

Lake Country

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She was certain it would be somewhat of a trial, but Milena committed herself to reading all the works of Franz Kafka. She began the day the almanac recommended planting her tomato seeds and gave herself a deadline of finishing July Fourth, when she would sit and, as was her personal tradition, watch the movie *Jaws* in solitude.

On this particular morning she did not have to be at work until nine o'clock and had just made the important transfer of her tomato seedlings from artificial lamp-controlled lighting beside her bed to the windowsill of the kitchen in her little studio apartment that was situated in the urban living complexes of Lake Country. Milena was nearing the end of Kafka's short story "Unhappiness" when her cellular telephone vibrated. She looked to the screen and saw that it was five o'clock in the morning on the dot. The caller identification showed it to be her only cousin, Dora, who never contacted anyone in their family. Neither did Milena but she thought she had better justification than Dora. They were the same age, having been born four days apart, their mothers still living at opposite ends of Lake Country.

Milena immediately answered. "What's wrong?"

"Can you do me a favor, Mili?" Dora said.

Milena recalled the last time her only cousin asked for a favor. Dora had asked to borrow Milena's transportation because its backseats adjusted down and there would be ample space for her to lose her virginity to a boy named Oskar. The stench of their copulation never really left the vehicle until Milena totaled it driving in a

distraught state she would like to forget.

“You’ve always been one with animals,” Dora continued.

Milena’s heart sank hearing this and she right then forgave Dora for sexing up her first transportation twenty years before. She looked to her left wrist where she still wore the black coil collar of her beloved coal-black Bombay feline, Felix, who passed away to kitty leukemia fifty-four days before.

She eyed her wristwatch. She did not need to be at work for four hours. “What must I do?”

“Come to my workplace. Now.”

Eighteen minutes later Milena pulled her little fuel-efficiency vehicle into the parking lot of the Lake Country Jewish Community Center and drove right to the end where the outdoor swimming pool was in operation for the summer. She saw Dora with a pool pole in hand, the net skimming the surface of the water. Her only cousin had gotten a summer job folding towels in the facility’s laundry quarters when she still lived with her mother. She had never worked anywhere else, having risen through the ranks of duties until finally promoted to Chief Swimming Pool Facilitator.

Dora saw Milena’s car, dropped the pole and sprinted to meet her. She was still delicate even for nearing forty, with her skinny little nose and long hair she kept tied up in a bundle atop her head; Milena could not recall having ever seen Dora wear it down. Her only cousin’s lifelong, effortless athleticism still irritated Milena, but she could at least pride herself on the fact that even Dora recognized that Milena was blessed with intelligence in a family that had little.

“I love your new do, Mili,” Dora said, practically crashing into Melina and wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

Melina tapped a palm to the back of Dora’s JCC staff tee-shirt as if burping a baby, or how she imagined it might be to burp

a baby. "Thanks," she said, not mentioning that she had paid to have her long, auburn curls stylized into a professional, adult cut the day before the interview with her present employer, where she now held a position of great importance for the past six years. "So," she said as Dora released her arms and looked right into her eyes; they were exactly the same height, which was all that was the same about them. "What do you need me to do?"

"This way," Dora said, taking Melina by the elbow and guiding her in the direction of the swimming pool.

They passed through the security gate where there was no staff attendee checking for membership identification since the outdoor grounds would not open for at least another hour. Only the maintenance staff arrived this early. They walked past the spotless patio chairs and sunning benches to the swimming pool. Dora pointed to the far corner of the shallow end near the stairs and said, "Look."

"Is that what I think it is?" Milena said.

"Yes, and it's a boy. Not skittish at all, let's you touch him with no problems. Super friendly."

"There's no way to identify the gender of them, you know that."

"Well, I guess I just want him to be a boy, so he's going to be a boy."

"Okay then, he's a boy."

"I really need you to take him."

Milena turned sharp to Dora. "Me?"

"Come on, remember when we were in the same fifth grade class and that spring Mrs. Lowy had us raise one and then release it to its natural environment the last day before summer vacation? Everyone was excited about it at first but by the time we got to letting it go you were the only one in the class who cared at all. We watched you raise it all on your own. And it's the official Lake Country species, it's on the endangered list. You're practically obli-

gated to do this, as a citizen.”

“I don’t know, Dor, I’m not prepared for this. My studio apartment is really small.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend, what’s the big deal?”

Milena was annoyed that Dora assumed she was manless, even though it was true.

“He’ll keep you company,” Milena’s only cousin went on. “At least take him for today. If Marvin sees him in the water he’s going to make me drain this whole pool and disinfect and sanitize it when everyone knows that’s not necessary. Marvin’s a nut about germs, he imagines them on everything, won’t even shake hands when he’s interviewing potential staff. Please do this for me, Mili. Marvin’s going to be here any minute.”

Milena had heard about the infamous Marvin. His reputation needed no explanation. She and Dora both shared a suspicious distrust of people who appeared to have happy families; Marvin’s was known to be the happiest of all the ones in Lake Country. Milena sighed a bit. “Okay, I guess I can put him in my bathtub and tonight after work I’ll release him to one of the lakes. You got a bucket?”

