

Beneath

Adrian Elder

2014

The sky was clear when they launched their boat from Lynn Deming park into New Milford Bay. Sweat ran down Julie's arms and made it hard to squeeze into her wetsuit. Dana's friend brought her fishing pole, but assured them that she would wait until they had been gone long enough to be fairly deep before casting. Julie added getting caught on a fish hook, or having her air hose hooked, to her list of unvoiced fears.

Dana read from a wrinkled printout. "‘Near the town of Jerusalem is Rocky River Gorge, which drops to 80 feet deep.’ We’re not going down there, but listen to this. I swear I’m not making this up, the site I got this from said, and I quote, ‘This leads to hell itself.’"

"You're damn right we're not going there," said Julie.

"If there is a hell, I know I'm probably going there already, but it won't be for this," said Dana, with a wink.

Two days earlier, Julie was surprised when Dana invited her out to breakfast at the diner where they used to spend long nights together. Facing Julie from across the booth, Dana drew a curved length of rusted iron from the pocket of her shirt and placed it on a napkin.

"What is it?" asked Julie.

"It looks like a fragment of a horseshoe, doesn't it?" said Dana.

Julie inspected the mostly oblong lump of rust, sipped her bitter coffee, and shrugged. "I guess it could be."

"Look at the hole, the right size for a nail, and the thickness. If you compare it to pictures of rusted horseshoes online, it looks just like them," said Dana.

Julie said, "It is a chunk of rust. Where'd you get it?"

Dana brightened noticeably and said, "I got bored over Christmas back home and started poking around in my family history. A trial membership on some genealogy site, at first. That's where I found out that some of my family is from around here for a while. The Wade family. They had a Wade Farm and everything. I guess they grew tobacco over by a village called Jerusalem. The

whole thing is under 40 feet of water now. Candlewood lake's New Milford Bay, to be precise."

"You got this on a dive?"

"I sure did. Isn't that cool?"

Julie was often envious of Dana's numerous expensive hobbies, which included rock climbing, skiing, flying gliders, and scuba diving. Julie wasn't sure that Dana had ever been paid for work in her life. Her family hadn't made their living from farming for a while. She wasn't exactly sure how she felt about that kind of life, but she did quietly wish that she had time to indulge in a few more ridiculous interests of her own. She only needed to come up with a few first.

Julie said, "How do you know that this is from their farm? I mean, how do you even know where their farm is?"

"I don't, not really. I just dove down and started looking around the remains of the town. It's pretty amazing down there, in its own sort of way. Not corral reef amazing, of course. Different. You could see for yourself, if you were interested in coming down on a dive."

Julie couldn't remember Dana ever offering to take her along on a dive before. Not that she knew anything about diving.

"Don't I need training?"

"Yeah, but I can show you the basics and lead you around. It's incredible to see in person. Some of the buildings are still standing, sort of."

Julie imagined a typical New England town clustered around a green with the white steeple of a church overlooking the scene, and then she mentally tinted the air blue-green, coated everything in a layer of ethereally swaying plants and pictured herself floating through the streets several feet above the ground. It was an enticing idea, she thought, even though she was sure that a real dive wouldn't be like that.

"If you're sure that I don't need training, and you stay right next to me. Like, right next to me."

"Of course! I really think you'll like it. It's like a shipwrecked town."

Julie said, "That sounds cool. I heard the lake was man-made, but I didn't realize anything was still intact down there."

"Partly intact. I mean, as much as it can be after all these years. Also, after CL&P finished buying up land from the various farms and families in the area, they destroyed a lot of it. They brought in a bunch of workers from way up north, Canada even, to help clear forest and demolish homes and relocate cemeteries. It was a massive project."

Julie laughed and said, "The next time I complain about a long day at the office, remind me that I could be relocating cemeteries. Did they have to dig by hand? I mean, did they have backhoes? When was this?"

