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Swimming To November

The thin swimmers quit early. Already by Labor Day they were running back out of the water hugging their chests, exaggerating their shivers, wrapping themselves in towels, trading jokes with the other skinny ones, the fit ones, the ones that weren't ashamed of their bodies. The teenagers toughed it out for another weekend, but then they were gone, too, and for all intents and purposes Brian had the lake to himself.

A troller took his boat in a looping circle out past the swim float, then came no closer. A man with a metal detector swept the beach, found a quarter, looked dejected, disappeared. A woman came with a dog, and it looked as though they would stay, but the dog ran off, the woman followed. *Courage Brian*, he told himself. Out in the center of the lake, on its one egg-shaped island, a tree had already turned color, and the flame of redness, through a trick of afternoon sunlight, seemed wagging at him, ordering him in.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching, pulled his sweatshirt over his head, inhaled, beat his fists against his chest, took three stumbling steps, then, when the water found his belly, folded himself over and pancaked in.

It wasn't bad, not after the initial shock. The sunlight had sunk through the surface, so even the cold spots that caught his legs in summer seemed warmer by a good ten degrees. He set out for the float in his best approximation of a crawl, breathing on both sides, knowing he shouldn't, but needing the oxygen. His arms hurt immediately, or at least his armpits, exhausted from the uplift and reaching. But this was to be expected, he wouldn't worry about it. The whole point was to get exercise, shed some pounds, gain respectability — and the one thing he knew about all this was that it was supposed to hurt.

A nylon rope lay across the water thirty yards out, one end attached to the float, the other to the red and white buoy marking the swim area's corner. He touched it, held on for a minute while he caught his breath, then started back toward shore. *Did some laps* was what he wanted to say when he went home. His wife, his daughter, his sons. They were always doing laps somewhere, they were always burning calories, and now he was doing it likewise, and he wished they were there to watch.

Two laps. Starting the third his arms gave out completely and he rolled on his back to float. He had always been a world-class floater. As a

boy, when the teasing grew intolerable, he would challenge the other kids to a floating competition, and their taunts about being ivory soap or lard didn't sting as much with the water buoying him up. He loved water for that, the way it took every part of him, every fold, crease and bulge, and made it lighter. It felt good now, the pressing sensation on the small of his back, the smooth way it penetrated, spread upward through his stomach and flattened it out. He folded his arms behind his head as a pillow and it made him ride even higher; he frog-kicked with his legs and steamed backwards toward the float.

The wood was warm from the sun and it baked out his soreness. From that high he could see the road along the lake's eastern side, the yellow tops of school buses, the brown tops of trucks. The water absorbed their sound, so all that came to him was a faint gearing whisper that merged with the ripples against the float's side. He wondered how many calories he had burned, how many were necessary before the first pounds dropped off. Swimming was the one exercise he could tolerate, you didn't sweat when you went swimming, seals for instance, who ever saw a sweaty seal?

It was so warm on the float, he was so tired from work, he fell asleep. When he woke up the sun had sunk low enough to get caught up in the maples out on the island, become shredded, with one bar of shadow, the widest bar, covering

him head to toe on the float. It was this sudden coolness that woke him — that or the sound of a car door slamming near the beach.

He raised himself up on his elbows, but otherwise didn't move. It was a small red car, a rusty import, with sides that bulged outwards like padded shoulders. The plates were Florida and instead of numbers spelled out a name: GINGER. The parking area was back by the tennis court, but the car was already nudging the sand when it stopped, and it angered him, that whoever was driving would ignore the sign.

A girl of about nineteen or twenty got out, pretty enough from what he could see of her face, with silky black hair that was so long down her back it looked like a cape. She had on an old-fashioned bathing suit, the kind with a skirt, only on her it seemed to be two skirts, a flouncy yellow one on top, a flouncy yellow one on bottom, connected by a stretch of black nylon fabric that seemed on the point of bursting. He was a good judge of weight, the talent having been forced on him, and he estimated she was well over 150 pounds, though she was even shorter than his daughter.

She stopped by the lifeguard stand, stared up at the sign listing the rules. As he had himself, she turned around to make sure no one was watching . . . he realized the shadows made him invisible on the float . . . and then with an awkward skipping motion she started toward the water. One winter before the lake froze he

had seen dogs chase a deer in over its head, and there was something of this harried quality in the way she plunged in, as if something vicious and invisible snapped at her heels. What's more, she swam terribly, slapping the water like her hands were paws, kicking far too hard, gasping for breath. He was on the point of jumping in to rescue her when she spasmed forward, coughed violently, found the bottom and stood up.

