

The Sandbar Oasis

A pair of townies with bloodshot eyes and foul breath stood in front of my brother and me. The four of us were on a wet, clammy sandbar sixty yards downstream from the irrigation canal's head gates. The unfamiliar faces, two guys, were spellbound by the whoop-de-dos created from the water that spewed out of the metallic rectangular openings in the concrete diversion dam. Even in their momentary trance, they continued to guzzle beer from pull-tab cans and take drags off their cigarettes.

Dan, three years older than me, turned and grinned in my direction. My older brother's fascination with the oddball intruders—our secret swimming hole had few uninvited guests—irritated me, perhaps even more than their presence did. I made sure the townies were still engrossed by the fast-moving water before I returned his smile with a scowl.

Jerry, the taller, huskier stranger took a long, loud drink of his beer. "Holy shit. This place is fucking awesome."

He crumpled the red and white can, then lobbed it into the rapids. The can eddied and swirled as it ran the torrents like a mangled canoe. Before the can reached calmer water, it became waterlogged and sank.

"Fuck yeah it is." Sam, the other one, grunted as he lit a cigarette from the soft, crumpled-up pack that stuck out of his back pocket.

"You kids come here a lot?" A large belch erupted from Jerry mid-sentence and he finished his words using burp-talk. Although I wanted to applaud him, I shook my head.

"We come here all the time. Our parents own the farmhouse you drove past to get down here." Dan pointed in the direction of our home which stood about a half mile up the old dirt road that meandered away from the canal toward the sandhills shaping the northern landscape. The closest house to ours was two miles away toward the small

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Midwest town we called home: population 1436.

“No kidding. Sam and I go to the reservoir or low water bridge any chance we can but some dude at the bar told us to check this place out. Man, it was hard to find.”

“The jackass wanted to come with us, but he was too drunk and forgot he asked so we ditched him.” Sam exhaled smoke as he spoke, and the act impressed me as much as finishing a sentence in burp-talk, yet I remained blank faced. I moved behind Dan to shield me from him as best I could.

“Sam you’re just pissed cuz you wanted to have a romp with that loser.”

“Screw you Jerry. The son of a bitch is a worthless, little piece of crap.”

“Sounds like your type.”

Sam flicked his half-smoked cigarette at Jerry and the cherry exploded when it hit him in the chest. Jerry stumbled back and dropped one of his six packs so he could pat the hot ashes off his dingy white, sleeveless t-shirt. Sam laughed as Jerry cursed and checked his clothes for burn holes. Cigarette smoke hung in the windless air and I tried to comprehend the insults.

Sam pulled out another bent cigarette and put it in his lips, then made no attempt to light it. “You’re someone to talk about types.”

Jerry bent over and picked up the beers sprawled at his feet. He tried to brush the sand and silt off a few of the cans.

“Hey, you guys want one?” He thrust the beers in our direction.

My brother shook his head. “Nah, we’ve got to go home soon, and our mother would smell it.” After a short pause, he pointed at me. “Besides my brother here is a bit too young.”

My whole body slumped, but he was right. Our mother would’ve gone mad cow if she smelled beer on us when we got home. Being grounded during prime swimming

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conditions would've sucked and farm work allowed us limited time as it was. After reconsidering his shrewd decision, I moved across the small sandbar and stepped into the shallows until my ankles were submerged. The tepid water would be warmer than a bath in less than a month.

Sam said. "Shit, ain't never too young for the suds, eh Jerry?"

"Fucking A right, party all night."

Sam smirked and softened his posture; his voice became less husky. I realized Sam was a woman. Her hairy legs, graveled speech, flat chest, and manlike mannerisms went against all my ideas of girlishness. I had no idea how old she was, maybe in her early twenties, but she was the oldest tomboy I'd ever met.

I stood there as the hot July sun baked my back into tanned leather and inspected her as if she was a spectacular, tumor-like growth from corn smut: a bizarre fungi on ears of corn that could become quite sizable in fascinating shapes and forms. Sam's inebriated yet observant dark brown eyes caught me gaping at her. My whole face twisted away from her chilling, penetrating gaze.

She popped open another beer and chugged the entire can in a matter of seconds. Her dark hair, six inches long at most, went in every direction like the tangled weeds growing along the banks of the canal. The few times she smiled, her snuff stained, missing, and chipped teeth made me cringe. Hardened cowboys at the annual rodeo sported choppers in better shape than hers.