“The 1920s, so probably just shovels. They flooded the place gradually over the spring and fall of ’28. There were quite a few cemeteries. There was a church that had a cemetery attached, but most of the farms had been there a while and had been passed down from generation to generation a few times, so, naturally, most of them had family plots. Maybe a dozen graves each.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I got bored with drawing the family tree and started asking my older relatives questions. I wanted to know more about the people. I had this really great talk with my aunt, great aunt really, about her mother, Sarah Wade, my great-great aunt, who lived on Wade Farm at that time. Apparently she was a real go-getter. I mean, I know that everybody on a farm works, but apparently she was the real muscle in that family, to hear my aunt tell it. And when people started complaining that the northern workers were opening the coffins as they moved them, presumably stealing, basically getting paid to grave rob, she managed to start up a little competing side-business that the locals were more willing to trust.”

Dana picked up the rusted lump and played with it idly as she spoke. Tawny dust crumbled off and collected on the napkin. Julie watched her carefully in case any crumbs made it too near her home fries.

Dana said, “The crazy thing is that people found out that the workers were opening the coffins because of some rumors about coffins without bodies in them. Stones instead of bones, that sort of thing. People wondered how the workers would’ve noticed this if they weren’t opening the coffins, also kids started peeking in on the work sites to a catch of glimpse of the work and came back with stories of their own. Naturally Sarah Wade was nervous about finding coffins that didn’t feel right, which she did. She swore she never opened them, but she also said that all the strange coffins came from the same farm—Sturry Farm. I mean, it could have been a Sturry Family tradition to bury their dead with a heap of rocks of something, but when she asked the Sturry’s they didn’t know anything about it. All the missing bodies were buried by previous generations, I suppose. Naturally that brought the rumor mill up to full speed and people came up with all kinds of crazy explanations for why those graves didn’t have any bodies in them and started all this talk about black magic in the Sturry Family, and the way my aunt tells it, when the lake was finally complete everybody that had lived around those parts was relieved to have that farm good and buried.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of going down there?”

“Oh come on! You don’t believe any of that crap, do you?”

“Not really, no, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be worried about it if I stumble on some creepy shit while we’re diving.”

“I’ll be right next to you.”

Julie took the artifact from Dana. It was heavier than she thought it would be.

She had expected it to be just layers of rust, but there was still a distinct and solid core.

Julie said, "So I've got this right, you hear folk tales about supernatural shit hidden and dormant beneath a lake and you think that sounds like something you'd like to look into while you're reliant on a life support system?"

Dana laughed in her face. "Oh come on! People do it all the time. There are even guided tours, but why bother paying someone to take the fun out of things for us? Right?"

Julie wished that any of the plausible fears she had were half as potent as the fear of occult impossibilities that she couldn't quite shake. She only wished Dana would stop bringing up missing bodies, black magic, and hidden entrances to hell.

While they were still on the boat, Dana tested out the radio communication system that she had apparently purchased for the occasion.

Dana said, "Can you hear me? Over."

Julie said, "Roger. Can you hear me? Over."

Dana nodded. She was already distracted by something else in the heap of equipment at their feet. It looked utterly disorganized, and Julie briefly considered that she might be foolish to trust her life to someone who couldn't even organize her gear. If she's survived dives so far, Julie thought.

When she first looked down into the water through her mask she was startled to note that she could hardly see her feet. It wasn't at all like the pool they had practiced in the day before.

"I can't really see. Is it like this everywhere?" asked Julie, and then she remembered to say, "Over."

"Just up here where all the algae is. When we get down deeper it's clear."

Julie felt silly waiting for Dana to say "over," and decided they must not really be doing that. After a few moments of bobbing on the surface beside the floating diving flag, face to face, they dropped down together into the greenish soup. Dana turned and nearly disappeared in the second it took Julie to try kicking after her. They spiraled down into the night below.

Dana turned on her head lamp and Julie almost lost track of where Dana was as she hunted for the switch to her own head lamp. She felt like she was flying through the night sky beneath the green glow of northern lights. For one brief instant, she was truly glad she had come.

Below was featureless dark for a while longer. Julie noticed that Dana didn't disappear until much farther away now that they were deeper. She would've been relieved by the increase in visibility if Dana weren't swimming so quickly that she had to struggle to keep up.

The soft muck that appeared below was bisected by a ridge of stones. Having grown up in New England, Julie immediately recognized it as an old stone wall. It was the kind that used to separate farmlands but now mostly served as a reminder to hikers of prior generations' occupation of those lands.

