

Cold Water

By Bradley Lloyd

Stay on the top—in the warm water. Kick fast so your legs don't drop down where it's cold. Don't open your eyes. No matter what, don't open them. No murky green. Shit—smaller kicks so your legs don't drop into the cold, into the dark water. Swim fast. Swim faster. The faster you go the sooner it will be over. Just stay on the top. Stay on the top. It can still get you, probably, even if you stay on top, swimming on top of the water like a skinny, white, spidery bug. It can probably see the white of your skin in the dark water. In the green water your skin looks white like a skeleton. It would probably see you and come up under you and slurp you right off the top, like a largemouth bass swallowing a jitterbug, just come right up under you and suck you down—shlupp—a big slurpy sound—like a largemouth bass swallowing a jitterbug, and you'd be gone. Maybe it would be so fast you wouldn't even feel anything. Not at first, but maybe inside the mouth there would be a thousand tiny razor teeth that would cut you like a thousand paper cuts, and you'd sit all curled up inside the stomach where the acid would burn like orange juice in the cuts. You'd sit like Jonah alive in the stomach and burn to death on the bottom of the lake in the pitch black murky green. Burn up right in the water. Shit—smaller kicks and stay on top. Swim faster.

Smack.

The sound explodes from his body. Explodes. That's what it feels like. He sees a white spark at the back of his eyeballs even though his eyes are closed—a little ball of white energy that starts small at the base of his neck but bursts outward through his body, branching like a lightning bolt, shocking his body to the fingers and toes. The explosion leaves his body, and even in the water, he can hear it echo across the lake. It feels like he's looking down at himself from above the water. He can see everyone watching, all the kids standing on the pier, looking—the boys from his cabin, the girls all standing in their swimsuits and T-shirts. No one moves in the silence that follows the sound. They just stare.

But he is going down slowly. He drops into the colder water, unable to move. He's falling. Drowning. Why doesn't he care? He can hear the silence of the water, that strange un-sound of something covering his ears. He's floating, but floating down,

passing through the layers of water, layers like the colored sand in the jar his grandma kept on the counter in her kitchen. The white water on top, where the light from outside comes in. Then the yellow water. Then the brownish water. And then the murky green. The dark water. Cold. Floating down. And he sees it again.

It looks different from the last time. It's bigger than last year. Now it's huge, larger than a car. It's stretched flat across the bottom, almost as big as the wooden raft with the diving board nearly fifteen feet above it. He can hardly tell it from the weeds and muck and dim shapes and shadows of the bottom. It's like one of those pictures that you have to look at for a long time before you can finally see it.

He sees its eyes first. It blinks, the small black balls covered for a split second by milky white lids. It sees him. Its tentacles move slightly, like a wave running through them—a tremble of wanting.

It is coming for him.

The monster rises up from the bottom of the lake, stirring up the mud and branches and gunk and dead things around it. It raises a cloud as it moves, hiding itself. It disappears. Where is it?

His chest seems to cave in. Something inside is telling him to breath, but he forgets to tell his body how. Or else he is scared. Fuck. This is death. Kick. Scream. Do something. Nothing works. Fine. Shut your eyes. Don't look. Shut your eyes. Floating down, floating into the cold. He is going to die in the cold.

It grabs his arms with one of its tentacles, forcing them up against his ears, shutting out the strange un-sounds of the underwater. Fuck. He feels his body shake a little. A tremor. Fear. Try. Try to live, to escape—to breathe. But he only manages a tremble, as if the water is sealing him up so he can't move. Fuck. Try. Try. And he manages one kick—his right foot—all the energy he has to struggle comes out in one kick. A weak kick. He was never strong.

But his heel hits something. Hard. Something bony. Something that moves and pops. And then there is a pause. He's not floating. He's moving up, up into the warm water. Maybe he kicked it right between the beady black eyes, and it let him go. He sees light through his eye lids. He knows he must breath.

