

The Horror in Skemmult Lake

Despite the festival and all of the jovial feelings its smells and sights brought with them, the hair on the back of Officer Hawkes' neck stood on end. *There was something sinister in the air that night. It tainted every breath and just made you want to run as far and fast as you could in the other direction,* he would later write in his suicide note. At the time, however, he chalked it up to being caused by the harrowing call that had awoken him.

More than half-asleep, Melanie had asked, *What's wrong, honey?*

Hawkes had had to think it over a bit as he got dressed. She worried easily, and he didn't want that. Finally, he gave the carefully worded answer of: *There was an accident at the fair. They need me to come in.* Kissing her forehead, he said, *I'll be back soon. I love you.*

She had mumbled something in response, and he walked out the door. The reality of that call had yet to truly sink in as he got into his cruiser. Even as he walked between the brightly colored, desolate stalls of the Blue Moon Festival, he still couldn't quite believe it. *Twelve went under.* And it was only what was first reported. There would very likely be more.

The base of operations was set up on the shore between the frozen Skemmult Lake and the festival. Caution tape and uniforms kept the mounting crowd off the treacherous ice. Beyond the barrier, Hawkes could see the full moon reflecting off the frozen lake, except for where it didn't. And where it didn't, there was a chasm of darkness that looked wide enough for the whole world to fall into. In the darkness, pale shimmers of moonlight rippled with the freezing water. Silhouettes of men in rubber suits stood around the chasm, waiting for their signal to dive in. *Twelve went under. How's that even possible?*

Lockheed, Washington was a nothing town. It was the town where the worst crime to happen was committed by a cat that accidentally shot its owner with a misplaced rifle. Nothing ever happened. If you ever stumbled upon the small mountain town, it was by complete accident. For some ungodly reason, you were trying to cross the Ogaden Mountains connecting Idaho and Washington instead of traveling on the I-90. Outsiders rarely showed up, and much fewer stayed. Usually just gentle drifters and vagabonds, lost in the seas of life.

Making his way down the embankment, Officer Hawkes was set upon by wide-eyed and desperate people. One man grabbed the young officer's uniform and shouted, "Where's my son! My boy! I can't find him!"

A crying girl tugged on his leg and said through panicked sobs, "Have you seen my big brother? He was on the ice... I haven't seen him in a while."

Hawkes apologized and reassured profusely as he made his way through the crowd. He wore the visage of an optimistic young rookie, saying whatever he thought

would put these people at ease, but, at that moment, he felt old and wary. In his last words to the world, he briefly mentioned the encounter: *They were desperate for any sign that the world as they knew it had not just come to a violent halt. I wanted nothing more than to give those people their children back, but that didn't matter. Nothing really does.*

After the tortuous journey through the helpless crowd, the young officer found himself inside the makeshift tent that had been set up as a place for divers and officers to warm themselves. A group of blanket-covered young men sat around a space heater, doing everything they could to warm themselves, anxious to return to that darkness and continue the search. Sitting by the flap nearest the lake was the sheriff: a large, bearded man wearing an equally large jacket with the letters LHPD patched onto its sleeve.

"Sheriff Larson," Hawkes said as he approached the open flap. A diver was being helped out of the water just as another dove in. "Have they found any of them?"

The big man was silent for a moment. Sheriff Larson had never been a talkative man, not even when he had been the fitter and much better looking Officer Larson. Hawkes' own mother had been infatuated with the stoic man, but there was no evidence he had ever taken advantage of his good looks. He lived alone in a cozy apartment near main street, the same apartment he dwelt in for over half his life. Much like Lockheed, the man never changed save the steady increase in his size. But he was different, anybody could see it that night. He was somewhere else. When he finally answered the young officer, he said, "No. Not a one."

"Christ," Hawkes said as he wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

"Don't think he had much to do with this business," the sheriff said. "They're saying nineteen now. Skating around on the ice one minute, gone the next. Somewhere down there. Never seen a thing like it."

"Nineteen? That can't be, sir. Nothing happens around here. It's been ten years since Todd's calico shot him."

"I suppose we were due then," Larson said as he fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. The man had quit right about the time his weight began to skyrocket, twelve years passed. Now, he lit one and lightly puffed at it before gesturing toward Hawkes with the pack.

Shaking his head, he said, "No; thank you, sir."

Larson put the pack back in his pocket and leaned back in his chair, his eyes far away.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"The perimeter is pretty well established. Don't suppose you have any experience diving?"

"No, sir."

“Then I suppose the only thing you can really do is hope and pray to the god of your choice. Sorry for dragging you out here, son.”

“Not a problem sir. It’s going to be a late night for—”

“I saw it!” a man said as he burst through the tent flaps behind Hawkes. “It took them! Reached from the pits of hell and took them all!”

