

Overflow

The jagged edges of the blue vinyl allow the pool's chlorinated water to escape its metal borders. At first, the water gushed, escaping its captor at a rapid rate. The flow has slowed to a small stream. The stream has now dwindled to a steady drip. They are only drips, but they empty the pool just the same.

Shoving a clump of damp bangs out of her eyes, Ginny squinted past the silver circle with the inverted "V" hanging from a single metal thread, marking the front of her mother's car.

"How long 'til we get there?"

"Only about twenty minutes."

"Can we turn on the air conditioning?"

"It's not that hot."

"But my legs are burning and my skin's going to peel off!"

The older woman rolled her eyes towards the sky, the blues melting into one. Cool air blasted out of the dusty vents. Minutes later, the whitewalls grabbed the scuffed stones, hugging them closely, adjusting to the harsh, sudden change in the road's surface. The cows, the Sturgh's welcoming committee, followed the car, vaguely curious as to who was invading their property. The air conditioning drowned out their protesting "moo's."

Brilliant green trees stretched their branches towards the car, welcoming it into their embrace. As the car drove past, however, the way by which they had come looked almost impassable. Encompassing maple leaves hid the ancient, grey farmhouse, allowing only the obscured, misleading curves to greet the eye. To the right of the house, the cows began to mill around beneath the overhang of the barn. At one time, the barn must have glowed a vibrant, lively red. Now, the paint was peeling, exposing the aging wood to the harshness of life. Weathered paint shavings disappeared under the cows' hooves, pushed deep into the manure, forgotten. Opposite the barn, one lone maple branch reached down, fingering the water of the pool beneath it, threatening to disrupt the still, oval water.

"Welcome back!" A voice rang out over the cries of the cows. Ginny's mother Sarah, scanned the farm area in search of the owner of the voice, Madeline Sturgh. In the open doorway, Maddy stood, arms outstretched, an enormously large, yellow sun hat adorned her head.

"Great weather for swimming, isn't it, Ginny? Did you remember your suit?"

"Are you kidding, Madeline? She hardly ever leaves the house without it!" The two women laughed with a shared knowledge of the frivolity of young girls.

"Charlie's already in the pool with Sue. Why don't you go join them?"

"Great!" Only fragments of Ginny's voice reached the women's ears, as Ginny had already run to the pool's edge.

"Hey kiddo!" Charlie greeted the newcomer as if he were nine too, not fifty years her senior.

"How's it goin'?"

"Too hot for me Charlie! Hey, Sue! Look out below!" A nine year old splashed punctuated Ginny's greeting. Callused hands grabbed her as she came up for air, deliberately brushing against her thighs, her waist, hoisting her high only to dump her once again into the

water. Sputtering as she reached the surface, Ginny gasped heavily, trying to get enough air in her lungs to laugh.

"Hey Ginny! Watch what me 'n Charlie can do!" With that, Sue, Ginny's best friend, clambered onto Charlie's outstretched hands.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, watch closely as I perform a full forward front flip with a half twist," the girl yelled, mocking the boisterous ringmasters of the televised circus. Cradling Sue's bottom in the palms of his hands, Charlie disappeared beneath the choppy surface of the water. Sue bobbed, counting out loud, "One, two, three!" A circular scream of delight followed her path, arching into the air, flipping over, and watering the grass with a wave as she hit the water again.

"Me next! Please!" Swimming up behind Charlie, Ginny wrapped her arms around Charlie, the only father figure she had who actually had time for play. Leaning backwards, the man grasped Ginny under her arms and lifted her over his head. Holding her tightly, he planted a loud, wet kiss on the back of her neck. Ginny wriggled to escape, but Charlie's hands held her firmly.

"Madeline?"

"Yes?"

"It's Sarah. How are you?"

"Fine. Pool's still open. Ginny's welcome to come over and swim."

"Actually, I'm planning on going out of town this weekend. My dad has plans for Friday night, so Ginny can't stay with him. She really loves being with you guys so I was wondering if she could spend the night with you and Charlie."

