

The Sound of Water

Gina Chung

Justin had just finished watering his mother's plants when Ellie Park, eighteen years older than when he'd last seen her, walked into his family's convenience store. It was a slow summer day. A fan rotated in the corner sluggishly.

"Can I get a pack of Marlboro Lights?"

He looked up from his phone and squinted at the woman who stood in front of him. She wore sunglasses and tapped her fingernails distractedly against the countertop. A cloud of rose perfume tickled his nose.

"Ellie?" he said. He felt the back of his neck tingle as he said her name, told himself it couldn't be her. He'd last heard she was living somewhere in New York City maybe, or Boston, and that she was married.

She lowered her sunglasses. "Holy shit. Justin? Is that you?" He felt himself blush as he reached for the cigarettes.

"Could you get me a lighter too?" she said, fishing around in her purse. "White," she added, before he could ask her what color.

"On me," he said. "I can't believe you're still buying white lighters."

"Old habits die hard," she said. "And you don't have to do that." But her hands were already closing around the carton of cigarettes and the lighter he had slid across the countertop. He tried to keep his hands from trembling.

He could still remember cupping his hand around the flame of her cigarette in his parents' driveway the night she and his older brother James broke up, right after their high school graduation. He had been walking home from a party, when she called out to him from her beat-up old Camry, her voice a little husky. When he got closer, he could see she'd been crying. "Want to go for a drive?" she said. "I could use some company." She'd offered him a cigarette as well, and he'd taken it, even though Coach Jay would kill him if he knew. The smell of Ellie's rose perfume and the clean, hot flame had made him feel dizzy.

She wore her hair shorter now, and it was tinted a reddish gold color that didn't quite suit her. Her face had narrowed with time, and there was a slight tiredness around her eyes. But she looked good. Better than good. She still had freckles, he noticed, a small scattering of them across her cheekbones. She was the only Korean girl he'd ever seen with freckles.

“What are you doing back in town?” he asked. He wondered, with sudden self-consciousness, how he must look to her, whether she could tell his swimmer’s muscles had softened over the years. He wished he had showered that morning.

“Just seeing my parents,” she said, after a brief pause. “How are yours? How’s James?”

He told her that James was living in San Francisco now, and if her eyes betrayed a hint of interest or regret when he mentioned that James’s wife was pregnant, he couldn’t tell.

“I should get going,” she said. “Tell your parents I say hi.”

He watched as she got into a shiny black Corolla parked outside. He could make out a small form sitting in the front seat, a boy of about eight or nine years old, and as they peeled out of the parking lot, he felt an old, familiar ache behind his ribs. A kid.



“Don’t ever buy a white lighter,” Ellie had said the night he found her in his parents’ driveway. “It’s bad luck. All the members of the 27 Club had them.”

“So why do you have one?” he said, trying to be cool. Ellie’s mere physical proximity made him so nervous his palms were slick with sweat.

“Same reason my lucky number is thirteen,” she said. “I like to get ahead of things. If bad stuff’s going to happen, I want to see it coming.”

He didn’t understand that at all. Wasn’t the whole point of superstitions and the notion of luck in general meant to help you avoid the bad stuff, not invite it in?

There was a lot about Ellie that Justin didn’t understand, including why she’d dated his brother, James, in the first place. James was the golden boy, who got perfect grades without trying, and who everyone liked because he had an easy, arrogant warmth about him. And Ellie was, well, Ellie. She wasn’t unpopular or disliked, exactly, but she was divisive. She worked at the bookstore in the mall, got in trouble for things like refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance, and usually sat alone at lunch, writing poetry or reading thick books by dead philosophers. At a school Valentine’s Day concert once, instead of doing a choreographed dance routine to a Top 40 hit like everyone else, she brought out her guitar and intoned into the microphone, “This is a love song about knowing when to leave,” before launching into an impassioned rendition of “Fast Car.” Afterwards, Justin found the song on YouTube and listened to it over and over again.

As she drove along the highway, the nicotine and alcohol coursing through his veins made him feel the way he did during the first lap of the day. When he cut through the pool like a knife and his arms and legs churned—first slowly, as his body got used to the temperature, and then faster and faster—until the only thing he could hear was the beating of his own heart and the sound of splashing all around him.



When he got home that evening, his mother already knew all about Ellie Park being back in town. “She’s getting a divorce,” his mother said as she heated up kimchi stew for dinner. “That American husband of hers kicked her out. Imagine, at her age, and with a child, too.”

