

And the Water was Dark and It Went Forever Down by Tim Winton

What are the messages that we get from our parents?

Sometimes these messages are Complex, mixed up not only with our responses to what they Contain, but also with our feelings towards the people who transmitted them. Tim Winton has made such complexities the main interest of this story. Father has gone, leaving only his wife and daughter to sort out alone the many facets of their relationship. Some of the messages from other to daughter are easily dismissed, others need to be considered more carefully before they, too, are discarded. Above all, there is obviously a drive within the girl towards finding her own solutions to the problems that life has thrown up to her to solve.

The girl left her mother in the rented cottage with all the shades drawn and went down to the packed white sand of the beach. She passed the jetty with its whirling braid of gulls and followed the line of the bay. She was tall for her age, but years of ~~aining~~ in the pool had taken lankiness from her. Her hair was cropped close. In the summer sun her big nose had gone scabby. She just wished her mother would put the bottles away, raise the blinds, and come outside into the world again, but the girl knew she had a better chance of making the Olympics than changing her mother.

Eight years ago, when the girl was six years old and her father had been gone a year, her mother had a terrible accident. Depressed and drunk, she passed out while smoking in bed and woke in flames. Her nylon nightie crackled and hissed. She beat herself out on the floor and threw a jug of water over the bed, but she did not call out to the girl across the hall. She sat shaking in the dark with a bottle of sherry until dawn when she phoned an ambulance. Because she waited, her scars were hideous. Years later, she told the girl she hadn't wanted to alarm her by shrieking and waking her in the middle of the night looking the way she did, like a charred side of beef. From that moment the girl was convinced that her mother was either stupid or sick.

Down the front of her bikini, the girl saw her tiny breasts and was grateful that her own body was unblemished. Even these days, the sight of her mother caused her teeth to clench. She kicked up a string of kelp and watched it settle back on the sand. This holiday was boring. There was no one her age. Already she'd run out of books. It was no different to home.

Following the curve of the bay, she saw the small island offshore—low, rocky, spotted with vegetation—and she wondered how far out it was.

She knew her mother was sick and bitter and afraid. She just wished she could pull herself out of it, get a job, stay out of mental hospitals, save for some special surgery, find a man. God, to be normal!

All those stupid, recurring statements ran through her head. *'All a person needs is a bit of a land,'* her mother would say, *'that's what makes the difference.'* *'Men hate us. They hate our bodies.'* *'God has been cruel to me.'* *'Your father never loved you.'* These came up during TV programs, at meals; the girl heard them shouted in the night, heard them screeched from their sixth floor window as she slunk home from training. Over and over.

A hot breeze blew off the land, from where the colossal white backs of dunes humped at the edge of town, threatening the place ~~with~~their shifting weight.

She's gonna send me crazy, she thought.

Every night after school, the girl trained in the swimming squad. It was three hours of blind, busting effort, away from home, and though she didn't love it the way the others did, she knew she couldn't be without it.

The girl stopped walking. It was stupid to walk, she knew. Walking made you think. What she needed was a swim; to be an engine.

By now the island was directly out from her. Crayboats passed it, their motors coming from weird directions in the wind.

An old man on a sailboard skimmed past with a ludicrous smile on his face. With a grunt, she ran to the water and speared into the channel and swam.

She had good style. Her breathing was metrical. She was tuned for it. She swam and thought the thoughts of a machine.

Out in the centre of the channel the water was dark and it went forever down. The island seemed no closer.

She moved all her parts. Everything did its task. She was not tired.

When the water suddenly became warmer, she knew she was there. Standing in the shallows, just out from- a little sandy beach, she saw a cloud of birds and heard the blood chug in her ears.

'All a person needs is a bit of land,' she said aloud. She laughed and it wasn't all derision.

She stretched her arms. She noticed that she'd left her watch on. It had stopped. She guessed the swim had taken her fifteen minutes. The easterly was drying-her already, leaving streaks of salt on her flesh.



