

Sunday Morning | P.J. Smith

I walk through the forested park and let the sun greet my face and arms just like it always has. A choir of birds and yapping ducks chime through the background, the signature sound of our small Tennessee town.

I listen closely to the melodies of the birds, hearing their intricate and delicate and sometimes brash songs. They sing and cackle gleefully and angrily but I don't hear the bright and lively high-pitched notes I'm looking for.

The calm, algae-covered lake breathes in soft, even ripples and a cool breeze offers me that all-too-familiar scent of wet dirt and lakewater. I breathe in what feels like nostalgia, and old memories pour over me like a summer rain.

I flip open my bird-watcher's guidebook and stop on the Indigo Bunting, reminding myself of the male's vibrant indigo plumage splashing out from its cool gray beak, and then how it fades and bleeds into royal blue and cerulean.

Suddenly, a quick splash of blue darts past my peripheral. I snatch my binoculars and unkindly press them to my eyes and search the sky, not noticing I'm holding my breath. Seconds pass like minutes. Then I spot a hopeful speck of blue bobbing through the drooping vines of the old Willow that engulfs a small hill on the lake's edge.

My feet are forward before my brain can process I'm moving. I close in on the tree, my eyes darting faster and faster, searching for that bobbing speck, when a harsh crack snaps under my foot.

The head of a man in a brown, tattered hat lifts up behind the tree. I think I see the blue dot flying back over the unbothered, rippling lake. Great. I have half a mind to try and sneak out of sight and chase after the bird, but that's not how I was raised.

I'll apologize and be on my way.

"Sorry to wake you, sir," I offer quickly and delicately, "I thought I saw a bird in this tree and I - "

"You talkin' 'bout that little Indigo Bunting?" The man yawns.

"Yes, actually!" My binoculars are back to my eyes and I'm scanning the edge of the forest again. This bird isn't a common sight.

The man sits up, stretches his arms, and peers through the brim of his hat, taking in a quick scan of me. "You one 'o them birdwatchers?"

"Something like that," I say hesitantly, "my dad was really into it."

"Was?"

I pause, let the binoculars dangle around my neck, and look down at the lake. "He died ten years ago." I hold up the book, my eyes are heavy looking at it, and it's heavy in my hand, too. I'm suddenly feeling embarrassed, and I wonder if my arm is shaking, but I don't care. It feels good to talk about him nowadays, especially here. "I'm trying to finish this book he was working on. That bird is the last one I need."

"Oh," he says, "sorry to hear it, kid." His head turns out over the lake. "That's mighty noble of you, finishin' what yer old man started."

"Yeah... I mean, thanks," I say, shifting my gaze out over the still lake. "Anyway, uh, sorry to have ruined your nap. I'm gonna go see if I can still spot it."

"Hang on, what if I told you I could get the bird to come back?"

I'm not sure what to say. Is he joking? "Uh... I'd have

to ask how," I chuckle, my eyebrow raised. I'm trying to search his face for an expression but the light and the hat and the shade from the tree make it impossible to see his features. The only thing I can tell is that he's an older guy, probably in his late forties, early fifties.

"I'm serious," he says, seeming to acknowledge how crazy he sounds, "It'd be no problem, just come back here Sundy mornin'."

I'm lost. I don't know what's happening, but there's something I can't put my finger on, so I don't answer him. I just stare blankly, expectant. Did this guy know my dad or something? I remember his online community group, the one he'd share his bird shots with. I don't photograph them like he did, but I know he was involved with a fairly decent sized community of bird watchers around here.

Without me having to respond, he says, "Warms me up seein' a young man, missin' his old man, lookin' for birds, that's all." Then he pushes himself up, places his tanned hand on the base of the tree, looks out toward the lake, and starts walking. "Just come over to this here willow," he says, "Sundy mornin'." And he walks behind the tree.

I stand there, unsure of what's happening, a little annoyed. What the hell is this? I wait, expecting him to reappear on the other side, but he doesn't show. I lean to my left, trying to see what he's up to, but I can't see any sign of him. I keep my distance as I walk outward toward the lake. There is no man behind the tree.

"What the...?" I can't stop myself from the words escaping me, but then I stumble over a large root curling up from the ground and drop my book. I scurry up off the grass and approach the tree. I look up into its vibrant green branches. Nothing. I scan the vicinity, poking my head around both sides of the large, coarse trunk. Nothing. I knock on the trunk, and my knuckles sting against the bark.

