Too many kids bobbled and raced in the cloudy over-chlorinated water for anyone to notice that Jillanna’s tiny brother, Elliot, had stumbled in over his head. The crush of swimmers included Jillanna, who, on most hot days, played Marco Polo until her eyes burned and her fingertips bled from hanging on the concrete lip of the pool. The lifeguard had climbed down from his stand to spritz Bactine on Jillanna’s puckered scrapes. Someone’s mother screamed.

Jillanna turned to see her friends humped and hanging on the side in the deep end, their shoulders pink from the high sun, their faces pale with horror. They reminded her of shrimp cocktail clinging to a bowl and she laughed at the image in her head, even when she knew that whatever was happening wasn’t funny.

From where she stood at the lifeguard stand, she scanned the lawn area on the other side of the shallow end. Her eyes focused on her mother who was holding Elliot to the side of her face, his chest against her ear, his head cocked like a rag doll. Two pale limp legs dangled from his Superman swim trunks. Her mother’s expression crumpled and she felt her heart clench. A different lifeguard pried Elliot away from her mother. A group of women surrounded the scene, blocking Jillanna out.

The sound of an ambulance from the Washington Street Station grew until Jillanna could feel the screeching vibration inside her chest. She looked down at her fingertips. The sting of the antiseptic was the last feeling she could remember for weeks to come.

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The sweltering days of July trudged into August. The funeral over, Jillanna’s father had gone back to work. She spent a lot of time sitting beside her mother on the scratchy brown couch in the den. Neighbors visited, grown-ups. At first, she suffered through the weeping, and then found it interesting, the way her mother’s friends’ twisted the shapes of their faces to match her mother’s, smiled when she smiled, sunk their quivering mouths into a container for the next round of tears. Through all of the dabbing of make-up, Jillanna was in charge of moving the Kleenex box from one woman to the next. But after days of this, the condolences be-
came more and more faint to her as she grew restless cooped up in the house. Sentiments like, *we will never know why something like this could have happened and there is simply no explanation for such a horror* trilled through the room like the tinny chime of the brass clock on the mantel that punctuated the dull hours.

Jillanna knew the reason. It was simple. Blistering temperatures had sent everyone to the pool. Kids swarmed. No one had been paying attention. No one. Including that lifeguard. Elliot had been as invisible then as he was now. But of course she couldn’t say anything about that out loud.

Day after day, she watched as her mother shuffled toward the ringing doorbell, the sympathetic friends and their foiled plates of food, as if assurances could save them all from suffocating with guilt. At the end of each afternoon, Jillanna cleaned up the used tissues, plucking up white wads streaked with red lipstick, reminding her of the blood from her fingertips on the gauze that day at the pool.

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In the time between visitors, Jillanna shadowed her mother through rooms of the house made dim by closed curtains. She hardly spoke for fear that her questions would split her mother apart. Sometimes Jillanna coughed into the gloom to test her voice, to snatch at her mother’s attention; she wasn’t the only kid in the world who ever bothered a lifeguard for First Aid. But her mother just paced, eyes straight ahead.

Now and then, Jillanna expected to see Elliot run down the hall, a toy airplane in hand, his lips sputtering busy motor sounds, spittle flying. Elliot had made her mother laugh. He made them all laugh, a cute kid, the kind you see in magazine ads for cereal.

Jillanna only broke from her mother’s side to eat ice cream on the back porch with her father after dinner, enjoying the cool burn of the back of her throat, the nerve freeze that shimmied to her brain. At night, she slept alone in her room. There, she dreamt of clear blue water, shallow and lapping on white sand. In tidal pools, among crusted rocks, she saw her mother’s feet, the mauve polish of her mother’s neat toenails shimmering among pearl-like pebbles. Beside them were Elliot’s chubby white feet wavering in water and sunlight like tiny sea anemones. Jillanna searched, looking for her own feet, the polish on her own toes, and woke when she could not find them. She’d lie awake until morning wondering if she, or any of them, could ever be happy again.
One morning, with little summer left before school began, the air in the den felt sluggish from heat and perfume. Though the number of visitors had dwindled, women still floated in and out of the room with the dust. Pleasantries limped along. How many ways could they make excuses for what had happened to Elliot? Jillanna ached for one of them to tell the truth.

As she sat next to her mother on the brown couch, she tried to remember a normal summer day. She longed for friends, afternoons spent at the pool, and the soothing beams of sunlight that soaked their backs when they stretched out on their tummies, the sides of their faces pressed to the hot cement. She missed the sound of Elliot's troll-like voice mimicking pop songs from the kitchen radio and getting the words all wrong, but mostly, she missed the life she used to have, and that made her want the things she wanted even more. She felt the weight inside her chest push against her lungs, in the way she felt when attempting to blow into a tight party balloon. Desire coupled with the dense air in her throat, forming a clump of words that exploded.

