

Let Them Eat Cake

It was Jessica Brown's birthday. Jessica was a very popular girl in school and had many friends, of whom Billy Bland was the closest. She liked to tell him what all the other children told her when they were alone with her. Sometimes she shared their secrets with him, sensing that Billy was neutral about them and wouldn't tell anyone else. He didn't care about things other people regarded as special.

That's how Billy knew that one of the guests at her party, a boy named Chevy Raggs, was afraid of the water. Billy knew about how scared Chevy was before anyone went near the pool. A large group of children was sitting in the house, waiting for the remaining guests to arrive, and Billy looked at Chevy and he knew. He could see the fear in Chevy's face, which was blank in a funny way, like a deer staring into headlights.

Chevy sat on the couch with his feet high above the floor, kicking, as if someone had already thrown him in the pool, or was about to. He appeared to be thinking about that grim prospect so intensely that he wasn't aware of the room, of being on land. Once in a while he clenched his fists and gulped big quantities of air, as if he had the hiccups. Billy stared at him from

across the room, wishing he could help, but not sure how to do it, or if it was okay. It wouldn't be right, he believed, to go over to Chevy and say anything because he didn't want to betray a secret told to him by Jessica, who only knew about the situation because Chevy burst into tears when she asked him about her invitation two days ago.

It was a curious detail about Jessica that many children cried when they talked to her. All her reports to Billy about other kids included heavy gusts of emotion from them. For instance, Eliot Plum cried that his father was a mechanic but wouldn't let him play with toy cars. But Billy had seen Eliot playing with toy cars at school many times without a hint of sadness or tears. Maybe things were different at school, Billy thought, but if they were, how come Eliot told Jessica about it? Yes, it was sometimes difficult for Billy to believe Jessica's secrets entirely, especially when he considered that he never cried in front of Jessica either. But Billy tried not to tie all these loose ends together because he didn't like where they pointed. He didn't like that they pointed anywhere really.

The doorbell rang and the last guests arrived, a pair of twins named Simon and Sally. They were both dressed in their bathing suits with one extra item of clothing apiece. Simon wore a t-shirt that draped down over

his swimming shorts so that only the very bottoms were visible. Sally wore a pair of patterned shorts so that only the top of her one-piece swimsuit was visible. To Billy it seemed they were sharing a single outfit because the t-shirt and tennis shorts matched. He also knew about them that they liked to fight about clothing, each one claiming to own disputed outfits. For some reason, according to Jessica, they frequently cried when they complained about this secret problem to her individually.

But that afternoon they were happy enough. They skipped into the house holding hands and arrived at the room full of children and stood still in front of the assembled guests, continuing to hold hands with no indication they would stop. Billy looked at them and imagined their clasped hands were the bottom of a smile that was formed by their arms. The same nagging feeling came back that Jessica's secrets were unreliable, a word his young mind was only beginning to grasp.

It may have been easier for Billy to permit this new thinking because Jessica had not joined the party yet. She had not made any appearance at all, despite repeated questions about her from everyone in attendance. Everyone wanted to know where Jessica was. Some children, such as Lisa Coos, was practically crazy over the issue. She stood up on a bean bag and

told Jessica's father that if Jessica didn't appear soon, the game wasn't fair. Those were Lisa's final words: "This game isn't fair!" Her face became red when she shouted them.

Mr. Brown, Jessica's father, put down a package of paper plates on the dining room table and took a deep look at Lisa. He had been speaking to her from the other room for several minutes on the subject, but this was the first time her really engaged with her. "What game?" he asked, eyeing his wife for support or a hint. Mrs. Brown did not engage much either and snapped, "I don't know, dear," as she filled some bags full of candy. Billy tried to imagine the Browns as Jessica sometimes described them, sitting alone in separate rooms, silently crying.

"Hide and seek!" Lisa Coos insisted. "It's not fair if Jessica is hiding and we don't know we should be looking. That way she wins before we get a real chance!" Lisa Coos hopped off the bean bag and went into the dining room, operating under the unspoken assumption that so valid a claim merited a proper response right away. She marched up to Mr. Brown and tugged on his pants pocket to get one. Billy imagined her at home, asking for things that no one would give her, like fancy pens and pocket watches. A vision of Lisa attempting to claim these items anyway by reaching into the pockets of

an indifferent parent appeared in Billy's mind, surprising him. He wondered if imaginary circumstances like those were enough to make her cry in front of Jessica, who reported she often did.

