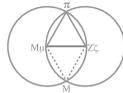


*The  
Summer of*  
**WEIRD  
HAROLD**

*Eric Walker Williams*

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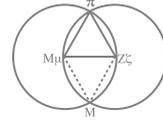


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## THE SUMMER OF WEIRD HAROLD

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# 1



*Not so far away there's a quiet little place where the sun always shines, the water stays warm all year and your neighbors want to kill you.*

This was going to be harder than I thought. I didn't want the lake to sound like the setting of a horror movie. There were no chainsaws or shapeless blobs lurking in the shallows. Wait a minute, I guess there was a chainsaw. A chainsaw, yes, but no blobs. Still, writing about everything that happened to my family over the summer was going to be nearly impossible. And the problem was nobody would believe it anyway.

Mrs. Staller was asking for a 500-word story about our summer vacations, and while most kids would write about happy trips to Mt. Rushmore or riding record-setting roller coasters, I didn't even know where to start. Where could I? There was Art's floatplane dive-bombing me and the collapse of the lookout tower and where was I supposed to squeeze in the mysterious disappearance of Jimmy Longstockings?

I guess everything went back to Grandpa Tug. He was the one who taught me to count woodies and catch crawdads with my bare hands. Grandpa Tug's Bass Lake was a secret

world where the sun felt so close it could only be tamed by the cool shade of towering Kentucky Coffee trees. It was a magical land of deep fried Twinkies, lawnmower races, and a world famous Fourth of July goat drop.

But everything changed when Grandpa left. Without him coming around, things grew so cold it felt like the whole earth had been jolted from its axis and was spiraling further and further from the warmth of the sun. For three long months my dad seemed lost in a fog, until he walked into my room one day and told me to pack up my stuff because we were going back to the lake. Almost immediately the sun came crashing through my window and filled my world again. This marked the beginning. The beginning of the Summer of Weird Harold.



Bass lake is three hours south of the city. Three hours from honking car horns, grumbling pedestrians, and El trains clacking down their tracks. I missed being at the lake so much that the three hours felt like three days.

I had my week planned out before we even got in the car. Looking for new birds in the swamp and swimming with the sunfish topped the list. I planned to fill in the gaps with a bunch of other stuff you could never do in the city.

“There’s Harold,” Mom groaned as we turned into the drive of our cottage. The Jeep’s headlights cut through thick darkness before flashing across the ghostlike figure of our neighbor. His white bucket hat glowed in the dark. Slumped down in his chair, Harold Farcus looked like a spineless scarecrow that had collapsed into a heap of blue jeans and flannel.

His throne was a plastic lawn chair missing one leg. Here Harold sat, perched like a king, giving the stink eye to all who came and went along Lake Road.

"It's after midnight, why's he still sitting in his yard?" I asked.

"He was in that exact same spot when we left two years ago honey," Dad answered, sliding the gearshift into park. "I do think he changed shirts though." We paused to stare at the shadowy figure that was our neighbor.

"He's not moving," I said.

"Weird Harold's sure one creepy dude," shuddered my twin brother Kyle.

"Quit calling him weird. One of these days you're going to say that to his face and then what?" my dad asked.

"Then he'll know we think he's weird?" Kyle answered.

"Why's he always around? I mean he's always just sitting there staring at people and stuff. Why doesn't he just go inside and go to bed like any normal person would?"

"Harold's a lot like the weather, Sweetie," Mom answered quickly. "You never know what he's going to do next and you're just left to deal with it the best you can."

Rumor had it Farcus was a millionaire, though he wore nothing but faded blue jeans, ratty hunting flannels, and the same floppy bucket hat.

"I don't care what you say, Dad. That man is weird from head to toe."

"Cool it Kayla Marie."

"Why would anyone dress like a lumberjack in July? And up here of all places?" Kyle huffed.

My brother was right, things get so hot on Bass Lake in July that even lumberjacks would laugh at anyone dressed like a lumberjack there. Besides, you would think if Weird

Harold were a millionaire, he could at least look the part. Suit and tie, top hat and cane, fancy wing tip shoes; or at the very least, he could buy a chair with four legs.

Before I could ask if the reason Harold wasn't moving was because someone had superglued him to his chair, Mom handed Dad his marching orders. "I'll take the food in and put it away. You get the bags off the roof."

"What should we do?" Kyle asked.

"You should probably just stay in the car for the next two weeks," Dad answered quickly, "That's really the safest place for you."

"Mom? Is he serious?" Kyle whined.

"Your father is going to get out and talk to Harold. When he does, you two make a run for the cottage."

"Sounds like a game plan," Dad said.

An explosion of light filled the jeep when Dad threw his door open. "Hey there Harold!" he called out, tossing a friendly wave into the night.

There was no answer. An awkward moment was filled by crickets surging from the weeds. Maybe Weird Harold was ignoring my dad, or maybe he'd spontaneously combusted leaving only his blue jeans, hat, and flannel behind. Now that would be weird.

Dad went to work untying the bags on the roof as I glanced at Kyle. We were both thinking the same thing. Instead of running for the cottage, we wanted a closer look at Harold.

