

The Whispering Lake

Ria Ramchandani

Short Story 6th – 3rd Place

Beep, beep, beep.

Dylan groaned as he banged on the alarm clock and dragged himself out of bed. He freshened up and shuffled down the stairs for breakfast where the aroma of sweet, sticky maple syrup, freshly cooked pancakes, and slightly salted butter drifted up from the table. Dylan hurriedly sat down, gobbling all of his food.

“What’s the hurry, mister?” His mom asked.

“Running late to meet Milo, Susan, and Kendall at 7:30 am,” Dylan replied.

“Where are you guys going this early?”

“Don’t know, Milo said he found a scenic hike close to the woods. ”

“Well, have fun,” she said.

~~~~~

Dylan cringed as he looked around the “scenic hike”. The ground was covered in mushy mud, giving out an unbearable odour. The air was damp and the gray rain-filled clouds lay like a blanket on the sky, leaving no room for sunlight to stream through. Dead leaves were scattered on the ground and the trees were nude and lifeless. Dylan understood why many people didn’t come here.

“Are you sure we’re at the right place? This place has no reception, and even an animal wouldn’t live near here” Dylan said skeptically.

“Yeah, but now that we’re here, let's just continue.” Milo said.

“I’m not so sure about this.” Dylan muttered, mostly to himself.

Milo had heard him. “Come on, don’t be a chicken!” He taunted.

“I’m not, let's go.” Dylan replied, his tone defensive.

“Where do we even enter from? There’s no pathway.” Susan wondered.

“Look, there’s a sign,” Kendall spotted.

There was a sign indeed. It read- “Shadow Valley”. The sign had an arrow, which had fallen off.

Next to the sign was a shriveled dusty paper, perhaps thumbtacked to the sign at some point. It was a missing person report with a worn out photo of a girl. The foreboding feeling from Dylan’s gut became louder, yelling at him to turn back. He snubbed it, knowing that it was futile arguing with Milo. Plus, he didn’t want to be called yellow again.

“There’s an opening in between those trees,” he pointed out. “We can enter through there.”

“Good thinking Dyl,” Milo said.

They began their venture through the forest.

~~~~~

The difference between day and night was thinning as they walked deeper into the forest. It was almost as if the trees were fusing together to form a dark wall around.

“Be back, I’m going to look for a place to attend nature’s call,” Milo said.

He walked through the trees, leaves crushing beneath his feet. It was eerily quiet around him, the silence soon broken by luring whispering.

“Hello?” Milo said, but the whispering didn’t stop. It was as if the whispers were coming from right behind him.

“Anyone there?” he asked in a panicked tone.

There was no reply. He looked around quickly, but didn’t see anyone. There, far out in the distance, was a beautiful lake. Crystal clear, surrounded by thickets of luxuriant shrubs and bushes, in contrast with the muddy swamps and leafless trees he’d left behind. The sun shone brightly there and the sky was clear, like the lake. In a hypnotic trance, he walked towards it. He stood at the edge of the lake, his reflection staring back at him, as if it had a life of its own. He felt a strong urge to enter the water, as if the voices were drawing him closer toward the lake. Slowly, he dipped his feet in the water, sending millions of ripples into the still lake. He saw something shiny move by him, but he shook it off. All was quiet again, except for the faint splashing of water. Suddenly, something ice cold grabbed his feet. As he fell, he was broken from his hypnotic trance and writhed around like a fish out of water, as he was being pulled underwater. He dug his nails into the muddy ground, trying to get a grip on any rock, but it was too slippery. Something held firmly onto him, digging its long razor sharp claws deeper into his feet. He couldn’t tell which was worse- the burning of the salty water, or the sharp claws, slowly digging into his flesh.

“Help”, he tried to scream, but no words came out. He felt as if his nose, throat and lungs were on fire. All the sounds around him became muffled as water flooded his ears. The whispering sounds now became louder. The world seemed to be spinning around him and nothing made sense to him anymore. He spun and splashed helplessly in the water but knew it wouldn’t do him any good. After what seemed like an eternal battle between his will to survive and an impending death, he finally pursed his lips and let out his last breath, which was now a brand-new whisper of the Whispering Lake. Thick, silver bubbles floated to the top of the lake and then, they disappeared too. The lake became calm, still and alluring, yet again.

~~~~~

“Milo!” “Milo!” “Where are you?!” They all called.

They had searched for hours, but there was no sign of Milo.

“I think we should split up,” Dylan suggested after a while. “We could find him faster. You guys can go together. It would be safer that way.”

“Be careful,” Kendall added as Susan nodded in agreement. Then they parted ways. The search for Milo was proving to be futile. By this point, Dylan was beginning to lose hope. Suddenly, shrill shrieks of terror tore through the silence. He instantly recognized the voices- it was Kendall’s and Susan’s.

“Shoot!” Dylan exclaimed.

A mix of emotions ran through him- sadness, fear, anger, and frustration. But one stood out the most- the one that was the most painful. GUILT. Guilt that he had suggested for them to split up. Guilt that he had put them in danger. And guilt that he couldn’t find Milo and now something bad might have happened to Susan and Kendall as well.

He swiftly moved through the trees, following the direction in which the shrieks came from. Abruptly, he was stopped by a girl's voice.

“Are you looking for someone?” she asked.

He turned back, startled. He felt like he had seen her from somewhere. Then he realized from where. This girl had a striking resemblance to the missing girl from the photo. Could it really be her?

~~~~~

When Dylan didn’t return home the next day, his parents got worried, notified the police and organized a search party with the other parents. They found Milo’s car near Shadow Valley. The next day, the police recovered three bodies from the lake. Bodies which were soon identified as Milo’s, Kendall’s, and Susan’s. Only one case remained a mystery- where was Dylan?

One week later.....

“Buddy!” “Buddy, where are you?!” Luna called on her dog. “Oh, there’s a pathway. Looks like people have already been here. Buddy must have gone this way,” she muttered to herself.

She inched towards the pathway and saw the sign that read “Shadow Valley”. The photo of the missing girl still lay crumpled and shriveled on the ground. Next to the sign though, was a freshly thumbtacked photo of a missing boy. Luna only subconsciously paid attention to the photos, she had bigger worries at hand. She walked into the deserted woods.

“Are you looking for something?” A boy’s voice called from behind her.

She turned around, startled.

“I’m looking for my dog. I was walking him, the leash slipped and he ran into the forest.”

“I can help you look for him. Follow me,” the boy said.

As they walked into the maze-like woods, a beautiful bright lake shone in the horizon. Luna stared in awe at this sight, but the pleasantness was short lived as a horrible smell engulfed Luna. Her pale skin turned a slight shade of green as she had an uncontrollable gag reflex. She instinctively pinched her nose shut. An outline of a figure lay under the rotten willow trees. As Luna walked closer to the figure, terror struck her. It was a boy. A dead boy. His body lay there, rotting, more rotten than the willow trees. Flies and maggots slowly picked at his flesh. Luna ran backwards in fear but tripped over a log. The boy turned back and ominously smiled at her. Whispers drifted around Luna, making an invisible wall. They were combined voices of men, women, girls and boys. One at a time, the voices started disappearing as they converged into the boy. Then, there was silence. Luna's fear skyrocketed as everything suddenly made sense. The missing boy she had seen earlier in the photo was the same boy in front of her. The boy in front of her was the same boy that lay on the ground, decaying....