

Nightswimming

by

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The rubbery material upholstering the bench seats in Gregg's AMC station wagon was sticky even before you sat down on it. Kaylee's thighs clung to the material as the wagon tossed her around in the passenger's seat.

"Jesus, Gregg. It's a dirt road," she said. "Slow the fuck down."

If Gregg heard her he made no effort to slow down. Kaylee grabbed the handle above the passenger door and clung with both hands, her tiny fists clenched around the passenger restraint above the window -- the "oh shit" bar, as they called it. Gregg wasn't flying around too much-- he had the wheel to steady himself, and Aurora and Aaron in the backseat didn't seem to care if they were flung into each other repeatedly.

The wagon bounced over another pothole in the well-worn utility path as Gregg leaned forward and punched the knob and killed the wagon's lights. Although August's full moon lit the rural countryside well enough, under the trees that lined the utility path to the long-abandoned quarry, turning off the headlamps struck Kaylee as exceptionally dangerous.

"Gregg!" she barked, and he barked back:

"You can't come 'round this corner with your lights on," he said. "Unless you want the neighbors to call the cops. Or do you want your dad to find us? We ain't supposed to be up here."

Gregg had asked her to get out and hold up the chain served as a barrier to the dirt access road. She lifted it up over her head while he drove the wagon under it. That was clue enough of their trespassing, Kaylee knew, and she didn't much care for the sneaking around.

"Gregg," she cooed, trying a different tack to calm his behavior. "Come on. Don't be crazy."

"Easy, babe," he said, slamming on the wagon's breaks and skidding to a stop just short an old elm. "We're here."

The cloud they'd raised as they slammed down the dirt service path caught up to the wagon now, engulfing the car in a puff of hot, raw dust that stung Kaylee's throat as it rolled past.

It settled quickly enough, however. As Kaylee rubbed the dust from her eyes, she surveyed. Out her window she saw a break in the tree cover where the ground curred over in a short cliff and then stepped in a series of rock plateaus down to the waterline of the flooded quarry. The car was parked at the top of a sort-of natural staircase that wound down the north side of the quarry-- obviously the truck access when the quarry was an active site. The other three walls of the were fifty to seventy-five foot cliffs that fell from tree-line directly into the water.

"Gregg, it's just like you said," Kaylee said. "Like a private beach, completely hidden."

"Yup," Gregg smiled, lighting a camel cigarette with a flourish of his Zippo lighter.

"You said the water is clean?"

"Yup. I've been in it lots of times this year." he exhaled. "I didn't get an infection or nothing."

She smiled at him and turned back to surveying the quarry. The silver-washed light from the full moon and sparking star field of the Milky Way spanning from one end of the horizon over into the tree line made the whole scene look magical, Kaylee half expected to see fairies or a unicorn lapping at the quarry's shallow shore. "Let's go in," she said, springing out of the car so quickly that the station wagon's rusted door hinges barely had time to protest.

"Let's," Gregg laughed. He, too, sprung out of the car and ran around to Kaylee's side. "Are you coming Aaron?" he asked.

"I think we're going to stay up here a minute," Aaron mumbled from he and Aurora's entwined embrace.

"Rora?" Kaylee asked, peeking back at the pair in the back seat. Aurora didn't say anything except to flash Kaylee a thumbs up and an A-OK gesture with the hand that wasn't trapped under Aaron.

"Let's go then," Gregg said. "You have to follow me though."

"Why?" Kaylee asked. "The moon is low tonight. I can see." Kaylee and Gregg hopped carelessly down the long sloping steps to the water's edge, Gregg pointing out features of the swimming hole as they waded.

"Do you ever jump from the cliffs?" she asked.

"Some of the guys do," he said. "But you have to scout the spot out first. Not all the quarry is as deep as it seems. Plus there's a lot of junk on the bottom that floats around in there."

They reached the bottom of the north face and sat down on an old log, where Gregg pulled off his boots.

"What kind of junk?"

"I dunno," he said. "Junk. Like old cars and trucks and shit."

"Why would it float around?"

"It just does. So you don't want to jump off the cliffs unless there's someone already in the water that scouted out your landing spot." He flicked his cigarette butt into the water and pulled his shirt off over his head.

"Are there fish?" Kaylee asked, looking at the water.

"You're not going to chicken out are you?" Gregg asked.

"No." she said, unsure. "Are there?"

"A few. Little pan fish. They're cute. Most of them aren't much bigger than your fist."

"How did they get in here?"

"I dunno. Farmers or fishermen, I guess. I know that some of the kids at school tossed a few in here last summer." Gregg pulled his pants off then, showing off his boxer shorts, and shouted. "You're coming in! Let's go!" he lunged at her.

"No!" she shrieked. "Not like that."

“What?” Gregg asked, startled.

“You can't see me naked.”

“Fine,” Gregg said. “I'll go in first and you can join me.” He ran off from the shore, splashing as his feet hit the water in the shallows. After he got about 12 feet into the water, he jumped, splashing down with a whoop. He quickly bobbed back up and whooped again. “It's so great,” he shouted. “The water's perfect.”