Careful not to wake our older sister, Kyle crawled over Abby as if he were the son of a navy seal or ninja instead of a deputy assistant to the mayor of Chicago. It was both an athletic and smart move on his part because Mom always said Abby was about as pleasant as a bag of rattlesnakes when she

first woke up. With weird Harold lingering just outside the door, the last thing we needed was a rhumba of rattlesnakes slithering around in the Jeep.

Abby was just a teenager, but most of the time she went around acting like the queen of some far away country. A place where people only care about hair products and finding the perfect outfit to match their eyes. It was a country Kyle and I had nicknamed Hormonestan and our sister was the unquestioned queen.

In the dim light Harold's chair was empty. He'd vanished faster than Houdini. "He was just sitting right there," I whispered to Kyle. "Now he's gone."

"Maybe he's like Sue Storm or something. You know, he's still sitting there but we just can't see him."

"Sue Storm?" I repeated.

"Yeah, Fantastic Four? The Invisible Woman?"

My brother Kyle is a total movie freak, and by 'freak' I don't mean he just loves watching movies. Watching movies is totally normal, and 'totally normal' and Kyle Minnix are four words that don't share space in the same sentence very often. In this case, 'freak' means no matter the situation, Kyle always finds something from a movie to match it.

As we were busy probing the darkness for signs of life, Harold's raspy voice emerged from the shadows next to our dad, "Sorry to hear about Tug, Wally. S'pose you'll be puttin' the place up for sale at the end of the year?"

"Gonna spend some time catching a few rays, Harold. That's all," Dad explained.

My dad seemed to answer Harold's question without really giving an answer, but there was no time to overthink things. The strap he was tugging soon broke loose, causing an avalanche of bags to come crashing down around him.

Grumbling loudly, he kicked hard at a suitcase. I was pretty sure I heard the same word Kyle shouted after striking out to lose the Cook County World Series. For that my brother had gotten his mouth washed out with soap; and I mean cursing, not losing the World Series.

“Things aren’t the same up here anymore, Wally,” Harold wheezed, offering no help with the bags.

From inside the Jeep, Kyle and I watched the man’s dark figure shamble away. Dad said something about it feeling strange to be at the lake without Grandpa Tug, but there was no answer. Harold was gone.

“Dude’s like a spy,” Kyle muttered. “Here one minute, gone the next. Maybe Weird Harold’s just a cover name or something. Farcus, Harold Farcus,” he said in the deepest voice a twelve year old boy could possibly muster.

Kyle’s theory sounded completely ridiculous. Still, something about it didn’t seem all that farfetched. It was true nobody really knew what Harold did for a living. Nobody really knew where he got all his money either. And if he was a double agent, there appeared no better identity to fake than a recluse living in a ramshackle cabin on a tiny lake in the Midwest.

“I wonder if he has all the codes to our nukes? I’ll bet they’re written on the inside of that hat. Probably why he never takes it off!”

Before I could picture Harold in the war room launching nuclear warheads, or using uranium laced fishing lures to foil a Russian plot to dominate the world, a series of strange sounds emerged from behind his cottage. A loud banging. The shrill rattle of metal crashing to the ground. The unsettling shriek of a cat.

“What the heck’s that weirdo doing back there?” I asked.

“Who cares?” Abby snarled. “Just get out of the way already, you little losers!” A well placed size seven forced Kyle and I out the door.

Her royal majesty was in rare form as she blasted out of the Jeep, stormed up the cottage steps and let herself inside like she owned the place. A ‘hurricane of hormones’ Grandpa Tug would say.

“Honey?” Mom asked from the front porch, “Why’s my makeup bag running away?”

All eyes fell on mom’s little black bag which was bouncing up the drive as if it had sprung legs. “Dang you, Tricky!” Dad howled.

All eyes were locked on the makeup bag as it was busy bolting away like a frightened squirrel crossing an interstate. Tricky? Was it that same troublemaking raccoon Grandpa Tug had spent so many years trying to outsmart? Before I could train my eyes on Tricky, that rascal had disappeared, paws clattering into the night.

“They’re gettin’ big money for property up here now days, Wally,” Harold’s voice returned, folding his frail body back into his three legged chair. The man’s tone was steady and showed no concern for the fact a wild animal had just committed a serious crime, “Over on the other side of the lake they’re rippin’ out trees and puttin’ up them high priced condos.”

Building condos? On the lake? Weird Harold was finally speaking a language I understood. The far side of the lake was sacred ground, a place far too important for anyone to be building anything.

The swamp on the far side of the lake was where Grandpa Tug and I counted heron rookeries every spring. Perched high in the sycamore boughs, the last thing those

fragile little eggs needed was a jackhammer in their front yard. Weird Harold sent a shiver up my spine, but thoughts of construction on the far side of the lake had my stomach tumbling.

“How’s Jimmy doing?” Dad asked. “Been around much lately?”

“Change is inevitable, Wally. It’s what you do with it that matters,” Harold confessed, completely ignoring my dad’s question as only a man whose nickname was ‘weird’ could. “But I’ll *never* sell my cottage. They could wave a million dollar check in my face and I wouldn’t bat an eye at it.”

