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Water Madness

by
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Water. Madness. But not the bad kind of madness, this time. The crazy, sure of yourself, wild under rain and jagged cracks of lightning kind. Thunder. Running. Savage, Joy.

But maybe I should back up a bit. Begin at the beginning. Or at least where it began for me.

I love the stars. That was the only reason why I wanted to go. The city cloaks stars by spitting gases and fog up into the air. Most of the time you can't even *see* them in the city, not anymore. When it was clear, Mom and I would go out on our tiny balcony. Silently, we would lie down on our backs, head to head, stare for entire nights at the sky. I would forget myself, lose self entirely. Their pulse, their ebb and light was the blood in my

veins. “What do you see?” Mom would ask. And I would tell her. Leo. Cassiopeia. The Archer. But that was before. These days, I would watch them alone, falling into their patterns, feeling them as a compass reaching skyward. Feeling small, insignificant, awed. Knowing my place.

So small. So I wanted to go to camp, sort of. I mean, forest and games and space and fresh air—who cares, really. The stars were enough.

Mom understood. And I think she had a feeling about what would really happen there. How she knew, I don’t question anymore. But when she smiled goodbye, I saw hope in her eyes.

I met Matt first. I was unpacking in the cabin, tossing my clothes blindly onto the shelves when he slunk into the room.

With shifty, narrow green, he eyed me. Then he grinned, flashing a full set of braces a mile wide. “Did you see the dumb whore out there?”

“What?”

“The little girl in the lodge. You know, the bitch who won’t shut up. Jesus H. Christ, man, she asks a thousand questions a minute. I wanted to fucking gag her.”

I nodded nervously.

“You here for the week?” He ran his fingers through blonde hair that was streaked with white.

“Yeah,” I said, shifting my stance, immediately defensive.

He giggled. “Wanna play?” He tossed a Gameboy at me.

Startled, my hands jerked upwards to catch it but fumbled, knocking it down to the floor. Pieces broke. “Shoot,” I said, near tears.

He grinned again. “Don’t worry. It always breaks.” He flicked his hand decisively.

I gave him a tentative smile, and bent to pick up the pieces. “I’m Sean,” I said.

“Matt,” he laughed.

It was a beginning.

Daisy was my counsellor. It was her, later, who would dance with me in the rain. I thought it was weird to have a girl for a counsellor. Kind of cool, too. And she was pretty. She had dark hair and eyes that reminded me of Mom's. And freckles. A lot of her reminded me of mom, actually. And when she announced that night that our cabin group was going star-hunting, I couldn't complain.

That night, while everyone else was asleep, we crept out of the lodge. The moon was so brilliant that I squinted, shielding my eyes. The air was soft and warm, and I breathed into the wind, letting it breathe into me. As we walked along the path, I could hear night birds muttering softly. I could hear a far off owl. I could hear animals moving through the brush. And with a small brush of surprise, I realized I could hear the night. The light of the lodge was winking farther and farther away through the trees, but I found that I could see. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, and my feet became surer with each step. I felt this rock in the path, that bump, this leaf brushing against my hair. And I saw. A shard of moonlight through tree trunks. An eerie branch in the shape of a hand. A sprinting chipmunk that should have been asleep long ago. The hairs on my arm raised as I shivered, again and again.

Then I jumped, my breath a sharp intake of air. But it was just Daisy's hand on my arm. Wordlessly, she pointed. My eyes turned, following her outstretched hand. For a minute I didn't see anything, and I was about to turn away when she squeezed my arm again. Then, I saw him. He was less than two feet away, right at eye level, gripping the trunk of a rough tree. And it was his eyes that I noticed first of all. He turned his head and suddenly, he was staring at me. He didn't move. I didn't move. I don't even think I breathed. Time erased itself, gave me a moment beyond. It was real, so unreal that I felt like I was watching him on TV. He looked like a bandit, with his black mask encircling his bright, bright eyes. Who are you, I wanted to ask. Understand me. Speak. Whisper to me the secrets of the night.

"He's beautiful," Daisy said softly.

I didn't say anything. She was wrong, though. Raccoons weren't beautiful. And this one certainly wasn't. A hand reached out towards him, and I realized that it was mine.

