

2020

Don't Stop Swimming

Abbigail Davis

West Virginia University, agd0009@mix.wvu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Abbigail (2020) "Don't Stop Swimming," *Calliope*: Vol. 32 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol32/iss1/29>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact ian.harmon@mail.wvu.edu.

DON'T STOP SWIMMING

Abbigial Davis

My parents hid a lot from me when I was younger. They hid when my dad lost his job. They hid that the bookbags they brought home filled to the brim with school supplies for my siblings and I came from a charity. They hid the fact that the room in the bottom of the church was not a grocery store, but a food pantry. They hid how much it hurt them to see us waste food as kids do. They hid how much they were struggling. We were blind to the fact that we weren't doing well because we were. My siblings and I thrived. My 9th birthday party had a rock climbing wall, and I got a purple Hannah Montana guitar. My parents always took us to the nice pool in town. You had to pay to get into that one. They sacrificed what little they had to hide the fact that we were anything but rich. My ignorance was bliss, and looking back I'm grateful for it.

Poverty is not something I saw during my childhood, but I can see pieces of it spread throughout my life when looking back on the little things, breadcrumbs to a truth no one wants to see. Like when my mom worked 50 hours at a nursing home, part-time at Walmart giving flu shots, and then in her free time she would clean people's houses. This was poverty. Actually, this was the fear of poverty. She wanted so bad to have us grow up "normal" and not impoverished. Little did she know in our small town, over 60% of the population was well below the poverty line. Poverty was the norm. My dad strug

gled to find work after losing his job at a furniture company. He had to drive 7 hours to work with his father five states away. We saw him once a month if we were lucky. I remember thinking that he was lucky, getting to go somewhere new. At this point in my life, I had never left the tri-county area.

They were barely treading water, struggling with each kick against a system insistent on dragging us down. This world is sink or swim, but I never understood what pushed them to keep fighting until this summer. It was scary when I saw what happened to a child whose family had been underwater for far too long. They gave up.

She was bright like a flower, unique and imaginative. The world in Daisy's head buzzed with excitement, she would tell me of new colors she made up, songs she'd learned, and games she'd triumphed at. Uno was one of them. She was an amazing child. I just wanted to teach her about God and about life, but I think she taught me more than I taught her. I didn't realize how truly remarkable she was until she was driven away in a police car.

I met Daisy this summer when I had a job as a counselor at a sleep-away camp for at-risk youth. We had new groups come in every week, and Daisy came during the third week of camp. The veteran counselors called it the third-week slump. That was very true, I had never been more tired in my life. The night before the kids arrived I had a dream, one of those dreams where your mind just replays a memory, and I was grateful for the comfort this one brought. The veteran counselors called it the third-week slump. That was very true, I had never been more tired in my life. The night before the kids arrived I had a dream, one of those dreams where your mind just replays a memory, and I was grateful for the comfort this one brought.

I was 6 or 7. Our burgundy mini-van pulled up the driveway, driving over each pebble felt like an earthquake. We had just got back from a long trip, I was tired. The van lit up as my siblings opened the door and climbed out. My eyes were still shut, my hair matted against a blues clues pillow passed down from my brother, flattened from years of abuse. I heard my mom try to wake

me again, calling sing-songily. I groaned outwardly at the thought of getting up. My mom chuckled for a second before the van rocked again as someone else got in, my dad. He grumpily lifted me up, pillow and all, and carried me inside, up two flights of stairs and to my room. He thought I was spoiled. I was. My mom came in and tucked me in, and they both wished me sweet dreams through my doorway. I drifted off to sleep again, eyes never opened, but a smile on my face. That was a moment when all I felt was love.

The morning the kids were going to arrive I tried to get excited. I cleaned up my area, swept the cabin, then sat down to call my mom. Those phone calls were the hardest to end, I missed her so much. Whenever we ended that call I had one of those relieving cry sessions where you feel a coolness in your chest where all of that negativity just left. I cleaned myself up and went to the driveway of the camp. I joined all of the other staff in making a tunnel to greet the kids in when they first arrived. We disbanded after picking our positions until we heard the rumble of the struggling budget charter bus bounding up the steep hill. The brakes squealed as the door opened up and kids jumped out, we cheered and hollered for every one of them. My throat always hurt for a few hours after our greeting.

