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On Ten Years of Not Drowning

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ON TEN YEARS OF NOT DROWNING

Ten years ago they told us we could, and should, expect a death. At least a very serious and emotionally-scarring injury. We were opening a new facility, and all the numbers from all the other facilities said that within the first twelve months of any new facility, something bad was sure to happen. A whole different neighborhood with a whole new set of kids to get to know, lifeguards getting used to all the hidden angles of the pool walls and sun's changed glare, lack of experience among the younger and newer hires, all of us adjusting to the way the weather hit the pool now that it was a real hole in the ground and not just an oddly-shaped dog's water dish on a well-lit table in the city council's office. The discomfort of a new thing yet to be worn in, the jury said, so havoc overall. Keep your eyes out.

The polo-shirted people from the district office kept us sitting in our plastic chairs for hours in the community center ballroom, watching tape after tape after shitty DVD of drowning incident and Red Cross instructional video—even all the old ones they could find, back from as early as the 80's—while the air-conditioner roared and our eyes strained to see the small TV (they couldn't get the projector screen to work) at the front of the room but, really, scanned each others' faces, really, hunted for something nicer to look at for the present hour than an image of a busy pool with a passed-out body hidden somewhere in the shot. They brought a big guy in from OSHA to say the final words and rules, and told us to be really on our game, or it would be on everybody's backs.

“Remember,” they all said, and fourteen-fifteen-sixteen-year-old us looked up with lazy, glazy, still-scared eyes. “The first twelve months.”

“Probably sooner,” our real boss in the blue shirt said, “since the waterslide and all.”

The man from OSHA nodded.

“That puts your risks”—he brought his hand up around his temple, like a side-salute, like he'd had it up to here—“way up.”

The polo-people nodded behind him, standing stern like emperor penguins, only with arms crossed across their gutty chests like flabbing bodyguards of public population.

Our blue-shirt boss asked for a round of applause for our guests, and every one of us obliged. The polo team moved off the low stage like a blob and ushered OSHA guy outside. We watched our boss watch after them out of the corner of her eye, and give one more instruction deep into the mike:

“I want two people on the waterslide.”

We'd imagined, in our own time, how it would have been if it had happened. The summer would stop entirely. The air from the bay would settle hot and heavy on our little 'burban town, would take a long nap in the hammock of the valley and bake us all from slip to singe inside an arid inland kiln. All the city's seizing ceiling fans and overworking outside sprinkler systems—their nightly hissing so loud and rolling across the neighborhoods in blocks like the wave at a baseball stadium, their spray always moving somewhere, never ceasing, drowning out even all the feline fights and caterwauls that happened on the dryer sides of streets—would break right to a halt and let the lawns turn yellow and the air inside our houses set like a crab mold in our rooms.

At graduation-time the administrators would stand there bored, the hems of their black gowns waving only with their shifting weights and the fringes of their tassels sometimes whipping back a little when they went to wipe their sweat or whack a fly with it—no little brothers launching water balloons for them to go after in the stands, instead just boys squeezed somber in between their sitting thickened parents, their mothers' skin-heavy, sunscreen-slippery arms around them still despite the sweltering heat. Keeping them too close now (like all mothers of living sons and daughters do after news of someone else's loss, like holding one not-dead tighter would somehow bring another dead one back to life—and it's certainly not, they'd say if asked, just good enough to remember how short and precious life is. I know. But if it could bring her back I would keep him here all day—so strong our empathy here, to without words or actual bars or chains prevent a little rowdy formal fun, to keep the sweating graduates from a little artificial concentrated rubber rain). The senior girls would re-

main poised with pride and every range of milemarked emotion during the valedictorian's speech, no need to shriek and squeal under unexpected fire this year, no squeegeeing the water out of their flatironed hair (oh how they sweat there in the summer bathrooms, even with the AC on) or brushing any neon rubber scraps off onto the stage or field below them.

