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Buried

in the sand

by Heather Drouse

On a buildup of rocks smoothed round by the water of Lake St. Clair sits a little girl. This little girl has just turned six years old, and so she wears her new, frilly two-piece bathing suit that she got from her mom. Her hair, as short as it is, has not yet gotten wet; the little girl is too busy running her little palms back and forth over the soft algae of the rocks, moving slowly with the motion of the water. To her, it feels just as good as running her fingers through her hair when it was long and free, when she'd keep her head back in the bathtub, just enough so that she could breathe but still feel as if she were entirely underwater.

A brush of wind goes by, and the little girl shivers. This is enough for her to finally leave the algae alone in favor of sliding off of the rock and fully into the water. The June sun has kept it nice and warm for this little girl, just as she likes it. She is careful not to fall too far from the rocks, both at the many warnings of her dad and for the sake of her comfort. She likes to be able to sit down in the rocky sand and dig her toes into the softer silt below, and given long enough, she buries both of her legs in it, too. The motion of the water cannot sway her when she's buried like this, which only aids in her ongoing make-pretend that she is a beautiful mermaid basking in the sunlight upon the shores of some faraway island.

Even without anyone to share this world with, the little girl spends her time within it for hours and hours, letting it wash over her each time she visits the lake, takes a bath, and sometimes even when she swims with her cousins at her Mimi's public pool, but only when they are tired of her and leave her alone in the shallow end. Being alone, luckily, is not something that she struggles with, but it's not that she doesn't care for company. In fact, on this particular day, there's someone that decides to join her after she's fully cemented herself in the sand and silt. A bullfrog settles down in the algae atop the rocks, its body just large enough to allow its eyes to sit above the water at its highest. The little girl stares at the bullfrog, absolutely transfixed. She watches as it slurps the microscopic bugs and other crawly things out of the waving algae. Its eyes never look away from hers.

"Hi, Mr. Frog." The little girl's voice is just pitched high enough that it rises over the lapping of the water. "What did you do today?"

The bullfrog takes a brief respite from combing through the algae in front of it and anchors its webbed feet onto the slick rock. "I ate some bugs, of course! You got any bugs for me?"

"Nooo," the little girl giggles. Her hands move up and down, up and down in the sand on either side of her out of excitement, kicking up clouds of grainy dust. "Mommy has worms in her garden. I like the worms. Do you want worms?"

“Oh, yes!” The bullfrog shifts its back legs and scratches its right side with its foot. “Big worms. Bring some tomorrow; I’m getting tired.”

The little girl, with a smile from ear to ear, watches the bullfrog hop off of the rock and shoot through the water, going farther and farther until it can no longer be seen. Alone once again, the little girl resumes her make-pretend. By the time her dad comes looking for her, her hands are so shriveled that they remind him of his own father.

The sun has only just come up the next day by the time the little girl dips her toes into the water of the lake. She carries with her a plastic, bright yellow bucket meant for building sandcastles; today, it is being used to carry the five worms that the little girl dug up not long ago. Her fingers are still caked in the black dirt that her mom recently covered the garden with. The little girl had spent her birthday helping her pat down the dirt and make little shallow holes to put the seeds in. Her mom wore thick patterned gloves and old clothes that she could easily bear with dirtying, but the little girl was in her prettiest yellow sundress, which she used to hold the seeds she wanted to plant in her lap. By the end of the day, the bottom half of her dress and her legs up to her knees were covered in dirt, but her mom wasn’t angry with her. She never was, and that’s what the little girl loved so much about her. No matter what she did, her mom never yelled at her.

Her dad was a different story. When she came in the house that day through the sliding glass door and tracked the dark dirt into the computer room, her dad picked her up roughly by the arms and carried her all the way to the bathroom in her parents’ room. He took her dress off and made her sit on the edge of the bathtub, and unlike the gentle touch that her mom would use, he scrubbed her legs with an old washcloth until they were red and burning. The little girl cried and cried, but her dad said nothing; when he felt that she was finally clean of all of the dirt, he sent her upstairs to her room to change into her pajamas on her own. She spent the rest of the day hiding in the corner of her room underneath the slanted portion of her ceiling, sniffing as quietly as she could and eating chocolate raisins one by one out of the box that her dad gave her that morning.

