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## DROWNING IN MY THOUGHTS

*Kyle Giebel*

The light blue 2004 Ford Taurus barely turns over. I turn the lights on with aching fingers and squinting eyes. I look down at the aftermarket LED display to check the time. The intensity of the light was too much to handle in the darkness of the Indiana winter. I curse my older brother for putting an expensive sound system and display in the “Blue Bullet”. The time is 5:31 a.m., odd for your average person, but routine for my winter days. The temperature is a brisk zero degrees Fahrenheit plus or minus a few degrees; it is decently warm compared to the previous years. I sigh as I back out of the driveway and my breath rolls out of my mouth onto the windshield. I start my daily drive towards the high school.

This meaningless routine was absolutely necessary for my days to go smoothly. Swim practice set the tone for the rest of the events in my day. Swimming consumed my life and I didn’t mind it, or at least I didn’t know it. I didn’t mind the early mornings, the hellacious practices, or the factory produced scrambled eggs for breakfast. I was a swimmer and it was just a part of the title.

The five-minute commute seemed like an hour-long drive. With every turn of the wheel my back ached with dull soreness. My arms felt heavy and lifeless as if they have been tied to cinderblocks. My whole body is one quick movement from a perpetual cramp. My movements behind the wheel were slow and methodical. My body and the world around me were in slow motion while my thoughts were racing through my mind.

I take state road 28 to the school. It is a 2-lane road lined with street lamps and 24-hour burger joints on either side. The amount light being used when the whole town sleeps is astounding. As I drive, the school approaching in the distance, my eyes gloss over. The McDonald’s sign becomes a red and yellow mass of light. The streetlights turn to mysterious orbs floating by in the sky. The one stop light in town turns into a flashing beacon of nondescript light. This is typical for my drive. If someone were watching me they would try and break my wide-eyed, blank stare, empty faced trance.

Neither the radio nor the engine made any impression on me. Every sound became more and more muffled until they all blurred together to create a low hum, almost like a fan turned on for white noise while I sleep. What I heard on the drive would be completely different than that of anything a passenger would have heard. Any passenger would have heard the fans of the heater, the engine struggling to keep up, or the song on the radio. I heard none of this.

My thoughts as I drive completely consume me. I eventually made it to the school safely but I remember nothing specific about the physical world after the lights became a blur. This was the day I became conscious of my life. I started to think to myself:

“Why?... Why are you doing this?... It doesn’t matter... It is meaningless.”

Then the train left the station. I remember how I couldn’t come up with a concrete answer, and the anger that boiled inside of me as a result. I live my life in a rational way. I need facts and sharp answers for justification of doing anything, and for some reason swimming slipped through that filter. I was angry because I hadn’t found a reason. I was furious that I couldn’t find a reason. One thought flowed through my mind:

“Meaningless. It is all meaningless.”

The next thought that ran through my head was the peak of my train of thought. I remember thinking that if I were to get in a terrible crash and die, I would be completely indifferent about it. I didn’t want to die; I would simply have accepted it. I painted a vivid picture of the hypothetical accident in my mind. The slow motion crunch of metal against a light pole. My body flying through the windshield. The safety glass shatters through the air and twinkles yellow in the light of the mysterious orbs. The expression on my face was empty. There was no emotion, only a small hint of peace. I then imagined my life then flashing before my eyes. I could see everything that ever mattered to me. My friends and my family all had spots in my thoughts as had my pseudo pre death flashbacks.

I’m not cold any more. The heater is finally working or I am just numb. My money is on numb. I come back into the real world in the parking lot. I am in the same parking spot, right beside the “Reserved Athletic Department Members Only” parking space. It is 5:36. I sit trying to remember how I got there. I remained motionless as if the cold had finally broken me down. My stare, cold and hard, cast in the direction of the door that seemed so suddenly unappealing. My mind began racing once again.

