

*Off-Duty*

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Age 16, Taconic Hills Central School

It was summer's last gasp, the penultimate dog day. My final shift of the season lifeguarding at what everyone in town called a lake (but was really no more grandiose than a large pond) had come to an end fifteen minutes prior. My supervisor had booked it, but allowed myself and my coworker, Ollie, to linger around as long as we wanted. So we sat on the dock.

Actually, I sat on the dock and Ollie was lying on his stomach. His neck and head were hanging over the edge. The ends of his hair skimmed the murky water and his face slowly turned scarlet. When the blood flowing to his head reached an apex, he abruptly sat up and swayed dizzily. I took the opportunity to push him in the lake.

"Why'd you do that?" he sputtered upon surfacing. I shrugged. In response, he choked and gasped, pretending to be dragged into the depths by some phantom. He jokingly pleaded, "Asa, save me, save me!"

"I'm off duty.

Go ahead, drown."

Ollie quit the performance, instead treaded and asked, "Has anybody ever actually died in here?"

"Yeah... I think so. A few years ago, maybe? My mom might have mentioned something about a girl. She would have been a bit older than us then," I mused.

"So we're the age now that she was when she died?"

"Approximately."

"Was it an accident?"

“She and her boyfriend went swimming at night. She slipped and hit her head and sunk.”

The wind blew, bringing a promise of autumn and raising goosebumps on my limbs. More yellow leaves than ever floated on the reflection of the sky, and the shadow of the mountain stretched long over the lake.

Ollie hauled himself out of the water and left behind a small fizz of bubbles. Once he exited, the wake didn't disappear –it mysteriously expanded. The sight was sort of mesmerizing. We both couldn't tear our eyes away from the oddity.

“Asa, what's going on?” Ollie asked me. It was at that moment that a girl popped her head out of the froth. I recoiled as my coworker shrieked. The girl laughed at our reaction.

“You're seeing this too, right?” I asked Ollie urgently.

“The chick who just emerged from the deep? Yeah.”

“Are we having some kind of mutual trip?”

“No,” the girl replied. “I'm really here.” She gave a little wave.

I asked, with more of a scared stutter in my voice than I would have liked, “What the fresh hell is going on here? Where did you just come from?”

“I'm Meredith. I'm the girl you were talking about a minute ago.”

“The only person we were talking about was the one who drowned,” Ollie said. His voice was raw with confusion. “You're not saying you're a ghost.”

“Aren't you a smart one,” Meredith grinned. “Yes, I do haunt the lake. Have been for four years. I surface every anniversary of my little accident. Usually nobody's around.”

Clearly, this girl was the one on drugs, not Ollie and I. She must have been hiding under the dock, or something plausible like that. Her emergence was *not* a sign of the supernatural. I was sure of it. “I don't believe you,” I challenged, staring straight into her eyes. I blinked first,

unfortunately.

“Really? I’m not going to try to convince you. My self-esteem’s pretty high, and my time here is limited anyway. I sink at sunset.” Meredith shifted onto her back and floated like a lotus.

I asked her: “Why haven’t we heard of ghosts before now? Definitely, I mean. Shouldn’t somebody call the media, the scientists, the government? Does this mean everywhere where anybody ever died is haunted? Does this mean there’s a ghost of Jesus, or Kurt Cobain?”

Meredith shrugged. “I don’t *know*. All I know is that I’m here, and I have been here ever since I died.”

“How did that happen?” Ollie asked. I whacked him on the arm and glared. First of all, I didn’t want to feed into this girl’s delusions, and secondly, if there was even the smallest chance that she *was* in fact a ghost, it didn’t seem very tactful to ask this question.

Though she did answer. “My boyfriend and I were, um, intoxicated, and we decided to sneak out to the lake and go for a seditious swim. I slipped in the dark, hit my head on a rock, and plummeted down to the bottom of the lake. The whole thing was kind of lame. My last words, especially.”

“What were they?”

“My last words were *Oh my God*. Hardly original, I know. ” Meredith seemed nonchalant, but I could see a glimmer of despair in her eyes. I began to wonder if maybe she wasn’t lying. Her answers were ready immediately upon being asked. I’ve always been good at sniffing out liars, and her story didn’t seem fabricated. But all the same - ghosts?

I didn’t *want* Meredith to be real. I didn’t want my perception the world to change as radically as the reality of ghosts would force it to.

