

The Deep End

Rachel leaves a trail of her morning around her parents' house. There's a book by Christopher Hitchens on the coffee table, coffee cup on the dining table, a half-eaten granola bar on the counter, and Rachel at the sink, head under the faucet. Her mom has told her not to wash her dreads in the sink, but it clogs her shower's drain if she does it in the bathroom.

Here's Rachel: shorts and t-shirt over a red one-piece that says LIFEGUARD, tattoo of a rose on her upper arm, slight gap in her front teeth, islands of moles dot up her other arm and into her shirt, and dreadlocks that tangle like tumbleweed.

At 23, cannot settle on the idea of God even though she leaves for Pepperdine's Theology graduate program tomorrow. She still wishes she'd studied eschatology as an undergrad at the University of Texas in Arlington. She loves words like *Ground Zero*, *DEFCON-1*, *Cold War*, and when she's bored she rolls the word *Eschatology* around in her mouth and loves the way it sounds, the way her lips never touch like all the apocalypse theories.

But Pepperdine gave her a sweet deal. Tuition waived. Full scholarship. Teaching assistantship. A stipend. She wants to study religion because the end of the world is programmed into most of them. Not to mention it's California, and Rachel is too young not to believe in its illusions.

Wringing water from her dreads, thin tributaries carry loose hair down her hands and into the garbage disposal. Dirty dishes soak in soapy water the sink over. Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" rambles in the background from her dad's stereo. Boxes pile up in the hallway and around the door—her clothes, books, some pots and pans she commandeered from her mom. She likes to think moving back home to the Texas panhandle after college was some nostalgic thing, like saying goodbye before she never came back. But she knows it was purely financial.

She can't wait to leave West Texas, to wake up in the morning and go outside and not smell cow shit miles away, to trade in tornados for earthquakes, to be by the Pacific Ocean, even if it's too cold to swim. Bob Dylan wails about nowhere he's going to and Rachel thinks about I-40 for 1200 miles from Amarillo to Albuquerque and Gallup and Flagstaff and the turnoff for I-15 to Los Angeles.

"Don't think I don't care," she has said to her mom and dad. "This is something I just have to do."

She ties her dreads tighter and wrings them again, moving to the next one, repeating the process. Her phone rings at a volume just below eardrum shattering. An unknown number has been calling her for weeks. With her head still under the faucet, she reaches over blindly to turn it off. She thinks it's Jess, whose number she deleted when she left for UTA four years ago. Now that she's back home, lifeguarding at the city pool again, living with her parents, she can't imagine seeing him more than she has to. She really wishes he won't be at work today.

She shakes her head in the sink and lets the water run cool and free down her face. She ties her hair back and washes her hands, wiping her face on her mom's old dishtowel before she leaves. Outside, it feels like the Middle East, although it's just Texas in August. The unknown number calls her again and she ignores it as she prays to nothing in particular for her car's A/C to work. Rachel really wishes she had put on sunscreen. She wishes again even more so that Jess won't be at work.

Rachel has pulled off some elaborate shift-switching to avoid Jess. They've worked together just a few times this summer, hardly ever saying a word to each other, but on her last day something like fate can't be helped. They both open the pool today and sure enough Jess is

early, too. He's all but throwing the skimmer to the middle of the pool where a rogue Band-Aid avoids the net, inches from his reach.

He hasn't changed much since high school, Rachel notices. He's still tall and skinny, brown hair that has turned slightly blonde from all the sun, and a slightly receding hairline to match. Without a shirt on he is impossibly tan, ribs just barely showing.

"Shit," he says, almost falling in, dragging the skimmer back to him.

The schedule shows four lifeguards, but Rachel and Jess are the only ones here. They're both 20 minutes early, and Rachel can't find a good reason not to talk to him.

"A lifeguard afraid of water," she says. She locks the gate behind her and already the neighborhood kids are at the chain link fence, some playing on the playground, some just sitting on the curb. The filtration system's respiration is an epiglottal gurgle.

"I don't want to get wet," he says, leaning on the skimmer. His eyebrows are frowning checkmarks, like he's seeing a ghost he doesn't see too often.

"Pussy," she says, and undresses to her bathing suit.

"Shame, I'm all out of dollar bills," he says, trying to get a reaction. "Look, you even have a rose tattoo to match." This is the most they've said to each other all summer.

"I'd rather grind on that skimmer before you," she says, dipping her feet in the water, then sliding all the way in.

"Here you go," he says and tosses the skimmer next to her in the pool.

The water is still cool even though the morning is close to a hundred degrees. The Band-Aid is still in the shallow end and she uses the net to scoop it and catapult it over the fence.

"Y'know, I haven't quite got the PH right and I think some kid peed in it yesterday," Jess says.

“A kid pees in it everyday.”

