

THE DARK TOME
SEASON 1, EPISODE 3

Featuring "BREATHE MY NAME"
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Draft 1

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MUSIC - Theme of THE DARK TOME, eerie, sense of mystery, wonder...

EXT. ALLEY OUTSIDE CASSIE'S HOUSE

We pick up with Cassie coming home sometime after the big dance party at end of Ep 4...

CASSIE
(humming tune to herself -
drum/bass beat, tired but also
jazzed up)

FX - Cassie grabs ladder, starts climbing up

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Annnd the window, just like I left
it.

FX - window creaks open. Cassie climbs in.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(effort) Eeyyyyyyrrrrk

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(narrating) It was probably close
to 3 am now, or after. I'd last
visited the Dark Tome and had some
kind of rite of passage. And to say
that when I got back, I rocked my
high school prom, would be quite
the understatement. I don't know
what all my class mates will think
of me, when we're back to the world
of the normal, back to classes, but
when I was on the dance floor, none
of that mattered. I was brought
back to some ancient bacchanal, the
music flowed around me, into me,
and out through my body, and it was
amazing. But now. Now it was the
early morning.

Man and woman laughing in the next room, drunk.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
(in scene) Oh crap. It's mom, and
Mark, I just have to - whoa -

Cassie loses her footing, knocks over a lamp.

FX - Lamp smashes!

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Dammit!

MARK

(from next room)

What was that?

MOM

Oh come on, don't worry about it.

MARK

I told her to come home on time,
she's gonna regret...

MOM

Mark. Hey. Mark! Leave her alone!

FX - door bursts open

MARK

What the hell are you doing?

CASSIE

Leave me alone.

MARK

Sneaking around all night... Is
that what you want? Get knocked up
when you're a kid, just like your
mom?

MOM

Mark!

MARK

It's the truth, right! (chuckles)
You're damaged goods! Only you -
you might be something. If you
weren't going right down the same
path...

Mark approaches

CASSIE

Get the hell away from me!

MARK

Someone's got to leave an
impression on you, girl. Someone's
got to make you want to make
something of yourself.

CASSIE

Get. Out.

MARK

You're not so bad looking. I mean, you like the books a little too much, right? The guys aren't into that. But you could serve --

CASSIE

You make me want to just -- (CASSIE SCREAMS)

As Cassie screams, the walls of the apartment rattle and all of the glass shatters

MARK

Aaaakkk! What the hell! What the hell did you do to me!

CASSIE

I told you to leave me alone! I told you!

MOM

Cassie, what did you do? Was that a bomb? All the windows, they just exploded

MARK

Look at my face! That stupid kid of yours just stuck me... glass... in my face!

CASSIE

Don't worry about me, okay? Either of you. You don't have to worry about me ever again!

Cassie grabs a bag then splits, runs out the front door of the apartment, slams it.

FX - rushes down apartment stairs

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(upset, holding back sobs)

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(narrating) It continued to impress me, this thing about life. How quickly you could go from being at the top of the world, to back in the depths of hell.

INT. GUSSY'S BOOKSHOP, NIGHT

FX - Door opens, jingles, Cassie trots in.

GUSSY

Oh, hey, Cassie, you back so soon?
(beat, now worried) Cassie?

CASSIE

I had to get out of there. I had to
get away from him.

GUSSY

Him? Him who?

CASSIE

Mark. My mom's... I don't know what
he is. I just needed to be away
from him.

GUSSY

Well, come take a seat Cassie,
you're safe here.

Cassie strides over, plops into a chair.

GUSSY (CONT'D)

I mean, relatively speaking. I'm
not so sure about this Book
sometimes.

CASSIE

I'm going to go crash in the
basement like I used to, okay?

GUSSY

You used to... when?

CASSIE

When you were in the hospital. And
a few other times you weren't
around. When I needed somewhere to
go.

GUSSY

Sure, um. I'll guess I'll turn in
too. My apartment's upstairs, you
need anything.

CASSIE

I'll let you know. Thanks.

GUSSY

Alright. See you tomorrow, I reckon.

CASSIE

I think so.

FX - Gussy gets up, closes door.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(silently fumes for a moment, then)
SHIT!

Cassie collects herself.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

(starting to cry) What would he have done to me... If I didn't... Hey. (wipes back tears) What the hell do you want with me, Book... The symbol on your cover has changed. Now it's some sort of monster. Like... A crocodile. Or maybe a dragon? But no... There's gills on it, or something.

And here, it's Mr. Gussy's note. The invitation for the party. No... That's not right either. It's got a letterhead on it. "Gracetown Preparatory School, Gracetown Florida. The new English instructor at Gracetown Prep was chosen with the greatest care, highly recommended by the Board of Directors at Blake Academy in Boston, where she had an exemplary career for twelve years. No history of irregular behavior presage the summer's unthinkable events."

Well, that's promising.

