Writing Sample by Julia Halprin Jackson

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The Africans

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Freddy and I are out on the Paseo when he dares me to haggle with the Africans. The other boys on our block make a game out of it; they rustle up the shoreline, follow the trail of towels where the men lay out stacks of DVDs and CDs, sunglasses and jewelry. The deal is to see if you can stay there long enough for the Policía Local to show up—when the cops come, the men rush through the sale, and you can usually count on an extra CD thrown in for good measure.

It is always easier to remember the things the men sell than to remember the men themselves. I don't think I'd ever looked one in the face until that day. Mum says it is best to walk past them quickly, eyes twenty yards ahead, like you're looking for a coin you've dropped. She says the men, they hiss at first, but if you don't respond they'll go away. Like bullies. The trick is to appear disinterested, to keep walking, to act like there's nothing you want less than a pirated video game or Xeroxed porn.

"You've got to remind them of their place," Freddy says. "Don't listen when they tell you how long their poor mothers spent weaving baskets. It's all bunk. You've got to show them that you know their con, that you can throw it right back at them."

It is a Saturday morning—market day. We arrange it all in advance. Mum always sleeps in after her Friday shifts and the promenade is crowded with vendors selling candied nuts and popsicles in the shape of strawberries. I wouldn't dream of buying ice cream from a man with a cart. Maisie says that only perverts peddle things a child might buy, and worse, that most of these men have no place of their own, so they peddle well into the night, the jingle of those bells echoing across the bricks long past the time you'd want an ice cream. But on this Saturday they are a blessing in disguise, crowding the pavement with children and their runny treats.

We pick our men the way Mum picks out fruit at the market. I want to find the ripest one of all.

"What about that one?" I point to one of the shorter men, who leans against the sand wall like he has all the time in the world.

"No; that guy's been here awhile," Freddy says. "He'll sniff us out."

I nod. Freddy is smart, tough; he's lived in three countries already, and he's only 13. I am lucky to find him—he's the only other kid my age still stuck in elementary school. They keep flunking him because he

refuses to learn Spanish. He says it isn't worth it; after all, he spent three years learning French, just to move to Spain.

"That one," he says, pointing to a man opposite the Pig n' Whistle. "He'll do." One of the smaller men lights a cigarette for him. He's wearing a red plaid jacket which looks too hot, and still he shivers. Does he miss the desert? I wonder. Is he even from the desert? His skin is pockmarked and so black it shines. I look him right in the eye. He looks right back, as if remembering me from somewhere.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I mean, he's right in front of the pub."

"So?" Freddy hasn't taken his eye off the man.

"So, my uncle owns that place. He might see us."

"And?" He turns his gaze to me.

I look away, the sting of the sun against my cheeks. "Yeah, that guy looks right."

Freddy smiles, though he may have just been squinting into the sun. "Now we wait."

We wander in and out of the beachfront shops; run our hands through the scarves that ripple from the open stalls. I watch Freddy chat up the merchants in a bloody mixture of French, English and Spanish, making the old women smile as he palms tubes of chapstick, plastic figurines and glittery key chains. He wears cargo pants for a reason. Sometimes I wonder if he's ever stolen from the pub. Freddy does everything on principle; his own principle, true, but principle nonetheless. He probably wouldn't steal from one of his own.

The sun is high in the sky by the time we're ready. We scrounge up €2 and split a liter of Coke. He points down the beach, beyond the cabanas selling lawn chairs and the open-air cafes barbequing tuna, and says, "They're on their way. It's time."

A band of men in green vests saunter down the pavement on horseback. The Policía Local are a volunteer force who patrol the beach on the lookout for illegals. That's what Freddy says, at least. I sometimes hear reports of shiploads of Moroccans and Senegalese sneaking in along the shoreline in the middle of the night and unloading their wares by daybreak. They say it is only 14 kilometers to the tip of Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar. I suspect that some of these men could run further than that.

Freddy approaches our man, who has spread his goods across a tarp on the pavement. I can see now why Freddy picked him: unlike the others, who peddle mostly pirated items, this one has a spread of Sony digital cameras and tripods, all packaged neatly in transparent plastic. They are bundled with such care, and I know without asking that cameras do not come this way; that this man has, at some point, cradled each one in his hands. He kneels on the ground and still is nearly our height; his arms hang loosely at his sides. Freddy inspects the cameras, though he keeps an eye out for the incoming green vests.

