

IF ONLY

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ON THE DOCK AT LAKE GEORGE, loons wailed and the frigid water lapped against the pier. Soon that water would carry away what remained of my son.

He left a note near his body. He wanted his ashes sprinkled in the lake where he spent happy summers on family vacations. After years of unremitting pain, he longed for release.

I looked into the water and saw his face reflected. Many faces. The little boy, inquisitive and sensitive; the adolescent who rebelled by shutting down and turning to drugs; the law student whose eyes were filled with hope and then hopelessness. His ecstatic expression the first time we swam all the way out to the island together. His joy when we played on the beach and a gentle wind propelled our leaf-and-pine-cone cargo ships.

As we spread his ashes, a freak April snowfall swirled across the lake, dropping icy flakes. He would have loved that. He was always one for a prank. His ashes disappeared into the muddy water. I lost him, this time forever, and color and laughter drained out of my world.

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He deserved a better father. One who listened and saw him for who he was. One who would not grow frustrated over small things, like music lessons; one who would never hit him if he refused to practice. Like that day. The look on his face went from surprise to shock, to alienation, finally, to resignation. That look is seared in my mind forever. That was the first time I lost him. Even though we reconciled two years later, our relationship was never the same.

We made a quick trip to Lake George together that year. We rowed out to the island where we pitched our tent and built a campfire, but we didn't go fishing, didn't stay up late talking. Our conflicted thoughts could not harmonize with the scent of the pines and rhythm of the lake lapping the shore. We didn't experience the wave of relaxation that slows the pulse, relaxes the brain, and allows a deep breath of freedom from stress.

How did it happen? I hadn't intended to be a bad father. I wanted to be like my own dad, a person whose ambitions never compromised his role as emotional center of our family. He

was the man I turned to whenever I had questions or problems. My parents sacrificed greatly for me to have a first-rate education and training. I internalized an expectation that I must be outstanding in everything I did. Only the highest level of performance and success would make me worthy of my family's sacrifices and hopes. When I went to Lake George as a child, I reveled in how far out I could swim, how fast I could sail, enjoying every kind of competitive activity in which I could challenge myself. But I ended each day with a moment of solitude, dangling my feet in the water and watching the sun gild the horizon. No deep thoughts. Just a kid breathing in the awe of nature. A moment of profound inner peace.

Those moments of peace didn't last. I grew older, married, and chose a career. I entered the rough and tumble world of academic medicine. Ground-breaking science had to be accompanied by acute political instincts. The latter was my downfall. At home, I was accustomed to speaking my mind forthrightly and unfiltered. At work, that was a disaster. Soon I

