



Cuz
Andrew C. Miller

Ben had just settled onto the couch with a glass of red wine when his mother called. Since he and Veronica divorced, she phoned at least once a week. She wanted to know if he was dating, when he would be promoted at Jablonski & Associates, and what he was doing next weekend. She'd bring the conversation to a close when he'd ask about their volunteer work at the food pantry or Dad's golf game. But today was different.

“It’s your father,” she said.

Dad had collapsed while practicing with his pitching wedge in the backyard. Sebastian, his Australian shepherd, barked for 15 minutes before she investigated. The Emergency Medical Technician said he had a massive stroke, and there was no reason to take him to the hospital. Ben pressed the glass against his forehead. Dad collapsed. Like scaffolding, a building, or a bridge. A key component fails, then everything tumbles down. Her tone was terse, almost accusatory, as though Dad could have chosen a better time and place. Come on, he thought, the backyard wasn’t all that inconvenient. It might have happened while they were driving or eating in a restaurant.

The following day, Ben called Skeeter, who had recently been appointed Section Chief. As they talked, Ben could picture Skeeter’s freshly carpeted office: plush chairs for visitors, windows on two walls, his desk shining like an alpine lake, void of reports, papers, and books. Skeeter wanted to know if the interns were up to speed on the Wilmington Project. Ben said yes and added that he’d keep in touch while he was away. A long silence followed. Skeeter was likely leaning back in his chair, smoothing his tie with one hand. Ben knew he’d better call the interns right away. Otherwise, Skeeter would have them in his office, quizzing them about his projects.

“Sure, take all the time you need,” Skeeter said.

Ben drove to Nashville International Airport and boarded a two-stop flight to Traverse City. He hadn’t been to Michigan since the divorce. If Dad were there, he’d want to know why he and Veronica split. Ben wouldn’t know what to say. Veronica didn’t seem to have a reason; she just wanted to call it quits. She was going to Delaware, look for a job, start over. That’s what she said.

Ben stared down at Grand Traverse Bay as they approached the airport. Dying, he thought, must be like the last few minutes of flight. The engines throttle back, ground speed reduces, those around you make hurried preparations. But not for his father. He was swinging a pitching wedge one minute, sprawled on the grass the next.

When he parked in the driveway, his mother was on her knees in the flower garden, dead-heading petunias. They embraced. She seemed smaller than he remembered.

“Where’s Sebastian?” He expected to be greeted by the shepherd.

She stripped off her work gloves and slapped them together. “I had to give him to the Winston’s.”

“Had to? What do you mean, *had to*?”

His mother shrugged. They walked back to the gazebo. Dad had built it several years ago but didn’t maintain it. The trellis was overgrown with morning glories, and the garden was out of control; tomatoes, beans, and squash were buried in a tangle of weeds. He and his mother sat at the table: a glass-topped wagon wheel that rotated on a center strut. Dad hated it.

She poured a glass of iced tea and slid the pitcher toward him.

“Your father always looked after him. I don’t know anything about dogs.”

“Mom, there’s not much to know.” Unbelievable, he thought, unbelievable.

“The Winston’s have a couple of teenagers.”

“I would have taken him.”

“On a plane all the way to Nashville?”

She took a drink of tea and then motioned toward the garden. “Will you clean up all that?”

She wanted him to get rid of everything: tomato cages, stakes, fertilizer, hoses. Compost the plants, then let everything revert to grass. even weeding and watering the flower bed was too much.

She stood up, pushed her chair back. "There's a bunch to do tomorrow. We'll talk later." She tossed the rest of her tea in the grass. "I'm going to make dinner."

#

Ben spent most of the next day in town—visiting the bank, the funeral home, the car dealership—and didn't get to the garden until late afternoon. When his phone buzzed, he had just carried a stack of tomato cages to the end of the driveway for trash pickup.

"Hey, Cuz."

As soon as he heard "Hey," he knew who it was.

"Phil..."

It was Phyllis, his second cousin. His mother and her father were first cousins. Phil was two years older than him—that'd make her 28 or 29—and lived in Daytona Beach. He hadn't talked to her in years.

"I was sorry to hear about your father."

Just like her. Clear, steady, straight to the point. Was she in the house or outside? Didn't sound like she was in a car. She talked a little about Dad, then asked what he was doing.

He described settling his father's affairs.

"Sad business."

"Still some loose ends."

"The family reunion's next summer. You going?"