"Twenty euro," the man says, picking up one of the cameras and passing it to me. "Good condition."

I kneel on the tarp, turning the camera over in my hands. It is light, lighter than I'd expected. The only pictures we have at home were some Dad's old Polaroids, back when he took pictures. Back in Bristol, back when he would stop by, unannounced, and pull all the canned tomato sauce off the tallest shelf and stack them in pyramids in the center of the tile floor—just to take a picture. Or he'd pick up Geoffrey, back when Geoffrey was still in his diapers, and plop him into Mum's big cooking pots and leave him on the kitchen floor, waiting for the moment when Geoffrey peered over the side of the pot, the lid balancing on his head. Geoffrey was never scared, except when Dad would leave the room for stretches at a time and come back when only Geoffrey knocked the lid against the floor, the tinny reverberation of metal against metal echoing throughout the entire flat until Maisie or Mum ran in the room to fetch the baby. It was all in the service of some great photo—supposedly the longer we waited, the more dramatic the image would be.

Over time, the Polaroids had all faded, their white edges flecked in yellow, their filmy black squares stained with light and fingerprints. Would things have been different if we'd had a proper camera? If we could have really documented it all? I know now, turning the camera over in my hands, its silver body sleek and perfect underneath the plastic, that it is already mine.

"You want?" The man asks. He notices the green vests, the clop of horses' hooves resounding off the buildings. He keeps one hand on the edge of the tarp, ready to roll it up if necessary.

"I've only got ten," I say, sticking one hand in my pocket, as Freddy taught me. You should never show them the money itself, he said, not until the deal is done. Freddy winks.

"Eighteen," the man says, curling his wares into the tarp with both hands.

I can smell the sweet stench of horse droppings as the policemen stop at a nearby stall. A fine line of sweat trickles down the man's forehead. I wonder if he can taste it.

"Ten," Freddy says. "Or we don't want it." He kneels so his face is up close against the African's, nose to nose.

"Fifteen," the African says, sweeping the tarp into a compact tube, cameras intact. He hunches on all fours, preparing to flee. Around us the other men gather their things and hustle down the block, whooping, dropping trinkets as they turn corners in their bare feet.

Freddy nods as I slip the camera in my pocket. We back away.

"Hey!" The man shouts. "You don't pay!" He shakes his fist as we flee, weaving through the Saturday morning foot traffic—women with their market carts and baby strollers, couples walking hand-in-hand, street dogs and kids with their ice cream, their chins dripping pink and wet and their laughter somehow familiar – as if they don't remember they're from somewhere else. I keep one hand on my pocket; listen for the crinkle of the packaging as the camera slides around. I've never been chased before, though I'm not clear who is chasing who. I look back only once, as we reach the end of the Paseo and turn toward the central plaza, and see men dismounting from their horses, circling the African, who, in his anger, has forgotten to run away.

"Don't look," Freddy says, grabbing me by the arm as we duck under an awning and out of sight.

The very day we landed in this hot, green place, Uncle Pete took us straight to the pub, pushed us through its smoky guts, the smell of cigarettes hitting me full in the face. And then someone, one of the regulars, got Pete talking, got him pouring, and I had to piss, so I grabbed some nearby knee and asked, "Toilet?" And the knee, it shook me off, but pointed toward the dank room in the back. I stood there in the toilet, the porcelain thing cracked around the edges, lacking a proper lid, and pissed away everything I knew—I pissed away the old shipyards, my old room in our old flat, Dad and his Polaroids. I admired that yellow, because here was a thing I could make all my own, and I could make it anywhere: Bristol, Málaga, the middle of the bloody ocean. And the moment was gone too fast, because after I flushed I saw that the door, it had no inside handle. It wouldn't budge. And I'd banged and banged against it, the heavy weight of the thing probably more than me and Maisie and Geoffrey combined, and it was useless, really, because by then my lousy uncle had put on that lousy music, the thump thump thump of reggaetón.

It was Maisie who wove her way through the pub and wrest the door open. I don't know if she was looking for me, or if she had to piss herself. Either way, she was the one who let the air in, who found me, crumpled and waiting, my back up against the bathroom wall.

"Kenny?"