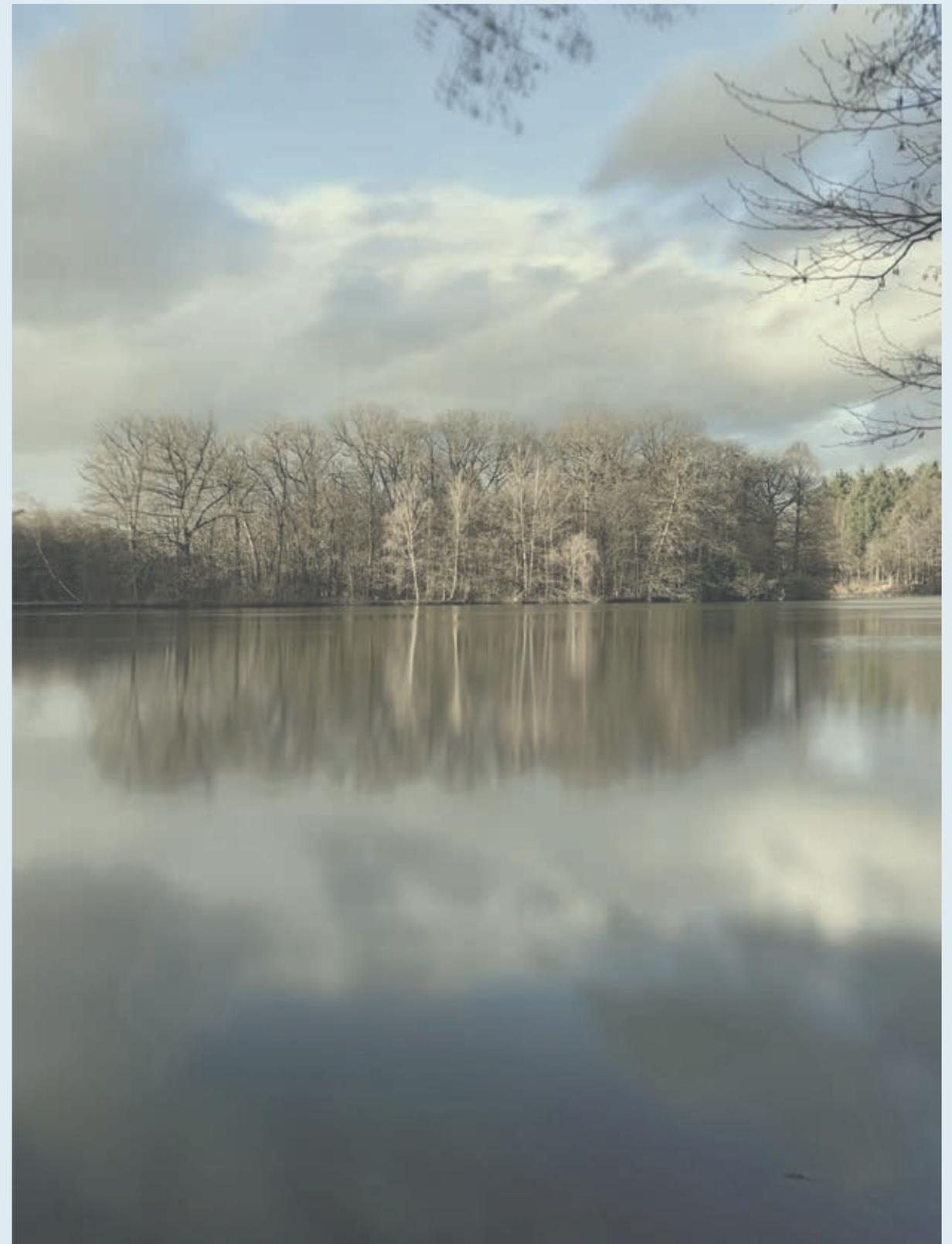


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became a loner, a maverick viewed with suspicion but also with grudging respect. I could rely only on hard work and high performance to move my career forward. Moving ahead was what I wanted, what would make me worthy in my own mind. I rose to the challenge, but it took a toll.

During those years, I didn't return to Lake George. My inner restlessness made it impossible to appreciate the lake's spell. I could not enjoy the intimate sounds and smells from the lake and surrounding mountains.

It wasn't until my two sons were in middle school that we returned to

the lake, and I allowed their innocent enthusiasm to reenchant me for a week every summer. It was the one time when we could relax. The rest of the year, I was demanding. I wanted my sons to stand above their peers. I fostered a disciplined atmosphere to enhance their proficiency in math, science, and music. Math every morning. Music every afternoon. Science on Saturdays. No time to rest, to revel in the happiness of childhood.

That was how I had advanced, and I wanted them to succeed more easily than I had. But my sons weren't like me. They weren't loners. They were so-

cial creatures, comfortable in situations that I shunned. I mistakenly imparted the message that love was linked to high achievement. Family celebrations centered around prizes won for science and math projects, getting fives on AP exams, gaining admittance to prestigious colleges. I misjudged my most important job, providing acceptance and unconditional love. Why did I fail at loving my children for who they were?

After spreading my son's ashes, I stared silently into the lake searching for wisdom. But I didn't find an answer there.

It took decades for me to burrow within myself and find the unqualified love my family deserved. Too late. While they were growing up, I failed to appreciate that my sons were more sensitive than I, and each needed a different type of encouragement. If only I had appreciated my younger son's gifts and nurtured him on his own terms, the outcome could have been different.

If only. The most painful words I know.

Suicide asks it over and over.

I was unable to surround him with the love and confidence that make life worth living. I hadn't established trust, the silent connection that glides back and forth effortlessly like playing chamber music. Two people in perfect harmony. My father's unconditional acceptance and love had enabled me to tackle the world. Why couldn't I do it for my son?

That day on the dock at Lake George, I vowed to do better with my elder son. He had become an engineer, following a career in science very much like my own. He was more outgoing than me, had a large network of friends and managed relationships more easily. After his brother's death, I tried to nurture the relationship that survived between us. Things seemed hopeful at first. We took weekend trips together. We discussed his work, his friends, his hopes and dreams.

Then he married a woman who shunned involvement with our family. It was as if he had deliberately chosen a wife as unlike me as possible. She was always impeccably groomed, appropriately behaved. Appearances and social expectations were critically important to her. She came from a large family where everyone went their

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own direction, paid their own way, set up appointments to meet weeks in advance. But perhaps she was like me in ways I would rather not admit, in being judgmental and inflexible.

I was uncomfortable in the environment she created. Little by little, I gave up trying to bridge the gap between us. Our son and his daughters visited his mother and me less frequently, his wife not at all. One day, my son informed us that his family would no longer visit. I was shocked.

I had never seen that fixed, cold look in his eyes before. A feeling of absolute zero. A frozen lake devoid of life, one which will never see spring. My heart stopped. My first-born, whose veins coursed with my blood, whose very being was created in the incubator of our family, had rejected me.

That was how I lost both my sons.

That's how it remained for three years. Three years while my wife schooled me in the relationship we wanted with our son and his daughters. We hoped. Nothing changed. We hoped more.

But the impossible happened. Another chance. Our older son came back.

Unknown to us, his marriage had been unraveling for five years. He

was now heading toward divorce. Simultaneously, the company he founded plunged into bankruptcy. He needed help, immediately and unconditionally.

This was not how I wanted it to happen. I had hoped for a reconciliation because it was right, because we loved each other. A reconciliation where no one suffered, where everyone was enriched. But no matter the reason, the atmosphere shifted. Forgiveness and accommodation became the ground for our changing relationship. He called us. We canceled all other plans to come immediately to help him.

Now I have the chance to show I have learned from past mistakes, that I can create a loving and supportive environment. I am ready to be the father I wish I had been years ago. I remind myself, *Don't slip back. This is your last chance.*

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