

Vuotjärvi

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THE BEAUTIFUL INDIFFERENCE
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She stood on the pontoon and watched him swim out. His head above the lake surface grew smaller and more distant. After a while he turned and looked to the shore. His face was white and featureless. It eclipsed as he turned away again and continued swimming. The water was sorrel-coloured, with ruddy patches where the sun lit its depth. When they'd arrived they had knelt on the wooden structure and examined cupped handfuls, trying to discern what its suspension of particles or dye might be. Peat perhaps. Some kind of mineral. The rich silt of the lake bed. Evergreens lined the edge of the glinting mass. Beyond was a vast Scandinavian sky that had, for the duration of their stay, failed to shed its light completely at night. The humidity had surprised them, this far north. The air was glutinous. The meadow grass and the barks glistened. Locals complained that it was the worst year ever for mosquitoes. Spring conditions had suited the larvae. They were everywhere now, whining in the air, their legs floating long and dusty behind them. In the outhouse there

was no escaping. They seemed to rise invisibly from the walls, from the chaff and sawdust covering the silage container below the hole. She had rows of bites along her ankle bones, legs and arms. Each bite was raised into a welt, but was not itchy.

Though there was electricity at the cottage, they had been carrying buckets of the orange water up to wash plates and cups. A natural well was being directed to the house, they had been informed, but the plumbing was not yet complete. Two other cottages were tucked into the strong greenery along the shoreline, painted red, shingled, their plots impeccable. There was a pleasing folk-art look about them. Their inhabitants had not been seen much. Wood smoke curled from the sauna sheds in the early evening. The second night, while they'd been standing at the water's edge observing the start of a vague, ineffectual sunset, two forms had exited the nearest shed, made their way along a scythed path, and entered the lake. She had waved to them. The Finnish neighbours had waved back, then swum round a pine-covered promontory, out of sight. There was a correctness here, a sensual formality, which she liked very much. *You must always take your shoes off inside*, the friend whose cousin had lent the cottage had said to them. *It's a particular thing*. Since arriving

they had worn no shoes at all. Nor much clothing. The grass around the cottage had been softened by a rainstorm. She had woken during the first night to the purring of rain on the cottage roof.

Under her feet, against the tambour of pontoon planks, the lake slapped and knocked. He was three hundred yards out or so. She could see that he was swimming breaststroke. His feet and hands barely broke the surface. He did not turn round again and his movements were slow and regular. His head grew smaller. He had decided to swim to an island in the middle of the lake and back again. It was perhaps a mile and a half altogether. He was a strong swimmer and she was not concerned. At home he went a long way up the rivers. She did not want to join him. She liked swimming, but not any great distance. She was happy to float on her back, her head submerged, listening to the somatic echo. Or she would crouch and unfold in the water, crouch and unfold. Or look down at her hands – two moon-white creatures in the rippling copper.

The lake was deep, but it was not cold. They had already rowed out in the little boat belonging to the cottage and dropped anchor and gone in where the shadows were expansive, the bottom no more than a black imagining. The temperature seemed almost indistinguishable from that of her blood, a degree

or two cooler. He had held her waist as they kicked their legs, bringing her gently to him. His shoulders under the surface looked stained, tones of surgical disinfectant. His face was wet. There was a taste of iron when they kissed. Suddenly she had become breathless, from exertion, from the eroticism of their bodies drifting together, the memory of that morning's lovemaking, on their sides, discovering the fit of him behind her, that she should lean away slightly and tip her pelvis as if pouring water from it. That feeling of rapture, of flood, like being suspended.

Her fears had begun to coalesce. The lake depth was unknown and the pressure against her limbs was a trick: it felt no greater than in the shallows. Underneath was vestigial territory. Rotting vegetation. Benthic silence. The scale of her body in this place was terribly wrong. Something was reaching up, pulling down. Urgency to get out made her kick away to the boat, haul against the side and scramble over its rim. Once inside she had rested her head on the oarlock, breathing away the panic, amazed by the direness of the impulse. *Are you OK?* he'd called. *Oh God, for some reason I thought I should feel imperilled, and then I did,* she said. *What an idiot. Look at you. Calm as anything in there.* He acted out a frantic drowning, and she laughed.

