

Treading Water

I am the coach yelling ‘Go go go go go go go.’ I stalk up and down the pool deck hustling my 12-and-under swimmers from one end to the other: ‘Come on kiddo come on now—keep that pace—that’s it—there.’ They stroke stroke stroke *breathe*, while I dissect their technique and break down the stroke phases: catch, pull, push, recovery. Voices bounce off water, off walls. Gutters dribble and scaffolding glints as I record their pace times on a chalk board. Here, in this cocoon of chlorine-saturated air, I am safe inside a brightly-lit world of discipline and routine.

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It has been three days since my brother’s accident and I arrive at the Intensive Care Unit on schedule. They tell me he is still not responding, that it doesn’t look good. They say he’s going to be here six months, maybe 10. *But*, they reiterate, his condition is still critical and not to set any expectations.

I enter his room and sit in the usual chair beside his bed. There is a tube in his mouth artificially controlling his breathing, and with each exhalation blood brims to his lips. There is a shunt in his head draining the excess blood from his brain cavity. Double black eyes are swollen shut. His legs are immobilized in splints; feet have been reconstructed in the OR and are thickly bandaged. Tubes protrude from both sides of his chest and drain fluid from his punctured lungs. They say he can hear me.

‘Hi, Matt. It’s me, your sister. Can you hear me? They spelled your name wrong on the bracelet. Don’t worry, I fixed it—two t’s in Matthew.’

His two front teeth fell out and the nurses put them in a pill bottle on the counter. I take his hand, lay my head on the thin mattress and listen to the blip of his heartbeat.

Matthew is 20 years old, two years younger than I. We share an apartment. He moved in a month ago when my boyfriend moved out. On Matt’s first night living with me, I was rummaging through the

medicine cabinet searching for my floss. Realizing that my ex had taken it, I threw up my hands and announced sarcastically, 'He took my FLOSS!' Matt appeared at the bathroom doorway and threw up his hands, copying me. 'He *took* the floss? He took the floss!' Still heartsick about the break-up, I leaned against the wall. 'I can't believe he took my friggin' floss.' Matt placed his hand on my shoulder and pulled his floss out from his drawer. 'Here,' he said softly, 'use mine.'

At the pool, the kids are wired; they bob up and down at the shallow end and spit at each other.

'HEY!' I shout. My voice ricochets off water, off rafters. 'Everybody over here—out of the water RIGHT NOW!' The team hops out of the pool and sits like little Buddhas on the blue tile deck.

'WHAT is *THIS*?' I demand. They look at me with wide eyes. 'How many of you are doing the drills the way I asked?' I point to the chalk board where their drills are written out. Their eyes flicker from me to the board, from the board to me. 'How many?' I repeat. 'Now LISTEN UP, you all hope to be swimming at AA's next month—don't you? Well, can anyone tell me how you're planning to get there? ANYBODY?'

Cahley hesitates, then raises her small hand. 'Um,' she says, eyeing me. 'Practice?'

'You're going to have to QUALIFY,' I boom over them, 'and to QUALIFY, you're going to have to LISTEN and TRAIN properly. Do you understand me?' They nod, hang their heads. 'Now. Back in the water—chop chop. This time I want to see you THINKING. Start from the beginning.'

I record their pace times on the board and wipe sweat from my forehead. At the end of practice, Cahley approaches me. 'Um,' she says, equipment bag slung over her shoulder. 'Samantha. Um, are you okay?'

'Of course I'm okay. Are you okay?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. Then we're all okay.'

Day 14. Matt has a trache instead of that big tube down his throat; now he breathes through a hole in his neck. Still unconscious, he coughs up a lot of mucus. A chest infection, they say.

Last week I spoke with the neurologist. 'The scan,' said the doctor, 'reveals significant patches. His brain may not have received enough oxygen following impact. Thousands of connective nerves have been torn, this is called "shearing." You could be looking at re-parenting him all over again, he will have to relearn the basics. He may be violent, aggressive.'

His sinus cavities and eye socket have been crushed; his eyes open

sometimes but he's not responding. His hands move involuntarily. Blindly, he grasps at the air; his long thin fingers seem to be searching for familiarity, for something to hold onto. The nurses have started tying his wrists to the side bars so he doesn't accidentally pull out any tubes. When I am with him, I untie a hand and fold his fingers into mine.