My co-counselor and I stood up from the mass of fresh campers sitting in a cluster outside the activity center and called our campers names for the first time. We needed to grab their stuff from the bus, then we would walk to our cabin and they could all get settled in.

We called out 16 girls' names, but we only had 15 girls in front of us. One girl's missing, Daisy, she never got on the bus. We move on after telling the camp director, sometimes we would get no-shows. At that time, it's no big deal.

Our day proceeded according to schedule, but at dinner the camp director pulled me aside and told me that tomorrow she's going to pick up Daisy from her home and bring her to camp. Sometimes the camp would do this if it wasn't the child's fault that they missed the bus, and they still wanted to come

to camp. I would meet Daisy the next day, and my heart would break for her only a few hours later.

The only other time I remember feeling broken-hearted was when I was about 10. My mom had tried to give me a haircut herself, it was an utter disaster. My long hair had turned into a “bob” that ended at the top of my ears. We both cried that night. To make up for it, like she felt she had to, she got a bunny from her friend who was a farmer for free. I named her Gracie. Gracie was a huge rabbit with long pointed ears, soft brown eyes, and the most beautiful white and brown speckled body. At one point after having Gracie for a few months, she had to go back to the farm. I don’t think my mom anticipated how much keeping Gracie would cost. Upon many reassurances that Gracie was still mine and I could visit her whenever I wanted, I let her go willingly. The farm was her first home after all.

A “bunny-flu” struck the farm the next day, and Gracie died the day after. She was used to being inside, and my mom’s friend told me she just couldn’t handle the temperature and being sick. When I found out I cried for hours upon hours, stuck with the idea that it was my fault. She was my pet, and I kept her inside. Then I gave her back, without a fight. The thought that she died cold and alone was what bothered me the most. I eventually recovered, as all children do with their first experience with death, but the profound sadness of her death was something I prayed I never felt again.

She arrived the next morning after breakfast, very polite and sweet, in a cute colorful dress. We showed her to her bunk, let her drop her stuff off then we went with the day’s schedule of activities. We did bonding activities and played games until 1 o’clock, time for F.O.B. (flat on bunk aka naptime for the kids). We have them all lay down and we do the same, it’s a break time for all of us and wow I needed it...

I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary until I looked over at Daisy’s bed. I wondered how she was settling in, and I’m shocked to see her laying on the bland plastic mattress, in her dress. No pillow. No blanket. No sheet or

sleeping bag. Just her cool ebony skin pressed against the plain latex mattress. I could see her goosebumps from my bed. I assumed she just didn't want to make her bed, so I got up and trudged over to her.

"Hey Daisy, I know you're probably tired, but you've got to make your bed." She looked at me softly, never moving from her resting position on her back and whispered "Okay, Miss Abbi". I went to my own bunk and sat down, relieved that she didn't argue with me over the little things like so many other campers did that day. I looked over to see her unmoved and stiff, her eyes locked with mine. I walked over to her again, sensing something to be wrong.

"Daisy do you need help making your bed?" She looked up at me with giant sad eyes and quietly explained.

"Miss Abbi, I'm not a baby. I know how to make my own bed, it's just that I don't have any stuff to make my bed with. I folded my pillow though." She gestured down to her jean jacket she folded into a ball. No one sent her with any bedding. I quickly responded and told her that that's absolutely no problem at all and that I'm glad she knew how to make her own bed. We would go get some stuff to make her bed with after FOB, but for that moment I had extras she could borrow. I gave her my throw blanket and throw pillows to use for the last 20 minutes of FOB. I laid down on my bunk and stared up at the random engravings looming above my head. "Deborah 2011" "R+H" "24" Too tired to sleep, I was worried if I closed my eyes I'd sleep straight through the remainder of the day.

