

AFLOAT

Lake spray splattered Shannon's face as the jetski skimmed the surface like a skipping stone. She hugged up close behind Eddy's summer-hot body, imagining with satisfaction her effect on him. The wind clawed her auburn hair into a ribbon of seaweed behind her, and sluiced away the ripple of concern she'd felt back on the dock, flirting with Eddy.

"Get on, babe," Eddy had demanded. "I'll show you what this machine can do."

"What about the kill switch?" Shannon had asked. She knew all the rules, and kept most.

"What are you scared of? You can swim."

This was an understatement. Born on the west coast, Shannon had learned to dive off the rocks as a child. Every family vacation involved hotels with swimming pools. After years of lessons, she now held her senior lifeguard certificate, which had snagged her this summer's job at Pine Mountain Bible Camp, a quarter of a mile down the forest path from the lake. A month of duty at the camp pool had already bronzed her skin, and her new bathing suit showed off lots of the tan.

Last night, at the raucous beach party around the campfire, down at the lake, she'd daringly modelled her suit, and asked, "It makes my eyes look aqua, don't you think, Eddy?"

"You know it's not your eyes I'm looking at," he'd said, and Shannon flushed under his appreciation, aware of her magnetism.

Even a week ago, the first time they'd met down at Pete's Boat Rental where he worked, Shannon's potent attraction had been in full force. Eddy and his buddies were hanging around the shack, sucking on colas and trying to look like they were drumming up business. Camp staff rules dictated her staying on the grounds, but Shannon had finally slipped away from the

director's authority and the boisterous clatter of primary kids, down the shady path to the forbidden public beach, with its secular dangers. No more kiddies, pool for Shannon. She was craving a real swim--the plunge into icy, glacial water, the scattering of minnows. It was her own universe, the water. She ruled. Her survival depended on no one but herself, her strokes, her breathing. Swimming energized her.

So when she pulled herself back onto the splintery boards of the pier, flinging lake water off her hair and casting a net of colours around herself, all the guys took notice. Eddy got there first.

"Like a ride, babe?" he'd asked.

"No cash," she'd smiled.

"It's on me."

And since then, all week, every time the camp bell rang for chapel, Shannon darted down to the public dock. Every night, as the primary campers and their cabin counsellors gathered around the fire and started out with their theme song about Noah, she hung out with Eddy at the beach, flattered by his bold attentions, flirting with her own power.

Once this week she almost got caught. The director was just leaving the outhouse when Shannon rounded the corner, beach-bound, and launched into his substantial frame.

"Where you headed in such a rush, Shannon?" Probably it was the momentary desperation in her eyes that made him think the problem was a gastrointestinal one. He moved aside to let her pass, and she made sure to slam the outhouse door loudly enough for him to hear, before continuing on to Eddy.

Shannon knew how to slam doors. As the oldest of four kids, she'd shared a room since her first sister took up residence in the family cradle. She was supposed to be the good example.

It seemed to her that for seventeen years she'd been trying to get some privacy, trying to do things her way. Whether locking the bedroom door against her siblings or shutting it against her mom's exasperated "I can't contend with you much longer," Shannon suffered deluges of guilt.

But at camp this summer, Shannon wasted no guilt on duping the director; if she'd wanted to be a good example for the campers, she'd have signed up as a cabin counsellor instead of lifeguard. The last thing Shannon needed was a cluster of girls teeming around her, flooding her with questions about God.

Today's jetski ride was thrilling--frightening. Eddy had the machine opened up wide, and was battering the tops of the waves with a new aggression. Was he trying to scare her? He squinted back over his shoulder at her again, and shouted,

"Faster?"

She shook her head and gripped his torso more tightly. They were almost alone out in the middle of the vast lake, the sun ricocheting off the fibreglass frame as their craft bounced through the choppy waters. Eddy suddenly cranked the handlebars sharply to the left, cutting deep furrows into the water, heaping them. He leaned hard into the turn, and Shannon leaned with him for the full circle, till they hit their own wake. The jarring was violent, but didn't unseat them or upset the jetski.

"Slow down!" Shannon yelled over the engine's squeal, as Eddy started cutting his second louie. It wasn't the water she was fearing. She felt so out of control.

They crashed into the wake. This time, the impact pitched Shannon overboard and her shriek, the motor's snarl and the wind's whine were snuffed as she pierced the water.

The pressing silence of underwater descent swallowed Shannon. It should have been familiar to her, but it came so unexpectedly. She wasn't prepared. Her lungs were almost empty,

the shock severe. Yet, as if by instinct, she started kicking, pulling the water down with her strong swimmer's arms.

A moment before Shannon surfaced, the shadow of the machine passed over her. A split second later, she was jerked sharply upward, pain searing her skull even in the cold waters. Her head smashed into the underbelly of the craft. She was dragged briefly with the momentum of the jetski, which had stalled dead in the water.

It took only a heartbeat for Shannon to react. She began flailing wildly, trying to kick free. Her head was snagged like a fish in a net, and she couldn't even tip it up to see why. She pulled at her head, dug up around the jagged edges of the safety grill and into the machine that had sucked her hair into its jet blades, twisting it up like spaghetti on a fork.

The water oozed pink.

All the safety rules of swimming didn't apply now. Treading water would do her no good. Despite the hours of practice learning to rescue others from drowning, Shannon couldn't save herself.

Images saturated her mind. An hour ago she'd been laughing at her escape from chapel, from the director, from God. She could picture Noah's neighbours laughing, too--laughing at his urgent preaching. Had they flirted around the ramps of the ark while Noah and his crew pounded wood onto the hull, building flesh onto that great, ribbed skeleton beached on the dry earth?

She had been paddling her feet in the lake, preening in front of Eddy on the dock. Had Noah's neighbours waded curiously into the edges of the newly-forming puddles--dabbling, procrastinating?

She had slammed so many doors. Had Noah's neighbours run into their houses and slammed the doors shut behind them, as the rain began in earnest?

Now, she beat with her fists on the boat's surface above her. Is this how Noah's neighbours had beaten on the door of the ark when the mighty waters rose? Why hadn't they listened to Noah, hammering the planks together, hammering his warnings into their ears?

She ripped at her hair in a frenzy. Is this what it felt like to drown, lungs bursting for air? Is this how Noah's neighbours had died, then, grabbing at the nearest body as the waters engulfed them, tearing at the hair of their lovers, their children?

They couldn't get in. God had shut the door.

Shannon blacked out just before her boyfriend managed to flip the machine over and get help, cutting her hair free from the rotors of the boat. A lot of water came out of her lungs. Shannon's scalp wound, skullbone deep, was stitched and bandaged, and by midafternoon she was transferred back to the camp infirmary to await the arrival of her family. Shannon slept.

She surfaced through dreamless depths and found herself alone, cradled in swaths of camp blankets, dry as a baby in a pitch-lined basket. The cabin window overlooked the gravel drive, and a few fat drops plopped against the pane--a sunshower! Was that a rainbow out over the trees? Shannon dizzily pushed herself upright on the cot and swung her feet to the floor. The crunch of car tires and familiar, bubbly voices wafted in as she shuffled across the room and opened the door.