

Swim

By Jackie Shannon Hollis

The same young woman still lifeguards the evenings. She calls out, “Welcome back. Long time.” Echo on chlorine and blue. The old man who comes for his six laps every night at 6:30 is here, eighth lane. The thin blond is in the sixth. She’ll swim her laps without ever stopping and then leave without ever talking. Three other regulars are in their usual places.

Nothing has changed in here since I’ve been away, though outside everything has moved on: flowers to seed, leaves to gold and red, the grass to brown and the night air cold. The only difference in here is that where before it was light out those big windows: sun and grass and trees, now it’s my reflection that shows. Red Speedo one-piece, straight cut brown hair just below my ears, the V of my shoulders a little softer for these months away. I take the third lane, my usual. The fourth is empty.

Dive

Like I was never away, like I was never a toe-dipper. He took me past that. Told me, “You have to go in fast because it will start you off with power. Carry you on.” His hand flat on

my back, the place where muscle curves into spine. “Go.” His lips so close to my shoulder that maybe they touched, maybe. That’s what made me reach and stretch for the water. The force of that first rush. The chill maybe from that touch or from the water or the way the dive stretched me long, even my toes and fingers stretched, the water shushing and bubbling, me full-out reaching.

After that lap, at the edge, he squatted down. “You have a perfect dive.” He touched a bead of water on my arm. “You should always dive.” He stepped over and stretched out, dove into the fourth lane.

Breast Stroke

His first night at the pool, he was already in the water when I came in. Me slipping in, feet first, no splash, tucking my hair behind my ears. I started: hands forward and then wide and then in prayer, legs frogged and then wide and then together. Used the glide, face down, to move forward. Face out of the water long enough to see there’s someone new in the next lane. Someone who knows how to swim.

At first it’s just a body moving. Then a man: round muscled shoulders, dark hair shaved close, those dark eyebrows a heavy line each time he turns for breath, mouth fishing for air. Nothing really. Just a man, one lane over.

We finished at the same time. Rested at the end of the pool, goggles hanging on our necks, breath raising and lowering our chests. I pushed myself up and out of the pool. Water, trying to stay behind, rushed off me. His eyes on me the whole time, nothing hidden about it.

Butterfly

A week of nodding at each other. Five nights of saying hello and goodbye, always our eyes holding just a little longer. That place between my chest and my stomach: flutter kick and small breath. Two nights of talking in the pool after our laps, him saying he liked the force of the stroke, the way it looked violent for someone watching, but for the swimmer it was a way to use your whole body. Something you had to work at to learn. “But once you know it, there you are. Gliding and smooth. A butterfly, no matter how it looks.” And then this: “Why don’t you dive?”

One night of talking outside by our cars. Him: divorced six months. “But we’ve been apart longer than that.” Me: work. “You know, if you have your own business, you get a little lost in it.”

The next night he helps me remember how to dive. “You can’t think about it, or you’ll never go.” And later, by our cars, he asks me to coffee. “I’ll drive.” He touches a button on his key and the interior lights go on. “I’ll bring you back after.”

We never make it to coffee. We never make it out of the parking lot. Just to a dark corner. In that corner, in the car, we rush to each other, arms spread at first, then holding on. The force of the time in between that first nod and now, exploding in the way we pull at clothes. Our hair still wet, our skin still water cool but hot underneath from the swim.

Sidestroke

The way it’s not competitive, you think you could do it forever. Just switch sides now and then, though one side always feels more right than the other. We swam every night that first month. Got there at the same time and even though he was stronger, I could go just as long. And after the swim, still we could barely make it beyond his car. But we did. To his place, a new apartment not far away. Everything new, nothing of a married life. Leather couch, glass coffee

table, silver and black bar stools, that bed that held all the space in the world. King size. We used it all.

No way to know if we were hungry for food or for more of each other, or from the swim or what we did together. We stopped and ate and then had more.

