

You float.

It's hot out, not kind of hot, not medium hot, but midsummer-Arizona hot. Sweltering one hundred and twelve degrees, and you're floating on the Salt River, the first time ever, on one of those black inner tubes, the old-fashioned, tar-smelling ones that need to be inflated with a tire pump. You've already scratched your upper thigh on that poky thing where the air goes in, because you thought it would be easier to put the tube around your waist to lug it into the mucky river. It slid down your body and scraped your leg, leaving a big red welt.

This was not your idea of tubing.

Your idea of tubing was hanging on to a rope from the back of a speedboat while the cool wind whipped through your hair. You imagined clinging to a tube specially designed for the activity, and you would be on a lake, not a crappy river filled with snakes and fish and mud and slimy plants that would wrap around your feet if you dared to stand for a second, your feet sinking into the gooey bottom.

But it's your best friend Jae's sixteenth birthday and her mom planned this surprise for her, and so you came along, not expecting anything like this. There are mostly family members and some friends from her soccer team and church group. Now you're scorching in the sun, trying to stay cool, wishing more than anything that you could somehow fast-forward this "tubing" experience, because it's an expected four-hour "float" down the Salt River on burning-hot black inner tubes, and most of the party has gained momentum and you're stuck in the back with a few stragglers you don't know.

So you float. And you're miserable. And you're stuck.

You plop your hand into the water and splash some droplets onto your chest, trying to cool off. Your mom didn't want you to wear the bathing suit you wanted to wear because in her opinion it's too revealing, so you lied to her and told her you wouldn't. Then you brought the one you wanted to wear and changed into it anyway. Because what does your mother know? She doesn't remember what it was like to be sixteen. She doesn't understand the things you need to be concerned with, like wearing a good bathing suit in a crappy river.

But right now, the only thing you have to do is float.

So there's a lot of time for you to think.

You're really good at thinking, and there's a lot to think about. Like about how you look, and how you wish you looked different. You're too tall. You wish your nose wasn't so slopey. You hate that your eyebrows could be waxed every week, but your

mom only lets you get them waxed every month. You hate the girls your own age, except for Jae. They're mostly high-pitched girls who only care about how many Instagram likes they have or how many Twitter retweets they get and you wonder what makes them so popular. Most days you wonder what it would be like if the universe were different.

You wonder, if you feel this way on a partially good day—because you know this is supposed to be a good day—how you are going to feel when a bad day hits. Because you also know a bad day is bound to come soon. It's been a while. There's been a slew of not-so-bad days, and on this partially good day, when the sun is shining, and you're floating, you should be feeling good, right?

"You're having fun, aren't you?" Jae asks when you stop at the midway point for lunch.

"Sure," you say, nodding. "It's fun."

You touch her chest and the spot flames from white to bright red under your fingertip. "You're getting sunburned."

"So're you," Jae says, poking you back.

So you lather each other up with some more sunscreen, which you know isn't going to do jack shit to keep you from burning because you're pretty fair anyway, but it's better than nothing.

Jae's mom sets food on a rickety wooden picnic table. Lucky

her, she opted out of the river ride and delivered lunch instead, although eating lunch is not exactly your favorite activity either. You stand awkwardly while everyone fills their paper plates with hot dogs, chips, potato salad, and fruit. Jae's mom catches your eye. "Lunchtime?"

You're doing this little back-and-forth on your heels, feeling jittery, and you pick at your fingernails. "My mom made pancakes for breakfast. I'm not hungry." One of those statements is true, but you aren't going to eat with the group. You can't. "I'll have a Coke though?"

"Sure, over there." She points to the blue-and-white cooler past the picnic table.

A guy from the party is by the cooler. You saw him earlier, noticed he was really cute, wanted to get a better look at him, maybe ask Jae who he was, but then he had disappeared into the river with everyone else. Now though, he's right in front of you. Shirtless. Smiling.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi," you say.

"You friends with Jae?"

"Yep."

"Me too. Well, I'm her cousin's friend. I never met her before. Braden asked her if I could come."

"It's too hot," you say. Then you want to kick yourself because you're being negative.

