

The Swans

by Chris Belden

We had been biking for hours and were now headed home. Laura, riding several yards behind me, suggested we stop by the lake on the way. Last week we'd seen a family of swans there, the upright, imperial parents and their five little cygnets. She'd been talking about it for days, the babies so soft, so sweet and innocent, covered in ash-gray down.

So I turned right onto the lake road instead of left onto the dirt road that led to our home, where the food was, and the liquor cabinet. I was tired and hungry, and I was sore from all the riding. Ever since we'd bought the house—a cottage, really, where we spent the summer weekends—I'd had more than my share of hikes and excursions into the insipidly pretty countryside, with its green hills and fields and old stone houses. Then there were the trips to local wineries and museums, parks and antique shops, none of which particularly interested me. But I smiled through it all, noting the effect my good behavior had on Laura, and I secretly lived for the evenings, when I would pour myself a gin and tonic, turn on the news, and relax.

The lake abutted the road down at the bottom of the hill so closely that it sometimes flooded after a hard rain, stopping traffic. It had no name, as far as I knew, just "the lake," though it was more a pond, a blue dot on the road maps, mottled at this time of year with algae, and populated with some geese, a few ducks, and the family of swans.

I braked by the side of the road, set down the bike and stretched my aching back. It's not natural, I thought: all one's weight concentrated on such a narrow, thinly cushioned seat. Laura pulled up next to me.

"There they are."

The family of swans floated about fifty feet out, the parents side by side, the cygnets close by. The adults floated serenely on the lake's surface, their long necks shaped like question

marks. The babies had grown since last week, each about the size of a football now, but remained toy-like, their gray down like the fur of a kitten. They all seemed so content, one big happy family out for a stroll, enjoying the late summer breeze that rolled across the algae-pocked water.

Laura set her bike down next to mine. "They're so adorable, aren't they?"

Looking at her now, beside this lake, her face still pink from the exertion of riding, her eyes soft with sentimentality, I thought she appeared as healthy and sane as she'd been in a long time. Over the summer she'd put back on some of her old weight, softening the sharp angles that had surfaced on her face. And she seemed to be breathing slower and deeper these days, like a person in repose, not so tense and breathless. I recalled the doctor's recommendation: "She needs some good old-fashioned R and R," he'd said, inspiring images of sanitariums nestled in the Alps, "rest cures" for pampered society ladies. We had laughed about it later on, Laura and I, after she'd recovered enough to make jokes about the whole ordeal.

She looked up at me now and smiled. I smiled back, knowing we'd be home soon. I would sit on the deck, reading a magazine, while she prepared dinner. What a relief not to spend every waking moment consoling her, watching helplessly as she wept, holding her until she finally fell asleep. Such jags still occurred, of course, but less and less frequently, so that I could now go off on my own, even if just to another room to have a cocktail in peace, without feeling guilty or worried.

"What's happening?" she asked.

One of the adult swans seemed agitated. It spun in a half-circle, churning up water with its powerful legs.

"Something's underneath it," I said.

"A snapping turtle?"

"I don't know."

The swan, I could see now, was locked in some sort of battle below the surface of the water, and yet remained weirdly

serene above, as if it did not want anyone to know what was happening. The other adult was paying close attention, while the cygnets floated nearby.

"Wait a minute," Laura said.

"What?"

"There are only four."

"Four cygnets?" I counted them.

"I could swear there were five last time," she said.

Just then, from beneath the agitated adult swan, there emerged a dark gray head and thin neck.

"Oh my God."

"Is that one of the cygnets?" I asked, though by now it was clear.

The struggling creature opened its beak and let out a shrill cry before both parents moved in and, using their webbed feet, forced its head back under the surface.

"Oh my *God*," Laura repeated, covering her mouth.

No, I thought—here it comes: the tension coiling itself up inside her.

"We have to *do* something," she said, moving toward the scummy edge of the lake. "I'm going out there."

"Wait."

I did not want her to go into the lake. The water was dark and thick with vegetation, she would get bogged down before reaching the swans. Plus these were wild, aggressive animals. I'd heard stories about swans attacking people, hissing and using their vast wings to knock them down. I would have to jump into the muck to save her.

