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Opening Extract from...

This Is the Water

Written by Yannick Murphy

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THIS IS THE WATER

YANNICK MURPHY



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CHAPTER ONE

This is the water, lapping the edge of the pool, coming up in small waves as children race through it. This is the swim mom named Dinah wearing the team shirt with a whale logo on it, yelling at her daughter Jessie to swim faster. This is Jessie who cannot hear Dinah because Jessie is in the water. Jessie is singing a song to herself: She is singing, "This old man, he played one. He played knick knack on his thumb." Dinah is red in the face, standing in the stands. Dinah moves her hand in the air as if to help hurry her daughter along. Behind the starting blocks the water comes up over the edge of the pool and splashes the parents who are timing on deck.

This is the facility. The long shafts of sunlight that come in through the windows and hit the water on sunny days. The showers whose pressure is weak, whose tiles need brush-cleaning in the grout. This is Dinah after her daughter Jessie doesn't win the race. Dinah is sitting back down on the bleachers in the stands. She

is writing down Jessie's time. She is comparing the time to the last time Jessie swam that event. She is telling herself at least her daughter beat her previous record. This is how much she beat it by: one one-hundredth of a second.

This is the racing suit some of the swimmers wear. It feels like the skin of a shark when rubbed the wrong way. Rubbed the right way it's smooth and gives you the feeling that you can beat your old times, that you can beat anyone's times. The suits are supposed to fit tight, as tight as a corset probably. The suits, the girls all say, are terribly uncomfortable. They ride up their crotches. They cut into their legs. They dig into their shoulders. They flatten their chests. They make it difficult to breathe. But they love their suits nonetheless and after a meet they rinse them and hang them up dutifully to dry, unlike their practice suits, which they sometimes let stay in their bags overnight in a wet ball, and the chlorine from the pool eats away at the fabric.

This is the bathroom in the locker room where a girl changes into her suit. In the bathroom grunting can be heard. Many hands are on the girl and the suit trying to help her get into it. If you look under the bathroom door, you can see so many legs. From the stall you can hear the pull of the swimsuit fabric, the sucking sound of skin being pushed and shoved.

This is the mom named Chris who is timing with another parent she doesn't know from another team. Chris is not wearing the swim team tee shirt with the whale logo. She did not think to put it on when she left the house at five a.m. with her daughter in the car and her daughter's swim bag stuffed with towels to last throughout the long day of racing, and when the moonlight was flowing over the field, lighting up a deer and a doe nibbling at the edge of the

forest. Chris does not cheer for her daughter. She only realizes her daughter is swimming in the race when she looks out across the lanes of the pool and sees someone who looks like her daughter swimming. She still doesn't cheer when she realizes it is her daughter because she knows her daughter would not hear her over all the other noise. Chris also thinks it's silly how many parents are so involved in their child's swimming and cheer so loudly, as if the cheering will make their child go faster, as if it were the Olympics or if winning or losing a swim down the length of the pool and back were a matter of life and death. Chris's daughter, Cleo, is becoming more interested in swimming every season, even though Chris doesn't ask her much about it. Cleo keeps a record in her journal of all of her past times and of the times she needs to qualify for certain meets. Cleo has begun sharing her times with her father, Paul, because he seems more interested than her mother in how she's able to shave off time by tucking tighter in her turns, or keeping her hips up in the backstroke. This is Chris, being splashed by the water when a swimmer dives in and liking the way the water feels through the leg of her blue jeans, making her feel cool when it is so hot in the facility. These are the windows of the pool, covered over in mist so thick it looks purposely sprayed on, as if what were being done behind the glass were not to be seen by anyone on the outside.

This is the outside. A bright New England day that is almost spring, but not quite. Snow still in patches in places surrounded by the pale green grass of last summer—last summer wanting to still be seen, even if its grass looks frizzy at the tips and is mixed with what looks like bits of straw. These are the two highways behind the lawn of the facility, the cars going by quickly, most of

the drivers wanting to leave the area whose exits are congested with shopping stores and food chains. They want to get back to the areas where people actually live instead of shop. They want to get back to their homes on rural roads where what wakes them up in the morning is the occasional lowing of the neighboring farm's cows, or a woodpecker at work on the exterior siding of their cedar-framed house, and where the spring peepers peeping at night in the nearby ponds are the last sounds people hear before sleep. This is what's in front of the facility: a view of a small mountain gently rounded, a skyline often interrupted by vee formations of high-flying geese, a dirt road that loops around the facility and also branches off and travels to the south for only so long before it peters out and you see a field of scrubby grass surrounded by scraggly pines, unhealthy at their tops, their upper boughs the color of rust.

