

Outside Eden

By

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That summer, the biggest point of contention in mine and Ryan’s relationship began with his assertion that he was responsible for creating his summer camp’s popular after-meal phenomenon casually known as “the Hiawatha chant,” which had catapulted him to minor stardom.

“I did that.” He had nudged me the first day of camp that summer, as we sat side by side on a cramped bench, on a long and wobbly bench enclosed in the mess-hall chaos. Kids sat pressed up on us, either side, and the porous scent of warm sweat leached into the early June air. Outside the sun had just set, haloing the lake into a smooth and delicate stillness. Fireflies and dragonflies skimmed its surface, leaving minute but noticeable ripples in their wake.

I reached up and tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear., “What?”

His hand crept across the negative space between the underside of the table and our legs below. He settled a warm palm on my left thigh.

“I made the words to this song up.” He paused a moment, “like eight years ago.”

I scratched at the back of my ear, a mosquito bite had formed underneath the skin.

“That’s cool!” I tried to muster up my enthusiasm, even as I felt the long day sink into my body, a tiredness settling in my bones like newly-poured cement.

He shrugged, and raised his eyebrows in mock haughtiness. “I guess you could say I’m something of a celebrity around here!”

I knew he was joking, but there was just enough of a truthful hint behind the words that I felt a form of unease creep down my spine.

“Oh please, you are *not* that cool.” I ceased rubbing my bug bite, but used my descending hand to hit him lightly on the back of a hand, where it was still damply caressing my leg.

“No really!” He looked up, gestured to one of the kids sitting across from us. She was a young girl, with wild red curls and a sharp buck-toothed grin.

“Emilia! Hey.” She looked up at his call, a red blush spreading over her freckled cheeks in definitive response.

“Hi,” she said, leaning over the center of the table, her elbow moving perilously close to a puddle of spilled mustard left by a fellow-camper earlier in the meal. Her eyes were fixed on Ryan.

“Hi Emmie.” Ryan said.

I looked from her to Ryan beside me. The corners of his eyes crinkled attractively with his smile, a glimmer of knowing coyness hidden under the playful tone. He looked over at me, and nudged my shoulder with his.

“Emmie, this is my girlfriend Susie-- she’s a counselor for Holy-Oak 1A this summer. Would you please do me a favor and tell her that I’m cool?”

Before he even finished speaking Emmie's eyes grew round. Her gaze flitted between our two faces. Her blush intensified, and she looked down at the table.

"Yeah! Ryan is the *best*." She pulled out the word *best*, in defiant emphasis. "The very best counselor." She peeked back up at him.

Ryan emitted a throaty laugh, full of confident understanding. He raised a fist and reached it across the table, where Emmie met it with her own.

"See, Suz!" He turned to me, eyes shining. It was a deeply unfamiliar sort of confidence, something that I immediately knew was different than any other expression I had seen in our nearly three years of dating. "Emmie knows I'm cool!"

He grinned, leaned over and pressed a small kiss to the corner of my mouth. Emmie let out a small but distinct squeak of alarm from across the table.

It's the end of Summer party that the director throws for the staff the night after all the kids go home. We are up at a rented cabin on The Cape, because technically no one is supposed to smoke or drink on camp property, and that rule is absolute whether the kids were there or not. Ryan and some of the other male counselors drove up separately, earlier today, while I was left to ride with Marcie in her army-green Subaru Outback, blasting Taylor Swift at top volume as I nursed a burgeoning headache.

The summer is over, and I am fine with it because it only took me about three days to realize I am not really cut out to be a camp counselor. It is made worse by the fact that technically Ryan and I weren't even working at the same camp because the boys' and girls' sides were split into practically separate properties. While I ran arts & crafts for girls on one side of

the lake, where the cabins are all named after women's colleges, he taught sailing on the other, where the monikers come from Native American Tribes.

There is only a shared mess hall in the middle. At most we saw each other for meals, or for only a couple hours at night, and on our nights off once a week when we would venture into various surrounding New England towns.