Every one of her tattoos had imperfect lines and the typical faded greyness common with painful, self-administered ink. A few of my brother's friends had ones like hers—blemishes they would have to explain for years to come.

She smelled of rotting hotdogs, which overpowered the musk of the sandbar. Her Megadeath concert T-shirt with a skeleton in a business suit being swarmed by demons

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had splotches of grease and tiny holes. An evil wish to push her into the water for a quick bath came and went.

While I continued to comprehend Sam's gender, Jerry tried to give us beer again and again, more times than Mom offered second helpings at dinner or prayer all day long. My brother had gone to quite a few keg parties and some days that's all he ever talked about. I had dabbled with alcohol a few times with my friends, one of which resulted in a weeklong grounding, but I still had limited knowledge about booze. These idiots were blotto and had no intention of slowing down.

Before long, I noticed we had messed around with the fools so long my swimming trunks were no longer wet. Dry trunks were a sin against the river gods and a sure sign we had wasted valuable freedom from endless chores. My frustrated fascination had become boredom. Dan could stand there and listen to the drunk dummies and their stupid bullshit for as long as he wanted. I was done.

I ran deeper into the water until it enveloped my thighs. Before I was waist deep, which would've slowed my momentum and allowed the current to push me further downstream, I dove in. Angling across the current, I swam as hard as I could to reach the other bank at a point a lot closer to the spillway.

Showboating was part of what we did whenever there were newcomers, but I wanted to put a lot of distance between me and the people on the sandbar. It was also damn good to get back in the water and cooled off again. With ease, I reached the spot I'd set out for and hefted myself up onto one of the large chunks of concrete rubble that kept the bank from eroding.

For a few moments, I sat there and pretended I was alone. The reek of cottonwoods and fish funk was stronger on this side of the canal. This was odd phenomenon since the tall cottonwoods spangled with sharp pointy buds and spade

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shaped leaves stood in a small copse on the opposite side fifty yards downstream.

After a few minutes of solitude, I dove in again. This time, I stayed under the water for a long time and worked my way even further upstream by staying under the current. When I surfaced at the edge of the spillway in the slack water, Dan and the duo concentrated on me as if I were an exotic, colorful fish.

Sam and Jerry acted invigorated. Dan's furrowed brow drained the smugness off my face. It quashed my plan of going back under to show them I could make an even bigger swim with little to no recovery time.

I cut into the currents and made sure I stayed on top of the water's surface. Even so, I used aggressive strokes to minimize being washed past the sandbar. Getting beat by the current and having to walk back up using the bank was a bigger taboo than dry shorts.

My arrogance returned because I accomplished my goal better than anticipated. I popped out the current right where I'd dove in. Instead of coming all the way out of the water, I floated along until my toes touched the sandy bottom.

I kept the waterline right under my nose to try and hide my grin from Dan. He glared at me while I floated in the convergence zone between the intense downstream flow and the devious back current. The canal side of our swimming hole made the paper every five or ten years when someone would drown. Most of the time there were no witnesses and it was assumed the tricky back current caused the person's demise.

Once again, the back current tried to pull me into its swirling, seductive, counterclockwise spin. I swam into the shallows that led up to the sandbar. From practiced skill, I avoided getting trapped in the dangerous back current.

Dan knelt and gripped his chin between his curled index finger and thumb. "The ditch rider cranked the check gates of the canal all the way up for the midsummer push to water the crops. Its running as fast as I've ever seen it."

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“Yeah man, that shit looks crazy.” Jerry put the can of beer back up to his lips almost before the last words escaped his dour mouth surrounded by week-old stubble.

“You fuckers ever swim in the main part of the river over there.” Sam pointed and then flicked the butt of her cigarette a remarkable distance into the swirling water of the back current.

“We swim over here when it’s this intense. Other than that, we’re in the big water.” Dan’s gaze seemed to follow the tan stubby cigarette butt until it became lost in the rapids.

“That’s insane.” Jerry took a few steps off the sandbar into the water as he glanced at me and tilted his head. “Your little brother can handle the main river?”

“You saw how well he can swim. Are you good swimmers?”

“I was on the swim team in high school, but Sam should stick to wading.”

“I can swim better than you can ya fuckhead.”

“Bullshit, you’re like a confused duck when you swim.” Jerry’s smile was big, yet his head swayed from side to side as if he might teeter over and fall headfirst into the water.