Kaylee flicked away her sandal and waded over to the shoreline. She tested the water with her toes and, to her delight, found it just the right temperature. Not cold, not tepid-- a refreshing wash on a hot dusty summer night. She tossed her other sandal back toward the first and then stripped down.

“There you go!” Gregg yelled, swimming and kicking about 20 feet off shore.

“Turn around,” she said.

Greg pouted for a second and then swam in a circle to face away from Kaylee.

Kaylee, then, wearing only her undergarments, strode carefully into the water and Gregg barked instructions. “Go about ten feet out and there will be a drop. Walk carefully so you don't fall off.”

Kaylee stepped carefully and then, at about the ten foot mark, sure enough she fell face-first off the cliff, splashing down into the water. she was a strong swimmer and quickly righted her self, laughing.

“It is a sudden drop off,” she said, laughing. Gregg swam over to her and the pair splashed and played, playing water games and cooling off under the silver moonlight. Kaylee didn't know how much time had gone by, she and Gregg swam over to the little island in the middle and saw that Aaron and Aurora had come down to the shore.

“Is it safe you guys?” Aurora asked.

“Of course it is,” Aaron shouted, and he, stripped also down to only his bikinis dashed off into the water, and the next thing Kaylee knew the four teens were laughing and splashing in the quarry pond.

Eventually, Kaylee made her way back to the shore, Gregg and the others followed, and the four of them smoked cigarettes sitting on the rock bottom of the shallows, chatting, smiling and laughing. The August heat of the day was all but forgotten, and Kaylee was surprised to find herself completely comfortable sitting only in her bra and panties, leaning on Gregg for support and slipping into thoughtless comfort when suddenly a deep, wet scraping sound burst from the east wall of the quarry. She jumped and ran from the water, turning only fast enough to spot a huge wake moving across the water, bearing down on the others who were still standing in the shallows, watching, dumbfounded.

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Her voice was hoarse from screaming and she was freezing because her father was running the Lincoln's air conditioner at full blast. She shivered and hugged herself with her arms looking for warmth. She'd left her shirt at the water's edge.

From experience, Kaylee knew better than to ask her father to turn the air off. And she could tell from the way he had his jaw set that he was trying as hard as he could not to yell at her. But she also saw a cold sadness in his eyes that she'd never seen before. He'd only spoken a gravely instruction to her when he'd climbed down to the shallows to her rescue. “Get in the car please.”

Her dad never said please, not in Kaylee's experience, and certainly not to her. She was too shocked to argue, or even be embarrassed. She craned as the Lincoln pulled out of the quarry's dirt

access road onto the town highway to see if Gregg, Aurora and Aaron were following in the station wagon. She didn't see any lights. She wondered what they'd say to each other when they got to school on Monday.

Sure, the thing in the water was-- well it was something. It was scary, for sure. And, when it pulled Aaron under and out into the deeper part of the quarry, that was terrifying, but with Aaron you always had to leave a little room for the possibility that he was messing with you. But his screams for help seemed genuine. He was being pulled maybe? It was hard to tell.

Then, as quickly as the roiling started, it stopped, snuffed out by a bright spotlight blasted from the edge of the quarry. A second moon blasting down from the quarry's edge trained on the center of the roiling water, directly on Aaron. The water quieted. Aaron scrambled for the shore and Gregg ran out and helped his friend back into the shallows and out of the water. Aurora and Kaylee were holding each other and screaming. Kaylee heard a shotgun blast ring out and then her father's voice boom her name. He'd gathered her up without speaking to the others, but she watched him take silent inventory of who she was with and the number of cigarette butts and empty beer cans along the shoreline. Not that many of those had been hers. Not that it would really matter.

Her dad sighed heavily as they wove their way across town roads and main county trunks back into the city. When they turned down Western Avenue, one of the little town's few double-lit boulevards, she saw an ancient photograph of she and her mom was sitting on the dashboard of the Lincoln. The streetlights shown on the photo as the car drove under them, each one lighting up a reflection of the photograph in reverse on the inside of the Lincoln's windshield. She was little, sitting in her mom's lap at some one's birthday party. Kaylee's Mom was sitting in an aluminum lawn chair and she was helping little baby Kaylee drink from a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon. The rolling streetlights made the image appear to dance and move, like some kind of ancient flip book. Kaylee noticed tears welling in the corner of her eyes. She watched her mom laughing in the reflection in the windshield. She watched baby Kaylee kicking and giggling. She watched the bitter PBR rolling down her chubby baby cheeks. Baby and momma. Momma and baby.

"I thought I knew you, Kaylee" her dad said. He wasn't angry anymore, but his tone was so sad, it did nothing to slow the flow of Kaylee's tears.

"What do you know, dad?" she blubbered. "I thought you knew me too."

They both glanced at the photograph's reflection in the windshield. Kaylee chuckled under her breath looking at her mom's picture again. "I miss her so much," she said.

"I know. Kaylee." said her dad. He was crying too. "I know you do. Just hush now."

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.



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