THE LAKE

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First her ears and eyes, and then her nose, broke the surface of the water. The eyes blinked several times, adjusting to the appearance of things in a different medium. The smells of the night air reached her nostrils. She flared them slowly, drawing the cool, moist air through her nose in long, heavy inhalations. The small peaks of flesh atop her massive head twitched nervously and then stopped, bent slightly forward at the tips.

All was as it should be. No threats seemed to lurk in the tall savannah grass that partially ringed the outer edges of the lake's shore. Satisfied, the rest of her emerged, the water spilling off her back in a rush and forming a gentle sucking motion as she broke the surface. The short, powerful legs steadily pushed her bulk up the muddy slope until she stood alone on the shore, dripping with the clayey ooze she brought with her from the lake's bottom.

Overhead, the crescent moon gave her body a grey, glistening appearance whose outline was both large and difficult to apprehend.

Once, while in captivity, she had dreamed of a place like this. A place where one could feel alone and free in the wilderness, alive to its comforts, as well as to its threats. No barriers of concrete and steel to separate the world from its natural place. A place with no planned purpose, but a purpose just the same. She dreamed of the stout trees and rough bark to rub against, so unlike the ones surrounded with wire mesh and rubber.

She dreamed now, as she stood in placid equilibrium on the shore, of the soft, munchy plants she could feed on while roaming around in the bush at night. So very unlike the bales of nutritious fruit and cabbage thoughtfully provided by a generous and external will. She longed for the wild and uncertain place to wake up to, rather than the passive, safe place that held her prison-

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

er.

The solitude of her freedom felt enormous. Just a little while more and they would come for her and then, she knew, the struggle would begin again. Like the time before and the time before that. Like every time she had found a way over the concrete barriers and through the chain link fences. Either the others were too indifferent or too fearful of escaping. She had tried to convince them, but they refused to heed her argument, so eager were they to forget the past. That past from which they all had been sundered and with which they would never be united again.

A spark of defiance separated her from the rest, making her an outcast among her own

FICTION

kind. Recently, her captors had become suspicious and wary of her seemingly odd behavior. They had begun to get angry too, and she had sensed their exasperation the last time she was caught. Now it had gotten too serious, and there would never be a next time, she thought, if they ever got her again. She had tricked them too many times. And they hated it.

The last time she escaped, she took her son with her, instructing him that the barriers, designed to look like natural obstacles, could be surmounted. patience and persistence and, above all, desire, is all one needs to survive. But her baby was uneasy and scared of freedom. Having been born in captivity, and knowing nothing of his mother's past, he feared the thought of being alone and in the wild, away from the security provided him by his captors. She understood. And so, returning herself and her child to captivity, she decided not to take him with her again.

The needs of the moment ended her reflections and brought her mind back from its reveries to consider her present condition. She had managed to elude them for almost two weeks, slipping into one of the three nearby lakes whenever her captors got within dart range. The bait of fruit and cabbage so neatly centered on top of the camouflaged rope nets had never fooled her. The darts, though, had surprised her. She remembered from her first capture how they made her drowsy and unbalanced and unable to move her feet. And she knew now their range and how far she had to stay ahead of her pursuers to avoid making the same mistake.

But she knew she had become a nuisance by now. They might try something different and more permanent to keep her from making fools of them. She had made her life expendable at last. The cost of coping with her was becoming too expensive, as well as too embarrassing. She welcomed their decision, however, for she knew that this would be her last flirtation with freedom.

Serene and implacable, she stood on the muddy bank of the lake contemplating her next move. Her tail twitched and her ears flapped nervously, as though to contradict the imperturbable mass of her body. The cool, quiet night air was motionless but for the slight rippling of the water lapping the shore and

the gentle rustling of the long grass. Standing immobile between these sights and sounds she blinked her eyes slowly and lumbered up the bank toward the grass and dense foliage beyond. Now on level ground, she stomped through the savannah, delighting in the stiff brush scratching her ribs and flanks. She anticipated chomping on the soft, succulent plants and leafy vegetables that grew so abundantly further to the west.