She was far enough out the sun caught her shoulders . . . she reached down to pat them as if congratulating herself . . . and then she did something that surprised him: she leaned her head back and laughed.

It was a good sound, deep and throaty, and it seemed just what the afternoon needed to reach its climax. He saw her stick her hand into the elastic of her suit and draw it back out clutching a plastic bottle of shampoo. It was against beach rules, but maybe she hadn't read that far or didn't care. She tucked her head, tilted the bottle and massaged the soap in, until her hair was covered with bubbles that trailed down her back and floated like a frothy inner tube around her hips. Finishing, she plunged in again, swam just far enough to get thoroughly rinsed, then stood up and walked out onto the sand — slowly, awkwardly, as if it hurt gaining back the weight the water had supported.

She dried herself, squinted for a moment out toward the island, then walked over to her car.

He waited until it was gone before getting up, thoroughly chilled now, and yet feeling light-hearted and strong. He lowered himself down into the water, scissored his legs back and forth to stay upright, then launched himself toward shore. One last beam of sunlight managed to touch the beach, and by swimming as fast as he could he caught up with it just as his stomach began scraping against the shallows. He felt the warmth touch his head, his back, his legs, and then, one second before it disappeared entirely, he slapped his arm out on the sand and captured the last yellow saucer beneath his hand.

The next day was cloudy, cooler, and he was going to go straight home from work — but what kind of resolution was that? He changed in the old cabana in the woods, slapped his sides to get the blood flowing, plunged in. And it wasn't bad — if anything, it seemed warmer than the first afternoon, as if the clouds were so heavy they had compressed the water into velvet. He managed four laps, was just finishing his fifth, when his head, rolling underwater after a breath, bumped into a doughy pillar of whiteness that startled him so much his buoyancy gave way and he had to scramble to his feet.

It was legs, fleshy legs. He brushed the water out of his eyes, tried focusing. The Ginger girl stood waist-deep in the lake watching him, a droopy smile on her face, her arms wrapped

around the upper, skirty part of her swimsuit like a kapok life preserver. She wasn't as pretty close up. Her face was pear-shaped, thick and mottled in the chin, smoother toward her forehead, with a flat brown raisin of a nose. But her eyes were blue, vividly so; her hair was so sleek and luxurious it seemed stolen. And she looked pale for someone from Florida. Pale for anywhere.

She brought her arms down, trailed her hands back and forth across the water's surface. "It says swim at your own risk," she said. "Back there on that sign."

Was this an attempt to be funny? Brian wasn't sure. "Well, everything you do is at your own risk, huh?"

She nodded vehemently up and down. "Boy you've got *that* right."

The way she said it, the way she stood there not daring to go deeper, made him want to help her, though he wasn't sure how. "I see by your plates you're from Florida," he said. "It's early for foliage, most tourists come in October."

"Oh, I'm not a tourist. Hardly exactly. I have a cousin who lives up here somewhere, but she wasn't home. She was, but she laughed at me right there in the driveway, and anyway I'd never even met her before."

She moved her mouth around vigorously enough to tighten her chin, and he realized she was chewing gum. "You're a good swimmer," she said, after the silence went on too long. "I

watched you. Like a porpoise thingy. How come those bubbles come up like that?"

"Over there? That's from logs on the bottom, the way they decay. There was a hurricane here sixty years ago, and the government collected all the dead trees and floated them in the lake so the insects couldn't get them. The war came and the logs were forgotten and they sank."

He was ready to tell her more, he knew lots about local history, but instead of listening she was staring intently across the lake's surface with her hands shielding her eyes.

"Who owns that island out there?" she asked.

"No one. The state."

"Like a desert island? That's neat. A desert island in a lake."

A breeze came up, blowing straight in from the island as if it were responding to her compliment. She smiled, made a dipping motion with her knees, but remained where she was.

"I wish I could swim as good as you," she said.

He laughed. "I'm awful. That's number one. Number two is you probably can. How about swimming out with me to the rope and back?"

She squinted. "That's far."

"We'll take our time."

"You go first."

"You."

