The Last Birthday Party

by John Wentworth Chapin

The boat crashed into the concrete bank and the little boy shrieked, delighted: “Do it again!” His father tried to put it in reverse with the remote, but the engine only whined. He directed the boy to turn the boat around.

“You broke it already?” she said.

He said nothing.

“Come back to the party. We're going to do cake soon.”

“It's his birthday. Let him play.”

“Mommy, look!” the boy shouted, nudging the boat away from the edge.

“Careful, sweetie,” she called, her tone shifting to warmth. She hissed *five minutes* and disappeared over the embankment.

He joined his son at the water's edge and toggled the remote. The propeller spun a moment, urging the boat forward, then stopped. “That last crash might have been one too many,” he said.

The boy took the remote and carefully pushed one lever forward. The engine caught and reached full speed, leaving a tiny wake. The boy grinned up at his father: two rows of white baby teeth.

“Turn it around now,” the father suggested. The boat continued forward and then the engine died, stranded fifty yards away in the middle of the pond. The man sighed; he took off his shoes and rolled up his pants legs.

“Can I come?” the boy asked. The father looked past his son up the embankment and nodded. The boy held onto his father's hand as they waded together out into the shallow, frigid water. The boy giggled, splashing his father and howling at the cold.

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