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## Blue

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# Blue

*Cindy Gritton*

Air—so tantalizingly close—remained painfully out of reach as I stared frantically up through the serene blueness of the swimming pool water. Such a beautiful color that blue was. Vivid and as permanently etched into my memory as thinking out what I would yell as soon as my head (hopefully) broke the surface of it one more time, because I knew I could only do it once more, knew it was a miracle I'd surfaced twice already, that after this next time, blue would turn to black and after that, I would not be walking home. "LET GO!" I screamed and sucked in that last, final, desperate breath of chlorine-scented air before I sank back down and into blackness.

I was in eighth-grade PE, and it was free time. Everyone was having a blast doing what they wished at the end of our regularly scheduled two weeks of swimming lessons. Instead of doing laps, it was lovely, disordered chaos, and, as usual, it was great! Also, as usual, I'd chosen to enjoy my favorite activity: jumping from the side of the pool into the ten-foot section, touching the bottom and then rising back up. It was soothing and something I could do on my own. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy doing things with the others in class; I simply enjoyed doing this, and so I found myself that day going up and down, finding brief solitude on the pool floor, then entering a world of noise and splashing and laughter on breaking the surface.

Across from me, about ten feet from the wall, Anh, Elaine, and Mae<sup>1</sup> splashed, screaming and yelling. From the diving board, someone was

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1. Names have been changed.

entering the water with a cannonball, or perhaps it was gracefully—much more gracefully than the belly flop I had demonstrated for the photography class earlier that year. (They had howled in laughter, their teacher included, and I couldn't really blame them. At least they never published that shot!) In the shallow end, balls were being thrown and chased. I paused to watch it all and then sank back down. It was the fourth or fifth time I had done so when I looked upward at Anh's, Elaine's, and Mae's kicking feet, and my mind suddenly grasped what it should have earlier: Mae didn't know how to swim. The three of them had been screaming *at me*—for help!

I rose to the surface and swam to them. My hand pulled Mae up first, then took hold of Elaine, followed by Anh (all three of them having just sunk under), and then a hand grabbed my arm, a body climbed onto my back, and I found myself out of breath, kicking with all my might to rise back to the world above me, praying for help, wishing I could get Mae off, grateful at the same time that at least *she* had to be getting air!

I made it up once, gulped in a breath, and went under, wondering where Anh and Elaine had gone, my mind desperately thinking, "Why aren't they helping me?" unable to process how worn out they were.

I made it up again, saw they were clinging to the side of the pool, knew Mae and I now were in the middle, that I would never make it back to the side. I breathed in and sank once more, my mind frantically trying to come up with the shortest possible sentence I could scream out that might save me, that might save us both, because if I went down, unable to rise, Mae would too.

Kicking with all the strength I had, I came up screaming, "LET GO!" In that instant, I saw Theresa holding onto the side of the pool, her eyes intent on me, knew she would be coming toward me in a moment; I saw Mrs. C, our PE teacher, bending down to get her shoes off, giving instructions to Theresa; and in that frozen fraction of time, I took a final breath, and sank, knowing that I would never make it back up again with Mae on my back. I'd been blessed to ever rise the first time, let alone a second and a third, but now my strength was spent. And then her weight was gone. My feet propelled me up. My face broke through that thin, tension-tight skin of the water, and I drew in air. The light was yellowish; sounds washed around me. Theresa and someone else had Mae nearly back to the pool's edge. Exhausted, I made my way there, too, and somehow pulled myself out.

"Are you alright?" Mrs. C asked me anxiously.

“Yes,” was all I could say, my body beginning to shake.

“What happened?”

I told her, briefly, tiredly, and then heard her say, “I thought they were only playing around, too, and then I heard you, saw you, and I thought, ‘She wouldn’t play around that way,’ and I knew you were in trouble.” She fell silent, studying me, seeing how I trembled, and not from being cold. “Go get dressed,” she said gently, and I did.



