

# Global short stories competition

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November 2010 Winner

Jacqueline Winn

The Dangers of Swimming

Rosie never learned to swim. Though, God knows, she tried. Her father insisted that fear was the key. So, when he threw her over the side of the little rowboat, she fought like crazy against the slimy waters of the inlet, that great mangrove-stained bowl of tea, that muddy brew of fish and weed. She thrashed her arms and kicked her feet, desperate for hold against the sinking. But the water sucked her down until her stomach was bloated from so much swallowing and her chest was begging for just one long dry rush of air. Her father's angry grip pulled her up from drowning and back into the boat to face his scowl of disappointment.

When her coughing and wailing subsided, Rosie looked up to see her twin brother Robert grinning back at her from the stern. He had managed to get back to the boat under his own strength and their father had helped him back on board with a kinder hand, before slapping his back and shouting his praises. As she pushed her shaking fists into her eyes, squeezing out the tears with the brackish water, Rosie heard her father's disparaging whisper, 'Girls.'

There was only ever one swimming lesson. That was the limit of her father's patience. But Rosie's failure didn't even nibble at the joy of fishing with Robert the next morning, off the end of the little jetty that struck out into the curve of still water below the holiday shack. Every day of that summer break was another long blue sky burning the skin off their noses and drying their hair to straw as they perched, legs dangling, toes tipping the cool water, fingers flicking at cork-wound lines.

The inlet fish had long been wise to jetty children. Only the puffer-fish fell for the wormy bait and the twins exacted a misplaced revenge by flipping each catch onto the splintery boards and whacking them with a fierce-wielded thong. But not until the fish had filled itself with as much air as it could hold, not until its prickled throat had swelled to twice the size of its body, not until they could almost see its innards through the balloon-thin skin. Robert held his thong high until Rosie judged the moment when the puffer could puff no more. Then she yelled 'Now!' And they greeted the almighty pop with a great circus of leaping and shrieking.

'The best yet!' Robert declared every single time and Rosie grinned her agreement.

In the afternoons, their mother laid towels on the thin strip of beach, and their father speared the sand with a rainbow-coloured umbrella for shade. At first, the twins played together but, after the swimming lesson, Rosie found herself paddling alone at the foamy fringes while her brother stretched his newfound skills further out. Their father pushed him on by swimming a distance, then standing and waiting for Robert to meet the challenge. Deeper and deeper each time. Until one day they strode out of the water together and the boy announced, 'Dad's taking me fishing. Out in the boat. Out in the channel. Tomorrow.'

The disappointed quiver of Rosie's lip went unnoticed amongst the torrent of objections from their mother. 'No, Bill, the boy's only eight. I don't mind you taking them out on the calm waters. But not the channel. He's too young.'

'C'mon, Emmy, you've seen him. He's a champion. And I'll be there to watch over him. It's time he learned to catch some real fish.'

Any further motherly concerns were smothered by a whirlwind of whooping as Robert tore back into the water and plunged, fingers outstretched, toes disappearing, as neat as a dolphin.

'See,' their father assured. 'Swims like a fish.'

Rosie ducked her head and wandered along the edge of the water. One chance, that was it, and she'd wasted it. She should have tried harder to stay above that sucking water. Tomorrow morning, there'd be no fishing from the jetty and she'd be the only one missing it. She kicked at the wet sand, refusing to

look up at Robert with his splashing and yelling.  
'Rosie, look at me! I'm a fish!'

'You're an idiot,' she whispered, not meaning a word of it.

Rosie heard them leave before dawn the next morning, hushing and shuffling around in the kitchen, clicking the door softly closed, crunching along the gravel path down to the jetty. Then the slow-fading slap of oars.

She mooched her way around the longest morning. A few pieces placed in the holiday jigsaw, a half-hearted game of snap with her mother, a postcard written to Gran. She sniffed at her mother's suggestion to go down to the beach before lunch, but followed all the same.

