

## Neutral Buoyancy

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They always make it harder to achieve results.

Kielbasa Joe paddles his noodle<sup>1</sup> up the fourth lane in a painfully slow crawl, the fluorescent pool lights making his flesh look blanched and sausage-like. There's no sense waiting for him; he'll hog the lane for a full hour, noodling back and forth without a twinge of shame. Likewise, Doctor O.C.D.

5 Grumblestein is busy evenly spacing the lane markers along the rope of lane five, just like he always does, muttering the whole time, as though that qualifies as exercise; that's probably a twenty-minute wait. Which leaves Chatty Boners chatting up one of his AquaTramps in lanes two and three, and Wady Mary, doing her wady dance in the shallow end of lane one, the flotation belt cinched around her squishy belly propping up her sagging tits like beached jellyfish.

10 For Jetta, this is probably the best option, because not only does Wady Mary get tired quickly, she also buckles under pressure. So she'll probably give up her lane as soon as Jetta goes over and stands at the head of it, doing stretches, to communicate as emphatically as she can without yelling out loud that if there isn't a free lane by 2:15, which is exactly four minutes from now, she'll just dive in and dart past Wady Mary underwater like a tadpole, just another challenge to incorporate into her daily  
15 sixty, another test to help hone her technique.

Sixty laps, every day for the past three years: this is the constant by which Jetta Crisp runs her life. Every day at the BeWell Downtown pool, in by 2:15, out by three. This is the ritual, no matter what. Her health depends on it. She has to stay fit, her doctor said so, and swimming is the best exercise for her, full-body with stress reduction benefits. She has no intention of missing a day and breaking her  
20 streak, even with her job as busy as ever, which is exactly why she absolutely has to get started by 2:15 or risk overshooting her lunch break and having to stay an extra hour or two in the evening.

Strength in routine, her doctor said, means strength in the body. Sixty a day to keep relapse at bay.

So Jetta takes her position and begins her stretching, swinging her arms up in a huge arc to make sure Wady Mary gets the picture. Sure enough, with the first sun salutation, the old woman smiles  
25 weakly at her and says nothing, but climbs out of the pool at the speed of a tortoise, every creaky step making Jetta's heart rate shoot up another notch. *Getoutgetoutgetout*, she thinks. She can feel her veins winching up inside her, making her whole body rigid, the perfunctory yoga not helping at all, her heart flapping under her rib cage like a panicked bird. For a second it feels like the woman will never get out, like she'll just freeze there on the shallow stairs, dripping chlorinated drips down her tapioca-  
30 pudge thighs<sup>2</sup> until Jetta sun-salutates herself into an aneurism and her head explodes all over the pool room.

Then she's in, and everything softens.

The water welcomes her like a gentle confessor, the hard slappy echoes of the tiled room melting away in the warm water. Jetta's breathing slows to deep, even waves. She puts her goggles on and  
35 gives a sideways glance over at the other swimmers, all the ones she's named according to their faults, the ways in which they're not as serious about swimming as she is, the things they could improve on. Sometimes, once she's gotten a lane and there's no more doubt about whether she'll make her sixty that day, she begins to feel a bit bad about mocking these people so mercilessly in her head. The old and overweight and lonely, the ones here just for something to do. They sometimes  
40 speak to one another – Chatty Boners spends most of his time in the pool jabbering away, trying to pick up whatever damp floozy has taken the lane beside him that day – but Jetta never speaks to them. She treasures the pool as a silent space. Here, for Jetta, there's no time for inane chatter or pointless conversation or mundane stresses. Boners aside, she wonders what kind of aimless, insignificant stuff these people could possibly want to talk about.

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<sup>1</sup> a swimming aid that helps to keep you afloat in water

<sup>2</sup> *tapioca-pudge thighs*: (here) fat thighs

45 Thinking about it too much, though, will make her lose time and focus, and that's not an option. The BeWell slogans are there on the wall to remind her, painted above the life preserver in the same bright orange hue: *Focus on your Goal and Achieve Results. Be the Best Possible You.*

This is not about other people. This is about fitness, and performance, and survival.

50 So: breathe in, go under and launch. Jetta fires forward, dolphin swimming for six seconds, feeling her insides starting to osmote<sup>3</sup> with the water. This is what she yearns for, this dissolution of boundaries, this neutralizing liquefaction. She kicks up toward the light and gets into her steady rhythm, stroke, stroke, breathe; stroke, stroke, breathe; legs straight and fluttering, palms cupped closed and pulling the water so she can feel the muscles work, trying to move with the sleek and fluid movement of a fish. Once Jetta is away, there's no stopping the motion, no pausing in the pursuit of  
55 her daily sixty: twenty front crawl, twenty back crawl, twenty butterfly. She waits for the moment that she loves most of all, when she finds exactly the right velocity of breath, exhaling in the water to create tiny perfect bubbles, so that when she turns her head sideways her intake is expertly timed to coincide with the machinelike motion of her limbs, splash-burble-splash-burble-inspire. Inside and outside, working in concert. Nothing existing except Jetta and the water.

60 Only when she rears up to turn over for one of her nimble flips, does the poolroom come back to her, with its plastic couches and bleary skylights seeping grey filtered light. But now that she's become the water, she doesn't need these things in order to see, to know. She can feel the ebb and flow of the swimmers as they vacate the pool, can feel the water calming as Kielbasa Joe stops his noodling and climbs out, feel serenity arise as Chatty Boners takes his pursuit of the red-headed pool nymph  
65 out into the sauna area. She loves it best when she has the pool all to herself, but it's not so bad if Dr. O.C.D. Grumblestein and his arthritic pacing are all she has to tune out to get into the Zone – the place where her thoughts actually stop, and she's nothing but pure fluid energy. Jetta has only eleven percent body fat (Marie at work, who's overweight, is always telling her she can see Jetta's spine poking out from under her blouse, but she knows that's just how her structure is) but when she gets  
70 into the Zone it's like she weighs zero, no more globby<sup>4</sup> tissue, no more corrupted flesh. *Keep moving, she thinks. Leave it behind.*

She's flying now, knocking off laps with complete ease, feeling the Zone approach like an invisible cocoon opening up ahead of her.

