August 1997

Maud

There was the matter of the cabins.

Before prime blueberry picking season, the farm was also a Bible camp, Moose Rock. It was hard to keep the farm afloat on blueberries alone, and so, in addition to his job as a county clerk, Mr. Madison rented out the cabins and the lakefront to his church for June and July. Kids would come from all over New England, pack their own Bibles in trunks with clothing that could get dirty—things Moose Rock's packing list called galoshes, dungarees, slickers. There was breakfast, then worship, then the kids would get to do something Maud would call "actual" camp—archery, bowling, baseball, kickball—before more Bible study and sleeping in the cabins up in the pines.

Maud wondered if Jesus was good at kickball.

Truth be told, Maud was a bit put out that she hadn't been invited to the Bible camp part instead of the Blueberry Gathering. Blueberry picking was not her thing. Maud's favorite thing in the world—after maybe dicks, talking, and Gideon—was the Bible, which she had read three times in middle school. She was an atheist, but the one thing her Jewish father and lapsed Catholic mother

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had agreed on was that when defending your decision to not believe in any type of holy father, or to believe in a woman's right to choose or the rights of gay men to love each other out loud, it was good to know which part of the Bible someone was trying to quote.

But the cabins. Maud was the only female picker in the summer of 1997 and this was both a Bible camp and a blueberry farm, not a liberal arts college in Providence, said Mr. Madison on day one. And that meant that Maud was going to have to sleep alone. In the farthest-away wooden cabin up the hill.

"For privacy," Mr. Madison had said, dropping her duffel on the cabin's front steps, right on top of a bevy of pine needles no one had bothered to sweep off. Behind the screen door, the cabin sat empty except for three metal bunk beds, stripped clean, and a solitary twin that someone—Gideon, no doubt—had made up with sheets, a quilt, and a pillow. The cabin itself was small, not much bigger than Maud's freshman dorm room, and in a small clearing, surrounded by pine trees and silence. The last cabin she had seen was a few hundred yards back.

Private, for sure.

But privacy was not one of Maud's core values. She'd grown up in a city that never slept and as such didn't trust the dark in the best of places, and Maud did not include the backwoods at night as the best of places. The bears, for one. That was enough, really. The silence and the bears.

"I'll walk you up every night," Gideon promised later, in the kitchen of the White House, which is what they called the Madison place. Maud had asked Gideon if it was a play on the famous one, you know, the one in Washington, and he'd looked at her seriously and said slowly: *It's because it's white. The house. It's a white house. And the cabins are brown.*

They were making dozens of sandwiches for all the pickers, since the fields were a drive away, spreading peanut butter and jam on the thick white bread Mrs. Madison spent her dark winter days baking and freezing in the ice chest in the basement. Blueberry jam for everyone else, raspberry jam she'd bartered for with a neighbor

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sometime in February in anticipation of Connor's return. That jar was kept on a high shelf and labeled CONNOR'S.

It seemed to Maud that Mrs. Madison had spent their entire sophomore year waiting for Connor to come back. And now that he was here, she spoke to him more than she did to Gideon, who mostly ignored her, or to Maud, who she spoke to not at all.

Maud looked up at Gideon, screwed up her face so her eyebrows nearly touched the blueberry-blue bandana she'd bought at a head shop in Georgetown, hoping it made her look like a picker, even if that was the last thing she wanted to be doing. "You mean, you really think I'm going to sleep there? Are you nuts? I'm sleeping with you guys."

Connor and Gideon shook their heads at Maud. Connor even went so far as to squeeze her shoulder, lean in and whisper in her ear, "Drop it."

Maud hated when Connor touched her in front of Gideon, even if it had only happened three times. Hated it because it rendered her breathless, at least for a second, and she'd lose her train of thought as she would try to steady herself. She was suddenly glad that she was not Connor's long-legged ex-girlfriend, Claire. A girl that fair would definitely be blushing.

Gideon looked at her, opened his mouth to say something, but shoved a pair of the PB&(r)J sandwiches in Connor's direction instead.

