

9/11/21

# Leaving Home

by ROXANA ROBINSON

EVERY summer when I was growing up, we made the long drive from outside Philadelphia, where I was born, to the village of Devon, in western Massachusetts, where my father's family had lived for a hundred and fifty years.

The small road to Devon turned off a larger one along the Manitoonic River, dropping suddenly down the riverbank and then leveling abruptly to cross an ancient covered bridge. Our car bumped sedately as it entered the bridge, which was dark inside, with huge crisscrossed beams. Going slowly and majestically through the nineteenth-century gloom, we could hear the hollow wooden echo of our passage.

This ceremonial crossing of the river was the moment I waited for. When we came out of the dark tunnel of the bridge, I said contentedly, "Now we're in Devon."

"Now we're in Devon," my father always answered.

We drove up Devon's one steep street, over the railroad tracks, and past the small, neat shops that my grandmother had used: Bates the butcher, the dry-goods shop, the grocery store.

"Wallace's is closed," my mother said. The grocery store was always closed by the time we got to Devon.

"We can stop at the farm for eggs and milk," my father said.

The farm belonged to Cousin Thomas, who was the only Thatcher still farming. Four generations ago the family had split: Thomas's great-grandfather had stayed in Devon, and my father's great-grandfather had moved to Boston. Thomas's line had stayed farmers, and the men in my father's line all went to Harvard. They were Episcopalian ministers, like my father, and judges and teachers and lawyers. Now the Thatchers lived all over the Northeast, but they had kept the family land and the family houses. The cousins, more distant with each generation, still came to Devon in the summers.

Cousin Thomas's farm was at the foot of Devon Hill. Two big gloomy hemlocks stood along the road, and there was a pond below the house for a flock of bossy gray geese. The house was white clapboard, symmetrical in front, with square pillars and a deep and generous front porch. In back the house meandered, with lopsided additions. It had been built around 1800, and now, in 1965, the shutters sagged, the clapboards showed cracks, and it needed paint.

We pulled into the driveway, next to the house. A flock of bantams with shaggy boots fussed in the weeds.

"Coming in with me?" My father turned sideways to talk to me; I was in the back seat. I could see his Thatcher nose, pointed and severe, his pale blue Thatcher eyes and limp blond Thatcher hair. I have Thatcher looks, like his, and

when I was little, I liked this. I liked people saying, "Well, I can see *you're* a Thatcher." All this made me feel a part of something larger than myself, part of a gentle tribe, a network that was invisibly spread across these Massachusetts hills. But the year I was thirteen, looking like a Thatcher made me uneasy. Looking in the mirror, I felt like a fraud, as though I were wearing a Thatcher mask I couldn't take off. I looked like a Thatcher, but I knew in my heart I was not one.

The Thatcher family was famous for integrity: those judges, headmasters, ministers, were all high-minded and principled. They were models of rectitude. The Thatcher genes carried not just blue eyes but virtue, and when I was thirteen, I had become aware that I was deeply deficient in virtue.

My mother turned and smiled at me over the back seat. My mother wore round flesh-colored glasses, which made her eyes pale and vulnerable. She had straight brown hair, very fine, held to one side with one bobby pin. She never wore makeup. Her clothes were unworldly: baggy woven skirts, sturdy comfortable sandals, limp tan cardigan sweaters. Appearances did not matter to my parents; the material world was unimportant. I knew that I ought to feel this way too; I wished that I felt this way, but I did not. When I was thirteen, I was deeply, and shamefully, concerned with appearances.

"Go in with Daddy," my mother said, smiling. "You always do."

But that year I didn't want to go into the farmhouse with my father, though I didn't know why. Avoiding my mother's

eye, I looked out the window at the dense green sea of corn rising up Devon Hill.

"Maybe Cousin Gloria will be there." My mother offered me the cousin closest to my age, but I didn't answer. My mother said kindly, "Go on. Don't be shy."

This sounded condescending, and I said crossly, "I'm not shy."

"Then what is it?" my mother asked.

Another silence.

"Sounds like shy to me," my father said, brisk and certain. My father was certain about everything. "Better come in."