*Eighteen ... nineteen ... twenty ... flip!*

75 Now she's on her back, following the seams of the tiled ceiling to keep straight, closing her eyes for seconds at a time once she feels the alignment, her muscles knowing the proper trajectory.

*Twenty-four... twenty-five ...*

Jetta opens her eyes to check the ceiling just in case, and a splash plumes<sup>5</sup> up somewhere beside her. It's not like Dr. Grumblestein to stir things up; usually he's strictly a water walker, maybe a few  
80 foam weights here and there, never anything approaching a proper stroke. So Jetta's kind of irritated that on the one day when he's the only other swimmer, he's decided to go spazzy<sup>6</sup>. But she's in the Zone now, really almost really in it, so she can't think about it too much.

*Thirty-two ... thirty-three ...*

It keeps happening, though. Although Jetta tries to keep her stroke as aerodynamic as possible,

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<sup>3</sup> become one

<sup>4</sup> thick and lumpy

<sup>5</sup> rises

<sup>6</sup> *to go spazzy*: to have spastic cramps

85 gliding through the water to incur the least possible friction, she can feel little droplets of pool spume landing on her face from Dr. Grumblestein's water-mosh<sup>7</sup>. Maybe, she thinks, calisthenics<sup>8</sup> are his new thing.

*Thirty-eight ... thirty-nine ... flip!*

90 As she turns and pushes off the wall to start the final leg of her sixty, the toughest one, the butterfly, she sees. The splashing in lane five isn't controlled. There's no rhythm or logic to it. It could be Dr. Grumblestein is throwing a fit, and how could she blame him? But then she hears him calling out, and knows that's not it.

*Forty-four ... forty-five ...*

95 Dr. Grumblestein is in trouble. But she has to keep going, because she also glanced at the clock and it's pushing 2:55 and if she stops to help him now, she won't finish. Which she has to.

100 Sixty laps a day, every day, for the past three years. Jetta Crisp keeps lunging through the water, achieving as hard as she can, hurtling like a shimmer of reflected light toward the moment when she can touch the wall and stop swimming and come back to real time and go help the old man. Pushes herself to go harder, faster, finishing sooner, even though she hates it just as much as always, the idea of stopping, the moment when her body will come back to her in all its earthbound weakness. Hates the old man's body, too, for screaming its failure at her through her precious veil of escape.

*Forty-eight ... forty-nine ...*

105 She can see him beneath the water, now, whenever she plunges her head under for another stroke. Where there's supposed to be no one else in the world, where it's supposed to be pure achievement, there he is, flailing, spewing bubbles, knee twisted in a gruesome kink, eyes aghast and bulging in the aquatic blur.

*Fifty ... fifty-one ...*

110 If she stops she won't finish, and she has to. She knows he can see her, knows she's the only one who can save him. The attendants at the front desk never watch the pool video feed, and by now it would take them too long to get up the stairs and into the pool, because he's starting to turn the same blue as the chlorinated womb that's smothering him.

She wishes, wishes so hard, that she could really become the water. Indifferent, absolved. Antiseptic.

115 As she swerves, a chemical mouthful of pool fills her lungs. She swallows it, stifling coughs and dolphin-kicking hard under the lane markers until she's on top of him. She hauls at his weight, pushing his head above the surface, clutching his limp arm while she clambers, all bones and angles, onto the deck. She tugs it as hard as she can to get Dr. Grumblestein up onto the tile, his body far more solid than its papery skin makes it look, and clamps her hands over his chest and pushes, one-two-three, one-two-three, then plugs his nose and locks her mouth onto his, blowing out whatever air she has left, blowing all her energy and momentum into his lungs to send a jolt to his heart, filling him with her precious Zone, until he sputters out white froth and inhales a big, desperate gulp of air and begins breathing again.

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<sup>7</sup> (here) uncontrolled movements

<sup>8</sup> type of gymnastics

The worst is that he forgave her.

125 Jetta turns the hot water up until it's steaming. She's standing in the shower, quaking, wondering if it even all happened. Trying to convince herself she didn't almost let a man drown.

130 After he came to, she'd just sat there on the tile, crying, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I was in the Zone." And between gurgling breaths he'd put his hand on her tricep and said, "It's OK. Don't cry, don't cry. I'm alive, thanks to you." He even called her a hero when the attendants finally realized what was happening and came barreling into the poolroom, rescue buoys at the ready, blowing stupidly into their whistles, as though that would help anything. Then later, when she said she had to excuse herself and get back to work, when she scuttled away like a wet rat, reeking with shame, he'd held out his hand and said, "I'm John," and the first thing she'd thought was, *No, no, I can't know your name, because now how will I swim? How will I swim now?*

135 The water hits her skin, scalding and hard, stripping away in pressurized heat the last few calories she's retained by missing her sixty for the first time in three years. She folds her arms over her tiny breasts, pushing them down into her ribcage, and leans against the slick shower wall and lets her face twist into whatever horrified and broken shape it wants – trying to leech it out, that moment when she saw him drowning and thought, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing at all, to sink to the bottom and fill with water, and be still.

(2014)