

# The Counselor

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Around midnight, Paula came back into our counselors' area and flopped onto her sleeping bag. "She's crying again," she said. "I think I made it worse."

I lowered my phone and made a face, and Paula said, "I know." For hours now, like parents of a nursing baby, we'd been trading night shifts in the dark. I got out of bed, setting my retainer back on the nightstand.

On the other side of the blue curtain, in the main bunk room of our cabin, several of our thirteen-year-old campers were huddled again around the center bottom bunk, where Valerie lay sobbing, hands over her eyes.

"It's really messed up," said one of the girls.

"So unfair," said another. "You guys were like, the cutest."

Valerie had been like this since dinner, when we'd broken the news to her that she could not say a final goodbye that night to Felix, her camp boyfriend. Socializing with the boys' camp was not allowed outside of Co-Ed and Social days; she knew that. We were sorry she hadn't said goodbye at the Social, but we couldn't do anything about it now. Camp rules. She'd cried through pasta and meat sauce and continued through cleanup, then announcements, then even—and we'd been counting on these to save us—ice cream sundaes. When another camper guiltily pointed and asked about the melting sludge in her bowl, Valerie surrendered it like a martyr.

"Giving up a *sundae*? Over a *boy*?" Biting her maraschino cherry off its stem, Paula tried to lighten the mood. "Have I taught you *nothing*?"

At tables around us, spoons clattered against the last of the dishes; plans for that night were shouted or whispered, laughter rising like heat toward the rafters. So much exchanging of cell phone numbers to do—social media handles, pacts of friendship forever—so little time. This was the last night of camp, the last summer I worked as a camp counselor. When Valerie only cried harder, and Paula looked at me—dead-eyed, exhausted, powerless—I had to hide a laugh in my Coke.

I'm older now; I know I'm supposed to forgive us. We were kids, too, barely able to take care of ourselves, with responsibilities we barely understood. Between verses of "We Never Really Say Goodbye" at Final Campfire, one hand uncertainly rubbing

Valerie's back, I'd whispered to Paula, "I don't think I've ever cried that hard in my life," and Paula said, "I hope she doesn't pass out." It was almost impressive; I wondered what Valerie knew that we didn't. I wanted to appease her, to give her some of what she wanted, but any plans I might have made died half-formed in my head. We were trying our best; we wanted to be good counselors. We kept singing.

"Guys," I said to the girls' backs. Now we'd passed the time of protests, any eleventh-hour bargaining. In the light through the windows from the bathhouse, their legs seemed so thin, all lined up around Valerie's bunk; I saw a few with hair still on them. "It's past midnight."

One by one, giving a squeeze to Valerie's hand or shoulder, the girls slid into their own bunks, flipping their sleeping bags over to face the walls. They were pissed at us. In solidarity with Valerie—the prettiest girl in Cabin A, the only one with a French-Canadian accent, who'd shown them eyeliner and made out with a boy at the Social—maybe they had to be. Still, it'd never been like this with the Juniors, who I'd had last year. Their problems were so simple—untied shoelaces, wet bed—as easy to solve as math equations. One wouldn't eat a single vegetable, then I made a game out of it. "She ate *green beans*?" said her mother at pick-up. She opened the Notes app on her phone. "And what was it you did?"

That summer with the Seniors, though, I was like a double agent; I was only seventeen. One minute like their sister, making friendship bracelets, giving piggyback rides, getting makeup smeared across my face for the Ugly Counselor Contest—how were we ever in charge of anything?—then I'd have to be their mother. Be nice. Relax. Get down, that's not safe. Here's a tampon. You owe her an apology. No, you can't go to the boys' camp. It's past midnight. Go to bed.

How badly I wanted to go back to bed. The truth was I saw too much of myself in these girls; I had no idea how to help them. I crouched on the cabin floor.

