

## Sitting Still

Shelby Hayes

I was sitting by the river and nothing was moving. The air smelled stagnant, like a refrigerator that hadn't been opened for a week. All the smells had blended together into one flat, yet obnoxious odor. The watery surface of the river in front of me was quiet and still, matching the trees in park behind me. There was no wind to indicate where this hot humid weather was coming from or going to, and there I was, sitting in the middle of it, vigorously searching for a summer job and looking for a direction myself. It had been my habit for weeks to spend these early summer afternoons reading the classifieds back to front and filling out job applications in a park by the river. So far, I had filled out three to be a housekeeper, five for telemarketing-type jobs, one to work at a pet shop, and too many waitressing ones to count. But in a college town, summer jobs are a hot commodity, and by the middle of June, I still had turned up nothing.

But at least by moving my job hunting "office" down to the riverbank, I could console myself with a darkening tan: the only kind of progress I'd experienced in the weeks since spring finals. For a classic type-A like myself, not having a job, a list of things to do, or some kind of general purpose to fill my days was agonizing.

This particular day had been so horribly uneventful that I was actually beginning to get jealous of my fellow river-parkateers. Even backwards-hat-no-shirt guy who I was sure was using his little dog to pick up voluptuous sunbathers seemed to be taking a break from something productive. I'm not sure if he had a job or if he considered it one to play Frisbee with "Bonehead" in front of attractive girls at the park, but in my overactive imagination, I was sure he just getting off work from a very important, resume-building internship that paid him lots of money so he could pay all his bills. My own light bill was sitting on the kitchen table at home. I had two weeks before I had to call my dad and have him transfer money into my account.

The only other activity that went on during my afternoon hours at the park was a little bit of writing in my journal. This too was going nowhere. While I was pretty sure that most people's journals were filled with profound thoughts and compelling write ups of important life moments that would some day be turned into brilliant stories, my journal was filled with thoughts that were supposed to be brilliant and a list of expensive shoes I would buy when I finally had some money. Most of the shoes on the list were available at my local department store of choice. There were the strappy pink sandals with the stiletto heel, the strappy gold sandals that laced all the way up my calf, the strappy blue sandals with turquoise stones nestled between the bands of faux blue python skin. I had tried them all on several times, and I had even had the audacity to put some of them on hold. I told Darrell, my shoe man with whom I had a very familiar relationship, that as soon as I found a job, I could allow myself to buy just one pair. He had already extended my hold date twice. He told me if I couldn't buy them by next week, he would have to put them back on the shelf. After all, a 6 was a popular size, he said.

Just as I was just ripping a page with patent leather Jimmy Choos that I would never be able to afford out of my InStyle magazine, I heard a faint yet annoying song in the distance. It was some kind of music box song that my mom hummed to me when I was a kid, but I couldn't name the tune. As it grew louder, Peppy's ice cream truck rounded the corner onto the street that ran by my spot by the river. Driving this ice-cream-mobile was a greasy haired, yellowed toothed man with an I-just-got-released-on-probation look across his face. He smoked his cigarette with one hand while he handed vanilla drumsticks to children with the other. Occasionally, he would utter profanities to his round bellied assistant who had emerged from the back of the truck and apparently wouldn't stay out of the fudge bars.

"Those damn things are two dollars a pop," I heard him yell from a distance. The fat man didn't seem to care. He looked the driver of the truck directly in the eye and took another huge bite.

To complete this odd spectacle, underneath the cotton candy-colored bubble letters that spelled out "Peppy's" on the side of the truck, was a slogan written in bright red. I couldn't make it out from where I was sitting, so got up and walked a few yards closer.

When I got within reading distance, I realized the slogan on the ice cream truck had nothing to do with frozen novelties at all. It said “Remember kids, watch for cars when crossing the street.” Great. If that man could get a job selling ice cream to kids from a truck with a wholesome safety rule on the side, how could it be that I had been turned away from almost every job I’d applied at? Surely, I had to be able to do something.

I looked around at the rest of the park. On one side of me, mothers were pushing their kids on the swings and helping them up the stairs to the slide. The park maintenance crew was hedge trimming and backing over the occasional shrub. The man who ran the carousel even gave his ostensibly simple job some purpose by giving the kids a lecture on proper carousel safety each time a new batch got on.

“Now kids, is this the right way to ride the merry-go-round?” he would say as he hung on with one arm while the rest of his body dangled off the side of the carousel horse.

“Nooooo,” they would respond in unison.

