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IN THE BLACK POND, SWIMMING

Rachel May

When the water falls across our naked bodies, we moan or shriek or sigh or stay silent—any of these things will do, because it feels so good. Water on skin. The older kids come here to make out, but we don't. We only come for the sensation. Mom says we should enjoy our bodies because one day we'll be old like her, with sore knees and an aching back. She doesn't know we come here. This is sneaking out, in the nighttime when the world is sleeping. There's a delicious feeling to night-creeping when the whole world has gone to bed.

There are six of us—me and my three best girlfriends and two boys whose names are Jacob and Rob. Last year, Rob got a leech stuck on his penis, just like happens in that movie, only in real life his mother had to pull it off, and she called our mothers to check us for them, too.

No one lives near the pond. No one at all.

Down the road, there is a Girl Scout camp where I have gone every summer but will, finally, not go this year because I am older, and a mile away is Paulina Chepeski's house. She has raven-black hair and dark eyes, and everyone says her mother is a witch.

When we swim, we splash and play and make fun of one another. Sometimes, we'll rub arms with the boys on purpose, just to get a taste of how it feels, testing. We swim all the way out to the raft in the middle of the pond, and the water is cold, and the moon shines down on us, or the stars, or sometimes, once a month when it is cloudy, nothing at all—a moonless night. It's on these last nights that we tell ghost stories.

Everyone says the ghost of the girl who drowned here lives in the trees. Her name was Dara Singh, and she lived down the street from me in the blue house and hardly ever went outside. Her father was sick once, and my mother brought them a casserole. Mom went inside the house while I waited in the car. When she came back out, she wouldn't say anything at all about

what it was like inside.

"Normal," she said. "Just like our house."

But I didn't believe it. The little girl had blue eyes that stood out against her dark skin, like she'd been marked for something special in life, like she could see differently than the rest of us with our plain old matchy-matching skin and eyes. Mom said then that she'd grow up to be a real beauty, and that her brothers were all quite handsome, that I might keep that in mind for one day down the road. "Ew," I'd said.

But three years after the little girl's father got sick and then well again, and three years after Daniella's little sister was born, the little blue-eyed girl drowned in this pond. She was only seven then, three years younger than me. They said she was on a ventilator for two weeks, and then her family decided to let her go. That's how Mom said it. "Let her go."

The boys are daring me to swim to the other side of the lake now, saying, "Betcha can't."

I look back at them, treading water. "What do you know?" I say. "I've been on swim team all spring. Wanna race?"

The boys say yeah, and off we go, across the lake, my three girlfriends waiting on the raft, cheering for me. We can scream as loud as we like here, and no one will hear; that's the beauty of it.

We swim, my head in the black water, splashing, arms pushing, fifty yards, sixty, seventy-five, and I start to run out of breath. I raise my head out of the water to see where I am. There is the shadow of trees ahead of me. Not far now, and the two boys splashing beside me, just behind. I am fast. They'll see. I put my head back into the water, and I swim, pushing hard for proof of what I can do, cold water shushing all around my body, arms skimming my hips and then pushing back, pinkies up and out of the surface, hands thumb-side down at my ears. I fall into the rhythm, breath coming easy as I turn my head every other stroke.

And then, ahead of me, underwater, I see a fish—its white underside swaying. It rises up, out of the darkness of the depths, body bending in and out, fins pedaling, eager, like a child. I follow it all the way to the shore, and when we arrive, it bellies itself out

of the water, onto the sand, and grows legs and walks into the trees, white arm waving as it disappears. I stand there, water falling away from my shoulders, rolling in great drops off my skin, and I know who it is and am not afraid, because this is not a ghost story.

I can see her blue eyes now as if it is the night our car headlights fell upon her white-shirted body, me and my mother driving home, Dara alone in that big blue house, the single yellow light glowing upstairs. That night, all I could see of her face was the divots and round, dark shadows of the hollows, the sharp-edged brightness of her cheekbones, her forehead. But I could see her eyes in my mind. It's the same now. Those blue eyes. They haunt me. She is a shadow in the trees. She is in the periphery, always on the corners of my mind, even when I think I have forgotten. To my memory, it does not matter that I hardly knew her while she was alive. She will always, always be standing, a white shape in the headlights, her blue eyes looking out at me, knowing something I do not.

The boys splash up beside me, wade to the sandy shore, stand and catch their breath, hands on their knees.

"How'd you get here so fast?" they say.

I keep watching the woods.

No one could hear them scream that day, how she must have called out as she splashed, how her brother must have called as he pulled her in to shore, her lips already blue. It was April, too cold for everyone else to swim. They took a different school bus and got off here. The driver was fired for letting them off without a note, small recompense for a family aggrieved. I wonder how it is for him now, and more, for her brother.

When she was alive, I could tell she had a secret. It was in the way she moved—her hands so full of grace they seemed to float on the air, the careful set of her lips, the guarded blue eyes, the way she would not run and laugh and play with us in the neighborhood after school (those two years she went) but walked home alone, in even, steady steps that could not have belonged to any normal six-year-old. She is playful in death, at least.

One of the boys, Rob, steps up beside me and touches my shoulder, a cold shock. He has broad shoulders, and his black hair sticks to his forehead in thick, straightened strands.

"Wake up," he says.

I do not know it, but in two weeks I will kiss him, a sweet, awkward first kiss that will charge my whole body from my heels up through my swim-strong calves, through my spine, to my shoulders and my flushed cheeks.

I turn to him in the night, our skin still shedding drops from the shimmering black pond, and I touch his face, run my fingers down his forehead, his cheeks, over his two wet lips, just because I can, just because it feels so good to touch each other in this life.