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Swim Lesson

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Swim Lesson

Cover Page Footnote

For Rico

Swim Lesson

This is how I learned to swim: My twelve-year-old-brother, Rico, threw three-year-old-me into the deep end of our family pool. Bubbles burst cloudy turquoise above me, as I cycled the heavy water. Small legs soon tired, so I began clawing my way up, in vain. I AM GOING TO DIE my brain said to my heart, and my arms lifted in prayer. My legs fell asleep; arms weren't enough. Exhaling and exhausted, I let myself sink. NOBODY IS COMING TO SAVE YOU my heart said to my brain, and my arms fell limp. Falling, falling—At last, I felt the familial tug of retrieval, as he fished me up.

Three decades later, I got the early morning phone call that he was finally at peace. But Rico died twice before dying. There was

1.) the initial accident
and

2.) the subsequent surgeries, painkillers, and, finally, alcohol, as he learned to walk again.

The night he really died, his liver burst. He dreamt through that drowning.

We squint against sun to spread his ashes over Lake Michigan. When it's my turn, I throw him in. For us there is only the trying; the rest is none of our business. But I know the rest: he'll learn to swim or if he can't, if the lesson becomes too tiring, I know, at last, I'll fish him up. Say to him what he said to me so many years before, wrapping the towel around my shoulders, giving them a little shake: I'm proud of you.