So maybe I sympathized with her a little, until she said:

“By the way, Asa - that’s your name, right? Asa? I don’t recommend wearing that orange bikini any more. It’s not your most flattering.”

All my pity dissolved right then and there. It didn’t matter if she was dead or not; the girl was annoying, vague, and rude, I decided.

Ollie gently suggested, “Meredith, why don’t you, you know, go into the light? Move on? Hanging around the lake doesn’t sound like the best way to spend eternity.” I couldn’t believe that he was so readily accepting of the paranormalcy.

“You’re cute,” Meredith cooed. “You kind of remind me of my boyfriend, except he was a loser. He obviously wasn’t very adept at the whole knight in shining armor thing. Let me drown, didn’t he? But you’re sweet, Ollie. I’ve watched that all summer.” Her face was cloyingly, annoyingly infatuated. Ollie appeared slightly uncomfortable - he dripped sweat, and kept his eyes on the grain of the dock.

Meredith gazed at the sun’s rapid descent. “Soon I’ll be back in the lake. Quick, update me on everything that’s going on.”

She quizzed Ollie and me on recent news events (“Glad I didn’t stick around for this hot mess”), music and television (“Everything was better in my day”), and the fate of one Monica, who she’d gone to high school with.

“Monica was my nemesis,” the ghost said vehemently.

“Well, there’s a Monica working at the grocery store. She’s a checkout girl.”

“Brown hair? Nose piercing? Tattoo on her wrist?”

Ollie nodded.

Meredith grinned, fangs bared in satisfaction. “I always knew she’d end up doing nothing with her life.” Then her cocky smile faded. “Though I guess I didn’t do anything with mine,

either.”

She was like a time traveler, I reflected. Except time travelers always went back, not forwards.

The sun would very soon disappear behind the mountain. It was illuminating the whole bowl of the lake. I shielded my eyes from its tangerine glare, the color of the orange bulb on a traffic light. Do not stop, do not go: proceed slowly, with caution.

Ollie was asking, “Do you want us to send a message to your family?”

“No, I don’t want to give them false hope. I try not to think about these things.” She inspected him more, and actually licked her lips a little. “You really do look a lot like my boyfriend.”

I don’t understand any of what happened that afternoon, but this next part I understand least of all. The ghost lept up and snared Ollie, dragging him underwater. I stared with big, shocked eyes for a second, then my lifeguard training kicked in. I dove in after them.

Submersion in the lake was surprise to my body; it always was. It was like jumping from day into night, from consciousness to sleep, from life to death, everything blazing and vivid and hot, then gloomy and obscure and frigid.

I made out through the caliginous water that Ollie was wrestling to get away from Meredith. The whole scene was a writhing, determined mess of bubbles. I latched onto a limb, then found my way to Ollie’s chest.

Meredith had a good grip on him. I think loneliness and a marrow-deep drive for revenge against her old boyfriend gave her tremendous strength. But I was strong as well; I had labored all summer, and more importantly, I was alive. I wrenched my coworker

up. The tug-of-war between life and death ended the second I was able to get him to the surface. For a second all I could focus on was the sound of us breathing, and the welcome sight of the lambent sky. Then I hauled Ollie to the dock, where he coughed and retched. I kept an eye on the water, which was suddenly still, tranquil. The sun had sunk behind the mountain's black silhouette and left behind only a halcyon haze.

"It's almost like it never happened," I murmured. I don't think Ollie heard, because he exclaimed in a hoarse voice:

"Wow, I nearly bit it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, almost."

"Thanks for saving me."

"Hey, it's in the job description."

"Yeah, but you're off-duty. It took guts to jump in. I don't know if I could have."

"She was a real ghost after all, I guess. But she was also a twat."

"That she was. All the same, I feel bad for her. But I'm definitely not working here next summer." Then Ollie took my hand. I tugged it away as if he were hot to touch, shocked.

"What was that?" I practically yelled. Ollie looked cowed.

"I'm sorry, I was feeling a vibe?" he offered feebly.

"What vibe? Some ghost just tried to kill you, that's not romantic! Besides, I don't *like* you, Ollie! Just because there's a guy and a girl at the end doesn't mean they have to get together."

"I guess it felt cinematic."

I decided to forgive him, but I had to make myself clear: "You misread the vibe, Ollie."

"All right, Asa. I misread the vibe."