While her mother spread towels on the sand, Rosie peered across the inlet. A long smudge of mangroves marked the far side and she could make out a dip in the horizon, a gap in the rim. The channel. She wondered how many fish they'd caught already. Real fish, no puffers. Her father would go again tomorrow. And he'd take Robert again, most likely.

It suddenly occurred to Rosie that she had time right now to practice her swimming, away from the critical eyes of her father and the jeering teases of her brother. She waded out just over knee-deep and crouched in the warm, clear water. Then she reached down and pressed her palms onto the spongy sand, before locking her elbows and slowly stretching out her legs. Her chin just dipped the surface, as she kicked up her feet, and, immediately, she felt her body rising to the surface. Floating at last. She started to hand-walk back and forth, and, when she was sure she had this much mastered, she stood and looked back at the beach. Her mother was nodding and miming a round of encouraging applause. Getting there, she was certain of it.

'Watch, Mum!' she yelled out, before throwing herself into a lunge, fingers outstretched, no hands touching the bottom, this time. For a brief moment, she was gliding over the surface. But the next instant, she was sinking, water surging in her open mouth and rushing up her nose. She flailed with arms and legs until her knees found the sand, and her head pushed through the surface. Then, spluttering, shaking, warm tears welling, she stumbled back to the safety of the beach. 'Never mind, honey,' her mother cooed, wrapping her in a sun-warmed towel. 'Give it time. You'll get there.'

But not today. She'd had enough of the water and she nodded gratefully at her mother's suggestion that they go back and make some sandwiches ready for when the hungry fishermen returned. The piled-high plate had just made it to the table when gravel-footsteps drew Rosie to the window. There was Robert holding high a silver-glistening fish, big enough for dinner, and she couldn't help conceding a grudging smile of approval.

Over lunch, Rosie suggested the jetty but Robert shook his head. 'Nah. Just a bunch of puffer-fish. Who wants to catch rubbish?'

Rosie put down her half-eaten sandwich, and sat in silence for the remainder of the meal. She sneaked sideways glances at her brother, envying his salt-crust hair, his wind-red eyes and his easy chatter with their father. Robert had been out in the channel and she didn't count anymore. He was Dad's mate, now.

Next morning, her brother and father were already gone when she woke and, by the time she'd finished breakfast, she'd decided to go to the jetty. Why should she miss out just because Robert wasn't here? And anyway, she could whack puffers with her own thong. Nothing hard about that.

'Not in the water, Rosie,' her mother insisted. 'Not by yourself. Stick to fishing off the jetty.'

But once she was sitting on the edge of the rough boards, she didn't feel like putting in a line. She peered over the edge and stared at the jetty ladder for a while, and wondered how deep the water might be down there. She might be able to touch bottom.

A second later, she was stripping down to her swimmers and climbing foot-over-foot down into the water, until she was perched on the lowest rung. Cool ripples lapped at her waist as she peered at the shafts of sunlight flickering over the sandy bottom. But it wasn't so easy to tell how deep that might be. Moving her hands down to the last dry rung, she stretched one leg down into the depths. Even with her toes pointed to their limit, she couldn't touch. She shivered at the thought of all that water beneath her

and quickly drew herself back up, pressing her cheek against the safety of the ladder. Her mother's warning suddenly dropped into her head, and she screwed up her nose. It was because she was a girl. She'd heard her father say it. She was the same age as her brother, but Robert could swim, Robert was allowed to go fishing in the channel. She was left behind, alone on the jetty, because she was a girl.

Without another thought, she took one long breath and lowered into a crouch, fingers tightening on the ladder, toes curled around the bottom rung. Then she let both feet slip their hold and kick out. The harder she kicked the more her body rose to the surface, until she was floating there, arms outstretched, fingers clinging to the rung. When her legs began to tire, she stopped kicking and was surprised to find she didn't sink. Then she let go one hand. Gripping tighter with the other, she swept her free arm back and forth until she was facing the beach, parallel with the jetty. She could see the shack from here, and hoped her mother wouldn't look out and see what she was up to.

