

Narrative text, Item #2: “Touching Bottom” by Kari Strutt

Touching Bottom

by Kari Strutt

“How many fingers?” Dad asked at bath time.

I was afraid, but I ducked my head into the half-full white tub. I opened my eyes, then came up sputtering.

“Two.”

“That’s right.” Then his hand, broad as a rainbow, covered my head all the way to my ears, and slicked back my sopping hair. He wrapped me in a clean yellow towel, and the fear, what was left of it, evaporated.

I could open my eyes under water.

The summer I turned seven I went to Camp Kinaird with fifty other girls. “Where young girls learn to swim,” Dad quoted from the black text between the brochure photos of smiling kids.

“You should learn to swim,” he said, “you never know when you’ll end up in water that’s over your head.”

The camp instructors told me I was a good swimmer. My spindly arms cut the water like fins, and I could circle them at a furious pace. I learned to put my face in the water, turn my head for air. I was quick, like a water beetle, and I liked the feeling of the cool water pushing through my hair.

On the fifth day of swim lessons, the fat girl came to shore with a dark glistening streak on her back. Somebody shrieked, “You gotta leech on you,” and the shoreline became a seething mass of squealing, blue-lipped girls. The terror rang in my ears long after the camp counsellor salted the girl’s back and caught the writhing leech in an old tin can. She was still whimpering when we went to the cookhouse for lunch.

For the rest of the summer I refused to go in the water. The other girls backstroked and side stroked and perfected their Australian crawls. The fat girl and I sat on the dock watching a black bloodsucker make its way across a yellow plastic bowl lodged in the sandy bottom near shore.

That fall my Dad signed me up for Red Cross swimming lessons. In a pool.

“You can start again,” Dad said. “I’m sure there are no leeches at the YMCA, but I’ll come and watch, just to be sure.”

When we got to the YMCA, Dad and I walked around the pool together, looking for leeches. I thought I saw one, but it was just a Band-Aid.

The pool water was clear blue-green and with my goggles on I could see the bottom. There were wide black lines painted along the length of it. I used the lines to make sure I was swimming straight. I finished all of the Red Cross lessons, then I joined a swim club and learned to race. I trained every day, back and forth in the pool, guided on either side by the lane markers—bright strings of plastic bubbles, led from below by the thick black lines. When I turned fourteen I trained twice a day, every morning at five-thirty and every evening at five. Dad drove me to practice after practice, day after day, year after year.

I was skinny and hungry all the time. I ate a lot, but it was never enough. Sometimes I swam the backstroke, staring at the pool ceiling and dreaming of macaroni and cheese. After practice I sliced wafers of cold butter, let them melt on my tongue.

I learned to swim a long ways, but I never did get comfortable in murky water: lakes, rivers, anywhere I couldn't see bottom. That kind of water made my throat open too wide to bring the air into my lungs, made me breathe fast, out of control.

That's why, when I think of California, I get queasy. I lived there for four years with my husband. He came to Canada on business, to the art gallery where I worked, and swept me away to Los Angeles on a blue wave of charm.

My Dad told me not to go, not to marry him. He said I would be sorry. He said, "His mid-life crisis will pass soon enough and you'll be stuck in California, like a fish out of water." He said he would not come to the wedding. He didn't. The day I got married I felt lonely and afraid.

I lived with my husband, my sister-in-law and Ian, in a house in the San Fernando Valley. The air is close in that valley, but the people are distant, separated from each other by car lengths and private desires.

My husband's sister was a loveless woman, no girlfriends and no boyfriends. She once called the police when she found a rat in the kitchen. She screamed into the phone, "He's in the house! He's in the house!"

"Where in the house?" they demanded.

"He's under the stove," she shrieked. When the 9-1-1 operators found out she was talking about a rat and not a violent perpetrator, they hung up on her. She stood on the front porch for four hours, sweat trickling into the small of her back, waiting for help that never arrived. After that, she refused to cook.

