

Blue Moon

(version 1.7)

a short story about Clay Aiken

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Summary of Story

Blue Moon is a story inspired by Clay Aiken but 100% fiction. The story takes place in the summer of 1999, when Clay is 20 years old. Clay is working as a YMCA camp counselor in the mountains of North Carolina. Yes, there's a girl involved. The story started out as very lighthearted but got more serious as I wrote it. It really did take on a life of its own. A central theme is Clay's fear of water. The moon is everywhere. And yes, he does get to sing—5 songs in fact, including gospel, bluegrass, country, and pop. Wish I could get Clay to record the soundtrack to accompany this story! There are actual quotes hidden throughout the story from Clay, Simon, Paula, Randy, and Gladys Knight. See if you can find them. Have fun.

Let me know what you think of the story. Should there be a sequel??

Send comments to Elena Felsing at elfe350@yahoo.com.

Blue Moon

Clay opened his eyes abruptly and lay there, panting slightly. The sweaty sheet stuck to his back as he sat up in his cot. That dream again. The second time this summer. He willed himself to calm down as he gazed around the cabin, colored faintly blue by the light of the moon seeping in through the windows. None of the boys stirred. At least he hadn't called out in his sleep and woken any of his 8 year old charges. What kind of a camp counselor was he, still having irrational nightmares at age 20? Clay lay back down. The sheet felt damp and cold on his bare skin. He tried to slow his breathing, but his heart raced, unwilling to give up the memory of the dream. What he longed for right now was the warm, consoling hand of a girl tucked into his own. But it was too late at night to go seeking the comfort of friends. And he did have plenty of friends who were counselors in the other cabins, and certainly a few who would good naturedly keep him company despite the late hour. He checked his watch—2 am. A long time yet until dawn, a long time to lie awake with the lingering echoes of waves and water and a vastness that.... Christ, he had to stop thinking about the dream or he'd never get back to sleep.

Clay sat up again and swung his feet out of bed. He reached beneath the cot for his pants and Teva sports sandals. He slid into the plaid pajama bottoms, pulled the drawstring tight around his narrow waist, and slipped his feet into the sandals. With a last glance around the cabin at the sleeping boys and K.C., the slightly snoring 16 year old junior counselor, Clay slipped out of the cabin and closed the door gently behind him.

Standing on the doorstep, he pounded his right fist repeatedly into his left shoulder. No, what he really needed wasn't a friend's hand, but to take hold of himself and tame this fear.

He'd head to the river. It was walking time. Calming time. Maybe even singing time.

"Hi, this is Crystal. I'm not here right now. Leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as I can. Beep." Joanna sighed in frustration but decided to leave a message.

"Crystal, this is Joanna. Calling from camp. Are you OK? I just had this really bad dream and you were in it. It's freaking me out and I wanted to talk to you. I know you've had a hard time lately. Sorry to call so late. Just wanted to make sure you were OK. Bye."

Joanna pushed the red button on her cell phone and ended the call. She leaned against a hickory tree and stared at her cabin, made ghostly by the blue light of tonight's full moon. What should she do now? After that dream, she was too keyed up to sleep. She'd call her sister again in the morning. In the daylight, she and Crystal would probably laugh over her concern and the 2 am phone call. And she'd kid Crystal about where she'd been at that late hour, anyway. But right now, the dream didn't seem funny and she knew that if she were to go back inside the cabin and lie down, she would only play it over and over in her head. There was one thing that never failed to calm her and that was a swim. The swimming hole at the river would be quiet and still at this time of night, and eerily blue in the light of the moon. She shivered. Perfect.

As she passed the boathouse on the path to the river, the moon drifted behind a cloud. The shadows lengthened and the jumble of life jackets strung on the wall suddenly looked like a cluster of gigantic bats, hanging head down and silently watching. She stumbled over a stone in the now dark path and shivered again. Already she felt better. There was something about moonlight and shadows that excited her and lifted her spirits. She was looking forward to the swim.

When she reached the bridge, she headed upstream and quickly undressed, leaving her clothes behind the large boulder on the left bank. She swept her long, dark hair up on top of her head and twisted it expertly into a bun. She entered the cool water with a gasp and swam out to the center of the pool. She lay back and floated, listening to the rush of the water downstream and the whisper of a breeze through the trees. The cool water was bliss in the late summer North Carolina heat. Ripplets of water stroked her skin. Too bad she couldn't fall asleep here.



