

Float

2943 words

Paul leads me to a clearing in the woods, what I think will be a sweeping vista revealing the first brassy hues of autumn foliage in the distance. Instead we walk onto a giant slab of trap rock, a platform on the edge of a cliff overlooking the municipal reservoir, splash rings visible below from recent jumpers.

The boys in my math class talk about this place all the time. It's illegal to jump into the reservoir, so they just tell their parents they're going hiking or dirt biking. The woods out here are so expansive, the up-and-down trail so demanding on the knees, that no one's parents would dare follow them all the way to the cliff.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Paul turns to me and asks. His green eyes beg me to be impressed.

"We're very... high," I say, cringing at the word choice. To my relief, Paul just laughs.

"I can't believe you've never been here. You live so close."

There are a lot of things Paul probably wouldn't believe about me. Like how I can't have a social life because my mom won't let me get in a car with anyone who's had their license for less than a year, but she also won't let me hang out with anyone who is more than a year older than me. I've spent most of my free time in high school sitting in my room, playing guitar and trying not to be bored while Mom works three jobs to pay the rent.

Paul's only had his license for five months, but he picked me up for our hike since my house is on the way. I texted Mom and said I was walking to the library to meet up with a partner for a group project. When I was in middle school, I watched as my older brother got in trouble for going skateboarding with a friend after dark. Mom accused him of buying drugs and took

away his phone for a month. If that's the punishment for telling the truth, I'm afraid of what might happen if I tell a small lie, so this is the first one I've made.

But Paul doesn't know any of this. He especially doesn't know he's the first boy I've liked enough to break my mom's rules for. All he knows is I get straight 100s on my Spanish quizzes and I don't try to be noticed by boys. No make up, no fancy hair products or highlights. Mom probably couldn't afford any of that anyway if I asked.

"Paul!" another voice shouts from below. We both turn and look to see Jeremy, one of the boys from math, and his girlfriend Julia, climbing up a series of boulders rising out of the reservoir. Water drips from their hair and faces. Jeremy's shirtless and Julia is in a bra and track shorts. I can see goosebumps covering their arms and stomachs by the time they reach us, even though the late afternoon sun is hot through my black t-shirt.

"Hi Sierra," they each say when they see me. I've never seen either of them outside of school before and the way they avert their eyes when I say hi back tells me they are also aware of this fact.

Paul and Jeremy talk while Julia grabs a towel hanging off a nearby tree branch and dries herself, then lays the towel out and sits down. She looks at the boys and then at her phone.

"Do you want to jump?" Paul asks me.

"I—um," I stammer, feeling a hole form in the pit of my stomach and widen, growing arms and legs to rip the rest of me open and pull me under. "I didn't bring a bathing suit."

I mean, it's not a lie. I'm still wearing what I wore to school today: Screaming Females t-shirt, jeans, old dusty black Vans.

"None of us will care if you jump in your underwear," Julia offers.

I shake my head.

“You sure?” Paul asks.

“Yeah. Maybe next time.” I try to sound optimistic, but who knows if there will be a next time, if he’ll want to go anywhere with me again if he discovers the real reason I won’t jump.

“Okay,” Paul says. He glances at Jeremy and then back at me. “I’m just gonna jump once, okay? Then we can go if you want.”

I nod and sit down a little ways from Julia, try not to stare as Paul sets his backpack down, then takes off his shoes and shirt, his back muscles pronounced from years of competitive swimming. When he asked if I wanted to go for a hike after school, I didn’t know we’d be coming *here*, that his friends would also be here. I thought he wanted to just hang out with me, talk more than we ever have time to at school or on Snapchat, not jump off a stupid rock into water that will eventually wind up in my kitchen faucet. Plenty of people don’t know what’s in their drinking water. Apparently in this town, it’s the sweat and tears of daredevil teenagers.

I scoot up to the edge of the cliff with nervous anticipation to watch Jeremy jump, then Paul, their bodies shrinking as they fall farther and then disappear under the blue surface. I try to count the rings around the spot where Paul goes under, thinking that like the rings of a tree tell us how old it is, maybe the rings around the spot where a body goes underwater can tell how deep they’ve gone. Except there’s too many rings to count, and from up on the cliff, they kind of all blur together.

“Don’t get too close to the edge,” Julia warns, looking up from her phone. “That’s a good fifty-foot drop. Maybe sixty.”