It is a two-hour drive from camp to the cabin where the party is being held, after traffic, and after stopping to pick up all the necessary alcohol. We pull into the driveway, lined with crumbling and haphazard red-brick wall. I sigh as Marcie reaches out and taps the music off. In the back seat, some of the other junior counselors, whom we elected to provide a ride for, titter excitedly. I get out and feel my knees crack in protest.

My nose is happily assaulted with the fresh and crisp air indicative of a nearby salty sea. I take a deep breath, and allow it sit in my lungs with a contented hum. I lean over to re-tie my sneaker lace, which came undone and loose sometime during our drive.

The front door behind me opens, and someone tumbles out onto the pebbled front walk. It's Ryan, because I know only he would attempt to sneak up behind me, blanketing his front up against my hunched back. His arms band themselves across my stomach, digging into the soft area right above the already sensitive skin under my shorts' waistband. His scent, like the promise of sunscreen and weathered Old Spice, is welcome.

"Ryan!" I laugh, and try to straighten up, though his weight on my back prevents much progress. He snorts, from his belly, before releasing his hold. I raise my upper body, and smile again up at his sun-tanned face.

"Hi," he says. He slips a hand into the back pocket of my shorts, thumb rubbing small circles in the layer of fabric which separates our skins.

“Hi, fancy meeting you here.”

He grins, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” My mouth feels frozen in happiness. The dizzying headiness of the summer ending is finally started to feel real. As if I have just, in that very moment, finished running a marathon. This giddiness is my hard-earned reward.

He grasps my hand in his and pulls me towards the cabin.

“Come on,” he urges.

Inside is cool, and dim. The shiplap paneling has a rich and deep woodiness which reminds me of home in Virginia. Ryan pushes me to a room off the main hallway, and into a corner. As he crowds into my space, the skin of my bare back (exposed by my tank top) presses against the spines of old books. They creak in musty protest. For some reason it feels in that moment as if I haven’t seen him at all during these past two months.

“I missed you,” I whisper. Our lips are close to one another, hovering so close I feel the ghost of them against each other.

Instead, push up, and my nose meets his.

“I know,” he says, closing his eyes. He leans down, and we kiss. It’s that slow quiet kind, settling over our sheltered bodies. His lips are chapped, but so warm against mine. Beneath my palms, which had settled on the sides of his cheeks, the skin is smooth and almost leathery after weeks in the unrelenting sun. His arms clutch at my waist, one thumb dipping under the waistband of my shorts.

“You know?” I whisper, throatily and with the promise of things to come.

“Yeah,” he says, as our lips come back together.

. Ryan had been going to camp since he was nine years old, and had been a counselor for two summers before we started dating officially.

“It’s home,” he whispered as we lay in the bed of his pick-up truck, watching the fireworks going off over Richmond’s Labor Day carnival, almost a year prior. He had been back two weeks, and we had only gotten back to school a few days earlier. Being without him while been up in Maine for the whole summer had felt excruciating.

He first mentioned camp (casually), on our very first date. We were all pizza grease stained fingertips clenched together across a vinyl table-top checked red and black, but I knew he was sharing something important, pivotal.

Even after preparing stoically for the eventuality of his summer commitment, the long weeks apart had felt like an itch sitting right under the surface of my skin -- an oncoming sort of prolonged heat-stroke. It was sort of like the time my family took a trip to Storm King and I was assailed by the condition. While they hiked around, admiring various art and music, all I could do was lie on the ground, resisting the urge to scratch my prickly skin and staring up at the great expanse of sky. It was like that, only this time it didn’t go away after calamine lotion and ice-baths.

“It was so good, but I still missed you.” He nuzzled the warm crease of my neck, sucking and nipping the skin lightly.

“I missed you too.” I slid closer, my hand clenched in the fabric of his shirt, nose alongside his ear. The wind blew the hair on the back of my head in lazy abandonment, and the distant smell of frying food mixed with the musky spice of his aftershave.

