

11-SS-16

Water Music

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The lake hasn't changed at all. I breathe in the warm, moist air and press my sandals into the shoreline of grass and sand, bits of shells strewn along its edges. Piers jut out from the shore's perimeter like teeth of a jack-o-lantern, and cottages dot the surrounding forests of pine and birch, the treetops giving way to a smooth, cerulean sky. The lake's surface mirrors the horizon with crystal perfection, until a disturbance in the water creates a ripple. Then another. And it's as if each ripple carries with it a picture from long ago, like luminescent sun trails that linger after closing one's eyes on a radiant sunny day.

In a flash, I am a girl once more, fifteen, mightily reeling in a catfish. My brother is a boy plunging awkwardly into the water from a dangling rope. And my mother and father are young and vibrant, oblivious to life's cruelties.

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He was just a boy, no different from any other in so many ways. There *are* about three billion of them on the planet, aren't there? So why should one stand out from any other? Two eyes, two arms, two legs...but oh, those eyes, those arms, those legs.

Luke had always just...been there. He and his family lived three lots away from ours in the summertime, and his blond hair and freckled cheeks are etched into my earliest memories; a life that ran parallel to my own. One moment he was Luke, playful Luke who hated losing and whose tantrums often signaled to our parents an earlier bedtime than we'd hoped for. And then he became *Luke*, a perplexing and mysterious blend of muscle and charm, of pining and patience, of sweat and sweetness.

And sometimes, affection, like the day he boosted me up onto a lower bough of a tree. In the past, he would have cupped his hands and pushed me with too much force, sending me toppling over the branch, his way of announcing, "I'm a boy," fulfilling his thirst for attention. But this time he raised me properly, almost gently, and when I'd gained purchase on the tree limb, he stroked the back of my leg, just for a moment, almost subtle enough to convince me it was nothing more than a trivial act, void of any meaning. But when I lowered myself onto my stomach so that my arms swung over each side of the branch, Luke, after a moment's hesitation, raised his hands and caressed my own, he blabbering all the while, as if to downplay the significance of his actions, and my skin tightened and tingled.

My father had a rule: no leaving the cottage at nighttime. But rules established when I was seven needed to bend, if not altogether break, for a girl of fifteen. After saying goodnight to my parents and brother, I went to bed and waited eagerly, my breath shivering with anticipation despite the oppressive heat. After an hour, I crept from my room, silently unlatched the cottage door and spotted Luke awaiting my arrival at the pier, I more eager than he, for before he could even say hello my mouth ardently found his, and as we kissed, his languid fingers explored what had until then remained untouched.

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A ripple once again transforms me, this time into a lanky nine year-old, lying down in a row boat and squinting against the bright sky, the flickering shadows from the swinging oars intermittently disrupting my vision. On either side of me, I hear the water slosh, low and unnerving, against the fiberglass of the boat. At my feet, my father says in rhythm to the strokes, "She sells sea shells by the sea shore." I repeat as best I can, and giggle when my tongue trips.

I sit up, redo my ponytail, and take a seat on an orange cushion behind me, which exhales its captured air in a way that my father finds particularly funny.

“Nice one!” he says.

“That wasn’t me!”

“Hey, that reminds me of another tongue twister.” He lets go of the oars and turns toward me with a mischievous grin. “Try this,” he says. He opens his mouth, holds his tongue with his fingers for a moment, and then says, “Hold onto your tongue like that.”

Already smiling, I follow my father’s instructions.

“Now,” he says. “Repeat after me: My father was born on a pirate ship.”

I fumble over the words with tongue in hand, and my father, showing mock surprise, says, “Your father was born on a pile of what?!”

Oh! How I shriek with laughter! So hard, so long, I lose all my air, and my father can’t stop either, each of us starting the other up again just when composure seems possible. Only when we reach the shore have we really settled down.

“I can’t believe you said that,” he says. “You owe a dollar in the swear jar.”

“I didn’t swear! I said ship!”

My mother calls from the back porch of the cottage, “What are you two going on about?”

Grinning at me, my father says, “Oh...nothing.”

* * *

My summer as a fifteen year-old elapsed as all summers must, with gradual diminishing daylight hours cheating us of our treasured time outdoors. Luke’s and my excitement for each other ebbed and flowed. We’d frequently go days without seeing each other, and then we’d reconnect, sometimes in a timid and playful way, other times ravenous with desire.

One morning over breakfast, my father made a quip about what I thought had been a secret nighttime escape from the cottage. “You should leave a light on for yourself next time,” he said. “Make your journey back a little easier.”

Flushing with embarrassment, I fled outdoors, eventually finding Luke and unloading all the grievances I had with my family. I soon found myself crying, and in Luke’s embrace I realized that my tears weren’t really for anything my father had said, but for Luke and me. Soon we’d part ways and return to our homes, apart from our World Apart, back to routines and cliques and reputations, studies and schedules and responsibilities.

For Luke and me, there would be no emails, no posts on Facebook, no texts, the way today a summer relationship might persevere, or at least linger a while longer. The few phone calls we made that fall were awkward and unsatisfying, like stroking a dog’s coat with gloves on, but maybe we could have learned how to share tenderness over long-distance calls or heartfelt letters. If only we’d had more time.

That October, my father and brother planned to return to the cottage to take out the pier before winter arrived. When I asked if I could come too, my father wrinkled his forehead for a moment before showing signs of understanding. “Oh, honey. I don’t think Luke will be there.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean...” But I did, and he knew it. “I could still come and help.”