"I'm *not* shy," I said again, crosser. "I don't want to go in, that's all. I don't *care* if Gloria is there. I don't care about Gloria. I *hate* Gloria."

And now a terrible silence filled the car. I had spoken a word that was never used in our household. The sound of it hung in the air—the short, explosive syllable, with its fierce aspirate beginning, the powerful black vowel at its center, and the sharp closure, like a hissed threat. The shock of it quivered among us. It was as though I had thrown a rock through the windshield and we now sat staring at the star-shaped fracture, the damage.

My mother gave a long sigh, her face sorrowful. "I hope that's not true, Alison," she said quietly. She sounded wounded, as though I had struck her in the face, and I knew that was how she felt. "I hope you don't really *hate* your cousin."

Another boiling silence followed. With my brutality I had betrayed my mother and disgusted my father. My father looked straight ahead now, the back of his neck rigid. My mother watched me, full of concern. They waited for me to

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answer.

I looked out the window. I couldn't now retrieve the word, which I had never meant to say in the first place. The word had come out before I thought, and now I would have to pay. I had no defense, no excuses. I never did. I could never argue with my parents: they lived in a moral universe separate from mine. They never swore, or spoke unkindly, or had uncharitable thoughts. My parents were guided by virtue.

I sat in the back seat and wished that God, for once, would take my side and erase the sound of the word from family memory. I told myself that it was just a word, but I was without conviction. I stared out at the jostling sea of green corn, waiting.

In the front seat my mother sighed again. She said gravely, "What is it that you 'hate' your cousin *for*?"

I didn't hate Gloria. I hardly knew Gloria.

The farming Thatchers had five children: two boys, Tom and Charlie, and three girls, Gloria, Karen, and Joanne. I hardly ever saw them. I spent the summers at the tiny club down at the lake, with its two soggy red-clay tennis courts and old shingle-sided boathouse. The farming Thatchers didn't go to the club. Their children were never seen fooling around out on the rafts, or playing tennis on the bumpy

courts, or sitting on the club's muddy beach with sandwiches and soft drinks. Tom and Charlie, in blue overalls, spent their days on slow, thundering tractors, cutting hay and ploughing fields, lifting a laconic hand if someone waved from a passing car. I don't know where the girls were, but it wasn't down at the lake.

"I didn't mean I really *hated* Gloria," I said slowly.

My father turned sideways again. "Then maybe you should not have used that word, Alison." He did not, of course, say the word himself. "That word is very strong," he said. "You should think carefully before you use it. If you don't mean it—and I hope you didn't—then it's not a word you should use." He paused. "I hope you don't really feel that emotion toward your own cousin."

I didn't answer. I stared out the window again so that I wouldn't have to look at my mother. My mother, her eyes shining through the colorless glasses, watched me steadily. She was ready to forgive me.

We fell again into silence. I knew what would happen. If I didn't answer, if I didn't admit to my crime, we would sit here in silence for the rest of the evening, for the rest of my life. The black sound of the word I had used would hover over us forever. I closed my eyes. The weight of this bore relentlessly down on me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

My father nodded slowly, without looking at me. His face was bleak, and frozen by disapproval. His mouth was drawn in on itself, and his pale-blue eyes were hooded and distant, as though I were someone he had never met. Hours would pass before he approached friendship, even acquaintance-ship. My mother leaned across the car and patted my shoulder. She gave me a brave smile, but her eyes showed damage. She had been wounded by my savage behavior.

"I'm going in," my father said. His voice was remote. He got out and shut the door.

I looked sideways at my mother, who nodded urgently at

me. She waved me toward the door. I waited a moment, for pride, and then got out.

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**M**Y father stood in the rutted driveway, taking a deep breath of Devon air. I moved tentatively next to him, and he turned away, stepping up onto the side porch. A clothesline hung above the railing, wooden pins staggering along its length. I could hear a radio inside the house, and a trashy singer yearning to a sunset-colored melody.

My parents listened only to classical music. Once, in the car, I was rolling the dial along the radio band. I stopped it at a popular-music station, just for a second, as though I were pausing to shift my grip on the dial. Suddenly a hot red blare of sound filled the car, and my father reached over and clicked the radio off. He looked straight ahead, his mouth closed and tight. He didn't say anything. I didn't dare turn the radio back on, even for the news.

