

My job is a lot less glorious than the name implies. I was trained to use an automated external defibrillator, and to do cardiopulmonary resuscitation. I was trained to pull a two hundred pound person from the bottom of a twelve-foot pool and onto the deck without assistance. I was trained to make a splint and to deal with heat strokes. I was trained to recognize the difference between playing and drowning. I was trained to be a lifeguard, but I do a lot more scolding than saving. I do a lot more reprimanding than rescuing.

Today I walk down the long blue hallway through the “staff only” door onto the pool deck, where I’m attacked by the unmistakable stench of chlorine. It’s 3:24- six minutes left before Family Swim. My boss is in the pool with his three o’clock private lesson, a tiny Korean girl whose mother is fast asleep in her seat against the wall. “Hey, Dan” I call as I weave carefully around puddles on the uneven tiled floor towards the locker room. He looks over at me while holding the girl’s hands, bobbing her up and down. “Hey, Meadow,” he calls back. Dan’s shift is over after this lesson, and since I’m second-in-command, that mean’s I’m in charge tonight. As I push open the heavy double doors on the opposite side of the pool, a cool burst of air hits my face and I realize that the deck is probably eighty three or eighty four degrees today. We may not have sunshine here in the basement of the King Street Y, but we sure have heat, even in the dead of winter. Once in the locker room, I can still hear Dan’s booming voice. “Okay, Miko, let’s see some bubbles!”

I hastily open my locker and throw my towel into the dryer, so that after an hour of teaching I’ll have something warm to dry myself off with in this icebox of a locker room. I close the two parallel doors- one leading to the deck, the other to the pump room- so that I can change without anyone walking in on me. If Anna and Georgia were on duty it wouldn’t matter, but it’s all guys today aside from myself, and we’ve already had some embarrassing moments involving bathing suits and partial nudity.

I pull on my one-piece and exchange my sneakers for my beat up flip flops, rejects from the summer. I grab my shorts and my t-shirt that says *King Street YMCA* in red and orange letters on the front and yells *LIFEGUARD* on the back. I put my whistle around my neck and tie my hair up in a ponytail. It’ll get wet soon, anyway. I check the crooked clock on the wall; it’s 3:28. I lock up my crap and head back to the pump room. The cold water tap is off, and with a combination of eighty four degree water and eighty two degree air, I decide the water level is low enough to turn the tap on for an hour or two. I check the chlorine tank to make sure it’s full enough, and the chemical smell immediately stings my sinuses as soon as I open the lid. I pull on a dusty gas mask and scoop some more chlorine pellets in. It’ll save me time later, when I’m trying to close up. I hear the locker rooms doors slamming; it must be 3:30.

“Hi, everybody!” I hear Jason’s voice echo from the deck. He must have come through the back while I was changing. “Everyone needs a bathing cap!” I walk to the desk in the corner

of the pool deck and take a purple plastic binder off the shelf. I find the letter “C” for Connery and skim through the color-coded timecards. Green is for teaching, Blue is for guarding. I select the green one I started on Tuesday and fill in the date and time, then close the binder and put it back on the shelf. The noise level seems to be increasing at a constant rate. Kids and parents are scrambling around with their towels and bare feet. Some parents try to get away with leaving their shoes on by hugging the edges of the floor, but I spot them creeping along. “Sir, no shoes on the pool deck,” I say. I wait for the protest- there’s always one. *Oh, but I’m not staying*, is their usual response. “Please, no shoes. It’s for your children’s safety.” That usually shuts them up.

“Hey, Jason, where’s West?” I ask as I take off my t-shirt and search for a bathing cap in the desk drawer. Preferably one made of silicone, so I don’t have to go through the torture of ripping all my hair out with a rubber cap. I know I hid one in the back of the drawer somewhere.

“Dunno,” he says. “But Matteo is in the back. You take the Tadpoles, I’ll take the Sharks, and whenever Matteo decides to do some fucking work for once, he can clean up the equipment room.” I nod. “Oh, there’s West.” He gestures towards the staff entrance as West hurries in, pulling his headphone buds out of his ears.

“Hey guys, sorry I’m late. Meadow, you’re teaching the Tadpoles today?” I nod. “I’ll jump in as soon as I’m changed, okay?” he says as he vanishes through the locker room door. West is so incredibly hot.