"Of course! We'd love to have her."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be too much of a hassle?"

"Of course not. Why don't you bring her over early Friday afternoon? She can get in some swimming before dinner."

"Thanks so much! I really appreciate this. Ginny'll be so excited! I'll talk to you Friday. Bye!"

"Good-bye."

"Ginny! time for dinner! Get dried off before you come in, please!"

"Comin' Maddy!" She rushed to the porch where Maddy waited to wrap her in an oversized towel. "I'm starved, but I shouldn't be! I think I swallowed half the pool!"

"Well, we're having mashed potatoes..."

"Yay!"

"Corn on the cob..."

"Alright!"

"And," Maddy added, pausing dramatically and pointing one manicured fingernail at Ginny's nose, "roast beef."

"Roast beast!"

"It sounds as if my dining choices are a great success."

"Definitely!" Ginny smiled nervously, suddenly aware of her over-anxiousness. "Did you, um, make any of your apple crisp for dessert?" she asked timidly.

"You mean all that other grub ain't enough for you?" a gruff voice asked from behind her. "Pretty soon, I'll hafta put you out in the sty with the rest of my pigs!"

"Oh Charlie," Maddy admonished, "stop picking. Of course you can have the apple crisp, sweetie. And we even have vanilla ice cream."

Stuffed with all of her favorite foods, Ginny plopped down in the cushy rocking chair with her apple crisp. A napkin peeked out from underneath the plate, damp at the corners from soaking up the melting ice cream. Charlie sprawled on the floor, watching some Fourth of July special.

"Why don't you lie down here with me?" Charlie's fatherly voice inquired. Ginny slipped from the warm comfort of the over-stuffed armchair and onto the hard floor. Propping her head up with her hand, Ginny tried to find a warm spot and sang out with the television, "O'er the ramp-arts we watched, were so gal-lant-lee streaming." Lifting her voice to a screech, she cried, "And the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air!"

She felt a hand on her body where some day her hips would emerge into a womanly curve. The hand pulled her closer, into the uncomfortable warmth of Charlie's torso. She could no longer hear the words to the national anthem. They had been replaced by the strangely husky tone of Charlie's breathing.

Ginny trembled. A blanket crept upward, covering her body, covering his hand. The blanket took the place of the hem of her shirt, but it didn't keep her warm. She felt entirely frozen, but the frost could not block out the feeling of his hands. His breath grew warmer on the back of her neck, gently blowing the standing hair. The hand moved lower. She could see the movement under the blanket. In the small of her back, she felt something hard. she tried to move away, closer to the chair, but met with a frightening resistance.

"Charlie! Could you come here please?" Maddy called from the kitchen. "I can't reach this top shelf! And ask Ginny to please get ready for bed." At the sound of Maddy's voice, Charlie gave Ginny's thigh one last squeeze, pushed himself into her back, and rose with a disgruntled chortle.

"You heard her. Get movin'."

Ginny, tugging her shirt back into place, scrambled into the bathroom and pushed the door shut behind her.

"Ginny! Please don't slam the door!" she heard Maddy's muffled voice gently reprimanding her. She twisted the lock and dropped to her knees. Closing her eyes, her arms protecting her small frame, she rocked gently back against the wall. She heard Charlie's boots coming down the hallway

"Let's go, kid. Bedtime." His voice tried to hold some semblance of jovial authority, mocking that of her father's.

"No!" she wanted to scream, but she said nothing.

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"Lights out, Ginny!" Maddy sauntered into the guest room to say good night. "I'd like to read some more, if that's alright? Please?"

Maddy took the shine in Ginny's eyes as a pleading to read.

"Alright, but only fifteen more minutes. I don't want you going home and reporting that I let you stay up until all hours of the night. Your mom'll have my skin!"

"Fifteen more minutes of light. Ginny's mind worked frantically to postpone the darkness that would soon take over the unfamiliar room.

"Okay, Ginny. Light's out for real. What do you want for breakfast in the morning?"