My father's footsteps thundered on the porch floor, and I heard chairs scraping inside. We went into the dark mudroom, where a mud-colored dog blanket, flattened and hairy, lay in one corner. Faded jackets hung on the wall; tipped-over rubber boots sprawled on the floor below them. My father raised his hand to knock, and the kitchen door opened.

"Well, if it isn't Cousin James," Cousin Florence said, her bold, dark eyes seizing on my father. Cousin Florence stood outlined in the doorway. She was thick everywhere: across her high aproned belly, through her pale ankles, and through her powerful upper arms, which she now clasped. She folded her arms and tilted her head cheerfully to one side. Her round face was flat and red, and her brown hair stood in a wild halo around her face.

"Hello, James," Cousin Thomas said, stepping forward and smiling. Cousin Thomas's nose was Thatcher, as were his cheekbones, but he was half a foot shorter than my father, his body small and dense. His denim overalls were loose and waistless, like a clown's suit.

Thomas hugged his elbows, but my father put out his hand. Thomas unclasped himself and they shook hands slowly, smiling at each other. Cousin Thomas turned and grinned at me.

"Well, come on in," he said, amused and pleased, and waved us past. The mudroom smelled rank, but I took a deep breath before I stepped into the kitchen.

In the middle of the kitchen was a table covered with red-and-white-checked oilcloth. Battered wooden chairs stood unevenly around it: in two of them sat girls. I saw them out of the corner of my eye. I stood with my head tilted to one side, my eyes fixed on my father's face as though I had to read his lips.

The farming Thatchers had dinner early, and we had arrived in the middle. Food filled the plates, and in the center of the table stood a pie-shaped piece of yellow cheese. The cheese was sweating, and two flies moved thoughtfully over its fissured yellow surface. The room had a dense, powerful smell, and when my deep breath gave out, I opened my mouth slightly, to breathe.

"Come sit down, James," Florence said. She stood in front

of the stove, her solid white arms cocked on her hips. She wore thin white socks, limp around her ankles, and her brown oxfords had a dull pale bloom of scuff at the toes.

My father smiled gently. "I'm afraid we can't, Florence. Diana's out in the car, and we're meeting Ted at the house. He doesn't have a key, so I'm afraid he's waiting there. And it looks as though we're interrupting your dinner, so we won't bother you any more than to ask for a few eggs and some milk. We'll bring the can back in the morning."

"A few eggs," Cousin Florence said. She moved to a table where a wide cracked bowl stood. It was heaped with brown eggs, bits of feather stuck to them. "How many is a few?" Florence asked my father, twisting to eye him.

"Oh, two, I suppose," my father said, not sure.

"Six," I had to prompt him, in a whisper. My brother, Ted, loved eggs.

He looked down at me. "Six?"

I nodded and he repeated it to Florence.

Florence looked at us and shook her head, grinning.

"Sure now? Six? Or two?" she said.

My father smiled. "Six," he said, nodding. Florence turned again and began to count eggs into a wrinkled brown bag. "Gloria, get the milk," she said, her voice suddenly peremptory. The older girl slid off her chair, staring at me. Joanne, the youngest, in pajamas and a turquoise bathrobe, sat at the table, watching. Her curly hair was in a fine tangle, and she held a comic book, forbidden in our house.

"Give them the can," Florence ordered.

Gloria went to the old-fashioned, high-legged refrigerator. She took out a tall, silvery milk can and carried it carefully to my father, ignoring me. Gloria had Cousin Florence's round face and her restless dark eyes. Her elbows were sharp. She wore a cheap lace-edged blouse, yellowed and tattered, and baggy jeans. As she passed me, I breathed in a close, fleshy smell.

"That be enough milk?" Florence asked loudly. This was meant as a joke: the can was so full that Gloria could hardly carry it.

"I think it will be just fine," my father said, polite.

Gloria came and stood directly in front of me, too close, invasive.

"Hi," she said. She lifted her chin suddenly and scratched under it.

"Hello," I said coolly.

Cousin Florence held the bag of eggs out to me.