"Let's go, champ," he said. "The berries have been waiting for you all year. Remember," he said to Maud, "Connor's a legend around here. Best handpicker we've ever seen."

Connor dropped his hand from Maud's shoulder, took the sandwiches, and started to follow Gideon out of the White House. He looked back at her and grinned. "Don't worry, Maudie, *the woods are lovely, dark and deep.*"

Which rendered Maud speechless. No one had told her that this Connor, this King of the Blueberries, came with poetry.

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"I feel," said Maud on the seventh day, as she stood up to stretch her back. She had not been given the gift of handpicking; there was nothing wrong with her ankles. Or Connor's either, at this point, but no one dared take the crown off the handpicking champion. Mrs. Madison had made it clear—Connor still got to sit. Maud and the rest of the pickers got rakes and the real Farmers Madison got the mechanical harvesters. "Like this is some sort of socialist boot camp, bringing elite college kids to a farm so we gain empathy? Like if all that shit you've been reading didn't get you worked up, breaking your back for blueberries certainly would?"

"How's it working out for you?" said Connor, not looking up at her from his nearly naked blueberry bushes.

"I'm feeling very Hugo Chávez, for sure," she said, dropping the rake on the ground and bending at her waist to do windmills like she was back in third-grade gym. The internship at the State Department—long nights, studying up on the Balkans and the Middle East hoping someone would ask her opinion about anything—had not gotten her into shape for blueberry picking.

"Cesar?"

"That's salad," Maud said. "Don't get your produce mixed up, Connor."

"Cesar Chavez, dummy," said Connor, standing up because his crate was full, not because he needed to stretch.

Another goddamn crate, filled with nothing but perfect berries. His went straight to the White House, skipping the sorting process entirely, and directly into Mrs. Madison's private stash. Gideon hadn't been kidding. Not that she should have doubted him, not that Connor had ever been bad at anything. She just couldn't imagine him caring enough to deliver. Much less two years in a row.

"Are you fucking kidding me with the blueberries?" she said, looking down at her crate. It was half full and half of what she had was debris she'd raked up with the berries. She imagined that when people sat to clean them in the barn, they'd roll their eyes, say: "Maud's. Obviously."

"Cesar Chavez was the one organizing all the farmworkers,"

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Connor said, undeterred from educating her. "Hugo, a Venezuelan revolutionary. Different people."

"Well," she said, blushing for sure now, "who would have thought on the first day of college that it would be *you* helping *me* keep my revolutionaries straight?"

"You know too much," Connor said, smiling at her, squinting in the sun. "That's your problem. There's so much stuff in that little head of yours. How many Americans know either of them? Much less enough to get them confused. I could hear you do a whole bit on them on your show. Maybe you could do a call-in quiz on famous Chavezes. Or Cesars, for that matter. Might get more callers. Or anyone other than Gideon."

The blushing. It spread to her neck. She had to look away.

"Hard to get people to call in when it doesn't even broadcast anywhere but Perkins, and I'm not sure it even makes it there." That Maud was dedicated to a show on a student radio station without a proper broadcast airwave was possibly the biggest evidence of how much she liked to talk. To anyone. Especially since it was likely no one.

"Gideon never misses a recording. He likes to listen to your voice. In bed," Connor said, pointedly, waiting for her to catch his implication and protest. But Maud stayed silent, so he said, "But I'll call in, if you need me. It would be an honor, of course, to be on *Midnights with Maud.* Could be my big break."

"Connor O'Sullivan, that might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me," she said, though they both knew it wasn't. "Maybe socialist boot camp has already worked for you. Are there socialist lawyers?"

"Maybe I'm not going to be a lawyer," Connor said, putting his full crate on the back of the rusty pickup truck Gideon parked in the middle of the field every day. Couldn't go home until the bed was filled. "Maybe I'll be a writer."

"Because everyone is sitting around waiting for your pearls of wisdom," Maud said, and immediately regretted it. Immediately saw the sixty nights before the Gathering when she had done just

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that. Or waited to write back to Connor to not seem like that's what she had been doing. He just left it there. He knew she'd stuck his landing for him. He pulled an empty crate off the stack.