But it wasn't her mother at the window that suddenly made Rosie kick her legs and thrash her arm, desperately straining for the safety of the ladder. It wasn't the two men shouting and running up the gravel path that made her gulp great mouthfuls of salty water. It wasn't her mother flying through the door, barging past the men and tearing down to the beach that made her feet windmill against the deep, searching for the lifeline of the bottom rung.

It was her mother's screaming, over and over, that made Rosie haul herself up hand-over-hand, until she stood on the jetty, legs trembling in a puddle of her own dripping. She threw up her arms, waving and yelling between splutters, 'Mum, I'm here!' But it didn't stop the screaming, and it was only when Rosie started to run along the jetty towards the beach that she realised her mother wasn't even looking in her direction. She was wailing across the inlet, crying out to the channel gap. And it wasn't Rosie's name she was calling, but the names of her brother and her father.

Rosie never learned to swim. Not like her twin brother, clawing at the chilly deep of the channel, kicking against the drag of swirling eddies, filling his lungs with water until he was weighted with the swell, and drifted like a weed along the sandy bottom. Not like her father, diving again and again for his boy, until his arms gave out and he floated facedown on the outrunning tow. High tide tumbled their bodies onto a surf-scoured beach, days later. Rosie was not allowed to see, but she heard whispered snippets, and she could imagine. They swell up, bodies that have been sucked down, held without breath for too long by the sea's selfish grip.

Learning to swim can be dangerous and, after so many long blue summers, it's something Rosie still believes. It's something she repeats over and over, as she stares across the inlet and thinks of her brother, burn-peeled nose, sun-strawed hair, stranded on the sand like a puffer fish.

Joint winner  
Duty Bound  
Tom Benson

Gary felt pain throughout his body. He opened his eyes and gasped. A small monkey that had been studying him from six inches away shrieked and scurried along the high branch. Gary slowly looked around. At 26, he was young for a Royal Air Force fast jet pilot. Instructors had assured him that he was 'the best'. His blue eyes widened and his lips curled as he looked around. He murmured, 'Being the best might be tested here....'

Dangling under his silk canopy in the jungle, Gary cast his mind back to the mission. Only two aeroplanes were used. Thirty minutes after take-off, the ground erupted in smoke and flame as they dropped ordnance on enemy locations. Both pilots had known the risks, but a successful mission would save many fleeing refugees. Gary and his partner Jonah had gone in low and fast. As they pulled up to leave, warning lights and alarms sounded in their cockpits. Knowing there was 'incoming', Gary selflessly slipped into Jonah's slipstream. He screamed into his headset, 'Go! Jonah! Go!' The frightening impact of the missile shook the plane and sent the controls haywire. Jonah's aircraft became a speck in the distance whilst the damaged aircraft banked. Gary glanced at his instruments then pulled the handle that no pilot wants to use.

Whilst descending under his parachute Gary had seen where his plane went down. It didn't explode. He estimated that he was still twenty miles inside enemy territory. A mental calculation told him the plane travelled four miles before crashing. Every mile between him and his aircraft would be a bonus. It was closer to hostile forces. On the down side, during briefing, the pilots were told not to let their aircraft fall into enemy hands.

'There may come a day,' his father had once told him, 'when duty and survival may not go hand in hand. You'll be compelled to make a hard decision.'

'Survival is instinctive dad.' Gary had replied and laughed.

Gary hung there now in his snagged parachute, looking around anxiously, thankful for the protection afforded by his flying helmet and suit. He was also grateful for the dense jungle camouflage. A glance told him his parachute was secure. Tropical fragrances drifted in the air. Birds, silent on the final part of Gary's descent were now squawking and chirping. He wondered how rapidly enemy patrols would organise a route of approach from the wreckage. Would they be more interested in the plane, or the pilot?

Imitating the Scottish accent of Sergeant Murray, his survival instructor Gary whispered, 'Basics first son....' He gently moved his neck then limbs to check working order. There were bruises but no fractures. Gary pulled the small homing device from a breast pocket and pressed the switch before replacing it. Now somebody would know he'd survived.

