

Nix the Pity-Party

a *Forgotten Relics* short story

When I started sassing my parents and wearing black lipstick at fourteen, the family introduced a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Mom’s delicate Southern sensibilities couldn’t cope, and Dad’s temper hit 9000 when I talked about boys. I still had a curfew and a GPA to maintain, but they didn’t pry and I didn’t volunteer. Where my friends’ parents came down on them like Godzilla on Tokyo, mine trusted me with independence.

And until I was eighteen, it never occurred to me to manipulate that trust for my own hormone-fueled ends.

My senior year of high school, Cinco de Mayo fell on a Saturday, coinciding with the Mathletes’ State Championship, during which we stomped the previous year’s winner into a geometrically-perfect hole in the ground. We got home late, but between the holiday, the victory, and it being the last event, period, for the six of us graduating, we wanted to celebrate. Once our coach was out of earshot, Paul Hoffman, the starry-eyed, broad-shouldered calculus whiz and basketball star who hadn’t noticed I’d been lusting after him for two years, announced his parents were away for the weekend, leaving his place open for a free-for-all.

The parking lot emptied as my teammates peeled out, and my gut knotted. I’d never been invited to the cool kids’ parties. Popularity eluded me my entire high school career, and there it was, dangling in front of me at the last possible moment. But my curfew was midnight, and it was already eleven.

I had one foot on the running board of my Silverado when a voice behind me said, “Where you going, Cora? You too good to party with us?”

The lustful shiver up my spine told me it was Paul before my brain did. I turned to lean nonchalantly against the car door, trusting it to hold me up as my knees weakened. All his attention was fixed on me, waiting for an answer. Suddenly, the dinky street lamp was too bright, the almost-summer air too close. My inner Good Girl wrestled with the Hump Everything Nympho and drew scraps of propriety around me like a security blanket.

“I... have to go home,” I stammered. “Mom’s expecting me.”

He laughed, warm and sharp, as if I’d told a hilarious joke. “You’re not serious, are you?” He flashed a wicked smile filled with promises and perfect teeth. “C’mon. It’ll be fun.”

Guess where I went?

The party was a total bust. Duh.

I wound up alone in a corner of the two-car garage filled with seniors high on skunkweed and bargain-basement vodka. Paul hadn’t so much as glanced at me in the hour I wasted vying for his attention after our encounter at the school. Regret laughed at me from the bottom of a plastic cup. The third rendition of “Because I Got High” pushed me over the line, and I chucked the remains of my spiked Kool-Aid as I ducked out the side door.

Compared to the reek inside the garage, the aroma of cow shit in the pasture outside was positively refreshing. I inhaled so deeply I almost snorted a mosquito, then started walking to ride out the contact high and sting of rejection, heading for the stock pond at the back of the property.

The short fishing dock creaked as I flumped down to dangle my toes in the water, tennis shoes and socks in a pile beside me. Moonlight illuminated the ripples of stagnant water. I watched the hypnotic circles grow then fade, washing away my despondency over popularity, partying, and penises. Water always calmed me down.

I don’t know how long I sat there feeling sorry for myself, but eventually, I got bored and cold. Just as I was about to head home and face the music for blowing curfew, there was a nibble on my foot.

Now, a normal person would’ve leapt up and run away screaming. But as Daniel Riley’s daughter, I couldn’t help being curious. Did the Hoffmans have something magical living in their pond? A kelpie or a nix or a naiad? It sure as hell wasn’t fish this early.

Another, more insistent nibble. More of a tug.

I gripped the weathered boards beneath me and craned my neck over the water. But between the low light and the flotsam on the surface, I couldn't spot anything moving. Did I imagine it?

Nope.

In the space between pulling my feet onto the dock and standing, there was an explosion of water and mud. Two blue-white hands seized my ankles, throwing me flat on my back and knocking the wind out of me before yanking me into the drink. It happened so fast I didn't have time to scream.

Survival instinct propelled my limbs into desperate thrashing against the iron grip on my feet. I tried to remember what Dad had taught me about elementals, but my empty, burning lungs fuzzed my brain. The black water whizzed past as the thing bounced my head off stones at the bottom, compounding the terror and pain.

Right when I was ready to stop fighting and take that fatal, wet breath, the thing let go. Adrenaline gave me a precious second to react, and I shoved my feet down, searching for the bottom, but they swished through open water.

Then it was in front of me. Definitely a nix. A ghostly white human against the velvet water, eyes like neon-lit goggles, teeth like tangled fishhooks. Unmistakably joyous to watch me drown.

I'm still not sure how I got away — lack of oxygen equals blurry memory — but I think it went something like this: Panicked. Kicked nix in crotch. Stepped on prone creature to surface. Grabbed by ankle. Kicked nix in face. Used momentum to swim to shore. Scrambled into pasture out of reach.

As I lay in the grass nursing the stitch in my chest, I could see the damned thing peeking at me from the water, just visible to the nose, which made it even more creepifying. My animal brain screamed for me to run, but I stayed put. I knew it couldn't leave its waterbed; Dad told me so.

But then it did rise up in the shallows, glaring at me with furious balefire eyes, dingy water spilling off stringy black hair in the moonlight, and stalked out of the pond into the thick mud at its edge.

I fucking bolted. Didn't even go back for my shoes.

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