

Lake Cabin

William Cass



Lake Cabin

Ellen sat listening to her father's lawyer read his will. The only surprising thing was where he wanted his ashes spread: tossed at sunset from the end of the dock at the lake cabin that had been her grandparents on her mother's side. Ellen's parents had both been teachers, and their family had gone there together for most of every summer and parts of winter vacations until they divorced when she was

nine. More than forty years had passed since then, and her father hadn't ever been back to the lake. While the lawyer read on, she circled around this surprise. He'd revised other things in the will—he'd told her as much—so she was uncertain. Had he overlooked changing the wishes about his ashes after the divorce, or was the wish intentional?

It took Ellen a few weeks afterwards to take care of his affairs: close accounts, terminate the lease on his apartment, sell his furniture and car, donate clothes. She boxed up a few of his personal belongings, including the urn that held his ashes, closed the door of his apartment for the last time, and drove across the floating bridge from Seattle to her own house on the eastside of Lake Washington. She stored the box in her basement and didn't think much about the ashes until her mother called and asked her to come over to the lake for the upcoming Memorial Day weekend.

After work that Friday, Ellen packed a duffel bag with some clothes and the urn inside and started the drive across the state. Her mother had driven over with her stepfather, Don, from their own home in Seattle a couple of days earlier. Ellen drove without the radio on up over the pass and out to the gorge. She passed the spot just beyond the Columbia River where her younger, severely-disabled brother, Ben, once had his trach pop out during one of their family trips to the lake. He was about three at the time and his head lolled out of the brace on his specialized car seat. Her father and mother couldn't get it back in, so they rushed him to the hospital in Moses Lake. She remembered her mother shaking her head with her arms folded and shrugging off her father's embrace as she stared out the window in the ER waiting room.

As evening descended, I-90 straightened towards Spokane through long stretches of wide, low fields. Every now and then, Ellen could make out wheeled irrigation pipes standing still in the moonlight; as a girl, she'd loved watching them crawl along in those fields shooting graceful arcs of water. She smiled to see streamers still strung to some of the fences along the roadside identifying alfalfa, potatoes, wheat, canola, peas. She did the same as she passed road signs for those tiny towns whose names always delighted them when she was young, but which they never stopped to see: Schrag, Fishtrap, Tokio, Rodna. She thought of the songs they'd always sung as they drove, reached over to her duffel bag on the passenger seat and felt for the urn through the fabric.

After Spokane, she headed up along the panhandle on Highway 2, crossed over the sprawling Pend Oreille River where it separated Washington and Idaho, then drove a little further east into Priest River where she stopped for gas. As she filled her car, she looked across the road at the old grocery store where she knew her mother and Don had stocked up before the final leg to the cabin and at the diner where her father had always bought her a milkshake after they'd gone shopping when she was a girl. She looked up at the blanket of stars piercing the night sky and thought of lying on her back with him on the dock in their sleeping bags all those times searching for constellations.

She made the rest of the drive to Priest Lake in less than an hour and pulled into a spot next to her mother's SUV behind the log cabin just after ten. A chorus of cicadas and crickets surrounded her as she climbed out of the car. The lake sat wide and shimmering silver-white with moon beyond the cabin through the trees. She stood in the coolness for a moment scanning her eyes across it before carrying her bag up onto the back step, knocking, and opening the door. A note was tacked to the entryway saying her mother and Don had gone to bed. She turned lights out on her way to the bedroom she'd used since she was little, undressed, and got into the lower bunk. Her brother had used that bunk before he passed away a year before her parents divorced. A moonbeam lit the spot at the end of the bed where his wheelchair had been tucked each night after their father tucked them in.

*

Her mother was already drinking coffee on the front patio when she got up the next morning. Ellen joined her there with a mug of her own. They embraced, and then sat in the long shadows of the tall spruce trees and tamaracks that surrounded the cabin down to the short beach and the dock.

"Drive over okay?" her mother asked.

"Yes," Ellen said. "Easy."

"Not many people here yet this early in the season."

They both wore big cardigans against the morning's chill and Ellen tugged hers close. "Don up?"

"On his walk."