Both the officer and the sheriff turned to look at the man. A ushanka sat above his crazed eyes, but he wore no other outerwear substantial enough to protect him from the cold. The man’s teeth chattered and his hands were crossed over his chest when they were not waving frantically. Poking out from under the hat were long strands of gray hair. Hawkes pegged him as being somewhere in his sixties.

“You can take care of him,” Larson said as he turned back toward the desperate efforts of the divers in the middle of the lake. With a nod, Hawkes set across the tent toward the madman.

“Come on, guy,” he said. “Get back out there with everybody else or go home and get warm. It’s not good for you to be out here like that.”

The man shook his head. “They don’t listen out there. They’re hearing me, but they’re not listening. A crazy man is what they’re calling me. I need to talk to somebody with some authority, somebody that will listen.”

This guy’s been out there too long. Must have come out to see the comotion. I can’t just send him away, he’ll freeze, Officer Hawkes thought. Later, he would write, I should have drowned that old man in the lake. We would both be better off if I had.

“You want to talk? Fine, talk to me. Let’s just do it over here, where it’s warm,” he said while pointing at the circle of men by the space heater. Rubbing his hands together, the crazed man nodded and walked over to it.

They took seats opposite each other. Hawkes turned his seat around and sat backwards on it, so that his chin was resting on the seat’s back. Two of the divers were the same ones he had seen when he first entered—one sported an impressive beard that was still dripping, the other had a crooked nose that made his face look lopsided. The third had been replaced by a shivering man fresh from the lake. “Do you mind if we warm up with you fellas?” Hawkes asked the men. He took their grunts and nods as a yes. In his note, he wrote, *I didn’t recognize any of them then, not a one. Perfect strangers. It wasn’t until later that I realized that I had seen all of them dozens of times before.*

“So what’s your name, friend?” Hawkes asked the old man.

“I’m not your friend, and it’s Gerald.”

The name rung a bell, but Hawkes couldn’t place it. “Gerald. Maybe we’ll be friends before the end of the night. What brings you out here? Wanted to come see what was happening?”

“No,” Gerald said as he rubbed his arms. “I was here when it happened. Saw everything.”

“So... you were watching the kids?”

“Not in the way I feel you implying, but yes. Somebody had to be. Didn’t see an adult among them. I saw it coming, could feel it in my bones. Tried warning people that it would happen tonight, but nobody believes the old man.”

“Like you had any idea,” the bearded diver scoffed.

Another of the divers, the dripping one said, “N-N-Nobody could have s-seen this coming. Th-They said the ice was safe.”

Waving his hand, Hawkes said to Gerald, “Okay. So you were watching them for their protection. From your little rant earlier, you said you saw something... grab them?”

The divers sneered at this. “That’s a crock if I’ve ever heard one,” the diver with the crooked nose said. “Cold water and dead kids. That’s all that’s down there.”

“And how many of those dead kids have you found? Hmm?” Gerald asked them.

Shooting up from his seat, the dripping man said, “I’d like to s-see you dive in there, old man.”

“Three years ago, I did. I think you did as well,” Gerald said as he glared up at the man.

And then Hawkes remembered where he heard the name. Gerald Guyett. Hawkes had just gotten back from the graduation at the academy in Spokane. A man and his kid had gone out fishing in their boat, and only the man returned. For the life of him, Hawkes didn’t know how he could have forgotten. He was usually good at recalling details. It was coming back to him now, like a flood.

Leaning back, suddenly weary of the man in front of him, Hawkes said, “Your son drowned... I was one of the first responders.”

Gerald’s eyes grew brighter as he nodded. “You were, officer. You absolutely were. Didn't remember that, did you?”

All of the words that came to mind didn't seem right. What could he say? *Oh, I remember now. Must have slipped my mind. It was a small thing, you know? Just one of those things you forget.* Hawkes simply nodded.

The dripping man seemed to have come to his own realization as he slowly sat back in his seat. “That d-doesn't make any damn sense,” he said quietly.

After giving a hollow sort of laugh, Gerald said, “This town has a way of moving on when it comes to this lake. We remember Todd well enough, how his cat shot him in the ass, but you, diver, can't remember ever rescuing anything more than cats and dogs that went overboard. It’s that thing, that ungodly thing, down there. It preys on us, then makes us forget it ever existed—if you’re lucky.”

A new diver walked in from under the tent flap and sat beside the newly horrified fellows. Scanning the group's faces, he said, "Now, I don't think I've ever seen a more forlorn group of folks."

"Any luck out there?" the old man asked as the new diver wrapped himself tightly with blankets.

"Nah. Ain't no luck no more. Don't need it. I'm just hoping this whole foolishness ends soon so people can get on with their lives, and I can get warm."

