

Coral

©Kayla O'Neal

“Please, repeat this phrase: *‘I do not recognize the bodies in the water’.*”

My grandpa had drilled that mantra into my brain. It was my first memory of him. Holding me against his hip and looking out over the lake. The water gently slapped against the dock posts and the husky smell of fish and lurs was pungent to my small nose. Normally he was a man of logic and reasoning but not about this.

He didn't just warn me. He warned all the snowbirds who rented boats and fishing tackle from our store. The out-of-staters would laugh nervously. Surely this was just a way to get curious tourist a bit of excitement for their fishing trip. But his steely eyes and stern mouth would not waiver.

My parents would only nod along to it. “Weird things are in this world. Dark things. Never listen to those calling out to you when there are no other boats around.”

It wasn't unusual for someone to not come back. A retired couple or some college kids on break. I was ten years old when I was allowed to go on my first search with my dad and grandpa. They didn't speak much as we loaded our boat and set out. The lullaby of ripples and the absence of the moon created a shiver down your spine. The searchers voices echoed across the lake. Calling to the lost. The bodies would sometimes wash up a few days later, but not always.

Outsiders speculated it was a serial killer or inexperience at boating. But my grandpa would just shake his head. “They became what they sought to save.”

The occasional missing person didn't really change my life. It would upset it for a week, but then my routine would go back to normal as the searchers left or a body bag was sent back to the deceased's family. That is...not until she came. I was the sole person in the shop that day. Reading a book some tourist had left behind. At first, I didn't pay her much attention. She was just like all the others who came in on the daily. But then she started questioning me about one of the recent missing persons. It was her brother.

So I told her what my grandpa told everyone.

Every day she went out on the lake. Every day she came back empty handed. There were bets around town about how long she would last. A few days. A week. Maybe two. A month came and went, but she didn't. She became a regular at the shop. I learned her name was Coral. Mom felt sorry for her and offered to hire her part time. Let her use the boats whenever she liked as her form of payment. Grandpa wasn't happy about the arrangement.

"You're just encouraging her. You know good and well that girl is never going to find her brother, and if she does see him well...we won't ever find her."

I couldn't let that happen. Not to Coral. I started going with her. I blamed my flushed skin on sunburn. Her strong hands and full lips swam through my mind as we cut through the water. Her eyes never left the reflections. But she told me about her brother. He was the only family she had left. He deserved to be laid to rest alongside their mother.

The more we went out on the water, the closer we sat next to each other. My fingers would linger after adjusting her lifejacket. Her lips would find mine. Lipstick on her cheek. Perfume in my hair. Our hands intertwined. I finally found someone who felt the same as me. I

didn't have to hide with her. She embraced it. I counted down every second until I could see her again. I couldn't get her gentle voice or lopsided smile out of my mind.

"I need you to go pick up a new engine for the sailfish," grandpa handed me his checkbook and the keys to his truck right before I climbed into her boat. "It can't wait."

Coral promised to be safe and she waved me off as I repeated grandpa's phrase. "I know I know. I'll call for help before attempting anything."

Hours went by and she wasn't answering my calls. The long drive back from the store seemed to never end. The road stretched out impossibly long. Grandpa stared out across the water from the dock. The wind was picking up. The sun was going down. My sides ached from running all the way from the truck to the docks. Panic on my face. Sorrow on his.

"They found her boat."

Fish heads and pines crunched under my feet. Water splashing up over the sides of the boat. A lone baseball cap sat abandoned on the ground. The boat clanked as I shoved it off the rocks into the water. Lightning in the distance. Fog on the water. My grandpa called for me to come back.

You do not recognize the bodies in the water.

My arms burned with how fast I paddled. Was that her voice I heard? Or just the wind through the reeds? The air reeked of mud and fish guts. The air was heavy, suffocatingly so. My spotlight skimmed across the lake. I couldn't see the shore anymore for the fog.

That's when I found Coral. Milky white eyes stared up at me from below the surface. Her mouth slightly open, hair framing her head like a dark halo. Hands floating up towards the surface. Reaching out towards me.

I fell back into the boat with a yelp. A hand over my mouth. Nausea in my esophagus. My boots rattled against the metal side of the boat from my trembling. I could hear my grandpa's voice in my mind.

"You do not recognize the bodies in the water."

But I couldn't tear my eyes away from the lake. It *was* her. I'd know that chin. I had kissed it into memory. The scar on her forearm from when she had a tumor when she was a child. Her caramel skin. The red jacket I had given her. The boat tipped forward as I leaned closer. My spotlight piercing the dark churning water and revealing the rest.

I couldn't tell how many bodies there were. But I knew them. The man who vanished last summer. The two cousins who made national news from their disappearance. A little girl who had wandered away from her parents one New Years Eve party. My grandmother. My Parents. People who had no right to be staring back at me from under the depths.

My hand broke the surface. Not even the icy temperatures could break me from this trance. My fingers reaching out for Coral's. Desperately trying to grab her and bring her back.

Her hands wrapped around mine. She pulled. There was a violent splash and a scream. Then silence fell the boat slowly drifted away. The water calm. The fog lifted.

I wondered if my family recognized my body in the water.