

**Kim Ferguson**

## OUT OF THE BLUE

From the high diving board the pool looked like a big striped towel, the light blue fabric woven with the hazy black lines of the swimming lanes. At the top of the diving tower ladder, Meg watched the children swim in the middle and at the shallow end of the pool.

Josh was there. Meg could see him lagging behind the other children, and from this height she could see clearly his left leg kicking out wildly as he tried to do breaststroke. At least he would get in the water now without screaming. He was getting more sure of himself and she was at the pool instead of the dam. That dirty dam she had grown to love, then in one crunching second came to hate.

The diving board flexed beneath her. She felt heavy, and self-consciously tugged down the seat of her bathers. Some parents sitting on the hot aluminium bench seats around the pool watched her as she dived.

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Watching the swimming lessons was boring. It was the first time Rick had been to them. Sam used to bring Kenny to the lessons with the other mothers. There was still half an hour to go. Rick watched Kenny swim to the instructor again. Kenny was trying to learn breaststroke. Rick had been watching that for 30 minutes.

He tried to guess how long a minute was. He shouldn't be doing that. He was wasting a minute of his life. He should go and talk to the other parents, all of them women. Some of them looked all right. He looked all right in his Speedos and tan and maybe some were divorced like him. Fifty-two seconds, not bad. He tried again. Here he was on holidays, at home, and his son was having holidays with him. They would have gone away if his ex-wife Sam had not insisted Kenny have his swimming lessons. Even though she had fled to the city with his son, Sam still directed Rick. Forty-nine seconds.

A woman in purple bathers was on the diving board. It had to be Meg Wilson. Her child would be older than the six year olds like Kenny. She must still love to dive. She had become a bit plump in ten years, but Rick recognised the way she stood, the way she moved. She looked out of practice, but that was her with her arms straight in front of her, her legs stretching, the way she bounced almost on her tiptoes. He had not seen her since the day after he swapped her with big Connor Campbell for some beer at the high school ball.

Connor, what a weird name. Rick didn't know him well, mostly the boys poked fun at him out of earshot, from a distance.

"Connor who can't con up anyone," they said.

Meg wasn't that smart either. She had been in basic for all her classes. But she looked cute on the dance floor and Rick asked her to dance. He had heard that Connor had beer in his ute outside. The rumour gushed through the seventeen year old boys. He swapped Meg for two cans of warm, tin tasting beer. Big Connor got Meg pregnant and they were married and disappeared onto his father's farm. One minute 13 seconds. Bugger.

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Josh screamed when the instructor lifted him onto the ladder to get out.

"H," he yelled. "H."

His mouth formed other words that would not come out, then he screamed again. Kenny and other children fell back into the pool, some ran to the changerooms, and the instructor tried to free Josh's grip from the ladder. Meg got there and his noise stopped. Although he was heavy she lifted him out of the pool and hugged his towel around him.

"It's okay," she said to Josh and the red flushed instructor.

Josh held her arm as they walked to the kiosk and the exit.

"Tum on," he said. "Tum on."

His bad leg wobbled under him like a broken stilt.

Then, in the cool of the kiosk area, Meg saw Rick.

"Hi," she said, trying to get Josh through the squeaking turnstile.

"Hello," Rick said.

"Our first swimming lesson."

"Mine too," Rick said and she was gone.

Kenny came up from the pool, walking stiffly, his arms out, a robot looking for the towel Rick held.

"Freezing," Kenny said.

"Who was the kid making all the noise?"

"Josh Campbell. He's a dork."

"Don't say that word," said Rick.

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Connor filled the kitchen doorway. He had a habit of ducking his head on the way in, although he cleared the top of the doorway by more than an inch. He just liked to be careful. The kitchen was hot.

Connor did not like cold meals, not even in January. Meg was at the stove and Josh sat on the floor on the sheet they put out for his mealtimes. He played with a spoon. The bedsheet saved cleaning up the mess. Connor stepped over Josh and sat at the table. Where he had washed his hands he was clean, but above that line his skin and clothes were yellow with dust.

"How did it go?" he said.

"All right except for when he had to get out," Meg said. "I think the woman forgot about his leg, sort of thing."

"Is it really worth it?"

"Every time I go past the dam, Connor, I think about it. We decided he should learn."