Her gait developed a faster rhythm as she rumbled on, the blades of grass swishing steadily at her sides. Losing her concentration, she drifted back to a lost homeland and a distant memory. Time seemed to stop for her and begin again somewhere else. All the delights, fears, uncertainties, and challenges of a free life suffused her spirit and drove her on through the grass. The faint whirr of a motor was heard to start up, cough, and then die with a stubborn whine. The interruption brought her back from a nostalgic fantasy to a rude and immediate reality. Frozen with a new anticipation, she listened for any other unnatural sounds that would tell her she was in danger.

In the teeming growth surrounding her, bull frogs croaked loudly and insistently to one another; crickets chirped back and forth, creating harmonious cascades of fluctuating excitement; rabbits peered out from hiding and listened nervously, munching quietly on bits of foliage; a gnome owl hooted from an unseen branch, waiting for his next prey to lose its sense of caution. A stiff breeze rustled through the eucalyptus trees bordering the southern half of the lake. Suddenly, the smell of man was caught on the wind bringing with it an ancient dread.

They were out there. And she knew they were getting ready with their darts and other engines of captivity to end her string of freedom. Remembering previous encounters, she figured that their strategy would be to entice her away from the lakes--far enough away for their darts to take effect before she could retreat to one of the lakes' murky bottoms. There was no immediate threat to her safety as long as she stayed in an area approximately midway between any two of the three lakes. As long as she adhered to this simple plan, there was no way they could surprise her. By having her choice of lakes to go to, she felt her captors could not predict exactly which lake she would move

toward in case of trouble.

The moon was now hanging over the mountainous horizon to the west, one of the points of its crescent ready to snag a mountain peak and bring to a halt its descent. The darkest part of night was approaching, and she felt safe and sure of her situation.

Carefully chewing the soft shrubbery, she settled into a more complacent mood and strolled in the direction of the northern two lakes. She could hear the solitary cawing of a blackbird as her meandering intrusion invited a shrill objection. Dragon flies zoomed precariously close, chasing imaginary foes in aerial combat. The nocturnal sounds of throngs of crickets swelled in front of her, diminishing to silence as she passed, and then swelling back up to a furious roar behind her. A bull frog puffed itself up indignantly and promptly sprang aside from the ponderous thud of her foot. The night disclosed the sweet smell of jasmine and lavender and made her want to stop to taste the succulent fruit of the cabbage palm. This was the night she adored.

Reluctantly, the moon had begun its descent behind the mountains. Too late to anchor the passing of the night.

Ahead and to the left, there was a clearing that she could cross, if she wanted to journey to the lake beyond. Or she could turn to the right, skirting the clearing and move on through the foliage to the north and then east to the other lake. She hesitated, sniffing the night's secrets. Crossing the meadow would expose her to ambush, if her captors had anticipated her moving in that direction. She stood on the southern edge of the clearing and considered the other side. It was only a few hundred steps diagonally across the clear patch of ground, and she would be safe once more in the dense thicket of brush. From there, it would be but a few hundred yards to the lake. She swayed her massive and low slung bulk back and forth several times, as if to further make up her mind, and headed across the clearing. She lumbered forward in a straight line as quickly as her feet would take her. A soft, gentle breeze rolled over the meadow from the opposite side and brushed her face. The coarse, black bristles on her muzzle quivered and suddenly stiffened. The smell of dread penetrated the cool, moist air. Too late,

she made a grim retreat.

The dart struck her in the left rump, making her jump a little. It dangled freely from her side as she hurried to get the proper distance from her captors. Veering to the left, she took an oblique path and cut back into the underbrush toward the northeast. Running for her life, she dared not relax until she reached the safety of the lake. Even a moment's hesitation would give the drug in her body an extra measure of time. Cut off from the lake to the west, and being too far from the lake to the south, she surmised that her only chance of escape was through the dense foliage and over the high rise of ground to the remaining lake that offered her refuge.

Racing frantically through the crackling brush, she thought of nothing else but keeping ahead of her pursuers and avoiding their darts. She stumbled as her feet caught on the tangled vines that criss-crossed the ground in aimless, endless patterns. The vines snapped loudly as her great weight overcame their gnarly resistance. Frenzied and tiring, she struggled to keep the distance she needed, if she was to reach the rise of open ground and make it to the lake unmolested. The strain on her nerves and muscles was tremendous. She began to hear a ringing in her ears. The drug was already making itself felt.