“Last time you almost drowned cuz you were so drunk.”

“I ain’t any drunker than you are.”

“Yeah right. Let’s see if your little candy ass can make it to where the kid did.”

Sam eyed Jerry over the top of her beer can as she took a long swig.

“Man, that’s child’s play.”

“I bet you twenty dollars you end up way downstream...or drowned.” She turned her gaze on me and before I could flinch away her cracked teeth made chilled the space between my shoulder blades.

“You’re on.” Jerry threw his half empty beer down onto the sandbar as hard as he

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could, his way of solidifying the bet. Sudsy beer oozed out of the opening and made a yellowish pool on the dark sand that was already saturated by river water.

“Hey, before you guys get too froggy, stay away from the back current. It’s killed some people and damn near got both of us, more than once.” Dan used his hand and made a slow circle to match the water’s hypnotic pattern.

“What? That little current? It’s almost slack water.” Jerry staggered as he tried to pull his feet out of the silt that the current had built up while he stood knee deep in it.

Sam walked over to the sandbar’s edge and studied the back current. “There’s a current—it looks pretty tame.”

“It’s deceiving. Believe me it can get you in trouble, quick.” Dan’s arm went faster and faster like the cooling fan of a tractor when its throttled up.

Jerry said, “Sam, you can take on that little old trickle of water. Right?”

“Pssst, I guess. The heck with all this, let’s do what we came here to do. Sides I need that twenty bucks, so I can buy more beer for later tonight.” She pulled a can of Skoal out of her front pocket and packed a large wad of the tobacco into her lower lip.

“Shit fire, I need that twenty for some condoms cuz Becky’s in town.”

“Man, you’ll be passed out long before she comes over.”

“The Hell I will.”

“Shut up and dive in ya fucking pussy.”

“You first ya twat.”

Sam stood up and cupped her crotch. “Fine, I’ve got way bigger balls than you do anyhow.”

She emptied her pockets and stacked everything she had on top one of the six-packs that was missing two cans. Her smokes, the dark green can of Skoal, a purple see-through Cricket lighter, and a thin synthetic wallet made a precarious tower. She eased

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her way into the water and gave Jerry the middle finger.

Dan and I stood side by side as they continued to bicker and goad each other while Sam moved deeper into the water, the current rippling the bottom of her t-shirt. Unwilling to let a girl outdo him, Jerry followed. As they waded deeper into the water and began swimming dogpaddle style, I understood why Dan had given me the look.

I made swimming the treacherous waters seem banal as if anyone could do it. These drunken nitwits no longer perceived the water as dangerous, if they ever did. The alcohol helped diminish most of the real terror they might have had. And I dislodged any of their lingering fear like a cow kicking a persistent calf off her sore udders.

“So, we have to babysit these morons?” I crushed one of the empty cans with my heel.

“They’re terrible swimmers and drunk to boot.”

“And at least five years older than us.”

Dan ran his hand over his crewcut. “We should just let them drown?”

“Jerry was on the swim team.”

“Like a hundred years ago.”

I tried to kick the can, but jammed my toe in the sand. “Aw man, this sucks. I want to go home.”

“Me too but we’ll leave after they do.”

“What if they’re here until midnight?”

Dan untied his red athletic shorts and cinched them tighter before he remade the knot. “They’ll get bored with the place in an hour.”

“That’s just fucking great.”

“We can still swim—and keep an eye on them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like buckets of fun.” I worked up a loogie and launched it at a

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tall sunflower on the bank closest to us. My wad of snot hit the brown center of a large drooping sunflower and stuck fast.

“Casey, sometimes...oh shit.”

Dan took off running and was in the water swimming before I could react. Sam was stuck in the relentless back current dog paddling against it and going nowhere. Jerry was right, Sam’s form was terrible, and she struggled to keep her head above water. A few mistimed gasps for air made her gag and choke. Could she even last until Dan got there? As if to answer me, she went under. A few seconds later, she bobbed back up like an open beer bottle’s final crest before full submersion and sinking out of sight forever.

Dan was twenty feet from Sam when Jerry’s languid, single cry for help drew his attention. Jerry was struggling to get back across the current after failing to make it to the other bank. In the center of the current, he disappeared under the water. Dan diverted to Jerry due to proximity and perhaps believing he had a lower chance of survival in the rapids. He motioned for me to go after Sam’s dumbass.

