

You Asked, and This is How I Am

1.

My name is Laura Hutchinson and on July 12 I walked away from an accident leaving three boys to die. I walked away wet and shaking, surrounded by darkness and watched by stars. The lake reflected a crescent moon, ripply from the wind. Other than the broken fence, flattened weeds and the soaking survivor that was me, you would never know what treasure lay at the bottom. I walked the road in a direction I thought was towards town, along a section with no light. I don't remember thinking much. I remember dirt from the road caking on my squeaking shoes.

2.

I am the female survivor you read about in the news. The others you know much better. You've seen their pictures. You know their names. You read their names and their high school accomplishments and the wasted potential. You read about their heartbroken families and their community work. You read about the alcohol. You didn't read anything about me, except that there was only one survivor, a female.

Lucky to be alive.

3.

I was walking into a dip in the road when I heard a car coming. I looked for somewhere to step off, but the sides of the road fell away steeply. The car crested the hill behind me and I stood as close to the edge as felt safe. I turned; the headlights were blinding. I heard

the scrabble of gravel, as the car – it looked black, but how could I tell – skidded sideways a little before righting itself. It raced up the other hill blaring its horn. That's kind of pointless, I thought. What I didn't think is that maybe that car should have stopped and helped me. I kept walking.

4.

I expected questions, which I did get from the police, but not really anyone else. Well, questions, the kind you have no answer for, did come, like, “How *are* you?” How am I? What about, What the hell were you doing driving with those boys when you knew they were drinking? How could you walk away from them? Why didn't you get help?

About that last part. Something in me thought I was doing the right thing when I walked to town, or to what I thought was that direction. I walked for a very long time, and only saw that one car. I saw many dark shapes move. A porcupine or a raccoon, or something else small, but not a rabbit, definitely not a rabbit, crossed the road a few feet in front of me. Prickly or furry? There were insects. I felt them bump into me, Junebugs I guessed. Insects buzzed and whined in my ears. It was annoying, but I couldn't keep up the energy to care. At some point, I did come to what seemed like a settlement of cottages, perched on the side of the hill as it rolled down into the lake. Some of them had small porch lights burning, and even from a distance I could see the bugs orbiting, bouncing off. I followed the road as it swept up behind the cottages, then walked down a winding driveway to the first one I saw. I don't know what I looked like, but I smelled like a swamp and with every step, my jeans seemed tighter and more uncomfortable. I came to an entry, with a

screen door that had no glass or screen, so I wondered what to do. Reach through and knock on the inside door? Bang on the frame of the outside one? I grabbed the handle and shook the screen door. It was locked. Who does that? Still the rattling was plenty loud, and I saw a light go on. A man came, looked through the window. I stared. He looked beyond me, in several directions. Looked back at me. He opened the door a crack and said, “Young lady, I think you’re at the wrong place.”

So to answer that question that no one has asked me. I did. I did get help. I just went to the wrong place.

5.

I goddamn hate the cottage, and I’m not just saying that now. I always hated it. I like parties okay, but I like them at home. Where you can leave and go to bed. And you don’t have to gather in the kitchen the next morning and figure out how to make breakfast.

When we all go up together, it’s like we have to be celebrating something, endlessly. And we don’t know what it is, so we drink until we figure it out, and then we all love each other, unless we’ve decided we all hate each other, and then what’s the point in the first place, because that’s no celebration at all. And like I said, you’re trapped, so where are you gonna go, and you’re drunk so you shouldn’t go anyway.

A weekend at the cottage with your friends is like a party you can never leave. At least I had my own tent that weekend. It was big enough for four, but I made it clear I wasn't sharing. Anyone who wanted to sleep outside could bring their own damn tents.

6.

The funeral was July 18, and it was for all three of them. The church was full of people. Kids my age in tears. My own friends who I knew each hated at least one of them, including my brother. Yeah. My brother was one of the people in the car, one of the boys I left behind. Apparently he was an aspiring athlete, which was news to me. He was a pothead, and really not very competitive. Although just because he was a noncompetitive pothead doesn't mean he couldn't be a bastard.

For example, he was one of the four boys who threw me in the lake that night. He had my left leg. They swung me four times as I screamed, then let go. But not all together, so I twisted in the air, my arm caught the edge of the dock, and I landed face-first in the water, came up choking while everyone laughed.

And you can say that's why I left my older brother – you've read his name, don't make me say it – in that car to drown. You could say that. I can't argue.

7.

Outside that cottage with the locked and useless screen door, I stepped out of the light. Things felt softer in the dark, and in that moment, less dangerous. Alongside the

driveway sat a trailer with a tarp over it. I thought it might be nice to crawl in and go to sleep.

I was getting cold. I walked back up the drive and continued in the direction I'd been going.

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One of the other boys I had left behind liked me and I knew it. It was nice to have someone do little things for you. He was a little shy, but not so afraid to tell me his feelings. I let him come in my tent that night, and kiss my sore arm better.

