

JULIE McARTHUR  
**FIRST DIVE**

“DAD, ARE YOU WATCHING? Dad!” I cried. “I’m ready this time.”

He was sitting in a lemon-lime plastic weave lawn chair at the other end of the pool. Aunt Jane was beside him. They were smoking. They both smoked back then. My pimply cousins stood shivering in a tiny patch of sun coming through the crabapple tree. Mum kept bugging Dad to cut it back, her vegetable garden wasn’t thriving.

“Dad,” I called.

“I’m watching,” he said, hunching over to pick his beer off the grass.

“She’s chicken,” Matt said to Shaun, who had his face buried in a towel.

We lived in a new suburb of bungalows. Our street ran south in the shape of a backwards L with our house at the turn. A field followed our dead-end street, a line of trees after that. Neighbourhood kids—the lot of us—spent most evenings and weekends out there. Boys collected scraps of wood to build with while girls sat hiding in the long grass, spying and eating jelly sandwiches and stolen Flintstone vitamins.

Watching my aunt and dad made me wonder if I would still know my brother Terry when I got old. Terry and his friends had a fort in the trees, a piece of plywood nailed to a couple of scrawny maples. They let me up once and said I could be in their club if I peed off the wooden platform. I did, but they never let me up again.

I turned from the pool’s edge and stepped to look out through the chain-link fence. Our field was alive. Its grass, weeds, and wildflowers danced in the breeze. I knew the tree-line by heart—the maples, oaks, and its worn path of packed mud that wove between.

I heard my aunt say Audrey, my mum’s name. I kept staring out over the field.

Dad had come home late again the night before.

Mum’s voice woke me. “I’m not doing this anymore,” she yelled. “I’m not raising three kids on my own.” I never heard Dad’s voice when

they argued. I sneaked out of bed and crouched by my door to peek around its frame. Mum was holding a small suitcase, the one she took to Arizona when Granny died. "If it's not work, it's the bar," she cried. "The kids need you. I need you." The front door opened and closed.

In the morning Terry took off to meet friends at the arcade. Sometimes he stayed out all day.

I asked Dad where Mum had gone.

"A motel," he said. "She'll be home later."

"When, later?"

"Tonight," he said.

It was getting dark and my bathing suit was almost dry.

A couple of people on our street had pools when Dad decided to dig the summer before. He let us play in the hole before he fitted it with pale blue lining for the shallow end, dark for the deep. A white metal edge bordered the pool with square concrete slabs and a foot of grass thereafter. Nothing fancy—no slide or diving board.

I turned and saw Dad dipping a small plastic tray in the water. He used it to test the chlorine levels.

"I want to help," I said, scurrying over.

I held the tray while he eye-dropped one liquid into the left side and another two drops into the right. I held my fingers over the tray's openings and gave it a few shakes before handing it back.

"Looks good," he said and poured its contents—yellow and pink—onto the grass.

I walked back to the deep end, sat, and dangled my feet in the water. When the ripples stopped, I saw something shiny on the bottom. Dad had thrown money—mooses, beavers, and sailboats—into the pool last week for Terry's birthday party.

The cousins were on the other side of the fence, hanging upside down from our rusted swing set. Mum wanted it gone before the baby came.

"Boys," Aunt Jane hollered. "If you're not going back in, go get changed."

"Fine," Matt said. He jumped off and plodded to the back door of our house. Shaun followed.

I don't remember my uncle, but Aunt Jane had a boyfriend two summers before. His name was Kevin and he looked like the lumberjack from those cereal commercials. He would fill his dump truck with water and let

us swim inside it. I'd bob up and down with my brother's old orange floaties pushed up past my elbows. I didn't understand why the water didn't leak out.

I stood and waved my arms, "Dad, I'm ready."

"Okay," he said.

I put my hands together in prayer.

"I'll count," he said. "One, two,—” On three I bent my knees and jumped, but I forgot to push forward. My shins smacked the metal edge as my upper body slid below the surface. Numb legs followed. I flailed above the water and saw Dad jump in.

"Daddy," I spluttered, tasting chlorine. I gripped his shoulders as he porpoised me to the shallow end. He sat me on the grass as Aunt Jane wrapped a towel around me.

He carried my crumpled body through the house and laid me on the couch. I could see a trail of water on the carpet. Mum would be angry when she came home.

Dad went to the kitchen. "Hold on," he called. He brought a bag of frozen peas and placed it on the towel covering my legs.

"I'm sorry," I sobbed.

"Why are you sorry?" he asked.

The cousins walked in just then. "What happened to her?" Matt asked.

"She tripped on the steps," Dad lied.

I turned and smiled. Aunt Jane was busy soaking up Dad's wet footprints.