They swam above and along that wall, Julie couldn't tell how far above. All distances felt strange and uncertain down there. She felt tiny one moment, and giant the next. She could not tell how long they swam either. It could have been a few seconds, or minutes. She had to remind herself to breath as she looked as far ahead down the wall as she could—always expecting something to pop suddenly into being before her. And, maybe say "Boo!" She wanted to laugh at the thought, but she was actually present in the mid-afternoon dark at the bottom of a lake, and Dana seemed to be moving away with intense purpose.

Unable to take the silence any longer, she asked "Do you know where we're going?"

"Wade Farm is up this way, I think."

The wall had ended and they swept over a gradual drop into a wide field littered with bottles and assorted trash. Dana swam over to something that it took Julie a moment to recognize as the foundation of a home.

"This is where I found it," said Dana.

"The horseshoe?" asked Julie.

"Yeah."

"Was this a barn?"

"It looks like a house. I don't think they laid foundations for barns."

"Oh, right."

The connection hissed a bit when they spoke, but otherwise Julie could hear Dana clearly.

Dana said, "I think it might have been a spare kept in the house, or maybe it drifted in the time since, but there aren't any currents to speak of here, or maybe they had it nailed to the front door. You know, to ward off evil."

Julie wanted to say "Shut up!" but she was too busy peering off in every direction. Under water there were so many directions for something to sneak up on her from. When she had nearly convinced her nerves that nothing had, she realized Dana was gone.

Julie said, "Where are you?"

"Over here."

A light blinked in the distance and Julie began to follow it.

"Are you flashing your light?"

“Yeah.”

She found Dana hovering over the squat remains of another house. More than just a foundation, this one was a house—albeit slightly askew and open in several places it shouldn’t have been thanks to decay.

As soon as Julie approached her, Dana swam in through an open window and the light of her lamp illuminated the house from within giving it the appearance of a face with luminescent features.

“Is that safe? What if it falls on you?”

Julie approached the front door.

“What farm is this?” She asked, but she was afraid she already knew the answer.

Billowing silt exploded from the front door and blinded Julie before she could swim away. Every way she looked was a rushing and swirling. Her impulse was to swim away, she just didn’t know which way was away and which was into the house. Certain that she didn’t want to mistake one way for the other, she held still and held her breath and waited. She couldn’t tell if she was moving or not. Eventually she began to breath again—slowly counting each inhalation. Dana burst out of the cloud and Julie grabbed her by the shoulders. They tumbled backwards looking into each other’s masks. Nearly blinded by the light of the head lamp so close, Julie squinted and hoped that she wouldn’t hit her head on anything.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Dana.

“What are you doing? I thought we were going sightseeing.”

“We are.”

Julie said, “No. I’m working hard to keep up with you because you clearly have something else in mind. Why am I even here?”

“I thought you—”

“No. Why am I here? I’m not stupid enough to really think you wanted my company. Go ahead, tell me this isn’t that creepy farm. Sturry Farm. Tell me you don’t have some fucking crazy plan that I’m just supposed to go along with no matter how much it scares the willies out of me. Go ahead, dismiss my fear.”

Julie couldn’t see Dana’s reaction clearly through the mask and glare. Dana didn’t say anything for a moment that stretched on far longer than she was comfortable with since it gave her more time to contemplate her fragile position below forty-something feet of water breathing through a rubber hose, and adjacent to god-knows-what.

“Does that mean you won’t help me?” asked Dana.

Julie shouted into the radio so loudly that the connection distorted. “With what? What do you want from me?”

“I need help,” said Dana.

“You could say that again,” said Julie.

“I need help lifting something.”

“Just tell me it’s not a fucking coffin.”

“It’s not. I promise.”

Julie wasn’t entirely relieved.

“I just need a hand. It’s not hard. If I could do it myself, I would.”

Julie didn’t say anything.

“If you help me do this, then we can swim back up together right away. OK?”

The implication that she might have to swim back alone if she didn’t help was insulting, but not enough to overcome her desire to end this trip without too much more fuss. “If that’s what you want,” said Julie.

Eager to be done, Julie swam toward the entrance of the farmhouse. Dana followed. It was cramped inside and Julie stopped to wait for Dana to swim up beside her and indicate a patch of the floor that looked different than the rest. A stone tile? A door.

