

Lake Day

By Anne Miller

Mostly splintered picnic tables and towering slash pines scatter our swampy lake front. Rickety, ivy-covered chain link fences squeeze the sides of the shoreline, tucking the scenery safely behind the shadow of a simple, whitewashed brick Baptist church. It's June and always blistering. My pink Little Mermaid one-piece scratches my armpits as I rush down the small, sandy bank and into the cool, cat-tale filled waters.

"Get back here! You need sunscreen!"

My head slowly inches above the water as my oldest sister continues to holler at me from our camp site next to old favorite of the old picnic tables which tottered near the left corner of the sand bank. Her long, tanned arms angrily wield a blue bottle of sunscreen over my younger brother's unsuspecting blonde crown. Her green eyes warn that she'd throw it at my bobbing head if I shouldn't make myself available to be slathered and properly prepped for the bright sun.

Not wanting to ruin everyone's lake day with my sun burning, I pull my body from the water and skip up the bank. Having finished his sticky torment, my younger brother sticks his tongue out at me and takes my place of splashing in the lake as I grouchy sit on the pile of towels we brought.

"YOU only wear coconut oil; why do I have to wear sunscreen? I'm trying to work on my taaaaaaan," I wince as Brandy rolls her eyes and pulls my limp mopyy brown curls into a sad bun.

Her quick hands run the cream up and down my small arms and back, careful to cover my ears and scrunched up face.

“I wear oil because I’m older, and you’re a baby. You burn more easily, Annette. Now, go swim,” Brandy retorts as she removes my hair from its wet prison and lightly shoves me off my perch on the table. She took my spot, spreading out the towels so she could soak up the sun and supervise from a safe distance. I met the sandy beach with a run, turning back to growl at her one more time before I plunge into the water, narrowly avoiding Patrick’s tiny swinging arms. The murky wetness replaces the sticky white substance covering my body with algae and happiness.

With little breath left, I rise to the surface, sunshine filling my squinting eyes with white brightness speckled with little black dots. My feet peddle the light current as Patrick hovers closely with his right hand in a fist pressed to the palm of his left, resting patiently just above the water. I begin to question what he could possibly doing, but before I could speak the words – lake water squirted into my gaping, child mouth. With a gurgle, I spat his ammunition back at his freckled, round, already burning nose. I smirk in triumph, yet my victory was short lived as he rebounds with a physical attack: pushing my head below the water, essentially drowning me, even but for a moment. His tiny hands dig deep into my hair as I struggle – his high-pitched gleeful screech piercing my clogged ears. As the older of the youngest two, I simply couldn’t let him drown me and enjoy knowing he had bested me even for a –

I thrust my hands above, grabbing his and I –

Pull!

I pull my entire weight – all 45 pounds of my tanned small limbs, torso, and mind – down against the forces of Patrick and the lake. Gravity had nothing against sibling rivalry.

Myself, my furry, and the water simultaneously worked together to completely disarm my brother and send his body flailing a good 5 feet away from where I stood truly victorious.

Patrick splashed up to the surface, gasping for air, “That’s not fair! You hurt my head really bad!” His small baby face, all puffed and red from the sudden attack, threatened to burst with tears or screams or another attack.

I glanced at the shore to see my sister toss the magazines she’d been reading and ran waist-deep into the lake thinking Patrick had gotten mutilated by a preying alligator. Not wanting to deal with whatever my sister had to say, I plunged deeper into the depths of the lake, attempting to find a deeper bottom past the roped off section where the KOA director kept his faded red Yamaha speeding boat with its rusty old motor. I dove deeper than ever before – passing the white and blue buoys, pass the shore hugging reeds, into the black, freezing depths of the lake. I almost made it to the center depths of the lake when my whole body jolted. The spasm surprised me so much I stopped mid-stroke. My whole body began to shutter and shriek for anything but the darkness and water I seemed to be getting pulled into.

Air!

Deeper.

I fell deeper and deeper into that black. My body ached for the warmth, for the weight of anything else besides this in which my body was not my own. I remember thinking it was funny that my brother had almost drowned me earlier just for me to drown at the bottom of the lake. That this was it. That I would only exist here. That this is all I’d ever be. The girl at the bottom

of the lake. The girl who died just after playing with her younger brother. The girl who never left. She stays in the lake forever, haunting those who wonder down to the shore at night.

Just jump scares, that's all I'll ever be.

I'm okay with terrifying my younger brother for as long as he visits the lake, but I wasn't okay with staying here once he left. With energy I didn't know I still had, I kicked my legs till I thought they would bleed and call all the creepy crawlies to drag me back down to the depths again. I burst through the surface, raking the sweet air into my lungs and attempting to steady my breathing. I sat at the surface, letting the waves crash over my shoulders while I defined what was water and what wasn't.

I lazily swam back to the shore to find my younger brother building a trench for his lopsided sandcastle. I heaved my weakened body from the water and laid heavily near where he tirelessly worked.

"I thought you died," Patrick stated quietly. His hands quickly digging in the sand and covering my legs with his findings.

"I found the bottom. There's a portal there surrounded by dark magic. It can take you anywhere you wish. I went to the moon."

"Liar."

“Maybe. But you’ll never know because you can’t swim to the bottom of the lake like me!” I declared as I broke free of the new sandcastle he had constructed around my tired limbs. I hardly registered his scowl and the crude comment he huffed as I made my way to my oldest sister who handed me a peanut butter and jelly sandwiched that spilled out on the sides. “Don’t swim so far out. I don’t wanna have drag your body out of the lake and call mom and dad,” said Brandy as she sat me down on the picnic table’s bench and began combing out my hair for a braid.

We left 20 minutes after I almost drowned at the bottom of the lake. The sky rained down pointy rain as we hurried to gather our things and make our way back to the house. With my towel around my freshly braided head, I ran towards the warmth of our back door light.