Mr. Brown patted Lisa Coos on the top of the head without really looking at her. "That's a good idea, Lisa," he said. "Why don't you go in the other room and count to a hundred. No," he revised, "make that five hundred. Then when you've finished counting, you can be the first one to go look for Jessica." He winked at his wife from across the dining room, but she was already on her way to the kitchen.

"She is hiding!" Lisa Coos concluded.

"You'd better hurry," Mr. Brown said, nudging her back toward the room full of children. "Don't let Jessica win."

"Well," Lisa Coos reconsidered, "it is her birthday." She turned around and skipped off. By then Mr. Brown had opened the package of paper plates. He arranged them along both sides of the long dining room table, occasionally throwing one to the farther portions like a Frisbee. He was not listening to Lisa Coos anymore, but appeared to be having some fun. His wife came back into the room and picked a few of the fallen paper plates from the floor, shaking her head.

When Jessica Brown finally appeared, her guests were all waiting quietly in the living room, verging on boredom. No one was crying and no one cried when she came in. Lisa Coos lay almost completely horizontal over the bean bag, counting out loud, covering her eyes with one hand. Her voice was like the ticking of a clock, increasing the general sense of being between things indefinitely. In the high sixties she lost count and asked the room what number she was on, but no one could agree, forcing her to start all over because only zero was a fair number, she said.

Jessica brown was wearing a pink one-piece swimsuit with a large yellow sunflower embroidered over the belly. She cupped the flower with her hands and squeezed the flower softly as she walked. It was clear from her expression that she had just finished crying. Her eyes and cheeks were moist and the corners of her mouth sagged. She did not look like a girl who was happy it was her birthday.

"This party wasn't my idea," she announced as she walked into the room. "Is everyone here?" The children sat up in their seats and looked at her. Many looked away afterwards.

Mrs. Brown came into the living room and told everyone about the games they were going to play that afternoon. "We have a water slide," she

explained. "It's called a Wet Banana." The children laughed about its name. Some of them knew it. It was a popular toy for children with large yards, a thirty foot stripe of yellow vinyl that you spray with a hose and slide over after taking a running start.

Eliot Plum said, "I have a Wet Banana too." He was happy to encounter another one.

"That's great, Eliot," Mrs. Brown said. "Why don't you take the other children outside and show them how to use it?" But Eliot didn't move or stand up. He tilted his head, thinking.

"Eliot?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"I don't know how to use it," he admitted. "My daddy likes me to play with toy cars." Some of the children laughed at this news, but the laughter was friendly and inexplicable, the sort of laughter people share at a party because parties are fun by definition. The only child who didn't laugh at all was Billy Bland, who was wondering how in the world Eliot's father could be someone who forbid his son from playing outside in a sprinkler because it wasn't a toy car. When Billy finally joined the shared laughter, it was already trailing off. His belated chuckle, arising from somewhere he didn't understand, drew attention to him.

"Billy, is something wrong?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"No, ma'am," he said, glancing at Jessica. She was standing in the center of the room, but more like a person who was part of the wallpaper. She scratched the top of one foot with the bottom of the other and held her hands behind her back.

"Maybe you can show everyone how to slide," Mrs. Brown suggested. Then she addressed the whole room. "Billy comes over and plays on the slide all the time."

Billy blushed deeply over this information. He felt funny singled out as a regular guest at Jessica's, as if suddenly the other children would be able to read all their secrets written on his face. He looked to the side to avoid being seen. At this side the arm of the couch was worn down and he ran his fingers across the loose threads for a moment while his brain and his feelings bumped around. It was not until several minutes later after he finished his first demonstration of using the slide and stepped aside to watch the other children shoot merrily across it that he realized a deeper reason for his embarrassment.

In his thoughts it went something like this: I'm at Jessica's house the most. Now everyone knows. That was my secret. He felt a sudden urge to tell Jessica about it and cry.