To paraphrase Shakespeare; “To swim or not to swim.” I pondered this for the first time in a life that was filled with swimming. There was no reason why I should have to submit myself to the brutal cold, early mornings, or tortuous practices. There was no reason I had to be there that morning, or

any morning. There was no reason I had to swim. The option to quit was always there and always will be there. This is the first time I had noticed it. I had chosen to be a swimmer and that meant struggling along the way. I could have just as quickly chosen not to be a swimmer, but the idea of quitting to make me happy didn't sit right with me. Thinking about the drive home sent a shiver down my spine. I couldn't quit. I had already accepted that I wasn't going to the Olympics; it just wasn't in the cards. There is no monetary inspiration in swimming either, and I knew that. There wasn't an immediate positive to me continuing to swim. I couldn't quit. I had created meaning by enduring the struggle for so long. It became so normal to me that quitting would have ripped a hole in the space-time continuum. I was having an existential argument with myself in a parking lot at 5:38 AM. No wonder the world's greatest Olympian had smoked weed and battled depression for most of the latter half of his career. This was a heavy subject for a 16-year boy old to contemplate while I am still worried about asking my crush to junior prom.

I still sit in the same motionless state. The windows are in an intermediate state of fog and clarity; there is just enough clarity to see the door but enough fog to piss someone off if they had to drive any distance in these conditions. The heater must be working now. I notice my teammates a few spots over. They sit in a 1990 Toyota Corolla. In the driver's seat sits my best friend and best competitor. He was 18 at the time and I strived to be like him in most ways. Next to him in the passenger's seat sat one of the freshmen on the team. They carpool together every day since they are neighbors. That seems to be the only thing they have in common. The freshman sits with an innocent smirk on his face, as if he was happy to be there sitting with a senior. Our eyes connect and he waves and begins to dance to some inaudible music. I look at the driver and he has blank stare. It seems familiar in so many ways. My gaze shifts back and the poor boy is still dancing. I look away in disgust and slight jealousy. The time is 5:41.

The look on his face is one I had made mere minutes before. I wonder when my friend had asked himself the same questions I had. I wonder why he even was still swimming. I also wonder when that poor freshman will hit the wall as we both had. I did feel a small pinch of comfort knowing that I wasn't the only one who felt the weight of awareness. I had strength in numbers at that point. We would make a choice together and we would have each other for support. The question, still at hand, was to stay or to leave? I sat, still undecided.

I glance out my window and I see a shadow approaching the "Blue Bullet". My friend shuffles on the slippery pavement to the window. The fog is even thicker on the windows. I can feel the heat burning my skin. My sore muscles are just now just a dull discomfort. I could sit there forever.

I hear a knock on the window. I crack the door and I see a weathered smile.

He asks, “Are you coming?”

I don’t reply. I only feel the slap of cold air hitting my roasted cheeks. I look into his eyes. They are dark and cold, but full of trust. We sit for what seems like a full minute.

He breaks the silence; “Come on, we have to go.”

This is the moment that I knew that he knew we were on the same page. In those six words he answered the question whether to stay or leave, or whether to swim or to quit. In those six words he stuck out his hand to help me. In those six words he reassured me of what I needed to do. This may have been me looking for an answer or for a sign from some higher being. He may have no clue what I had just been through and he may just always look like that at 5:43 in the morning. Whatever the case may be, he helped me.

I turn the car off and remove the keys from the ignition. The metal key chain is warm in my palm. I step out of the car. My body aches as I close the door to the “Blue Bullet”. My friend and I turn to the door and start a slow walk. It is still dark. It is still cold. As we walk, the wind whips specs of ice that sting our cheeks. We tuck our heads and carry on towards the door. Each step I take is a battle being fought on two fronts. I look at my friend. He is walking at my pace and his face is chiseled with determination and acceptance. My mind slows down and a wave of clarity falls over my body. I re-tuck my head and keep walking, modeling his acceptance. We get to the door and each release a long, deep sigh. With those sighs we communicated to each other that we both knew we had the option to quit, but we needed to continue the drive.