

# Skimmer

Momma liked to say Grandma's house was where fun went to die. But then she said that about many things—the dryer was where clothes went to die, the refrigerator was where leftovers went to die, the upstairs hamper was where socks went to die. Florida was where everyone went to die. That last one gave Grandma's place a triple curse, because she lived in Florida and she was probably close to actual dying, even without Florida's help.

Why a person would send their own child to a place so negligible was beyond Addy. Yet Momma did, every summer for a whole month-and-a-half, because she needed some, as she said it, “me time”.

“Momma, every day is me time for everyone,” Addy said. “You are always you.”

“Yes, Addy,” Momma replied. “But summer is my *just me* time.”

Addy thought maybe Momma's “me time” was more about Roger, a man from her office who would sometimes stay over, leaving behind a sprinkling of little black beard hairs in the bathroom sink. She would wipe out the sink with damp toilet paper after he was gone.

As with previous summers, her pink hand-me-down-from-some-random-cousin Barbie rolling suitcase was packed and placed by the door the day before the trip. At

the last minute, Addy snuck in *Black Beauty*, a book she had read maybe six times since the fourth grade and planned to read again and again forever.

When she got off the plane, the flight attendant walked her out the gate to the exit where Grandma was waiting with her little dog.

“Let’s grab your bag, pumpkin,” Grandma said, “I’m missing my shows.” They collected the Barbie suitcase from the baggage carousel and Grandma told Addy to hold Pete, her very old (older than Addy, even) miniature poodle. Sometime around the time she was born, or in another century, something bad had happened to Pete’s tongue and it no longer stayed in his mouth. Rather, it hung out, like a long pink eel. It was kind of like a freak show exhibit, and she knew about those because Grandma let her go in one the previous summer, at the county fair. She still could not get the sight of the “Gargantuan Siamese Twins” out of her mind. The way they sat there on an old couch connected side by side from chest to thigh, watching television, eating pizza. Addie wasn’t sure what was worse, being gargantuan, being connected to another person for life, or being destined to sit on that seamy-looking old couch that sagged in the center day after day.

In the car, Grandma reminded Addy her chores would be to help out with Pete and the swimming pool. Somehow, it had become her job over the past few years to both walk the dog and sprinkle packages of chemicals in the blue pool water each morning.

“Well, here is a future case of cancer,” she once said under her breath, sneezing and coughing from the fine mist of chlorine particles.

“Adeline Larissa! Don’t even say such things. It brings ‘em on.”

Pete walked so slowly that walking him meant basically just standing in the hot sun, waiting for him. Further, his tongue dragged— yes actually dragged— on the ground, which was ew.

The other and final Addy assignment involved emptying the pool skimmer. Each day, when she opened the square catchment lid, she discovered the contents were different. One day it was filled with tiny purple blossoms, another with green helicopter seeds. On the fourth day of the trip to Florida of this summer, she fished out a big toad which sat there on the pavement, blinking the sideways way toads do. “Well hello there, Mr. Toad,” Addy said to which the toad responded with a sudden splash back into the deep end.

One morning, right before she went to walk Pete, Momma called. “Are you having fun at Grandma’s, Addy?” she asked. “Have you been swimming a lot?”

“Not yet,” Addy said.

“What have you been doing?” Momma asked.

“Walking Pete. Cleaning the pool. Grandma had me rub some kinda’ lotion on her feet.”

Momma sighed. “Addy Larissa, can’t you tell me about one fun thing you’ve done?”

Addy hesitated. "I'm reading Black Beauty," she said, "I read in the utility room, it's very cool in there. And there is a beautiful girl who lives next door. I saw her sunbathing."

"It's not nice to spy on people Addy!"

"But she's so pretty."

"That is just none of your beeswax," Mama said. "I told Grandma to take you to the county fair again, tell her to get you a cotton candy."

"Ok, Momma," Addy said. She was wishing she could invite the teenage girl next door. She would love to see her long hair fly in the air on the rides. Maybe she would even hold her hand.

The next day, when she was walking Pete, a boy across the street called out, "Hey girl!" His hair was so short he was practically bald, and he had a basketball.

"Who, me?"