Ian was my husband's son from a previous marriage. The summer Ian was born, I got a new CCM bicycle and I built a tree fort with my friend Elaine.

Ian was a sensible boy, tall for his age. I weighed more than he did, but our eyes were

level. We listened to music. I introduced him to albums he'd never heard before: the Roches, Penguin Café Orchestra and Philip Glass. We laughed at the same movies. *Better Off Dead*, *Buckaroo Banzai*, *Real Genius*, *The Big Snit*. Ian was a good kid, smart.

Ian's mom told me once, "Don't try to be his mother; he already has one." She was taking Ian away for the weekend and I was seeing him out the door, making sure he had pajamas and enough underwear. I didn't want to be his mother, I just wanted her to know that I was good to him.

One day, Ian, my husband and I went to the beach near the Santa Monica pier. It was a warm day and the Santa Ana winds whipped the water into frothy whitecaps.

Ian was frantic about swimming, desperate to be in the water. I didn't really want to go because of the kind of water it was. Murky. I said yes anyway because his father wouldn't go with him, and kids should have fun. I told him, "I'll swim with you, but not where it's over our heads."

Ian was not a good swimmer, but good enough to do a few lengths. We stayed close to shore and let the waves knock us over. I laughed because Ian was laughing and whooping. His happiness caught me by the arm and spun me around, breathless and grinning. Ian could do that to me.

He bounced up and down in the waist-deep water. "Look at that," he said, pointing a slender arm, scraped at the elbow, toward the open water. "That's so awesome." There were boys on belly boards, fifty yards out, catching the bigger waves.

"Let's go there," Ian said. "It's not that deep and the waves are better. Can we?"

"Nope." I shook my head and his smile faded. I grabbed his waist and tickled him, extracting more laughter and a desperate squirm. Kissed the top of his head, the smell of salt and sunshine.

"Please, please, can we go? I'll stay right beside you. Please?"

I didn't like the idea, but he was right about the waves.

I told him we had to go a little further up the beach, because I didn't want the belly boarders to run us over. We went south, down the shore, not more than thirty yards or so, wading into chest-high water until, clear of the boarders, we stopped to rest. We put our backs to the incoming waves, watched a gull rise and drift north.

I could see Ian's father on the beach. He was lying in the sand, pretending not to watch the bronzed, blonde girls playing beach volleyball. He was lying on his stomach, hiding his pot belly from the sun and from their view.

Ian and I started swimming out to the bigger waves, and everything seemed okay. It's hard to tell where you are in the ocean, no lane markers, no bottom lines.

I was swimming and wondering if, in California, it was okay for a married man to lie on the beach watching girls while his second wife entertained his son.

That's when I noticed Ian and I were being pulled out to sea. We'd taken only a few strokes, but we were nearly as far from shore as the boarders. A few seconds later, we passed them.

Ian didn't notice.

He kept swimming until I said, "Ian. Stop. Stand up."

I dropped my feet to bottom and felt my toes dragging through the sand, just briefly. Then the bottom dropped away and the water was over my head.

"Head back to shore, Ian," I called. A hollowness was opening in my throat. Ian turned around without argument.

"You're going to have to swim hard," I said. "We're in some kind of current."

Ian swam hard. I swam behind him, pushing him forward by the soles of his feet. I could see the boarders, forward, to our left. We swam for a long time. We didn't get any closer.

My husband was a dark mark on the beach. He seemed to be talking to one of the volleyball players. I could see her pale yellow hair. She was standing above him; hands on hips. He was sitting in the sand, legs bundled to chest, I buried my face in the water, swam hard for shore.

Ian's front crawl grew lame. He was breathing loud and fast, exhaling twice with every stroke. He couldn't drag his arms out of the water.

"Keep swimming, Ian," I growled.

"I can't."

"You have to."

Ian kept swimming. He knew we were in trouble.

I thought about jellyfish stings and, just once, leeches, breathed slowly, looked toward the beach. The volleyball girl was sitting by my husband; they sat face to face, laughing.

