

At the Water's Edge

Ezra closed his eyes.

The last stretching fingers of honeyed August light warmed his cheeks and brow, and he brought the can to his lips. Crisp, light beer. He drank deeply, chased it with the hot smoke of his cigarette. Snubbing it out in his plastic ashtray, he mindlessly patted Rufus on the head and surveyed his property through the oatmeal cataracts that had begun to develop in his left eye.

Thirty acres of forest sloped down gently to a private lake he sometimes rented out to roadtrippers and college students. A thin, rocky path traced its way down the hill to the water, a remnant of racing younger paws. A trellis stood off to the side of the patio a few yards like the last traces of a lost civilization. The garden Abby had put so many hard hours into was nothing more than a petrified patch of overgrowth, punctuated by the trellis. It hurt him deeply to see the state of it, to know that he'd allowed the artifact of their lives together to wither and die.

He took the last drink of the hand-warmed can, crushed it with his boot heel, and scooted it under his chair to join the other casualties of his overflowing recycling bin.

Rufus pointed his milky eyes at Ezra, blindly stared into the middle distance, and wagged his tail. Ezra smiled and grabbed a beer and a stick of jerky from the cooler, and tossed the desiccated strip to Rufus. It bounced off his nose, and the hound stood with great effort to hunt down the morsel. His collar rattled as he descended the stairs. Rufus would never protect him like he had Abby, but a shared love of jerky had nursed a strong bond between the two old-timers. He cracked the beer with a clumsy hand and took a heartburn chug of the foam.

He stood, walked down the stairs with malty gracelessness, made his way to the trellis. A sudden irritation, sharp like the screech of a fork on flatware, crept up the soft hairs of his neck. She was gone a year next month, and every day he'd had to see the damn trellis.

Each thistle and bindweed seemed to push the thing up, hold it like an offering, a mocking reminder of what he'd become in her absence. He grabbed the trellis and ripped a slat from it in a one-handed attempt to pull it from the weeds. He threw the length of wood down the hill, the force from his throw pulling a childish wheeze from him.

A pounding buzz settled a few inches behind his sinuses, and it took him a moment to recognize the intrusion of a new sound—something like the light cracking of roasting embers from a distance. He glanced around. The sound resolved itself into smokey, whispered consonants. It was coming from the lake. A quick look to Rufus confirmed it; his ears stood erect, his body aimed toward the lake like a dart. Ezra shaded his eyes, but it was no use. The sun had sunk further, and bright light bounced off the water surface like a stray bullet, blinding him.

He took an unsteady step and beer spilled over his hand, wetting his sleeve. He cursed and turned to Rufus. "What do you think, buddy?" The old dog cocked his head. "Lost hikers?"

Rufus wagged.

"Alright." Ezra dropped his can in the dirt and grabbed the empty twelve gauge by the door. "Come on, then."

The sun was just dipping below the peaks, casting the woods in long purples and deep blues as Ezra and Rufus made it down to the water's edge. A chill came down from the mountains, wove between the trees, and crept up Ezra's spine. Unseasonal fog yawned awake above the shimmering surface of the lake.

Ezra looked around.

The whispering had grown more pronounced as they'd come down the hill, but as far as he could tell, there wasn't anyone down here. Rufus sniffed the air, the coarse hairs along his spine and at the base of his tail standing on end. Ezra stood as straight as he could and tried to hold the shotgun in a way that projected a greater level of comfort with the firearm than he felt.

"Alright," he boomed. "Now, I can spend the next twenty minutes rooting y'all out, or you can just come on out and be escorted off my property. No harm done, but if you make me look for you, both me and my vicious attack dog will be cantankerous as hell."

No response, just the steady whisper that came from more than one direction.

"Alright," Ezra said with a sigh. "Ready or not, here I—"

There was someone in the water.

Bald and sexless in the dark, a head sat half-submerged some fifteen yards out. The sight of them there, mounting fog swirling about their head, turned Ezra's stomach. The whispering rose to a hushed mumble, and Ezra found himself desperately wishing he kept the gun loaded.

