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Lakeside

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Author Bio

Katie Bolger is a junior English major with a Writing Concentration with minors in Spanish and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from West Caldwell, New Jersey. On campus, she is the Event Coordinator for The Mercury, a Resident Assistant, a tutor at the Writing Center, and a Peer Learning Associate for the English Department. In her spare time, she sings show tunes (loudly and off-key), thinks about the proper use of the semi-colon, and watches The Office. Her life motto is "What would Lady Macbeth do?" She has given Gettysburg a reprieve by spending the spring of 2017 in Salamanca, Spain.

Lakeside

If Seneca Lake is considered to be one of the Finger Lakes with an area of about sixty-seven square miles, I think it'd be fair to call Waneta Lake a knuckle. Just three-and-a-half miles long, it's situated in the middle of Nowhere, New York, surrounded by mountains just tall enough to remind me of my own smallness in the Grand Scheme of Things. But what did I care about the size? I had never been to a lake. Previously, "vacation" had always been synonymous with "beach" in the Bolger household. Sixteen-hour drives to Hilton Head or the Outer Banks were a breeze down I-95, despite its many attempts to mire us in traffic. We had nearly perfected the essential road trip skills, including listening to our own music through headphones while Dad's music played over the radio at an absurd volume, not throwing up even though there were no air vents in the third row of the Explorer, and holding in our pee for extended periods of time. But this was summer of 2016; the Bolgers had fallen on hard times (had been falling for years) with Erin fresh out of college, me in college, Brian six years behind me in private school, and Thomas bringing up the rear in a public middle school, and beggars couldn't be choosers, so there would be no such drive to the Carolinas.

If we were the beggars, the choosers were my aunt and uncle, who had no children and no mortgage, and had graciously invited us on vacation for the second year in a row. Last year, the six Bolgers, two Albrights, and my dad's brother, Frank, had spent a week one block from the beach and right on the bay in sunny Ocean City, Maryland. Last year, Aunt Mary hadn't gone through chemotherapy for breast cancer, and Uncle Glen's donated kidney wasn't failing. Last year, we could all get drunk on sunshine, and we didn't care where the nearest dialysis facility was. Last year was not this year. But they insisted the eight of us go on vacation together anyway—this was *summer*, after all—and my family didn't have much of an alternative. So we packed up in New Jersey and pointed our cars north instead of the usual south, heading for a lake instead of a beach.

After five hours in the car, our caravan arrived at Waneta Lake. To me, anywhere that wasn't the City was "upstate New York," but just 150 miles from Canada, Waneta Lake was *actually* upstate New York. The owner of the dark red lake house, a squat man named Tim, began giving us a tour. As he led my mom and aunt inside, my dad and uncles dropped into the chairs on the deck facing the lake; I imagined seven days passing without any of them moving. With Uncle Glen's kidney+asthma+pair of broken feet, it was understandable on his part; my dad and Uncle Frank, on the other hand, just enjoyed sitting down, usually with some cigars.

Looking east down the sloping lawn, a tall screened-in porch hovered above the shore—a perfect reading nook, I noted. The whisper of water lapping at the land and a glimmer of sunlight hinted at the proximity of the lake, but the trees surrounding the house made it difficult to see anything. I looked at Brian; he'd gotten much taller in the past year, although he still didn't quite reach me at five-foot-six (no matter what he said to the contrary). Somewhere in between

last summer and my year away at school, the beginnings of his transformation from little kid into actual person had escaped my notice, taking root in the new way he carried himself, shoulders back and head high.

“Let’s go,” I said to him.

“Where?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes and began walking down the lawn toward the dock, my legs happy to be in motion instead of tucked underneath me after the long drive. Hurried footsteps told me Brian had decided to follow. Maybe in places like school and work I was timid, waiting to see what others did before I acted, but among my siblings, I was the go-getter, despite my position as the second-born instead of the oldest. Jogging down the stone stairway and then onto the metallic dock—*clang clang clang*, it rang out with each heavy footstep—I purposefully kept my eyes cast down until I reached the end; another step would have propelled me into the water, which I could see wasn’t deep this close to shore.

I looked up to take in the panorama and immediately decided I liked lakes. Perhaps not as much as I liked the beach, but I definitely liked lakes. The mountain in front of us served as a barrier from the rest of the world, as if the houses lining the edge of Waneta Lake were the only witnesses to its existence. We alone were privy to this secret place, and the windows of the houses across from the dock looked at me with blank expressions, as if to say *Alright, you’re here now, you’ve seen it, and it belongs to you, but you mustn’t tell anyone else*. A shade being drawn winked at me, acknowledging my initiation into this secret society. I nodded, my eyes sweeping from one end of the lake to the other. If I stretched my arms out, I thought I could embrace the entire three-and-a-half miles. The sun was beginning to dip behind me; it had waited until we got here so we could get our first glimpse of the landscape under its warm gaze, but now it was getting tired, going to rest behind the mountain on which our house sat.