“You can just tell when it happens, too. They get real still and kind of get that serious, glassy look in their eye, y’know, like they’ve seen some shit?”

Rachel ignores his attempt at a joke and how he’s trying to mimic them.

“Nice dreads by the way,” he says. “Did they come with the tattoo?”

“Why do you keep calling me?” she asks. “Like everyday I’ve been getting a call from you.” If she didn’t just wash her hair she’d swim some before the pool opens, to avoid talking with Jess, but the pool has a thick chemical smell and she wonders if Jess even checked the pool’s levels.

“Not me,” he says, waving her question away like it was a fly, or a bad smell.

“Whatever,” she says. The pool smells like bleach and toxic amounts of chlorine.

“Are we gonna be like this all day? I remember when we used to be friends.” Jess is now at the top of the stairs, ready to help Rachel out of the pool.

“I think that was part of the problem,” she says, wading on the bottom step.

“Can you forget about that?”

If she still had the Band-Aid she would’ve thrown it at him.

“I’ve forgiven you,” she says, pulling herself up with the handrail, “I swear.” Rachel’s body looks porous exiting the pool, as though water were shedding out of her skin and swimsuit. Jess offers his hand, but Rachel ignores that, too.

“I swear,” she says again.

“Okay, I’ll take that,” he says.

They go into the lifeguarding office to cool down and Rachel uses one of the towels that have been left behind. Her red swimsuit is only wet from her belly button down, and she knows Jess is doing everything he can not to make some immature joke.

“We’ve never really had a chance to talk since you left,” he says.

“Or since I’ve come back.”

“Well, I usually open, you usually close.”

She remembers throughout their whole senior year in high school Jess talked about taking a year off before college.

“Why are you still working here?” she asks. “Looks like that one year off turned into four.”

“I went to the community college, and did some online classes. I’m not worthless,” he says.

Rachel slips back into her shorts, and starts raiding the cabinets in the office for sunscreen. Already the sun feels like it’s taking Rachel’s last day personal. The concrete is scorching, and even though it’s still morning there aren’t any shadows.

“I wasn’t saying that,” she says.

“I’ve thought about leaving. Tons of times. Just never felt right. I work here in the summer; at the community college’s indoor pool in the winter.” He opens up a drawer and holds the sunscreen out for Rachel. “I’m happy here,” he says.

“Never said you weren’t,” she says, rubbing sunscreen into her tattoo first then the rest of her arms.

“Yeah, I’m happy,” he says again, like he’s trying to convince himself more than Rachel. “Y’know, there’s more to this place than just leaving it behind again.”

“Like what?”

“Like how it’s home.”

“For you, maybe. But after you’re gone for 4 years your definition of home changes. You change. Home isn’t entirely the same anymore. I thought you’d know that.” Rachel fears most that she is wrong in this moment.

Jess nods solemnly, conceding that she’s probably right.

The kids who were on the playground are now crowding the fences, shaking it with their hands like claws. The parents sit in their cars in the gravel parking lot, the same parents who treat city pools like cheap daycare. Jess unlocks the fence and watches as kids run and dive into the shallow end.

Rachel won’t admit it to him now, but nearly every shift this summer she has remembered when she and Jess were kids, seeing who could hold their breath the longest. They’d go all the way to the bottom of the deep end, all 12 feet, to make it seem more real. One second too long being the difference between drowning, they would sit like rocks, staring each other down as the chlorine burned their eyes. Jess would usually lose and swim to the surface first, rubbing his burning eyes and catching his breath as lifeguards blew whistles at him while Rachel stayed on the bottom, waiting to surface. Now, here they are, telling kids not to do the exact same thing.

Here are Rachel and Jess as children playing with a Gardner snake. They flip it over on its back, and watch how it turns its pale yellow belly back over, weaving so gracefully around its own body. Here is Rachel holding her breath longer than Jess in the deep end of the pool where they now lifeguard. Here is Jess, at 10, climbing into Rachel’s room late at night because he’s

going to run away. Here is Rachel, drunk for the first time, calling Jess to come pull her car out of the mud. Here is Jess getting Rachel a job lifeguarding at the city pool. Here is Rachel thinking she likes Jess just before high school graduation, just before she leaves for UTA. Here is Rachel telling Jess to come with her to UTA, that she could possibly love him. Here is Jess telling Rachel it would never work. Here is Rachel not thinking about Jess in Arlington. Here is Rachel holding a grudge. Here is Rachel moving back home to save money and work at her old lifeguarding job. Here is Rachel finding out Jess still works there. Here is Rachel moving on with her life.

There's a peculiar sense of boredom found in lifeguards. Time doesn't pass in minutes, but by the glare of the sun off the water and the degree of a sunburn. When a lifeguard hasn't moved in more than an hour, when she spends every 30 seconds counting the number of swimmers in her section, when she yells *Stop Running* for the 60th time in the 60th minute she will feel the world spin beneath her and her chair. Rachel wonders if the phrase crushing boredom lends any truth to its own expression. Some days, she can feel her body folding over itself into shapes she cannot describe.