She made her hands into cups, splashed some water over her hair, dipped her knees again, but this time all the way down until her face was

near the water and she could launch herself gently. She swam in a combination breast stroke and crawl, with two stately strokes followed by a splashy one — and yet it moved her on. He started out after her, liking what her kicks did to the water, churning it into a white bubbly cloud that felt good on his face. When he made it to the rope she was already holding on, her eyes rolling in what could have been terror or satisfaction or both.

“Good!” he yelled. “Again, one more!”

She swam with more confidence this time, her bottom stayed closer to the surface, and she didn’t seem so out of breath when they stopped to rest. “My record!” she gasped, or something like that, and, treading water next to her, he found it difficult not to reach out and pat her head.

She started back toward shore, and he gave her a good lead, wanting her to think she had raced him and won. He was feeling pretty confident himself — he decided to go all the way without taking his face out of the water to breathe. He made it, he got to his feet expecting congratulations, when he saw her hurrying across the sand toward her car.

“Hey!” he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Nice swim!”

But she didn’t hear him, or if she did, it meant nothing to her, and in seconds the little red car had spun itself around on the sand, made a wagging motion and disappeared.

That first afternoon became their pattern. He would always arrive first, swim his laps, extending them by one a day, then, just when he got tired, come upon her legs there in the shallows as she advanced timidly in. They would talk a little, about the weather, about the lake, but every time he asked where she lived or what her life was like, she would say something evasive and funny, or even wade deliberately away.

“Well, how many we doing today?” he would finally ask, and by exaggerating the heartiness, swinging his arms around like a camp counselor, he would eventually get her swimming. And she made real progress under his coaching. It was basic stuff, getting her to breathe on just one side, kick with her legs, not her knees, relax her hands. By the end of their first full week she could manage to go three times to the rope and three times back. She was tremendously proud of this. One day at work he made a paper ribbon with a gold star, and then he gave it to her — the afternoon she first managed four laps, she blushed with happiness and kept running her hand up and down her wet hair, as if this were the part of her that deserved congratulations most.

Their afternoons always ended the same way, too — with Ginger rushing off without saying goodbye to him, or without any preliminary at all. One minute they were swimming side by side through the shallows a length behind their

own shadows, and the next she would be up on the beach clutching her towel halfway around her middle and hurrying toward her car.

He asked her about this once, and her face had gone slack and ugly, the way it did whenever the talk grew even slightly serious. "Cinderella always leaves early, don't you know that?"

"Yes," he said, trying to understand. "But she wasn't a swimmer."

"No, she was a pumpkin," — and with that she was gone.

She was gaining weight, that was the odd thing. As much energy as she put into swimming, for all the desperation with which she slapped the water and kicked, he could see her visibly gain weight. Her swimsuit was tighter, the flouncy parts seemed to rise higher on her body, and it gave the sense of flesh that was expanding on its own, independently of anything she could do about it. The swimming worked the opposite way for him — he could feel a tenseness in his stomach that he hadn't felt in years, and it was a good tenseness, a flat tenseness, and when he first plunged in every afternoon he experienced an overpowering gratitude for the water and what it was doing for him.

The water. It was difficult pretending it was as warm as before. At first the change came subtly — there was an extra added tingle that had nothing to do with wetness. The velvet

changed to something grittier, and seemed less one blended whole than superimposed layers, each of which was colder and more metallic than the one floating just above. He found himself hesitating now before plunging in; instead of falling into something that welcomed him, cushioned him, he was forcing himself into something that forced him back out.

One night it rained and that cooled the water a full three degrees, as if ice cubes had been dumped in the lake by helicopter and vigorously stirred. More often now the breeze came from the north, and that chilled it further. The leaves began changing color, the sand on the beach tightened into clumps, and the island, there in the distance, seemed to loom larger and closer and clearer, as if it were lonely out there in the middle and floating in just for company.

And yet they didn't miss a day, neither one of them. Too cold, he would decide, sitting there in his cubicle listening to the weather, but then on the way home, thinking about how far he had come, picturing the empty house that was probably all that was waiting for him, he would turn off onto the beach road and change into his trunks. Or too rainy, he would think, she won't be here today, but the moment he got up the nerve and started swimming the battered red car would nudge to a stop against the sand.

September ended, October began, and the weather suddenly turned warm again, so they had another afternoon that was almost like

summer. For the first time they continued out past the ropes toward the center of the lake, doubling the greatest distance they had managed before, and he swam right beside her back toward the float to make sure she didn't get tired. He went up the ladder first, then reached down so she could pull on her arm. Even so she came up only with great effort, getting the top half of herself wedged over the float, jabbing down with her elbows, then rolling the rest of the way.