FX - low humming sounds.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

The Book is feeding off of this. Look at it. "The Lake" By Tananarive Due. The pages are starting to blur, in just the way they do, folding from paper and ink into reality, bending just so...

FX - Whoosh - then, Florida outdoor ambience - swampy, etc.

EXT. HOUSE IN FLORIDA

CASSIE

Yep. Flipped again. Now I'm...
where. Gracetown, Florida, I guess?
It could be Florida. That cypress
tree is a giveaway. And the
water... Look at it...

ABBIE

It's pretty, isn't it? I sure do
love the water.

CASSIE

(startled)

Oh, hi! You must be here to tell me
a story.

ABBIE

Is that right? I suppose that's
true. I'm Abbie.

CASSIE

Hi. Cassie.

ABBIE

Hi Cassie. Well, welcome to
Gracetown.

CASSIE

Nice house.

ABBIE

Ah, well, what can I say. It didn't
look like much when I got here.
Needing some fixing up. Needed a
few things. Can you stand that
heat?

CASSIE

Uh, yeah. I guess so.

ABBIE

I'm from Boston - third generation -
Florida summer is still quite a
thing for me. And no locals ever
thought to warn me about summers in
Graceland.

CASSIE

What do you mean?

ABBIE

Oh there was the hitched eyebrow or two when I told them I planned to relocate in June to work a summer term before the start of the school year, but I assumed it was because they thought no one in their right mind would move to Florida, even Northern Florida, in the wet heat of summer.

In fairness, I would've scoffed at their stories and called it hysteria. Delusion. I suspect that's why Gracetown has learned to keep its stories to itself.

I thought I'd found my dream job here in Gracetown. A fresh start. My glasses fogged up with steam from the rain-drenched tarmac as soon as I stepped off the plane at the Tallahassee Airport. Yep, this was to be a great adventure, on the order of Ponce De Leon's storied landing at St. Augustine.

Oh, my parents and my best friend, Mark Kay, warned me not to jump into a real estate purchase until I'd worked in Gracetown for at least a year. "The whole thing's so hasty, what if the school's not a good fit" they said. "Who wants to be stuck with a house in the sticks in a depressed market." - but I fell in love with this white lakeside colonial the moment I saw it listed... and for just one-fifty! For sale by owner. I bought it after a hasty tour - too hasty, it turns out - but it's nearly three thousand square feet! Oh, Love, this is the biggest house I've ever lived in, with more room than I had furniture for. A place with potential, despite its myriad flaws. A place, I daresay, very much like me.

So the build-ik bookshelves sagged. The floorboards creaked and trembled on the back porch, sodden from summer rainfall.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

And I'd need to lay down tiles in the kitchen right away, because the mud-brown flooring put me in a bad mood the moment I fixed my morning coffee.

But (conspiratorily) there would be boys at the school. Strong and tireless boys, boys who could help me mend whatever needed fixing. In my experience, there are always willing boys.

And then there was the lake! The house was my excuse to buy my piece of the lake and the thin strip of red-brown sand that was a beach - in my mind at least - although it was much too narrow for the beach lounger I'd planted like a flag. The water looked murky where it met my little beach, the color of the soil, but in the distance I could see its heart of rich green-blue, like the ocean.

The surface bobbed with rings and bubbles from the hidden catfish and brim that occasionally leaped above the surface, damn near daring me to cast a line.

If not for the hordes of mosquitoes that feasted on my legs and whine with urgent grievances, I could have stood with my bare feet in the warm lake water for hours, the house forgotten behind me. The water's gentle lapping was the meditation my parents and Mary Kay were always prescribing for me, a soothing song.

And the isolation! A gift to be treasured. This property is bracketed by woods of thin pine, with no other homes within shouting distance. Any spies on me would need binoculars - and a reason to spy - sicne the nearest homes are far across the lake... harmless little dollhouses in the anonymous subdivision where some of my students no doubt lived.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My lake may well be as wide as the Nile, protected from any envious whispers.

That's why on my first day here, I climbed out of my tattered jeans I'd been wearing as I'd unpacked my boxes, whipped off my t-shirt, and draped my clothing neatly against the lounge's arm rails.

Imagine! I was naked in my own backyard. If any neighbors could see me, they would be scandalized already, and I had yet to commence teaching at Gracetown Prep.

I wasn't much of a swimmer - I preferred solid ground beneath my feet even when I was in the water - but with my flip-flops to protect me from unseen rocks, I felt brave enough to wade into the water, inviting its embrace above my knees, my thighs. I felt the water's gentle kiss between my legs, the massage across my belly, and, finally, the liquid cloak across my shoulders. The grade was gradual, with no sudden drop-offs to startle me, and for the first time in years, I felt safe and truly happy.

That was all Gracetown was supposed to be for me - new job, new house, new lake, new beginning. For the week before summer school began, I took to swimming behind my house daily. At dusk, safe from the mosquitoes, sinking into my sanctuary.

