Praise for *LAKE LIFE*

A *New York Times* "Editors' Choice" selection • One of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*'s "10 Best Southern Books of 2020" • A *Publishers Weekly* "2020 Summer Read" • A *Lit Hub* Book Marks "Rave" title • A *Millions* "Most Anticipated" book of 2020 • A *Southern Review of Books* "Best Southern Book" of July 2020

"If your . . . summer vacation was canceled this year, console and distract yourself with *Lake Life*, the tale of a family getaway gone very wrong. . . .There's a lot of bad behavior here, perhaps because Poissant is so good at writing it. His prose throughout is sure-footed and intelligent. . . . [He] also leaves room for absorbing discussions of art, the socioeconomics of vacation property development, and religion."

—Jean Thompson,
The New York Times Book Review

"Masterfully crafted . . . simultaneously heartbreaking and hilarious . . . A totally engrossing story of the long shadows cast by troubled relationships and the glimmer of hope that dawns after painful confrontation."

—*Booklist* (starred review)

"Impressive . . . A well-wrought family tale from a talented writer."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Most stunning in this debut novel is Poissant's remarkable facility and fluency with point of view. . . . Each character's trajectory is masterfully rendered. . . . For a perfect summer read, look no further. You're not likely to find more beautiful, more distinctive prose anywhere."

—Melanie Bishop,
New York Journal of Books

"Poissant is one of our most talented local writers and we've been waiting for this, his first novel, for what feels like *a very long time*. If 2020 did nothing else good, at least it brought us this book."

—*Orlando Weekly* (Staff Pick and Best Book of 2020)

"*Lake Life* is a lyrically inventive and emotionally generous novel. Poissant is a gifted chronicler of the fault lines that lie just below family life."

—Jenny Offill,
author of *Dept. of Speculation* and the
New York Times bestseller *Weather*

"Vividly imagined and carefully rendered, *Lake Life* is both generous and unflinching. I loved every member of this functionally dysfunctional cast."

—Karen Joy Fowler, author of
The Jane Austen Book Club and
We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

"By turns moving, tender, and wryly funny, this gorgeously written ensemble novel about the unspoken dreams and secrets and self-deceptions of a middle-class family is deeply insightful and rewarding."

—Dan Chaon, author of *Ill Will*

"*Lake Life* is an absolute wonder. By turns tender and wrenching, gorgeous and haunting, it explores what can emerge from the wake of tragedy and the depths of love. David James Poissant is a writer of the highest order, and this stunning novel is one readers will never forget."

—Bret Anthony Johnston, author of
Remember Me Like This

"*Lake Life* is a beautifully written, expertly told novel about family and tragedy and love and loss. David James Poissant captures so beautifully the tangled love between parents and children, and how that love evolves and unfolds over time. I loved this book."

—Anton DiSclafani, author of
The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls and
The After Party

"When you find yourself thinking about a novel's characters well after you've finished reading it, wondering about them and how they're doing as though they were friends of yours, family, it means that you've found something truly special: one of those books that's not just about life but somehow contains it. Poissant's characters linger just that hauntingly, and his novel breathes with just that kind of life."

—Kevin Brockmeier, author of
The Illumination

"A humane and wise book about a family getting into all sorts of trouble. I am obsessed with the Starlings."

—CJ Hauser, author of
The From-Aways and *Family of Origin*

"*Lake Life* is a terrific story, one that delves into a family's messy history, and finds there not only pain, but—thrillingly—stubborn survival, hope, and love. I'm grateful for this book."

—Christopher Coake, author of
You Would Have Told Me Not To

"Told in stirring language, *Lake Life* is the complex story of contemporary Americans, each dealing with a brand of loss: of children, of youth, of self-control, and of destiny. Here is a book that is heartbreaking and true, lilting and swooping, dark and light, wry and touching."

—Michael Carroll, author of
Little Reef and *Stella Maris*

"*Lake Life* drew me into the kind of narrative dream that I'm unable and unwilling to leave. I read past daylight, and when I closed the book I had no memory of having turned on the lamp by my chair. The conflicts and themes of the novel are timeless and universal, and the prose sings."

—Allen Wier, author of
Tehano and *Late Night, Early Morning*

"A gorgeous, nuanced portrait of a deeply funny, somewhat dysfunctional, strangely lovable bunch."