He tries. He tries to lift his chest to breathe in. He feels his eyes drop to the back of his head, and feels himself floating up into nothing.

There is a light. He can't move. He is bound by slimy tentacles. He tries to move, tries to struggle.

"He's breathing." He hears the small voice from somewhere behind him, it seems. And he realizes that he is breathing. Retching and breathing.

He is no longer in the water. He can feel the cold air on his body, the only warmth from water just vomited on himself.

"You'll be OK. Don't try to move. Can you hear me? What's your name? Does anybody know his name?" He realizes two things at the same time: his head hurts, and someone is talking to him. A woman. "Where's his counselor? Can you hear me? What is your name?"

A number. The lady wants a number. Shit, the water test. Had he finished the test? Where they marking him down? What was his number?

"I'm David Noland," he said. Noland, with an *N. N*—just past center. Just past 100. 102. He was 102. He remembers. He is number 102.

"I'm number one-oh-two," he says.

His head hurts. The back of his eyeballs ache, and he feels the black wave wash over him again.

A light in his eye again. Is he dreaming? Talking? The light is bright, and he shuts his eyes.

He hears a voice. It's not the woman anymore. It's a man's voice. The woman had turned into a man, and he says, "One-oh-two . . . are you sure, David?"

"Huh?"

"How old are you?"

"Oh. Eleven."

"Good," the man says to him. The man says something else, it seems, but not to David. And then he says, "Do you know where you are David?"

He's not in the water anymore. Never again. That's all that matters. "No," David says.

"David, you are in the hospital. You hit your head. Do you remember hitting your head?"

"No," David says. How did he get away? Who saved him from the monster? Everyone must have seen it. Maybe he was famous. Maybe it was dead.

"David, my name is Dr. Bradley. You're going to be fine. We took x-rays, and your neck is fine. You're going to be all right. Just a bump on the head."

David tries to open his eyes, but the light seems to shock his head, hurting the back of his eyeballs. Shit, his head really hurts.

"David . . ." this is a different voice, the woman again. "David, you gave us quite the scare."

"Huh?"

"Do you remember who I am? It's Carla, the camp nurse. You hit your head—on the raft, during your swim test. Remember? Swam right into it. Pow."

He can tell by the tone of her voice she is trying to be funny. She isn't funny. He opens his eyes slightly. She's standing over him, looking down, her curly blond hair falling around her face. She looks like somebody's mom, with eyes that stick out of her head too far, like a bug's. For a second he wonders if they might fall out of her skull and onto his face.

"Knocked you right out," she says.

But what did they do with it? Did they kill it? "Did you see it?" David asks. "Who saved me from it?"

"I didn't see it happen, David," Carla says, "but the lifeguard saved you. Put you on a backboard and everything. Doug saved you. He had to give you CPR and everything. But God was watching over you, David. The whole camp went to the cafeteria and prayed for you, David. So don't be afraid. You're in good hands. We're all so glad you are OK. The whole camp. The doctor wants to keep you here over night, but you can probably come back in the morning. I talked to your mom on the phone from Colorado. You'll be able to talk to her, soon. We'll have you give her a call. She's waiting for you, and I know she'll be so glad to hear from you, but don't worry, she

knows that you'll be OK. Everyone will be glad to have you back and know you're OK. They've all been praying hard for you."

Everyone? All the boys in the cabin who were standing on the pier. All the girls in their swimsuits and T-shirts. Had they all seen? The lifeguards—big and strong and not afraid of anything, not even lake monsters. Maybe Doug had slayed the lake monster. Or maybe it had eaten someone else. Maybe he was too skinny and bony. Maybe it saw the lifeguard, and let him go . . .

"How did I get away?"

"What?" asks Carla.

"Did it get anyone else?"

"What are you talking about David?"

"The monster . . ."

"David, I think you were dreaming."

"No. It had me. I saw it. The monster."

"David, I promise you everything is going to be OK."