“If you want to, we’d love to have you. But please don’t think that you have to.”

He had offered me an out, and I wonder now how things might have changed had he not, had he instead insisted that I pack my suitcase and hop in the car to join them. As it was, I decided to stay at home. But that night when they arrived at the cottage, my father and brother noticed lights on from the cottage three doors down – Luke’s family – a coincidence that would have been serendipitous had I been there, but was instead an omen.

For had I been there, Luke wouldn't have taken his family's car out to practice for his upcoming driver's test. He wouldn't have driven along the asphalt road past the boat landing where my father walked most mornings after breakfast. He wouldn't have cut the car too close to the brush that had grown wide over the summer and had yet to be trimmed, its branches shading more than just the sun. And he wouldn't have swerved into my father head-on, swiping his feet from underneath him and catapulting him into the windshield and onto the pavement, severing his spine, and minutes later, stealing his last breath.

If only.

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Hank calls me from behind.

"You coming, honey?"

I pause for a moment before I turn to face him, but all I can see at the top of the hill is the Honda parked at the end of the gravel driveway.

"Where'd you go?" I yell, too loudly, forgetting how clearly sound travels at the lake.

I hear the slam of the trunk and then Hank appears, looking preposterous. He's changed out of his wingtips, and the legs of his grey suit pants are scrunched up against a pair of work boots still caked with mud from the last time he wore them. He traipses down the hill and I say, laughing, "Nice outfit."

He greets me with a smile and a kiss. "You said you'd only be a minute, but it doesn't look like you're ready to go."

"I'm not."

"My meeting's at three, so we really should take off by one."

“I know.” I hadn’t expected to stand at the water’s edge for so long, but here I am, my feet practically planted in place. I take a deep breath and exhale. “I could stand here forever, couldn’t you?”

Hank puts his arm around me and gives my shoulder a squeeze, which could either be a sign of love and understanding or a gentle reminder that forever isn’t on today’s agenda. It’s back to Wausau by three, pick up the kids at 4:30 from my mom’s, and then probably cook a hasty, undesirable meal – maybe sloppy joe and carrots. The kids will love it.

Hank glances back at the cottage. “So no nibbles yet on the property?”

“Nope. Her Realtor said it could be months. Even longer.”

Prior to preparing it for sale, my mother hadn’t visited the cottage in years. A family from Illinois had rented it for several summers, covering taxes and basic maintenance needs, but last fall my mother decided it was time to sell the property.

“That is…” she had said to me, “...unless you or your brother would like it.”

We didn’t.

I can feel my husband’s impatience poking me. “Okay,” I sigh. “I’m ready, but let’s get some lunch before we leave town.”

“I don’t think we have time.”

“You said you’d come with me for one last look, and you’ve hardly done that, and now I want to go get lunch.”

“Fine,” he says and trudges back up the hill to the car, not even bothering to wait for me. Relax, I tell myself. We can still have a nice lunch. But there it is again, as it always is, the stone that sits inside my stomach, this immovable weight that reminds me all is doomed even when I know everything is okay, that the kids are safe, that Hank and I are fine, that I should be

thankful for the husband I have instead of the men I've lost. Dr. Linn calls it a mild case of depression. Hank calls it a wall that's keeping us apart. The kids call it "mom's issue." I don't know what to call it.

We drive away from the cottage, the gravel crunching beneath us, and then advance down the narrow road that took my father away from me. It winds for a mile before stretching out westward in a long straight line. All is clear, but a blur suddenly dashes from my right and springs forward into view, lunging onto the hood of the car with a ferocious thud before colliding violently against the windshield, shattering it. There's a blaring shriek of tires. A brutal jolt of inertia. Audible gasps. And then silence.

I scramble for the door latch and dash out of the car. Rushing to the long grass beside the road, I locate the doe, its expansive chest still rising and falling.

"Hank! Oh God."

Hank rushes from my right. "Is it still alive?"

"She's still breathing!" I crouch beside the deer, place my shaking hands gently upon its side and listen to its snout sputtering for air, its nostrils flaring in and out.

"Go call for help," I tell Hank. "Hurry!"

Hank fiddles with the phone. "There's no signal. Hang here and I'll try on top of the hill." He jogs up the road in his clunky boots, and I, still trembling, gaze into the deer's helpless eyes, just as Luke had with my father that day. Those poor, dying eyes. "Hang on," Luke had said to my father, over and over after my brother arrived. "Hang on."

But I say to the deer, "Let go. Let go."

It's a mantra I've told myself many times, ever since the day of the funeral, when I fled our home seeking solitude, desperate to escape the madness that accompanies death. I

welcomed the biting fall air, drew it deeply into my lungs, and walked briskly, aimlessly, along unnamed roads. After a mile or many miles, I freed my head from the hood of my sweatshirt, and turning to shake my hair away from my face, spotted Luke thirty yards behind me. I hated him, but I didn't yell or run. He drew closer, and I noticed the anguish that lined his face. He was no longer a boy. He kneeled down before me on the hard asphalt and clutched my legs, pressing his head into my thighs, and wept. Not a word was spoken as I stroked his hair, and though my tears sprinkled his head like the healing tears of a phoenix, nothing could rejuvenate what was meant to wither and die.

The deer's breathing is more labored now, but still it hangs on, clinging to life, as unable to let go as I am. I can offer it nothing but the assurance that soon its suffering will be over. Before long, my husband will return with someone to put the doe out of its misery, and as I place my hands once more upon its heaving chest, I can't help but envy the elegant beast.