—Hannah Orenstein, author of
Head Over Heels

"*Lake Life* captures the complex truths of familial and romantic relationships better than any novel I've read in years. This book is a triumph!"

—Joe Oestreich, author of
Hitless Wonder

"*Lake Life* is a tour de force. Heartbreaking and filled with characters that will haunt you long after you read the book, this is one of the year's finest novels."

—*Largehearted Boy*

"With . . . *Lake Life*, Poissant rises so far above expectations that it seems like he's been writing novels his entire existence. The form and execution of the work here are masterful, and the characters and settings are brilliantly painted."

—Barrett Bowlin, *Fiction Writers Review*

"Poissant has cooked up a deliciously satisfying novel, sharpened with suspense and psychological acuity."

—*The National Book Review* ("5 Hot Books")

"David James Poissant's prose, often rare and structurally both fierce and elegant, is a joy to read."

—Shann Ray, *Northwest Book Lovers*

"A fantastic book . . . outstanding . . . remarkable."

—Eliot Parker, *Now, Appalachia*

"Poissant's absorbing first novel . . . is fueled by moonshine and melancholia. . . . Death ripples through a family as riven by secrets as it is united in love."

—Matt Seidel, *The Millions*

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for my parents, who gave me water
and for Marla, who taught me to swim

PART ONE

FRIDAY

1.

The boy on the back of the boat, laughing.

The sky, pewter-stamped and threatening rain.

Michael Starling, age thirty-three, warm on his father's boat, watches the other boat, the boy, the bay—the water that will never be his because Michael's parents are selling the house.

Yesterday, they arrived—Michael and Diane, Jake and Thad—and were given the news: Richard and Lisa Starling will not be retiring to the lake. In a week, the Starling family summer home will be sold so that Michael and Thad's parents may retire, instead, to a pocket of Florida shore that screams margaritas and sand and all things distinctly un-Starling.

This decision, it's not like Michael's parents. They are not Florida people. They are ex-hippies, academics. They are lovers of cold mountain lakes and clear, cool streams, of trees that change color in the fall. Their summers are North Carolina summers, starry skies and the converted double-wide the family affectionately calls its *cabin in the woods*.

What has become of Michael's parents? Who are these brave fools who splash before him, bobbing in swimsuits and inner tubes in the calm waters of a Lake Christopher summer day?

Onshore, a heron picks through reeds for fish. Above, clouds cover and uncover the sun.

A morning on the lake—sandwiches, swimming—this was the Starlings' plan before the rogue vessel arrived, unzipping the water behind it, never mind swimmers or the bay's enforced no-wake speed. The boat dropped anchor too close, and the man at the wheel uncovered his head and waved with a hat—a captain's hat!—from the

deck. He whooped, spat a wad of tobacco overboard, then turned up his music very, very loud.

This is not good lake etiquette. This is not done.

Lake Christopher is not a party lake, and this is not a noisy bay. Longtime residents work hard to keep it that way, having survived decades of development and two challenges—one public, one corporate—of eminent domain.

The interloper boat blasts Jimmy Buffett, *The Party Barge* stenciled pink along its side. Its pontoons gleam gray under a gray sky.

Michael's father doesn't seem to mind. "Join us!" he calls to the man with the captain's hat. Then everyone from *The Party Barge* is in the water, all but the boy (*swimmer's ear*, his mother says, *a shame*) and his older sister, left aboard to watch the boy. Soon, though, the sister is under the canopy on her back on the deck of the boat, eyes closed, earbuds in.

Michael watches the boy and wants a drink.

The boy is four, maybe five. Where the boy's biceps should be are pumpkin-colored water wings. He moves to the outboard motor, then straddles the cover, a jockey in silver swim trunks. His horse is tattooed *Evinrude*, his racetrack the sun-dappled water in his wake. "Giddy-up!" he screams.

Some might find this cute. Michael doesn't.

The inflatables bulge like blood pressure cuffs around the boy's arms. One hand releases an invisible rein, and the boy mines a bag of Cheetos in his lap. He turns his head to observe his sister in the boat, his parents swimming fifty yards away. Michael follows the boy's line of sight. When he looks back, he finds a finger. It is a middle finger, the signature neon of Cheetos, and it is raised in Michael's direction.

Michael shuts his eyes. Why is he watching over this kid? He doesn't even *like* kids. He opens his eyes. The boy sticks out his tongue.