No one cheered for one another, that would be the almost-worst, and hardly even for themselves (the worst of all), their own accomplished progeny moving across the stage in sweat-soaked silence, a fake diploma exchanging hands and almost tearing from how wet it got in the receiver's hand as he sat and waited for his entire class to walk that nearly-flaming stage, as he turned it around and around and around again in his oven of a lap, as he thought about almost nothing sitting there, as he let four years go by without a second thought. Would he remember how this happened? And the rest of us—how would we remember this height of public education with only a zombie-murmur voice over a set of melting speakers? But everybody would, because it would be the year the bad thing happened at the brand new pool.

Yes, they'd ahh and nod when they remembered. That summer.

That summer, they'd say. That was too bad.

It never was how anybody dreamed or wanted, but this year in particular would be a bad bad thing, a serious one like from real life, not another quirk or chain of midtown life. Graduation here was always the hottest graduation anybody's sat through, and everybody always talked about it for days and days on end, kept aloe on their sunburned shoulders and frozen washcloths on their reddened necklines after work. Some cheeky local journalist who couldn't make it out in Washington, D.C. would put it in the paper as "Summer Starts with Pomp and Sweltering" beneath a picture of the tossed hats falling in the air. It was always something to smirk about, always something we secretly appreciated, the sort of pain we sat through for each other, and we liked to say it.

But this one—this one after what was meant to happen at our pool here in the first 12 months—this would surely be the hottest, too hot and

sad for anyone to say a thing. The dads would wipe their cheeks and not even try to say it was sweat, look at their little boys beneath their woman's pudgy tanktopped arms and feel a surge of familiness, feel the swell of what-if-it'd-been-my-kid-instead and just have to sit there with it, have to wait it out in stillness there in the still-packed grandstands. Afterwards he'd hug his graduating daughter and kiss her forehead with tightened grad-dad lips, take her graduation gown from her and toss it in the back seat of the SUV, get in the car and blast the AC while he waited for the final pictures to be taken (still pictures to remember, though not so many this year; our dad wouldn't have to wait so long, would have to hold in his heaving sobs when he heard the click of the back passenger door and the shuffling of his smallest kids into the middle seats).

"This is a summer facility," our blue-shirt boss reminded us. "We get most patrons between the months of May and August."

She paused. We fidgeted in our chilly plastic chairs.

"So it's more likely that an incident will happen in three months instead, not twelve."

We kept imagining. Saw empty stores downtown, and streets with hardly any trash, and movie theaters still packed full in matinees but without the chatty conversation after every show—that would be the town outside us in the summer if it happened. School starting in September would be a relief, a chance to start anew and force our brains into other information, another intellectual zone besides grief counseling and individual therapy, other facts besides those ugly ones of life and death.

Inside the newly-mortared walls and freshly-painted gates of the pool, the emergency would look like this: at first, people wouldn't come. They would boycott swimming and water entirely, even cut their showers short. They would turn against all city departments entirely because of what we'd done—it would be all over the news and the news would be all over us.

Close down the pool, they'd say, to the cashiers at the grocery stores and in the minutes at the city hall meetings, yes that's what they should do. (Later, and not much later, only after the back-to-back realiza-

tion that the first and best way to prevent drowning aside from steering clear of H-two-oh forever was to teach kids how to swim, to make your kid feel safe and strong in water, some mothers—the kind that read each and every article in the news and every parenting book and magazine around—would cave and get our personal numbers from the front desk and call us up for private swimming lessons, where they'd sit and watch us hawk-eyed. We'd meet up later at someone's house, still in our Speedos, halfway in and out of hot tubs on an August night, and exchange stories of the hugest homes and hottest moms and biggest tips. But for now, Home Depot would be sold out of locks and iron fences so that kids couldn't get near a backyard pool.)

Close down the pool, yes that's what they should do. But then where would we go to swim?

"No one's swimming anymore," we'd say under our breaths at city hall.

"But what about keeping our tax dollars in town?" Some woman in a blazer would stand up tall and talk. "We don't want our people driving out to Woodland to use their pool."

We'd put our foreheads to our hands and roll our eyes while the adults got riled up and politicked. What about, we'd wonder, how we're always on the ballot every year to be cut anyway? Recreation always on the chopping block to go? Why is shutting down a pool we just used millions of local tax dollars to make even an option at this point in time—not even twelve months out? But mainly: what about our jobs?