"It didn't get anyone? No one else got hurt?"

"Hurt? You mean Doug? Do you remember Doug? He's in the next room. He's asking about you. He'd really like to see you, I think. Do you remember kicking him? You kicked him good, right in the kneecap. Displaced it a little. But he's OK, too. But don't worry about that, David. It wasn't your fault. Accidents happen in situations like that. Things happen so fast. You just take it easy."

Take it easy? *You take it the fuck easy, lady*—he wants to say. How can he take it easy when *it* is still out there, still waiting for someone on the bottom of the lake? Hadn't anyone seen it? It'll eat someone else. Or maybe it's waiting just for him. Maybe he got away just in time. It had seen him. He had seen its black beady eyes look at him. Maybe it remembered him from the swimming test last year, when he had crawled out of the water and onto the raft. He never finished the test, so maybe it hadn't eaten all year, just waiting for him.

"I'm not lying," David says. "There was a monster out there."

“David,” Carla tells him, “I promise you—there is no monster. Maybe you were dreaming. No real monster, anyway. There’s evil in all the world. That’s the monster. And you were saved, David. You have nothing to worry about now. You were saved.”

Fuck you, thinks David. If someone dies, it’s your fault.

No one had believed him last year, either.

It hurts to have to sit up, but it’s the only way he can hold the phone that Carla is handing to him.

“Hello?” David says.

“David, sweetie? Are you OK?” His mom sounds very far away.

“Yeah mom, I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“A monster tried to eat me.”

“David. Don’t joke. This is serious.”

“I hit my head.”

“When are you going to learn to be more careful? They called and said they were doing x-rays. That’s serious, David. You have to be careful, sweetie.”

“I know.”

“What happened? All those swimming lessons this last year. I thought for sure you’d make it.”

“I don’t know. I just hit my head on the raft.”

“Oh God, David. Are you sure you’re OK?”

“My head hurts.”

“Well, count yourself lucky if that’s all that’s wrong. They said they had to do CPR.”

“Just a little. I don’t remember. I guess I’m OK.”

“It’s such a shame. I know you wanted to pass that swimming test so badly this year. All those lessons. It almost seems like a waste, huh? And all that money. Are they going to let you take it again?”

“I don’t think so. I have to wear a brace on my neck.”

“Oh God.”

“And anyway, I don’t want to go in the water anymore.”

“Well, not until you’re better. But don’t quit, David. You have to jump right back on that horse. Don’t quit again.”

“I don’t really want to be here, mom.”

“David, it’s only five days. I really want you to stick this out. I think it will be good for you. Make some friends. Isn’t it nice being back in Michigan?”

“Not really.”

“You must remember Michigan. Fishing with your grandpa?”

“I don’t like camp.”

“David, I went to that camp when I was little. And you went last year. It shouldn’t be anything too scary anymore. Just make the best of it.”

He can feel it coming. His forehead scrunches up, and his head hurts. He is crying. “Mom, I just want to come home.” He feels Carla put a hand on his back, rubbing up and down.

His mom takes a deep breath, as if she is going to speak, but she is silent for a long time. Then, finally, she says in her serious tone, “David, I know you want to come home. But you need to stay. I can’t afford to change your ticket, or waste this money. I know you don’t want to, but you need to. You’re a big guy now. Eleven years old. You took a hit, but just get up, dust yourself off, and make the best of it.”

“Mom, I want to come home.”

“David, please. You’re a big boy. Do it for me.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“I need to talk to your nurse again David. But cheer up. You’ll be fine. I’ll see you on Friday, and you’ll have lots of great stories to tell me. Have a good time. And right me a postcard. Will you do that?”

“I guess.”

“OK, David. I’m glad you are OK. But be careful. Don’t do anything stupid. I can’t believe this happened on the first day. Some bad luck, huh? But remember your mom loves you.”

“I know.”

“Bye David.”