Hey, Michael wants to call to the negligent parents, *your shitty kid's giving me the finger, and your other shitty kid's asleep.*

Michael should be swimming, but his head has bats in it. Sobri-

ety is wings in the skull. It's echolocation behind the eyes. He needs vodka, stat, but this morning he woke to an empty orange juice jug and no way to sneak liquor undetected onto the boat. His family will put up with a lot, but not vodka before noon.

The boy raises the chip bag to his mouth, and his chin and chest are dusted orange. Then he drops the bag into the lake. He stares at Michael, daring him to speak.

It's a new sensation, being bullied by a child, and Michael can't say he cares for it.

He cradles his head. He misses his liquor cabinet. He doesn't miss his house. He'd rather be here than back in Texas. He's spent every summer on this lake since he was two, and if there's a place he feels at peace, it's here.

The boy draws himself to his knees and peers over the motor cover's edge.

The boy's family, they aren't from here. Michael had them pegged for out-of-towners. But out-of-towners pilot marina-rentals, and this is no marina-rental. This pontoon is an Avalon Ambassador, 90K on a good day, a watercraft that makes the Starlings' six-seat fishing boat the seafaring equivalent of Tom Hanks's *Cast Away* raft. (Michael's father christened theirs *The Sea Cow*, hand-painting the name on the gunwale in blue house paint that, thirty years later, has faded to a wavery *a Cow*.) No, these people—the mother with her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses, the father with his faux naval captain's cap—they aren't locals or vacationers. They're newly minted lake house owners breaking in the captain's midlife-crisis present to himself. Even as the Ambassador entered the bay, the mother was probably cutting price tags from the stack of towels at her side.

These are loud people who loudly flash their wealth around. To Michael, these people are everything that is wrong with America in 2018.

Speakers thump. Guitars strum. And for the love of all that is holy, would someone get Jimmy Buffett a goddamn cheeseburger already?

At the shoreline, the heron lunges and comes up with mud.

On the other boat, the girl who's supposed to be watching her brother is definitely asleep. She's young, late teens, bikinied, body toned and honey-tan. She's roughly the age and shape Diane was when she and Michael met here, in this bay, fifteen summers ago.

The boy leaves his knees. He's squatting on the motor now. His sister shifts in sleep, and it occurs to Michael that these siblings are far enough apart in age that the boy might be a mistake. Perhaps the accident waiting to happen has been an accident all his life.

The first one you smother. The others, he's heard, raise themselves.

Michael doesn't want a first one, never did. That was their agreement. That was *always* the agreement.

Diane floats on a raft in blue water, belly-up. She won't show for a few weeks, though sometimes Michael swears he sees the hint of something, a contour, a fattening. His wife isn't fat, but she's no longer the girl on the boat. He wishes she was, and, wishing, knows this makes him *hashtag something or other*. He doesn't want to be whatever wanting a fit, young wife makes him. But wanting not to be won't ease the want. He misses youth, his and his wife's.

Does this make him sexist? His mother would say yes. His father would say no. Thad, his brother, wouldn't care, and Jake wouldn't know what Michael was talking about. Jake, Thad's rich, attractive, slender boyfriend, is young. He's naive. He lives in New York and makes paintings for other rich, attractive, slender people who live in New York. As far as Michael can tell, Jake's interest in other people extends only as far as the dollar signs attached to his canvases.

In the water, Jake and Thad toss a football. Michael's father and the captain laugh, water noodles rising from their crotches, red, obscene. The mothers tread water, talking, Diane between them on her raft.

The girl on the pontoon boat sits up. She says something to her brother that Michael can't make out over the Jimmy Buffett din. She pokes at her phone a minute, then lowers the phone, lies down, and shuts her eyes.

From her raft, Diane won't look at Michael.

For fifteen years, they were so happy. Happy enough. Content, at least, before Diane upended everything. *People change*, she said. Michael's not so sure. Did Diane change, or did she trick him? Is this what she wanted all along?

Michael moves to his father's chair at the helm and flips on the fish finder. The depth here measures sixty feet. At the fifty-foot mark, something big drifts gray across the screen, a catfish, maybe, or a tree branch settling into underwater rot.

His mother adjusts her broad-brimmed sun hat—*the cancer hat*, she calls it, an attempt at levity that, every time, makes Michael cringe. Probably, she's telling the other mother about the skin cancer she beat. Again, Michael thinks, *Florida? Seriously?*

The bats cavort. Soon his hands will shake. He really, really, really needs a drink.