Changing the subject in a finger snap was another of her characteristics. The last reunion was nine years ago. Earlier, Ben purchased two bottles of wine. He wished he had a glass in hand right now. He sat on the grass next to the garage.

“Ready for a swim?” The words burst out of him.

She laughed deep in her throat, almost a chuckle.

“Are you drinking?” she asked.

He could hear her breathing. “I will be later.”

“That time in Lake Michigan?” She laughed again. “I sneaked a couple of peeks through the leaves but didn’t see much.” She paused, “What I mean was—I saw you from the back. You have cute buns, Cuz.”

She had seen more of him than he had of her. That didn’t seem fair. He remembered her clothes draped over willow branches. He was glad his mother was inside.

“I never told anybody, did you?”

“You were 16 then—right?”

The next-door neighbor, a man about his age, dropped a couple of black plastic garbage bags next to the tomato cages. He raised his hand in a somber wave. Ben knew he should go over and speak to him. Mom would know his name.

He wondered if she was still married. “How’s Lawson?”

“Still into NASCAR.”

He picked up a slight hitch in her voice. Like she didn’t think that was too neat. Why had he lost touch with her? It wasn’t intentional. He hadn’t seen her since the reunion.

She asked what he was doing tomorrow.

“I’ll rent a kayak, float down the Betsie River.” He flicked a black ant off his pant leg.

“Is your mom okay?”

He thought about Sebastian. “Yeah, considering. Dad was tough to be around.”

“Sometimes it’s harder that way.” There was a muffled conversation at her end. “Hey, things are happening here and I’ve got to go.” Her voice turned sharp, a little edgy, “And Cuz— don’t get drunk tonight and call up old girlfriends.”

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Ben packed sandwiches and water into a cooler and drove to a kayak/canoe livery on the upper Betsie River. He considered stopping to see Sebastian but decided against it. Dad dies, Mom gives away his dog. What a deal.

While sorting through his father's filing cabinet, he found a letter-sized envelope stuffed with bills. Twelve hundred and eighty dollars. He counted it twice. A few hundreds and fifties, mostly twenties. A reserve for unexpected crises? For women? Ben considered keeping it, not telling Mom. If he gave the money to her, she’d know Dad had been skimming the household account.

He had just set his cooler in the kayak when two vans pulled up and discharged a bevy of teenagers and half a dozen adults. He pushed off, anxious to get ahead of them. He'd paddle a while, then stop for a quick dip. He'd drunk too much wine last night, and a cold plunge would cure his headache. He turned and watched the teenagers cast off. They were about the same age as he and Phil when they met at the reunion nine years ago. The two of them had stood at the sign-in table and read the schedule. The following two days were packed: breakfast get-togethers, picnics, a trip to the historical museum, skits put on by the younger cousins.

“This sucks,” Phil said. “Let’s you and me go somewhere tomorrow.”

He held his breath. She seemed so...exciting. And they hardly knew each other.

They left right after breakfast. Phil drove her father's car and followed the back roads to Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes. They slogged up the first and second dune, then sat in a loose grove of poplars to watch the climbers. After lunch, they drove south along the coast and stopped at a high bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. They slipped and skidded down the steep, eroding path to the beach and kicked off their shoes. After walking along the water's edge, they stopped and sat on a partially buried log. Ben pulled water bottles out of his pack and handed one to Phil. She scooped up sand with her toes and flung it into the air. She asked about his plans for next year. He hadn't chosen a college but wanted to stay in Michigan. Dad said he should go into business or medicine, but he was undecided. She slipped off the log and lay back on the sand. Bank swallows swooped overhead, snapping up gnats. A warm breeze stirred.

She poked him with her knee. "We should have brought our suits."

Ben nodded, not sure what to say. A couple of sandpipers skittered along the water's edge. Farther offshore, a raft of gulls rose and fell with the waves.

She sat up and dropped one hand on his knee. "We could still go in."

Ben felt a tickle of sweat in his armpits. Did she mean...without clothes? Or...in their underwear? His underpants were white, and saggy. Also, holes in them; he'd been meaning to throw a bunch away but hadn't gotten around to it. He pressed his fingers deep into the sand.

She stood up. "Tell you what, Cuz." She pointed to a brush pile. "See that?"

A section of bluff had collapsed, knocking loose a wedge of clay jammed with rooted birch and willow saplings. It had slid into the water and formed a tiny peninsula.

"I'll go on the other side, and you stay here. It'll be private." She scrambled through the branches.