Ellen nodded. Don was fifteen years older than her mother, but still tried to walk every morning and evening. From high up in the trees—jays and ravens—called back and forth. They each sipped from their steaming mugs.

"I'm sorry about your dad."

Ellen nodded.

"Heart attack, then."

"That's what I was told."

"At least it was quick. Well, I hope it was." She paused. "He was a good man." Their eyes held until she added, "He was."

"Yeah." Ellen pursed her lips and looked out over the lake. It sat perfectly still.

"Work all right?"

"Same, you know."

"I'm retiring," her mother said suddenly. "End of the school year."

Ellen looked over at her and watched a small smile crease her lips. Her mother had recently stopped coloring her hair, she'd explained, so she wouldn't look so much younger than Don. She'd told Ellen that she was embracing her age; she'd just turned sixty earlier that spring. Ellen's father had been a decade older.

"Good for you," Ellen said. "What will you do?"

Her mother shrugged. "Not work."

The mudroom door creaked open, footsteps crossed the floorboards, and Don pushed through the screen door onto the patio. It had been six months since Ellen had last seen him, and he seemed more stooped, his long white beard bushier, the tufts of hair left above his ears nearly gone. His tremble was more pronounced. He pushed his big glasses up on his nose and said to Ellen, "Hey, you." He reached out his bony hand, and she squeezed it. Then he looked at her mother and smiled. "Let me get you some more coffee, my love," he said.

He took her mug, and Ellen watched him open the screen door and go back into the darkened interior with it. The door yawned slowly shut behind him.

*

After breakfast, Ellen went for a walk down the path towards Hunt Creek. She stopped at the Olson's cabin, still boarded up from the long winter, and looked at the narrow stream that led from their spring down to the lake. She and her father had floated tiny plastic boats down it when she was hardly more than a toddler; they'd fashioned figures from twigs to place on them while she created tales about the perils that awaited those passengers on their waterway journeys. A little further along, she paused near the big spruce where the two of them had come upon a deer with her newborn doe early one morning after an all-night snowstorm; there had been a depression in the bottom of the trunk that had provided some protection against the storm and left a little bed of pine needles amid the expanse of snow. Ellen crossed the bridge over the creek, headed up the long gravel drive. She passed the spot where they'd walked on early mornings to pick wildflowers for her mother; Ben's genetic syndrome kept him small enough that he could usually accompany them until the end in a child carrier on her father's back. At the top of the drive, she looked over the big spread of huckleberry bushes where they'd picked together most afternoons after the ripening, but the berries were only tiny green knots in late May.

On the way back to the cabin, she came across the clearing where the two of them had often set up their easels and painted watercolors of the lake, the boats, the islands, the distant shore at the foot of the tall mountains of the Selkirk Range heading off towards the Canadian border. Green in the foreground, growing blacker in the distance. Her heart slowed, filled with ache, as it always did when she was there.

*

A couple of hours later, Don hobbled down to the dock and readied the motorboat for a ride. He had it idling with the buoys drawn up when Ellen and her mother climbed aboard. "You better pull us away," he said to her mother.

Ellen took a seat at the stern and watched their backs in the bow. Don stood next to her mother adjusting his hearing aid as she eased the boat away from the dock. He was as much shorter than her mother as her father had been taller. She thought back to first meeting Don shortly after her mother left all those years ago; Ellen only knew at the time that he had been her yoga instructor in the classes she'd begun taking during Ben's long admittance in the convalescent hospital for medically fragile children before dying. She and her mother had driven to a park to meet him, and she remembered

them walking towards him holding hands and the chill that spread over her when he kissed her mother after they reached him.

Don took the wheel when they were into the lake and motored them slowly perhaps fifty yards out and parallel to the shore up towards Indian Creek. Ellen noted the distinctive features of each cabin along the way that were ingrained in her memory: colors, flagpoles and weather vanes, styles of docks and porches and boathouses, swaths of beach. At the narrows, Ellen watched the old stone homestead pass on the little island to the left and the creek, high now with winter runoff, that fed it from the shore on the other side. Back in the open water, Don increased speed, and they crossed the wide part of the lake, then slowed again when they got to Kalispell Island where her father had helped her catch her first fish.