Furrowing his brow, Officer Hawkes asked, "What do you mean 'foolishness'? There's still bodies down there. The parents deserve some closure."

The diver undid his boot and dumped them out onto the gravel floor before sticking his feet near the heater and saying, "There ain't no bodies. I'm tellin' you now: if there were anybody down there, we would'a found them by now. Trick of the mind is all it was. Them kids are around, probably got themselves lost in town. We never should'a come out here."

An uneasy feeling settled over the group. Looking back at the open tent flap, Hawkes could see Sheriff Larson yawning and checking his watch, his demeanor seemingly back to normal. Hawkes stood from his chair and traveled to the opposite side of the tent, where he had come in at. Opening the flap, he saw the impossible. There was nobody. All of the parents were gone. The little girl with the missing brother was nowhere to be seen. *They had all moved on*, Hawkes wrote in his note. *Like their goldfish had just gone down the toilet. But it wasn't a goldfish, it was their children and siblings.*

"And now you know," Gerald said in a sad voice as he put a hand on the officer's shoulder. "I'm sorry for that. I had to tell somebody. Thought it might put me at ease some."

Shaking his head, Hawkes said, "This isn't happening. There's no way this is real."

"It's one thing to listen to an old man talk crazy, it's a whole 'nother thing to see it."

His head was swimming. Stumbling out of the tent, he looked all around him. No bystanders were in sight. The officers were picking up their cones and bundling up the tape; some were talking about the football game the day before. He had to sit—his legs were rubber under him. Collapsing on the embankment, he covered his mouth to keep from screaming. Gerald followed and sat beside him.

After taking a few deep breaths, Officer Hawkes said, "What can we do? How do we stop it?"

"We both know the answer to that." *Not a thing.*

Hawkes shook and stared up at the sky. The night was full of bright stars and a huge moon. All of which seemed menacing now. He shot his view back down, to the

lake, but that seemed even more insidious. All of the bad things in the world seemed to stem from the chasm in that instant.

“Hawkes!” Sheriff Larson said as he exited from the tent. “I’m headed home. I advise you do the same.”

That night, Melanie woke to the sound of a blood-curdling scream emanating from her husband. She yelled his name, shook him, then finally slapped him before he woke with a start. When questioned, he stated that he couldn’t remember what the dream had been about. But his wife knew him, and she knew he never forgot his dreams.

Soon the incident slipped from her mind and their lives continued, though she noted that he always seemed a bit more irritable and tired than she remembered the man she had married being. She once tried to reassure him that it was just a prankster that broke the ice, but he seemed more distressed by this than anything.

Then, finally, on the first day of August, the neighbors of the Hawkes’ residence were startled by the sound of a single, loud *BANG!*. Coming out of their homes, they stood on their porches and shot each other questioning looks.

“You hear that?” Old Lady Porter shouted across the street to the Thompsons.

“Sure did!” Mrs. Thompson said. “Sounded like a gunshot!”

As the entire town would later discover—and then forget—, it was in fact the blast of a shotgun. Sheriff Larson had been the unfortunate first responder. He was met with the grizzly sight of Hawkes in his garage with a carefully written note beside him, the ending of which read:

Gerald took his own life about month ago now. Witnesses say he stood on the shore and cursed the freezing water with a shaking fist before removing his boots and wading in. He was found face-down by a more able-bodied man who had swam out to rescue him. When he was laid out on the shore, witnesses were beholden to a sight so terrible that one of them lost their lunch. Where his eyes should have been were two empty, dark red sockets. His mouth had been frozen into a permanent scream. They say he lost his will to live after his son moved so far away, but I know better. That old man had meant to thrash that thing in the depths. Instead, it made sure he was just as scared as his son had been in his final moments. I won’t go out like that, but I must go out.

Gerald was crazed, but that was not his fault. You see, just as easily as that thing in the lake can make you forget its existence, it can also make you never forget. It is not malice that causes it to pervert our thoughts, it is mercy. I have seen beyond its illusion, I have angered it. It has fully thrown back the curtain and revealed itself to me in visions and nightmares, likely the same ones that haunted Gerald. There are no words to describe it. Recalling my dreams produces only a monstrous silhouette

surrounded by distorted moonlight. Now I'm seeing it in everything. Even the graphite on this paper seems to be mocking its shape. Worse still, it is WHISPERING to me, begging me to swim out to it, to get the answers I want. I must end this madness.

This thing—this wretched abomination—lies in the shadows of the Ogaden Mountains, in the darkest depths of Skemmult Lake, waiting for any unfortunate thing to tread on its grave. Perhaps if it is known, it can be stopped. Deep down, I know that is why Gerald told me of it. I will not be the one to end it, however, for it is too late for me. I love you mother, I love you father, and I love you, Melanie. May there be some mercy left in the world for you all, and may that thing never realize the fullness of our futility.