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## QUAKE LAKE

by

Dominic Shaw

*Where do houses go when they die?*

—Loone, “Offering”

On August 17, 1959, the Montana sky likely shone bright. The moon was full and large over the rugged landscape; the moonbeams brilliant, unmarred and unhindered by light pollution or smog. The campsites inside Yellowstone National Park, as well as those that surround the park, were packed.

The season was past its peak, but reports from that day describe the campgrounds and cabin-filled neighborhoods of the Madison River Canyon as full of life, full of families, full of slumbering people from across the country who had come to brave the August cold and see the great landscapes of the West.

Just like the annual snowmelt causes Hebgen Lake to swell and expand, the summer months cause hordes of visitors to pool into every valley and riverbed in the Madison River area. Like every other year, 1959 was packed with tourists. But August 17 couldn't have been expected; it was a snap-shot of the true character of southwest Montana, a reminder of the raging behemoth just a few miles under the soil, a

supervolcano as temperamental and dangerous as humanity's most destructive forces: love and lust and greed and every other human avarice. But these pressures are easy to forget when they lurk so many miles beneath the soil. The visitors must have forgotten them, or perhaps the swelling heat beneath the Earth's crust was unknown to them, a surprise as sudden as the twinkling in a woman's eye and just as debilitating.

But this night served as a reminder.

Mountains fell and rocks roared as they rolled into campgrounds. The earth shook as landslides pushed the once-languid canyon air at speeds of one hundred miles per hour. In this tight space, the air whipped hard, hard enough to rip tent spikes out of the ground and throw some of the poor campers off their feet. The noise of the gusts and the crumbling earth was deafening.

Fault lines collided and scraped, one against the other in the most ancient form of dance. One side of the Hebgen lake-bed, which had sat calmly for years on the Madison River valley, dropped, causing the water to slosh in torrents across the artificial dam. The water tore pieces of cement off the structure as it roared over and into the valley below. Cabins, too, were pulled up and away from their foundations by the waves. But the flood's destroying angel passed over some edifices and left them for a later destruction, a fate of erosion as the water wore them down grain by grain; some cabins were left behind, some tents submerged, and some roads never driven on again.

The mountains imploded a few miles down the valley from Hebgen dam, re-plugging the waters that had jumped up and over that original barrier with rock, dirt, and debris. This landslide may have saved the communities below, but it trapped those Madison

homes and it trapped twenty-eight people's weary bones. The new nature-made dam birthed a new lake that swallowed those relics of life and leisure whole.

It took days for the rescue workers to count the casualties; it took days for the report on the severity of the earthquake to come in: a 7.5 on the Richter scale, earth-shattering. Still, it would be another couple of months before the Forest Service could track the scarp lines and understand how drastically this moment changed the environment, creating small hillocks and little ravines, ripping the roots of trees from their mother earth. In all the years since, after all the miles walked to measure the fault lines and the progress of new vegetation growth, we still might not understand those effects. Our human proclivities cannot, in the course of a few years, measure each shoot of new vegetation growing and cementing the soil back together, nor can the faunal shift at new waterholes be completely tracked. The ecology is bigger than us; it's bigger than our science and our measurements.

Maybe it was our determination to understand the damages and their cause that led to a visitor's center being built on the edge of this newly created Quake Lake. But more likely, it was our morbid fascination with watching things fall apart. Maybe we want to stand on the edge of destruction. That explanation comes a lot closer to explaining why people who are driving through the area will often stop to view the skeletons of old cabins buried in the clear waters of the lake, to see the dreams that the flood couldn't quite sweep away.

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*Everyone I've ever loved is full of ghosts. Every time they leave they make another one.*

—Loone, “Offering”

Nearly fifty-seven years after the devastation, she and I stood on the shores of Quake Lake. The overcast of the day produced colder, darker water, too dark to see the old structures left behind, but not dark enough to hide the memory of those twenty-eight souls drowned beneath the waves. We rehearsed the stories and tried to spook each other with the violence that lay just beyond the shore. But we didn't sleep in that valley; we had learned from the mistakes of those who came before. Instead, we drove back to Utah, back home. We drove back to safety—or the closest thing to it.

Our two warm bodies weren't huddled under thick blankets next to wood fires in a cold Montana cabin; instead, we curled up like the Pompeii lovers across a couch in a house on the edge of a cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Salt Lake City. The cold mountain wind didn't whip over our thick fabric tent; instead, we swam in cool basement air. We didn't face the elements, but lazily indulged in each other's laughs and promises.

It would be our last night alone with each other for over a year. We pressed our bodies tight, too tight, like tectonic plates building pressure as denim and skin rubbed together. Friction. Heat. Thoughts and hopes and fears about our future building and becoming the pressure that shook deep within us both.

Until the tension broke. The words that would change the landscape between us came pouring out.

Rolling over, onto me, and straddling my abdomen, she said,

“Maybe we should get married the winter after I get back.” My body trembled beneath hers. She leaned down and kissed me on the lips.

“Do you promise?” I asked, my side of the fault line pushing back. She did with her smile. I just laughed.

It took rescue workers a few days to count casualties in Montana; it took us roughly the same amount of time. After three days, she boarded a plane and moved to Portugal for longer than I knew how to calculate; at least we could measure the distance. 5,113 miles put a number on the damages—it became the length of the scarp lines between us, splitting our communication over time zones and continents. Still, a few months passed before we really knew what to make of our landscape. Months of talking long-distance, months of letters helped us to survey the new territory that was searing with uncertainty, hidden miles beneath a crusted-over promise—uncertainty that came boiling up at night, my stomach aching beneath the sheets, my brain waiting for sleep to come, replaying our fading memories.

The Yellowstone fault lines still sit atop magma chambers that allow the earth to rise and fall, breathe in and out, offering hope that the tears might realign. But our faults seem crystallized, cooled by time and tied in place by the growing root systems of new lives, new priorities. Short, terse replies, like fault scarps between us, hardened into long stretches of silence: December never came. It’s hard to keep a promise across continental lines. But on occasion, I still find my mind retracing the crevice that divides us, as if this will offer me some kind of peace.