

BRANDI MILLER

CHILDHOOD'S LAST SUMMER (an excerpt)

The drive to the park took only about three minutes, even with traffic. There were only two stoplights between her quiet street and the popular park. But on this beautiful sunny day, as she gripped the steering wheel and drove as fast as traffic and safety would allow, it seemed to take forever. With heightening anxiety she replayed the conversation with her son in her head and hoped that between the time she hung up and arrived everything would be ok.

"Mom, my friend fell in the river. He's been under water for four minutes," he said in a voice that sounded strangely normal to her ears.

"You better not be joking around, she said as her pulse quickened in anger and fear. That's not funny!"

"No mom. I swear. He fell in. He's drowning."

"Oh, God! Did you call for help?" she asked, her throat tightening.

"Yeah, we just got off the phone with them. Can you come down here mom?" he asked.

"I'll be there in just a minute, ok?"

She didn't even think to ask who... what friend. It really didn't matter. Any of them being hurt or killed was equally bad. Her chest constricted as the faces of each of his friends came into her mind. They were all so young and alive, and every one of them had special qualities that this world would surely miss if they were no longer in it.

How did this happen? What were they doing? she thought frantically. Her son loved to fish in the river; he had been doing it for a few years now. This was the first summer that he stopped wearing the funny nylon fishing hat that she bought him. The river was also so shallow because of the drought this year that his being down there so often didn't concern her as much as it usually did. Just like her, he had a healthy—bordering on paranoid—respect for water. She didn't know why she felt that way, maybe because of her little sister's near drowning in the family pool when they were themselves young and she herself rescued her sister from the cold waters because she was the only one out there.

As she made her way down the driveway into the park and saw a couple of emergency vehicles parked nearby, and the people lining the riverbank, she knew, with a sinking heart, that her hopes were not going

to be realized. There wasn't going to be a boy, soaking wet, sitting on the riverbank, scared but alive. She jumped out of the car and as she ran along the foot bridge that spanned the river, she saw her son walking toward her, cracking his knuckles—something he did when he was nervous. She expected high color on his cheeks, remnants of tears but he appeared like he always did, except for his eyes—they were no longer as bright as they always seemed to be. He had such beautiful blue eyes, but like someone with a high fever, they now seemed dull and old.

Seven minutes had now passed. Time was moving slowly, yet all too quickly.

“What happened?” she asked, out of breath, as she watched two police officers lying belly down, gun belts off, on the outcropping of rocks at the base of the dam, intently watching the roiling foam for a sign of the boy below the water—watching... waiting for anything close enough to the surface that they could grab hold of and pull him out.

“He walked out on the dam, and when he came back across, he slipped and fell. He yelled for help, but he slid down into the water,” her son said as he rubbed his eyes with one hand and pointed over to the dam with the other. “He couldn't pull himself out. Then we thought he was getting out of it,” he paused. “He came up twice and got farther away from the bad part, but then he went under again and we haven't seen him since,” he explained in a quiet mechanical voice as he watched the police. He continued to crack his knuckles.

He still sounded so calm, and there were no tears—just empty calm. Her heart was hammering. She couldn't catch her breath and her hands were cold and numb. She was afraid that she was having an anxiety attack. She felt that she was going to crumple to the ground. It was hard to hold back the tears, but she had to for his sake. How could he be so calm? She wanted to put her arms around him, tell him it was ok, that it would all be ok, but it wasn't, and they had long since stopped hugging. It made her feel sad because it was just another part of his growing up and becoming more independent, needing her less. But now, when she felt he needed her most, she knew he couldn't handle it if she did put her arms around him—so she didn't.

As she stood there with him, she heard sirens in the distance. There is a surreal feeling that comes over you when you hear the sirens; such an everyday occurrence in a city, but when you realize they are coming to your emergency it causes a fear in you, knowledge that after they arrive, life would never be the same again. [The previous sentence should be rewritten because you switch from third-person narrative to your own feelings.] She had only experienced that once before in a life-and-death situation, and that was when her grandpa died. Her parents had found him face down on the

floor of his kitchen where he had laid for a few hours after suffering a massive heart attack. Since she herself lived so close, she had gotten there before the police and rescue vehicles. It seemed strange to her that they came with sirens that time, because they knew he was gone. Here it was happening again, and with every minute that passed she knew with a sickening sense of reality that just like that summer day, they would again not be performing a rescue.