“Next year you should come.” His other hand roamed lightly, in a dipping nonsensical pattern across my back. “I don’t wanna be without you again.”

I hummed in quiet acquiescence, not giving it much thought. Next summer seemed a million miles away.

“Maybe.” I thought, hazily in that moment, it might be nice to know him like that.

“I want to show you,” he whispered. Our noses touched and our lips found one another’s as the final fireworks exploded brilliantly from above.

Those of us at the cabin early that afternoon cook dinner together, and wait for the rest of the staff who had stayed back a couple more hours to finish closing the site down (at least until cleaning crews could come manage the worst of the damage in a couple weeks). Half-way through cooking up chicken on the stove the fire alarm goes off, blaring haphazardly into the tranquil stillness. For twenty minutes everyone scrambles to find some sort of mechanism to disable it.

I pray we won’t see a fire-truck lumbering down the cottage drive, and am thankfully rewarded when none appears. Ryan gets in touch with Steph, the camp director, and asks if she can get in touch with the owner of the Airbnb via email. Steph tells us the owner is in France, and that we ought to just try and figure out everything by ourselves given that it is the middle of the night there. Steph also says she doesn’t want a bad review against her account for disturbing the woman with dumb questions. So that’s that.

Eventually the alarm shuts itself off. The firefighters don’t come, and we abandon our chicken in favor of congregating on the back porch for a feast of Takis and Doritos.

I sit on Ryan’s lap, and lean back until my hair swings over the back of his shoulder. His face is skewed somewhere to my right, so I evaluate his skin, and the small mole under his chin. His lips are cracked from the sun, and his ear has a small cut, lightly scabbed over, that I haven’t

noticed before. The point of contact on our bodies, where his hands are clasped tightly under the fabric of my shirt, thrums with quiet warmth.

Ryan is, as I have come to expect, the center of the conversation. In real life, *home life*, Ryan is an affable and dorky sort of person. In fact, his natural clunkiness is something that made me like him initially, when he tripped over my bike freshman year. He isn't at the top of the social food chain or the bottom, just... somewhere in the middle. I like that about him.

That's why the first time he kidded about being cool at camp, that very first day of summer, I had thought his self-proclaimed celebrity was an elaborate joke. But as I started working and meeting the rest of staff, I realized that more often than not *my* Ryan was central to almost every piece of gossip or news. At first, it was incomprehensible.

"Did you hear that story Ryan told in the mess this morning?" my co-cabin leader Caitlyn had whispered to the photography instructor while tanning during our off-blocks.

"Susie, is it true that Ryan snores?" A giggling fourteen-year-old from Wellesley 2C had tittered sheepishly as I attempted to explain the basics of macramé.

"Dude! Ryan is *the man*." I caught the line passing by a pair of boys from Navajo 2B on my way back from the bathroom one night.

Strange as it seems, my boyfriend's name pops off anywhere and everywhere, with the type of deference nobody normal gets in real life. One time, when I tried to ask Ryan about it (about halfway through the summer) his eyes grew wide, his whole head thrown back with the force of his laughter.

"I grew up here!" he said, by way of explanation.

Now, as we sit huddled on the back-porch of the cabin, it strikes me again how everyone seems so magnetized to him, like they're the arrow of a compass and he's true north. Girls wait

to hear him speak, and afterward boys slap him accommodatingly on the shoulder or back, rocking us both forward.

Marcie hands me the hose of the hookah, lugged to camp by one of the older staff members so we could smoke on our off time, and I take a long but satisfying pull. The crisp tang of strawberry and mint files my mouth, barely covering the acrid tang of tobacco. The edges of my vision grow blurred, and I let the numbing haziness take hold of my mind. That is why I don't realize for a moment that someone is asking me a question. Ryan unclasps his knotted palms, and slaps me lightly on the hip.

I startle, "hm?" with half-feigned interest.