"Okay."

She put two fat pork chops, mashed potato, peas and carrots on a plate in front of Connor. She gave a bowl of the cut up meat and vegetables to Josh. She sat and they ate without talking. Then she remembered:

"I saw Rick Thompson today."

"I thought he would have moved away by now," Connor said. "Most other people in town have."

"Hadn't seen him since we left school. I danced with him once, the night we got together. At the school ball. I wonder who he married?"

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Connor the farm boy was red-faced as he towered above everyone in the decorated town hall, his thick sweaty hands and head sticking out of his giant suit. He did not know or like anyone much, and was too high up to hear conversations above the disco music. Rick appeared next to him with his surfy hair and watery smile and waved him down to talk.

"Got any beer, Connor?" said Rick.

"Why?" with a farmer's suspicion.

"I'll swap you two cans for a bird."

"I've got some in the ute."

He could smell her perfume when she stood next to him. The mirror ball high in the centre of the hall flecked them with tiny squares of light. On the dance floor, he watched her move till he became conscious of his slow movements and started to feel awkward again. She was smiling at him, but it wasn't like she was laughing at him.

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Connor wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, and pushed his empty plate into the middle of the table.

"What did Rick have to say?" he said.

"Nothing. We just said hello, sort of thing."

"I've got some work to do in the shed."

He stood and picked up Josh, who had been banging his spoon on the floor. He looked like a big doll, a ventriloquist's dummy, slung over his father's arm. Connor worked on the tractor engine that he had laid out in pieces on the floor of the shed. He put Josh on the floor next to him. Josh put a spanner in his mouth.

"If only we could fix you like that," Connor said.

"Truct," Josh said.

Connor had never liked the swimming pool. He had hated the way he stuck out from the other kids. The way he was much taller and bigger and sweated all the time and how when he got sunburnt he stood out even more. Connor loved to swim in the dam on the farm.

He and his father had made a long wide canoe from old tin and metal pipes and he would paddle fast out to the middle of the dam, his strong arms slushing the one oar from side to side into the water. Then he would swim in the deep, where the water smelled of the earth.

But when he had to go to the pool for school sport, he moved slowly over the slippery concrete and when the other kids laughed at him they dived off the blue starting blocks before he could catch them. Connor would belly-flop into the water behind them, then slowly lumber through the chlorinated (eye-stinging) water like a big red whale with arms.

Once, after he had chased them and was resting in the water, his big arms slung over into the gutter that ran the length of the pool, one of the kids swam past him. Connor reached out his big hand and pushed the kid's head under water. His hand covered the whole top of the kid's head and he held him under, the boy's small hands waving under water and flicking out into the air. Connor laughed. The other boys crowded along the blue concrete edge of the pool above them.

"Let him go, you cretin," one yelled.

"You big dork, you'll drown him."

Connor took his hand away and the boy sputtered into the air. Connor only swam in the dam after that, which suited the teachers who helped drag the limp boy out of the water. Then Meg became his girlfriend. She liked to dive off the diving board, and if he wanted to see her the day after the ball, that's where she would be. They sat in the shade on the lawn under a wide peppermint tree and Rick walked past. Connor saw Rick and Meg look at each other. Rick did a bombshell into he pool.

"You want to come for a swim?" Connor asked Meg.

"In a minute," she said, adjusting the thin bather straps on her brown shoulders.

Connor felt the sting on his big stomach as he hit the pool. He plodded through the water to Rick.

"Nick off," Connor said quietly.

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Sam phoned that evening in her hard voice, the voice she reserved for Rick.

"Is Kenny okay?" she said.

"I took him to swimming lessons today."

"Make sure he doesn't get a cold."

Rick screwed up his face. The lessons had been her idea. Even over the phone she could sink him.

"He won't get a cold. It's stinking hot here."

"Are you making sure he puts on sunscreen?"

"Yes, of course I am," then said what he really wanted to say:

"I saw Meg Wilson today, at the pool. Remember she was in my year at school?"

"So?"

"Remember how she got pregnant straight after school finished and married Connor Campbell? She's got a son. He's got something wrong with one of his legs. And he can hardly talk. Poor kid. Poor Meg."