Feeling giddy, he pulled off his shirt, pants, underpants and piled everything on the sand. He heard splashing on the other side as he edged into the water. Cold, it took his breath away. What if he got turned on? Without a suit, that would be embarrassing. That happened last year with his then-girlfriend. Abuddy told him later that some girls did that on purpose—gave a guy a hard-on in public. But not today; down there he was his usual shriveled self. He could hear steady arm strokes on the other side of the brush. Likely she would soon turn and see him creeping toward deep water, stoking the courage to plunge in. Did she take off everything? Maybe she was in her underwear while he was naked. He took a deep breath and submerged. When he surfaced, she was beyond the brush pile. He could only see her head.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” She folded her arms over her breasts and bobbed up, almost to her navel, then sank out of sight. A few seconds later, she surfaced, laughing.

Unbelievable, he thought. Un-be-lieve-able. He turned toward shore. She had suspended all her clothes, even underwear, over a clump of willow branches. He had never done anything like this with any of his guy friends, certainly not with a girl, never mind his second cousin. For several minutes they tread water, staying some distance apart. His eyes snapped back and forth between her and the beach.

She splashed water on him. “I’m getting out.”

He waited until she disappeared behind the bush before he swam toward shore. As his feet touched bottom, he glimpsed her through the leaves. She was scrunched down on the sand, arms wrapped around her knees.

For days he couldn’t get that swim out of his mind. He began to worry the memory would go stale, like listening to favorite music over and over. Years later, he and Veronica rented a condo with a pool. One night he suggested they go in without their suits. Once he spoke, he

could sense her body stiffening. She shook her head and looked away. He was glad he never talked about that swim with Phil.

Last night's phone call spun through his mind like a Möbius loop. He pondered the change in her voice when he asked about Lawson. He let the kayak drift. A red-bellied woodpecker chattered as it swept by, dipping and flapping. Ben closed his eyes. He could see Phil bursting out of the water, auburn hair tight against her head, water cascading down her face.

He had first-time sex with a girl in his AP English class during his senior year. It happened one Saturday afternoon while her parents were grocery shopping. It unnerved him how she yanked off her bra, how her breast catapulted out of the fabric. They did it twice in quick succession on a gray couch in her basement. A few weeks later, they broke up.

Once well ahead of the teenagers, Ben beached the kayak. As soon as he slid underwater, his head-throbbing melted away like crushed ice on hot asphalt. He breast-stroked to the other bank, clutched a handful of cattails, held motionless against the current. A few hours later, he stopped, ate his sandwiches, and swam again. He kept thinking about Phil. He should be reminiscing about Dad. But he had enough of that yesterday.

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At the end of a long straight reach, Ben spotted a boy on the bank. He was poking in the water with a stick. Probably about 16 years old, wore tennis shoes, blue jean cutoffs, and an old baseball jersey. Two other boys, probably twins and about six years old, stood nearby. A white-haired woman sat some distance away, her back against a beech tree.

When the older boy saw Ben, he dropped the stick and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Can you help us?"

Ben glided toward shore. "What's the problem?"

“Can’t get up the hill.” He pointed toward a grove of sugar maples.

Ben followed the boy to a sandy two-track lane that wound up a steep hill. A faded orange pickup sat at the bottom in a field of jewelweed. Angry scrape marks snaked along one side, and colonies of rust grew around the wheel wells.

“I just bought it,” the older boy said. “It was my Uncle Bart’s.”

“He can’t shift the gears worth crap,” said one twin.

The other twin swatted at a fly. “Call Uncle Bart; he’ll pull us out. He just bought a new Chevy 4x4.”

The older boy shoved both hands in his pockets. His shirt was too small and exposed part of his belly. Looked like he needed a haircut. Ben stared at the hill, then back at the truck. He dropped to his knees, pressed his hand into the sandy soil. If they smoothed out the tire tracks, covered the churned-up sections with branches, and got a running start—they might make it.

The woman got to her feet. “We should have studied it before we came down.” She wore a plain blue dress, pink tennis shoes and had a baseball cap perched on her head. Ben wondered if she was taking the blame, had encouraged the boy to drive down, and now regretted it. Or maybe she told him not to and was covering for him.

“Okay,” Ben said. “Let’s give it another try.”

He and the older boy smoothed the ruts while the twins collected branches and laid them over the bare soil. Ben walked to the top of the hill for a better look. The curve at the top was gradual, but the road sloped the wrong way, away from the hill.