The atmosphere at the park began to have a circus-like appearance. There were kids flocking from every direction. Some were running, some walking, some pointing and crying, some laughing, and some were even taking pictures with their cell phones. As the police blocked off the bridge and the fire department rescue boats were put in the water the original five kids, who were just moments before laughing and having fun, huddled together, away from all of the chaos. They looked so different than they had earlier that day. They seemed hollowed out, older, somehow. Each had a faraway look of disbelief on his face, like shell-shocked victims of a war-torn country. Every once in awhile one of them would shake his head or rub his eyes as if he was trying to wake himself from a nightmare he couldn't escape.

Kids began saying that they heard the police say there was a possibility that there were air pockets under the dam that he could be in, that, therefore, he could live, that perhaps he was alive down there and why weren't they trying to get him out? There were firemen in wetsuits walking the river—it was that shallow, to hopefully find him. And then there were the firemen in the boats, jabbing at the river bottom with their long pike poles as they slowly moved along the deeper parts of the river. [Work the marked out sentence into the previous sentence—3rd person. It could be powerful.] The police were talking to the kids that were there when it happened. That was when she learned that her son was the one that made the call to 911.

One officer told her that, pointing to her son as he patted her on the shoulder.

“That was a good thing he did. It's a miracle that none of them jumped in to help him. No one could survive that water,” the officer added. She supposed it was meant to make her feel better. It didn't. She didn't think anything could make her feel better except reversing time and making this not happen.

As members of the media showed up, the kids who were in the original group refused to talk to them, which only made the reporters try harder. Other kids who weren't even there talked, arms slung over each others shoulders, waving and smiling to the cameras.

“Hey! I'm going to be on the news!” one hyper, excited boy shouted.

“That's so cool!” said his friend as he dialed his cell phone to call more friends.

Kids began playing tag. They were eating food, laughing—she didn't think her son would ever laugh again. Parents of other kids were standing along the riverbank just like she was--probably thinking just like her, "That could have been my kid. Thank God it wasn't--," and breaking off the thought then, feeling guilty and saying a little prayer while looking over at the parents of the boy in the river. She didn't know the parents, barely knew the boy—she remembered that he was quiet and polite and his nature didn't make him stand out among the circle of friends—because she usually got to know the louder ones since they tended to draw more attention within the group.

Grabbing the arm and getting in the face of one boy who was running around like it was any old summer day, "You need to stop screwing around or go home!" she told him. "Don't you realize that your friend is dead, in that river? They are searching for his body! He is not coming out alive," she yelled at him.

"They said he's in an air pocket," the boy responded. "He's just waiting for them to come down and get him," said the boy. "I don't know why they are taking so long."

"No! He's not going to come out alive!" she told him, intensifying the sound of her voice. "You need to show some respect for his family over there," she said, pointing at the family huddled together on the other side of the river, on the other side of the police barricade. "They can see you acting like an idiot while their son is in the bottom of the river!" she nearly shouted as she pushed away from the boy and his friends.

That was when the tears spilled over. She didn't just cry for the boy in the river, or just for his family: She cried for the kids who watched their friend struggle for his life and lose, the kids over there as she watched them, away from everyone else, the ones who refused to talk to anyone. They lost, as their friend lost his footing and went under—never again to breathe fresh air, the last of that childhood innocence that had been barely hanging on. This was the last summer they would have before they went off to high school and they had, up to this point, anyway, spent it the way kids were supposed to—sleeping late, playing at the park, hanging out with friends. They shouldn't be sitting by the river trying to understand how and why this happened, thinking about what they could have done differently or how they could have maybe saved him. They talked quietly to each other, each one of them saying he wished it were himself instead of the boy that loved to fish in the river. It's what boys were doing for years and years. They weren't out getting into trouble, they were just fishing. How can something bad happen when you are doing something innocent like that?

(an excerpt)