"There!" she said, tugging down her suit.

They lay staring up at the sun, letting it bake them, the float rocking gently in the wake of the troller across the lake. It was so quiet they could hear the church bell chime in the village — it was as if the sky were lightly reaching down to tap their noses. "What are those thingies?" she asked, bringing up her hand.

"Geese. Snow geese probably. They stay high like that."

"You could shoot them. Zapper. This game I like." She pointed her finger. "Pow. Pow pow pow."

He knew a lot about birds, he was starting to tell her more, but already her focus had turned elsewhere. He was used to this now. Greedy for information, there seemed no place in her for it to fit, so the moment she asked one question, she was on her way to the next.

"How old are you?"

He laughed. "Oh, pretty old."

"I guess forty-four."

"A good guess."

She rolled over on her stomach, spread the skirty part of her suit so it covered the bruise-colored veins on her thighs. "Are there any houses on that island?"

"A falling down cabin. Some people think a hermit built it, but it's just an old summer home no one uses."

"Yeah? Does your wife know about me?"

That surprised him — he would have liked to press lower to study her eyes. "No," he said. "All she knows is that I need to shed some pounds."

He could make out just enough of her face that he saw her expression grow pinched and mean, mean to herself. "I need to shed more than pounds," she said. She dipped her hand into the water, twisted it, watched the drops roll down her wrist. "How late can you swim here? All winter?"

"I wish. It freezes."

"Solid?"

"Most years. December usually. Sometimes we can have Indian summer like this, so we'll probably have time for more swimming. We still have to reach the island."

"Oh for sure. The island is everything."

"It will be a little cold, but we won't let that stop us."

She mumbled something into her arm.

"What's that?" he said.

"I don't feel the cold. You ever notice? I see you shivering and beating your arms around your chest and gasping, and I envy you, because my skin doesn't goosebump and I don't shiver and something must be wrong with me I don't."

Short as it was, it was the most in the way of confession he had ever had from her, and it made him want more. "How come you don't, Ginger?"

She bit her arm — bit it hard, then brought her head up to stare at the red and white circle left by her teeth. "Because I'm fat. Fat people don't feel cold, that's what they say. If I were slim like you I would feel it."

"Slim? Wow, that's a good one."

She swiveled to the side, pushed with her hands and elbows until she sat up. She acted more excited than she'd ever been before — the paleness around her eyes glowed pink. "You *are* slim!" she insisted. "Slim, slim, slim!"

It was amazing how good it felt, the tight slippery sound of the word, the way it drenched him like warm lake water poured over his head. "I am *not* slim," he laughed. "No one slim can do this."

He crossed to the far side of the float, turned, took three lumbering strides, pushed with all his momentum off the edge, tucking his knees into his chest and grabbing onto his ankles. "Yeow!" he yelled, a second before he hit the water. The spray exploded straight into the air — he sank through the concussive thud, felt the depth

press on his eyelids, then kicked himself triumphantly to the surface in the creamy bubbles of his own entry.

On the float Ginger was laughing, clapping her hands in delight. He climbed the ladder, shook like a dog, did another one, a better, higher one, with a bigger plume of spray, a louder splash. Again and again he cannonballed for her, ten times, fifteen times, climbing the ladder so fast, jumping so fast, he was landing in the cushion of bubbles left by the previous jump, creating waves that rolled toward the beach. His yells echoed off the hills — anyone driving past would have thought he was freezing — and yet none of that concerned him, but only wanting to make her laugh and applaud and giggle, shaking her sadness so thoroughly she could never be sad again.

By the time he finished he could barely find the strength to hold onto the ladder, let alone climb back up. Ginger reached down over the side to help him — his hand fastened onto her wrist and tugged her gently in. They swam together through the amber polish left behind with the sunset, spreading the water away from them in languid breast strokes, Ginger swimming more easily and gracefully than he had ever seen her swim before.

In all their afternoons together, with her racing off, they had never been alone together on the beach. Her towel was draped around her neck, a cheap towel, the kind that looked stolen

from a motel, and it seemed so tiny against her shoulders it was like she had a hankie there, one that could only soak up the smallest patch of wet.

"I've never seen anyone's like that before," she said, when they stopped near the lifeguard stand. She had her head tilted to the side, as if trying to see under a screen to his face. "Those thingies right there. NO, underneath."