But he agrees with you. "Way too hot. You want a drink?"

“Yeah, please.”

He bends down and plunges his hand into the icy water to search for a can, and you get a better look at him. You already noticed he is taller than you, a lot taller, probably six inches taller. He’s got thick, dark hair, and his back is muscular and tan. When he stands up to give you your drink he sees you staring at him and he half grins.

“This one okay?” he asks as he hands you a root beer.

“Yeah, it’s good.” You laugh.

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Lunch is over, well, for those who ate, and now everyone is being corralled back into the murky water. This is the part you've been warned about, where it might get a little bit fast on the river, with some small rapids, and Jae's mom says to be careful.

"Make sure not to lag so far behind this time," Jae yells to you as you lug the tube to the river. The black tire burns your hands and you drop it to the ground. You can't believe how stupid hot it is out. You set your sunglasses over your eyes and grab your hair and try to create a makeshift bun, but it's impossible without a hair tie. You let your hair fall down over your shoulders. You swat at a fly buzzing in your face.

"You better get in, or you're going to lose everyone."

It's the boy. He's standing behind you, waiting.

It's silly really to call him a boy. He's not a boy, he's more like a . . . Well, you don't know what he is, except perfect. And this time you look at all of him, and you can't think of a thing to say.

“Go on, slowpoke.” He nudges your tube with his tube. “Need help?”

Everyone is already in the water, laughing and waiting.

“Sure. Yeah.” You barely manage the words.

He lifts your tube easily, his muscles hardly straining at holding two of them, and you see he’s got those awesome veins running through his forearms. You wonder if this is really happening.

He strides ahead of you a few steps.

“Come on.” He nods in the direction of the water.

You follow quickly because this is really happening . . . and *arm veins!*

He flips the tubes into the water effortlessly. You try as delicately as you can to arrange yourself onto your tube. Then you’re off. Floating.

You and the perfect boy.

Suddenly, it’s the most beautiful day. You’re not in the rapids yet and the river is calm. The sky is translucent and there’s not a cloud anywhere. Just blue, blue, blue. And a spot of sun.

If you look at the sun for too long, you know it’ll hurt, but it’s one of those suns that burns bright, it’s one of those suns that begs to be stared into. You can’t help yourself. And when you close your eyes everything flashes white except that spot where the sun was—it’s turned black, blinding.

You're sprawled out on your back on the tube, knees bent, ankles and feet plunged into the water, your fingertips skimming the glassy top layer of the river. You're floating, just floating, thinking of endless possibilities, when the boy says, so near to you that you practically jump, "Do you have a name?"

You tell him your name and he says he's never heard that before and you tell him you get that a lot.

He says it's pretty.

You feel yourself blush but then you're not sure if it's the sun on your face or if you're really feeling a little blushy. You turn your face to get a better look at him.

"What's your name?" you ask him.

"Ben."

"Hi, Ben."

He moves his tube closer to yours and grabs on to it so he's right next to you. You tense up a bit, but then remind yourself to relax. That this is a not-so-bad day, a partially good day actually, and you're wearing your favorite bathing suit. It's just you and Ben; and Jae and all her friends and family floating up ahead.

You're close enough to notice his brown eyes—dark as Hershey's chocolate Kisses—and he's smiling at you, so you don't look away. He asks if you're still hot and you say a little, and then you worry he's one of those jerky guys who might try to flip you over on the tube, and maybe try to make your top fall off, but instead he just dips his hand into the river and drips

some water onto your shoulders to cool you off. Which feels really nice and you think it was a sweet thing for him to do.

“Thanks.” You smile at him. It’s the smile you’ve practiced in the mirror. The smile-at-boys smile. You hope it turned out right.

He asks where you go to school and you tell him. When you say you are going to be a junior, he says he thought maybe you were a senior. He’s going to be a junior too, although he’s almost seventeen and you turned sixteen in May, so you’re about a year apart in age. He goes to one of the other high schools in town and you don’t know any of the same people. He runs track and used to play football but didn’t like it. “The guys are all douche bags.”

You mention that your brother plays football.

