

Take It Back

By Pamela Slea

I wanted to jump.

The thought lingered in my head, along with the melody that played in the background of the film I saw that night. Funny thing is, I didn't even remember hearing at all – until I'd left the theater and was walking through the streets trying to think of something else, and I found myself humming it.

I was walking home and thinking about all the reasons I shouldn't do it, and trying to warm up from the out-of-control air conditioning in the theatre. Midsummer warmth rose up from the pavement, thawing me, comforting me with its quiet. I was thinking about the apartment, about my key going into the lock and running a bath. But I knew that there was no way I was going straight home that night. I fingered the plastic baggie in my pocket.

I had seen a midnight showing of a documentary on birds, "Winged Migration". No talking, just lots of birds flying flying farther than we could imagine, all over the sky, all over the world, with that music playing, loud. And there I was, Caroline Shuster, twenty-three years old and never getting anywhere. Cause I saw those birds and I saw the water and I just wanted to jump so bad I couldn't stop thinking about it.

When I was a teenager my Dad used to think it was so weird that I would go to movies alone, but I don't see why everybody thinks it's such a social thing, to sit together in the dark like that. I liked to be silent by myself.

I felt brittle and crystallized from the movie theatre. My bones clattered and clanked in my jeans and my sandals squeaked on the damp cement still warm from the sun that set long before. Traffic ran by in waves, but it felt like everyone was asleep already, the cars in a monotonous drone of driving without thinking or seeing. Alone, in a zone, they got where they needed to be.

I put one foot in front of the other and ended up at Boston Common again, the park in the center of the city. The streetlights illuminated parts of the midnight scene with an orange hue. The big trees and the leaves and shadows and water were all moving, reflecting, mocking me.

The swans in the pond were not sleeping. They swam like taxicabs around and around the pond uselessly and unabashedly. I imagined them encased in crystal like me, separated from everything else, parting the water, and watching the drops of water roll off in streams from their glassy backs.

To try and distract myself, to slow things down, I threw a rock. Watched it plunk. I wanted to skip it but I didn't move my wrist in the right way and so it just dropped, useless and heavy, to join some other rocks and minerals. Lucky pennies and unfortunate quarters. My palms started to sweat as I watched the breeze rattle the leaves and the water, and I knew I had to jump.

I thrust my head around to see that I was alone, and I pulled my tee shirt up over my head and folded it quietly on the bench and one by one I placed my jeans, my sandals, my bra and panties neatly underneath in a pile so that no one would mistake them for someone's discarded items. I'd never had a problem before, but it was always worth making the effort. Safety first.

I took a deep breath. I shook my fingers and cracked my neck.

The approach is simple, I'd start on the far end of the path that leads up to the edge of the pond (where the children feed the ducks fifteen meals a day), three running steps and a hop, followed by a dive into the murky and algae-infested waters. Into the forbidden duck and swan territory in the middle of the city.

The cold water felt shocking and intimate, like the surprise meeting of a childhood enemy as my fingers began their search over the green and black tinged floor of the pond. Experts. They can tell quarters from rocks in a fraction of a second as they whiz their way across the slimy line of children's sacrificed wishes.

I take them back.

With every kick of my legs and my arms I could feel my hair brushing against my face and my back, standing up and searching the water; a team with me, no eyes and no ears in the black waters we scrambled in that all-important first dive before I had to come up for air. I always got a lot more in that initial dive than any other time I went under, so I tried to make it last as long as I could.

I never stayed for too long in one spot, even if I felt like I could get more if I stayed there and dug, I saved my energy for the ones that reached out for me. The ones that wanted me. I flew across the bottom of the pond and scared the fishes and the turtles (and whatever else is down there) with the accuracy and the expertise of my probing hands. I could almost feel them swimming away, terrified by this alien jumper.

I reached through the seaweed or the litter (I never quite knew what any of it was with my eyes closed) and searched all though it, grabbing the underwater plants to propel me along until my hands were full and my lungs and stomach were pulling in on my

chest with the weight of oceans. That's always the point where my eyes want to open and see where I am, but I knew it was a mistake to give into that. My burning eyes would make the first trip under into the last.

I let my feet touch the bottom and leapt up to the surface in an explosive whoosh of sound and motion and release. My mouth entered the atmosphere first and in one great inspiration of air I kicked my way clumsily, my fisted hands in front of me, hopping on the water to the edge of the pond to deposit my earnings. The film that covered me as I waddled toward the edge, treading water, was comforting. Like a bubble that surrounded me.