"Valerie." She sobbed and flipped away from me. From bunks on the other three sides of the cabin, I could feel the eyes and ears of the other campers, trained on my every word. "If it were up to me, believe me"—she tensed, waiting for me to give her everything—"I'd let you go, but it's not. I couldn't let you go over there without breaking tons of rules myself."

"Can't you talk to Liz? Can't you just let me go, for five minutes?" Her voice was so pure, I hated who it made me in opposition.

I dragged my knees closer to her bedside. "I get it," I said. "I used to be a camper, too. It's really hard when you"—I tried to

think of the right phrase—“fall this hard”—which did not sound right—“in such a short, intense period of time. What you’re feeling now, it’s totally overwhelming. It feels like he’s the whole world.” Where was I pulling this from? By the time I was thirteen, on my fourth long summer at camp, only one boy, Jeremy Peterson, had kissed me, and he’d done it right as his counselor was calling his cabin back up the road after our Social, as if he didn’t care whether he did it or not, then just did. I never heard from him again. High school hadn’t offered me much in the way of romantic experience either: A few random hookups at parties; a friend’s older brother who’d put his hand down the front of my shorts, then told me if we dated “it wouldn’t be right.” Flings that already felt so dumb and meaningless, it was hard to imagine them meaning anything to anyone. “But that doesn’t mean—”

With one hand, Valerie stopped me right there. “No offense, Courtney.” She fumbled back toward me in her sleeping bag, brushing a fat tear from her bottom lashes. With a feeling like nostalgia, I noticed the series of Polaroids she’d tacked into the wall behind her, white-framed shots of her and the other girls in our cabin—tight tanks, flat-ironed hair—posed against the backdrop of pine trees in what I’d later learn to call sorority squats. “You don’t get it. If you really ‘got it’”—punishing air quotes—“then you’d let me go see him. That’s all I want, is to see him. I love him so, so much.” Even her eyes, so real and desperate I had to look away. “I’m never going to see him again!”

I think I knew, even then, that I could have done better. I could have gone to Liz, pled the case for young love, arranged some goodbye during daylight hours. I really should have made sure Valerie said goodbye at the Social, but by the end of that Social I’d been skipping out on my dance-monitoring duties; Paula, Jake, Danny, and I snuck next door to the rec center and went up to the cupola. Passing around a swiped bag of Doritos, talking over the Ed Sheeran and Ariana Grande that reached us muted through the window glass, we could see the whole scene from above: The crowd of preteens dancing on the grass, in the warm shadows of the citronella candles. When I saw Valerie and Felix—the blushed, barely contained pleasure on her face, his tongue down her throat—I was thinking only how often, between different pairs of boys and girls, I’d already seen all of this play out—already a counselor, right on cue, was stepping over to separate them—until Jake, who was a counselor in Felix’s cabin, turned to me and said, “Aww, our kids!” Wiping his Dorito fingers on his shorts, he tried to wrap his arms around me, and I laughed, played along with it. For a second in the darkening window, I saw my face flush as pink as Valerie’s.

Maybe she's right, I thought, as Valerie pulled her pillow back over her head. I said goodnight to the other girls, who ignored me. Maybe she did love him—so, so much—and maybe now that wouldn't matter at all.

"Sucks, doesn't it," said Paula.

I collapsed onto my bed. "Brutal."

"Our little Juliet," she yawned. "Felix is Romeo but like, if Romeo had acne and was into LARPing." Swinging a Twizzler like a lasso, she turned back to the spiral notebook propped on her knees. All summer, she and a boy she'd met at Emerson orientation had been exchanging letters; I had no idea about what. As I leaned over to grab my phone from the nightstand, I tried to read what she'd written so far, but aside from the guy's name and some doodles the page was blank.