They walked to the shallow end of the swimming pool. Milena now got a better look at the baby plesiosaur as Dora went to the staff utility shed by the whirlpool to find a bucket. Milena was struck by just how similar this baby plesiosaur resembled the one she had single-handedly nurtured in Mrs. Lowy’s fifth grade classroom. It had tiny whale-like flippers and a lizard-ish scaly head atop a long, snaky neck. It looked like a snake that might have ingested a barrel. His thick little tail was tapered and he already had two of what she remembered would become four powerful flippers. He was nipping his tail with his primary teeth that had already come in, his long neck bent so much that Milena wondered how he wasn’t tipping over and submerging his upper half under the chlorinated water with his two baby flippers flapping in the air. The only thing odd was that he had what appeared to be roundish,

rubbery ears that flopped back and forth over his sky-blue eyes. She could swear that Mrs. Lowery had taught them that plesiosaurs did not have ears.

“Well, hello there, little guy,” Milena said as she kneeled to the edge of the swimming pool. The baby plesiosaur instantly stopped nibbling his tail and turned his scaly, gray head to her direction, those blue eyes popping wide with a confused expression. He could not have been more than the size of a watermelon, which Milena remembered indicated that he was probably less than a month old. His eyes locked with hers and did not deviate.

“I have no idea how he ended up here,” Dora said, returning with a large, plastic bucket. “I just arrived this morning and there he was.”

“You don’t think the chlorine will hurt him, do you?” Milena refused to remove her eyes from the baby plesiosaur’s.

“No, if anything it’s killing off any harmful bacteria he might have on him. Try telling that to Marvin, though. You want to scoop him up or should I do it?”

At that moment Milena saw the baby plesiosaur’s tiny mouth spread into what appeared to be a smile. She reached out her left hand and he instantly licked her finger that had adorned an engagement ring at a previous point in her life for precisely one-hundred and eight exact minutes, then he rubbed the left side of his scaly snout against her palm, his mouth still spread upward—content.

Milena took the plastic bucket from Dora and in one motion dragged the top open rim into the water, downward under the baby plesiosaur and then upward in a swift motion, lifting him safely out of the swimming pool. He splashed about with what she interpreted as joy.

“Wish I had your arms,” Dora said.

Milena refrained from mentioning that she had always disliked her arms. They were the reason she refused to wear sleeveless

blouses and why she resented women like Dora who sported them without consideration for such things because they did not have to consider them at all. She looked down and locked eyes with the baby plesiosaur again. At that moment he began to fan his little tail quickly back and forth, spilling a small amount of water from the bucket to the concrete edging of the swimming pool each time.

“I think he likes you,” Dora said, retaking the pool pole.

“Don’t say that,” Milena said, because she had never seen a reason for anyone to like her, even the man whose engagement ring she had accepted for a total of one-hundred and eight exact minutes.

“Well, thanks for doing this. And let me know when you release him back to his natural environment.”

“Sure.”

They did not touch as Milena departed with the baby plesiosaur in the bucket.

And he did not stop smiling or looking to her the entire drive back to her apartment.

Milena immediately took the baby plesiosaur from the bucket and set him in her bathtub when they arrived home to her little studio apartment. Regardless of what Dora said she spent eighteen minutes washing away the chlorine from his body with the detachable showerhead nozzle. With each squirt he swayed his tail and smiled and gave a swallowing “gleep” of a sound. He seemed enjoy the bathroom’s one little window view of the Lake Country Conversion Plant smoke stacks. When finished she filled the tub with water and he paddled his two small flippers and swam about. But after she turned off the bathroom light he began to howl “gleep gleep gleep” over and over, so she left the light on.

“Don’t worry, little guy,” she said. “You’re in Lake Country. We’re gonna find a nice bit of water for you to call home.”

“Gleep!”

She got ready for work, dressing in a stylish below-the-knee black skirt with a just below-the-elbow white blouse. As she fastened her identification card to the left breast pocket of her blouse she heard an extra loud splash and when she entered the bathroom found her copy of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* floating cover-side-up over the surface of the water. In the opposite corner was the baby plesiosaur with his scaly head tucked under his backside; his long, snaky neck wrapped around his whole body. He was shaking.

“There there,” Milena said, taking the drenched book from the water. She had forgotten that she had finished the book the night before when taking a bath and must have left it on the rim of the tub. She began to stroke the backside of the baby plesiosaur and, slowly, he stopped shaking and turned to her. Again, when their eyes met his tail began to sway and his jowls lifted into a smile, exposing his little primary teeth.

She knew she should probably give the baby plesiosaur something to occupy his attention, that he deserved that since she too had been frightened by *In the Penal Colony*. She then remembered that the man who had once requested she marry him had never asked for his workout bag back after their split. She went to the closet, unzipped the bag and found a tennis ball with a racket and a change of exercise clothes. She dumped everything but that tennis ball into the trash bin under the kitchen sink, entered the bathroom and looked to the baby plesiosaur.

“Hey, little guy, want a treat?” she said.

Tail sways.

She tossed the tennis ball to the bathwater and watched him swat at it with his two flippers. He expressed many “gleeps” until she realized she needed to leave for work.

Milena was thankful the Lake Country Children Museum’s

chief officer, Felice, was not on site. Felice was in Desert Country making arrangements for what was rumored to be a very rare and unheard of partnership for an unnamed traveling exhibit to come to their Children Museum for a special showing. Felice was good at what she did, all of the Lake Country Children Museum employees had to admit that, but she always struck Milena as the type of person who once smoked a lot of dope but did not anymore and was self-righteous about not doing so when in the company of others who did.