Just a tree.

Did that just happen? I back away, starting to question

my sanity.

Of course it happened! I'm not crazy. Not that crazy, anyway. But there's no way that just happened! Something strange is going on. A magic trick? Sorcery? No way. I press my hand to my forehead. No fever. I look around. Everything is normal.

I drop my heel on the grass around the tree, prodding for a secret door or some kind of sound that might cue a hidden hollow space. Nothing!

I see my dad's book laying in the grass over by the edge of the lake. I walk over to retrieve it and notice my reflection.

I've stood in this spot many times as a boy, catching minnows and tadpoles and playing in the mud, but this is my first time looking down as a young man. Everything seems smaller. I'd been avoiding this spot for years without even realizing it. Soft ripples dance and break on the small shore just as they always have, but the face I see doesn't look anything like it used to. It's the same lake, but it looks somehow distant and smaller, its water darker and less deep. Its reflection is mean. The boy that used to look at this lake smiled and laughed all day but the person looking back at me now doesn't look like a smiler or a laugher.

The ripples seem to float right off the surface and into my skin. At first they're cold, and it feels like they're knocking me back. They flutter up my arm and neck until I can feel them pouring out of my eyes and down my cheeks.

If only I could've said goodbye. I look over my shoulder, expecting to see him. Because from this angle, that's all I ever saw.

"Hey buddy, what'd ya find?" I can still hear him say it, sipping his beer, sitting there in

his chair, his rod at his side.

And then the rippling stops, and my cheeks turn hot,

and in an instant I realize I'm mad. He left me when he died, and he took those memories with him. I brush the back of my hand across my face and I chuck the book out onto the lake.

And then my cheeks are wet again, and I'm sitting there on the edge of the lake. I'm mad and sad, and I miss him, and I hate him. I watch the book disappear beneath the surface and close my eyes.

I open them again to look at my reflection again, so I can see my tear-stained face and hate him more.

And I'm looking at myself, my puffy eyes and pathetic reflection breaking into focus between the ripples. The minnows dart through the water without care. And then the man, with his tattered hat, is standing over my shoulder. I lash my head around, but he's gone. Like he was never there at all.

Just like my father.

Just like his book is now. Lost to the lake.

I gaze out, the sun is lower in the sky. It shines and skips across the surface, blinding me for a moment. I stand up and I look at the indifferent scenery. The lake ripples on, the willow continues to sway, and the birds chirp their ancient songs.

I see a flash of blue, but I stand up and I walk home.

After I eat, brush my teeth, and have a shower, I walk over to my dresser to grab a pair of boxers from the top drawer. I'm drained, and today feels like it was all a fever dream. I don't know if I'm going crazy, but I try to ignore it all. I thought I'd grown past all of these complicated feelings. I pull my boxers over my feet and up my legs and notice the frame sitting on my dresser.

There we are. Me, smiling, probably five or six years old,

and my dad looking down at me, probably in his mid to late thirties. He's carrying our fishing rods in one hand, a tackle box in the other, and a couple of chairs and a cooler are strapped around his shoulders. Mom says we were always running away to the lake, but she took the photo with his camera because he

"needed something other than birds in there."

I'm staring at my young, foreign face, and at his, which appears happy enough, searching for the feeling in my chest, when I notice the tree behind us and see a still, blue dot perched behind the grainy leaves. I look up, out of my window. It's dark now and I can hardly see the tree from the photo. I look back at the frame, and it all floods back to me.

That day was particularly windy. I remember arriving at the lake, the surface was rougher than I'd ever seen it before. The ducks weren't bobbing and splashing in the middle like usual. Dad said fish didn't particularly like windy days either, but he said the spot under the old Willow tree would be calmer since it and the hill it canopied would shade and shelter the water. We set our equipment up as usual, and sure as he'd said, the water was calmer there. My hands were immediately sifting through the water with a small net, my eyes set on a particular amber, gold, and crimson colored minnow, when I was hit on the head by something soft and watched as my dad's hat flew out over the water, riding the wind for a moment, landing on its surface, and then sinking, lost to the lake.