Clay followed the path as it snaked among the girls' cabins toward the river. The boys' cabins were on the other side of camp. So it was a bit of a trek to get to the river from ClayNation, the name his current batch of campers had given to their cabin in his honor. Still, despite the distance and his occasional stumbles, the walk had been good for him—he could already feel his dream receding. The moon played hide and seek in the clouds, turning the path into a shifting ribbon of light and shadow whose rough patches surprised his feet. It didn't help that he'd forgotten his glasses.

As he left the girls' cabins behind, he began to hear the gurgling and rushing of the river ahead. He stopped. His heart beat faster with the memory of his dream and his unreasoning fear of water. The river sounds stoked his fear and he closed his eyes to better feel his heart pound and the sweat return to his forehead. It was a familiar fear and he welcomed it like an old friend, even though he hoped someday to conquer and be rid of it. If nothing else, the fear made him feel very alive.

He opened his eyes and continued on, pausing at the boathouse to grab a life jacket from its hook. He half smiled as he snapped it shut around his bare chest and pulled the side straps tight. That was him all right—Clayton Aiken, YMCA camp counselor, scared to death of water and never seen within a stone's throw of the river without a life jacket. It was pathetic, really, and he wondered what kind of role model that part of himself was for the groups of boys who were his summer responsibility. Certainly, he'd come a long way from four years ago, when he was first a junior counselor in training, like K.C. Back then he'd barely been able to go within sight of the river. But now he could—with a life jacket. He shrugged. That was just who he was, and the boys in his cabin always seemed to like him despite this weakness. The girls' counselors found his fear endearing, much to the dismay of a few of the more rough and tumble male counselors. Why should they care, anyway—with their brawny good looks, they had a head start on him in any competition for female attention. He knew he wasn't much to look at, with his bright red hair, freckles, skinny frame, and big ears. But he liked to think he had other redeeming features.

Like his jokes and pranks. Hadn't he made everyone laugh last night as MC at the end-of-summer camp talent show? And his singing. He had a voice that some people said sounded pure as an angel's when he sang.

Halfway across the bridge Clay stopped and leaned on the railing. He gazed upstream at the narrow river, really more of a stream this late in the summer. He could just make out the still, deep section where the river widened into a swimming hole. In the blue moonlight, he looked down and saw the gently rushing water beneath him and the twigs and leaves tumbling playfully on their journey toward the far off ocean. They weren't afraid of the water. Why was he?

He was too far away from the girls' cabins for anyone to hear, so he closed his eyes and began softly at first to sing one of his favorite gospel songs, *Peace in the Valley*. For in the soft moonlight that colored the trees and river in white and black and shades of blue, it did seem that there was a heavenly presence, that God might indeed be there. And besides, his voice loved to curl around the slow, broad tones of the hymn and build to a crescendo with a power that filled his entire body with pleasure. When he finished, he opened his eyes and smiled, all fear momentarily chased away.

Joanna froze as she floated on her back, then pulled her head out of the water. Treading water slowly, she strained to hear. A man's voice. Just one. Singing.

*I'm tired and so weary
But I muh-ust go alone*

She shook the water out of her ears and held herself as still as she could, paddling just enough to stay afloat. Great. Caught here in the bright moonlight on her solo swim. With no clothes on. Who would have thought she'd run into some guy out serenading the moon at 2 am in the morning? She continued to listen.

*And the night, night is as bla-ack as the sea, oh-oh-oh yeah
There will be peace in the valley for me-ee-ee, some day*

The voice gathered strength and swelled through the night. Its rich tones washed over her. Whoever was singing was really getting into it.

*There'll be no sadness, no sorrow
No trouble, trouble I see*

And suddenly she felt a chill run through her, the chill of being in the majestic presence of a king among voices. Wow! This guy could sing. She continued to listen until the last line, like a deer caught in the shining lights of a car that had appeared out of nowhere.

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me

Silence. Save for the water sounds and the wind in the trees. Where was he now? Released from the singer's spell, she glided toward the river bank, to the spare safety of a shadow at the river's edge. She stepped out of the swimming hole and climbed the shallow bank toward where she'd left her clothes. She tugged at her hair and let it tumble down in front to cover her breasts. With the water dripping from her body, she crept through the bushes toward the boulder where she'd left her clothes. And froze again as the voice returned, this time much nearer.