Her mother resumed the wheel and decreased speed further as they approached the fueling dock at Hill's Resort, then idled completely when she edged close to an open slip. Ellen dropped both buoys, hopped onto the dock, tied off each end, and watched her mother help Don up onto the fabricated wood planks. He held her elbow as they walked up the dock and across the green lawn through the back entrance to the lodge. No one was at the bar or behind it, and only a few people sat at the tables in the sun-filled restaurant that fronted the western shore. They went into the gift shop, bought some packages of smoked trout from the cooler, and returned the way they'd come. Ellen looked at the badminton net set up on the grass just below the restaurant windows where she and her father had sometimes played.

Don motored them around the south end of Four Mile Island through the smooth water where her father had pulled Ellen and other kids who summered along their shore on inner tubes when she was very small, and then later, on water skis for the first time the summer before her mother left. She remembered him pumping his fist when she stayed up wobbling, glancing behind him as he drove the boat, teasing the throttle so that it was just right for her to stay balanced. She remembered her mother holding Ben on her lap in the back of the boat that day, smiling and giving her a thumbs-up. It was a hot afternoon, Ellen recalled, full of white light, and her father's bare shoulders were brown from the sun, the muscles there taut and strained as he turned back and forth with excitement for her.

*

When they'd finished lunch, Don napped while Ellen and her mother read in lounge chairs on the dock. It made its regular slow rock when a passing boat's wake reached it. The day had warmed, but they kept their sweaters on against the breeze. Wisps of clouds bracketed the top of Sundance Peak to the southeast, but otherwise the sky was eggshell blue. Except for the occasional boat or bird calling, it was quiet, still. At one point, a family of ducks swam by.

About four o'clock, her mother went up to the cabin, and Ellen moved to the mesh hammock suspended from two pilings at the shorter cross dock. She left her book on the lounge chair and rocked herself slowly with one bare foot at the end of the dock. She thought about the pictures she'd seen of her mother and father's marriage on that same spot. She glanced at the canoe tied up next to her and thought about paddling out in it with her father and Ben after dinner, her brother in a too-big life vest leaning against her father's shins in back, and she in the front, as they sang Ben's bedtime songs softly to him and the sun made its final descent. Her father had taught her to swim in the little inlet formed by the two docks, standing chest deep in the water with his hands

outstretched while she jumped towards him from the dock with floaties on her upper arms; she'd hit the water and dogpaddle towards his waiting grasp, spitting water and blinking with pride as he hugged her to him. She thought about the period after Ben's death when their house in Seattle stayed mostly silent, and she and her mother would get into her parents' big bed almost immediately after dinner each night. Her mother would read aloud to her until they both fell asleep while her father watched television in the sunroom; sometimes she'd awaken to the sound of him opening the liquor cabinet quietly in the living room, hear the pouring, hear the cabinet door softly close, hear him walk back to the sunroom. Most nights she was only vaguely aware when he finally came into the room himself and carried her to her own bed.

*

Later, she helped her mother make dinner while Don watched the evening news with the volume high. They each sipped wine as they worked.

"His hearing about the same?" Ellen asked.

"No, getting worse. I give up sometimes saying things to him."

"Shucks."

"And he gets up to pee about five times a night now. With that and his snoring, I can hardly sleep." She took a swallow of wine.

"No fun getting older, I guess."

Her mother chuckled. "You've got that right."

They were standing at the counter cutting ingredients for salad. The late afternoon light came dustily through the window that faced the water.

Ellen asked, "Have you been over here lately?"

"Nah. Not since you were here last. Don's not much for it. Never has been." She dropped a handful of chopped carrots into the big bowl they were sharing, looked out the window, took another sip from her glass. "Truth is it's never been quite the same coming here since Ben passed, since your father and I split. If I'm to be entirely honest, I think this place was always more special to your dad than me."

Ellen stopped chopping and watched her mother gaze out the window towards the dock. She thought about finding her father gazing in a similar manner out their living room window the afternoon she came home from school and he told her that her mother had left; afterwards, they'd both begun to cry.