He cleared his throat as an anxious warble came from Rufus. "Look, just come on out and..." his words dried up and he took a step toward the water.

Rufus whined and nudged Ezra's hand. He waved him off and took another step. He needed to know what they were saying, craved it deep in the pit of his stomach. There was an urgency to the words and he feared that if he missed them, some unknowable existential secret would be forever lost to him—the necessary course correction he was otherwise unwilling to acknowledge. His mouth was sticky and dry and beading sweat had begun to trace cool rivulets down his spine. There was a danger here, he could feel it, but it was distant and secondary to his

hunger to hear the words. Another step, up to the water's edge. Small waves lapped against his boots and Rufus bit his hand.

Ezra wrenched his hand out of the hound's mouth and a malevolent rage passed over him that made him distantly worried for Rufus' safety. He blinked what felt like sleep from his eyes and the anger passed. Looking down, he realized he was no longer holding the shotgun, had lost it somehow.

He looked down, fever-heat flushing his cheeks. He was up to his shins in the water now. Rufus whined, dancing anxiously along the silty shore, and Ezra took an unsteady step back out of the lake.

Movement in the water stole his attention. The thing rose from the water and his mind fused shut.

It wasn't a person.

Slick limbs, dark and oily, writhed from the creature's torso. Its body looked like it had been assembled from ill-fitting parts, sharp, chitinous angles flowing down into smooth, infantile skin. Where a face should have been, two large holes rattled as it scented the air. An astringent smell, like processed meat and vinegar burned Ezra's nostrils and stung his eyes and an essential part of his sanity stretched taut and snapped like a steel wire. He would carry this image with him for the rest of his life, eyes constantly darting to dark corners and toward exits.

Prey.

He had become prey.

He nearly collapsed as he scrambled toward the tree line. A rushing crash of waves came from behind him and atom-splitting terror sparked down his spine. It was fast, he could hear it

gaining on him, and it sounded more like a stampede than anything a single being could produce. He didn't dare look back.

A short sprint brought him crashing drunkenly into the trees, sleeves tearing and skin splitting where twigs were broken against his arms. He barely felt any of it. Saplings and low growth threatened to steal his legs and more than once he nearly fell, sprawling, to the forest floor. It occurred to him distantly that Rufus wasn't with him, but his mind had become radio static and there was no space for anything but the fear. He imagined it back there, the rolling gait of a thing unused to dry land, rattling scent glands following the sour smell of him.

His smoke-hardened lungs gave out all in a rush and he stopped, stars popping and fizzing in his vision. He turned and expected the thing to come down on him in a rush of thrashing limbs and hidden mouths.

Nothing.

Wild eyes darted left and right, but there was nothing with enough shape in the dark for them to settle on.

Then, a familiar face.

It was Abby, not as she'd been in her last months, but young and vibrant as when he'd met her. A dim glow surrounded her youthful features, smiling eyes meeting his own. It was the smile she'd given him when they'd first met, lingering eyes betraying a wit she'd been told was unladylike. Tears brimmed and rolled down Ezra's cheeks, flowing down the age-cut channels.

"No, this isn't... you aren't..." a sob caught in his throat.

"Jesus, Ezzy, did you go feral without me around?" She grinned. "What are you doing out here? Marking your territory?"

"Abbs?"

She held out her hand to him and he took it, habit overriding caution. “Come on, let’s get out of here before we both break our fool necks.” She turned and led him gently out of the forest as he cried quietly behind her. He knew it was a trick, knew it was impossible, but he desperately wanted to believe it really was Abby.

Fog had accumulated above the lake like a smothering pillow and it was country-dark now, the only light washing down from the moon and the endless flickering stars. A breeze came in over the water, parting the fog and filling Ezra with a wistful nostalgia. Maybe it was Abby. The hand he held was the same he’d held for the past four decades—verging on too warm, and coarse from years as a hobby gardener. She smelled like Abby too: rosewater and some fragrant combination of east asian spices.

She led him down to the water.

A tinkling of metal and a whining growl. Ezra turned to see Rufus standing a few yards away, head low, facing the two of them.

“Come here, buddy.” Ezra wiped his eyes and patted his leg. Rufus didn’t move and his growl became more pronounced.