“Bye mom.” He sniffs, and hands the phone to Carla.

David is still crying a little when Doug comes into the room, but just a little bit. Doug is wearing a pair of red shorts and a white T-shirt, not at all like David’s paper dress. There’s a brown stretchy bandage wrapped around Doug’s knee. He is limping. Fuck, this is embarrassing. Carla gets up so Doug can sit down in the chair by David’s bed.

“Hey, there’s my guy,” Doug says.

“Do you remember Doug at all?” Carla asks.

“Not really,” David says. He doesn’t remember Doug from in the water. But he had seen him before the swimming test. He had even thought it would be cool to be a lifeguard someday. Doug has those small dark whiskers on his face like a man would have if he hadn’t shaved in the morning. His hair is black. As Doug sits down in the chair, David sees his arms bulge at the bicep. He could never be like Doug. He is too small, too skinny. Doug is big. Beautiful. He probably has fifteen girlfriends.

“How you doing buddy?” Doug asks, smiling. His voice is strong and happy.

“OK, I guess.”

“Good. That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” David says, thinking that his own voice sounds very weak.

“Hey, no problem, David. Don’t sweat it.”

Don’t sweat it. That was a cool thing to say. David looks into his eyes. Doug has bright eyes, blue eyes. Does he know? Had he seen it? He wants to ask. If he did ask, Doug would just think he was a stupid little boy. But Doug had been there. He must have seen it. And it is real. Maybe Doug does know. His eyes are kind.

“Did you see it?” David half whispers.

“See it?” Doug asks.

“Oh. David had quite the smack on the head,” Carla says. “He was dreaming about sea monsters or something, right David?”

You fucking bitch, thinks David. *You fucking bitch with your bug eyes. Just go away.* He lowers his eyes away from Doug’s. “No,” he says. “I just . . . I mean. Sorry I kicked you and stuff.”

“Oh, that,” Doug says, laughing a little. “Hey David. Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault. You were doing the best you could. I just got in your way. Totally my fault.”

“Well, thanks,” David says again. He looks back up. Doug is smiling. What an awesome guy. Even if he hadn’t seen the monster, Doug had still saved him. Who knows what would have happened otherwise.

“You’re welcome, Dave,” Doug says. He reaches out his hand and gives David a pat on the shoulder, but he doesn’t withdraw the hand. It feels strange to be touched by this guy who goes around saving people’s lives. His hands are large, the skin brown and the hair on his arms dark.

Fuck, fuck. David can feel a stirring in his midsection, the beginning of a hard-on. Fucking paper dress and thin sheets. He turns away and onto his side as best he can, trying to hide it, hoping no one notices.

“It looks like a flower, David,” Connie says.

Connie is sitting on the pier with him in her purple swim suit. It’s a one-piece, but he can still see the roll of fat bulging out at her stomach where she’s leaning over from sitting. She’d make a good meal for the monster.

“Does it hurt?” says a girl near him in the water. He doesn’t know her name, but he thinks she’s in Connie’s cabin. She’s skinny, but she has braces.

“No, not really.” He lies. His face does hurt. It’s only been two days, but the purple bruise seems to grow bigger by the hour, red on his forehead, purple on the sides of his nose and purple and yellow around his left eye. It changes shapes and colors every time he looks at it.

“Can I touch it?” Connie reaches out towards him. David doesn’t say anything; he can’t move his head because of the thick neck brace. She lightly brushes his brow with her fat, poison fingers. “It looks awful,” she says.

“Gee, thanks.”

Connie looks down. “No, David . . . I just mean that it looks like it hurts a lot is all.”

“Well, it doesn’t.”

“Well, it must have hurt when it happened. I could hear the sound of it. It was loud. It sounded like it hurt.”

“Not too much. I don’t really remember.”

“I was really scared, you know. I was really worried about you.”

“You didn’t even know me.” He wants to add *fat bitch*, but he doesn’t.

“I know,” Connie says, turning away.

