

Twenty Inches of A Lake

Twenty inches. The length an Eastern Gray Squirrel can grow, like the one that's currently banging its nut against the small brick wall. The squirrel swishes its tail, using it for balance as he jumps to another tree. Each squirrel is unique in its own way, some longer, some shorter. But all need their tail to help them balance as they jump from one tree to the next.

Twenty inches. The length of the IV tube connecting me to the drip by my bedside. I didn't know then, back in February 2018, that this would be my life for the next couple of years. Balancing life and death. Balancing the struggle and the fight. Balancing, quite literally, as I try to stand on my own two feet. My mother stood next to me helping me to my feet. A routine we had figured out over the past few months. She helps me over to the table full of multi-colored meds. Beside the meds, a rehydrated macaroni and cheese, something to hide the taste of meds disintegrated in my throat, and dull my mind from the pain of breathing. Each ragged breath, a slice from the plastic knife on the table, slow and torturous, a blunt cut through nothing.

Twenty inches. The length I could walk in spurts before my body raged itself into a panicked asthma attack. One step after the other until we reached the lake surrounding the hospital. My new home away from home. It was my first time away from the sterile, disinfected room. The stench of Quaternary Ammonium, Hypochlorite, Accelerated Hydrogen Peroxide, Phenolics, and Peracetic Acid had burnt through the cavities of my nostrils, leaving only a gaping hole for which to breathe. The smell of fresh dew wafted up at me from the newly

mown grass. A petrichor of earthy scent after rain falls on dry soil flushed away that chemical burn, as if the Greek gods themselves were bestowing the fluid that runs in their veins to heal me.

Twenty inches. The length of distance between your hand and my face when you hesitated before wiping the tear from my cheek. Surgery. We were told I needed a transplant, or I would die. My eyes flooded before I could stop them. My tears, the foreshadowing of the Maryland flood of May that same year. I remember *your arms* encasing me for the first time in months. I remember the coldness of *your arms* around my shoulders, despite the warming of the Floridian sun as it rose from the East. I remember the words you cooed in my ear. "You're not alone. You will never be alone." I can still feel your breath tickle my ear, a subtle, yet goading tease at the one thing I beg for most.

We sat there for hours, you holding me in your arms. You stroking my head crying, *my little girl, my little girl*. I was frozen in time. Encapsulated in ice like Frankenstein's Monster, my mother trying to break me free. She was the Frankenstein to my monster. The silence hung between us, like dissonant chords played in a Sondheim musical. My *Sunday in the Park with George* moment, a tune that won't end with an evocative melody, but a beautiful dissonance of life, choice, or death. The Atlantic hurricane storm had hit, cascaded past oceans, passing Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, until it reached me. It's damage causing a white noise blanket on my thoughts of a future, where my home is no longer a hospital room.

As I sit here now, watching that twenty inch Eastern Gray Squirrel break through the carcass of his acorn. I wonder to myself how one squirrel can spend hours gnawing on a single acorn. The unrelenting effort it takes to crack the barrier between him and his delicious snack. I

wonder how he can spend his day hoarding his treasures in trees or holes dug in the ground.

Little pieces of himself, hidden for later. How then, is it so easy for a squirrel to leap 20 feet or to run at 20 miles per hour? How can one simple squirrel never give up and never back down from a challenge or fight? He pushes through despite his feet only being 1 inch long and barely able to hold its own weight of 1 pound.