No one told me - not the realtor, not the elderly widow I'd only met once when we'd signed paperwork at the lawyer's office downtown, not the Gracetown Prep's cheerful headmistress. Even a random first grader at the grocery store could have told me that one must never, ever go swimming in Gracetown's lakes during the summer.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

The man-made lakes were fine, but the natural lakes that had one been swampland were to be avoided by children in particular. And women of childbearing age - which I still was, at thirty-six, if barely. And men who were prone to quick tempers or alcoholic binges.

Further, that same first-grader would say, one must never, ever swim in Gracetown's lakes in summer without clothing, when crevices and weaknesses were most exposed.

In retrospect, yes, I was foolish. But in all fairness, how could I have known?

(laughs) You know, my ex-husband accused me of irreparable timidity, criticizing me for refusing to go snorkeling or even swimming with the dolphins, never mind the scuba diving he'd loved since he was sixteen. The world was populated by water people and land people, and I was firmly attached to terra firma. Until Gracetown. And the lake.

Soon after I began my nightly wading, which gradually turned to dog-paddling and then to awkward strokes across the dark surface, I began to dream about the water.

FX - imaginative soundscape starts building here

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My dreams were far removed from my nightly dipping - which was actually somewhat timid, if I'm to be honest. In sleep, I glided effortlessly far beneath the murky surface, untroubled by the nuisance of lungs and breathing. The water was a muddy green-brown, nearly black, but spears of light from above gave me tents of vision to see floating plankton, algae, tadpoles, and squirming tiny creatures I could not name... yet knew.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My underwater dreams were a wonderland of tangled mangrove roots coated with algae, and forests of gently waving lily-pads and swamp grass. Once, I saw an alligator's checkered, pale belly above me, until the reptile hurried away, its powerful tail lashing to give it speed.

In my dream, I wasn't afraid of the alligator. I'd sensed instead (smelled instead?) That the alligator was afraid of *me*.

My dreams had never been so vivid. I woke one morning drenched from head to toe, and my heart hammered me breathless until I realized that my mattress was damp with perspiration, not swamp water. At least... I *thought* it must be perspiration. My fear felt silly, and I was blanketed by sadness as deep as I'd felt the first months after my divorce.

I was so struck by these dreams I called up Mary Kay, who kept dream diaries and took such matters far too seriously.

MARY KAY

(on phone)

You sure that water's safe? No chemicals being dumped there?

ABBIE

The water's fine. I'm not worried about the water. It's just the dreams... They're so...

MARY KAY

What's scaring you about the dreams?

ABBIE

The dreams don't scare me. It's the opposite. I'm sad to wake up. It's as if I belong there, in the water, and my bedroom is the dream.

MARY KAY

Abbie, you should call up the local Health Department - they must have a website or something. Call them up and have your water tested. You shouldn't be swimming water with weird chemicals.

ABBIE

Sure... okay... bye.

FX - Phone being hung up.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

It was then that I really felt the weight of distance from my friend. There was a time when we knew each other better than anyone, and now she had no idea of the shape and texture of my life. No one did.

Well, liberation is loneliness, isn't it, young Cassie?

CASSIE

I guess it is.

ABBIE

How old are you, anyway?

CASSIE

Sixteen.

ABBIE

Ah, sweet sixteen. The age of my students. Such lovely kids. I dressed sensibly, conservatively, for my first day at my new school. I'd driven the two miles to the school, a red-brick converted bank building in the center of downtown Graceland, before I noticed the itching between my toes.

INT. GRACELAND SCHOOL

FX - Bell Rings.

FX - High school students walking the halls.

MISTRESS

LaFleur? (looks at clipboard) Abbie
LaFleur?

ABBIE

Yes, that's me.

MISTRESS

LaFleur... That's an interesting name. Where's that from?

ABBIE

(narrating)

You ever have someone try to fool you like that? "Where's that from?" Any etymologist could have guessed it was French. What headmistress Loretta Millhouse really wanted to know was whether I had ancestry in Haiti or Martinique to explain my sun-kissed complexion and the curly brown hair I kept in a bun.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(in scene)

My grandmother married a Frenchman in Paris after World War II. LaFleur was his family name.

MISTRESS

Oh I see. Ah. Well, as I said, we're so tickled to have you with us. Only one letter in your file wasn't completely glowing...

ABBIE

(narrating)

At this, my heart went cold, and I forgot my stubborn, itching feet. I'd assumed my detractors remained silent, or they would never have offered me the job.

MISTRESS

But don't you worry: swimming upstream is an asset here. We welcome independent thinking at Gracetown Prep. That's the main reason I wanted to hire you. Between you and me, how can anyone criticize a ... creative mind?

Last words are said, leaning in, conspiratorily.

