollen noses, and women who looked and talked just like Dinah, because they had known her forever. *I’ve got girlfriends who could work circles around these young clowns*, she said. *And they’re ready to start any time.*

“Play for me, No Count,” I said to my brother. “I have exactly ten minutes left to be in this room.”

“What’ll you have, Shiv?” he said, drawing himself up cross legged, picking up Little Miss but facing the possum a bit, too, like he was singing to both of us. “‘Omie Wise?’ ‘Pretty Polly?’”

“No,” I said, slowly. “No murder ballads. No dead girls.”

He hummed and strummed, pondering, before continuing a song of his own he’d been working on. His voice had gone raspy, sleeping under the air conditioner so long.

*I don't want to go to Cherrystoke.  
I'd rather be here, and I'd rather be broke.  
I'll ride the rails and I'll be free.  
I'll find some old gal to ride with me.*

He sang in his lightest register, because of the wild animal in the room. I listened with my eyes closed. “‘Old Gal’ sounds stupid,” I told him, and he nodded, setting Little Miss aside and reaching for his bag of tobacco.

My memory, it only went back a few years without help, and my brother, he had never not taken me seriously in those few years, which I really considered my whole life. Before my accident, I had barely known him, but I had known him well enough – that is, I had never known him to be rebellious, or to have so many dark notions about freedom. *You changed when I changed*, I think I once realized, but the idea never made it to my mouth.

"I'll get some old rodent to ride with me," Shad sang *a cappella*, to me and to the possum. I giggled myself into hiccups, half asleep. He kept a straight face.

That night, after dinner and a game of horseshoes I watched at the lakeshore, I came back to an empty room. The space under the air conditioner was empty. No pallet or sleeping bag there, no dirt-colored banjo. I didn't see the possum anymore, either.

It had been a long time since I got to be alone in my room, so I took off my damp work clothes, accidentally stuffed them in the bathroom trashcan instead of the hamper, and wrapped my body in a luxurious fluffy towel my mother had sent to Lake Revel with me. I sat on the deck in my towel-robe to feel the air off the water. Any second, that sultry breath could decide to change.

At first, I was furious, finding Shad gone like that. But since he had only gone up to Dixie's Dairy Bar to bring me back a mixed hot fudge and caramel sundae, it would be ridiculous to complain. All I had to do was wait for him.

The knock on the door made me jump, it was so rough and formal. "Come in, I guess," I called. "But don't come out on the deck, I'm not dressed." I was still trying to see into the coming dark, wondering if the baby possum would be back. What turned me around was the sense that my visitor wasn't bent on that question.

"Hey, Girlie Girl. Long time no see."

My eyes adjusted, and my mind followed. I saw Damon Doherty D-Dawg Deez Nuts. There he was, out on the deck

with me, as jolly and rosy as ever – so many healthy teeth inside him, so much shaggy hair, grown down to his shoulders like an outrageous fib.

“Girlie Girl” had been a joke between us, before Shad arrived. The joke was how this big, grown boy couldn’t pronounce “Siobhan.” He couldn’t find the time to do it right.

But he had been my friend, once. “I know you’re ... off,” he had told me kindly, the first time we talked. He’d actually winked at me, once he said it – where had he ever learned something so glamorous? “It’s pretty obvious you’re off,” he repeated. “Or at least it’s half obvious half of the time.” He laughed. “It’s not so bad, though.” He had taken my hand with great ceremony – I think we were the last ones at dinner that night. “I’m an open-minded guy. I actually think you’re pretty. You’re pretty sexy, Girlie Girl, if I’m going to be honest.” Hearing that, I touched my own hair.

“I always speak my mind,” he had said. “That’s just D-Dawg talking.”

He hadn’t asked me if I was lonely. I wasn’t – I was happier than most people here, that was certain. But he was – he was lonely, he said, and thought I must be feeling it, too. His girlfriend had cheated on him, before he came here. So he was left lonely and sad. I told him I had had a boyfriend in high school, before my accident. Sometimes I could picture him very well.

Now, on my deck, Damon spread his arms out wide, in apology or triumph. “It’s my last day,” he said. “School starts next week.”

I stared. There just wasn't anything else to look at. When he leaned in and his rum fumes reached me, I sniffed like an animal, because I had lost my manners a long time ago.

"What are you doing out here with no clothes on, Girlie?" he said, watching the top of the towel that I had tucked underneath my breasts. It was too late for me to remember the towel was supposed to go over them.

"Oh. Wait, though. Shad will be back in a minute," I said. "He's at Dixie's getting me ice cream. He's at --"

"He's not at Dixie's," said Damon. He liked me, but he never liked me enough to keep from interrupting everything I tried to say. "He's down in Lacey's room, got all his hobo shit with him. I just saw him."

"I think you must be wrong," I said. "He must be going to get me some ice --"

"Bet he's going to take her with him, freighthopping," said Damon. "And you'd better get used to that particular situation."

I was bent over my *matelassé* coverlet, thinking of lost ice cream with what felt like a very old sorrow, while Damon grunted away somewhere far above me, my long hair wrapped up in his fist as his personal handle. The sound of his loud body falling frantic against my naked behind made me think of the motorboats that would pass our piece of shore on Lake Revel, grinding the water so far out of place the waves would slap the bank for five minutes afterward.

I could hear a familiar sound start up in my own throat, the sound that marveled at such a turn of events. My thoughts were alive – that or my confusion.

I felt my mind had made a mistake, some time earlier in the evening – a mistake I couldn't remember anymore. It could have been a year, or even a hundred, that passed while that lonely man was in back of me and on top of me, not inclined to free himself – a rabid baby possum riding its mother.

So I was thrilled, after a spell of centuries, to see Shad finally come in the front door. I wanted to tell him about these grand new pictures my mind was making: Damon who was just like a motorboat, spoiling the lake. Damon as the absolute worst possum around. My brother would approve of it all.

My brother! That odd, nodding, bald little spitfire. "It's Shad," I said. "It's No Count." He looked like the good round sun coming up early, that's what he absolutely was, moving toward me in such an unneeded rush.

Since Shad was here, I could take my own time to talk. But he didn't have Little Miss with him; that was the bad thing. I didn't recognize what he was carrying – I didn't even recognize the way he was moving. I could tell you, with no one allowed to correct me, that my twin brother was not singing.