

Lake Vagary

A startled deer rushed out of the headlights of an approaching Toyota Taurus as the car clumsily bounded through the woods like a wild beast. Any semblance of real road had been replaced with dirt tracks a long while back, and the party travelling in the car had to switch to a decade old map to even follow this pseudo trail.

“Fucking christ you cannot see anything on this road. Are you sure we are still on the right trail Kay?”

The driver of the car exclaimed, a young woman who looked just as startled as the deer. Her friend sat in the backseat, nose practically pressed up against the window staring out at the trees, a slightly crumpled map sitting between their legs as they contorted the seatbelt to get a better look.

“Kay. fucking- Kay!” The driver shouted back.

Kay spoke up out of a haze, their mind had been stolen by the vastness of the forest for the best part of the last hour. “Oh..! Uhm, yeah, yeah we’re fine! Sorry Vivian... I-”

“Distracted, we get it Kay. Give us the map will you?” Alex Thompson growled from the passenger seat, less than thrilled that he had to remove his headphones. The young man peered out of the window into a sea of greenery, it was close to the way he remembered it, but overgrown and sad. A smile that spoke ‘oh well’ spread across his face as he recalled a similar car trip from his childhood, the only difference being that before, the pissed off driver was his mother.

Before anyone could actually check the map, the car collided with the last of the branches that stood between the group and their destination. The car screeched to a halt at the side of the path, the ignition turning off in the same breath. Vivian stumbled out of the driver’s seat, taking a moment and sighing before lifting her head. “There it is. Lake Vagary Summer Camp. I’m not driving anymore. Grab your things, we’re gonna walk it.”

The three took their first steps under the sign and through the front gates of a shared nostalgia. ‘Lake Vagary: Take a breather!’ That’s what the ads would say. It was the destination vacation for those needing a break, boasting amenities and activities that for the local area were pretty okay. They might not be able to explain why, but ask anyone and they would say that place was special. Alex, Vivian

and Kay were no exceptions. They hoped that returning here would also return that special feeling that they hadn't felt since their last visit. A hope that was quickly shattered upon their arrival.

"Looks like shit." Alex craned his neck up to the sky, stretching out from the drive, doing anything he could to avert his eyes from the place he thought he remembered.

Vivian, just ahead, interrupted him with a sigh.

"Come on, you know how these sorts of places get with time, the camp business just isn't what it used to be... I guess..." Always optimistic, even her tone started to waver as she brushed her hand across the fence, brushing cracked paint and rust onto her jeans. Kay rushed ahead, practically skipping. The whirring of their polaroid camera shattered the pitiful silence of the place as the amateur photographer snapped a couple of shots, looking up to their friends.

"Well, I like it... It's different, *spooky* even..." Kay raised their eyebrows and laughed a little, prompting some lighthearted eyerolls.

"Don't get any ideas Kay, I'm here to chill out, not participate in whatever Blair Witch shit you've started concocting in your freaky little head." Alex chuckled, grabbing his friend by the shoulders and pushing the group forwards.

All three of them were right. It was spooky, shit and not what it used to be. The campsite at Lake Vagary never felt big, but it always felt busy. Whilst the rotting wood and decaying metal was unsightly and the fading colour of the place felt sad, nothing caught the trio's attention more than the deterioration in atmosphere. The cabins were grim, but they were empty. The playground equipment was probably rusted shut, but no one was using it. Even in this state, they couldn't make sense of it. Perhaps they didn't want to make sense of it. Nobody spoke but three sets of eyes met. *'Where did everyone go?'*

Armed with a morbid curiosity, and a polaroid camera between them, the three continued to wander through the desolation of their childhood. Each abandoned tent they passed felt a little emptier until

each step forward felt pointless, their pilgrimage to this land of distant childhood bliss leading to something far too familiar: disappointment.

“Well then-” Alex was cut off by the sound of the camera’s flash, closing his eyes and breathing deep.

“What now?” It was a good question, but one with absolutely no answer. They sat on the steps of the old welcome centre. A tiny building where they had hoped to collect their keys and a map today.

“There’s still beer in the car, we could sleep there tonight? Head home in the morning?” Vivian suggested, her tone vague and indistinguishable as her eyes got lost in the cracked paint of the porch.

Kay piped up. “Maybe it’s like, one of those ghost camps and there’s just one old man running the whole thing. Like a super ancient dude who just can’t let go of his legacy and when anyone comes to shut the place down he fucking-”

“Christ Kay! ...Fucking hell!” Vivian sighed into a laugh and leaned forward. “You must actually want us to end up in some slasher, don’t you? ...Worst part is I wouldn’t even mind it at this point...”

She frowned. “It’s something to do, right?” Her eyes found their way to Alex, who was now pressed up against the window of the welcome centre.

“There’s a light. Guys, there’s a light in here.” He blurted out.

