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Tiny Planets

NORA, IMPATIENT, IS STUCK BEHIND A PAIR OF WOULD-BE SWIMMERS AT THE check-in counter of the Dogwood Hills Indoor Aquatic Center—the woman broad-shouldered, Amazonian, her hair shorn close, her trench coat a beige waterfall; the young man darker-skinned than the woman, outfitted in shark-festooned swim trunks and a mesh t-shirt.

“I know he looks older,” the woman, maybe his mother, says in a tight, smiling voice to the attendant seated behind the counter. “He’s tall. But really he is just fourteen.”

While the attendant sorts out the Parks and Rec entry fee categories—one adult and, grudgingly, one child—the tall kid shifts back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“If I had a driver’s license,” he says in a sing-song, “I’d prove my age to you. But I’m not *old* enough to have a license.” He laughs at his own joke.

Nora sees the woman throw him a look—keep quiet, honey, would you?—and he stops laughing abruptly, scrunches a corner of his swim trunks with one hand. Well, maybe he is younger than he looks. Just fourteen? Anything between Zane’s seven and the age of majority is just a guessing game to Nora.

Though it isn’t like her to call off work at the last minute, she has cleared her entire morning to carve out plenty of time to talk to the elementary school principal. Now, having already met with Dr. Maynard, she has more time than she knows what to do with—so what difference does it make, the waiting? Besides, languishing in line is a welcome break from thinking about the last twenty-four hours. She’s still all wound up. Okay: angry. Angry, okay? (Andrew is probably sitting at the dining room table right now, biding time till the start of some baggy, late-morning conference call, his legs stretched forward, his fingers hovering over the laptop keys, rubbing the letter “r” with a distracted finger.) Earlier that morning she hadn’t been able to bring herself to look at him directly, or he at her, while getting Zane ready for school. She is surprised she had been able to sleep at all after last night’s fight with Andrew, who spent the night on the pull-out in the living room.

The woman at the check-in counter is fumbling with her wallet now. The tall teenager studies his toes. He wears a brilliant stud in each ear. Fourteen and out of school on a Wednesday morning—there's got to be a story there, thinks Nora. Well, who knows? Maybe he's homeschooled. All kinds of kids are homeschooled. From all kinds of demographics. The boy looks back at Nora then—cherub-cheeked, gazelle-eyed—and she drops her gaze. Yeah, he *is* fourteen.

Last night Nora and Andrew initially fought about Zane's teacher, Ms. Morris. (Ms. Morris: the heart-shaped face. The bright and commanding voice. Howard grad, teaching fellow in D.C. And now first grade in their rebounding public school, in their rebounding Southern city. So things weren't going the way Ms. Morris had imagined—too bad! Welcome to adulthood.) "The school is lucky to have her, and so is Zane," Andrew had said, standing at the kitchen island, dicing cucumbers for dinner even though Zane refuses to eat cucumbers—too cold, and way too slimy. Jesus, doesn't Andrew know that by now?

Finally! At the counter at last and training a baleful eye on the attendant, Nora zaps her Parks and Rec pass and heads into the locker room. It is sallow and dank and clammy as always. A passel of jiggly-armed water aerobics matriarchs steam in the mildewy showers as Nora changes out of her clothes. She balances on one flip-flop and then the other while ramming each leg through the black spandex of her new one-piece.

Nora had also loved Ms. Morris—at first. But there had been problems early on, even if Andrew hadn't noticed. The first sign of trouble: Zane started complaining of headaches at school pickup a couple weeks into the school year. One Friday morning—it was Pancakes-For-Breakfast, that's how she knows it had been a Friday—Nora reached to feel Zane's forehead. Glumly removing her fingers with one syrup-sticky hand, Zane said, "Ms. Morris *talks* too loud. She has too many rules." He licked each of his fingers then, one after the other. "Ms. Morris doesn't *listen* to me."

And then yesterday. The October parent-teacher conference. Disturbing the other children, said Ms. Morris. Demanding, disruptive, oppositional, she said. "Let's hope for all our sakes she sticks around," Andrew had sighed last night, which is how the fight had started.