But that wasn't exactly what Billy wanted to tell her. Besides, it was already too late. Everyone knew. What good would it do to share his regular visits to her house as his secret at this point? A secret is something no one else knows, not something no else doesn't. This was a tricky point for Billy and remained one. He didn't see that he wanted it to be. He didn't see that tricky points were a clever way to focus on one thing when there's something else you're more worried about and don't want to look at directly, such as what exactly it was he really wanted to tell Jessica, what his actual secret might be.

Billy was a young boy and these first hints of an older self were not familiar territory for him, not enough to haunt him or teach him the future value of significant reflection. Instead, he told himself Jessica already knew he was a regular guest and confiding that fact to her as a secret was redundant and dumb. Ironically, this dismissal advanced him another step into an older self for being at least half right in some dim way and therefore credible enough to sustain momentarily in favor of the truth, but not without

the recurrence of his previous urge to take Jessica aside and cry in front of her about something. Only what? The urge was so strong now that he wondered if maybe it had been inside him a long time. That he managed not to express it was another mysterious step.

The next time Billy hurled himself along the water slide he had the incredible feeling he was flying into the future at lightning speed. At the far end, laying in a puddle with mud spattered lightly across his arms and face, he understood things had changed. In the course of one quick run on The Wet Banana his life was no longer what it used to be, and there was no going back. He stood up a bit dazed by this realization, not entirely sure how to process realizations of any kind in the first place. Then he heard the other children laughing wildly behind him. He was about to turn around to see what was so funny, but a deep surge of shame prevented him, and he was grateful it did. He paused for only a second, but long enough to notice the last trip on the slide had seriously lowered his bathing shorts. His visible rear end was, quite literally, the butt of the joke.

Billy blushed for the second time that afternoon, quickly pulling up his trunks. He tied the drawstring very tightly across his belly, working on it more than he needed to so he wouldn't have to turn around. He couldn't face

the laughter yet. He told himself to make sure the drawstring was tight enough and tied it again. I'll turn around when it's tight enough, he said, untying it to do it over. But the drawstring could not possibly be tight enough and he knew it. There was no way he could fasten it well enough to warrant turning around. He finished a thick double knot and ran for the pool, diving in without looking back.

By this time Jessica's father, Mr. Brown, had come into the yard to take control of the hose, spraying the Wet Banana between every turn by the children. He accidentally sprayed wide of the slide, watching Billy Bland, a curious boy in his opinion, run away from the party, completely unaware of the reason for this escape. The misfire of the hose shot directly on his daughter, Jessica, who stood by herself, watching the children laugh and jeer at Billy. She stood completely still as the freezing cold water drenched her, never saying a word against it, simply frowning. By the time her father noticed her situation, she was absolutely soaked. Her thin hair, previously arranged by her mother into a fetching set of ponytails, clung to her head like fresh papier-mache.

"It's time to go swimming," Jessica's mother, Mrs. Brown, said, marching across the empty Wet Banana at Mr. Brown, from whom she

grabbed the hose angrily. The two adults exchanged private words, which included a concluding and audible hot remark from Mrs. Brown that she ought to spray Mr. Brown! She threw the hose on the ground and shook her head in a pique of disbelief. Owing to the water pressure, the thin green hose danced along the lawn like a charmed snake. Mr. Brown stared at it sullenly as if it were charming him, not the other way around.

"Yes, children," Mrs. Brown resumed, "now that you're wet," she said persuasively, trying not to direct the remark too specifically at Jessica, "it's time to go in the pool for a swimming race." The Wet Banana was becoming a dry banana very quickly under the afternoon sun and the children readily accepted the change of activity. Jessica watched them gather into a group and wander to the pool. She stood at a distance, fighting the onset of shivers she did not want to reveal.

"Come on, Jessica," said her mother. "You love swimming races."

"No, I don't," Jessica sulked. "I want to hold my breath the longest. Nobody can beat me!"

"Well, honey," said her father, approaching her with a towel, "that's an unusual request." He was about to explain how holding your breath is not as much fun as a swimming race, maybe also how it wasn't really appropriate for

some reason, but both women in his life, his wife and his daughter, glared at him as the words dared to form in his throat. He stopped in his tracks with the towel open before him, unclaimed, and visibly swallowed those unspoken words, breathing deeply as they dropped into his belly. The open towel in his hands became important to him suddenly. He folded and refolded it several times, displeased with the results.