The swans continued to force down the baby, abandoning now any attempt to appear composed. Despite their efforts, the cygnet was once again able to raise its head above the surface and screech.

Laura looked at me with wide, terrified eyes, her mouth poised on the brink of a scream. How quickly, I thought, she can

return to this state after so many months of relative calm and serenity.

"What can we do?" she cried out.

I looked around for a rock, but the ground here by the lake was littered with small, useless pebbles. I ran across the road and picked up a chunk of loose asphalt. Then I returned to the shore and tossed the clumsy missile at the swans, trying not to hit them but to get just close enough to spook them. The chunk of asphalt splashed a few feet shy of the mark. The swans ignored it.

"We have to *do* something!" Laura screamed.

I could see she was prepared to dive in, anticipating what it would take to swim out there to the swans.

"They must be doing this for a reason," I said.

"*What* reason?"

"Maybe the baby is sick. That happens sometimes, in nature." I immediately regretted saying it. Laura looked at me as if I'd slapped her. "Maybe it has a broken wing or something."

"It seems fine to me. Look how it's struggling."

As if on cue, the cygnet's round little head reappeared, slick with lake scum.

The parents again went to work, forcing their baby under. Laura began to whimper, and buried her face in my chest. Looking out at the lake, I noted how odd it was, all this violence going on beneath such a clear blue sky, the trees rustling gently in the breeze, the other water birds—the geese, the ducks, even the remaining cygnets—calmly floating on the lake's surface. A jittery Monarch fluttered so close that I had to swat it away.

The swan parents continued to struggle for several more minutes, then, quite suddenly, returned to their previous state of calm.

"It's so cruel," Laura said.

I held her closely. "Let's go."

"No. Not yet." She stared out at the water. I put my arm around her. If someone passed by now, they would see an early-middle-aged couple taking in a bucolic scene.

"I should have done something," she said.

"It's not our job to intervene." I thought of those gruesome nature shows on television, in which wild animals murder one another as camera crews looked on.

"Nonsense," she said. "I should've swum out there and..."

Unbelievably, the cygnet appeared again, its tiny bill silently grabbing at the air.

Laura tried to pull away from me, toward the lake, her mind made up now.

"No," I said, barely holding onto her. She leaned away from me, putting all her weight into the effort.

"Let me go!" she hissed, but I held tight, pulling her toward me and wrapping my arms around her.

The swans were upon the cygnet. The baby, by now too weak to fight, gave out one last high-pitched shriek before being pushed under. There was no struggle this time.

Laura collapsed to the ground, her knees on the hard dirt.

"I can't believe I let that happen," she cried into her hands.

I waited a few minutes, hoping she would get it out of her system. I was angry, dreading the inevitable reliving of this trauma. It was going to be a long night.

When her shoulders stopped heaving, I said, "Come on. Let's go home."

"Did you hear it?" She looked up at me, her eyes pink and swollen. "How it cried?"

I could hear it still, echoing around the lake and off the trees.

I held out my hand, urging Laura to stand. I led her to the bikes, and lifted hers up for her. It was understood we would walk the bikes home. Balance was out of the question. I lifted my own bike onto its wheels and started up the hill, but Laura lingered and gazed out on the water. The swans floated blithely away, toward the middle of the lake, followed by the four surviving cygnets. At the spot where the killing took place the water was now placid.

"Laura," I called, but she did not turn.

The sun edged itself below the tree line, plunging the lake into shadow. A cold breeze rolled through, reminding me that in a few

short months we would close up the house, not to return until next Spring. Another long, cold winter in the city.

“Laura, please.”

Still holding onto her bike, she leaned toward the water. For a moment I thought she was going to vomit, and I prepared myself to run to her aid. Instead, she let out a long low moan that climbed unsteadily in pitch and intensified into a bloodcurdling howl. When she finished, the noise reverberated around the lake, like the call of some wild animal, a fox or a wolf.

Finally, as the echo died away, she turned and followed me up the hill.

