

The Doe

By Alex Candage

Every other year we lived in some other country or some other state, but every few summers, we always made it back to the same cabin on the lake in upstate New York. The smell of pine became an invisible smoke signal for safety, an embrace ever since I was too small to pick my own head up.

The woods felt full of possibilities.

My favorite trail was about half a Taylor Swift album away from the cabin, where the dirt path was packed down enough to support my wheelchair. Hugo, one of the groundmen, swept the mulch, pine needles, branches, and acorns away so that I would be able to access it. He didn't know that I knew, but I always sent a smile and a silent thank-you to him whenever I saw him. There was a clearing that always had soft grass to sit and lie down on, and wild dandelions to talk to and wish with. The view of the underbrush gave way to deep blue water, full of whitefish and herring, even a few bigger catches if you were lucky. They inspired beautiful descriptions for my novel. I even saw a young doe once. Here, it was calm.

But it wasn't the anticipation of productive fishing (or writing) that made my heart beat faster that August.

"Hi," said a voice behind me.

Using my hands to lift my butt off the ground, I spun around too fast, and for a moment, the world spun with me.

Before I fully recovered, I glimpsed her crown of voluminous curls tamed by mismatched sparkled hairclips and surrounded the entirety of her. It was as brown and deep as her eyes, practically out of a shampoo commercial, despite being in the middle of the woods. She was wearing a smile I thought was too large for someone with black combat boots. Something about her was trouble—less in a mischievous way and more in a grand "I'm going to make something of myself, no matter what you think" way.

She was more than beautiful. She was authentic.

“Uh, hi,” I said.

Her impish smile showed a sliver of her teeth and crinkled her nose. I waited for her to introduce herself, but she only stared.

“Hi.”

“You said that already.”

I had to focus on breathing a lot more than usual. “Uh, I know, I just—what’s your name?”

“Jazz.”

“Oh, cool. I’m Emma.” Did her parents really name her Jazz?

“So, Emma, you preparing your sacrifice out here or something?”

“No—what?”

She laughed at my terrified eyes. “That’s exactly what someone preparing a sacrifice would say.”

I held my hands up, palms facing her. “Hey, you caught me. I was sitting on the floor because I was just about to make an unsanctioned fire to roast my rabbit sacrifice to the gods.”

She turned down the corners of her mouth and raised her eyebrows, nodding, faking being impressed. She asked me how long my stay was.

“Too long and too short all at once.” I gave her a half smile.

I didn’t want to go into the “my dad is in the military” speech. It was too long and too short, too.

Maybe it was because she was bored, or maybe it was because she felt my sudden somberness, or maybe she liked me. Whatever it was, I surprised myself by saying yes.

“A party?! Where they driving you to, New York City?” My mom was always overprotective. She couldn’t protect my dad from extremists, and she couldn’t protect me from surgeons’ knives, but she could protect me from underage drinking and other “teenage tomfoolery,” as she would say.

“It’s at one of their friend’s houses, and it’s gonna be chill. I’ll bring my cane.” I could walk without it most of the time for short distances, but my cane helped stabilize my balance in a way that my inner ear couldn’t. “It’ll be fine.”

“You’re not bringing your wheelchair? Is their house not accessible?”

I hadn’t asked; it wasn’t exactly considered ‘cool’ to ask whether her brother’s car’s trunk can fit a collapsible manual wheelchair, including the foot rests, or whether your friend’s house has stairs up to the entrance. “No, it’s not. I’ll eat plenty beforehand and have a friend with me, though. I can always take an Uber home if I have to. My phone will be fully charged. I’ve got it covered.”

My mom sighed. “I can at least trust that you won’t do anything illegal, right?”

“I promise I won’t do anything illegal,” I deadpanned. It was like she didn’t already know that my greatest thrill in life so far was spotting a fawn in the woods.

That night, the cicadas were out—and to my surprise, so was I. It only took about half an hour for the trees that went on for miles to succumb to suburban houses, roads that weren’t dirt, and chimneys billowing. It still smelled faintly of pine if you were really looking for it, but I missed the woodland air as soon as we pulled in.

The entire house was pulsing pink, green, red, pink, green, red. I mentally prepared myself for the ensuing migraine. I knew I’d wake up tomorrow with all the agony of a hangover without the fun or freedom from being drunk the night before.

And that’s when I realized I had nothing to lose.

I had never gotten drunk before; since I was underage, doctors could never give me legitimate advice about whether my various medications would condone drinking besides “It’s best not to do it!” That plus being eighteen, an introvert, and constantly moving houses hadn’t exactly presented many opportunities for partying.

I found out three things that night: one, beer tastes absolutely awful, as does most other alcohol; two, you feel much warmer when you drink than I thought (I had to take my sweater off halfway through

my second beer); and three, drinking isn't actually that fun. It's mostly just confusing and spacey and hard to balance. I stopped after two cups.

After all my solitary days writing and enjoying nature, I had thought I needed to drink to talk to Jazz. I was surprised at how easy it was to discuss her engineering degree and my terrible dances moves. We shared a love of fishing and missed when our fathers would carry us on shoulders toned by hard work.

I had put water in my cup to rehydrate—and so no one would ask if I wanted a drink, or why I wasn't drinking. If it had something to do with my cane. Why was I using a cane? What was my life story? *What is wrong with you?*

I wasn't drunk, but my chronic fatigue was dialing up a few notches, creating my own buzz. I put my cup down and beelined toward the stereo, pulling Jazz with me, her beer sloshing on my socks. In the middle of the dancing crowd, my left arm gripped my cane as my right pumped to the beat, against the fatigue, the nausea, the pain I'd be in tomorrow. Jazz's eyebrows shot up, but instead of saying anything, she grinned, whooping and holding her cup in the air. She was on her third drink (that I had seen) when I kissed her.

Suddenly, her cup was on the floor and my arms were around her. It all happened in a moment that was her saying hi, and I saying hi, and her saying hi, and I saying you already said that, while I stepped so close the tips of her toes were touching mine, and then the tip of her nose, and then her lips.

Eventually we broke apart and she whispered we should get going and her brother drove us home, but I was too engrossed in the scent of pine in her hair to remember much of it.

She was a great kisser, but more than that, she didn't ever ask me why I was using my cane.

When we pulled up to my driveway, she hopped out behind me.

"Hi." Her hand touched my back, making my spine tingle, and I turned to look at her. Her crown of hair was shining in the moonlight passing between the leaves of the tress. She was scared, too. I saw it in her eyes.

I cracked a smile. “You said that already.”

We held each other for what we wished was an eternity—

Then the doe moved on toward winter, and the summer ended.