ABBIE

(narrating)

Then it was clear to me.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

The criticism must have come from Johanssen, the vice-principal at Blake who had labeled me argumentative - a bitch, Mary Kay had overheard him call her privately, though he'd never put that in writing. So what did it mean that the headmistress was confiding in me now? Was she someone who pretended to compliment you while putting you down, or was this a shared secret hidden beneath the twinkle in her aqua-green eyes?

MISTRESS

Don't go easy on this group. Every jock trying to make up a credit to stay on the roster is in your class. Let them work for it.

ABBIE

Always, Ms. Millhouse. I take creative literature very seriously.

MISTRESS

Very good. Have a lovely class.

FX - Abbie walks into the class. Boys are chattering, then shut up as she enters.

ABBIE

(narrating)

Mistress Loretta was right. Though Gracetown was Co-ed, of the 25 students in my class, only 5 were female.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(whispered, to self)

My house will get fixed right up, won't it?

CASSIE

You planned on using the kids to fix up your house?

ABBIE

I planned on teaching them first. Starting with Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure. That one always blew young minds, with its frankness and unconventionality.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

All their other instructors would
cram conformity down their throats.
I would teach rebellion.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(to class)

Okay, listen everyone, there are no
desks.

Kids murmur, puzzled. "No desks?"

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Yes, that's right, push them side.

FX - desks start getting moved around in a classroom.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Bring the chairs to a circle.
Excellent. This is a conversation,
not a lecture, do you understand?
You are going to discuss the
readings, yes, but you are also
read pages from your journals, and
share poems.

Kids react - puzzled - some excited, etc.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Some days, I'll surprise you by
playing music and you will write
whatever comes to mind. Do you
understand? This class is designed
to shake things up.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(narrating)

Oh yes, Cassie, I did intend to
break them in, alright, and during
orientation, you can bet I was
sizing them up. The girls, I
dismissed. Most were too wispy and
pampered, or far too large to be
accustomed to physical labor.

CASSIE

Would you have chosen me?

ABBIE

(appraises her) You're made of
different stuff of most girls,
Cassie. But still, the boys...
Well, they were a different matter.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Of the fifteen boys, only three were unsuitable at a glance - bird-chested and reedy, or faces riddled with acne. (disgusted sound) I could barely stand to look at them.

That left twelve to ponder. I listened carefully as they raised their hands and described their hopes and dreams, watching for the spark of maturity I needed. Five or six couldn't hold my gaze, casting their eyes shyly at their desks. No good at all.

Down to six, then. Several were basketball players, one a quarterback. Mistress Millhouse hadn't been kidding when she'd said my class was a haven for desperate athletes.

The quarterback, Derek, was dark-haired with a crater sized dimple in his chin. He sat at his desk with his body angled, leg crossed at the knee, as if the desk were already too small. He didn't say 'uhm' or pause between sentences. His future was at the tip of his tongue.

DEREK

And so when I get to University of Florida, on scholarship, then --

ABBIE

I'm sorry. How old did you say you are, Derek?

DEREK

Sixteen, m'am.

ABBIE

Ah, good. (under) A mature age.

CASSIE

What were you planning to do?

ABBIE

I could not be too careful about which students I invited to my home.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Locker-room exaggerations had grave consequences that could literally steal years from a young woman's life. I'd seen it before. Whole careers up in flames. But this Derek... He was full of possibilities. You know it's funny, I found myself playing the headmistress' game. Sizing him um, trying to guess if his jet black hair whispered Native American or Latino heritage. Throughout the ninety-minute class, my eyes came to Derek again and again.

The young man wasn't flustered. He was used to being stared at.

Yes, I'd made my mind up alright, long before the final bell. But I didn't say a word to him yet. I had plenty of time. The summer had just begun.

FX - Shower running - establish - out. Then sounds of someone getting out of the shower, etc.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Three days later, I realized my feet had stopped their terrible itching.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(in scene)

Oh, look at that... (coos, enchanted)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

No wonder they'd be itching so badly. Thin webs of pale skin had grown between each of my toes. My toes, in fact, had changed shape entirely, pulling away from each other to make room for webbing.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(in scene)

And aren't they longer than I remember? No wonder my shoes felt so tight!

ABBIE (CONT'D)

I was startled to see my feet so altered, but not alarmed.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

New job, new house, new feet. There was a logical symmetry to my new feet that superseded questions or worries. I picked up my phone to call Mary Kay.

FX - phone rings, rings, eventually woman answers

MARY KAY

Hey, Abbie? How you doing? You haven't called in a while (Beat)
Hey, Abbie? Are you there? Abbie?
Abbie?

FX - phone hangs up. Then, footsteps, slapping wet footsteps across tile floor.

ABBIE

Still naked, I went to the kitchen, when I brushed my upper arm carelessly across my ribs, new pain made me hiss. The itching had migrated. I stopped in the bright fluorescent light to peer down at my ribcage and found my skin bright red, besieged by some kind of rash.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(in scene)

Great. Life is an endless series of challenges. (breathes, raspy) The lake. I need the lake.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

I slipped out the rear kitchen door and scurried across my back yard toward the black shimmer of the water. I did not hesitate. I did not wade. I dove like an eel, swimming with an eel's ease.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(in scene)

Am I truly awake, or is this a dream?