"I asked what made you want to come work at camp this summer," a junior counselor from across the circle asks. Her head tilts to the side, blonde hair curtaining her crossed ankles and sun-burned cheeks scrunching in consideration. I don't know her well-- she worked with the older girls, while I mostly stayed with the younger ones. I think her name could be Julia, but I'm not sure.

"Well, Ryan and I have been together for a while and he wanted me to... so I did," I answer, my tone (perhaps) somewhat lackluster.

"That's so great," she enthuses, somewhat more excitedly than seems necessary. Her eyes squint under the waning sun, but shoulders hunch over in happiness. "It must have been fun to really see him in his element."

She looks at me, as if we should be sharing some secret.

"Yeah for sure." I hand the hose of the hookah to the next person in the circle, and lean back again onto Ryan's chest.

We went skinny-dipping for our first night off together, about a week into the summer, which was already a week longer than I thought I would be able to make it. Getting out of the car, on the small deserted bank of the large lake, had been like being able to breathe again.

“See, isn’t it beautiful?” Ryan’s eyes were glimmering in quiet pleasure, his arms spread wide open as if to say *see, I told you it was everything*.

I observed his wild curls, and saw how god-like he seemed in his mirth. He was waiting to welcome me and other revelers into his party. It was another of the small things I had noticed since coming here, how he almost seemed lit from within sometimes.

He also was right-- it was spectacularly enchanting, the dappled stillness of the lake, the sun setting over a clear horizon at his back.

“Yeah,” I nodded, feeling suddenly shy at the breadth of his enthusiasm, the depth of his beauty.

At home, and at school, he was prone to bouts of sadness, from which only a kiss or promise of video games might rouse him, or maybe a well-timed call from his mother or Matthew. Here, it was as if he needed nothing more ever than the sun on his cheeks and the wind running through a sail to feel joy. He came towards me, and cupped my face between his hands. Gave me a lingering kiss.

I felt that exhaustion and anxiety bleed from my chest out onto the sand beneath our feet. My fingers crept to the hem of his shirt, and played with a stray thread. After a moment he traveled in the same direction, and with no prompting I allowed him to lift my t-shirt over my head. Goose bumps crept over my skin as I was left in just my light blue bra and denim cut-offs. He moved his hands to mine, where they were still clenched in his clothing. Together we stripped his top off of him.

“I am so happy you are here.” His whispered exclamation held an awe-struck timbre. I blushed.

“I’m so happy to be here with you too,” I whispered back. I was too, no matter how hard it had been that first week.

“I’ve never wanted to share this with anyone before,” he paused. “This part of my life is so special to me.” His thumb tripped the button of my cut-offs, and they fell to the sand. I undid the tie to his basketball shorts, urged them down as well. We kissed again, as he unclasped my bra.

“It means a lot to me,” I murmured. I had meant to tell him, earlier, how hard that first week had been for me and how lonely I had been feeling. Before we came to camp, on the drive up to Maine, Ryan had held my hand and promised I would love being there. He said it would be like standing at the center of my own tiny universe.

Instead, that past week had felt like everything was just bad. But standing in the shadow of his body, stripping him of his boxers, all I could think about was the smell of his skin, and the feeling of his arms around me and how when we were there together it was worth it, always.

When we were both standing against each other, stripped of our clothes, he took my hand in his and we walked to the edge of the lake. I smiled as we waded into the still water. It was cool, and licked against my skin in silent comfort. I closed my eyes and allowed the feeling to surround my body. Ryan’s hand felt even hotter in my grasp. If the whole summer could have been like that, it would have been like the most perfect moment of my life, I thought. On and on forever, extending into infinity.

The cars carrying the last of the summer staff show up late, and immediately a keg is tapped. A jungle-juice-esque concoction sloshes haphazardly in the grip of my red solo cup as I hold it out to Marcie for a chug. After, she pulls away and a red tinge lingers at the edge of her lips. It will likely stain. She brings a joint to her lips, and I watch the end glow a deep and fascinating red as she inhales.