"It was not my fault!" Jillanna shouted into a thick pause in the ladies' conversation.

Her mother's friends set down their teacups or brushed crumbs from their laps. They would not meet her gaze as she sought their confirmation. Jillanna's mother wrapped her arm around Jillanna's shoulders, pulling her close and stroking her temple too hard. The clasp of her mother's charm bracelet tugged a wisp of hair on the base of Jillanna's neck, skin pulled tight by her ponytail. It caused a sharp repetitive sting that, strangely, Jillanna enjoyed. At least, her mother was touching her again.

"Of course, it was not your fault," said Vanessa Greene from the floral high back chair that blocked the window.

Vanessa Greene lived at the other end of town. It was the first time the woman had visited having been on vacation with her grandchildren when Elliot died.

From across the carpet, Vanessa Greene looked into Jillanna's eyes. "You miss your brother, and we are all very sad, but it is absolutely no one's fault."

Jillanna pulled away from her mother. She nodded, but the problem was she did not miss her brother as much as she thought she should. She remembered that he had cried in the night as a baby, waking her up, and that her parents had hissed at each other in the room next door. She had made sand drizzle castles for him to destroy last summer at the beach. She liked the way
the droopy ears of his fuzzy wolf cub hat bounced up and down as he struggled to walk in deep snow. Sometimes she pushed him around the neighborhood in the stroller so that her mother could finish a client’s account, but other than that, Jillanna hardly spent any time with Elliot. She went to school and played with friends her own age. Earlier in the summer, when her mother offered her rides to the pool, Jillanna chose to walk, preferring the open air to the stuffy car and the smell of peanut butter smeared on her little brother’s car seat. She didn’t really know him. She should have taken those rides in the car. Maybe he hadn’t been gone long enough for her to truly miss him. She was more concerned about how Elliot’s death had changed them, their family. She was sure that was true. But this realization was something else she could never say.

When Vanessa Green stood to leave the den, Jillanna offered to walk the neighbor to her car, wanting to be near the woman who understood her.

Outside, Vanessa Greene turned to her and said, “You understand that it wasn’t your fault. You do understand that, don’t you?” The woman seemed to need for Jillanna to believe her. “You’re just a child,” she added.

Jillanna nodded. She felt a mouse-like curl in her throat. She bent her head and swallowed. The lady took her hand.

On the sidewalk by the curb, Vanessa Greene placed two palms on the top of Jillanna’s head, lightly, as if forming a cap made of feathers. “Help your mother, Jilly. She needs you.” Then the touch was gone.

Jilly. Only her closest friends called her Jilly, not grown-ups. As she watched Vanessa Greene drive down the street in a VW Beetle the color of sky, Jillanna wondered how the woman could know her so well. It was as if Vanessa Greene could see into her heart like an angel.

The sun floated down through the branches of the Sycamores that lined the street and contentment slipped around Jillanna’s shoulders. The heat of August rose from the sidewalk to caress her bare legs. She would have liked to walk to Carla’s house, to see her best friend, but she knew that Vanessa Greene was right; her mother needed her.

When she returned to the ladies and her mother on the couch, the room seemed brighter. When one by one, the visitors left, Jillanna hardly noticed. She was thinking about the way Vanessa Greene’s palms had cupped the top of her head, fleetingly, almost as if it hadn’t happened, when her mother turned—one quick motion—and slapped Jillanna across the face with a dry flat hand.
Jillanna’s cheek stung. She realized there were only the two of them in the room.

Her mother said, “Don’t you ever shout out like that again when grown-ups are talking. Ever!” She pushed the words out between her teeth. “Do you hear me?”

Jillanna’s surprise overrode any tears. She nodded. She had never been hit in her life, had only seen slapping on television. She looked down and saw how her mother twisted her hands on her lap.

“How could you embarrass me like that on top of everything else?” her mother asked. “As if I had actually blamed you in private.”

Then, Jillanna knew. Her mother had blamed her in private. If she had not distracted the lifeguard for attention that she didn’t really need, Elliot might have been rescued. Did her father think that, too? Did they all think that?

Her mother left the room without apology, shutting the door, closeting the entire incident. Jillanna felt perfectly calm. Elliot’s death was not her fault. She had Vanessa Greene on her side: the kind words, the understanding words, and that touch on her hair to carry her through the day.

Jillanna didn’t know if she was meant to stay in the den or if she was free to leave. But go where? To her room? The kitchen? The house was as airless and dark as a church.

She scooted to the edge of the couch and straightened her spine the way she had seen Vanessa Greene sit on the edge of her chair. She attempted the graceful pose of Vanessa Greene’s hands folded still on her lap.

