

Night Swim  
by Emily Andersen

“Josie,” Mom yells, “where are you going?”

“To play on the dock outside,” I say.

“Fifteen minutes, then it’s time for bed.”

I stifle a sigh as the screen door bangs shut. I run down to the lake sporting my unicorn nightgown and bare feet. My hair, still damp from my bath, flies wildly behind me. In my hand I clutch Kitty, my stuffie and extension of myself.

Once I reach the dock I sit with my legs dangling over the edge, my bare feet just skimming the water. I position Kitty the same way. We sit like this, appreciating the stillness of the night and the calm water. Looking up, I spot the Big Dipper. It’s the only constellation I know. As I try to discern Venus, I hear a *plop* and look down. Kitty has toppled down from the dock and floats on the surface, facedown.

Immediately I drop onto my stomach and reach for her. Just as I’m an inch away from grabbing her and pulling her to safety, she disappears beneath the water.

“No!” I cry. “Kitty!”

Did she sink? No, no. It looked as if something pulled her under. I sit back on my knees, confused, tears brimming my eyes. She was too light to sink that quickly.

Just then, I hear a sound on the other side of the dock. I look over. My heart pounds in my ears. What was that noise?

Slowly, I crawl over, afraid of what awaits. Peering over the wooden boards, I see Kitty floating face up.

My heart leaps with joy, and before I know it, I’m reaching for her. I just need to get her back into my arms and then I will run to the house and never look back. Mom will throw her in the dryer, and I’ll hug her a little tighter as I fall asleep tonight.

I’ve got a hold of her paw. I’m reeling her back in, but just as I’m lifting her out of the water, something catches. My brow creases and my breathing quickens. I tug, fearful of ripping her. Standing now, I grip her with both hands. I can’t see what is holding her, and I don’t care. I just need her with me.

“C’mon... c’mon,” I whisper, “let go!”

At that instant, whatever was holding on to Kitty releases. I stumble backwards, unbalanced after playing tug-of-war. My feet hit the smooth wood of the dock until I take one step too far and plunge into the water myself.

Terrified, I splash around vigorously while struggling to come up for air. Hands seem to brush against my arms and face. A small part of me hoped that Mom saw my struggle and was now heroically saving me from these murky waters, but I think better of it.

I breach like a whale and take a big breath in. I can't tell if something is grabbing at my legs, or if I'm so wound up from the night that it's only a phantom of my imagination. I kick wildly to the shoreline. Seaweed clings to me in long, slimy tendrils. The rocks near the embankment claw at my feet as I scurry to safety. I am chilled to the bone, both physically and mentally. And worst of all, Kitty has succumbed to the water's depths.

I run inside, wet and drained of all energy. I'm hysterical, so much so that I can't speak. Mom scolds me for going for a late night swim. For the second time tonight, I'm in the bath. Once my crying has subsided, all I can manage to say is that I lost Kitty.

"That serves you right for messing around before bed."

At that, I slump even more while Mom combs through my wet hair. I choke out a sob, unable to relay the details of my night swim.

Feeling bad, Mom says "In the morning we can look for her. Maybe she'll wash up on the shore while you're sleeping."

Feeling slightly more hopeful, I walked sullenly to my room. It's now way past my bedtime and I'm feeling tired but restless. When I finally doze off, my sleep is fitful. When I wake, I instinctively reach for Kitty before realizing she's not there. The clock reads 2 A.M.

I roll onto my back, and stare up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. As I replay the night's events, I hear a squelching sound. Puzzled, I look over the side of my bed.

Moonlight reflects off a puddle of water in the middle of my floor. Upon closer inspection, I see a large trail of water leading from my door to my old rocking chair that I'm far too big for now. Seated on the old wicker is Kitty, drenched and staring directly at me. My mouth falls open as I start towards her. Did Mom find Kitty and put her there? I ponder this as my feet hit the cold floor of my bedroom.

I'm about to stand when suddenly I freeze. Ever so faintly, the chair starts to rock. It's as if an invisible hand is pushing it.

My eyes shift to the back of the chair, where the closet sits. The door is halfway open. From the shoulder down, a long, spindly arm hangs out. So skinny and black it looks burnt. I see traces of

seaweed and water glinting from its taut skin. I continue to stare, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. Slowly, two constricted, yellow eyes emerge from behind the door. The rest of the thing's face is swallowed in shadow.

"Hello, Josie," says a voice from the closet, "It's me... Kitty."