On my bed, I tapped through Snapchats and Instagram posts from my friends, most of whom were waitressing or nannying in our hometown that summer, worrying about the new roommates they'd stalked online, the bedding they'd have to choose, what would and would not fit in the car, the suitcases, the tiny imagined dorm rooms. I was going to BU, where my dad had gone, and I probably would have been thinking about it more if I hadn't been at camp. College felt worlds away then, a future as unimaginable as marriage, or death. Mostly I felt glad that, since we'd all be in Boston, me and Paula and some other friends from camp could still hang out. I asked Paula if she was going to Docksider.

"No," she said. "I'm tired."

One by one I quit the apps. "We're all tired."

On the other side of the curtain, the sobbing had subsided, but a few whispers persisted—a few of the girls, I was sure, had crept back to Valerie's bedside, offering further sympathies and grievances against us. The sound had become a low, invisible buzz, a mosquito's whine. Paula only shrugged, though, her pen hovering.

I propped myself up on my elbows. "Do you think Jake will be there?"

"You'd know that better than me, dude. Text him."

"I'm not gonna text him."

"Go find out, then. I'll hold down our House of Capulet."

In a languid show of ambivalence, I got up, stretched my legs, redid and tousled my ponytail in the mirror. Through the window I could hear the rest of camp tucking in for the night; one squeal from a cabin near the water got quickly shushed in the darkness. Briefly, I wished for some mascara or blush, though by some unspoken camp rules, none of us counselors had packed

any. I could easily find some in the bunk room, I realized, then felt better about going without. Exhaustion made going to Dockside seem only more natural to me—the warm, breezy night; lake water against the rocks, the call of a loon—held all the invitation of something I might never have again. Maybe I already knew I never would.

“There she goes,” said Paula, as I grabbed my water bottle and flashlight. “Don’t get pregnant.” I gave her the finger and left.



Even though I’m nearly a college graduate now, a voter, an aspiring member of the non-seasonal workforce, and Dockside’s one of many places I’ve grown into (bars with real bouncers, the Senior Soirée) only to grow tired of, it still meant everything to us that summer. Campers were never told about its existence directly, but we’d grown up hearing about it in the whispered conversations among our counselors, whose lives we knew continued past our bedtimes.

For all those years of built-up mystery, physically it wasn’t much: an extra cabin on the boys’ side of camp, built from the same worn, scarred wood as any of the other buildings we slept or ate in. Likely it’s even less impressive now, special only to whatever group of teenagers, not knowing better, now work our old jobs. I had to have hung out there a dozen nights already that summer, but that night—passing the cabins of sleeping campers, the gravel drive that led to Liz’s house—it held some of that same draw, like what I remembered as a camper, of something illicit. Beneath the familiar excitement of going out after dark, the anticipation of what might happen, sat a small fear of getting caught that I must have known couldn’t actually come true.

I pulled on a sweatshirt, suppressing the shivers under my skin, and anxiously hopped the roots and rocks along the trail. Maybe Valerie and Felix would track each other down, keep in touch through whatever platforms they’re into, or maybe they wouldn’t. I tripped and caught a pine branch, kept walking. Either way, she’d be the better for it. Valerie was thirteen. You live and you learn. Life goes on. After all, Jeremy Peterson, wherever he was now—his thirteen-year-old face on practically a man’s body—felt unreal, like a joke.

I didn’t wonder whether I was being a hypocrite. I didn’t think how alike we were, me and Valerie, how equally alive and aching. The nighttime air was cool and porous, as intimate as breath against my skin; unshaded bulbs glowed through the windows up ahead. What was one goodbye, really? By the time she

was my age, maybe sooner, I was sure Valerie would remember Felix, Cabin A, me, with all the significance of a dream, which means nothing.

“Catch!” Over the counter flew a can of beer that landed with a soft spurt at my feet. “Shit, sorry. I thought you were gonna be Jake.” Danny waved. The door closed behind me with a satisfying thud. “What’s up, Courtney.”