Ian started to cry.

"I have a cramp in my calf," he said.

I know how bad that can be, like a rod of hot iron right through the belly of the muscle.

"Float on your back for a while."

Ian tried, but the waves kept washing into his mouth, making him cough, weak and watery.

I lifted Ian's head out of the water and held it up, side stroking in the direction of shore. Not losing ground, not gaining ground, stroke after stroke. Something in my shoulder snapped, and the joint began to grind. My sides clenched in the first spasms of exhaustion. I tried to add it up. Nearly half an hour of swimming in place, fifteen minutes of pulling Ian. That was equivalent to three miles at least, so I still had two more miles left in me, maybe three.

I felt dizzy. The water felt so cold now.

I wanted to let Ian go. I could see his father, reaching to touch the bronze girl.

"Can you try again, Ian? Just swim for a minute."

"No, I'm too tired."

"Just try, for me."

I didn't wait for him to answer, I just let him go. I knew instantly that it was a mistake. He started to drift away from me, seaward. I watched the distance between us grow until he screamed.

"Mom, help."

"You can shave four seconds off your best one hundred-yard time if you pull harder. Slow your cadence, and pull like this."

"Okay, coach."

I pulled hard, body rigid, head down, breaking the waves. A sprint, anaerobic, no time to breathe, no need to breathe. But when I got there, Ian was already going under, his face distorted by panic. He grabbed onto me, snarled my limbs with his. He was trying to keep his head above water and he pushed me under. He held me there, and for a few seconds I waited, hoping he would settle. When I started to run out of air, I pulled myself downward, away from him, deeper into the water.

It surprised me when my toes hit the sand. The bottom had never been too far away, twelve or fifteen feet at most, the water not much deeper than the diving tank at the YMCA. I opened my eyes and looked up. The water felt quiet. I could see Ian, above me, silhouetted against the yellow ball of the sun. I was so tired, and it was so soft and warm under that deep blanket of water, I thought I would sleep, just for a minute or two, collect my strength for the swim back to shore. Already dreaming, my knees touched coarse sand.

Kitchen table. Cinnamon toast.

"How come I didn't win, Dad?"

"Did you do your best?" Melted butter and spiced sugar, turning liquid on my tongue.

"Yes."

Dad's eyes, wise, weariness in the corners. "To win, you have to give until it hurts, then give some more."

On the surface of the water, Ian was still. My chest roared hot. I pushed myself upward, off the bottom, toward the pale light and the dark shadow of a boy.

At surface, I dragged air into aching lungs.

Ian on his back. Floating.

"I thought you might be dead," he said almost matter-of-factly. "I did like you told me, I'm floating." His body convulsed with uncontrollable shivers.

“I’m sorry, Ian. I won’t let you go again.”

I lay on my back, and cradled Ian’s head on my chest. I thought that if I could swim north, get closer to the boarders, I could yell for help. I kicked us northward, parallel to the beach.

I know about the currents now. Bands, sometimes as narrow as twenty or thirty feet across, that pull toward deeper water. Swim parallel to shore and you can be free of them in a minute. Swim toward shore and you battle the current until you die.

I kicked and looked at the sky. I breathed slowly. I kicked and kicked until both calves locked into tight balls. Lungs felt so hot, so full.

I thought of the distance swimmer I once saw on television. The TV crew filmed her as she swam from Cuba to Florida, a boat beside her, keeping pace. The boat supported a moving net, a box of iron mesh to keep away sharks and jellyfish. It must have been nice, that net. She would always know she was in the right place, in miles of open water, even without any bottom lines.

Ian was quiet, resting. His shivering had nearly stopped. It sounded like he was humming. I had the smell of macaroni and cheese in my nostrils, the taste of slick, warm butter on my tongue.

I lay on my back, kicking, pulling weakly at the water with one arm. I hadn’t looked around for a while, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, but suddenly I could hear the boarders.