Justin thought sometimes that his mother lived for only three things: Jesus, news about James, and gossip. He eyed the large acrylic painting of Jesus that hung on the wall opposite the kitchen table as he ate. Jesus’s gentle brown eyes, as large and liquid as a deer’s, probed his. “She came by the store today,” he said.

“Is that so?” his mother said, sniffing. “That girl is trouble,” she’d said when Ellie and James began dating. This was not long after Ellie was nearly suspended for turning in an art project at school that involved a 3D model of a vagina composed entirely of tampons.

“She said to tell you she says hi.”

His mother softened, momentarily. “How did she seem?”

“Fine, I guess,” Justin said, heaping more rice onto his plate in order to avoid meeting his mother’s eyes. The last thing he needed was her ferreting out that he had a years-long crush on Ellie Park. “How’s Apa?” he said, lowering his voice.

His father’s back pain had grown worse over the last few months. The doctor, a few weeks ago, had said it was time to consider surgery. That they had waited too long already. He’d said it disdainfully, in a way that had made Justin’s hands ball up into fists inside his pockets. “How much will it cost?” Justin had asked, and the doctor demurred, saying they’d have to consult with insurance first. “Useless,” his mother had muttered in Korean under her breath, and for a moment, Justin had thought she was referring to him, his own uselessness as a son, unable to pay for his father’s medical care and still living at home at the age of thirty-three.

“He’s sleeping,” his mother said.

“We should tell James,” he said.

His mother shook her head. "Don't bother him," she said. "Your brother's going to be a father soon. He's got enough to worry about. We'll manage."

Justin stared at his plate and swallowed the rage he always felt whenever his parents talked about James like he was some far-off dignitary who was too important to be bothered with the minor details of their lives. He wanted to throw his plate against the wall. They were always shielding his older brother from bad news.

After dinner, Justin went upstairs, where he could hear the TV in his parents' bedroom. He walked past the half-open door, hesitated, and turned back. "Joonsuh-yah?" his father called.

A pool of blue light illuminated the wrinkled sheets of his parents' bed, where his father was lying down, propped up by pillows. The room smelled of Tiger Balm and sweat. "How's your back, Apa?" Justin said. His father, grimacing, tried to sit up. He waved Justin away when he reached out to help.

"Get me the remote," he said. Justin handed it to him, and he changed the channel from the news to a fuzzy soccer game. White and black static rained down on the players as they ran around on a yellow-green field. James had offered to buy them a flat-screen, but their father refused to switch, saying he liked his old TV just fine. Justin settled into the armchair by the bed, and they watched the game in silence for a while.

His father scratched his armpit and yawned. "Busy day today?"

"Not really," Justin said. "New shipment came in." He forgot the word for shipment in Korean, and instead used the English word, feeling vaguely guilty as he did so.

His father nodded. They did not discuss what the doctor had said. "We need to sell the store," Justin wanted to say. A realtor had come by a few months ago with a business card, saying they were looking to redevelop the whole block. Justin had thrown the card out, only to retrieve it from the garbage and tuck it away in the back of his wallet a few hours later. He couldn't think of any other way they would be able to pay for the surgery and the care and physical therapy his father would need afterward, even with insurance. But he remembered how much his parents had saved up to start a store of their own, all the hours his father had put into cleaning and organizing it, caring for it like it was a third child, and he didn't say anything.

"Ellie Park came by," he said.

"Who?" his father said.

"Park Aeri," he said, using her Korean name. "Justin's ex-girlfriend."

“Oh, the chatty one,” his father said. “Isn’t she married now?”
“She’s getting a divorce,” he said.

His father snorted. “All your generation knows is divorce,” he said. “You flee at the first sign of trouble or disagreement. Back in our day, a marriage was for life.”

Justin felt the urge to defend his generation to his father, but he was too tired to contradict him. “I’m going to bed, Apa,” he said. He shook out two pain pills for his father from the collection of bottles by his bedside table. His father grunted his thanks, his eyes already back on the TV screen.

In his bedroom, Justin shrugged off his shirt and crawled underneath the covers. He opened his phone to find a text from his best friend Paul. “Drinks tomorrow at McNalty’s. You down?”

Justin had known Paul since they were fourteen. Paul, who used to spend days indoors glued to his gaming console, had recently gone through an extreme workout regimen and, suddenly ripped, was determined to make use of his new body and the attention it got him from women. He was always asking Justin to come out with him, and while Justin was usually too tired from working to say yes, part of him was afraid that one day, Paul would stop asking.

“Sounds good,” he wrote back. “Who’s coming?”