In the locker room, Nora showers off in the sole vacant stall—diligently not looking at the nest of hair clinging to the drain—and thrusts open the heavy door to the pool room with both hands. Arms slashing, bodies torpedoing and gliding and churning, back and forth, attacking the water—in every lane but one. There,

in the right-most lane of the pool, the out-of-school-on-a-Wednesday teenager swishes slowly. He sinks, arms stretched wide like Jesus inviting all humanity, and then he twists languidly to the surface. Again and again. In the same lane, his mother (young grandmother?—possibly) swims on her stomach slowly, methodically, sweeping the water aside, head out, barely ruffling the surface. The lane to their left is the only one that isn't already doubled-up with swimmers. It is inhabited by an old man with mole-speckled shoulders wearing a snorkeling mask. His legs scissor palely below his sagging trunks, his pectorals slide toward oblivion. Nora dangles her legs in the pool—the water is the temperature of a lemonade pitcher left sweating for hours on the kitchen counter—and waits for the old man to reach the far end and return.

Homeschooling is not unreasonable, it's *not*, Nora had shouted at Andrew last night. What's the alternative? So much chaos in that classroom. There's nothing wrong with advocating for our son. If not us, then who? And if homeschooling is such a fucking horror—I never said it would be easy for either of us—then we need to work more closely with the school, okay? We need to advocate for Zane.

"Just try for once to see it from her perspective," Andrew had said. "From Ms. Morris's point of view."

Ms. Morris, *Ms. Talia-Fucking-Morris!* Nora turned her red face toward the kitchen ceiling, in the direction of the judging heavens. Why do you keep defending her? Ms. Morris doesn't understand—Zane is not just *bright!* He needs someone who *gets* him. He'll start hating school, and that's a point of no return. I know that homeschooling is the nuclear option. But it's time to consider it—the school is failing him. We can do better. I'll pitch in however I can for the rest of the year, okay? Isn't this the whole point of your three-quarter-time schedule—to be flexible? Isn't that the fucking point? This is Zane's *life* we're talking about. Why don't you fucking get it?

"Just try for once to see from *anyone* else's perspective," Andrew said.

The cookbook: the road-trip-through-America tome, a Christmas gift from Andrew's younger sister when they were first engaged. The cookbook, flying through the air.

Nora was the one who threw it. At Andrew. It hit his chest and tumbled lamely to the floor. She threw it. Because of what he said. Because of the look on his face.

When the old man surfaces at last beside Nora's toes, she smiles and gestures to the left side of the lane, a silent *may-I-share?* "Of course!" the old man crows.

"The water's marvelous. I promise not to kick you." Nora returns his laugh half-heartedly before slipping into the water. She starts with scissor kicks, holding the kickboard before her; then she pulls with the foam hand paddles. She formulates a plan as she goes: two laps of breaststroke, four laps of freestyle, two laps of breaststroke again, one lap of butterfly. Then repeat. Then repeat.

Nora only decided to meet with the principal—Plan B? Plan C?—on the walk to school with Zane. She didn't tell Andrew. After dropping Zane at his classroom, she lingered for twenty minutes for a chance to speak with Dr. Maynard. Wedged into a corner of the shiny sofa as the school secretary trundled in and out of the mailroom, Nora had crafted an impromptu mantra: Who else will stand up for my sweet boy, if not me, if not now?

When Nora pauses in the shallow end to swig from her water bottle, the old man is chatting amiably over the lane divider with a muscly-shouldered woman in a coral swim cap. On the other side of Nora, in the first lane, the woman with the teenager is still paddling, head out, at the same slow but steady pace. When Nora passes—easy breaststroke this time, for four lengths—the kid is sinking to the bottom again, mid-way down the lane, as if tied to an invisible chair. Nora doesn't want to stare, but she can't help it. He is torqueing now, moving his arms in delicate waving arcs. Dancing underwater. Mermaid-style. What is wrong with him, anyway? His earrings glint in the greenish underwater light. Nora turns her face back toward the bottom of the pool. It's easy to pretend you are entirely alone when gliding smoothly beneath the water. The other swimmers are tiny outlying planets—silent, caught forever in muffled orbit, far, far away.

This is what she said to Dr. Maynard this morning:

They'd had such a good start to first grade with Ms. Morris. No scrambling around like the beginning of last year, when Zane had come, new, to kindergarten at the two-week mark—thanks to those fascists over at Forrest Academy (well, she didn't say *that* part to Dr. Maynard). But at public school the teachers have to meet Zane where he is. And they have done so, by and large—or *had* done so, last year. (A neighborhood school, and really integrated, for a change; Nora wants badly to support it, she truly, genuinely does.)

