

Life Should Be

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He was driving on I-95 in the middle of the night in the middle of December, somewhere in Maine, somewhere in Vacationland. Maine the way life should be, Maine with the kind of people who make birdfeeders out of pinecones and the kind of people who shoot deer in the woods with bows and arrows and mount their heads in their living rooms and think nothing of it, and call it sport, Maine where he grew up, practically, because he always felt more alive in the summers than he did in New York, Maine with its three respectable colleges, Maine where it's hard to find NPR on the radio, Maine where he had his first kiss, where she kissed him, if you want to be honest about it, because he was scared and young and immature in a way that's nice to be when you're fourteen and alone for the most part and it's a little chilly out, cold enough to wear a sweater even though it's the middle of July, Maine with kids with dirty hair, unkempt impoverished kids who look like America, Maine with miles of trees all around you, even on the highway, Maine where his father had once worked at the same summer camp he attended as a child, the summer camp that used to be in his family, the summer camp where his love life's waiting silently for him, the camp that closed down years ago, where hicks in unwashed clothes now icefish on the lake in the winter, Maine where he read books that changed his life, where he thought about God, the only place he'd ever been where he could stand in the middle of a field, stand on a clear day and tilt his head all the way back and look up at the completely blue sky and feel at ease, Maine where he made friends he hasn't spoken to in years, young men with responsibilities and jobs and wives now, probably, Maine with country stores every couple of miles, at least three in each town, no matter how small, that sell two items and two items only: milk and beer, Maine with the good looks of people who enjoy tennis, Maine where he'd sat in a canoe in the middle of lakes and on rivers and pretended to be the kind of person who loves nature, where you could rent a motel room off of Route 2, just outside Skowhegan, just a few miles down the road from the lake that's now surrounded by a state park that used to be the summer camp he spent too many years at as a boy, no buildings left

standing save the little girls' bunks, no buildings he'd lived in for the summer, no buildings his girlfriends used to live in, buildings he walked around the lake -- a mile and a quarter at least -- to get to in the middle of the night with friends he no longer knows so he could play kissy-kissy with a stupid girl for a few hours and then walk way the hell back before sunup, stupid girls he thinks about a lot when he gets out of his car, finally, after nine hours of driving with Bob Dylan on the radio the whole way, singing songs that used to make him sad when he was fourteen, songs that still make him sad because he liked himself better then, liked himself better when he knew all the words, where he could walk into the lobby of the Canaan Motor Lodge at three in the morning and ring the bell that wakes the manager up, wakes her so she comes in from the back room and hands him a key (he notices that she's pregnant), the kind of place where you can just pay in the morning.

He would pay in the morning, pay with his Visa card, pay with electronic money wired in from a bank in the big city, a Manhattan bank with tellers who were not now nor would anytime in the near future be pregnant, but before he'd pay in the morning, before he'd walk back into the office wearing L.L. Bean shoes, unshaven but freshly showered, he'd have to make it through the night, and that's what he was thinking of when she handed him his key, the key to One Nineteen, the key attached to a little green key chain that made him sad, thinking about making it through the night, about country music songs and the kind of people who drink alone in hotel rooms and how he was one of those people now, or would be soon, one of those people he hates, thinking about while he leafed through the Christian Science bullshit pamphlets while she went through the box of keys under the counter, thinking about what the hell he'd do next, what he'd do till morning, about how he'd sleep in a tiny room that smelled of mothballs and cheap beer, the kind of room sixteen-year-old boys bring their girlfriends to, how he'd unwind, thinking about all of these things in the thirty seconds it takes to find the right key in the Canaan Motor Lodge at three in the morning in the middle of December, a cold night of the kind that, if he was making this pilgrimage years ago, as his father might have, he imagined, if he was born a generation before, was almost cold enough to cause him to bring the battery, the car battery, inside the hotel room with him, but that isn't necessary now, not in 1990, not now when cars drive on the frozen lake he swam in as a child past tiny make-shift fishing huts with men inside, woodsmen drinking coffee out of thermoses and peppermint schnapps.