The little girl positions herself next to the rocks of yesterday and sets the yellow pail on top of the biggest one. She shoves her hands in the water and waves them around, then slaps them together until all of the dirt is gone. With her hands clean, she reaches into the bucket and pulls out one earthworm. She dunks it into the water, too, and shakes it until it’s clean. She repeats this process with the other four worms, transferring them to her left hand once they are clean, and then finally grabs the bucket and glides it through the water until it, too, is free of dirt. She drops the worms back into the bucket, buries her toes into the sand, and relaxes as she waits for the bullfrog to return. The bullfrog announces its entrance by the sound of its padded feet smacking the water atop the rocks. It stops just short of the bucket, unaware of what’s inside.

“Mr. Frog, Mr. Frog! Look what I got!” The little girl awkwardly reaches into the bucket and pulls out one of the worms. Her quick actions startle the bullfrog, but only enough to make it take a step back. With her arm bent and her elbow pressed firmly into the algae, she holds the squirming worm in front of the bullfrog’s face. It lunges at the worm and takes some of the little girl’s fingers in its mouth, causing her to let out a surprised shriek just as she draws her hand back. This does not deter her, however; with her signature smile painted on her face, she grabs another worm and fearlessly offers it to the bullfrog again. She repeats this process until all of the worms are gone, then turns the yellow bucket upside down.

“Those are the best worms I’ve ever had.” The bullfrog draws its feet underneath it, hunching down.

“I got them from Mommy’s garden,” the little girl tells the bullfrog. “She has a lot of worms in there. Mommy told me they’re good for the plants because they help them grow. Daddy says so, too,

so he doesn't like when I dig the worms up." Under the water, a cloud of sand grows as she begins to move her feet from side to side. "Daddy yells at Mommy sometimes for letting me do it. I don't like when he yells. I like you, Mr. Frog, because you don't yell."

The bullfrog rotates to look directly at the little girl. They exchange stares, unblinking and silent, until the bullfrog turns back around and hops into the water.

"Oh, are you going home? Okay! Bye bye Mr. Frog!" The little girl waves as she watches the bullfrog kick its powerful back legs and masterfully glide through the water. She wishes that she could be just as fast, but she knows that her legs were meant for walking, not swimming. With nothing left to do on the shore, the little girl reluctantly peels her legs out of the sand and stands, brushing off her legs as best as she can. After making absolutely sure to grab her cherished yellow pail, she spins around and skips all the way home.

Though she wanted nothing more than to visit her new froggy friend, the little girl was unable to go down to the shore for a whole week after their second meeting. On and off thunderstorms and the high winds that came with them made it too dangerous for her to be outside on her own, let alone near the water. There wasn't much for her to do at home, admittedly; she could watch PBS on the living room TV, but that was about all. She didn't like the babysitter that came to watch her while her parents were at work, either, so she couldn't even play any games with her. The little girl instead passed her time laying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, and imagining that she and her bullfrog friend were swimming together at her Mimi's pool.

She wondered if the bullfrog had any friends other than her, or if it had any parents to go home to. She wished that she knew where it lived, too, and whether or not it was safe. If she had known that the storms were going to be so bad, she would have picked up the bullfrog and taken it with her in the same yellow bucket she fed it out of. She thought it would appreciate that. A home is better than the outside world, anyway. Outside is too hot in the day and too cold at night, windy, rainy... The little girl was suddenly thankful that she had a roof over her head.

Over the course of the week, there was one thing the little girl worried about, other than the bullfrog's safety. She didn't like to be home with her dad very much, and with the storms being so bad, he didn't leave the house after he came home from work like he usually did. Him and her mom, as a result, were yelling at each other more and more. It happened most often at night. Even though their room was downstairs and on the other side of the house, the little girl could still hear their voices carrying up through the vents in the floor of her room. She wished that there was something she could do to make them stop, but it just scared her more to think about. She didn't know why they fought, or what it was about, so she didn't know what to say. All she could do was cover her head with her blankets and try to go to sleep, because she knew that if her dad came upstairs to find she was awake that late, he'd yell at her, too.