Jessica's mother gave the final word. She said it was time to see who could hold their breath the longest. She spoke these words mostly at her husband, frowning at him. He was wringing the towel in hands, draining out moisture that wasn't in the towel yet. Then he slung it behind his neck and wore it over his shoulders casually like a lifeguard or swim coach, the far ends in his hands.

Jessica's mother didn't know it, but her daughter was already far along by that time in her own private breath-holding competition or else practicing for the real one to come. She had been holding her breath since her father spoke his first unfinished words against the idea. It was only when her mother contradicted him that Jessica took another breath. She sucked the first lungful of new air into her chest through her nostrils, which flared wide. She breathed out through her mouth audibly, sighing. These

were the simple mechanics of respiration in general, but they doubled in this instance as indications of anger and complaint. Jessica walked to the pool and sat down at the steps leading into the shallow end, her feet in the water to cool her scorched heart.

The other children assembled at the shallow end behind her, waiting for instructions about what to do. For reasons no young visitor will ever bother to puzzle out explicitly, the Brown household dwelled in an atmosphere thick with waiting. Even as things were supposed to move forward, they tended to malingering on the threshold instead, without promptly delivering the final decisive moment of action. Then the resulting delay slowly drew attention to Jessica, as if she was the original hold-up. Was she or wasn't she? The unspoken question irked her and she kicked at the water, wiping out its surface reflections, especially her own.

Billy Bland stood alone at the far end of the pool, continuing to work on his drawstring, which he finally tucked in. He stepped onto the diving board, familiar to him from thousands of previous uses, and started to hop up and down, testing its torque. Or so it appeared to everyone else as they shifted their attention from Jessica. The truth is Billy Bland was also testing the sure grip of his drawstring, making sure his shorts stayed in

position through a series of gravitational disturbances. After the tests panned out he bounced one last time and converted the accumulated energy of his experiments into a tight forward flip. He entered the water bottom first, holding his legs in a cannonball position with a pretty good splash at the end aimed accurately at the shallow end. He disappeared into the water and stayed near the bottom, confirming one more time with his hands that his shorts were okay. When he surfaced, his big smile told the story of a boy who conquered pesky swimwear.

Had he not, had the absolute worst occurred and had he lost his shorts altogether, had the little pair of trunks darted away from him forever like a frightened fish, leaving him naked and marooned, it would not have mattered much anyway, not immediately, because the children were no longer looking his way. No one was. The grand effect of his dive was not only reassurance for Billy, but reanimation of the party as a whole. Thrilled by a successful forward flip and tickled by the outstretched fingers of the long resulting wave, the children launched into action, jumping into the pool from every edge at once. They bobbed on the surface like a lost cargo of corks. They shouted and splashed each other with their arms. Eliot Plum, the boy whose father forbid him from (forced him into?) playing with cars,

darted up the ladder in the deep end and ran onto the diving board to try a forward flip for himself, but delivered a belly flop. He surfaced with a big smile on his face, spitting water.

The only children who didn't follow Billy into the pool right away were Jessica Brown and, of course, Chevy Raggs, the boy who was afraid of water. He sat down at the steps beside Jessica and watched everyone swim, not sure what to do. "It's okay," Jessica told him. "You can hold your breath from here. On the steps. It still counts."

But Chevy Raggs surprised her. "I'm not afraid," he said defiantly. "I can do it if she can!" He pointed across the pool at Lisa Coos, the champion of fairness. She was standing by the diving board, insisting to another child that it wasn't his turn yet. Why he focused on her was a mystery to Jessica, but she understood well enough.

"Go ahead," she suggested, touching Chevy's shoulder. Chevy watched a drop of water run from her wet finger down his arm. It ran over the bump of his bent elbow, paused a moment, and splashed into the pool, a perfect metaphor for himself.

Chevy looked at the surface of the pool, happy to see the lost drop disappear into the shallow end. He stood up and stepped out of the pool,

pausing for a second, exactly as the drop had. He looked down at Jessica and said, "Happy Birthday!" Then he walked around the pool to the deep end and pulled off his shirt.