But what a group this year! With Oliver in the class and everything. Oliver, whose older brother had drowned in July. (Drowned. Poor Oliver—poor Vivian and James. The whole tragic fucking situation.) *Of course* Oliver acts out in class. It's a lot for Ms. Morris to manage, in addition to the usual behavior issues with the other kids. A young teacher, new to the school, and starting out the year that

way, with Oliver in class. I get that it's tough. I *get* that.

The old man, panting, hoists himself backwards out of the pool as she finishes her extra rounds of breaststroke. Good: the lane is all hers now. She slides her goggles up her forehead where they suction to her swim cap; wearing them during backstroke makes her claustrophobic. Then she pushes off the wall, belly up. The shadows of clumped dead leaves blot the roof panels above.

She will tell Andrew about her meeting with Dr. Maynard later. Tonight maybe. When she is ready to look at him again. Yeah, it was shitty to throw the cookbook, sure—she can own that one—but she's not the one being irrational, really. In the meantime, Nora hopes Dr. Maynard won't cc him on a follow-up email. At least not until Nora has readied herself for the next battle with Andrew that will doubtlessly (she now understands) follow her confession.

At the shallow end again, Nora hops, shaking water out of one ear and then the other. So tired, so tired. But all this exercise is improving her mood. Yes. She will carry this calm rejuvenation with her into the day. Unleash this brume of equilibrium, envelop her clients in it. Her clients: their bulldog-weary faces, their histories of failure a teetering stack of useless coupons. I, Nora Trask-McKinnon, JD, underpaid but devoted public servant, am not a terrible person. I battle mightily to get the crooked landlords off my clients' asses; to draft, to file, to argue; to take a pickaxe to the fortress of the avaricious on behalf of the poor and weak; to hope, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, in a more just world. Despite everything, to believe that better is possible. For them, for me, for everyone. A better world.

She turns toward the deep end once more, prepared for freestyle. She adjusts her cap and notices her goggles are gone. She gropes the back of her head, her ears. No goggles. They came loose somehow and have floated away. Or they sank, more likely. They aren't in the shallow end in her lane or to the right or left of her. And they are good goggles. Not inexpensive.

She breaststrokes with her head out of the water to the far end and peers down. Yes—there they are. Docile beneath ten feet of water. She doesn't think she can manage to retrieve them. It's a long way down; she's a good lap swimmer, but going that deep would make her ears ache, panic her lungs.

She pulls herself out of the pool and approaches the lifeguard, a long-faced young man with a buzz cut, who sits on his wooden throne with a red foam life preserver strung over his lap. She explains the situation. Isn't there some kind of implement he can use? A long pole with a net or something? The lifeguard makes

a noise of regret, gesturing with his thumb to the other swimmers. He can't leave his post. And, he says, he can't let her use one of the implements. Against the rules. Nora watches him drag his expressionless gaze across the pool.

"You could ask him," the lifeguard says, leaning over his knees, nodding toward the far right lane. "The kid. Diving around already anyway."

Nora nods; worth a try. She loves that pair of goggles. It's stupid of her, but—the little losses, they add up so quickly. She squelches over to the long side of the pool, halfway down, where the basin slopes steeply toward the deep end. The teenaged boy is humming to himself, swishing the water with one arm, cocking his head side to side, in time to music only he can hear.

"Excuse me," Nora calls, as if from a vast distance. It's hard to modulate your voice at the indoor pool—to be heard over the slap of the water, the crash of arms, the goading bark of the water aerobics instructor starting another class session. The indeterminate hum of the Evacuator, working whatever dark magic with all those chemicals. The teenaged boy, now treading water, looks up at her. "My goggles," she says. "They're way at the bottom in the next lane. The lifeguard said you might be able to snag them for me. You don't have to. What do you say?" She grits her teeth and smiles.

The kid, diffident, raises his eyebrows and nods, just once. He dives beneath the buoyed rope into her empty lane and propels himself underwater. She flip-flops nearer to watch him, passing the boy's mother-grandmother-aunt-guardian-whoever-she-is. Nora tries to exchange a friendly glance with her, but the woman, inching slowly forward, head-out on her stomach, doesn't lift her eyes. The kid pencils toward the bottom of the pool, feet-first.

This is the last thing Nora had said to Dr. Maynard this morning:

"What about Ms. Jeffries?"

