

## Round and Round It Goes

Lake Hubris. Not really. It was one of the ubiquitous Round Lakes, as uninspiring a name as any lake could have. It was right up there with Mud, which at least had a little mystery to it. If a lake was called Mud, there was always the hope that something was hiding in the namesake's murk. No mystery in a name like Round. There was the implication of a circle, unchanging, smooth, boring. Nola didn't like circles. Round and round it goes, where it stops, nobody knows. A lake deserved better. Besides, this Round Lake, one link in a paternoster chain of lakes, wasn't technically round. What natural lake was?

Out with it; that was Nola's philosophy. If it didn't work for her, and Round Lake certainly didn't, she'd simply get rid of it. Today, it was Lake Hubris. Yesterday, it had been Lake Misbehave; the day before, Lake Falderal. Depending on her mood, tomorrow it might be Lake Humility or Lake Remorse. Lake Consequence would definitely enter the mix within the week. Christ. Here it was. Pathetic fallacy – reflected in the surface of a nondescript lake. Her life reduced to a literary convention. So it goes . . . .

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Nola liked this illusion – making the water swarm her without getting wet. If she sat at the very end of the dock and was careful with her peripheral vision, she felt surrounded by the lake, like she was lapping and bobbing as the water lapped and bobbed. Levitation, but safe. No chance of falling. Relaxing into the monotony.

Wait. Maybe she didn't like the illusion. This was Lake Stagnate. She knew it. The lake knew it. Everything was the same, the same, the same. The falderal was still there, even after the misbehavior and the hubris. Hubris? How could she have been so cocky? To think that she could change the monolith by being naughty, of all things? The Institution was so old, so set in its ways that even the new workers settled unquestioningly into the organizational sediment like the rust-colored rocks cemented into the bottom of Lake Stagnate. She'd been young and dumb like that once. Willing to go along to get along. No longer. She needed something more. Too bad Lake Stagnate wasn't a spring creek full of snow melt – rushing water churning with energetic gulps of oxygen. That's what The Institution lacked, a breath of fresh air. She had tried to inject some with her prank.

Lake Consequence had been no real consequence, not like she'd hoped it'd be. Youthful hi-jinks, that's what they'd attributed her misbehavior to. Youthful? She'd been there twelve years, thirteen if she counted the internship. They laughed it off, brushed her off. She was so mad, there'd been no room for Lake Humility or Lake Remorse. Instead, a brisk wind flashed across the water's surface like a stuttering shadow and whispered Lake Patronize to her for three days straight. She'd gone home each of those evenings with a face numb from the cold slap.

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Nola didn't swim. It wasn't that she couldn't. It was just easier not to. If she was honest with herself, she'd have to admit that all she could manage was an anemic dog paddle and a

couple of floats, back and dead man's. She'd never learned to crawl with long, strong strokes. Forget about that rhythmic breathing – breathe in, face in, face out to the right, breathe out - breathe in, face in, face out to the left, breathe out. It took too much coordination and thinking, especially coupled with the arm movements and leg fluttering. She decided that she would have to be satisfied with an anemic dog paddle, ineffective though it was. But, that was many years ago, when she was a teenager, and today, the lake was called Honesty.

Nola had discovered that the difficulty with honesty was other people. She could be honest with herself and she could be honest with the lake. No problem. But, when other people entered the picture, judgment crept in and it was no longer safe to be honest. She was satisfied with a dog paddle and two floats when no one was watching her and laughing. When the watcher's watched, the tide turned. The dog paddle became anemic and she became dissatisfied. Their judgment became self-judgment and an ineffective paddling technique was no longer enough.

Enough for whom? Why did she care what others thought? Nola threw a small, smooth stone she'd been fingering into Lake Honesty and read the ripples for a reply. The lake remained noncommittal.

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Pregnant clouds hung suspended on invisible hooks over Lake Harbinger. Definitely impending – fat raindrops overdue and waiting to drop.

The lake was hungry. Impatiently, it salivated, heaving noiseless spirals to the surface and swallowing them again. Over and over.

Bits of stuff, tiny rugs of moss, the odd, soggy old leaf, floated by in the black water, all heading in the same direction, insistently, as though late for an important party. Nola hadn't received an invitation.

She was being snubbed at The Institution. It was subtle and had taken Nola weeks to discern. The memos she didn't get, the staff meetings she found out about after the fact, the project committees that excluded her. Time, and the lake, had added it up for her. The realization that Round Lake was spending an inordinate number of days masquerading as Lake Stultify nudged Nola into full awareness of her tenuous status at The Institution. That, and the reality that she was now being assigned to grunt jobs that even the interns weren't willing to do.

So, this was the way it was to be. Management didn't have the *cajones* to fire her outright. They were going to make her life miserable at The Institution, force her to admit defeat and quit, watching and laughing as she did so, hoping that she'd scurry away like some broken, simpering puppy. She was going to try not to give them that satisfaction, but she was doubtful she'd be successful. Lake Harbinger was taunting her, telling her that the worst she could fear was exactly what she was going to receive.

Funnels of worry spun through her mind like the silent spirals in Lake Harbinger. Nola couldn't take it any more. She jumped feet first from the dock into the lake, never minding her shoes or clothing. "Shut up! Damn it! Shut up!" she shouted at the lake, slapping her palms on the surface of the water, determined to wipe the cynical sneer from Lake Harbinger's ugly maw. It felt good to smack the lake.

