

MICHAEL DOYLE

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

“WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOING?” Jenny Chu asks. She grabs two-year-old Frances snug around her chubby waist and pulls her still-running body back to their towel at the edge of the pool. “Can’t you read? No running on the pool deck.”

She pulls and snaps the purple lycra stretched across Frances’s wet belly, points at the signs spaced evenly every twenty feet along the wall of the building and down at Frances’s stamping feet, which stand on another notice built into the deck and spelled out in tiny black-and-white tiles.

“The signs are everywhere,” she says into Frances’s ear. “*No running.*”

The girl’s feet stop as she raises her arms to wipe the drops from her face. Newly aware of her water wings, she tugs at them, the inflated orange plastic squeaking with each twist.

“No, pickle.”

She stops again and looks at Jenny, then at me.

I wave from my place in the lifeguard’s chair opposite them, but she just stares up. Her eyes are round, yet touched by almond points, the union of her mother’s French-Canadian blood and her father’s Chinese made into something new. Jenny follows her gaze and smiles, embarrassed.

The toddler swim has been over for half an hour and everyone else has gone home, but I’m letting Jenny and Todd hang around for a bit. They’re my next-door neighbours, and pretty nice. I’ve babysat the kids a few times. Last night they brought seventeen cupcakes over for my birthday, each with a candle in it. I hadn’t made a wish in a long time, but when I blew them out I wished that everyone could understand why I’m leaving.

Jenny’s pregnant. Her belly rests large and detached on her lap, covered by one of Todd’s t-shirts. She’s dry except for her feet, which kick lazily in the water. Frances has her curls, but Todd’s black hair. He’s waist-deep with their seven-year-old, Jack, in the shallow end. His dark arms

swish just below the water's surface as Jack hops weightlessly from foot to foot and sizes up his opponent.

"Dare ye disturb the great mouth of *Charybdis*," Todd moans as deeply as he can. His arms make a whirlpool between them. "Come, and be *swallowed!*"

Jack darts forward only to be sucked in and propelled backward into the air. His skinny body lands with a splash near the buoy line, but he is quickly upright and considering his next approach. Each time the boy attacks Todd spins him higher so that he cries out when he hits the water; each time he returns, happy with his reddening arms and sides.

"Okay, fellas," Jenny says. "In case you haven't noticed, we're the last in the pool. Jude's hung around long enough on our account. He would probably like to go home."

"It's okay," I tell her. "I leave tonight."

Jenny smiles back as if she didn't hear me.

Frances wipes her hand across her face and I think of last night.

I woke up around three to some guy singing: *Until you've loved a love you've had to lose, you don't know what love is*. I was sure to keep the radio-alarm quiet enough to keep from waking my mom or Rachel, but while I grabbed what I needed from the bathroom, I thought I heard my mom's movement through the wall. It's easy to imagine her waking in the dark and turning on the table lamp to find herself alone. I see her in the nightgown Rachel and I bought her last Christmas, her eyes squinting in the half-light, toes finding warm hardwood.

First I looked for the Vaseline. It's supposed to keep my feet from blistering. Found the first aid kit behind in the cupboard behind the towels, and grabbed the Tylenol from the medicine cabinet. I was about to shut the cabinet door when I spotted my dad's shaving kit. The one he uses when he visits. After a moment's hesitation, I quietly unzipped it and removed the razor, brush and foam. His smell spilled out with them. I shut the mirror and inspected my face for signs of a beard, but nothing. If I didn't see one now, on my eighteenth birthday, maybe next year, in a different mirror, on my nineteenth. I looked from the items I'd set aside to the kit sitting open in my hand, felt its cheap vinyl as I placed the things back inside. After grabbing everything I wanted, I turned off the light and stepped into the hall, left the room and the kit in the dark.

In my room, I went to the closet and pulled down the box of letters my dad had been sending since I was little. Wedged in behind it were my hiking shoes. As I had done nearly every night for the last month, I pulled the roll of Canadian bills and euros from the toe of the left shoe, just to be sure it hadn't disappeared in the night.

My door squeaked. In the dim light, I saw Rachel standing in her nightie at the door. She backed away for a moment, but I waved her in. She looked around the room as if it were an alien place in the middle of the night, got her bearings before crawling onto the bed to look at the world map I'd laid out earlier. Even by the weak glow of the desk lamp I could see the amber in her eyes.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

I should have sent her back to her room, but instead I took off my shirt and tried on one of the wool ones. They smelled like a department store. I'd spent an afternoon trying on everything in the Outdoors and Hiking section, asking the clerk which pair breathed best, dried quickest, packed lightest, then kept them in their bags in the back of my closet until the time had come.

"Everywhere on that map."

She looked down at the colours and lines I'd studied every night for the past three months: borders like puzzle pieces, mountains etched in shades of grey and countries painted in relief. She leaned forward to study something.

"Are you going to the castle?"

"Castle?"

It took a second to figure out what she meant. One night when I was bored I drew a church steeple in pen over *Santiago de Compostela* in Spain, where St. James' bones are supposed to be buried.

"It's a cathedral." I slid my pack out from under the bed and packed the Vaseline and toiletries before dragging Rachel onto my lap. "Depends if I want to do this long medieval walk called the Camino. Eight hundred kilometres through the Pyrenees and vineyards, farmers' fields."

"To get to the castle?"

"Yeah, but I won't stop there. I'm going to walk three days more to Finisterre. Here." I placed my finger on a tiny black dot I'd scribbled on the coast. "I want to see the ocean."

Rachel let loose a soft sigh as if something wasn't going her way. I couldn't tell whether she was upset or just tired. I tucked my nose behind her ear and let it rest there. She let it rest there too.