Corkscrew

No reason other than to show off. Front to back, turning like that and still moving forward. But he said it was for balance, for the way your body needed to have work doled out evenly. “And it will keep it fun.” He showed me how and after I learned to keep moving straight ahead, I always did one lap like that.

At the edge of the pool, in his lane, him holding me there, the cup of my body in the cup of his, a few swimmers still swimming. Lifeguard not guarding, because we’re all grown up and there’s no one alone in the pool. Us together, so quiet, so slow, it would look like he was just holding me. Just resting. The lines that marked the lanes wavered under the water. Until I closed my eyes. Until my small cry and his deep breath were the noise we made together. Maybe covered by the splash and lap of the water. But still, there was the echo. The thin blond in the sixth lane, the old man in the eighth, kept swimming.

Immersion

Exhale and inhale twice. Completely. Push off hard. Make your body one long smooth line. Streamline. Stay under. Bring your knees to your chest, your hands to your chest. Pull them out and away, back to that smooth line. Glide. Go as far as you can on just that. Stay under. Don’t panic, don’t think about time passing.

Weeks of the world going away. All the things I watch, unwatched: sleep, food, doctor, group, work. Nights with him, in the water and out of the water.

Late in the third week, we circle swam in his lane because someone had mine and all the others were full. We swam immersed, to see who could stay under longer. I went first. He caught up. He tapped my foot to pass, but didn't. His hands ringed my ankles and let go so quick there was no sinking, no choking, no need to kick at him. But it's what could have happened.

He swam around me, went fast enough to get ahead so that we swam exactly opposite. Me up the lane, him down the lane; me down the lane, him up the lane. Each time we passed, he stopped his stroke, one hand held out to run the length of my body. Each time he passed, my body stalled and floated, mid-stroke, mid-kick, waiting to be pulled under. It's what could have happened.

Backstroke

I helped him with it, early in the fourth week. "You're not as efficient as you could be." Showed him how to do it without hurting a shoulder, the way to keep his face just above the water. How to breathe. Said, "If you do it right, it's a way to relax, but still get a workout." Held him by the round of his shoulder, shaped the cup of his hand. Hoped my touch would cover the jag in my voice, the clench in my jaw, the waves inside, the sinking. Something had changed.

That was the first night we didn't leave together. I had my blue suit on, the one with the low back, the one he liked. "It shows off your muscles." He couldn't see my back though, where I was in the water, looking up to him squatted down at the pool edge, third lane.

Him: "I need to make it an early night."

All the signs were there, the slipping, the edge so close.

I lift my goggles. Me: “Oh. Okay. I guess I’ll stay awhile longer.”

I bob up for his kiss but his lips land just above my mouth. Both of us: “Sorry.”

I push off, onto my back. Glide then float, then the legs, the arms. My eyes leave him and go to the ceiling. I do this better than him.

That night, alone, I sleep all the way through. The first time in weeks. A sleep like the clear of the pool, before that first body dives in. Just small waves from filters below. It’s why I started swimming. Because the doctor said it would help. With the sleep, with the moods.

That’s when I should have stopped him. Before he stopped me.

Crawl

The one you use most. Stroke, stroke, stroke, breath. The flutter kick no deeper than the depth of your body.

The last night. His ending. The way I might beg and how that beg would pull me under. And that old man, the thin blond woman, the young life guard, would see. That’s what takes me up, out of the pool, into my clothes, out of the building and to my car, next to his, where my key makes a long grey line in his black paint.

That’s what takes me away from the pool for long enough.

For months after that night: Sink away, go under. Just barely come up for breath.

For weeks after those months: In my car, outside his apartment. Until enough dark nights go by that I go to the window. Drapes open, apartment empty.

For days, after those weeks: Wait outside the pool in my car to make sure he’s gone.

For seconds, after I come into the pool: By the edge, waiting to dive, waiting for his touch on my back. But no. Go. Remember how to swim. Pace myself to the thin blond woman in the sixth lane who swims without ever stopping, leaves without ever talking.