“What about this?” the man said again as he lay with his head on the revolving steel floor. And the game continued until the kids were laughing hysterically, the carousel man was limping off the merry-go-round pretending that his leg had gotten caught in the machine, and the mothers were sharing snide looks, wondering if it were really necessary for him to pretend to be an amputee. True, it was a little over the top. I wouldn’t want my kid developing a complex about limb-eating kiddie rides either, but this guy approached his job with more energy and passion than any other carousel worker I’d ever seen, and I had to commend him for that.

As I completed my scan of the general activity, I realized that even the ducks had their rightful purpose in the park. They ate bread, making the elderly people that fed it to them feel like divine humanitarians and saviors to the Iowa City mallard population; they swam in the river, providing something else for the kids to point and yell at; and they defecated on the sidewalk, giving the park maintenance squad an chance to use this ridiculous looking scraping tool that they only used for “special” situations. I asked the day before while inquiring about summer positions. Yes, the search was getting desperate, and besides, I’d already made friends with about five of the ducks. I fantasized that I could get paid for being the duck liai-

son, convincing them to give the maintenance crew a break by shitting in the grass instead of the sidewalk. This thought was clearly designed for the journal.

Just as I was packing up my classifieds section, job applications, and phone books for the day to watch any one of the trashy talk shows I'd grown addicted to, I noticed someone standing beside me. After a few moments of blatant staring, I recognized him as Jacob, one of the kids from the merry-go-round. I knew his name because every time he came to the park, his mother would yell at him to "get the heck off the merry-go-round" because they "had to get home." Usually, he would ride it about three more times before she actually had to come over and get him herself.

Though I recognized Jacob, I'd never met this kid before in my life, and I had no idea why he was standing beside me. His Scooby-Doo T shirt barely covered his belly. He had fudge bar remnants all over his mouth, down his shirt, and even on the exposed skin of his stomach. And he smelled like a foot. He was making me nervous. I waited for him to kick my papers in the river or throw up all over the blanket I'd been sitting on.

"Uh, did you lose your mom?" I asked as I finished putting my things in my bag.

"No."

"Mmmkay. Do you want a sucker?" I asked as I pulled a Dum Dum out of my bag sitting on the grass. When I got in awkward situations with children I didn't know, offering candy was my only tried and true method of communication.

He peered into my bag to check out what kinds of suckers I had. He shook his head no. Wise boy, there were only root beer ones left anyway.

"What are you doing over here?" he asked as he began to dig around in my bag making me worried that he would dump it out or steal all my loose change.

"I don't really know what I'm doing... Don't really know what I'm doing at all. Being a bum, I guess. Can we not dig in my bag maybe? Don't you think your mother is looking for you?" I was getting slightly annoyed. He didn't care.

"Where's that book you always write in?" he continued as he dug around some more and eventually retrieved it. Apparently, he'd noticed me too. As he paged through my journal, I felt uncomfortably exposed. It didn't occur to me that

he probably couldn't read.

"I wanna write something in there too. I need a pen." I couldn't believe it. This child was shameless, and he was writing in my journal of shoes and brilliant thoughts.. I didn't know what to say. I handed him a pen. I didn't want him messing up my line about the shitting ducks. When he came to a blank page he drew a huge circle with spikes on the side, an obvious daisy, according to him. Before I knew what I was doing, I was setting up camp again and trying to impress the kid with my own drawings of the ducks. He told me they looked like tennis shoes. I tried again. "Nope, still tennis shoes," he said as he took the pen and showed me how to really draw a duck, which amounted to another circle (slightly flattened) with a few more spikes on the side. After a few more artistic endeavors, Jacob's mom came and took him to the car. She thanked me for hanging on to him and keeping him from the "crazies" at the ice cream truck. I nodded politely, knowing what she meant.

It was getting late. If I didn't hurry, I would miss my talk show smattering of the day. I put my things back in my bag, smiling as I shut my journal. Kid doodles of ducks were so much better than strappy sandals anyway.

On my way back to the main road that led to my apartment, I saw an old veteran fishing in the river. Two garbage bags full of pop cans were at his feet, which would probably buy his supper, and he wore an old tattered hat with some numbers on the side. I imagined they meant something once. He was muttering to himself, as I had seen so many of them do before.

"You know they kick you out if you don't have a license," I said, half apologetically.

"Damn Nazis," he said, without taking his eyes off the pole.

"Yeah, damn Nazis is right," I said. Some more time passed, but I didn't feel like I could leave just yet. "Are the fish even moving, though? It seems so still."

He didn't answer me. His eyes were glued to the bob as it floated slowly, but like it had a destination, somewhere down the river where I couldn't see.