'Hi, Matt. Can you squeeze my hand? Squeeze once for U2, twice for Radiohead. Please. It will be okay, everything will be all right. We'll go home soon, you'll see. I brought your horoscope, hang on—just a second.' I pull out the small scroll of paper I bought at 7-Eleven, flatten it out on the side of his bed and clear my throat. 'Your assertive move in romance is powerfully effective. Taking a risk you have studied well gives your dream-plan wings. The quicker you take care of a family problem, the better.'

His eyes roll back in his head.

The kids are working hard, swimming through the accumulation phase of the program. This means the mileage covered and intensity of the workouts are high. Most of them have been swimming the repeats remarkably well, making the intervals and holding their form. Scott, a feisty kid with bleach-blond hair stops abruptly mid-set. His face is bright red and he looks like he's going to cry. I lean over his lane.

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'What is it, Scottie?'

He looks at me through fogged-up goggles. 'This hurts,' he says. 'I'm tired.'

'I know it's hard. You're doing great, we're almost there.'

He dunks himself underwater and exhales bubbles. He bobs back up looking spent.

'I'm tired,' he repeats, slapping the water, pleading. The other kids are flying through the set and flipping at the walls. 'They're creaming me! I can't do it!' He starts to cry. He tears off his goggles and throws them at the chalk board. I take a deep breath.

'Scott, come here.'

He pulls himself out of the pool and drips over to me, wiping his nose and averting his eyes. He holds his hands over his mouth, sobbing. I speak softly, the way my brother speaks.

'Scott. Look at me.' He looks at the ground.

'Scott. I asked you to look at me.' He does, blinks.

'Scott,' I say, 'this is not a crying thing.'

He wipes his nose again, and as he catches his breath, he thinks this over. 'Now,' I say, 'I want you to relax for a few minutes, go drink some water—and when you're ready, I want you back in the pool, okay?'

He nods. 'Okay.'

Day 21. The neurologist says Matt has come to enough to start some basic tests, like sitting. I sit on the bed in the neurophysiotherapy room. Matt cannot sit up; he crumples onto my lap while his eyes rove around the room. He is still unable to speak.

'Matt. We're going to sit up now, okay? Sit up.' I hold his back and shoulders so that he is upright, but he flops back on my lap. His neck hangs loosely from his collar.

He raises his eyebrows at me—which they say is a good sign. It means he might be recognizing me. The physiotherapist suggests we lean him back in bed and adjust it so he is supported upright. He starts coughing, a deep chest cough. Blood and mucus come out of the hole in his trachea—the nurse quickly suctions it from a plastic cup attached to his neck.

We set a magazine in front of him on the bed to see what he does. Weakly, he reaches for it with his left hand. Matt is right-handed. The physio says he doesn't appear to be using his right side yet. She suggests I work on hand-eye coordination with him while she takes notes on a clipboard.

'Okay, Matt. Try to hit the ball.' I pass a balloon to my brother, serving it gently like volleyball. He watches the balloon coming at him but doesn't react. It falls like a feather onto his lap. I pick it up.

'Matt. I want you to pass the ball back to me.'

He raises his eyebrows. I pass it to him but he cannot react in time. He wilts forward. 'It's okay,' I say, and pick up the balloon. 'We'll try it again. Here we go, hit the ball, Matt; come on, hit the ball.'

Feebly, he lifts his left hand and pushes the balloon over his bandaged legs.

'There—that's it! Good job!' His eyebrows rise. 'Let's try that again.' He lifts his hand up this time, more engaged. I toss the balloon and he pushes his hand forward but misses it. His face creases in frustration. One of his eyes jitters; he looks like he's going to cry. The physio wants me to keep pushing him. I watch Matt writhe in his bed, crying soundlessly. 'No,' I say, 'It's time to take a break,' and hand her the balloon. 'My brother needs a break.'

I wrap my arms around him, manoeuvring around all the tubes. His body has become emaciated; he curls his head into me, brings his hand to my face. 'It's okay, just take a rest, it's okay.'

Whistle shrills echo in the aquatic centre. The kids are competing today and looking terrific. They form a tight circle and place all their hands in the centre as they rehearse their team cheer:

California oranges!
Arizona cactus!
We race you guys
Just for practice!

After which they all break out into shouts and hollers, scampering around the pool deck with their Gatorade bottles.

