

The Sandbar Oasis

A pair of townies with bloodshot eyes stood in front of my brother and me. The four of us were on a clammy sandbar sixty yards downstream from the irrigation canal's head gates. The unfamiliar faces gazed at the whoop-de-dos created from the water that spewed out of the large metal 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, my older brother by three years, turned and grinned in my direction. His fascination with the oddball intruders—our secret swimming hole had few uninvited guests—irritated me, perhaps even more than their presence did. Maybe if I was sixteen instead of thirteen, I'd have shared a similar allure instead of being agitated. I made sure the strangers remained engrossed by the fast-moving water before I returned his smile with a scowl.

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

"Fuck yeah it is." Sam, the punier 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?" Jerry belched mid-sentence and finished his words using burp-talk.

Although I wanted to applaud him, I shook my head. Most of his tattoos had wonky lines, and the faded grayness of crude tats done at home. A few of my brother's friends sported similar blemishes they would have to explain for years to come.

"We swim here all the time. Our parents own the farmhouse you drove past to get down here." Dan pointed toward 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

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landscape. The closest house to ours stood two miles away toward the small Nebraskan town we called home.

“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.”

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

“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 stretched and faked a yawn.

“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 grasp the insults.

Sam pulled out another bent cigarette and put it in his lips, yet left it unlit.

“Who’re you to talk about types?”

Jerry bent over and picked up the beers scattered at his feet. He tried to brush the sand and silt off the dirtier cans.

“Hey, you guys want one?” He thrust two of the beers at us.

My brother shook his head. “Nah, we’ve got to go home soon, and our mother

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would smell it.” After a brief pause, he pointed at me. “Besides, my brother here is a bit too young.”

My entire body slumped, but he was right. Our mother would’ve gone mad as if she smelled beer on us when we got home. Being grounded during prime swimming conditions would’ve sucked, and farm work already stole most of our free time. After rethinking his smart decision, I moved across the sandbar and stepped into the shallows until the water submerged my ankles. The tepid water would be warmer than a bath by mid-August, which was less than a month away.

Sam said. “Shit, ain’t never too young for the suds, eh Jerry?”

“Fucking A right, party all night.”

Sam smirked and softened his ready-to-fight posture; his voice became less husky, and I realized Sam was a woman. Her hairy legs, graveled speech, flat chest, and manlike mannerisms went against all my ideas of girlishness. She was in her early twenties, and that made her the oldest tomboy I’d ever met.

I stood in the water as the scorching sun baked my back into tanned leather and studied her as if she was a spectacular, tumorous growth from corn smut: a bizarre fungus on ears of corn that formed into freakish shapes and impressive sizes. Sam caught me gaping; her observant dark brown eyes, dulled by intoxication, were still quick enough to nail me. I twisted away from her, wishing I’d been slyer.

She popped open another beer and chugged it in a matter of seconds. Her dark hair, cropped at six inches, 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.

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While I continued to grapple with 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 been to 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. I still had limited knowledge about booze, but these idiots were drunk, and they 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 swimsuits were a sin against the river gods and a sure sign we had wasted valuable freedom from endless chores. My irritation had become boredom. Dan could stand there and listen to the drunk dummies and their stupid bullshit for as long as he wanted. I needed to get back into our routine and have some fun.

I ran deeper into the water until it rushed over my thighs. Before I got waist deep, I dove in because it would've slowed my momentum and let the current push me downstream. Angling across the current, I swam as hard as I could to reach the other bank at a point much closer to the spillway.

We showboated whenever there were newcomers, but I wanted to put a lot of distance between me and 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 reinforced the banks.

For a few moments, I sat there and pretended I had the place to myself. The reek of cottonwoods and fish funk was stronger on this side of the canal. Nobody could figure out why, since the tall cottonwoods spangled with sharp pointy buds and spade shaped leaves stood in a small copse on the opposite side fifty yards downstream.

After ten or fifteen minutes of solitude, I dove in again. This time, I stayed under

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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 a small zone of slack water, Dan and the witless duo stared at me as if I were an exotic fish.