Ryan disappeared with Matthew after he arrived earlier, the two barreling into one another if they've spent years rather than hours without one each other's company. Matthew, Ryan's best friend since their first summer at camp together, was all gap-toothed smiles and whooping shouts as the two collided into one another at their reunion.

"Another summer, dead and gone," Ryan exclaimed, as Matthew thumped him on the back.

"You know, you did pretty ok for a new girl." Marcie is already drunk as a skunk, even though it's only going on ten at night. Her speech is slurred, and the joint looks as if it could fall through her fingertips at any moment. I lean up against the counter beside her, and rescue the weed from her relaxed fingers.

"Oh yeah?" I don't really care what the musings of her drunk mind might have to offer, but Marcie herself has been a bearable acquaintance throughout the summer.

"Yeah, I mean, it's hard to go somewhere new," she pauses, "and besides, Ryan is like everyone's baby bird, so people were bound to hate you no matter what." She giggles.

I lean back, resting my head against the cupboard behind me, and briefly close my eyes. The low-level but persistent throbbing from earlier still lingers at the edge of my consciousness. I try to push out the ache her words cause.

It 's true that most people here have, at different times in the summer, shown me more or less deference depending on their view of mine and Ryan's relationship. It is also true that in some ways that, from the second I swung down from the cab or Ryan's truck in June, some of the girls around never saw me as my own person, worthy of independent judgement or friendship.

"I guess," I settle on saying back to her.

She reaches back towards me, and I deposit the joint back in her seeking hand.

I had taken a small drag, and now the familiar and comforting aroma of it hangs around my body, like the familiar lullaby of teenage expectations.

"Yeah, I mean," she flicks the ash off the end, directly onto the carpeted floor.

"When Ryan told everyone last winter that his girlfriend was gonna work this summer people were upset kind of."

A lump feels lodged in my throat. I knew it was true, but this is the first time someone is saying it to my face.

I shrug, hoping for more, and she continues before I can even prompt her.

"Ryan is pure, like *pure*, and he has been everyone's baby or crush, or friend, for forever and you," she trails off, but gestures around with the joint in a pseudo sweeping motion, "rocked the boat."

I tap my foot against the floor, and wonder (not for the first time), how I have found myself in this situation.

"I just thought it would be good to see," I mumble, perhaps too vaguely.

"Yeah," she turns to me, and locks a gaze on me. I think it is far too steady for someone as drunk as I think she is. "He should have told you though."

One time I heard them whispering about me as I walked from the arts & craft center, towards the mess after hours one night sometime during the third week.

“She’s kind of cold, like a fish,” someone giggled.

I stopped cold, alone in the middle of the pathway and turned toward the entrance to the covered gazebo on my right, where staff went to talk or hook-up after the kids went to bed.

“I mean, I saw them last week together after they scooped the ice cream and honestly I think she has him under her thumb. All she did was order him around.”

Unconsciously, I moved a bit off toward the manicured set of trees where I thought I could hide, but still be able to hear. There was a sinking feeling, and a sort of nauseous tingle was climbing up from the bottom of my stomach to settle in my throat. Ryan had signed us up for that job at Sunday staff meeting, a coveted role because you got to eat as much ice cream as you wanted when everyone else on staff could only eat one bowl.

“Honestly, I think she is probably a bitch. I went to check up on the kids from Bryn Mawr 1B at the arts center, and she seemed pretty impatient with them when someone asked a question about threading the looms.”

I crossed my arms over my clenching stomach. A moment earlier, hiding and listening had seemed like the optimal option (I was prone to eavesdropping by nature), but suddenly I knew I needed to get out of there, and maybe find Ryan or maybe just find somewhere to cry alone by the lake-side where no one would find me.

“I think he just deserves so much better,” I still caught, as I hurried away.