The island was a bird sanctuary. There were signs and warnings. It wasn't a big island. Maybe ten hectares she guessed, or less. She climbed up from the beach and wandered across the island's humpbacked plateau. Seabirds filled the sky; they nested in holes in the ground and limestone nooks; they chased each other in territorial battles and shrieked from places unseen. On the packed sand, scrub and limestone monoliths offered little shelter. The tracks of birds peppered every soft surface. The whole place smelt birdy. On the seaward side surf creased across reefs, and small, sunken lagoons and potholes stood still and full. From the low cliff she could see fish down in the water with birds diving on them. Underfoot, wherever she went, broken eggshells mashed and blew. As she walked, a murmur grew and birds fled before her. One ran blindly from its hole and skidded off her shin. Thousands, thousands of black birds.

In their midst, in the centre of the island, the girl sat down to watch them soar and stitch about her. She wondered why they thrived so. She thought of Biol. class and tried to think. There seemed to be plenty of fish for them to eat. No predators that she could see—no sign of snakes. Just birds, and she didn't even know what kind. Hatching, growing, hunting, mating, dying. There was something relentlessly single-minded about the whole business.

After a time, she stood up and more birds rose with her, taking their atonal music with them. By her foot, she saw the carcass of a small bird. All over the island she found dead birds: whole, mutilated, broken. And shells and feathers. And shit. A constant layer of debris. She felt within the grasp of something important, something she might understand. From Biol. What did that skinny teacher with the tobacco breath call it? That was it—the web of life. She saw it all before her. The sick and the weak died and the young and the strong lived and thrived. It's the way things are, she thought. You need to just go, that was it; survive, win.

All you need is a bit of land . . . something solid under you. Ah, what rubbish, especially from her mother. Something solid, and there she was all day in the dark, drinking. A life of fluids. A whole ocean she must have drunk by now and she talked about land! Bird sanctuary for a lame duck. She was tired of fighting it all, always always . swimming over the top of that sea of grog. Maybe that's why I started, she thought, to stop her drowning me.

She went back down to the sandy beach and she took off her watch and bikini and lay in the sun. Her body was strong and hard. She was young. There was no more room, she decided, for feeling sorry for dead things and dying things. and sick things; for her mother or even herself. Now there was only time to live, to survive. Live. Survive. They're the same thing, she told herself quickly. No difference.

She got up and saw that she had left her perfect shape in the sand, and then she cried out in triumph and ran naked down to the water and pierced it and began to swim.

Be an engine. Don't complain. Don't ask. Don't hesitate. Swim, don't think.

Pushing out, she knew that as soon as she was old enough she would leave her mother. There was no room. She had to look after herself, leave her mother to the web. There wasn't time enough any more for all this swimming through craziness and ugliness and dumbness, sherry, beer, scotch, gin.

Be an engine.

But she faltered.

Don't think, breathe! She moved her parts. Swimming machine.

Think.

No, you old bitch. I can swim.

She cut through the water and filled up cold with anger and went harder.

I can be a machine. Like a fish, you old bitch. I can swim away.

Harder.

Go.

Do.

Cut.

Harder.

That body thrashed and whitened the water, throttling out, vibrating, parts shearing away, roaring white hot, and all the way down she felt young and strong and perfect in the cold darkness.

"Making Connections": Brian Keyte, Longman, 2003 (Six Australian Short Story Writers)

Discussion Questions

1. What are the girl's feelings towards her mother? Are they justified? Explain.
2. What does swimming represent to the girl? What does it symbolise in her life?
3. Do you feel sympathy for the girl, for the mother? Explain.
4. How different are both the mother and the daughter?
5. The mother is associated with her cliché, 'All a person needs is a piece of land.' What do you think this represents to the girl?
6. What are things on the island that was symbolic to the girl in connection to her or her mother? How are they symbolic?
7. To what extent is the girl justified in planning to leave her mother? Will this help her to grow to be a better person or are her reasons for leaving going to hinder her growth? Explain.
8. At the end of the story does the girl achieve personal growth?