The boy perched on the motor flips him off again. The sister's earbuds have popped out, and her mouth is slack with sleep.

The heron in the reeds gives up and lifts off, fishless. The boy watches, and Michael follows the boy's eyes following the bird.

The boy smiles. He stands. Then he's overboard.

His body tugs him under, and the water wings rocket from his arms like champagne corks. A hand breaks the surface, slaps, but the floats slither, amphibious, from his grasp. The hand does not break the surface a second time.

And only Michael's seen—seen the boy stand, then fall, the seat of his swim trunks hitting the shell of the outboard motor, hard; seen him slip over the side; seen, in the eyes of the child, water below and sun above, a transmission, one word telegraphed from boy to man, and that word was: *Please*.

Michael rises, kicks off his shoes and sheds his shirt. He calls to the others, a cry he can't be sure is heard over the music blasting from the boat. He dives. He swims. He turns his face to take a breath and calls for help again, but he cannot stop. He cannot break his stride.

No splashing ahead, no hands.

Three more strokes, and Michael's close enough. He takes a breath

and dives. He's seeking silver swim trunks, teeth, anything that might catch light in the belly of a lake. But ten feet down the light is scarce, the water turned to murk.

He pinches his nose, pushes air from his ears to equalize the pressure.

Fifteen feet. Twenty. Blind, but grasping. Water in fistfuls, but no boy.

Come on.

He tunnels, pulls. How deep is he? How fast does a body sink?

The light is gone, and the water grows colder the deeper he goes. Whatever happens, he must not lose track of up and down.

In high school, he could hold his breath for a minute at a time, but high school was a long time ago. His ears throb. His lungs are lit coals. Wait too long, and he'll take a breath reflexively. He can't be underwater when that happens.

He has to surface. Surface or drown. Except. *Except*.

A whisper. The dance of something just out of reach. Swim trunks, fluttering. The pink of fingernails. Either the boy's below or Michael's dead and dreaming this.

Then he has the hand.

He can't see it, can't make out the boy's hand in his own, but he has it. The hand is there, and it is good. It's a hand he can swim with. He'll rise and hold the hand and not let go.

Later, in the hospital, Michael will wonder. Say he'd had a drink that morning, just to calm him down. Say the shock of his parents' revelation, the house for sale, hadn't led him to drink so much the night before. He might have held on tighter, risen true.

But that isn't what happens.

What happens is that Michael kicks the boy.

He doesn't mean to, but a body underwater isn't weightless, and swimming with one arm is hard to do. The boy's body drags. It is kicked. And just like that, the hand is gone.

He exhales, but there's no air left to leave his lungs.

He's swimming the wrong way. The boy is below. Why, then, does

Michael rise? He cannot rise without the child. He must turn back, but his body will not let him. Something in him has taken over, and the something in him wants to live.

He kicks, he claws, but there's no light. Impossible to gauge direction without the compass of the sun.

Then, a vague illumination. An object passing overhead.

He's heard stories. Catfish the size of zeppelins. Sturgeon armored like gators, ten feet long. Unless the thing he sees is his soul rising, leaving him behind.

No.

He is alive. He lives, and he is swimming. The fish or soul, it grows, and he swims toward it.

He's lost all sense of distance, space, and time. All dimensions are *water*. Fireworks go off behind his eyes, and a siren screams for him to breathe.

Breathe, then, he thinks. *Join the boy. Be done with this.*

Except that Michael's life is not his own. He is a *father*. His life is marked by that which is in bloom. This truth hits him with a force so great he hardly notices his head striking the bottom of the boat.

All is water. Then light. Then air.

He coughs, gasps, and throws up. He breathes.

Above him, the girl is screaming. Her brother is at the bottom of the lake. Surely, by now, he rests. Surely, he's stopped fighting, stopped water-calling, now, his sister's name.

Michael tastes salt. The salt is blood and the blood is his.

He cannot dive. He dives again, he'll die.

He is a father.

His life is not his own.

Beyond the boat, others fling themselves from rafts and swim to him. And in the distance, wings, severed from their body, spin, orange and current-caught. They orbit each other, knowing. They tumble, ocular with water's awful wink.

2.

Boats cross the bay, trolling for the boy. Through binoculars, Lisa Starling watches. She could have changed clothes. After swimming to shore, after dialing 911 and helping Michael into the ambulance, before grabbing her binoculars and returning to the water's edge, she could have put on something dry. But it's only just occurred to her that she's in her swimsuit still. Anyway, she's dry enough. The warm air has sipped the water from her skin.

