

The Swimming Lesson

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The student:

I'm the brother of the drowned and today is my first swimming lesson. I'm still deciding whether to jump in or not. Don't get me wrong: I'm not afraid of sinking right off the bat. (My instructor, Masha, is a student at the high school where I used to teach. She knows CPR. I asked.) I'm fifty-nine and more afraid of sneezing and pissing my swim trunks, or disappointing my granddaughter who wants me to take her to the pool on Saturdays. Problem is, I'm standing on the lip of the pool and the concrete feels the same under my feet as that sidewalk.

The instructor:

It's my last swimming lesson of the season and I was feeling pretty fuck-yeah about it until now. My student has scheduled the earliest slot, my favorite, when the deck is empty and the water sways with rings of light. I'm already in the pool, my hands star-stretched over the surface, coaxing Howard to jump in. He's an older gentleman, vaguely familiar like I've seen him before at the public library. He's standing on the NO DIVING strip, plucking up his courage. Fine by me. I'm busy thinking about tomorrow, when me and my mom drive out to the state college for move-in day.

At once I'm back in Jersey, joshing on the curb with my little brother Leon. We're cutting watermelon slices on the concrete with a knife and picking out seeds with the point. The boombox beside us blasts *The Beatles* while the neighborhood kids skin their knees on blacktop and zing their marbles into gutters. Leon teaches kindergarten and I teach high school history, and we pick out our students from the crowd. One of mine presses a Coke to his forehead; Leon points to six little legs dangling from the only tree on the block.

As he lifts a watermelon rind to his chin, Leon gets an idea. *Look at them*, he says, *all these kids know is concrete*. He decides to take his kindergarten class to the ocean—no swimming, just beach activities. It's only a forty-minute drive and he'll get approval for the trip, no problem. But day of, two of his chaperones won't show. He'll go anyway. While the kids cup the flat of their hands as visors, looking at the might of the sea, a girl will step onto the skirt of a crashed wave. When he looks up, she'll have vanished. My brother will go after her and the girl will somehow survive. How old would she be now? Seventeen? Eighteen?

I'm actually going to miss this town. I've ridiculed its smallness, but suddenly it comforts me that everybody here remembers everything: they can name when the strip mall was put up, when the gas station burned down, when those teens crashed their car on New Year's. They know exactly what time Sunday traffic backs up on the boulevard for church, and they reminisce about that heat wave, orange popsicles melting off sticks, children shrieking *ghost in the graveyard* late at night when the world had cooled at last. Some still even remember my accident, when I almost drowned—even though I don't.

I've tried to go that far back in my memory, but the earliest thing I see is my mom kneeling before me. She's pinning a dress that's too big for me. *Stay still, silly*, she says as I swish the navy skirt. She's going around the hem, folding and pinning, when I wriggle and she sticks her thumb. *Ouch*, we both say to the thread of blood. She goes to the bathroom to clean it and opens the tap, forgetting. I'm alone in the room when I hear the sound of running water and clap my hands over my ears. Mom rushes back to me now, smelling of green apples. *Hush*, she says. She takes out the pins as she holds me, her breath hot in my ear: *I'll never let you out of my sight.*

I can see Masha in front of me, cheering me to go on already. I'm thinking about that sidewalk, littered by our watermelon seeds. I'm afraid that if I jump in, I'll scrub out the image of us together—teachers, brothers, non-swimmers. Since the start, when Leon was an infant and just learning to walk and talk, he'd follow me everywhere. Sometimes I'd get irritated at his talcum stink and shout down the hallway, *Mom, he's copying me again*. She'd say, *How-ard* to scold me and then Leon would join in, repeating *how, how, how* as he crawled toward me. And that's what I hear, that sweet syllable of my brother's voice, as I suck in my gut and jump.

The water's not too cold, thank God, because my student is still standing there. I chant encouragement—*How-ard, How-ard*—as I imagine how tomorrow will go. I know Mom will insist on coming up to the dorm room with me. We'll get there early, my roommate not yet arrived. Mom will unpack the sheets and snap them in the air before pulling them across the mattress. We'll both sit there and she'll smooth a wrinkle in the sheet with her palm. And then it'll be time for her to drive back.

As Howard leaps in at last, I'm hoping she'll make good on her promise. That before she goes, she'll push back a strand of hair, crack open a window, iron out another wrinkle—anything to keep me in her sight just one second longer.

