

The Lost Boy

Lauren Winkler

Autumn came with the sound of my brother's and my feet pounding against the gravel road that led to our house. The school bus dropped us off every afternoon at three o'clock sharp, and the race would begin. I sat on the edge of the cushion after coaxing Gina Taylor to give up her aisle seat again. It cost me the next day's lunch money, but I didn't mind going hungry, seeing how I got a head start on Will that way. He couldn't get over his pride to sit closer to the door. I suppose he didn't want to be called a baby, sitting up front with the young kids.

I had been training hard all summer to upset Will's record of beating me every time. This was my first chance to whoop him, and I was certain that I would. Once I saw our stop approaching, I grabbed onto the seat in front of me and lifted my behind. I waited for the bus to stop and for the doors to open. A blur ran by me. Before I could get up, Will was already down the steps and bookin' it to the house.

"For cryin' out loud," I yelled after him once I had leapt off the bus. I was running as hard as I could, but Will was faster. "You can't get up till the bus stops, Will'm!" All that shouting must have made me slow as tar. Will was nearly to the bend in the road that led straight to our driveway. I put on my brakes and yelled, "You can stop showin' off now, fancy pants!" I walked slowly down the road, holding onto the straps of my back sack and kicking the biggest rocks I could find. The trees that lined either side of the street canopied the road from the sun and kept me cool. Little beams of light fought through the leaves and brought to life the dirt hanging in the air. The rest of the way home I pretended it was fairy dust sprinkling down from the trees and onto my head. I figured it could

make me fly like in the *Peter Pan* story I read. I wished I could have flown away, right then and there.

I got home ten minutes after Will, dragging my feet in disappointment of yet another defeat. “That’s another win for me, June. You ain’t never gonna beat me.” Will was sitting at the table, munching on cookies and grinning at me, while crumbs tumbled onto his lap.

“Oh yes I will! I would’ve today if you wasn’t a cheatin’ sack of sh—”

“Mary June Lawrence!” Momma glided from the back of our house into the front room with a laundry basket. “I don’t wanna hear any such thing comin’ from you. It’s unladylike.” Momma always entered a room when I was using my fighting words, and she was always telling me to watch something: my behavior, my manners, and this time it was my mouth.

“But that’s what Daddy calls those men when they’re over playin’ cards.”

“Well, that’s your daddy’s business and none of your own.” She set down the basket and began folding clothes. “Now, watch your mouth, young lady.”

I grumbled, “Yes, ma’am,” and plopped down next to Will. I grabbed one of Aunt Jamie’s famous cane syrup cookies and began eating away the outside edge as I eyed Momma and Will, upset with both of them for their mistreatment of me. Momma left the laundry and went to the back of the house, and I gave Will a kick in the shin underneath the table.

“Ouch, June! Whad’ya do that for?”

“For bein’ a cheat and for getting me in trouble with Ma.” I took an angry bite at my cookie.

“You shouldn’t be cussin’ like that, June. You know how Momma’s real sensitive to things like that.”

I rolled my eyes at the wisdom Will seemed to be acquiring in his old age of twelve years and helped myself to another cookie. We sat quietly

until Momma came back with Big G. “Big G” was what we called our oldest brother. He was a year Will’s senior, and he was my best friend. I never understood why he would pace around so much and repeat himself. Sometimes he’d pound his own head or chest like one of those apes at the zoo. It used to scare me when I was real young, but I got used to it. “That’s just the way G is,” Momma would reassure me. She said that he wasn’t like Will and me, and we were blessed to be healthy.

Momma thought that Big G needed to play and run around like any normal kid. That’s why he was our responsibility after school. She said I was doing a good thing by keeping Big G company. As long as we didn’t leave the property and wander into the woods or roughhouse, we wouldn’t get in trouble. It just so happened that the things we were restricted from doing were also my favorite things to do. Momma’s rules left us with no other option but walk around the land surveying trees and wild life.

“William . . . Mary . . .” Momma confronted us at the kitchen table. “Take Big G outside to play. He’s been cooped up all day at home school with the two of you gone and me takin’ care of the house.” She tucked a loose strand of blonde hair into her bun. “And I don’t want to hear about any fightin’ either, y’all hear?”