Felice had to know her long, mannish face, tall frame and wide, wood-like shoulders did not render her pretty, even to the Children Museum exhibits. She disliked younger women who always drew the attention of Willy, the museum's gift shop clerk who had been making his interest in Milena quite obvious. Milena did not yet know if she was ready to date again since her failed brief engagement, but Willy kept asking her out. Sometimes he gave her little gifts, defects from the Children Museum gift shop's received shipments. On this particular morning she went to her employee locker in the back break room and on its handle found a rubber baby-teething pacifier with "I Visited the Lake Country Children Museum" monogrammed over it. She pocketed the pacifier from Willy, which actually was a nice gift even if it was missing the museum's emblem of two dangling baby booties, which was likely why it was a defect.

Mondays were Milena's easy shift. She swiped her identification card through the censor strip to check in. Nine o'clock on the dot, as always. Punctual arrival had earned her the distinction of Employee of the Month on several occasions over the years. She then went to the feeding supply room, which she alone possessed a key for. The only time she had to surrender the key was two years before when state budget talks reached an impasse and the Lake Country governor refused to raise taxes on the wealthy and the whole government shut down for a week. Since the Children

Museum was publically funded she was not allowed to set foot on the grounds to feed the exhibits. All of the Newborns and most of the Crawlers died, but everything else survived. Milena had been keeping an eye on the political climate and had overfilled the feeding bins and slurping containers the day before the Lake Country's legislature negotiations broke down.

She knew there were probably already a few patrons in the museum. Mondays brought a mostly older crowd, which Milena preferred because they asked fewer questions and were generally quieter and more respectful of the exhibits. She hated to admit it, but the foreign tourists were really the worst; talking at high volumes, letting their cellular telephones ring without answering them or putting them on vibrate, and constantly wanting to leap the security barrier ropes to touch the exhibits or disregard Children Museum policy worded at the door of every gallery section and attempt to have their pictures taken in front of the exhibits.

A woman her grandmother's age smiled pleasantly to Milena as she exited the door of the supply room with a bucket of feed in one hand and a water container in the other. The woman was holding an unopened complimentary map of the museum's layout that Grete, the museum's front desk host, made sure each patron received after paying the entrance fee. The only time Grete did not bother handing out the maps was during the disastrous Teenagers Show they had brought in from their sister Frost Country Children Museum. All those exhibits did was fight and copulate all day at exceedingly high pitches. Grete would just say, "Follow the noise, you'll find what you came here to see." That show was supposed to last a month but it was taken down and returned it to the Frost Country Children Museum where it was permanently housed after one week because the exhibits never ate and let all of their feed and water and milk spoil. Ottla, the Lake Country Children Museum's senior custodian, had finally leveled with Felice that it was impossible to clean the expanded cage they had set up for the event in

Gallery Wing K each night because the Teenagers were just too out of control to let her do her job and it was going to soon become a health hazard. The Frost Country Children Museum said they had never had any complaints and only praise for their Teenagers Show when they had lent it to other venues in the past and demanded the entire borrowing fee. This was one of the few times Milena felt sorry for Felice. She imagined that Felice was not taking chances again, which was why she was spending so much time with the curators at the Desert Country Children Museum and keeping the next special event show she was arranging to bring in secret for the time being.

The Five Year-Olds and Six Year-Olds were Milena's favorites. She fed them first each morning even though Felice preferred Milena to go about her schedule in age order. But Milena had been with the museum so long and had proven her irreplaceable contribution to the operation that Felice only brought it up during her menstrual cycle these days. And even then Milena had to remind Felice that if she wanted to go about it in age order she had to wait until at least noon to attend to the Four Year-Olds because if they ingested anything before that time all hell would break loose, to which Felice would reluctantly agree.

The Five Year-Olds and Six Year-Olds shared a double-sized cage since they mingled well. The males were already awake and stacking rocks into a pile. The females were taking turns jumping in and out the center of large semi-truck tires that had been donated to the museum by one of its largest benefactors. Occasionally the females arranged the tires into a row but most of the time they were just randomly spread about the double cage. When Milena entered the cage they all stopped for a moment and waved to her. The one red-headed male that was a relatively new addition to this exhibit but had been accepted by all of the Five Year-Olds and Six Year-Olds not only waved his left hand but, with his right, shook back and forth what made him a male. Valli and Elli, the two Lake

Country Children Museum trainers, both agreed that this behavior was a sign that this particular male was fond of Milena and it would pass, that it was probably the result of him being a salvaged exhibit they acquired when the Rain Country Children Museum lost its own state funding and had to liquidate everything in its galleries before closing completely.

Milena went to the corner opposite the hay-strewn flooring of the slumbering section in the double cage and refilled the feed bin and water-slurper. She took note that the milk-lapping container was low but did not need attending to until probably Wednesday. As she left all of the Five Year-Olds and Six Year-Olds waved their fingers to her and returned to their rocks and tires.

If only all of the Children Museum exhibits were this easy, Milena thought.

Now her day really began.

She decided to restock the Two Year-Olds' cage to just get it over with since they were the worst. She sometimes thought of asking Willy to attend to the Two Year-Olds for her because she knew he would do anything if it might coax her to agree to dating him, but she always concluded that to do so would be cruel. She returned to the supply room, ready for the work at hand, hoping there would be no inconsiderate foreign tourist groups visiting today.

On the drive home from work, Milena stopped by one of the many lakes in Lake Country, but it was near the interstate. Traffic might scare the baby plesiosaur. She figured keeping him another day or two until she found the most optimal lake would not present any real hardship, and she was indeed a bit lonely since her beloved feline, Felix, passed away. So, she went to Arthur's Deli and bought several pounds of nova lox, tuna fish and ocean scod. She could not remember from grade school if plesiosaurs ate water dwelling food that was not alive so just in case she also went to the grocery store

and purchased the smallest live crab from the tank available.