We had been happy just to have another summer job, a relatively easy one with suntans where we got to watch bodies all day and splash in the water on our breaks. Until this bad thing happened and reminded us of death, of a thing that meant taking away life—life, this thing we were barely starting to get to know, a thing we still thought happened mostly inside school hours or in passing periods, in dim and dusky hallways. We thought work was easy, that even forty hours wasn't bad if you were going to do it outside with other people. For most of us (aside from one or two of

us who'd lost a grandma here, an uncle there to cancer or old age) this was our first blush and brush with death, and all it meant was that these forty hours stopped being fun. We wouldn't be so far off from the truth, only underselling it a little, underestimating its white-knuckle grip on everything we did. We didn't yet know about—and weren't prepared for—the other hours we'd be putting in, the ones late at night where we'd dream up images of the little drowned boy's body (even if we hadn't been on shift that day, we were seeing his dead white body float beneath), where we'd rack our brains to think why, of all the kinds of death we knew there could have been, this seemed the most unfair of all, where our stomachs would turn and turn and turn in hunger and disgust. We'd become zombies during every waking hour, except stuck in our own heads instead of trying to chew out someone else's.

"Who did this?" Dan, our manager, would yell, beside the open fridge, holding a half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

We'd sit there in the break room shuffling cards or fake-reading someone else's book and shrug. It was just like normal, only there wouldn't be a fight, wouldn't be any tattletelling (Ashton ate it, saw him do it) or guesses-turning-gossip (Tyler probably did it, he said he hates Kim, he probably thought that it was Kim's). We wouldn't look him in the eye but it would be from apathy not fear, from what-does-a-sandwich-matter-now instead of will-you-kill-me-if-you-think-I-did-it. And Dan could read that, too, could interpret everything besides the eyes as well, and he'd say it back in the way he shut—not slammed—the door: you're right, the sandwich doesn't matter now.

We'd go back out when our twenty minutes ended to the still-empty pool, still empty but still open for everybody's business even if no one wanted to get or give a thing. For a few days nobody would come at all except for an out-of-towner who heard how great this pool was supposed to be from their crappy local paper.

"Where is everybody?" they'd ask.

We'd lie and say, "We don't know what the deal is."

Or maybe we'd be honest and say we had an incident.

"What kind of incident?" they'd ask.

"A submersion incident," we'd say, like we were trained to say in training and trained again to say in grief counseling sessions and in other hours after. We'd leave it at that. A timid mother would leave it at that, too, the nice kind, the kind who didn't mind driving out of town to check out a new pool with her three kind and quiet kids who just splashed around gently and giggling echolessly in the shallow end. But a brash mother—the kind who parked her sunglassed ass inside a lounge chair and let her kids loose like pitbulls in a dog park, yelling and running around (Walk, we said, walk. I said Walk, we said) and realizing that they were the only ones in the area (that was the saddest part to have to see—the first touch of self-consciousness, of suddenly being aware that they were being watched and, worse than that, the only ones being watched. It would make us feel guilty upon guilty, to see their tails drop like bricks between their legs. And worse, confused: if it had been just this before, just four kids running rampant, then nothing would have happened; we would have kept an eye on every one all day, so why feel guilty now for keeping order)—that mother was the kind of mother to come up to us and ask:

"You mean a drowning?"

And we'd nod. The girls would tear up underneath our sunglasses, and the boys would let their eyes glaze over—just stare at her and try not to see anything, especially the little dead boy floating down below.

This kind of mom, though, was the kind who'd get her money's worth. The kind who didn't care if someone'd died there just a week or any month or year before. It was her place now and hell, she was alive, so let's all live, shall we? She'd stay there all day (how do they do that without getting bored? It's just a pool); her kids would stop yelling and running and instead just lurk around the pools and decks, looking into gutters and running their hands along the tiles. They'd team up here and there, try to play Marco Polo and then stop when everyone'd been "it" already. They'd ride the waterslide without a whoop or whee, just go down and splash into the catch pool and

get back out and do it again and again until we all got goosebumps at the sunset and the wind, but neither of our parties budged. They'd stay all night until close and we'd have to be there with them and only them alone, and so with all kinds of space and time for dead boy thoughts to wander in—we'd have no choice but to think about it all for hours and hours and hours, a nonstop comparison of the one kid swimming alive in front of us and the other one not swimming not alive somewhere else away (God, where else?). Even when the brash mom's older kids got out—already tainted by a too-self-conscious world and so more prone to let discomfort interrupt their fun—her smallest one would stay and stay (Isn't he cold? we'd ask each other as we rotated positions. He has no body fat, no blubber) and swim and swim around the shallow end, tossing his goggles across the pool and then hunting around on the bottom like a nurse shark 'til he found them, over and over, over and over and over again. We shivered, watching him, and felt relief each time he popped up with the goggles in his hand.

