Before I turned eight, I thought the world was my oyster as most of us did, but at the same time managed to be scared of pretty much everything. I would make my parents recite a safety checklist each night before I could sleep soundly. For all this fear, there was one entity I was never afraid of: water. So, on my eighth birthday when I was challenged to prove this, I was not going to turn it down.

It was a blistering afternoon on the southern coast of Australia and my cousins and I were running around playing, getting burned to a crisp in the midday sun. We were at the beach by the pool for my eighth birthday party and the parents paid us no mind, we were just crazy kids feeling blissfully free. My cousin, Christine, challenged me to a swimming competition and I of course obliged, as I would take any chance to prove I was the best swimmer at the party. We lined up and set the rules. We would race all the way to the deep end, flip over, push off the wall and swim back just like real swimmers in the Olympics. I was confident being a child who loved water their whole life and having the delusion that I was somehow a competitive weightlifter. We counted down, “Readyyyy, Setyyy, GO!” and we were off in a flash. Everything was going according to plan; I was in the lead and bounced off the backwall with lightning speed. Arms burning and heart pounding I could practically feel victory in my fingers. Before I knew what was happening, I was under the water.

When I opened my eyes, I was underwater looking around and up through crystal clear water. I could see sparkles of light filtering through dancing bubbles all around. There was a heavy pressure on my shoulders and I knew the bubbles didn’t belong to me. My sunburnt skin soaked in the cool water rushing and swirling around me. My hand reached up and I could feel maybe only a foot or so above my head was warm air, cooled by the droplets on my hand. I tried to swim up, I needed to breathe, I hadn’t had time to take a deep breathe before everything happened. I struggled to no avail, whatever or whoever was above me would push me down every time, grabbing ahold of my black and blue racerback swimsuit in an effort to keep me under. An interesting phenomenon happens when you know you have run out of options. Your body conserves its energy and slows down. Your muscles weaken, heartrate slows, things become foggy, but strangely a wave of peace washes over you. This was my case as I vividly remember that peace gently engulf me and make me feel like whatever happens everything will be okay. Of course, at that age I didn’t have the words for that feeling, but that is the best way to describe it now. I forgot about the chaos above me and focused on the moment I was in. After all, if you knew these could be your last few moments on earth, wouldn’t you want to soak in every second of it? I knew I couldn’t breathe but I did anyway, inhaling water that tasted of chlorine and salty air. In that moment I saw want could have been. I saw my childish dreams of being a vet and exploring every inch of the world I could get my hands on. I would have grown up beside my brother and we would be best friends. I would get a dog and name her Molly and she would be small with black and white spots. I would play in the sun every day and create new imagined worlds that only I would live in. I knew I had my whole life ahead of me, and at eight I felt like I could do anything and be anything and to some degree I still believe that. However, the peace I felt under that water with that crushing feeling in my chest interestingly enough made me never want to leave. I imagined staying there forever and creating a new world for myself; whether it was there under the water or wherever you go once the lights go out, which even I couldn’t dream of. It was in that moment that I really understood what death can feel like. Now I know that the fear of death I held for so many years was just delusions my brain entertained to keep me alive.

I don’t remember being pulled out and laid on the hard, fake sand concrete, but from what I was told one of my other cousin’s alerted my dad of the situation. Originally, they had no idea anything was wrong because Christine was standing on my shoulders and the bright reflection from the sun hid me from view. As my dad walked in to check on Christine, he noticed there was someone else there and realizing it was his daughter he immediately pulled her off me and carried me back to safety. I coughed so hard my eyes teared up and my lungs burned a thousand times worse than when I had been racing through the water. Christine had said she knew how to swim very well, but when she got tired around the deep end she panicked. When people panic they can be dangerous, it wasn’t her fault that I was the closest thing she could grab onto. I never felt resentment towards her, partially because my parents explained to me why she did it and partially because I was thankful for the experience I just had. That little girl who was scared of every little sound and had to check her stuffed animals to make sure they wouldn’t come alive every night (because I had stuffed snakes okay, those things are dangerous), she was gone. I still believed I had my had a whole wonderful life to live, but this new life was one free of the fear that death would take me with malice and pain. This experience changed the way I feel about the death of others and is how I rationalize that my own death could happen at any point. Instead of living to avoid death, I made the choice to live for living. I live to see the beauty in the dangerous and ugly parts of the world and I know that whenever my clock runs out I can imagine a new world on the other side.