This morning, when she woke, the sky was blue. Now the sky is gray, cloud-clotted. The color of carrion, she thinks, though she isn't sure this thinking makes much sense. But a boy is at the bottom of a lake, therefore the world does not make sense.

Lisa believes in God, though God is no one she'd like to meet today.

All over the bay, neighbors stand on decks and sit on docks. They huddle on shorelines and along the point. Across the bay, a man emerges from his house with scuba gear, then enters the water, tank on back, fins on feet, a regulator bulb in his mouth.

A pair of police boats keep other vessels from entering the bay. The boats are white and blue, and from the top of each, lights flash beneath the leaden sky. Above, a helicopter breaks up clouds.

Lisa lowers her binoculars. They are Swarovski Swarovisions. They're eights because she likes her birds bright. They're small because she likes her bins lightweight. They're among the best binoculars in the world. She knows. She helped rank them for last year's *Cornell Lab Review*.

She raises the binoculars again. The Starlings' boat is still out there, anchored alongside the other family's pontoon. A third police boat

bobs between. This is the boat from which, minutes ago, two divers leapt with flashlights big as megaphones.

Her husband, Richard, has joined the other family on their boat. He looks tired, face yellow, resin-stiff. He stands, a hand on the shoulder of the man they met just hours ago. The man's removed his sunglasses, his captain's cap. He holds his wife's hand. Their daughter's face is hidden in her mother's lap. The daughter and the mother cry. For an hour they've cried while the men watch the water, saying nothing.

Lisa lowers the binoculars. Their strap is cool on her neck.

She should have gone to the hospital with Michael and Diane, but she feels needed here. There are stories of children gone under, recovered twenty, thirty minutes later, then revived. Not miracles, biology. If the conditions are right. If the water is cold. If one stands onshore and watches long enough.

But, if she's being honest, they're only looking for a body now.

She starts up the hill to the house.

The house is small and old. *Distinguished*, Richard would say. *Not old, and neither am I*. Oh, but they're getting up there. Lisa is sixty. Soon her husband will be seventy. The lake house is older than Lisa's children, a '70s-model double-wide converted in the '80s to a house. She and Richard bought the place on impulse not long after Michael's birth. Their marriage was rocky. Twice they'd separated, then come to an arrangement: *No more maybes*. They would stay married, for better or worse. The summer home was the handshake on the deal.

And what a home it had been, years ago. Long and low to the ground, the house lolled at the top of the hill like an errant fire truck, white-shuttered, cedar siding painted red. A porch, low-banistered in the style of those old Sears Roebuck build-'em-yourself bungalows, wrapped the house, the back screened. A quilted hammock hung in the yard between two trees. A sprinkler system set to a timer kept the lawn green while they were away, and a detached two-car garage became a place to store research when their offices in Ithaca filled up.

Then came the storms of '86 and '90, the blizzard of '93, the

tornado—a near miss—of 2011. And don't even get her started on the great ant invasion of 2017. They tried to keep up, but maintaining a summer home was work, and they had work already, Richard teaching at Cornell, Lisa conducting research in the labs, both of them publishing. Summers were for resting, not repairs. So they'd let the house go a little. Okay, a lot.

These days, the porch sags. The siding is gray and mildew-stained. The roof is missing shingles, and what shingles remain hang furred with moss. And is it Lisa's imagination, or does the whole house kind of *lean* a little? The hammock in the yard has long since rotted away, and the lawn is a patchwork of grass and dead places, of anthills and weeds.

Last month, during negotiations, Lisa and Richard made so many concessions to the inspector's damage report that they stood to lose tens of thousands. "Hold off," their Realtor cautioned. "Fix up the place. The market's only getting better. In a year, you might make twenty thousand more."

But what's the point? The concessions are a way to tank the asking price, nothing more. Even pristine, the house, sold, would greet a wrecking ball. The lake is changing, investors coming in. In the end, it's not the house that she and Richard are selling. It's the land.

Unless Lisa calls off the sale. Closing is a week away. Barring a lawsuit, it's not too late. Keep or sell, stay or go, Richard won't fight her. Because they had a deal. And Richard broke the deal, forgot what marriage meant. The handshake—the house—it has to go. This isn't punishment. It's more that the equation must be balanced. To stay together, they must start over. To start over, they must sell the house. That much, to Lisa, seems clear. And just because Richard doesn't know she knows, that's no reason to go on as though nothing's happened. Is it?

