Ella Harrigan
Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI
Educator: Mika Perrine

Category: Short Story

Swimming Lessons

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It was bright and our shadows moved together. They merged into one and back into two as we talked, joined as we leaned in, separated as we stretched in the New York heat. Sam splayed out on the grass, his shirt unbuttoned. A blade of grass sat in-between his teeth, bobbing gently.

He wore wealth carelessly, like the truly rich do. It just seeped out of him; it stuck to his pores. He didn't think much about money, losing 100 dollar bills, shedding cash like dead skin. But even then, dressed in thrift-store clothes, he lounged like a prince. That's another thing about the rich. They know how to pose.

Back then, I didn't know how to pose. We were only sixteen, and I still studied the world around me like I'd get tested on it, always preparing for some cosmic pop-quiz. Sam was my best friend, and so I studied him most of all. I loved watching him. I stole the way he smoked for a poem, his parents' tax evasion for an essay. I studied the way he walked into class, his body slanting backwards as if willing him not to come in.

I met him when we were fifteen and I had just moved to New York. I got a scholarship to a school full of over-achieving rich kids and sat next to him one day after the subway made me late to class. We fell into friendship, spending hours a day with each other.
I'd gotten into the school through a combination of luck and desperation, compiling financial aid documents and teacher recommendations like protective amulets, writing an earnest personal statement about how I was sure the school would change my life. He, on the other hand, ended up there after getting kicked out of his previous school, and the school before that, and the school before that.

That day in the park, he told me a story. He used to free-dive in St. Barts, hold his breath and swim until he was close to breaking. He loved it— the blue speed of his body pushing against the water, the world blurred. The hugeness of the ocean and him in it, how easy it would be not to come up for breath. More than anything, he loved the moment right before breaking the surface and gasping for air. He loved prolonging it, getting closer and closer to passing out.

Once, the summer he was thirteen, he almost drowned. He waited half a second too long and, instead of coming back up to the surface, he started sinking downward. Half-conscious, he felt himself fall. He told me he didn't know exactly how, but he found the strength to come to the surface. He floated there for a long time, eating the air. He didn't tell anyone what happened. He just swam to the shore and walked home.

When we were teenagers Sam was magical, unbruised by danger. One Friday night, the fall of our junior year, he told me as much. We'd just smoked a joint and had been laughing about the sound of our own laughter, cuddled up together in the corner of this girl Louise's room at her party. There were bad songs playing and drunk boys wearing their dad's watches trying to sing along. But the room was warm and full of smoke and everything was fuzzed in a lovely, unfamiliar sort of way. Someone had put a plastic flower crown on my head and it balanced there as Sam and I laughed, clutching each other.

After we stopped laughing, he got quiet. He leaned in. His eyes red and serious, he told me his body could take anything, especially his lungs. He had blessed lungs. Lungs that were born with asthma and then cured with cigarette

smoke, lungs which let him inhale for thirty seconds straight, lungs which held enough air to last him seven minutes, eight minutes, nine minutes underwater. He was untouchable, he told me then. He was safe.

It was around then when he started spending more time with people I didn't know, kids from different schools who invited him to parties in abandoned apartment complexes and raves in old meatpacking factories. He had always been on the edge of things, showing up to school with a bottle of vodka and a wink, but it was different now, more serious. In French class he picked MDMA out of the crevices of his pockets, sorted it out from the tobacco and weed flecks around it.

That winter, when midterms came around, we studied together like we always did, which meant me working and him keeping me company. I wrote out pages and pages of notes, cried into my Chromebook's plastic keys. He gave me his coat and told me stories, jokes, little bits of comfort. "Those writers you love never cared about school, anyway. You think Frank O'Hara was good at Calc AB?"

"They didn't have Calc AB when Frank O'Hara was alive." I said, wiping my eyes and laughing.

"You're smarter than anyone else here." he said, gesturing with a chunk of pumpkin muffin in his hand.

"At this cafe? Maybe."

"At the school." He paused for dramatic effect. "You're the only one who can keep up with me."

"You're so fucking obnoxious." I sniffed and pulled his coat close to me. "Shut up and eat your muffin."

Sam didn't show up the morning of the Calc midterm. I did well, concentrating so hard I developed a pulsing headache and the numbers started to blur in front of me. Sam got to school at noon, walking with a limp. There was a crust of vomit on the back of his shirt and dried blood around his nose.