“You know what ‘Finisterre’ means?” I whispered.

Her dark hair rubbed against my cheeks when she shook her head.

“It means ‘Land’s End.’ They used to think there was nothing else past it, that they were standing at the edge of the world.”

She didn’t look up, but I could tell she was listening. I pulled away and leaned on my elbow behind her.

“What about over there?” she asked, motioning toward the Americas.

“They probably didn’t know about it back then. Besides, you can’t see any of that from this side. Just the ocean.”

We looked down at the map together, the Atlantic inked in shades of blue, darker where it grew deeper, white curling out where the Azores and Canary currents meet and part ways. A few inches from the Spanish coast, a small cartoon whale was peeking out of bubbly froth, smiling at us and spraying water like a spring from its blowhole.

Rachel placed her finger on Finisterre like mine had been, then slowly, casually, swept it just an inch or two into the blue.

“Dad!” Jack whines.

Todd has launched him high again, but this time toward the side of the pool. The two swim to the side-ladder, the boy climbing while Todd lifts himself onto the deck.

I’m on the ground by the time the family has moved toward the change rooms. Todd goes to scoop up Frances but she wiggles free and strays a few brave steps before Jenny can steer her back to the group.

“Carry me,” Jack says, as Todd lets loose an exaggerated sigh before swinging him up onto his shoulders. “I’m gonna hit the ceiling!”

Jack leans back, placing his whole trust in Todd’s grip, which Todd releases just long enough to hear the expected panic.

“Todd,” Jenny says, but before she can say any more, Jack yelps again, his body pitched precariously back while Todd tries to reclaim his slippery arms. Jenny moves just in time to keep him upright, but in the small commotion none of them notice Frances. Suddenly free, she is hurrying along the edge of the deep end. It’s only when I start running that they turn to see her, her round legs already squatting at the base of the diving board

“Frances,” Jenny calls, but the girl pays no attention. She waddles to the end of the board and crouches, her eyes fixed on the water. I calmly hop onto the board and call to her gently with my hand out. *Frances*. She

looks at me and smiles. Even half-obscured by her loose, black curls, there is something hidden, light and curious, behind her eyes.

“Frances, go to him,” Todd says.

She looks at my hand, considers it, then turns back toward the water, reaches forward, and is gone.

“Frances, take his hand!” Jenny yells again as if caught in the fraction of a second before the fall, as if she hasn’t heard the splash. But Frances is gone. I am quick to the edge of the board and gazing down as she just was.

I see her small body falling away, blurred for just a moment beneath the sloshing water, her hair like twirling weeds in the blue, reaching for the surface even as they grow darker beneath it. Her small arms have risen above her, wave lazily amidst the water’s sway and pull. I am ready to jump, my legs tensed as trained, but I cannot move. She seems a different kind of calm, as if she has been here before, drifted through this yawning, guiding space. It is nothing to her. Her lips bear a soft frown, but remain parted and indifferent to the tiny bubbles slipping past them. She is a child newly woken from a nap, her eyes as Rachel’s used to be when she stood behind her bed rail in the dark of her room. They are glassy as if not quite awake and empty of all thought, yet, somehow, clear as moons. Wide and relaxed and gazing straight into me. They are telling me something I can only barely hear, whispering my name without saying it, inviting me in, and I want to go. I will.

Then it all bursts.

The water explodes beneath the weight of Jenny’s body. She lands close, but sinks like a treasure chest, her swollen belly dragging her under water.

A moment later Todd is already in the air, diving straight and sure and then cutting through the water like a fish. He parts the water in front of him and his hands reach and find Frances. She comes up first in a rush, Todd’s hands wedged in her armpits, her face to the washed-out ceiling lights as she breaks the surface and finds air. She is another again, far away from me, soaking wet and gasping for breath. Her body shudders, eyes squeeze shut. She begins to cry.

Because I’m leaving, I will fail my last semester of high school. When my classmates finally ask, “Where’s Jude?” Ms. Geleyn will say something like, “He’s Canadian history.” The other lifeguards at the indoor pool will split my shifts, and the Wednesday afternoon, pre-school Tadpoles won’t give my disappearance much thought. My mom will ask Rachel questions she won’t be able to answer and close the door when she needs to cry. My

dad will pull into the driveway Friday with a carefully chosen gift he'll have to leave on my bed.

Jenny breaks the surface a moment after Frances, also gasping for air as she reaches blindly for her daughter.

"Shh ..." Todd says, kicking in the water with Frances held tight. "I've got her. She's okay. I've got her."

Jenny begins to calm, still blinking as she joins them. Her hands find Frances's head and shoulders while the three swim as one to the poolside.

Jack waits for them, a foot from the edge and shivering in the chlorinated air. The ripples born from his family's fall break at his feet.

"Away from the pool," Todd says to him, as Jenny lifts herself out of the water.

Jack steps aside. Once standing, they dry Frances's face and body with wet and trembling hands. Frances wraps her arms around Jenny's neck and rests her head against Jenny's chest as Todd helps them past the separate change rooms and into the empty foyer where they can stay together. Through the observation glass I see how tired they've suddenly become.

Todd looks at me, still standing on the end of the board. His neck muscles are clenched, his chest puffed. I think he's going to say something, to yell at me, but the glass is thick between us. He just stares, and as he does, his brow furrows and his eyes soften as he if he may have mistaken me for someone else.

I scratch my nose. Smell chlorine. My breath is hot and slow and shallow.

Jack is alone at the pool. He watches his mother pace in circles with his sister's head pressed to her chest, the two of them crying, then walks to the pool's edge and lowers his foot over the water.