

Another Safe Day

By Bradley Lloyd

She was the hottest woman that had ever liked him. Looking at her now, with her hair wet against her bare shoulders, he wondered why he had never done anything about it.

“I win,” he said, as she removed her goggles and made a quarter turn to face him. “A very appropriate ending to seven years, all things considering.” He smiled, noticing the red indents around her eyes left by the goggles, and submerged his hands, bringing them back to his face to try and rinse away the raccoon circles that he knew still lingered around his own eyes.

She let out an audible breath of air, as if she were annoyed. “I wasn’t racing.”

“Uh-huh, sure.”

“How far did you go?”

“A mile and a half.”

She let out another huff of air, much the same as the first, but she didn’t speak.

Overhead, the street light was humming, while underneath it, their breathing was hard and fast. He submerged for a moment, and the hum of the street lamp was replaced by the soft, muffled rhythm of the pool pump. Over this came the intense, inward beating of his own heart, pulsing through to his ears. He felt the cool of the water washing away the heat of the miles he had swum. This was his favorite moment of the day, when all work was done, when he still had the high of physical exertion, when he was floating, completely weightless, enshrouded by the quiet and dark of the water. It was a joy of extended brevity. He would miss this.

His chest tightened--a kind of constricting from his neck to his torso--and he knew he would have to breath. He moved to the surface very slowly, first feeling his wet hair press against his head, then the odd sensation of the water receding from his ears as the sound of his heartbeat died away. Finally, he took a long, slow, conscious breath as his mouth found air again, but he rose no further, preferring to remain in the water habitat as much as possible. He rubbed his eyes and then opened them to the blurry but familiar turquoise color of the pool edge, and the darker blue of the night sky beyond. Somehow he had gotten turned around. It was easy to forget that up here, direction mattered.

It was the sound of her voice calling his name that at last made him rise more fully from the water, and he turned to look at her.

“This is sad.” Her face and her voice better described how he was feeling than her words did.

He splayed his tired arms along the pool edge, and rested the back of his head against the wet cement, looking upward. The chlorine gave the steel lamp above a rainbow halo, and far beyond were the tiny, eternal glows of a million stars. What words could he say? “Seven years . . .” he began, but didn’t say any more.

She, too, stretched her arms spread-eagle along the edge, her fingertips so close that if he had pressed his hand flat, they could have touched. He now tried to expose as much of his body to the cooling night air as possible, as the sounds of their brisk breathing began to subside. It seemed as though their bodies radiated heat like an invisible steam rising from the water. Sweating in this environment was a singular sensation, simultaneously hot and cold, free of the stench and stickiness of the real world.

“No more bets,” she said in melancholy tones.

“You never made good on your bets, anyway,”

She opened her eyes wide and feigned offense. “I never did? You never did, buddy.” He noticed how her eyes seemed even larger than usual with her head wet and her hair pressed down against her.

“You never ran naked around the pool.”

“You never jumped naked off the diving board.”

He smiled. “Sarah, I have a confession to make.”

“What is it?” Her voice had a hard, skeptical edge to it.

“Remember about four years ago when we agreed to go skinny dipping, and we both went to opposite ends of the pool and held our swimsuits over our heads to prove that we had done it.”

“Yeah . . .”

“I was wearing underwear.”

“What?” He recognized the familiar sound of shock in her voice. He liked shocking her. She turned towards him, raising a clenched fist as if too hit him, but she just opened her mouth, the corners turned upwards in a half smile, miffed, yet probably not completely surprised. She didn’t hit him. She had ceased any physical flirtation years ago, and he now wondered why.

“OK then, lets do it now,” she challenged, her eyes wide again.

He looked around the pool, the light from the street lamp above suddenly seeming to lose its translucent, fuzzy halo and become stark. He looked beyond the chain linked fence surrounding the pool to the row of residential houses across the street. Driveways were illuminated in white halogen circles, and a filtered dimness escaped from some of the drawn shades in living room windows. He listened hard for the sound of any children that might be lingering behind him in the park, but heard only the chirping of fat September crickets and the hum of the light. Even the parking lot was empty save for two cars, his and Sarah's. All was solitude.

"Nah," he said, dismissing it casually, as if it were something lesser than his years permitted.

