

The Cabin

by Jake Barnes

When I got back from rehab, I cleaned my vacant townhouse. You had taken all your stuff when you moved out. Next I took an airplane to Minneapolis and another one to Fargo. Then I rented a car and drove the fifty miles to a little town in Minnesota. I visited my mother in the nursing home, and then I drove out to our cabin on the lake.

I turned on the water, aired the cabin out, and made up a bed. I plugged in the refrigerator and let it cycle. Then I walked down the steps to the shore. There were forty-three concrete steps. I know; I built them myself.

That evening I sat and watched the sunset. The color of the water changed from blue to black. The sky turned from pink to star-spangled ebony. There was no moon.

In the morning the fog boiled up from the ground as I padded down the steps to the lake in bare feet. I stood at the edge of the water naked as a newborn. Tiny ripples licked my toes. I walked into the water until it was waist deep. Then I scrubbed myself with a bar of Ivory soap.

Later I dragged my canoe down from the lawn to the water's edge. I let it sit there. I would take it out that evening. I liked to paddle to the shallows at the west end of the lake as the sun set and watch the colors change.

That night I slept the sleep of the dead.

The next day, after breakfast, I put on my old sneakers and ran from the cabin to the highway and back. I figured it was about a mile. I ran every day, rain or shine, in those days. I started when I was thirty years old. I had looked in the mirror one day and saw a man who was getting fat.

I was no longer fat. I had lost twenty pounds that summer. I weighed 165 pounds when I got to the rehab. I hadn't weighed that little since I was in high school.

My wife and I used to run together. We ran after she got home from work and on weekends for exercise. We ran 10Ks. Then, earlier that summer, she went one way, and I went another.

At the lake all that seemed like it happened a long time ago. I read, swam, went for walks, went fishing. At night I watched the news on an old black and white portable TV.

At bedtime I would turn off the TV and sit in an old recliner that had belonged to my dad and think about my dead father and my wayward wife. I didn't drink. I was tempted to, but I didn't. I told myself that I didn't want it, didn't need it. That was a comforting lie.

I would lie in bed and think about my past life with more relief than regret, happy to have survived the train wreck, glad to be alive. I fell asleep listening to the shrill lullaby of crickets.