Vivian Retorted. “Nice find, *inspector*”

“No, seriously there’s a light, and a shadow... a shadow of a guy... maybe?” Alex tried his best, failing to get his eyes around the blinds to see. Kay rushed up behind him and failed to do the same.

“You guys realise there’s a door, right?” Vivian sighed as she got to her feet and reached for the door handle, her friends close behind as she pushed it open.

Behind the door, sitting at a desk, was a man, or rather the remains of one. He lay limp in his chair with arms dangling by his side, blue at the fingertips, staring at the ceiling just as Vivian had done moments ago. If you ignored it he would have seemed to have died a peaceful death. If you ignored it you would’ve thought nothing but all the sad thoughts that come coupled with death. They couldn’t ignore it though. The bulging mass of fungal growth that protruded from the man’s neck looked like it had just eaten its way out, fanning out grotesquely from a scarred over wound. It glowed, the only

thing in the room with any life left in it, the light that Alex had seen from outside. The three stood in silence in the doorway, a silence that would seem to last forever till a click, followed by whirring. A polaroid fell to the floor.

“Blair fucking Witch.”

The dead man demanded silence. Could he have talked, he might've called the trio standing in the doorway copycats, the way they stood with mouths agape and eyes wide in horror. For just a second the eye contact the three shared with him felt real, like they could just ask for their cabin keys and be on their way. In reality the only response that would come from the dead man's mouth was a bug. A response that would be enough to shatter the tension in the room ten times over.

“What the fuck... What the fuck? What *the* fuck.” Alex held to the act of speaking this phrase like a life preserver as his mind began to drift further from the welcome centre, his backwards steps taking him in a similar direction. “What the fuck is that?” He didn't want to know, not really... not at all. Kay differed, gently brushing past their friends in the doorway approaching the man with caution. There was something about him that persuaded Kay.

“Kay I really wouldn't-” Vivian gave up before she could finish, Kay wasn't listening. They got close enough that the glowing growth took up their entire lens, that way they wouldn't have to look at it with their eyes. Click. Whir. Click. Whir. Click- The realness hit Kay through a potent smell. They hadn't realised but they were yet to take a breath and as soon as they did that same breath tried to escape them. Buckled over they stumbled back, gagging, no concern for any of their fallen pictures. “Yup. Just like that.” Vivian placed her hand on Kay's back as they stumbled back through the doorway, she closed the door and left the man, what was left of him, in privacy. “You know not everything has to be photographed... right?” She watched Kay, huddled up against the porch's railing, there was very little conversation to be had right now.

An hour passed and the night began to rise along with the need for a plan. Still on the porch the three discussed, far more concerned about the rotting remains of their vacation than those of the man in the building behind them.

“No service... great...” Alex grumbled, dropping his arms.

“Oh yeah... Hi, FBI? Yeah, yeah, we’ve got a dead dude with a weird alien crawling out of his neck! And the alien might be dead too? Yeah, we’re here at Lake Vagary, come pick us up for questioning and shoot us in the back of-”

“Kay! Not everything is a fucking horror film!” Alex growled, almost ready to pounce until Vivian silently caught his eye.

Kay sighed, leaning back against the railing some more, at some point they felt like they had merged with it. They didn’t mind that at all, it felt natural to be attached to this place. “Feels like one...”

Vivian saw silence in her peripheral, prowling around the porch ready for the kill. She wasn’t going to let this vacation die.

“Right! Uhm... I know this is, god this sounds fucked, but I just want to have a nice night? I didn’t kill him... Can’t bring him back either...” She fidgeted with her sleeve, eyes darting between the expressions of her friends as if there would be something to see. She started staring at the floor “I was thinking... There’s that swimming spot with the Jetty, we could head there and-”

Alex cut in, startling her with a hand on her shoulder. “I’m in. yeah...” He looked over to Kay, still curled up. “You wanna come with?” They pretended to consider it, waiting for a second and shaking their head. Vivian was already leaving, she tossed the keys back.

“Head to the car if you get a cold, okay?” She feigned a useless smile, Alex and her setting off.

Kay hadn’t considered that the camp could’ve felt any emptier, however there were a lot of things happening that they hadn’t considered before arriving here. They shuffled through photos like a deck of cards, peering deep into depictions of cracked paint and rotted wood in hopes of finding a glimpse of what they came here for. Nothing. They turned to the door of the welcome centre. There were pictures in there, ones they had dropped, maybe they had that feeling in them. A churning began in their stomach. The door wasn’t the dead man, but it felt like the dead man, for a second it had eyes

like the dead man, it looked at them like the dead man. The churning was enough to get them to stand up and leave the porch. They thought about following their friends but their legs wouldn't take them, forcing them to wander around the camp's main amenities. It was the perfect setting for a horror film. Kay began to sort through all the ideas they could bring to life here, all the ideas they hadn't brought to life yet. The churning began again, spurred on by something far more dreadful than a dead man. They brushed dust from a cabin window, hoping to find a distraction from the encroaching feeling of failure only to be met with their own reflection: far more dreadful than a dead man.