I was already in a full sprint and launched myself into the back current and stroked as hard as I could. Sam slipped under the surface before I could reach her. Confident that I’d find her without much trouble, I only took a small breath and dove to get her. I came up empty handed on the first dive and panicked because of how bad I misjudged things.

My hand brushed against her back during the third attempt, which was a miracle because I’d lost hope of finding her. After grabbing ahold of her arm, she used me like a ladder to try and resurface. Her reaction stunned me and finding her had taken a long time; my lungs ached for air. Instead of breaching the surface with her as planned, her craziness pushed me deeper and my ears popped from the added pressure.

My weight drug her down before she could get a full breath because she had no

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intention of losing her grip on me. I thrashed to get away from her. She was distraught, but strong, or frantic, enough to keep both of us under.

She twisted and writhed like a nightcrawler that had slipped off the hook. Her sharp nails dug into my skin and her legs squeezed my diaphragm until air bubbles leaked out of my nostrils. In one last all-out effort I pushed away from her towards the bottom. Going in the opposite direction from the surface surprised her and she let go.

My feet found the sharp rocks used to help retain the sandy bottom against the rushing water. I crouched and used a jumping motion to propel myself upwards. When my face breached, I gasped, and the brilliant taste of air filled my burning lungs. A few small cuts on the bottom of my feet hurt but were nothing to fret about.

It took a few seconds to get my senses and my next breath was loud as I filled my lungs with as much air as possible. I dove back in and found her without any problem because I followed her air bubbles. This time I grabbed her from behind. I threaded my arm under her arm pit and made a strap across her chest.

She struggled and thrashed again but I held her as tight as possible. I kicked with my legs and stroked with one arm, which got us to the surface faster than expected. Her movements were weakened, but she was ok. I kept as much of her torso above water as I could manage.

Keeping Sam in fresh air made getting breaths for myself difficult. Every once in while she mustered enough strength to squirm like a feral piglet caught in a snare. At some point she went limp and floated in my arms as if she were unconscious.

I pushed myself harder than I ever thought was possible. My heart thundered and lungs burned. When we collapsed onto the sandbar gasping for air, I noticed that the cool sand was different. The clamminess had become silky and supple. A strange desire to bury my hands deep within it hit me. I worked my hands into the soft muck with every

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intention of never pulling them out again.

After a few minutes, I tried to get up because I had forgotten about Dan and his charge. The silt was halfway up my forearms and my hands were stuck. It took more effort than I expected to get free of the suctioned grasp. Soon, I pulled out of it and stood up to search for Dan and Jerry, my arms coated in sandy muck.

From bank to bank and downstream as far as the first bridge I scanned the surface of the water. The sun was now at an obtuse angle from the horizon, but it still made my back hot. The late afternoon light ignited the swimming hole in dazzling yellow. A sparkling diadem on my brother's head—an illusion from the water—lasted a few seconds when he surfaced. Any longer, and I would have gone in to find him.

Sam was lying on the sand next to me, but I was too intent on Dan to give her my full attention. Her awful sounds of heaving and phlegmy coughs were gone. She groaned once or twice and then sat up. Soon, her lighter clicked and the pull tab on a beer can made the familiar *psshht*. Off to my side, smoke billowed and hung in the air like thick morning fog over a wide-open field. The sweet smell of burning tobacco tantalized and repulsed me at the same time.

Dan and Jerry were in the slack water. Conjoined, savior and victim were like a large hideous beast from the bluest, deepest seas. Jerry was conscious, but Dan dragged him into the shallows as if he were half dead.

I made my way toward them. For some reason, Dan's heroism overshadowed mine. A ballad in Freddie Mercury's lyrical voice resounded in my brain as Dan hefted Jerry out of the shallows onto the sandbar's edge.

Out of the water, Dan struggled with Jerry's weight and I latched onto him to help get him to the center of the sandbar. Dan and Jerry slumped onto the sand a few feet away from Sam, who made no attempt to get up.

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Jerry kept coughing and sputtering water out of his mouth, much like Sam had done moments ago. Sam, unwilling to set her beer and cigarette down, did little more than slap Jerry on the back to help him recover. Her pattern was bizarre. She gave him a few whacks, a couple pats, and then more whacks. After a brief pause, she repeated her efforts.