The one thing Rachel likes about the shallow end is the large mushroom. It is right by her stand, and water cascades all around it. If she closes her eyes it almost sounds like a waterfall. The screams from children are slightly hushed and barely a whisper. She sees mouths moving but there's almost no sound like in a nightmare. Without sound, the joy on these kids' faces turns surreal.

When she gets impatient Rachel walks her section. She holds the long flotation tube that says LIFEGUARD on both sides and paces from the depths of one foot to four feet. There's a

length of plastic balls that separate the shallow and deep end only by an idea. It is the difference between four and four and a half feet, between kids standing and standing on their tip toes.

Jess, at the diving board, however, lets kids dive tandem off of it as though they are practicing for the Olympics. He doesn't even care about chicken fights and watches as high school guys and their girlfriends wage war against each other like human skyscrapers. Freshmen devise elaborate strategies to steal bikini tops in the shade of poolside deck chairs. The younger kids Marco Polo until whoever is Polo cries. The deep end, when Jess lifeguards, looks like some adolescent free-for-all.

Rachel can see these kids in the pool without lifeguards and how it would inevitably descend into chaos: Indian rug burns, chicken fights, diving contests in 3 feet of water, nose bleeds. Lifeguarding at a pool is close to apocalyptic anyway, and with Jess lifeguarding they're only a few degrees away from anarchy. Rachel knows it wouldn't get much worse unless they were all stranded on an island with a conch.

The diving board bends and snaps and spits the neighborhood kids up and out and down. There are belly flops, cannonballs, jackhammers, and infinite backflips and front flips that never break into a dive. Rachel lets a boy in Xbox swimming trunks walk-jog around the pool and toward the fence only because the concrete is scorching and Texas hot. She's been there and wishes she were still there sometimes. His friends make a run for the fences, too, and Rachel sees why before blowing her whistle at them.

From the parking lot walk high school girls in bikinis, drinking iced Starbucks drinks, Route 44 Sonic Cokes, and wearing oversized John Lennon sunglasses and Reefs. Their bodies move like slender pendulums the boys wish they could understand. They set all of their deck chairs to the same flat 180 degree angle, parallel with the sun, and lay there on their backs and

some on their stomachs, a couple of them already untying the knots to their bikinis. Rachel hears them talking about not getting tan lines. Her own back has permanent white straps over her shoulder.

The same boys conspire in the corner next to the SNACK BAR and the boy in Xbox trunks begins inching dangerously close to a girl in an electric blue bikini who has already untied her top. Rachel assumes the posture of a lifeguard daring the boy to do it. She blows her whistle just soft enough to catch Jess's attention. When Xbox turns back to his friends they all wave him forward, anticipating a quick escape. Some are hopping in the shade; others pace behind them, trying to get a good look. Xbox takes his time planting his feet firmly on the scorching hot concrete. With each step his back arches in pain. Either he'll make a run for it or he won't, Rachel knows.

Xbox can't take the concrete too much longer and right then the boy is about eight feet from the tanning girl. A thin string of electric blue bikini top dangles away from the half-globe of the girl's breast. He looks back at his friends who are now still. His pruned feet are burning. The blue string flutters in the wind. It rests. Rachel wishes the boy could understand what is happening to him. The blue string flutters and rests, the girl looking away from him, moments from sleeping. She sighs. The bikini sighs with her. When the boy looks back to his friends they are gone. Rachel wishes the boy could understand, but before anything happens he jumps back into the pool.

If Rachel could say anything to Jess in this moment she would say, "don't think I don't care. This is something I just have to do."

The other lifeguards finally come in an hour late, and Rachel snaps her flip-flop against her heel as loud as she can, making a sound kind of like rough sex. Jess swings his floatation

tube around like it's a yellow light saber and drops it. Jess blows his whistle, not at any kids, but at the lifeguards in the office who give him the finger in return. Everyone looks at him and keeps breaking the rules. Behind her, Rachel thinks she hears her phone ringing and then the quiet semaphore of it being a missed call.

Here are the kids who are quiet, who don't run, who go off the diving board one at a time, who apply sunscreen, who wait 30 minutes after eating. Here are the kids who chicken fight, who dunk, who Marco Polo, who spike beach balls at the smaller children in the shallow end. Here are the kids who see whom can hold their breath the longest, a lifeguard's nightmare. Here are the high schoolers who tan, who try to talk to girls in bikinis, all of them trying to get laid just once this summer. Then there are the kids out there on the edge of the diving board, too paralyzed to dive into the chaos beneath them. They have something like a spiritual awakening on the white tongue of the diving board, looking down the 8 feet into the deep end of the pool where eventually the white tongue will flick them up, and out, and down, but for now they only look, experiencing this entirely in the depths of their soul. Here are the rest of these kids' lives: and then they jump into it.