But then he was away, climbing the tree, back to night and home, to where no skinny, twelve-year old stranger asked him question after question in his eyes.

It was only on the way back, almost home, back to the lodge and light and normalcy, that I realized the truth. He wasn't beautiful. No. He was perfect.

And it wasn't until later, much later, tangled in my sleeping bag and fighting insomnia, that I realized something else. I sat up in bed, for once, startled at myself, feeling a wave of something like surprise. The stars. We had forgotten about the stars.

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The next day was the fight. I didn't start it, but I did take sides. Matt sure didn't know how to keep his mouth shut. Me and him were hiking to the lake for free swim time. Every girl we passed was a "dirty whore," every guy a "fuckhead" and occasionally he would dub a rock in the path or a branch a "goddamn bastard." He wouldn't stop grinning, though. And he didn't stop, the whole week. I began to call him Cat, for the Cheshire Cat.

We had stopped to look at the lake from the cliff above. Above us, the sun was hot. A seagull wheeled lazily along the shore. Here, we were higher than it. I squinted, and wished desperately for some sunglasses. "Do you ever stop swearing?" I asked him, suddenly.

He looked at me, his face a mixture of frown and snarl. "Hell no," he said, wrinkling his mouth seriously. But then the unabashed, rueful face was back, and I was sure I had only imagined a difference.

"Jump," he laughed, pointing to the cliff face. He edged closer to the dropoff, his feet dislodging small pebbles that rolled off and down into the air.

I was suddenly uneasy, like I had just stepped onto an icy lake, unsure if it would crack.

"Dare me?" he asked.

I took an involuntary step back.

His eyes found mine, locked there. "Are you ever sad enough to want to?" His hand flicked across his face. His eyes looked clear, glassy.

My eyes dropped to the ground, breaking his gaze, losing him. “Everyone gets sad,” I muttered. He was silent for a minute, and I forced my gaze back up to his, struggled to keep it. His eyes were so bright and strong.

“Yeah, about stupid stuff. I mean sad.” His eyes narrowed. “Like, real sad, like you would jump?” His eyes followed the edge of the cliff, down and out. He stared at the water far below, grinning.

“No,” I said, beginning to get angry.

“I would. Maybe I will.”

“I’m scared,” I said, then immediately regretted it, and I didn’t mean scared of him jumping, but scared of something more elusive and vacant.

But he didn’t mock me, only nodded, almost absently, like he understood not just because he was being kind, but because he *knew*.

I let silence come, because I didn’t know what else to say about it.

“C’mon,” Matt said.

And we looked at each other, and we both realized, in our mutual gaze, in a moment beyond time, in a place where I understood, that we didn’t have to say the things that needed to be said. The rest of the hike we snapped pine branches in each other’s faces, laughing, but then our eyes would meet, not uneasily, but not quite easily either. I felt something between us.

When we got there, the first thing I noticed was a fat boy in bright yellow swim trunks, who was spraying his friends with a Super Soaker. He ran up and down the dock, pumping his gun continuously, shrieking like a banshee. His friends, wet already at the shoreline, playfully ignored him.

Matt and I threw our towels on the beach and dashed to the end of the dock. I was a half step ahead of him as I dived. The water was a brief shock, then I glided upwards. Matt surfaced seconds later.

“Hey, you guys! Want ta get a bullet in the head?”

It was the boy with the Super Soaker, his face red and puffy. His ponderous legs squeezed to a halt on the dock above us, his gun aimed at Matt’s head. He was dry but for the beads of sweat emanating from his face.

I shook my head. “Don’t—” but Matt was too fast.

“Bring it on, you dirty son-of-a-whore,” he sneered. His grin this time was a ferocious baring of teeth and metal.

A blast of icy water cut the air and literally bounced off Matt’s forehead. Matt shook it off, swung his arm and sent a beautiful arc of water over the end of the dock, where it drenched the gun-wielding boy. The boy stood, shocked for a few seconds, his mouth flapping with incredulous indignation, then he growled and pounced off the dock onto Matt, a wildcat swinging his gun like an angry claw, connecting with Matt’s head in a loud crack. His weight sent them both under, and they emerged in a flurry of fists and shouts. I leaped into the fray with a yell, swinging my fists and trying to ignore the fact that I was hitting not much more than lake water.

