

“And this loneliness won’t leave me alone....”

Yesterday after working all night, I slept until three and woke to a bright, windy summer afternoon. I walked down to the waterfront, but instead of making my usual loop on a quiet path, I cut through the park, which was full of people of all ages. I passed by the bocce courts, where a tournament of sorts seemed to be going on; and the play set, which was crawling with toddlers and their mothers. At the baseball diamonds, three different games were in play—two of teenage boys in team uniforms, one of grown men in shorts and t-shirts. I leaned against the fence like a kid, the railing tucked under my armpits, to watch one of the boys’ games. Things seemed to move more quickly than in baseball games on TV—because the ball was dropped every now and then and needed to be chased, and the runners advanced along the bases and runs were scored. The parents in the bleachers yelled, “Go! Go!” and the boys shouted at one another excitedly.

I cut across an empty soccer field and headed back toward the water—past the yacht club and the Marina Market Bait & Tackle Shop. A sign on the window read:

CHIPS
COLD BEER
LIVE BAIT
HOT COFFEE

At the dock, one small fishing boat was tied up. The water lapped invitingly at the concrete and the little boat rocked gently on its surface like a lullaby. My eyes and legs suddenly felt tired. I walked out on the wooden dock a ways, just next to where the boat was tied up, and sat down. I tucked my hands under my legs and hummed to myself.

*Sittin’ here restin’ my bones,
And this loneliness won’t leave me alone.*

There *was* a loneliness there with me that was difficult to place. It had something to do with working all night and sleeping through most of this sunny day—and then being in such close proximity to these people and their communal weekend activities: ball games, picnics, moms pushing their kids on the swing set and chatting with one another over their shoulders.

I thought about the night I’d spent on Labor & Delivery and what strange and isolating work it was: Gazing at the computerized strips on the wall, occasionally entering one of the patient’s rooms to slip my fingers around the edge of her cervix or break a bag of water. Sleeping on the couch in the resident lounge with my pager glowing on the table next to me.

Then, at some odd hour of the night: “We need a doctor in Room 12.” And in I came, gowned and gloved and standing suddenly between her legs, a woman I hardly knew, meeting her frightened gaze. Blue towel in hand, masked and crouched like a catcher behind the plate—how strange and distant I must have looked to her, waiting expectantly, perhaps impatiently—at the end of this passage that she had been traveling for hours, days. I would touch her baby before she would. What an uncanny intimacy, a bridge and also a gulf between us.

As I sat on the dock in my circadian stupor, hypnotized by the motion of the water, I couldn't have felt further away from the people around me in the park, their lives and activities and joys and worries.

A car engine rumbled in the parking lot behind me, coming closer. I turned and saw an old van with a boat trailer rigged up behind it reversing beside the dock, the trailer aimed toward the fishing boat in the water. When the trailer was mostly submerged, almost touching the boat, a man climbed out the driver's side door and walked onto the dock. He had a thick white-grey beard and wore black rubber boots, jeans with black suspenders, a backwards ratty baseball cap and sunglasses pushed up on his forehead. He was tall and his arms were brown and strong. Although he passed right by me, he didn't say a word or even turn his head. A cigarette was caught in his lips, and it remained there as he untied the boat from the dock and, gripping the ropes in both hands, guided the boat expertly, carefully, onto the trailer. As he worked, I turned and peered inside the passenger window of the van. On the dashboard: a pack of cigarettes, a water bottle, an empty tin can. I imagined the can served as receptacle of some kind, for chewing tobacco or cigarette butts.

Now the boat was secured to the trailer. The man walked by me again without saying a word, cigarette in his lips. He climbed into the van and drove away, the little boat rattling behind on the trailer. I wondered where he was going now, and what it would have been like to spend this day out on the water in that boat, with piles of fish in old paint buckets, a pack of cigarettes in a zip-lock bag.

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