

## *The Shoals*

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**E**uan swore he'd had enough excitement to last him for a lifetime, and that all he wanted to do was settle down with someone, but he didn't mean with Becca, which was something she had known since the beginning.

His conclusion about any relationship the two of them might have, which he still reminded her of almost every time they saw each other, although then it apparently slipped his mind — hadn't she, once again, just spent the past two hours trudging through the woods behind him? — had always been that he couldn't let himself get too attached because eventually she was only going to leave him, and he was just too tired to go through that again.

Although Becca had heard it all before, she had to admit that this time he actually did look tired as he explained it, taking off his glasses and setting them beside him on the quilt he had spread out across the bumpy ground. He stared through the trees at the hiking trail they'd just come down without attending to the landscape, the sleeves of his white T-shirt rolled back to flatter the definition of the muscles in his arms, reminding her she would leave him eventually simply because she had never seen what lay beyond the sort of pine trees they had just hiked though, or the Georgia border, which they were nowhere near.

This inevitable future explained why every time they saw each other was supposed to be the last time.

"Not true," she countered, deliberately misunderstanding him. "I've been to New Orleans. I've been to Alabama."

Back in the summer, she had always started ahead of him on the hiking trails they took on the weekends, aware, even as she pretended that she wasn't, of how much he liked her legs, her ragged cut-offs. Then there had been blackberries to stop and hunt for, something to break up the monotony of the buggy woods, a courtship to be created from each shared glossy handful of plump berries. But now it was December, unseasonably warm, and all that was left was a low thicketed blanket of brambles and the endless fingering of the dense, straight trees. The faint trail they had followed to get to this spot had been occasionally barricaded by thorns as if guarding something truly important, but Euan had long ago stopped pinning back the tendrils creeping across it.

"Someday," he predicted, reaching over to adjust one of the straps on his backpack, and she knew what he was going to say before he even began to say it. Someday, the charm would wear off and she would graduate, and he would just be old. She would grow up and then she wouldn't love him. Once he had used that as a justification for why their relationship was best kept casual; it had also been the excuse he used for what they both had recognized, even then, as a certain type of bad behavior. But this time he rubbed his eyes as he laid it out, as if it all — her, the

two of them together, his past, the future that seemed up for grabs to her but to him was already all spelled out — had suddenly just become the complicated question he once only pretended that it might be.

“You think we might find arrowheads once we get out to the mounds?” she asked, changing the subject, knowing that he knew she was doing so. In the beginning, his weapon had been a future she couldn’t imagine, but she had learned that she could usually gain the upper hand with hers: a present moment infinitely more seductive.

“Possibly,” he said. “But we shouldn’t take them.”

Euan no longer smoked, he had stopped eating meat long before she was old enough to step into a restaurant by herself and place an order, and the fact that he was even *with* Becca was a rule he claimed he was ashamed of breaking.

“Well,” she said, studying the heap of stones in front of them that looked to her like tumbled concrete. It was entirely possible that the patch of ground they were sitting on was one he had already visited on other picnics, in other seasons, probably with Marianne. Who, finding herself someplace where there might be arrowheads, Becca imagined, would simply take one.

Through the underbrush she could catch a glimpse of the silty river. “So is this it?” she said. “Skull Shoals?” On their way out of town he had explained it: how the land along the shoals had been a Native American burial ground first; that General Oglethorpe’s debtors had pushed their way toward it from the sandy coast, until eventually someone had built a ferry and levied fees to anyone who needed passage across the flat red river. The second group pushing out the first and then, in turn, being themselves pushed out in a cycle that couldn’t be changed, just documented. When Euan had parked the car at the boundary of the Forest Service land, he pointed out the fact that the gravel road was three feet lower than the earth on either side of it with the same enthusiasm he had brought his position as a Teaching Assistant for the history class where she met him.

