

Whatever Happened To Daniel?
by Pierre Demery

It wasn't on any "Top 10 Most Scenic Hikes" list in the nearby area, or even a secret best kept local secret that was a must see. It wasn't even on the campgrounds website. No one in the area knew about it. Or if they did they made sure to keep quiet about it. What it was, however, was an easy hike that ticked our current priority boxes: 1. find somewhere scenic, and most importantly of all, 2. make sure it could be done with a slight hangover.

Morgan noticed it while peeing off trail, where around that time the amount of walking had sobered us up enough that the thought of an adventurous detour would make for a great story. So, we ditched the trail and cut through the forest towards the water we saw through the slits of the trees. I was bringing up the rear, so I was the only one who saw the sign, after I ended up dislodging it with a solid kick that reminded me I was in need of hiking shoes and not sneakers. I gave it an extra stomp out of frustration and cleared the leaves on top of it. Enough to read what was on the sign.

Mirror Lake.

It was breathtaking. The trees and mountains surrounding the water were like a bowl of nature reflected in the crystal clear water perfectly.

Scotty, Jordan's new boyfriend, called out to show us his stone-skipping skills, and my heart practically fell into my stomach thinking he was about to shatter the whole lake. I mean, it was like glass, that's how perfect it was. He made some sort of macho pose when he got a solid 4 skips and bet anyone else to try and beat that. It was then that I saw Daniel.

"Can you see it?" He pointed.

I think maybe Morgan heard him too? We were the closest, but I was the only one who cared to look. Maybe there was a deer or something on the other side?

"There, in the water. Look."

Before I could look I saw Jordan waving the lunch sandwiches we packed so I called Daniel over, but he just stood there, staring out at the lake like he was in a trance or confused by what he saw? I don't know, I was hungry and wanted to eat so I headed back to the group.

"Hell yeah, go for it man!" Scotty cheered in my direction, but not at me.

I turned to see Daniel wading into the water. I called his name.

Someone else with a mouth full of food called out too, told him to not get his pack wet.

He dove in, clothes, pack, all, and that's when I started running.

No strokes, no tread. Nothing. He was gone; slipped down into the depths.

I called his name from the beach.

The group's laughter turned into giggling.

I screamed it.

Everyone went quiet.

"Guys?" Jordan said.

"This isn't funny anymore." Morgan added.

I wouldn't let my eyes off of the water; hoping to see something, anything. The ripples on the surface flattened. I couldn't see Daniel...but I could see *something*. I took a step closer, the

toe of my shoe broke water, and sent my own ripple out across the lake. I watched the liquid arch glide away from me, and I wanted to—no I need to catch it, before it got too far. IT'S GETTING TOO—!

Morgan grabbed my arm. She asked me something I didn't hear. She shook me.

"Where is he?!" She looked scared. Why was she scared?

I looked at her, and the others who were standing close but behind Morgan. I turned back to look at the lake, then up at the mountains that made the lip of the bowl.

"Huh. Do you see that?" I said pointing up at an empty space between two peaks. I didn't see if they were looking.

I traced my finger down to what should be an empty space, but filled by an upside-down reflection of a mountain.

By the time we got back the police and the park rangers were there. They took each of our statements. I didn't mention the mountain peak, or what Daniel was saying. They said there wasn't much they could do in the dark—oh yeah, it was night by then; we couldn't find the way back to the trail. We couldn't even find the clearing where the sign was, so we wandered until we found a trail.

After the cops and rangers left we decided to leave first thing in the morning. Someone started a fire and we sat around it like hungry moths. It was short-lived though.

No one wanted to look at or sit by a single empty chair.

Not long after that, everyone went to their tents feeling terrible, but I could feel their eyes on me, hear their hushed voices behind the zipped up tents. They blamed me for—I don't know, being the closest to him and not helping when he...I guess they just needed someone to blame. I don't know what I could've done. I think I blame myself, too.

When we got back home time went by with no word about his disappearance. The group fell apart; I didn't expect anyone to reach out to me. I know things weren't the same but I felt like I needed—I don't know. Answers? Closure? *Anything*.

So I went back.

It wasn't hard to find, cause I think it wanted to be now.

I stood on the shore, right where he stood, and looked out at that perfect, smooth surface reflecting the past back at me. Right there, where he disappeared, breaking the water upside down in its reflection. Not floating, or treading, but suspended. Eyes grayed over and bulging. Skin water-logged, marbled and bloated. I knew I saw something.

Can you see it?