David has an image in his mind of everyone looking at him. Everyone staring. Everyone laughing. How many of them would be laughing if they had seen what he had seen?

“Do you want to go to arts and crafts for something?” Connie asks him.

“No, not really. I just want to sit down here by the water.”

“Then why don’t you get your swim suit on. You can go inside the pier.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Aren’t you bored?”

“No. I just like to watch is all.”

“OK. I’m going to go up to change for dinner. Who are you sitting by for campfire?”

Why couldn’t she just leave him alone? “I don’t know,” he says without looking at her.

“Oh. OK. Well, I’ll see you tonight for sure at campfire.”

“Yeah, I guess.” David looks out on the water. About a dozen campers are out on the raft, swimming and jumping off of the diving board. An older boy acts like he is going to push a thin girl in a light blue bathing suit off of the raft, but the boy looks up and sees Doug, who is in a rowboat nearby. The boy stops and does nothing, but the girl screams anyway as if he might push her in. Girls just want attention.

There is no sign of what lurks below them, but David scans the water, watching. Doug moves the boat, circling the raft. David watches Doug’s muscles move as the oars dip back and forth. He looks at his own arms, thin and white, before looking back out across the water.

David has a seat on the bench by the baseball field. The other boys in his cabin—the bear cabin—are talking nearby, getting ready to play against the woodchuck cabin. Thank God for the brace, David thinks. He sucks at baseball, but now no one has to know. He's happy to watch. Across the field, he sees Doug approaching. Maybe he's umpiring their game today.

"You're honorary team captain, David," Chad, his counselor, tells him. Chad is about fifteen and he has thick glasses and a red birthmark in the shape of a banana on his right cheek. "You go out for the coin toss to see who's up first. If you get it, we want last ups."

David says nothing, gets up off the bench, and trudges past his team towards the middle of the field.

"He better get it, if that's his only job," one of the boys in the cabin says. David doesn't even know his name.

"He could always be first base," says Glen, the largest boy in the cabin.

"How could he play first base?" someone asks.

"No," says Glen. "He could *be* the base. Just have him lay down and we can step on that inner tube he has around his neck."

They all laugh. David just ignores them and walks past.

"Hey guys, let's get our minds on the game," Chad says. "And remember, this is a Christian camp." He's a pussy.

Doug is now standing in the middle of the field, and David walks towards him. Doug still has the bandage around his knee, but he doesn't limp anymore.

He smiles as David approaches him. "How's it going, Dave?" he asks.

"Alright," David says, even managing a smile.

"Kinda too bad that you can't play, eh?"

"Nah. I don't mind so much."

"Why? You don't like baseball?"

"Well, I'm not very good." He doesn't know why he has just been honest.

"That's OK. I'm not great at baseball, either." David thinks he must be lying.

"Anyway, we all have our own talents. What do you like to do?"

"I don't know, really."

“Well, what are you good at?”

“Not much.”

“Oh come on! I don’t believe that. You know, to tell you the truth, you looked like a pretty good swimmer to me. You were going really fast when you hit the raft. So fast you knocked yourself silly. Funny as it sounds, that takes talent.”

David blushes a little. It was cool Doug would say he was a good swimmer, coming from a lifeguard. It was cool that he noticed.

“So what else do you like to do besides swim?” Doug asked.

“Well, I used to go fishing with my grandpa.”

“That’s cool, I love to fish. You don’t go anymore?”

“Nah. My grandpa died a few years ago.”

Doug doesn’t say anything, just looks at him for a while. “You know, Dave,” he says finally, “I like fishing myself. Campers aren’t supposed to fish, but seeing as how you and I are kind of operating on minimal capacity, maybe they could make some exceptions for us.”

So Doug felt sorry for him. Shit. That had to be it. Maybe he could go fishing, though? But, shit, the thought of going out on a boat in the lake wasn’t too appealing. He could barely stick his feet in the water on the pier.