Ginny couldn't think that far ahead, but managed to mumble, "Cereal's fine," as she closed her book. The click of the switch seemed to echo in the immutable darkness. Throwing back the

covers, Ginny fumbled for the small desk lamp beside the bed. It threw more shadows than light across the room, but at least it wasn't suffocating. Sniffling, she crept to the door and gently guided it into the door frame. The sound of the knob turning in its place sounded like a shotgun to her ears. The door had no lock. She slumped against the door, imagining that she could hear footsteps coming down the hall. The carpet muffled the sound of the chair scraping along the floor. Ginny had seen people in movies block doors with a chair. She shoved the wood up underneath the door knob. It didn't look very sturdy, but she couldn't move any of the other furniture without arousing attention.

She couldn't let Maddy know. She couldn't let anyone know. What would they think? Ginny made her way back to the bed, shuffling her feet in protest. Her eyes roamed the room. The harsh edge of the shutters around the lone window was lessened by the gentle sloping of the curtains. Stuffed animals hid in the shadows around the room, remnants of Maddy and Charlie's daughter, Becky, who had long since escaped the house. Her eyes returned to the bedside.

A black phone met her eyes. Next to the phone, 10:34 glowed a bright red. The receiver seemed heavy, but the dial tone sounded even before it reached Ginny's ear. The phone slipped from Ginny's hand. She grabbed the cord. The phone swung in an arc, knocking into the nightstand. The dial tone remained. Shaking, Ginny dialed.

A hard, unfeeling voice reached her ears. "We're sorry. Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please hang up and..." Ginny's eyes swam in pools of tears.

"Please, please, please," she prayed. She dialed again. The phone rang once. She allowed herself to believe that her mother would be home, having returned early from the mountains. Two rings. Three.

"Hello. You have reached 358-9571. We can't come to..." It was her mother's voice, recorded and distant. Ginny hung up. She dialed a new number. Her grandfather would be home. He had to be. He'd come and get her. This time, however, she did not even receive the comfort of a recorded voice. Her grandfather, being a touch old fashioned, had never purchased an answering machine. Propped on the skeletal chair, a stuffed monkey, tilted at an ironic angle, seemed to laugh in mockery at her defensive efforts. The phone in her lap, Ginny's fear kept her wide awake.

Slowly, the red lights on the clock counted away the hours. Eleven, twelve. She stretched out her legs, the muscles complaining at being moved. She began to believe he wouldn't come. Her eyes, their steadfast glue unable to hold them on the door, began to close.

Ginny jumped, eyes open, every nerve tense. The chair lay flat on its back, the monkey staring blankly at the ceiling. The door was open just a crack. Her heart pounded in her ears. Like the rabbit held immobile by a car's headlights, Ginny froze. Underneath the carpet, the floorboards protested the stifling weight shifting restlessly on top of them.

"It's alright, Ginny. It's just me." The husky, hungry tone had returned to Charlie's voice. "I'm not going to hurt you. You trust me, don't you?"

Ginny thought she would choke to death trying to stifle her sobs. She wished she would. She stared at the floor as if willing it to open and admit her to hell early. She deserved it after what had already happened that afternoon. Bare feet invaded her view.

The lights clicked off. Charlie sat down next to Ginny. The mattress gave under his weight. The unequal distribution of weight drew Ginny towards him with the irrefutable force of gravity that pulled her away from the high end of the see-saw and towards the ground. His skin was iron hot. Ginny jerked backwards, her nine-year-old reaction anticipated by the older man.

"Ginny, I only want to make you feel good. You like when we play in the pool, don't you?" His hands around her neck prevented her from even shaking her head in protest. "You like when I touch you in the pool, don't you? It'll be just like that." His legs, now straddling her narrow hips, pinned her beneath his overwhelming weight.

"Now, we're going to play inside." His words rushed out, a whispered command. One hand left her throat, its fingers deliberately tracing the hem of her nightgown, opening each button it met. "We don't want to mess up your pretty dress, now, do we? Of course not."

