

Emmet
and the
Boy

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Swan
Creek
Press

A teenager is just a grown boy
with a child's heart

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CHAPTER 1

It was our time of the evening. I sat on the Adirondack chair at the water's edge. Warm water lapped my toes. Mia sat curled in my lap. Her bony hip pressed my stomach. The cancer had stolen her weight. She drifted between sleep and wakefulness. I wondered if she could feel my heart beating against her chest.

Her chair, where she usually sat, was empty beside us. The high-pitched whine of the Jet Skis faded, but the mosquitoes had yet to find us. This was the time we usually talked and reminisced in the evening's gloaming.

Weakening sunlight danced across the tips of shallow whitecaps. Across the lake, trees stood at the water's edge, their branches full and heavy.

Her body tightened. I held her gently until the spasm passed.

She said in a weak voice not more than a whisper, "You promised."

It took me awhile to answer, "It was such a long time ago."

Her cheek nestled my chest. I was glad I couldn't see her face. Her hand found mine and squeezed.

“You promised.” Her words seemed filled with pain – or was it anger?

“Mia.” I couldn’t go on. My heart raced and the panic came.

She shuddered. The spasm was longer and harder. Her pain overcame mine. It took all my strength, but I stood. She weighed no more than a child. I gazed upon the lake that we so loved. The sand was firm beneath my feet. Mia was warm in my arms.

She gasped. Her frail body tightened. I backed away from the water. We walked the pebble path to the cottage not side by side, but with Mia in my arms.

Years ago we had screened in the porch. The breeze came off the lake. There was no need for the ceiling fan tonight. The furniture had been moved to the side to make room for the hospital bed. It was one of our arguments. I wanted the bed to be in our bedroom. She wanted the porch. I told her it was too hot during the summer afternoons, but she said, “Heat is my friend.” It was another argument that I didn’t win. At night I’d sleep on the cot beside her.

I guided the straw to her. It seemed to take all of her effort to swallow. When she finished, I took the ointment from the bedside table and coated her lips. The spasm came hard. By rote, my hand found the bag of syringes. I quickly tore one open and filled it with morphine. I didn’t have to search for a vein. They put an intravenous therapy into her arm before we left the hospital. All I had to do was to insert the needle into the iv. The medicine took hold and Mia drifted to sleep.

I tried to read, but I couldn't. I set the book on the floor and turned off the reading lamp. Light from the cottage shined through the porch's window onto my wife. She lay on her back with her hands by her sides. It was strange, but when I looked at her, I saw the girl I married and not the woman she has become.

I walked to the screen and stared at the lake. The moon was full. Her summer midnight moon, she would say. I pictured her standing at the edge of the wooden slats leading out into the water. She'd shed what few clothes she wore and stand naked in the moonlight. She didn't care who saw her. Her buttocks were like two tiny white moons. She'd dive into the lake. I'd bring a towel for her and sit on the edge of the pier. When she tired, she'd swim to me like an enchanting mermaid. She'd climb up from the water and I'd wrap the towel around her and carry her to our bed.

The change in her breathing shook me from my reverie. I knew the morphine was wearing off. I sat by her side and held her hand. She must still be dreaming because her eyes danced beneath her eyelids. I wondered what she dreamed.

Her eyes opened. She stared at the ceiling. She seemed confused, trapped between dreams and wakefulness. I brought her hand to my cheek. She slowly turned and when our eyes met, all I saw was sorrow. It took me awhile to realize her face was reflecting mine.

She wet her lips and said, "You promised."

I let go of her hand and reached for the water cup. I brought the straw to her mouth, but like a little child,

she shook her head. The spasm came sudden and hard. I prepped the morphine. Her pain brought tears to her eyes and to mine. She relaxed as the medicine took hold.

I sank back in the chair under the weight of an unbearable promise. The vials of morphine were waiting on the table. I held her hand as the hours passed. She stirred, but before she could awaken, I reached for the morphine.

Dawn came slowly and quietly. My only love lay as still as the calm water of the lake.

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CHAPTER 2

The hospice nurse would come between 9 and 10 every morning. I had left the door unlocked. She knocked. When I didn't answer, I heard the door open. She called my name. Her footsteps echoed along the kitchen's wooden floor.