It took the two of them three tries, Julie’s breathing unpleasantly clear in her ears as they pulled the heavy stone door back. When they dropped it, the resulting whorl of silt and debris was blinding all over again.

Left alone with her imagination, Julie hoped desperately that she hadn’t opened the secret tomb of some crazy devil worshiping farmers, and naturally could picture nothing else. Skeletal remains drifting out and reaching for her like a scene out of a cheap horror film, that’s what she was certain was coming next. Every moment that failed to happen was just another moment of paralyzing suspense. She reached out and felt for the edge of the opening, and pulled herself slowly toward it. She came face to face with Dana.

“Are you ready to go back?” asked Dana.

Julie wanted to say yes. She wanted to see the sun. She wanted to see farther than one foot into the desecrated remains of some potentially crazy family’s ruined home. When she pressed the little blue button on her wrist to activate the transmitter, she said “Yes.”

That was it. She was done. She wouldn’t need to pretend that she wasn’t feeling genuine fear for the kind of nonsense folklore that even a moderately immature child should laugh off. But, she was right there. If there was nothing there, it would be better to know. It would be so much better to know and to know by seeing it with her own eyes than to keep on imagining.

Julie said, “Wait!”

Dana hadn’t even started moving. She was still mere inches from Julie’s face.

Julie said, “I want to see. I want to see what’s really there.”

Much to her disappointment, there was nothing there. Not the friendly nothing of an empty coal bin or something else equally benign. There was a great pit of nothing with a ladder running off into the black nothingness below.

Dana didn’t wait for further discussion. She swam down into that abysmal cavern.

Julie wanted to say, “What are you doing?” but she couldn’t even breath. There was nothing more to discuss, anyhow. Julie didn’t want to be there, but she couldn’t very well leave her friend, as shitty of a friend as Dana might be for tricking her into helping with some crazy-ass shit like this, she thought. She waited at the opening and watched with mixed awe and fear as Dana shrank and shrank and shrank into the distance without even the faintest light cast onto a wall or any other sign of limits to the cavern.

“Wait! Come back!”

No response. The light was getting so faint that Julie began to accept that it would disappear in the dark before revealing any more about the cavern. She just wished that Dana wasn’t taking her curiosity so seriously.

“Dana! This is insane. Come back!”

A loud hiss of static from the radio startled Julie, and was quickly followed by Dana’s voice. Faint and crackly.

“I just want to see. I have to see. I have to know.”

Julie said, “No you don’t. Come back. We’re not prepared for this.”

Nothing.

“Come back!”

Nothing.

“Please come back.” Julie looked around the ruins of the tiny room she was in and wanted nothing more than to lunge toward the open door. She wanted to get away. She imagined herself leaving. She imagined explaining what had happened, first to the friend on the boat, then the police, then the newspaper, over and over to herself. She could imagine leaving, but she couldn’t leave.

“Dana?”

Dana’s light dimmed and melted into the dark. She could be caught on something, out of range of transmitter, Julie thought. She tried picturing herself going down after Dana. Climbing the ladder face down—clinging tightly to the rungs to avoid getting lost in the dark. Something like courage began to swell in her and she felt that she could do it, even with the fear. She could fight back the fear of her light failing, or the the house collapsing—trapping her in the dark until her air ran out. That was the kind of fear she could push through.

Then she saw a horseshoe fixed to underside of the stone door that had been, until a few minutes earlier, facing the dark beneath.

Julie backed away.

The radio made a quiet hissing like Dana had toggled the transmitter, but her voice didn't come through.

"I can't hear you. What's down there? Are you OK? Dana?"

Another silence and another whispering hiss from the radio. She could not make out a voice in the static, and then she wished that she could not. The static spoke with a voice that simply could not be Dana's. It hissed and sucked in wet gasps between its words.

"What is beneath? Was beneath? Will be beneath?"

Another voice took over that rose and sank—almost in song.

"You will not know or you will see. You will come down to see or we will rise to you."

Dana said, "You have no choice, you fool! You will know."

Together they chanted, "know, no choice, know, no choice." They grew frantic, screaming one over another, and another—voices multiplying until no one was discernible among the howls in the dark.