Gary saw that the closest tree was out of reach. He commenced raising his knees, kicking out, then back. It was exhausting, even for a fit man. Time flew as his efforts continued. Normally calm, logical and humorous, Gary was now saturated and feeling frustration and the fear of capture. Nothing to laugh at now, he thought grimly. He stopped swinging, his usually agile mind trying desperately to arrive at another solution. To undo the harness would free him, but with no idea of the drop. Gary started bending and kicking his legs again, teeth clenched now. It was agonisingly close. He thought of all the gym sessions and the mantra, 'no pain... no gain.' He struck out hard with both feet and caught his ankles around a branch. 'Hold it mate.' he whispered to himself. Gary hung there grimacing, suspended between his trapped parachute and the trunk of the tree. The parachute strings strained. Gary's body ached but he was determined to get free.

Gary's arms trembled violently with the effort to pull his body weight against the branch. He reached around desperately with one hand and hugged the branch. The harness pulled back. Gary yanked sharply on the release buckles. Finally unhindered, he wrapped both arms and legs around the tree and allowed himself two minutes rest. 'Thank you Lord!'

Fifteen minutes later, following a massive effort he reached the ground. The flying suit had survived undamaged. Gary looked up. He now realised, had he simply released the harness he would

have killed himself. Removal of his helmet eased some pressure. His normally immaculate blonde hair was soaking. He listened to the green world that surrounded him. Gary was about to hide his helmet in the undergrowth when the voice of his instructor came back to him, 'Never leave a sign without good reason... especially equipment.'

A fateful decision was his to make now. Four miles east to his aircraft would mean he could follow the policy of destruction. Fifteen miles west led to the coastline and possible rapid rescue. Gary sighed and said quietly, 'Okay dad,' his lips curled, 'my decision is made. I hope it's right.' He walked quickly a few metres away from the tree. It took two minutes to create a bad job of hiding his helmet. That should slow them he thought. He adjusted his mini compass and set off.

Mixed with the tropical fragrances, Gary's nostrils could not ignore the aroma of decay on the multi-coloured jungle carpet. After a few minutes of fighting his way through undergrowth Gary stopped and checked the magazine on his pistol. He cocked the weapon quietly so that it was ready to use. He had never used it in anger, but the realisation that he might soon was not lost on him. Bomber pilots know they will kill people, but unlike soldiers, pilots don't get close to their work. His pistol slipped back into its shoulder holster, Gary set off again, slow and determined.

The sticky heat did not come across in films or training, and that, combined with the smell was irritating. Gary was renowned for his ability to see the positive side of situations. To ease pressure on himself he simply had to remember how things could have turned out. As it was, Jonah got away and he himself had survived. He knew Jonah would land on the carrier cursing his mate's sacrifice. His lips curled briefly. He stopped to listen. Not to the birds and insects, but for anything else. Sergeant Murray taught, 'An enemy trained to fight in jungle terrain will not disturb wildlife, but if in a hurry to catch a downed pilot, patrols might move with less care.'

'Well that's okay then.' Gary had suggested that day, amusing all but the instructor.

After an hour there was a mechanical buzzing. Gary stopped, held his breath and listened. The noise seemed to stop, only to return and grow louder. The jungle affected the sound waves. A helicopter? When explaining the hazards of survival Sergeant Murray had told the pilots, 'If you land in jungle it works differently. You may hear movement in the air or on the ground, but you won't know who it is, or which direction they're travelling.' You got that right Sergeant Murray, Gary now thought as he craned his neck. The sound disappeared after a few minutes and Gary decided it had been a helicopter. Had the enemy found the wreckage? Were they looking for him?

Fear was 'healthy' and never forgotten as Gary continued his advance. Inside his suit was saturated with perspiration and outside was covered in slime. His face was constantly lashed by long damp leaves and springing branches. His legs were caught and whipped by thick undergrowth and his feet held by low branches and clawing mud patches. It felt like the ultimate physical training test. He found himself once more thinking back to Sergeant Murray as he approached a broad leaf plant and pulled out his collapsible water container. He eased one of the massive leaves down and caught some of the rainwater. It looked clear, but he still dropped a sterilising tablet into it. Knowing that he would be able to have a drink in a few minutes gave Gary renewed confidence as he set off again. 'Thank you Sergeant Murray.' he whispered and smiled.