The third boy was in fact an aspiring athlete. He was my brother's friend, and the one who insisted we go for a drive. People said he dreamed of being in the Olympics, as a wrestler. I could attest to that, because he had wrestled me into his room – the cottage belonged to his family – and tried to get me to sleep with him. He was already drunk by that point and he didn't try that hard, but he did get mad when I tried to push him away. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I didn't want to do something. I even kind of liked him taking charge. But he had to know he wasn't going to get it that easy. So I pushed away a little. And he gave up too quick, and guess whose idea it was to throw me in the lake? And doesn't he get my brother to help him out.

He was the one that topped all the news stories and got the most comments on Facebook. We had lost a good-looking star athlete, maybe a gold medalist in 2012! You're not gonna believe this, but I miss him the most. I was ready to kiss him, just wanted to know what it would feel like to be with him, to have him all over me, and it was my last chance even though I didn't know it at the time.

8.

You know, it's not easy when you hit the water upside down to know what to do. There's your seatbelt. There's your door. There's the window. There's the water slowly filling up the inside of the car. And you're turned over. What would you do first? I chose the window. I don't know if it was the best thing to do. Maybe it made more trouble for the boys, filling more of the car with water. But my escape became clear, and I undid my seatbelt, and twisted my way into the lakewater.

On that long dark walk, I had gone the wrong way. I realized this as I came to the next group of cottages. I was back where I started. Most everyone was asleep, though I could hear voices inside the cottage. I went into my tent, and fell asleep.

I dreamed an island. I was on this island, and the one across from me had a long trail of smoke spiraling straight into the sky. It went forever, straight up to the midday sun, as if it connected sun and earth. I was alone on my island and looked down to see a fire of my own with the same smoke going up to the sky. All the islands on the lake were connected to the sun by smoke.

9.

I made one try to save them. I went down where bubbles from the car were coming up, and actually reached them. It was almost impossible to see, but I could make out the shadows of the boys. My lungs hurt, and my eyes stung, and I had a moment of uncertainty. Which of them should I save?

10.

I spoke to a grief counsellor, who was waiting for me outside the church the day of the funeral. We went for a walk. It seemed like hundreds of them had descended on the place to talk to hurting young people. I had the feeling that I was the big prize, the one they all wanted to get their sensitive, caring hands on. I didn't talk much to the counsellor. I told him I felt a little sad because I thought that night I was going to have real sex for the first time. Then I stopped myself and I said some other things that weren't true, just to say the kinds of things I thought people who needed grief counsellors were supposed to say to their grief counsellors. I think he knew what I was doing. But he didn't say anything about it, and sometimes I think that was the nicest thing anyone did through this whole time.

11.

When I woke up in my tent, it was bright outside and I was hot. People were packing up their stuff as if nothing had happened. No one knew yet. Then I heard a car. There was quiet mumbling and it grew to a pitch and then there was crying. I stayed in there,

pretending to myself and anyone who might come in that I was still asleep. But everyone assumed that I had been in the car.

Eventually someone found me in my tent.

12.

You should ask the questions. You people don't fool me. You throw around the word "tragedy" so easily. Like you know what the tragedy is. You who call yourselves reporters, parents, police officers, counsellors, friends. You talk about the wasted lives, what they could have been. I know what they would have been. They would have been you.

It's like you want to believe that if they had lived, the pushy young jock would have won a gold medal, the pothead would teach young kids to say no to drugs and the shy boy with good grades in English would have been a great writer with his own novel under one arm and that standoffish girl – who finally saw the light – under the other. But really all they would have been is a slightly better or slightly worse version of you.

It's not my fault. This is what I'm told by my family, though they look at me as if they're angry I'm the one who lived. I was told that it's not my fault by my English teacher, my counsellor and even one of the cops who investigated. But I know what I did. I was down there in the water, looking at the still shapes of a boy who wanted to me, a boy I wanted to love and the boy who I had to love because he was my brother. I closed my eyes and

reached through the window, found an arm. I tugged, but it was too difficult. My pained lungs demanded I go back to the surface. And that was it. I swam through the water – it looked like black ink – and emerged at the shore like a swamp monster. I know whose arm I grabbed, but I knew it had been useless. Maybe it's not my fault, but I know what I did. I left them to die because I didn't want to choose.

I returned to school last week alone. Lucky to be alive, but oh, don't we hate the lucky. I've taken to joining the smokers at lunchtime. We don't talk much. Each of us is a little island, and together we form an archipelago a safe distance from the side of the building. I won't smoke. I just watch the others as they inhale, then blow it out. Try to see the exact point where the smoke they expel goes from visible to invisible. My classmates can smell it on me in the afternoon, but they don't say anything. They don't ask, but I see the unasked questions on their faces, as if printed on everyone's forehead. What were you doing with those boys? How could you leave them behind and sleep in your tent? How do you sleep at all? I sleep OK actually. It's being awake that kills me.