As she talks, I hear a splash, and look down to see Paul resurface. He waves to me before he starts swimming back to land, and I wave back, trying to think of anything comparable fifty or sixty feet tall, wondering what it must feel like to fall through the air and trust the water to catch you.

I've known Paul since sixth grade, when the three elementary schools in our town merged into one middle school, but we didn't talk much until this year when we wound up in three classes together. We mostly chat about music and compare grades, him never able to match my grade in Spanish and me never able to match him in science. In English, we're pretty even. The other friends I talk to at school say we would make a cute couple, but I'm too shy to try initiating anything and I don't quite know if he reciprocates my feelings. And then there's the whole not being allowed to ever go places.

Paul stops to say hi at my locker on the way from lunch to science. It's the day after the hike and I've ignored him all morning, worried he probably thinks I'm super lame for not jumping.

Instead he says, "Sorry if that wasn't really your thing yesterday. I'm never really sure where else to suggest hang outs besides, like, the bowling alley."

I shut my locker and readjust my backpack straps, look him straight in the eyes. "It's fine. Hiking is totally my thing."

"Well I already got the hint that jumping off a cliff is not." We walk side-by-side down the hall. "It's okay if you're afraid of heights."

"Oh. It's not the heights."

Paul stops outside the classroom door. “What is it, then?”

“I can’t tell you.” I feel a hole forming in my stomach again.

“Why not?”

“It’s embarrassing,” I hiss, not wanting anyone else in the crowded hallway to hear me.

“I doubt it’s embarrassing, Sierra.”

I like the way my name sounds when he says it, each syllable given equal emphasis, but it’s still not enough for me to acquiesce. The bell rings and we walk inside the classroom, sit down at our respective seats a couple rows away from each other. Our teacher begins by reviewing yesterday’s lesson, but neither of us really pays attention, stealing glances at each other whenever she turns to write something on the board. He mouths “tell me,” and I just shrug, watching his forehead crease in concern.

In the second half of class, we do a lab. Paul and I are partners, and once we’ve moved into the lab room I figure there’s enough noise going on with the clanking of beakers and chatter of classmates that no one is going to eavesdrop.

“If I tell you,” I say as I lay out our materials, “you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“My lips are sealed,” he says. He even mimes zipping his lips and throwing away the key.

I look around the room and then lean closer to the table. “I can’t swim,” I whisper.

Paul is quiet for a moment. “Like, you never learned, or you’re just bad at it?”

“I never learned.”

He starts adding ingredients to one of the beakers. “Why were you afraid to tell me?”

“Because you’re on the swim team!” I blurt out, and immediately feel my face go red in fear of other people hearing me. “That’s like, your thing.”

Paul continues to set up the experiment. We're supposed to add different ingredients to beakers of water and test each one's density. I usually write down the observations and let Paul do the actual experimenting.

"I could teach you," he says.

I look up from the notes and envision a parks and rec style class, where it's me and half a dozen five-year-olds who all pick up treading water way faster than I do. "No one else can see us. Or know."

Paul laughs. "Yeah, you've made that pretty clear. I know a couple places where we won't be seen. Just bring a bathing suit this time."

"Okay," I agree, unsure whether to be excited to hang out with him alone or terrified of making an absolute fool of myself in front of him.

Paul adds the last ingredient to the last of the three beakers and hands me the rubber stoppers. We have to record whether the stopper floats or sinks in each substance. I roll them over in my hands and then drop one in the first beaker, wincing as it makes contact with the liquid, as if I'm the one on trial.

Paul picks me up the following evening at 7:00, when it's starting to get dark and we'll have less of a chance of being seen anywhere. Mom won't be home for three more hours. This time, I don't text her with a fake alibi at all, since after the hike she questioned why my sneakers were so dirty, and while she bought my story about taking a shortcut home from the library, I decide not to say anything at all tonight. We ride for a while in silence, while I alternate between staring at my fingernails and admiring the purple and orange sky out the window.

“So what’s the story behind you never learning to swim? If there is one?” He fiddles with the radio, even though it’s turned so low I can’t really hear it.

I shrug. “My mom doesn’t know how to swim, either.”

“Does your dad?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t lived with him since I was little. My mom was going to pay for lessons at the Y when they were still married, but he said not to waste her money and that he would just teach me.”

“And that never happened?”