The first mother, the nice and quiet one, would have left if she'd dared to ask that second question, if she'd found out for real—she'd be too respectful and concerned to stay. She would see the dead boy, too, and see the pool his grave, and couldn't let her family's presence disturb all that, or that disturb them.

"Oh," she'd say. "Oh. How awful." And she'd let her children splash for ten more minutes while she sat there and decided what to do. We could see it in her, her shoulderblades creeping up her back, her chest swelling with thicker breaths now, her pulse quickening. Quietly and kindly she'd ask them to come out.

"Come on, Quinn," she'd say. "We're going now, help me get your brother dry."

They'd pack up and go.

God, we'd wish it were that easy, to get away from a dying place. But she'd seen the dead boy underwater once now, and she'd see him after. We think of her, too, when we'd toss and turn in our sleep.

But as it stood those first three months the pool was full of all

alive. Not a single hint of death but every kind of life instead: the fat ones who floated better, and the skinny ones who somehow found it comfortable to lay there on the concrete even though their ribs and hips jutted out like that. There were big ones, where you'd turn to answer a question about the snack shack and realize you're looking at a chest, a firm and furry manly chest and there's miles of gold chains between there and his beefy head. And there were small ones, where we'd take bets from the back on whether she was a child or a mom, and everyone involved would find surprise every single time. There were day camp packs with their lines of kindergarteners in matching neon t-shirts that fell way down past their knees, and middle school girls who pranced along in just-too-loose bikinis, looking down at their own chests so often it was like a tick or twitch. And there were lone wolves. We kept our eye on these—most grown men free to lounge at city pools on weekday afternoons aren't the type that moms want near their kids.

There were red ones (just when we thought we'd seen the mother of all sunburns, in walked some other lobster of an even crimsonier hue, plus oozing pus and flaking like a pattycake to boot), blue ones (a kid would wander to the guard room crying and we'd scan his tiny skin for lesions, check his bones for breaks—but then he'd burst to us My daddy left my mom and we'd just have to find his mom and tell her he's okay, he's fine), tan ones (of course, the ones who used their sunscreen right), black ones, brown ones (when a white kid couldn't swim it was simply slow development, someone sign that sucker up for Level One; but if a not-white couldn't it just reinforced every awful stereotype we knew—we cringed when they came true before our eyes but cheered inside when Mexicans beat gringos in a race across the pool).

"It's still the first three months," our blue-shirt boss told us at the mid-summer staff evaluation. "We're not out of the woods yet," she said. "In fact, we're never out of the woods. We are in an endless forest of scary, scary trees."

Somebody yawned. The rest of us thought of how when someone

yawns then everybody does, and then we all tried not to, and then we all did, into our hands or the insides of our elbows or just out there in the open.

“Ten minute break,” our blue-shirt boss said. “Go stretch your legs. Get some air. When we come back in it’s CPR.”

The waterslide did prove a trouble zone. The water at its base was only three feet deep, but all the twists and turns and the rush of water at the bottom left lots of riders disoriented and smaller kids caught in the swirling current. We jumped down from our chairs to pull them up so often that we moved one right to the very base of it, so all the slide guard had to do was bend down and reach her hand out and help the rider get a grip. In July we figured out that if we turned the water pressure down just a little bit, the problem went away, and no one had to get out of any chair or even lend a hand—riders started saying “wow” instead of “ow,” and little kids left the slide pool smiling and not scared.