Years ago, his father got stuck on a dirt road one Sunday afternoon. Their car hit a slick spot and fishtailed into a ditch. His father had jammed the accelerator down and spun the tires. They sank lower into the mud. Finally, he and Ben got out to push, and Mom sat behind the

wheel. Dad told her to rock the car. She tried several times but couldn't get the hang of it. Dad finally brought both fists down on the hood of the car.

“Goddamn it, rock the car!”

Ben stepped toward his father. “Quit yelling at her—you're the one that got us stuck.”

His father turned and shoved Ben backward, knocking him off balance. Ben sat down in the mud with a splash. He scrambled to his feet and shouted, “Go push your own damn self out.” Head down, fists clenched, he slogged down the road. Fifteen minutes later, their car crept up behind him. A farmer had pulled them out with his tractor.

Ben realized the woman was talking to him.

“I said, do you want us to push?”

She could have been 60, but it was hard to tell. Arms tanned and muscular, a few creases on her face. Teeth straight and white, eyes a light blue.

He shook his head. “Ride in the front with me.” He looked at the older boy. “You and the twins sit in the back. Make sure they don't fly out.”

Ben started the engine, checked the rear-view mirror. The older boy had both feet braced, one arm across each twin. They could be his kids, the woman, an older version of Phil.

The woman snapped on her seatbelt. “His dad said he could get the truck since he did so well in school. Plus, playing baseball.”

“What's your name?”

“Frances,” she said.

“We're going to do this, Frances.”

Maybe he shouldn't have put the boys in the back. But they needed weight over the rear wheels.

“Damn straight.” She gripped the armrest with one hand and the back of the seat with the other.

Ben backed up as far as he could, revved the engine, and released the clutch. It didn’t engage until the pedal was nearly out. Not a good sign. He hoped it wouldn’t fail before they reached the top. He brought the truck to speed in low gear, then snapped into second as they approached the slope. Tires churning, boys bouncing, they skittered over the branches. When the engine started to labor, Ben rammed into low and swerved into the turn as fast as he dared. Dirt spewing behind them, Frances chanting come on baby—come on baby—come on baby—they rounded the bend and arrived on top.

The twins leaped out, whooped and yelled, tossed handfuls of dirt in the air. The older boy shook Ben’s hand, clapped him on the back. He said folks called him Zack. Frances told him her name again. She hugged him twice, once tentatively, then again with more strength. Her chest was bony, her arms strong. He imagined her exploding out of Lake Michigan on a spring day. They walked him to the river. Zack and the twins steadied the kayak while Ben climbed in. He paddled a few strokes, turned, and raised his hand. The boys waved. Frances stood in the water. The bottom of her dress was wet.

He and Veronica had talked about having children. But she was always busy. After getting a BS in Biology, she started teaching at a local high school. From the start, she got into arguments with the principal about teaching Evolution. The principal wanted her to add Creationism to the syllabus. Other teachers got involved in the controversy. Veronica finally quit, decided to go on for a Ph.D. She’d research better ways to teach Evolution, make it less controversial. Ben didn’t disagree with her. He just thought it was a waste of time. Biblical

literalists don't want to accept Evolution. They wanted to believe in Adam and Eve and everything else in Genesis.

Ben wondered if Veronica knew Darwin had married his first cousin. He had read that first cousins had a genetic similarity of 12.5%. For second cousins, it was about three percent. He didn't know if Phil and Lawson had children.

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Ben leaned forward, squinted through the leaves. A few hundred yards downriver, a bare-breasted woman sat on the bank, can of beer in one hand. He stopped paddling. She must have heard him because she quickly slipped into a sweatshirt. Ben continued to drift. Sitting next to her was a man wearing a yellow fedora. He waved.

“Need a cold one?”

They were eating pistachios, tossing shells over their shoulders. Ben paddled toward the bank. A cold beer would taste good.

“Come on,” he said, “we got plenty.”

The man handed a tall can to Ben.

He popped the top and took a drink. “That is cold.”

“Salt.” The man pointed at the cooler. “I add salt to the ice. It keeps the beers extra cold.”

No canoe or kayak in sight. They must have parked close and walked in.

“I'm Harvey. This here is Glenice.”

Harvey stepped in close, grabbed Ben's hand in both of his, and squeezed. He was tall, wore only maroon shorts and sandals. Swirling blue and red tattoos flowed down both arms.

“Don't they make those boats for two people?”

Ben told him it was a kayak and said they did. Some held more than two.

“Thought you might have some young thing with you—or following behind.”