Two weeks before she died, my mother took me to Boston Commons, and she would throw these silver dollars in when she would make a wish. Big, shiny dollars that she would take out of the bank especially for this wishing game. Every day she took me there she would wish, and the people around would throw in their money and sit around and smile and laugh. I was seven years old. I thought of the shiny, perfect silver coin floating down down into the water like a feather, and I wanted it. At that moment I wanted to see it down there, to grab it and hold it and not let go. I didn't even look at my mother's face, I just ran to the side of the pond, hesitated for just long enough to hear the shriek of my mother as my little legs bent in anticipation of the jump, and went into the water where the sounds were light and easy. The water was cold, and I went down into where the coin went.

When I surfaced my mother grabbed me by the collar, her blonde hair whipping in the wind and she pulled me out of the pond and I cringed and screamed and squirmed

from the expression on her face, something I had never seen before. I think it was mortification, disgust.

“That’s dirty, Caroline! You don’t do things like that,” she hissed. My palm was holding a lump of dirt and moss, and inside the wet soil was not the silver dollar, but one lone penny, 1958, murky and dirty, hanging from the tentacled roots of the underwater plant that had held it there.

But I did things like that. I always did.

Quarters and dimes used to be all I would bother with, but in the last few years I’ve realized that passing up pennies can be a terrible waste of a trip. I can get hundreds of pennies from one pond, and not only is it gratifying; it is special, the act of cleaning them in vinegar afterwards and watching them shine. Giving them to the man at the gas station and watching him gawk at my inconsideration, my audacity in paying for my gas in pennies like a child.

“Is this a joke? I’m not going to take this!” The heavy accented man cried with his fist raised. But of course they do. They have to, it’s money. It’s fair. I count them out one by one and make neat little piles of shiny copper pennies on the counter.

I can't jump during the winter, of course, but I think about it. There was one year in high school that I didn't do it at all. I would go to the park and try reading and drawing, instead. I would look at the trees and the happy families taking pictures and laughing. I would jot down a note or two: "fat fat woman shakes whole face when she laughs," "the homeless lady sleeping on the bench could be dead. Is not, I checked." I

thought I was ok then, that I wasn't so needy, but looking back I think I was just kidding myself. The urge was always there, it doesn't go away. But maybe I always wanted to be caught. Maybe I wanted somebody to figure me out.

No one at school ever knew, and I don't think they would've cared, either. I was invisible. I didn't talk all the time like they did, or laugh at their jokes. I was so invisible that they would start telling each other secrets right in front of me like I wasn't a real person. Like I wasn't there at all.

"I heard that Catherine is sleeping with Billy."

"No, she's just giving him head on the bus ride home. They're not serious. But don't tell her I know. Billy told me not to tell..."

After a while when they would talk to me and I wouldn't answer, they just didn't even try, and I would look up from Chemistry lab, and look them in the face, but they never looked at me, because I didn't say anything.

I didn't mind. Makes for interesting possibilities. I would stay up at night thinking of ways I could use all my information about them as blackmail. But what did I want in return? Those kinds of girls never have anything interesting like a journal to read or a skeleton in the closet, just money. I'm interested in dirt, and they're interested in make-up. Even the black lipstick girls, they're all the same.

So I stayed by myself and watched, mostly.

But then I would feel so guilty or lonely sometimes, especially when the weather would get warmer - I never even knew why - but I wasn't able to get it out of my head, and that's when I would start to get shaky, and I knew the only way to get rid of the shake is to jump.

I pulled myself out of the water with my plastered hair sticking awkwardly to my face and back and I stumbled my way back to the bench. I felt exposed and dirty but refreshed. Satisfied. I put all my coins into the plastic bag I brought with me. I always have a few baggies with me, even when I'm pretending to quit.

“Quite a show you put on there.”

I screamed. I didn't remember ever screaming before in my entire life, and the sound was oddly uncharacteristic. Very high pitched. I always fancied my scream would be more masculine. I stopped myself and looked to the voice, out there in the darkness. It was soft, shy almost.

“Ok mister, just turn around.” I couldn't see him properly, my eyes still stinging from the water, and I froze, taking in the shock.

“Oh. Well, I didn't mean to scare you or anything.” His voice was young, earnest. He moved a bit closer and I could make him out in the orange light of the streetlamp. I pegged him at about nineteen or twenty. His blond hair fell over his eyes, and he kept jerking his head to the left to get it out of his face. For some reason, I didn't think to run away. I didn't think anything.

“Well I'm naked. Turn around.”

“You're in public.” He shrugged, but didn't move any closer. Apparently he thought this whole thing was very funny.

