

MARSHALL GU

THE MONSTER OF WINOWA LAKE

THE SIGN THAT READ “BEWARE LAKE MONSTER” was considered tacky by some and unnecessary by most, as everyone knew that there was something *off* with the lake.

“Why do you think the ducks never come here?” Old Man Barton asked his grandson Jake, scaring him straight when he caught him skipping stones.

It was true: ducks never idled there. Neither did the fishermen when they wanted to go fishing nor the townspeople when they wanted to go swimming.

The situation got even worse in 1982, when a group of drunken teenagers went skinny-dipping one night and the youngest—Alison Simmons—gashed her leg something fierce. Alison never confirmed or denied the existence of the monster after she recovered, though she hasn’t gone swimming since.

In 1991 the newly-elected mayor Fred Brimhall, a well-intentioned man with few ideas, decided to turn the Winowa Lake Monster into something of a tourist attraction, converting a small shack into a gift shop that sold t-shirts, stuffed animals, and other Loch Ness-type paraphernalia. It wasn’t his worst idea, exactly, for the fifty or so people who passed through Winowa every month.

Winowa was home to roughly eight hundred people at the time, although Mayor Brimhall hoped to increase the town’s population to nine hundred by the end of his term. In addition to the gift shop, there were two schools, a motel, a hospital (although a building that happens to have two doctors in it would be a more apt description, according to Gertrude Simmons), a library, two churches on opposite sides, and a bank in the centre. There were also a few restaurants, with one close enough to the lake that you could get a decent view while you ate. At any given time, you could count the number of cars on Main Street with one hand.

If you were one of the few people who passed through Winowa, you might have turned to the person sitting next to you in the car and asked, “Who would want to live here?” But it’s doubtful that you would have ever passed through anyway. Some of the residents didn’t stay either, as they often left for school or work, which were just different ways of saying “more stimulation.” Nevertheless, the town’s population still kept growing every year. Jake’s parents died in a car crash when he was little, and that’s why he and his grandfather moved here. There were also those who came because it was quiet, the housing was cheaper, the air smelled good, the townspeople were nice (for the most part), you could see the stars at night, and you couldn’t have an existential crisis in the middle of a traffic jam on the way to work.

Small-town clichés aren’t always true, as the townspeople didn’t all know each other, but gossip did get around. When Carrie Mulligan disappeared, for instance, everyone knew before the sun went down.

“Maybe the monster got her,” Jake said quietly during a church service held in her honour, but he wasn’t quiet enough, as everyone saw Peter Mulligan glaring at him from the back of the room.

The members of Carrie’s book club, who met every two weeks at the library, had their own theory. “She was too good for Peter,” said Gertrude, who never subscribed to the monster theory despite what happened to her daughter. “It wouldn’t surprise me if she left him.”

Bradley Dukes, the sedentary security guard at the bank, thought that she must have been murdered, even though there were no signs of foul play. “Maybe she even knew the guy. That’s usually the case with these things.”

Peter printed two different flyers and put them up on every post and bulletin board in town. The first flyer had the question “HAS ANYONE SEEN THIS WOMAN?” written in bold, black letters with two pictures of Carrie. One of them was his favourite, with the half-pout, half-smile that always drove him crazy, and the other was a less glamorous one, without her famous smile, that was taken when they moved to Winowa for cheaper housing. The second flyer said “I MISS YOU, COME BACK” with a picture from their wedding. This was accomplished within days, leaving Peter feeling useless afterwards.

“What now?” he asked his friends, but no one answered.

Mayor Brimhall made a public announcement, asking anyone with information to come forward, but no one did.

Days passed, and at some point Peter stopped staring blankly at photos and started drinking. Soon he could measure his days in beer bottles. At first his friends tried to cheer him up, but they eventually stopped trying.

Years passed. Old Man Barton died, and everyone offered their consolations to Jake, who took over his grandfather's bookshop.

Under newly elected Mayor Rockwell's guidance, the population passed the 850 mark.

The local bar started hosting open mic nights, although the same few people would show up to display their talents every week. If you had stopped in Winowa and visited the bar on such a night, you might have heard Jake performing covers of Rolling Stones songs, particularly "Prodigal Son" and "No Expectations." But it's doubtful that you would have ever passed through, let alone stayed the night and visited the bar.

One night Jake had an audience of four, including the bartender, Ed Bunn, who had heard these songs many times before; a young couple, who appeared to be on their first date; and Peter Mulligan, who was on one of his regular benders. Later that night, long after Jake had put his guitar to rest, Ed had closed up the bar, the couple had kissed and parted ways, and the lights of Winowa had gone out, Peter calmly walked to the edge of town, took off his clothes, and swam into the lake.