I didn't say anything, just got to my feet and brushed past her into the dark underbelly of the pub. Little did I know that a pattern was developing, that from now on, whenever the five of us went anywhere together, I could slip into the crowd and she'd be the only one to notice.

That night, leaving the pub with Mum, Maisie and Pete, I saw the Africans for the first time. They lurked in the shadows. They knew when to move, when to stay still. I asked Pete where they went at night, and he scanned the beach, asking, "Who?" I thought he was lying, that he wasn't ready to introduce me to that side of the city yet, or worse, that in my jetlag I'd made the men up. But neither was right; Pete saw the men as extensions of the beach itself, ebbing in and out of the city with the tide.

I keep the camera in its plastic for a few days, hoping, as I do with new toys, that the longer I keep it packaged, the newer it will feel. But no matter how long I wait, it still feels wrong. I hide it in deep in my desk, away from Geoffrey's wandering hands and Maisie's prying eyes. Every day I dig through old worksheets and notebooks to make sure it's still there. One day, as we walk home from the bus stop after school, Freddy asks if he can borrow it.

"I dunno," I say. "I feel like I should return it."

"To who?"

"To the African."

"Why do you care about that guy? He doesn't have papers."

"Do we?"

"Kenny." Freddy shakes his head in his hands. "Don't compare us to him. We're different."

"How so?"

Freddy stops. He glances to our right, where, a mere two blocks away, we can hear the melodic crush of waves upon sand. "I can't believe we're having this conversation, when really we could be taking pictures of girls on the beach."

I get the camera from my room. Once I take the plastic off, something changes. Somehow it feels heavier, charged with power. Freddy waits for me on the street corner.

"Let's have a look," he says. As we walk he takes pictures of the winter trees, their branches barren, of the newspaper stands selling porn, complete with 40-ounce cans of beer. We pass the *polideportivo* where Maisie met Mario, the boy who calls her his *niña*and rides a moto. I went there once, at Mum's request, to check out this place that Maisie had begged to join. Thirty Euro a month gained admission to this bat cave of a gymnasium, its walls covered in framed portraits of Arnold Schwarzenegger. All the men there wear those tight wrestling boxers with the skinny straps—onesies, are they called? I knew the minute I walked in that Maisie did not intend to lift weights. She wanted to swim—around the back they had a pool the size of a billiards table. Maisie, I'd said, we live by the sea. But I can't swim in the sea! she said. No one swims in the sea. She was right. As Freddy and I walk the boardwalk, the sand is covered in people, but no one is in the water. A long string of clouds keeps the sun under wraps.

I am on alert for our African. There are fewer vendors out on the boardwalk, though a few abandoned towels billow along the pavement, rolling cell phone covers and plastic jewelry down the sticky asphalt. I follow the camera's beeps as Freddy zigzags from stall to stall, walking camera-first like a tourist.

"This thing is great," Freddy says, stopping once, as if for air. We sit on the steps leading down to the sand. "It's got an amazing zoom. Here, look." The image he shows me is all pink, a slight dusting of orange freckles spotting the surface. "It's your face." He snorts.

It is then that I spot them – there are three of them, the slaps of their feet against the ground echoing along the Paseo as they move in. I can't see their faces but something about their gait is familiar. I grab Freddy by the arm. "We should go."

We are barely to our feet when they close in. Their faces are sweating and their shirts are damp; otherwise they bear no evidence of exertion. They are tall. One has a crooked nose; another has an arm in a makeshift sling. All three carry rolled-up tarps, bulky with the weight of their goods.

"You!" The sling says, pointing his index finger in my face. "You're a thief."

Before I can respond, Freddy slips in front of me, the camera at his eye. He snaps a picture of the man's face and shows it to me. This close up, I can see the deep grooves of acne scars on his cheeks, digging even lines along his jaw, making him look even tougher, leaner. The man with the crooked nose snatches the camera away.

"You stole from our friend," he says.

"Technically," Freddy interjects, "we didn't steal, because, technically, he isn't supposed to sell, is he?"

The tall one, who has until now stayed silent, pushes the other men aside and leans in close enough to kiss Freddy. His arms are sinewy and strong, his fingernails clean half-moons against his dark skin. His eyes have an implacable shine, almost as if they aren't real, as if he's never cried, as if there is nothing he could see that would surprise him. I wonder how old he is.

"Who are you?" the man asks.