The distance had no meaning to her now, only time mattered. Aching to catch a glimpse of the uncovered ground ahead, she did not notice or feel the ripping thorns and angry branches tearing the bleeding flesh from her sides. Then, to her great delight, she could see a treeless mound through the thinning brush, and she barked a cry of joy. In moments now, she would be bursting through the underbrush and heading up the hill. The ringing in her ears was getting more intense and a thick soup was beginning to pour over her brain. But she kept going with unabated stride. She could feel everything now—the pain, the blisters, the bruised and bleeding flesh, and the exultation of being almost there. Something asked her if it was worth it, and she squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again, as hard as she could. She broke through the final thicket of vines and brush onto the gently sloping open ground.

As she emerged from the thicket, she

felt the teasing pang of the tiny darts as she was struck in each shoulder. They had been crouched and waiting, but she hardly hesitated to blink as she ran a determined beeline course up the hill. It was only about a hundred yards or so to the top and about the same down the other side to the lake below. There was no thought of tiring as she raced toward her goal. Even time ceased to matter now, as her heaving flesh rumbled up the steepening slope past the isolated clumps of bushes and the stark treeless stumps. She mused that there would be no bark here for her to rub her sore hide against and catch her breath.

The ringing in her ears had become a great roar in her head. The soup pouring over her brain had become glue. And her legs felt like they were miles under her. She stumbled to her knees repeatedly and rose again an equal number of times. She staggered rubbery, wet, and bleeding. But it did not matter. She had reached the top of the rise, and the cool, moist night air was blowing in her face, bringing with it the sweet, stagnant smell of the lake below.

Without pausing, she was over the top and making her descent. Racing too fast to brake her momentum, her wobbly legs gave out, and she fell over in a helpless roll toward the bottom. Suddenly, she screamed in agony as she came to an abrupt halt, falling heavily on her right side. She stretched her neck to see the thing that had caught her in its grip. A twisted root jutting up from the ground was wrapped like a tentacle around her right hind leg. She tugged helplessly to free herself, but all her weight strained futilely against the dead and tenacious root. It was anchored too deep, and each effort she made to free herself only pulled her more firmly to the spot. Twenty-five yards ahead of her was refuge and a journey's long end.

As she lay on her side, she found it increasingly difficult to breathe. She felt her massive weight crushing her and knew she would have to get upright, if she were to keep from suffocating. By rolling halfway over on her stomach, she would be able to correct her condition. This degree of movement was allowed her.

The sweet smell of the stagnant waters again penetrated her nostrils. Atop her massive head, the small peaks of flesh cocked

forward at the tips to hear the soft rippling waves lap gently and slowly against the muddy bank. Gazing forlornly to see what lay so near, she sighed, knowing it was too far. The effort to relieve the crushing burden of her own weight could still be made. She refused.

It was now quite dark. The crescent moon, lost behind the horizon, would not come again. The eternity of the moment, for a while, was fixed between the stars.

As she lay dying, she thought of her son. She wished him as much bliss as was possible and an ignorance of all things that made a happy life in captivity impossible. And she thought, too, if he would remember her. The ringing in her head was gone, and the thick soup over her brain was lifted. No more pain was felt. She closed her eyes to the world as it is for the last time.

Her memory of things as they once were suddenly became illumined, and she felt a warm glow over her eyelids. Opening them, she was in a different world as she peered down her muzzle just above the surface of the brown, murky waters. She could see countless little animals lined up along the shore: squirrels, rabbits, lizards, birds, and even some nervous young gazelles. All of them were at the side of the lake drinking. On the other side was a lioness and her cubs, some hyenas, and several leopards. They had all come at mid-day to refresh themselves at the communal lake and bask in the sun. A carpet of bright green lily pads floated perilously close to her nose. With a great snort, she dispersed the carpet into a myriad of undulating, emerald fragments. All appeared as it should. Taking a final, deep breath, she sank slowly and noiselessly beneath the surface to the inviting brown ooze at the bottom. Her breathing had stopped, and a melancholy heart beat no more.