She had rowed the boat back to the cottage while he lay against the prow and sunbathed, getting used to the rotation of the long thin oars, the lunge and drag. Soon the vessel began to skim through the water, and was easier to steer. They'd beached the boat, pulling it high up into the trees and looping the rope around a trunk, taking the bung out so the hull wouldn't fill if it rained again. Then they'd walked through the meadow to the cottage, through blooms of airborne pollen and ferrying insects, their shoulders sunburnt, hungry, in no rush to eat. The midday sky was an immense shale. When she lifted her arm her skin smelled of the lake, almost sexual, eel-like. All she had been able to think about was having him move behind her again, fractionally, his hand on her hip, until it was too much, or not enough, and he had to turn her against the bed, rest his weight on her, take hold of her neck, her hair, move harder.

A eucalypt scent. Pine resin. Spruce. The reeds behind her rustled. A breeze combed the lake surface, left it smooth for a moment, then came again. The pontoon rose and sank, instinctively, like a diaphragm. The pages of the book he had left next to his sunglasses and camera flickered. She picked it up. It was a speculative text about humanity's chances of

extinction within the century. All the ways it might happen. Plague. Bio-terror. Asteroid impact. *Finland is the right place to read a book like this*, he'd joked as he began it on the plane. *They're such great survivalists. There's some kind of seed bank there, just in case we mess everything up. I think that's in Norway*, she had said. They had read dreadful sections out to each other over the last few days. *The twelve-day incubation period for smallpox means it could spread globally before an epidemic is declared, or contained. Aerosolising sarin is the terrorist's main challenge*. Most unpredictable were the colliders, the super-viruses, strangelets. Dark matter.

She rocked up on her toes and strained to see his head, which was now a tiny brown spot, difficult to identify between the onshore waves. He must be two-thirds of the way to the island. Soon she would see him climb the rocky skirt in front of the huddle of trees, and stand upright. Even at this distance, even minute, she would surely see him, once he was out. Her eyesight was good. He was tall. And he was naked. His pale form would contrast with the dark green hub of the island. He would probably rest for a time then set off back. She put the book down, under the camera.

He had decided to make the swim after they'd taken a sauna. The sauna hut was traditional in design, beautifully crafted. He'd prepared it, checked the tank, cleared away the old ashes and built a new fire under the stones, as instructed by the cousin. They had waited for the heat to intensify, then lain on the benches in the cedary fug, listening to the interior wood panelling click and creak. The heat was so dense they were immobilised, robbed of energy. They became soaked with perspiration, reaching out to touch each other with extreme effort. Finally, the situation felt forced, the environment unendurable. They bathed in the lake afterwards, and emerged refreshed. Then he said he would try for the island. *I think it'll take about forty-five minutes, or an hour. Photograph me coming back victorious*.

She could no longer see him in the water so she kept her eyes on the spot where she thought he would probably get out. The foliage mossed together the more she looked. Birds circled over the lake. A bird was calling nearby, within the forest, the notes hollow and looping, a song that did not seem diurnal. Now that she could no longer see him it was hard to remain focused. Her mind wandered. She thought

about his sounds of arousal, surprise and relief as the soft obstruction yielded, finding a way inside, acute pleasure in those wet recurring motions, the stunned intervals. They were now experts in the act, which was a series of steady, humid acts. He was becoming more vocal. He would speak to her of what he desired. His assertions, his voice, worked her as if she were being touched. The world before and after was incredibly vivid.

The bird in the forest let up. The fluttering in her chest stopped.

She thought about the blue Arabia crockery they had seen in the antique market by the quay in Helsinki. The city's Russian architecture: the Uspenski cathedral with its golden domes and the sentinelled railway station. The quiet Finnish underlay, restraint and elegance, design that would always oppose corruption. Helsinki was attractive, a clean blend of modern and historic. It lacked people. The drive to the cottage had taken six hours, the arboreal view varying only slightly once outside the city. Road signs were impossible. It was a language so unexported the pronunciation could not even be guessed. It sounded similar to and was possibly rooted in the oldest human language, a cross-continental language, she had read. There were sixty thousand lakes.

Theirs was called Vuotjärvi. It was situated between two bigger lakes, towards the dialect of Savo. The GPS unit had led them off the motorway, down minor roads, then along seventeen kilometres of gravel track, past glimmers of water, almost to their destination. The lane to the cottage was overgrown, its entrance easily missed. They had found the place by calling the owner on her mobile phone, hearing her real voice behind the froth of bushes, and walking towards it. Anna Sutela was delighted to meet them and to lend the cottage. It was older than most of the lake cottages. The previous owner had seen a wolf in the garden. She had prepared a salad for their supper and would eat with them before driving back to Kuopio.

