

Treading Water
by Katherine Hill

We're in a pool, floating, not really swimming because the sharks will notice the kicking motion of our legs. But there aren't actually sharks here, I just feel like there are, feel it on the back of my neck creeping along my skin like a centipede's little legs scurrying to make a home of my scalp. I'm scared of that, too, of bugs and things I can't see making a home of the body I can't even feel comfortable in myself. In reality, there is nothing in the pool except me and two clear inner tubes that I cling to with clenched knuckles and a face that's turning red because I can never be too cautious.

One inner tube escapes my grip and drifts towards the deep end of the pool. It's for my friend, Carly, but she's not coming because she's still in the hospital and won't be released for another week. Her kidney transplant went well, and I'm so relieved and guilty at the same time. I wanted to be her donor, but they wouldn't let me. Something about too many health concerns, that I'm too sensitive to make major decisions, but they ended up finding a donor anyway, and Carly only looked slightly upset with me. I'll make it up to her somehow.

My name sounds even though there's no one here. I don't react; I'm used to it. But then my phone rings, and I'm fairly certain it's actually ringing, so I push myself to the edge of the pool and lift myself out, ignoring the wave of gooseflesh. Scurrying, Mom's name flashing on the surface of my phone, I answer with still wet fingers that leave a water trail behind. Mom tells me it's time to come home, that they're waiting on me to start everything, and I want to say I'm not done floating, but the words lodge in my throat. I say okay.

With a towel around my body and flip flops that squish underneath my feet, I walk to my car, but my definition of walking seems to be different from everyone else's. They move one foot in front of the other at a slow pace. I think I might flutter instead, my feet barely touching the ground. My clothes, normal everyday clothes, sag under the weight of the water, and I sit on the towel to diminish the damage to the seat. The car is old; it used to be my sister's. She gave it to me after she bought something better. It isn't until I'm halfway home that I remember the inner tubes. I can't go back. I'll buy new ones later.

An orange two story house sits in the middle of a run-down street, the green shingles of the roof lopsided in some places from the time it was struck by lightning a few years ago. It leaks when it rains. The grass is yellow, straw-like, covering the entire yard except for a small section separated by more orange bricks where fresh soil covers the ground inside. Nothing is planted yet. That's what we're doing today, planting the garden. It's the anniversary of Dad's death, and this is how Mom memorializes him, fixing the garden he built in an effort to make the house seem nicer than it was.

They're waiting in the front yard already, Mom, my older sister, Riley, and the baby, Tigger. She's four years old now, the baby is, but she'll always be the baby to us because she's the last. Stone-faced, skin almost translucent, I can see right through my family and I want nothing more than to run away screaming, knocking on neighbor's doors to warn them that my mother is keeping secrets, that she's ashamed of me and the way things are.

“Crissy,” Mom says. She hugs me. I stand there. This tradition feels to me like putting out cookies for Santa Claus. When she pulls away, her clothing is marked by moisture where my body met hers.

“I wish you wouldn’t swim with all your clothes on,” she sighs. I want to joke, say that skinny dipping isn’t allowed in suburban pools, but she wouldn’t laugh, just stare at me until my palms overflowed with sweat. We spend the day planting a garden that dies within the month.

The rest of the week passes in a blur. The day before Carly is released from the hospital, I sit at the edge of her bed putting makeup on her. Inside for so long, her skin is too pale for the foundation that used to match, and it looks like she’s wearing a mask. She doesn’t care. She’s still beautiful.

“I missed you a lot,” she tells me.

“I know,” I say. “I’m sorry. You know my mom gets weird this time of year. Can’t really see anyone.” She just nods and I smear her eyeliner and we’re both laughing, a fragile sound that barely reaches the ceiling because we’re afraid of the nurses coming in. Or at least, I am. I fix the liner.

“Was it the garden?” she asks though she knows. She looks solemn. “That’s hard, without your dad, I’m sure. I’m sorry.” I have to stop myself from scoffing at her.

“You do know my dad isn’t dead, right? Mom just pretends he is because she doesn’t want people to know he’s in the crazy ward.” That word, crazy, feels like acid on my tongue, a word my mother uses liberally like tossing pennies into a fountain generative of sympathy.

She looks at the bed and for a moment, the room is still. I wonder if she actually didn’t know. Sometimes I forget for myself that my dad is still among us, gliding room to room in a gray hospital surrounded by high hedges and thick silver fences. He’s been gone for so long that he feels imaginary, like a dream from when I was very small creeping into my consciousness in vague nostalgia almost reminiscent of *déjà vu*. It’s hard to say I even miss him because I only remember the bad days, when voices sounded through the house like thunder and left blood against the walls.

“I know,” Carly murmurs finally, “but it still must be hard without him.” She winces. Suddenly, I am keenly aware of how scratchy her sheets feel, and that she’s in a hospital, too. I want to tell her how sorry I am I couldn’t be her donor and I hope she doesn’t resent me, but I am afraid of watching anger crease the delicate features of her face, of her telling me how much she actually hates me and won’t ever forgive me for what I’ve done. I swallow my thoughts and hide them in my stomach where they churn, pouring sweat onto my hands.