Leaving the grocery store Milena looked across the street and saw congregants leaving church following early evening Mass. She paused and watched them with interest. She had always been somewhat jealous of people who “did the church thing,” as Dora would put it. Milena had always desired the spiritual, but she accepted that it was just not in her. Still, she had not given up on the chance that one day it would come to her as so many others had experienced it. Because of those so many others, she reasoned that it could happen to her as well. But it had to come to her, not the other way around, like everything else in her life.

When she returned to her little studio apartment she could hear the baby plesiosaur splashing about in the tub.

When she entered the bathroom he looked up and smiled.

“Hey you, did you have a good day?” she said.

He squealed “gleep gleep gleep” repeatedly.

Milena noticed that the tennis ball had somehow ended up on the linoleum under the sink. She tossed it back to the water and the “gleeps” ceased as the baby plesiosaur joyfully batted the ball about the water with his two flippers.

That night Milena fed him the small crab, placing it in the tub with its claws still secured tight with bands. The baby plesiosaur surprised her by how wide his snout opened, eating the crab whole in one swallow, bands and all. She then fed him little spoonfuls of the nova lox, tuna fish and ocean scod. He swallowed all of it and she concluded that she would not have to feed him live water dwellers.

When she settled onto the couch with a cup of hot green tea to begin reading Kafka’s *Amerika* she heard the baby plesiosaur squeal “gleep...” only this time his tone concerned her. As she entered the bathroom his ears were down and his eyes sagged. But when he saw her they rose and he excitedly squealed “gleep gleep gleep.” She decided to read aloud to him in the bathroom, sitting

on the toilet with the lid down, facing him. Every time she paused to rest her throat or sip her tea he would release a brief “gleep” and then quiet after she comforted him by scratching between his blue eyes with her index finger. Finally, she took the pacifier Willy had given her and he accepted it willingly, sucking the artificial teat, watching Milena as she read Kafka aloud.

When she was done reading for the night she said to him, “You need a name, little guy. How does Franz appeal to you?”

He spit the pacifier to the water where it bobbed and then floated and he squealed, “gleep gleep gleep!”

“Then Franz it is,” she said, and kissed him goodnight on top of his scaly snout just behind his three nostrils before brushing and flossing her teeth and going to bed.

For several weeks Milena visited different lakes after work but simply could not find one in Lake Country that she felt was deserving of having Franz as its resident.

Her reading of Kafka’s work flourished but her tomatoes on the kitchen windowsill would not grow. One evening after reading “The Bucket Rider” she decided to flush the tomato seedlings soil down the toilet. When she walked into the bathroom she could not resist giving Franz a tummy rub and set the long soil container on the windowsill of the bathroom’s one little window viewing the Lake Country Conversion Plant smoke stacks. She rubbed his tummy so long that she fell asleep on the tile floor beside the bathtub.

When she woke the next morning with one of Franz’s flip-flops draped over her back, she rose and saw that her tomatoes had started to sprout from the soil in the container. She looked at the container, pleased. Then, she paused, looked to Franz still sleeping, back to the tomato sprouts, once again to Franz, and smiled.

She had taken to bathing at the JCC, Dora sneaking her into the women's locker room before operating hours since Felice had started to comment about how lately Milena was smelling peculiar and offered her perfume. She had not taken a home bath since Franz came into her life.

"This has to stop soon," Dora said one morning. "Do you realize what could happen to me if Marvin finds out I've been letting somebody without a membership on the grounds, let alone use the showers every other morning? I know a perfect lake for Franz. Let me show you."

"No," Milena said, "I have to discover it myself for him, something just tells me that's the way it has to be."

"You should let people do things for you, Mili. Let me do something for you. Let's have a cousins only night, my treat, go bowling like when we...well, like something."

Milena declined and Dora seemed disappointed.

"You seriously need to take Felix's collar off your wrist, Mili." And Dora returned to her care of the JCC swimming pool.

Franz had grown to occupy two-thirds of the bathtub but Milena had never once had to change the water. He ate what she brought home for him from Arthur's Deli each evening but never seemed to use the bathroom the way she did, as if he was retaining all he ate for his growth. By now he had grown his final extra two flippers and had gone through Willy's pacifier, which she replaced with the toilet plunger. She was worried that the bathroom's one little window view of the Lake Country Conversion Plant smoke stacks was not stimulating enough for Franz while he was in such a crucial period of his development, so she bought posters of images of the natural world, each of them depicting a watery landscape. Franz seemed to be especially fond of the one of a vast lake that filled the crater of the missing top of a volcano that erupted mil-

lions of years ago that Milena pinned to the ceiling above the bathtub. He would stretch his long, snakelike neck and craned his scaly head up to it, his three nostrils sliding over the paper. And he still loved her reading Kafka aloud to him every night. She noticed how he responded to the different pieces and was particularly interested in how he did not suck on the toilet plunger and instead was alert with his neck straightened towards the bathroom ceiling and his tail erect the night she read "The Metamorphosis."

It was her favorite, too.

July Fourth was the next day and she was almost through with her goal of reading all of Kafka's work. Her tomatoes in the container on the bathroom's windowsill had ripened, and she was proud that Franz enjoyed them. She had so many tomatoes grow that she had to give some away or else they would rot. The day before she had given a basket of them to Dora who thanked her, followed by "You sure you don't want to have a cousins only night?"

Milena declined again.