Harvey ambled a few feet away, flipped down the front of his shorts, and hosed down a stand of bracken ferns. “Don’t mind if I do,” he said, looking over his shoulder. Seemed a bit informal for having just met, especially with his wife or girlfriend sitting there. Harvey began to whistle, shook off for longer than necessary, then turned around before stuffing back into his shorts. Ben took a long drink of beer. They were older than he first thought—maybe in their fifties. Harvey’s biceps sagged like fresh dumplings.

“Now me and Glenice—we’ve been together eight years come next weekend. We do everything as a couple. But sometimes we get together with others.”

He sat on the blanket, looked up at Ben. “Know what I mean?” He turned to Glenice, squeezed her thigh. “Agree, don’t you, Hon?”

Harvey started shelling pistachios, accumulated a pile of meats in his palm, then tossed them down like a shot of whiskey. He held up the bag. Ben shook his head.

“How about some salmon? Got a couple of cans. Excellent with saltines.”

“Maybe the man’s not hungry,” said Glenice. She lit a cigarette. “I’ve never been in a kayak.” She leaned back and crossed her ankles.

“Well, Darlin’,” said Harvey, “I bet Ben would be glad to give you a lesson in paddling.” He laughed and poked her with his elbow.

“I’d love to learn.” She turned her back to Harvey. “Is there something biting me back there?”

“I’ll look.” He lifted the back of her shirt. “I don’t see anything. Of course, it might’ve crawled down your butt.” He snapped the elastic on her shorts.

Ben motioned toward the river. "I better get going." He took another drink. "Thanks for the beer."

Harvey stood up. "Well, hang on, no need to be running off. Me and Glenice hardly got to know you."

Ben wondered if they had a plan. Maybe he was supposed to make it with Glenice while Harvey watched. They'd end up as a rollicking threesome on the blanket. Ben turned his head as he glided into the next bend. They were eating pistachios, staring at the river.

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Kayaks and canoes were lined up along the bank like felled trees. Most were red, but a few were green or blue. Now the trip seemed too short. It was fun: swimming in the river, helping Zack and his family. Later he'd call Phil and tell her about it. He could go farther since the sun wouldn't set for hours. Except the next take-out point was miles downriver. And Mom was holding dinner for him. Likely she had a chicken in the oven.

He had decided to give the cash to her. It wouldn't be right to keep it.

A truck and trailer from the livery rattled into the parking lot. A boy and girl in their late teens climbed out. A golden retriever pup trotted to the river for a drink. He rolled around on a sandy spot, then raced back to pee on a kayak.

"Good trip?" asked the girl. She wore faded blue jeans with fake rips. Two long black braids reached to her waist.

Ben thought they might be a couple. They loaded the trailer, starting with the two-person kayaks and long canoes. Her braids snapped back and forth like riding crops. She was as strong as the boy. They gathered up life jackets and paddles. Ben grabbed his cooler and hopped into the truck.

Maybe he wouldn't call Phil. It could be awkward.

Baked chicken, just as he figured. And green beans and corn from the farmer's market. Mom didn't ask about his day. Instead, she talked about next year's reunion. Her cousin and his wife—Phil's parents—would stay at the house. When Dad was alive, they used to put guests in a motel. But things had changed. After dinner, Ben opened a bottle of wine. He wouldn't drink as much as he did last night. His mother took her glass into the bedroom to watch television.

She had taken the envelope of cash. Ben thought she might split it with him.

Ben turned off all the lights and sat in his father's chair. Tomorrow he'd finish sorting through Dad's things, take several loads to the Christian Rescue Mission. He'd salvaged a few items for himself. The pitching wedge, a mug from Central Michigan University, a few CDs. He poured another glass of wine.

Sad business. That's what Phil said. Sad business.

Phil's parents would come to the reunion. Maybe they'd bring Phil along. Would Lawson be with her?

Ben swirled his glass. He held it up and watched the legs creep up the sides. He set it down and looked through a stack of his father's CDs. He would be nice to listen to stuff Dad liked. He took another sip of wine. It would be okay to have another glass. And he would call Phil. Not now, but later. Before going to bed. He didn't have her number written down, but it had to be on his phone from when she called yesterday.

Andrew C. Miller (he/him) retired from a career that included research in aquatic systems and university teaching. Recent fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Front Porch Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *The Meadow*, *The River*, *Northern New England Review*, *Maine Homes*, *Toastmasters Magazine*, and *Fatherly*. He lives in Florida, volunteers in prisons, restores antique stained-glass windows, and writes. His website is <http://www.andrewcmiller.com/>.