A million dollars? Suddenly all the things Weird Harold could buy with a million dollars flashed through my mind. Some new clothes, a hearing aid, maybe some classes on how to carry on a normal conversation. I watched Harold’s shadowy figure rise from his chair. He seemed to float like a ghost to the edge of Lake Road where he stopped to stare out across the black water.

“Red sky at night, Larry,” Harold declared. “No reason to hole up now, friend.”

Larry? My mind ran down everyone in the immediate vicinity. There was only Mom and Dad, my brother Kyle, Tricky the make-up wearing raccoon and the Queen of Hormonestan. As far as I could tell, there were no Larrys to be found anywhere.

Tiny lights from distant cottages shimmered across the lake. A moment lingered as the chirping of crickets rose and fell sharply like someone pumping an accordion. I stood waiting for Larry’s response as the sound of a fish splashed through the darkness.

An uncomfortable feeling began settling over me, so I headed for the cabin, leaving Harold and his imaginary

friend alone outside. The cottage was just as I remembered. The same wood paneling on the walls and golden hardwood floors. The same faded curtains with the same outdoor print; bears and canoes and pine trees.

Above the couch hung the wooden sign with cursive letters burnt into it that read “Welcome to the Lake” and, in the corner closest to the fireplace, a pair of waders and Grandpa’s bamboo fly rod sat waiting right where he had left them.

Grandma Minnie’s rug was still there too, as was Kyle’s grape juice stain. Grandpa Tug said if you looked at the stain just right you could see the state of Alaska, but Grandma Minnie hadn’t been amused. I could still hear her howling around the cottage about my numbskull brother ruining a rug that had been in her family for three generations. That how somewhere her own grandmother was ‘turning over in her grave’.

Grandpa Tug had been quick to point out, “It doesn’t matter if your grandmother turns over in her grave Minnie, just means she wouldn’t be able to see the stain anyway!”

Inside we went about unpacking our things. Kyle and I shared the front bedroom overlooking the lake. Abby had the larger room down the hall. Mom and Dad took Grandpa’s old room downstairs.

“Kay?” Mom called up from the kitchen. “Be a dear and get my book from the car.”

Sliding my flip flops on, I zipped downstairs and hurried out the front door. Mom’s book was waiting on the passenger seat. But when I shut the door, something else was waiting for me too. It was Weird Harold Farcus, standing so close our shadows became one.

His face glowed green under the security light of the shed. He looked like something from another planet, or

maybe a gangly man with a crooked nose and really bad teeth who'd fallen into vat of plutonium. My guess was too much time spent casting Russian fishing lures.

That's when I saw them. Small and round, like tiny black marbles, his eyes were perhaps best classified as belonging in the ferret family. "Better be careful up here sweetheart," he cautioned. "The lake can be a dangerous place." The word 'place' hissed from his mouth like a rattlesnake's warning. "I'd hate to see a little girl like you get hurt."

Tripping over my heel, I fell backwards into the gravel. Without speaking, I scrambled to my feet and raced for the cottage, leaving Harold alone in the drive. Standing in the doorway with my heart pounding, the sizzle of cicadas filled my ears. I peered out at Weird Harold one last time. He was staring across Lake Road toward the dark water.

Spotty moonlight through the coffee trees dotted his rangy figure, but the white bucket hat couldn't be missed. In thirty years of coming to the lake, Harold Farcus had never once spoken to my family. Now he was asking questions and full of advice.

Grandpa Tug told stories about strange things on the lake. Boats sinking, barefoot skiing squirrels, catfish so large they could swallow the bait, the hook, and a toddler too. And of course the Great Muskrat Scourge of '88. A time when so many of those slippery little rodent devils were lurking about that people didn't dare dip a toe in the water for fear it be nibbled off. But nothing, nothing topped Harold Farcus. He was 100% Grade A Weird.

Outside my window the moon crept over the lake. Down by the water a lonely bullfrog drummed loudly. As troubling as it was to hear someone was building condos on the lake, my mind couldn't shake Weird Harold. When I

closed my eyes, I saw the peculiar way his ferret-like eyes hid beneath that white bucket hat. I could see his rail thin frame and rattletrap cottage. I could hear his raspy voice choking out the warning, 'The lake can be a dangerous place'.

That's when I turned to the one person who'd looked after me for so long. The one person I trusted more than any on Earth. It was at that moment I asked Grandpa Tug to protect me from Weird Harold Farcus.



## About the Author

**E**ric Walker Williams is a children's writer, husband, father, and pretty good American. He wrote his first story at age eight on a manual typewriter so heavy he couldn't even pick it up.

In addition to a weekly newspaper column in *The Lebanon Reporter*, Eric's work has been featured in *Faces the Magazine*, *The Indianapolis Star*, and various online publications. Learn more about his writing at [ericwalkerwilliams.com](http://ericwalkerwilliams.com) or at [facebook.com/EricWalkerWilliams](https://facebook.com/EricWalkerWilliams).

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