“I hope you come home soon.”

My neighborhood during the summer looks almost exactly the same as it does the rest of the year. There are clouds hogging the sky from the sun, children whose parents make them feel the breeze through locked screen doors. It rains here so much, but the pool keeps me safe, so that’s where I stay, dwindling the days away until Carly can join me too. She makes it home safely but with orders not to swim for at least six months following the surgery. I will swim enough for the both of us. With the pool to myself. People generally don’t come nor do they stay as I arrive.

Dad crosses my mind a lot more lately than he used to. I can't figure out how many years it has been since I last saw him. I don't even remember the last moment together, remember laying eyes on him. Maybe I stared at the ground the entire time as they took him away, packed into the confining grip of a gurney wheeled and squished into an ambulance. It seems almost unfair how we talk about him in the past tense. I'm starting to think I might miss him, that I'm curious what happened to him, and I imagine him sitting blank-faced in thin-cushioned chairs with the light of the sun moving in a line across his irises. But I don't dare to ask. When I see my mother, I hurry past her, evading accusatory stares as though she has access to my thoughts.

When Carly finally can be outside again, we go to the pool. I float inside a metallic turquoise inner tube, arms wrapped around the front. She sits next to the pool inside hers, a shiny purple, pretending to tan her stomach despite the enormous umbrella perched over her. This time I'm actually wearing a swimsuit, so I tuck my legs in as close to myself as I can because my heart beats too quickly when I'm stretched out. She's talking about something I can't remember, and hard as I try to listen, the words don't reach for my ears like they reach for the water. My face swims next to me in a reflection, but the more I watch, the harder it is to believe that I'm not the reflection myself.

"Crissy?" Carly calls. "Are you okay? Are you listening?"

My chest hurts. I don't know what to say so I reply with, "Yes."

She's staring at me with wide eyes. The water feels different around my body, constricting, like a snake wrapping itself around prey, and then I hear a splash that's probably the sharks coming to get me. Water lops against the concrete edges of the pool from all directions. Nothing is wrong, but everything is, because I know it's coming, the yelling. Carly opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

"I'm so sorry," I sob. "I'm sorry I couldn't donate for your surgery. I wanted to; they wouldn't let me. Please don't hate me."

So scared to look at her, I press my palms to my eyes and try to listen to my breathing, to slow it down so it wouldn't move like wind pushing from my lungs. Everything inside me is moving very quickly, sloshing like the water against my body. I love Carly so much. I just want to make her happy, to be the kind of best friend she is to me, but I never seem able to give as much as she does, to be worth as much as she is. Time seems suspended as my heart hurts in my chest, as air leaves in gasps, but when the silence finally does come, the sun is almost down.

"Crissy?" I pull my hands from my eyes, and I can hear normally again. I'm not in the pool anymore, just next to it, my legs dangling in the water. Carly sits next to me, one arm around my shoulder, eyes peering over.

"I'm sorry," I say. She's shaking her head.

"Do you really think I'm upset with you for not giving me a kidney?"

Her tone surprises me. "I don't know."

"Crissy, you're my best friend," she tells me, "not an organ farm. I would never expect you to do that, even if you could. And I've never been mad at you for anything. I'm almost hurt you think I would be."

I can't look at her, so I look at the water, green with twilight. Goosebumps cover my arms and legs. Memories flash through my mind of our friendship, of text messages sent with aggressive periods, of glances and tone shifts and things that went wrong. I thought I remembered being yelled at, getting into trouble, being a terrible friend. But maybe I don't. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe what I remember isn't the truth. In the water, I see the unmistakable ripple of a giant gray fin coming toward us from the deep end.

"I think something is wrong with me," I tell her.

After that day, I begin to notice gaps. Tiny details I can't grasp. Things from my childhood that feel so tangible they can't possibly be made up. But when I go through photos, there are only pictures of my family smiling, of smashed birthday cakes and icing in hair, or water balloon fights and yearbook photos with missing teeth, Dad in a suit after a long day at work, still creasing his face into a weary grin. I'm starting to wonder if he really is dead, but I can't remember ever going to a funeral. Maybe they didn't let me go.

Carly has been my best friend for as long as I can remember. She's lived down the street from me my entire life, knows everything that has ever happened behind my front door. She has always been there for me, I think. Always tried to be.

I start sleeping underneath my bed because it makes me feel more down to earth. My family moves like lions on the other side of my door, always hesitating just before it as though evaluating whether to strike. No one ever comes in and I only go out to talk to Carly. The words of that conversation haunt me through my every day, that something could be wrong with me and I walk through the world as though everything is fine. Only I don't know what I'm supposed to do if everything isn't. Tell my mother? The thought is frightening. So past she walks every day, and the sounds fill me with fear.

That day at the pool, Carly told me in a quiet voice that I need to tell my mom. Not that I should, or that it was a good idea. That I need to, and I consider it every day. There are things moving into my ceiling, I think, small creatures with dozens of legs, and when I watch the wall for too long, I can feel the tickling sensation of their movement against my neck. I put a hole in the wall trying to stop them only to find nothing there. Days seem to pass before I sleep again, but I can't tell my mother because I know how she will react. Glaring, pale-faced, she will tell me I'm making things up, that this family has grieved enough over my father.