"I'm next," he said to Lisa Coos, handing her his shirt. She looked at it like a severed head, confused.

"No, that's not fair," Lisa Coos said, talking to the shirt. "Jenny and Benjamin are before both of us, and I'm before you." There were plenty of other children gathered also, but Lisa Coos didn't mention them initially, as if she were too busy counting the grand total.

Chevy Raggs did not wait for the result. He stepped around Lisa Coos and approached Jenny and Benjamin. He hesitated a second. "I am very sorry," he said somewhat formally, as if he obeying a request from his parents about apologizing for something. The addition of a slight bow from the waist with his hands held loosely before his heart was his own personal touch and also a masked private prayer. Once performed, he stepped onto the diving board and exhaled loudly. Screwing up his courage, he ran to the end at full speed. As she shot off the board without claiming any vertical spring, his legs continued running in the air. They were still running when he surfaced, as they had been on the couch.

Lisa Coos watched him drop into the water and frowned with terrific disapproval. She raised Chevy's shirt above her head and threw it into the pool after him. "Zero!" she shouted. "Now I have to start counting from zero again!" But why bother? She climbed onto the diving board instead and performed a formal dive before the children rightfully preceding her could go. The technical correctness of it propelled her underneath Chevy Raggs easily and when she surfaced in the middle of the pool, she had to turn around to face him. He beamed at her like a champion swimmer, treading water wildly, but not getting very far.

"Hello, Lisa Coos!" Chevy Raggs said. Lisa looked him in squarely in the eyes. She informed him, "Your shirt's in the deep end, Chevy Raggs!" The words were meant as a lesson, to provoke mild alarm for a swimmer of his rank. They worked that way too. Chevy Raggs started to cry out of all proportion to Lisa's update. The sum total of his daring leap into the pool came home to him all at once, at that perfect instant, pouring from his eyes and nostrils as tears and phlegm. Beginning to sink, he lapsed into a coughing fit, which worsened as he splashed.

Lisa Coos could not sustain the nasty teaching. The words of it broke their original context almost in spite of her, transforming into something

unfair that people usually call help. She looked at Chevy Raggs flailing wildly in front of her in an area of the pool where he could actually stand. She shook her head and sighed. "I was only telling you so you'd know I meant to get it," Lisa Coos remarked, meaning the shirt. She swam off and retrieved it and threw it over Chevy's head into the shallow end. It landed with a bigger splash than he had. The truth is Lisa was trying to hit Chevy with it. That she missed was an outcome she regarded as unfair.

Jessica Brown watched this entire series of events, having sent Chevy forth to live it out. She watched him doggie paddle into the shallow end at first frantically and then calmly, victoriously, as his feet scraped bottom and he realized he could walk. She watched him trudge his way to the steps, to her side. She watched him sit down beside her again as the other children continued to play all over the pool. Chevy Raggs didn't say a word. He simply claimed his drenched shirt and placed it, crumpled into a soggy ball, onto his head, water streaming down his cheeks and into his ears. Jessica put her hand on the bunched up shirt and pressed down as if she were juicing an orange against Chevy's head. Chevy laughed. He kicked his feet in the water above the steps, but this time they weren't swimming.

Jessica laughed too. She stood up beside Chevy Raggs and started to speak, although the noise in the pool overpowered her voice. But Jessica's way of standing always attracted attention for some reason, which may have explained her great popularity among the children. They tended to notice her when she wanted noticing, a fact she savored in comparison to life in her home. Yes, the word for Jessica's manner of standing was to preside. She held court, if you will, in a kingdom of child subjects. She was their queen, and she intended to prove it. Right there, in front of her parents, she would show everyone how things ought to be.

Jessica lifted her arms and repeated her original words. "We're going to have a contest," she said softly into the clamor of water sports. "We're going to have a contest to see who can hold their breath longest." She spoke the last half of the announcement two more times, never lifting her voice, but offering her palms in a gesture of royal benevolence. Chevy Raggs, soggy shirt pancaked against his scalp with nubs of sleeve sticking up, played court jester and hollered unintelligibly.