But even after six months of excursions like this, Becca still couldn’t distinguish between battle trenches or house foundations and the brush that grew over and around them, and left on her own, it would have never occurred to her that the road they had driven to get here, worn away and packed hard by half a century of logging trucks and who knew what before that, had been in place almost two hundred years. When she was with Euan, all she could see was the obvious: an end-of-the-year sky the color of waxed paper and a dank, scrubby expanse of trees; and that sitting in the woods on New Year’s Eve was the closest to a date as she and Euan would probably ever get.

“A lot of people out here, considering it’s New Year’s Eve,” she said, thinking about the three pick-up trucks they had seen nosed to the side of the graveled road before they pulled over. “You think they’re going where we’re going?”

He reached down to pluck the topographical map from the flapped pocket of his backpack.

“The shoals are right here. Maybe people park along the road to go fishing.” He touched a finger to the map. “Here. Here’s where we are, at the ruins of the mill. The mounds are supposed to be a quarter of a mile upriver. This trail should take us.” He traced it and looked over at her, his eyes such a beautiful, unexpected blue that she bent her head to study the map, embarrassed.

“I’m glad you were home when I called,” he added. “It’s nice to get out of town.”

Becca knew Euan was too old to be some slouchy, sullen James Dean, too smart to be so unaware of how he looked, with his push-ups at night and the way he had coaxed her into sitting on his tensed back for the last ten the only time he stayed over at her apartment. Was having his sleeves rolled up that way a calculated affectation? Even though she had begun to suspect it might be, she still couldn’t keep from appreciating the way his arms looked, couldn’t help being aware that underneath his faded flannel shirt there was a faint line of curling hair that worked its way up the middle of his stomach.

When she and Euan had first started sleeping together, she’d hoped to pull statements like the one he just made from him as evidence of certain sentiments he swore he didn’t have that they would prove. But somewhere along the way, any admission she could force him into had begun to contain its own reward, as if everything that went on between them had begun to mirror the countryside he took her walking over: of interest only because it was the site of certain protracted battles. Somewhere along the way, the balance between them had shifted, and whether he was too old to fall in love or she was too young to keep from doing so had stopped being the issue. As usual, he was about to move his hand and place it on her knee, he couldn’t help himself; the two of them were incapable of being just friends, and she had long ago determined she was going to beat him at his own game.

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Euan’s push-ups were part of the regimen he had started when he turned thirty: it was something he explained when he first met Becca; that and running five miles every single day. He needed, he had said wryly, to learn self-control.

The fact that he had waited until after she walked into his cubicle and turned in her take-home final to ask her if she wanted to go out for a beer sometime had seemed evidence of self-control and illustration that he had already learned it. And at that point, his self-control or lack of it had not seemed anything either to dissect or debate: mentioning it merely added an extra dimension to a flirtation they both already knew the end to.

But lately she’d begun to wonder if Euan wasn’t learning self-control, but trying to negotiate some bigger, more complicated trade-off. Maybe what he really

meant but wouldn't say was that if he kept in shape, it would be okay that he was on the other side of thirty; that, even though he had finally almost finished his dissertation and was applying for a permanent lecturer position at the university, his wife had left him right before he and Becca met, and he had spent most of the time since then merely *coasting*.

"Christmas was pretty rough," he said, pulling two lukewarm bottles of water and the sloppily-wrapped sandwiches from his pack. "Marianne and I still have some stuff to talk over. We still have things we've got to iron out."

Becca knew that if she were someone else, Euan's friend, for instance, instead of what she was — his girlfriend? a way to pass the time? his former student? — she might have asked him how it had gone, seeing Marianne. She might've asked him what it was that the two of them had left to iron out. If it made him sad. If he thought he'd ever be able to forget her. She didn't say anything, just reached for a stick and prodded at the layers of rain-slicked leaves he had kicked to one side when he unfurled the quilt for them to sit on. The air was heavy and wet, full of the smell of rot.