In seconds, hordes of limbs came flying through the air—tanned, swinging arms, kicking, muscular legs, whole disjointed bodies landing on and around us. Fat boy’s reinforcements! I felt a fist connect with my mouth and I punched blindly, scrabbling wildly to keep afloat and desperate to inflict as much damage as was humanly possible. A foot glanced off my ribs, a fist off my ear, and a well-placed knee just missed taking me completely out of the fight. I leaped onto the back of one boy, my arm around his neck, my fist pounding on his face and suddenly, the world shifted. Through a haze all I could see was blue, like I was watching the world from underwater, where voices and movement stretched out to slow, hazy motion. Blue water, blue water splashing as I hit him again and again until I couldn’t stop, until I didn’t want to stop, until I was panting, whimpering with each punch, until my heart beat in time to the fury. In the back of my head, I could hear a whistle blowing continuously, and then rough hands clamped on my shoulders, tossing me up onto the dock. The blue haze clouded my eyes, so I could barely see, and I shuddered and curled up in a ball, feeling my angry breaths blow violently out my nose, cradling my unclenchable fists. My shoulders shook. Four pissed-off looking lifeguards cleaned up the rest of the fray, shoving and tossing and shouting for all they were worth.

I closed my eyes, but refused the tears that threatened. It was madness, this fury of mine. Madness. I drew a shaky, precarious breath that fought to get down to my lungs, fought to bring me desperate air. Then Matt was beside me, grinning in undefeat. His face

was cut, and the blood dripped and mingled with the water on his face. His held his head high and this time, his grin bore nothing comic but was shaped in jubilation, and a fierce pride. He was a warrior, triumphant in victory. He glanced at me. “They’re the scared ones, now,” he said, matter-of-factly.

I was far from where words could be found, far lost in haze and blue and anger changing to fear. I looked, and there were the other boys, huddled on the side of the dock around a bloodied figure and a grim looking lifeguard. I felt my fist uncurl, and I saw that blood dripped from my hand onto the dock, staining the wood in dull, twisted patterns.

“No,” I said, finding that I could speak, that I could, after all. “No.” But it was the only word I could find, the only shape that I could force through my trembling, freezing lips. Madness. Terrible, terrible madness. Water madness. I stared fiercely at Matt.

And when Matt looked at me, his grin was suddenly gone, his eyes suddenly frightened. Full of horror, of realization that fear was the same, no matter where, no matter if you found it or it found you, no matter if you hurled it like a punch in someone’s face.

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It was the end of the week, already. It went fast, I thought, sitting on a log beside Matt. Tonight, our cabin, led by Daisy, and our cousin-cabin, led by Spunk, were having a campfire in the woods. The light was just beginning to fade, the fire just beginning to take over the sun. The campsite was at the top of a small hill, amidst a small clearing. Above us, and to the west, fluffy, strung-out clouds painted the sky a vivid, pastel pink mixed with blue. Baby blue. Ridiculous, I thought, glaring up at the sky. It looked like a bad painting. The trees cut a hole into the sky directly above. It was then, staring at the ridiculous sky, that I saw my first star of the night.

“Star Light, Star Bright,” I began, quickly whispering the familiar words, “First star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, Have the wish I wish tonight. I wish...” I paused, breathed deeply, feeling the star, feeling the wish in my bones before I spoke it. “I wish—” I cut off as a fist plowed playfully into my shoulder.

“What are ya mumbling about? Forget the fucking stars, we’re roasting marshmallows!” Indignant, Matt shoved a squishy, dirty marshmallow into my hand.

I cocked an eyebrow mockingly, eyeing the dirty marshmallow.

Matt cracked a grin and handed me a stick. “Shut up and roast it,” he quipped, although we both knew very well I hadn’t said anything. He bounced closer to the fire, crouched, and jammed his marshmallow right in the flames.

I turned back to my star, and for a brief, disoriented second, I couldn’t remember what my wish was.

“I roasted you the Best marshmallow,” came a smiling voice.

I looked down to see Daisy holding her stick out to me.

“It’s perfectly brown, perfectly squishy inside. Like I said, the best marshmallow.”

“Thanks,” I said, gently sliding the marshmallow off the stick, popping it whole into my mouth. I smiled at Daisy. It was good.

