

The Lake

Amelia was six years old. She stood at the edge of the dock in her bright blue swimsuit and yellow goggles that were too tight for her head. The inflated orange floaties were squeezing her arms, she could feel the plastic getting hotter under the midday sun. It wasn't as if she really needed them anymore, but her Dad had put them on anyway. She stared at her toes, they looked a bit like the worms in her garden back home. Her gaze slowly drifted past them to the clear water which sparkled between the gaps in the wooden planks.

Her lips were still sticky from lunch, they had eaten juicy watermelon that dripped down her mouth, down her hands, to her elbows. It was sticky, but she didn't mind. Plus she wasn't afraid of bees, so when they wandered curiously towards her, she simply redirected their attention to the nearby rose bush. It was almost June and thick roses the color of sorbet bloomed by the picnic benches. Her Dad had brought a basket filled with watermelon slices, fresh strawberries, cream cheese and two baguettes. He always brought the best things. Even Riley, her best friend. Riley was only five years old but she knew a lot of things because she could talk a lot.

The lake was big and blue. Amelia was watching it carefully, trying to decide how she felt about it. Her best friend, Riley, had big blue eyes. Everyone liked Riley. Everyone liked the lake too.

Thud - thud - thud. Someone was running down the dock. Their footfalls were quick and heavy.

"Your Dad said you're too close to the edge." Riley panted behind her. "I'm such a fast runner, I love to run, I should run more. But my ankle is still hurting, but I'm still really fast."

The Lake

Amelia watched the water. The way each soft wave formed just in time to be split in half by the dock pilings, each soft crest was filled with golden sparkles which were suddenly broken and scattered out in glittering ripples, was mesmerizing. Her mother had told her that the sun-shimmers were fairy wings reflecting the light, she was still waiting for the fairies to appear. Fairies were shy and quiet creatures, you could not force them to become friends with you. You had to wait and listen.

Riley was still talking, "I'm actually really fast. I think I've always been a good runner." She finally paused, bored of espousing things she thought she was good at. "What are you even doing?" She put her hands on her hips, more curious as to the lack of attention Amelia was showing than to what Amelia was actually thinking about doing.

Amelia didn't answer. She was waiting for sun fairies, it was obvious. Riley laughed. It was a soft laugh, harsh and shrill, like a hawk circling its prey.

"You can't swim, right?"

"I can swim," Amelia said. She didn't like that she had to say it.

"You need your floaties," said Riley, matter of factly, "you can't even make it to the middle of the lake without them." The wind tousled her brown hair, for a moment her eyes were obscured. "It's okay," she continued, in a prickly tone, "I had to practice a lot before I could swim too."

Amelia dug her heels into the smooth planks of the dock. A horrible feeling was building up inside of her, it was slippery and wiggly like a worm being overturned and exposed from the shaded dirt into the hot and unforgiving sun.

She cried at once, suddenly and uncontrollably.

"Are you upset," said Riley, in a sickeningly sweet tone, "I didn't mean to upset you."

The Lake

But she *had* meant to, hadn't she, and now she didn't want to be the bad guy.

Amelia didn't like how she felt, like a worm drying in the sun. After a few moments she wiped her eyes. "No, I'm not upset," she said, a sense of emptiness creeping into her stomach even though she had just eaten.

"Are you sure?" Riley asked again, probing for some sort of reassurance.

The tears down Amelia's cheeks were beginning to sting, she brushed them away with the back of her hand. Maybe she wasn't okay. Was that okay? She rolled the orange floaties off her arms and tossed them to the side.

"Don't worry," said Riley, now set on being the good guy, "I can teach you."

Amelia pulled her goggles over her eyes, then jumped off the dock. She made sure to plug her nose before she hit the water.

"Wait –" Riley's voice faded into a loud splash. Amelia's ears were cold and then they were not. She stayed motionless in the water, suspended just below the surface. After a moment she realized her eyes were squeezed shut and opened them slowly. Algae moved unhurried in the soft currents. Two silver fish sparkled like shooting stars as they darted into the safety of the shadows. A snapping turtle kicked its feet and shot down towards the pebbly bottom, the opposite direction Amelia needed to go. She wished she could follow the turtle, bury her body between the sand and the pebbles and just sit there until everyone left. But she wasn't a turtle, she knew she couldn't go where they went.

Amelia began to kick her legs. One, two, three, she quickly surfaced. She felt strong and confident treading the water. She had always been good at swimming. Ignoring any voices that called to her from the dock, she began to swim to the center of the lake. She mostly

The Lake

doggy-paddled. Sometimes she mixed in a frog stroke, whenever her head felt too hot. Halfway to the center of the lake her legs started to tire so she flipped onto her back.

The sky was a soft blue, light wisps of white clouds floated across her gaze like strands of cotton candy. The farther she went the colder the water became. She turned and looked down and found that her feet were dangling above a huge and dark abyss. What slept beneath, in the shadows, she could only imagine. So she tried not to, and instead, flipped onto her back again and stared at the sky.

The wind blew strongly in sharp gusts above her. From the corners of her eyes she could make out the tops of the evergreens bending and twisting. violet-green winged swallows with white underbellies danced above her now, at this portion of the lake. Their little wings fluttered and stretched and soared. They dove steeply, slurping up gnats and other tiny bugs. But she couldn't hear the swallows chirp, she couldn't hear the wind or the buzz of insects. As she lay there and floated haphazardly into the heart of the lake all was quiet. Only the soft beating of her own heart followed her to that place. It was gentle and constant. Nobody could see her here, and yet how was it that she felt the most seen?