Clay shook his head with a smile and bit his lower lip. That had felt amazing. He glanced around, self-conscious for just an instant, then turned, headed back down the bridge and followed the river bank upstream toward the grassy clearing opposite the swimming hole where his campers sometimes liked to eat lunch. The perfect place to sit, enjoy the moonlit night, and offer up a few more songs. Then back to bed. Now he was feeling almost happy he'd had the dream because it had brought him here. The night was fine.

He reached the clearing, lowered himself to the ground, and leaned back against a stump, the life jacket providing a padded cushion for his back. He'd come here before to sing, although not often. Once a trembling deer with dark, dark eyes had come to listen. And then run away when he had stopped. He sang *Blue Moon of Kentucky* in honor of tonight's moon and because its bluegrass rhythms matched his now playful mood. And then the old Hank Williams song, *Your Cheating Heart*. He felt relaxed now and allowed a twang to creep into his normally mellow voice.

*Your cheatin' heart will make you weep
You'll cry and cry and try to sleep
But sleep won't come the whole night through
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you*

To finish up, he segued into his favorite sort of song, a ballad. This one was old but perfect for tonight. He threw up the haunting melody into the sky.

*Blue moon, you saw me standing alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own*

Crack. Clay heard the snap of a breaking twig. A deer? He didn't miss a beat or move from where he sat but kept singing and tried to make his voice as gentle and encouraging as possible. He heard another snap and a rustling in the bushes upstream. Although the song was done, he began another chorus. Slowly he stood up and turned around, still singing, and peered ahead to look for the deer.

Joanna crouched in the bushes and listened to one song after another. If she hadn't been so nervous about the possibility of being discovered naked in the woods by a strange man, she would have enjoyed the impromptu concert. For his voice was beautiful and seemed so right for the deep shadows, blue glow, and magical rustlings of this moonlit night. If she closed her eyes, she was transported to a place where the air seemed too heavy to breathe and she gasped for breath as the voice resonated through her body.

Despite the warmth of the night, she shivered. Her legs began to cramp from crouching so long. She needed to make a break for it. If she moved quickly and softly, she might be able to make it to the boulder, where she'd be sheltered from him, pull on some clothes, and steal away further upstream along the path that flanked the river. Or once her clothes were on, she could step casually from behind the boulder and say, "hey, nice singing."

One, Two, Three, Go! thought Joanna to herself, and then dashed for the safety of the boulder. She snatched up her underwear and fumbled them on in an instant. Her hurried attempt to dress was interrupted by the singer's voice.

"Who's there?" called Clay as he moved across the open grass toward the boulder. The white shape he'd seen streak behind the boulder had been no deer. But his eyes, without their glasses, were unreliable at this distance. As he came nearer, he asked again, "Hey, who's there?"

"Me," said Joanna, realizing he'd seen her. There was no use pretending she wasn't there.

Clay stopped at the sound of the girl's voice, which had quavered on its single syllable. "Who's me? Is everything all right?" he asked. It occurred to him that a girl might be scared of meeting a stranger alone in the dark, far from where anyone could hear them, so he tried to reassure her. "I work at the camp. It's OK." The moon moved behind a cloud and left them with only the stars for light.

"It's Joanna, from Hickory cabin." Yes, he recognized the name and knew the cabin well. He'd passed it just minutes before. She must be the replacement counselor who'd been there for only a few weeks. He'd not yet had a chance to meet her.

"Joanna, come out. I can't see a thing in this dark and I'm blind as a bat without my glasses."

Well, that was good news to Joanna. She stepped out tentatively until she was only partly shielded by the rock. Her long hair covered her breasts and shoulders. In the dark, who would be able to see anything? Clay squinted across the 10 yards or so that separated them.

"Well, Joanna. I can't really tell what you look like from here, but I think I know who you are. If my miserable eyes aren't lying, I'd say you have long dark hair and are wearing a white bathing suit. Been swimming?"

Joanna relaxed imperceptibly. He couldn't see a thing. "Yes." She gestured at the swimming hole. "Did you come for a swim too?"

Clay laughed. If she only knew that the only way he'd get into the swimming hole was if someone were to knock him unconscious and drag him in. He shook his head. "No. I didn't come to swim. By the way, my name's Clay." And he stuck out his hand and stepped closer. Joanna immediately backed up a step. Clay stopped.

"I know who you are," said Joanna.

"You do?"

"The talent show. I saw you at the talent show tonight," she said, remembering his easy banter as the MC and his playful ad libs that drew laughs from the crowd. His sun-bleached red hair had stuck up in front from either a cowlick or failure to use a comb. He'd reminded her of nothing more than a grown up Dennis the Menace.

