

## Where Ducks Walked on Fish

My mom and I packed our yellow Fiat with camping essentials: plastic containers of pie filling, bread, buns, and chips, my s'more ingredient carrying box, coolers of pop, a frisbee, a Keurig, and a tent going on its second use. A last minute camping trip to Pymatuning Lake, the largest lake in Pennsylvania, that is actually a reservoir, to show my brother's girlfriend, Nicole, our favorite summer spot. It was really one last weekend spent together, before I'd go back to college in Boston, fall weekends would fill with marching band competitions, and my older brother would move to Nashville. With the late August sun already taking a toll on my spirits and energy level, I was ready to get on the road.

"Are you sure that stuff is okay at your feet?" My mom pointed to the bag of clothes on the passenger seat.

"Yeah it's fine. It's only two hours." I assured her, even though I still had my backpack and three pillows to fit on my lap.

"Sorry about that. I want to make sure Johnny and Nicole have enough room back here. It seems like every time Nicole is with us, she's crammed in the car." The blankets and sleeping bags piled high on the right window seat muffled her voice. "Remember not to open this door." She pushed her weight against the pile, making sure there was enough room for my brother and his girlfriend to sit.

My dad had started his first trip to Pymatuning at six that morning, taking his pick-up truck to deliver the bikes and kayaks to the campsite. My mom had taken my younger brother, Evan, to marching band practice at eight. My dad would come back home, go to work for a few hours and pick Evan up at two. Then, they'd pick up our dog from the house and make their way

north. For my mom, Johnny, Nicole and me, plans to leave around 8:30 turned into hoping to leave by ten.

We finally got on the turnpike, ready with graham crackers and peanut butter for the two hour ride north through the hills of Western Pennsylvania. For more than 15 years, my family has spent nights in the Jamestown campground in a sporty black and yellow pop-up camper and a remodeled 1971 Airstream; long summer weeks spent with extended family, creating new stories to return home with. This time, with just the immediate family and one guest, we left our Airstream at home to try sleeping under the stars.

We didn't drive up together pulling the trailer, and all settle in to the two tiny beds nestled in the Airstream. It was just us. No uncle to add an extra 'm' and call the place, "Pymatuming." No aunt to make mashed potatoes for an afternoon snack.

It wasn't a lot of time, but it would be enough to ride our bikes around the campsite, kayak and most importantly sit around the fire with the setting of the sun over the lake. It would be enough time to roast our vegan marshmallows and smoosh them between graham crackers and dark chocolate, and introduce Nicole to mountain pies.

By the third leg of the ride, where highway meets winding country roads and small town Pennsylvania, the bars of service dwindled to one. We had passed the first road sign for horse and buggies when the pillows on my lap were noticeably covered with cracker crumbs and peanut butter drips. We were getting close. Wooden "Jesus" signs popped up in front yards. I pointed out the first one on a peek up from my phone. My mom insisted she had already seen two. Another sign, "Lose Your Guns, Lose Your Liberty," served as an unfortunate reminder of

the political leanings of the area and of the state park's placement in rural Pennsylvania, five minutes from the Ohio border.

When we finally arrived at site 229 in the Jamestown campground of Pymatuning State Park, it was already afternoon. The four of us discussed plans at the picnic table over hummus, salsa, and corn chips in a cast-iron pan. My mom pushed for the winery that afternoon; my brother hoped for a long bike ride to the dam, and a game of frisbee. He insisted we take Nicole to the Spillway, a place we had been visiting since we started coming to Pymatuning. He refused to explain it to her. She just knew he wanted her to "see the fish."

The Linesville Spillway puts Pymatuning Reservoir on the map not for a pleasant view of the water against Western Pennsylvania landscape but for what happens in the water. The Spillway adopted the phrase "where the ducks walk on the fish" to try to explain what happens there. It started off with campers and lake-goers feeding carp on the side of a bridge with expired loaves of white bread. Over several years, it has grown into a major tourist attraction with fresh sidewalks, a large parking lot, benches and a stand that sells popcorn, T-shirts of cartoon carp, magnets of the favorite motto, and expired bread. The Pymatuning State Park website claims it's the fourth best thing to do in the park.