In her house, Carly has an impeccable room decorated in colors stolen from the gentle flame of a candle. Everything is silhouettes, tulle hanging in a canopy over her bed, quiet net baskets pinned to the corners stuffed with animals. Her family is just her and her parents, and they are a deep breath inside my lungs when I wander into their home. Something about the way their features soften when they look at me, the way they hug me close to say hello. It feels safe. Her father has kind eyes, a little like my dad, and he tells me he's rooting for me when we meet and it's nice.

In her bedroom, we sit together on the floor. I look at her, try to read her thoughts from the lines in her face, but instead I blurt out my own.

"I want to find my dad."

She wholeheartedly agrees.

The first moments after the thought hung suspended in the air, it sounded crazy. But the more I consider it, the more it becomes a need, the only way to get better. He is in place populated entirely by people who know what to do. They will pull me aside, listen to me talk, give me a way to fix all of the things wrong in my room, in the swimming pool. I go through my mother's file cabinet when she isn't home one day and find the hospital she's hidden him at, a place called North Oaks Hospital, the address in a bold serif font centered at the top. Real. Tangible. I can go. I can go and take Carly with me and my mother won't ever have to know.

We go together in my car, the scent of old rain wafting through the AC. There is no conversation. Rain makes lines across my windows like paper and I fill it with worries about what we will find there. That maybe he's dead, died this morning, and they'll open a door to his graying corpse. Or he's lost completely to the sunset stuck on repeat in his eyes. Maybe he wouldn't recognize me at all. I cannot decide which I think is worst.

When we arrive, the building is inconspicuous, lining the street like any ordinary office building might. I get out of the car and step into a puddle that seems to devour my legs, but the water comforts me like being in the pool does, like I've jumped clothes, shoes and all into shark-infested liquid with nothing to lose. We walk together in sync and I fight to urge to hold her hand. I'm not a child; I don't need guidance. And I don't want her to feel how clammy my hands are.

Past two sets of glass doors is a desk where a man sits wearing scrubs and thick rectangular glasses. He rises stiffly when he sees us, his face emptier than his waiting room. I read it as serious and I can feel my heart throbbing and I wonder if I'm making a mistake coming here. The room glows with the same soft yellow as Carly's, but suddenly, it is thick like a smoke bomb, obscuring my vision and nose. The man asks what we need; I ask about my dad.

"We don't have a patient of that name here," the man tells me. "He was discharged over a year ago."

It isn't long before my mother discovers the trip to the hospital. I expect her anger, but instead receive something almost worse: a complete lack of reaction at all. Maybe she already knew he couldn't be found, that he had disappeared into the world with nothing more than a history legally concealed in the cold metal of a file cabinet. She seems softer, somehow, after that, no longer sighing at me as I past her, no longer walking heavily outside my door. It takes time for me to contemplate the possibility that she simply never acted that way to begin with.

In the hallway, I stop her. I watch her eyes. I try to feel the energy of the room, but it feels flat. "I think something is wrong with me like Dad."

She blinks. "There was nothing wrong with your father, Crissy."

I stare. "There was, he, that's why he was in the hospital. But he's out now, Mom, he's better. He's fixed. Maybe they can fix me, too."

She is silent for a long time. I can see her replaying what I've said, truly coming to terms with the fact that I actually went looking for him. My heart picks up in my chest, warning about the yelling to come, about the punishment and the ridicule, the guilt. She's going to berate me for not accepting her as my sole parent. Something along those lines, something terrible.

“He’s gone, honey. He died a long time ago. It got a lot of attention, but it’s over, and there’s nothing wrong with you.” Her words weren’t harsh. She barely spoke above a murmur and then she walked away and a pack of centipedes followed along the molding of the wall. I want to scream after her that she can’t just lie to her children forever and expect them to never do anything about it. But I say nothing. I let her walk away. I know better than that.

When the day comes where Carly can finally float in the pool with me again, we rejoice with plans to spend the entire day there. We bring snacks, drinks, umbrellas, cute swimsuits, inner tubes larger and shinier than any we’ve brought before. It’s the start of something, we tell ourselves, the start of something better, because Carly is finally safe from what was trying to kill her before, and now only one of us has a determined murderer. I hope she knows how much I love her.

That conversation with my mother planted something in my mind that festered like a mushroom growing over the fallen trunk of a tree. It grew into something overwhelming, finding its way into my head in the most unusual of ways, through the things I saw on the walls, in the time I spent around other people. She had a point talking about my dad. He did something to get attention.

Carly opens a can of soda with one hand, leaving it on the edge of the pool as she climbs into her inner tube, laying across it. I smile at her, warm in my stomach, an empty orange prescription bottle with my dad’s name written across the top closed in my hand. I stash it in my bag and then climb into the pool after my best friend, looping my arms around the edges of my tube, letting my feet glide far from my body. Together, we swim and splash and I never for one second forget the sharks I know are swimming in the deep end of the water, moving in careful circles. Slowly, I inch myself in that direction, afraid but exhilarated. Maybe the only way to get help is to hand myself over.