“No problem,” I say while I bring my whistle to my lips, turning away from the empty space he left so I won’t stare. I blow it quickly two times. “Tadpoles!” I yell. “Everyone needs a backpack and a noodle. Meet me at the shallow end.” A mob of four-year-olds scramble to get to the opposite end of the pool. “WALK!” I shout over and over. Some of them look back at me and slow down, but others are completely oblivious. Either that or they’re purposely ignoring me. “Matteo, can you grab the backpacks and like...” I count quickly- my job has made me an expert at fast counting- “thirteen noodles?” He salutes, says “yes, sir!” and spins on his heel. The Sharks that are watching him crumble into a fit of hysterics. Apparently, he is quite the comedian.

He disappears into the equipment room and returns carrying a bouquet of noodles and kicking a big blue storage bin filled with powder blue flotation devices onto the deck. “Backpacks for everyone! Noodles for sale!” he yells, throwing noodles at kids like candy. I scope out the kids who are not exactly skilled at snapping and tightening their backpacks without pinching their skin in the process. “I can do it myself!” one particularly pale kid screeches. I think his name is Brian. Or is it Ryan? “If I let you do it yourself, this is going to slip right off of you,” I say, meaning *if I let you do it yourself, you will drown*. Before he can whine any more, I pull the strap tight just underneath his belly button. I move on to the next kid. “Hi, Middle!” says a scrawny boy

whose black curls are struggling to escape his neon green bathing cap. His name is written across it in motherly handwriting. "Hey, Xander! You ready to swim today?" He is one of many kids who call me *Middle* rather than Meadow. I guess they kind of sound the same. "Uh huh!" He flaps his arms in excitement as I snap him into his backpack and pass him an orange noodle. It matches his shorts.

I hear a splash as West jumps into the pool. He lightly touches my shoulder and I turn. He's wearing a turquoise bathing cap. Even in the dim fluorescent lighting that's reminiscent of both a jail and a hospital, his skin is smooth and tan. "Meadow," he says seriously. Droplets of water distort the tattoo on his chest. "Sorry I was late again." Honestly, it could get annoying, but when he's here he actually works. He talks to the kids. Plays with them. Teaches them. I mean, Matteo's always on time, but it's not like he does anything worthwhile; usually nothing more than eating at the desk with his feet up. "Well," I say, "you're here now. Don't worry about it." I smile and splash him. He smiles and splashes back. I turn back to the kids.

"Okay, I need everyone to line up on the side of the pool..." A hand shoots up. "Do you have a question, Jenna?"

"Sitting or standing?" She's a little overzealous.

"Good question, Jenna. Standing. We're doing some jumping today." Echoes of "yay!" reverberate off the walls- the acoustics in here are horrendous.

West wades forward in the four foot water. "Nobody jumps without either me or Meadow watching you, okay?" The kids nod vigorously. "Alright, who's first?"

So we practice jumping for five minutes. During the next five, we practice rolling in the water. A lot of the kids forget that their mouths are open when they roll from their backs to their bellies, so I do a lot of "no drinking the pool" to try and lighten the mood. When kids get scared in the water, they shrink back to the wall and start to whimper. Once they get to that point, there's usually no turning back and they spend the rest of the lesson weeping into their parents' laps, always leaving a big wet stain behind.

The next five minutes is for blowing bubbles, so they get used to having their faces in the water. With fifteen minutes to go in the lesson, West and I each take two kids at a time to the deep end and back, telling them to kick behind them rather than underneath them, and to use "rainbow arms" to pull themselves along the twenty yard pool. We do the same thing on their backs, but this takes a little extra time, as they tend to freak out a lot more when they're staring at the ceiling. I tread water underneath them and rest their heads on my shoulder. "I've got you," I say when they wobble around. "You're doing great! Almost there." One kid flips over accidentally and starts to cry when his faces gets wet. "You're okay," I say as I readjust his goggles. "You just have to remember to look up at the sky and kick as hard as you can, and everything will be fine, okay?" He nods and chews on the strap to his backpack, not caring that

there is no sky in sight, just fireproof coating that resembles dirty popcorn. “How about trying again?” I turn him over before he can say *no*. I catch West looking at me. He’s acting as tug boat for two girls who’ve run out of energy. We exchange a smile.

“Three minutes of free time, Tadpoles,” he finally calls as he looks at the clock. I take up a position on the stairs, a little higher than the kids, so I can count them and keep an eye on them. Play time is way more dangerous than a lesson. Granted, I only know that due to logic, not experience. After play time is up, I have Matteo put away the backpacks and get more noodles. Our Sea Horse class is considerably larger than the previous one, and we need another guard in the water, so Jason joins me and West. The guys are positioned in the pool; Jason in the nine foot area, West back in the shallow end. I’m up on the deck tying noodles into knots around kids’ chests, which is a lot harder than it might sound. Once they’re tied in, I pick them up by the noodle and throw them in. “Me next, me next!” squeals Lucia, a girl who is two years younger than the rest of the class but a natural in the water. “Alright, alright,” I say as I wrestle the pink flotation device into a knot. “1, 2, 3!” I throw her in. She squeals on the short trip down.

