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City Scape

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I

You listen to the music as if it were the first rain of the summer season. The first droplets are like the notes at the high end of an old upright grand piano. It is music you have heard many times and it has always led you to yourself, to thoughts of your own life. Now, it empties your mind. Your world, if only for a moment, becomes the music. The song you are listening to has no words. There are no voices. None even speak inside your head. You have always known that this song is instrumental, but today is the first you've actually focused on it. It conjures up images of deep green fields, devoid of trees, stretching a thousand times farther than the eye can see. Closing your eyes, you can see the grasses blowing and waving in the breeze. The music plays on, its notes now strummed by the wind, an aeolian harp sitting motionless on a windowsill. You rise and move to the window. The leaves on the trees are as green as the darkest all-winter fir. The sky has grayed and the dark green of the trees takes on a similar soft tone. The music moves. The small, short lived circlets appearing on the surface of the lake tell you your vision of rain was correct. Again there is the notion of the upper octaves of the piano, playing lightly as the droplets increase in number and the circlets grow wider and vanish more slowly.

So came the first rain of summer.

It is a cleansing, feeding rain. You step outside as it begins and it washes away everything that the music has cleared from your mind. This is what you came for. This is what you have needed. All of life's little, everyday annoyances and even larger, darker problems are simply washed away. The rain is strengthening, and as it is being thrown down at the earth, the surface of the lake is disturbed by a thousand tiny ripples. You step back into the cabin, clean from your morning shower.

II

You pick up a towel, and move to the portable stereo on the mantelpiece of the old stone fireplace. The song ends, and the tape runs out, a resounding click signalling the completion of its task. Feeling cool and relaxed, you wrap the towel around yourself and sit down to breakfast. You recall a similar breakfast, almost fifteen years ago. It was raining, and you were newly awakened.

Richard Barnhill, age 10.

The rain came down in a constant drizzle as Ricky hurriedly ate his cereal. He loved corn flakes with plenty of fruit as his grandparents had first shown him. Strawberries, fresh from the patch, raisins scattered throughout, blueberries next to bananas, and nectarines after oranges were a part of almost every breakfast. Even still, he rushed to empty the bowl. A rainy day. That was always a good excuse for indoor play. When the sun was out, Ricky felt guilty for playing inside, but not on rainy days. When his grandparents smiled at each other knowingly, Ricky knew he was about to be excused.

"Give your hair a good comb first." Ricky's grandmother was not about to let her grandson meet the neighborhood with messy hair.

Ricky quickly obeyed and dashed out the door as soon as his bed was made and his pajamas were folded and put away. He met the neighbor's children and in their basement began the day's activities. Although they all wished to be in the lake or elsewhere outside, they relished giving life to their toys. The toys usually were pooled and each boy in turn would chose his army. Spaceships there, ground forces there, they would set up their own individual "bases" and then the three would reenact favorite science fiction movies, or create adventures of their own. Rescue missions flew around the house, behind enemy lines, and commando scout parties climbed the highest mountain for the best spy view of another ten year old's creation.

Strange that only now as you have reached adulthood that you can see your memories in your mind, watching them as if they were a movie unfolding before your eyes. You can't decide if you like watching yourself on the screen.

You look once more at the three boys playing. It is one of the fondest memories you have of the cabin, and you almost chuckle as you add the strawberries.

III

The rain has ceased as you clean up from the morning meal, and you decide to recline on the dock. Picking up a practically nameless book which you bought for "fall asleep reading," you carry a folding lawn chair down onto the dock. You open the book, lean back in the chair, and begin reading. And, at almost the same instant, nod off. You dream of past summers at the cabin.

Richard Barnhill, age 15.

Amy Reed was the kind of girl Rick had played with as a child, ignored as she reached about age eleven, and then started to notice again around age fourteen. When summer came that year, Amy had an attractive bathing suit which, of course, caught Rick's hormone influenced eyes and mind.

His motives were not purely physical, however. Since their cabins were not over twenty feet apart, he saw her often. They swam in the lake together, had lunches, enjoyed the summer sun of their vacations, and talked. Future plans, past experiences, friends come and gone drifted out over the lake on warm July days. The one date they did have would remain etched in Rick's mind for years.

With thunderstorm threatening, the two slowly finished their dinner, not wanting it to be over so soon. They were beginning to discover how much alike they were, and they were wondering what it meant to be in love. They drove homeward as the pouring rain slowed to a drizzle and finally a barely perceptible mist. Lightning still flew overhead, and the earth was drenched from the downpour. The air was a force so fresh it was as if the two people were breathing life, pure and unobstructed. The car at rest in the driveway behind them, Rick approached Amy, thinking he'd like to kiss her, but he was unsure about her feelings. It was one of those times when one's hopes come to meet with reality. They are few and far between.

Rick had never seen her again. They had written for a time after she moved away, but their summer vacations never seemed to meet. They eventually lost touch, but Rick always had hopes.

When you awaken, you are startled to find yourself apparently adrift in the middle of a lake. Then you recall your surroundings and wonder about the time. It does not feel like night, and yet certainly many hours have passed since you fell asleep reading. What was the title of the book? You pick it up and refresh your memory. "Summer of Lost Love" That explains the content of your dreams, but not the length of your nap. There is a faint glow all around and a slightly brighter one to the east.

"Dawn." you think out loud. Then, as if in response to that, you say, "I never cease to amaze myself. Sometimes my grasp of the completely obvious boggles the mind. For my next feat of magic, I predict that the sun *will* rise over that hill within the hour."