She was almost through with *The Castle*, which would mark the victory of her personal reading challenge and she looked forward to having a sense of accomplishment. But, as always, life—or more appropriately, work—interfered.

It had not been a good morning at the Lake Country Children Museum. Ottla must have left the back door to Gallery Wing F ajar, not remembering to wait for the lock click before moving on with her custodial duties. One of the male Crawlers was missing. They had to keep the museum closed until the Crawler was retrieved and that meant doors did not open until well past eleven o'clock. A tour group of foreign visitors from the far off Peninsula Country were at the front doors of the museum screaming to be let in and were disgruntled that they had purchased admittance tickets in advance and were worried they would miss the new Toddlers First

Walk exhibit Felice had secured to have lent out to the museum from the Desert Country Children Museum. So far the new feature was a huge hit.

The runaway Crawler was found dead in a pool of Ottla's turned-over bleach bucket, which was in a shadowed area of the custodial supply room. All employees were thankful that Felice had gone easy on Ottla, saying, "These things happen but don't do it again. Please dispose of the body. Now let's open for business." Milena was convinced this niceness was the result of the success of the new Toddlers First Walk exhibit, and the fact that Newborns and Crawlers were cheap and easy to come by compared to the costliness of older ones. Ten Year-Olds were the rarest. Milena wanted to ask Ottla if she could have the carcass of the dead Crawler for Franz to eat but she knew she had no way to refrigerate it until she got off work and it would spoil by then.

That afternoon Milena was eating a tomato sandwich during her lunch break when Willy sat beside her.

"Were those tomatoes in my locker from you?" he said.

Milena smiled. "Yeah, I thought you would like them."

"Oh, tomatoes are my favorite."

"I'm glad."

"Say, why don't you let me buy you a drink tonight after work to say thanks; let me do something for you."

Milena admired Willy's persistence and figured he had earned at least one outing. "Okay," she said. "But let's make it an hour after work. I need to do something first."

The lake she examined that day following clocking out of the museum was also not good enough. She sighed and went to the convenience store to buy a treat for Franz before meeting up with Willy. Franz was particularly fond of peanut m&m's.

As the clerk rang up her purchase she noticed that he had a

pack of American Spirits Lights in his breast pocket. Milena could not help seeing the “c” as a “k” after having read *Amerika*. American Spirits had been what her ex-boyfriend, Max, had smoked when they tried to make their relationship work the first time. Milena found convenience store checkout lines to be difficult because the cigarette brands displayed behind the counters were like all the loves of her life that never remained staring back at her. Alexander, Marlboro Reds; Hermon, Winstons; Siegfried, anything with menthol; Ernst, anything unfiltered or that he could roll himself; Max the second time around, Virginia Slims. It made her want to reread “Rejection” from Kafka’s *Meditation*. Milena never smoked, which she attributed to all of these failed potential husbands, each of which her mother had said were “suitable.”

Willy ordered a dark beer and seemed surprised when Milena asked the bartender if he could brew her a cup of hot green tea, which he said he could. She did not particularly mind the establishment Willy had suggested, a pub in Lake Country Square she had never seen before even though she drove past the Square every day to work. She was thankful that it was quiet.

“The gift shop gig at the Children Museum is really just temporary,” Willy said. He paused to sip his beer, the name of which had sounded exotic to Milena when he ordered it.

“What is it you really want to do with your life?” Milena said with genuine interest. The bartender set her green tea on the counter for her. She adjusted herself on her swivel stool and gently blew on the surface of the steaming cup.

“Not sure,” Willy said. “Just something where I don’t have to sell anything. I swear, I really think some people come to the museum when they know there’s a limited edition item being sold in the gift shop just to make my life hard.”

Milena really did empathize. She had heard from Otlia about how a museum member had literally accosted Willy, accusing him of holding out on her when he insisted that the gift shop had

sold out of the limited edition baby teeth necklaces with a medallion depicting the engraved image of a fetus for the Lake Country Children Museum's silver anniversary of its groundbreaking.

"How about you?" Willy said. "This the final stop for you or are you looking to make another career move?" Beer sip.

"I like my job," Milena said. "I work with nice people and I feel like I'm part of something important. Also, in this economy it really is nice to have health insurance, and our pension plan is pretty good. Felice may be hard sometimes, but she did go to bat to secure those for us."

"Yeah, I see your point."

There was then an awkward silence for some time until Willy finally broke it and said, "I've been meaning to ask you, is that a feline collar you wear around your wrist?"

Milena fingered the black coil fabric with the red tin nametag. "Yes. This was my feline Felix's collar. He's no longer with us. We were very close."

"I'm so sorry. I'm sure it's been rough. I'd be completely beside myself if my feline, Brod, wasn't in my life." Swallow of the last of his beer.

Milena paused and looked into Willy's eyes. She had never found him particularly attractive or unattractive. But after hearing his sentiments about his own feline she set her teacup down on the bar counter, reached out and took his cheeks in her palms and gave him a warm, soft kiss to the lips. She then tapped the end of her nose to his and retook her teacup.

They stayed at the bar until it closed at two in the morning. Milena found pleasure in being surprised by Willy. She had pegged him as the type who held Lake Country Soccer season tickets because it was the only sport appreciated by hipsters who never participated in athletics their whole lives. She liked being wrong.

Willy gave Mileena his full attention when she told him about Franz. He mentioned that his own fifth grade classroom raised a baby plesiosaur to release to its natural environment in the spring. They agreed that it had to be part of the Lake Country schooling system's established curriculum.

