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VIRGINIA L. GORDON

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## The Queen of Diamond Lake

Dot drove the black, '41 Ford up a twisting dirt road known as Washboard Boulevard and came to the end of a long trip North. From the top of the hill, she and the girls could see the separation of a thick pine forest leading to the emerald-blue water below. Across the lake, cottages dotted between clusters of giant Michigan fir. A small campground of faded fishing tents sat near the swimming beach. Rowboats drifted around the water, poles hanging from their sides.

"Sure good to see folks up here," Dot said to Mary Kay and Alice, climbing out the back seat. "I was scared to death with the war they'd all stayed to home." She pulled her large body out of the car, while the girls hoisted two gladstones and a valise from the trunk, dropping them with a thud into the sand.

Back in the city while they had waited for Fred, summer stretched before them like a desert. The threat of polio had closed the city pool, leaving Mary Kay with little more to do than spend her afternoons running through the backyard sprinkler. By August she was too old for this and sat beneath the weeping willow drinking lemonade and playing rummy with her mother, Dot, and her girlfriend, Alice.

Dot unlocked the door to the cottage and gave it a good shove. Inside it was hot and stuffy. Sun poured through the unboarded windows, and thick white funnels of dust shot across the round, oak table in the middle of the room.

"What we need in here's some light on the subject," Dot said, patting her bleached pompadour back into place.

When they had removed the shutters and aired out the cottage, Mary Kay and Alice walked barefoot back down Washboard Boulevard toward the beach, their towels rolled beneath their arms. Mary Kay had pulled her flaxen hair into a ponytail that swung back and forth with each step. The road was lined with wildflowers. . . Queen Anne's Lace and velvety Sumac stretching to the edge of a dense pine forest.

"That's Caroline's over there," Mary Kay said, pointing towards a tarpaper shack.

"Someone live in there?" Alice asked, fingering yellow daisies tucked into her braids.

"Sure, it's an Indian shack. Old Grandma lives there with Caroline. . . and Eddy did too. . ." Mary Kay turned off the road down a path toward the beach, cutting through the field of wildflowers in front of the shack. Alice skipped along

behind . . . she'd never been to Diamond Lake with Mary Kay before.

"She's a real-live Indian," Mary Kay whispered to her.

Near the shack a sleek, dark-haired woman pumped water into a wooden bucket. She waved, shielding her eyes against a blinding sun. Beside her Mary Kay could see a basket filled with rainbow trout thrashing hard against the sides. On the way to the beach, she thought of Eddy and how she had watched the movement of his firm, brown body when he had shown her the thick matted-down grasses in the meadow where deer had lain, and to their tracks embedded in the moist black dirt. And she remembered when he had shown her the beauty of silvery blue racers glimmering beneath the sun as they slithered into green-laced fern. And one heavy August day he had taken her hand and led her into the middle of a pine forest where soft needles carpeted the ground, and they had climbed under the branches, and he had kissed her and pinned into her hair a cluster of wild Michigan orchids. . .

At the water's edge two sailor boys were leaning against Shorty's Bait Shop smoking Luckies and drinking Dad's Root beer. No one was sunbathing along the narrow strip of beach.

"We seen your car go by hours ago . . . what took so long?" Jimmy asked, dropping his cigarette.

Eyeing him up and down, Mary Kay asked, "So how'd you two get in the Navy?"

"Billy and me turned seventeen, that's how," he replied with pride.

"So big-hairy-deal," she teased. "We came down for a swim. What you guys hanging around here for?" she asked, slipping the tee shirt over her head, revealing the outline of her tiny breasts.

The girls were standing in the water when the sailors came swaggering out of the bathhouse in their Navy trunks. Shorty came out the side door of the bait shop at the same time and lit his pipe. Ever since the war began he wore his worn-out sailor suit left over from the first one, wanting to feel part of everything.

Jimmy walked out to the end of the dock flexing his muscles and showing off. He dove in, doing a double barrel that made a big splash. Both girls screamed and giggled when Billy tried to follow his lead, then they walked slowly out into the cold water that sneaked up their smooth legs and firm stomachs. Jimmy and Billy started in splashing at them. They had a good water fight; their laughter could be heard all the way across the lake to Murphy's tavern.

When they were all worn out, they swam back up to the strip of smooth white sand and threw down a khaki blanket. A soldier boy and his girl were setting out food on a pinewood table. Kids were playing war with toy machine guns and lead soldiers.

Mary Kay and Jimmy sat side by side facing the water.

"So how's about it tonight?" Jimmy asked her, slicking down his waxy brush cut.

"We saw Caroline," she said.

". . .they heard from Eddy yet?" he asked.

". . .no, but he's okay, in China," she replied, edging her hips away from his.

