

The Last Splash

An ignored janitor embarks on the final day of his career at the local waterpark and surprises everyone with a feat of unimaginable skill.

“The sign’s grown breasts again, Robie,” a buttery female voice sang out through the door in the men’s restroom. “Mr. Matthews wants you out there soon as you’re done here, ‘kay?”

Robie grunted.

“Thanks, hon,” he heard the voice trail away.

It sounded like a question but it was not. They never asked. They only told. Robie grunted again, his arm up to its elbow in toilet water. His fingers finally caught what they were searching for: a plastic blue juice box in the shape of a dolphin. Some runt always thought he could flush it back to sea. He tossed the blue mammal into a rusted metal trash can and shuffled out the door to his next chore.

Barnacle Bob’s Family Waterpark, or Barnacle Boob’s as the sign currently indicated, was an hour from opening for the last day of its 30th season. Robert “Robie” Jeffcoat had been the man-of-all-trades for every single one of those summers and today would be *his* last day as puke mopper, pipe welder, toilet plunger, sign painter, door mat. He hadn’t told anyone about this decision, and as he slapped on a hundredth layer of paint to give Barnacle Bob his waterpark back, he grunted a chuckle to himself in anticipation of his surprise retirement speech.

“When you finish here, I need you settin’ up the bleachers at the Flue Lagoon.”

It was Beau Matthews, the boss’s youngest son and acting manager for the past few summers. He was doing his obligatory time in the family business, learning how to exert power over people working hard to make a simple living in the seat of Alcorn County, Mississippi...not just biding time before moving an hour and a half out of town and state to grad school, a future wife and two perfect children in Memphis.

The sun was heating up as Robie dragged the final bleacher into place along the side of

the lagoon, a glorified deep pool. Some lifeguards wrangled a banner onto the pirate ship facade along the adjacent side of the pool. A plank, actually a rickety old diving board that Robie had fixed a dozen times, jutted out from the ship. This was where the Corinth Cannonball Contest would be held this afternoon. This was where Robie would end his career, a life spent shuffling around a cesspool of a waterpark unnoticed and unwanted except to fix other people's messes.

The park filled up rapidly and Robie kept busy tending to several calls throughout the day: another clogged toilet (this time a mermaid juice box in the ladies' restroom), a low pressure problem with the water guns at the Confederate Shoot-Out and a shattered Jim Beam bottle some shmuck had snuck in. And then the upchuck the same shmuck lost as he was escorted out the park by the head lifeguard. At 3:45, the buttery voice from the restroom crackled over the intercom:

Hey y'all! Why don'tcha make your way over to Barnacle Bob's pirate ship for the annual Corinth Cannonball Contest!

Robie followed the crowd of sunburns and popsicle drips to the big pool. The bleachers, aka 'The Splash Zone,' filled slowly as people spread their towels over the hot metal seats to protect their bathing suited behinds.

A local grocery store owner, the county's reigning Miss Battle of Farmington and the boss himself, Victor Matthews, settled themselves in three judges' chairs in front of the splash zone. Competitors of all sizes lined up beside the pirate ship. Robie shuffled towards the end of the line, not quite in it but close enough to hear the participants' excited mini-conversations. They chatted about body positioning, diving board strategy, water projectile predictions and the weather. He expected no one to notice the old geyser in oil-splattered, patched-up overalls and

they didn't.

The kiddie competition concluded with only one minor injury when a 12-year-old boy landed flat on his back to a big "oooooh" from the audience. All the women landed daintily with cute splashes or feigned fright on the end of the board while the men made big shows of bravado. They flexed their flabby arms or jiggled their big bellies to the raucous crowd and laughing judges before sprinting off the plank. The splash zone loved it and many 10's were granted.

The line dwindled and Robie's stomach fluttered with excitement as he shuffled closer to the ship's ladder. In the months leading up to this day, he imagined everything he'd say to all the people at Barnacle Bob's Family Waterpark. Ruminations, well-wishes, stern warnings and mildly funny anecdotes: the usual retirement speech affair.

Now there was only one person in front of him, a skinny stringbean of a teen who looked like he wouldn't even be able to pull himself up the tall ladder. The boy's splash earned boo's. Robie reached his right arm out shakily at the same time a hand grabbed his left elbow.

"What do you think you're doing, Robie? A competitor got a nosebleed and we need the sidewalk hosed down." Beau Matthews.

Robie grunted him off and stepped up.

"Robie!"

The old man finished his climb.

"Are you crazy?" the manager shouted from somewhere far away.

He looked out across the waterpark and the splash zone. All the words in his head swam away with the little blue dolphins, so he proceeded down the plank instead.

Robie bounced and then soared through the air, clutching his overalls to keep correct

cannonball form.

When he hit the water, the sound of his impact cracked like lightning. He thought he'd float down slowly, but he was surprised to hit the bottom hard, jarring his tail bone. He pushed up only to discover that he was standing in only two feet of water. He looked up from the bottom of the deep end to find every single person at Barnacle Bob's Family Waterpark staring down at him in silence, completely and inexplicably drenched.