

The Locked Waterfall



An old woman watches as a waterfall flows down its rocky edge. She yearns to touch the water...to feel it wet the tips of her fingers once again. But a wooden fence constructed by the modern world keeps her away from the place she used to go.

The swift autumn breeze chills her body but she cannot leave. Bittersweet memories swirl around in her head. It would be nice to let the memories go like everyone else, but the wrinkled woman

knows that she can't let the waterfall get lost in a world where it has become too risky to swim in the water -- too dangerous to be free.

As a young woman, the waterfall was still a place to have fun. But most of the people who used to play in the falls had moved on. One by one they stopped coming. She knows why: it was rules and regulations of the modern world. People were sent to place the thing that would make playing at the waterfall nothing but a memory: a fence and a warning sign that told all visitors to not go any further. The fence drove the people away.

She finds it funny how some words on a sign can stop everything that used to happen...how words can do so much. Yet the words do nothing for her. Yes, she had tried to make them tear out the fence and unearth the sign, but nobody would listen. The wood keeping her from the waterfall she once enjoyed was just as stubborn as the people who put it there.

She looks toward the sign resting by the edge of the watering hole. The sign and the fence stop visitors from getting even close to the falls. She sighs and decides to focus on happier memories. She pulls an old black and white photograph from her pocket. It's worn and ripped at the edges, but the image is still the same. It shows children of many different ages playing in the falls. She spots a little girl wading into the watering hole. Her hair is messy. Her dress wet. A toothy smile lights up her face! She smiles at her younger self. But the smile soon fades as she looks back at the old waterfall.

She remembers that day...a day from a time with less fear. There was little fear of injuries, lawsuits, accidents, and everything else that drives a person to lock up a waterfall. That day laughter

echoed throughout the land, kids splashed into the watering hole, and friendships that would last forever were formed.

Now, joy didn't radiate from children splashing each other and shouting words from games long forgotten. The kids of today don't know what happened there, and may never know what will. The prior generation loved the falls, but even they could not stop what would happen there.

No matter how much kids loved the waterfall, fear can consume a person. And that's exactly what it did. There were too many doubts. "What if we let kids play there and they get hurt?" "What if their parents sue us?" In a way, people didn't build the wooden fence -- *fear did*.

The woman looks out over the waterfall again, tears brushing against her eyelashes and resting at the brims of her eyes. There was nothing today that could measure up to the fun children had at the falls in the past. Nothing that could make a young heart overflow with joy like water overflowing a bucket.

She tries to remember more about the photograph, and in her head the little girl she used to be is back at the watering hole. Her curly blond hair in tangles, she does her best to lift up her pink dress as her body sinks into the water. Younger boys swim around and play games, while older boys try to impress the girls by diving off rocks. When her feet no longer touch the ground she begins to swim. Her dress was soaked as much as her mother would be mad, but she didn't care. No one at the waterfall cared.

The memory fades and the old woman frowns. If only she could close her eyes and pretend that the children were still there, playing and laughing. But she can't. Reality has too tight a grip on her. And so the laughter of the past is replaced by the fence of the present.

The children who played there that day would have never imagined that their kids would be tying up their bikes at a wooden fence, only able to watch the falls from afar. If anything, they thought their kids would dive from the same rocks they did and swim in the watering hole. But now they see the modern reality, and the sight is upsetting.

Why did things have to work out the way they did? Why can't the children of today play where their parents did? All the "whys" got her nowhere...only back to the reality in front of her. Nobody was going to pass over that fence, and nobody was going to swim in the water. It was a modern truth that sunk her stomach like a sack of ice. Her emotions hurt more than the strong breeze hitting her face.

As the wind slows a sense of emptiness fills her. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she spots several young children. They had come down to the stream which leads to the watering hole. And there they played, just outside of the restricted area. She watches them, and they finally notice her. She just gives a hopeful smile and a slight wave.

The children remind her of a time when the waterfall belonged to nobody. Yet, to everybody. And maybe, just maybe, that is what drives her to pull out a pen from her shirt pocket and turn over the photograph. On the back she scribbles furiously: **UNLOCK THIS WATERFALL.**