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My eyes adjusted to the lack of light, bringing instant focus. I had never seen the true murky depths of my lake, so much like the swamp of my dreams.

Were they one and the same?

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My ribs' itching turned to a welcome massage, and I felt long slits yawn open across my skin, beneath each rib. Warm water flooded me, nursing me, my nose, throat, and mouth were a useless, distant memory. Why hadn't it ever occurred to me to breath the water before?

CASSIE

There's an alligator. It's coming -

ABBIE

It's stupid, is what it is. Too late, little lizard.

FX - thrashing of alligator under the water, then Abbie snarls toward it, grapples, gator roars and struggles

CASSIE

You bit it... It's blood is everywhere.

ABBIE

Blood, delicious blood.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(waking, in scene)

Aahhkk! Blood. Blood. Oh... Oh... Oh hell. Look at me. No blood. I can breathe, I can breathe, I can breathe... Just... air... Air...

Another dream. Of course. How could it be... anything else?

CASSIE

You still have the rash.

ABBIE

(looks down) Yes, that's right. Oh, and my feet (Looks, satisfied) thank goodness. The delightful webbing is still there. Tomorrow, I'll swing by Payless and pick up a few new pairs of shoes.

MUSIC - Transition

FX - End of transition, bell rings.

INT. SCHOOL GROUND

ABBIE

(to group)

Okay class, remember that tomorrow you are finish Part IV, and bring me 500 words on the question, how would this series of events be different if set in modern times?

Kids shuffling out of high school.

DEREK

Mrs. LaFleur.

ABBIE

Derek. It's Miss LaFleur. That was a wonderful poem you wrote. About the boy who died on the football field.

DEREK

Before he could be tested by life. (chuckles) Riley Brown almost died when I read that, didn't she?

ABBIE

That she did. How can I help you?

DEREK

I lied before. About my age.

ABBIE

Then how old are you?

DEREK

Fifteen. Til march.

ABBIE

Why would you lie about that?

DEREK

Dunno.

ABBIE

Of course you know. I heard your poem. I've seen your thoughtfulness. You wouldn't lie on the first day of school without a reason.

DEREK

Fine. I skipped second grade, so I'm a year younger than everyone in my class. I always say I'm sixteen. It wasn't special for you.

ABBIE

But you're here now. Baring your soul. Who's that for?

DEREK

Like you said, when we're in this room, we tell the truth. So here I am, telling the truth.

ABBIE

(smiling) So I'll tell you the truth too.

DEREK

Yeah?

ABBIE

I bought a big house out by the lake. Against my better judgement maybe.

DEREK

That old one on McCormack road?

ABBIE

You know it?

DEREK

Everybody knows the McCormacks. She taught Sunday school at Christ the Redeemer. Guess she moved out, huh?

ABBIE

To her sister's in... Quincy?

DEREK

Yeah, Quincy's about an hour, hour and a half, down the 10...

ABBIE

Yes, that's right, isn't it. Hm.

FX - Abbie claps her hands

ABBIE (CONT'D)

Well! An old house brings a lot of problems. The porch needs fixing. New kitchen tiles.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

I don't have the budget for a real handyman, so I'm looking for people with skills.

DEREK

My dad and I built a cabin last summer. I'm pretty good with wood. New planks and stuff. For the porch.

ABBIE

Really?

DEREK

I could help you out if... you know, you buy the supplies.

ABBIE

I can't pay much. Come take a look after school, see if you think you can help. But you know, Derek, it's easy for people to get the wrong idea if you say you're going to a teacher's house...

DEREK

Oh, I wouldn't say nothing - I mean, anything. Besides, we go fishing with Coach Reed all the time. It's not big deal around here. Not like in Boston, maybe.

ABBIE

No, you're right about that. Nothing here is like it is in Boston.

MUSIC - Mysterious

INT. HOUSE - LATER

ABBIE

And that's house Derek Voorhoven came to spend several days a week after class helping me fix my ailing house, whenever he could spare time after football practice in the last daylight. I made it clear that he couldn't expect any special treatment in class, so he would need to work hard on his atrocious spelling, but Derek was thorough and uncomplaining.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

No task seemed too big or small, and he was happy to scrub, sand, and tile in exchange for a few dollars, conversation about the assigned reading, and fishing rights to the lake, since he said the catfish favored the north side, where it was quiet.

As he'd promised, he told no one at Gracetown Prep, but one day he asked if his cousin Jack could help from time to time, and after he'd brought the stocky, freckled youth by to introduce him, I agreed. Jack was only fourteen, but he was strong, and he didn't argue. Although the boys joked together, Jack's presence never slowed Derek's progress much, so Derek and Jack became fixtures in my home well into July.

