

Bodies of Water

Let me be clear. I know how to swim. Sure, I am the child of a single mother, I love watermelon, I can hit a free throw without much effort, and I'm quite loud in movie theaters. But I can swim. I took classes at the Y from the time I was six, splashed around with the kickboard, held the side of the pool and dipped myself in and out, holding my breath for longer and longer. From polliwog, to guppy, to minnow, to fish. By the time I was ten, I could swim the twenty-five meters from one end of the pool to the other, reaching for the edge at the end of a lap like my life depended on it. It did, I suppose.

I just want to make that clear. I know how to swim. It wasn't that.

Wassaic is a hamlet about two hours outside of New York City. We were there for Claire and Priya's bachelorette party. We'd spend the weekend in the Airbnb, cooking lavish meals and smoking the weed grown on Claire's brother's property in Mendocino. We'd hike through trails, laze in creeks, and screen an endless loop of *Now and Then* on the living room TV. We'd be in bed by eleven each night.

We arrived at sunset and Claire swanned through the house, showing off the amenities and directing us to our rooms.

"You get a bunk," she said pointing to me, "you get a bunk," she said to Angie, another friend from college.

I expected her to continue the the joke. *Everybody gets a bunk!* But her childhood friends were assigned to a room with two twin beds, her work friends to their own separate rooms on the second level. She and Priya, of course, shared the master bedroom with en suite bathroom. A palace for the queens.

Claire and I had met during a freshman year anthropology course. After class, a few of us would have dinner in the dining hall, where we'd argue over ethnocentrism and celebrity gossip. If ever we couldn't find enough seats together, Claire would find a group of guys

taking up too much space and tell them to scoot, or rearrange, or move their lacrosse bags from the chairs to the floor. They always did.

After graduating, we moved to New York together for internships, and shared a queen bed in a downtown studio for a year before our budgets forced us in different directions—Washington Heights for me, the East Village for her. I'd cried myself to sleep the first night in that strange new place with my strange new roommates. I got through by reminding myself she was still around, just a train ride away.

We first met Priya on a night out in the Bowery, where she was tending bar with surgical skill. Claire obsessed over the perfection of her drinks, the odd dimples that crinkled just beneath her eyes with each smile, the sleeves of tattoos that rolled elegantly down her brown arms. By the end of the night she'd told me she was in love. It was typical Claire, but when Priya eventually punched her number into Claire's phone, I was relieved. I'd seen Claire through a lot of women, all beauties. But Priya seemed special—interesting, and genuine, and nice to be around.

I was happy for Claire, of course. But I felt that twinge of fear that comes when a friend finds love.

On our second day in Wassaic, after hours of sweating—volleyball in the backyard and a light hike through the woods behind the house—we took an afternoon trip to the creek. We all sported high-waisted two-pieces with playful patterns, a trend that, I now noticed, appealed perfectly to women in their early thirties whose increased sense of self coupled nicely with their shifting proportions.

Even though it was July, the water felt like freshly melted snow. Claire and her friends slipped beneath its surface with ease. But I shrieked with each dip of my toe, as did Priya and Angie, who'd been a scholarship kid, like me.

"Come on!" shouted Claire, twirling between the two banks. "It's amazing."

I was sure the sensation Claire felt was, in fact, amazing. For one, she'd had half an edible before we'd left the house. She'd also grown up with the sort of life where trips into natural bodies of water and unattended wooded areas were commonplace. As a girl, she'd eaten freshly tapped maple syrup, walked barefoot around the backyard of a summer home. Claire and her childhood friends were at home in the bucolic.

"All right," said Priya, who'd lived her whole life in Pittsburgh before moving to Harlem three years ago. "Let's just do this. It can't be that bad, and we'll hear it for the rest of the weekend if we don't."

Priya, Angie, and I each extended one leg and then the other, shoulders high, teeth chattering. Eventually, we let our bodies fall until our feet hit the rocky bottom. My hands floated above the surface. I forced a smile.

“Happy?”

“Go all the way under, it’ll feel better,” said Claire.

I didn’t bother looking at the others. What felt good for Claire was never what felt good for me.

A detour.

When I was young, I had a friend named Eureka. I was friends with Eureka because our mothers worked together in the fragrance department at the St. Louis Centre’s Famous-Barr, and my mother felt bad for Eureka because she had sickle cell, so made me spend time with her, which is to say, we weren’t really friends.

I was sent to their house every few weeks to play Polly Pocket or watch TV alongside her. I always preferred the TV days, of course. We were both ten, too old to be playing with dolls. And Eureka made strange voices for Polly that made me sad for her, but I felt obligated to chime in or even laugh every few minutes, which in turn made me feel fraudulent and manipulative.