Soon all the children were standing in the shallow end or holding onto the sides of the pool in deeper parts, all of them staring at Jessica with soft expectation in their eyes, as was her parents, who stood outside the

pool, her father wearing the dry rolled towel around his neck, holding the ends of it in his hands. He seemed curious at seeing this side of his daughter and waited to see more. The same was true of his wife, who finally stopped busying herself around the pool, no longer lining up cushioned chairs and tilting sun umbrellas until, for the next few minutes anyway, they were absolutely perfect. Instead she walked over to her husband, Mr. Brown, and leaned against his side, both of them watching Jessica. Mr. Brown tilted his cheek against the top of his wife's warm head and draped one end of the dry towel around her. She held it in her hand.

"That's our girl," Mr. Brown whispered appreciatively into the top of Mrs. Brown head as the children's commotion died down. Mrs. Brown sighed the single word "yes", but pronounced it with a "J" and an extra "s". The couple did not speak the tumult of words implied in this tiny exchange, that their daughter was the reason they continued with their marriage. For one satisfied second they understood their sacrifice was worth it, an idea seldom arising in both of them at once. It was eminently worthy of the silence that surrounded it.

The silence became deep. The only sound was the pooling lapping lightly against its container and that faded too. Jessica Brown put her

hands around the sunflower on the belly of her swimsuit and explained to everyone that the secret of holding your breath is to keep the air in your belly. "As if it's a seed," she explained. "Then you let the seed grow until it's ready to blossom." These were esoteric words, but she offered them as a thought exercise, a way of staying underwater without fixating on taking another breath. "It works," Jessica said. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you, because you now you have a chance."

The children accepted the advice, but gathered in the shallow end to implement techniques of their own as well. Lisa Coos counted to twenty as she took that many deep breaths. Eliot Plum rumbled like a race car, gunning his own engine. Chevy Raggs gulped air as if there snowflakes in front of him and he was trying to catch them. In his mind this activity was what a fish would do if it wanted to stay underwater a long time, an idea he did not carry to its natural conclusion. Only Billy Bland refrained from warm-ups of some kind. He sat on the side of the pool with his feet in the water, watching his friends getting ready, knowing they would lose, not only because Jessica was a blue whale at holding her breath, as he'd witnessed many times, but also for reasons he could not quite explain, reasons growing inside him like a seed about to blossom.

"I'll be the referee," Billy Bland stated, speaking to Jessica. He thought he'd stay out of the contest and watch. He wanted to be helpful in some way. The seed in his belly was beginning to sprout.

Billy scratched his leg and waited for an answer. "We'll need someone to say who wins," he told the children. Without questioning his logic, they all seemed to agree, those who cared. The rest continued to prepare, focusing on their rituals.

But Jessica knew better. She was the only child standing and the way she stood was to preside. She was also the birthday girl and in this instance she claimed the role completely. It was totally up to her if Billy Bland or anyone else, including her parents, would occupy the position of referee, and by her thinking no one would. She announced to the group that there wasn't any need for a referee in a contest holding your breath, because the winner would be the last person to come up! It was obvious, she said, bending the words a bit at the end. "When I come up," she explained, "everyone else will already be there!"

It was hard for Billy to argue with this presumptuous statement, except by accepting its challenge, which meant getting in the water and holding his breath. There was something sinister about the pretzel of logic

implied here, working against him. But Billy was hard pressed to say what it was exactly. He knew only it felt similar to his losing his shorts. He gazed down at his belly, concerned for a loose drawstring. He reached inside his waistline and found a secure double knot. There was nothing more for him to do. He was going to compete.

The children gathered in the shallow end, including Jessica and Chevy Raggs, who moved in from the steps. Jessica instructed her parents to count to three and told all the contestants, speaking the words directly at Billy Bland with a sweet look on her face, that once they heard the number three, they would all go underwater and no one should come up until the air in their belly became an open flower. Lisa Coos especially liked these instructions because they emphasized counting. What's more, they were very clear and therefore absolutely fair. She had no idea what fairness really meant in this instance.