She stopped in the doorway. Her gaze went from Mia to me. She slowly walked to my wife. She checked Mia's vitals, but we both knew there was no need. She adjusted Mia's pillow as if that somehow would make her more comfortable.

She turned to me and asked, "Have you slept at all, Emmet?"

I shook my head.

"I need to make a phone call and then I can make some coffee."

I nodded. I looked upon Mia. Her hand was cold beneath mine. I knew her spirit was gone. I felt it leave during the night.

I seemed to be losing track of time. The nurse put the coffee cup in my hand.

"Do you want me to call your daughter?"

I knew it was my call to make, but I also knew my daughter. I simply nodded.

As the numbness left me, I tried to gather my thoughts. There were things that had to be done. Mia had made most of the decisions in the prior weeks. She said, if it was back in the time when we were both still teaching, she would want a service at the funeral home in the city. Our lives in many ways revolved around the high school, the students, and our fellow teachers. But it had been five years since we left Springfield High School. We'd kept in touch with just a few of our friends from our school days.

Our family was small. Both our parents were dead and both of us were only children. There was our daughter, Jackie, and our grandson, Colin. There were the neighbors, of course. They all knew of Mia's illness. Mia thought there was no need for a funeral service in the city. A small gathering at our cottage would do.

The nurse said the funeral director was on his way for Mia. He knew what she wanted. Together we would go with him. It was another promise that we made to each other a long time ago. The first to pass would witness the cremation of the other.

Jackie and Colin wouldn't get here until tomorrow. I would go with the funeral director. Mia couldn't wait that long.

CHAPTER 3

I stood on the dock and gazed upon our lake. There was enough light to see the still water, but not the trees on the far shore. I had to swim. The lake was empty except for a few early morning fishermen. Cottages along the bank were dark and silent. I wore my swimsuit and my rash guard. The white, long-sleeve shirt was easy to see in the water. It was another promise I made to Mia.

When I was younger, I used to swim across the lake, but those days stopped when I almost lost my life to a Jet Ski. Now, I swim in the predawn before the Jet Skis are allowed on the water. I hug the shore and swim where it is just deep enough for my arms to clear the bottom. No matter the weather, from late spring to early fall, I'd swim to the abandoned train trestle and back. It was part of my life.

Today, more than ever, I needed the familiar routine. I climbed down the ladder. In May the cold slap of water would make me gasp. Now, in August, it was like stepping into a warm bath. I didn't realize how tense I was until my muscles relaxed. I found my rhythm. My breaths came easy. I pushed all thoughts away and let the water cocoon me.

It takes an hour to swim to the trestle and back. During that hour the lake awakens.

I finished my swim. My arms were sore. My mind felt like it had been shut off and needed to be restarted. I treaded water by our dock. I took off my goggles, spit in them, and wiped them with my finger. When I swam near shore, I couldn't tell if my goggles fogged or if the water was sandy and cloudy with algae.

I checked the lake for boats and then swam to deeper water. I took deep breaths and dived beneath the surface. It was always a shock when I left the warm top layer of water and swam to the cold bottom. Away from the beach, the water was always clear. I ran my hand through seaweed that clung to the bottom of the lake. You couldn't see them from the surface, but small Bass blended with the green weeds. The pain in my lungs forced me to leave. I broke the surface and swam to the dock.

At first glance, I thought she was Mia. My daughter stood at the edge of the dock with her arms held tight across her chest. I climbed the ladder. The sun was behind her. She looked so like her mother.

"Dad! What are you doing? You scared me half to death."

She bent and grabbed my arm and helped me stand.

"I've been looking all over for you."

"You know I swim in the morning."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Mom just died and you're out swimming."

"It's what I do."

Jackie took my arms and shook me.

“Why didn’t you wait? You could have waited a day.” Angry tears coated her cheeks. “I needed to say goodbye.”

She pushed me away. She turned and fled down the pier.

I took my swim shirt off and walked to the cottage. The humid, early morning lake air clung to me like a second skin. I pictured Mia sitting on the porch with her morning coffee cup clutched between both hands. She’d wait for me to finish my swim before our day together began.

I can’t describe the loss that I felt. I’ll never see my Mia again. At times like this I wish I had religion and could believe that we would meet again in the afterlife.

I climbed the porch’s steps and opened the door. Mia wasn’t sitting in her chair. The boy sat in her place.