I wait for Freddy to say something. I expect him to laugh, to break the tension. Instead his shoulders slump, his neck falls to his chest.

"Nobody," he mumbles.

"What was that?" the man asks.

"I'm no one," Freddy says again, louder.

"Ah, yes," the man says. He stands up and puts one hand on his hip. He exchanges a few words in French with the other two men. They click through Freddy's photos. While they stand above us, the rest of the world shrinks. I lose track of the sounds of the ocean. The sun emerges from behind the clouds and flattens us with its force.

"It's okay," Freddy whispers to me. "We can get another one."

I'm nodding no when Freddy jumps up and down and waves his hands. "Officer!" There, again, are the men in green vests, this time without their horses. The Africans exchange nervous looks and back away.

The man with the sling freezes, stares me in the eye, and hands the camera back. "You are nobody," he whispers. As the officers approach, the men hop down the steps, where they disperse like grains of sand in the wind.

"*¿Todo bien*?" The officer asks, withdrawing a notebook from his back pocket.

We nod, and to my surprise, Freddy wipes away a tear. I've never seen such a performance, his brow crinkling just so, the peach fuzz on his upper lip quivering. As his eyes well, he turns to me and winks.

"*Cálmat*e," the officer says, patting Freddy awkwardly on the back. "*Espera*." He pulls a Euro from his pocket and extends it to us. "*Para helado*," he says, pointing across the way to the ice cream cart. He nudges us forward, until we stand before the cart with its array of fruit-shaped treats. I'm not hungry, but Freddy insists, saying, just try it, you stupid fool, and so I do. And it's better than any strawberry I've ever had. It's that special holiday kind of sweet, the kind of sweet that says, this has never been, and never will be, a fruit, and when it drips in pink lines down my chin I am almost happy, though I remain on the lookout for that red plaid jacket.

That night, something dislodges inside me. Maisie and I are eating pizza on the patio and I feel it deep in my stomach, a knot the size of my fist, and I wander around the flat, waiting for something to happen. I'm sweating and cursing and punching little holes in the dry wall above the toilet, and still nothing changes.

"Kenny? You all right?" she asks, following me into my room, where I wriggle and shake. I want to break it down. I imagine all the organs gathering below my belly button, making some executive decision without my approval. I can't keep still.

"What's all this about?" she asks. Her eyes fall to my desk. "Is that a camera?"

"No," I say.

"That's not a camera?"

"It's none of your business."

Maisie is quiet for a moment. I want to leave the room but she's standing in the doorway. Since we moved here, she started dressing differently: taller shoes, shorter skirts. Sometimes I catch her tucking one of

Uncle Pete's flasks into her jacket pocket, line her eyes with thick black mascara, its blackness more bleak than her pupils themselves, which no matter how long you look at them, always seem to shrink.

"Do you miss him?" she asks. She doesn't look at me; her eyes are on the back wall, where I've taped the Polaroid Dad took that last day at the airport. Nobody wanted a picture but he'd insisted. He got us all to line up against the drab white wall of the departures gate and convinced Uncle Pete to take our family portrait. It's the only picture I have of the five of us. Dad's the only one who's smiling; the rest of us are staring off in opposite directions, as if we're all expecting separate guides to take us away to some better place.

"I need to go outside," I say, and before she can stop me, I grab the camera, heave open our front door, fly down five flights of stairs, buzz through the front gate and am out on the street, where the night covers me in a cloak. I feel invisible and it is the only thing that helps. I pick a direction and start to run.

The knot begins to disperse and I can sense it, fingers of feeling starting in my belly and working their way outward, until my hands are shaking, until my legs are pumping fast, faster than ever before. I never ran like this back home. Back home the streets were shorter and wider, and there were no such things as motos. Back home people never drove with their windows rolled down, never blasted music so loud you could hear the bass thumping a block away. Back home Mum never had to work double shifts.

I am at the beach. The night is full and black. People melt into the shadows. I size up the length of the Paseo and imagine it is a bridge to somewhere new. I close my eyes and run blindly, listening hard. Maybe if I listen hard enough I'll hear Dad bringing the ships into dock. Maybe if I run far enough I'll reach Africa. It isn't so far. I open my eyes and welcome in the darkness.

