

It was an uncustomarily cool day for the end of June. I had invited the whole family over for a pre-4th-of-July party, since I planned to be alone on my boat during the holiday. Family has always been important to me, and I didn't want to let a holiday go by without having a gathering.

This gathering was a bit tense, since its guests included my two-week-sober (again) brother. We'd had words at the last gathering. Mine were especially cruel, his especially slurred. He either had been just sober enough to remember the exchange, or had been filled in on the details, because he had been avoiding me all day.

"...so I'm planning to stay with Jared for the next couple weeks," my brother was saying as I sat beside him and our uncle.

"You need a place to stay?" I asked him, slouched down in my folding chair, hands in the pockets of my shorts.

"Yeah, I kinda didn't keep up on the rent too well at my place," he said, running a hand through his hair nervously. His hair was clean and at an odd length that spoke of how disgusting it must have been two weeks prior.

"Well, you can stay at my place," I said, "I need a house sitter."

"Yeah?" said my brother, surprised and delighted.

"Of course!" I said, "Here's my keys."

I took my keys out of my pocket and handed them to him.

"All I'll be needing is this one!" I smiled as I dangled the key to my boat up in front of me.

"Great," he said smiling at me.

"Well," I said, looking around at my family members. They had all been surreptitiously observing the exchange between my brother and I. "I'll see you in a few weeks."

I got up and headed for the door.

"You're insane," my mother said.

"That's why I'm staying on a boat," I said over my shoulder, "I'll be sane when I come back."

I walked to the docks instead of driving. I had intentionally left my car key on the ring with my house keys. I wanted to be completely disconnected from the place for the next three weeks. I boarded my boat and drove away from the docks to the place I had marked out the day before. The place that was a mile out from my house on the shore.

I checked over my equipment. If I was going to have to go back for something, I wanted it to be today. I needed to be gone for the full three weeks starting tonight.

Everything was in order. I had never been one to skimp on details.

Over the past few weeks I had bought tons of books and brought them all onto my boat. I now had a small library to last me the next three weeks. I set the timer to rouse me from my literary bliss tomorrow and dove into my first book; a who-dunnit mystery. I did nothing but doze and read until I heard my alarm go off. I ate a quick meal of beans and ready-made toast and started my trip closer to shore.

I left the key to my boat in the ignition and, in t-shirt and shorts, jumped into the water and began my brisk swim to shore. No matter how much I tried to prepare myself for the plunge, the icy water was always a shock. In my anticipation, the cold faded quickly and the few minutes I knew had passed seemed only moments long. I was playing the fast approaching moment again and again in my mind; feeling the weight in my pocket.

As I walked out of the water and into the warm summer air, a preemptive shiver ran through me, knowing I would be returning to the water all too soon. But the excitement kept me from dwelling on the coming swim. When the time came for my next dip, I would probably have enough adrenaline coursing through me to warm me through the winter.

I stopped at a bush a few feet away from the gravel walk where I'd hidden a six pack of beer and a bag of weed yesterday. The beer was warm, but it wouldn't matter.

It felt strange as I knocked on my own door. My brother opened it after about a minute, swaying from whatever influence he was under, and used it to balance. I smiled at him.

"Hey," he said, straightening in an attempt at looking sober as he recognized me.

"Is there anyone else here?" I asked him.

"Of course not," he lied, "Just me all by myself."

"That's a shame," I said, "'Cause I'm here to party." I held up the six pack of beer in one hand and the baggy of weed in the other.

He looked surprised, then smiled and said, "You're turning over a new leaf."

I shrugged, "Leaves have been turned. I just haven't had the opportunity to hang out with you lately."

I walked into the house. My house. The smell of whatever fast food he'd ordered earlier still lingered in the air.

"Jenny!" he called, face turned upward toward the stairs, "Come meet my sister!"

And so it would be the blue-capped bottle for Jenny. I handed her the beer as she walked into the room. She, too, had a sway to her gait.

"Hi," she said quietly, eyes darting between me and my brother. He clearly had told her that I wouldn't appreciate her presence and was waiting for a negative reaction. I smiled sweetly.

The beginning sounds of the evening's many fireworks shows, both professional and otherwise, could be heard through the open sliding glass door that lead to the back yard.

My brother had a joint rolled and lit in record time, and was already passing it to me as he held a smoke filled breath in his lungs. I took the smallest puff and passed it on to... Lucy? Janey? Jamie? She took a large puff. She would be passed out in a few minutes.

"So, how are things going?" I asked, sitting with them on a separate section of my couch.

"All is well," my brother said with a salute to me. I just smiled and nodded approval in return.

"You got plans to go look at the fireworks?" I asked him, watching out of the corner of my eye as- Jessy? Jill? Jody?- took large gulps from her beer bottle, blue cap in hand.

"No," said my brother, leaning back on the couch, "we were just gonna bum around here." Bum around indeed.

"Cool," I said, "You order any food?"

"We were gonna order some Chinese," said my brother, "but I think we're gonna fire up the grill instead. Throw some hot dogs on there."

"Very festive," I said, the bottle growing warm under my fingers. I watched Suzy-Lizzy-Dani already looking drowsy and descending into sleep. An empty stomach. No surprise.

"Yeah, I thought so," said my brother, smiling a huge, relaxed smile.

The sound of fireworks started to come more regularly now.

"Hey," I said, "let's see if we can see any of that firework show from the back yard."

"Sure," said my brother, true to his character, not even glancing at- what's-her-face.

We walked out into the back yard. The ambient light from the moon, the street and the fireworks was just enough to make out our shapes in the dark.

There were several bangs in the distance, and one closer one from my gun. My brother dropped. And he bled. And I left, heading back to the lake shore. Heading back to my boat.

The funeral would cost a bit, but his continued mistakes would cost more. This was the wiser choice.