We didn’t allow much else in the way of fun—no alcohol, no running, no blow-up pool toys, no riding down the slide in chains or pairs—so all things considered, the pool deck was a pretty equalizing place. When all you have is water and your body, all signs of individuality are in the open, and there’s no room for distinction. We saw all birthmarks, moles, tattoos, scars, skin discolorations, weird growths and hair patterns, tons of muscles and lack of them entirely. It didn’t matter if they wore clothes over, or if those clothes were loose or tight or long or short. The water made them heavy and let gravity pull them harder all the same. We saw them melt in the heat, watched the way they hung all over and learned precisely where the sweat and chlorine caked and pooled on their bodies—and exactly which parts of them pricked up or pulled tight away inside when the slightest breeze came through.

We saw all sorts of inside people, too: moms who got there early and made a beeline for the shaded spots beneath the couple trees and overhang, other moms who came in later and picked catfights just to share a corner out of sun. Moms who’d had enough the second they came in

and moms who stayed all day with whining kids without a harsh word or an eyebrow. Single dads who brought their kid as bait for single girls who embarrassed themselves terribly in front of obviously chaste and married women; single dads who brought their kid in really simply just for good time with their kid and wouldn't flirt with anyone, not even the most gym-rat single mothers, not even the oldest and the prettiest of us. We saw kids in every kind of giddy glee and every kind of tantrum—over tiredness and hunger, over winning watertag and losing, over getting bullied and getting left behind, over who got the best ice cream or who got the last barbecue potato chip, and always mostly over nothing.

Our favorites were odd pairings that we couldn't figure out: how were they related, or why were those two holding hands? We loved interracial families, awkward early-high school relationships where taller girls hugged short fat boys, and adults with unclear affiliations. Were those guys father-friends or gay? Was this pair just chit-chatting or was an affair occurring right before our very eyes? Weird things happen in early afternoon. People surprised us with their affections and attentions, with their choice of focus.

But our focus was set ahead of time. Just keep our eyes on them.

And we did. Three months passed, then twelve, and we saw it all except for a shadow of a body on the bottom of the pool.

"This is still a new facility," our blue-shirt boss said, a year after we opened. "We got really lucky last year."

"Is she disappointed?" we whispered to each other. "Do you think she's sad it didn't happen?"

"It could still happen," she said into the microphone. "This facility is still the newest in the county. And that waterslide didn't walk away."

We shivered in the air conditioning and drew swirlies on our information packets, little stick figures riding in the waves to look like we were taking notes.

"Pretend like it's the first three months," she told us, sternly. "I want every training minute taken seriously. This year could be the year."

We kept imagining and practicing, though every year it never was. Every year we play-drowned in the deep end, pulled each other off the bottom and fake-gasped when we pulled each other up on deck. Every year here we rehearsed for death, and in between, our lives happened. We came back each progressing summer with new things: bigger breasts, stretched hips and shoulders, dyed or different hair, a deeper voice, an attitude adjustment, a hidden piercing, a not-so-hidden ink job, a shift in confidence for better or for worse. We were passing adolescence and we were always changing, but our job remained the same.

In '09 we thought that this was it, but we had our eye on him from all the way across the pool, were walking over as we saw the kid go from froggy-kick to still below and we got right in and got him out and breathing right before you could say nine-one-one. The years went on and there were one or two more deals like that, but nothing major happened: a knife-fight just outside the gates, a couple drunk parents we had to call the cops on here or there. A baby choking on a piece of pineapple, another choking on a leaf (A leaf? we wondered. Really, mom and dad?). A girl who bit the tip of her tongue off while chewing on a popsicle. A little boy whose lips turned blue at least once an August evening. A thousand different toes stubbed in a thousand different ways.

“How are we supposed to save anyone on an empty stomach?” Dan said, when we came into the break room. He was sitting on the counter with half a sandwich in his hand.

We took our sunglasses off and looked at him, set our guard tubes on the table.

“Stop eating my shit, you guys,” he said. He took a bite, hopped off the counter, and walked past us out onto the deck.

We didn't get hit with accident or casualty, but we did get hit with budget cuts. Trainings got shorter—even with thirty new guards to us every year, we only watched one DVD, only did one eight-hour session in that cleaner-smelling ballroom instead of a full week. The polo-shirted people said that lifeguard certification classes were enough, even though we'd paid

for that ourselves. They still kept the pool from closing, still said we had to be ready, but they said it like they were bored and tired too. They brought in printed copies of sorry headline pieces from other local papers, from drownings that had been in other towns, but we didn't see our own names, didn't see our own dead boy floating around in other peoples words. Those first three months turned into several years and they still tried to keep us sharp.