“Nope. My mom’s friend told me once that I almost drowned when I was little, but I don’t remember it.”

Paul’s eyes go wide. “What? How? Were your parents there?”

“I don’t know the whole story. Just that I apparently fell into my grandma’s pool and my mom’s friend saved me. I was like two or three.”

“And your parents never mentioned that to you?”

“No,” I say, though I hadn’t really thought about how odd that was until now.

“Jesus,” Paul says.

I say nothing and keep my eyes glued to the window. Vines suffocate a fading sign from a long-abandoned dairy farm, the grass underneath overgrown and morose, almost blue in the fading light.

We pull into the parking lot of the elementary school Paul attended, and he parks in the spot farthest from the road. On our left, tall street lamps illuminate a newer but empty handicap-accessible playground. In the summer, teenagers take over the playground at night,

some high, others just holding onto a false sense of childhood nostalgia. I came here once at midnight while on a sleepover at a friend's house who lives nearby. We sat cross-legged underneath the wobbly bridge and played Never Have I Ever. Turns out, I've never done much of anything.

"Is this one of those scenarios where the pool on the roof rumor is actually true?" I ask as we get out of the car and I hug my towel to my chest.

Paul laughs. "I wish. We are actually going out there." He points to the tree line on our right, away from the school and playground.

I follow him a few feet into the woods and stop when we reach a shallow brook, snaking through the trees and out towards the direction of the road. It doesn't look like it could be more than a couple feet deep.

"We're going to swim in this?"

"Not quite." He sits down and takes off his shoes, rolls up his khaki cargo pant legs. "Before you can learn to swim, you have to learn to float."

I look at the water with apprehension as I place my towel on the ground and strip down to my bikini, the only bathing suit I own. I'm fine wearing it around my girl friends, but I'm suddenly feeling extra self-conscious, as if Paul can see too much of me, inside and out. I can't look him in the eyes.

"Um, you can just sit in the water to start," he says. His voice cracks a little while I step into the creek and sit, pull my knees up to my chest, instantly shivering when my body touches the water.

Paul sits on the grass so his legs are still in the water, but he is closer to me. “Okay. You’ll want to sit with your legs straight out. Relax. Pretend you’re in your bathtub.”

I follow his directions, try to focus on my breathing, but it’s hard when I’m distracted by the buzzing of insects I cannot see. Every time a car passes in the distance, I worry it’s the police who will bust us for trespassing, or worse, someone from school who might expose my secret.

“Lean your head back,” he continues. “Like, not so your face is underwater, but your hair should touch at least.”

The water feels coldest when I lean back and it laps onto my cheeks.

“Do your legs feel like they want to come up?”

“Sort of?” I say. I take a deep breath and let them go limp, let them float closer to the surface.

“Okay, so now the hard part: you have to do the same thing with your butt.”

“How?” I ask, looking directly at him for the first time since before I got into the water. My legs pull themselves back to the bottom of the creek, frustration overcoming embarrassment.

“The same way you did with your legs. Just relax and concentrate.”

“What if I lose my concentration and sink under the water?”

“It’s not deep enough for you to actually drown. And I’ll catch you if you do start to sink.”

His face looks serious when he says this, so I nod and then turn my attention to my legs, try to get my toes to pierce through the water’s surface. I close my eyes, let my arms rest on top of the water, and focus on my breathing. As soon as I feel my bottom begin to lift, some type of panic button goes off in my brain and I start to roll over on my side, my right arm and leg

grasping for solid ground. When I'm back in a sitting position, I look at Paul who looks at me with his brow furrowed. It takes me a moment to realize I am nearly hyperventilating.

“What happened?” he asks.

“I thought I was drowning,” I say, and then look down at the water and realize how stupid I sound.

He moves a little closer, and if I was braver, I could reach out and touch his face. “I won't let you drown. I'll catch you, okay?”

I nod, trying to memorize the freckles on the bridge of his nose I had never noticed against his tan skin. I take another deep breath and relax my arms and legs, but my eyes are open this time, focusing on Paul as well. He reaches his arms out towards the water, ready to spot me, as if I was climbing a mountain and actually in real danger. As I will the rest of my body to relax and become light, he leans forward, not unlike the way he leaned into his cliff jump a couple days ago. I am aware of his closeness, how we are almost close enough to kiss, but all I can think is that I want to be suspended in this water and in this moment, forever on the brink of everything that could be.