We used to ride our bikes there from another campground. My aunt would make sure to pack old bread for us to throw into the water. Sometimes we played into the tourist trap and bought bread there. We went yearly until we didn't. The question, "Does anyone want to go to the Spillway?" always came up but got shut down quickly with looks of *ew*, *no*. This year, with the goal of showing Nicole Pymatuning, the answer was yes. It wasn't a yes we want to go; it was a yes we need to go. It was just as necessary as showing her how to make a mountain pie,

kayaking out into the middle of the lake, riding a bike through the woods, spending the afternoon at the winery, making sure to spot a horse and buggy, and closing the day with a s'more. It's an ugliness attached to the entire experience of camping.

With only had five bikes, two kayaks, and a terribly needy golden retriever, entire family activities were limited. Eating happened separately since everyone cooked something different on the fire. In site 229, the little spot we had to ourselves, we'd make a fire, sit around the fire, cook on the fire, and talk about the fire. This time, my brother told me that I act like I'm the "queen of everything," because I can make a fire better than anyone else in the family. My dad's inability to do so came up often. We slipped in jokes about how he should have been a firefighter not a civil engineer. My mom blamed it on his lack of common sense, that had been passed on to my brothers. We relived moments in the past to enjoy the present and laughed at flaws to fill silence. We still talked about my dad's episode of falling off of his bike, off of a small bridge, and into a stream the year before at the campground. Evan reminded us of a story about the Spillway, how the science teachers from our school district took a trip up to Pymatuning, wrapped a loaf of bread in a blanket, and held it like a baby while looking at the fish, until they "accidentally" dropped it into the water and watched the fish swarm.

We slept in several tents strewn across the campsite and I shivered the entire night trying to remember the one-with-nature-ness of sleeping under the stars, trying to get my dog to move off of the blankets I needed and holding my stomach, wishing I'd decided to fill up on something other than baked beans.

With the return of the sun Sunday morning, the temperatures rose and the five shirts and two pairs of pants seemed instantly inappropriate. Evan slept in until late morning. His interests

shifted from wanting to be the first to wake to get in an early bike ride around the campground to the friends he missed at home and his only connection to them, his phone. On Sunday afternoon, my dad, tired from splitting wood and eager to get home in enough time to settle into the evening, left with Evan and our dog. The rest of us planned to stop by the Spillway on the way home. We had to drive into Ohio and then back into Pennsylvania to get there. By that time, exhausted, sunburnt, and bloated, I hoped we would skip it and go straight home. But after missing a turn in Ohio, and arguing about who to blame, we managed our way to the Spillway, expecting the fish to be just as hungry and aggressive as any other time.

I managed to the edge of the sidewalk, after stumbling out of the car and having to settle the pillows that had been piled on top of me. At the edge of the fence and start of the lake, I saw only still waters. I didn't see overwhelming numbers of fish. The four of us walked along the edge, peeking over the fence, expecting the open mouths of countless carp. A family interrupted our walk along the edge, the group of them watching over the railing and chucking bread crumbs into the water. Despite the one small area of carp eagerly awaiting an eight o'clock carb load, the rest of the water, typically filled with masses, wasn't. Just a single fish here and there following the sight of us, opening its narrow lips, beckoning for any stale scraps. The usual scene of "ducks walking on the fish" involved carp jumping over top of each other for the slice of bread. You couldn't see the water between the brown slimy bodies, the spit up tootsie rolls of creatures that swam in the reservoir. But today, at eight o'clock on a Sunday evening, as if they wanted to settle into a restful evening after a long weekend of eating before a long week of the same, none of them showed up to the Spillway.

“There don’t seem to be as many fish as usual.” My mom understated her observation, hoping someone there would have the answer. An older woman, with just her husband, claimed it was the solar eclipse.

Nicole didn't understand our disappointment. It didn't disgust her like it should have.

Maybe the solar eclipse suddenly released these animals from the constraints of human dependence or they were already settled in before sundown. I tried to suppress the horrifying questions about where the fish went, hoping they had really disappeared with the same magic that brought them all here. I felt a mix of relief that the fish were no longer there to be used for human entertainment and sadness that the place that had been the same for so long was changing. Beyond the surface of disgust, the place holds a charm maybe only felt by those who have grown up with it, by those who associate it with campers and favorite aunts. I imagined the carp dispersed into the lake, hidden under the film of fog below my kayak, just beneath the sail boats that graced across the wooded landscape. I held on to the feeling of sitting in the middle of the lake on the kayak, dizzy from the stillness of the water, unaware of what was going on below the surface of the water and beyond the edge of the beach.