“Not all football players are douche bags,” Ben says, smiling.

“Oh no, they totally are, my brother included,” you say, and laugh.

He asks if you play any sports and you say no but you like to draw. He asks you to tell him more about it so you explain you mostly sketch, and you like to do line drawings and create cartoon figures.

“I took a ceramics class last year but I got a C,” he says. “I sucked at it.”

“I had a tough time in my ceramics class,” you say, because you want to be sympathetic, and also because it was hard. “Throwing clay on the wheel was the worst.”

You're floating closer to the rapids and you're getting jostled in your tube; water splashes everywhere.

"It looks a little rough ahead," Ben says, and grasps your tube a bit tighter.

"This part scares me," you admit.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you're safe," he says.

Jae's ahead of you and she and some of her friends laugh loudly and a couple of the girls mock-scream. She sees you and waves and you wave back.

There are small whitecaps of rapids and the quiet calm of the river has changed to a whooshing rush of water. The river has also gotten deeper. Your heart speeds up and you close your eyes and tense your body as you and Ben start careening through the rapids.

For a minute or two, things seem okay but then there's an unexpected drop in the river, not too deep, but enough that Ben loses his grip on your tube. The good news is, once you've hit that drop, you're coming out of the rapids. The bad news is, you've fallen out of your tube.

Just before you're about to go under, you feel arms reach around your waist and Ben, no longer in his tube, pulls you up in to him.

You thought you were going to lose your breath before, but when you're this close to him, and he's holding you like this, you really can't breathe. He's got your tube, and he's holding you in the water, looking right into your eyes. He asks, "Can you get back on?"

“I think so.”

Ben lets go of you to steady your tube. Instead of climbing on top, you plunge under the water and swim up through the hole. You wrap your arms over the top of the tube and hold on, so your arms are hanging over the sides and your legs are submerged deep within the hole of the tube.

“Okay, I’ll go grab mine,” he says.

He swims to his tube, disappears under, and gets in just like you did. When he comes back, he reaches out and you grab his hand and pull him to your tube.

“Thanks,” he says. You are now face-to-face, both of you in the middle of your tubes, arms hanging over the sides. There are those arm veins again.

You expect him to let go of your hand, to just hold on to your tube, but he doesn’t. Instead, he takes your other hand too, and rearranges his fingers so they are intertwined with yours. He moves his thumb over your knuckle, and his eyes light up, as bright as the sun on this beautiful, strange day.

“That was kinda crazy,” he says.

“Yeah.”

The water caresses your skin, the sun is a blanket of warmth on your back, and Ben slides his thumb over and over the top of your hand, like he’s been around forever, like you haven’t known him for only a couple of hours.

You feel it, you feel everything, all the way through to your toes.

You both stay like that, talking, looking into the too-bright

sunshine, and into each other's eyes, holding hands for the rest of the afternoon.

It's more than a not-so-bad, partially good day.

You're holding hands.

You're floating.

You're in your room, listening to music, and there's that knock. Your parents have asked you not to lock your door so you don't lock it and they have mostly respected your privacy by knocking. You want to lock your bedroom door though, because it's your room, it's the only place you feel like yourself, and it's not like you're doing anything bad. You're just lying here. Thinking.

You think about how you need to take that little yellow pill every day to be in a sort of good mood, and it generally doesn't even guarantee you'll be in a good mood.

You wonder if you're going to have to take that pill every day for the rest of your life.

You think about how often people comment on how tall and beautiful you are, and how you wish you could believe them. Why can't you believe them?

You think about how freaked out you are about school starting next month.

You think about what picture you'll put on Instagram next, and if your mom will yell at you for exposing too much cleavage. (*I didn't have boobs like that when I was your age!* she'll say. You'll remind her they didn't have social media or iPhones *or the Internet* when she was sixteen and she rode to school on a dinosaur. You do love your mom, you do.)

You think about how your lips are always chapped and you should get some new lip gloss.

You think about Alex but then you make yourself not think about Alex.

You think about how you're a little bit hungry. Then decide you're not.

You think about how you held hands with Ben just yesterday and how it was practically one of the most perfect days you've had in a very long time.