I looked forward to fixing them lemonade and white chocolate macadamia nut cookies from ready-made dough. With each passing day I knew I'd been right to leave Boston behind.

I talked to Mary Kay less and less, and I didn't tell her about the boys. Not that she would judge me, but, I wanted to hold my new life close, and share my secret only when I was ready. It would go like this.

MARY KAY

(on phone)

So I was over at your mother's the other day, and she was talking about the state Senator they're sending to Boston, can you believe that--

ABBIE

You'll never guess the clever way I got my improvements done.

MARY KAY

(confused)

You. What? On your house?

ABBIE

Two boys. From school. Paid them in cookies and a ten-spot for a day's work.

MARY KAY

(both delighted and scandalized)

And to think I pay a pool boy, and a gardener!

FX - Phone click.

ABBIE

But there were other reasons I was erecting a wall between myself and the people who knew me best.

Derek and Jack, bright as they were, weren't prone to notice small changes, or even the large ones, the changes that would have leapt out to my mother and Mark Kay - and even my distracted father.

My mother would have spotted the new size of my feet right away, of course. And the odd pallor of my face. Fishbelly pale. And the growing strength in my legs and arms that made it so easy to hand the boys boxes, heavy tools, or stacks of wooden planks.

Mary Kay would have asked about the flaky skin or the back of my neck or my sudden appetite for all things rare, or raw. Oh yes, I'd given up most red meat two years ago in an effort to remake myself after the divorce that tore my self esteem to pieces. But that summer, I stocked up on thin-cut steaks, salmon and fish I could practically eat straight from the packaging. My hunger was voracious, my mouth watering from the moment I woke, my growling stomach keeping me away at night.

I was hungriest when Derek and Jack were here, but I hid that from myself.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

My dusk swims had grown to evening swims, and some nights I lost track of time so completely that the sky was blooming pink by the time I waded from the healing waters to begin another day of wanting to swim. I resisted inviting the boys to swim with me.

That is, until the last Friday in July, with only a week left in the summer term. I lost my patience.

FX - Exterior, lazy hot day in Florida

EXT. GRACETOWN - BEHIND ABBIE'S HOUSE

ABBIE

I was especially hungry that day. Dissatisfied with my kitchen stockpile. Gracetown was suffering a record heat wave with temperatures hovering near 110 degrees, so I was sweaty and irritable by the time the boys arrived at five-thirty. And itching terribly. Unlike my feet, my gills never stopped bothering me until I was in the lake. I was so miserable, I almost asked the boys to forget about painting the refurbished back porch and come back another day.

Oh, if only I'd done that, I would have avoided the scandal.

I strode behind the porch to watch the strokes of the boys' rollers and paintbrushes as they transformed my porch from an eyesore to a snapshot of the quaint Old South. Because of the heat, both boys had taken their shirts off, their shoulders ruddy as the muscles in their sun-broiled backs flexed in the Magic Hour's furious, gasping light. They put Norman Rockwell to shame, Derek with his disciplined football player's physique, and Jack with his awkward baby fat, sprayed with endless freckles.

Boys are joking, telling 'locker room' tales

DEREK

And so she says to me, "Derek
where'd you hide my panties?"

JACK

She didn't.

DEREK

You don't believe me?

ABBIE

(approaching) Why do you come here.

They stop working.

JACK

Huh? You're paying us, right?

ABBIE

Ten dollars a day? Split from the
twenty I give Derek? I'm not paying
much.

DEREK

Got that right. I'm here for the
catfish. Can we quit in twenty
minutes? I've got my rod in the
truck. And some chicken livers I've
been saving.

ABBIE

Quite now if you want. Go on and
fish. But I'm going tswimming. Good
way to wash off a hot day.

FX - Abbie turns, starts walking across grass.

Boys comment from off

JACK

Where's she going?

DEREK

The lake, dumbass...

JACK

Whoa, look -

DEREK

Holy cow.

ABBIE

(narrating) I pulled off my t-shirt, draping it nonchalantly across my beach lounge, taking my time. I didn't turn, but I could feel the boys' eyes on my bare back. I didn't wear a bra most days. My breasts were modest, so what was the point? One more thing they tried to hold against me back in Boston. My feet curled in the sand, searching for dampness.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(calling)

It's all right if you don't have trunks. My back yard is private. There's no harm in friends taking a swim.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(narrating)

I thought I heard them breathing. Or maybe the harsh breaths were mine as my lungs prepared to give up their reign. The sun was unbearable on my bare skin. My sides burned like fire as the flaps beneath my ribs opened, swollen rose petals.

The boys didn't answer. Probably hadn't moved. I hadn't expected them to. Not at first.

One after the other I pulled my long legs out of my jeans, standing at a discreet angle to hide most of my nakedness, like the Venus de Medici. I didn't want them to see my gills. Or the rougher patches on my scaly skin. I didn't want to answer questions. Me and the boys had spent too much time talking all summer. I wondered why I'd never invited them to swim before.