She isn't sure.

She's sure of this: The choice is hers. Richard already made his choice. Richard gave up his right to have a say.

Up the hill. Up the porch steps. The staircase gasps underfoot.

Beneath it, where her children used to play, ivy's taken over, a hiding place for snakes. She skips the fifth step, run through with rot. The railing shakes. The wood is soft as cork, the kind left too long in the bottle that crumbles at the corkscrew's kiss.

On the top step, she turns and once more brings the binoculars to her face. She focuses, and the mother is there. Lisa should be with her on the boat. But, being on the boat, she would become the mother, and she has already been the mother. She will not touch the hem of that particular misery again.

And why is this happening now, their last week at the lake? Why rob her of the beauty of this time with her family?

But these thoughts are evil. For a moment, she can't stand herself.

The other mother is Wendy. In the water, she gave her name, and Lisa thought of *Peter Pan*, not the play or Disney movie, but the book, a favorite of Lisa's mother, whom Lisa lost three summers ago. Cancer, parents—the indignities of growing *distinguished*.

God, Wendy's face when those inflatables bobbed into view.

Who was watching the boy? Who was *supposed* to be watching him? Not Michael, who saw and dove and rose beneath a boat.

Poor Michael. Poor Wendy. Wendy is ruined. Wendy will never forgive herself.

And where do they go? Lisa wonders not for the first time, not for anything like the first time in her life. Where have they gone, Wendy's son and Lisa's firstborn, all the souls of children gone too soon?

If heaven exists, it has received them. They're children, after all. If not innocent, then innocent enough. Lisa imagines a Neverland for them, a place the ghosts of children go to wait, to fly, until their parents come for them.

She hopes for this. She prays.

Some days, all that keeps her going is this thought: If God is love, she'll see her girl again.

3.

Jake showers, and Thad leans against the sink. Thad still can't be sure how it happened—the boy, the boat, his brother's head. He searches the bathroom mirror for answers, but all he finds is his pale, unshaven face. The mirror fogs, and he wipes the condensation away. His eyebrows need trimming.

From the bay, they swam ashore and ran uphill. His mother made the call while Thad tried to convince his brother he needed an ambulance, Michael insisting he was fine, that he could drive, while Diane cried and pressed a blood-soaked washcloth to her husband's head. When the ambulance arrived, Michael reluctantly got in, Diane with him, and Thad's mother stationed herself at the edge of the lake. When at last Thad thought to check on his boyfriend, he found him in the bathroom.

"Are you still there?" Jake says, steam from the shower filling the room.

"I'm here," Thad says.

And who is this boy he's been with the past two years? Jake is twenty-six, four years younger than Thad, though there are times the gap feels wider, days Jake acts sixteen. They've reached the point they should get serious, commit or go their separate ways. That Jake might not recognize this makes Thad sad.

"Can I have some privacy?" Jake asks.

Thad wants to believe he's misheard. He pulls the shower curtain aside. Jake stands beneath the water. He's small and lithe, with acne on his chest. There's lather in his hands, and he's erect.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Jake pulls the curtain back. "Leave me alone."

"A kid's at the bottom of the lake," Thad says. "My brother's at the hospital."

"I'm stressed," Jake says. "This happens when I'm stressed."

Thad leaves the bathroom, slams the door.

Stressed. There's an explanation for Jake's behavior, but *stressed* isn't it. Jake's horny. Jake's *always* horny.

Thad used to be. Before weed. Before the regimen of Xanax, Paxil, and Seroquel. His dick works, it's just the want that's waned. He should want Jake. Jake's gorgeous. He's successful. He's good to Thad, or good enough. And *good enough*, given Thad's track record with men, ought to be enough. But it isn't.

If only Jake listened, asked about his day, showed him affection unattached to sex. That, to Thad, would look like love.

He moves to the kitchen table.

In a double-wide, even a converted one, rooms run together: kitchen, dining area, family room. Two table legs rise from carpet, two from linoleum the color of uncooked pasta. The floor's old, the kind that sticks to your feet with every step. Thad's feeling hungry, then ashamed for feeling hungry. How long, in the aftermath of tragedy, does one wait to eat?