It was a Sunday when the storms finally died down. The sky was still grey and cloudy, but the wind had stopped whistling through the pipes and rattling the windows, and the only rain left was in puddles on the sides of the road. The little girl's mom had told her that once it stopped raining, she could go back down to the lake, but this time she had to let her know. Therefore, as soon as she wakes up on this calm morning, she races downstairs after changing into her bathing suit and only slows down when she opens the door to her parents' bedroom. She can tell that both of them are still sleeping, mostly by the loud sound of her dad's snores and her mom's awkward position.

The little girl creeps over to their bed and stands at the side. With her mom up against the wall, she has to shake her awake from over her dad--but she finds that with her arms so short, she can't reach. Before she can move to try again, her dad's snoring stops abruptly and his body tenses, and all of a sudden, the little girl is on the floor, whirling with pain. Cries wrack her tiny body, her hands

cupping her right eye tightly. The noise wakes her mom, and she scrambles to get around her dad and onto the floor, her arms finding their way around the little girl along with coos of "What's wrong? What's wrong?"

"He hit me," the little girl sobs, rocking back and forth. In that brief moment of her dad's semi-consciousness, his mind realized that someone was in the room with them, and without knowing who or why, the first thing he did was throw out his fist. The little girl's dad tries to reason with her mom, but there is nothing that can be said to make her any less angry. His pleas turn into anger, and her mom's sympathy does the same. Before it can get any worse, the little girl forces her way out of her mom's arms and runs out of the room. Her parents, too preoccupied with screaming at each other, leave her be, thinking that she would run upstairs to cry it out and they would deal with her later.

But the little girl can only think of one place to go. She runs out of the house and goes straight for the lake, her bare feet picking up mud and bits of blacktop as she goes. Still, she holds one hand over her eye, which has swollen and blackened in the time that has passed. Though there is no rain now, the sky is still swirling with darkened grey clouds, and the wind makes goosebumps pop up all over the little girl's exposed skin. The water is just as cold as the outside air, but at the very least, it keeps the wind from biting at her.

The bullfrog is already at the lake, having smushed itself into a small hole created by the space between two rocks. The little girl, after steadying herself against the waves with her toes in the sand, shoves her face in front of the bullfrog and sobs as loud as her little body will let her. She removes her hand from her eye, too, letting it see what's happened to her up close.

"My daddy-- he-- he hit me," she cries. "I just-- wanted to ask mommy something, and..." The little girl coughs, unable to go on. Instead, she just stares at the bullfrog and lets her tears drip into the water, little by little. She puts her hands on the rocks on either side of the bullfrog when she feels the water pulling her too much. In response, the bullfrog raises its head and extends its front legs to appear taller. Its tongue flies out of its mouth and snags an ant from the wall of rock next to it, and as it goes to swallow, it pushes its eyes briefly into its body. The little girl noisily sniffles, still staring right at the bullfrog, but it gives no reassurance.

A raindrop plops squarely on the top of her head. When she opens her mouth to speak again, the wind picks up, whipping her hair into her eyes; just as she swats it away, she sees the bullfrog hop into the water right in front of her and start kicking its long legs, heading deeper into the lake.

"Wait! I wasn't-- I'm not done! You're being rude!"

The little girl whines, wanting sympathy, but the bullfrog only speeds up. She lets out a wail and wades further into the waves. She hopes to catch the bullfrog in her tiny hands and trap it between her palms. Swimming, however, is not a skill that she possesses. As she tries to move faster to catch up to the frog, she starts to kick both legs at once, outstretching her arms and slapping them into the water to try and imitate a paddle. This proves to be even slower than before, but when she tries to stand, she can no longer feel the sand beneath her feet. She can barely stay afloat, only managing to keep herself up with the furious paddling of her feet, but she quickly becomes tired and can kick no longer. The bullfrog has gone completely out of her sight, and the shore looks so far away. The waves have gotten taller, and in the middle of her rising panic, the little girl is swept under by the current. Her lungs fill with water through her open mouth, and with no time to close her eyes, the salt burns them deeply. Her legs won't obey her, her arms don't know how to carry her, and her sense of direction was lost as soon as she went under.

Uneasy relief washes over her as the world fades to inky black.