The middle of July meant I had spent two months waitressing and had a little less than a month before I went back to school; this was the first time all summer the air around me felt breathable. Maybe while we were here, in this strange-but-beautiful place we’d never heard of, we hoped to forget about everything else, what came before the trip and what was yet to come. None of us expressed as much, but this vacation was not a week of “R&R”; we were way beyond that kind of help. It wasn’t as if at the end of seven days, we’d go home, and the anxious crease in Mom’s forehead would have been smoothed, or there’d be a job for Erin waiting on our doorstep. No. Being at the lake wasn’t about going somewhere or attaining anything; it was about getting away, as if all the troubles from home wouldn’t follow us here, or perhaps they’d resolve themselves in our absence.

At nine o’clock the next morning, I popped out of bed, excited to lounge and read, read and lounge. I rifled through my suitcase and hurriedly changed into my swimsuit, stopping in front of the mirror. I’d been doing a “Skinny Mom” workout I’d found on none other than Pinterest; in addition to the ridiculous amount of walking I did as a waitress and my daily runs, I was looking pretty good. Which made me feel pretty good. I examined myself a moment longer, considering today’s date. It had been exactly four weeks since my break-up; I had only cried once, mostly due to the fact I was working more often than

not and partially due to the fact he wasn't much of a loss. Fortunately, I hadn't heard from him since. Offering a small smile at my reflection, I darted upstairs.

That afternoon, after getting through my first book and floundering around on an inner tube with my siblings, I trekked through the grass to get lunch. My uncles and dad were sitting on the deck and observing the lake. I was surprised to see a fourth spectator had joined them.

"Whose cat is that?" The creature had long brown fur with copper stripes, matted in some places and sticking up in others. It looked like it had just crawled out of a dumpster.

"We don't know, but I named him Eddie," responded Uncle Glen. As I got closer, I noticed his open palm, from which the poor excuse for a cat was eating leftover hamburger meat. "Don't pet him, though; your father thinks he might have ticks."

I scrunched my nose in repulsion and drew my hand back. The cat glared at me with its creepy glowing eyes as I wrapped my towel tighter around my shoulders and slipped into the air-conditioned house.

"Erin, can you just bring me your credit card?" My mom had her hand over the speaker of her cell phone.

Erin looked distressed. "You've already used it twice this month, you said you were gonna try not to!"

"Yes, I'm still here, one moment," Mom said into the phone before replacing her hand over it. "I didn't realize we'd have to pay for the dinner cruise up front," she responded to Erin. To celebrate my dad's birthday, we had decided on a boat ride around Seneca Lake. My sister begrudgingly got up from the table and disappeared into the basement, reappearing a moment later with her wallet. My mom gave her a thankful but apologetic look. Erin crossed her arms and looked across the table at me. I offered her my best sympathetic expression, but I'm not sure how strongly it came across—Mom owed me quite a bit of money as well.

"Cath, we could've just paid for it," Aunt Mary said as my mother hung up the phone.

"It's fine," my mom answered, smiling. "I'll pay you back next pay cycle," she said to Erin.

"What're you gonna wear for the cruise, Er?" I asked my sister to change the subject.

She looked sullen for another moment before she started telling me some of the outfits she was considering.

Ultimately, she decided on a striped maxi-dress while I wore one in floral print, and the two of us stood on the deck of the ship following dinner, giggling with our brothers as we made Mom take our picture. We kept quoting *The Office*, and some other passengers laughed at us when we posed on the bow as Jack and Rose from *Titanic*. Aunt Mary poked her head out to tell us dessert was ready, and everyone began making their way down the stairs.

"I'll be right down," I called, glancing at my phone for the first time all night. My heart sank as my ex-boyfriend's name flashed across the screen—he had a knack for poor timing. I looked desperately up at the rhinestone-dotted sky; the stars flashed in condescension, as if to say, *You really think you're the only*

person who's ever heard from an unwanted ex? I turned my gaze to the black water beneath me, hoping for a bit more sympathy; it was unmoving but for the wake of the boat, like a block of onyx waiting for me to make some sense out of it with the skill of a sculptor. I considered throwing my phone into the darkness, tempted to interrupt its serenity the way mine had been interrupted by a stupid text message. I opted instead to slip my phone back into the pocket of my dress, text message unopened, before going downstairs to sing "Happy Birthday."

Erin and Uncle Glen both enjoy lively discussions, because somehow, miraculously, neither of them has ever been wrong in their lives, but the next day at lunch was different; they were arguing. The three of us had been having a conversation that had somehow disappeared into anger, flaring up so unexpectedly that the rest of the family froze around us.

"That's what you two do," Uncle Glen said, pointing a finger at Erin and me and raising his voice. "You start these discussions, and you both think you know everything, and it's starting to piss me off!"