Willy had to work that morning, as the Lake Country Children Museum received heavy traffic on July Fourth. Milena had requested the day off in advance in order to complete her reading regimen and to fulfill her solitary viewing of the movie *Jaws*. The new hire, a girl with a name ending in "Y," was covering her duties. Staff turnaround was high at the Lake Country Children Museum so nobody bothered with new hires until they proved they were staying. Still, Willy was so inquisitive about Franz that Milena asked if he would like to stop by her apartment and see him for himself. Of course, she had additional reasons for the invitation.

"That would be quite nice," Willy said. "Don't worry, I won't make a move on you."

"I know you won't," she said, hoping he would.

Willy followed her transportation back to her apartment complex in his own vehicle and complimented how nice and secure the building was. Milena appreciated him noticing that. Security had been very important to her when she had been apartment-hunting many years before.

When they entered her little studio apartment she called out, "Franz sweetie. Sorry I'm home so late. I brought you a treat." She took the peanut m&m's out of her purse.

She and Willy could hear an excited "gleep gleep gleep" from Franz and the sound of his four permanent flippers joyfully splashing the tub water.

Milena entered the bathroom and there was Franz with his flippers flapping. Once again his tennis ball had gotten out of the tub and was on the linoleum under the sink. She held up the peanut m&m's packet which produced another "gleep gleep gleep."

Then Willy popped his head through the bathroom door. "He's so cool looking," he said, and stretched out his arms to both sides of the doorway.

Franz went still and silent. His scaly head slowly turned from Milena to Willy, back to Milena and then again to Willy where his eyes stayed fixed, his three nostrils contracting, his floppy ears bent all the way back.

"Here Franz," Milena said, pouring a third of the peanut m&m's into her palm. "Remember to chew six times before you swallow."

Franz's stuck out his tongue, gently taking all of the peanut m&m's from Milena's palm and chewed slowly, but his eyes never left Willy. Milena noticed.

"He's fascinated by you Willy, must dig you a lot. Here." She handed the packet of peanut m&m's to Willy. "You feed him the rest. He'll like that."

Willy poured another third of the peanut m&m's to his own palm. Then, just as he slowly held out his arm, Franz's blue eyes tightened into slithers, his lids practically closing. He let out an incredibly low, gargled and singular "gllleep..." And right then he shot his scaly head sharp forward, all his many permanent teeth now bared. Had Willy not instinctively dropped the peanut m&m's and pulled back his arm, Franz might have very well taken off his hand. A crisp ping, like crystal being struck and shattered by a stone, echoed about the whole bathroom as Franz's teeth came down on themselves and he wooshed his head back over the bathtub shower faucet and released another incredibly low, gargled and singular "gllleep..."

"Franz!" Milena shouted. She jolted into Willy's torso, edging him out of the bathroom while still looking to her plesiosaur, spilled peanut m&m's crunching under her shoes on the linoleum of the bathroom floor. "What has gotten into you?" She pushed Willy entirely out of the bathroom and into the little studio apart-

ment. "I swear he's never done anything like that. It must be all the sugar I just gave him."

They could hear a succession of low, gargled and singular "gllleeps," over and over.

"I should go," Willy said, his right hand holding the one Franz almost removed.

Milena could see Willy's body slightly shaking, the same way an unaccepted Eight Year-Old at the museum jittered after she succeeded in keeping his fellow Eight Year-Olds from eating his fingers one day as retribution for having found two wooden sticks for himself in their cage when all of the others only found one.

"Are you sure?" she said, placing her hands atop his shoulders and staring up to his eyes. Only he was still looking to the bathroom where Franz remained gargling those low, drawn out "gllleeps." She sighed. "I'm serious, he's never done anything like that. I really don't know what got into him." Willy's eyes met hers. She smiled, then bent her head in the direction of her bed in the corner of the small studio apartment and she then wondered if she had worn matching underwear today and hoped she would very soon find out.

Willy looked to Milena's chest. His arms seemed to stop shaking. He shook his head slightly, gave an irritated sigh and reached for the apartment door's knob. As he was leaving he muttered, "Don't be stupid. It's an *it*; everybody knows you can't tell the gender of those...those...things. And that one must be retarded because they aren't supposed to have ears."

She did not bother asking if she could walk Willy to his transportation, just closed the apartment door. As the lock clicked those harsh, drawn out "gllleeps" stopped completely.

Milena stepped hard into the bathroom, crushing even more of the peanut m&m's under her shoes. There was Franz, his face and ears and snout downward, his four flippers not splashing but tucked under his barrel-like body.

“Bad boy!” Milena shouted, pointing an index finger at him. She then tapped that finger hard over the middle nostril at the end of his snout. “Very bad plesiosaur! Mommy is very angry with you! You don’t deserve to find out how *The Castle* ends.”

She stormed out of the bathroom and for the next half hour tried to read, curled up on the couch. But the entire time she heard Franz release a sorrowful “gleep gleep gleep” precisely every eighteen seconds.

Finally, as the sun was rising, Milena rose and walked back into the bathroom. Franz became still and quiet and just looked to her with his ears and snout still downward. She reached for the remaining packet of peanut m&m’s that hadn’t been crushed. Franz snapped alert, ears high, mouth open and happy, displaying all of his bright, white teeth.

“What am I going to do with you?” Milena said. “Let’s make up.”

Franz’s flippers splashed the bathwater.

Milena held out one green peanut m&m in the center of her palm and Franz gently dragged his long tongue over it to scoop it into his mouth. As he chewed six times then swallowed his tail began to sway back and forth against the bathtub walls, cracking some of the gray tiles. But Milena did not care. She just wrapped her arms around Franz’s long, snake-like neck, hugging him tight to her chest as his tail glided back and forth and she leaned upward and kissed the under-scales of his snout.

