

FALLING  
OVER  
SIDEWAYS

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I'm waiting in the wings, watching all of the fathers dancing onstage. Well, all of the fathers except mine. It's my annual dance recital, and I have just turned fourteen. This is the first year I am old enough for the Dads' Dance—the big father-daughter number that closes the first act of the recital every year. I have waited since I was a little girl to be in this dance, but just because you've waited for something doesn't mean you'll get it.

All of the other girls around me are whispering, pointing, giggling as their dads ham it up in the bright lights of the theater. There is booming surf music playing, and at the moment, half of the men are pretending to water-ski, while the rest are acting like lifeguards, throwing Frisbees around, hula-hooping, and even flying imaginary kites. It's incredibly dorky, but also incredibly sweet. My eyes burn, and I step back into the shadows a bit. I don't want anybody to see me tearing up, but it's hard to be inconspicuous as I dab at my face with the corner of my ridiculous tiki-girl skirt.

My best friends at dance school, Alanna Salas and Katherine Byrne, notice, and drape their arms over my

shoulders. This only makes the tears come faster. “I’m *fine*,” I whisper, a bit more harshly than I mean to. They both pull away and give me that look—the sympathetic-but-doubtful one that everybody has been giving whenever I claim to be okay.

I have probably gotten that look ten thousand times since the morning last September when my father—and my life—tilted and slumped over sideways.

Alanna and Katherine let me go—or at least, they do after I shrug their arms off my shoulders—and for some reason, I think about when I used to go swimming with my dad when I was five years old. I was in half-day kindergarten back then, and my father, who writes novels for a living, quit his day job so he could spend three afternoons per week with me. We had little rituals for each day. Wednesday was pizza day. Thursday was movies. And Friday was swimming, which was the absolute best.

We would go to the indoor pool at the township community center, which was always basically empty at that time of day aside from us, plus some random elderly people swimming laps. There was a roped-off area for “free play.” Dad and I owned that part. We played with floating cushions and kickboards and life vests and beach

balls and every other toy and gadget the pool had. Before going in, we would stick our towels in the sauna so they would be all warm and toasty when we got out. After we were dried off, we would shower in the family changing room, and then my father would spend what seemed like hours trying to brush all the knots out of my long hair while I laughed and laughed at him. I always told him that Mommy never got the brush stuck in my hair, but of course that wasn't true. I'm pretty sure he knew that.

Finally, when my hair looked presentable enough, we would go home, make hot chocolate, and snuggle up together to drink it.

But none of that was the best part, the part that I will always hold close to me. The best part was when my father would challenge me to swim from the edge of the pool to him. I had taken some swimming lessons, but I wasn't very confident in my skills yet. Every week, my father would move a few steps farther out from the wall. Then he would say, "Come on, Claire! Swim to me! I have you!"

I would say, "What if I can't get to you?"

And he'd say the exact same thing every time. "Don't worry, honeypot. I will always get to *you*."

Some weeks, I would make him promise more than once, but always—always—I kicked off from that wall with

all my might, paddled my little hands as hard as I could, scissored my legs, and headed straight for my father's arms.

My dad never once failed to catch me. But now things were different. Now my dad could barely even catch himself.