

Water Tales & Bedtime Stories

Read me a bedtime story
And tuck me in tight
Sing me a lullaby and
Always kiss me goodnight.
- Nursery Rhyme

Memories deceive, fading in and out of focus, buried beneath the minutiae of daily life. My mind plays tricks on me, blurring the boundary between what's real and what's not. Years pass and forces conspire to make me question what my senses tell me. But the truth beckons, summons me to remember what I know, have always known, to look closer at what happened to that little girl. To me.

I lie in bed late at night, sleepless, thinking back to another time, so very long ago, when a much smaller, younger version of myself lay in another bed, terrified. Lonely.

#

It's past my bedtime. I'm three, upstairs for the night. The dark envelops me. I'm wide awake. My bed is wedged into the small, wood-paneled bedroom my father built, board by board, nail by nail, adding it onto our tiny starter house. The darkness makes my heart pound.

I touch each finger once, count to ten, then call downstairs, "Good night?" Silence. I count again. "Good night?" Silence. More waiting. "Good night?!" A question. Why don't they answer?! Every time I ask, my voice gets higher, shakier, closer to tears. I have to hear my parents, know they're close by. Where are they? I feel sick.

It's not the dark itself I'm afraid of; it's that they've forgotten me. Or left me. Gone somewhere? I begin to quietly beg. "Please, please answer?" I think I hear voices. From the television? More silence, then I hear a low grumbling sound from my father, followed by my mother's mean laugh. I don't understand what's funny.

Her voice then quickly changes. Angry, loud sounds pummel me, rise up the stairs, her words making the journey as though on stomping feet: “You’re too *old* for this, Linda,” she yells. “Stop it. Go to sleep *right now*.” Her voice sounds cross. Different than the one she uses with my dad. I know I’m not supposed to call downstairs, but what if they leave me alone? The silence surrounds me again like a thick blanket I can’t kick off. Suffocating me. If my mother would just come upstairs and give me a hug, I’d be okay. I could sleep. Just one more hug. Not the kind where she thwacks my back, a hug like they do to people choking on TV. But that doesn’t happen. Tonight or any night.

#

Thinking about my own children now, and the nighttime rituals we shared, I don’t think a child is ever “too old” to reach out to a parent. Why couldn’t my parents have deviated from their evening schedule, popped upstairs to say something comforting once in a while, given tiny three-year old me a heartfelt embrace? Such a simple remedy. As a small child we had a nighttime ritual: I’d wrap my arms around my father’s neck as though on a lifeboat on stormy seas, then move on to my mother, encircling my arms around her waist as I pressed my face against her starched shirtwaist dress. But my parents stiffened at my overtures, and my rituals had time limits. Once I’d been officially tucked in bed, anything else was nonnegotiable, even if I had nightmares, even if my unquenchable need for my parents’ affection continued.

#

I’m five or six years old, in bed for the night, waiting to be tucked in. It’s a nicer house, a little bigger. I share a room with my baby sister, who still sleeps in a crib. I stare at the wallpaper cov-

ered with big boats; *schooners*, someone tells me they're called, though I have trouble spelling it. Different shades of blue cover the wall: one blue for the sky, a darker blue for the water, a mixture of blues for the waves, with black and white squiggly lines that make it look like the water is wavy, choppy.

If I stare long enough at the waves, I feel seasick, like I'm being sucked into the wallpaper's story. I feel like that with my family: topsy turvy, never knowing who will be angry with me. Wondering if they'll stop talking to me, or make fun of me. Every day is a surprise, like my jack-in-the-box toy that makes me jump. It's like standing on one leg, never knowing if someone will come along and knock me off balance. It's nice having my sister here, though, even if she can't talk to me; just knowing someone else is with me is comforting, even her crying. With my parents I'm on stage and we're all saying the lines of a play. It feels rehearsed, stiff, not spontaneous at all, something someone else wrote for us. My sister's tears are at least real.

