

LAUREN KOCHER

Warm Enough to Swim

It's June. The summer only just started and it's hot outside but the inside of the drain feels like my basement. It's cold, like spiders. Cold, like steel support beams that echo when you slap them with the palm of your hand and like cement rough on your knees. Jessie is there. She's going ahead of me and since she's one of those girls who only wears skirts in the summer I can see the elastic of her pink flower underwear sticking to her thigh. I'm sitting in the mouth of the tunnel and the back of my neck is hot but my cheeks are cool and I shouldn't follow her in but I do.

My mom lets me buy my clothes at the Walmart and for once I wish she didn't. At the Walmart the only difference between the boy clothes and the girl clothes is the color and I like it that way but I wonder if I ought to be dressing more like Jessie. If she ought to see my tiger-stripe boy shorts, and if she did if she'd like them or if she'd look away. But my cargo shorts hang over my knees and my t-shirt is purple and two sizes too big and I can see more of Jessie's skin than I've ever shown in my life. My clothes are not for looking at.

Piper, come on, Jessie says and I realize I've been sitting on my knees in the mouth of the tunnel watching her get smaller like she's shrinking but the tunnel's shrinking faster.

The tunnel isn't a tunnel, it's more like a tube, but it's not really that either, it's a storm drain in a ravine on the empty lot across the street from my house. Mine's the big blue one right before the dead end and the corn field that swallows us up every summer and spits us back out again with the harvest, dusty and dry. Last week Jessie and I hung out for real for the first time and we watched a bunch of kids who don't even live on our street come in and wade through the grass with their arms raised over their heads. They came out hours later with trash bags full of empty soda bottles and plastic grocery bags and wrappers off of jumbo candy bars.

Then Jessie said let's go see it, and so there we are in the storm drain in the ravine hidden by the grass and the 'for sale' sign that's lived on the corner of the lot for as long as I've been alive. There's water sitting stagnant between my feet. I wonder if my mom will notice my shoes are wet. I wonder if she'll

get mad at me for going into the empty lot, which she's told me not to do at least a hundred times before.

What if there are animals, I say, and Jessie laughs and says what if there's snakes and she turns back and looks at me and says whoa look at that. I look back and we're so far from the outside it looks like a picture or a porthole on a ship. It looks like that movie where the girl falls into the hole and she's in a world that didn't exist but now her world doesn't exist and she can't get back the way she came. Maybe we should go back, I say, and Jessie says no we're almost there.

At the end of the tunnel is a corner. Around the corner is more drain, but in between is a hole so deep I can't see the bottom. It sounds like water sloshing against concrete. I wonder how far it goes, Jessie says, and I think she's talking about the hole and it scares me to think about finding out. Then I realize she's talking about the second tunnel, the around-the-corner tunnel, which also goes farther than I can see and it feels like wind pushing against my face even though it doesn't really feel like wind at all, but more like cold seeping into the bones under my skin. I'm scared, still, but Jessie and I are crouching side by side at the end of this tunnel and I hear myself saying let's find out and then she's climbing over to the other tunnel which involves jumping and sliding on her knees on the algae-wet concrete and turning back to me and saying come on, already.

The second tunnel is smaller than the first. Instead of walking crouched over with our backs scraping the concrete we're on our hands and knees. It's getting darker but I can still see Jessie's panties under her skirt. I ask her can you see anything and she says no and laughs and says, isn't this nuts? I bet we could go all the way across the neighborhood.

I bet we could go all the way across the state, I say, and Jessie laughs and it feels good and I'm glad I followed her into the tunnel. Maybe afterwards she'll come over and we can fill up the pool my mom blew up for me last week because it finally got warm enough to swim. Maybe she'll stay until it gets dark and the fireflies come out and we can catch them in jars and then climb the big tree in my back yard and my mom will call us in to make s'mores in the microwave. I'm thinking about that and I'm thinking about how many nights Jessie could sleep over this summer and I'm thinking about how cool I'll be when I go back to school and tell everyone in the lunch room that my best friend is a middle schooler and they'll want to sit with me and be my friends but I'll be the one telling them no. I'm thinking about all that and I'm

squinting through the dark at the pink elastic of Jessie's underwear and then I'm not. I hear her scream. I hear something soft and plump like a twelve-year-old knocking against something wet and hard like concrete. And then I hear her body hit the water.