“Yessum,” Will and I replied.

G stuck close by me, while Will searched the trees for birds. He’d been looking out for them since April when Aunt Jamie gave him a book about birds and their migration patterns for his birthday. He had only spotted blue jays and crows, but he had his heart set on something exotic, as if a phoenix would appear right before his eyes. I didn’t care for birds, seeing how they squawked an awful lot. I liked reading much better. That was hard to do when we took long walks on the property, so I talked to G instead.

“Now G, you can’t go stealin’ my dessert tonight. I had to hack up tomorrow’s lunch money to get a head start on Will for the race home.” Big G grunted.

Big G never responded to anything anyone asked or said. Momma told me when I was little he could hear me and maybe even understand me, but he couldn't talk back. I thought that was sad, and I figured maybe that's why he was always pounding away at himself. It must be frustrating to have something to say and no way to say it. I believed that he understood me since he respected my request and left my strawberry shortcake alone that night.

"G, what do you want me to read you tonight?" I asked as we walked along the worn path. Will still had his head craned to the sky, muttering to himself as he occasionally looked down and flipped the pages of his bird book. "I heard that *Tom Sawyer* book is real good. Should we start on that one?"

Big G rolled his head side to side as we came around to the driveway that led to the gravel road. The Anderson boys lived up the street and were walking our way. I didn't care for the Andersons much since they'd rob you blind the first chance they got. Their daddy had money, but that sure didn't stop them from making off with anything of value that I brought to school. I once brought a sack of rocks from my collection to show the class, but they weren't in my cubby when I was packing my things to go home. Mrs. Dee said I probably misplaced them, and she was certain that they would turn up when I least expected it, as if their disappearance had to do with my being irresponsible. I tried to convince her that Mickey Anderson made off with my rocks during lunch, due to the fact that his whole family was a band of thieves. Mrs. Dee couldn't see things my way, and I ended up rock-less in a corner by myself until the bus came. Mickey Anderson teased me the whole way home for being a cry-baby.

The Andersons stopped in front of our driveway. Mickey picked up a piece of gravel and chucked it at my feet. "Here's a rock to add to your collection, Mary June."

"Mickey Anderson, I'm gonna hafta to challenge you to a fight if you don't quit it!"

“June, calm down.” Will came out of a bird coma and held his arm out in front of me before I could get closer to Mickey. He was famous for treating my threats to others as childish, but the moment I challenged him, he would fight. “What’re y’all doin’, Bradley?” Will asked the eldest Anderson.

“We’re goin’ down to the lake for a swim is all. Sorry about Mickey. You know how little kids can be.”

“You’re only three years older than me ’n Mickey,” I said.

“Which makes you barely nine.” Will said. He turned to Bradley, “Don’t worry about her none. I know exactly what you’re talking about. Little kids don’t understand nothing.” My brother and Bradley Anderson were the wisest men in the county.

“Lord,” I mumbled. Big G sat on the root of an oak tree nearby and started playing with the dirt. It was about a good of an idea as any seeing how we couldn’t run wild, and the Andersons had interrupted our walk.

“Y’all can join us at the lake if y’all want to,” Bradley Anderson said.

“Sorry, we c—” Will cut me off.

“Well . . . I guess that would be alright,” Will said.

“Alright? Will’m you know we gotta stay with Big G till supper.” Will grabbed my arm and pulled me aside where the Andersons couldn’t hear us. “We ain’t allowed to leave, Will.”

“Now look here, June. I never get to go down to the lake like all the other boys.”

“Me either!” I argued

“You’re a girl.” Will held me tight by the forearm. “You don’t even like to swim.”

“Yes I . . .”

Will wasn’t listening. “Anyways, Big G needs *you*. He don’t need me. You’re the one who reads to him every night and who can calm him down when he gets all upset.” Will looked back at the Andersons and

held up a finger. "Now I'm going down to the lake to swim with the guys. Don't you go tellin' Momma either. Just keep your big mouth shut till I get back."

