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## Sixty Percent

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## Sixty Percent // Meghan Roberts

Mrs. Gilbert told our class that approximately sixty percent of the human body consists of water, which is kind of a lot. I remember this fact not because I like school or anything, especially not Mrs. Gilbert, who smells like gasoline and B.O. and has skin that sags off her face like wax on a candle. I remember this fact because I am afraid that my own body will drown me, swallow me whole, erase me completely.

My mom signed me up for swimming lessons a few years ago. She said that nine-and-a-half was too old to not know how to swim. But I knew she only signed me up because Auntie Monica told her to. Mom's impressionable like that.

Auntie Monica drove my cousin Alexis and me every Tuesday and Wednesday to Instructor Debbie's house, which had a cobblestone driveway and a giant pool with a waterfall and a black Labrador retriever that barked so loudly he scared away any nearby squirrels or birds. I felt embarrassed walking into the backyard with Alexis, who was only five and tiny with evil brown eyes and evil brown hair. One time, at a family barbeque, Alexis tiptoed over to me and knocked my orange popsicle to the ground. I forced myself not to cry even though I really wanted to, like the time Alexis teased me for crying after I dropped a bowling ball on my toe at my other cousin Rachel's birthday party.

There were two other kids in our swim class: Melissa, a skinny blonde girl with constellations of freckles on her face, and Amber, who laughed almost as loud as Instructor Debbie's dog barked. I was the oldest, which made me squirm sheepishly in my 25%-off flip-flops from Target.

Instructor Debbie had a no-nonsense-under-any-circumstances-ever attitude. I swallowed a bunch of water ten minutes into our first lesson and started coughing like crazy. But Instructor Debbie didn't care and just thrust my head under water again until I really couldn't breathe and scrambled to the surface.

"You're not going to learn to swim if you act like a baby," she scolded. Amber giggled. I glanced over at Auntie Monica, who was too busy gossiping with Melissa's and Amber's moms to pay attention to my near suffocation. Melissa would stop and beam at her mom's camera every two seconds, which for some

reason, Instructor Debbie didn't seem to mind.

By the end of our first lesson, my legs felt like Jell-O and a string of snot dribbled down my face. Alexis pointed and laughed, and then Amber laughed (loudly), and then everyone laughed, even Instructor Debbie, and I just wanted to go home and never come back.

Auntie Monica praised Alexis on the ride home.

"My baby, you did so great! Perfect! You're going to be in the Olympics one day, baby, I just know it. Isn't she, Nicole?"

I nodded because Auntie Monica gets really red-faced and yells a lot when people disagree with her. But secretly, I wanted to drop a bowling ball on Alexis' toe and watch her cry instead of me.

Our lessons continued as the summer dragged on. I was pretty sure Melissa was part mermaid, because Instructor Debbie complimented her strokes over and over again but criticized mine. Still, my ability to hold my breath underwater improved. My goggles no longer hurt my head after wearing them for two hours. And I learned that in order to get the chlorine smell out of my hair, I had to rinse and repeat, even though I usually skipped the repeat part.

Alexis pouted when Melissa, Amber, and I began treading water in the deep end of the pool because Instructor Debbie said she was too young to join us.

"You'll be in the deep end one day," Auntie Monica assured her on the ride home. "You're going to be a star, baby. You'll out-shine them all."

On our last day of class, Melissa, Amber, and I performed a synchronized swimming routine in the deep end for the moms. Melissa did most of the tricks, because she had learned how to do flips underwater, and that made Instructor Debbie proud, even though Melissa said her dad taught her in her pool at home. Amber and I mainly treaded water and swam from one end of the pool to the other when Melissa did. Melissa's mom videotaped the entire performance, while Auntie Monica talked on her cell phone and Amber's mom complained about her sunburn.

Alexis threw a tantrum about not having her own performance, so Auntie Monica demanded that she have her time in the

spotlight over in the shallow end. Alexis' performance was boring because she was so slow and only swam a couple of laps, no tricks. Still, Auntie Monica applauded and cheered so loudly that even Instructor Debbie's dog fled the backyard.

After Instructor Debbie fished a huffing and puffing Alexis out of the pool, we all went inside to change into our clothes and have some ice cream. I was last to change and entered the kitchen as Instructor Debbie gushed about Melissa's talent to her mom and Auntie Monica and Amber's mom gossiped and Amber and Melissa ate their ice cream while whispering and giggling. I held my ice cream cone very close to my face and glanced around suspiciously for Alexis, but she was nowhere to be found. I sneaked outside through the back door and found my cousin perched at the edge of the pool, staring into the still water.

