

“Little Island, New Man”

A terrible year had led him to this place. Social distortion, financial wreckage, and the assault of opinions bankrupted the entirety of him and so here he stood on the riverbank, looking at the boat he hadn't rowed since he was a teenager. He removed his phone from his pocket and buried it in the sand then stepped onto the old wood and sat, listening to it creak. Then John flexed his fingers around the oars and looked out at the city one last time, wondering how its failures had been tolerated so long. The boat split the water as he set off. As he rowed, John reflected with regret that he had been with them, recklessly pushing for more of everything until he what he got was never enough and discontent bloomed like poison in his soul.

Navigating a bend in the water, John's eyes swung to the trees, now taller and more abundant, and felt a loosening inside him. His lungs swelled with clean air, his ears filled with bird chatter, and scents of pine and lake water drew up his nose until John felt his eyes began to tingle. He wiped the tears from his cheeks and removed his shoes, then threw them in the water. His socks, too, went in. And his watch. And his belt. And the jacket he'd gotten for two decades of loyalty to the company that just fired him. He watched the water devour his old self and continued for a long while until he came to the little island that he used to know.

John approached slowly, observing the water-smoothed rocks and isolation-dense trees with a fondness that rose through him and filled those spaces that the city emptied. He sighed and pulled his boat onshore. Even the sand was better here. This sand would not ask anything of him, would not drain what could not be drained. This was a *filling* sand and so John squished his toes deep inside and let it fortify his fragilities, then he left the shore to look for the cottage.

He found the path swept and the nearby bushes trimmed back. He found the front porch neat and the windows washed. The first sparks of fire glittered from the fireplace and as John pushed his key into the door, it fell open to a room full of people.

Aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, former neighbours, old lovers, and recent coworkers sat on kitchen chairs, rested on the living room couch, laid on the floor, leaned against walls. Grandmothers knitted quietly, grandfathers read books, and children he did not know played games he hadn't owned. In the far end of the small room was his own mother stirring a pot of soup. “We knew you'd come eventually,” she said simply.

John considered the escapees' faces, saw the contentment that was missing from the city, and wished he'd been fired sooner.