

The Weight of Us

My sister does ballet and my oldest brother plays soccer and my other brother floats about a foot off the ground. I am the youngest and I don't really know what I do yet. I guess my favorite thing to do is make things up. Me and my brother Max make things up all the time. He's the one that floats.

(Some people don't believe me when I tell them that. Most people don't float, so they're not used to it, but that doesn't mean it can't happen, you know?)

My family lives on a small street that dead-ends into a swamp, and me and Max used to go down there a lot and explore. There was an easy path from our house to the edge of the swamp, where the trees and the bushes would open their arms and pull you in. Once you crossed over that edge everything changed. You couldn't hear the cars on the highway nearby, and the sunlight came through the leaves in a quiet way. It felt like church, the way everything was so beautiful and hushed. The only difference was that we could do whatever we wanted and be as loud as we wanted. God couldn't find us in the swamp. Nobody could.

A lot of people think swamps are mostly muddy water with a lot of trees, but our swamp actually has a lot of solid ground that you can walk around on. The trees are tall and skinny, the kind that grow with their roots deep in the water and their branches covered in Spanish moss. Sometimes there's so much moss covering the trees that their branches snap from the weight and come crashing down to the ground. Me and Max saw this happen one time. We were walking through the swamp and suddenly there was a big gust of wind and this huge branch loaded down with tons of moss snapped off of a tree

and crashed into another branch below it, and they both slammed into the ground right in front of us. We came back to that same spot a few days later and both branches had already been sucked into the ground, as if the swamp had just been waiting for them to fall.

One time, me and Max were exploring in the swamp and we found a homeless man—at least, we found his camp where he lived. Mom had kicked us out of the house because we'd broken a lamp, so we decided to go exploring, picking up big sticks that we used as machetes to hack away at the bushes and weeds as we walked. So then we were walking around in the swamp and Max was floating, saying “Think light thoughts,” and laughing every time right before I stepped in a really muddy spot.

“What if dinosaurs never actually died but lived in the swamp?” I said.

“Dinosaurs are still around, Mia. Alligators! Crocodiles! Lizards!” Max said.

And then suddenly we heard noises like someone else was in the swamp with us and they were snapping branches as they moved away from us. Country music was crackling from a radio somewhere nearby. And then it was quiet—except for the music.

“Come on,” Max whispered, and waved me towards where the noises had come from.

Think light thoughts. My muddy sneakers snapped twigs while Max's drifted through the air without making a sound. We crawled behind a big bush so we could get a better view. Max pulled apart some branches so I could look through, but all I could see was a small, dusty radio and some empty beer cans that looked a lot like the ones that Mom had found in our older brother's room that one time.

“He must live here,” Max said.

“Who?” I asked.

“The man who ran away.”

We went back to the swamp day after day, following the same path to the same clearing, hoping to find the man who ran away. We wanted to get advice from him on how to live in the swamp, because we wanted to live there, too. We thought Mom would probably let us do it as long as we were prepared. She was all about making “smart choices.”

We just couldn’t tell anyone about our plan yet. The last time I told our sister about one of me and Max’s plans, she just laughed at me and told on us to Mom. Our older brother isn’t fun anymore, either. They both used to be fun. All four of us used to climb into the big tree in the front yard and pretend like we had been abandoned and we had to survive on our own. Our sister was always the leader, telling us what to do, which flowers were poisonous and which ones were okay to eat. Our older brother was always the one who would fight off the bad guys, and sometimes Max would help if he was allowed to. Max was really good at fighting bad guys—because of the floating.

One time, when we were braving the elements in our imaginary tree house, our sister asked me and Max to go inside and make her a grilled cheese. We did it even though it broke the rules of the game, because we wanted to keep playing. But when we brought it back to her, she was reading a magazine and texting on her phone.

“Go away. Stop breathing on me,” she said as she snatched the sandwich from Max’s hands.

Me and Max just looked at each other.

Now we know not to be so gullible. That's why me and Max knew that we couldn't tell anyone about our plan to go live in the swamp. We were on our own, but that was okay. We were going to do it.

Max said that the homeless man was fat, because of all the beer, with clumpy brown hair, because he could never wash it, and a crazy beard, because he could never cut it. But I knew that he was tall and strong, like Tarzan, because he probably jumped from tree to tree like Tarzan. Max gave me a look that meant he thought I was being stupid.