He had been gone forty-five minutes, probably more. The lake had a dark tint to its edges, underneath the tree line. There were small white bars at its centre where the wind was freer. Or a current was moving, flows between the two larger lakes. Time had seemed irrelevant, their circadian rhythms were gone, yesterday they had eaten at midnight, but it was now definitely evening. She searched the little island for his intrusive shape. Perhaps he had arrived and was walking its circumference. If he was still swimming there it meant the exercise was not as

easy as anticipated. If he was still swimming there he would need more stamina.

The sky and the lake transferred topical yellow patches between each other. Such eerie empty beauty. She began to feel a little uncomfortable. She should have been watching more carefully, consistently. That was really her only duty. She strained her eyes. There was no sign of him. There was no point calling his name, the distance was too great, and the neighbouring Finns might hear and think her disturbance improper. She stepped to the edge of the pontoon, as if those few extra inches might provide enough clarity to locate him. The wooden structure sank slightly and water lapped across her toes. She stepped back, turned, walked off the pontoon and made her way round the little beach above which the boat was moored. She began to unknot the line tied around the tree trunk.

The sensible thing was to row out. Not because she imagined he was in trouble, just in case. He might be struggling. He might have cramp and be treading water, or be floating in the recovery position. Perhaps he was sitting on the island, tired, having underestimated. Or he might already be swimming back to the cottage and she could accompany him, companionably, encourage him if he was flag-

ging, make sure he was really all right and not in any jeopardy. She should have rowed alongside him from the beginning, not because she thought he wouldn't make it, she did think he would make it, but because the boat would be a handy back-up, eroding none of his achievement, simply ensuring the safety of the swim. Why hadn't she gone? Why hadn't she acted more responsibly? She had been too blasé about the whole thing. The possibility of disaster had not really occurred to her, not in a valid way, a way to make her officiously oversee the exercise. Suppose he was in difficulty, now, beyond her field of vision, somewhere in the water.

She tugged at the mooring. He had knotted the rope earlier that day. The knot looked slack but seemed very stiff and loosened out of its synthetic coils and links only a millimetre or two. Her fingers felt too weak for the operation. This was not supposed to be the hard part. The hard part would be moving the boat from its position up the bank where they had dragged it together, down onto the beach and into the lake. She became frustrated and began to yank at both ends of the line, without regard for its undoing. A horrible feeling was trickling into her. A sense that as she fought, uselessly, he was vanishing. *Fucking thing. Come on.* A small, aggravated cry

left her. She stopped for a moment and took hold of herself. She looked at the inelaborate shape in her hands. Then she pushed the standing end of the cord through the tuck. The knot released, and the plastic length buzzed as she pulled it loose. She slid the rope from the trunk and threw it into the boat.

The boat was moulded fibreglass rather than wood, but it had still felt heavy when they'd moved it out of the water before. She was uncertain about managing now, alone, even in reverse, with a down-slope. She had not put on shoes. Her shoes were in the porch of the cottage, on the other side of the meadow, too far away and timewasting to retrieve. She tried not to notice how vulnerable her feet felt. She had on a thin cotton shirt, bikini bottoms. She took a breath, leaned against the prow of the boat and pushed. Her feet dug into the ground. Plush earth, twigs and thistles, pebbles where the bank became beach. The vessel resisted, shunted forward a notch or two, then stuck. She pushed again, got traction, gathered momentum. The boat ground across the stony apron of the beach and slid into the water. The first time she had launched a boat. The first stage in a successful rescue, a solo rescue. Already a positive retrospective was forming in her mind. How it might later be told. She felt a source of energy

packed within herself. And adrenalin, like a lit taper.

She lifted an oar, steadied it, fitted the metal ball on its underside into the oarlock, then did the same on the other side. She waded the boat out to thigh level, climbed in, took her position on the seat and pulled with her right arm to turn the boat. She remembered the action. Now it was easy. Now it was simply speed, how fast she could row. She turned and looked at the island, imagined her trajectory, began to pull on the oars. The oars, charming and narrow and traditional when they had tested the boat initially, now seemed impractical. She worked her shoulders hard, exaggerating the strokes, improving them. The water was uniform. Though the boat seemed not to be moving locally she was in fact passing new sections of shore, passing the cottage of the neighbouring Finns and noticing, because of the new angle, their electric-green lawn and jetty with bathing steps, passing the promontory, its congestion of trees, its rocks stepping down towards the glistening surface, passing away from the land. Then she was in open water.