Sam and Jerry acted more energized and animated, but I couldn't understand why. 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. Right off, I stroked hard to avoid 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 effort let me accomplish my goal better than I hoped. I popped out of 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 gained my footing and kept the waterline right under my nose to hide my nervous grin from Dan. He glared at me while I floated in the convergence 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 people in our small community assumed the back current killed them.

As usual, the back current tried to pull me into its seductive, counterclockwise spin. After a surge of fear, I swam away from the danger; I went straight toward the shallows that led up to the sandbar. Stepping back onto land made me happier than it should've. However, relief flooded over me every time I avoided getting trapped in the dangerous current: a skill learned by too many close calls.

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Dan kneeled and gripped his chin between his curled index finger and thumb as he spoke. “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.”

“Yeah man, that shit looks crazy.” Jerry put the can of beer back up to his lips right as 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 third cigarette a remarkable distance into the swirling waters.

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

“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 that part of the 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 got to.” Sam took a long swig and eyed Jerry over the top of her beer can.

“Man, that’s child’s play.”

“I bet you twenty dollars you end up way downstream... or drowned.” She turned

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to face me. Before I could flinch away, her awful teeth chilled the space between my shoulder blades.

“You’re on.” Jerry threw his half empty beer down onto the sandbar as hard as he could, his way of solidifying the bet. Sudsy beer oozed out of the opening and made a yellowish pool on the dark sand 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 at least a half dozen times.” Dan moved his hand in 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, but it looks pretty tame.”

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

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

“*Pst*, 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 pass 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 of 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 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. 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 dog paddling, I understood why Dan had given me a stern look.

I made swimming the treacherous waters seem banal, as if anyone could do it. These drunken dolts no longer perceived the water as dangerous, if they ever did. The alcohol helped diminish most of the actual 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 slobbered to boot.”

“And at least five years older than us.”

Dan ran his hand over his crewcut. “So, we should let them drown?”

“Jerry was on the swim team.”

“Like a hundred years ago.”

I tried to kick an empty 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?”

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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 watch them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like buckets of fun.” I worked up a loogie and launched it at a 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 dove in the water before I could react. Sam fought against the relentless back current, dog paddling as hard as she could, but gaining no ground. Jerry was right, Sam’s form made me laugh in exasperation as 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 of *help* drew his attention. Jerry struggled 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 because of proximity and perhaps believing he had a lower chance of survival in the rapids. He motioned for me to go after Sam’s dumbass.

Already in a full sprint, I launched myself into the back current and swam as fast as I could go. Sam slipped under the surface before I could reach her. Confident that I’d find her with little trouble, I took a small breath and dove to get her. I came up empty-handed on the first dive and panicked because I had misjudged things.

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During my third attempt to find her, my hand brushed against her back, which was a miracle because I'd lost hope of finding her. I grabbed ahold of her arm and she used me like a ladder to resurface. Her reaction stunned me. Finding her had taken a long time and 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 intention of losing her grip on me. I thrashed to get away from her. She was distraught, but strong, or frantic enough, to keep ahold of me and we sunk even further.

She twisted and writhed like a nightcrawler on a small 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 shocked her and she let go.

My feet found the sharp rip-rap that helped keep the sandy bottom below the spillway from eroding. 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 minor cuts on the bottom of my feet stung 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 with no problem because I followed her air bubbles. This time I grabbed her from behind. I threaded my arm under her armpit 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 as hard as I could, which got us to the surface faster than expected. Her movements weakened as we surfaced, but I could tell she was ok.

Keeping Sam in fresh air made getting my own breaths difficult. I kept as much of

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her torso above water as I could manage. More than once, she mustered enough strength to squirm like a feral piglet caught in a snare, yet I kept her from getting out of control. At some point she went limp and floated in my arms as if unconscious.

I pushed myself harder than I ever imagined I could. My heart thundered and lungs burned. When we collapsed onto the sandbar, gasping for air, I noticed that the sand's 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 intention of never pulling them out again.

When things calmed, Sam's BO became unbearable; a foul aroma of rotting hotdogs, which overpowered the musky sandbar. Her Megadeath concert T-shirt with a skeleton wearing a business suit being swarmed by demons had grease splotches and tiny holes. I couldn't tell if the shirt caused the stench or something else. An evil desire to push her back into the water for a longer bath came and went.