When he saw me in the hall, he waved his hand vaguely and kept walking. There were no jokes today. When I went after him and asked what happened, he told me his parents were out of town again, and he'd gone out to meet some friends. They'd given him something to snort. He thought it was ketamine, but it was actually ecstasy, and by the time he got home he was balancing on the edge of an overdose. He was vomiting and vomiting, stumbling up the fire escape and into his bed. He stepped onto an open box of legos, thus the limp. His nose bled as he seizured in his sleep, blood splattering the ceiling, thus the red crust under his nostrils.

I gave him a hug, avoiding the dried throw-up. I bought him a green-juice from Starbucks for $5.50, probably more than I could afford. "Drink this." I said, sliding the bottle across the desk in our French midterm that afternoon. "It'll cure you. I promise."

"Thanks." He looked at me as I tried not to cry. "Hey, I love you. Thank you." He paused, worked a gold ring off his finger. "I didn't know we were exchanging presents, but here. Take this." he said, slipping it into my backpack. "Don't do that again," I said.

"I'll try," he said, and that was all.

The rest of the year decayed from there, in a series of his parents' desperate curfews and piss tests. Eventually, his parents cut him off, and he begged me for money. He was in nicotine withdrawal, he said, and it wasn't fair of them to make him go cold turkey. I gave him 100 bucks. I didn't know what else to do.

In March, he overdosed properly for the first time. It was Vicodin, apparently, laced with fentanyl. He never used to do pills, said they scared him. They were too clean, too official, all bone and no blood. But he'd started that winter, swallowing them with cheap booze and feeling the world go quiet around him. I think it reminded him of the water--how it swallowed him up, blurred all the sound and colors around him, and how endless it seemed, the ocean floor shrouded with dark.

A friendly drug dealer had given them to him free. A gift. When his mother called 911, he tried to hit her. When the paramedics came, he tried to hit them too. He woke up handcuffed to the hospital bed.

I didn't even get to see him before his parents sent him away to California to live with his grandparents, to be, officially, no longer their problem. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

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By the time I was 21, I was a junior at Yale. I had lost touch with Sam, after he'd stopped replying to my messages halfway through our senior year of high school and I stopped trying halfway through our freshman year of college. At Yale, I helped run the litmag, I had a boyfriend, I had my shit together. I wore cashmere sweaters with no bra, I knew the difference between assonance and consonance, I went to parties hosted by half-secret societies and could take vodka shots without changing my expression.

I wore Sam's ring on my thumb but when people asked I told them it belonged to my grandfather. It was one last secret I could keep with Sam, one last in-joke. My grandfather had been a mechanic and died when my mom was seven years old, his red Jeep veering off the snow-covered roads on the way to a hunting trip. My family didn't collect heirlooms, rings or otherwise. We collected coupons.

Sam called me one night in the middle of winter. He was in New Haven. He needed a place to stay. He wanted to know if our high school promise of giving each other a place to crash still stood. I mumbled yes into my phone and grabbed my coat. I laughed into the microphone. "Yes, of course you can crash here, we just have to sneak you into my apartment."

I lived in student housing off campus and felt like a real adult, my tiny apartment filled with posters of famous paintings and packets of instant noodles. My roommate had gone home halfway through the semester because of a nervous breakdown and so he slept on her bed, underneath the polaroid pictures of her friends that she never bothered to take down. He rolled us a joint and then another and another and another, laughing when I coughed.

"You've gone soft," he said, pushing his shoulder against mine.

I closed my eyes, feeling the red hot pulse of my eyelids, listening to my breath go in and out. I hadn't smoked in forever and had forgotten what it felt like, how it made you remember your body. Breathing slowly, I felt the heat radiate from my skin and escape into the winter air. "I've always been soft, remember."

"Yeah, that's true. You always were."

He wouldn't tell me what had happened since we'd last talked, although he apologized over and over for not answering my calls. I let it go that night. Instead, I told him everything that had happened to me. I showed him pictures of my boyfriend and pieces I'd gotten published. He called me brilliant. He told me he was proud of me.

Over the next few weeks, he wouldn't tell me much more of anything, either where he'd been or what his plans were. We settled into a routine. In the mornings, I'd leave for class and he'd still be asleep. I'd come back at night and we'd eat dinner together, usually after I stole something for him from the cafeteria. Some nights, he'd just eat ramen or not eat at all, chain smoking til my room smelled more like tobacco than it did like me. At night he'd go out, I'm not sure where. He'd come back in the early morning exhausted and stumbling into the room, his pupils huge.