*

That night, she heard Don get up several times and shuffle down the hall to the bathroom, heard the starts and stops of his weak urine stream, heard the farts that sometimes accompanied his efforts. Each time afterwards, it took her a while to get back to sleep, her thoughts drifting to the past. She thought of being a flower girl in their wedding, of watching the pain on her father's face when Don stood up to give a toast at her wedding reception, of discovering her husband's infidelity before her own marriage ended. She thought of other things, too: of having no children of her own, of her father's death being a step closer to the end of their fractured family, of what her mother might do with her remaining years, of what she might do with hers.

*

They busied themselves separately for most of the next day. By mid-afternoon, the sky had begun darkening, and the first distant lightning and thunder came from the north not long afterwards. More followed in quickening succession. The light outside turned coal-like, and the temperature suddenly dropped. The three of them gathered in front of the big window facing the lake as a flash of lightning lit its surface along with crash of thunder like barrels rolling down a nearby flight of stairs. They heard the first splats of rain on the tin roof only seconds later and watched it bounce off the patio pavers and begin pocking the lake. The rain quickly became a downpour that seemed unleashed.

"My," her mother whispered.

They stood side by side, Don in the middle, watching the torrent for several more minutes. Then as quickly as it had come on, it diminished and was done. Another flash of lightning split the sky over Cavanaugh Bay, followed by a crackle and tumble of thunder, and they watched the dark sheaf of clouds hurry south and west towards Spokane. Sunlight resumed, filtering through the treetops and steaming the pavers a little as the temperature rose again.

"I love a good afternoon storm here," Ellen said.

Her mother nodded. "Well, it's almost five. I'll get some of that smoked trout and crackers. Ellen, you dry off the patio chairs. Don, you pour the wine."

Ellen went into the mudroom and opened the cupboard there that held cleaning supplies. She lifted out a pile of old towels and paused when she saw a small upside-down frame underneath. She set the towels down on a bench and turned over the frame. It held a photograph of her mother, father, Ben, and her standing on the dock squinting and smiling into the sun. By her size and Ben's, Ellen figured it to be not long before his death. Her mother and father had their arms around each other; her mother held the headrest on Ben's wheelchair, and her father had his other hand on Ellen's shoulder. Ellen brushed dust off the frame's glass. Her heart had quickened. She thought again, as she had many times over the years, of how little she knew about the reasons behind their marriage failing. Only once had she heard her mother speak about it, shortly after she'd left, when Ellen overheard her talking with one of her aunts on the phone. She remembered snippets of what her mother said: that her father had grown distant, that they shared nothing anymore, that she and Don communicated on another level. Her aunt must have said something about Ben then because after a pause, her mother replied, "Even before he died."

Ellen replaced the frame where it had been and covered it with a towel. She'd stored another like it in the box of her father's belongings that she'd taken from his apartment. It had always stood on the bureau in his bedroom next to a potted plant. She thought about him never remarrying; as far as she knew, he'd never even dated anyone in all the years after the divorce.

The three of them sat on the patio while the clouds continued to dissipate and the air took on that after-rain freshness. Don did most of the talking, trying to convince Ellen's mother that he was strong enough to take a river cruise in Europe after she retired. While he talked, Ellen watched the dripping branches nod and glisten in the lowering sun. Jasmine next to the rope swing her father had hung for her wafted a sweet fragrance. A logging truck rumbled by up on the road.

They were quiet after a while and just sat looking out over the lake. Her mother asked, "When are you heading back tomorrow?"

"Early. Have to go into the office for a little while. You?"

"Noonish." Her mother shrugged and glanced at Don. "Or thereabouts."

Evening had begun to fall when she found herself alone, and it was then that she went to her bedroom, took the urn from her bag, and carried it down to the end of the dock. A few lingering clouds the color of a bruise hugged the tips of the Selkirk's to the south, and the sun was still a little above the mountains across the lake. Ellen stood blinking at the urn. Forty years, she thought. Forty years of life spent, of things that could be held onto and those that couldn't.

William Cass has had over a hundred short stories appear in a variety of literary magazines such as *December*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Conium Review*. Recently, he was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*. A former resident of the Northwest, he currently lives in San Diego, California.



