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I MET CARMEN WHEN I wasn't well and had gone to the lake for the second time. The first time I went was ten years ago, when I still thought life would bring me things. Life had seemed to bring other people things, and I thought it might bring them to me. I didn't know it was too late for all that, even though I was still very young.

I met Dwain in the expat bars, and it was through Dwain that I met Carmen. Carmen had lived at the lake all her life. When I first met her, she seemed like a queen. She was haughty and she was arrogant and she had the most beautiful hair. Later on, I saw her differently, but that was how she seemed when we first met.

I went to the lake because my life in New York hadn't worked out, and my life before that hadn't worked either. On the outside I seemed to be functioning well, but inside I had the feeling that nothing had meaning and also that everything was fake. Even the waves of the sea looked fake. I knew the waves of the sea were

real, but when I looked at them from the side of the boat on the way home from a camping trip, they looked fake, as though we were on a movie set and the sea was a giant swimming pool and the sun was electric light. Nothing seemed real, and to feel real, I imagined, was the fundamental thing, the thing you needed before anything else can begin. I thought if I was going to fix my life, I would need to get to where things felt real.

Things had not been good. They had never really been good, but for a long time I had believed that things would get better if I really tried, as though life was a fight that you could actually win. I found there was nothing left to try. I was sick of it. I was sick the way you feel when you have eaten too much and then arrive at a place where they offer you food, which you don't want but it would be rude to refuse.

I had moved to New York five years before. New York was the furthest place I could find from my hometown in north-east Victoria, not in distance, but in its largeness, which I thought might cover me. I moved there and I made a life and I did all the usual things. I went to work. I did the grocery shopping. I cleaned my apartment on Saturday mornings with the windows open to the street. I played the same CDs over and over again. On the outside, I lived a normal life. But, inside, life didn't make sense to me.

I started with the lists in the fifth year I was there. I did it as an exercise. I imagined I was dying, and I made lists of what I would do. I made lists for different periods of time, if I had just one day left, one month, or one year. I tried five years too, but that was

diffuse and too far away to get anything good. Each morning before work I went to a diner and drank coffee and worked on my lists. I wrote throughout autumn in the wild rains when wet leaves stuck to the windowpanes. Winter came and I wrote and still I found nothing that I wanted to do. But the trying had given a rhythm to my days. I got up early and I dressed quickly now; I had somewhere to be.

Life seemed to be mainly about love, about love and staying alive. I did not love anyone back then, but I remembered that, once, I had loved a place. I remembered the lake, that it existed still, that I had been there, that I could go back again. I had loved the lake and I had not really loved anything since. That was part of how I wasn't well.

I had loved the lake. I could go back. Leaving was easy. Staying was harder, but I could deal with that later. That's what I was thinking when I decided to go back.

I gave notice on my apartment. I quit my job. I called a thrift store and they collected my furniture. I booked a flight for the end of the month. I lived on the floor, sleeping on a camping mat. Each day, I made trips to the thrift store to donate a bag of things. Finally, everything that I owned fit in a single bag.

In the last few weeks before I left, spring had started to arrive. I could feel my life ahead of me. I could smell the coolness of the lake as I walked the concrete streets. Around me there were people shouting and there were traffic jams and loud cars, and all I could hear was the sound of waves falling on the shore like a metronome.

And, like that, I went back. The thought crossed my mind that it might be a mistake. But it might also be right.