Not for the first time Gary submerged to his knees in green sludge. After cursing, he used branches to pull free of the tugging, stinking mud. A look at his watch told him it had only been three hours since he had come down from the treetops, but it felt as if he'd been fighting jungle all day. He was close to exhaustion. Jungle never truly knows daylight he'd been told but it was definitely getting darker. He would persevere. He suddenly thought of his mum. She hated having both her husband and son on active service.

When it felt as if he could go on no longer Gary stopped and took another sip of water. The sterilised water had an acquired taste. Gary's laboured breathing was brought under control as he calmed, considering his progress. During the brief respite he noticed the eerie silence. A twig broke underfoot a short distance away. Gary slipped his pistol out and lowered himself stealthily into the undergrowth.

He was a good shot, but could he shoot a man? Could he kill? He checked his watch but otherwise stayed still, listening. His mouth slightly open to improve hearing, he now felt insects investigating the moisture on his face. The 'open mouth' idea works Gary thought, and made a mental

note. He'd thank Sergeant Murray, if they ever met again. Deep inside, Gary felt a knot. In future he would have greater respect for soldiers. Soldiers like his dad, twice decorated for conspicuous bravery. He wondered what his dad would make of this latest decision.

The birds were chattering again. Gary put his pistol away and checked his watch. Before moving he realised twenty minutes was lost hiding in the damp leaves. An hour later and tiring, Gary stopped again aware of his vulnerability. He felt the hairs standing on his neck. The noise had reduced again. Was there a patrol? How far had he gone? Calculating a walking pace in jungle was not easy. He was confident with his compass, but not time and distance in this terrain.

Gary set off using both hands to move greenery aside, keeping progress steady and quiet. Sergeant Murray's words registered again, 'The enemy has more time than you and they can afford to wait.' An occasional stop was all Gary could afford now. Jungle sounds and smells abounded. Whilst there was nothing to see, he would concentrate on listening. Thirty minutes later Gary checked his compass and allowed himself another sip of water. As he set off again he parted the branches. Briefly, his eyes narrowed and his lips curled. He could see fuselage and a wing. His plane was up ahead. He drew and gripped his pistol. When he had first set off he had been apprehensive. Now his stomach was churning. A cold sweat formed over his entire body and he stood still, hardly breathing. It was unnaturally quiet. Gary's eyes were on stalks. His tongue moistened dry lips and he swallowed hard. He heard his own gulp.

Simultaneously from behind, strong hands grabbed Gary's pistol and covered his mouth. He found himself powerless, being lowered rapidly and silently to the ground. Whilst immobilised by two assailants another camouflaged man knelt down beside him, a forefinger touched Gary's lips. The kneeling man turned his shoulder around slightly and Gary focused on the red dagger insignia of the Royal Marine Commando. There was a deafening explosion and heat blew over their bodies.

Fifteen minutes later in the helicopter Gary looked around at the smiling camouflaged faces of six men. They had arrived at his aircraft twenty minutes before him and rigged it with explosives. One man spoke. 'We're all proud of you son. Good decision.'

Gary looked into the eyes of Sergeant Murray, his survival instructor and said, 'Thanks dad.'  
Highly commended  
I have planned for a long journey  
Steingrimur Teague

Of all your dreams, this is my least favorite. All the same, I've read it at least four times now:

June 20:

I am a hair-stylist at a chic salon. S. walks in and takes a seat in front of a mirror. We are divorced and she is also Prime Minister of Belgium.

"Something drastic, please," she says.

I'm anxious for S. to know that I don't resent her for divorcing me. Cut her hair very carefully. Suddenly she screams and stares at herself in the mirror: I have accidentally amputated both her ears.

She hates me now and there will be a diplomatic crisis with Belgium.