". . .he ain't okay, don't let 'em kid you," Jimmy said, rolling and unrolling his towel.

"Since when they take Indians in the Marines?" she asked him.

"Hey," Billy piped up, inching down beside her, "they take anything. . .even niggers. Ain't you heard? There's a war on!"

"I'm damn sick of it," Mary Kay snapped, shaking out her wet hair. ". . .that's all Fred and Dot ever listen to. I never even get to hear the Hit Parade." She stretched across the blanket, adjusting the straps of her suit. Alice sat alone, staring out at the still blueness of the water. A summer kid from across the lake pulled up along the shore in a motorboat. They all waved to him, but he ignored them, turned the boat around and took off. They watched the boat circle and circle the lake, making the other boats rock. . .disturbing the fishermen who shook their fists and shouted at him. But he ignored them all and pulled up along the shore near some lily pads. He glanced in their direction, revved the motor and scared the bullfrogs, making them splash headfirst into the water. Mary Kay waved again, but he ignored her. "He's mad because he's 4-F," she said, picking up a handful of sand and letting it sift through her fingers.

She thought of Dot and wondered what she planned to cook up for supper. She could almost smell the fresh bread Dot would be cooling on the counter when they got back. She remembered that Dot had promised to take Alice fishing in the morning and to teach her how to bait a hook and cast a line out far enough to catch the most fish. Mary Kay hated to fish. She couldn't stand to watch the warm, wet worms being folded back and forth onto the hook, and she couldn't stand to sit still for hours, wasting an entire morning without even talking. . .just sitting beneath the scorching sun with nothing more than an old hat to keep her cool, when all the time she could be stretched out on a nice beach towel reading *True Story*, getting a suntan and splashing in the aqua water whenever it got too hot. She thought of her dad, Fred, as the sand piled into a pyramid, and wondered if he was going to show up the way he had said. He'd promised so many times to come home for a few days and never seemed to. . .ever since the war began. . .ever since all the car factories were turned into making guns and tanks: he had stayed in Detroit, and she and Dot were alone most of the time.

Once she got a picture postcard of New York City with the Empire State Building

in the skyline. It was addressed to “Miss Mary Kay Vander Pearl.” When she had turned it over it read: “To the Queen of Diamond Lake. A little bird told me that you love me. Yours truly, Frankie.” She hadn’t shown it to anyone, not even to Dot. She saved it for when her dad came home so that he could be the first one to see it. Before she gave it to him, she made him close his eyes, and when he opened them he nearly fell over dead from laughter.

Mary Kay loved Frank Sinatra. When Dot had said they were going up to Diamond Lake with-or-without-Fred, war-or-no-war, Mary Kay had taken down the pictures of Frankie from her bedroom wall and carefully wrapped them up in tissue paper and packed them into the top slot of her suitcase. Her favorite was the one where he wore a red-polka dotted bowtie and was smiling at her for all he was worth.

She had wanted to bring Cookie to Diamond Lake instead of Alice. Cookie was older and had a lot more on-the-ball than Alice. But Dot wouldn’t hear of it, no matter how much she had begged. Dot put her foot down and said she was cheap and that Alice was the only girlfriend Mary Kay had who wasn’t spoiled rotten and afraid of getting her hands dirty once in awhile by helping out. Mary Kay couldn’t imagine having to spend two whole weeks with Alice, who was the kind she saved for days when no one else was around, or when Dot’s constant singing nearly drove her up the wall.

Besides, Alice’s dad was dead. Everyone knew it but Alice, and the whole business about it was spooky. After he’d been buried, Mary Kay went over to Alice’s; her mother was a big dumpy woman — bigger even than Dot — who smelled like beer and had tiny red spit-curls plastered up and down the sides of her face. The house was big and dumpy too, and stunk of cats. Even then, Alice wouldn’t admit that her dad was dead. She had told Mary Kay he was away on a defense job and that any day he’d be pulling up in his old, gray Chevy and take her back to Detroit City where he was working.

“Your old man is deader than dead!” Mary Kay had hollered back over her shoulder when she ran down Alice’s rickety back steps. “D, E, A, D! And don’t you forget it either.”

“No he ain’t!” Alice had hollered back, just before she slammed the door. “. . . he’s over to Detroit working on war planes, so don’t *you* ever forget it!”

After they had made up, the girls never mentioned Alice’s dad again. But, Mary Kay thought of him once, and remembered his dark, gentle eyes looking for all the world like he was some big, famous movie star in his soft white fedora. . . .

“Your ma going over to Murphy’s tonight?” Jimmy asked out the side of his mouth, like George Raft.

