

BROKEN ARROW

JULY 1966

The summer before he got sick, my kid brother Jesse kicked off his baggy bathing shorts in our front yard, splashing naked with our sister Maddie in his new blue inflatable wading pool. When our mother looked away, too busy pulling up dandelions from her flowerbeds, Maddie peeled off her one-piece mermaid bathing suit and chased Jesse around the pool, naked and shrieking with laughter, making a widening circle in the cut wet grass of our front yard. Then they both ran straight out into the middle of Broken Arrow Road.

Always stuck with bagging cut grass and keeping an eye on my brother Nate—playing in the dirt with his G. I. Joe—I leaned on my rake and watched.

“Get out of the street, you grunions!” our father shouted over his Briggs and Stratton, sunburned in his khaki shorts, grass flecking his freckled ankles.

But they just grinned at him. He shook his head and laughed, then ran out into the street, roaring like his mower, chasing after them till he’d snatched them both up squealing under each arm like skinned rabbits and carried them back to swim in Jesse’s wading pool.

“You’ll get run over!” he shouted at Jesse. “Smooshed like a skunk!” He blew raspberries into both kids’ bare bellies and tickled them,

holding onto them as our mother wrestled them both squirming back into their bathing suits.

Maddie was five, Jesse two.

“Don’t encourage them, Deuce,” our mother said, her arms folded.

But they did it again and again—suits off as they circled the front yard, then out into the street, our father laughing and running after them—until our mother shouted, “Stop it, Deuce! You’re going to get them both killed!”

Our father dropped his head and cut off the mower, then flipped the sloshing, heavy pool over like a giant jellyfish till it had emptied. Then he dragged it upside down from its circle of yellow grass to the back yard and slammed the side gate shut.

Waking from his second coma in his Baylor Hospital bed the following May, after our father’d moved us into an awful green-shuttered house on Estate Lane, Jesse whined that he wanted to go swimming, his arm taped to a transfusion board. So when our mother’s new day lily bulbs bloomed and Dr. Spiegel told her Jesse’s white cell count had dropped a little, our mother coiled the water hose warming on the patio in the morning sun, then wrestled him out of his Superman suit and put his bathing trunks on before all us other kids got up.

Spotted with yellow-blue bruises on his chicken-bone knees and elbows and shins, his belly white and round and thumping-hard as a honeydew melon, Jesse sat shivering in the pool, hugging his goose-pimpled arms, but then he laughed and slapped at the water and refused to get out, not even when his lips had turned blue. Hearing him laugh, Maddie and Nate and I joined him, still warm from our beds, Maddie punching us hard whenever we bumped or splashed him, three rowdy kids and one sick kid all crowded into a three-tubed vinyl pool from FedMart.

The summer after Jesse died, when Maddie begged her to let her go swimming in Jesse's old pool, our mother finally gave in and found the sun-faded pool crumpled and mildewing behind our father's tool shed. Our mother blew it up, the vinyl creaking with air, but instead of splashing and playing like she had with Jesse, Maddie just sat there in the cold water in her bathing suit, the mermaid smiling up at her from the bottom of the pool.

When our father started up his mower from the front yard, Maddie shimmied off her cold, wet suit, straps off her shoulders, then down, snapping past her ankles. Then she ran in circles around the back yard, squealing with laughter, our Sheltie, Reveille, barking after her, till she unlatched the gate and ran straight out onto Estate Lane.

"Stop, Maddie!" our father shouted. "You let the damn dog out!"

But Maddie just smiled at him from the middle of the street, her hair coiling red ringlets of water down her shoulders.

Same drill, different house—I looked up from a pile of raked grass to watch.

Our father cut off the mower. "You come here right now. I'm not telling you again."

But she just stood there, grinning.

"I'm counting to ten," he said.

When she stood through the whole count snickering at him, he ran into the street and jerked her up into the air by her wrist and slapped her hard across her bare backside.

He put her back down, her bare wet feet slapping asphalt. "You want to get yourself killed? You think this is some kind of goddamn game?"

And our mother just stared at him, her arms crossed, our father's big palm print bright red across Maddie's bare ass.

A car passed, then another, and then our father let Maddie go, but he didn't see the third car coming, a yellow '62 Ford Fairlane, a woman

with black-horned rims and a stiff blond bouffant shouting at her son in the back seat.

Maddie ran out into the street again.

When he saw the car, our father shouted, “Get over here! Now! Goddamn shit and hell.”

Maddie’s eyebrows curved like a broken arrow, and she ran away as our father ran after her again, straight toward the car, but Maddie didn’t see it, looking back at our father, and the woman in the car had her back turned in her seat to shout at her son again and didn’t see Maddie or Reveille, right behind her.

Maddie dodged our father in the street, weaving and ducking, then stumbled and fell, scraping her bare knees. She shrieked and stood and ran away from him again, the dog barking at her heels, but the car just kept coming.