Matt turned to us. “No, the best marshmallow is the completely burnt one,” he giggled, pointing to the ball of flame on the end of his stick.

Daisy made a face at him, then leaned close and blew out the flame. “Only because you *can’t* roast it without burning it,” she teased.

“Wanna bet?” They both lunged for more marshmallows, mock fighting over the bag.

I rolled my eyes, sighing with laughter. The evening wind coming off the lake touched my cheek, and I stepped away from the campfire. Already it was darker, almost night. From the lake’s mirrored surface came the high, lonely call of a loon. The pink in the sky was shadowed by darker blue, and, as I watched, the stars began to wink on, faster and faster, finding their own images in the water. Brilliant. I walked down the path, away from the firelight and laughter. At the edge of the forest, I looked back, for a few seconds, my eyes seeing dark silhouettes, the flicker of fire, and smoke trailing upwards.

There was a field there, and I lay down on my back, staring at the night sky. I saw more stars than I had ever seen before. The entire sky was covered. In between the major constellations were millions of tiny flickering lights, so dense and myriad. I lay for awhile, then heard footsteps, and a shape lay down near me, its head near mine. Daisy. We

watched in silence for seconds, minutes. Until I became so comfortable with her presence I almost forgot she was there. Then, her soft voice.

“What do you see?”

And I told her, though even now I cannot tell you why, not exactly. I wanted her to know, to understand, to see what I saw, to feel what I felt. I wanted her to tell me what it meant, to answer the questions that beat my heart into sadness. “A warrior stringing her bow,” I whispered. “A unicorn with a bloody horn. A tiger snarling. A war.”

Silence, and a deeper silence, when the wind waited.

“A father who...left. A mother who doesn’t know what to do. Someone who’s scared.” I felt the tears begin, running down my face hotly, emptying me.

Then, Daisy’s voice. “I see a racoon,” she said simply. “And a campfire. I see someone whose been to camp before, and who will come back. Someone named Sean who’s stronger than he thinks. Burnt marshmallows.”

I smiled through my tears, sat up. And when she reached for me, wrapped her arms around me, I thought I had forgotten what a hug was. I felt my arms encircle her waist, and I was crying, like a little boy, like someone lost, like someone who had forgotten how, but was now remembering.

Soon, the sky began to cloud over and the wind rose. Daisy got up, held out her hand. Her dark eyes smiled back at me. “C’mon,” she said. “Let’s go back.”

Within seconds of our arrival at the fire, the first drops of rain made themselves known, hissing angrily onto the flames. Within a few more seconds, the drops had become a torrent. Spunk, the other counsellor, rounded up the guys and herded them down the path towards home.

“C’mon Daisy!” Spunk yelled into the whipping wind.

Daisy and I just stood there in the rain. Suddenly, a figure ran back up the path, skidding to a crooked halt in front of us.

“It’s just a drizzle,” drawled Matt, tilting his head, crossing his arms, and perfecting a nonchalant, blase look despite the fact that he was beginning to look like a drowned rat.

I began to laugh, giggling at first, then doubling over until my sides ached and I was wheezing noiseless breaths. “Let’s roast more marshmallows,” I gasped breathlessly when I could next speak. The fire, being so huge before, had not yet been put out. The three of us bent over the flames, roasting the marshmallows in slightly hysterical, jerky movements.

Then, we stood up in the rain. I closed my eyes, letting the water pour down on me. And then we were dancing, the three of us, dancing in the rain. We moved with the untamed energy of a thousand dancers, where we spun and leapt and felt the upside down, insane emotions of rhythm, of delicacy, of ecstasy. Whirling around the campfire, our arms wide and reaching, our mouths open, shouting to the sky, louder and wilder and faster. The rain danced with us, soaked us, and we couldn’t stop. We danced on, never ending, ever changing, always burning with waltz and tango and the fiery fiesta—erotic, climactic, high and heavy with crazy, savage life. Crazy, confident, laughing hysterically, singing, shouting in the wind, and we were wild. Wild, savage. Full of self and power and fertile, wicked laughter. Free. Free, for a space beyond, for a time known only by rain and running and laughter. For a time known only by crazy lightning, by the wild, wild rumble of thunder echoing. For a time known only by water and madness. And joy.