

Excerpt from:

STAR LAKE

by Lee MacDougall

Our main activity during the hot days of summer was swimming. Star Lake wasn't very big, but it was spring fed, so the water was always cold. We'd stay in as long as we could, then stand shivering on the dock until the sun warmed us up, then back in we'd go. I couldn't really swim yet, so I spent my time either standing in the water up to my armpits, jumping as the waves rolled in, or holding my breath and doing what I called the submarine, a kind of underwater thing with my arms at my sides and my feet kicking frantically. There were a couple of old rotting scuba masks that we would spend hours using, paddling around marveling at whatever we could find along the shore. When they filled with water, we'd stand up gasping, tilt our heads back to drain them, and dive back under.

One afternoon Billy and I were down by the lake, with my father a few feet away, asleep in a lawn chair. Mother was cleaning up after lunch, and my sister was either putting lemon juice in her hair to lighten it, or lathering herself with baby oil to deepen her tan. I was looking for a good mask, and at the bottom of the box I found an old green flipper. There was only one, but I thought it would help me as I submarined along the shore. It was too big for me, so I spent a while trying to tighten the frayed strap around my small foot. As soon as I started to swim with it, I was amazed at how fast I was able to move. We had seen Jacques Cousteau documentaries on television, and suddenly I was part of the team, exploring the rugged coast of some tropical isle.

Having never worn a flipper before I didn't realize that the one-sided propulsion would force me in a large circle. As I motored along, I was too excited by my new speed to realize that I was making a slow turn to the left. I noticed the rocks and sticks getting further away as I moved over them, but when I couldn't see anything below me, it didn't occur to me that I might be in deep water. Thinking I saw the shadow of a fish, I stood up to tell my brother. I was surprised when I surfaced to find myself out past the end of the dock. I saw him shivering, with a towel wrapped around him. The flipper was heavy, and as soon as I tried to stand up it slipped from my foot and sank to the bottom. I tried to reach for the sand and rocks below me. I looked at my brother through my half-filled mask, and it was only then that I realized I was over my head. I tried to keep myself above the surface, but I didn't know how. I swallowed water, or inhaled some in my panic. I felt myself going under. Because I still had the mask on, I could see the sunlight streaming through the murky water before me. I fought my way toward the sky, and managed to make it up to gasp and cough one short breath. Billy stood, watching me. He knew what was happening, but was frozen in fear.