"Leaves of three," he said. "Leave it be. I think that's poison ivy, Becca."

The first time they had ended up in bed, he had traced the slant of her cheekbones. He was the first person who ever told her she was beautiful; he had said he could see the women she'd come from in the planes of her face. He was talking about the original Scotch-Irish immigrant the final paper she could just as easily have dropped into the cardboard box outside his cubicle had indicated she came from, but in the moment he said it, she had also felt certain what he meant was that when he looked at her, he saw every single one of his previous girlfriends.

"It's Skull Shoals because the bones from the mounds washed downstream every time the river rose." He unwrapped his sandwich and nodded toward the crumbling walls reaching up toward a nonexistent second story.

"Or maybe the first owner of the mill was named Scull," she finished. He'd told her both speculations on the drive out, also that it was so long ago that no one knew for certain why the mill failed, why the colonists left. She almost wanted to say *maybe so long ago that no one even cares*. Though she knew he did, that he couldn't see what seemed obvious to her: the walls around them had a desolate feeling, as if the former inhabitants had left hurriedly, fleeing in the face of some inevitable natural disaster. "Hand-quarried," he said, seeing the direction of her gaze. "And carried in from somewhere."

She turned to look through the remains of the doorway at the width of the river, taking a bite of her sandwich. "Maybe malaria got them all," she said. "I bet in the summer there's lots of bugs." The water was unnaturally thick, so slow-moving it hardly seemed liquid at all. "Or something. It's spooky out here." There were only a few wavering ripples pockmarking the water's expanse to indicate the shoals that

were lying beneath, and no signs warning of dangerous currents attached to the low-hanging tree limbs.

“They just left.” Euan drained his bottle of water and shoved it into his pack.

Or maybe the treacherous, invisible rocks beneath the surface had been given their name simply as a warning to anyone who might arrive at these banks, cocky and believing they, unlike anyone else who had come before them, could be the first to successfully ford them.

“Maybe.” She was unconvinced. “There have to be reasons.”

He bunched up his jacket and leaned back, pillowing his head against it. “It’s not the Lost Colony. It’s not like they vanished into thin air. Maybe you watch too much TV for your own good.”

Roanoke was where he and Marianne had met. “I know somebody who’s one to talk about TV,” she said. “Somebody who’d have a great big wide-screen, if his wife hadn’t taken it with her when she up and left him.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, without opening his eyes. “And just see how my life has improved.”

She wasn’t sure if he meant, because Marianne had left him, or because he didn’t have a TV anymore. “We could come back sometime and swim,” she said. “Maybe when the weather’s warmer?”

In the beginning she had sometimes brought up the immediate future as a way to try to get him to admit they might actually be together for that long, but lately it had begun to feel part of a game, something she just did to see how he would respond.

“That would be nice.” He rolled over to face her. “But I’d been thinking about how to really celebrate, after I finish my dissertation defense. The beach might be better.” A faint rumble, like thunder, rolled down from somewhere; further upriver, or the opposite bank, where the far-off delicate threads of an irrigation system arched across the flat, cultivated land.

“Hunters?” she interrupted. “Was that guns?”

“Shouldn’t be. At least, not around here. Not on public land. They might be further upriver.” He leaned back on the quilt. “Nobody around for miles.” He looked over at her. “Nobody to see us.”

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She stretched out beside him, listening to the slap of the river beneath the bluff, and a single bird calling somewhere back in the trees. It hesitated and then fell silent, as if listening to the low booming being carried toward them from somewhere further upriver. She sat up.

“It’s New Year’s Eve. Do you think somebody’s setting off fireworks?”

“Nowhere near here,” he said, reaching for her.