"Oh. Yeah. I do that every year on the last night of camp." He paused. "I can't believe it's the last night already. Are you sorry the summer's over? You haven't been here long."

"Yes, kind of." Joanna paused. "Are you sorry too? Is that why you're out here by the river in the middle of the night?"

"No, I'm ready for the summer to end and to go back to school—I go to school in Charlotte. I came here tonight because.... Well, to be honest, Joanna, I had this really bad dream and I just needed to get out and walk it off."

"You did? So did I! That's why I went swimming. The water was so still and cool—it helped to calm me down," said Joanna.

Clay smiled again. He could think of nothing less calming than a swim. He held out his hand to Joanna. "Come here, Joanna. Come here and tell me your dream." He paused. "If you want to." And he tried to make his voice as gentle as he could, as if she were the deer he'd tried hard not to frighten. He was rewarded by her steps toward him and at last he felt her cool hand slide into his. Looking down at her in the dark, he strained to see her features. He was intrigued by this girl who liked to swim in the dark all alone in the river.

Walking toward Clay, Joanna wondered at her boldness. Alone with some guy in the middle of the woods, and her with no shirt on. Well, of course, he didn't seem to know that. His voice was just so reassuring—it seemed practically to sing the words—and she felt he really was interested in hearing about her dream. When she'd first awakened from her nightmare, she'd felt an intense need to talk with someone. Although the immediacy of the dream was gone, she still felt drawn to tell someone about it. And now here was her chance. She slipped her hand into Clay's and talked.

“I dreamt about my sister Crystal. Back home. We live in the same apartment building and we’re very close. I dreamt that something bad had happened to her. I won’t say what. Just something bad. I woke up all worried. So I called her and no one answered. And that worried me some more. I’ll call her again in the morning. She’s probably fine, but you know how it is with dreams. I just couldn’t sleep so I came out here.”

“You’ll feel better once you talk to her. Why don’t you call her again as soon as you get back to your cabin?” he suggested, squeezing her hand between both of his. While they had been speaking, the moonlight had gradually returned as the clouds continued their trek across the sky. Joanna looked up at this gangly guy who held her hand, dressed for the night improbably in a life jacket and plaid pajama pants. She started to smile as she realized he had more clothes on than she.

“How about you?” she asked. Clay didn’t answer. “How about you?” she repeated.

“Uhhh, what?” he asked. He’d become suddenly unable to follow what she was saying because in the moonlight he’d realized that this girl was practically naked.

“Your dream, Clay. What was your dream?” Her long dark hair was the only thing that hid her breasts from him. She was beautiful in this light—he could see her very well now that they were close. He leaned forward involuntarily, dropped her hand, moved his own hands onto her shoulders, and began to pull her toward him. But then he stopped—it wouldn’t do to take advantage of a girl caught skinny dipping in this isolated spot.

“You’re cold, Joanna. Come sit with me and I’ll tell you my dream.” They sat with their backs against the same boulder that hid Joanna’s clothes on its other side. Clay put his arm around her and she leaned back into the warmth.

“Now my dream will sound selfish compared to yours. My dream was only about myself. I’ve had this dream before. And I know it’s going to sound, well ... trivial. I dreamt about the ocean.” He was silent. He’d never told anyone his dream before and doubted he could communicate its terror. Especially not to someone who went for casual nighttime swims in the river. Just talking about the dream brought back a stab of fear that made him acutely aware of the sounds of the river: its gurgling, dripping, rushing, flowing. He realized his heart was beating much too fast. But maybe that wasn’t because of the water but because of the girl, softly nestled all bare skin and silky hair beside him.

“And?” prompted Joanna.

“And, well, this ocean—it’s so vast. It goes on forever. And there’s no land. Only waves and sea. And I ...”

Joanna waited.

“That doesn’t sound like much but that’s more than I’ve ever told anybody and that’s all I can manage tonight.” Clay remembered how right after the dream he had wanted to hold a girl’s

hand and he smiled. Well, here she was. “It’s no secret to anyone at camp that I’m scared of water. That’s why I always wear this when I’m near the river,” he said, thumping the life jacket where it crossed his chest. “It makes being here possible.”

It was Joanna’s turn to squeeze his hand. She felt strangely comfortable, sharing stories of nightmares with this stranger in the night. Earlier, at the talent show, he’d seemed like the class clown, a happy-go-lucky guy without a care in the world. Now his frightening dream and fear of water had revealed a vulnerability that drew her to him like a light draws a moth.