"That's very interesting, Rick," Sam said. "Can I talk to Kenny now?"

If every conversation they had did not boil into an argument about how his selfishness had forced her to leave, or how she couldn't even make a simple effort and try again, and why should she for all the thanks she ever got, and how all she ever did was nag and try and tell him what to do anyway, Rick could have told her:

If he hadn't swapped Meg, she wouldn't have a disabled son. If he hadn't brought Meg and Connor's slow, imperfect genes together, the boy would not have been born like that.

When Kenny hung up, Rick got one of his T-shirts from the bag Sam had packed and made him put it on, over his small brown bare chest.

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Rick was empty as the pool. He dived in before the start of the lesson. The raw water and the heady smell of chlorine took his breath, made him more hollow. He missed Sam. Maybe she would decide to come back. Without him having to ask again. In a few days, Kenny would be gone again too. He watched his son hopping from foot to foot with the other boys and girls near the edge of the pool, waiting for the instructor to blow her whistle so they could splash down the wide steps and bubble about in the blue water. Meg came down the steps from the kiosk, leading her son. Rick felt sick, as if his stomach had the bends, as he watched them. He and his friends had all laughed when they found out Meg was pregnant.

"Connor the goner," they said.

The day after the ball, Rick had walked past Meg and Connor sitting under a tree near the high wire fence around the pool grounds. He looked at Meg. She looked okay in bathers, but she was still dumb enough to fall for him swapping her for two cans of beer. Connor had just been dumb.

Rick had long sunlight hair and board shorts. He was hot. There were plenty of other girls, like Sam, who was in first year and watched him at school and at the pool, he knew.

Their marriage lasted five years before he let it blast itself to pieces.

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Meg imagined her stomach bulged out when she knelt down to take off Josh's sandals. She did it quickly, then carried him across the concrete to the steps. As they sank into the cold water, she stroked his black hair and whispered, "It's okay. It's okay," and he was all right. The instructor took his hand and Meg let go of his other hand and he was floating. Two boys laughed, but Meg was used to her son being laughed at and she hardly heard. Once it had made her ashamed and angry, but she blocked it off. Today she felt fat. Sitting on her towel, she watched two thin teenage girls smoking cigarettes. Meg used to look like those girls. Wait until they had a baby and a husband who had three big meals a day.

She had been scared of Connor at first. She had hardly spoken to him at the big district high school, the boy who stood above the crowd but was not a part of it. He looked like a man compared to the other farm kids when they swung up into the orange bus after school. Later, during the last year of school, he started bringing in his father's old farm ute, the wheel like a bangle in his hands, his big arm poking out the window as he drove.

She was one of the girls who did not have a partner for the end of year ball. One of the girls who spent weeks picking out a dress and practising to get their hair and make-up right and hoping someone would ask her to go with them. One of the girls who in the end said, "What would you want to go with someone for? It's more fun being on the loose," and danced with each other.

The disc-jockey put on Blondie. They were her favourite. Rick came up and asked her to dance. Rick was quite good looking, but he had a reputation. He had a succession of girlfriends. If they did not sleep with him, he quickly dumped them. If they did, it took a bit longer for him to move on to someone else. "Heart of Glass" finished, and Rick took her by the hand to the group he was with. He stood her next to Connor.

"Connor wants to dance with you," Rick said.

She looked up at Connor, who looked at her, then at the floor. She looked at Rick.

"He's been saying what a good dancer you are. Go on," Rick said.

They went onto the dance floor. The disc-jockey was playing "Crocodile Rock." Connor hardly moved. Back in the group after the song, he put his big arm around her shoulder. She flinched as it went round her, but it was light, like a caress.

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"Meg," Rick said, coming across the lawn to her.

She pulled her loose shirt around her.

"How are you?" he said.

"Very well, thank you."

"I thought that was you yesterday."

He went down on his haunches next to her. She thought he looked nervous.

"How is Connor?"

"Good. Who did you marry?"

Rick blushed.

"Sam Baker, remember her?"

Meg slowly shook her head.

"She was younger than us," Rick said. "We got divorced. But I've got my son Kenny for the holidays. That's why I'm here."

"Our Josh is having lessons too."

Meg also blushed slightly.

"He doesn't like the water, sort of thing," she said.