"Don't forget the eggs," she said energetically. "All two of them. Or was it six?" She laughed again, staccato. She looked at me more closely and frowned.

"Happened to your hair? Caught in the mowing machine?" She looked at my father and then back at me. My father smiled.

I said, "I had it cut."

Cousin Florence laughed briefly. "I can see *that*."

"Well, thank you very much, Cousin Florence," my father said. "Thomas." He bowed his head. "And you all are well? The boys? The farm?"

"Pretty good," Cousin Thomas said. Thomas had a nice smile, small and true. He put his hands comfortably inside the bib of his overalls, as if it were a muff. "Things are pretty good. I can't complain. And you?"

"We're pretty good ourselves." My father nodded goofily,

like a marionette. "Well, thank you again for all this," my father said, holding up the milk can, nodding at the eggs. "I'll bring the can back tomorrow."

Cousin Florence flapped her hand at him. "Don't worry about it," she said. "Children can bring it back. Right, sister?" She stared at me again.

"Come at milking," Thomas said, smiling at me.

"Thank you," I said, smiling stiffly back. I knew he meant this as a treat, and when I was little, it had been one. But now what I remembered was the row of dirty-haunched Holsteins with their slimy noses, the concrete gutter behind them clotted with green manure, the heavy-bodied flies everywhere.

When we were back in the car, my mother asked, "How are they all?"

"They were fine," my father said, backing the car out of the driveway. Our house was at the top of the next hill; we would be home in minutes. "Thomas was cheerful. He always is."

"He's a good-hearted man," my mother said. "So is Florence. I hope she didn't give you all their milk. She'll never tell you that she needs any for herself."

"I wonder if she did do that," my father said, slowing the car down. "I wonder if she gave us all their milk. Maybe we should go back."

I sat in the back seat, the cold milk can against my chest. It was freezing, and I could feel the milk sloshing back and forth inside. I closed my eyes, hoping that my father's conscience would not demand that he go back to the farm and reopen negotiations.

"Did she just give you the can from the fridge?" my mother asked. "Did they pour any off into a pitcher?"

"No," my father said. "They gave us the whole can." He turned the car in at a driveway to turn around. We set off back up the hill to the farm again. This time I didn't go in.

**O**UR house in Devon was built by my grandfather. It was massive and rustic, with rough, dark-stained clapboards. Huge stone chimneys guarded each end of the roof, and clusters of tiny-paned windows huddled in groups under the eaves.

Ted was waiting for us on the front porch, his knapsack beside him. He had hitchhiked here. Ted always hitchhiked, not in a dashing, carefree, gypsy way but in an ascetic, puritanical way, as though he disapproved of the comfort and expense of other kinds of travel. My father shook Ted's hand and my mother hugged him. I stood off to one side, and when Ted was finished with our parents, he turned toward me and I lifted my hand in an awkward wave.

"Hi there," Ted said. He was eight years older than I was, serious and remote. He talked very little, and practically never to me. He was going to be a concert pianist, and he practiced six hours a day. While he played, his mouth went down at the corners, like my father's. I was afraid of Ted: I knew he disapproved of me. I knew that he could tell that I was vain and selfish, superficial, brutal—a false Thatcher.

While the others unloaded the car, I opened the house. This meant unlocking the back door from the outside and the front door from the inside. I always wanted to be the first

person to enter the house in the summer. Carrying the key, I ran through the summer twilight. My bare feet knew the long springy grass of the unmowed lawn, the narrow rocky path down the side of the house, the splintery gray steps up to the back porch. The woods came right up to the back porch, and at night the raccoons made their secretive way up the steps to the scraps left out for them.

I set the key into the heavy lock, twisted, and pushed open the door. The kitchen was cool and gloomy, deeply silent. The refrigerator door stood open, declaring its metal racks empty. The big green back-porch rockers sat tipsily on top of one another in an uproarious still life. In the dark pantry glass-fronted cupboards rose up to the ceiling, stacked with my grandmother's fluted white Wedgwood china. The rooms smelled, as they always did, of wood and wax. After the pantry's gloom the dining room was a burst of light, with its pale, shining birchwood floor, its long wall of French doors facing the lake. In the living room the huge, blackened granite fireplace was flanked by oak bookcases. An iron cauldron stood to one side, for firewood. Facing the hearth

were overstuffed chairs in baggy slipcovers and a faded chintz sofa. The house was unchanged since my grandmother had arranged it.

