

History of a Lake at Night

Luci Kandler

There were nights when I'd drive down to the lake just to get away. I would walk through the visitors' gate, past the abandoned ticket window and out onto the deserted beach. Occasionally the sand would be newly raked, leaving patterns like a Zen garden. In the summer, I was more likely to find remnants of children's sand castles. The moats empty and the towers partly crumbled—a palace abandoned. From the shore, I could look off into the distance and see tiny lights on the other side—maybe even a boat moving slowly through the dark. I would stand there and watch it move, following its path until it disappeared into a cove. The lake looked so small from its beach, its body hidden in the twists and turns of secluded coves.

Coming to the water calmed something inside me. The aggression, the tension, the pain was pulled away by the tide of the lake. Tears I didn't know I had poured out like they were being called home. How much suffering did this lake hold? There were more secrets in its depths than local folklore could remember. There was history, so much history.

When glaciers slit open the earth, they left a gash deep enough to hold the stories of all who would find themselves drawn to the shores. The first to inhabit the water's edge were the Oneota Indians. But as all such stories go in our country, they were overthrown by pioneers interested in controlling the water's power for their own prosperity. Wealth would forever after take up every free inch of shoreline. Years and years of lazy affluence transformed Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The rich and famous built up their

summer mansions like a gaudy frame around a priceless oil painting.

It is said that Guns N' Roses called Lake Geneva "The Paradise City, where the grass is green and the girls are pretty." By that, I am sure they meant the Playboy Bunnies from Hugh Hefner's club, built just minutes from the shore, and the acres of rolling mansion lawns, cut to perfection but never enjoyed. Every summer, the water is crowded with motorboats, water skiers, and WaveRunners—loud, obnoxious, drunk, and oblivious to their disturbance of beauty. The beach overflows with tourists and travelers. Tiny bikinis and superfluous bodies desecrate its once treasured coast.

While the beach was inhabited, I avoided it and explored the lake's center. For a while my father had a sailboat on Geneva. He and I would pack lunch and maneuver around the flashy speedboats. It was such a time-consuming job that we never had the chance to eat. Eventually he would find a neglected cove where we could skim along. He steered and I leaned way over the edge, counterbalancing the weight. As I bent backwards, I found myself suddenly parallel to the water and able to explore its depths. Could our tiny boat sense the hulls of greater vessels buried in the sand far below? I had heard tales of storms that hit hard and allowed the lake to take revenge on the yachts of millionaires that had forced the Oneota away. I imagined that the water felt annoyed by the audacity of all boats bigger than an Indian canoe.

One summer night a storm hit and ripped our boat off its buoy. We found it on the shore of the beach like a washed up sand pail. This attack was not the only indication that the water needed sacrifices. Occasionally divers and swimmers were molested by the rudder of a passing boat. Hands, feet, arms, and legs were quickly lost in the depths of the second

deepest lake in Wisconsin. I heard one summer that Geneva's most prestigious tour boat; "The Lady of the Lake," had found what I considered to be its pin-up girl. A man from Chicago was taking a little vacation from his wife and children. He and a buddy had spent the night at the bars and had picked up some girls to help them continue the party on their motorboat. They were drunk. It was dark. A girl dove in and was run over. Her chest was punctured, causing her to sink 135 feet to the bottom. Divers searched for her corpse for weeks. Our very own Lady of the Lake.

Though I hardly ever visited the beach when the sun burned its surface, at night I was drawn in. A friend of mine lived near a side of the lake that exposed almost all 5,262 acres of water. I spent nights on her dock with a group of giggling girls. We shared gossip and dares before stripping down to training bras and underwear and jumping into the cold darkness. Once in the water, the laughing stopped and the quiet of its mysterious expanse would flood our young minds. We became profound, the deepness of the lake adding to our own mental depth. From the neck down, our bodies disappeared under sheets of black silk. The merging stars and city lights showed only heads floating along in the blackness.

I grew up, as all kids do, but I never got over the feeling of water on skin at night. In the middle of summer, I'd beg Sean to go with me to the lake. It took talent to convince him to brave the mosquito bites and submit to the water's chill. To avoid the worst attacks, we would hide our bodies under the surface and let our faces bear the brunt of it. The lake's almost complete silence had the same effect as our favorite music. We went quiet as if listening to the light beat of drums or a rising chord. That moment of bodily absence meant at least a week of torment by bites in places mosqui-

toes should never go.

The real power of the lake came in with the storms. I knew the stories of the terror of Geneva in anger and had seen first hand what it could do to our own little boat. So when lightning lit the sky, Hannah and I made sure we were there to bear witness. On clear nights, I'd repeat my past, standing in my underwear thigh deep, as I watched Hannah wade deeper and deeper before me. We shrieked at the chill as it hit our waists, swam to the docks and jumped into deeper water. After fully submerging, the water took over, as it always does at night, and we would become silent. On occasions when dark clouds stirred the lake, you could find us standing on the shore, overwhelmed just at the sight. Something in the way a storm hit seemed to be part of the lake's revenge on its ungrateful inhabitants. I couldn't imagine the lake treating the Oneota with such fits of anger. They called it Kish-Wa-Kee-Tow, "clear water," and I imagine it always being clear under their dutiful care.

I added much of my own history to Lake Geneva. I balanced out sailboats, shared secrets in the dark, exposed my skin to danger, and watched nature take over. It was not history that would be recorded in travel brochures or chamber of commerce postings. Having played no part in the draw of tourists to Paradise City, it belongs only to the water itself. Let it sink to the bottom with the boat hulls, bodies, and the past.