

Swimsuits

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Mary chose black, and I chose Baby Color. She was sunning on the dock, but her skin was still pale, paler against the black suit. If I pulled my straps down, I could find a tan line, at least something to bring home with me at the end of summer. I hated the suit my mom said was lovely after she denied me a two piece. She called it Lavender. I called it Princess Color. Baby Color.

Mary didn't even want a two piece. "The world doesn't need to see me in a bra and panties," she said.

But she lost her modesty back at the lake house. In our room she'd sprawl on the bed reading her comic books in less. It embarrassed me in a way it hadn't when we were thirteen.

Mary didn't need a two piece to be sexy. There were boys on docks, boys fishing at the ends of boathouses, boys on boats. And Mary had a deep V on the back of her suit. Mary had blonde hair and the kind of pale skin that wasn't problematic.

The day before, the boys on the dock across from us called, "Hey, blondie," but she just slid into the water. I followed. I hid my body and tread water and thought about having shoulders like Mary's. At least my Baby Color suit had a deep scoop too. When I looked in the mirror, I could at least say my back was nice.

The boys called, "Hey, ladies," but I knew it wasn't for me. Not with my church haircut and what my brother called a shelf butt.

"Go talk to them if you want," Mary said.

"Are you kidding? My parents are right inside."

My mother asked too many questions about Mary's home life. I was sure she smelled the smoke on us after dinner. Mary found three perfectly good butts in an ashtray, and all the gum in the world couldn't ease my stomach after.

When Mary wouldn't respond, the boys pointed to their cooler. "Y'all need some refreshments?"

Backstroke had been Mary's event, but she dropped out of swim team at the start of summer. She swam to them, but she didn't race. I watched her strokes. The suit made her chest look small, but it made her waist look even smaller.

She waved at me from the boys' dock, but I shook my head. I was pruning. I hid my body in a towel. The sound of pop tops carried over the water, and I thought my parents would check on us any minute. Mary let the boys touch her shoulders, her knees, higher.

"Don't be so worried and boring," she said after. My flip-flops flung pine straw at my calves.

That morning, the boys were asleep on their dock and Mary didn't even notice them. I poured sunscreen into my palm and hoped they'd burn.

Mary rolled onto her back. "Want me to rub some on you?"

"No. I want my back to get tan."

"Okay, weirdo. Want to swim then?"

"No. I don't want to wash my hair."

When we were kids, we'd take showers together after our swims. That summer Mary kept suggesting we try again. The night before, her breath sour with the two beers I'm sure my mother could smell, she asked a third time.

"You're drunk," I said, though I wasn't sure she was.

Mary dove in with no splash. When she surfaced, her hair was at least brown. "Don't be stupid," she said. "You'll have to wash it anyway."

"I just don't feel like showering today, okay?"

I watched from the dock as Mary sank herself. I knew she was counting. I counted too.

“Hey there, movie star.” My father and his camera, usually reserved for sunsets and blue herons. He mostly knew to keep his distance beyond meals.

“Dad, no,” I said.

“Come on, I need at least one decent picture of you.”

Mary dolphined out of the water, her inhale loud enough to scare the birds. She pushed herself up onto the dock, her arms still swimmer strong.

“90,” she said. “I think.”

“Alright, get together, ladies,” my father said. “Get together and smile.”

“No way.” Mary sat on the dock and dipped her feet in the water. “Not in a swimsuit.”

“Swimsuits are off limits,” I said.

My father adjusted the lens. The boys on the dock were awake. I could see them whispering about us.

“I guess it’ll have to be candid then,” my father said. And the clicks began

He had never been this insistent. He didn’t even like Mary.

Maybe he knew what I was just starting to understand. This would be one of his last opportunities to document our friendship. With Mary, it would be easiest to let her fade.

“Let’s just take the picture,” I said. “Then he’ll leave us alone.”

“That’s the spirit,” my father said.

I took Mary’s hand, but this time she didn’t squeeze back. I pulled, but she went crumple even with both my hands pulling. My father snapped photo after photo. “Smile, ladies. Smile.”