"Fine then, I win." He could tell by her deliberate tone that she was trying to get a rise out of him.

"Yep, you win."

"Uh,"--she did that thing again with her breath, and he noticed as if for the first time how she would dip her head down and roll her eyes while making the familiar sound-- "You're no fun."

"You can do it if you like. I'll watch."

"Yeah, I bet you will."

"OK then, I won't watch."

He was looking across the pool, across the twenty five meters, towards the darker blue water of the deeper end, focusing on the twin diving boards hovering a few feet off the water. Still, he knew without even glancing to the side that she was daring him with her half-smile and half-smirk, her wide eyes a little narrowed. He peered only ahead, and spoke firmly. "OK, then. Let's do it. Let's jump off the diving boards naked."

"OK."

"Let's take off our suits, swim naked to the other end, and jump off."

"Should we?"

"Yeah Sarah, let's go." But he made no move to leave the wall, his arms still spread out and clutching the turquoise edge of the pool, his eyes still focused ahead, looking at the diving boards and the halogen-lit houses beyond them across the street. As a kid, he had delivered papers to a lot of those houses. The house directly ahead was the gray one, where the autistic boy lived, with his Australian-accent dad and English-accent mom.

“What if the cops come by?” Her voice had taken on a more timid tone. He liked playing with her like this.

“What’re they gonna do? Fire us? We finished our last day. We won’t be back next summer.”

“Arrest us.” That thought made him laugh. It would be silly to see their names in the local paper in the police beat, arrested or cited for indecent exposure. There, in print, for all the kids to read--all the kids that he had called the cops on in the last seven years, for underage smoking or vandalism or stealing or fighting. He read that section every week, just to see how they’d be written up, those nameless juveniles that for him, had faces. Or maybe the city’s crop of fourth grade girls would read it there in black and white, and all their girlish cooing about him and Sarah would take on a new not-so-innocent tone, something whispered rather than giggled loudly across the pool, giggles he had always pretended to ignore. Giggles were easier to ignore than earnest whispers.

He removed his arm from the ledge, and turned to look at her. She still clutched the side of the pool, her tanned and toned arms out of the water, stretched flat and turned slightly behind her, so that he could see every muscle. She had nice triceps for a girl; none of that under-arm waddle. The arm hairs were bleached white from the sun and chlorine. They were like spun glass, and lay flat and wet against her skin, parting to form a large, bare line--a crease from the water.

She, too, moved her furthest arm from the ledge and turned to look at him, but slowly. Time was different in the water at night. Motion was orchestrated. Every movement became a deliberate one, and included its own sound--a small splash or a light rippling--small drops of water falling from wet hair and chiming on the crystal surface of a calm pool.

She was looking at him, and her eyes suddenly lit up. “Oh, look at that.” She was looking past him. “Look at the moon. Isn’t it cool?”

He turned to the opposite horizon. Across the dark and empty baseball diamonds, above a dark line of pine trees in the distance, the moon hung large and low, a subdued orange. “A harvest moon.”

“It’s beautiful. It’s like a sign or something. It’s so nice out. I can’t believe I won’t be back here. Do you realize how many hours we must have sat in these chairs?” She motioned to a raised chair at the corner of the pool, about ten feet away. It was the same maroon color as the locker room doors on the wall of the pool house behind them. Seven hours a day, six days a week, three

months a year, his ass had sat in that maroon chair, or one of the three others exactly identical at every corner of the pool.

“We should carve our names in it, or something.” It seemed the appropriate thing to say, but the action felt too trite.

“I think my butt print is permanently etched into it.”

He turned back to her, smiling. “Well, see. It’s your chair, now. That means you have to come back next summer.”

Her voice took on a more raw edge. “There’s no way. I’ll have school next summer. It’s gonna suck. I won’t even have time for a job, let alone this one, in this town. Besides, we’re college graduates. It’s pretty sad that we came back this summer.” She crouched down low into the water, and hugged herself, as if she were growing cold. “You can come back next summer. You’ll be manager all alone.”

“No. I’m not coming back.”

He took a step toward her, and she took a step backwards. They were moving, doing a strange sort of ballet, walking on tiptoe and moving their arms to push the water aside as they cut through it. The water level gradually dropped a foot, so that it was at his chest. She crouched low and stopped moving. He stopped, still one step away.

