

An Empty Nest

Miranda measures the length of her marriage in summers. She and her husband Matthew are both teachers, and the school years are more alike than they are different. But each summer stands out in memory.

Summer one: wedding followed by honeymoon in Nicaragua.

Summer two: rafting on the Colorado River.

Summer three: tour of Rome on a rented Vespa.

And so on.

They have now reached summer seven: lake cottage in the Adirondacks. It does not share the excitement of their earlier adventures, but they are tired. Perhaps nearly broken.

For Miranda, there is another unit for measuring the length of her marriage. Miscarriages: four.

The cottage is remote with no cable or internet. Cell service is unreliable at best. Miranda welcomes the break from seeing her friends' lives unfurl on social media. The fast from technology seems less satisfactory for Matthew, who spends much of his time at the top of the driveway, cellphone aloft, searching for service. He is miserable here.

Running is his way to blow off steam. He runs a little farther each day.

There are loons on the lake. Their nighttime calls undulate through the darkness. Three notes: low high low, like a person limping. Like a wolf howling.

The cottage has small windows. The shower smells of mildew. Cooking in the tiny kitchen makes the place feel airless, like being buried in cotton balls. Miranda barely has an appetite anyway. She eats little more than toast with butter. Matthew eats sandwiches piled high with deli meat. He sits across from her at the old wooden table. During lunch one day he asks at what point they stop trying. Miranda has wondered this too, but it doesn't feel like his place to bring it up. It is her body. He says he worries about her health. A dab of mayonnaise flecks the corner of his mouth. She remembers a time when she would have wiped it away with her thumb.

The cottage comes with a battered yellow kayak. While Matthew runs, while he drives into town for deli meat, while he stands at the top of the driveway, Miranda pulls herself across the water. The tiny vessel sways with each stroke. When the water is rough the motion causes a hint of nausea. It reminds her of the queasiness she experienced with pregnancies two and four. It was said that nausea in early pregnancy was a good sign. It wasn't.

The loons drift across the water. Their daytime calls are a single, drawn-out tremolo. Miranda sees them both alone and in pairs. They dip their heads, picking at the water, before going down for dives. Miranda scans the water to see where the birds will reappear. There is no

way to guess. She remembers swimming as a girl, twisting and turning under the surface, her hair floating around her face. She stayed under water until her lungs burned, until she wasn't sure she would make it to the surface in time.

In early July, while paddling around the edges of a tiny island, she happens upon a loon, hidden in the reeds. It is perched on a muddy nest. Its beak parts when it sees her; the tips are sharp points. She understands this as a warning. She casts her eyes down to the water, backs away.

Matthew and Miranda have taken to turning away from each other to sleep. They resemble bookends, with no books to either separate or connect them. Through the window screen, Miranda hears the lake lapping against the rocks. Bullfrogs bray and cluck. And in the distance, always the loons. Matthew's breathing is shallow, his muscles tense. He is not asleep. He must hear them too.

She cannot resist the pull of the nest. She goes back each day. Then one morning, she does not see a loon; she cannot find the nest. She squints among the grasses. At last she spies a large brown egg, speckled with dark spots. She searches the water for the parents, sees nothing.

She consults a tattered bird book she finds in the cottage. Some of the pages are stuck together. She peels them apart with care. She finds the page on the loon family. There are only a

few lines describing the common loon. No information about length of incubation, or whether nests are ever left unattended. She considers taking her phone to the top of the driveway, but decides it is better to wonder.

Miranda paddles past the nest at different times each day. It is always unattended. With each visit, she steers closer. The egg is larger than she would expect, nearly the length of her hand. She imagines scooping it up, keeping it warm against her body.

Weeks pass. The egg remains. Further up the lake, another pair of loons swims with their baby.

The abandoned egg is flawless. No cracks, no sign of rot. Miranda wonders what made the parents quit the nest, what they knew that she does not.

The evenings grow cooler. Soon it will be fall. In bed, Miranda listens to a pair of loons calling to each other through the darkness. Her shoulders tremble with the effort of keeping her sobs inside.

Matthew turns, loops his arm around her waist. He presses his face to her bare shoulder and kisses her. His face is wet. He is crying too.

On the last morning, Miranda wakes early. The lake is glass. Mist curls up from its surface like ghosts. She makes her way to the nest. The reeds brush the sides of the kayak as she pulls up along the edge of the island. She stretches her arm toward the muddy bank.

The egg is cold and slick with dew. She cradles it on her lap and paddles home to Matthew.