Scott swims his 200-metre backstroke and gains time. He comes to me after the race, disappointed and choking on tears. He kicks at the deck, crosses his arms, sobs. I bend down to meet his eyes.

‘Okay, Scott, come over here.’ We move away from the busy poolside.

‘That was a terrific swim, Scott. Your dive was spot on, you nailed the turns and you held your form. Fantastic. No swimmer always gets a best time, not even the Olympic swimmers, it’s all part of the training.’

He continues to sob, his hands cupped over his mouth, face red.

‘Scott, what did I say about crying?’

He looks at me; I can see his wheels spinning. He blinks.

‘This isn’t a crying thing,’ he says.

‘That’s right. You did a great job. Now go cool down in the dive tank.’

Diligently, he turns toward the tank. ‘Oh, and Scott,’ I say, ‘I’m very proud of you.’ He turns his small red face, blinks, and hides a smile under his hands.

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Day 31. Matt’s trache is plugged, so now he must practice speaking. In a weak, hoarse voice he says, ‘This sucks. I want home.’ I want to scream, I’m so relieved that it makes sense, it fits. He’s speaking, thank God. In physio he tries to rub his right leg, ‘Don’t feel enough,’ he says. ‘My nerves.’ He gets mad and tries to kick out but can’t. He bangs his fists on the wheelchair.

‘Matt, you’re going to have to focus. You’re going to have to be patient.’ I try to sound firm, logical and collected.

‘I don’t have the patience!’ he chokes. One of his eyes still jitters.

When he calms down he stares at his leg, tapping it with two fingers. ‘Doesn’t look good,’ he says dully.

‘Time, Matt, these things take time. Everything will be okay.’

He doesn’t listen. I wheel him around the ward to distract him. We stop at the nursing station and I park him beside me. There is also an IV wheelie beside the desk. As I talk to the head nurse, I look over to check on Matt who is putting the plastic IV plug in his mouth. I lean over and take it out.

'Why are you doing that?'

He looks at me with wide blue eyes. 'It just...makes sense.'

Back in his room we listen to his *Star Wars* soundtrack while I wash his hair, shave his face and clip his nails.

'My socks,' he says. 'Can you put my socks on?'

I slip his clean tennis socks over his reconstructed feet. The nurse comes in. 'Look, Matt,' she says, 'the sun is coming out!'

'And *why* would I care?' he mutters.

'Now, *Matthew*...'

'I'm starving,' he interrupts, coughing up bloody phlegm. 'Fuck!'

The nurse suctions the mucus out of the trache. I look from Matt to the nurse and back again. 'Not yet,' she tells him. 'Soon.' He rolls his eyes. He touches the IV tube that comes out of his nose, looks at me, agitated.

'Slim Fast,' he says flatly.

'What?' I ask. 'Slim Fast?'

He repeats this several times, becoming more and more impatient. Sometimes his language is scrambled.

'What? You want Slim Fast?'

'No no no no no no no,' he shakes his fists.

'CHAPSTICK!' he says, finally.

'Oh.' I scurry to the sink area where his Chapstick collection is.

'Orange, watermelon, Dr. Pepper or cherry?'

'Orange,' he says, exhausted. I pass him the orange Chapstick, sit back in the chair and watch while he feebly applies it with his shaky left hand.

After coaching I decide to swim. It has been months since I've been in the water. I push off the wall—stroke stroke stroke *breathe*. The pool is empty, underwater lights glow. Stroke stroke stroke *breathe*. Head down, flip at the wall—streamline. Decrease resistance to the body at all times, no unnecessary movements. Catch, pull, push, recovery. Soft at the beginning, accelerate at the end, feel the water.

My brother drove into a concrete wall doing 80. Crunched in glass, my little brother was in a burning car slumped over the wheel. Stroke stroke stroke *breathe*. Circles, circles, around and around. The officer thought he was dead.

I am the coach yelling 'Go go go go go go go.' I'm so tired. Flip at the wall, stroke stroke stroke *breathe*. Increase propulsive forces by strokes and kicks, move forward during each stroke as much as possible. Forward with a high elbow position. Exit of the arm begins with the elbow first after the push is over. It spools in circles, around and around. No release. Pull forward, finish the stroke. *This is not a*

crying thing. Keep moving into the momentum. Find the path of least resistance. Flip at the wall—*streamline.* Stroke stroke stroke *breathe.*