“Ian, can you swim for a second?”

“I don’t think so.”

I held Ian upright with one arm and turned onto my stomach. We nearly ran into a blond boy, perhaps fifteen.

“Please,” I asked, “My son is exhausted. Can I use your board to tow him to shore?”

The boy said nothing, but piloted his board to me. He helped me heave Ian onto the board and together we towed it to shore.

As we made our way in, I could see my husband, his hand on the waist of the bronze girl, sliding it slowly over the slick skin of her belly toward her breast. She brushed his hand, in that “somebody might be watching” kind of way. Her bikini had a pattern of teddy bears on it.

When we got to shore, I thanked the blond boy. Then I threw up in the sand. Mostly salt water. I retched for a long time after my stomach was empty. There were wide bleeding welts on my arms and back, and one eye was swollen shut. My right shoulder felt splintered inside.

Ian sat with me and covered his ears with his hands as my stomach heaved again. He looked at my bleeding arms. “I did that, didn’t I?” I nodded. He cried, and that hurt worse than the welts or my eye.

“Should I get my dad?” he asked.

I wheezed a shallow “Yes.”

Ian stumbled away from me and came back a few minutes later with a towel. “Dad’s busy right now. He said he’ll be here in a minute. Are you okay? Are you going to throw up again?”

“I don’t think so.” The taste of bitter bile on my teeth and gums.

“Good.” He plopped into the sand and took my hand. We huddled together and I wrapped the beach towel around us, held Ian close, our cool skin touching, warming. We sat, silent, watching the waves tumble onto the sand.

Three months later I divorced Ian’s father. I wasn’t allowed to see Ian any more. I came home.

Ian is a man now. Last year he came to visit me, all the way from California. He is tall, and handsome, and very smart. We went for long walks and sang all the old songs we could remember: *Cats*, *The Roches*, *Songs from Liquid Days*. We talked about when we lived together, about Disneyland, and Magic Mountain and shopping at the Galleria. We talked about what he would do when he finished college, his career as a photographer, his desire to move to London. He told me about a girl he had fallen in love with, how she had broken his heart. He said nothing of his father. I didn’t ask.

The day before he went back to California, Ian took my biggest yellow towel, rolled his bathing suit and a pair of goggles inside it, and drove me to the public swimming pool near my house. I watched him doing lengths from a seat in the gallery. He is a powerful swimmer now, with a broad back, strong limbs and a well-tuned front crawl. He raced in high school. “Like you did,” he smiled, “but probably a lot faster.”

I asked him that night, after dinner, if he ever swam in the water off the coast.

He swirled his fingertip in a drizzle of cheese sauce that edged his plate. “Only when I have to,” he replied, licking his finger clean. “I don’t like the ocean much. But if I ever have kids, I’ll make sure they learn how to swim in surf. I’ll make sure they know about the currents.”

After breakfast the next morning Ian flew to California. I drove back to the pool.

The water is different now.

“Government legislation and chlorine restrictions,” the lifeguard said, slapping a grey mop onto the white deck. “The public pools have all been retrofitted for salt water.” He swabbed limply. “Just as sterile, and better for the environment.”

The salt muddied the blue-green water, made it less clear. The lines on the bottom were blurry, even with goggles. But salt in the water makes a swimmer buoyant. I floated easily.

I swam a few slow miles. Moving like a kayak. Felt the simple pull of each arm, the smooth thrust forward, my head slicing the water like a prow, my spine, compressed by gravity, elongating. I watched the dark mass of my own shadow on the pool bottom follow

me from end to end. I swam and swam until the nagging hunger returned; then I let it sit there, familiar.

A lukewarm shower in a cold locker room. I carefully dried myself with a clean towel, fresh from the dryer, I drenched my salt-parched skin with lotion, sweet-scented with orange and ylang¹ to protect it from the harsh, dry cold of autumn.

I can still swim quite a ways.

¹ **ylang**: a scented oil derived from flowers.