Paul replied instantly, rattling off a list of names that Justin was vaguely familiar with, guys they’d known from school or that Paul knew from work. “I’m hitting the gym early tomorrow if you wanna come,” Paul said.

“I’m good,” Justin wrote back, tired at the thought of it. He knew he should work out, lose the extra band of fat that had collected around his middle in recent years, but the thought of lifting weights, or worse, running like a hamster on a treadmill streaked with other people’s sweat, did not appeal to him. What he really wanted to do was to start swimming again. He missed the pull of water against his body, the quiet blue calm to be found just a few feet below the surface. But memberships at gyms with pools were expensive, and he wouldn’t have the time to make use of one anyway.

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The next morning, he woke up at 6 a.m. It was much too early, but sleep was a lost cause. He went downstairs to make coffee. His mother had already left for the early morning service at church, where she went every day. To his surprise, his father was sitting at the kitchen table, flipping through a stack of bills.

“Are you feeling better?” Justin asked.

His father held one of the bills up. "Why were you hiding these from me?"

"I wasn't," he said, feeling like a child. It was not quite the truth but also not quite a lie. Justin had grown used to hiding things from his father, to protect him, he told himself. Like the time he'd found *GO HOME CHINKS* scrawled across the store's front window and he'd had to scrub it off, or the time a red-faced man wearing a baseball cap had casually taken a piss on the doorstep. Just unbuckled his pants and did it right there, grinning, while Justin was inside at the register. He tried to shrug these incidents off as one-off, random occurrences. He didn't want his father knowing about such things, or worrying about bills they couldn't pay off.

The coffee machine gurgled and spit. His father ran his hands through what was left of his hair. "I'll be in later this afternoon," he said. "You can take the rest of the day off then."

"You should be resting," Justin said.

"I feel fine," his father said.

Outside, the sun was just starting to rise, a line of pale gold on the band of blue that made up the horizon. As he drove to the store, he remembered asking his mother, when he was a kid, why his father was going bald when other dads weren't. His mother had scolded him for being disrespectful, saying, "Your father's hair falls out because he worries so much about you boys." Ever since then, he had been haunted by any signs of his father aging, convinced that it was all his fault. James was never to blame, of course. It was Justin who was the problem, with his poor grades, his awkwardness, his inability to make friends.

Swimming had been a last resort, a suggestion from one of his mother's well-meaning friends at church, to get him to stop holing up in his room playing video games with Paul. And to everyone's surprise, including his own, Justin had taken to swimming. To Coach Jay's frustration, he almost always finished second or third in his regional meets, even though he was the fastest on the team during practices. "You're psyching yourself out," Coach always said. "You can't look over to see what the competition is doing and freak yourself out."

But he had been good enough to get a swimming scholarship to a small private college in central Jersey, not far from home. When he received his fat acceptance packet in the mail, his father's face had flushed with pride, while his mother immediately called all of their relatives in Seoul. Even James, who was rarely impressed by anything Justin did and had gotten a full ride to UPenn, was happy for him. "Way to go, little bro," he said.

That was before his father had slipped and fallen from a ladder while changing a lightbulb at the store, severely injuring his

back. Before the endless procedures and doctor's visits, and interminable calls with insurance that he had to make because his father was incapacitated and his mother was easily overwhelmed by the phone operators' fast, clipped English.

The lightness and buoyancy he had felt at the news that he would be able to go to college after all began to fade, and he woke every morning with a heaviness inside his chest that swimming could not dissipate. He headed off to school that fall with a pit of dread in his stomach that only grew when he realized that he was no longer the fastest swimmer on the team; he would need to work twice as hard to be half as fast as most of the kids there.

In the spring of his freshman year, when his grades began to falter and it became clear that his father would not be able to go back to working at the store anytime soon, Justin sent an email to the registrar's office to let them know that he would not be returning. It was very easy, he realized as he packed his things, to let go of a dream when it had never belonged to you in the first place. Swimming had never been something he was heading toward—it was just a way out, a shortcut to being someone other than James's weird, quiet little brother.

His parents didn't say a word when he came home and told them. His mother's eyes filled with tears, and his father left the dinner table. When he finally called his brother, who was doing a consulting internship in Boston for the summer, he was surprised to find that James was angry. "You can't just give up your own life for theirs," James said.

"Someone has to stay home with them," Justin said, a snap in his voice that he had never used before with his brother. "I'm not like you."

There was a silence. "I'm just saying, think this through," James said finally.

"It's already done," Justin said, before hanging up.

