

Swimming to Swim

by Gene Brady (Northville, MI)

Paul hadn't planned on ending up in the lake on a very dark night. Probably past ten now, clouds covering the moon. It was windy and cold. The water so cold. Swimming from his broken boat, toward a point of land that kept fading in and out. Digging hard into the water, kicking his feet when he remembered to. Shivering and swimming.

And thinking of Laura in her cottage. Probably reheated dinner at least twice. Probably upset. Maybe sleeping. Arms jabbing into the cold lake. Kick.

Laura didn't want to stay on the lake. "I need to get the steaks on. Can you take me back? You go out."

"Will do. Your loss." Paul reluctantly brought her back to shore, dropped her off at the dock, then turned the boat away from land. Steering the boat, he looked back and watched Laura walk up the dock, brushing her black hair from her face. Six years later and she still made him stir.

His clothes weighed him down. Paul kicked his shoes off a while ago. He was tired, but he kept swimming. Waves fought him, pushed him sideways, rocked him, engulfing him, the large lake making him feel small. And cold.

The day started like a lakeside postcard – sun a mile high, gulls darting high and low, careening around the point. He took the tarp off the boat, preparing it for their cruise that afternoon, checking the tanks. Laura had breakfast ready when he came up to the cottage. Eggs over a thick slice of her homemade wheat bread, fat slices of crisp bacon, grapefruit juice, steaming cup of coffee. She'd opened the window by the kitchen table, letting the warm air in. Paul smelled the coffee as he made his way up the hill.

"Delicious." Eating and talking their plans for the day – a drive to check on the gate latch repair, exploring the farmer's market, a drive over to Chasen's Grove to see if the house at the corner was still for sale. They'd still be by the lake, but with more room. Laura wanted more room. Paul's job was killing him, working weekends, but it afforded them extra money to get a bigger place. Then maybe Kevin would come to visit.

His son hadn't talked to him since he started seeing Laura. Life goes on, Kevin. Six years. Paul's ex-wife had said God knows what to his son, but life goes on.

You keep moving forward. If he stopped digging his arms forward, and kicking, that would be it. Game over. If you stopped moving forward, well...

You had to keep pushing forward. Wasn't that the point?

He saw a flicker of light on shore, near the point. Their cottage. Laura must still be up. Paul had to be getting close. Dig, swim. Shake off the cold. Ignore it. He'd be warm soon. Sitting in the rocker next to the fireplace, dry clothed, blanket wrapped around him, hot cup of coffee.

Warmth.

Dig. Kick. Laura would definitely be upset but relieved he was safe.

Clouds moved, revealing the moon, and light poured over the lake. The wind died down, along with the waves. Paul relaxed, briefly. Treading water, his head tilted back, staring up at millions of stars. So peaceful.

He saw the shoreline clearer now, but couldn't see the cottage lights he was aiming for. He thrashed around in the water, frantically looking at the shore, and realized he had been swimming away from the point, not toward it. His legs felt heavy, pulled down to the bottom of the deep lake.

He turned and started stroking hard, frustrated and helpless. With a new flicker of fear.

No patrol boats in this bay. That was part of the charm, the isolation. Peaceful Martin's Bay, a perfect place to wind down after a long week, a great escape for a summer's vacation, a perfect spot to run your boat into a reef at dusk.

His fear gave him renewed energy. He swam harder. His legs felt cramped, his arms strained but digging. When the boat crashed, he wasn't hurt, just his pride. Laura commented as she got off the boat that he should be careful on the lake, the water was choppy, it would be dark soon. "You should call it a day." He laughed. "I know the lake like the back of my hand."

Now his hands were freezing. Paul saw the light again on shore and swam toward it.

Laura followed his lead less, lately. Like not finishing the boat ride with him and shooting down the stock he wanted to buy. The new car he surprised her with, she took back to the dealer the next day, didn't think it was the one for her. Laura eating dinner in silence. More often.

He would get things back on track. The extra money coming in impressed her, reaching out to his son impressed her. Things would get better. But then this. He screwed up. Again. He swam harder, his legs like weights but his arms kept digging. He swam to Laura. Warmth. Then get the boat fixed. They would go on.

Laura heard it again. Paul wasn't back yet, missed dinner, very late now, and Mintner was outside, tormenting her. Moving around in the dark, making her edgy.

He did it earlier when she was getting off the boat. Minter seemed to watch for when Paul was gone. The boat pulled away and Minter was suddenly there, walking down the dock, grinning, looking her up and down, more time spent on certain parts.

“Enjoy the boat ride, Laura? You doing ok? ‘Cause if not, you know, I’m around, can make sure you’re attended to.”

He licked his lips or she imagined it, it didn't matter, her neighbor made Laura very uncomfortable. She turned and looked back toward Paul, already out in the harbor.

“I’m fine, Matt.”

Laura shouldered her way past Mintner, accidentally touching his beer belly. He snickered. She smelled cigarettes and alcohol. Mintner and his wife were supposed to have sold their cottage months ago, move to Tennessee. Didn't happen.

Laura went inside the cottage, locking the door. As she moved through the rooms she heard him outside.

“He’s out on his boat, Laura. Maybe you and I could make nice and neighborly like. I sure could use a beer. Got any beer?” She peeked outside the drapes and saw him leaning against a tree. He looked out at the lake, buttoning and unbuttoning his faded t-shirt.

“Don’t see Paul nowhere. He won’t be back for awhile. Left you all alone. Sure could use a beer.”

And now in the dark she heard him. He gave up earlier, went away. Now he was back. He probably noticed no boat. Where was Paul when she needed him? On a damn boat ride. In the middle of the night. Unbelievable.

If she called the cops they'd take forever to get there, with all the side roads. They would lecture her to not call them for every little thing. Last spring she called in the night and they found a tree branch fallen on Paul's car. Limited resources, they said. “Make sure you have a good reason to drag us out here.” One of the drawbacks to living in an isolated area.

Laura walked past her suitcases, went into the closet, got out the shotgun 20-gauge pump. She went out with Paul before and shot up cans and plastic bottles set up on a wooden crate. Paul made sure she could shoot it if needed.

She put shells in the shotgun, pumped one in the chamber, put her coat on and went out in the dark.

“Go home, Matt. Leave me alone.”

Laura peered out toward the lake, saw nothing. The wind blew harder now. She heard a voice, a low, throaty growl, but couldn't make out Mintner's words.

She slowly raised the gun. “I mean it. Go.”

She saw a distant movement in the trees, knew he was coming closer. “Stop.” He didn't.

She aimed the shotgun out into the woods to scare him away. Closed her eyes and pulled the trigger. One shot. Loud, crackling through the woods.

She waited, looked. No Mintner. She looked to the left and right. Nothing. Gone. It worked.

Laura hurried back into the cottage, put the shotgun back in the closet, picked up both of her packed suitcases, looked around the room, then walked past her note and out the door.

She drove her car carefully down the dark, dirt path. She swerved to avoid a large tree branch lying on the path.

Paul cried out from the ground as the car veered around him. “Laura! I made it! Where...” He watched her car slowly drive away, then turn and disappear onto the main road. The sweater Laura bought him from the art festival last year was slowly filling with blood.

It was very dark, and windy and cold. “I made it.”

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