“You mustn’t worry, Evelyn,” she said in her fake grown-up voice to the mother she pretended still sat in the room. “Your behavior is completely understandable. It’s due to the shock and the grief.” Her face flushed. What if her mother was listening on the other side of the door?

The backs of Jillanna’s thighs felt hot and itchy on the rough couch and she thought again about her friends at the pool. No one had forbidden her from going back there. These last couple of weeks her mother mostly ignored her as if she were a pet cat, expected only to appear now and then. Jillanna’s father worked until long after dark. Perhaps her parents thought that she wouldn’t want to return to the scene of the accident, but she did. She did want to go back to the pool. She did.

She decided to leave the door of the den closed, as her mother had left it. She pushed Vanessa Greene’s chair aside and slipped out the window. She pressed her face through the foliage of the prickly hedge in front of their house. All clear. She raced across
the sunburned lawn to the sidewalk. Walking seven blocks to the public pool, she felt as if it were the first day of school vacation instead of nearing the last.

When Jillanna reached the main gate, she was surprised to find it latched. A sign read, “Closed for Repairs.” Jillanna thought it strange that no repairmen worked or lingered. They must be off at lunch. The gate swung inward with a slight push, pulling Jillanna inside its fence of protection.

The swimming pool stretched out blue and sleek. Cicadas squealed raspy songs from the trees. Crickets chirped secretly in the grass. Mourning doves cooed from inside the shrubs. Jillanna imagined they were all trying to tell her that she was welcome here. She had never noticed these sounds before. For her, the swimming pool at the park had not been about peace and quiet, but friends wearing out voices that had been muted in schools all winter. There was nothing like being in the center of the pack: the shouting, the confusion, the endless games of chase where you fought to be noticed, to be part of something, just enough to matter, but not enough to be “it.”

So where was everyone since the pool was closed? Did they go to the mall without her? In the weeks past, Jillanna thought it was strange that none of her friends had called or come to see her after the funeral, although plenty of their mothers had passed along messages using words their children would never say.

Now, with the insects and birds, Jillanna found that she didn’t mind being there alone. The hot sun shone on the flat surface of the pool. She had always wanted to be the first to cannonball and break the transparent gloss of water, but children had rules and routines, like adults; they played “1-2-3 shoot” right up to the edge. The older kids never let Jillanna win. Today was her day.

Under her denim shorts and sleeveless blouse, Jillanna’s white cotton camisole and underpants were damp with sweat. Her skin itched where her clothing had sharp tags: on her neck and at the back of her waist. The water looked cool. She hadn’t put on her suit that day; why would she have? But it didn’t matter. She was there alone. Jillanna dropped her shorts and shirt to the concrete.

As she approached the rim of the pool, she saw a mass of putty grey undulating the surface near the basket filter. It was a dead frog. Its arms and legs, spattered with black spots, created the shape of the letter X. Three limp dragonfly frames also floated, brushing up against the underbelly of the frog. Jillanna felt sick. The tea she had sipped all morning roiled in her gut and burbled into the acidic sting which now clung to the back of her throat.
The clock from town hall two blocks away struck one. She figured the repairmen would soon return from the mid-day break. She had the chance, now, to plunge into the deep end and feel the weight of water on her skin press against her chest and thighs as she held her breath and counted up to twenty-seven Mississippi’s when she knew she would need to surface and replenish her pounding lungs. She imagined how her hair would spread like jellyfish tentacles and how her waist high panties would buckle and fold against her bellybutton, an outie, just like Elliot’s.

Elliot.

How afraid he must have felt as he waved his tiny white arms and struggled against layer after layer of unrelenting water? Had he hit his head on someone’s elbow—Billy Masiello’s, Addie Schaeffer’s, or Carla’s—and been knocked instantly unconscious? Had they all swum over his dead body like the feeder goldfish at the pet store? Jillanna began to imagine that instead of worrying about her raw fingers, she had taken Elliot to the baby pool to play with his boats. But it was too late for wishes. She faced the pool, wanting to feel the pressure of the water against her limbs, wanting to push all of the water away.

She loosened her hair from its ponytail, closed her eyes, and dove over the insect detritus and dead frog whose bloated form would haunt the rest of her dreams that summer and into the school year.

She dove again and again, each time extending the length of her held-breath: twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, and then finally stopping at thirty-five. Thirty-five Mississippi’s. Just wait until she showed her friends.

She swam to the edge and held the top of her body out of the water to rest. Maybe one day, she would count underwater to thirty-five Mississippi’s in front of Vanessa Greene, or maybe it would be her mother there, who would place one hand softly on Jillanna’s cheek, smile down at her as Jillanna gripped the side of the pool. Her mother would say, “Jilly, that was amazing.”

She pulled herself up and over the lip of the pool to stretch her body on the warm cement. She lifted her chin to face the sun.