Sometimes Max and I don't have to talk, like that look he gave me. We just know. Mom says that when we were little, like baby-little, we used to talk to each other all the time. She says that Max used to climb out of his crib and into mine in the middle of the night, and then he would wake me up and read aloud to me from one of the baby books that had been left behind in my crib. She says that I would sit quietly, happily, and listen to his baby babble—even though no one likes being woken up in the middle of the night, least of all babies. Max would read me stories about little farms and little bird families, and I would listen to his gibberish words and understand. See? We've been this way since the beginning.

This is a good thing to have in our family, because there are some things that we don't really talk about.

Imagine you're blindfolded, and you're walking through a large room with a bunch of furniture and stuff. Every now and then, you're going bump into something. That's how you know not to walk in that direction, because you hurt your shin or your elbow or you stubbed your toe. It's like that.

Once, a long time ago, I asked Mom why we didn't have a dad. We were all sitting at the table eating dinner in our usual spots. Max and I were across from each other, our siblings next to us, and then Mom at the head. The seat on the other side of the table across from Mom was empty—it's always empty. As soon as the question left my mouth, everyone froze, forks of spaghetti halfway to their mouths. Mom looked at me, and I saw that I had hurt her. Her face got really tight and then she said, "Let's not talk about this at the dinner table." Later that night, she tucked me into bed and kissed me on the forehead and told me that she loved me enough for two people and that's why we didn't have a dad. Then she turned my light out and left me alone in the dark.

I've seen enough movies to know that he left us a long time ago, before I was old enough to remember him. I used to imagine that he packed up all his things in the middle of the night and drove off in a car that used to be the family's car, not even looking at the reflection of our house in his rearview mirror as he drove away. I used to imagine Mom waking up the next day, going about her usual morning routine, thinking he had just gone to work early. She would be washing the dishes from the night before, taking a shower before starting her day, but eventually she would start noticing the things that were no longer there. There would be empty spaces in the bathroom where his toothbrush and his razor should have been, and more empty space in the closet where his clothes and shoes should have been. There would be an empty space in his chair at the dinner table that night and every night afterwards. I used to imagine how she must have felt, but now I know better than to ask. This is something that we do not talk about.

Me and Max had been looking for the homeless man in the swamp for a few weeks when Max turned 12 and got a set of encyclopedias for his birthday. It took me a long time to learn how to spell encyclopedias, but I can do it now. Max taught me how. He told me that there's one book for each letter of the alphabet and each book has everything you could possibly know about things that start with that letter. So for the "A" book, it talks about alpacas and Africa and the Andromeda galaxy.

Max got so excited when he opened them, he started rubbing his hands together really fast in the way that he does, as if he's trying to create sparks for an imaginary fire. Our older brother made fun of him and said he looked like an evil magician with ADD. We didn't care though, because we had the entire universe (found in the "U" book) stacked in front of us. We would never not know something again.

Me and Max would pick a book each morning and then we would pick an animal from that book, and then we would be that animal for the day. You had to learn what the animal eats, how it walks and runs, whether it fights or not. And you couldn't stop being that animal, not even when Mom was making us do summer math workbooks.

Max always loved to be something new. One time he was some sort of insect, so he curled himself up real small and only spoke in insect language, like this: "Swiikeshwasa. Kwyitisyrai." Our older brother tried to pretend to kill him with a flyswatter, but we told him that was against the rules.

I kept telling Max that we should be swamp animals and go back and look for the homeless man. I kept telling him that we needed to work on our plan to live there if Mom was ever going to let us do it, but he just kept saying that it was too dangerous. I asked

him if he had gotten in trouble with Mom and he said no and went into his room and shut the door.

The whole house was sour. Our older brother and sister were home all the time since their school had let out for summer. They had both started going to the county school down the road when they started middle school, which usually left me and Max alone with Mom all the time since we were homeschooled. It was always much better this way. Whenever the older kids were home, they stayed up late and slept until the middle of the afternoon, and when they finally did wake up they were cranky and mean.

There was one day when I found Max watching TV with our older brother. I told him that I was going to the swamp whether he was coming or not, and he just kept staring at the TV and said, "Okay." So I went by myself.

I walked down the path that led from our house to the edge of the swamp trying to decide what kind of swamp animal to be. At first I thought I would be a water moccasin, a good swamp animal, but then I realized I couldn't actually slither through the mud. Mom would kill me if I ruined another pair of pants. So I was just me. I figured I was as much of a swamp animal as anything else.