"I saw yesterday. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"You were on the diving board yesterday, I was watching you," Rick said.

Meg wished she could lose some weight.

"You always dived beautifully."

Her confidence rose. Rick still knew what to say.

"Until yesterday I hadn't been here for years," she said.

"I got pregnant and Connor only really liked swimming in the dam so I gave it up, sort of thing."

"I'm sorry. If I hadn't got you and Connor together," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I wish I hadn't introduced you two. Things would be different."

"Oh," was all she could think to say.

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They had all the doors and windows open to cool down the farmhouse. An annoyance of cicadas clicked in the night outside. Josh was in bed, Connor and Meg watched television. The snowy picture rolled down the screen from time to time, the American voices crackled.

"I saw Rick again today at the pool," Meg said. "He married a Sam someone and got divorced and he's taking his son to swimming lessons."

Connor got up and fiddled with the horizontal hold.

"He was talking about the high school ball, how he got us to dance, sort of thing."

"What did he say about it?" Connor said.

"Nothing much," Meg said. "Did you know that John Armstrong that we went to school with is in jail? And Beth Collins joined the Army and ended up marrying a Colonel? All those people we knew, sort of thing, and I didn't have a clue whatever happened to them."

"I can't watch this rubbish," Connor said. "I'm going to bed."

Down the dark passage he went into Josh's room. The boy rolled down the mattress towards him when Connor sat on the edge of the bed. He put his big leathery hand on Josh's shoulder.

"You could be worse," Connor said. "Kids might laugh at you, like they did at me, but you're not dumb. Not like your old man."

Josh looked up at him. Connor could not tell if he just had his mouth open or was trying to say one of his words that would not come.

"Just remember that it isn't anyone's fault," Connor said. "No matter what anyone says about the dam. All of us are scarred, some way."

He kissed Josh on the forehead and got up. He stood in the lounge room doorway, his head tilted to one side.

"Are you coming to bed?"

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"Soon," she said. "I just want to finish watching this."

She tingled when she thought about how Rick wished he hadn't introduced her to Connor, how he wished he had kept her for himself. He was still good looking, there in his little bathers, but she had made her choice a long time ago. Even those times she had felt like running away from the farm, she stayed.

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"In a minute," she had told Connor, tightening her bather straps before she climbed up to the blue diving board.

She bounced up and down until she found her balance and felt the moment was right to dive. Connor was in the water at the side of the pool on her left, Rick was doing laps, freestyling his way towards her on the right. Her feet left the board and she dived into the blue water and came up and swam to Connor. He buoyed her in the water with his thick arms. She liked how strong his arms were. How his big hands were safe, as solid as the farm he took her to, the farm that had been in his family for generations.

Meg was sad and Connor was surprised when she fell pregnant. She gave away the town and the people there, and she was busy learning about Connor and the farm. When Josh was born she loved them both. She had wanted to be a nurse. Now she nursed Josh.

But Meg missed diving, and asked Connor about going to the pool.

"The dam's more fun," he said. "Let's swim there instead."

Connor would take them down to the dam for a swim, or would row them around in the big canoe. They sparkled in the dam. When it was hot and Connor was working, Meg would take Josh to the dam in the clapped-out old ute.

Josh was five when they were there alone and she left him in the shallows and took hold of the heavy canoe and tried to push it afloat from the mud bottom where it rested.

"Are we going for a ride?" Josh said.

And she pushed and the canoe cut across the brown water and Josh went under it and she stamped through the water and he was stuck under the canoe and she could not move it and she howled and the water was churned up and she felt under the canoe and touched his small arm in the water then she lost her foothold in the mud and she pushed it again and the canoe moved and she scooped up Josh and she screamed.

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Rick got to the pool early again. He left Kenny with the other children and went along the warm concrete to the deep end and dived in. He had apologised to Meg, and he felt cleansed. He would phone Sam tonight and start the process

of clearing things up with her too. Maybe she would come back before the holiday was over and Kenny had to leave.

He heard someone do a bombshell and spun around. Connor was thumping through the blue water, riding his own wave towards him. Connor's wet red face came up close.

"You tell her, and I'll kill you," Connor said.

His big hand came out of the blue onto Rick's head and he pushed him down, holding him there under water.