An odd sensation made me clench my fists and stand behind her. She should be attending Dan even though the ignorant man needed help far more than my brother did. The dipshits were a plague on our sanctum and had damned near killed us all. Their stupidity made it clear why we detested outsiders in our river kingdom.

The pittance of Sam and Jerry's worth continued to diminish. I was amazed my view of them could reach so low. My anger cooled fast because I spawned their actions and ruined the entire day. Labels of fool could be passed out like blue ribbons at track and field day. The first big blue ribbon belonged on my chest, pinned into the skin to draw blood. I sat down next to my brother and waited for him to say, "Let's go home."

An hour later, Dan sat on the sand recovering from his latest rescue of Jerry who had attempted to fight his way up the rapids and failed. I was pulling Sam out of the back current for the fourth time: no matter where she went into the water, she always ended up in the wicked current. Sam's legs were wrapped around my midsection tighter than before because I was too tired to fight for a safer position behind her.

Midway back, she wormed her hand into my swim trunks as far as she could get it and began fondling me. I tried to stop her, but she was too powerful for my state of exhaustion. It took everything I could muster to keep us from sinking and she made no attempt to help or stop her assault on my body. Even so, it was all so quick and if her hand hadn't aroused me, I would've believed it never happened.

All I could do was try and get us into the shallows as fast as possible. Each time I

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gasped for air her fetid breath of stale cigarettes and hot beer made me twist my head away from hers. That often put my face in her armpit, the source of the awful hotdog stench, which was still strong even after all her cleansings. This made me miss a stroke or two and that seemed to make her happier, even giddy.

By the time we entered the slack water, Sam was laughing so hard she could no longer keep a tight grip on me. Right as my feet found the river bottom, she slid off and began her terrible form of dog paddling. I wanted to tell her she could stand but said nothing. I stayed submerged up to my chin to give my body time to calm down. Her crazed laughing piqued Dan's attention, but only for a moment. To him, it must've seemed like another successful rescue and nothing more.

Sam paddled around in the slack water as if nothing were amiss. Her eyes were impossible to read, but my face burned—too easy to discern. If she was smirking, then the joviality that made her sneer at Jerry was a lot different. Unlike most of the day, I stared back and tried to make her flinch away as I eased my way to the sandbar.

Dan whistled to get my attention and I took a long time to turn toward him. When he shrugged his shoulders, I shrugged back. He motioned for me to come and sit next to him so we could talk, but I stayed in the water. I made a few strokes and tried to act like I was enjoying myself. Right before I went under the water to deepen my ploy, he winked at me.

When I resurfaced, Sam was walking onto the sandbar headed straight for her smokes and the remnants of a six-pack. Jerry lay back, or collapsed, and drained his beer; then he tossed the can onto the heap of empties. Dan stood up and stretched.

I was so thrilled by his gesture that I rushed out of the water and onto the sandbar. It was his trademark move, the one that meant he was ready to leave without having to say it. My care about running around with a deflating hard-on was gone, I wanted to go

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home. Bellyaching about leaving hours ago was the furthest thing from my mind until I got right next to Dan, but I held it all in.

I said, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, fuck this."

We stood in front of Jerry and said our goodbyes. Dan kept it short and terse. Sam had wandered back into the shallows and the water was up to her knees; she was smoking a cigarette and holding an open beer covered in sand. She seemed as if her interest was elsewhere, but her cagey eyes darted over to me and stayed.

As we drove away in our beat-up single cab farm truck I turned around, and through the back window I fixated on the two figures in the canal. Part of me wanted them to vanish into the long shadows casted by the trees, weeds, and occasional rotting fence post. I was also unsure of what to make of the day and if I cared about what might happen to them.

A John Cougar Mellencamp song came on the radio in the middle of the chorus, yet the desire to sing along remained crushed. I always sang along to the songs I knew hoping Dan would tolerate my offkey singing long enough to finish the song. The repressed desire to do so was baffling and I became alarmed I would never want to sing along again.

I opened the sliding glass panels of the rear window to let in more air and get a clearer view. "Maybe we should turn around."

Dan jammed the truck into a higher gear, but it almost stalled out. He downshifted, pressed on the gas, and eased out the clutch to stop the truck from lurching. Staring ahead, he acted like we never met Jerry and Sam, as if he had no intention of acknowledging the worst day of swimming in the canal, ever.

Before we turned a corner, Sam waded deeper into the water and Jerry stumbled

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off the sandbar into the shallows as he tried to catch up.