

Two pieces by Caitlin McAllister

The Loons and the Lilies

We were all too old to play make-believe, so we sat in the grass on top of the hill, paying no attention to the darkening sky or the dirt that would stick to the back of our shorts long after we stood up. Sitting in the grass is one of the privileges of summer, like ice cream cones or long days at the beach. We ought to have been out working summer jobs, but we ignored that. Just like we ignored the mosquitoes biting the backs of our necks. Coming up to our old spot on the hill was Mel's idea, whose face glowed bright red after the climb. She'd refused to take off her new university sweater for most of that week.

The wind tugged at my braid, pulling wisps of hair out in front of my eyes. It was the kind of breeze that carried pure air from the lake into our lungs. It was the kind of breeze that smelled of water lilies and barbeque. It was the kind of breeze that carried with it the fluttering call of the loon. Someone once told me that loons are territorial. A single family can claim an entire lake for themselves and live all together.

We ate candies from pockets until our tongues turned red and green and every colour in between. We laughed until our stomachs hurt. We were all too old to play make-believe, but somehow, we continued to pretend the sun would never set on our hill, on the loons and the lilies, and on our fragmented family in the grass.

The Pebble

The nurse handed me a chart: Timothy Brooks, six years. Male. Solid mass impacted in ear canal.

"He's waiting for you in exam room three," she said. "I have to go find his mother, a Mrs. Smith. The poor dear has had it up to her ears with all the trouble this little one seems to find himself in."

Now, this was unusual, but after twenty years in the emergency department, I've seen it all. When I walked into the room, the boy was waiting for me in a chair, swinging his legs. They were far too short to even reach the floor. His race car shoes lit up with each kick, sending brilliant flashes of red into the room, illuminating his dirty yellow t-shirt and skinned knees.

"Timothy, would you mind explaining to me how you managed to get a pebble stuck in your ear?"

"It's 'cause it kept falling out of my belly button, that's how." I searched in the drawer for my forceps while he explained, "Nowhere else to put it except my ear. Pushed it in real hard so it would stay put." I made a mental note to speak with Timothy after the appointment about how the back pocket of his jeans would be a better spot for all his future treasures.

I sat down with my penlight and tried to assess the damage he and his precious rock had done. It was definitely stuck. I had my work cut out for me.

“Hey! Guess what? My friend Alex knows a guy who has six toes and...Ouch!” The boy flinched. “Hey mister! Be careful with that, okay?” He looked around nervously and brought his face close to my ear. “I think it might be a diamond,” he whispered.

“Wouldn’t that be something? Hold still.”

“How much can you sell a diamond for, mister?” he asked.

“Well, I can’t seem to reckon if I’ve ever tried.” I placed a hand on top of his head to steady it.

“I think this one will be worth a whole lot,” he said. “It’s pretty big.”

“No kidding.” I continued to struggle to get the godforsaken thing free.

“Then you know what? I’m going to get a big house.” He smiled, leaning far back in his seat. I, with my forceps, was forced to follow. “And it’s going to have a swimming pool on the inside and the outside and be big enough that Momma and Daddy and I could all live in it at the same time. Daddy wouldn’t be all the way across town and Momma and I wouldn’t have to live with that smelly old Jim anymore.”

There it was! Timothy flinched as I pulled out his prize.

That would be Jim Smith, I suppose.