But it was hard to do: we changed. No one kept a deck of cards in the silverware drawer anymore. We walked in to the break room and the new kids, the youngest of us, wouldn't even be looking through each others' books, wouldn't be all up in each other's business telling sultry summer stories or other sorts of secrets, wouldn't be fighting for the last Otter Pop inside the freezer or the rights to the best positions in rotation (umbrella guard or top of slide). Dan would come in with a dummy in his arms and make us do CPR there on the med room floor, and we'd all feel good for bringing a plastic torso back to not-live life.

We all kept each other's space, learned after a couple yellings not to eat each other's stuff and to put our name and date on ours; learned to let our dinner sit 'til after we'd picked up trash and checked the bathrooms and the showers for weirdos and for injuries; learned to drop whatever we were doing to help when someone came in with a skinned knee or a bee sting. Plenty of little tiny injuries all day all week all year, but nothing serious or scarring or emotional at all. At least not emotional for us, anyways—plenty of kids about to hyperventilate just because they'd seen blood come out of their knee, plenty of moms about to strangle us in case we got the bandaid on just right right now. Plenty of things we were happy to forget and that were easy to, as well.

The summers blended all together, all the ones we'd had and all the ones we hadn't. So every year of all of that and what now did we have to show? A couple bumps and scrapes, a long list of band-aids given out in the med kit log, but certainly no death or drowning. We hadn't even had a single-limb paralysis.

We forgot the summer of the hottest saddest graduation because it never happened. We couldn't remember all the lives we'd seen, could barely keep track of our own at this point, had graduated from high schools, trade schools, firefighter and policeman programs, colleges and universities, EMT and nurse trainings, grad schools; had people our size and smaller living with us now; got cats and dogs and different bikes and cars and most of us insurance. We had a lot of letters to our name.

Now we were here, at the front gate, all of us. Someone (Who? we wondered, who there now would think of us, with all these years gone by?) had spent the better part of an evening calling all of us—we could see the stacks of phone lists on the counter there inside the office window, and we'd read the message threads in email inboxes online. Our blue-shirt boss—her hair was grayer now, the shirt was just as blue—came out of her closed door and looked at all us calmly, scanned all our faces just like we were patrons in the pool.

"I'm going to be in here," she said. She said it with such disaffection that it made us scared. "Dan will tell you what to do."

She went back in and Dan came out, led us out onto the deck.

"Well, the covers are on," he said, and looked at us, like, time to get them off. We hated him, right then, if he'd called us for the covers.

But he didn't say another word. He pulled off his shirt and threw it in a pile with his flip-flops. And then he ran. We looked at one another, and then we all took off after.

How do you explain cover running? The covers float atop the pool with just enough viscosity to be a kind of ground for a certain kind of earthling, to be a different type of land for those of us, like us, who live for contained waves. If you go fast enough across the covers you can keep your weight from sinking down, can get from one edge of the pool to another without getting anything but your feet wet. If you go fast enough you are like a Jesus lizard. If you go fast enough you walk on water; you are like Jesus Christ himself.

Teams of us stayed at the corners to pull the covers back real tight

and fast so the next of us could go without a wait. When we got across we traded places, held the corners down ourselves so the other us could run. We ran with big light strides. We strode. We flew. We flashed our tans across the blue. We relayed back and forth and back and forth until our thighs and calves got tired from being picked up so hard and high to heaven, until we felt like men and women once again and sunk into the tarps mid-pool and stayed.

We laid there in that blue cover like eyes in potatoes, like stars in a fat night. We could hear our breath. We could hear the displaced water sloshing into gutters at all four of our sides.

And then someone yelled—we couldn't see who, because all around our face was starry dark and tarp blue—let's get these covers OFF!

And we crawled out of the covers, swam under-over to the sides and got out of the pool, went and got the metal roller racks and pulled the dripping covers right off that deep and shallow place we knew, just the way that we'd been trained to do.