I apologize but she carries on screaming, can't hear me: no ears. Wake up in mortal terror and instinctively check S.'s ears. Enormously relieved to find them still in place.

No, I don't like it, and here's why: I love you. I married you because I love you, and that has never changed, not for a moment.

I feels this brings on certain privileges. As my chosen soul-mate, I feel you are required to have nice dreams about me: of us making love, definately. Perhaps in outer space or on a yacht made of rock candy? That's not asking much.

My chosen soul-mate should not spend his nights amputating me. Or divorcing me.

To be fair, I do appreciate being appointed Prime Minister of Belgium by your sub-conscious. I am also slightly heartened to read that you are „enormously relieved“ not to have acted out your dream in the real world, but that doesn't mean that my husband still loves me, it just means I didn't marry an absolute monster. I already knew that.

Seriously though, an actual dream-journal? A hidden dream-journal? That's high-school girly stuff. You are not – nor have you ever been or resembled – a girl in high school. There is absolutely nothing effeminate about you. You subscribe to Popular Mechanics. You have a magnificent, manly beard. On

your chest. Call me narrow-minded, John, but I don't feel it's proper that middle-aged, financially secure men with chest-beards should hide their weepy little dream journals around the house. Even if they should choose to hide them at the bottom of the downstairs tool-box – a manly place, I admit.

Believe me, when I first open your book, ashamed, suspicious, I don't expect it to be what it is. I don't know what I do expect. An exposition of a smoking love affair? Certainly not this:

July 2:

Standing in my old classroom, which is also a mechanic's garage. I'm the mechanic – repairing an old, blue Saab which is parked in middle of floor. Classroom/garage is empty.

D. is now standing in the room, holding a large horse by the reins. I'm not surprised to see him, not sad, because in this dream he's not dead. If anything, I'm irritated at the interruption.

The horse has a large mustache. D. points to it.

“Shave the car, Dad,” he says. “Please.”

I continue repairing Saab. Say: “That's not a car, David, it's a horse.” Slightly exasperated.

Angrily, D. stamps foot.

“It is too a car, Dad!” Pig-headed. “It's a car! It's a car! It's a car...” etc.

With sudden horror, I realize that D. now has mustache identical to horse's, grotesque on 7-year-old's face. The horse is now making car noises. It breaks loose from D. and gallops around the classroom, with D. now throwing a full-blown tantrum. “A car! A car!”

I've finished repairing the Saab. It, too, has a mustache – makes a neighing sound, slides into motion.

“Dad, you poo-poo head!” D. says, livid. “Too late, now!”

He's right. I've failed to stop the two cars and they'll run over D. He's going to die.

Open my mouth to scream, but can't: choking on own moustache. Wake up very shaken.

I put the book down and rub my eyes behind the glasses.

Thanks, John.

Yes, the driver had a moustache, much like a Mexican bandit in a Lucky Luke comic.

Yes, he drove a Saab – bottle green, however, not blue; evidently, your id isn't any better at remembering colors than the rest of you.

And David had a temper. He could be overbearing and obnoxious. I would like to deny this, but I can't – it's true. As funny and engaging he could be in a good mood, by God, when that boy was bored, angry or just starved for attention, he was insufferable.

You find this a truly terrible thought to have, even while sleeping. I can see how you must hate to dream of him like this – David on a bad day, out of control, throwing an embarrassing tantrum. Why couldn't I have dreamt of him on one of his good days? you must wonder wretchedly, emanating misery like plutonium secretes radiation.

If I know you at all, that's how you'll interpret this dream. I can see your nights are just as filled with ingenious self-flagellation as your days.

Not always, though. Sometimes it seems that even you can't help having a little fun. Here's a pretty good one:

June 24

Something to do with Smurfs. Snowboards. Possibly rap music? I've forgotten. Next time, must jump immediately out of bed to write dream.

Rapping Smurfs on snowboards? From you, the antithesis of levity? Seriously – this little book of yours is fantastic! Why do you hide it from me? Are you afraid I'd laugh?

To be fair, I probably would.

To be even fairer: I am laughing right now, but in a good way. I like MC John of the Smurfs.