“Maybe, I don’t know. My mom said she didn’t really want me back out on the water at all.”

“Oh. Well. Maybe sometime.” Doug looks like he doesn’t quite know what to say. “Should we get this game underway?”

“Sure.”

Doug takes out a coin. “You call it. Heads or tails.”

“Alright.”

He’s poised to flip the coin, but stops. He looks at David, and David is a little awed and just looks back. “David,” he says, “I’m going fishing tomorrow morning, before breakfast. You’re more than welcome to come. In fact, it’d be really cool. Think about it. If you want to, be down there at 6 AM. If anyone gives you trouble, just tell them I said it was OK.”

“Alright,” David says.

“OK then.”

Doug flips the coin in the air, and David waits until it is at its highest point before calling out “tails.” The coin hits the ground at David’s feet, and he realizes that he can’t even bend his head down to see what it is.

After the campfire down by the lake, David stands in the shadows of some nearby trees, watching everyone go up. No one notices him, not even Connie. She is probably pissed that he didn’t sit by her. Good.

It takes only a few minutes for everyone to clear out. Still, David waits. He waits for about twenty minutes until he hears the bell, which means lights out.

He doesn’t know how long he has. He walks down to the shore of the lake. He takes off his sandals, and can feel the cold sand on his feet. The night is cool. David hugs himself and shivers a little.

He leaves his sandals on the beach, and walks out on the pier. He sits on the edge with his feet in the water. He looks out over the water, which is black like oil in the dark.

Go. Go now.

He stands up and removes the brace. The Velcro makes a loud sound, but he doesn’t look behind to see if anyone hears, if anyone has come looking for him. His neck is a little stiff, but he can still move it.

He takes his shirt off, sucking his stomach in because it’s cold. He removes his shorts, leaving them on the pier. His white underwear is whiter than the skin on his legs. Quickly, before he can change his mind, he hops into the water.

For a moment, he loses his breath. His toes find the bottom. The water is up to the top of his chest. He is covered in cold. His midsection aches, his penis shrinking into his body. He begins walking. Deeper. Deeper. Finally, he can no longer stand. He half swims, half treads out into the water.

He doesn’t look down. He knows he would see only black. Or, perhaps, the dim shadows of something moving beneath him, something that was blacker than the water.

He swims quickly, approaching the raft, where the water is three times as deep as he is tall, at least.

He stops. He can hear only the sound of his own breathing, short and fast. Fuck, fuck, he thinks as he treads. He realizes that he is bunching his legs up beneath him. He consciously lowers them, and can feel the cold of the water as his toes dip down past the warmer layers.

He wants to cry. He tries to fight back the urge. He won't cry. No matter what happens, he won't cry. Instead, he takes as deep a breath as he can, and lowers himself down into the water.

He hears the un-sound of being under the water. His eyes are shut. Open them. Open them. He has to tell himself twice before his eyes finally open.

The dark surrounding him is not like the dark of the outside. It's thicker and greener, with a strange yellow towards the top of the water. He sees nothing. He pushes his hands over his head, making himself go deeper. Still nothing. Deeper. Still nothing.

Then he feels it. The tentacles around his toes. He lets out some air, a sound escaping from his mouth that is almost like a scream, but he catches himself, fighting the urge to swim up. Instead, he lowers himself deeper.

The tentacles curl around his legs, up his knees, around his thighs.

Let it take me, he thinks.

But the tentacles loosen. He feels only weeds. He needs to breathe. He kicks quickly to the surface, and once again hears the sounds of the night and the air. He takes a deep breath. He looks around the surface of the water. He sees nothing. He waits.

Nothing happens.

David swims to shore. He puts his clothes back on, even though he is wet. He puts the brace on. He wants to turn and look at the lake, but he keeps his back to it as he dresses. He keeps his back to the lake as he walks up to the beach and puts on his sandals. He trudges up the path to his cabin, and never looks back.