My bare feet made no sound on the polished floors, and moving through the silent rooms, I felt as though I were walking into the dense center of my family. I was breathing air that my family had breathed, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, my father. I was seeing the same images—these same chairs in their baggy slipcovers, these old china lamps, this Toby jug on the mantelpiece—that my family had seen each summer for generations.

Usually I liked this moment. Usually I felt as though I were somehow swimming into my own past, as though the whole liquid, transparent past of my family enveloped me, warm, comforting, nourishing. But this time the house felt strange. The air seemed heavy, and the rooms felt claustrophobic. I went straight to the front door without stopping, and when I unlocked the door and pulled open the heavy slab of oak, I stood still in the doorway, facing out of the house. The cool evening air, smelling of ferns and woods, swept into the house like a blessing.

The next morning I went, early, down to the lake. The air was fresh and minty, and the narrow downhill path through the birches was soft and padded with leaf mold. The wooden boathouse was empty, and the floor echoed hollowly beneath my heels. I walked out onto the deck and took a slow breath, looking around. The lake, ringed by low wooded hills, was calm and light-filled. I could smell the weathered, sunbaked planks beneath my feet. The air was still, and I heard no sounds anywhere. In the middle of the lake, far out on the shimmering water, two fishermen sat motionless in a flat-bottomed rowboat. A filmy white mist traced the green shoreline. I walked to the edge of the deck and looked down: the water was yellow-green and translucent. A narrow fish hovered over the sandy bottom, its fins rippling like transparent flags. The early sun was warm on my bare legs, and I sat down between the stiff wooden arms of the ladder. I closed my eyes; I could feel the summer about

to begin.

**B**Y the weekend I had met everyone my age who was there that year. Calvin Edgerley, fourteen, whom I knew, was staying with his grandmother. This year Calvin's older cousin was there too, Trowbridge Small. And one afternoon we rode our bicycles over to see Betsy Jordan, whom the boys knew.

The Jordans' house was new. It was low and sleek, made of brick. Betsy's mother opened the wide white-painted door. She had short blonde hair, curled, and she wore a flowered terrycloth shift with ruffled edges.

"Hi, kids, come on in," she said cheerfully. "Betsy's here somewhere." She called behind her, "Betsy!" She turned back and smiled at us. Her lips were clear curves of raspberry.

"She's doing her summer reading, so she'll be thrilled to see you."

Betsy Jordan was wearing blue-jean cutoffs and a tank top. She held a book negligently in her hand, a finger stuck between the pages. Betsy was short and rounded, with neat limbs and easy gestures. Her face was covered with dark freckles and her hair was sleek, like an otter's. She was completely relaxed, and I could see that she knew, just by instinct, how to be. I stared at her with admiration. At once I felt myself too lanky, long-boned, wrong.

"Hi," Betsy said. "Want something to drink?"

In the kitchen we got Cokes, which were forbidden in our house. We went back to sit in the living room, and I looked around. We sat on built-in sofas covered in bright-red jittery prints. In front of the sofas were low glass tables with metal frames. The floor was covered with a white wall-to-wall rug, thick, like the fur of an animal. On the shiny white shelves against the wall were a stereo system and a huge television set. The white-brick fireplace was raised off the floor. All of this seemed perfect to me, exactly the way a house should be.

Trow, in tattered blue jeans, his hair falling across his eyes, sat next to Betsy. He leaned against her shoulder and pointed at her book.

"So, whatchou up to, Bets?" he asked.

"Villette," Betsy said mournfully. "Brontë."

"Like it?" Trow asked, grinning.

Betsy snorted lackadaisically and shook her head slowly. "Hate it," she said. "Hate it." She used the word casually, as though it were no different from any other.

"Wait'll you get *Middlemarch*," Trow said, raising his eyebrows, grinning. He shook his head. "Woo-woo!"

"*Middlemarch*," Betsy said, wrinkling her nose. "Please. We read that last year. I hated it, too."