There's also a grown-up dream I like:

June 27

Some kind of outdoor festival in a green field. There is a stage in front of me, a comedian on it performing. He is wearing a white suit, comes from Iran. Stand-up routine is accordingly in Persian. I don't understand a word, but for some reason find the act hilarious. Thus laugh hysterically.

D. tugs on my sleeve. “Is it funny, Dad?” he asks, uncomprehending. “Is this funny?” In a good mood, nonetheless.

S. comes through crowd. Very beautiful, has three popcorn bags. Distributes popcorn bags. Does not laugh but smiles.

I try to stop laughing, but can't.

"Yes, this is very funny, David," I say. "Very, very funny."

You see? Very beautiful. Susan is very beautiful. Now I'm smiling. When was the last time you let me know I was beautiful? I can't even remember.

It's a laughing dream. You know, you really do have a marvelous sense of humor, a sort of dry sense of the ironic, the absurd. Why don't you use it anymore? When you're awake, I mean?

Finally, here's a really, really grown-up dream I like, even though it's a nightmare:

July 3:

I am in a restaurant's kitchen. On a secret mission for the government: must steal a giant pizza before chef returns. The pizza is in an oven, I try to grab it with bare fingers but catch fire trying. The burning is painful, but apparently non-fatal.

I am not in the kitchen anymore but in a large ballroom. S. is there, wearing an expensive dress. Says: "I'm glad you're here. None of our friends showed up." Looks at me, pushes dress off shoulders and to the floor. She is naked. Wanting her, I am about to reach out for her. Hesitate, then wake up.

No, it's not nice that you dream of catching fire, but I don't need a dream-journal to tell me that you're in pain. We're married, I know how you feel and I'm miserable too. I don't know what to do about it, but I'm your wife and I know.

So, unpleasant as it is, the nightmare part of the dream doesn't shake me up. Not any worse than any given waking hour we share.

What I like about the dream is this: You still want me.

This dream doesn't involve love-making or yachts of rock-candy, but it'll do. I like it.

So why don't you go on wanting me while you're awake? I'm here. Maybe withdrawn like you, hesitant to break the silence. But I still want you to breathe down my neck and touch me like you used to. You never do, these days.

Why? Because we're entering the golden years? Because your chest sprouted a beard and mine succumbed to gravity? So what? The years have treated us kindly. We don't look bad.

Is it because of David, then? The compulsive clown? The poorly co-ordinated tree climber, breaker of Grandma's china, encyclopedic authority on dinosaurs and primates, collector of bizarre Japanese trading cards, recently deceased? David broke things, terrorized cats, ate his own snot, made crazy word associations that we found funny when we weren't too exhausted. Then he got run over by a bottle-green Saab. Boo-hoo.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound callous. But what are we supposed to do?

Did we love him? Of course we did, with burning hearts. And of course we shouted at him: he was ridiculously difficult. Just because he died you don't have to pretend he was some saintly little cherub. You can't expect anybody to constantly cherish every moment of their child's growing up. We didn't know he was going to die, obviously. We were waiting for him to grow out of it, calm down, mellow out. But he died before he reached that point.

And do we love each other? We do. Your dirty little secret, your hidden book, told me. It seems to have achieved the impossible: it's reached right into me and rung the rusty little bell that goes Susan loves John. John loves Susan. Susan loves John...

I'm not sure what to do with that. I can't just walk in to the living room, snatch your newspaper away and say: "I found your journal and it was a wonderful read. Now it's time for some unfinished business. Me Jane, you Tarzan,"

Some couples could do that. We're not like that.

We're timid.

We're like this:

I thumb forward to the first blank page in your journal, think for a minute. Then write:

Sometime in July:

I'm on a hot air-balloon, rising vertically through an empty sky. It's cold and the air is thin, but I'm moderately hopeful: I have planned for a long journey, so I've brought lots of pretzels. John loves pretzels, he'll be around.

When I'm done, I put the book back into the tool box and replace the lid, because I'm your wife and because we're in love.