"Catch!" he said. Then he bounced the basketball to her. It hit her arm.

"Can't you see I'm walking this dog?"

"That dog is butt ugly," the boy said.

"So?" Addy shot back. She couldn't really argue with his premise.

"So, so, suck your toe, all the way to Mexico," the boy replied.

"Whatever," Addy said, turning into her Grandmother's yard.

Later, when she was cleaning the pool, she saw the boy peeking over the fence.

"Don't you ever swim?" he asked.

“Not really,” said Addy.

“You should swim.”

“You should shut up.”

“Addy Larissa, don’t be rude, ask your friend to swim with you!” Grandma called out through the kitchen window. She had clearly been listening to the conversation.

“He’s not my friend,” Addy said.

“I said don’t be rude,” Grandma said, again. But by then, the boy had heard Grandma and was already scrambling over the fence and then, in the yard, pulling off his shirt. Underneath he was very white with several large moles. “Don’t look at my moles,” he said.

“I’m not.”

The boy jumped in the pool, splashing her. “What are you waiting for?” he snapped. He reached over and grabbed her ankle, pulling her. She was still wearing her clothes.

“Stop it,” she said, kicking him away, but her left leg was already half way in the water when he gave her one more tug. She fell in and was face to face with the boy with the moles. She tried not to be obvious about looking at them. “I’m Zeke,” he said.

“I’m Addy.”

“I know. I heard your Grandma.”

“I have on my sneakers,” she said.

Zeke dove under the water and tickled her. “Hey, stop,” she said. He grabbed her head and pushed her right down under the water and just held her there, with surprising force.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi..... how many Mississippis would it take to become one more thing that came and died in Florida? By “seven Mississippi,” the boy let go and she burst to the surface, coughing and gasping. She jumped out of the pool and he followed. “Look here,” he said, parting the hedges, peering through. On the other side the teenage girl was sunbathing without her shirt on.

“That’s Martha Littleton. She’s sixteen.”

“You shouldn’t be looking at her,” Addy said. She made it sound like it was something nobody should do, but the truth was, Addy just didn’t want to share her. Still wet, she grabbed a towel and Black Beauty and ran into the utility room, slamming the door. It was quiet and cool in there. The air condition vent on the ceiling gently sighed and the light was dim, but she could see. She peeled off her wet clothes and pulled on a warm sundress from the dryer, then curled in a corner with the towel wrapped around her like a blanket. She liked that the room had no windows. It was a good place to be and read and think about the world. Martha Littleton, she thought, was the most beautiful girl anywhere. Addy thought she would like to lie naked beside her in the sun and let their toes touch. That kid Zeke had no

business staring at her like that. But, she realized, she had stared at her, too, which made her stomach sort of bubble, like she drank soda too fast.

She opened up Black Beauty to the part where the stable hand Earl gets drunk and rides Black Beauty too fast, stumbling in a field of rocks and stumps. Earl was a lot like Zeke and Black Beauty was like Martha, Addy thought. People like Zeke and Earl had no business being around beauty.

For dinner, Grandma made crab cakes.

“I’m not hungry,” Addy said.

“Ungrateful child,” Grandma whispered. She was eating hers on her recliner watching “The Price is Right. “Choose the curtain, chose the curtain,” Grandma chanted. The player, a woman with long fake pink braids, chose the envelope. Inside was a coupon for pet food.

“I’m telling you, that curtain had a car,” Grandma said. “Get your things, Addy, and give Pete a quick walk. I am taking you and your friend to the fair.”

“He isn’t my friend,” Addy said.

“I am going to pretend I didn’t hear that, young lady,” she said. “You have a lot to learn about manners.”

Addy put Pete on his leash and headed out. In her hand were two orange plastic bags to pick up Pete’s poop. Pete headed down the street with slow resolve. *If Florida was where things go to die, then when was Pete dying?* Addy thought. There was no joy in this dog. He didn’t even look up when she tossed him a ball. That was a bad thought. She

chased it away by thinking of cotton candy at the fair. She leaned over to pick up Pete's poop and there, when she looked up, right in front of her, was Zeke. "I'm going to the fair with you and the old lady," he said. "My mom says."