She’d walk her tiny blonde Polly over to my thumb-sized redhead and start talking in a high-pitched, raspy voice.

“Want to go to the park?”

“Sure thing, Polly,” I’d say, in a voice that seemed, to me, appropriately white-girlish. “I’d love to go to the park.”

I knew it was a lie. My doll didn’t want to go to the park with creepy Polly. But what was she supposed to do? She was trapped.

We’d bounce the characters around piles of clothes that had accumulated on Eureka’s floor, pretending shirts were slides and elastic-strapped pants were swing sets. Eureka never had to clean her room.

“Weeeeeee!” she’d say, moving her poor little toy around violently. I’d walk my toy, while sneaking a peek at the digital clock. The minutes felt like hours in her room. I knew that checking the time only made it move more slowly, but I had to know how to budget my energy.

Inevitably, there’d come a knock at the door.

“Made y’all some pizza rolls,” her mother would say. She was short and thick, and always wore animal print.

“Fine,” Eureka would whine. “But I like the Bagel Bites better.”

I think her mother noticed that I preferred pizza rolls, which made me feel bad, but not bad enough to stop myself from devouring them. Each time, I’d burn my tongue on the first, letting the hot cheese and pepperoni fall from my mouth onto a napkin. Eureka would nip at hers like a little mouse. It was disgusting. Eventually, after it had cooled, I’d pour

the spit-out roll back into my mouth and dive into the rest of the plate. Her mother would stand in the corner, watching and smiling. It made her happy to see Eureka with a friend.

We spent most of our time inside because Eureka was always tired, and often in pain. Her feet would sometimes puff up beneath her pastel socks so much she couldn't walk. Her joints would ache. There were times when we'd be playing, and she'd drop Polly, clench her whole body, and let out a moan.

Her mother would run in, pull Eureka into her chest, and rub her arms or legs where the pain was worst. Sometimes she'd bring in a bottle of pills and a glass of juice, drop one of the tablets on Eureka's tongue and tell her to tilt her head down. It was the easiest way, Eureka said, to swallow.

I hated watching Eureka swell, and groan, and swallow pills. Her misery turned my stomach, but I was careful to never let on how much her presence disturbed me. She hurt. I reminded myself this every time she whined, or made a weird voice, or started crying in the middle of an episode. She hurt.

The sun perched just above us, and eventually the creek water did begin to feel nice. My head and arms and chest still hovered above, intentionally baking. The heat made the occasional splash from one of the others feel glorious.

Priya shot me a conniving look, and before I knew it, she was under the surface. She emerged with a quickness, her thick black hair clinging to her face like seaweed. Everyone clapped as she shook her face from side to side, the hair peeling away to reveal her big-mouthed laugh.

"Way to make us look bad," I said, giving Priya a splash. Angie joined me. She and I had met at a work-study job where we called alumni to beg for money. The two of us joked that we were too poor to be on that campus, where the buildings crawled with ivy and students wore honest-to-god boat shoes. If anyone ever called us to ask for money, we'd have to claim a wrong number.

Angie had grown up in the Bronx and attended a high school where she'd learned to confidently wear hoops, cuss a boy out in Spanish, and lay her edges. Her Italian mother and Jewish father had blessed her with a head full of glorious curls. She'd been on the dance team in high school. The first night we'd gone out together as freshman, I'd watched her move to the music, and felt a tinge of jealousy for how easily she dipped and rolled. I thought, *Who does she think she is?* Soon, I realized she knew exactly who she was.

Now, a decade after graduating, and two years into her medical school residency, she wore very little makeup or jewelry. Her hair was always piled carelessly atop her head, while mine was barbered neat and low. Concerns of getting our hair wet were long gone. Still, we weren't going under. It was a resistance that lived deep within us.

“Come on, kids,” said Claire. “This water feels better than a back rub.”

We couldn’t help but smile. There’d been a time when Claire would muscle all the knots out of our backs in the most heavenly way, and we’d try our best to reciprocate. If anything else brought her pleasure—a slice of pie, a noteworthy album, a stiff drink—she’d proclaim we had to try it. It was *better than a back rub*.

“I’m good up here, thanks,” Angie said. We high-fived.

“Suit yourselves,” said Claire.

She dunked her head and floated downstream. With careful footing, we all followed. The rocks were slippery, and I toed each advancing step before placing my foot flat. I was afraid to slip, go under, hit my head. We were so far out that it would take hours for an ambulance to find us. I’d be a goner before the EMTs arrived. I could see the headline: *Black Woman Dies on Gentle Creek Stroll in Upstate New York*.