Sometimes she still went on dates with other guys, boys from her classes who asked her out, standing in the hallways before or after classes. They opened doors for her, or else they didn't. They took her out to dinner or the movies, but when she sat across the tables from them, they mostly bored her: when she was with them what she really wished was that she was in the car with Euan and they were speeding someplace that she hadn't ever been yet. When she was with Euan, they stayed in motel rooms, where he kissed her in the elevator before they even got up to their room. He put his hands against her head and bent it back, and in the mornings he always left before her and she felt wrung out, as if she had just run for miles. The motel rooms were so dark it was like being underwater. The second the door of their room swung shut behind him everything within her already would be tensed towards the next time she would see him.

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“God, Becca, how I love to sleep with you.” He eased a hand beneath her T-shirt. Trees pressed against their little bit of clearing, threaded through by the blackberries' stripped branches.

It was the closest he would come, but then again she had never said she loved him, either. She would never tell him that the first time he had touched her in a certain way, there had been nothing but his hands, his body, and within her a chord struck, deeper. That it had been almost like he pulled it from her, or as if things had gone beyond her for the first time.

But sometimes now she wondered if someday they might cross over something, some sharp line that neither of them would notice until they were completely past it. “Here.” She lifted her hips as he sat back on his heels to tug at her jeans. When she leaned back, she could feel every bump in the ground knuckling her shoulder blades; when she laid her hands against his back, she could feel each knitted knot of his spine, beneath her fingers.

“Becca?” He sighed. A stick snapped on the far side of the river.

“What's that?” she asked, raising her head. “I hear something.”

His answer was a murmur against her neck.

“Don't you hear that?” She pushed at his chest as the sound of voices was borne toward them above the soft sluice of the river. “I told you. I told you I heard guns.”

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Once heard, the hunters' slow progress toward them became obvious, and easily measured: a jovial slide down the river's opposite bank, a wade and splash across the muddy water. As the hunters slogged through the bracken, their noise made it clear that not only had their afternoon been squandered in splashing and catcalls, but also that any self-respecting deer must've long since fled through the

woods. But the time it had taken them to work their way across the shallow ford of the river would even give Becca the chance to get her muddy boots on.

She looked over at Euan as they hurriedly buttoned and buckled. “I told you there was somebody else out here. But of course you knew more than I did.”

“At least they’re giving us time to get dressed. Hope they don’t think we’re deer and shoot us.”

“It’s the last day of the year. The last day of deer season.” She stood up and brushed off her jeans. “How many years have you been hiking out here? Didn’t you think of that, before you asked me to come out here?”

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey,” he shouted toward the band of water visible through the trees. “There’re people back in here. Don’t shoot us.”

Becca started twisting up her hair. Even if there was little chance they would be mistaken for deer, she didn’t want to be fair. She turned away from Euan and started along the trail, leaving him to fold up the quilt.

The hunters were a huddle of camouflage and orange vests at the side of the trail at the top of the riverbank. “Hiy-dee,” a voice said as she approached, but she refused to look up. There was a snicker.

She didn’t look at any of them as she pushed past; neither caught, nor shot, what was she but another campfire story that they might tell later? A single vine coiled across the path, and she kicked at it, sliding and catching her balance. How stupid the people who settled this place must have been to think there was any point in building houses down here, in such an obvious flood plain.

Off in the trees, a single bird called again, a long prolonged note of what might have been grief, sounding like a freight train. Behind her on the trail, Euan had started shouting. He didn’t even call her name, just whooped the way the hunters might if they were beating brush or driving something. *I am not* — she wanted to say — *some kind of trophy*. But even before his voice died away, she understood that they’d finally arrived at the future he’d feared all along. Behind her in the brush a stick cracked, snapped; a door that blew opened, closed, a hunter’s gun, a simple wind. Like a trap that Euan might’ve baited, or one he’d stumbled into.

*Caught*, she thought. Because in the woods she’d left behind her, Euan was still crashing wildly through the bushes. “I’m over here,” she called, hating him for the pity she suddenly felt, something else he had hurried along, another lesson it probably would have been best for her to learn in her own time.