From the circle of moth-eaten couches, three of the other boys’ counselors waved and nodded hello: Trip, who always bought the beer; a guy we called Cricket, though I don’t remember why; Benny, who taught sailing and once showed me how to tie a bowline knot. The room was filled with a depth of smell that doesn’t ever come out: pine, sweat, Axe body spray. Danny, still skinny and stoop-shouldered at that age, had a thing for me then but wouldn’t fess up to it until nearly two years later, when after a reunion party we ended up having sex on a couch that wasn’t, now that I think about it, all that different from this one in Docksider. Picking up the beer that had fallen, I offered it up to him, and he mimed chugging. I have to tell myself like a reminder: this was the oldest we had ever been. Once I thought none of them were looking, I tucked the can back among the others, where it wouldn’t be forgotten and found the next day.

I grabbed a different beer—ignoring the boys, or pretending to—and moved toward the window, where Chrissy and Abby, both Assistant Counselors in the Junior Village, were perched on the sill. Over the Simon & Garfunkel playing at a ridiculous volume through a speaker beside us, we shouted hello, how are your campers. One of Abby’s Juniors was having night terrors, she said, the freakiest shit. I told them about the bedwetter I’d had last year, and they nodded sympathetically; then I started to tell them about Valerie. Surprising myself, though it wasn’t untrue, I described her as my favorite of all the girls I’d had that session, how her bossiness was almost endearing, her style uncompromising. So headstrong, I said, so unlike how I was at thirteen, I wondered sometimes who was really the counselor. They laughed. I talked about forbidding her to say goodbye to Felix, speaking in the same sort of self-deprecating, gossipy way that I might have confessed to napping through the afternoon bell, or leaving boat keys in the ignition overnight. I still felt guilty, I realized as I was talking, but Chrissy and Abby were listening, wide-eyed and attentive. The music shut off; someone swore; his phone had died. I fumbled in the silence—in front of us, the boys picked up ping pong paddles, demonstrated forehands, whacked each other on the ass—before rolling my eyes and saying, “She’s just so in love.”

"They always are," Chrissy said, shaking her head, her attention drifting over the edge of her beer can. "Kids and their hormones."

"Yeah, sorry you have to deal with that."

I sipped my warm beer. I felt restless now; I couldn't sit still. Was Valerie asleep yet? Did she know I was out? I checked my phone—a text from Paula, from ten minutes ago, a bunch of kissy faces and question marks. When Cricket and Benny offered paddles in our direction, I followed Chrissy and Abby toward the table, typing out, *all quiet back home??* then deleting it. I texted her a bunch of skulls and crossbones. She texted back, *doooo it*.

"Where *is* Jake?" I asked Abby, sliding my phone back into my pocket, as if I were just concerned for his whereabouts, his safety—as if he were any one of my campers.

Danny turned around. "Went to take a piss."

"Piss"—I would have laughed, had I been there now. It's not a word a seventeen-year-old can say without sounding like they're trying it on for size; at the time, though, it was more foreign to me than to him. "Piss." On the girls' side, we never said "piss." Renewing a familiar topic of conversation—popular among all of us that summer—concerning how much easier it was for boys to pee outside compared to girls, we tried on some words of our own.

"Classic male privilege," said Chrissy, swatting the ping pong ball to score a point against Abby and Trip.

Abby put up her hands. "I'm not helping." Pressing the ping pong paddle toward me on her way to the couches, she said, "Save us."

I've always liked ping pong—I'm still pretty good at it—and there's no way I was drunk, though I'm sure I thought I was, but maybe from the bubbles, the musky smell throughout the room, the music and laughter of all my best friends, I did feel like I was, that night, exactly where I was supposed to be. In between points, I checked my phone again but heard nothing more from Paula, who had probably passed out. So everything was fine, Valerie asleep. Tomorrow she'd get picked up, drive off into the world, live a whole life unaffected by whatever did or did not happen with Felix, or with me. We would both be okay. Trip and I scored two points over Danny and Chrissy, were closing in on a third, and by the time I looked up and saw Jake in the doorway—the ball flew and landed somewhere past my elbow; Chrissy and Danny shouted and high-fived—I was thinking yes, tonight I could make something happen.