She kept pulling hard. Her grip on the oars was firm. Tenderness to her palms, which would mean blisters. She leaned forward, pushed back. She was making good time. It was not very long since she had

lost sight of him. The oarlocks rotated. The paddles washed. She pushed away the image of a sallow indistinct form drifting under the surface. She would find him. He would be stranded on the island. He would be pleased to see her. Or, if he was in difficulty in the water, the sight of the boat coming would sustain him; she would arrive and help him in. She would give him her dry shirt to put on. She would kneel in the hull in front of him and hold him. She would tell him that she was in love with him, because she had not yet told him this, though she had wanted to for weeks, though he must see it, mustn't he, whenever she came alive under him, pushing him back so she could see his eyes in that driven, other state, their concentrated pleading look, or when she suffered that peculiar tearful euphoria in climax, with its physical gain, its fear and foreknowledge of loss. *This is all I want. I can't be without it.*

Her strokes became heavier. Her technique was slipping, or she was tired from rowing earlier. It sounded as if the lake was splashing up against the prow more and more. She would have to break, so that she could recover and realign. She slackened the tight grasp of her hands, flexed her fingers. She turned around to look for him again. Inside the boat was a pool of rusty water.

For a moment she did not understand. A leak. There was a leak. *Shit.* How had it gone unnoticed? Had the bottom been punctured when the boat was moved, either up or down the bank? In the centre of the hull was a small black eye. A small black hole. No. In the rush to launch she had not fitted the bung. It was still in the small locker by the pontoon. It was her fault that the vessel was not watertight. *Or, most likely, it will be an unforeseen event, manufactured under the auspices of technological advancement, which finishes humanity.* She let go of the oars and shunted forward on the seat. She cast her eyes around the boat. Rope. The little three-pronged anchor. A sponge. There was nothing with which to bail. She could take off her shirt; stuff it into the hole. But she knew that would fail. The cotton would balloon. The twist of fabric would slip out. She was about half a mile into the lake.

Everything was so quiet.

Suddenly she knew how it would all play out. The boat would continue to take on water and would lug down as she tried to row back, its debilitation unstoppable, and then it would submerge. She would make it to the shore, because she could swim well enough, but it would be ugly and ungraceful, it would involve swallowing water and choking

because of the desperation. The rescue would be aborted. He would never make it back. Though she would pick her way along the green shoreline to the Finns as quickly as she could, and bang insanely on their door, and beg to use their boat, and listen as they spoke to the emergency services in their pure, impenetrable language, they would not find him or his body. He would be lost. She would be complicit. She would not ever love in this way again.

She heard herself whimpering. The scenery passed out of focus. Her fear was bifurcating; she could feel the fibrous separation in her chest, the intimate tearing, so uncomfortable she could hardly bear it. Then, without any pain, she sealed, and the fear was singular again, for herself only.

She looked out over the water, and thought, just for a second, that she might see him swimming casually along, close enough to come and help her. If he converted his easy breaststroke into a crawl he could get to her before the boat took on too much water. His presence would somehow ameliorate the crisis. Alone, her chances would be worse. She stood up and the boat rocked. A small oblique tide rolled against her ankle, and withdrew. *Where are you? Please.* She scanned the water. The lake was empty. It was full of the night-resistant sky. She sat down

and the seiche came again across her feet. The pool settled. It was four or five inches deep. Something else was in it. That colour. And though she felt overwhelmed by the foreign character of this place, by not understanding its substance, the instinct to fight against it was immediate and furious. A desire that tasted bloody in her mouth. She reached for one oar and then the other. She searched the shore and at first could not differentiate between the tiny cottages. Which was it? Which? The first red-roofed one. With the separate outhouse and sauna. And the little beach. And the meadow that had been left wild, where there had once been a wolf. She turned the boat with her right arm, and began to pull heavily in that direction. *In winter, Anna Sutela had said to them, there are twenty hours of darkness. The snow reaches the cottage roof. We do not come here.*