"Maybe that's why I'm here," he said. "To figure it out." He scouted the field and started walking toward a patch too rocky for raking.

"Or maybe," he tossed back over his golden shoulder, where his blond curls met the collar of his T-shirt, "I just like spending my August getting high and picking blueberries. I'm a man of mystery, Maudie, aren't I?"

Which gave Maud more of the chills than she would like to admit.

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Truth be told, Maud had considered not coming to the farm at all. To begin with, she'd had to choose between another internship at the lab and one at the State Department. Maud was having to come to grips with the fact that she might not be able to be a doctor after all, even if she wanted to. Maud, who had gotten a 1580 on her SATs and was still a little mad about the 20. Maud, who knew the Kaddish and the rosary. That Maud had failed organic chemistry. Or would have, if Brown didn't let you just drop things instead of fail them.

Maud had failed at many things, of course. She'd failed to make a friend before the ninth grade, when she started at a magnet school and found her people. She'd failed to kiss a boy until junior year, a fact she had spent most of college trying to make up for. But basically failing a class, let alone a class that seemed to exist only to weed people out of going to med school? That was a first.

Plus, Maud was just more interested in politics. She was studying World War I in her global history class and her professor kept insisting on talking about the war raging in the Balkans, so many thousands of people killed, *just as we sit here in Providence.* Maud started reading *The New York Times* every day, somehow surprised

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to discover history was happening all the time, not just in textbooks. When Maud kept showing up to office hours to ask more questions, the professor suggested Maud apply for the internship at State, a fact that Maud told her mother when she got it, to mute the obvious disappointment her mother displayed at the orgo problem. Plus, she emphasized, she'd be interning for the first female Secretary of State. Surely that had to carry some weight in erasing her abject failure?

Her mother had sighed and said, *That's just so you, Maud. Always taking the easy way out.*

Only Maud's mother would accuse her of slumming it with an internship at the State Department. But she also wasn't sure her mother was wrong. Because the truth was she was taking more political science because she wasn't quite sure she could ever pass organic chemistry. Curing disease, apparently, did not consist solely of *talking* about how terrible disease was. One could talk politics all day long. She wasn't even sure *doctors* liked talking about organic chemistry. Even Gideon couldn't convince her of that, and a doctor was the only thing he wanted to be.

Even if they weren't allowed to talk about that fact at the farm.

Which was another reason she had considered not coming. The list of things they weren't allowed to talk about seemed to just keep on growing. The fact that Gideon had had a sister. The fact that Gideon had told her not to mention Hannah, nor the fact that he was planning on becoming a doctor, because his parents didn't believe in doctors.

Like, at all? Maud had asked. *I mean, it's not a debate. They're not Santa Claus. Doctors exist.*

Like they don't believe in going to them, said Gideon. *They believe God has the power to heal,* he explained.

And you? she'd asked. He looked at the ceiling.

I'm figuring it out, he said.

Remind me not to break my ankle, she'd said, expecting him to laugh and say, *No, no, that's fine. We believe in doctors for broken bones.*

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Good plan, he'd said instead. So she packed an Ace bandage and extra Tylenol.

But that wasn't all she wasn't supposed to talk about. There was also the fact that every time Connor sent her an email, all she could think of was how long she had to wait until she wrote him back. And the fact that Connor was going to study abroad for all of junior year at Oxford and had broken up with Claire in anticipation of that. The fact that, in a cruel twist of academic fate, without fluency in another language, the only study abroad program that she qualified for was a spring semester either in Prague, where students seemed to study nothing but beer, or in Amsterdam, where people assumed students studied nothing but pot, but which also offered a semester of international politics and justice, which made State seem like a pre-req.

In the end, it was her parents who'd made the decision for her to come to the farm. They'd been divorcing so long it was like a profession. *What do your parents do?* a boy would ask, tracing Maud's bony shoulder in bed. *They're divorcing,* Maud would say. Which seemed fair, since it was a process that had been going on since the seventh grade, and among the things that had not been settled since then was who was to pay for what in relation to where Maud lived during school breaks, despite the fact that she was in college and, by all other accounts, an adult.