As we walked, Priya asked me a question about my new job, another nonprofit gig. But my mind was on the rocks.

“You there?” she asked, waving her hand in front of my face.

I snapped out of it with a blink, and looked up to see that we were approaching a wide expanse of blue, crowned by a gray stone cliff.

Raging Rivers was a forty-minute drive from our town. Eureka was having a good stretch, hadn’t been in pain or had much swelling in weeks. And so her mother wanted to treat her to some summer fun.

I’d been to the water park a few times before with cousins, and the prospect of going again filled me at once with excitement and anxiety. There was nothing like the thrill of spiraling down a giant plastic tube into a pool of lukewarm water. But there was the problem of Eureka. I could barely get through an evening in her home. A full day in a water park would surely be worse.

“All right, girls,” said her mother, after slathering us with sunscreen near the entrance. “Y’all wanna start at the wave pool?”

Eureka was wearing a glittering one-piece with an attached skirt that hung nearly to her knobby knees. She wore strange water shoes, sunglasses, and a waterproof visor, her sad bun poking out from the top. I proudly sported flip-flops and my first-ever tankini. My hair was in neat pigtails, not tucked beneath a swim cap like my mother had recommended. It’d be a process to wash the chlorine out after returning home, to part, oil, blow dry, and re-braid my hair. But it would be worth it.

“It’s fun?” Eureka asked.

“Everything here is fun,” said her mother. “Come on.”

We followed her obediently to the fake shore of the wave pool. Neither of us had ever been to a real beach. Our families weren’t the sorts to go on lake vacations or big trips

out of state. So, this was the first time Eureka had ever experienced a wave. Her mother stood near the edge, tilting her face up to the sky, as Eureka laughed maniacally with each rush of the tide. We were only knee deep in the water, surrounded by squirmy little kids. Eureka jumped over each wave. Slowly, we made our way deeper, until we were at our waists, then our shoulders.

“Can you swim?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

I watched as she laughed some more, letting the slight wave take her a little further out. “OK, girls,” her mother said eventually, fanning herself. “It’s about time for lunch, ain’t it?” She took us for hot dogs and lemonades before sending us back out into the park.

“You’re not coming?”

Eureka kicked me as I asked.

“I’m gonna read for a minute,” she said, pulling out a *People* magazine. “You’ll keep an eye on each other.”

“We sure will,” said Eureka, in a voice that wasn’t quite hers.

We treaded carefully at first, floating down the lazy river and sliding down some water-slides. I was surprised that Eureka seemed to be having fun. She moved slowly, but bobbed out of the water quickly with each shoot from the slide, each tip from the tube into the river.

“Let’s do the diving boards,” Eureka said as we emerged from a third trip down the waterslide. She was shivering, even as we dried off in the ninety-degree heat.

“I don’t know. That’s for really good swimmers.”

“What, you trying to say I’m not a good swimmer?”

“That’s not what I mean.” I hesitated. “I’ve never dived before.”

Her laugh was a startling shriek. I looked around, embarrassed for both of us.

“I can’t believe you’re scared to dive.”

“I’m not scared, I’ve just never done it.”

“Fine.” She grabbed my hand and started marching in her squishy water shoes. “I’ll go first.”

As she dragged me toward the diving section, I felt myself pulling away. Her grip was changing. Her hands were swelling.

The line was long, and Eureka and I trailed a row of dripping boys for twenty minutes up the steps. They were older, maybe twelve or thirteen, and kept pushing each other. Their bodies knocked around, inching closer and closer to Eureka. They easily could have gotten too rowdy and knocked her down the steps. But they didn’t.

At the top, a lifeguard held the line. There were two diving boards, each managed by separate lifeguards, who made hand signals with yet another group of red-clad guards in the water. Their presence told me this was a high-risk situation. My stomach twisted. I’d

never been so high in the open air. My heart thumped as Eureka and I were sent to one of the boards. The lifeguard held me back as Eureka walked the plank. Her knees bent, and she jumped bravely into the water. My heart beat harder as I made my way forward, reminding myself that I was a good swimmer. I could do this.

I was finally getting my courage up when the whistle sounded. I looked down from my spot on the board to see Eureka pop out of the water, her arms flailing. A lifeguard dragged her toward the edge of the water. She was choking and coughing. The water around her was the most pure, beautiful red. The color was spilling from her lips.