FX - She jumps, sploooooosh!

FX - almost mystical underwater ambience

ABBIE (CONT'D)

The catfish parted as I dove,
diving just deep enough not to
scrape myself against the rocky
floor. Fresh fish was best. That
was another thing I learned that
summer.

FX - She pops out of the water, splashes.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(chuckles) It's delightful! Come
for a swim

JACK

(off) I don't know...

DEREK

Come on, don't be a pussy...

FX - Derek walks off the porch, starts running.

DEREK (CONT'D)

Yaaahoooo! Free as a bird!
Yeehawww!

FX - Derek rushes into the water, splashes around.

JACK

Hey Derek - man - your pants...
Look, I don't know...

DEREK

Whooooo-Hooooo! Awesome!

ABBIE

(to self)

Ooh. I'm. Hungry. Might have to go
after those catfish.

JACK

Hey... Uh.. Derek... Derek, man.
Not supposed to swim in the lake in
summer.

DEREK

That's little kids, dumb-ass.

JACK

Nobody's supposed to.

DEREK

How old are you, six? You don't want to swim - fine. Don't stand staring. You gay or something?

ABBIE

I felt invisible during their exchange. I almost told Jack he should follow his best judgement without pressure, but I dove into the silent brown water instead. Young adults had to make decisions for themselves, especially boys, or how would they learn to be men? That was what Mary Kay and I had always believed. Anyone who thought differently was just being politically correct. In ancient times, or in other cultures, a boy Jack's age would already have a wife. A child of his own.

Just look at Mary Kay. Everyone had said their marriage would never work, that he'd been too young when they met. She'd been vilified and punished, and still they survived. The memory of my friend's trial... Oh... It still broke my heart.

(sighs) Now. As the water massaged my gills, I released my thoughts and concerns about the frivolous world beyond the water. I needed to feed. That was all. I planned to leave the boys to their bickering and swim farther out, where the fish were hiding.

But then something large and pale caught my eye above me.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

(cheerily, underwater FX'ed) Jack.

ABBIE (CONT'D)

So Jack had changed his mind, and was swimming near the surface, his ample belly like a full moon, jiggling with his breaststroke.

(MORE)

ABBIE (CONT'D)

That was the first moment when I felt a surge of fear, because I finally understood what I'd been up to, waht my new body had been preparing me for. My feet betrayed me, their webs giving me speed as I propelled toward my giant meal. Water slid across my scales.

The beautiful fireball of light above the swimmer gave me pause, a reminder of a different time, another way. The tears that had stung me in my back yard tried to burn my eyes blind, because I saw how it would happen, exactly like a dream: I would claw the boy's belly open, and his scream would sound muffled and far away to my ears. Derek would come to investigate, to try and rescue him from what he would be sure was a gator, but I would overpower Derek next. My new body would even if I could not.

As I swam directly beneath the swimmer, bathed in the magical light fighting to shield him, I tried to resist the overpowering scent of a meal and remember that he was a boy. Someone's dear son. As Derek - was that the other one's name - has put it so memorably some time ago - perhaps while he was painting the porch, perhaps in one of my dreams - neither of them yet had been tested by life.

But it was summertime. In Gracetown. In the Lake.

FX - Snarling, terrifying snap of monster grabbing the boy

JACK

Eyyylllllppp!

CASSIE

No, no, no no no!!!

DEREK

Who - (confused) who the hell are you?

CASSIE
(fighting to swim) Stay away! Stay
away! It's a monster!

DEREK
Where is Abbie?

CASSIE
I don't know, she - she's not
herself. Run! Swim! Whatever! Get
out of --

DEREK
(ignoring her) Jack! Jack! Where
are you?! Shit! It's a gator, you
distracted me--

CASSIE
No, don't don't, don't --

FX - creature launches out of the water, with a horrifying
sound it grabs Derek and pulls him under

DEREK
Urrrrrkkk!

FX - thrashing and splashing

CASSIE
Oh God, Oh God... She...

FX - The water subsides. All is still for a moment.

CASSIE (CONT'D)
She is coming after me next. I've
got to get to the shore!

FX - Cassie starts frantically swimming

CASSIE (CONT'D)
Should've spent more time... at the
Y... !

CREATURE
(snarling, sworling behind her)

CASSIE
No no no no

FX - water splashes behind her - beast emerges

CREATURE
(hisses attack)

GUSSY
No you don't!

FX - whack! Gussy hits the animal with a solid whack.

CASSIE
Mr. Gussy!

GUSSY
Up here, in the canoe!

CASSIE
Canoe, how did you --

GUSSY
Get on the damn, boat, Cassie!

Cassie struggles up, while Gussy continues battling the creature

FX - paddle crunched into splinters.