But they were all used to fighting about where to live, since the matter of housing had been at the forefront of The Divorce (Maud considered it capitalized, like World War II, the Renaissance, or the Middle Ages—eras, all) ever since the fight that had brought the family down.

The anger—that which had always been there, lining the rooms of their apartment like spikes in a medieval prison—erupted so nakedly one night at dinner. It was Maud's birthday and they'd argued the whole meal—it started even beforehand when they'd disagreed over Serendipity 3 (Maud) or Peter Lugers (her father)—but when the check came at the steakhouse (he'd won, he was paying) and her mother refused to let her father tip because the waiter had not filled

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up her wineglass fast enough (*Two bottles, Maureen!* her father had said, staring at the bill in disbelief. *I think it was fast enough!*) the rage just erupted, a volcano exploding all over the steakhouse.

When you're middle-class white people of any attractiveness, let alone as pretty as Maud's mother, it takes quite a lot before people will call the police on you. A lot of *please, would you think of the other customers, please.* But her parents had moved past *pleases,* they'd moved past Maud's crying, her mortification. They were incandescent with rage, they could not listen to reason. So come the police did, and, in the most embarrassing moment of Maud's life, asked her right there in the middle of the restaurant, all of which was staring at them, if her parents ever hurt her.

"Physically?" Maud had asked.

"Maud," her mother had said, lips pulled so tight they were white. Anger made some faces ugly. Not so Maud's mother, for whom it seemed her best look, and certainly most frequent. Her cheeks flushed like she was wearing a sheer blush. Her eyes became translucent. She was radiant. And also radiating. Fury. It rose off her like steam.

"Ma'am," the female police officer had said, holding her wrist. The female cop was not swayed by Maud's mother's face, not even a little bit. She had a gun on her hip.

Maud shook her head, a moment she'd regretted for the next two years, during which her parents both refused to move out of their Classic Six on the Upper West Side. It was the aftermath of Black Monday, Manhattan was in recession. And besides, the apartment was rent-controlled.

Over my dead body will I move out, her mother said.

God willing! her father would scream, slamming his door so hard, Maud was constantly amazed no one called the cops on them again.

They'd retreated into the apartment's main bedrooms, forcing Maud to sleep on the couch in the living room since her father insisted on keeping the maid's room for his office, and left it only when he knew Maud's mother would be asleep, seeing as she had

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court first thing in Brooklyn every morning. Maud's mother defended other people's children in court. Other people's children who actually broke the law. Or at least ran afoul of it.

But Maud did no such thing. Each evening she pulled out her bed and each morning she dutifully made it, tucking her pillow into the space between the couch and the wall, careful to leave as small a fingerprint on the place as she possibly could.

A sibling, a sibling would have been useful, but Maud had none. She didn't even have a friend. So what Maud did was what she always did: She picked up a book.

It was the Bible, of course it was the Bible, the basis of Judeo-Christian law for centuries. If law enforcement couldn't get them to see reason, Maud figured she should go straight to the source to make them see reason.

Reason being a reason for one of them to move out.

First, she sought out examples of aspirational peacemaking. "Live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you," according to the Corinthians.

She tried. Suggested to her mother that there were things more important than real estate. *We could move anywhere. That's the best part of being a lawyer, you can lawyer anywhere you want. You passed the New York bar on the first try! There must be kids to defend somewhere else.*

Maud had gone to watch her mother in court once in junior high. It was a school dispute—one kid had pulled a knife on another in the bathroom, *allegedly,* Maud's mother kept saying, as that was the very point she was arguing. Maud watched as her mother tore into the victim, *the alleged victim,* using every piece of legal textbook and Latin she could think of to make the alleged victim stumble and say damning things like "I don't remember. Maybe."

But Maud's mother was not deterred, flitting around the courtroom on her cross-examination, disputing statements about the time of day, the description of the coat the alleged perp was wearing. She would not give in. She was tearing this nine-year-old a new one.