Of course it's ridiculous now, how obsessed I was that whole summer with Jake—a blond senior counselor, a sophomore at

Washington State—but I'm sure I had reasons. He taught the ropes course; he knew his way around a pair of waterskis. Things that matter when you're seventeen, in a world circumscribed by the lake and woods and dirt road. He could grow a beard when the other boys couldn't, which—I wasn't above it—might've made being with him feel like a more significant accomplishment, a further shot up toward adulthood. First session, I saw him tackle an older boys' counselor completely underwater to steal a greased watermelon and win the final round for his team, and that's something that has, actually, stayed with me. He's graduated now, stayed out west to camp and hike a trail. It is, apparently, a thing people do.

Free and far away from the circumscriptions of camp, at twenty-one, now I'm nearly free from those of college. Believe it or not, I've become quite worldly. I live in my own apartment. I pay taxes. I eat plenty of vegetables. I've had sex with a few different people, a few different ways, and I've even dated someone long enough to miss them, badly. I keep hearing about all these futures, the things people have planned to do. New York, San Francisco, travel stipends, starting salaries, stock options. It's two a.m. in my college library; I have a final paper due at eight. In one week, when I graduate—please hold your applause—all I'm embarking on is indefinite unemployment. My future, as far as I can see, involves scrolling the news from a plastic seat on a commuter train, vaguely hoping the person I am on my way to meet will give me a job. Worst of all, I'm supposed to be excited about it. I couldn't feel further from that seventeen-year-old by the ping pong table, clutching a shitty beer like a life buoy, but I am her. It was the last night before our campers left us. The game would be over; we'd go back home; we'd go to school. And I thought *that* was when we'd be forced to grow up.

"Hey," Jake said to the other girls. "Hey, Courtney." He burped. Are we all so embarrassed by our younger selves? "Anyone wanna swim?"

"Fuck, no," Chrissy said. "It's freezing!"

"What if Liz finds us?"

"We'll ask her to join." Jake turned to me. "Court?"

"She won't," said Danny.

I ignored him. "We could just swim back to our side," I said to Chrissy and Abby. I shrugged like this was casual, like I did this all the time. "No one would find out."

"Hell yeah," said Jake.

Danny downed the last of his beer. "Hell yeah."

While Cricket went out to the dumpster, hiding the empties, the rest of us crept down the dirt path, shushing each other's

laughter, to where the metal dock bobbed in the wake. Even then I must have known this was something I would never have again: At any moment we were ready to swim. No need for bathing suits or towels; the boys tugged off their shirts; Chrissy, Abby, and I stripped down to sports bras and underwear. No one said anything about it. We did it as comfortably as we would have demonstrated an archery shot, or passed meatloaf at dinner.

“Oh my God.” A splash.

“We’re so fucked,” said Chrissy, but she was smiling. She plugged her nose and pencil-dove into the lake. I can still see them now—Chrissy, Abby, Trip, Benny, Cricket, and Jake—their heads barely above the surface of the water, moving out toward the silhouetted trees on the girls’ side. Slipping off the side of the dock, I swam a few strokes to keep up.

The lake was like another world that night, black and white like an old movie. Our shouts and splashes echoed in the night air, hitting the trees, outcroppings of boulders and docks, the white clapboard sides of other people’s lake homes. If any lights were on now, we didn’t see them. If any campers were having night terrors, if Valerie was still crying, we wouldn’t have heard them. Under the moon, the lake felt so much colder than it did during the day, when I’d be in a one-piece Speedo and with ten or twelve kids, demonstrating butterfly and the breathing techniques for freestyle. Did this lake have any eels in it? I felt stupid for never wondering before.