Without even thinking about it or planning, Addy pushed Pete's poop right into his face. "Gross," he yelled, pushing her away. "That dog should die already. And I'm still going to the fair with you."

Addy just stood there. She had thought the same thing just a moment before—Pete probably should die – he seemed half way to dead already, but now she hated herself for it the same way she sort of hated herself for watching Martha Littleton sunbathing.

When she went inside, she lay beside Pete on the kitchen floor and scratched his ears, which barely seemed to register with him. She tried hard to love him.

"Ok, ready, Freddie?" Grandma asked. She had her purse and was by the door.

"I'm Addy," Addy said.

"It's a figure of speech," said Grandma. "Sometimes I think you've grown up in a terrarium.""

They went out to the car where Zeke was already sitting. "Can I sit up front with you, Grandma?" Addy asked.

"Ask your guest if he wants to," she said. "Be polite, Addy."

"Do you want to sit up front?"



“No,” said Zeke. He was wearing clean clothes and had washed off the dog poop. He smelled of toothpaste.

At the fair, Grandma bought a roll of yellow ride tickets. She sat on a bench handing them out so Addy and Zeke could go on the Zipper, Orbiter and the bumper cars. Then Zeke wanted to go on the Chaos, but Addy thought it might make her dizzy.

“Chicken,” Zeke said, “bwack, bwack, bwack.” He bent his arms like wings and moved them up and down.

“Ok, already. They walked over to the ride where it was established that Addy was just barely tall enough. Then they were strapped in with a metal bar over their laps and the seats began to rise and fall while rotating in a circle, faster and faster.

“Oh no, I think it’s broken,” Zeke shouted. Addy felt her stomach sort of leap.

“Liar,” she said.

When they got back to Grandma, she handed them each a cone of cotton candy.

“I just can’t,” Addy said. Just looking at it made her want to puke.

“I’ll take it,” said Zeke.

“Here-- go on in the Fun House,” Grandma said, handing them the last tickets, “or would you prefer the freak show?”

“Neither,” said Addy, remembering the sad twins on that old couch, eating that crappy looking pizza. She knew the Fun House had a ton of mirrors where she would have to look at Zeke over and over. “I don’t feel so well,” she said.

“Awww, Addy,” said Zeke, “you’ll feel better soon.” He took her hand and pulled her away from Grandma, over to the penny toss. There, he tossed a few pennies at the dishes, but they all fell to the sides. Then, one neatly spiraled into a bowl. The carny handed him a large pink alligator. “Here,” Zeke said, jamming it into Addy’s hands.

“How sweet,” said Grandma, when they got back. “Ok, let’s head home, kids. I am about ready to have my medicine and relax a little. Plus, Pete will be missing us, Addy.”

That night, Addy heard Grandma on the phone with Momma: “I think Addy has a little boyfriend,” she said. “It’s so cute.”

Addy was listening from the utility room. She was at the part where Black Beauty saw the heavy load being pulled by the horse named Ginger. It is a scene that always made Addy cry. Someday, she would buy a farm and save horses that people have been mean to, she thought.

The next morning, she woke up to Grandma yelling: “Addy, go clean the pool. And then you can go play with your little friend.”

When she came out of the bedroom, Grandma was standing there with her hands on her hips. “Your mama is so glad you made a friend,” Grandma said. “Now hand me your book. Your mama said it is time you moved past that book. How many times have you read it already? You probably have it memorized.” Grandma reached for

Black Beauty, which Addy was carrying, but Addy pulled back. She ran out into the yard. She leapt over Pete and slipped on the garden hose, falling down.

When she opened the skimmer box, it was swirling with colors...yellow blossoms, orange blossoms, teensy seeds. It was like someone had spilled a whole garden or rainbow in there. She thrust in her hand to pull out the debris but felt something soft inside. It was spongy, even.

She shut her eyes tightly and cast her hand down into the catchment, under the skein of grungey chemical water and vegetation. When she pulled her hand back up, she leapt back, dropping the contents. There on the tile patio was a small black bird, its feathers foamy with chemical suds. The little orange claw feet were curled up tight. A single black eye stared up at her.

“Are you ok?” she heard someone say. The someone was Martha Littleton, who had heard her fall, the slap of her cheek on the pavement. “Come here, honey.”