The last time I spent time with Dad, he took me and Geoffrey and Maisie to this great big museum in London and made us stand before paintings for hours, until our feet hurt from standing, until we begged for lunch. But Dad wouldn't let us go, not until we inched up real close to the paint, nose just centimeters from those thick green and blue and purple splotches, mighty little globules like grains of sugar. And then he'd made us take steps backward until at some magical moment the grains fused together, and the green and blue and purple were people rowing boats. Kenny, he'd said, that's an impression. And then he'd scrunched his face right up to mine, as if to kiss me, and whispered, this is my impression. And then he walked away.

There's a stitch in my side like my body has been broken and is now being sewn back together. I've reached the end of the boardwalk but the sea, it keeps going. It looks endless but I know that somewhere, fifteen, twenty kilometers out, the green ends and the brown begins again. Freddy says that on good days,

if you climb up the hills above Mijas Coast, you can see all the way to Africa. But down here, where the pavement ends and the sea cliff begins, angry crags almost as ferocious as those back home, I'm too low to see beyond the biggest breakers.

I unearth the camera from my pocket and use it to survey the beach. The full moon leaves a long trail of light across the water. The bonfires are out already, though in the distance I can see the burning remains of a solitary fire. I zoom in, and when I see them, I nearly drop the camera. The Africans huddle around the dying flame, their faces so close together that their bodies form one continuous shadow. All the blood rises to my head. Can they see me? I realize I am under the yellow glow of a single lamppost and dodge into the darkness, holding my breath. One of the Africans stands up. I zoom in again and see his hand held to his forehead, his high cheekbones stern and taut in the evening wind. I snap a picture, but the image is all black, save for the flare of the lamppost. The men are invisible in the frame.

He spots me as I am trying to edge quietly along the beachfront, slipping behind umbrellas and under awnings. I know he can see me; his spine is rigid and his silhouette flawless, as if he isn't so much a person as a lighthouse, his eyes a beacon surveying the boardwalk. Maybe I should leave him the camera, an offering. I could set it right there on the edge of the sea wall, or better yet, in the circle of light still left under the lamppost, a prize left unclaimed. He talks to the other men. And then: a series of small flares, lighters igniting in the sea breeze. They rise as a group and their shadow transforms; they are a thundercloud gathering strength on the sand. I don't wait; I run.

I am still running, the camera in my hands, when I hear the soft roar of Mario's moto. Maisie calls my name, her voice hoarse and hollow, like she has been trying for some time. When she spots me, I think she'll yell, clap me across the cheek, grab me by the scruff of my shirt, which is damp with night. But instead she jumps off the moto and sweeps me up into her perfumed arms, her voice lost in my shirt. Mario doesn't say anything; just keeps the engine idling and looks away while Maisie hugs me, and for the first time I realize how skinny she's gotten, the hard bones of her hips digging into me. She is quiet. They sandwich me on the moto, and as the cold draws in, Maisie's heart thumps against my back.

Red Tide

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Fiction by Julia Halprin Jackson

The letter

On your way out you say, write me a letter. I watch until your car is a white speck on the horizon. Monday is lousy with rain; I let the drops fall on the page. Tuesday the trees are dewy with blossoms, so I squish some in the envelope. Wednesday a squirrel leaves footprints on the paper. Thursday I want to fit the rest of the world in, but there aren't enough words. When Friday comes, you are here again, your books on my desk, your smell in my room. You say, don't worry, baby, this is what I meant.

Heartbreak

She has a heart but all it pumps is blood. She can't fall in love. One night an infomercial changes everything. There it is: a love machine. It arrives two days later, this small contraption that slips right in her bra, as close to the atrium as she can get it. She wears it on her next date, and immediately Craig is more attractive, more wonderful. Months pass. Craig proposes. She has never been happier. But she forgot to read the fine print. The machine short-circuits on her wedding day. As she walks down the aisle, her heart races, bursts.

Crunchy

He's synesthetic. He's macrobiotic. He's vegan. Al eats only raw food that, when written down, appears yellow, green, or brown – colors of the earth. His body is so pure, so unadulterated, that if you stared down his throat, you could see the Crocs pattern on the sole of his shoe. His body is a wind tunnel. When winter turns to spring, you can spot him out west of town, shooting through the fields like a kite. I found him once, tangled up in my cherry tree, and asked, Why? Al's smile was beatific. Because it's wonderful, he said, being raw.