“Just because I take off my clothes in public doesn't mean you have the right to disrespect me, now turn around so I can put my clothes back on! Jesus.” He obediently turned around. My hands were sticky as I threw on my shirt and jeans. The jeans clung

viciously to my legs as I jerked them on. A lump in my throat and my stomach made me anxious. This guy could be anybody.

He started yelling over his shoulder with his back to me. "That's probably not the best place to take a dip. Don't you think it's gross? That pond is polluted." I wanted to hurt him. This is not amusing, this is crazy, and I didn't appreciate him making a joke out of it.

"Everything's polluted. Take a culture of the inside of your mouth and you'd be disgusted." I went back to getting my things together. I didn't know what to feel. I'd run it through my mind before, this scenario, but always it was me running away, flying, running. This was so ordinary, so quiet. A swan behind me fluttered its wings. I didn't know what to do. I looked at his back over there, white tee shirt.

"You should go away. I have my clothes on now, show's over." I held my baggies and my sandals in my hand and held my breath, waiting for his response. He turned around and looked at me long, like he was figuring out whether I was serious or something.

"Why do you do that?"

I stopped, like a trapped rabbit my muscles tensed and this time I really wanted to run. I wanted to make it home without giving him any clues of who I was. I wanted to just get the hell out of there right then and start sprinting towards home, baggies jingling like a circus clown and forcing one heavy leg over the other, my feet sledgehammering into the pavement.

But I didn't. I wanted to know who he was and why he wasn't running. Why he wasn't laughing anymore. This was the first time and I thought for some reason that maybe he could understand.

This was my chance, maybe my only chance to see this part of myself from someone else. He was a person, after all. Must be thinking something.

“So then, what do you think? Bet you've never seen something like that before.” My voice was fluttering.

“Like what?”

Like someone acting insane. Not able to control herself. I started to feel a panic welling up inside of me again. This is not something I wanted anyone to know. No one had ever seen before, and I've never told, but this is my chance, I thought. He seemed pretty harmless, standing there, young and interested, like he might even answer.

“Do you think I'm crazy? This is a serious question.”

“I don't know, I guess I'd have to know your motivation.”

“Gas money.” Oh, why not. “And because I have to.” My shame subverted my eyes to the ground and I wanted to leave. I started grabbing at the last of my belongings.

“Well, yeah, gas prices are pretty up there, but...”

“No, I mean. You don't know me. This is bad.” I looked up at him. He was closer now, and the breeze from the trees ruffled his hair. He looked like he was interested in what I was saying. Like he wanted to know more. Like maybe he wasn't scared.

"There are worse things, I think."

The night air was incredibly cold on my slimy skin. The walk home after a jump was always itchy and with that came a combination of shame and pride from a job well done, but this time there was only the stuffed-up thrill of panic to guide me through the streets with this stranger, this man, walking beside me slowly, not talking, all the way back home. He walked beside me, so I guess he wasn't really following me, I guess we were walking together.

My hands fumbled into my back pocket and I held my breath while I held the key in my hand.

"You have to leave now. I'm going inside." I looked into his eyes and felt like a twelve year old, vulnerable, sheepish.

"Hmm. Yeah." I noticed how tired he looked. His expression was still oddly cheerful.

"You know, you seem so interesting to me. I want to see you again." A car drove by and pulled me out of my illusion. My mouth wagged in the air for a moment and I sputtered out:

"I'm very busy." My bags jangled in my hands and I shrugged my shoulders. I looked at the door lock. I thought of us at a coffee shop, of us being together and making small talk, and all the while he knew all about what I do. How could I be expected to tell him about my job, about my life, when everything is so different now? Now that he had seen me. I looked back at him, his face so ready for anything. It seemed innocent.

"Look, I'm not very good at meeting people. Maybe I'll see you around."

I caught my breath outside the door of the tiny park-view apartment as I watched him step backwards, still looking at me.

"Go on." I whispered, and I stepped inside and shut the heavy door behind me, and went up the stairs to my apartment.

I tried not to enjoy the stench of myself as I threw my findings into the Tupperware container in the doorway. On the walkway to the shower I peeled off my filthy clothes and left them in a trail behind me lying on the floor like clues to a murder leading up to the bathroom. No one will ever find out. He can't tell because he doesn't know who I am.

I let the water warm up while I was outside the tub. I don't know how I turned out like this. The shame, like a coloring bruise in my chest began to sink me from the outside in. I shook and tried to get it to settle somewhere else but it stayed and I stayed, kneeling on the bathroom floor next to the bathtub with the hot water from the shower steaming up the mirrors and the walls, and me, naked, sobbing, on the outside.