Outside, his mother's coming up the hill. The grass is high. If she's not careful, she'll take a horseshoe stake to the shin.

From the bathroom comes Jake's whistling. This one's a hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" in a minor key. A recovering Baptist, Jake knows every hymn, each word of every verse. For him, growing up meant church on Wednesday, Saturday, and twice on Sunday. For Thad, church was Sunday mornings once or twice a month, and only if his mother insisted. (She never managed to get his father through the door of any house of worship.) Thad gave his mother's church a chance, but he knew early on who he was, and while her church wasn't the kind to condemn him, neither was it a place where Thad might raise his head from prayer to find others like

him seated in the pews. Couples, there, were straight. Singles were straight. The minister was a woman married to a man. None of this felt particularly welcoming. None of it felt *his*.

He hasn't been to church since he was twelve. And, while he judges Jake's occasional childishness, there are days Thad, too, feels like a child. It's as though, having dropped out of college, he missed some class everyone else got to take. *Here's how to pay taxes. Here's how to balance a checkbook. Here's how to keep a job.*

How have his parents done it, stayed employed for thirty years, stayed married thirty-seven? Their love is real. Their work is important. Google either name, a thousand hits come up.

How, then, did they raise such dumbfuck sons?

Thad's mother reaches the porch, but she does not come in. She stands on the top step and watches the water through binoculars.

Thad will miss this house, house of summers, of card games and horseshoes, of fish fries and music and ice cream and love. But this isn't the home Thad remembers. The walls are marked by holes and hooks where paintings used to hang. Boxes crowd the corners, stacked or open, half-packed. Bookshelves stand empty. His mother's knickknacks and flea market ceramics have all been newspapered away. Framed family portraits, wrapped in brown paper, lean against the walls.

The room's one concession to ornamentation is Jake's painting—a gift last year upon his first visit to the lake. In the painting, a girl palms a pomegranate half. A cherub hovers over one shoulder. A compass at her feet points north. One of the girl's breasts is out. All of these add up to something symbolic, though, gun to his head, Thad couldn't say what. Part of him wonders whether Jake could say. Jake might be a genius, or he might be making shit up as he goes. Could be anyone who tries to analyze his work, the joke's on them. Thad merely remembers being relieved his mother hadn't protested the wayward boob.

His mother, as a rule, is thoughtful, unfailingly polite. He imagines her packing, fretting over whether to take the painting down or

leave it for Jake's benefit. Thad can't say such worry is undue. Jake's got an ego and the sensitivity to go with it. Then again, it's possible he hasn't even noticed that his painting is the only one still up. Jake sometimes has trouble getting past himself. By twenty-four, he'd had two solo exhibitions. At twenty-five, he was the subject of pieces in *Artforum*, *New American Paintings*, and the *Times*. Just last week, the *New Yorker* gave his third solo show three pages, dubbing him Brooklyn's next big thing and praising his work's "mordant irony" and "refreshing excess." Jake pretended not to care, but Thad's caught him reading the article half a dozen times. He's had only one bad review. An *Art in America* piece celebrated a group show before singling out Jake's work as "clumsy, desperate, and eager to please," a line that sent Thad's boyfriend to bed for three full days.

The whistling tapers off, replaced by a bassline. Jake has switched on the Sharper Image plastic-capped bath radio he gave Thad's parents for Christmas and which nobody but Jake has likely ever used.

Thad moves to the hallway. He presses an ear to the bathroom door, and that's when he hears it. Over the rush of water, the buzz of the bathroom fan, the hum of Bell Biv DeVoe singing "Poison," Thad can just make out the gentle slap of his boyfriend jerking off.

Thad's mother crosses the porch. Thad steps into the bathroom and shuts the door. Immediately he's underwater, the room more steam than air.

How did his brother do it? Push himself past so much silt and dark?

"You have to stop," Thad says. "Or be quiet about it."

The slapping grows frenzied.

"Jake," he says. He doesn't want to pull the curtain aside.

The sound slackens. Jake's done. The radio cuts off. The water stops. The curtain draws back, and Jake's head appears, eyes blue, teeth so white you'd think he modeled for some product four out of five dentists recommend.

Those eyes, though. He loves this boy. Jake's sledgehammered Thad's heart a hundred times, but it's Thad who's let him. You can

only blame the hammer so long before you have to blame yourself for not stepping aside.

Jake wipes the water from his face.

