

Young Writers Award 2011: Maureen Donahoe Encouragement Award winner

Rips

by Deanna Antonioli

Mum says Derek is a dickhead, which I'm assuming, means they're through, but I can't be sure. She said John was a dickhead too and they stayed together for three more months before she shouted it at him in the car park of McDonalds' one night and he drove off in his old Commodore and never came back.

I watch as she takes the Christmas tree into the backyard and storms into the shed, returning with an axe. She hacks at the tree indiscriminately, tinsel and all, while Derek moves his packed bags out onto the front veranda.

Her face is the kind of red usually worn by old men with blood pressure problems and she mutters muffled words to herself as he lops another limb off our happy family tree.

Normally it wouldn't bother me, the break up. Normally I couldn't care less. She'd had so many boyfriends that I'd stopped bothering with names for most of them. The long list of mystery men had begun merge in my mind, forming caricatures of the people they probably were, but Derek was different. Derek had a kid and we'd never had one of them before, another single parent. I liked having a sort-of brother. Shaun and I would do all kinds of stuff; go off on our bikes or down to the beach. We'd stay in the water for hours, until we forgot the time and the Casuarina trees were nothing more than silhouettes against the twilight, then we'd have to run home, still in our boardies, salt thick on our skin.

Normally the breakup wouldn't bother me but Derek and Shaun had felt like hope, like family. Plus, it was nearly Christmas and I'd bought Shaun a present and everything, though I guessed that wouldn't happen now, Christmas, not since Mum was still tearing the tree apart. I could probably keep the present but it didn't feel right, keeping something you'd bought for someone else.

Derek moves into the backyard, watching Mum carefully. Without a word he casually retrieves a cigarette and lighter from his pocket and begins to smoke. He inhales one long drag and blows the smoke out upwardly through his mouth so the cloud hangs in the air for a moment before being dispersed. He steels himself for the next battle.

Shaun grabs my arm and pulls me away from the window just as Derek and mum recommence their screaming match. Their shouts fade away as we make our escape

out the side door and take the usual short cut through the neighbour's yards. Neither of us says a word, we know where we're headed. Like-minded runaways we jump the fences swiftly, dodging houses with dogs that might catch us out.

I can hear the waves as we near the beach, calling us in rolling tongues. Closing my eyes as my bare feet touch sand I breathe the salty spray. I have run away, but now I am home.

The sun hovers above the horizon, casting its final gaze over our hemisphere before giving over its sentinel to the moon. The wind whips up from the south and even though it's summer and hot I feel a shiver course through my body, there's a big storm coming. Black clouds lurk ominously, leering at us from a distance. Lightening flashes. I'm down to my shorts when a huge clap of thunder rolls across the water and hits me in the guts.

"I don't think we should..." I back away, the waves still lapping placidly at my toes.

"I don't care. I'm going in." Shaun doesn't shift his focus from the sea. He kicks off his thongs and runs into the surf. The storm, pregnant with violence, screams in pain like it's about to give birth to something terrible. Shaun doesn't care.

"Come on you wuss," he shouts at me from where he's wading in, dodging the growing waves. He knows I hate being called a wuss. I'm not a wuss. I once climbed all the way to the top of the mango tree in our front yard and even Shaun wouldn't do that.

"Race ya to the drum line." He points to the bright red buoys about two hundred metres out, just past the breakers, where the sea looks eerily calm.

"No way, I'm not going out there."

Electricity fizzles in the atmosphere as lightening spews from crackling clouds. I can almost feel the voltage passing through my veins. Shaun won't leave. He just stands in the surf and shakes his head at me.

"Please," I beg, "we have to go back."

"No."

It starts to rain. He's frightened, I know because I am too, shaken by the storm but terrified of returning to the house because we both know he'll be leaving soon, not just me and mum, but this place as well.

He looked weary when he first came to us. I thought he must be sick or something he was so pale, but he wasn't sick he was just tired. He and his dad had moved so much he'd never had room to rest, never had a home. It'd only be worse now, for both of us, knowing what we were missing out on.

"It's not fair," he shouts at me over the rain and waves. The world tries to silence him so he raises his voice above it. "We never get a say. One day I'll be old enough to go out on my own, leave dad, and then I'll come back here." He speaks wistfully as though recalling some half forgotten dream. We both know it's got nothing to do with dreaming. He's lying. People say they'll remember, they say they'll visit but they don't. He'll change, I'll change, everything will change including this place and the necessary pieces of the puzzle will be lost forever. I'll become a memory to him, slowly fade away from view, and every now and then he'll catch himself saying something like 'I really should' or 'I'd like to go back there' but he won't because he knows that it will never be the same as it is now, never as good as the memory he doesn't want to taint.

"Come on, one last swim. Let's race to the drum line, out to the buoys and back. Unless you don't think you've got it in you. Unless you're a wuss." He smiles strangely, like a politician, all teeth and hidden feeling.

"You can't go out there, that's where they catch the sharks. It's too far. It'll be dark soon."

His face contorts and he makes a noise that's halfway between a laugh and a sob. "I'm tired of being told what to do, where to go and when." Like a savage, wild animal once tame he turns away from me and dives under the waves. He's a good swimmer, gliding with grace and ease through the roughness of the open water. Shaun was made for the ocean, it didn't seem right that he should leave.

"Shaun." I call after him but he can't hear me. "Shaun."

