

Fishing At Spring Lake

That summer, the air in Spring Lake was like a thick wool blanket in your mouth. Mom had good reason to sweat because she owned and operated the local fitness center, but no one in town, from trash men to the mayor, could spend a few seconds in the sun without feeling the heat. The sun seemed to double in size; the horizons looked greyish-white. Perspiration was a fact of life. I went window shopping at the mall a few times a week just to take advantage of the cool air. Mom wouldn't run the air conditioner at home this summer because the electricity bills would ruin us. The gym wasn't bringing in much money and Dad hadn't sent a check in a long time.

When the phone rang, I was sprawled out on Mom's waterbed with one of her romance novels, one with the front cover torn off, and I was getting bothered by the loud window fan Mom had bought at Mass Mercantile to keep air moving through her room. The fan was too loud on its highest setting, but if I turned it down then I couldn't feel the air. I was glaring at the fan and getting huffy, and then Renie called. That was kind of weird. It's not that we were unfriendly or anything, because Renie and I played on the same soccer team and her mom always drove me home from practice, but I was a year older than her and Renie had friends her own age, plus she was

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a lot more boy-crazy than me, not to mention that, until that day, she had never called me on the phone for any reason. I don't know why she thought of me. Maybe everybody else was busy.

"Do you want to go to the lake with me? Both me and my little brother. My mom's driving. You want to go?"

"To swim?"

"Yeah, sure. You got a swimsuit, don't you? I have one you could borrow."

"No, I have a suit. I'll have to dig it up. Maybe it's in my closet. Sure, I'll go."

"Do you need to ask your mom?"

"No, I get to do what I want, mostly."

"Damn, Shayla, your mom is so cool." Renie said "damn" like it was a ten-dollar word, something she read in a book and needed to drop into conversation as often as possible. "This'll be fun. My mom's yelling for me. We'll be right over."

My swimsuit had been pushed to the back of my underwear drawer, behind some cute argyle socks I got for Christmas and never had an opportunity to wear. I heard Renie's mom honking for me just as I put my fingers on it, so I grabbed a beach towel from the hall closet and scrambled out to their minivan before I could put it on. I remembered to lock the door. Mom always yelled when I forgot.

"It's nice to see you, Shayla," said Renie's mom.

"Hi, Shayla," said Renie, giving a little wave from the passenger seat. "I told you she would come, Mom." Renie looked back at me while I slammed the car door. "My mom thought you wouldn't come."

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"Have you heard who your teacher is this fall?" asked Renie's mom. She had a fluffy feathered haircut and a little too much eye make-up. "Renie is in Miss Lowe's homeroom."

"That's who I had this year. She's nice."

"Who's the seventh grade teacher, Shayla?"

"Uh...my mom hasn't gotten me registered yet, I don't think. She hasn't said anything."

Renie's mom slowly nodded her head, and looked like she wanted to continue this line of questioning when Renie burst in. "Jesus, Mom, what makes you think we want to talk about school? It's summer!" Renie glared at her mother.

"Watch your mouth, young lady."

"Yeah, yeah."

"It doesn't seem possible that Renie is going to be in sixth grade." Renie's mom bit her lip.

"Yeah, it usually comes after fifth grade, Mom."

I sat in the back seat with Renie's nine-year-old brother. He was already in his swim trunks and wasn't wearing a t-shirt. He held a battery-powered water gun against his fish-white baby-fat belly. He stuck out his tongue at me.

"Butt-snot," he said.

"What?"

"Ignore him," Renie said. "Have you been to the lake this summer?" Just like everyone around here, Renie used "the lake" as shorthand for Spring Lake, where the locals spend the summer skiing behind motorboats or swimming at the boat docks. Residents of the town of Spring Lake could park there for free, so it was a popular spot to spend a hot afternoon even when money was tight. We lived in the town of Spring Lake, a

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few miles south of the docks. All four of my mom's grandparents were born in town and almost everyone I knew had also been born here too.

"Not this summer, no. Actually, it has been a long time. My dad used to take me fishing up there."

"Your dad? I thought your parents were divorced. Your dad doesn't live in Spring Lake, does he?"

Renie's mom shushed her, and I said, "It's all right."

"I've never gone fishing," Renie said.

"It's fun. Dad got me my own rod, one that looked just like his in a smaller size. He always loaded the fishhooks, because I was only seven years old and those hooks are sharp. We usually had the whole place to ourselves. If we fished in the afternoon Mom came and laid out in the sun, but we usually went in the morning, because that's when the fish were really biting."

"Yuck," Renie said. "I hate mornings."

The showers and locker rooms were right next to the parking lot. I still needed to get into my swimming suit, so Renie kept me company in the locker room while her mom and her brother walked down to the water's edge.

"Guess who called me on Friday?" Renie said, eyes bulging. She sat on a wet wooden bench near the showers with her legs crossed nice and ladylike.

"I have no idea." I pulled off my shorts and panties and tried to act as if I undressed in front of people all the time. I had my own room at home and I always closed the door for privacy.

"Jeff Wallace. Can you believe it?"

"Is he in my grade or yours? I know three Jeffs." I pulled my t-shirt over my head, quickly, and stepped into my suit.

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

"Shayla..." Renie was staring at me. "Don't you wear a bra?"

"What?" I slid the straps over my shoulders. My forehead started to feel hot.

"You need a bra."

"What?" I felt really stupid. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Yeah, look how big you are! You need a bra!"

I lowered my arms and looked at myself. "Come off it. I'm not that big."

"You ain't flat! When's the last time you wore that swimming suit? It doesn't fit you."

"It doesn't?"

"Look at yourself!" Renie thumbed over to the mirrors above the sinks. She was all giggly, like a kid who found her Easter basket. "Your boobs are poking out." Renie was making a big deal out of nothing, but she was right that the suit was digging in under my arms. "I brought another suit if you want to wear it. Mom got it at a garage sale for me but it's too big. It should fit you."

"Thanks." I put on Renie's swimsuit as fast as I was able and we headed outside, down to the beach. The sand was rough and hot; I was sure my feet were getting scorched.

Renie wouldn't stop talking. "That's weird that you're getting them before me. Your mom barely has boobs! Sure, you're older, but my mom's huge. She's kind of fat, of course, and your mom is really skinny. Maybe that has something to do with it. You're skinny, too, of course. Maybe it's from your dad's side of the family. Did his mom or sisters have big boobs?"

Renie thought it was weird that I never met my dad's parents. I changed the subject and she left it alone after that.