After receiving the word to begin, Jessica's parents, mutually holding the dry towel, began counting together, one, two, three! The children gulped a last giant seed of air into their bellies and plopped underwater. A few of them floated right back to the surface, especially buoyant, but their heads remained submerged as their bodies rolled sideways, their knees tucked into

their clasped. Most kept their eyes closed, as children often do in the water. Billy Bland was the one notable exception. He sat at the bottom of the pool, emitting tiny bubbles in a steady stream, staring at something he almost refused to believe.

Two bodies away, across Benjamin and Chevy Raggs, Billy Bland saw the blurry legs and blurry lower waist of someone he suspected was Jessica. It was a strange thrill for him to stare at her lower half this way, without anyone caring. He looked at her pretty legs and her blurry cute feet and a part of him wanted to look for as long as his breath would hold out. But he couldn't see well on account of the water and he had other reasons anyway for swimming in for a closer view.

Above the water, where Jessica's face and upper body loomed, invisible to Billy and all the other children, a little standoff was taking place between Jessica and her parents. She stared at them silently, holding their attention with her eyes. The family was locked into visual recognition of itself and Jessica sustained it. She did not know Billy Bland was on his way over to police her about cheating.

Instead, she folded her arms and waited for the expressions of mild alarm and disapproval on her mother and father's faces to soften into open

inquisitiveness and finally a hint of surrender. When that quality gave way to sorrow, Jessica was ready to speak. She loosened her crossed arms and held her hands over the sunflower on her swimsuit. She didn't notice she was doing it.

"You two have to decide," she told her parents, plucking at the yellow petals around the flower with her fingers. "You have to." She paused for a second and shook her head that yes, the time had come, this was it, she was right to be telling them. "You have to decide," she repeated, "do you love each other or not? Do you understand? You have to make up your minds and live with your choice." Jessica chose these exact words on purpose as the ones her parents often spoke to her when she got in trouble, making them hard to refuse.

Jessica felt a hand against her calf, petting it like a cat. She looked down for a second and recognized Billy Bland in the water at her feet. "I'm going to hold my breath now," she said, gazing down at Billy's submerged body, distracted by his curious treatment of her leg, but not enough to lose her purpose, which was so long in coming.

She looked up one last time and stared her parents in the eyes. Her mother's contained tears that were almost free to fall. Her father's were

like twins moons after an unexpected collision, rattling stones unaccustomed to contact of any kind. Jessica spat onto the surface of the pool. "I'm going to hold my breath now," she repeated, "and when I come up, you two will know exactly what decision you made." She was tempted to finish with the cooperative question, "All right?" but she purposefully swallowed it in her throat with a mighty inhalation and dropped completely underwater. Not entirely by choice, it became her seed for the competition, the little words "all right" sprouting in her belly.

As seeds go, it wasn't the worst. For instance, it set the right mood for sitting underwater with her best friend Billy Bland, staring each other directly in the eyes. It made it easy for two of them to smile at each other and blow bubbles in a simulated conversation. It also helped her hold out her hand when Billy reached for it and laced their fingers together, taking hers into both of his. But this sure grip from Billy gave the seed its next push and Jessica realized it was "all right" to cry. She succumbed to a breathless release of tears, staring at Billy. It was her great secret coming out for no one else to hear.

Many of the children had surfaced by that time anyway, having traded the fanciful glory of victory for the practical needs of respiration. Eliot

Plum stood in the shallow engine sputtering. Chevy Raggs held his breath three and four times, going into and out of the water. The twins Simon and Sally waded by the edge of the pool, trying to decide which of them came up first, having come up together. Soon it was only Jessica and Billy who were still holding their breath. They outlasted the other children to the point of truly whipping them.

When their immense victory became clear and continued to increase itself, Lisa Coos began counting. She stood outside the pool in a giant shower towel, marking off the time with excited stomps of her feet. She was approaching sixty seconds.

By that time Billy Bland was completely out of air. He could feel the water becoming heavy against his head, which began to feel light. Mild tingling ran throughout his arms and legs, becoming consistent and severe. His throat tightened and his chin quivered, but there was no way on earth he was going to go up. There were too many reasons not to, all mingled in his head, where his brain starved for air. There was the urge to stay with Jessica in her time of need, and his own need to hold her hand, and above those fuzzy ideas an even fuzzier one that somehow, for some reason, it was important she lose on this one occasion, as if a victory this time would work

against her better interests. Billy hardly knew what he was thinking. His thought process was breaking down by running amok. He gripped Jessica's hand and kicked with his feet to remain underwater.