“So this is how you treat your mama, huh? Typical teenager.”

“Rufus, it’s mom.”

Rufus barked a throaty warning and took a step forward.

Abby chuckled. “Come on, Ezzy, leave him.”

Ezra cocked his head. “Leave him?”

“Ezzy...” Abby’s grip tightened.

“He’s just... he’s blind, he doesn’t recognize you.

She pulled him toward the water. “Leave him.”

This couldn't be Abby. He tried to pull free from the vice-grip of her hand. "What the hell-"

"Leave the fucking dog, Ezra." A sharp yank on his arm pulled his shoulder out and he screamed. In an instant, Rufus was sinking his weathered teeth into the thing that was no longer his wife. Ezra hadn't seen the change, but Abby was gone, replaced with the monstrosity from the lake. It released Ezra and with an inhuman, crocodile rumble, it hit Rufus with enough force to throw the dog ten yards up the hill. The dog hit the ground with a yelp and rolled a few feet before coming to rest on his side.

The thing turned to Ezra, scent glands rattling, and he shoved it as hard as he could manage. It wasn't much with one hand, and a strange gelatinous quality to the softer parts of it absorbed much of the force, but it bought him precious seconds. He ran to Rufus, trying to pull him from his collar. A gurgled whine came from the dog and Ezra released him.

He turned, expecting to be thrashed, and saw the creature down by the shore. It hadn't followed him. It paced back and forth on legs that seemed to shoot and retract from its body, scenting the air frantically. Ezra watched it for a moment and it watched him back.

"Ezra, help!" Abby's voice ushered from somewhere in the creature's undercarriage. "Ezra, help, I can't swim! Ezzy, please!"

He covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut like a child as the thing continued to pace like a caged predator.

"Oh, god, Ezzy, it's hurting me! Why aren't you doing anything? Help me!"

"Stop it!"

It was quiet. He opened his eyes and saw Abby there, aged, papery skin separated from brittle bone by mere millimeters. Red fingers of blood ran down her face and neck where a

recalled airbag had launched splintered steering column into her. Even now, seeing her like this again, he couldn't wrap his head around it. A routine fender bender. How could that have done this?

"I needed you, Ezzy. I asked them to call you, you know."

A wailing sob was ripped from Ezra's chest like blubber in a shark's teeth. "Stop! You aren't her!"

The thing chuckled Abby's chuckle, pumping red from the holes in her. "Okay, Ezra. Fair enough. Listen, this was fun. Same time tomorrow?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Yeah, okay." It mocked him in his wife's voice and he was glad to feel anger welling where terror had begun to nest; It made him feel more himself. The thing turned and made for the water. "Catch you later, alligator."

After a while, crocodile.

Then, silence.

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Ezra cast his gaze to the derelict trellis. He'd spent the morning methodically clearing the desiccated weeds from its surface, one arm held in a makeshift sling, and righted it before gathering the graveyard of beer cans in a black plastic bag. He cried as he worked. The ripe, hoppy smell of cheap beer wafted up from the lawn and he wished he'd chosen a spot further distant from the porch to pour out his remaining collection. Already the craving was wrapping itself around his spine.

Rufus stood heavily and crossed to the stairs, ears perked, before ultimately deciding there was no imminent danger. Ezra reached into the cooler and held out a piece of jerky to the gray-faced mutt. He took it with a wag of his tail and laid down on his blanket.

The sun was nearing the end of its afternoon descent and a flicker of stray light from the lake sent a bolt of panic into Ezra's gut. He looked toward the lake. Nothing. It might as well have been a pane of glass for all the disturbance in its surface. He set his hand on the shotgun and took a deep breath. This time he was prepared. At least as well prepared as one could be for something like this.

Ezra pulled one of Abby's old sparkling water bottles out of the ice and twisted off the metal top. It bubbled over his hand and he cursed. He set it down and lit a cigarette instead.

Quit that shit, Ezzy. I'll be pissed as hell if I outlast you over some dumb shit like that.

He smiled and wiped his eyes.

One thing at a time, Abbs. One thing at a time.