My black cloth dog with the floppy ears, felt eyes, and white belly lies right next to me. I've hugged the stuffing out of him. I accidentally roll over him at night, so he's flat, limp, floppy, like a rag. I will never let him go. He reminds me of the dog in a cartoon I watch: "Tom Terrific."

My mother arrives, the smell of black licorice from her favorite candies preceding her into the room. They remind me of the little round wafers the minister hands out to grownups at the church altar. I hate black licorice; it makes my stomach woozy. I'm caught in a tug of war game.

I want her to be close to me, but when she's next to me, I don't feel better and want her to go away. I don't know what I want.

She doesn't stay long, doesn't tell me a story or read me a book or sing me a song or make sure the blanket covers up my icy cold feet or tell me she loves me or brush my straight brown hair off my face or even look at me. In a hurry, she leans over to give me a peck on my cheek, her lips in a tight, straight line.

"Go to sleep," she orders. Her voice sounds mad. Is she mad? After she leaves, I listen carefully. Music drifts up from the record player downstairs. Broadway shows with lots of singing. *Camelot, My Fair Lady*. My mother likes that kind of music. So do I. Maybe it makes her feel better. It makes me feel better. My heart stops beating so hard. Listening to it together would be perfect, sitting on her lap, but that never happens.

If I'm very quiet I can hear another sound, farther away: a train whistle coming from the basement. My father is working on his model railroad. These sounds remind me of the different levels of my dollhouse. I'm at the top level with my brothers and sister; my mother is one level below, and my father is at the bottom. Like dollhouse dolls, we're stiff and don't hug each other, or visit other in the house. We stay where someone else has put us, in our assigned rooms.

All six of us in the family stay in different rooms, unless we're eating dinner, but dinnertime is when my father and my oldest brother are cross with each other, their voices louder, their hands

and arms waving around along with their words. If they're not arguing, my father talks and talks and talks, mostly about his job downtown. He sounds angry even when he's talking about boring business things. I don't pay attention because I don't understand any of it; it has nothing to do with me. When he and my brother disagree, though, I listen for clues. If I can unlock the puzzle of the arguing, I'll know how to avoid my father getting mad at me.

#

I still have the black stuffed dog with the white stomach, my comfort so many years ago. When I look at him I remember the yearning, the longing. I still love listening to 1960s musicals. I still hate black licorice.

#

I'm six. It's late at night. Dark. Just a few dim lights are on, foggy, like ones you see in swimming pools, but these are yellow. I'm lying in a special ward for children at a hospital, listening to the silence. This is the first time I've slept in a room without my sister since she was born a few years ago; I wish she were here with me. I hear the sound of a little boy near me, crying until his voice gets softer and softer. I think he gave up. No one is coming to talk to him or hug him or make him feel better. I know how he feels.

I hear a nurse's shoes clomping down the empty hallway, the sound bouncing off the walls as though a large rubber ball were ricocheting back and forth. I've been left behind, this time in a bed with bars, a big crib. I'm too old to be in a crib. Every day they give me so many shots, and sometimes they leave the needle in my hand or arm for a long time. I try not to look at it, dangling there.

My godmother gave me two small cloth dolls. They look like white gingerbread men and are spongy and soft with material dots for their eyes and mouths. I keep them close to me, touching me, but when I squirm because of the needles stuck into the top of my hands, the dolls fall to the floor. I can't reach them through the bars of the bed, but I see them on the floor, waiting to be picked up. I want the dolls to know they're loved, cared for, that I won't forget them, that I will take them home with me. I try not to bother the nurses or the stern doctors, but the dolls and I need to be together, to love each other so we won't be scared.

I long for my mother to be with me; an ache the size of a boulder is growing in my stomach. She can't come every day because of my baby sister. My father never comes because he's far away for work in Jefferson City. He must not think I'm very sick. When my mother does come, she tells me I have something called Infectious Hepatitis.

#

Forty years later, doctors giving me a physical for a work trip to Africa will tell me this is impossible. They examine my blood and announce I never had "Infectious Hepatitis," even when I argue that, yes, I did; I know I did....Didn't I?

