



Virginia Mud

By Loraine Reitman



Afternoons in southern Virginia were spent at an unnamed pond where Chase and I would go when it was hot. It was the only pond I knew of that wasn't crowded with steaming cows or flocks of geese soiling the water—probably because it was so fully hidden by bushes and trees. Chase and I spent nearly every afternoon there before cold set in (which is more time than my neighbors in Maine can imagine). So my return to Virginia found me slipping through the brambles to find my childhood.

The soil made a gentle transition to mud, then sloped beneath thick reeds to turn into black gravy. It was so hidden under delicate thorn bushes that I was splashing my sandals through water before I realized where my feet had led me. Bending down, I pulled my sandals from the watery mud, and then from my dark dripping feet. Mud sucked between my toes as I held my dress up from the water's edge. Virginia mud is like heaven under your feet.

I made my way around the edge of the pond and came to a gap in the bushes where I could walk ashore without running into more needles. The pond was twenty yards across, five deep in the middle. I pulled the combs out of my hair and placed them on a velvet moss stone next to my sandals. My dress was a toe-touching, cotton-flowered, button-down favorite, now splattered with mud. I slipped it off and laid it carefully across the bushes. My bra followed the dress; then came nylons, noticeably torn by my walk, and then my watch.

"Hurry up, Chase!" I called.

I turned and waded into the clear water, which churned up in dark clouds wherever I stood. Chase was still off in the bushes, pulling off that silly bow tie and dress shirt his father made him wear to Sunday school. The mud was billowing up through the water as I sank lower into the pond and made a few tentative strokes. I curled my feet close to my body to avoid the cold water at the bottom.

As always, the most wonderful moment of my swim was sinking my steaming head and hair beneath the surface. I listened to Chase fumbling around in the bushes as I closed my eyes and tilted back under the warm water.

My hair flared out around me as I pushed myself lower, closer to the cold water hidden beneath the surface. My scalp and skin tingled as water coursed

through my hair and over my face. My feet found gooey black mud, and I opened my eyes to the hazy underwater world, then pushed my way back to the surface. A glint of gold had caught my eye.

Even as my head broke the surface, I was pulling in air to go back down. The gleam was probably trash, I guessed, as I dove again to the bottom of the pond, this time headfirst. It could be trash. Or treasure.

The water was dark with mud now, the black mud

Chase was somewhere in the bushes, pulling off that silly bow tie and dress shirt his father made him wear to Sunday school. "Hurry up, Chase!"

from the bottom. Insects and bits of reed and grass were churned up as well, making it harder to see the golden shine. I dove down till my fingers could reach out and twist into the bottom reeds, anchoring my whole body to the floor.

Even in the murky water I could make out the thin stretch of light. I pulled myself through the reeds and icy water until my face was just inches from the treasure. The golden light was a tiny circle of metal, no bigger than a coin. I pinched it even as my lungs began to ache from holding in so long. The ring was caught in the heavy grasses, but I pulled it close enough to see the design—plain, with the initials C.L.

My feet pushed off from the bottom and launched me to the bright warm world of oxygen. Brown water dripped from my chin and nose while the water from my hair blinded me. I knew who the ring belonged to. Sucking in air, I shouted for Chase.

"Your ring, Chase! You dropped it in the pond!" Behind me, I could hear him plunging into the water by the shore.

I dove down again, finding my spot at once in the dark waters. I hadn't fully caught my breath yet, but I held my lungs tight and reached for the glint. My hand closed around the cold metal, and I began yanking. Hard. I could hear Chase in the water above me, splashing as he came toward the center of the pond. I looked up to see him, but the water above me was empty. The sun was shining through the water like so many golden pebbles. I breathed out slightly, watching the bubbles float quickly away. I had the oddest desire to breathe in.

Sliding my hands along the reeds, I slipped the ring onto my left ring finger without looking at it. I was ten. Convinced that Chase's ring belonged there, on that finger. Not on Shirley Gregory of Ohio, twelve years

later. My eyes stayed shut, my body enjoying the cool beneath the water. Somewhere above me, Chase was floating on the surface. But he was supposed to be at the bottom of the pond, with me.

My lungs didn't ache anymore. I slid back and realized that the constant draw of the surface pulling at my body had disappeared, that I could relax into the comforting black mud. The golden pebbles dripped down on me from the dark above. As the rest of the air slid out of my lungs, I leaned back, my hair twining with the grasses. My movement sent up a thick cloud of darkness to surround me. I could feel the suction of the sticky mud along my back and thighs.

Chase was swimming closer now; I could feel the water churning around me as he dove deeper. And then he was touching me, pulling my arm up to the surface. He didn't understand how comfortable it was to lie on the black bottom beneath the grasses. I opened my mouth to tell him and felt cold pond water rush into my lungs. My eyes opened, saw Chase's frantic face. He was kicking wildly, not understanding why I still clung to the reeds. He turned and stared at me, his soul in his eyes.

I turned and slipped off the ring, freeing myself from the strong grip of grasses. The golden loop dropped back into the black mist, back into the dark reeds. And Chase pulled me steadily back to the sunlight and oxygen.

I came to the surface with lungs thick and watery, convulsing. My throat choked for air, my chest burned for oxygen. I kicked wildly in the center of the pond to hold myself above the water. And when my vision cleared and I could breathe well enough to pull myself to one side, I couldn't help noticing that Chase was already gone.

As the rest of the air slid out of my mouth, I leaned back, my hair twining with the grasses.

I walked out of the pond, covered in mud and debris. I had forgotten about certain nasty realities. Like bugs. And slime. And how itchy mud gets when it dries. I was still dripping as I pulled on my watch and bra, left the nylons that a fat black spider was now inhabiting, and stepped into the dress. I buttoned it up, refastened my hair, snapped on my sandals and turned back to make my way to my brother's house. Perhaps I'd give my condolences one last time to Shirley. But I was ready to go home. ★