

A Walk Around the Lake

“Left, right, left, right...Left! Left!...I *left* my wife and forty-nine children with nothing but gingerbread *left* to eat ...” Annie chanted the old song to herself, to help her put one foot in front the other. Today, she was determined to make it around the entire lake.

The lake—more of a large pond, really—was behind her house, and the rest of the tidy neighborhood. Annie had always loved the lake, in every season. Now, in late spring, the trees that lined one side were getting lush, and the grasses were turning from their winter yellow to a soft green.

“Did I do *right*,” Annie continued to chant, looking at her feet on the gravel path, remembering how she had once used the same verses to help herself backpack up a mountain. She pushed that away.

It didn’t matter how slow she was, she told herself, or that she wasn’t hiking up mountain. Just that she was going.

She looked up from her feet, still muttering, and realized she wasn’t alone. A neighbor family, a couple and their two sons, were out walking, enjoying the evening. They were frozen in their tracks, gazing at her.

Annie supposed that coming across her, muttering to herself, confirmed the neighborhood rumors.

“Hi,” the younger boy, Paul, said. As these neighbors had lived right across the street for many years, Annie knew the family, although she hadn’t seen them much the past few years. She figured Paul was about ten now, and, judging from the open, friendly tone of his voice, as outgoing as always.

“Hi, Paul,” Annie said, forcing cheerfulness. She glanced at Josh, Paul’s older brother, and then quickly looked away. She and Josh had played together as kids, but she hadn’t seen him up close in ages.

“You don’t look sick,” Paul said, suddenly.

“Paul!” his mother, Diane, exclaimed. She looked at Annie, and immediately apologized. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know where he comes up with this...” she trailed off. Annie could imagine the things they said about her, at home. She felt her cheeks warming.

“Not everyone who is sick looks like it on the outside,” Annie said after a moment, smiling a little at Paul. “But I’m glad I don’t look it.”

Paul grinned back. “What are you sick with? I heard my mom say that your head was broken or something, and that’s why they sent you away—“

“Paul!” Diane snapped. “That’s enough!”

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“It’s okay,” Annie said, avoiding Diane’s gaze. She looked back at Paul. She appreciated his straightforwardness. “It’s called depression. It’s a type of sickness in your brain. I think I’m getting better, though.”

“Yeah?” Paul said, happily. “Can I come over and play with your puppy, then? I’ve seen it in your yard. It’s really cute, but my mom says—“

“Yes,” Annie interrupted, not wanting to know what else was said about her. “Come over anytime. His name is Murphy. He’s really friendly, and always needs someone to play with.”

“Thanks!” Paul grinned. He looked up at Josh. “Josh could come, too. He’s been sad ever since Fluffy died.”

Josh gave Paul a look, then looked at Annie. Annie saw—sadness, fear, compassion, something, in his dark eyes.

“Aw, Fluffy died?” Annie said, remembering the old family golden retriever with fondness.

“Yeah, he was really old, but it was still sad,” Paul answered, speaking for the family. “So, could both of us come over sometime?”

Annie sent a sideways glance to Josh. His dark eyes were still on her face.

“Anytime,” Annie said, forcing another smile.

“Let’s go, boys,” their father, John, said, speaking for the first time. He glanced at Annie. “Um, nice to see you, Annie. Say hi to your family.”

“I will,” Annie said, and turned back to her walk. She didn’t look back. Would Paul and Josh would ever come over? Probably not, if they talked about her like that at home.

About halfway around the lake, Annie heard her name again. She turned, and saw her brother, Dan, jogging towards her. She’d forgotten this was one of his many running paths, although lately it seemed like the entire town was his running path.

She felt a twinge of annoyance at the break in her rhythm, but realized she’d been looking at her feet the entire time. She hadn’t even stopped to enjoy the lake. This side, away from the houses, had always been her favorite part of the trail. Shady trees, long grasses, it often sheltered ducks. Even as Annie thought this, five ducklings came into view, trailing their mother across the water.

“Hey,” Dan said, catching up to her, out of breath. He must have been sprinting, as he was never out of breath. He was in running shorts, his sneakers well-worn and grungy, his sandy hair windblown.

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“Hi,” Annie said, stiffly. “What are you doing?”

“Running,” Dan shrugged, not meeting her eyes.

“Did Mom send you to check on me?” Annie asked, reading his telltale signs of discomfort.

“Well...yes.”

Annie sighed, exasperated.

“Don’t blame her!” Dan said, immediately jumping to their mother’s defense. “She’s worried!”

Annie said nothing as she struggled for patience. She knew she wasn’t the only one who had to recover, or so her therapist had told her.

“Did you see the Millers?” Dan asked, as Annie started walking. To her surprise, he fell into step beside her.

“Yes.”

“Did they talk to you?”

Annie shrugged. “Paul did. Josh and his parents were—polite, I guess. Nervous.”

“Oh,” Dan said, noncommittal. After a pause, he said, “Josh always asks about you.”

Annie looked up at him. “Really? How much do you see him, anyway?”

Dan shrugged. “A lot. We both work at the park, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” Annie said. She hesitated. “What do you tell him?”

Dan looked down at her. “Not much. Just that you’re ...you know. Okay.”

Annie felt a smile blooming on her face. *Okay*. Normally, she hated it when she heard her family’s opinions of her. But somehow, when Dan said it now, it felt almost like the truth.

They walked in silence for a while. Annie realized she’d forgotten about keeping track of her steps, and was just walking.

Their house came into view—the backyard, fenced off, went right to the trail, and overlooked the lake. As they got closer, they heard Murphy’s happy barks, and laughing

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voices.

Annie looked over the fence, and saw Paul, barefoot despite the cool grass, his hair a wild disarray, running after the small black puppy, giggling and yips echoing over the water.

Standing nearby, a grin on his face, was Josh.