It's temporary, he told himself. He signed up for night classes at the local community college, spent his days at the store attempting to read textbooks that he checked out from the library. But nothing interested him. Economics, which he'd vaguely considered majoring in, seemed incomprehensible to him, as did history, which he'd enjoyed in high school. And one year became two, became three, became five, until he stopped counting.



The next time he saw Ellie Park, it was Friday night, and she was picking a song at McNalty's, while Paul was yelling into his ear about some Tinder girl he was seeing.

It was dark and loud in the bar. McNalty's had been an old-fashioned Irish pub that had languished for years on the corner of Broad and Myrtle, before its owner finally sold it to a Korean businessman, who had tried to turn it into some kind of nightclub-cum-karaoke bar but had, for some reason, kept the name. The back had been converted into private karaoke rooms, from which Justin could hear the occasional rap song or ballad being shouted into feedback-prone microphones.

McNalty's was not the kind of place Justin would have picked out for a night with friends. Not that he had many friends now; he'd lost touch with most of them over the years. The guys who joined him and Paul nodded perfunctorily at him before they began talking among themselves. Justin looked around and caught sight of Ellie. She was wearing dark lipstick and a sleeveless black T-shirt, her phone tucked into the back of her jeans. She propped up her elbows onto the bar to request a song from the bartender, before walking back to her table with her drink, where a pack of her girlfriends were holding court.

"Dude, you're not even listening to me," Paul said.

"Sorry," Justin said. "Long week." But Paul had caught where Justin was looking. He whistled. "Ellie looks good," he said.

"Didn't know you were into older chicks."

"She's barely two years older than us," he said. But Ellie had always given off an air of being much older than everyone else, just in the way she tended to look right through guys she thought weren't worth her time.

Paul gave him a sly look. "How long's it been, bro? You get any since you and what's-her-name broke up?"

The last girl Justin had seen regularly, Melody, had broken up with him via text a few months ago, after she had gotten back together with her ex. He'd felt a blip of sadness, before feeling numb and somewhat relieved. "Melody. And none of your business."

"So no then," Paul said, sighing.

The first few bars of an eighties synth melody came on, and Ellie squealed. She ran out onto the small stage at the center of the bar, dragging a friend with her. "Her hair is Harlow gold," Ellie sang into the mic, swaying a little. "Her lips sweet surprise." A crowd began to gather around them. Justin felt slightly anxious, the way he always did when someone sang in public, but Ellie seemed at ease with the attention. An errant spotlight danced off her shoulders and collarbones as she sang.

"Didn't she used to go out with your brother?" Paul said. "Why'd they break up?"

"I don't know," Justin said, his voice testy. Ellie had told him, in the car that night, that James said it wouldn't make sense for

their relationship to continue on into college. That they had diverging futures ahead of them, because he was heading to UPenn, while she was taking a year to continue working at the bookstore and figure out what she wanted to do. “I need to be with someone who has a plan for their life,” he’d told her. It was just like James, Justin thought, to try and five-year-plan his way out of an actual breakup conversation.

“Go talk to her already,” Paul said.

In the end, it was Ellie who approached their table. “Hey, boys,” she said, dropping her phone by accident. Justin picked it up for her, catching a quick glimpse of her lockscreen. It was a photo of Ellie and her son, sitting side by side. He had light brown, almost blond hair and light brown eyes, but he had her smile, and her freckles.

“You were good up there,” Justin said as he handed her the phone. “Like, really good.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m going out for a smoke if you want to come.”

“Uh, sure,” Justin said, turning to Paul, who was suddenly deeply engrossed in his phone.

“You all go ahead,” Paul said. “Good seeing you, Ellie.”

“What’s up with him?” Ellie said to Justin once they were outside. It was still warm out, but after the cold air-conditioning inside, the balmy night air felt like a relief.

“He’s got some Tinder date he’s meeting up with,” Justin said.

Ellie lit a cigarette. “You want one?” she said.

“A Tinder date?” he said, confused.

She laughed. “A cigarette.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m good.” He tried not to stare as she took a drag and closed her eyes, savoring the taste of the smoke. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, and he felt a jolt in his chest. “I promised my kid I’d quit,” she said.

“What’s his name?” Justin said.

“Quinn,” she said. Justin wasn’t conscious of having made a face until she burst out laughing again. She had beautiful teeth. “I know, I know. White-ass name. I don’t know what I was thinking, but my husband—I mean, my ex—he liked it. It’s a family name, on his mom’s side.”

