

Excerpt:

my life as a
country album

LJ Evans

I'M ONLY ME WHEN I'M WITH YOU

Written by Swift/Orrall/Angelo

<http://taylorswift.com/releases>

Our parents would have skinned us alive and hung us out to dry if they'd known what we were doing. Unsupervised lake? With the teenagers there partying and whooping it up? Well, it wasn't exactly a parent's dream come true, was it?

For me, that first day at the lake was magical. The high school kids didn't hit the lake till later in the day. Maybe they were sleeping off their hang overs or making plans for that night, who knows, but they weren't there till the afternoon. And, the lake wasn't really big enough to attract serious boaters or water skiers. So, all in all, it was pretty quiet.

We were a lot further from town and our houses, but it was all good. We had your cell phone in case of emergencies, but we'd almost die before we used it and have our parents find out. We didn't want to ruin a good thing.

The lake had a warm breeze and the smell of the trees and flowers. One hundred and ten percent better than the chlorine, sun tan lotion, and hot dog stench at the pool. We measured the distance across at the short end and had our new racing grounds. We didn't have Wynn. I missed that a little. Just a little. But there was no way I wanted Wynn to know where we were and bring the flock of gagging girl geese with her. Plus, Wynn would probably say

something to her mama, and it would all be over because then my mama would know. Wynn wasn't the best secret keeper in the world back then.

We raced all day. Hardly used sunscreen. Ate lunch on the shore. And, we didn't have to fight with babies, parents, or lifeguards. It was a little piece of heaven. You beat me every single race that day, and yet I was still smiling. I told you that it was because you weren't distracted by boobs. You laughed and ruffled my hair, but didn't disagree.

We were both starving by the time we left at almost six o'clock. We'd eaten everything we'd brought with us by about one. When we were at the pool, you were constantly back and forth to the snack bar, so we'd never really gone hungry. That day you acted cranky and a little disoriented on the way home. I had to keep you from making a couple wrong turns down the dirt roads, and you growled at me like my dog, Sparky, when the cable guy came to our house.

When we got home, dinner was waiting on your table, and we scarfed it down like we hadn't eaten in a week. Soon as you had food, you perked right back up. When I made a couple wise cracks about your GPS failing you, you looked at me funny like you didn't even know what I was talking about. Even in my stupid ten-year-old brain, that seemed strange.

So, I just started packing lots of extra food. Power bars, bananas, extra sandwiches, and Gatorades. I don't think I really realized that anything serious was wrong with you. I just thought you'd been super hungry. My mama thought I was trying to save money and was all smiles. If she'd known I didn't give a rat's patootie about the money, that I just wanted to keep you from being cranky with me, she might have been a little more hesitant to send me off with such a pile.

Slowly, as the summer got hotter, the lake got busier earlier in the day. More teenagers came bringing their music and beer. Most of them left us alone because, even as middle schoolers, you and your boys seemed like kids to them. But, a few of them, Wade and Blake especially, because they were the ones who played football with you on our block, began to watch our races. And even participate. It became a new adventure. They hated being beaten by a "little" girl. But I was quick as lightning in the water. I didn't always win, but I

came close, and sometimes I did win.

Unfortunately, they also brought their girlfriends with them. That was a distraction for you again because these girls had more curves than the wanna be's at the pool had. They were also a lot more experienced, and better at flirting, and you were the god you were even at thirteen. The only good thing is that the lionesses weren't really interested in a man-cub, even though you were the god you were.

But you were interested. Or rather, your hormones were. One day, while you were particularly distracted by the music wafting from Wade's car and the teenage girls in their short, shorts and bikini tops dancing around full of alcohol, I was left alone longer than I could stand. I got angrier than a bull stabbed in its... well... that would be more boy humor. I'd gone from competing with a gaggle of geese to a group of lionesses. And, if the geese outshone me, the lionesses might as well have eaten me alive, the little grasshopper I was.

So, that day, while you were honing in on your flirtation skills, I was alone, with no kaleidoscope eyes watching me. And, I only felt alive with you or when I was in the air. So... that left me eye-balling the cliff hanging over the lake. It seemed to be a little higher than the seven and half meter board at the pool, but to me, that just added to the challenge and excitement. It would mean I'd be in the air for longer.

I left you on the beach, found my way barefooted through the trees, up the cliff side and out onto the edge. I looked down into the water and could feel the breeze on me already. It was a hot, sticky breeze, but I knew it would lift me up and away and for three seconds I'd feel as if you were watching me whether you were or not.

I closed my eyes and pictured the dive. I just wanted a forward pike with a twist. At that point, I didn't know what the move was called. I just could picture in my head what I wanted my body to do.

I pushed off the edge, and just as I felt my feet leave the ground, I heard you. That inner sense of yours had tuned in at the last minute, and you screamed, "Cami! Nooooo!"

But it was too late. I was already rotating through the air. Feeling alive and feeling the breeze. I unfolded, arms first into the water. I took my time coming up to the surface, and when I did, you had swum out to me. You grabbed my shoulders and shook me so hard

my eyeballs rattled.