That night, I ate dinner and was quiet, my mind repeatedly going over what had happened. I sat next to Marissa, my Indian Placement sister, whose aunt had clung to my back that day. Growing up on the reservation, away from any major bodies of water, neither of them had ever needed, or wanted, to learn how to swim; both were now doing so, as required, during PE time. In the dressing room, I had learned that Anh and Elaine had hoped to help Mae swim in the deep end, certain that between the two of them, they would be able to help her do it. That didn’t bother me. They had been trying to help her. Not the best way in hindsight, but they’d just wanted her to be able to have more fun. Meanwhile, I felt stupid for not understanding their shouts to me sooner and fearful over what might have happened. But what weighed on me just as much was that I’d almost signed up to take the life guard class the month before and hadn’t.

Why hadn’t I? I would have known what to do, known to never turn my back on a distressed swimmer, known to use something besides me to pull her up and get her to the side, known to approach Mae from behind so it wouldn’t have been so easy for her to climb on me, thus endangering me and not really helping her. I felt foolish and awkward and afraid and grateful to be alive and to have been there to help Mae and Anh and Elaine.

That night, in the room I shared with Marissa, I closed my eyes to sleep, and water encased me. My eyes flew open, my lungs gasping desperately in terror, my arms pushing back the blanket. I knew what being in the dark meant: I was in the pool, unable to breathe; the sight behind my eyelids was blue water holding me down. Time after time after time I tried to sleep. Tears came. Fear wrapped its arms around me. Lying on my bed, my blanket snuggled around me, I knew: death waited for me. All I had to do was close my eyes and it would pull me under, close me off from my family. I was fighting for the very air that touched every part of

me. And so I prayed, prayed to be able to sleep, that Mae and the others could sleep, that I wouldn't be so afraid, and somehow I finally slipped into a much needed rest.

In the many years since I nearly drowned with Mae, I have made many choices. Sometimes I've been wise and heeded that still, small prompting to do something, whether it meant walking home a different way, stopping to see a friend, or passing up one job opportunity for another, a decision that eventually led to me meeting my husband. But there were other times when I felt something and assumed it was merely a passing thought, only to later realize that, much like the idea of registering for the life guard class, this, too, had been the Spirit attempting to guide me to avoid future heartache or discomfort.

The Lord knew I would be in the deep end of the pool that day so long ago, knew I would be willing to do what I could to help my classmates because I'd daydreamed about doing just that (I try not to daydream so dangerously anymore), knew I would be risking my life to do it too. He also knew those few moments of my life would be easier to recover from if I had the necessary tools to do so. He tried to prepare me. I failed to take advantage of his offered help—not rebelliously, but distractedly, procrastinatingly—and yet he didn't let me sink to the bottom of the pool that day. He gave me the strength I needed to make it up to the surface enough times until help came so that both Mae and I could live. He didn't stand on the sidelines, shaking his head at me, saying, "I tried to warn you, child. I'm so sorry you didn't listen. I guess we'll talk about it in a few more minutes when you come home earlier than I'd planned. Thank you for doing what you could to help Mae, Anh, and Elaine, though." No. Instead, he lifted me up after all I could do, gave me the strength to fight for air, and wrapped his arms around me that night when I called out to him again for comfort and help.

I sank that day and night into a nightmare. I rose exhausted, shaking, able to go on. Water wrapped around me, enveloped me, and so, too, did my Father's and my Savior's love.



The light was blue as I looked up through the water. It will always be blue in my mind. Feet, kicking above me, surrounded by that blueness, no longer haunt me, nor does the weight of one in desperate need whom I should have known better how to help. The sounds of those moments are muted and tangible, distant and graspable. The faces of those coming

to our rescue are fixed in my mind—their emotions and looks frozen in time. So, too, are my remonstrations and thoughts and memories:

I should have taken that class; I would have known what to do.

“At least Mae can breathe.”

“LET GO!”

The water is so blue.

“I knew you wouldn’t play around like that. I knew you were in trouble.”

I was in trouble. Several of us were in the gravest of danger, but we were never alone.

The light was so beautifully blue.

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This essay by Cindy Gritton won third place in the BYU Studies 2015 personal essay contest.