"My sockets? My eye sockets?"

"They have sand in them they're so deep. They make it look like you've been crying sand."

As always, he felt himself reaching for a joke to laugh her off, but something in him resisted this time — the darkness, the way the afterglow of light purpled the beach, the summer-like warmth — and so he didn't joke, but stood where he was meeting her eyes.

"They are sandy," he said softly. "You could take it out."

She stepped closer — for a moment she was near enough he could feel the soft, anticipatory cushion that comes before actual contact. He tightened his stomach to meet it — and then she turned, hurried off to her car. The door slammed, the engine started and the headlights flared on, cracked and hooded, barely able to wedge apart the darkness enough the car could follow.

It rained that night ahead of a cold front, and

by morning there was frost. The water held its own for a few days, then surrendered to the cold — the color went from a yielding, blue-tinged transparency to a silver that was glutinate and hard. Over the weekend the beach committee came to pull in the float and take down the ropes, and that made the lake seem bigger, less cozy, with nothing out there to clutch while they caught their breaths. The leaves fell, red and yellow rafts they enjoyed swimming toward and splashing, but the leaves quickly lost their color and sank.

It took courage to plunge in now — real courage, not the make-believe kind that had gotten him through September. He had never swum past October first before, and now it was almost Columbus Day and they were still at it. Somewhere during this his attitude changed, so instead of looking forward to his swims all day, he dreaded them — not only the cold, not only the chance a duck hunter or someone he knew would see them and make fun of them, but the fear of quitting and gaining back his weight. Each day he decided enough was enough — each day when work ended he drove straight to the beach.

The lake hated them now — he was sure of that. All it wanted was to lay quiet waiting for November, and here they were splashing it apart, kicking it to froth, agitating it far past the point where it could have any tolerance. It paid them back triple, with every trick of chilling it

knew. Wading in wouldn't be too bad, there would be enough sun in the shallows to fool him into thinking it would be tolerable, but then with that first headlong plunge came the hard steel jacket around his chest, the screw press on his temples, the vise clamping inwards toward his heart. By frantically reaching and kicking he could manage to burst past these, but then the water would get busy on his face, slapping it each time he turned for a breath, pressing the indent between his eyes with a sharpness that made the pain in his heart seem feeble. The headaches disappeared after he got out, but he would shiver for the next three hours, and nothing, neither warm blankets nor hot showers nor coffee, could make him stop.

Ginger was immune to this, looked at him with a mix of amusement and scorn whenever he complained. "Not bad," she would say, standing up after her first plunge, smoothing her hair back from her forehead as if the water were shampoo. She stayed in longer than he did, swam farther, while his own distance steadily diminished. "Yummy," she would say, rolling over to float, and he grew angry with her for that, the way she seemed insulated in a thick rubbery tube of incomprehension.

She was gaining weight, that was obvious. Her bathing suit rode ever higher up her torso, and her breasts fell lower to compensate. She looked like a balloon that was steadily inflating or a melon turning overripe — he hated himself

for thinking of her that way, but it couldn't be helped. It separated them like the cold separated them — it was as if the pounds he was shedding were going straight to her.

"I think we're ready for it, don't you?" she said on the day he hadn't managed to swim more than two minutes. She stood with her towel around her neck staring mildly across the lake while his jaw trembled so much he couldn't respond. "I mean the island. It's in striking distance now. I think tomorrow is crucial."

If he came the next day he came only for her sake. The wind had sprung up and whitecaps whipped directly onto the beach, making it seem that, after warning him quietly, the lake was now warning him out loud. He tried pulling off his sweatsuit, but found it impossible — he tried tiptoeing into the water, but backpedaled immediately out. He stood with his toes plunged into the sand for warmth, wondering what had become of her — and then he heard a scraping noise as a car turned in past the tennis courts and parked. But it was a green car, not a red one; the man driving it got out, used the latrine and immediately drove away.

That's that, he told himself. He was surprised at how disappointed this made him, and he sat on the picnic table until it grew so dark out it made no sense to wait more. He would have called her to see if she was okay, but where? That night, in a kind of fury, he ate the biggest meal he'd had in a month, and topped it off

with a pint of cookie dough ice cream, taking a grim satisfaction in the cold way it went down.

He worked late the next day, and by the time he drove past the lake it was nearly dark. The clouds were the heavy kind that in another month would hold snow, and he wanted nothing more than to hurry past them and get home. From force of habit, expecting nothing, he glanced to the side to check out the water — and then he saw it, the small cube of redness on the yellow of the beach.

