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The Lake

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Author Bio

Eleanor Gross is a junior Anthropology major and French minor at Gettysburg College who enjoys spending her free time wondering how she'll leave the U.S and inherit a castle somewhere abroad.

The Lake

ELEANOR GROSS

Here, standing barefoot on the lush green grass, Ariel took her first deep breath in hours, days, weeks. The sun painted the sky a vibrant orange, streaked with a pale pink and violet at the top. She wiggled her bare toes and let them breathe in the damp dusk air. She welcomed the tiny insects who wove their way through them and the coolness of the dirt beneath the grass. Pale and lined with red bands from being trapped in socks all day, her feet whined and stretched in this familiar area. Ariel clawed her shirt over her head, desperate to be free of her constraining clothes. Unbuttoning her knee-length khaki shorts, she let them drop to her ankles, gingerly stepping out of them. She fervently ran her fingers through the braid of blonde hair at the back of her head and let the strands fall sloppily around her shoulders and down her bare back. Stripping completely, she bounded three steps until her feet met the wet sand at the edge of the lake. Here, surrounded by heavily shaded trees and bushes, she had found her own secret spot. She hadn't been here almost the entire summer, but today she just had to get away.

Dipping her toe into the cool, dark water, she watched the last of the sun disappear below the horizon, making room for that perfect moment at the end of the day when there were no shadows, no places to hide. She could see all of the thick brush that lined this lake, all of the tall evergreen and maple trees that provide shade and cool places to rest on the searing hot summer days. She waded into the water, working to keep the mud below the surface from sucking her feet into the abyss before she could take another step. This lake was an old friend to her. Red-eared slider turtles sank back down below the murky surface, having decided she was not a predator. Once she was neck-deep, Ariel tore her feet from the muck, shifting her weight to float freely on her back. Now surrounded by lake and forest, with the only observers being the last rays of the sun and her grandmother in the moon, she was safe. She could recount what had brought her here and ask for advice without judgement. She had wept at this lake, she had laughed here, she had swum in silence, and she had screamed until her throat burned at this lake. The lake would understand.

Going on 19, Ariel wondered how she had ever ended up stay-

ing in this godforsaken town. Her friends were preparing to leave again for their colleges and universities in far off places across the country. Ohio, Colorado, even Florida, were all stealing her childhood playmates to shape them into well-rounded human beings. What had Ariel done? She had stayed in this dusty town, she had stayed with her lake, with her father and brother, and she stayed screaming at the moon, waiting for answers she never seemed to have. She thought back to what made her drive all the way out here to float silently in the water.

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Fire crackled and sizzled before Ariel's eyes. The moon and stars were hidden under a heavy cloud-cover and the fire provided just enough light for her to see her coworkers. Log cabins surrounded them, and camp counselors sat strewn across blankets, old tree trunks, and one another. Every pair of khaki shorts held a dusty walkie-talkie and the sweat on everyone's foreheads had just begun to dry as the air temperature dropped by the minute. She reached over to squeeze the thick arm of her companion on the log. From his profile, she could see the perfectly straight path of a thin nose and thick curls of black hair that tucked neatly behind large ears and crawled down the back of his neck. A soft jawline was illuminated beautifully in the flickering light of the fire and Ariel wanted nothing more than to run her finger along it.

Ariel had liked this man from the moment she saw him, but it had taken these past months working together to take care of their group of campers for her to realize that she loved him. They were so perfect together and she wondered if he knew how much she loved him. Looking at him, she felt completely at home, like they had never not known each other. She knew that she never wanted to be without him.

The man beside her turned at her gesture on his arm and pale emerald eyes crinkled into the same crooked smile that had first caught her off guard when she met him. She imagined a life with him, this beautiful man next to her, and what it would be like to have a son who looked just like him. He reached over to pat her hand and Ariel's stomach fluttered at the simple gesture. An eruption of voices around them broke the silence and the two turned to watch one of their coworkers emerge from his cabin with a scratched guitar. This had become a nightly occurrence, but nobody ever got tired of a little music by the fire.

After singing and dancing and three interruptions because of

night terrors from campers, all of the counselors laid content and exhausted around the dying fire. Sprawling across her love in a graceful heap, Ariel didn't want the moment to end. He had stolen a kiss from her under the moonlight the week before and she had decided she would marry him when he asked her. She would wait a hundred years for him if he asked her to. Under her gaze, the man gently ran his finger along her cheek, sending a shiver down her spine. She wanted him more than anything else in the world, but he had never given her more than a kiss. She hadn't been able to figure out why, but she had assumed that it was because he didn't want to rush anything.

How silly of her.

As dawn broke on the horizon, Ariel pushed her stiff body up from her cot on the floor of the cabin, glancing to check if the bathroom was taken. It was. The door was shut, but she could see a shard of light illuminating the floor beneath it. Looking around, she saw that most of her coworkers were beginning to rise from their slumbers as well, having been woken by the noise in the bathroom and the blinding morning sun in the windows. Curtains blew in the gentle breeze and Ariel could smell rain in the air. Today, they would probably have to take shelter in their cabins with the campers. There hadn't been rain in weeks, so a deluge was to be expected. Wiping her eyes, she looked down at the old watch on her wrist. It was half-past six and she and her coworkers would have to be ready to feed the campers their breakfast in a little under an hour.

Jostling for the door, Ariel managed to squeeze by her friend, Rebecca, and get some water from the sink to brush her teeth. A mostly clean washcloth, one granola bar and change of clothes later, she was ready to start her day. Outside, clouds loomed in the distance, but the sun was still shining, so every counselor donned much-needed sunglasses to greet the campers for Rise and Shine.