The plans for tomorrow are set, and Thad should call them off. Say he did, would Jake go to Asheville without him, or would he stay? Either way, a boy is at the bottom of the lake. There are more pressing concerns than tomorrow's lunch with Jake's art school ex.

"I can't believe you did that," Thad says.

"Don't shame me," Jake says.

"I'm not shaming you. I just think it's disrespectful."

"*Disrespectful?* What I do with my dick—"

"Do you even care?"

Standing in this room is like being in a mouth. Everything is wet—the mirror, faucet, knobs all slick and glistening. Jake stands dripping, and Thad offers him a towel, which he takes.

"Do I care that a boy is dead?" Jake says. "Of course. I'm not a monster."

Thad lowers the toilet lid and sits. In the shower, Jake towels off his hair, which is short and dark. There's little in the world that Thad likes more than running his hands through that hair—clean and soft—before Jake slathers product into it. He likes Jake's hair the way it is. Jake prefers the electrocuted hedgehog look.

"All I'm saying is there's a time and there's a place," Thad says.

Jake laughs. "You don't believe that. You think you believe that because that's what you've been taught to believe. No sex for you. Not at a time like this. You're *respectful*."

"My mom is—"

"Your mom?"

Thad's arm itches. He runs a finger along the raised scar, swollen in the steam. "I could hear you halfway across the house. You want her hearing that?"

"Ah," Jake says. "That's different. That's manners. Manners I can get behind."

Jake's big on manners. In the city, he's as well-known for his charm

as he is for his art. Frank DiFazio—respected, feared, beloved owner of Chelsea's Gallery East, the man who made Jake and named Jake (before Frank, Jake was *Jacob*)—has Jake trained. "I took the boy out of Memphis *and* the Memphis out of the boy," Thad once overheard Frank tell a friend.

"I'm sorry I was impolite," Jake says. He's drying off. He's lean but not boyish, muscled but not buff. Thad had a body like that once, but he's put on weight the past few years. Too much pot. Too many late-night snacks.

Jake smiles. It's tough staying mad at him.

Thad stands, and Jake drops the towel. He reaches past the shower curtain and places one hand on Thad's cheek.

"I can make you feel better," Jake says. His hand drops to Thad's waistband. "Come on. I'll keep it real respectful." Then Jake's hand is down his shorts.

Thad pushes him, and Jake hits the wall, hard.

"Jesus," Jake says.

Thad moves to the door. He needs to leave the room before he cries. He doesn't want to meet Jake's ex. He doesn't want to lose Jake. He doesn't want a child to be dead.

"You think they'll find him?" Thad asks, but Jake won't look at him.

When Jake turns, his back is latticework, squares where the shower tiles have left their mark.

"I'm sorry," Thad says.

But he no longer has Jake's attention. Jake's stepped out of the shower, and his attention is on the small, black jar he's just fished from his toiletry kit. He uncaps the jar, dips two fingers in, then gently works the product into his hair.

4.

Diane Maddox exhales. Diane Maddox who traded Tennessee for Texas. Diane Maddox whose parents are divorced. Diane Maddox who married Michael ten years ago and wouldn't take her husband's name. Diane Maddox who carries a child inside her. Diane Maddox who had an abortion in high school and who does not regret that choice, but who is not in favor of making that choice a second time. Diane Maddox who went to school to be a painter before settling for being a those-who-can't-do art teacher. Diane Maddox who wonders whether thirty-three is too early for a midlife crisis, were women said to have those and if those meant more than a red motorcycle and the affair to go with it. Diane Maddox who has been reassessing her infinitesimal place in the cruel and sideways-pressing world. Diane Maddox who likes dangly earrings. Diane Maddox who has always longed to visit Reykjavík. Diane Maddox who grew up watching *Mad About You* and wanted to *be* Helen Hunt. Diane Maddox who, in eighth grade, cried—*cried*—through the *Mad About You* finale, cried over the fact that Paul and Jamie weren't together anymore. They would give it another try, the way Diane's parents gave it another try too many times to count, *giving it another try* code for the pain a daughter feels when some mornings Dad's there, eating Cheerios, and some mornings Mom says, "I hope that fucker drives that thing off a fucking bridge." Diane Maddox who is unhappy but for whom divorce does not feel like an option (whether to prove something to her parents or to *Mad About You*, she isn't sure). Diane Maddox who wonders whether things would have gone better had she taken her husband's name, though of course a name can't save you. A name can't save a