When I came to the end of the path, I realized I had never been to the swamp without Max. There were thorny vines I had never noticed before, and the ground was covered with tree branches that had given up under the weight of the moss. As I picked my way through the splintered branches, muddy water pooled around my feet and threatened to suck me in. I had never seen it so wet and sticky, as if the whole swamp was slowly sinking. Like Venice.

I tried to walk the same path that Max and I had walked the time that we had found the homeless man's camp. I thought I could spot the same patterns in the trees, but it had been so long and I realized that even if I could remember right, the swamp had changed while I wasn't looking. There were new trees I had never seen before and old trees had fallen and sunk into the ground. I was starting to get worried about finding my way back home when suddenly I stumbled into a clearing. It sort of looked like the clearing where we had found the radio and the empty beer cans, but I wasn't sure. I looked for signs of where the man would've built his fire or where he would've slept at night, but didn't see anything except for a fairy ring of mushrooms.

By the time I got home, I had decided to tell Max that we had lost the homeless man for good and it was all his fault because he didn't care anymore. I burst into his room and saw him standing there holding a big stack of his encyclopedias, "A" all the way through "M." The rest of the alphabet was scattered on the floor. They were stacked up so high in his arms, I could barely see his forehead. But his feet were just barely touching the carpet. He heard me walk in and dumped all the books on the floor. He popped back up to his usual spot, about half a foot above the ground, but it was weird.

"I want to be a snake today," I blurted out.

"I think I'm going to be a giraffe," he said.

I never know if I should talk about stuff like that—the weird stuff, when something is very, very wrong. I kept thinking maybe I would, but then I never did.

And then a few weeks later, I woke up around midnight, and I could hear voices in the kitchen. I thought everyone was together without me so I jumped out of bed and slid down the hall, but it was just Mom and Max and they clearly didn't want me there. I

could tell by the looks on their faces. Max was wearing a coat that must have been really heavy, because his feet were touching the ground again, more so than the last time.

“Mia,” he said. “Look.”

Max jumped and, even though he stayed in the air longer than the average kid, the coat pulled him back onto the ground with a whisper. He took a few steps, and he was walking, on the ground, even though he couldn't keep his feet from floating up in between steps.

“Keep your feet down, sweetie,” Mom said. “It's just like when you're in the air.”

But Max's knees kept jerking up with every step.

“No, it's not the same,” he said. His voice went sharp like a knife and then wavered. I had never seen him cry before. “It's pushing back against me. I can't do it.”

“You should put weights in your shoes,” I said. “To keep your feet down.”

I didn't want to say it, but I did.

“That's a good idea, honey,” Mom said.

Max and I looked at each other, but I couldn't figure out what he was thinking. His eyes looked different with his feet on the ground.

Mom started taking Max shopping for new clothes and fancy binders and a big, red backpack. Sometimes when somebody mentioned that he would be starting school soon (“A real school!” they would say, as if being homeschooled wasn't real), he would smile and rub his hands together really fast. I would tell him that he looked dumb, and when Mom got mad at me, I would tell her that everyone at school would make fun of him for it anyways. Max would always pretend not to hear me.

By this point, Max was spending a lot of time playing with his new shoes. He said he needed to practice, which was true. He was bad at walking. His feet would spring away from the ground at every step, and then he had a hard time getting them back down. As the weeks went on, his chicken legs started to grow thicker from the weights in his shoes, and he held his arms out away from his sides for balance, like he was pretending to be a pterodactyl.

But he wasn't pretending to be anything. He was just walking, and he wouldn't stop walking no matter how many times I stole his special shoes and tried to hide them. He was so busy walking, I never got the chance to tell him about the homeless man disappearing or the way the swamp had grown in on itself, changing everything. He didn't care. He walked his way across carpet and tile and concrete, all the way through summer, and at the end of summer he walked to his new middle school. Me and Mom watched him walk down the driveway, stomping and jerking, with his red backpack and his special shoes.

Me and Mom went back into the house, and it was empty. The lamp that me and Max had broken was gone. My muddy shoes, ruined by the swamp, were gone. The encyclopedia that Max had been reading the night before was gone. But Mom didn't seem to notice. She walked into the kitchen and started cleaning dirty dishes that were no longer there. Then she walked down the hallway into a bathroom that didn't exist, and I wasn't sure how to tell her or even how to get her back. So I laid down in a patch of sunlight on the ground and pretended to float away.