

1,376 words

From Lookout

It's a lake. You can see it from here. More than a pond, but not by much. The water is dead still and simply the most astonishing mustard color.

My mother said it used to be clear. That meant it was every color because it reflected the sky and the woods. Not blue the way oceans are. Gray and dark brown and the dull rust color of autumn leaves or the pink of those dumb little spring wildflowers that come up for a day or two next to the water and then disappear.

The bottom of the lake is mud. It's the scariest thing in the world to hold your breath and sink down to touch it with one toe, you're thinking, but then it grabs your whole foot. Not like mud in the air, water-mud. Very, very soft and cold. Unnatural. Probably green with algae but you don't know because you can't see. The water's too thick.

There's a Cumberland man who fishes there. On the bridge. Only in the fall. He brings his granddaughter. They fish for trout. Only in the fall. If you talk to him, he's

really nice. He'll tell you he walks all the way here from Alabama because the trout are different. They look like big minnows to me, but he says, They're cold-stunted, that's why they're small. Which makes them taste sweeter.

I think he's talking about girls. He's not talking about fish, he's talking about girls being sweet. Which is me. So I hightail it out of there. Straight up Lookout. Or halfway up. Then across, which I've never done before because there isn't a trail. Man oh man, it's muddy going. Red mud. Slippery-slidy. With that Cumberland man down at the lake fishing. He's got the place to himself now. It's his. I can't be there any more.

I go for a ways. Then I sit. I'm always running off, it's true, but I don't want to just now. Because I know what's in every direction. Woods. More woods. Some bad men.

What's wrong with me? There are good men. There's the nice man who helped me move my sofa from Boone all the way up the mountain because my mother said it would go. She said it would look great in the house.

Keep in mind, please, that I'm lying. That's not how it went. It was *me* moving that sofa, not my mother. She couldn't. She was already gone. But the nice man who helped me was real. He had a ZZ Top beard. He kept telling me about redbirds and how his mother loved them. She collected them, he said. Carved ones. Stuffed ones. I remember him saying (am I making this up?) that he lived with his mother in a cabin above a geyser just west of Pisgah. A geyser? He said they had no running water but why would he tell me that? Why would he tell me anything? He definitely told me about redbirds though. And while he did, we moved that sofa down the slate steps by the side of the house which are slick, by god, even on the driest days. The sun was already down at

four because that's how it works in the mountains. You're in a bowl that cuts off the light so it's nighttime at four and then it's snowing.

For real.

It was snowing.

Wet stringy clumps of slush on my nose. Catching in his beard. Making it treacherous to be carrying a sofa down slippery steps. And then we couldn't get it in the door.

That's how I ruined the house.

I needed somewhere to live and it was night and it was snowing and I had come all the way from Boone and now we couldn't get the sofa in the door so what did I do? Did I say, "Oh Mr. ZZ Top, why don't you take the sofa with you in your truck?" Did I say, "You take it." No. I said, "Bust in the window." Can you imagine? And that's what we did. We broke the downstairs window clean out of its casement, then hoisted the sofa in. Okay fine, the sofa's in the house but now there's no window and the snow's blowing in.

I guess I was thinking, It's the basement. The part of the house the woman who built the house reserved for her children. She didn't like her children so there was no inside staircase. If they were hungry for breakfast, they had to put on all their clothes and come around outside and up to the front door and knock and ask their own mother for food. Or the bathroom. Even in winter. In the snow.

The basement. That's where I put the sofa. I broke the window and then basically I didn't do anything about it. Oh, I tarped it, but that didn't hold.

I never went down there again. When my brother came to put the house on the market, water had seeped in. There was mold everywhere. Brown spots covering everything. Moss on the rug. Mushrooms growing in the cushions.

I ruined the house. I left it for my brother to patch up and sell because he doesn't want the place. He has a wife and a barn and cows and a burrow named Walter in Kansas that he can't afford to take care of, so he needs the money.

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I'm going to walk to the top of Lookout now. Away from the lake. And the house. "I am sorry," I call back toward my brother but my voice doesn't make a sound. He's far away anyway. It's like I can see him locking the door, handing the key to whoever will live there next.

I slog to the top, the path nothing but mud.

You can see everything from here even though it's not a big mountain. It's little really. And the peak is tiny. Just enough rock for maybe two people at most to stand and you really have to hold onto each other so that no one falls.

There it is. The lake. Shining. Mustard. The last of the sun glints but it doesn't reflect. The fisherman is there but his girl is gone. I can see my brother loading up his car with things he will keep even though he is already gone. Lord, he is mad. He is complaining about me to his wife.

I turn away. Due east. Which means the sun will set behind me. I still have some light. Brown light, thick like the lake, but I can see.

I know if I go the way most people go down the backside of Lookout I'll hit Ider Hollow and the Baptists in their cozy church camp. So I don't go that way. There's nobody where I go. Not even the ZZ Top man.

I head down into woods out of which I cannot see. Trees, no path. Sky, no light. Dead leaves, soggy underfoot.

This is what happens when you ruin your house, the last place you had to live. The loneliness is indescribable. And the regret.

I do regret. I regret it all. I did not mean to cause anyone harm, not even my brother who is gone. Or my mother who is gone.

She would say I should keep walking, but really there are times when that isn't safe. The brown light is dimming now. I think it's better to find some dry leaves and call it a night. Curl up.

I ruined my house. I can't get over it. There's nothing to do in such circumstances but walk away and never come back. Leave no forwarding address. Say I'm sorry in a voice no one can hear.

I wish I could give you good news but the fact is things can end badly. The very last thing you know can be sadness. I'm so sorry to tell you that. The very last thing you know can be sadness and then you step off the other side of Lookout and that's the last anyone knows. It's a terrible, terrible thing.