This is Dinah at the home meet talking to Chris when Chris's shift as a timer is over and she goes up into the stands. "How did your daughter swim?"

"She looked like she was having fun," Chris says. What Dinah hears is, "Chris's daughter did not swim well and she doesn't want to talk about it." This is Dinah telling Chris that her daughter, Jessie, lost one-hundredth of a second off her seedtime.

This is Chris needing the bathroom, thinking as she sits on the seat that she needed to sit down as much as she needed to pee. Chris has been feeling tired lately, she thinks, or maybe she's just been feeling tired for years now. She's not quite sure. Maybe she's been tired ever since she was a girl living down south and had a babysitter, a young woman named Beatrice who would stay with Chris in the evenings and make sure she did her homework and tucked her into bed, who was raped. Chris thinks she loved

Beatrice as much as she loved her parents, maybe even more. Her parents were too busy running the general store they owned to spend time with Chris in the evenings, but Beatrice would come over with her college texts, and Chris would have her math sheets and her ancient civilizations textbook out, and they'd sit at the kitchen table studying together, with music from the pop radio station playing. Beatrice would lean over Chris, helping with a fraction, smelling of fruity shampoo, and when Chris got the answer right, Beatrice would say, "Atta girl, Chris." After they studied for a while, Beatrice would announce it was break time, and she'd pull out her collection of nail polish and bend over Chris's toes and paint them with colors Chris had never even imagined existed, or had imagined existed only as precious metals that one could find deep in the veins of the earth. Gleaming, creamy, flecked metallic bronzes and coppers and golds and silvers in small bottles with price stickers from the drugstore stuck on their plastic tops. After seeing those colors, the realization came to Chris that anything could be replicated, even the insides of the earth. She imagined how fun it would be to be a painter, and to have those colors to work with all of the time and be able to paint anything you see before your eyes. Those evenings with Beatrice were some of the reasons Chris became an artist. Afterward, Beatrice would do her own toes, and the two of them would dance on the sloping farm kitchen floor with wads of cotton stuffed between their toes so that the nail polish would dry evenly. Then, at night, Beatrice would climb into bed with Chris. They'd pull the blankets up above their ankles and lift their feet up into the air so they could admire their nail-polish artistry and how their toes flashed jittery specks of metallic light when they moved them side to side in the falling

darkness. It wasn't until later, when Chris's parents would finally come home, having finished closing up the store and making all the egg and tuna salads for the next day, that Beatrice would slide out from under the covers and leave Chris's side. One evening, though, Beatrice did not show up at Chris's house. Some men in their early twenties had followed Beatrice in a van while she was jogging on a dirt road. They slowed down alongside her, matching her pace, and slid the van door open. They pulled her inside, where she thrashed and tried to escape, and where they kept her for three days with tape on her mouth and over her eyes. When they were done with her, they shoved her back outside the van's sliding door and onto the same dirt road where they had first found her jogging. After that, Beatrice didn't come over anymore. Even after the men were caught and convicted of her rape as well as others before hers, Beatrice still didn't come over. The last Chris heard of Beatrice she had dropped out of school, and her family had moved, taking her with them, but no one knew where. Chris was alone then in the evenings. Her parents decided she was old enough to stay by herself and put herself to bed, but sleep never came easily. She would think about Beatrice and how much she missed her.

I have felt tired since then, Chris thinks. And my husband now too, makes me feel tired. Lately, Paul has being waking her up in the middle of the night because he's been coming home late from work. Yes, ever since Beatrice and ever since Paul I've been tired, she thinks. But it's not the kind of tired that sleep could cure, it's the kind of tired that gets in your bones and becomes a part of you, a thing you carry around, Chris thinks while she's on the seat in the bathroom, still not wanting to get up even though she's finished.

This is you, Annie, mother of two swim-team girls, Sofia and Alex, wife of Thomas. This is you at the facility, walking in the crowded foyer because a meet is taking place and there are swimmers and families of swimmers from teams all over New England lined up to buy tee shirts with the name of the swim meet on them, and there is the hot machine that presses and glues the letters of the names of the swimmer onto a tee shirt and it stinks up the foyer so that it smells like rubber burning. This is you checking the time, knowing that in half an hour you will have to go on deck and help time the racers alongside Adam, the father of two boys on the team. This is you looking around the foyer, seeing other parents and other swimmers talking to each other, buying snacks, and using the restroom. This is you looking for a second at the newspaper lying on the cheery Moroccan-blue front desk of the facility. There is an article about a woman found dead out west in Denver. The police were triumphant, though. They caught the man and he confessed to strangling five women in the city over the past ten years. You are thankful you don't live out west, with the smog, and the craggy dry mountains, and the stranglers. You are thankful your children are raised here, where they can walk down the backcountry roads any time of day without feeling scared. Where the air is crisp with cold in winter and smells of moist green grass in the summer, where the mountains are covered in maple and pine, and where there are almost no strangers. Here is a place where the UPS man knows you and gives your dog a biscuit and lets your chickens hop onto the steps of his truck, where they peck at the bumps in the corrugated metal. Here, if your car is parked at the market, the UPS man knows it's okay to open up the back and put your package in there to save himself the trip on the dirt roads to