Jessica watched him struggle, but struggled herself. She spoke the words "all right" over and over in her imagination, watching them grow into a beautiful flower, reaching for the sun. But those words were a death knell. Reaching for the sun. That idea always signaled the end of her latest effort, the moment when the flower in her imagination opens as much as it can and she goes to the surface to take another breath. There was nothing else left in her technique and Billy Bland was still underwater, violently kicking. She was not going to beat him and she knew it. It was a strange realization, making her wonder who he was.

"All right," Jessica repeated to herself, conceded the victory with this new, higher meaning from the seed. She reached out and touched Billy's cheek and rose to the surface.

Billy Bland released Jessica's hand and swam a few jagged lengths across the width of the pool. His feet surfaced like periscopes and looked around a few times to insure the coast was clear. Then they dropped into the water and Billy's shoulders and head exploded into the open air. He let

out a giant gasp for oxygen and began panting almost immediately. His mouth hung wide open and his face was a light shade of purple. It was a long time before he realized the other children were applauding for him and he wished that they would stop. Lisa Coos shouted the number ninety nine and Billy didn't know why, except maybe in one second it was time to discover his hiding place.

His chief concern was to see about Jessica, to make sure she was "all right". He had no idea why those two little words chimed so insistently in his brain, but he repeated them over and over. He looked through the crowd of children at the far edge of the pool and breathed his first easy breath since coming up from underwater. There between her parents, behind the cluster of children, Jessica stood in the background with the dry towel wrapped around her, useful at last.

Billy leaned against the side of the pool and caught his breath. He was the winner of the contest. Jessica walked slowly to greet him, taking the long way around the deep end. Everyone watched her. She knelt down at the side and offered Billy her hand. Together they lifted him from the pool and he stood dripping on the rim. Jessica handed him the dry towel like a laurel wreath and he held it in his hands.

"I have something to tell you," Billy Bland said, lightly panting, clutching the towel.

"You won," Jessica conceded.

"I don't care," Billy told her. He was absolutely sure the victory was not important to him in the least.

"Then what is it?" Jessica asked. She heard the words "all right" sound in her mind, preparing her.

"I love you," Billy said. He and Jessica were far enough across the pool that no one could hear what they were saying. "I love you and I want you to love me."

"Then why are you crying?" Jessica responded. Billy wiped tears and pool water from his face with the towel. "Was it your secret? Are you telling me your secret, Billy Bland? That's when everybody cries in front of me, including my parents."

"It was my secret," he admitted, hiding his face in the towel. Jessica pulled it away and wiped his face.

"I won't tell," she assured him.

"Not even me?" Billy asked. But these words were complicated because he was the one Jessica Brown told people's secrets, so what would it mean if she told him this one? He wanted her to.

"All right," Jessica offered.

"All right," Billy said. He was quiet for a moment, considering the two words. Then he repeated them to himself and resumed drying himself with the dry towel that wasn't dry.

By this time Jessica's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, had walked over to their daughter to ask her what she'd like everyone to do next at her birthday party. Jessica considered for a moment, watching Billy scrub his short hair with the enormous towel. As in the water, she wondered who he was, as if he weren't Billy Bland anymore.

"It's your party, dear" Mr. Brown chimed.

"The children are waiting," encouraged Mrs. Brown. Which was true. The whole lot of them, other than Billy Bland, was standing at the opposite end of the pool, expecting directions of some kind.

Jessica Brown thought it over a little longer, tickling the sunflower on her belly with her thumb. It was no fault of her own that her next words had already been spoken by someone famous or that historians sometimes

differed in their opinion of who it was. Nor could you fault her that words like her next ones were therefore loaded with baggage that detracted from their direct meaning, which was all Jessica intended. She was hungry and happy and she wanted to make a birthday wish quickly while so many others verged on coming true.

Answering sweetly to her parents about how to direct the children, Jessica Brown cheerfully suggested, "Let them eat cake."