"But Will . . ."

"You understand?" I held my head low with my chin tucked into my chest so he couldn't see my eyes, and I nodded. "Okay, then. I'll be back for supper." Will shoved his bird book into my hands and raced off to the lake with the thieves. I walked over to where Big G was and sat down beside him. I couldn't help but to cry.

In between tears I explained to Big G how Will went and abandoned us. "He thinks he's high and mighty now that he's in the sixth grade. I saw this day comin' when Will kept his big ol' head in that dang bird book and stopped making up games for us to play. It was only a matter of time before he left us, G." I wiped some tears away. "I've been wantin' to go to the lake since I can remember, and now Will's gone and left us for it." Big G must've known how hurt I was because he started crying, too.

When Will got back from the lake, he was smiling ear to ear like he'd just won a big prize at the county fair. He was dry as cotton, and Momma was unlikely to notice his transgression. He approached Big G and me under the oak tree. I was still out-right mad at him, so I started digging away at the ground with a stick. Big G followed my lead. "Well, ain't you gonna ask me about it?" Will said.

"I don't talk to traitors, thank you."

"Oh, come on now, June. Don't you want to know if the rumors about the rope swings and the fishing and the old tree houses out there are true?"

I did want to know, but I didn't answer him.

A bell started ringing from outside our house. "Come on, June, Big G. Supper." Will was back and was the leader again. As he walked towards the house, I dropped his bird book in the hole and covered it with dirt.

On the hike back home, I kept thinking about the lake, wondering what it was like. I wanted to go more than ever before. I imagined rope swings from every tree, bungalow tree houses, and millions of kids running free. We had only heard such things from the other kids at school. From what it sounded like, it was Neverland. As we climbed the stairs to our porch, Will whispered, "It's all true."

Weeks went by, and Will and I hardly spoke. Our race up the driveway was more competitive than ever. He stopped cheating, but he still beat me every time. Eventually, I stopped racing and started to enjoy the long walk home, but Will kept on running so he could get to the lake as fast as humanly possible.

Although Will broke Momma's rules and left our property, Big G and I stayed under the same oak tree. I felt so sick to my stomach sometimes I could have hurled. I was afraid of Will getting in trouble no matter how mad I was at him. To keep my mind busy, I read to Big G. We finished *Tom Sawyer*, and I had started on *Peter Pan* again since it was G's favorite. He always got calm and peaceful when I read the part about Peter and the gang arriving in Neverland. His eyes would open wide, and his rocking and banging stopped. I figured he would like it there, seeing how he would be able to do whatever he wanted.

One afternoon I forgot *Peter Pan* in my room and didn't even realize it until Big G and I got to our tree. We couldn't risk going back for it since Momma was sure to ask questions about Will's whereabouts. "Sorry, G. No reading today." I sat down on the ground next to Big G. "What're we gonna do now?"

Without my book, I couldn't stop thinking about that lake. I wanted to run off to it. I wouldn't have to worry about keeping Will's secret, getting in trouble with Momma, or being responsible for G all the time. I wanted to be a kid.

"Come on, G." I took his hand. "We're going to the lake."

The lake was down the road and through a small clearing in some

trees. Big G had never left our property without Momma or Daddy. If I was to get caught sneaking off with him, I was sure to get a beating. I told Big G the things I had heard about the lake.

“We’re gonna be able to do whatever we want, G. Swings, tree houses, no adults either. You won’t have to worry about being stuck in the house all day. You’ll be with me instead.”

We were just a few yards from the clearing when I heard voices shouting. I figured the boys were splashing around and flying off rope swings like trapeze artists. I couldn’t wait to see what it was like. The shouting came faster and louder, and I felt my stomach get tight. I grabbed Big G’s hand and pushed my way through the brush. The screams turned into cries for help. Mickey Anderson rushed over to me as soon as I set foot on the bank. “June! Go run home and get your daddy.”

“What are you tal—” That’s when I saw. Mickey’s arm was pointing towards the middle of the lake where Will was fighting to keep his head above water. “Will!” I ran over to the bank closest to him, where Bradley Anderson was wading back to shore.