On the lookout

I hear them at night—high, looping trills that echo across the courtyard. I wander out onto our balcony and scan the patios of neighboring complexes. Maybe on some opposite balcony there's a girl like me, sitting out in the dusk with her bird, waiting for that moment when we're both out on our patios together. Maybe we could string up tin cans or wave flags of different colors. The sounds persist, starting after sundown and lasting until I lie down on my bed at night, but my neighbors rarely stay on their balconies long enough to send a signal.

Red tide

Asa takes me to witness the red tide. The beach emits sparks as long as the tunnel waves exploding out of dark water. When his feet touch sand, the ground blanches, white jets light up the rich black earth. The sea is a photograph's negative. We sit at the intersection of two glowing tides. The water leaks into the heavens: long, black, fluid, star-like waves extend skyward. I stay here until I, too, am bioluminescent. My freckles become stars, my hair its own Milky Way. Asa stargazes my freckles. When I brush my hair, he sees shooting comets. I glow.

Soloist

As published at fiction365.com

Patty has Vaseline in her hair and waterproof blue mascara smeared across her eyelids. Hank can see the hibiscus bobby pin in her bun from up in the stands, and now that he sees her in the pool, her arms above her head as she waits for the music to begin, he is nervous. She's a small brown dot in the center of the pool, which ripples in the evening light. The other girls wander around on the asphalt, their thin frames draped in towels, waiting and watching Patty wait.

It's a long moment, this interval between getting in the pool and starting the routine. The audience shifts. His mother's camera snaps and shudders. Patty's arms are high, her smile refreshed. Her braces match her blackberry suit.

"Come on come on," his mother says under her breath. "Not again."

The last time Patty competed, the coach accidentally played MC Hammer's "Can't Touch This" instead of Air's "Playground Love," which resulted in the world's most blasé interpretation of 90s hip hop. She'd had to sacrifice her signature move, a long, slow oyster, her body making a strong V at the water's mouth. When she left the pool, the other girls had quietly moved to the very edge of the cement, their ponytails dripping with glitter and water.

That night when she got home, Patty was quiet. Hank thought that'd be the end of that, that he'd no longer see his sister splayed out on the lawn, curling her arms and flailing her legs while their mother's peonies squished underfoot. But that was last year, and here they are again, congregated at the city pool with all the families watching, someone's dad navigating the spotlights at the top of the stairs. And still she waits, her face calm, her eyeliner visible even from the top of the tenth row.

He turns to his mom and asks, "Isn't the point of synchronized swimming that you do it with other people?"

She doesn't answer. And then, finally, the music comes on, a song Hank has never heard, but he can tell by the expression on his sister's face that it is the right one. She transforms, her unwieldy arms plucking at the air, culling it of oxygen. Her upper body is rigid as she kicks in a circle. And then she's under, her legs taut and straining as she kicks first one way, then the other, her arms and head invisible underwater. What is she thinking about down there, while her legs do the talking? Does she realize she's alone? Surely she must register that she is bigger than all the other girls, who wait on the side of the pool in their matching suits. Can she feel the eyes on her legs? Does she like that feeling?

When Patty resurfaces, she exhales loudly, loud enough that the coach notices, and for a moment he can see her lungs heaving through her suit. And the smile, don't forget the smile, the smile is back, looking

less like the other girls with their plastic, pristine faces, and more like a girl in the limelight who doesn't realize that others are watching. It's a secret look, the one she's giving now, as she tucks her knees under and spins. When the refrain starts up, he can see her lip synching.

"Oh, Patty," his mother says. "Forget the words."

But she doesn't—as her moves grow more furious, and the music builds, Hank can hear his sister chanting along. The only word for that look in her eyes is swooning. She's swooning, her breasts two small indentations above the roundness that is her stomach, looking rounder in that purple spandex, and before she can help herself, she's done a flip turn and emerged radiant, her mouth open wide, words echoing across the water. Hank doesn't know the rules to this sport but he can tell by the way the mothers are whispering that she's beginning to break every one of them, and for that, he's glad. She slips under again, her arms churning before she splashes upward in a body jump, her mouth open as she lets out a long, uneven bellow. The music fades but the spotlight remains on that face, her face, the face of someone who doesn't belong and probably never will, her braces radiant in the moonlight. And when she gets out of the pool she doesn't take a towel, like the other girls; instead, she stands dripping on the asphalt, still singing.

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