I phone my mother across the country to tell her what the doctors said, thinking she will tell me, "Oh, it was the 1950s, they probably misdiagnosed you," or "Oh, no. They're wrong. You definitely had it!" Or, "You're kidding?!" But she says nothing, changes the subject, gets off the

phone quickly before we've even finished talking. I wonder where the truth lies or if I'll ever know it.

Back then, before she and my father took me to the hospital, she whispered to six-year-old me in our little white-on-white tile kitchen, "It's your fault." She stooped down to my level; her voice whispery-cross so no one could hear. She straightened out my shoulders so I had to look at her. "You don't wash your hands after you go to the bathroom, do you? So don't you *dare* blame *me* for getting sick."

Is that right? I wonder. I thought I washed my hands, but maybe she's right? I can tell she doesn't want my father to think it's her fault I'm sick, causing extra work; I think it's part of her job to keep us all healthy. It has to be someone else's fault, especially since he's out of town so much for work and has left her in charge.

My face feels hot when she blames me. I want to defend myself but can't find the right words; they're all jumbled up in my mind; gobbledygook. I feel ashamed, confused. Mostly confused. I lie on the hard hospital bed, remembering her words, staring out through the bars, through the small window, looking for signs of daylight. If I could see sunlight I would feel better. Maybe someone will come visit me tomorrow, even bring me a gift or at least a card. Maybe they won't mind having to get the shot first; anyone who wants to visit me has to get a special shot.

#

What was really wrong with that little 6-year-old? Was anything wrong? I remember the pricks in my fingers and the chest X-rays and the IV sticking out of the top of my hand for what seemed like hours, my hand wrapped around a short board so the needle wouldn't fall out. I'd upset everyone's lives; even at six I knew that. What if I wasn't sick at all? I don't remember being in pain, just being very tired and having yellow skin.

#

I'm six when it happens. I remember watching the home movie — taken by my father — but where is it now? Maybe molding in a brother's basement, or thrown out? The movie itself is what I remember, even though I was there when the incident happened. The movie shows the action, strips everything else away. The camera focuses on the two actors in the drama: my mother and my sister.

We're on vacation in Florida in the late 1950s, Clearwater Beach, escaping from the Midwestern winter. My mother is holding my baby sister in the motel swimming pool. My father sits at the edge of the pool filming. Unintentionally, he captures what happens. Several minutes into the movie my little sister is separated from my mother's arms. It looks like my mother pushed my baby sister *away* from her body, not *towards* her. A flurry of manmade waves splash up onto the camera, blurring the lens, making it hard to see. Someone is screaming. Waves and voices and movement. Water is everywhere.

A few seconds into the movie, after the impossible-to-consider moment, a bystander — a former Olympic swimmer I'm later told — jumps into the pool in seconds five, six, and seven of the

movie, and pulls my sister to safety. The film stops abruptly, but not before my mother disappears from view. Did my father toss down his camera to help my mother and sister? I don't know where my mother went after her inexplicable movements. The shortest and most powerful movie in my life is over.

What happened? Could the film have reversed itself in a weird technical glitch, making the movement of mother and daughter look like a pushing, not a pulling, the short mother-daughter choreography a duet of embrace and release, not release and embrace? So many years later, unanswered questions remain: what happened? Why does it still haunt me?

#

I didn't see the home movie until several years after the incident. We lived in another house, the third one, one we moved to when I was in fourth grade, a bigger, grander home. My family — parents, both brothers, and sister — sat in the finished part of the basement, the rathskeller, while my father shared home movies with us. Many scenes from earlier years flashed by and then, on the same reel, the images from that day popped up. My father froze, then abruptly turned off the projector, but too late; we'd all witnessed my mother pushing my baby sister away from her. My eyes were glued to the movie. Suddenly he turned off the projector, flustered. The excess film flapped against the silver casing like a tiny whip beating against something metallic. No one ever spoke again of what we'd seen that day.