The hat was worn, brown, and tattered. And in the picture I'm squeezing tight in my hands, it's snug on his head.

An overwhelming sensation breaks over me like a wave, like an epiphany, but more like the feeling of realizing something obvious that's been right in front of my face. An image of the old man from the park pops into my head, his shadowed face looming over my shoulder.

My eyes are not sure where to go. I can feel my mouth twitching into a smile, exercising muscles that hadn't been used genuinely in a very long time. I want to drop every-

thing and run over to the old Willow right now. I want to see my -

I come to my senses before I can finish the thought. I wipe tears from my cheeks and sit down on the edge of my bed, staring at the picture, studying the hat and everything else around it, my grip loosening.

My dad is dead. That's real. I remember wanting to stop his funeral when they lowered his casket, to open it one last time to try and shake him awake. Because it had to be a fucking mistake. How could he have left me like that? And mom. We were never the same after that, and *that* was real.

That man at the park today was not. I feel stupid. I feel sick of myself. I feel pathetic. As if my dad's ghost would just be hanging around that old lake, taking naps in the grass and watching birds. That man had to be at least ten years older than my dad, and he probably just happened to have the same stupid hat. I'm so exhausted. Being there today, in that park, hearing the birds sing, smelling the wet dirt and lakewater, feeling the sun bite my skin and the soft breeze cool it down, must have triggered some weird hallucination.

I place the picture back on my dresser and take one last look. It's the first time I see it with a feeling of disappointment. I lay my head back on my pillow, close my eyes, and let my mind slip away into darkness.

Sunday morning, I wake up and look out my window. The sun is shining, and the leaves aren't blowing in the wind. It's calm. I pull on the pair of cargo shorts lying next to my bed and grab a clean t-shirt from my dresser. I haven't been able to think about anything else for the past two days. I know today is impossible. I know I'm going to be disappointed, but I'm going to the park. I must have played hundreds of scenarios in my head, but I kept them all to myself. Mom has been a little worried, but today it all comes to rest and I can finally put it all behind me.

I expect to find an empty park. Either that, or a really weird man. One who somehow managed to disappear into thin air and was planning on kidnapping and killing me. Or more logically, one who was part of my dad's old birdwatchers group and had some way of catching one of these birds and was going to show it to me. I skip breakfast. I'm not hungry.

I turn the corner with such anxiety that I feel like my chest is going to explode. My pits are damp, and I can feel my heart throbbing in my throat. I look out at the still lake, at the old

Willow tree on the other side, standing, unyielding, and green.

I make my way toward the spot. No man. No bird. Nothing.

I stand there, staring up through the leaves of the towering tree, watching the branches shift and breathe, protecting this dome from the sunlight trying to peek through like a time capsule. It's all the same under here. Everything except for me, that is.

I'm disappointed, confused, sad, angry. But also, indifferent. What did I expect?

I gaze out over the rippling lake, the sun glazing over the spot I saw his book splash just two days ago. It seems like the same place I saw his hat hit the surface all those years ago. The morning dew sparkles and glistens on the opposite side of the lake, a few of the Willow's leaves dipping into the lake with those same wilted fingers. I feel guilty for throwing the book out over the water, and I hate myself for it.

How could I be so stupid? Winding myself up into thinking I was actually about to see my father! For the past couple of days, there was this buried feeling I hadn't felt in such a long time. It was peeking through, like it was just waiting to pop out. It felt like a smile, like a deep laugh. Like a full, clear breath that didn't dwindle away with the

exhale. I felt closer to that young boy more than I ever had before. But that feeling is gone and I'm afraid I won't ever feel it again.

I sit down with my back against the tree. The ducks bob up and down into the water, pulling up laces of algae in their beaks, ruffling their feathers in the lake and stretching their wings with quick flaps. I close my eyes and let one final tear fall from my eye, as I wish and wish that it had just been real, and accept that it never could be.

I hear the ducks squabble for a moment, and a sharp, lively, high-pitched note whistles above my head. Leaves rustle and I whip my eyes open and look up. The sun is shining through the branches, distorting my sight, but within a few seconds, my eyes adjust.

There they are. A pair of Indigo Buntings, perched in the old Willow. My eyes well up almost immediately, but I'm careful not to make a sound or move a muscle. I just watch them cock their heads, and take in their never ending song. Then I smile.