I listened admiringly. At home I went to a church school, and no one talked like this. My parents did not allow complaints about schoolwork.

"What do you have?" Calvin asked me. Calvin had a long comic's nose, pale skin, and fine dark hair.

"Walden," I said.

"Henry David Thoreau-up," said Calvin, and laughed loudly.

"Where do you go?" Betsy asked me.

"Farmington," I said, proud. "I start this fall. Where do you?"

"Concord Academy," Betsy said, and I nodded knowledgeably.

They were all older than I was, and already at boarding school. They told me elaborately how terrible it was. I listened, entranced. I could not imagine what it would be like. I was hoping for a new life, coarse and raucous: loud radios, friends who swore. I hoped we would all laugh behind the housemother's back uncharitably, without remorse.

Sitting on the jazzy red sofa, with a Coke bottle in my hand, listening to them criticize the grown-up world, I was

proud. I thought we looked like a photograph of teenagers in a magazine. This was what teenagers did, I thought, and I myself was doing it. I was one of them, a member of this elect and glamorous group.

Of course, I knew that there were things I had to conceal from them, things that would reveal me as an impostor. For one thing, I liked to read. I had already read the Brontës, on my own, and I liked the books on the summer reading list. For another thing, my house was hideous, unacceptably old, and my family was unacceptably virtuous. But I thought that I could keep my two worlds apart, that I could keep these things hidden. In the meantime here I was, sitting in this golden group, holding a Coke. Two boys sat next to me, clowning. Betsy rolled her eyes languidly, and the boys laughed. I felt I had entered a charmed land, and that I had never been so happy. I thought my new life had already started.

**L**ATER in the month I lay one afternoon in the big canvas hammock on the porch. I was reading *Walden*, and from time to time I put my hand underneath the hammock and gave myself a peaceful push against the stone parapet. Below me the wooded hillside was quiet, and the lake was calm. Far out in the middle a single figure was paddling slowly in a silver canoe.

When I heard the knock on the front door, I stopped reading, wondering. No car had come up the hill. My mother's footsteps crossed the polished floor.

"Why, *hello!*" my mother said to someone, effusive. "Come right in."

I heard a muffled, unidentifiable voice.

"She's right outside," my mother said. "Come with me. She'll be so glad to see you."

I sat up, appalled. I was wearing stained green shorts and an old, too-tight jersey. Worse, I was here in the house: the huge, blackened fireplace, the humped, flowered, monolithic chairs, the faded Oriental rugs, the absent television. No Cokes were in the refrigerator, nor had Cokes ever been. I was caught, trapped, in these clothes and in this house.

"Alison," my mother called, "you have a guest."

The screen door opened and Gloria stood there, a bundle in her arms.

"I come to play," she announced, and smiled, showing her flat front teeth.

I stared at her.

"I brought my bathing suit," Gloria added, holding up the bundle.

"Good," my mother said brightly, looking at me. "That's good. You can go down to the lake together for a swim. How

about that, Alison?"

I was speechless.

The afternoon had, in a stroke, turned bleak and endless. Hours and hours lay before me, locked in Gloria's company.

I would have to talk to Gloria. I would have to listen. And Gloria's presence, I knew, would ruin me. Everything I had built up, all the teenagedness, whatever borrowed glamour I had managed to acquire from the group, would be destroyed by Gloria's presence. My true colors would be revealed, and I could never recover from this. Even if no one saw me, even if no one knew, a contamination would take place. I would be subtly expelled. The others would make plans, they would do things together, and they would not call me. They would expect me to spend the day with Gloria. It was the end of my new life.

Gloria looked diffidently at my mother. "Ma says I'm not to go to the boathouse, because it costs you. She says we can go down into the woods."

My mother looked awkward. "Oh," she said, blinking behind the colorless glasses. "Oh, that doesn't matter. Don't worry about that."

"No," Gloria said firmly, shaking her head. "Ma says I have to swim from the woods. I can't go to the boathouse."

After a pause my mother nodded. "All right. A path on our property goes down to the lake." She thought for a moment. "How old are you, Gloria?"

"Nearly twelve," Gloria said, proud.

I would be spending the afternoon with an eleven-year-old.