#

Florida, again. I'm six. The sun has gone down. I'm at the deep end of the pool, hanging onto a small inner tube with pink flamingos on top. My arms are draped loosely over the edges, my

head nodding, fighting sleep. Even though I'm six I don't know how to swim yet. I'm wearing a ruffled, bright yellow one-piece suit with black stripes and thin black straps, and my skin is dark from playing outside in the sun all day.

I'm tired. It's getting late, and playing in the water has worn me out, and the inner tube's movement on the surface of the water is rocking me to sleep. My parents sit on the other end of the pool, the shallow end, talking with new friends. My mother's voice is chatty, friendly, higher than normal. She sounds like an actress. My father is laughing, telling one of his stories. He's a good storyteller and my mother is pretty, so people like to be around them.

My eyes feel heavy. Gradually, I slip through the inner tube, arms forced upward as my body sinks through the hole in the inner tube. Down down down I go, the inner tube still floating on the surface without me as my body drifts towards the drain at the bottom of the pool, as though my legs were tied to the drain. My short life flashes before me like a movie I'm watching. Scenes rush by. My past year at school, the faces of friends, teachers, and family members appearing before me like pictures on a slide projector, but moving fast. Then someone strong — a man? — reaches down and pulls me out. I splutter and cough, but I'm safe. I imagine that maybe one of the people enjoying my parents' company at the shallow end of the pool, one of their new friends, listening to my father's stories while my beautiful mother laughed at just the right times, noticed something amiss. Maybe he saw my inner tube gently bobbing on the surface without me at the deep end, and sounded the alarm.

Later, when I'm safe and dry in our motel, in my pajamas, clutching at my mother I tell her the details of what happened. She pries my grasping fingers away from her clothes as though I'm choking her, says my life could not have flashed before me. "Don't be so dramatic," she accuses me. "We pulled you out long before you swallowed any water." She says I wasn't in any danger, that no time had passed at all before I was pulled out, that I'm overreacting.

#

Since then, I avoid swimming pool drains. No matter how many years have passed, whenever I swim laps, or stand at the side of a pool, when I see the drain I relive that day long ago and imagine being sucked through its black crossbars, into what I imagine is the bottomless hole beneath the grate. I squint my eyes or close them briefly to avoid looking at the wavy square box at the bottom of the pool.

#

Thoughts of that long ago little girl bring to mind a photograph I still have of myself at eight years old. Sitting up in bed, I catch a glimpse of it on the edge of my cluttered dresser, light from the moon illuminating the image as though in a spotlight. I reach for the picture, careful not to disturb my sleeping husband next to me. In it, I'm vamping for the camera, playing dress up in my mother's mink stole, which I've wrapped tightly around my tiny frame. My chin-length dark hair is topped with a dark pillbox hat decorated with delicate black lace that tumbles off the side of my face, my poker-straight bangs a fringe covering half my forehead. A bunched up dress swallows me up, only its white Peter Pan lace collar is visible beneath the mink stole. A chunky charm bracelet dangles heavily from my wrist, along with a too-large ring on an index finger. I

look like someone determined to look older, different, someone “other” than who I am, maybe my mother.

What captures my attention is the tentative smile on the face of this beautiful little girl, as well as the improvised costume she wears. Her head bent down slightly, it seems like she’s looking at the picture-taker beseechingly. “Am I okay? Pretty enough? Grownup enough? Good enough? Worthy enough now? Do you love this different-looking version of me?” she seems to be communicating in her altered physical state to the photographer and unseen spectators.

I want to reach back through time to the little girl playing dress up, hug her tightly, comfort her: I want to tell her: “I hear you. I see you. I believe you. You’re not alone. You’re more than enough just as you are. You don’t have to be someone else. You’re perfect just as you are.”

Memories deceive. The mind plays tricks. Years pile on top of years, and events become warped with age. Images and words flood over me, but the truth eventually floats to the surface. It rises above the myths and lies to reveal itself, to reveal once-submerged, painful realities.