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Lake Disgrace had arrived. An unfriendly sun bounced its white hot light off the water's surface in a Death Ray of Shame that roasted Nola's cheeks.

The Institution, so determined to put Nola in her place, had ultimately decided upon public humiliation; had called her to task for her insubordination in front of a full room of her peers. Insubordination, such a vicious term. Couldn't they see that her stunt was a cry for creativity, not a grab for power or a sign of disrespect for The Institution? On the contrary, she loved The Institution. She had simply wanted to put the multi-layered machinations of her mind to constructive use for its benefit. Why couldn't management understand that?

Nola fought hard to keep Lake Disgrace from turning into Lake Regret. She didn't regret what she had done, not for an instant, and they couldn't make her apologize. The severance package was adequate, but meaningless in light of the lake's magnification of the Death Ray of Shame.

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Day after day, Nola sat on the dock anchored out over the lake, an unemployable pariah. News traveled fast, blowing with ferocity over Lake Despondency. It was not a frigid wind, as Nola expected, but warm and smothering. No one would return her calls; positions miraculously filled as soon as she turned her attention to them.

The day of Lake Harbinger, the clouds had not given birth, but held back their roiling charges. It had rained between then and now, but Nola had chosen to stay away, unable to bear the added weight. Today, she remained and witnessed the slow, sloppy entrance of bawling raindrops over the course of the afternoon. Despondency edged into jagged grief as Nola allowed her tears to mix with the moldering, fishy drops. The only question that came to mind was, "Why me?" as she succumbed to the wetness and discomfort.

And the lake beckoned her. "Come on in, the water's fine," it said, easily, seductively. A hiccup suspended Nola's tears.

The raindrops that played upon the surface promised answers that had never previously been forthcoming. Nola supposed that she and the lake now had something in common – a good sopping from the sky. As long as she was already wet, she reasoned, she might as well go for a wade. Still, she hesitated. She stood at the end of the dock, tracking the developing patterns caused by the intercourse of lake and rain.

And then she saw it – a faint glow that seemed to emanate from the depths. She looked up and confirmed the grayness. Nary a glint, nor a glimmer, not a shaft of light to be seen. The light was not coming from above.

What was causing the phenomenon? She considered it, but curiosity did not get the best of her. She was not mad, not like the day of Lake Harbinger, not mad enough to flop into the water clothes and all. Soaked through or not, she had her dignity to preserve.

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The lake was patient. He was accustomed to creatures using him – flashing fishes miniscule to grand, toothy or “O”-faced, forcing him through their wavering gills; beings of every other description, furred, feathered, rubbery or shelled, never giving him a moment’s rest as they sipped him up, burrowed and plucked his torso in a vicious game of hide-and-seek, or cruised his bowels and skimmed his skin so that their voyage might be made easier; even the hordes of undulating fronds, tickling him around his edges – they all wanted something from him.

This creature, the one with the pooling eyes and drooping mouth who sat beside him day after day – he knew all about her, how she called him a different name with each visit (as if the one he had wasn’t perfectly serviceable), how she searched his surface, scrying for answers his exterior would never reveal. There was that one day when she broke through; he’d almost had her then, but she’d proven to be stronger than he’d expected. A little more patience, a little more coaxing – that’s all it would take. Let her continue to call him names and seek answers a while longer.

The lake put up with being used because he always got something in return.

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Tentative swimmer though she was, Nola took to bringing her swimsuit, a dull, one-piece navy affair with a skimpy modesty skirt. She wore it under her street clothes, ever at the ready to strip down should the glow reappear. As she sought out the mysterious light, Lake Misery became Lake Hopeful and Lake Hopeful begat Lake Observation.

On still days, when the sky and surrounding landscape pasted themselves on the glassy surface, it was Lake Window Cling, or, if Nola was feeling philosophical, Lake Reflection. Days of wind and white caps created Lake Tempestuous, which turned to Lake Feisty when the lake spit water upon her as she perched on the dock. She hung her legs over the edge and kicked back in gleeful revenge.

Wading, in ever deepening increments, brought Lake Sandy Bottom and Lake Rocky. On her tippy-toes, Nola discovered Lake Weedy and shuddered as the slimy tendrils brushed her legs. Lake Weedy was a barrier to Nola’s further exploration. Lake Sudden Drop Off was sure to be beyond and she didn’t think her dog paddle was up to the challenge. She contented herself with the shallows, practicing her floats and paddle, and working up the courage to go beyond.

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Lake Fickle. From Nola's vantage point, one side of the lake was calm and bright, the sun glinting on it like a swarm of fireflies. The other half was choppy and venomous. Not a good day for a swim, but, wait . . . the underwater light . . . it was back. Of course, it had to be in the dark water. She wouldn't have seen it in the light half of the lake. Nola had quite forgotten the glow, but there it was and she was determined to find its source. She approximated its location using the dock as her landmark. It looked to be just this side of the weeds, easy enough to get to without much exertion. In she went, first wading, then paddling.

When Nola reached the spot, the glow was not there. It had shifted, moving into the weeds. She went to it, but found that it had propelled itself out of reach. She continued following the glow as it conducted its relocation dance. Paddle, paddle, search, see the glow, paddle, paddle, search . . . the glow disappeared.

Nola treaded water and looked around her. No glow. Land was out of reach. Her heart beat double-time for a moment, then the panic left her. She was surrounded by the lake, a very round lake. Round Lake. She understood. She moved into a back float position, marveling at the water's support and the vastness of the sky. Nola closed her eyes and the lake swallowed her whole.