

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

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I can't understand what made them do it – I can only imagine.

Two young women go off for a weekend with their boyfriends. They are in college, different colleges, and their connection is the friendship of the men. They've met a couple of times before, enough to find out that they are both experienced swimmers, kayakers, and outdoors people. A weekend on the lower Cape in early October sounds heavenly. It's too early to worry about term papers and tests and snow and what's happening at home.

Amy cuts her last Friday class, leaves Brandeis in sparkling sunshine. She makes the short drive to the ocean, feeling more confident about life than at any time in the past two years. It suits her to have a boyfriend away; it allows her to make or break friendships in Boston at her own pace. Her grades are good this year. She talks to her teachers. Being a sophomore helps, too, if only because she's no longer a freshman. She's grateful to Brandeis for allowing her to drop out in September 2001, to postpone that year and grieve. She's gone to synagogue twice already this semester. She looks forward to sleeping with Josh.

The house is not on the water but is close enough that the kayaks are stored on the front lawn, ready for carrying the short distance to the harbor. Her friends are already there and they have coffee and cookies on the porch. Amy is anxious to get to the water; she can see a bank of fog offshore.

By the time they're ready at water's edge, the fog has nearly enveloped them. Josh and Richard decide to bag it. Amy looks at Janet, who nods.

"We're only going to go out for a few minutes, you wimps," Amy says. "We'll be OK, we know what we're doing. Look, it's not that thick, you can still see all the boats in the harbor."

They paddle out, the wind picks up, and they are not seen alive again. Amy's body washes up on Cuttyhunk and is buried next to her two brothers. Janet is never found.

Now here is what I imagine. Amy's newfound spirit had started affirming life again. She was charging ahead, challenging herself, facing down her fear. The water would put out the fire. Then, caught in the fog, she fights against the tide, the wind, the waves, yelling for Janet. She fights against the smoke and the terror and the screams in Cantor Fitzgerald at the top of the World Trade Center, where her brother died. She fights against the panic of an empty crib where her deformed baby brother lay for just a few months before her parents took him away. She fights against making her parents' lives even more desolate.

Then her mind snaps. Or her fragile vessel breaks up on rocks. Or she abandons her God and rolls her kayak and doesn't come up. Or she hangs on, cold and wet, huddling with nothing, barely conscious, for a day and a half. All this I can imagine, if not understand.

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What I can't imagine or understand is the pain of her mother. She stood in front of the cameras and talked in a calm voice as frightening as the horrors of the deep. She said simply, "I have buried all my children. What more is there to say?"

Did Amy choose the fog? The question should have mattered, especially to a mother of a generation that doesn't have our psychological resources, who had no choice, who could only watch and wait.