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When he got into his car, hamburger wrappers and soda cans and cassette tapes everywhere, when he sat in the driver's seat, the slouched-over uncomfortable sitting of the nervous, the sitting of people with things on their mind, when he turned the defroster on high though he knew it wouldn't work at all, would blow cold air at him on this Maine's December morning till the engine warmed itself up (who knows how long that'll take), when he entered his luxury vehicle he moved slowly the way one moves when he's absolutely certain that his next action will depress the hell out of him but he sort of wants to complete that action nonetheless, wants to get it out of the way, wants to do it for honor's sake, slow opening of the door that's almost frozen shut, slow sticking into car of right leg and then left, slow depressing of bodily weight onto leather seat, slow removal first of gloves and then hat and then coat so he's freezing in his car, shivering like a schoolboy, slow turning of the key to start the ignition and pushing of defroster knobs and heater knobs and the play button on the cassette player and finally out of the parking lot and down the road three quarters of a mile slow right turn onto the interstate, Dylan back on the radio singing about girls he feels he knows because he's sung about them too, sung in the car, sung with would-be girlfriends, sung drunk, sung not drunk but excited to get drunk wishing that drunk would come soon, whistled in the shower, whistled under his breath in the office and on commuter trains while reading the paper (ink smudging his hands), five minutes on the highway and then exit at Skowhegan, past paper mill with smokestacks like Chernobyl into the center of town, past Old Mill Pub and Thrift Drug and the one traffic light on Main Street (he speeds up at yellow and then wishes right away that he hadn't) and finally back onto Route 2, not long now, not far down the road that's steeped in his childhood, the road that appeared on mailing labels addressed to him at summer camp of long ago on packages with notes that read SHARE THIS CANDY WITH YOUR FRIENDS LOVE MOM AND DAD, addressed to him on letters, return addressed on letters he sent out to girls who used to attend the camp but did no longer, girls he'd been attached to in one way or another when attaching to girls seemed plausible and worthwhile and a fun thing to do, Route 2 over the Hinkley bridge, Hinkley bridge's falling down falling down his father used to sing when he was a boy attending summer camp in Maine, his father he rarely spoke to anymore, Route 2 two miles from the bridge and then

hang a right onto the Boys' Side road, the road he walked back and forth in the middle of the night too many times to see too many girls, anxious and nervous on the way over, tired and happy and feeling close to his friends on the way back, a silent sort of communal closeness that he hadn't felt since, not in college, the best four years of his life that turned out not to be the best four years of his life, down the road (unpaved but plowed) into the parking lot, a sort of returning home.

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Snow in his shoes, in his wool rag socks, snow on his khaki pants (cut a little too fully) so now they're wet and clingy in an uncomfortable way, stuck to his legs, his calves, coldly attached to body as he walks slowly not so much because he's freezing cold in Maine in December, a state he knows no longer, a state like an old friend he lost touch with because that happens sometimes, there's no avoiding it, no way around it, but because he's sad and embarrassed that he's sad to be visiting an old piece of land he knew well when he was twelve, embarrassed to see familiar spots, familiar trees, and it's this familiarity, this feeling of being somewhere you were before, somewhere you shouldn't remember but do, somewhere that shouldn't be important to you but is, this feeling of semi-warranted recognition that gives him pause so he's walking, slowly, and shivering but not thinking about it, walking lost in his thoughts, walking (on the other side of the camp now, the Girls' Side) and whistling Dylan songs slowly, soft heavyhearted whistling like the soundtrack of a bad movie that's telling a story that's not your story and it's hot in the theater and even though you've bought overpriced popcorn and soda in a cup that dwarfs the pint glasses in bars, even though you've got nothing to do with your evening at home, nobody to call up on the telephone even, you get up and leave anyway, walk right out spilling popcorn into the aisle (someone will clean it up, that's what they pay them for) people looking away from the screen and staring at you, illusion of losing themselves to the movie broken, back in reality now and you're walking past them quickly and they shake their heads like they know something you don't but you don't care don't care at all, and he walks past little girls' bunks that fail to bring back any sort of memories or that feeling of closure that you get sometimes when you finish a novel, walks past the basketball court (hoops torn down, backboards missing) out to the edge of the lake, frozen now in Maine winter of

1990, and stares out as a car drives by slowly but quickly for being out on the middle of a lake and a man gets out wearing duckboots and walks over to a fishing hut (four feet by four feet -- not an inch more) opens the door and disappears.