

The Floating Dock

by Christamar Varicella

The younger of the two boys scooped up a pebble and meant to toss it in the lake. He extended his back—arm cocked and ready—and glanced over at his brother expecting to meet a smile of encouragement, but instead found a set of furrowed eyebrows. He held the pose as he plotted his next move, finally releasing his pitch and catapulting a small gust of wind; the rock fell harmlessly behind him. He waited for his brother to return his smile, but the older boy's annoyance faded only after his attention locked onto something down the hill by the pier.

The yellow bow—the banana they called it because of its shape and color—rested in his lap, an arrow already fitted on the string. Slowly, Charley raised his little brother's toy. He drew back the string with two fingers as he mashed shut his left eye and sighted by the shaft, removing the red and green feathers from focus.

Sam was pivoting from hip to hip, craning his neck, and squinting to find the target when he heard the chord snap and the arrow whizz down the hill, all of twelve feet. *Thump*. It struck near the base of the dock.

The two boys emerged from the shade of the pine tree cluster and into the open sun. Charley bounded down the hill and was first crossing the plank bridge from the grassy bank to the floating dock. Sam scampered, yards behind. Charley was already on his hands and knees, peering over the edge, trying to remove the arrow, when Sam arrived.

The sun-cooked lumber roasted the balls of his feet. He bounced from burning foot to burning foot, hopped his way over to the little red dinghy tied against the side of the pier. He cooled his soles in the half-inch of rain water collected there. His first few steps would leave a dark stain against the wood, a temporary impression of his foot that soon faded.

The dock was a plywood box mounted on three large Styrofoam buoys. Remove the bridge now, Sam thought, and Charley and he would float away. They could go on an adventure like Huckleberry Finn.

The arrow had caught one of the buoys.

"I never would've believed it," Charley said.

"What?"

"Stop shaking the dock."

Sam stared at Charley's freckled back. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his cutoff blue jean shorts and then took them out again.

Charley hunched over his prey. He rose without the use of his hands, nimbly shifting his weight from his knees to his feet. When he turned toward his brother, he was grinning. A present was attached to the tip of the arrow. What at first appeared to be a long piece of spinning black licorice transmogrified into a snake.

Instinctively, Sam moved back a step. The lake was behind him. Charley stood between him and the bank. He darted forward, but Charley sealed off his escape route, waving the animal in the air as he crept closer to his little brother.

"It's a water moccasin. It's poisonous."

"Stop, Charley."

"Come 'ere."

"No, Charley!"

"I won't let it hurt you."

"Mom!"

Charley chuckled. "I just want to show it to you. Come closer."

Sam refused to come closer.

"Come on. I'm not going to put it on you."

"You better not." One foot crawled forward an inch, and then the other. The arrow was almost as big as the animal's skull.

"How did you do that?"

Charley continued his examination. Sam remained quiet, still frightened by the animal's thrashing tail.

"Why is it still moving?"

"That's its nerves," Charley explained. "It'll stop eventually."

"It's dead?"

Charley nodded.

Sam wondered if the snake knew that it was dead.

Charley went up the hill to the house and came back down with a garden hoe. He laid the wiggling snake in the grass by the dock.

"You can turn your back if you want to."

Sam did as he was told. "What are you doing?"

"You want it to stop wiggling don't you?"

Sam heard his brother make several whacks into the earth. When his job was done, a tiny blood-flecked head looked up through blades of grass.

Charley carried the corpse over to the dinghy and tossed it into the pool of rain water collected inside. The headless snake swerved through the water, oblivious to its fate, powered perhaps by exposed nerves and muscle memory.

"You said it would stop."

"It will."

They watched the snake until the sun hovered above the trees on the far side of the lake. When at last the nerves ended, Charley took the body to the head and buried them.

But the snake never really went away. Sam carried the snake with him through the years. He grew to be a man, and still he carried the snake and also the little boy. Both the little boy and the snake were with him years later when he drove his car through the gates of the cemetery.

It was a large cemetery that soon stretched around him to the horizon in every direction. Little hills rolled around him like waves with headstones bobbing up through the green grass. He drifted along, in his beat-up Toyota, trying to find his bearings.

It was more than a year since he'd been to this place and he was lost. At a random point, he pulled his car over to the side of the path. He left the driver's door hanging open and trudged up one of the hills. He scanned the names on the gravestones. The headless

snake was with him then, guiding him, powering him on through the will of exposed nerves.

The little boy trailed close behind.