We'd been talking about Zelda Fitzgerald and her cause of death, debating the details; as one of my favorite historical figures, I'd studied her life and written a collection of poetry about her. I felt the need to defend her when my uncle blamed her for the fire that burned down her sanatorium. I held fast to the idea that a "reformed" patient of the hospital who'd been promoted to security guard started the fire that killed Zelda Fitzgerald and eight other patients. But the argument was so asinine, and I was so uncomfortable, I would have agreed with my uncle if he'd said Godzilla had set the fire.

"No, I was only trying to say Kate *just* did a research project on this, doesn't that count for anything?" Erin asked incredulously, also unsure of why he was being so confrontational.

"Obviously it doesn't," I interjected, pushing away from the table, dumping my dish in the sink, grabbing my book, and hurrying outside. My footsteps pounded the dock, disturbing what had been a peaceful scene, as Uncle Glen's words ran around my head. My face was red in shame—*maybe I didn't know what I was talking about*—and tears ruined my view of the lake. I noticed a strange sensation in my hand and was surprised to see a knife and fork held tightly in my grasp; in my haste, I had forgotten to leave them in the sink with my plate. The knife's serrated edge bit into my skin. I set the utensils on the bench beside me and cracked open my book, attempting to disappear into the Pacific jungles of the World War II memoir.

A half hour later, my mother had joined me, and we were reading silently. Behind us, I heard someone coming down to the dock, but it wasn't the eager footsteps of my brothers or the slower but definitive tread of my dad. I turned to see Uncle Glen walking carefully toward us; he hadn't walked further than the distance from the house to the car the whole week, but I hid my surprise, determined not to acknowledge him. He stopped next to me, put his hands on his hips, and took in the view of the lake, inhaling deeply.

"I owe everyone an apology," he said. "Yesterday morning, when Mary and I said we had gone out to see the sunrise... we were actually coming back from the hospital. I'd had an asthma attack in the middle of the night."

"Really?" Concern colored Mom's voice, but I was determined to stay cold,

still not looking up.

“They gave me a heavy dose of steroids, and clearly, it affected my mood. And so I’m very sorry for that, Kate.”

Having been addressed directly, I finally met his gaze. “It’s okay,” I murmured. For some reason, I felt more ashamed after hearing this explanation. He extended his arms, and I dutifully stood and gave him a reconciliatory hug before sitting back down and staring at my book. Uncle Glen took another look around the lake; my mom jokingly asked if he wanted to get in the paddle boat. He laughed jovially, the kind of laugh that would have shaken his belly last year when he was twenty pounds heavier.

“Can you take our picture?” I yelled at the random teenage boy over the sound of rushing water. I was grinning broadly, aware of how insane we all looked, wet faces peering out of the hoods of thin blue ponchos. He nodded, and I backed up to join my family on the bow of *The Maid of the Mist*.

We had wandered around Niagara Falls State Park for over an hour, losing Uncle Glen and Aunt Mary as they’d stopped to take a break, losing my father as he continuously ventured off without saying where to, and losing our patience as we looked for the damn entrance to the stupid boat ride. Upon reuniting, we’d all sat around eating Dippin’ Dots and debating whether it was even worth it at this point. Then we noticed the ticket kiosk for *The Maid of the Mist* right next to the Dippin’ Dots stand.

Putting our ponchos on over our various hats and backpacks, we laughed at the bizarre blue forms our bodies took on. Rainbows bounced off every surface of the falls, and we excitedly pointed at lines of ducklings as they swam by. I looked at my mom and Erin, and I couldn’t stop laughing. Erin tried to ask what was so funny, but it wouldn’t have mattered even if we could have heard each other; I couldn’t explain what I was feeling. The journey under the falls purged all thoughts from my head; everything was pure joy. One of the most astounding places on earth, and all I could do was laugh in its face.

The next morning, our last at Waneta Lake, Erin and I stumbled out of bed and down to the dock, where gossamer threads of mist rose off the lake, evaporating into morning light. The mountain across the way was one long dark shadow, guarding the gleaming sunrise that had begun an hour ago. Wrapping my arms tightly around myself, I breathed deeply, trying to keep all thoughts of returning home from running through my brain. The tumultuous past week spread itself out like the fog over the lake; all the illness, financial anxiety, and ex-boyfriends that were supposed to stay at home had found their way here, one way or another, but I kept a brave face. I didn’t want the mountains to know that I had polluted this place, allowed the demons to follow us; I had failed to keep Waneta Lake secret. I couldn’t see the windows of the nearby houses, but I imagined sympathetic understanding in their gazes rather than disappointment.

Sunrise was lovely, if not awe-inspiring. I wanted a hundred colors woven through the clouds, bouncing off the ripples of the lake and inspiring me to wake up this early every morning. Instead, dawn reached its hand over the hills with clarity and gentleness, causing the foggy chill to dissipate. I snapped a couple of pictures, stifled a yawn, and waited another moment for Divinity to

make itself known. When it didn't, Erin and I wordlessly slogged uphill and went back to sleep for a couple more hours.