You're thinking about the sunburn you got and wishing you had put more sunscreen on—damn your mother for always being right about the stupid sunscreen.

You're also thinking about how it is worth a thousand sunburns to have had the day you had.

You think about how awful it is to be lonely, and you're tired of feeling this way.

You think about the girl from school who has two hundred thousand followers on Instagram and wonder how she got so many followers; what is it that makes her so popular?

You think about becoming an artist someday. Even though

you know that a job in the arts would not make much money, you feel that being an artist would make you happy.

Your mind never shuts off and it gets terribly exhausting.

There's that knock again.

"Can I come in, please?" your mom asks.

Your mom is usually the one looking for you. Your older brother, Todd, hardly bothers with you. Your dad, when he's not at work, is mostly always watching ESPN.

"Sure."

You turn off your music and wait.

Your mom comes in; she's holding a glass of wine and has that sweet-sickening smile, the one that's all cheery and upbeat.

"Dinner's ready." She takes a sip of wine and that happy-fake smirk makes you want to bury your head in your pillow and scream.

"I'm not hungry."

She already knows that. You know she knows that. This is the game you both play. It's been going on for years, pretty much your whole life, yet you still play it.

"Can't you come down and sit with us? You can eat whatever you want."

Another sip of wine.

"I don't feel like it."

You open your laptop. Like the discussion is over. Like you can control the situation.

"Not even an apple?"

“Mom.”

“Fine. But I have some news for you. That place I’ve mentioned before, Healthy Foundations? They called me back, and you have an appointment this Thursday. Your dad and I want you to go.”

You don’t look at her. Because you know. Deep in your heart, you know. You’ve been waiting for this and it’s almost a relief to hear that she’s going to take care of the problem: ever since you were a little girl, ever since you have had a memory, you haven’t liked food, except for the obvious good stuff—the safe foods.

The healthy foods that have protein and vitamins—the vital nutritious food—you don’t eat. It’s pretty much impossible. You’ve never known why—and it’s not that you haven’t tried, because you have tried, many times—but you have no desire to eat those things. Ever. You wish so much that you could enjoy food the way others do. But you can’t because something is there, stuck in your throat—a monster, guarding its castle, your body, and it won’t let the stuff go down. The monster comes and goes sporadically, but when you’re feeling stressed or anxious about food you know it’s his doing. You know it seems silly, but that’s the only way to explain it, yet you’ve never been able to tell a doctor this. Because it sounds so stupid, that a monster lives inside you.

And you know your problem is not anorexia or bulimia, because you’ve never wanted to lose weight, and you’ve never

thrown up, hidden food, used laxatives, or binged. The only time you've purposely not eaten was when that thing with Alex happened last spring and that doesn't count.

When you do eat the foods you can eat—your safe foods—the monster is usually quiet. You don't limit your portions, you don't worry about how much you put into your mouth, you don't think about gagging. You've always had a healthy-looking body, and that's one of the reasons your parents could keep denying something was wrong. You're neither too thin nor too heavy. Throughout your whole life, no matter where your parents have taken you to be evaluated—the pediatrician or a nutritionist—they always came to the same conclusion—that you're a healthy, normal girl who is simply a "picky" eater.

You're perfect.

But there's more.

Because the monster also makes it extremely hard for you to do things a normal girl is able to do. The monster was lingering at Jae's party, making it hard to socialize, making it impossible to eat with friends. He causes anxiety and depression, and makes you sad because he's holding you back from so many things you'd like to do, from so many things you know you *want* to do but are incapable of doing.

So when your mom tells you she's made an appointment, you feel that maybe the monster took a hit. At least maybe he got stabbed or something. Like the battle has begun.

"You're good with this?" your mom asks.

You look up from your laptop and shrug. You have all sorts of feelings but aren't sure how to react. You're scared and anxious, and you don't know what's coming your way or what you'll have to do to get the monster to die.

You just know you want the monster out of you. He's lived there far too long.

“Braden said Ben wants your phone number.”

