F. J. Bergmann - Mirror

They called it Little Mirror on the county maps. It didn’t show up on the state maps, ever. It was way out in the back woods on my grandfather’s farm, 640 acres until everything got busted up and went to hell in the Depression. The land was junk then, too; never did any good, too wet and sour. The water showed up as a round circle on the old township map, *Little Mirror Lake* in that fine script next to it, but the real shape changed every year, like a reflection in a carnival funhouse. As the years filled it in, the marsh spread and the tamaracks rotted and fell. I heard it’s public wetlands now.

When I was just a kid, I found a small round mirror along the state highway once, probably out of some lady’s makeup bag, and I carried it around in my pocket. Still got it. At night, after Dad had drunk enough so I could be pretty sure he wouldn’t wake up and come into my room, I’d read with a flashlight under the blanket about others, out there in space, and I felt more like them than like me. I started signaling every clear night, using the mirror to flick a code of flashes at the black sky, way faster than I could thumb the flashlight’s stiff, clumsy switch, hoping somebody might see the pattern and recognize a distress call: *Get me out of here.*

The noise wasn’t as loud as you would have expected. I heard it, in the quiet backroads night, but I don’t think anybody else did, except our dog. Rusty howled for days, till Dad kicked his ribs in and he died. Dad always said my mom ran off with some man when I was little. I can’t remember her at all. The trees were thick back then around the shallow bowl of the lake. Nobody else ever came around; Dad kept Grandpa’s old shotgun loaded with rock salt. I never had much luck with friends, even after Dad had the accident with that same gun.

I had paths through the brush where nobody’d follow me, and I went looking the next day. It didn’t take long to find, with the broken branches and torn-off leaves, but the ship had slid into the undergrowth quite a ways. Nobody could have seen it. It wasn’t shiny anywhere at all, but wrecked and burnt black, and pitted with holes like canker sores. The door was open, but there wasn’t any light and it smelled funny. I never went in there, it didn’t seem right. There used to be water lilies at that end of the lake. That ship didn’t look big enough to hold more than just the one, anyway. The ground was too soft to plow, and that scrub grows fast if you don’t bushhog it.

He’d made it as far as the edge of the lake, and was lying half under where the water opened to reflect the sky. I think it was a he; the shell around the middle might have been skin or clothes, I never tried to open it. His surface was slick like a frog, except where the sun had been hitting him, and the part of him that was torn open was in the water but wherever the water met his body the beautiful colors were already leaching and faded. There was a couple of dying bluegill on the bank. They never were worth the eating, anyhow.

Not much more dark liquid, rusty, came from the wound when I lifted him. It smelled like copper and lightning. Where I touched him my fingers burned and oozed but they finally healed and you can hardly notice the marks anymore. He wasn’t heavy at all, and I didn’t see any metal. He was smooth, like horn or plastic, kind of spongy underneath. Not so different from anybody else, as far as I know.

I held the mirror to the opening in his face for a long time, but it stayed clear and dark. Then I slid him the rest of the way into the lake and he drifted down into the black mud and was gone, under the glittering mirror. I put him in the lake, he was trying to get there. On the surface were only the water lilies, hanging in an upside-down heaven. I never dumped anything into that lake that didn’t belong.

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