“It’s a nice name, just not one I’d expect from you,” he said.

“Yeah, well,” she said, her smile fading. “A lot of life is doing things you’d never imagined you’d do, until you’ve done them and you’re like, ‘I guess it’s too late to change that now.’” The red light of the neon sign above their heads illuminated her cheekbones and made the shadows of her eyelashes even darker.

She asked him how things were going with the store, his parents. He told her a version of the truth—that his father had nev-

er fully recovered after his fall, that they had asked him to come home. It was easier to tell this version of the story, a version in which he came home because he had been asked to, not because he had been too scared to try and fight to stay at school, to insist on his right to stay.

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding genuinely sad. "I was convinced you were headed for the Olympics."

"Nah," he said. "I was never that good."

"I'm probably moving back here too," she said. "Isn't it funny? So many of us were so desperate to get out of this town, to make something of ourselves. To have better lives than our parents, because that was the point of it all, right, of them coming here in the first place? And then we wind up back here again." She was drunker than she had seemed in the bar. She crossed her arms and squinted up at the neon sign.

"I'm sorry about the divorce."

"I guess everyone's heard by now," she said. "It's fine. People get divorced all the time."

"What happened?" he asked her.

"Oh, you know. The usual. We got tired of each other, hurt each other. He found someone new. Younger, easier. Said he wanted to give us both a chance to start over, to live our own lives."

"I'm really sorry," he said.

"Oh, shut up," she said. Then her eyes widened. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm drunk."

"It's okay," he said. "That was a dumb thing to say."

"No, it wasn't," she said. "You were being nice. Nice is good." She began to cry then, looking away from him, her lit cigarette in her right hand while she dabbed at her eyes with her left wrist. He wanted to reach out and touch her, comfort her somehow, but he just stood there like an idiot.

"You know I haven't talked to any of those girls in there for two years?" she said. "They were all bridesmaids at my wedding."

"Why not?" he said.

"Too scared to tell them about how everything was going wrong in my life," she said. "I didn't even tell my parents what was happening, until it was all over. Isn't that awful?" She was standing so close to him now that he could smell her rose perfume, see the smudges of eyeliner that had collected below her eyes.

"I don't think so," he said. "There are a lot of things we don't tell people." He thought of how his mother had told him not to tell his father the worst of what the doctor had said—that while

it was the best course of action for addressing the chronic pain, there was a small chance that the surgery could impair his ability to walk forever. That there was also a chance the procedure wouldn't do much for his back at all. He thought of all the times he had chosen silence, of everything he had never said or that had never even occurred to him to say—to his parents, to James, to himself.

“Will you take me home?” she said, after a moment. “I probably shouldn't be driving.”

The drive to her parents' house didn't take very long, but Justin was hyperconscious of every bend and turn in the road. Ellie rolled down the window, and they listened to the chirp of night insects, the rush of other cars. A passing moth tried to come inside the car, and Ellie caught it in her hands and pushed it gently out the window.

“My mom used to tell me that moths were the ghosts of little kids,” she said. “I believed her too, for the longest time. I tried to save them all. Cried when they flew into lamps or candles.”

“My mom told me that the tooth fairy wouldn't give me money for my teeth, because she didn't come to Korean kids.”

“My sister told me that if you stand in the middle of a dark room at 3 a.m. and throw a pencil over your shoulder, you won't hear it land, because the ghost behind you catches it.”

“James used to tell me that they found me under a bridge when I was a kid. Said if I was bad they'd send me back there.”

“James said that? What a jerk,” she said, laughing.

They slowed to a crawl in front of her parents' house. He wondered how many times James must have dropped her off after dates. If they'd had to park farther away first, before she had to sneak in.

“Thanks,” she said. “Sorry I'm a bit of a mess tonight.” She gave him a half smile, like she wasn't sure whether to be embarrassed or not.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “It's okay.” She was so close he could see the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. He wished, not for the first time in his life, that he was someone different, someone like Paul or James, who would know exactly what to say next.

He felt her hand against his face. Her fingers were cold. Her thumb traced the edge of his cheekbone as she moved his hair away from his face tenderly, as he imagined she might do to her son. “Take care of yourself, Justin,” she said.

She climbed out of the car. Just before she shut the door, she turned around, peered into the window. “It's your life, you know,” she said. “Even if it doesn't feel like it is. Even if it feels

like you owe your family everything. You're the one who's living it." She said it sternly, almost angrily.

"I know," he said.