"And are you a good swimmer?" my mother asked.

"Not real good," Gloria said cheerfully.

"All right, then," my mother said. "Ted can go down with the two of you. Just to be on the safe side. He can take a book. The two of you can swim." She stood, smiling, surrounding us with warmth and approval.

Where would we swim?, I wondered bitterly. Back and forth in the shallows, trying not to touch the muddy, squishy, loathsome, monster-filled bottom? By this time our side of the lake was in shadow, and the water would be chill. And the bank offered no clearing, nowhere to spread a towel, nowhere to sit but on nettles. Ted would be no help; he would bring his book and say nothing.

We changed into bathing suits in my room. Gloria's suit was babyish, with smocking across the front and rows of ruffles across her rump. We went down the path, I in front. "The briers are bad this year," I called back in a grand way. I was trying to suggest some kind of superior knowledge, a connoisseurship of briers. I hoped Ted would answer, but Gloria did.

"Yee-ah," she said. She giggled loudly, and then screamed as a thorn ripped a white line along her arm. "Ow," she said. I turned onto the faint trail down to our landing. The briers were worse here. Behind me Gloria shouted good-naturedly at each hostile touch.

At the water's edge we put our towels down on bushes. Ted, who didn't care, sat down with his book among the brush.

"I'll go first," I said. I began to wade cautiously out into the cool water. Goose bumps appeared suddenly, up and down my arms. The lake bottom was famously awful, and cold black ooze came up between my toes. I stepped on

slime-covered rocks, slippery and unsteady. I kept my head down, trying to see into the sunless green depths.

Behind me Gloria screamed loudly with every step. "Oh, my God," she said, over and over.

When the water reached my waist, I looked up. The silver canoe I had seen before was coming in from the middle of the lake. It was a new aluminum one, with a girl paddling. It was headed past us, toward the boathouse. The girl paddling wore a smart black tank suit, like Betsy's.

I started walking more steadily through the cobbly ooze, pushing urgently through the water toward the canoe. The girl paddling was watching me. She slowed her stroke and slightly changed her course. As she came closer, I could see the flicked-up nose, the sleek wet head. It was Betsy.

I waved at her, lurching, trying to hurry through the heavy water. I could hear Gloria, now way behind me, shrieking in the shallow water.

"Betsy!" I called.

Betsy paused, her paddle lifted. Out where she was, the lake was still lit by the late-afternoon light. The canoe was radiant on the glassy water, and long silver loops slid off the paddle.

"Betsy! It's me!" I called. "Alison!"

I threw myself forward into the water and began swimming. Betsy hesitated and then turned the canoe toward me with a long, strong stroke that sent the boat skidding across the water. I swam toward her, flailing my arms and splashing wildly. When I reached the canoe, I kicked myself up out of the water in a flurry, reaching for the gunwale. I grabbed it as though I were drowning, as though I were desperate and the canoe were a lifeboat.

"Go," I said urgently. "Just go. Quick."

Without asking, Betsy began paddling again. The canoe, clumsy with my awkward weight, swung back away from shore and headed for the boathouse. I clung to its cold, pale side and stared at the normal life going on at the boathouse: the bored lifeguard lounging in his canvas chair, his white hat pulled down over his eyes; small children shouting in the shallows.

I didn't once look behind me, where Ted would be sitting among the bushes, his head now raised from his book, watching me, unsurprised. I didn't look back to see Gloria, who would be standing in the muddy shallows, quiet, no longer shrieking, staring at her cousin. Hanging on to the smooth, chill metal, my teeth chattering, I fixed my gaze ahead, as though I could put my family behind me forever, as though I would never have to look at them again. ☹

"O WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider,  
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,  
Yonder's the midden whose odours will madden,  
That gap is the grave where the tall return."

"O do you imagine," said fearer to farer,  
"That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,  
Your diligent looking discover the lacking  
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?"

"O what was that bird," said horror to hearer,  
"Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?  
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,  
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease?"

"Out of this house" – said rider to reader,  
"Yours never will" – said farer to fearer,  
"They're looking for you" – said hearer to horror,  
As he left them there, as he left them there.

W. H. Auden (1907–1973)