The Sea Horses practice their breaststroke kick, otherwise known as froggy kick. Some of them are successful, others are not. Some of them spend their time trying to splash me as much as they can. I just close my eyes and wait it out. I didn’t have time to remove my eyeliner before my shift, and I’m sure it’s running down my face by now. I have to remember to buy the waterproof kind.

Finally, it’s 4:30- the lessons are over. I get my towel out of the dryer, wrap myself in its warmth, and go out to the desk where Matteo is playing loud music that a parent will surely complain about. I turn it down. I fill out my blue time card for the rest of the night; it’s Friday and I’m on duty until 10:30, through Family Swim and then Adult Swim. The Sea Horses and the older Dolphins are leaving while new groups of parents and kids file in from the locker rooms. Parents approach the desk with babies in their arms, asking if their infants really need to wear bathing caps, because they *don’t have that much hair, anyway*. If the parent isn’t a dick, I tell them it’s fine. If they come off as snobby, I tell them that caps are a formality, but I make sure to offer the cloth ones for the sake of the babies’ little heads.

Family Swim is the busiest time of day for the King Street Y. We get anywhere between twenty-five and fifty swimmers, and I find myself counting every five minutes. “Help me move the lane lines over?” I ask West when he’s done filling out his timecards.

“Sure,” he says. “I’ll get the shallow end.” I bend down by the elevated guard chair and push the lever on the lane line with all my might. The middle one gets stuck all the time. Finally, it gives, and the coil of wire releases the tension, letting the rows of plastic blue and white circles weave around like a giant water moccasin. I stand up with the end of the line, and West

unhooks his end. We slowly walk it over a few feet to the next hook, opening up extra space in the pool for the influx of swimmers. Kids fill up the fresh space immediately. I sit down on the chair that lets me see the whole pool from a slightly raised angle. I count. And count again. Thirty-two both times; I make thirty-two tally marks in the log book. As I'm leaning over the book, I feel a warm hand on my back. "Counting again, Middle?" I close my eyes to try not to lose count of my tally marks.

"Why is 'Meadow' so hard for them to say?" I ask as I make the thirty-first and thirty-second marks. He laughs.

"I don't know. I guess if you say it fast, they sound alike. *Meadow. Meadull. Middle.* I can understand it." He pauses and catches a running kid by the arm. "Walk, buddy, alright?" The kid slows down just enough so that he's speed walking with his stomach pushed out in front of him.

"Oh look, walking with flippers on, ten o'clock." I point across to the shallow end.

"I'm on it," he says.

"Thank you."

He puffs up his chest, puts his hands on his hips, and nods. "Just doin' my job, ma'am," he says in his best mock-police officer voice. A smile creeps across my face and as I watch him walk down the deck I feel my cheeks heat up. I pretend it's the muggy heat. I hear West tell the boy that "if you're wearing flippers, you've gotta walk backwards."

I take my seat again atop the guard chair, and swing my whistle around my fingers, back and forth in circles. It feels natural to do this- it's not just an obnoxious thing we do because it's in the job description. Two older boys hold their heads under the cold water tap, but it's ice cold, so they can't keep them there for too long. When they start drinking the water I blow my whistle to get their attention, and when they look up, I tell them they'll throw up so much that their stomachs will turn inside out. "Cool!" they say, and swim away. I count; thirty-two. Everything is good.

I get the water testing kit off of the first aid shelf and fill up the rectangular test tubes. One with five milliliters of water, the other with ten. I pop two chalky pink tablets from separate blisters into the tubes, cap them and shake. I use the comparison scale to test the chlorine and pH levels; they're 2.0 and 7.2, respectively- good enough. I count again. Thirty-two. A mother waves as she carries her baby into the locker room. I wave back. That makes the total thirty. I look down at my legs. I'm glad that I've got some natural color, because working at an indoor pool all year is not the best way to work on a tan. I should have shaved in the shower this morning. I hear some splashes; I look up. Some boys are using their flotation bars as giant q-tips for ultimate fighting, and I'm about to blow my whistle but West is already on it. He sees me drop the whistle out of my mouth and winks.