He watched her walk inside. A curtain moved in the front window, and he saw two small eyes peek out to stare at him—the kid, waiting up for her. They regarded each other solemnly, until the boy closed the curtains.

The forecast on the radio threatened rain, but the skies stayed clear. He took the highway home, passing shuttered businesses, empty mall parking lots. He passed a church with a sign that said, "COME AS YOU ARE. YOU CAN CHANGE INSIDE." He passed an anti-abortion billboard that said, "CHOOSE LIFE. PRAY PRAY PRAY." He passed a McDonald's with a sign that said, "MCRIB LEAVING US SOON. ACT NOW."



The next day, he woke up early again. He stretched, felt a dry sourness in his mouth, and got up to pee and brush his teeth.

Downstairs, his father was sitting at the kitchen table. "You got in late last night," he said.

"Just met up with some friends," Justin said as he turned on the stove, reached for a skillet, and swirled oil onto its surface. He cracked two eggs into a bowl, whisking them together before pouring them into the skillet, and watched as the circle of yellow and white coalesced into soft curds. It was James who had taught him how to make scrambled eggs, who had in fact made them for dinner often, on days when both their parents had to work late. For all his superiority, James was a patient teacher, and he had shown Justin how to crack two eggs with one hand.

"It's good to enjoy time with your friends, while you're young," his father said.

Justin remembered what Ellie had told him last night. How his life was his own. But what about his father's life, or his mother's? Didn't they have lives of their own as well?

He watched as his father stood up slowly to clear the table of his own breakfast. "Apa," he said. "We need to sell the store."

"What are you talking about?" his father said.

"Your back," he said. "We can't pay for the surgery otherwise." His father didn't turn around. Outside, a cardinal landed, with a scarlet shudder, in one of the trees in their backyard, where his mother had hung a bird feeder. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a cardinal.

"Don't you think I know that?" his father said, his voice suddenly low and angry. He tossed the dishes into the sink and ran

water over them. “You think it’s so easy to give up on something. You have no idea what it’s like to start from nothing, to build something solid, only to have to give it all away.” A fork jangled to the ground, and although Justin made a move to pick it up, his father reached for it first, then winced as he braced himself against the counter.

“Apa, the doctors said—”

“I know what the doctors said.”

Justin sat there, frozen, as he realized that his father, the man he had never seen so much as shed a tear, even when his own parents had died, was trying not to cry. He stood up. He placed a hand on his father’s shoulder and felt conscious of just how much taller he was now than him. He still remembered the day he first noticed that he had grown past his father’s height, and how being able to look down at the top of his father’s balding head had made him feel as though he were doing something wrong.

“A man should be able to provide for his family,” his father said finally. They were both staring at the cardinal now, which flitted from branch to branch.

“You have,” Justin said. He cleared his throat to get the squeak out of it. “But you have to let us take care of you now.”



The drive to the store usually took around ten minutes. But just before the turnoff, Justin swung his car left, flying past the Dunkin’ Donuts and the auto body shop where his father and the owner used to swap friendly jabs with one another and haggle over repair costs. Almost without realizing it, he found himself driving toward his high school.

Dew darkened the toes of his canvas sneakers as he walked through the grass to get to the side door by the gym. It was a Saturday, so he was surprised to find the door was open. A custodian, maybe, who’d forgotten to lock up.

He walked up and down the empty varnished halls, marveling at how little the school had changed since he’d been a student. He even caught glimpses of his own blurred face in the framed photos of sports teams that lined the main hallway. In one, he was holding a trophy that proclaimed him the first-place winner in the one-hundred-yard butterfly, the year his school had hosted the North Jersey regional meets. It was one of the few times he’d won first place in anything.

The pool, a glowing blue rectangle bisected by a streamer of yellow and black flags, was just as he remembered it. Lines of

light from the water reflected off the walls. It was odd having an entire pool to himself, without the sounds of a whistle blowing in the background or of splashing. He sat down, slipped his shoes off, and dipped his feet in the water. The cold enlivened him, the smell of the chlorine activating a part of himself he had long forgotten.

He closed his eyes and remembered how his cheeks and shoulders had stung for hours after that win, from all the smiling he'd done for photos and the congratulatory back slaps he'd gotten from his teammates and Coach Jay. How his parents had stood up in the bleachers to cheer him on, and how he could hear his father, loudest of all, shouting his name as he raced toward the end. But most of all, he remembered how his arms and legs had seemed to lengthen as he swam. How he'd felt his pulse quicken, then slow, until the only sound he could hear was his own breath as it took on the rhythm of the water, rising and falling, again and again.