After a few minutes, I tried to get up because I had forgotten about Dan and his charge. The silt, halfway up my forearms, had welded my hands in place. It took more effort than I expected to get free of the suctioned grip. Once I broke out, I 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 searched every inch of the canal to find him.

Sam was lying on the sand next to me, but I was too intent on Dan to give her my

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full attention. Her awful sounds of heaving and phlegmy coughs faded away. She groaned once or twice and then sat up. After a few moments, 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 struggled toward the slack water. Tangled, savior and victim were like a large hideous beast from the deepest, bluest seas. Jerry was conscious, but Dan dragged him into the shallows as if he were dead.

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

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 effort to get up.

Jerry coughed and sputtered water out of his mouth, much like Sam had done moments ago. Sam, unwilling to set her beer down or toss her cigarette, slapped Jerry on the back to help him recover. Her bizarre pattern made no sense. She gave him a few whacks, a couple pats, and then more whacks. After a brief pause, she repeated her efforts.

A strange sensation made me clench my fists and stand behind her. She should attend Dan, even though the ignorant man needed help 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.

My anger cooled fast because I had done my part to spawn their actions and ruin

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the whole day. Someone could've passed out labels that read fool, like the blue ribbons given to participants 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."

A half hour later, Dan sat on the sandbar recovering from his latest rescue of Jerry, who had attempted to fight his way up the rapids and failed. I began pulling Sam out of the back current for the third time: no matter where she entered the water, she always became trapped in the relentless current. Sam wrapped her legs around my midsection as tight as before, and I was too tired to fight for the safer position behind her.

I concentrated on getting us into the shallows as fast as possible. Each time I gasped for air, her fetid breath of stale cigarettes and hot beer made me twist my head away from hers. That put my face in her armpit, the source of the awful hotdog stench, which was still powerful even after multiple cleansings. This made me miss a stroke or two, and that seemed to make her happy, even giddy—as if dying might be enjoyable.

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 myself some time to calm down. Her crazed laughing piqued Dan's attention, but no longer than a moment or two.

Sam paddled around in the slack water as if nothing were amiss, as if she wanted the back current to take her around and around forever. Her eyes were impossible to read. If she was smirking, then the good humor that made her sneer at Jerry was much different. I stared back and tried to make her flinch away as I drifted into the shallows.

Dan whistled to get my attention, and I took a long time to turn toward him. When

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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 everything was fine. Right before I went under the water, 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 on his back 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 these fools, small as it was, vanished. I wanted to go home more than I ever had in my entire life. Bellyaching about leaving hours ago was the furthest thing from my mind until I got right next to Dan, but I held it in.

I said, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, screw this."

"Why did we stay so long? We should've left after saving them the first time."

Dan ran his hand over his head to help dry his hair. "If these nitwits drown, Mom and Dad won't let us come down here to swim until God knows when."

The idea struck me hard, and his grave look made it worse. "That's not cool."

"True, but I'm done playing hero. Let's get the fuck outta here."

We stood in front of Jerry and said our goodbyes. Dan kept it short and jovial. Sam wandered back into the shallows until the water swamped her knees. She took long draws from a cigarette and held an open beer; the lower half of it covered in sand. She had no interest in the conversation or at least acted like it, but her cagey eyes kept glancing over at me. I stepped behind Dan to shield myself from her gaze.

As we drove away in our beat-up single cab farm truck, I turned around and

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fixated on the two figures in the canal. The scratched up back window distorted them into blurred shapes. Part of me wanted them to evaporate into the long shadows cast by the trees, weeds, and occasional rotting fence post. I sat there trying to figure out what to make of the day and if I cared about what might happen next.

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 aloud to the songs I loved, hoping Dan would tolerate my off-key singing long enough to finish the whole song. The suppressed desire to do so baffled me even more, 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 shuddered and 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 would never acknowledge it was the worst day of swimming in the canal, ever.

Before we turned the first corner, Sam waded deeper into the water and Jerry stumbled off the sandbar into the shallows as he tried to catch up.

End