As I pulled an uncommitted breaststroke around the side of the group, trying to pick out who was who, a noise cracked through the trees behind Dockside. Had a branch fallen? A deer or moose wandered out late? I treaded in place. A burble of water slipped dumbly from my open mouth. It felt imminent that Liz would find us, ready to tell us with all her authority that it was past our curfew, that swimming after dark was against the rules. Anxiously, I waited to hear the noise again. Maybe I wanted her to find us. Wouldn’t that have been nice, to be reminded one last time how young we still were? But now I’m projecting. I could have stayed there all night, through the next day, far into the future. This was it. No one was coming.

I could go back to Cabin A, I thought for some assurance. I could check on the campers, passed out in their bunks. We’d really done a good job with them, me and Paula. At least the best we could. As the sounds from the rest of the group rounded the bend and faded, I turned around and was hit with a splash.

“Hey, slowpoke,” Jake said. He shook his wet hair off his forehead. “I thought lifeguards were supposed to be fast.”

It took me a second to remember: This was everything I’d wanted. Jake’s hair, his gray eyes gleaming like the stars over-

head, eyebrows raised in teasing expectation. The scene felt like something I was entrusted with, like a gift; a whole summer's worth of vague hoping, not believing, now less than a foot in front of me. Time slowed, vision blurred at the edges; clichés become clichés for a reason. Here was something, I felt in the blood rushing from my chest, that might really matter. Laughing, I tried to think of a comeback. *That's more my nine-to-five. I don't see anyone drowning.*

He swam a stroke closer. I looked at my hands. Was it actually too much, I wonder, to see him then and know what would happen? Was it too much power? Did I feel guilty?

I kissed him; I'd wanted to. Then we were kissing, except I was focusing most of my attention on trying with one foot to locate a rock, but I was catching only water. We were both treading, grabbing each other's hands until I needed those to stay upright, too.

Now in my memory, I see us from above, fifty feet away, as if the scene insists on a safe distance. We look as small as campers, like we could—thank God—be anyone.

When my foot finally did find something solid, the rock was slimy, thick with dead lake stuff. My lips slipped, teeth caught. Oh God, it's awful. I felt nothing like a lifeguard. I looked at Jake—to laugh? to apologize?—but then he said, “Well, we tried,” and I dunked him under the water.

“Hey!” He sputtered, confused, laughing.

When I told Paula about it the next day, when the following week I told my hometown friends over bagels and iced coffees, I talked about the stars, the waves, Jake's lips. How he held my hands. Yes, his beard was scratchy, but I hadn't really minded. I told the story like I'd tell a fantasy—how the whole night I'd had this *feeling*, this *certainty* and *confidence* that it would happen—and what was so unbelievable, so magical, was that the fantasy had come true.

I wonder what I thought I'd had to prove. More recently, when I've told the story—it's a thing we do in college, go around in a circle, tell our best stories—I'm quick to say, “Yes, I went to *camp*.” It's a privilege; it makes me a type. “There was a *boy*. He had a *beard*.” I talk about the slimy rock. Sometimes I give Jake a puka shell necklace. I say things like, “Oh God, it's awful,” and “I could've lost a lip.” It's funny because I'm older now; we're all laughing. It happened so long ago. How often, for all of us, these stories have already played out.

I told the story to Danny, at that reunion party in New York. After hearing him introduce himself as “Dan” to someone's new boyfriend, I'd given him shit; I wanted to settle the score. Jake

hadn't been able to make it, sent his regards from out west to the group chat. Sipping a vodka cranberry, leaning into all my usual exaggerations, I made the story sound like it had happened a million years ago, to a kid who was barely me. Still Danny smiled, sort of groaned, looked out over all the heads at this party that—like everything else, it seemed—was starting to get old. He said, "I miss it." That made me happy.

I don't have stories I tell about Valerie. Making vague excuses, I left Jake and the others in the lake that night, swimming out toward the raft while I snuck back through the woods, half-naked and freezing. Every breath of the wind felt like a punishment. How imperfect it had been; how unlike what I thought it'd be. I sliced my toe on a rock, swore too loudly. Maybe I wasn't humiliated, exactly, but I couldn't get out from under this feeling that I'd done something wrong. If only I'd kissed Jake closer to shore, where it was shallower; if only I'd had something solid to stand on. I could still feel my legs flailing in the water, clueless and lost.