For the rest of the morning she sat facing Franz on the toilet with the lid down, reading aloud the end of *The Castle* and feeding him the rest of the peanut m&m’s, including the remains of the crushed ones she swept into a dustpan that she allowed him to lick from.

When Milena completed her goal of reading all of Kafka’s fiction, which had not been the trial she once predicted, she rewarded herself with a tomato from the bathroom windowsill.

She gave half to Franz.

July Fourth morning began with coffee for Milena, milk for Franz and her cellular telephone ringing.

She knew it would be Felice before even looking to the caller identification.

"It's the new hire," Felice said, "that girl with the name ending in 'Y.' She obviously didn't read the detailed instructions you left and fed the Four Year-Olds already." Milena looked to the clock above her kitchen sink as she sipped her coffee. It was only a bit past nine o'clock. "Seriously, all hell has broken loose in that cage. I had to close off all of Gallery Wing K. The Four Year-Olds are tearing each other's hair out and swallowing it and Ottla can't stop them."

Milena could tell where this conversation was going. "Well," she said, calmly, "the hair will grow back and it should digest just fine. It's probably easier on their bodies than the last time they ate before noon and ripped off each other's fingernails and toenails and stuck them in their eyes. It could be worse, imagine if the museum's central air went out on such a hot day like this one is going to be."

"Milena, are you serious? I need you here at work, pronto!"

"I'm sorry, I'm not available, this is a very important day for me, you know that."

"Yes, I am aware that you annually do not work on July Fourth and I respect that, but as you know this is also a heavily trafficked day for the museum and the Four Year-Olds respond favorably to your presence. They know you well and don't the new hire's name is that ends in 'Y.'"

"I really am sorry, but there's nothing I can do. The Four Year-Olds should be back to normal by the time the museum closes."

Felice was silent for a moment and then said. "So, that is your position?"

"That is my position."

"Fine then, go be with your family today like a good little patriot. We will have a long discussion in my office upon your return to work concerning your future with the Lake Country Children Museum." Felice hung up without saying goodbye.

Milena then finished her coffee and went to the bathroom. Franz was licking his right flipper then rubbing it behind his left ear, his neck bent like a horseshoe. Milena took the empty plastic bowl from the bathtub rim that Franz had lapped up completely clean, not one drop of milk left. "Good boy," she said, "looks like somebody had a strong appetite this morning." He looked to her and expanded his three nostrils and shook his scaly head with joy.

As she scrubbed Franz's milk bowl in the kitchen sink she thought more about how Felice assumed she was going to be with her family than about the possibility of having damaged her job security. She had always made sure to spend this day of the year in solitude watching her special movie. But Milena decided that perhaps change was a good thing.

"He's absolutely magnificent!" Dora said as she scratched Franz behind both ears with her stubby fingers. It was the first time she had ever been in Milena's presence with her hair down. It easily reached the small of her back. Franz's tail swaggered gently back and forth, his eyes scrunched tight and his snout bent upward. "I can see you've really taken care of him." Dora turned to Milena and lowered her voice just a bit. "He's actually a bit undersized, don't you think?"

"Franz is beautiful just the way he is."

"Of course, of course." Dora continued to scratch him.

"Well, he seems to really like you, Dor."

"He must instinctively sense we're only cousins."

"Well, I'm still in shock about how he responded to Willy."

Dora had been briefed about the incident after complimenting the air conditioning in Milena's little studio apartment. "I'm not." She stared right into Franz's closed eyes and raised the pitch of her voice that was still gravelly even though she had quit smoking cigarettes years ago. "You big protector, you didn't want your mommy getting laid, now did you, baby Franzie? You weren't going to let some gift shop loser do things to you mommy in your presence now were you? No, you want your mommy all to yourself, and nobody blames you." She turned to Milena and said quizzically, "By the way, what are those long, white things in the bowl on your bedside nightstand I saw?"

"Franz's baby teeth. I kept each as he lost them. I'm going to plant them with my tomatoes every year."

"Oh."

Later that evening, after a whole day of talking and eating tomatoes and giving Franz countless tummy rubs, they watched *Jaws*.

"I don't think I've seen this movie since we...well, in a very long time," Dora said. "By the way, your tomatoes are amazing. I'm so stuffed."

Milena handed Dora three bowls of popcorn and they moved Milena's little television and DVD player into the bathroom to arrange atop the closed toilet lid. They placed pillows from the couch on the linoleum and sat with their backs to the bathtub, Franz's bent down, scaly head between theirs in the dark. They munched the popcorn, Dora's without butter because she did not like anything she ate seasoned. Franz had already finished his popcorn before the movie began. Milena had made his without butter as well but only because she feared butter might upset his tummy the way vanilla ice cream had the week before.

"That girl's a goner," Milena said as the movie opened and the scene of two young people deciding to go skinny-dipping in the Atlantic Ocean preceded.

"Hey, don't ruin the movie," Dora said. "Franzie and I don't know what's going to happen. Isn't that right, Franzie?"

"Gleep."

Milena did not particularly care for Dora calling him "Franzie" but she was enjoying spending the day with her only cousin and said nothing.

When John Williams' ominous music score began to quicken with intensity and finally the girl was dragged under the ocean by the unseen shark, Franz buried his head into Milena's shoulder and whimpered "gleep gleep gleep."