"Alexis!" I cried, hurrying across the grass to her. "You can't be there. Instructor Debbie says you're not allowed in the deep end."

Alexis turned and scowled at me.

"Shut up. You can't tell me what to do."

My hand clenched tightly around my ice cream cone.

"Instructor Debbie is going to get really, really mad when she sees you out here."

"She's not gonna see me, stupid. She's inside."

I looked over at the house, expecting Instructor Debbie to storm outside hollering up a fit. When I turned back to Alexis, she was leaning closer to the water, her face inches away from its surface.

"Alexis, no!"

Alexis stared at me hard with her evil brown eyes and didn't blink, not once. My heart started pounding. I wanted to yell for Auntie Monica and Instructor Debbie to come, but no sound left my throat. Besides, I knew Alexis would only call me a tattletale if I did.

After a few moments' staring contest, I blinked. Alexis must have sensed my defeat, because she turned back to the pool and slowly, suddenly, silently slipped into the water.

I gasped. Dropped my ice cream cone. Dashed to the

pool but skidded to a stop at its edge. I could see Alexis' body flailing in the water, bubbles floating up in swarms around her. But I couldn't jump into the water to pull her out. I was fully clothed and wearing socks and shoes, my new ones, too, with the sparkly pink laces. Alexis' mouth appeared above the surface of the water, wet and red, and then she tumbled down again.

I felt panicky. I couldn't move.

"Alexis!" I called. "Alexis, if you can hear me, say something!"

I listened as hard as I could but Alexis didn't respond. Her left flip-flop detached itself from her foot and floated up to the surface, where it bobbed up and down like a rubber duck in a bathtub, or an apple on Halloween.

My stomach lurched and my throat burned and my legs wobbled and I staggered over to a bush and vomited until my insides sat in a puddle before me. I lay on the ground trying to breathe, but my breath felt funny and raggedy and my skin burned like I had a fever. I heard the back door open, and Auntie Monica started calling for Alexis and me.

"Alexis, Nicole! Come on, we're leaving!"

I wanted to stand, to speak, to at least point to Alexis' sinking body, but I couldn't move, and imagined Auntie Monica exploding with rage and accusing me of pushing Alexis in the pool myself. So instead, I pressed my face into the grass and squeezed my eyes shut.

Auntie Monica called our names a few more times. Paused every few seconds, probably to check the messages on her cell phone. And then she screamed. Her scream was the worst, most awful thing I've ever heard in my life and will ever hear again. It was harsh and crackly and dripping with tears; it felt worse than a hundred haunted houses or a dozen fevers or even throwing up in your swim teacher's bush.

I heard feet scramble outside. More screams erupted. A splash. Melissa's mom sobbed into her phone to a 911 operator. I peered around the bush in time to see Instructor Debbie, clothed and all, shove Alexis' body onto the concrete. Auntie Monica was screaming into Alexis' ear, but she still didn't respond.

I crawled out of the bushes as an ambulance squealed in the distance. No one seemed to notice me at this point, so I curled myself up on the pavement and cried, wishing, for the first time in my life, that Alexis was responsive.

All I could concentrate on as I shivered on the ground while the paramedics swarmed the backyard was my melting ice cream cone a few feet away, now sprinkled with ants. I watched the ice cream become liquid, and thought about my liquid, the sixty percent of my body that I had probably puked up half of in the bush. And Alexis, who had plunged into a pool that was one hundred percent water, combined with her sixty percent, which was one-hundred sixty percent, and that couldn't have been a good thing, and I wondered how much water it took to drown, to sink, to stop responding to the point that you couldn't even make fun of your cousin's tears. That day, from us being greeted by barking at the gate to Alexis' plunge to Amber's mom scooping me off the ground and wrapping me in a towel and driving me home, became the reason behind everything. It was the reason, according to Mom in a hushed voice on the phone, that Auntie Monica started drinking booze in the mornings before even getting out of bed. It was the reason that Mom had to force me to drink Gatorade to stay hydrated because I was too afraid of drinking water and increasing my sixty percent. It was the reason that I started drinking my own tears in the middle of the night, and the reason I stopped, because I knew Alexis was only laughing in her grave.