I moved like I was in a dream, or a movie, like everything was happening outside of my self. I felt the wind beating itself lightly against my back, and smelt the distant tang of a campfire.

It was weird, because it felt like all of a sudden I was a different person. In my normal life, my *real* life, I didn't have a problem with being happy or nice or anything. Ryan wasn't the fun one, and I wasn't the stereotype of a bitchy witch those girls seemed to see me as.

This person that I had become over these past weeks, someone who impatiently responded to a small girl wanting to make a friendship bracelet, wasn't a person I recognized.

I decided not to meet Ryan that night and wondered, vaguely, if he would even care that I was gone.

Later, I find Ryan upstairs with Matthew, after depositing Marcie on one of the couches to snooze off a bit of her high. Before I leave her, she reaches up, and runs a clumsy hand over my cheek.

"You know, Suz," she murmurs, "you're actually pretty ok."

I forced myself to laugh, and tried to see the situation as funny, rather than depressing.

"That's comforting," I mutter, pulling her hand away and moving towards the stairs. I climb the stairs, and find Ryan and Matthew in one of the back rooms.

"Suz!" Ryan bellows when I open the door. He, like everyone, seems hammered out of his mind by now. I smile at the sight of him, so radiantly happy and present, in a way that I desperately need. I want to leech the light right off him.

"Hey," Matthew lifts his cup towards me, seemingly more sober. "How's it going?" Matthew lives in Florida, and goes to FSU, so him and Ryan don't see very much of each other

during the year. Still, Matthew is a touchstone for Ryan. Matthew is always around in a way that I don't understand, flying for Ryan's depressive episodes and on the phone for Halo or Call of Duty day or night. It amazes me how close two people who live so far apart can be.

I don't have any friends like that, a fact which sits heavily in my stomach when I am with the two of them. In high school I had friends, good ones, but when I moved to college we lost touch. In school, Ryan is my biggest supporter now, and as the summer has progressed it has become almost painfully obvious just how deeply I rely on the constancy of that element.

"Hi love," I whisper in Ryan's ear, as I sit down in his lap. I see the tips of his ears pinken in response.

I turn towards Matthew. "I'm alright."

He smiles, full of boyish charm and bleached summer blonde waves.

"You totally gone yet, or do you still have some energy left in you?" Matthew is also kind, in a way that the rest of the staff mostly isn't to me. I am grateful for it, knowing that there is another safe port in the storm besides Ryan.

"I'm alright." I nod towards his cup. "You?"

He laughs, "I'm good." He gestures towards Ryan. "Doing better than your boy here, I think."

I turn in Ryan's lap to get a better look at his flushed face. His eyes are red, and slightly unfocused.

"All good?" I ask. He is definitely a bit more drunk than I had first thought, maybe high also.

His mouth stretches into a lopsided grin.

“I’m *great!*” He pushes the word “great” out like he is exhaling a big gust of air, punching it into existence.

“Alright,” I smooth a hand over his forehead, and push some of his curls back. They are slightly damp with sweat, the exertion of heavy drinking in a warm room evident. I bite my lip, and worry it between my teeth. “If I got you some water would you drink it?”

He smiles, but it is lopsided again. “Sure thing baby.”

A bit more than two-thirds through the summer marked the camping trip. Ryan and I hadn’t seen each other in almost a week and a half because our trips had overlapped. For him, a week spent leading twenty thirteen-year-old boys up a mountain inspired invigorative and restorative energy. For me, kayaking with the same number of fifteen-year-olds seemed like the hardest experience of my life.

I got back later than he did, and as we pulled back into camp after our three hour drive I felt an impossible weight lift off my chest. The door of the van, which we on staff called “the space-ship” swung open, and I practically fell to my knees on the smartly trimmed lawn outside the Mess.

I smelled the grass, and closed my eyes, and let the cool damp earth invade my senses for just a moment. After a moment I turned over, and looked up at the sky, bright and blue and stretching on for seemingly ever. Around me were the sound of girls yelling at one another, duffels hitting dirt, and counselors issuing orders. Yet, from my small pocket of earth on the ground it all felt oddly distant.