Talking to himself constantly, the loving father figure disappeared, replaced by a likeness of J.R.R. Tolkien's Gollum. The buttons gave way easily. Ginny lay exposed, her gown framing her in a whiteness which now matched her skin. Silent and dark. Ginny lost all sense of time. She heard nothing, saw nothing. The chill in the room had no effect on her. She did not feel Charlie slide her panties from her body. She did not see him lift the white cloth to his face, inhaling her little girl scent. It was as if she were already dead, his hands locked once again on a throat that wouldn't breathe anyway.

Red hot pain thrust her unwillingly back into reality. A whimper escaped her mouth. A heavy pressure on her neck answered.

"Shhh!" he gasped, gently stroking her hair. "It feels good, don't it?" daring her to disagree. His breath came faster and faster. Grabbing her hips, he pulled her against him.

Bile rose in her throat through the opening the absence of his hands allowed. She swallowed hard. Tears forced their way from underneath her closed lids. Her face was wet with her tears, her body with his seed. She drifted away again. Exhausted, Charlie pulled away from her. Quietly, he slipped out of the room, returning with a soft, cotton hand towel. Gently, he wiped away the dampness on Ginny's skin. With a warm, wet towel, he cleaned away the evidence of his visit, dabbing not only Ginny, but the dark, red stain on the sheet between her legs as well. Slipping Ginny's panties up over her trembling legs and buttoning her night dress, he returned the semblance of innocence to Ginny's form. Frightened by the chill of her skin and the paleness of her skin which nearly fully illuminated her features in the dark, Charlie retrieved another blanket from the hall closet. Tucking the blanket around the girl, he kissed her forehead. She never stirred.

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"Ginny?" a far away voice spoke someone's name. The girl struggled to remain in the coffin-like darkness of her sleep.

"Ginny?" the voice repeated. It was her name the voice spoke. She didn't want to answer. "Are you up? Breakfast is almost ready." A gentle hand rolled Ginny over. Grudgingly, the girl opened her eyes. "French toast," Maddy smiled, "come on." Maddy pulled back the covers, ignoring the extra blanket, folding them over the blotted red stain.

"You're awfully quiet, Ginny."

Ginny kept her eyes glued to her plate.

Maddy raised her eyes to her husband. "Is everything alright?"

The girl only stared.

"You're not eating very much."

The catatonia continued.

"You better eat if you plan to make it through a whole day of swimming with Sue. Aren't you hungry at all?" Maddy's voice took on a worried, mother-like tone.

"No," she whispered softly, the lone syllable catching in her throat.

"Well, eat what you can." A loud banging on the door drew Maddy's attention from Ginny.

"Why, Sue. You're a little early, aren't you?"

"Aw, Maddy, it's eleven already. Prime swimming time. Come on, Ginny!" Ginny rose slowly, thankful for the invitation to leave the table. Forgetting all her manners, she left her dishes where they had sat all morning, untouched, and wandered outside, not a word to either Charlie or Maddy.

"I don't feel like swimming," Ginny said as she lagged behind Sue.

"Are you serious?" Sue looked as appalled as a nine year old could. "How come?"

"Just 'cause."

"Look, Ginny. I know you too well. What's up?"

"Nothing. I just don't want to go swimming." Ginny leaned on the side of the pool and looked in. The water level had dropped drastically since yesterday.

"Well, you're in luck," Sue said. "There's only about two feet of water in there anyway. Must be a hole or somethin'. I'll go get Charlie."

"No! Let's look around first."

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With closer inspection, the girls discovered a tear in the thin, blue vinyl about an inch in diameter. At first, the water must have escaped quickly, rushing through the narrow, jagged tear, The gushing surely slowed to a steady, dwindling stream. As the girls watched, however, the water only dripped. They are only drips, but the drips form a puddle. The puddle grows larger and larger, each drop denting the earth just a fraction more. They are only drips, but they empty the pool just the same.