Whatever fears I'd felt before multiplied. I pulled myself away from the board even before the lifeguards made the announcement that they'd be shutting down. I rushed through the crowds of kids, twice scolded for running down the steps, to make my way to the safety area, where they'd taken Eureka. When I arrived, she was covered in a towel and shivering. The lifeguards were near her, but visibly afraid to get too close. She held a paper towel splattered with blood near her mouth.

"Eureka, are you OK?" I asked.

She nodded, tears rolling from her reddened eyes.

One of the lifeguards approached me and knelt down. He spoke slowly.

"I need you to get her adult right now."

Again, I broke the rules by running. My heart pounded in my ears, and I couldn't get the image of her bloody mouth and puffed up hands out of my mind. My face dripped with water, pool remnants, and my own salty sweat. It tasted awful, and it was blazing hot out. I thought I might throw up.

When I found her mother, she was finishing up her second magazine. Her eyes grew wide as I approached. I could see them, even from behind her sunglasses.

The water near the cliff was cool and deep. I felt a slight thrill as my limbs danced in the blue. The depths made it impossible to stay above water, and so I dipped in and out, feeling calm and clear. The temperature had risen, and we wiggled in and out of the water, enjoying the contrast of fire and ice.

"I'm starved," said one of Claire's high school friends after we'd swum around for a bit. "Should we head back soon?"

"Yeah," I said. "My stomach is very disappointed in me."

"Oh, come on!" Claire said. "How often are we in a place this beautiful and natural? Let's just enjoy it for a little bit longer."

I looked up and around at the high cliff surrounded by lanky trees clad in green, the blue water flowing through. The only sounds were the creek, and the birds, and our own voices. It was nice, but filled me with unease.

“I told her we should have brought snacks,” Priya said to me, under her breath, but not quiet enough for Claire to miss.

“Where would we have put snacks, Priya?”

“In a cooler!”

“Yeah, kids at my high school used to do that when they went floating in the Ozarks,” I said. “Pack some Buds and a few sammies.”

“My god, you two,” said Claire. “We’re not *all* trash.”

Priya slowly drifted under the water. I ducked beneath the surface, and we found each other’s eyes. She raised her hands to her shoulders and shrugged. I twirled my finger near my head and rolled my eyes. We emerged in unison, gasping for air.

When we came out, Claire was not in the water, but shaking off on the bank. She began climbing up the hill that led to the drop-off.

“She’s not going to jump?” I said.

“Did someone touch the bottom?” said Angie. “What if it’s like six feet.”

“Well, you’re five ten,” I said. “So it’s definitely more than that. But I agree, it’s probably very dangerous. Should someone spot her?”

“It isn’t gymnastics.”

“Well, I don’t know how this works.”

“Neither do I,” said Angie.

“Me either,” said Priya. “And it’s too late to get a refund on the venue, so she better not fuck this up.”

Claire made her way to the peak. Once she was there, it didn’t seem that high. A little taller than a brownstone, maybe. Her friends all cheered, while the three of us held our breath.

Claire’s legs were thick as tree trunks, her belly soft and white. And yet, she was like a gazelle flying across the sky.

She landed with a crash into the water, soaking us all in an instant. She emerged laughing in a fit of joy. Immediately, she got out and did it all over again.

One by one, the rest swam to the edge and pulled themselves out of the water. It started with the high school friends, then the coworker, but soon Priya was out, and Angie too. I cheered them on as they jumped from the ledge into the water, all making mild splashes in comparison to Claire’s original bomb. I felt light and slightly out of body, as though in a dream or watching a scene from a movie.

“Your turn,” Angie said, panting as she swam back over to me.

“I don’t dive.”

“It’s not diving. Who do I look like, Michael Phelps?”

“He’s a swimmer, not a diver.”

“Whatever. It’s fun. I promise.”

“It’s fun to watch!”

“Funner to do!”

“C’mon, champ,” said Claire, fully fatigued from half a dozen rounds. “You didn’t come all the way out here just to wade. Show us what you got!”

“If I jump, can we go back and eat?”

“Yes, please!” said the high school friend.

“Fine, jump and we eat,” said Claire. Soon everyone began to chant.

“Jump and we eat! Jump and we eat!”

Somehow, they were the only words that could have motivated me. We hadn’t eaten since breakfast, save for stolen bites of avocado toast before heading out. I realized, as I wobbled up the hill, that I was dehydrated too. I’d tried to drink the creek water, but kept imagining everyone peeing in it, so stopped.

By the time I reached the top, I felt like I was watching it all from above, higher than the cliff where I stood. I looked down and saw their miniature bodies cheering and waving. There was a big blue spot just for me. I let one foot take the air, then the other.