Clay leaned over and pressed his face into her hair and whispered “Thanks.” He left his head there and inhaled deeply.

“Joanna, your hair smells like tangerines!”

She pulled away and laughed. “I washed it just before I went to bed,” she said. They sat in companionable silence. “I heard you singing, you know,” said Joanna at last.

“Tonight?”

“Yes. You know, *Peace in the Valley*, *Blue Moon*, and those other ones. The whole concert.”

Clay rolled his eyes. “Hey, I thought I was alone.” He shrugged apologetically.

“It was beautiful. Your voice is beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. “*You* are beautiful, Joanna.” Their eyes met and they smiled, both suddenly self-conscious and very aware of each other—the sound of shallow breathing, the touch of damp skin.

“Here,” said Clay. “Give me your hand and I’ll sing you a song. And then we should go.” He took her hand, placed it on his chest under the straps of the life jacket, and then covered it with his own. “Just hold your hand right here.”

Clay chose another ballad, because what else do you sing on a moonlit night with a beautiful girl leaning against you?

*Somewhere, out there
Someone’s saying a prayer
That we’ll find one another
In that big somewhere out there*

Joanna leaned back and closed her eyes. He was effortless. He was effortless with his voice. Its golden tones warmed her. With her hand on his chest, she could not only hear but feel his voice. Its gentle vibrations made it seem that she *was* the song, rather than just a listener.

Clay looked down at Joanna as he sang. She'd closed her eyes and looked very peaceful. Her hair on one side had gotten pushed behind her shoulder and her breast lay there for him to see, its delicate curves accentuated by the soft blue light. He didn't think he was going to be able to make it through the song.

*And even though
I know how very far apart we are*

Joanna felt the power of Clay's voice building. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. She felt a wave of warmth envelope her. She opened her eyes and saw him looking down at her as he sang but it was as if he were a long ways away. And his voice seemed to come from off in the distance too, as though he were back downstream again. And suddenly, it grew darker.

As Clay looked down at Joanna, she opened her eyes. He felt guilty as a wolf in the henhouse, caught staring at her naked breast. He leaned forward to kiss her—he couldn't help himself—but suddenly her eyes rolled up in her head and she sagged against his arm.

“Joanna! Joanna!” Christ, she'd fainted. He lowered her gently to the ground. She opened her eyes immediately. “Joanna, you fainted. Just lie still. Are you OK?”

How embarrassing, thought Joanna to herself. And the word is ‘swoon’ not ‘faint.’ She had swooned in the middle of the woods with some guy she hardly knew. She'd thought girls only swooned in the movies. Or in old newsclips showing Elvis or the Beatles. She was glad it was dark; she must be turning beet red. She sat up hurriedly, wrapping her hair around her like a cloak. “I'm fine.” Clay looked at her with concern. “I'm fine,” she repeated. “The water was so cold and then I felt so hot sitting here and then, well, it just happened.”

“You're shivering now, Joanna,” he said. “Didn't you bring a coat ... or anything?” He could not imagine that she had walked all the way from her cabin dressed the way she was now.

“Yes, it's just right back here.” She hopped up and quickly moved behind the boulder. She grabbed her fleece jacket, put it on, and zipped it up part way. She left her shorts and shirt sitting there. She didn't want to draw attention to a stack of clothes that she should be wearing and wasn't. She would come back early in the morning and get them. Her jacket was long, hanging to just above her knees. Its fleece felt warm and soft on her skin. She realized suddenly that she *had* been cold. She shivered.

Clay joined her behind the rock. “Here, Joanna. Zip it up all the way.” He gently took the zipper and tugged it up to her chin, wishing a wistful ‘good-bye’ to what the jacket now covered. He pulled her hair out of the jacket and let it settle over her shoulders. “There.” He bent down, took her by the shoulders, and looked her in the eye. “Are you sure you're OK?”

“I'm fine. Let's go.”

They walked back in silence. What was there to say? As they neared the boathouse, Clay took her hand.

“I didn’t get to hear the end of your song,” said Joanna as they walked on.

“There’ll be other songs,” said Clay.

“But I just love songs about mice,” said Joanna, and put on a mock pouting face.

Clay laughed. He’d chosen to sing her a love song from a cartoon about mice, *An American Tale*. Well, it was a pretty song. And it showed off the range and power of his voice. “A joke, Joanna. Good. Now I know you’re feeling better.”

