Camp Lake (excerpt)

by Matthew Temple

In retrospect, we should have been a cult.

We would have killed ourselves in some standoff with the government, probably, or just all died from jealousy. We were too young, though, so we were a church youth group instead. If we had been our parents' age, we would have made the second Jonestown, we'd've been having mass babies and rewriting the Bible like David Koresh.

I think we were more religious than our parents were. They were more sane. They were more restrained. I used to think---at the time---that they would be quite surprised if they found out what was going on on our weekend sleepovers, weekend retreats, week-long mission trips. I was pretty sure at the time they wouldn't be happy about it. With about a decade of reflection, I am now sure that if they had known what we were doing, or if they ever find out, they would be horrified.

My memories of Beth are magical, they're trumped up, they're nothing short of glorious. In my mind, she was the best one of us. Even Maddy was a runt compared to her. Beth's attitude trumped us all. Everything she did is a postcard, everything she said a line of movie dialogue.

I guess I romanticize the crash with Beth. It really wasn't funny. We still had drinks from Zen, I mean when we talked to the cops the spills on our clothes were from long islands. Beth liked to drink the occasional long island ice tea on the boardwalk at a certain establishment. We just threw the cups in the grass on the side of the road. The cops didn't even ask. It's fucked up when you're such

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a regular that when you ask for a to-go cup at a bar...they give you one.

No one was hurt. Beth just dipped across the line, we hit this Jeep head on. We hit them on the corner, though, we just barely hit them, so it wasn't that bad. We slammed back into this Chrysler Sebring with these supersize office bitches in it. They were really mad. The Jeep ran off the road. When we hit the Chrysler it slammed back into the car behind them. Those office bitches were really mad.

Somebody could have died. I know that. It's not that I don't care, but it's just that it's the first car accident I was in, and it wasn't anything like I expected. When everything stopped, and people were looking at Beth and me through the windshield, they were looking at us like we were dead, or they were trying to figure out if we were. Everything did stop there for a minute.

Nothing means anything. That's the unfortunate truth. Meaning happens later. At the time, there is no meaning.

Beth was great. Beth was like having a big sister for someone who didn't have a big sister, or a brother. When she talked to me, she would talk about things that I'd never done. It's nice having someone older; they go out and try things, and report back. Then the mistakes they made, you don't have to.

I could say Maddy killed her sister. I could say that. But that wouldn't be exactly true. And I could say that if Maddy and Beth had never met me that Beth never would have died. And that might be true. I could even say that Beth killed herself. But that wouldn't be right of me to say. It took three people to kill Beth. It took me. It took Maddy. And it took Beth herself. The three of us have this in common: each of us, by doing things differently, could have saved Beth's life. That's a grim fraternity, but that's the one we have.

That wasn't our only fraternity. Our first fraternity was as the children of two families that were friends. Beth and Maddy's parents, and my parents, were friends. We went on vacations together. Beth and Maddy, and me and Suzette, played together as kids. We went camping in the Poconos. We rented a house in Sea Isle City, in New Jersey. And we saw each other every Sunday at church.

My earliest memory of Beth and Maddy and Suzette and I is all of us playing on the beach, our parents out of focus in the background. And, later, showering under a faucet outside the house before we went inside.

And the other thing, I guess, is that we sat in church together. Our parents sat up front. But we sat in the very last row of the sanctuary. That was our pew. We wrote notes to each other on the bulletin and right before the sermon we'd sneak out the back doors, cross the street, and go hang out in the Rite Aid.

We weren't the most pious set of kids.

I mean we used to steal horoscopes from the Rite Aid. The girls would try on makeup. I would steal lipstick for Maddy (one of the only times I've ever stolen anything). Beth would steal horoscopes---the long rolly kind. Then we'd lean around in the parking lot behind the church and smoke and the girls would put on makeup and Beth would read our horoscopes. She was an Aquarius, which makes sense; most people who are really really into astrology are Aquarians.
Sea Isle City was the good days. Just me and her at the bar, we'd get whole crab---it wasn't about the crab, Beth and Maddy and Suzette and I used to catch our own crab. Depending on the geography, we'd catch crayfish, crab, hunt mushrooms, Beth and I used to eat cicadas together, and certain types of grasshoppers. That's the kind of fun we had; we were real hands-on. But we'd

have crab at Zen's, too, plain, in a bowl, with butter. It was the same stuff we caught on the beach. Then Beth would take her mirror out of her purse, and she'd take this plastic canister that looked like something from a chemistry lab, and she'd go to the bathroom. Her mirror folded. It was white and pink plastic with Hello Kitty on it. When she came back from the bathroom she always seemed refreshed.

Being in the car with Beth was a dangerous thing. The only really bad car accident I've been in was when Beth was driving.

Beth would do things like floor it in a Walmart parking lot. If old ladies were crossing with their groceries, Beth would whisper, ``Let's gun,'' and she'd hit the gas, weaving between them. This combination of nihilism and exuberance can only exist in a sixteen-year-old. You can't be that excited about death unless you've never experienced it. On our drives from Sea Isle City to Ocean City to get crab and drink at Zen, Beth would drive really fast. *Hella fast*, she would say. It was like our fires when we went camping: they were *pyro hot*. You just knew we were going to kill somebody.

If I could have kissed Beth while she was driving I would have. I would have stopped the car on Highway 619, moved into the driver's seat with her, pushed her hair out of her face, and then...I don't know...I always imagine this like it's in a movie. I'd probably have a camera moving across the highway, on a crane, and Beth's hair would be blowing not because of natural sea breezes, but from gas-powered fans sitting right outside the frame. We'd shoot it in slow motion. It would be incredibly hot. Right before things went too far, someone would yell ``cut.'' I wouldn't have to figure out what to do after that. We'd just have the first six seconds of our kiss, as many times as it took to get it right.

My first kiss was directed by Roman Polanski. If I had it to do over, my first kiss would be directed by Michael Bay.

I wish Beth was still here. If she was, I'd get in the car with her and she could drive as fast as she wanted. I wouldn't say a thing.