“I can’t get him off. He’s caught on one of the tree’s branches. See?” A tree that was pushed over by a storm had fallen into the lake, and its upper half was submerged.

Without thinking, I jumped in and swam towards Will. I was halfway to him before I realized that Big G was in the water, too. “Big G! Don’t come in here!” Big G ignored me, and he continued pushing through the water making his way to Will who was fighting to stay above the surface.

As tall as G was, he could reach the bottom where I couldn’t. He wasn’t scared while he inched his way in. As I watched, he seemed like a normal kid, like he finally broke out of whatever spell he was under all these years.

Big G had water up to his chin when he reached Will. Bradley

Anderson jolted me back to life as he swam past me. I don't know how Big G freed Will, but he did. Bradley grabbed one of Will's arms and brought him back to the bank, leaving Big G and me in the water. He had gone farther out, and neither one of us could reach the bottom. Only I could swim. As soon as Will was released from the tree's branches, Big G's spell came back. Since he couldn't reach the muddy bottom, he started thrashing.

"G, calm down!" I told him. "I'm right here." His eyes opened wide and found mine. I could see how scared he was. He was flailing violently, and I knew I had to do something. I dipped under and started swimming to him, but something hard and heavy knocked me upside the head, and everything turned black.

Will was in my bedroom reading *Peter Pan* to me when I came to. He closed the book slowly and wiped his eyes. I felt groggy and had a bad headache. I couldn't sit up without feeling like I'd fall off the bed. I turned on my side to face Will. "Hey, Mary June," he told me, still wiping at his eyes.

"Hey, Will'm." I started to remember why my head was hurting so bad. I was walking to the lake with Big G and hearing a lot of shouting. I knew there was more, but it hurt my head to think about it. "Where is Big G at?"

Will stopped looking in my eyes. "Don't you remember what happened, June?"

I thought real hard for a bit, and images of Will stuck in the lake and Big G going in after him hit me like a hard punch in the face. I felt that big knot in my stomach tightening again. "Where is Big G at, Will?"

He was quiet for a while, as if I would suddenly become enlightened. "Remember, June? I was stuck on that branch out in the lake. I couldn't breathe too good." He looked me in the eyes. "Big G saved me. You remember?"

I squinted tightly as if I was trying to watch it replay in midair. “Sorta.”

“Well, he did. Then Bradley brought me back to the bank while Mickey ran and got Daddy. I was alright when he got there, which is just about when you went under to get to Big G.”

“I was goin’ to save him, Will.” The events at the lake started to get clearer, and the knot got tighter.

“I know you was. Daddy jumped in after the both of you. By the time he got there, you had taken a kick in the head from Big G.”

“He didn’t mean it, Will.”

“I know that. But he couldn’t swim, June.” He paused for a second and set the book on the nightstand next to him. “Daddy brought you back to the bank and turned right back around to get Big G.” He rubbed his hands on his knees. “But G was already under water.”

There was a long silence as Will started wiping his eyes again. I figured he was through talking. I asked quietly, “Is Big G okay?” Will didn’t answer, so I asked again. “Is Big G okay?” He started shaking his head left to right real hard, but he wouldn’t say a word. I knew what he was trying to say, and I put my head down on my pillow and cried. Will crawled into bed with me. He reached for the heavy blanket at the foot of the bed and stretched it over both of us. The darkness swallowed us whole, and we cried in each other’s arms.

“Where did he go, Will?” I asked.

“Neverland.”

It took me a long time to get used to Big G being gone. After the sound of Will’s and my feet pounding against the gravel faded every afternoon, I would come home looking for him. I shuffled into his room each night with a new book to read, but the bed was always empty. Often times I would climb into it and think about him. I would close my eyes tight and try to concentrate on our walks together and the way his eyes lit up when I read *Peter Pan*. Sometimes, an image of him walking into

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the lake would appear and then disappear. Those were the nights I cried the most. Somehow sleep would manage to take me, and I would wake up in the morning, wrapped tight in the sheets of his bed still without him.