Every now and then, you wonder about this habit you have of talking to yourself.

"It's the only way I'm guaranteed intelligent conversation," you reassure yourself. It is your usual excuse. Deciding that your brain is too disturbed at the moment for conscious thought, you find your watch, gather

your towel and chair, and head for the cabin. Glancing at the time, you carefully make your way along the slippery boards. You notice that they desperately need painting.

"Four thirty-six. The dock needs painting, dew has fallen, and I..." You look down and notice your damp clothes. "...I am rather wet." You give a tremendous yawn as you step off the dock onto the small, grassy hill leading up to the cabin. You are still tired.

You enter the cabin, dry off, and climb into the same bed you had climbed into every summer evening since you were four years old.

So ended the first full day at the cabin.

IV

You wake once more, and look at the clock. It reads eleven forty-three, A.M., and you are struck dumb by the sheer number of hours you have spent unconscious in the recent past. You slept when you arrived after watching the sun dip into the trees on the far shore of the lake; you woke, tasted the rain and breakfast, and then slept again until the following dawn. Then, you added seven hours on to that, and it is close to the following afternoon.

"Not surprising," you say as you climb out of bed. The springs squeak as they always have.

"I was awake for a week before I came here." But you don't want to think about that. You notice your hunger, and arrive at the conclusion that it must be time for another breakfast.

As you make your bed, you are reminded that you did not climb into this same bed since you were four. You remember your father putting you to bed in the room that had been your Grandmother's, many years before. Your bed was, and still is, on the enclosed porch where the adults stayed up and talked. When they were ready to retire, your father would carry your sleeping form to the porch and put you in your own bed. Every morning until you were too big to carry, you awoke in a different room than the one in which you remembered falling asleep. That *was* an experience.

The lake seemed much bigger then. You were not allowed to swim past the end of the dock. The swim out to the floating raft thirty yards from the dock was an eternity, even *with* a life-jacket, but compared to the rest of the lake it was child's play. You're pleased with that thought. An eternity of child's play.

Richard Barnhill, age 6.

"I can do it, Dad! It's easy! I swim that far for the swim team every day!"

"The pool at the 'Y' is only four feet deep all the way across, young man."

"I only swim on top! I know I can do it without the life-jacket.. PLEASE?!" Ricky was begging. And Dad decided to give in. He started to smile.

"All right... all right!" He sat down on the edge of the dock and looked at Ricky bouncing up and down in the water. "We'll go together."

"GREAT!! Thanks, Dad."

The swim was tougher than Rick thought. He was exhausted by the time he reached the raft, and he almost wished he had the life-jacket. After a long rest, and several daredevil jumps off the diving board, the two swam back to the dock, and Rick's father knew that the boy would sleep well that night. After all, they had only ridden horses in the morning, gone fishing in the afternoon, and had four swims in the lake somewhere in between.

That was the second to last time your father ever visited the lake.

V

With your meal out of the way and the cabin in fairly good order, you decide to take the small sailboat out into the lake. You feel a slight breeze blowing when you step outside, and you make for the old garage, now storage shed. The sailboat is small enough that one person can push its trailer to the water and launch it alone. "Convenient," you mutter as you push the boat into the water. Once out on the lake, you take the sail down and relax. You pick up a fishing pole and bait the hook. Dropping it over the side you watch as it sinks out of sight. The last time you fished from this boat was with Dad. You'd been out in it once or twice after that, but never with a fishing pole. Not until now.

Richard Barnhill, age 20.

"Dad, I..."

Silence only returned. The wind played at the loose sail, beckoning, almost pleading.

"Dad, tell me. I have to know."

The lake's surface rippled slightly with the breeze. For a very long time there was only the sound of the fishing poles, the lake, and the wind now barely touching the sail.

"About six months," his father said finally. "Maybe more.. Maybe a

little less.”

Richard resisted the temptation to say *I told you so*. But he had. He had told both his parents.. hundreds of times.

“Don’t you think I tried? We never got around to it.” He paused again. Richard cast his line, and his father continued. “Maybe now your mother will.”

A flat, faded and dried-out cigarette pack shifted out from under one of the seats as Dad leaned back trying to pull in a fish. The line suddenly went limp, and Dad started to reel it in.

“Looks like he got away,” Richard mumbled pathetically.

“Yep.”

Dad looked down and saw the cigarette pack. The wind ceased and there was complete silence on the lake.

“Yeah.”

VI

Two weeks have elapsed in the same manner. You have spent most of the time thinking about people you loved, people you still love, but are gone. First, it was Dad. Then, Mom succumbed for the very same reason. A different disease, but the same final outcome. That left you alone. You buried your Mother three weeks ago today. And now you are alone. Yours is the only voice you hear now. You continue to talk to yourself so you don’t have to listen to the silence. Mom had said something as she lay in that hospital bed linked into six different machines, wasting away. She had said, “Please find someone, Richard. You have always been too alone.”

You’re afraid that you’ll never find anyone. Or that you will, and you’ll lose them. you said that you came to the cabin this time to sort things out, to have time to think, and you did, you had needed that. But now it was time to return. it was time to go home and start again.

You leave the bags in the car and go down to the dock just one more time to see the sunset. You see someone standing alone at the end of the dock. You walk out to the end of the dock and Amy turns around. She has been watching the sunset.

“Hello, Richard.”

“Thanks, Mom,” you say skyward.

Grant Sterling Mudge
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