“What the hell were you thinking!”

“You’re hurting me,” I said as you pushed your fingers harder into my arms and continued to shake.

“You God damn fool!”

I looked up at you feeling alive from my dive. Alive from your eyes on me. I’m sure I was all smiles. I felt right down to my bones that that it had been a damn good dive. But, you weren’t interested in critiquing my dive at all. You were all rant and no rave.

“You can’t dive here at the lake! You don’t know how low it is or what the hell is under the water. You could have broken your neck. You could be dead!”

You were raging, and your fingers were still digging into me, and I still didn’t care.

Blake swam out to join us. “She okay?”

“I’m fine!” I said with a grin the size of Texas on my face.

You were still glaring at me, and Blake noticed the whiteness of your fingers pressed into my skin. He reached out and tore your fingers from my arms.

“Dude. You’re gonna leave a mark. Let her go. She’s okay. She’s Super Girl.”

You released me, but then you brought me up against your chest and hugged me so tight. Like you had when you’d caught me flying from the treehouse ladder. Your chin rested on top of my head. This time, I definitely didn’t push you away. Instead, I let my hands wrap around you as you held onto me like you’d never let me go. And I was lost. That was the only place I could ever call home. Ever.

We stayed late at the lake that night. Wade and Blake had brought their tiny barbeque out with them and cooked burgers, and we’d even got permission to stay out with them. Well. Our parents thought we were “going to the lake with them” not “staying at the lake with them”. Paul and Craig had to go home. Gee, darn. So, it was just you and I and the rest of the teenagers.

After we’d eaten, Blake brought out his guitar and started dazzling the ladies with his country rock music, which didn’t sound too bad, but what did I know. I couldn’t carry a tune any more than I could throw a football. Anyway, the lionesses were otherwise engaged, and

you and I went over to our favorite tree. The one that looked like it was holding its arms up to the sky in a victory dance. We lay down on the grass below it. The sun went down, and the lightening bugs came out. The air smelled like summer. But all I could smell was you. The sweaty boy smell that somehow didn't disgust me at all. It smelled like grass and earth and summer and cookies.

You put your hands behind your head, and I laid my head on your inner arm. We stared at the stars as they started to sprinkle the sky almost as if the lightening bugs buzzing through the grass had been caught up in the great beyond. We were quiet for a long, long time. Finally, you broke our silence.

"You have to promise me, you won't do that again, Cami." You said it in your voice that had changed to its deep, deep ember over the summer. I knew you were serious, because you called me Cami. So, I just nodded, my heart in my throat.

"I mean it. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you." I couldn't have responded if I wanted to because at ten I didn't even begin to understand the flood of emotion those words gave to my body just beginning its own hormone overdrive.

"Let me hear you say it," you said while never looking at me, just looking at the sky as it turned from gray to midnight blue.

"I promise I won't dive off the cliff again," I said quietly. Solemnly. And you knew I was telling the truth because I never broke promises to you. And right then, I had no intention of breaking that promise. But later on, that was a different story. And I guess that story is for later.

Blake ruined the moment when he called out to us, "Come on love birds, time to pack it in."

"You're perverted, Blake," you hollered back as you pulled me to my feet. And I guess to you, at thirteen, that did seem perverted. As if you'd think twice about a ten-year-old whose boobs had barely started to form?

But, I took off so fast towards Blake that you started teasing me on the ride home in the back of his pick-up truck about having a crush on him. And sure, Blake's shaggy blonde hair and baby face was on top of a really built body, but, I wasn't interested in him. There was only one boy I'd ever be interested in. And right then, his mosaic eyes were looking at me with laughter. What more could a

girl want?

At our houses, Blake stopped long enough for you to lift me off the tailgate and holler, “Adios, Super Girl,” before tearing off the down the street. I winced as your hands touched my bruised arms from earlier, and the wince didn’t escape your notice even though I tried to play it off.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” you said with emotion in your voice.

“I’m sorry you did too,” I said back. You hugged me one more time. Just a one armed, sideways hug before letting me go and ruffling my hair. We headed to our respective porches. I stopped with my hand on the doorknob when your voice called out to me.

“Cam.”

“Yea?”

“It was a really beautiful dive.”

I was all smiles when I walked through the door because I knew that no matter what happened, you would always understand what drove me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LJ Evans lives in California's Central Valley with her husband, daughter, and the three terrors called cats. She's been writing almost as a compulsion since she was a little girl where she was both inspired and spurred on by her older sister. While she currently spends her days teaching 1st grade in a local public school, she spends her personal time as a voracious reader, binge watching original shows like *The Crown*, *Stranger Things*, and *Downton Abbey*, and traveling with her family. She is the author of several completed screenplays that have gone to the quarter and semi-finals of such contests as *The BlueCat Screenplay Competition*, *The International Screen Writing Awards*, and the *Writer's Network Screenplay & Fiction Competition*.

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