your house. You are glad you live in a place where everyone leaves their cars and their houses unlocked, where the librarian calls you at home to let you know the book you have on hold is available, or if she doesn't call, she might swing by your house and leave it on your porch, along with a book that is new to the library and that she also thought you might like.

You don't read the entire article about the strangler in Denver. It's too grisly, too far away, and too foreign. Not like the facility, where right now there are so many youths looking well fed and fit, so many boys with perfect complexions and girls dressed in brightly colored suits, standing and talking to parents who wear fashionably understated and relaxed looking clothes.

You look around the facility. There is Kim's mother, who is nervous but tries not to show it, even though she is pacing in front of the glass window with a view onto the pool because she is scared that Kim won't win her event in her fly. Kim has wanted to win an event in the fly because it has been so long since she has won and she used to win her fly so often. Oh, and look, there is Sofia, your eldest, your pretty thirteen-year-old, running up to you before her event and telling you she is starving and that you have to buy her something to eat or she'll die. This is you telling Sofia that if she's hungry then she should eat part of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich you packed for her, and this is Sofia scrunching up her face so that her thinly tapered perfect eyebrows, which look as if they're painted on and which you wish you had yourself, form peaks so that now it looks as though two small mountains are perched on top of each one of her soft brown eyes. This is you looking into the pool through the glass windows and seeing the display board in the pool area that tells in bright lights which event

the swimmers are on, and then this is you saying, "Don't you have the two-hundred IM soon?" even though you know her event isn't for a while. This is Sofia also knowing she doesn't have her event soon—but knowing your answer means she can't buy something to eat—turning on her barefoot heel, going back inside the pool area with her head raised, and holding her towel on her shoulders as if it's a stole and she's striding off into the cold air of night instead of entering a hot, steamy, and very crowded pool deck.

This is you, Annie, in the foyer, the smell of the burning rubber from the hot tee-shirt machine making you feel sick, making you wish for a moment you were back home instead, almost an hour away, taking a walk through your fields, noticing how the moss was already coming up in soft mounds in the shade by the stream where a layer of thinning ice, thin as a sheet of plastic wrap, still covered the small trout below.

This is you in the foyer, thinking about how the burnt rubber smells almost like gunpowder after a shot has been fired, and this leads to you thinking about how your older brother, who was fifty-four, shot himself in the head two years ago because his wife had told him that week that she wanted to leave him. This is you wondering how he was able to do it, having teenage children he would leave behind, and how much blood there was, and how fucking stupid he was. His family never guessed he was capable of it, but maybe there were previous signs. Your brother could not stand it when your father left your mother for another woman. He could not stand it that your father never visited you or your brother. Your father never came by or called, and your brother, being the only son in the family, thought it was up to him to be the man now. But he could not be the man. He was still a boy. He played baseball on

a team called the Cougars and collected buffalo nickels inside of binders filled with blue-colored cardboard pages, fitting the coins into rigid slots shaped like half moons. He played trumpet, his lips after practice puffy and red, and your ears ringing with the brassy notes of "The Carnival of Venice" long after he stopped his practice session. He played monster in chase, you would scream when he ran after you, because he had that chipped tooth that looked like a fang, and he was so much bigger than you, you knew he could catch you. It was just a matter of time before he grabbed you and threw you down and tickled you until you cried. Now you are not so young, and being not so young, you think you shouldn't be thinking about milk that can't be unpoured, so you stop thinking about your brother, and think about the bathing suits for sale at the facility instead. There are suits so low in the back they look as if the dog from the Coppertone ad on the billboards were biting and pulling down on them.

This is you watching Kim, the girl who did not swim her hundred fly as fast as she thought she could. Her tears mixing with pool water dripping from her hair, which she just removed from her cap. Her shoulders heaving, the sobbing visible, even though the sound of it can't be heard. The voices so loud in the stands because spectators are cheering on other swimmers in a race after hers. The swimmer who wins in the race after hers raises her fist in the air, smiling.