GUSSY (CONT'D)
She got the paddle, OK, fire up the motor.

CASSIE
The - uh- uh -uh

GUSSY
There, pull the start. Now!

FX - motor pull start, canoe starts puttering away.

CREATURE
(mournfully howls)

CASSIE
Holy... holy...

GUSSY
This drains out into a man-made channel, we'll be out of the thing's territory in just a second.

CASSIE
Thank you, Mr. Gussy. It almost had me... How did you --

GUSSY
I was asleep upstairs. But not that soundly. I could tell something was up. Then I heard you screaming.

CASSIE

You heard me screaming. Even though I was... Here?

GUSSY

Yessah. Kind of funny to describe it, I don't think I could hear it, literally, I could just sort of sense you were in trouble. I touched the book and it caught me up with the story real fast. So I came up with something to help you out.

CASSIE

You can do that. Just invent a canoe?

GUSSY

I'm still figuring out what I can do, Cassie. Where the story ends and where... Whatever else there is, begins.

CREATURE

(howling)

GUSSY

Now, we best be leaving. You say the story's over?

CASSIE

The story's over.

FX - sonic whoosh, they flop out of the boat, pitch into the floor of the bookshop.

CASSIE (CONT'D)

Oof!

GUSSY

Unnghh!

CASSIE

(groans, sits up)

GUSSY

Don't reckon I'll be getting back to bed.

CASSIE

Sorry.

GUSSY
(ponders) Naw, it's okay. Cassie,
what's going on?

CASSIE
What, apart from me almost getting
eaten by a swamp monster?

GUSSY
Now you know that's only the
surface of the story, if you get my
drift. That monster called out to
you, Cassie. There's something else
going on.

CASSIE
It's nothing.

GUSSY
Nothing, huh? Nothing leaves those
bruises on your neck like that?

CASSIE
My, hey - my shirt was supposed to -
-

GUSSY
It's not use in hiding it. Who's
doing it.

CASSIE
It's okay. I don't want to--

GUSSY
Tell me.

CASSIE
(beat) Marc.

GUSSY
The guy you was telling me about
before.

CASSIE
That's right.

GUSSY
He ever, uh - no. You know what, I
don't want to know that. All I want
to know is, where you think that
fella is right now?

CASSIE
Why?

GUSSY

I think he needs a talking to, is all.

CASSIE

Mr. Gussy, it's like four in the morning.

GUSSY

This is the kind of thing, it cannot wait.

CASSIE

He was staying at my place. With my mom. Last I saw him.

GUSSY

Uh-huh. Well, I'll be right back. Only. I need the book.

CASSIE

You need the... Okay.

FX - she hands over the Dark Tome.

GUSSY

Try to get some shut-eye.

FX - Gussy opens the door, closes it.

INT. BEDROOM - CASSIE'S HOUSE

FX - Door opens.

MOM

(pretty hung over, drowsy)
What was that?

MARC

Your bitch daughter. Coming home. That'll show her...

MOM

Hey, Marc... Look, you be nice to her, okay? Someone from the school is gonna call...

MARC

One of those stupid liberal teachers? All politically correct I bet. Gotta give the girl a 'safe space.' They don't know what she's capable of.

MOM
(despairing) Maaa-aarcc...

MARC
Alright Cassie I've been nice to you so far but I'm not gonna have no girl sneaking out under my --

GUSSY
You must be Marc.

MARC
And who the hell are you?

GUSSY
Just a man who wants to have a little conversation with you, is all.

MARC
Get the hell out of my house. I have a pistol.

GUSSY
Do you now? Why don't you get your little toy.

MARC
My little... what is this all about?

GUSSY
Cassie told me all about what goes on here.

MARC
What? That little whore shack up with you now? Her grandfather?

GUSSY
Them's some mean words for a really nice girl. Now. There's someone I'd like for you to meet.

FX - Marc locks pistol

MARC
You're going to meet the business end of this glock in about --

GUSSY
Shoulaughathhhh Auraludoth, Mirigeth.

FX - Dark Tome starts glowing, howling, as a magical door is opened.

MARC

What the hell... is that?

GUSSY

It's a door, Marc. Why don't you go in?

MARC

I can't... I can't see!

FX - Creature snarls from deep within the evil dimension Gussy has opened up.

GUSSY

I've opened up a portal made especially for people like you, Marc. You're just a creature who likes to prey upon those weaker than you, aren't you? Well, in this world, there is a bigger beast. Much, much bigger.

MARC

(getting hysterical now) Get it...
Get it.. Away... Wayyy
aarrrgghhhh!!!

FX - portal sound grows larger, then snaps shut, and all is silent in the room.

Dark Tome hisses slightly.

GUSSY

Ayuh. Well, that should feed you a little while.

MOM

(staggering out of
bedroom)

Wh - what happened in here, where's Marc?

GUSSY

Marc went away for a while.

MUSIC - Dark Tome Theme, OUT.