Addy walked over. She let Martha Littleton place her hand on her cheek softly. “This probably needs an icepack,” she said. And then, looking down at the pavement, she gasped a little. For a moment, Addy thought the bird might still be alive. Its wings had a purplish cast. She thought it might have been a baby crow. Pete lumbered over and pushed his nose into the soft feathered body. “Stop it, Pete!” She yelled. Martha Littleton leaned over and picked up the drowned bird. “We can give it a nice grave,” she said.

They chose a spot by the fence, but as they were digging, there was a cackle. It was Zeke, peering over the fence. “You should not be spying on people,” Martha Littleton said.

“Tell Addy,” Zeke said. “She watches you sunbathing with your top off.”

“Is that true?” Martha Littleton said.

Addy face felt turn hot, and her fingers were prickling. Fat tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and she wiped them with the back of her wrists. She grabbed Pete and ran into the house where Grandma was standing by the door.

“Give me the book, Addy,” Grandma again demanded.

“No, Grandma,” she said, and then, softer, asking, “please.”

Addy’s Grandma liked to wear clothes that had sayings on them, like “I’ve got Jesus by my Side, Who do You Have?” and “I May Be Wrong....But I Doubt It.” On this day she was wearing her “Granny Knows Best” tee shirt. Addy wondered if it was something she planned. Grandma held her hand out for the book. “What’s wrong with you, Adeline Larissa?” she asked.

“There was a bird,” she said, finally handing Grandma Black Beauty. “In the skimmer.”

That night, after Addy ate a bowl of mac-n-cheese and watched Jeopardy with Grandma, she lay in bed. When she shut her eyes she could still see the way the seeds and flowers swirled in the skimmer. Over and over, she was imagining pulling the

black bird from the skimmer, the swirling seeds and bright blossoms below. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter and Black Beauty cantered into the backyard. The horse stood there beside her, also looking at the bird. And then appeared Martha Littleton, floating like an angel, over everything.

Grandma and Mama were right, she had read that book so many times she could remember every part. She remembered the part when Black Beauty sees the horse Ginger, dead in the back of the wagon. She remembered how in the end Black Beauty gets to go to a beautiful farm and run around free.

“Often, before I am quite awake,” narrated Black Beauty, “I fancy I am still in the orchard at Birtwick. Standing with my old friends under the apple trees.”

Addy thought of white apple blossoms, how they might swirl in the skimmer. Around and around and around.

The next day, Grandma handed her the Barbie suitcase.

“Time to pack,” she said. “vacation’s over.” Addy walked Pete one more time and then got in Grandma’s car for the ride to the airport. She wanted to peek through the hedge or say good bye to Martha, but she didn’t. She was glad to get away from that boy, Zeke.

On the plane, she opened up her book and read the ending of Black Beauty again. It was a sad book but every single time that ending would come along and make it happy again. Everyone should get a happy ending like that, she thought.

When she walked with the “travel companion” flight attendant out of the airport at home, her mother and Roger were waiting for her in the pick up zone in his white BMW. “Hey Addy,” they yelled and waved. She got in the car.

“So honey,” Momma said. “Good news and bad. Which do you want first?”

“Good news?” Addy replied.

“Ok, great, well Roger and I have something to tell you.”

“Your mother has agreed to marry me,” Roger said, “and we want you to be the flower girl!” Addy was silent.

“And the bad news?” she asked.

“Pete died. Sorry, honey. Grandma was worried about how you would take it. She said your little friend Zeke found him, in the back bushes of the yard. He just gave out, Addy. He was old.” Again, Addy was silent.

The car rolled up the main highway to their house, past McDonalds, KFC, the new Taco Bell. Soon Roger would live in their house on the cul-de-sac and they would probably be eating the homemade biscuits he once made for them a lot, she thought. He was very proud of those.

If she were still in Florida, Martha Littleton might help her bury Pete and make him a popsicle stick grave marker, just like they were going to do for the blue-black bird. And Martha might ask her to say a few words about Pete and she might smile and say, “there isn’t much to say. He was an ok dog.” And that might make Martha Littleton smile. And that would make Addy smile back.