I pull my guard shirt back on- we're supposed to wear them at all times. I count again- twenty-nine. Shit. Did anyone leave? But I'm sure no one left, because I would have felt the draught of cool air when the locker room door opened and closed. I count once more- it's easy to mess up. But still, only twenty-nine.

I stand up on the footrest and count again, this time, as carefully as I possibly can. West watches me intently. In the corner of the pool, a powder blue backpack bobs back and forth against the wall. It is still fastened. Five yards away, a little pink bathing cap starts to sink. Directly underneath it is a spot of black on the bottom. There are no bubbles.

Something rushes inside of me.

I blow my whistle three times to signal an emergency and as I jump in, I hear West yell "everyone out *now!*" I take a breath and catch a glimpse of a woman kneeling on the edge of the deck, mouth open, eyes wide- Lucia's mother. I submerge, and push my palms flat up to the surface, letting all the air in my lungs out as I descend at an angle, virtually eliminating the water pressure. It feels effortless and basic. My memory rewinds to the lessons on head injuries, but considering the blue backpack and the depth of the water, I decide that Lucia's spine hasn't been compromised. Her arms and legs are limp, swaying underwater. I can't see her face.

I skip the cautious stuff and grab her under the arms, propelling myself upwards by pushing my legs off the bottom as hard as I can, harder than I ever have before. As soon as I surface, West throws me a rescue tube, which I catch and slide under her head and shoulders. He tows us back to the edge while I try and wake her up, yelling her name. It's hard to tell who's yelling louder, me or her mother. She still isn't breathing. Jason appears on the deck, trying to keep parents and kids away from the pool's edge. He turns to look at me as I catch my breath and West pulls Lucia out of the water.

"I called 911. They're coming," Jason says as I haul myself out of the water with superhuman power. My arms feel weak but the strength is there. I nod and run to the first aid shelf. I grab a towel and a rescue mask. West is bent over her body with his index and middle fingers on her inner arm, feeling for a brachial pulse. I hear Jason yell at the crowd. "Step back! Clear the deck!"

"Can you find it?" I ask breathlessly as I grapple with the folded towel and quickly dry off Lucia's chest, in case we have to use the AED. She's wearing a tiny bikini. As I dry my hands, my thoughts move at the speed of sound, and I can't seem to control them. *I would never let a kid this age wear something so skimpy*, I think. *A bikini? She's only four.* I refocus. West presses his fingers firmly into her arm.

"Nothing," West mumbles just loud enough so I can hear him. I kneel beside her head, the tile cutting into my knees. I tip her head back to open her airway and quickly look for something she might have choked on, but there's nothing there.

“Hold her head,” I say to West, and he takes my position with the side of his left hand on her forehead and two fingertips under her chin, keeping her airway open. His hand is bigger than her face. I rip open the plastic container that holds the rescue mask and assemble it with shaking hands. I turn it upside down so that the nose piece covers her mouth, because she’s too small to use the mask properly. She’s four, but she’s tiny for her age. I press down firmly and give her two rescue breaths. West already has his hand in place on her chest; he only needs to use one. I count the compressions with him in my head and watch her torso rise and fall as if she’s breathing on her own. I will each compression to wake her up. “Stop,” I say, once West reaches thirty, and put my ear to her mouth so I can tell if she’s breathing. There’s still no life coming from her little wet body. I see Jason and another mom holding Lucia’s mother in my peripheral vision. It’s kind of funny to see all these people in bathing suits and swim caps in the face of a crisis. It almost makes me want to laugh. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

“Anything?” West asks. I quickly shake my head, then start up again with two breaths while his hand once again finds its place between her ribs. There is so much noise. There is so much noise and so much wild, terrified life to my right and there is nothing from this little girl and nothing but water to the left of me. It’s calm, unlike the people above it. It’s still; it’s glass.

“Get the AED,” I hear myself saying. My mouth seems to be moving faster than my brain.

“Right here,” says West as he unzips the packaging and unravels the wires. I dry Lucia’s chest as well as I can. We stick the pads to her chest and West says “stand clear,” just as we were taught in lifeguard training. I press the *Analyze* button on the machine and wait for what seems like an eternity. Finally, the AED’s artificial voice announces *no shock advised*, so we begin CPR again and my heart is sinking.

I suddenly hear shouting and two paramedics take Lucia away with an oxygen tank and a gurney. She is gone in an instant. The air in that tank is so much better than any air I could ever give her.

I’m still stuck there kneeling on the floor in a cold puddle of chlorinated filth when I feel two strong hands lift me up and turn me around. I look up. It’s West. “Meadow, it’s over. Are you okay?” I just cannot speak, but not for lack of trying. My arms and legs are numb; I can’t find any proof that they still exist.