It is the next night and you and Jae are on FaceTime, and when she says this, you tilt your head down and pick at your blue toenail polish so she can't see that your face lights up. Even though your room is dark because you've got candles lit and there are flickering shadows everywhere. The candles soothe you and they smell good, but your mom gets annoyed when you light them. (“You're going to burn down the house one of these days,” she's always saying.)

“Did you give it to him? My number?” you ask.

“No! I wasn't going to give out your number to just anyone.”

“Well, you can give it to him.”

“Uh, well, what exactly is going on?” Jae moves her face closer to the screen, scrutinizing you through the Mac.

Your smile goes big. You try to pull it back in but it's no use.

“What happened on the river?” she asks.

Jae knows everything about you. She knows about the

monster. She helps feed it when it's hungry. She calms you when the monster makes you anxious and she cheers you up when the monster makes you depressed. Jae probably wants it dead just as much as you do. She's been your best—really, only—friend since you met each other in first grade. She doesn't judge you. She understands you. You tell her everything. She's the closest person in your life, next to your mom, who sometimes drives you crazy.

But Jae, Jae means the world to you. She's nothing like the girls at school who live and breathe by how many likes they get on Instagram; Jae doesn't care what others think about her. You wish you could be more like her. Jae has that balance between caring and not caring too much. You need to find that balance. You want to be like her but you're not jealous of her. You just love her.

So you tell her about Ben. How he made you smile, how he cooled you off when you got too hot, how he helped you when the rapids got rough, how his lips curled up at the edges when you said something funny. How he made you feel like you were funny. How he said he liked tall girls. How he held your hands and you felt it all the way to your toes, a tingling that you've never felt with any boy.

"Not even when you first dated Alex?" Jae's eyes go wide on the screen.

"Ugh, I can't believe I wasted my time with Alex. Oh my God, Jae. When Ben and I held hands, I can't even..." When

you think about it now, you still feel the warmth that flooded your body. You want to feel it again.

“Text Braden my number right now!” you say.

“I’m texting him!”

You watch the computer screen as she texts your number. “Oh my God, I’m so excited for you!” Jae says. She’s the *best* best friend.

“Okay, he texted me back. He’s going to text it to Ben!”

You kneel on your bed and emit a little girlie squeal and then want to shove it back into your mouth, because you sound like one of those stupid girls. You don’t want to be a stupid girl.

Suddenly, you’re starving. You grab your Mac and Jae and take them into the kitchen. Todd’s on the couch with his earbuds in and he’s furiously texting someone. Dad’s probably still at work. Your mom is doing dishes from dinner, which you skipped.

“Hi, what’s up?” she asks.

“Nothing,” you say.

“Hi Mrs. Richards,” Jae says from your laptop screen.

“Hi Jae,” your mom says, and moves in front of your Mac to give Jae a quick wave.

You look in the fridge and you don’t know why because you never like anything in there. Maybe sometimes an apple. You open the pantry and grab the Ritz crackers.

“Why don’t you put some peanut butter on those,” your mom suggests.

“Mom.”

Your mom holds her hands up in protest.

You actually like peanut butter but you're not in the mood for it.

“It's just, I think you should probably have some protein,” your mom says.

“I'll get a Carnation Instant milk.”

You make your milk and take it and the crackers up to your room, along with Jae and your Mac.

“No crumbs!” your mom yells from the kitchen.

“Fine!”

In your room you settle onto your bed, not caring if you get crumbs all over.

“So,” you say to Jae, “guess where Mom's taking me this week.”

“I don't know, where?”

“One of those places.”

“What places?”

You roll your eyes at the screen and move your face close to where Jae can see you very clearly.

“You know,” you say, “one of those eating disorder places.”

It's the first time you've ever said the words aloud.

Hey?

Hey

It's Ben. From the river.

I know. Hi. 😊

Hey. You still sunburned?

LOL. Of course! It's only been 3 days! I hurt!

Me too, I got burned bad

Yeah

So, it's OK I got your number?

Of course

Good

So . . .

Um . . .

LOL . . .

So did you have fun?

It definitely got better

That's for sure

. . .

Do you wanna go see a movie tomorrow night?

Sure