In the pitch black of our counselors' area, I pulled off my sports bra and underwear and wrung out my ponytail. I climbed into bed cocooned in my towel. Five feet away, Paula snored soundly. So that was it. I covered my face with my hands. It was all over. I lost touch with Paula, even, sometime last year. I texted her on her birthday, months ago, and she responded, *Thank you!*

When the cabin door creaked open, I was afraid it was Jake. Clutching my towel to my chest, I leaned over the bed, smelled shitty perfume and thought it was Liz.

"I went to the bathroom," whispered Valerie. In the moonlight through the closing door, her face was flushed, then dark. Instead of the pajamas she'd had on when I left, she was wearing a tank top, jean shorts. She looked like something out of time, like a ghost. Her rubber flip-flops squeaked—she was leaning toward the bunk room; I might have let her go—but she stopped, noticing my face. Then, not a whisper: "Are you okay?"

What do I wish I'd done? Nodded, smiled like I was still asleep. If she had gone over to the boys' side, she'd obviously made it back, and kids break the rules all the time. She was so young. I climbed off my bed. *Are you okay?* My skin was vibrating. No, I wasn't *okay*. She'd probably gone over there, tapped on Felix's window like a child's idea of how these things go, had him sneak out while Jake's co-counselor slept—all while I, an *idiot*, was out in the middle of the lake, trying to find a *rock* with my *feet*.

In the silence of the cabin, I stood an inch from Valerie's face. There was the mascara, the blush I could have found so easily

earlier. I pointed at the bunk room. In a voice I barely recognized as my own, I told her, “Get the *fuck* to bed.”

Her eyes strayed to where I still clutched my stupid towel to my chest, then rose back up. She nodded, and she apologized, but in the second before she turned around, I swear I saw a smile, one that had nothing to do with me, on the edge of her lips. She’d already gotten exactly what she wanted.

Back in my bed, I lay awake for hours, listening for the creak and sigh of her mattress, waiting for the shifting of her sleeping bag to stop, the leftovers of whatever had happened like a problem unsolved. Oh, sure, I could have done better. We could have talked it out, the two of us—I get it, I would tell her again, and again, I get it—but it wouldn’t matter. I tried to remember all the campers I’d ever had but knew only that I was forgetting so many. I closed my eyes and felt afraid I’d disappear.

At Morning Meeting the next day, after Chrissy handed me the clothes I’d left on the dock, winking like she’d already heard a very different story, I pulled Liz aside and told her Valerie had snuck out. I was being responsible; I was being a good counselor. Later, in front of the pickup line of minivans and suburbans, Valerie peeled away from a group of campers and parents to hug me goodbye. She told me she was sorry. She said this session had been the best two weeks of her life, and she thanked me. I watched her climb into the passenger seat and wave through the window. She was not allowed back at camp the next year.

I’m sure she can’t still want Felix now. She wouldn’t have remembered him even if she had come back; it wouldn’t have mattered. It’s the same as it was for me: something real and pressing once, now gone—for better or worse—without a trace. But like everything else I’ve said or done, made happen or prevented, I am never finished thinking about it.

“You know what,” Danny had said, later that night in New York. On that ragged couch in his Columbia dorm room, our chests were still sweaty and heaving. “I bet everyone else is still at Dockside. If we hurry, we could—” and I laughed—because it’s a joke, to pretend we’re all counselors at camp again, it’s funny—while I gathered up the blouse and skirt that had felt fine earlier but seemed fake now, like something I couldn’t believe was mine.

If I ever finish this final paper, next I’ll graduate; I’ll pack up my apartment, move home, and try to become a person. I’m on the cusp of a great life, everyone tells me. This is going to be a really exciting time.