She cocked one arm along the ledge and looked at him with a friendly grin. “What’s your best feature?”

“What?”

“What’s your best feature? People get uncomfortable when they have to compliment themselves--why is that? We shouldn’t be afraid to say something good about ourselves. I bet people would be happier and more confident if we did it more often.”

“What?”

“What’s your best feature.”

“I don’t know. What do you think it is?”

She smiled to reveal her top row of teeth. Her lips weren’t incredibly voluptuous, but she did have a nice smile and straight teeth. He wondered if she had braces as a kid. “That’s not the point! C’mon. What’s you’re best feature.”

“I don’t know. Um . . .” He tried to think of a safe answer. He liked his eyes. He liked dark features with blue eyes. His eyes weren’t incredibly blue . . . more of a gray, really, but he knew

that other people found his eyes rather striking. His dark brows had a nice slant to them. It was one of the reasons he made sure to take his sunglasses off at every break. It was a safe answer.

“My eyes.”

“What do you like about them?” She was being rather relentless.

“I like that I have blue eyes. I like that I have darker hair. I think it’s a good combo. What about you? What’s your best feature.”

“Umm. . .” She turned her eyes up as if she were thinking. An appropriately modest move, he thought. She was a beautiful woman. He had always liked her legs. She had slender legs, yet they also had muscle. Her calf muscle bent out and back without being too large, giving her shape without thickness.

“My smile.” She was always smiling. She had many different smiles. “What else do you like?”

“I’ve always thought you had nice legs.”

She laughed genuinely and slapped the water. “Not about me--about you.”

He thought again. Even though they were farther away from the street light, it still seemed too bright. What would he give as an answer now? He wasn’t particularly buff, although he was certainly in great shape. Still, he couldn’t say his arms. He liked his stomach. He liked the way men’s stomachs had shape to them, unlike a woman’s stomach. Sarah’s stomach was not her best feature. She was thin, but it was still rather doughy. He liked a hard stomach. He liked the way a guy’s stomach sort of came in waves, starting under the breast bone. The ripples gave way to that spot on either side of the hip bone, where two lines started to converge, pointing down and to the center as they would disappear under a swim suit, pointing the way to something more substantial, and not shapeless. If a guy was really in shape, the top of the swim suit between these lines would be slightly off of the lower stomach--the slight bulge in muscle would bring it away from the skin. You could always tell a nice stomach on a sunny day, because in this little space, the swim suit would cast the smallest of shadows.

“My stomach. Twenty minutes of crunches a day, and it better look half-way decent.”

Suddenly they were bathed in blackness. The street lamps around the pool turned off, as they always did at nine at night. He looked up, and saw more stars than had previously been there. He was also very aware of the silence. Around him, the water took on a more frightening color, looking more green than blue without the light. He hated opening his eyes under water in the dark,

being suddenly surrounded by an unfamiliar murkiness. When the lights went out, that's when you'd shut your eyes under water.

"Oh, it's dark. Hey--there's the cops." Sarah was looking off to the left. A block away, under the nearest lighted street lamp and by the entrance to the parking lot, drove the familiar squad car, also right on time. They watched, still and quiet, as it made a slow pass on the street across from them. In his periphery he could also see Sarah, her silhouette hunched low beside him, hair hanging down in damp, shadowy strings. She seemed to be hugging herself again. He was hugging himself, too. He felt a chill, and suddenly became aware of the hair on his arms.

She turned to him. "Good thing we weren't naked, eh?"

"Yeah, good thing." He looked down beneath the water at his stomach and the dim shapes beneath. He could barely make out the red hem of his swim suit through the obscure green. Even across the pool, it was difficult to discern the familiar details of the diving boards. They were vague shadows.

He turned to her. "OK. Let's do it."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. This is our last chance. Let's go off the diving boards."

Through the darkness he could see her white teeth near the surface of the water. She was laughing, wearing her mischievous smile. "OK. I will if you will."

He took a few steps back, towards his side of the pool. She, too, began stepping back. His hands were already beneath the surface of the water, fumbling with the tie on his suit. He was shaking a little. Of course he had to be cold at a time like this.