I slide my hands over the wet cement until my fingers curl over the edge of the hole and I hold it until my knuckles burn. Jessie, I say, but she doesn't respond. Jessie, I say louder, but all I hear is wind and water rushing through the tunnel and hitting me from every direction like it could blow me back outside the drain where she'd ask me if I wanted to go in and I'd say no.

Jessie, I say again and louder and then I'm shouting. Jessie, Jessie, Jessie. I fall on my belly like I can reach my hand into the hole in the drain and pull her back up but it's dark and I can't see the hole or the walls or my hand but I'm reaching and reaching and shouting Jessie, Jessie and that's how they find me. That's how my mom, walking our dog, panting, sweating down the street hears me shouting from the storm drain and calls the firefighters. I don't hear the sirens because I'm screaming, but then there's a light flooding around my shoulders and I can see my hand reaching. I see my hand reaching and my fingers are wide and crusted in muck and green algae. The inside of the drain is slick and shining like someone glued a thousand muddy rhinestones to the walls and I'm still screaming Jessie, Jessie but I'm eleven and I don't think I've ever seen something as beautiful as this.

The tunnel gets bigger up ahead. There's a rat sitting in the water looking at me reaching and screaming and then he's running away, disappearing down another tunnel because there's a man behind me and he knows my name.

Piper, he says and I scream Jessie, and he says I'm going to touch you now, Piper, right here on your ankle so don't be scared. Okay, Piper? I'm going to help you out of here Piper and it might hurt, you might scrape your knees but it'll be okay, Piper. I'm here to help, Piper.

The way he says my name is like a snap of gum and I don't like it in his mouth. I latch my fingers onto the ledge when he yanks me back by my ankle and I scream Jessie one more time because I want to hear her. I want to hear her tell me to come on, Piper. I want to hear her tell me Piper, let's go see something. Piper, I'm bored, let's have an adventure. I want to hear her say my name. Say it like the wooden wind chimes strung up in our trees. Say it like she's known it forever and likes the way it feels on her tongue.

The firefighter pulls on my leg again and he's cursing at me under his breath. Damn kids. All I can hear is curses whispered into the concrete and

water settling at the bottom of a tunnel and the scrape of tiny claws in the algae. The light wavers and I let my fingers slide back from the ledge. The firefighter has my ankle and my purple t-shirt rides up around my armpits but he doesn't stop dragging me until we're back at the corner and he steps down into the hole like it's nothing. His feet are planted on the rusting bars of twin ladders I hadn't known were there. He lifts me and turns me around and sets me into the first tunnel and says you're almost out, kid. There's another firefighter there and I don't know where he came from or how we all fit in the hole between the tunnels, but he goes to look for Jessie. I don't want him to touch her. I don't want him to find her and put his ear to her mouth to listen for her breath and carry her out like she's a sack or a doll or something else that has never been alive.

The first firefighter tells me to move. I crawl down the tunnel and the skin on my belly stings from the rocks and the algae and I want to stop and look at it, to trace the scrapes with my fingertips but every time I stop the firefighter pushes the sole of my sneaker with his hand and I crawl forward again like a puppet. I can hear the firetruck engine rumbling but I don't see anything in the ravine at the mouth of the tunnel but the lights spinning, bouncing off the grass, and it's nearly night and I wonder where it all went, the sun, the heat, the summer. The fireman keeps pushing my sneakers and whispering his curses under his breath and the ravine is getting closer but I keep looking at the end of the tunnel, the perfect circle at the end of the tunnel. The outside air is cold like a fever and it's blowing dirt and old dried leaves into the tunnel, into my eyes, my ears, my mouth, burying my hands on the concrete.

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