I didn’t go to Eureka’s much after that day. We’d never gotten a clear explanation of what had happened at the water park, but the coughing up of blood didn’t stop. She’d lose her breath and spot the carpet with red while we played or watched TV. I’d scoot away and shield myself.

“I don’t know how to explain it. I’m just scared when I’m with her,” I told my mother.

She didn’t scold me for being rude or tell me about saying nice things or nothing at all. I think she understood. The only times I saw Eureka after that were when we were all together, mothers and daughters. Even those times didn’t last.

School started, and my days got busy. Eureka and her mother moved away after Christmas. Somewhere in Ohio, close to a good hospital. I didn’t make an effort to remember where.

A few summers later, I won a scholarship to an academic program at the university near Eureka’s old house.

“Have you heard from Eureka’s mom?” I asked. “How’s she doing in Ohio?”

“Oh, baby,” said my mother. “Eureka passed away in May.”

“Oh,” I said, like a sigh or a moan. “Oh,” I repeated.

“Poor thing. She was very sick, you know.”

“But.” I couldn’t formulate a clear thought. “How?”

My mother pulled into the university parking lot without answering. My head ached with the tears I was holding in. My throat burned with the cry I wouldn’t let out. My mother circled around looking for the right building. There were so many.

I tried to block her from my mind that day, and the next, and the next. Eventually, it worked. Eventually, I didn't think about her at all. Eventually, I forgot her completely.

Everyone stood over me. My nose, and ears, and eyes tingled with water in all the wrong places.

"You're OK," said Priya.

"You hit the surface like a ton of bricks," said Angie.

"Thank you."

"You were down there for a minute. Made us all a little nervous."

"I can swim."

"We know. It's just. You were out cold."

I looked from Angie and Priya down to the other faces that surrounded me—Claire's and the rest of her friends'.

They all lifted me up, and eventually I found my way onto Angie's back. We were headed back to the house, finally. Everyone was silent. My foot throbbed as the shock wore off. After a few moments, I opened my mouth, perhaps to distract myself.

"Jump and we eat! Jump and we eat!"

Priya turned around, a smile pressed between her lips. I could feel Angie's laughter beneath my hips.

Back at the house, they opened bottles of wine and beer and fired up the grill. I lay on a lounge chair in the backyard with my foot—hot with a crushing pain—wrapped and on ice. Priya brought me a joint, a pill, and a glass of water.

"What's this?" I asked, as she placed the tablet in my palm.

"Does it matter?"

I sucked on the joint, exhaled, then dropped the pill on my tongue. I took a swig and tilted my head forward.

Angie examined my foot. She wrapped and iced it, propped it up so that it was above the line of my heart.

Everyone cycled in to check on me. Everyone but Claire.

I began to remember the crash through the water, the sudden slowdown, my body drifting lower and lower and lower, then feeling my foot slap a rock with force. I'd pressed up with my arms, but the surface was so far away. I was certain I'd never reach it. Everything went black. I remembered feeling the snap of air, but seeing nothing. I remembered hands on my body and panicked voices.

The air cooled as the sun set. Claire handed Priya a blanket, and Priya walked it over to me.

“Tell everyone I’m sorry I ruined their trip,” I said.

“You didn’t ruin anyone’s trip,” Priya laughed. “If anything, you made it more exciting. I mean, a medical emergency! That’s how you know it’s a party.”

“Thanks,” I smiled.

“You just rest here.” She walked away to pour herself a glass of wine.

I wasn’t going anywhere. The pill had kicked in, and the joint took me the rest of the way.

Angie came over and re-wrapped my foot.

“How are you doing?”

“It was Priya who invited me,” I said. “Not Claire.”

“What?”

“I know Claire invited you,” I said. “But she didn’t invite me. And it’s OK.”

“You’re not feeling well.”

I smiled. I didn’t want Angie to feel bad for still being liked by our old friend.

Angie, and Priya, and all the others checked on me, but Claire kept a distance. The sight of my swollen foot seemed to turn her white, despite the day’s sun. She wouldn’t make eye contact with me, and I got the feeling she wished I hadn’t come.

Someone brought me a burger, and I ate it in big bites, sauce dripping down my chin. I watched Angie manage the grill, watched Claire palm Priya’s shoulders then dig her thumbs into that sweet spot behind the blades, watched the others talk, and laugh, and open more bottles. They were having quite a nice time.

Soon we were all inside. My foot earned me half the couch, and Angie propped some pillows beneath my head.

The *Now and Then* loop was restarting. I closed my eyes and remembered all I could remember. I began to cry before the parts that make you cry, a quaking, wailing sort of thing. They asked if I was in pain. *No*, I said. It wasn’t that.