That was where Ryan found me, some fifteen minutes later. By that time all the kids had gone, making their way to the showers and dinner beyond. Counselors went with them, or to the staff lounges for coffee, but I just couldn't find the energy to pull myself off the ground.

With each passing moment, it seemed as if real life was fading farther and farther into the background. I felt his weight, though, when he tumbled down onto the grass beside me and knew it was him instinctually. We didn't talk for a moment, but I felt his gaze on me.

"Hey." He spoke first.

"Hey." I felt the exhaustion sitting in my bones as if it were a real thing, and the sweat coating my skin like sun-warmed maple syrup. All I wanted was to stay in that moment of comfort, where none of it mattered.

I felt him lean over, fitting his body closer to mine and could see it in my mind's eye, how he was curled like a question mark around my body laid out on the grass. His breath was on my neck and though it was usually comforting, at that moment it made my stomach turn.

"Stop." I squeezed my eyes shut, and turned away, rolling onto my side away from his body.

"Oh babe, come on." He must have thought I was joking, so he rolled closer towards me again in a joking sort of intimacy.

"No. Seriously, stop." I started to push up, my arms like jelly and my mind hazed. The calm serenity of stillness was slipping away like sand through an hourglass.

He paused a moment.

"Is something wrong?" He was still joking, but there was an edge of something else beneath it now.

I sat up and moved to bury my head between my legs, and wondered when the last time I drank water was, or when I had put on sunscreen. I had never passed out before and wondered vaguely if this is what it might feel like. Suddenly, I felt dizzy and hot and cold all at once, and the spot where Ryan's hand found my knee tingled with vicious intention.

"I don't feel good," I managed.

I heard him chuckle, and looked up at him.

For a moment a white hot flash of anger reared itself across my chest, sending pin-pricks of sensation over my body. He stood and offered me a hand.

"It isn't funny."

"Sure." He led me in the direction of the nurse's office. I chose not to respond and focused on my breathing until I was met by the cool kiss of air conditioning.

I looked up when Ryan called out for the nurse. She took one look at me and gestured towards an examining room.

"I'll be a moment," she said by way of greeting. Ryan helped me sit down on the paper covered bench, and moved to sit in a chair across the room.

We were silent for a moment.

"Was it fun at least?" he joked.

I looked at him, narrowed my eyes, and felt that same form of unfocused frustration starting in my fingers, making its way to my throat.

"No." I meant it to be firm, but I think it came out more choked, or hurt sounding.

He blinked, brows furrowed.

"It was terrible," I continued, "literally horrible."

He narrowed his eyes a moment, and then scoffed. “Please, it couldn’t have been that bad...” He trailed off.

I turned my eyes to the ceiling, fighting the sudden urge to cry as the prickling sensation from before morphed into something far deadlier and threatened to close my throat. I gave a small snuffle and heard Ryan rise out of his chair.

“Suz, what is it?” There was the gentle Ryan I knew, and it ached to hear it in that moment. Ryan and I never fought, and I didn’t know what it would be like to try. “Did something happen?”

I didn’t know how to tell him, how my CO’s had looked at me and treated me like a child in my inexperience, or how the kids had pranked me in the middle of the night. How there were whispers, and cold shoulders, and how every moment I was away from him had felt like some prolonged form of testing.

I couldn’t explain to him how much I hated it here, and how every moment felt like a countdown until I had him all to myself again.

I shook my head, and tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. “It’s just hard,” I mumbled.

His hands came up, stroked my sweaty hair back of my forehead.

“What is?” It wouldn’t occur to him, how it was everything and nothing all at once that made me hate being here so much in this place, at the very center of who he was.

I closed my eyes. “I missed you.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, and buried my face in his chest and tried to breathe in and out slowly until the nurse came by to look me over.