Stroke, breath, stroke, breath, stroke, breath, just the way they taught us in school I follow him out. Swimming doesn't come naturally to me, I have to think about each stroke. Shaun is bobbing up and down in the distance, his body matching the rise and fall of the buoys. He waves at me and cries out but he's gotten too far away from me and all I can hear is the sea and the storm. I stop and watch him for a moment, bobbing and waving. He shouts again. The water swells in front of me. I lose sight of him. Shaun is gone.

Madness fills my mind. "Shaun."

My body takes over where my mind has run away. Shaun's head breaches the surface of the calm water where he is struggling, fighting the thing he had once seemed so a part of. He gasps and flails, he is not made for the ocean anymore. He falls under again.

My pulse thrums in my ears. My arms and legs continue to pump and kick though I have nothing left inside me. I am out of breath. Out of energy. Hollow. He surfaces once more just after I pass the breakers.

"Shaun." His arms outstretch toward me prematurely and the water takes him because I am not fast enough. Each time he surfaces he reaches out for something that is not yet there. Each time he comes back in sight seems a miracle. In my chest there is

tightness, a band winding round and round and twisting until I want to scream. ‘Please don’t die, I can’t swim any faster.’

From deep within, some final release of stored up energy, there comes a fierce kick and at last I reach him. I haul him back to the surface, back to life, grapple for him and refuse to let him go.

“My leg’s all cramped up,” he croaks as I gaze back at the shore and realise we’re out farther than I thought. The sea takes us calmly, secretly pulling us away from the safety of land.

“We’re in a rip.” I realise aloud and Shaun tenses. I can feel the panic in the muscles of his arm. He starts to struggle with me as if I were holding him against his will.

“Stop.” I yell over the rain, it’s pissing down now. “We’ll be alright,” I reassure him even though I’m not convinced of it myself. He looks at me, stops his struggling and grips my hand tightly instead.

Together we swim slowly, parallel to the beach, away from the rip and it’s placid peril, and back to the white water breakers. I know we’re safe when the waves take hold. I lose my grip on Shaun as we’re pummeled violently, repeatedly smashed by cruelty and kindness, the sea’s shouts and ire followed over and over again by her calm, quiet depths where the silence sings like a lullaby and tries to lure us into staying with her rather than returning to the tumultuous surface and its breathable air. In the end the sea must decide she doesn’t want Shaun or I after all because she spits us out onto the sand, mercifully rejected.

I pull Shaun by the arm, almost wrenching his shoulder out of the socket as I haul him up off the ground and we scramble out of the water’s reach, toward the sand dunes.

“I thought that was it,” he breathes, “I thought for sure I was a goner.”

I fall back into the rough comfort of the sand and feel it prickle and sting against my cold skin. A mammoth wave rises out of the sea and rushes with suicidal intent toward the shore, launches itself at us, and finding it cannot reach curls over and dies in the sand.

I fall apart quickly out of the water. Control slips silently away. I don’t want to cry. I’ve only really cried once before in my life I swear, when I fell out of the mango tree in our front yard and broke my wrist, and even then I only cried because you could see the bone and it really hurt. This is a different kind of pain.

Shaun doesn’t utter a word he just sits and lets me cry my little silent sobs. I’m not even sure why they’re coming, but they are, salt-water tears of the sea. It’s probably because we almost died, or maybe because soon I’ll never see Shaun again, because this is the end and I’m too young to see the end of anything yet so I’m having trouble imagining it. Shaun lets me watch the lightning and cry until I’m done which is probably the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me and only makes me want to cry more.

The wind moans and a flash of lightening illuminates the laboring storm as it draws nearer, encroaching too quickly upon us. Between the flashes it moves, stealth like, intent on destroying our modest paradise.

"Maybe we could run away." I look at him hopefully, not sure if I have the courage to follow through if he agrees. He thinks for a moment, rolls the possibility over in his mind.

"Nah." He shakes his head. "I reckon my dad would miss me way too much".

"Yeah." I think of mum and realise that even though I'm tired and sad, I can't bear the thought of her sitting at home worrying over what's become of me.

The ground suddenly shakes and rattles. The storm can't be far off now. We take the short cut home and nearly forget about the old German Shepard that lives two blocks back. We sprint through the yard and jump the fence into the next place just before the dog realises we're there. The dog's howls echoes though the night air chasing Shaun and I as we run, jumping the smaller fences of the neighborhood like hurdles.

Mum doesn't look angry or worried when she sees us walk in. She doesn't really look as though she's been anxious at all, she just grins at us wryly, like a person with a secret.

"What kind of day did you kids have then?" Derek swaggers in with the same smirk and I notice the table is set for dinner and the packed bags that had been laid out on the verandah have disappeared.

"So we're staying then?" Shaun voice rises in excitement and I silently will him not to get ahead of himself. This is the calm water I think, this is the danger zone.

"Of course we're staying. What are you talking about?" Derek reaches out a hand and pats Shaun on the head playfully "Why wouldn't we be?"

"You were yelling earlier."

"We weren't yelling," he corrects and I think he might actually believe the tale he's spinning.

"We were having a little disagreement, but it's over now," Mum chimes in.

They don't mention the fight again, or the packed bags, or our sudden lack of a Christmas tree. Mum puts dinner on the table. They act as though nothing has happened and expect us to do the same and all I can think is how much I want to throttle them both for thinking that Shaun and I are ignorant or stupid and for dragging us back and forth and spitting us out like the ocean, wherever they feel like it, without thought or explanation, but Shaun is smiling madly so I keep my mouth shut. It's nearly Christmas I remind myself, and I did buy him a present and everything.