Bursting into cabins 3 and 4, Ariel sang the Good Morning song to her campers, rousing everyone from their sleep with cheers and words of encouragement. After having announced when breakfast would begin, she exited the cabins to find her other counselors sitting lazily around the ashes of last night's fire, sipping bitter coffee and tea, or downing bottles of cool water from the spring in preparation for the day to come. She couldn't find her love in the circle, so she sat next to Rebecca and happily accepted a cup of herbal tea, setting it down first to braid her hair in her usual fashion. With her baby blue polo shirt tucked into her khaki shorts and her walkie-talkie secured on a belt loop by her hip, she adjusted her white crew socks until they peeked out from the tops of her muddy boots.

Her day continued as it usually did, but she kept an eye on the rain clouds in the distance, waiting anxiously for them to block out the sun.

As the afternoon drew closer, so did the clouds, and Ariel was happy that the air cooled with their arrival. Herding the campers back into their cabins for board games and theater plays, she caught sight of her beloved co-worker, the man with dark curly hair. He stood at the hood of a white SUV with his hands on his hips. A slender woman exited from the driver-side door, greeting him with shrieks and hops. He rounded the truck with his arms wide and took the woman in them eagerly. Doting her face and neck with kisses, he moved her short, wavy brown hair aside to get at more skin.

Ariel wanted to run, but she stood frozen on the porch of cabin 3. Frozen with her hand on the door, holding it open for all to see. What a fool she had been. What a fool. She watched as the man she loved lifted the woman with brown hair he loved into the air, swinging her in circles, laughing heartily in a way she had never heard him laugh before. Ariel's heart shattered, and her stomach roiled at the sight of the two lovers outside of the white car. Lovers. They were lovers. Ariel had loved this man, but she would never be his lover, would she. Did she love this man? Yes, she thought, she did. She loved him with all of her heart and had given him everything she had, hoping he would give all he had in return. Clearly, he hadn't.

Clenching the wood beneath her fingertips, she dug her nails into the door and wiped her eyes free of the tears that threatened to spill over them in front of these campers. *The campers*. She had to think of the campers, now. She couldn't let them see her so upset, because then they would undoubtedly find out she loved a man who didn't love her. The wind picked up as the first few drops of rain splattered the dusty ground below, drumming lightly on the roof.

Once she was safely inside, Ariel watched in awe as the skies opened and released a torrential downpour on the campgrounds. From the window she and the campers gasped as everything they had made in the past few weeks was washed away by the rain. The firepit, forts of branches and twigs the children had made, stick figures in the dirt, and chalk drawings on the asphalt were all erased, as if they had never been. Ariel wished she was more surprised by what lay before her. Did she expect everything to last forever? No, she never had, had she. Numbly, she played checkers and cards with her campers in cabin 3, cringing at their shrieks and screams while they excitedly won or lost the games they competed in. Once the rain subsided, she let everyone outside to play in the mud and carnage that remained, while choosing to perch atop the railing on the porch and watch.

Here, she let the returning sun wash over her face as regret and heartbreak clenched her stomach into uncomfortable knots. Pale emerald eyes, crinkled at the corners, flashed behind her eyelids whenever she shut

them, but she couldn't bear to see that glittering white SUV in her peripheral vision. She decided to focus more on her campers smearing mud on one another's faces. Watching them, she realized she should be scolding the children for doing such a thing, but why not let them have their fun? Happiness was such a fickle thing . . .

. . .

Ariel swished her arms at her sides, creating soft ripples in the water. Lifting her head, she wished the sun hadn't left so soon. Mosquitos and water bugs danced across her skin and in the water around her as she peered up at the moon above. At first glance she thought it might be full, but further inspection gave her the sense that just a sliver was missing. She frowned, unhappy with how such a tiny missing piece could make something so beautiful so wrong.

Stars dotted the blackened sky just above the tree-line, battling the moon for light. As the moon illuminated her skin, she thought she might be made of glass. Her torso and thighs glowed until they were almost silver, and she let her hair float dejectedly in the space around her head. In the coolness of the night and the stillness of this lake she could think clearly again.

He had never loved her, had he. *No*, the moon cooed at her, *he never had*. Had she ever loved him? *Of course you did*, the mosquitos whined in her ears, *of course you loved him*. Was this what heartbreak felt like? She didn't need an answer for that. She knew it was. She knew it was heartbreak by the ache in her chest, and the numbness of her limbs. She knew it was heartbreak from her shaky breaths and raw, stinging sobs on the car ride here. Yes, this was heartbreak. Yes, she had loved him. No, he had never loved her.

Ariel flipped over, showing the moon her back, and treaded water silently. A loon called, begging for a response. When it received none, it glided in circles in the water, deciding whether to fly away or remain in the lake here alone.

Wading to shore, she crawled into the grass to lay on the still-warm land. She closed her eyes and rolled to her side, curling into a ball. Alone. She was all alone. She was alone here, and she would be alone when she was old. Crickets chirped and frogs on the edge of the water sang their peeping tunes. Something landed on her thumb and Ariel opened her eyes to find a firefly nesting on her fist. A second firefly joined her on her hip, and she raised her head to find the bushes and tree branches alight in a network of yellow pops and sizzles. Two glowing eyes peeked out from the brush and a small fox crept into the clearing, coming to rustle her pile of clothes with his nose in search of a quick treat.

Rising to sit upright, she hugged her knees to her chest in the cool

air and watched the lake glow in the moonlight. Creatures of the night greeted her from all sides of the water, stopping by for a quick sip or just coming to say hello. Once the fox finished rifling through her pants, Ariel stood up and dressed herself once more, feeling the tightness in her chest finally give way to breath.