As usual, she had parked so the tires hit the sand. The car was empty and looked even more battered up close than it had from the distance — it was as if someone had taken a hammer to the side and deliberately made it pimpled. He leaned his face to the window, peered in. There wasn't much room with all the junk. A sleeping bag decorated with *Star Wars* characters, a dirty pillow, an entire zoo of stuffed animals, wads of cotton and gauze, empty wrappers from junk food, soda bottles, and, wedged into the dashboard like it was a cupboard, a dozen bags of caramel popcorn.

He rubbed the roof, stood there considering, then continued on toward the beach. Ginger stood up to her calves in pewter-colored water, her back to the sand, so at first she didn't see him. She had on a new bathing suit, a peach colored one, something that looked like a maternity gown, only too small for her, so it

looked like a baby doll negligée instead. Her back was board-like she stood so straight, and yet this only emphasized the huge expanse of her belly, which seemed to be regarding the lake and the coldness on its own. She didn't shiver, that was the other thing he noticed. With the temperature at freezing, she didn't shiver at all.

"There are lots of those bubble thingies around today," she said softly.

He spoke quietly himself, trying to match his tone to hers. "It's too cold today, Ginger. Swimming's over."

"I was thinking about those logs floating together, the ones you told me about way back when that got dumped here and forgotten. How they sank. How one of them must have sunk last."

He wanted to make his voice soft, but more than that — he wanted to make it into a blanket he could wrap around her again and again and again. "It's too cold to be swimming, Ginger. I've told my wife about you — she'd like to meet you. So would my kids. You can come back with me, have dinner with us. We have an extra room where you can sleep."

She put one leg behind the other, reached down to scratch, then turned so she faced him. As dark as it was he could see her eyes perfectly, realize why he had found them so compelling — how they were always trying to leap free of her body and have an existence on their own. But he realized this only because that

look was extinguished now; her eyes seemed easier, remoter, resigned. Finding his, like they were on a slide together, they rolled down the peach-colored fabric over her breasts out to her belly.

"I used to hear it all the time," she said. "About how there was always one person in the world for everyone. It was like a promise made you at birth. That no matter how homely you were you could always find one person. I used to pray for that. Just one person just once."

The water made her skin look whiter than he'd ever seen it. She touched the surface with her hand, stirred it in and around her legs, petted it, as if trying to turn it in her favor.

"Well, I found him all right. I found him in Haines City, Florida, and the joke was on me."

She shook her head, turned away from him, waded out until the water swelled against the bottom of her belly and made it rise. She put both hands underneath and lifted, then let it back down gently so it entered the water an inch at a time.

"Swim with me," she said.

"I can't."

"Please."

"I don't have a suit."

"Who needs a suit, silly? Today is the island. We're ready for it now. There's a cabin there like you said. It's surrounded by pine trees and no one can see us there and there's a fireplace where we can build a fire and get all cuddly and make

hot chocolate and get warm."

She peeled the straps down from her shoulders, made a pushing motion, got the skin of the suit down over her waist and cradled her dropping breasts with her arms. He could see her belly plainly now, enormous and perfectly round, not white like the rest of her but butter colored, with her belly button stiff before it like a boy's little cock. By the time she had the suit entirely off, she was up to her waist in the lake, then up to her breasts, then the top of them, so he could hardly make out her silhouette in the dark. With a graceful butterfly of her arms she launched herself in the direction of the vanished ropes, the bubbles churned by her feet looking metallic and heavy, as if they had forgotten how to pop.

Instinctively, from habit, he started in after her, but his shoes hit the water and the coldness immediately soaked through to his feet and made him go numb. This stopped him, or something harder did, the sense of what the water was now, dark and heavy and mercurous, something that would hurl him back the moment he tried entering, or if he wasn't careful suck him down.

He could see her making her way through it, spreading it apart with her arms in the gentlest of strokes, as if nothing wanting to alarm it, scare it, make it shy. She was out past where the float had been, out toward the middle, and he wanted to yell to her, tell her how beautifully

she swam, how good and brave her whiteness looked against the black, but it was too late for that — it was like throwing a life ring that wouldn't reach. She was already invisible, and

the only thing left for him to wonder about was where in the lake, at what precise moment, during what exact stroke, she would turn and realize she was alone.