I hear people behind me. “Get her a chair,” says Dan, who’s reappeared somehow. I hear a scraping noise and I’m lowered into a hard plastic seat. The pool deck is quiet now except for muffled voices. Jason starts to mop up the puddle we left on the floor. West kneels down in front of me, studying my face. Dan is talking to a woman who I recognize from the front desk.

West gently shakes me. “Hey, Meadow? Can you hear me? Huh? Can you hear me?” I manage to pull my heavy head up to look at him and nod. “Good. Good. It’s all over, Meadow.

They took her to the hospital and they'll call as soon as they know, alright?" I take a few breaths and look down at my knees. They're red, and indented with the pattern of the blue tiled floor.

"Where are my shoes?" I ask. I can't remember where I put them. This must be what it feels like to wake up from a concussion. I vaguely remember that I went to school today.

"They're in the pool, I think." West looks out into the water.

"I'll get them," Matteo says, and dives in. The sound of the splash makes my stomach drop, like I'm on a rollercoaster. West sees me wince and squeezes my hands. Matteo resurfaces with my gold flip flops in his hands. He smiles. "See? All good!" West disappears for a second and returns with a towel that he drapes over my shoulders.

The woman from the front desk comes over and asks me to tell her what happened, says I'll need to fill out an incident report. She hands me a clipboard with the paperwork on it, but my hands are still wet. "Did I lose my whistle?" I ask West. He looks down at me with concern written across his face.

"I took it off for you."

"Oh." I look at the papers. There are lines and spaces and black squiggles but there are no words. At least not in English. I squint- maybe I need a new pair of contacts.

"I don't think she can do this right now," says West, and he takes the clipboard from my hands and gives it back to the woman. "She needs a little time, alright? I'll help her when she's ready." There's more noise but I don't pay attention. "Come on, let's get you off the deck." Somehow, I stand up and West leads me out of the heat into a cool hallway and then we're in the pump room. There is a couch covered in corduroy patches that probably hides how ugly the fabric is. I bet it's from the eighties. I sit down on the edge of the couch and West is close, so close that I can smell him and feel his warmth. I am shaking. "Are you cold?" I say *no*. Still, he wraps his arms around me. "You're still soaking wet. You should change your clothes- I'll get them for you. What's your locker combination?" Somehow I answer him, though I don't even think I could reliably recite my birthday right now. He goes to the hallway to collect my stuff. "Here's a pair of shorts," he says and puts them in my hand. "I've got my sweatshirt here for you to wear. You're shivering." He takes the wet towel off me. "I'll turn around." I stand there, trying to get my arms to move. He realizes I haven't budged and turns back around.

"Okay, it's okay, I'll help you. Arms up." He peels off my wet shirt and now I'm in my suit, unbelievably cold. He puts his sweatshirt over me while pulling my suit off, keeping me covered the whole time. I'm finally warm and cloaked in his scent. He helps me into my shorts while I lean on his shoulders. "There you go. Better?" I nod. He attempts to dry my hair, which is still soaking wet. "Look, I think you're in a little bit of shock right now, but you'll be okay. You just need to sleep. Are you tired?" I realize that yes; yes I am so extremely tired. I hear the deck

phone ring, and a few seconds later Matteo walks in slowly, like he's afraid of what he'll find here in this softly humming room. He comes close and almost whispers.

"You did it, Meadow. She's okay. They said she's alive and okay." All of a sudden I feel nauseous. I feel stupid and angry. I need to cry, and I am. I am crying and I am shaking. Matteo is gone and I'm back on the corduroy couch.

"Hey. Listen to me," West says quietly. "The first save is always the hardest, but what you did was amazing. *You* saw her there. *You* counted and *you* found her. *You* pulled her up. *You* gave her breaths. *You* worked the AED. You did it, Middle. You were perfect. You saved her life." I try very hard to stop crying but tears still roll down my cheeks. He kisses my temple. "You did everything right." I find his hand and I hold on.

"I'm so tired," is all I can manage.

"I know. Close your eyes." I follow his instructions and my eyelids heavily shut.

"You've had to do that before?" I ask, on the edge of sleep.

"Yes," he says. "Once or twice." He leans back and I slowly fall with him until I'm resting partially on the corduroy cushions and partially on him.

"What happened? The first time?" I ask. I feel like I need to know.

"I did everything wrong," he says quietly. He strokes my still-wet hair until the tiled pattern on my knees begins to fade and the humming pipes sing me to sleep.