“. . . no doubt,” she answered, smashing the pyramid into a pancake. “They got a band over there yet this summer?” She remembered how she used to sit with Fred at Murphy’s drinking chocolate cokes, and listening to Dot sing like crazy at the player-piano.

“Yah, and a bartender that sells me beer, too,” Jimmy bragged.

Alice propped herself on her elbow and looked at them through her glittery new sunglasses. “It sure would be marvie to sit on the lake tonight in a boat . . . under the full moon . . . drinking beer and listening to a band play,” she said.

The sailors turned and looked at her. Alice slipped down her sunglasses and stared back at them.

Mary Kay broke the silence. “Get us some cigarettes. Alice and me ain’t smoked in ages.”

“Speak for yourself,” Alice said in a husky voice, rolling her blue eyes around in mock surprise. The August sun had inched its way across her auburn hair pinned into an upsweep. Somewhere along the line, her freckled skin had turned to solid brown.

Jimmy started talking to Alice. He told her he was going overseas as soon as he got back from furlough. Mary Kay ignored him. She was staring out at the satiny movement of the shoreline, thinking of Eddy, trying to imagine where China was. Kids were playing on a rafter, a fat, red-haired kid did a good belly flop from the high-dive after screaming with delight all the way down.

“Give me a Lucky,” she said, raising two fingers to her lips in a smoking gesture.

“You kidding?” Jimmy asked, taking his eyes off Alice long enough.

By the time the girls got back to the cottage, Dot had cleaned it up and planted pansies into the flower box. The place looked halfway lived in, and they could smell the sweetness of fresh lemon cake. The girls were hot and tired. They cooled off in an outdoor shower Fred had rigged up last year, then put on old, white Arrow shirts tying the ends into a knot at their stomachs.

“You girls sure look tan,” Dot said. “I used to be thin too, but look at me now,” she sighed, running her hands down her hips in a gesture of futility.

The girls set up a card table on the porch overlooking the lake. They set the table with Dot’s fiesta dishes and the silverware she had won playing Bingo at the Creston theatre. In the oak tree beside the porch, baby squirrels scampered among branches while blue jays dove at them from who knows where reminding Mary Kay of the times Fred had stood beneath the tree in his yellow golf hat, going cheek-cheek-cheek at them till all hell broke loose.

The sun lowered itself across the lake. Mallards skimmed across the water, their purpley-green heads brilliant beneath the scorching sun. Fishermen had hauled in

silver perch and bluegills left and right, and were quitting for the day. Mary Kay could hear their motorboats take off full speed. She went to the icebox and got a bottle of Kay-O Creme soda and took it out to the porch. After tossing canvas cushions on the metal swing, she flopped down spreading her slender tanned legs out in front of her to admire the shiny black nail polish on her toes. Then she picked up a copy of *True Detective* still in the same spot on the wicker table where she had thrown it last summer.

She closed her eyes and felt the hot sun on her face. Today was the first day of a nice long vacation. . . things weren't so bad. . . Jimmy was here, if only Eddy and Fred were, everything would be A-Okay. She got up and went back into the kitchen.

Alice was doing up the dishes. The fiesta glistened in the drainer. Dot was mixing an orange capsule into a pound of white oleomargarine. Alice and Dot talked about everything. Alice always had things to say to Dot; things Mary Kay would never think to ask her, things like. . . what was your life like before you met Mr. Vander Pearl? things like, why didn't you have another baby?

Mary Kay picked up a blue fiesta plate and began to dry. She thought of Caroline and of the time when she had told her how babies are made. . . and oh, dear God, thought Mary Kay, I don't want to think about that stuff now. . . Dot and Alice chattered on endlessly.

Mary Kay finished drying the dishes and went into her bedroom. The sun flashed its rays across the golden wainscoting as she bent down and began brushing out her hair. She thought of the time in fifth grade when she had been hit in the head with a swinging baseball bat. She shuddered when she imagined the nurse shaving off her honey blonde hair while she was unconscious, so that the doctor could sew up her skull. She had a concussion. What a terrible word: concussion. She thought she would never be able to go to school or be seen in public again; she was bald. She had begged Dot not to make her go to school. Fred had hired a tutor to come to the house everyday. Dot wrapped her bristly head in a red bandana and tied it up like a little picanniny. After awhile tufts of soft white ringlets began to grow. Each day Mary Kay had looked with wonder at this new hair; it was the color of pulled-taffy still hanging from a hook — like angel hair — and it grew long and straight, and fell down the middle of her back like a waterfall. It was so beautiful that Fred had called her *The Queen*.