With the knot loosened, he slid his hands against his stomach, beneath the suit and beneath the briefs he was wearing. He hoisted his legs up and in one quick motion slid out of the suit and the briefs together. He looked down beneath the surface of the water, and was surprised that he could actually make out the whiteness of his own skin. He hadn't taken into account his tan--or, in the case of what would now be visible, lack thereof. Still, he didn't think it would matter, as long as they stayed apart.

"Are you doing it?"

He held his suit above his head, offering proof.

"Oh my gosh!" Now she crouched low in the water, only her head visible. "Hey--you're wearing underwear!"

He pulled the briefs out of the suit, and held them up in separate hands. “Nope.”

“Oh my gosh! What if we get caught?”

He looked around. Behind was the pool house, which offered an effective barrier to anyone who would be in the park, which, at this hour, wasn’t likely anyway. To his right, the baseball diamonds were still dark and empty. Across the street, the houses were lit but the shades still drawn. To the left was the parking lot and it’s street light, illuminating nothing but pavement and the two cars.

He took a step towards the diving boards, moving deeper, and suddenly became acutely aware of the water on his body. It was a feeling that started at his thighs and genitals and spread to the tips of his fingers and the top of his head. The water was everywhere, a soft, cool tickle on his skin. He took a breath and **submerged**, still moving slowly through the water. Above the rhythm of the pool pumps was the sound of his heart in his ears, a steady beat still accelerating with the thrill of the forbidden and the freedom of the water. It was dangerous, being naked and blind in this dark water.

She was calling him again. He came quickly to the surface, a slight roar in his ears as the air replaced the water. Opening his eyes, he saw that Sarah was swimming twenty feet away, parallel to him, her swimsuit held proudly over her head.

“Oh my gosh. I can’t believe we’re doing this.” She was laughing, and he could see her whiteness. Her teeth seemed almost iridescent in the dark. Her shoulders rose and fell slightly in the water as she kicked, exposing and then hiding the partially tanned lines on her shoulders. Below the surface of the water, he could see the pale outline of her figure. As she bobbed up, he noticed the whiteness between her breasts and how it seemed to accentuate the expanse there. He had always wondered what it would be like to perform CPR on a woman—whether the breasts would get in the way, and now he thought that they wouldn’t.

She was still swimming with only one arm, the other displaying the red guard suit. He realized that he was holding his swimsuit overhead as well, held high and tight like a red banner of courage. They were half way across the pool, and he could easily make out the silhouettes of the diving boards against the halogen lights of the houses across the street. The gray house in particular had a bright security light shining from the garage which now seemed to spotlight the diving boards, even though it was at least 30 yards away. Thoughts seemed to pulse in his head with the quickened beating of his heart. What if the autistic boy is peaking out through that crack between

the window shade? What if the cops are even now getting a call from a bewildered or angry parent with an Australian or English accent? Who's going to go off the boards first? What if they both went together? What if Sarah looked, because man, it sure was cold. He smiled. "I can't believe we're doing this."

"I can't believe your doing this!"

Having her here, hearing her laugh made him want to laugh, too. He felt like he was laughing, even though he didn't think he was. "Hey—stop tryin' to look down underneath the water!"

"What? I'm not!"

"I saw you peeking!"

He couldn't see them clearly, but he knew her eyes got big again. He could hear it in her voice: "What? I can't see anything. It's too dark . . . Why? Can you see me?"

"Uh-huh."

It looked for a moment like she was going to hurl the red ball of swimsuit at him. "You cannot! Can you?"

"Let's just say that I can see your best feature."

She laughed again, and it seemed to echo on the water and become something ethereal. There was a moment of half-silence where the sound seemed to linger just above the surface of the water like a light mist. "Yeah. Well, I'm still looking for yours."

"Hey! Gimme a break. It's cold out."

"Yes. Trust me. I'm well aware of that, too."

"Oh. Sure enough. You are, aren't you?"

"Hey!" And she lowered her arm and sunk down in the water.

He was the first to reach the edge of the pool, coming in right between the diving boards. "I won."

"I wasn't racing." She was 20 feet away, in the corner of the pool.

He plopped his wet suit down on the cement ledge. "Loser goes first."

"Fine. But no peeking."

"Of course not."

"I don't trust you."

"You shouldn't."

“Are you sure about this? What if someone sees?”