FOB ended and I quietly pulled Daisy to the side as everyone walked to get

a snack and we went to the camps' depot, where we kept extra supplies. I grabbed her a sheet set, comforter, and pillow. We went to the cabin and made her bed. I let her keep the throw blanket and pillow I gave her earlier. So she would have two instead of none. I had hoped that would've been the end of Daisy's struggles, now that she had a nice warm bed to sleep in at night and during FOB. I hoped this week at camp for her would be a fun one. I still hope

it was.

The next morning rolls by and Daisy is in the same dress. She didn't shower the night before, but it was her first day at camp so she didn't have to. I thought for a moment she might've slept in the dress out of laziness. I wish I was right. I asked her in the morning why she slept in the same dress. She gave me a blank stare, and somewhere in my heart, I think I already knew the answer.

My co-counselor took the rest of the girls to our morning activity and I stayed behind with Daisy. I brought a stool over to her bed and asked her if I could move her suitcase so I could set my stool beside her. I pick it up, it's light. I sit down. Without me asking any more questions she stated simply "it's empty".

She sinks into her bunk, looking defeated, ashamed. Someone sent this girl to a week-long camp, one outfit on her back, no underwear, no clothes, and she thought it was her own fault. I felt more distraught than ever for this little girl. I explained to her that once again it wasn't a problem, and we would get her everything she could need. She looked delighted. She told me she thought we would kick her out of camp. That hurt the most. She expected to be kicked out of a summer camp for something within none of her control. I would be at the bus stop when her guardian came to pick her up, and I felt prepared to give them a schooling in human decency.

We walked over to the depot again. Five full outfits, seven pairs of underwear, two towels, a toothbrush, her first deodorant, a pink hair pick, body wash, shampoo, two yellow washcloths, a swimsuit, a pair of tennis shoes, a pair of shower shoes, and a couple hair barrettes later, she's ready to join our cabin for breakfast. That morning we had eggs and sausage. She told me she'd never had eggs before.

That week of camp flew by, and we were blessed it did. We had plenty of trials, flip-flop slapping wars, screaming matches to see who could yell louder, fights over who climbed the rock wall the fastest. It was a good week.

Daisy hugged me goodbye and told me she never wanted to leave. She loved eggs, God, and camp.

She had learned a lot this week, how to swim, how to make friends, how to hula hoop, how to braid, how to pray, how to make friendship bracelets and keychains. I still have the keychain she made for me hanging on my book-bag, it's green pink and yellow, wrapped tightly with care, I don't think I can ever take it off.

I thought this would be the end of my journey with Daisy. I prayed her situation at home got better, and that she would grow up to be an amazing mountain painter (her desired profession of the day). I got in the van to follow the bus to the bus stop. It was my turn to check out the campers as their parents picked them up, but I had lost all inhibition on confronting Daisy's parents. I was worried it would cause the parent to not send Daisy to camp again. The bus arrived an hour late to the stop, so the parents were angry but relieved. Checking the kids out was easy. I started doing a final check to make sure everyone got checked out, and I saw Daisy's name with no check beside it. I looked around and saw her with that giant empty suitcase, sitting on the sidewalk. My partner and I for checkouts, Richard, approached her. She looked up and saw me, visibly relieved.

"They're not here." She said emotionless, and I felt this pit form in my stomach. We sat on either side of her and watched the bus drive away.

"No big deal, we'll wait," I said to her. Her guardian was already an hour and a half late. The camp's policy says for us to wait an hour (a half hour ago) then call the police. That didn't stop us from sitting on the sidewalk with her making small talk, lifting our heads up every single time a car came down the road towards us, for the next two hours. The pit turned into a sinkhole.

Finally, desperate, we called the camp director. She told us to call 911. We did. The next car that came down the road was a cop car, lights, and siren sounding Daisy's tragedy to everyone in earshot. He pulled each of us aside and we told him what happened (her parents didn't come get her), and that

the contact number on her paperwork had been disconnected. He walked over to Daisy last. Ricky and I were told to stay by the van, we did. Daisy slowly walked to the cop car with the cop, he put her suitcase in the trunk, then told her to get into the back seat. The cop came over to us and told us that Daisy was most likely abandoned, and this was how her guardian decided to do it. He drove away, and all I could see was Daisy staring at her toes in the backseat, slumped over, looking defeated, slowly getting farther out of view. They let her sink.