If the war hadn't come along, life would be perfect. She remembered with dread how Dot and Fred used to listen to speeches of Hitler's late at night on the shortwave while she was upstairs alone, and they thought she was sleeping. The sound of his voice shouting out words that she didn't understand had given her the creeps; every-

thing they had said about him was like those silly impossible horror stories she had read in *True Detective*. She never believed in any of them.

When she went back to the kitchen, Alice was wiping her hands on the tea towel she had embroidered for Dot. "Let's get going as soon as your Ma leaves," she whispered, folding the towel over the rack.

Dot was in the bedroom getting all dolled-up for her big night out. Mary Kay knew she had been looking forward like crazy to driving over to Murphy's with Shorty for a few drinks and some D-Lake gossip.

"You girls be okay here for the night?" Dot asked, coming out of the bedroom snapping shut her new black purse. She had put on plenty of pancake and red lipstick, and looked like a mannequin in Kresge's storefront.

The girls met up with the sailor boys down at the swimming beach. They were waiting in a rowboat they had rented from Shorty. Mary Kay thought they both looked cute in their sailor suits and white caps cocked to one side. Alice sat next to Billy in the wide backseat, and Mary Kay climbed into the front. Jimmy started turning the boat around. The wooden oar cut into the still water with short rhythmic motions as the water flowed back into itself.

The sun was disappearing, the first day at Diamond Lake was almost over. When they reached the middle of the lake, the moon was like Dot's big orange platter peeking up over the pine. Mary Kay wondered if Eddy could still see it with those bombs exploding all over China.

Luckies were passed around. Before Mary Kay lit up, tiny bits of tobacco got on her tongue. She spit them out over the side of the boat and watched baby perch dive after them. One by one, lights went on around the lake. She bit down hard on her cigarette while the boat teetered and tipped as she moved to the center to be near Jimmy. When she sat down beside him, she could feel his arm slip around her waist. Billy and Alice were already kissing.

Jimmy pulled a chapel key from his pocket and pried a beer cap that popped off and fell into the lake. Steam drifted out of the cold, dark bottle. Mary Kay took a swig and felt dizzy from top to toe. A whippoorwill sang in the bayous; it was the first whippoorwill she had heard all summer.

She watched the reflection of each little light from Murphy's dock across the water. A band started and she began singing, "I'll walk alone, because to tell you the truth I'll be lonely. . ." Jimmy joined in, ". . . I don't mind being lonely, when my heart tells me you are lonely too. . ." She laid her head on his shoulder while the boat drifted around by itself. When he lifted her chin with the tips of his fingers and kissed her, she wondered if he'd make it back to Diamond Lake in one piece.

The girls were in bed when Dot got home. Mary Kay could hear Shorty's truck pull up and the sound of his gravelly voice as they talked about the war. Dot and Shorty had been kids together playing up and down the shores . . . jumping off the rafter just like the kids she had seen today. They started in harmonizing ". . . sentimental jour-her-ney home," and when they got up to the door, she heard Shorty whisper, "You buck up now, old girl."

Once inside, Dot hiccupped as she stumbled over furniture in the dark, trying to find her way to the bedroom. Mary Kay heard her fall headfirst into bed, and wondered what on earth Fred could be doing . . . if they'd ever see him again. When tears started down her cheeks, she was glad no one could see her.

Dot and the girls slept away the morning. Shorty came over, and had to knock really hard before he could get a rise out of anyone.

They sat on the front porch and chowed down on some of Dot's famous buckwheat pancakes smothered in the real butter and maple syrup that Shorty had brought over. After cleaning up, Dot and Alice tossed their poles and bait into the back of Shorty's truck and climbed into the front with him — Alice in the middle.

In the kitchen, Mary Kay snapped on the radio running the dial back and forth until she heard Frankie sing "Night and Day." She went out to the porch, flopped down with a new *True Story*, and thumbed through it. She became engrossed in a short-short about an old maid having an affair with a married floorwalker from Macy's. Frankie finished his song. She kept reading vaguely aware of "String of Pearls," when the announcer interrupted. Annoyed, she got up, letting the magazine slide to the floor. Before she flicked the dial, she heard the announcer's voice: it was somber, the words distinct. She turned up the volume and listened to him tell the world about a Fat Man that had been dropped on Hiroshima.

Hiroshima . . . she walked out of the cottage and across the yard. Hiroshima . . . the name twirled around her mind like a colored whirligig in the wind. Hiroshima . . . she walked quickly down Washboard Boulevard ignoring the gravel sticking to her feet. Hiroshima . . . she began to run, and she ran around the bend past the field of Queen Anne's Lace that grew near Eddy's shack and past the pine forest where they had sat. Hiroshima . . . she ran faster and faster down the hill hoping to catch up with Dot and Alice, but they had already disappeared into the snow-white sand . . . somewhere near the pristine water.