Fortunately the door of this cabin was ajar, it felt like the first open door Kay had been presented with in a while. They passed through the frame into a room that had more darkness than furniture and it felt like home. The first thing they saw was it. The thing that the trio had come here for, that special feeling, sat at the other end of the cabin in the form of a white case. That intangible, indescribable feeling that everyone must be searching was within their reach. Something close to a giggle rose in their throat.

Click. Click. Fwoosh. The case opened like in the movies, a glowing light crawling out from under the top as Kay raised it, for a second a cold mist covered the case's contents.

Elsewhere footsteps brushed through tall grass, following a path that everyone else had forgotten, promising squelches under inappropriate footwear that decorated the quiet in a straight line towards the lake. Vivian and Alex said nothing with their mouths, figuring that slumped shoulders and shaky hands would be more eloquent than 'What the fuck.' The moonlight walked alongside them, playfully ducking in and out from behind the trees as if it did not, or could not understand what they had seen, eventually revealing itself as the pair stepped to the edge of the water. Vivian swore she remembered a throne where the dilapidated jetty now sat, maybe it once was her throne. Regardless, she sat dangling her ruined shoes just above the lake. Alex stood, swaying on his heels as if he could fall right into the seemingly bottomless pool below. As the night reached its peak, the silence it brought was stolen by three words.

“It’s just wrong.” Alex’s words uttered out like a false start, quiet for so long that he had almost forgotten how to speak, not that he would have known what to say. Vivian looked up just past his shoulder.

“He’s dead. You saw a dead guy, that’s going to feel wrong. That’s going to feel really wrong.” She reeled, caught off guard by her own words as much as she had been by the body. So blunt, so matter of fact, maybe that was the scary part: That it was a fact.

Alex muttered, scratching at his collarbone, aware but avoidant of his friend’s eyes. “It’s not that... I mean the water. It’s wrong. I’m supposed to want to dive in, but I don’t want it to touch me. All I ever wanted to do at this stupid camp was swim in this lake, and now I don’t want to.”

Vivian flashed a pained smile. “You wouldn’t even dip a toe for 10 bucks?” It was only after a quick elbow to her friend’s knee that she read the room.

“Viv... I wouldn’t work an hour of retail for 10 bucks...”

For a second the night stole back its silence. Alex gazed intensely at his warped reflection and briefly he saw himself, he saw a child. He saw a child that right now he hated. Alex thought back to a summer he would never return to and he mourned something that child would always get to keep. He took a seat beside his friend, a wandering mind was enough.

In the cabin the mist covering the contents of the case had cleared, Kay stared down at a cylinder. It was white like the case, with some rings at the top, a clear section lengthways down the centre allowing them to see a fluid inside, small growths floating inside: they found it calming to focus on the details. It looked to be the last of many cylinders, accompanied only by the text on the case’s lid.

*Drivetol test kit 004 provided to Vagary Activities Co. **HANDLE WITH CARE.***

8x Drivetol Motivation Agent samples.

2x Terms and conditions/ Safe use manual.

Thanks for taking this step with us into the new frontier of motivation,

_____ *Research Laboratories.*

The cylinder fit Kay's palm perfectly, it made sense in their grip as they tossed and turned it to read the directions written on the side. The print was faded but confirmed what the case had said, "*Drivetol Motivation Agent. Administer only once to the side of the neck.*" Kay's thumb toyed with the button on top, their mind toying with the idea of liquid motivation: something worth more than liquid gold. They wanted to do something real and something exciting, to be someone real and exciting. Though the opportunity was something straight out of a public service announcement it had fallen right into their palm, the cylinder, the cabin, the door and even the dead guy was starting to feel right. They thought back to Vivian's words.

"It's something to do right?" they muttered, placing the end of the cylinder against their neck.

Click.

"My brother could touch the bottom, you know? I still think he was lying." The Lakeside silence was stolen once again by Alex's shaky voice.

Vivian looked up. "Bill, right? What's he up to now?"

"Law, I think. Something boring..." Alex followed the water closely with his eyes, past where a child could stand. "Do you think I could?"

"What, law? No fucking chance-" Vivian scoffed, concern fading, safe in the knowledge that Alex still held some sense of humor. A concern that would quickly return.

"Do you think I could touch the bottom now?" Alex interrupted.

Vivian followed his eyes to that spot, inhaling before she spoke as if that next breath would tell her everything she needed to say. "I don't know, probably? Yeah. You're 24 Alex. You're lanky too..."

Yeah. You could touch the bottom, for a bit. But there's a point where no one touches the bottom."

"What then?" Alex asked.

For the first time the silence that followed did not feel empty. Eyes still transfixed by the lake, Vivian spoke steady and sure. "I guess... You learn to swim."