Ms. Jeffries, one room over on the first-grade hall. The walls of Ms. Jeffries's room are painted plum; Nora has heard she does yoga with her class first thing in the morning. A giant wire-and-papier-mâché tree in one corner of her room—the Thinking Tree. Ms. Jeffries lets noodly Theo lie on the floor during reading time, Theo's mom told Nora, since that's what he needs to concentrate.

"We know that Zane is very bright," said Dr. Maynard, emerging at last from her nebulous listening pose. "All our children are special, and we honor that." But the principal was firm in her response: no. No, she would not move Zane to another class. And she was not—Nora noticed—particularly friendly, in the end. God, she hopes Dr. Maynard won't say anything to Ms. Morris about Nora's

failed request to move Zane to another class. It might hurt Ms. Morris's feelings. More to the point: there's no need to antagonize her. Especially since Zane is stuck with her for the whole year. And though Nora has shown herself an ally, subtly referencing their (presumably) shared (unmentionable) politics at morning drop-off, Ms. Morris might wonder: Because I'm Black? Beyond awful. Please, Dr. Maynard, please—don't breathe a word.

The woman in the first lane, Nora notices, has stopped swimming now. She leans back against the shallow-end edge of the pool and watches her son-grandson-nephew shimmy and plunge: once, twice, three times. The goggles keep scuttling away, crab-like, pulled toward a vent. The woman watches, and Nora watches her watch him.

Since July, since the horrific news about Oliver's older brother, Nora never swims laps without thinking of the tragedy. She thinks of it now with a thump of panic. Please, she mouths silently. She aims her wishes directly at the teenager deep below. Please don't drown, not for a stupid pair of goggles. She doesn't even know the kid's name, and how can she float an honest plea for him, not even knowing his name? The anger that scorched her inner organs all night and all morning has spluttered out. Please don't drown on my account.

The pool's chemical cocktail is getting to her—she clears her scratchy throat, squinches her eyelids against her stinging eyeballs. It's not just chlorine that's tickling her eyes, though. Don't do it, she thinks; pull yourself together. You're not a crier. But the questions have already risen from stomach to throat, like bile: Why do you always have to push so hard? Why can't you ever leave a thing alone?

Maybe she'll call Andrew when she gets to work instead of waiting till tonight. She still has a little time to think of what to say. To practice her confession. Meanwhile, she opens her eyes. A refrain pulses along with her heartbeat, in time with the swimmers' strokes: sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry. It's for Andrew; it's for everyone. Even if it's not much.

The tall, cherub-cheeked, gazelle-eyed kid, fourteen but looking older, out of school on a Wednesday morning: he has captured Nora's goggles. Bubbles jet toward the surface ahead of him. And then he is up, head bobbing above the water. Holding the goggles aloft in one hand with a bashful smile.

"Thank you, thank you," says Nora, clapping once, prayerfully, before closing her hands over the goggles and lifting them away. He is a stranger, this kid; she has never seen him before and will never see him again. "You look so graceful," she says, before she knows what she is saying. "Swimming like that, earlier. Are

you a dancer?"

The kid laughs his flutey laugh.

"No, really. You're a dancer, aren't you? You are." She smiles at him. A real smile, a really real smile.

"I *was* Fritz in the Nutcracker," he says. "Two years in a row. Before I moved here." He barrel-rolls to face the ceiling, his long body a cloud over the water, and then flips back to his stomach. He reaches his arms out. His fingers graze her toes—though he doesn't seem to notice—as he grips the edge of the pool. "Have you played Undertale? The video game?"

Nora shakes her head. Video games are, as yet, a vaporous formation on her son's horizon. A rivulet of pool water escapes her cap, rolls from nape to shoulders. She shivers.

"I could do that," he says. "When I'm older. Like, games and stuff. I'm good at drawing characters especially."

"That's neat," she says. "I didn't know." No kidding, she didn't know—she laughs, having said that, and he laughs too. Then he stops laughing; his attention has drifted away. Maybe he remembers something. He shakes his head thoughtfully. Shakes it again. And in that moment Nora is weightless and immaterial. A ghost. She pulls at the strap of her suit in a startled charge of adrenaline. She's there. Not dreaming, of course not dreaming.

"Bye," the kid says. And then he dolphins away.

She rubs the goggle lenses with her thumbs, watching—first him, and then the rhythmic wheeling and splashing of all those bodies in motion before her, back and forth. The ceaseless rising and falling of heads and torsos, arms, and legs. The unending ferment.

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