

Two-Piece

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It's the summer of my first two-piece. Before that, it was a practical mail-lot purchased at a discount store in a rundown resort town where we also bought marshmallows, bug spray, and floating devices. The two-piece comes from Emporium Capwell, a department store in the mall. I take off my underwear to try it on, despite the guidelines on the strip adhered to its crotch. It's hot pink and French cut. It makes my chest womanly with little half-moons of foam that are positioned discreetly between layers of Lycra. Sometimes they fall out in the dryer.

I am thirteen, emphasis on "teen" when asked my age. Maybe they'll hear sixteen instead. Maybe eighteen. The brown of my skin is layers deep: from lake swimming, from backyard cartwheeling, from Nicaraguan being. It smells like warm pennies and dry leaves. I am all dense eyebrows, shadow mustache, downy back. This is before waxing and tweezing. My teeth are crooked and gapped and uneven in size. My tongue is Charms Pop blue. I wear midriff shirts and expose pointless bra straps, a self-inflicted hickey on my bicep. The bottoms of my feet are black.

We go to Kidsports, my siblings and I, almost every day that summer. I hate that it's called Kidsports. Kids are lame. Sports are lame. It's at the gym where Mom takes step classes. She drops us off in the morning and picks us up in the afternoon. I don't want to go.

Scott Kidsports doesn't have a real last name or a real age. Maybe he's nineteen. Maybe he's thirty-one. His skin and hair are the same shade of scorched blond. His lips are white with zinc paste and his eyelashes are wet. Sometimes he makes us play basketball. Other times it's tennis. But we usually go down to the pool. Scott stands by the edge, at the five-foot mark, oily blue water up to his chest. We pass him with kickboards, legs frogging. Nice form, Molly, he says. Good job, Kevin.

I fall in love with him when he holds me weightless, his arm under my torso as he repositions my feet. Like scissors, he says. Keep your toes pointed. I kick clumsy and wild, my heart racing as I feel the hairs on his forearm against my stomach. I am close enough to smell his sunscreen, to see that one of his irises has a brown speck in it. I go home with a sunburn, fried pupils, one ear full and deaf with shifting water that eventually leaks warm onto my pillowcase when I lie in the dark thinking about his blemished eye.

The upside-down hearts on the worn-out knees of my jeans are for him.

Later, I lie on my back, my right arm a teepee over my eyes. My legs are bent at the knees, as if in the annual stirrups I don't yet know. I kick at a yellow jacket that has become interested in my root beer. My Walkman, whose cogs are crusted with greasy sand, plays gravelly Top 40: Roxette, Jody Watley, Lisa Lisa and Cult Jam, J. J. Fad.

My siblings shriek and leap into the lake from the pier. They take turns on the Fred Flintstone floaty thing. They practice curse words because at the lake, my gin-drunk, sun-drunk parents stop parenting. They, my siblings, are mad because I've become boring. Get in, they say. Get in! I will wait until the sun starts setting and they are back up at the cabin to get in. I will practice the moves Scott Kidsports has taught me.

I turn onto my stomach, spreading a thick magazine before me. I like the advertisements: United Colors of Benetton, Esprit de Corps. I dog-ear pages that inspire back-to-school reinvention—my own Ross-Dress-for-Less interpretation. I want tribal printed blazers and a Debbie Gibson hat. I want an armful of bangles and Lisa Bonet sunglasses. I want Coty Wild Musk and Secret for Her and little pink razors to glide along my calves.

Brian emerges from the pump shed with a Rolling Rock in one hand and an oar in the other. He wears swim trunks and chest hair. He is short and red and has a puffed abdomen. He kicks sand onto my magazine and calls me Helen Gurley Brown. He asks me if I'm reading up on how to get a boyfriend.

Brian is a friend of my mom's. He comes up to our cabin at night to drink g and t's and play Hearts. He takes us waterskiing and tubing from behind his boat. He throws us off the pier or comes up from underneath us when we are floating in the deep, and we scream. When I was seven, he saved me from a tipped canoe. He lifted me from the water and didn't mind that I kicked and cried and blew snot all over his shoulder. There is a picture of me with him and his sisters when I was only a few months old.

Helen Gurley Brown he calls me again and I have no idea what he is talking about. He wants to see the pages with the turned-down corners. He wants to know what YM stands for. Then he asks if I want a sandwich. I say yes. He tells me he has leftover tri-tip that is dynamite. I follow him up to his cabin, along the path where stickery leaves pierce the bottoms of my bare feet. The cabin is empty and dark and smells like cold coffee.

He makes me the sandwich, I think. I don't remember the sandwich. I don't ever eat a tri-tip sandwich. He sits close to me, closer than usual. He spots something on my shoulder; he touches it and wonders if it should be examined. Then he tells me he wants to kiss me. This uncle-y man I've known before I remember wants to mouth-kiss me. Sure, I say. I do not want to. I want to kiss. Not with him. I want Scott Kidsports. I want the unknown boys who dock up

at our beach for the afternoon and make use of our Ping-Pong table. I want not-Brian and I also want what this might make me.

I am afraid of what is inside his swim trunks. I am afraid he might take it too far. Take it to things gross or painful. I apologize. I make an excuse about meeting my cousin Chrissy down on the pier. Brian says something about keeping it our secret. I run, and I don't feel the pain of the stickery leaves in my feet.

I don't keep it a secret. I tell my mom as she puts hot dogs on a plate. She tells me to grab the condiments from the fridge. I tell her again and she laughs and makes a goofy face. She says that Brian is just crazy. She treats it like a joke.

Maybe it was a joke, like when Anthony asked me to go to the dance with him and then yelled psych! But I recall Brian's mouth on mine, his strange breath, the smell of his mouth on my lips that I scrubbed with dish soap after. I walk down to the beach alone after dinner to retrieve my magazines and my towel. I feel different. I feel sad. But I also feel like a grown-up.

I wonder if Scott Kidsports can tell as I breaststroke the length of the pool. Can he tell that a man has put his tongue in my mouth? That I am no longer a kid? Can he tell by the way my legs curl back in, an invisible vibration of water rippling between my thighs? I send him telepathic messages through the water. I tell him I love him. I tell him yes, I want him, too. I swim toward his submerged legs, bubbles escaping my nose, the sound of Kidsports muted. I come up for air where he stands, wrap an arm around him. I don't say anything with my mouth, but he can read my mind. I can read his, too, and it says this: I am flattered. I am thrilled. I am uncomfortable. I let go of his neck and dive under the floating lane divider to the other side, where adult-swim takes place. I am too old for Kidsports anyway.