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"Friedman," the judge warned, "the grandstanding. May I remind you this is a family courtroom and not an audition for *Law & Order*."

"Oh, Your Honor," she said, lowering her voice and brushing a blond lock away from her face before smiling coquettishly, "you saw the casting call, too?"

"Holy shit," said one of the child defendants to the other as the courtroom couldn't help but laugh, "That's your fucking lawyer? I gotta fire mine."

Maud had never seen this version of her mother.

But her mother had had enough of the Bible, having been force-fed it all the way through law school, so she had no interest in listening to Maud on the subject of Jesus. Or anything, really. What she wanted most was both to win and also to ruin Maud's father in the process.

Surely, her mother said, being no schlump on matters of the Good Book, *you've read the part of the Bible about the wronged woman getting justice?*

Because Maud's mother was sure she had been wronged. Her interactions with the world were seemingly just opportunities to prove it. Divorcing Maud's father was not just the end of a marriage, it was endless chances to show him up. There were so many lawsuits to file!

She would not back down. She moved through the courts, irate. She moved through Maud's life as a ball of ire, inspiring fear wherever she went. Terrified, Maud spent so much time trying to avoid her anger, despite the fact that it was hopeless: Her mother yelled when Maud came home early from school without calling. She yelled when Maud was late from school without calling. And, predictably, she yelled when Maud called to say she'd be either early or late. Where once her mother had been crazy but also crazy funny—the kind of woman of the New York eighties who you invited to dinner parties knowing she was never boring but also that she would never do dishes because she was too busy holding court—the divorce just made her angry. All. Of. The. Time.

Still, it couldn't be said that the Bible had nothing to do with the

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resolution. It was Yom Kippur that did it, finally. In September, when New York City public schools shut for the day of atonement, Maud decided to go to temple with her grandmother so she could atone for her parents' sins—there were so many—but mostly just so she could get away.

At first, she only planned to fast for the day, but as it went on and as she undid the sofa bed in her silent house, she saw a reason to never start eating again. She remembered another fight her parents had had, at the screening of *Gandhi* at the Film Forum when she was five. It was intermission and one of them had wanted to buy snacks and the other had said, "Snacks! Who can eat during *Gandhi*! The man starved himself for justice."

Which is when Maud decided to start a hunger strike.

Not eating seemed the easiest thing to do. You didn't have to do anything to not eat. Not doing was the whole point. And it was something she could control since her parents were barely around for meals, anyway. She lived mostly on chicken broth, crackers, and lemon juice (she didn't want to get scurvy, which she'd also read about), and every once in a while, if her father took her out for a pizza, she'd say she'd already eaten but would sometimes allow herself his crust.

The hunger strike lasted until January, when she fainted at school and no one could pretend any longer that there wasn't something off about a kid suddenly holding up her pants with her father's tie as a belt. It wasn't a fashion statement, the guidance counselor had told her parents seriously: *Maud weighs eighty-seven pounds. Another pound lost on her frame . . .*

They turned to her. For the first time since their civil war had started, they looked at their child. They looked at their precious, beautiful, precocious child and saw her wasting away and they immediately grew up, saw the error of their ways and stopped the fighting, and they all lived happily ever after.

No, of course not.

What happened was that the guidance counselor said that

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maybe what Maud needed was some domestic stability to focus on her recovery and that maybe it would be better if one of them moved out so she would get it. And that maybe if they didn't, she'd call social services on them. Which would be the second time, according to the guidance counselor's understanding, wouldn't it?

Her father moved out the next day. He pitched it as the heroic thing to do, leave a Classic Six, though the heroic thing to do would have been to take Maud with him.

Maud resumed eating. Just enough to keep social services at bay—for all the fear she inflicted on Maud, her mother apparently feared only getting disbarred—while also making sure the threat of them was always on the horizon. She moved back into her bedroom. It wasn't necessarily better—her mother had more time to yell only at her (offenses: using all the hot water, getting a B+ in calculus, calling that guidance counselor first when she won an academic prize, before telling her mother) but there were moments at least when her mother was not home and when her father no longer lived there where Maud felt something like the peace the Bible had told her about.