“Fine. I’ll go first.”

“Really?”

“Turn around. I’m shy.” He placed his hands on the edge of the pool, preparing to lift himself out of the water.

“Oh my gosh!” She dutifully turned away, facing towards the parking lot.

“I’m watching you. Just remember, you’re next. If you look, then so do I.”

She just laughed again. What did that mean? He wondered if she would look. He wondered what it would mean if she did.

He took a last look around—at the parking lot, the houses, the baseball fields, the pool house. It wasn’t a real look, though, because at last he didn’t care who saw. He didn’t even look at Sarah. He merely heard her “oh my gosh” blended in with the sloshing of the water as he exited the pool. For a brief moment, the world seemed like a fuzzy, halogen, chlorinated, adrenalized dream. He made it to the ladder on the diving board before the harsh reality of the night air hit him, a shiver that shriveled his balls and traveled out in a wave to the ends of his fingertips and the top of his head. The world sped up. He didn’t feel the metal steps of the ladder. He seemed to traverse the sandpaper surface of the diving board in two steps. His last thought before hitting the water was, “What sort of diving board maneuver would be most appropriate for this occasion?” It was almost like he was watching himself from the house across the street. He saw his legs flail up, his body torn between a jump and a cannon ball, and then a grand entry as he hit the water, ass first.

For a moment he saw the black lines painted on the pool bottom filtered through the murky green of night-time water, and then he shut his eyes, returning quickly to the surface. Sarah was smiling with an open mouth, looking at him.

“Hey, you were looking.”

“I can’t believe you just did that.” He started swimming towards her. “And I wasn’t looking. I waited for the splash!” She started moving backward along the pool edge, under the first diving board and towards the second, the same board he had gone off. She kept her eyes on his.

He smiled, wondering if she had looked. “You better do this.”

“I am. Don’t look.”

He reached the wall. “Fine. I won’t look.” He wondered if he should look. He wondered what it would mean if he did.

He heard her grunt as she lifted herself up over the pool edge, and heard the water splashing on the cement.

“Oh my gosh. It’s cold.” He could hear the exhilaration in her voice, and he knew she was wearing her mischevious smile. What if someone sees?” He could hear her feet on the cement, splashing slightly in the water that ran down the length of a body exited from the pool. “OK,” she said as he heard her step onto the board. He could hear her feet on the board, the familiar creaks of the board bending as she planted her feet and jumped.

He didn’t look.

He heard the splash, and wondered what she had done. He turned to look, and saw her rise from the water, her back arched and her head tilted backwards so her hair wouldn’t go in her eyes. She dove.

“Good job, Sarah. Five point eight.”

“Did you look?”

“Maybe.”

“You did!”

“Maybe.”

She let out the familiar huff of air. “Uh. I don’t care.” She was swimming towards the corner, and now he was backing along the wall, towards the far diving board where he had left his suit. Sarah reached hers first, and he laughed as she contorted herself trying to put it back on. She stopped for a moment to look at him. “Yeah. You laugh. You’ve never had to put on a wet women’s suit before.”

He grabbed his own suit, putting it on with one fairly easy motion, skipping the briefs. Tying the suit was more difficult. His hands were shaking. Even so, he had to wait several minutes for Sarah to finish. No words were spoken. They silently began swimming back towards the other end of the pool, away from the diving boards.

“I guess we finally did it,” he said at last.

“Yeah. Finally.” He could detect the sadness in her voice. Wordlessly they swam, listening to the sounds of their bodies moving through the water. They reached the edge of the pool, and she propped her elbow up on the ledge. The straps of her swimsuit were twisted, and he could see ivory lines of skin on her shoulders. “I’m gonna miss this. We have some good memories, you and I.”

“Seven years . . .”

“Yeah. Seven years.” She turned and backed out of the pool, sitting on the ledge, looking out across the water. He did the same, sitting directly by her side, leaving his feet in the water. It was late. The moon was gone. He was freezing. Still, he didn’t want to leave.

She stood up, and looked down at him. “Do you want to say it, or should I?”

He leaned forward to stand up, wishing he could always dangle his toes in the water like a little kid. “You can say it,” he said.

“No, I want you to say it.”

He rose and looked at her. “Another safe day at the pool.”

“The last one.”