I slowly pieced together what had happened. The move to California hadn't straightened him out the way his parents hoped it would. When he turned twenty, his dad got sick of his living in their house buying drugs off his money. He cut Sam off until he pulled it together. But he didn't. Not after the second overdose or the third. Before Sam ended up in New Haven, he'd been bouncing from friend's house to friend's house for a year, living in vacation homes and shitty apartments and on cardboard boxes on street corners. Sam had enough rich friends left to tag along on their plane rides and train tickets, and enough desperation to hitchhike huge swathes of the country, and so he ended up here, in New Haven, after exhausting all his other options.

Sam stayed with me for a month and a half before his dad called me in the middle of my history lecture. I rushed to the hallway and picked up.

"I want to thank you for," he cleared his throat "for giving Sam a place to stay."

I leaned against the wall. “Of course. I’d do anything for him.”

“Yes. And it’s so wonderful he has someone like you. Such a good influence. But you know, obviously, that he needs to come home. We’re putting him in rehab.”

“I don’t think he’ll want to go.” When he’d first come to stay with me, I’d promised him he could trust me. At the time, his reasons for avoiding rehab seemed to make a certain kind of sense: he wanted to figure things out by himself, he was doing better, it was just an excuse for his parents to control him again. But one by one, those reasons had started to decay, replaced with the strange monotony of our days-- him stumbling in every night, and me trying my best to keep him alive.

“Then don’t tell him I’m coming. I’ll be there Monday.” There was a pause, the phone static filling our ears, our mouths.

“You know,” he said, “I’d be happy to reimburse you for the rent and utilities Sam cost you. Plus more for the inconvenience. I can give you the cheque Monday, once Sam is safe in my hands.”

I sunk down to the floor of the hallway, holding my knees close to me. The telephone static buzzed quietly, waiting for me to speak. “Yes. Thank you. That sounds good. I’ll see you then. Thank you.”

“We can email to discuss logistics?”

“Yes. Of course. Yes.”

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After Sam left for rehab he didn’t contact me again. I know he felt like I had betrayed him. Maybe I had. I don’t know. I just kept on living. I married my boyfriend the summer we graduated and we divorced three years later, when we were 25. I worked at a copy-editing agency days and a restaurant waitressing two nights a week. I had dental insurance and paid sick leave, though not much of it. I wasn’t unhappy.

Five years after Sam first came to stay with me, I got a voicemail from a number I didn’t recognize. It was Sam’s dad, telling me to come to New York. Sam had died a week earlier, having taken a lethal dose of sleeping pills. It was his fourth overdose. At this point, I don’t think I believed he could die. He’d survived so long doing the un-survivable, and so it wasn’t hard to imagine that the sleeping pills hadn’t been intentional. He might have just thought he could tolerate things other people couldn’t.

I got time off work and took a train to New York five days later for the funeral. It was in a huge gothic church with a closed casket. No one really talked to me, except for his family, who waved me over. Looking at Sam’s father’s face, it was hard to speak. I hadn’t seen him since he’d picked Sam up for rehab. He’d stood calm and polished in the center of my tiny apartment while Sam raged around him, yelling and his father then at me. “You fucking bitch,” Sam’d said. “I hope you buy something nice.”

I whispered out my condolences to Sam’s family and went to my seat in the back of my church, where I hugged my knees to my chest the way children do. It was cold and I was tired, my breath catching and wavering on the edge of my throat. By the time Sam’s uncle had started his speech on the sanctity of life, I had grabbed my coat and rushed out, hyperventilating in the cold New York air.

When Sam had been alive, I took comfort in knowing he was out there, breathing and thinking and capable of forgiving me. I could’ve bumped into him at a coffee shop or in an airport trolley. We’d look older and neater, the slant of our shoulders straightened out, but he’d recognize me. He’d look past me then double back, call out my name. For a moment or two, we could’ve talked, our sentences stumbling and bumping into each other. I could’ve apologized.

There was a YMCA near the hotel and a faded blue swimsuit in the trunk of my car. I grabbed it on the way out and changed in my hotel room, rubbing my hands over the goosebumps on my legs.

I slipped into the pool and began to swim. The water was blue and mute, and all around me chlorine echoed into more chlorine. I guess I finally saw the appeal.

I held my breath for as long as I could, the burn in my chest filling my body with warmth. I picked up speed as my vision started to fracture into tiny dots, my heartbeat heavy in my throat as I moved closer and closer to the pool's edge.