Swimming Lesson

My first swimming lesson took place at a neighbor’s pool. I can’t remember the name of my teacher, or if there was anyone else around.

There I was, possibly six or seven-years-old, anticipating the joy of learning to swim. Sunlight warmed my skin, and reflected off the surface of the water similar to how it did off mother’s mirrored sunglasses. The wave-dappled pool appeared harmless and inviting.

I had none of those cute pink floaties around my arms. No life jacket snapped snug around my chest. It was just me with my goose bumps and stork legs looking over the rim of the pool at the shallow, textured steps. I marveled at the patterns of light on the steps, their shimmered illusions drawing from my fairytale imaginings.

But fairytales, like soap bubbles, can easily pop. This man—my teacher—seized me by my armpits, and heaved me, arms flapping, into the deep end.

Maybe I already knew the fundamentals, maybe not. What was there to know? Kick. Paddle. Tread water. Try not to breathe it.

What I didn’t know, and what I was about to quickly learn, was how long I could hold my breath. My teacher had only begun the lesson. He jumped in next to me and pulled me under the water without warning. No, “Hold your breath.” No, “You’re all right, keep paddling.” One second I was gasping from the initial plunge, and the next, I was sucking in chlorine as he dragged me down to the deepest part of the pool.

Once we reached the bottom, he folded his legs and anchored me against him. As it grew harder to breathe, panic triggered my fight response. One thought surged through my mind: I am not going to die.

I kicked. I flailed. I watched bubbles leave my mouth, but I couldn’t get away. His hold was smothering. I kept twisting away from his slippery skin, but my strength couldn’t match his. I thought he was trying to kill me. It would be easy for him. He had bigger lungs and I was running out of air.

As seconds dissolved—along with most of my bubbles—he let me go. I clawed my way upward, terrified he would haul me back down again. The sky seemed to stretch farther and farther out of reach, and it felt like the water had the consistency of jelly. Once I broke the surface, I sputtered and coughed until I could suck in a lungful of air. I pushed the air back out in a shriek, something my mother later told me I was known for.

The man surfaced behind me, splashing me quiet. “Now you know how to swim,” he said.

He was right.