"There there, Franzie," Dora said, stroking the spot between his blue eyes. "It's not real, it's fun."

They all watched the rest of the movie, mostly without saying much, until near the very end before the shark was destroyed when Milena muttered to herself, "I wonder how the shark would feel if one day it awoke to find it had been transformed into a giant bug?"

"What did you say, Mili?" Dora said.

"Oh, nothing," Milena said, and they finished watching the movie.

When they turned the lights back on in the bathroom they saw that Franz was already asleep and it was well into the early hours of the dark morning of July Fifth.

"That was fantastic," Dora said, cleaning the three empty popcorn bowls in the kitchen sink. "But why do you watch it every July Fourth?"

"Because the story takes place during July Fourth."

Dora paused and considered this, and then made no further comment about it. "Franz is great," she said as she placed the bowls on the dry rack.

"I know. But it really is past time to release him into his natural environment, I just can't find a lake suitable for him."

"Well," Dora said, coming over to the little round table

where Milena was sitting. "Remember how I said I know the perfect lake for him? Why don't you let me show it to the two of you because once you see it you'll know it's just the most perfect place in the world for him to spend the rest of his days. I promise he'll be very happy there. Let me do this for you. What do you say?"

Milena looked to her only cousin. Dora smiled big at her. She thought about it for a moment, and then smiled back. "Okay, Dor. Take us to it."

It was still dark in the wee hours of the morning of July Fifth. Dora had retrieved the utility pickup from the JCC along with a wheelbarrow. They transferred Franz and as much bathtub water as they could to the wheelbarrow and Milena sat in the bed of the pickup feeding him the last of her tomatoes as Dora drove.

They arrived at the JCC and Milena was confused. "We're putting him back in the swimming pool?"

"No, silly," Dora said, coming around the back to assist lifting the wheelbarrow with Franz out of the pickup bed. "Don't worry, you'll see."

They rolled the wheelbarrow across the open Family Events field that was littered with the remains of holiday picnic items and countless burnt sparklers from the July Fourth gathering that ended only hours before. Franz was very quiet and kept his head craned backward, his eyes staring to the vast, clear sky of stars above, his mouth wide open in amazement. The wheelbarrow caught every time they rolled over a crumbled soda can.

"Guess what I get to clean up today?" Dora said.

When they reached the end of the vast field they came to where the thickest and tallest trees were. It was impossible to see anything beyond.

"Where to now?" Milena said.

"Forward of course."

They pushed the wheelbarrow gently ahead and the trees parted into a long, thin path just wide enough for the three of them.

They continued on the pitch-black path for quite a long time until Milena finally saw a trickle of light ahead. When they came out into it, before them was the most beautiful lake she had ever seen in her entire life living in Lake Country. She especially liked the way the moonlight feathered the surface of the still water.

They were out of the woods that had closed behind them and Franz once again had his head craned upward and was admiring the sky full of stars on a clear night. Dora rolled the wheelbarrow to the embankment of the lake. Milena noticed that there was a tiny island in the middle with a small tree blooming with tiny white dots of flowers, like the sky above.

Dora looked to Milena. "Well, what do you think?"

Milena wondered why Dora had not brought Franz here when she found him weeks before but instead smiled at her only cousin. "It's just perfect." She then turned to the plesiosaur she had nurtured the past few weeks. "Isn't it perfect, Franz?"

His head casually bent from the sky and looked to Milena. His ears sprung up straight and he smiled all of his permanent white teeth to her. Milena wrapped her arms around his long, high neck and kissed him on the underside of his snout. Franz ran his tongue down her right cheek to her collarbone and gave out a high-pitch "gleep."

Dora looked to Mileena and they nodded. They each took one of the two handles of the wheelbarrow and gently lifted. Franz squirmed, not knowing what was happening and howled "gleep..." in fear as his entire body fell into the lake water and submerged under its surface, breaking the glassy stillness. Milena dropped her handle of the wheelbarrow and bent to the shore of the lake, panicked.

"Don't worry," Dora said.

Franz's scaly head emerged only a few feet from them. He looked right at Milena and was displaying his teeth happier than she had ever seen him. He was still for a moment and then began submerging and emerging from the lake over and over again, splashing his four adult flippers about and gliding under and over the water, all the while joyfully repeating "gleep, gleep, gleep."

Finally, Franz calmed and paddled his way to the embankment where Milena was crouched and Dora stood behind her.

"Gleep!"

"No," Milena said. "I can't. I have to stay here."

"Gleep..."

"No, little guy, this place is for you, not for me."

"Gleep..."

"I know. Me, too."

"Gleep?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Franz's ears drooped. "Gleep..."

"Mommy will miss you, too, honey. I really will. Now you go be happy."

Franz paddled slowly to the embankment, bent his long, snaky neck inward, stuck out his tongue and gave just a tiny tap of its slippery end to the tip of Milena's nose. He then pulled back, smiled big and did an enormous back-turn, gliding over the lake water at a speed Milena never imagined possible for him until he almost reached that little island in the center with that tree with the white flowers and dived under the surface.

They remained there at the edge of the lake for some time until Dora, standing above a crouched Milena, set a hand on her only cousin's shoulder. Milena looked upward and their eyes met. They both smiled and nodded as Milena rose.

Milena then removed her beloved feline Felix's collar from her wrist and placed it at the embankment of the lake.

"You sure?" Dora said.

"I'm sure," Milena said. She then held out her hand.

Her only cousin looked to it, reached across the empty space for them to braid their fingers together.

And they held each other's hands tight as the forest reopened to return them.