Rachel peels her one-piece's strap from her shoulder and groans at the deepening tan line. The sun is less brutal as it goes down, but it's still Texas hot, and the damage is already done. Rachel picks at a couple flakes of dead skin, decides it's no use. The pool is now quiet; the water's surface just a glittering of coins. The unknown number calls her again and she picks up her phone. Jess sits by the fan, blowing into it, listening to his voice modulate in the cool air.

Whatever, she thinks, and hits accept.

“Is this Rachel Baker?” a voice asks on the other side before Rachel can say anything.

“Who is this?” Rachel asks.

“Ms. Baker, this is Carol with Pepperdine’s administration office. Do you have a few moments?”

Jess keeps blowing into the fan while Rachel goes out back behind the office.

“Sorry I haven’t been answering,” she says when she can finally hear herself think. “It’s just I thought you were someone else calling me.” Already she sees the palm trees, the horrible LA traffic, the empty blue of the Pacific.

“Not a problem,” Carol says, “but we have been trying to reach you for weeks. It seems as though you never had voicemail set up on your phone or we would have left a number for you to call.”

“Just thought you were someone else,” Rachel says. “I can’t even begin to explain how excited I am to enroll this fall.” She sees cities with multiple zip codes. The cursive *California* on license plates, Great Whites waiting for surfers, piers jutting out into an unforgivable cold blue she’s only seen on a map.

“About that Ms. Baker...”

Carol’s side goes silent, and in the background Rachel hears white noise. There’s a pit in Rachel’s chest cavity.

“Now, it appears there were two Rachel Bakers who applied to our graduate program. Somehow you...”

Carol’s voice mumbles into Rachel’s shock, like a mushroom cloud dispersing nuclear wind, and becomes senseless. She literally feels her body folding in on itself, and outside the lifeguard’s office she’s sitting on the grass, moments from exploding.

“I’m sorry, but it appears you somehow got her slot and her funding package. I don’t quite know how to say this.”

Inside, Rachel can still hear Jess’s modulated voice blowing into the fan. Deep inside herself she can feel something snap.

“I’m not even accepted,” she says.

“No, I’m terribly sorry.”

“Jesus,” Rachel says, unfolding on the ground.

“We hope you apply again next fall,” Carol says. After a moment, after Rachel says nothing, Carol hangs up. There is a click and a dial tone that Rachel feels in her every atom.

“Jesus,” she says to herself again.

Jess comes out to tell her it’s time to go back on stand for their last rotation. The sun has been all but sucked out of the sky, leaving behind an explosion of orange and yellow on the horizon. The pool’s halogen lights automatically kick on. Rachel is on her back, staring at clouds that don’t look like anything.

“What happened?” he asks

Rachel says nothing, she holds her phone between both palms, trying to decide between throwing it or crying.

“I’m not leaving,” she says finally. She holds everything back, anger and tears. “I’m not leaving,” she says again, as though she decided not to leave in the first place.

When the sun finally sets and all the stars come out, winking in the early of night like white coins, when all the kids and high schoolers and parents have left, Rachel will finish skimming the water and Jess will adjust the pool’s chlorine levels, finally. The other two

lifeguards will have been long gone, Rachel having told them to go home, to leave her and Jess alone to close the pool together. Rachel and Jess won't say a word to each other and she will sit on the edge of the diving board, looking down into the deep blue of the pool at night, a greater darkness deepening above her by the minute.

When she finally gets up, Rachel will already know what she's going to do.

She will jump on the tongue of the diving board once, twice, before diving in. She will disappear into her own splash, and Jess will let her do this because he knows she has to. The water will be cool and air bubbles will shoot around her sunburnt body as she descends to the bottom of the 12-foot pool. Then she will sit there, on the floor, holding her breath. She will not think about *Ground Zero*, *DEFCON-1*, or *Cold War*. She will forget her favorite word is *Eschatology*.

Instead, the pressure will increase in Rachel's ears.

The pool's halogen lights will cast weak shadows on the floor, slanted, refracted, wobbly, and Rachel, at the bottom, will scream. It will sound like a high-pitched nothing underwater.

She will open up her lungs and she will scream until she tastes chlorinated water at the back of her throat. Air bubbles will rocket to the surface, and from above it will look like Rachel is down there thrashing with a shark. She will scream more, until she feels her lungs nearly collapse, until she forgets about home and Texas and California, and when she loses her breath Rachel will look up at the 12 feet of water separating her from the rest of the world, and then she will kick off the bottom.

When she finally breaks through the surface the air will smack her. She will swim to the edge of the pool, eyes burning, and her heart will beat like a piston in her chest.