“Well, here’s Hickory cabin,” said Clay. They walked to the foot of the steps together. Inside the cabin there was movement and they heard a child cry out.

“I’d better go,” whispered Joanna. “Good night.”

“Good night,” said Clay. Another sound came from within. Joanna let go of Clay’s hand and quickly moved up the steps and through the door. She looked back. Clay waved. She closed the door.

Instead of heading back to the boys’ cabins, Clay turned and followed the path back toward the river.

She didn’t see Clay at breakfast the next morning. The mess hall was chaos. It was always that way when each week’s campers were due to go home. And today was even more hectic because it was the last session of the summer. There were lots of extra chores to be done to help get the camp closed up for Fall. She had enough to do keeping her girls together, helping them pack, wiping away their tears at having to leave new friends, and getting them over to where they would board the buses that would take them back to the various YMCAs that they came from. She packed up her own things too; she would be chaperoning a large group of campers on the bus ride back to her home YMCA.

Outside, the sun was so bright, she had to shade her eyes. As the kids milled about and the buses lined up, she saw Clay. Today he had his glasses on and looked harried, as all the counselors did, trying to get the campers onto the right buses. He wore his red Y shirt and khaki shorts. Those long legs. Those bony knees. She flushed, just remembering last night. She felt awkward and shy, unable to approach him. What had really happened last night, anyway? Nothing.

Clay looked up and saw her staring. He immediately came over. “Joanna,” he stated. She smiled. He stepped up close to her and leaned his head into her hair. “Hey, tangerine girl. I missed you at breakfast.” He put an arm around her and turned her to face him. “What about your sister? Did you call her? How is she?”

“Yes. I talked to her this morning. She’s fine. I was so relieved.”

“Joanna, I’m so glad.” And he folded her into his arms in a hug. With her cheek against his chest and her eyes closed, she heard the beating of his heart. Or was it her own? Joanna felt in danger of melting into the ground. God, he was so physical. So casually physical. She loved it.

“Clay, would you stop nuzzling that girl—oh, it’s you, Joanna—and get over here,” said a wiry man with graying hair—the camp director. “I want you to manage the bus assignments this morning. Here are the lists.” He held out some papers to Clay.

“OK, right away,” he said, stepping back from Joanna and nodding at the director, who strode away. “Got to go,” he said to Joanna. “Hey, try not to leave too soon. I have something for you.” He moved off, leafing through the papers, and was soon surrounded by a tangle of campers and counselors.



A boy made his way down the aisle to where Joanna sat at the back of the bus, which was almost ready to leave. He was wearing a shirt that said “ClayNation” and featured a hand-drawn picture of a red-headed character who resembled Chuckie from Rugrats. He grinned and asked, “Are you Joanna?” She nodded and he handed her a paper bag labeled “To Joanna, from Clay.”

Inside were Joanna’s red YMCA T-shirt and shorts, the ones she’d left behind the boulder the night before. She’d visited the river this morning before breakfast, but her clothes had not been there. There was also a note in the bag.

*Joanna, I’d like to see you again (with or without your shirt). Last night—you were just too beautiful. Can’t wait to finish the song. Please e-mail me or call.
Love, Clay*

At the bottom of the paper he’d scrawled his phone number and e-mail. Joanna sat staring down at the note in her lap, afraid to look up. Her whole body felt warm, her breasts tingled, and she wondered if she were turning red. Trembling, she remembered how his rising chest had felt beneath her hand right before she’d fainted. To avoid having to share the moment with the young campers around her, she looked out the window. Outside the bus, a little ways away, she could see Clay standing there, talking to his junior counselor, K.C. She let herself smile at his sheer goofiness—red hair sticking up, broken glasses taped together on one side, long matchstick legs sticking out from his khaki shorts.

Clay and K.C. were studying a piece of paper—a list no doubt of campers and their bus assignments. A teary-eyed little girl—Joanna knew the look well—clutched at Clay’s shirt. He bent down for a second, whispered something in her ear, and she burst into laughter. He swooped her up in his arms and balanced her on his hip while he resumed his conversation.

Clay looked up and caught Joanna smiling at him from the bus window. She held up the bag so he could see she'd gotten his message. Clay abandoned K.C. in mid-sentence, and walked toward the idling bus, the little girl still in his arms. As the bus pulled out, the girl snatched Clay's glasses from his head. Undistracted, he continued to look right at Joanna. He raised his hand to wave, and then he winked. "Call me," he mouthed. "Call me."

THE END