Still, the hunger strike had only solved high school—she'd lived with her mother until graduation, her father withholding child support until the courts decided the rest. College was a whole new thing. So with Maud at an academic crossroads—double down on science and take orgo again, despite all the evidence that science was maybe not her kind of smart, or embrace political science and policy as her rightful, if less immediately impressive, future—she found out that the two internships she'd been offered came with housing but that the State Department left two weeks at the end of the summer she would have had to split between their apartments, evenly so no one would owe the other any money. That was when she knew for sure she didn't want to be a doctor anymore, when she would spend two weeks living with her parents to avoid anything to do with science. But then Gideon invited her to the farm for the time instead, saving her the custody battle.

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And even then, it wasn't easy, choosing the free rent of the blueberry farm.

Because there was also the matter of the boys.

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On Fridays and the last night of the Gathering, there was still pie. Served out on the picnic table, next to Mrs. Madison's garden—zucchini flowers bursting through the chicken-wire fence, eggplants fat enough to carve. After going to town to check their email, Gideon and Connor had showered for the first time all week, arrived at the picnic table looking like toddlers out of the bath, cheeks all rosy, hair combed back.

Maud's hands were stained blue, her back was aching, but as the boys emerged from the woods—Gideon's wire-rimmed glasses catching the glint of the sunset, Connor's face looking like he'd been dipped in honey—suddenly she could see what had happened to Connor here last year. She could see why someone would fall in love with the Blueberry Gathering.

"I've never had pie like this!" Maud said to Mrs. Madison, hoping Gideon would tell her how rare it was, Maud eating sugar, Maud eating. Maud eating just to make Mrs. Madison happy. He didn't seem to, they didn't seem to know anything about her, because Mrs. Madison just said "Thank you, dear," before fussing over Connor again, which seemed to be her natural resting state, talking to Connor so she didn't have to speak to Maud or hear Gideon's silence. *Was Connor sure, absolutely sure, he didn't want her to make him an apple pie?* She had some apples, still, in the cellar, left over from the fall. *Was Connor really okay without some pie? He'd lost so much weight, again.* Not even Claire had cared this much about Connor, Maud thought.

"Mother," said Gideon, finally having had enough. "Come September, women will be feeding Connor all over England. It's Maud here that's a sack of bones. She's the one we have to worry about."

All of the Madisons, the pickers, and Connor turned to look at

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Maud. Maud shrank deeper into her sweatshirt, pulling herself back so much she nearly fell off the picnic table.

"Maud's fine," Connor said, leaning over to wrap his arm around her shoulder, scooping her back up to the bench, pulling her tight to him. "Maud's perfect as she is."

Gideon frowned. "Of course, Maud's perfect. That's not what I meant."

Mrs. Madison had looked away, but not before Maud thought she caught a tear in her eye. Connor squeezed her shoulder, willing her not to call attention to it, or to the fact that Gideon was flushed.

"Be perfect," Maud said to Mr. Madison, *"as your father in heaven is perfect."*

Mr. Madison dropped his jaw a little and stared at Maud harder, like he was actually seeing her for the first time. *"Blessed are the peacemakers,"* he said, just to Maud, *"for they shall be called sons of God."*

Connor said, "Wow, it's like a Bible Olympics."

"Please. Matthew 5 is strictly amateur hour," Maud said. "*Blessed are the meek,* and so on. Everyone knows that."

"If you love those who love you, what reward have you?" said Mr. Madison, nodding slightly to Connor's hand on her shoulder. "Also Matthew 5." He looked delighted with himself, looked like he expected Maud to raise him again.

But instead, it was silence that descended on the table.

Mr. Madison started to speak, but Gideon coughed, pointedly.

Which ended the matter. But Connor didn't drop his arm from her until it was time to clean up the pie plates and Maud was adding love to the list of things she was apparently not supposed to talk about.

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Skinny-dipping was Connor's idea.

They'd been sitting at a campfire at the lake when Connor had decided it would be a good time to take out the boats. He was

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