The glass is cool in my hand. I fill it up, and down the contents myself before refilling it to bring it back to Ryan upstairs. I walk down the hallway, poised to shoulder open the door where I had left Matthew and Ryan fifteen minutes earlier. It would have taken me less time to get back, but it seemed going down as if everybody I passed was charged with creating some obstacle to my journey.

Couple making out on couches, and girls throwing up in bathrooms. Offers of joints, and cups held out in invitations both open and condescending. There are over fifty staff people, all huddled into this not so large cabin, and in that moment I really felt as though the walls were closing in on us.

I raise my hand, poised to knock on the door, but pause.

“I’m glad you had a good summer, though, despite it all,” Matthew’s voice is hushed and careful. “But man, remember it’s late and you’re wasted.”

“Oh please.” Ryan’s voice echoes, less controlled. “Of course it was fine, I just wish it had been better than fine.”

Slurred words, and a creeping suspicion pinches the nerves where my hand is raised against the door.

“Man come on, don’t say things you’ll regret.” Matthew urges.

“It’s just,” a pause before Ryan let out an indistinguishable breath of frustration. “I wish she could have been happier.”

I know she is talking about me.

A sigh, “It’s all my fault I think.”

“Come on, you know it’s not,” from Matthew.

“Yeah, it is.” Ryan gives a quiet laugh, but it feels and sounds as if there’s something else beneath it. “I knew it was going bad and I wanted her to stay anyway.”

“She made that choice,” Matthew reminds him.

I felt an ache lodge in my chest. All summer I had tried to keep it to myself, but should have known I wouldn’t be able to manage it completely.

“No, she didn’t.” He has a definite quality to his voice now, almost shiny sounding. “I did, because I told her how great it was gonna be. I *promised*.”

I want to go in. I don’t want to keep being this person who hides how they were feeling, and who pushes everything down to make their partner feel responsible for their problems. I want to be a person who can solve her own problems. I push the door open, just a crack, and see Matthew rub his face with his hands in apparent exhaustion.

“Ry, camp has always been good for you. You love it there. You always say it’s like your sanctuary. You couldn’t have known, and it’s not fair for her to expect you to understand emotions you have not felt.”

“Sanctuary,” Ryan murmurs. He looked at Matthew. “This is corny as fuck, but honestly it makes me think that it’s like standing inside the Garden of Eden and never wanting to leave.”

He buries his head in his palms. “That’s what it feels like to be happy here.”

Matthew rolls his eyes, “Careful, your Catholic school is showing.” He sighs, “Also, dude, you’re fucking drunk. Shut up.”

I shake my head, and finally push the door open.

“Finally,” Matthew echoes out loud, in relief.

I move over to Ryan, offer him the water, and force a smile to my lips. “Sorry it took so long.”

Later the house is quiet, and Ryan and I make our way hand in hand to the bed we staked out after arriving earlier that day. It is a bit out of the way, and luckily it has not been found by the rest of the drunk masses. We pull off our clothes and crawl under the sheets, not even bothering to brush our teeth. I lean my head on his chest, and his finger traces light patterns up my side. I wait until his hand stills and wonder at his drunk musings.

In Ryan's life, and in our relationship by extension, *camp* has been this ethereal place of love, comfort and acceptance. It's at the core of who Ryan is. Coming here had been asking a question: *could I know what it is to be at the center of my own universe?* Could I ever even hope to understand?

I think back at all the snide comments and hurtful looks. I think of how cold they had felt and how lonely I was. But then, after a moment I turn over, and examine Ryan in sleep. His features are slack, his lips ever so slightly parted. I remember lying together under the fireworks last year. Swimming naked under a clear blue moon. I think of his palms on my thighs, and breathing out together. It has to be *enough*.

I wonder then, if maybe I already have that answer I was looking for. Even if it wasn't what I thought it was, maybe I only needed some spine to figure it all out. Maybe I had been there the whole time, not outside at all, but right there beside him in the most important ways.