

A Glimpse Before the Fall

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As Shelley fell from the pier, gravity seemed to begin to play tricks. Her feet and legs, which she knew were but a moment ago firmly planted below the rest of her body, had suddenly found their way above her now flailing arms. She considered this as she crashed through the surface of the water. Given the short distance she had just fallen (she wasn't even quite five feet tall yet), she was surprised at the harshness of the warm sting now spreading across her face. Worse than a belly flop, she thought, a pain she knew well and sort of enjoyed.

The cool water rushing against Shelley's face soon eased the shock. She opened her eyes slowly while drifting to the bottom of the lake. She wondered what she had tripped on, but quickly abandoned the thought. Her sundress was already soaked. Her mother would, no doubt, consider it "ruined." No reason then to rush back to the surface for scolding.

Shelley instead began making upward motions with her open palms, pushing herself towards the lake's bottom. She had been a strong swimmer since taking lessons at the age of four and could hold her breath for quite some time. As her feet found the lake's floor, she dug her toes deep into the mud and sand, firmly planting herself until only her ankles and heels were visible. She bent her knees, pulling herself into a squat, all the while continuing to push the water around her upwards. The mud and sand billowed in a small cloud around Shelley's ankles and then up to her knees. She watched as it swirled, expanding in the middle, then quickly spreading thin until it settled again on the bottom of the lake.

A small, sparkling fish burst through the last puff of murky cloud, just above Shelley's left foot. The fish darted, making an "S" around Shelley's arm and neck. Brushing past her cheek, it switched course, angling up in an acute incline towards the glittering surface of the water, not but a foot above her head. The reflected sun was nearly blinding. Shelley squinted as the fish flitted by in one last circle, nearly skimming the surface, before it swam off beyond

Shelley's sight, into the dense gloom surrounding the lake floor's drastic drop off a few feet ahead.

Shelley gazed at the sand to discover a rather large crayfish had begun inching its way towards her feet. She began a game of slowly pulling a foot from the sand and mud, lifting it over the next foot, and then digging it in again. Then, uncrossing her ankles, her right foot would unearth itself and switch back to its proper place, beside her left foot, and so on and so on, as the crayfish attempted to catch up. Shelley was enjoying herself for the first time since her family had dragged her to the lake house. She again pulled a foot loose, and the startled crayfish scuttled back an inch before continuing its pursuit. This was nice, she thought. This was simple. Tiny creatures went about as they chose to go about, without care.

Shelley knew all too well, once the summer ended, once middle-school began, her life would become increasingly filled with responsibilities. Like having to remember a locker combination. Like having to walk around carrying the impossible pile of books one would need to not only read (Shelley actually enjoyed reading) but comprehend. Not books with stories, but books with facts. Confusing facts regarding history. And Spanish. And sexual education.

And geometry. The word seemed foreign to Shelley. She had heard horrors of geometry. Of having to keep up so that one could begin pre-algebra by seventh grade, then moving on to algebra I, followed by algebra II. And by the time one reached high school these were followed by the strangest of them all, trig-on-om-etry. Trig-on-om-etry was accompanied by calculus, which one needed to not only reach, not only pass, but do extremely well in in order to be fully prepared for the even more rigorous challenges of college.

Shelley considered staying at the lake's bottom forever. She felt her lungs begin to burn as she struggled to dig her toes deeper below the sand.