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Black & Blue

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Black & Blue

Tony McComiskey

Our heads collided mid-race and the world went dark.

My lungs filled with chlorinated water, causing my body to slowly sink to the bottom of the tiny aboveground pool. For ten seconds, I remained still, face down on the pool floor. Tony McComiskey, the nine-year-old swimming superstar, was dead. Or at least that's what I wanted Lauren to think.

I heard a muffled scream and felt her hands pull me to the surface. Eyes shut and body limp, I kept the act going for another few seconds before I looked at Lauren and squirted water at her through the abnormally large gap between my two front teeth.

“Gotcha!” I said laughing.

Lauren was covering her face and didn't say a word. At first I thought that I might have gotten water in her eyes, but then she began to snifle. I reached out and gently squeezed her arm, which she slapped away, revealing her face. There was a rage in her turquoise eyes that I had never seen before. Lips pursed and tears streaming down her cheeks, Lauren said nothing. She only glared.

“Look, I'm really sorry—I was only messing around. I didn't mean to scare you.”

An awkward silence passed before Lauren finally muttered, “I thought I killed you.”

I tried to calm her down, but she turned away and swam towards the wobbly plastic ladder. She left the water, walked over to her back porch, grabbed her favorite Pokémon-themed towel, and sat on the steps blankly staring at the pool. Being a nine-year-old, I didn't know how to handle the situation so I stayed in the water and tried to think of a game plan. After all, this girl was my first crush. Sure I had fun coloring *Toy Story* characters with Jenna Gallagher the previous year, but that was just a silly kindergarten crush. What I had with Lauren was the real thing. Not only did we share the same favorite Pokémon (Blastoise), but we were also next-door neighbors. It was obviously destiny.

Unsure of how to fix my screw-up with words, I decided that impressing her in some way would get me back on her good side. With little to work with in the pool, I swam over to the ladder. Lazily bobbing up and down, the ladder had four steps and wasn't attached to the bottom of the

pool. Just as I was about to step out of the water, the idea hit me.

What if I swim through every gap between the ladder's steps? Lauren would be really impressed and completely forget about my prank. Genius!

Thrilled with my stroke of brilliance, I cannonballed back into the pool in an attempt to get Lauren's attention. Without even checking to see if she was looking, I plunged my head through the top gap and began weaving through the second with ease. The third gap proved to be difficult, forcing me to twist my thin body into a snake-like structure, but it was manageable. Upside-down with my head now behind the ladder, I attempted to push it through the fourth and final gap. I was able to poke my face through it, but the rest of my tangled body refused to move. Furiously, I tried to push a little further, but it was useless. I failed.

In desperate need of oxygen, I admitted defeat and attempted to unravel myself, but the ladder wouldn't let go of me. My head was above the fourth step, my torso was contorted in a U-shape around the third, and my legs were wrapped around the second. I was trapped.

Panicked, I thrashed around as much as I could manage. Pounding on the wall from underwater and violently kicking the edge of the pool, I desperately tried to get Lauren's attention. Tears and black spots began to impair my vision and my muscles were too oxygen deprived to keep calling for help.

Lauren wasn't coming. She thought she killed me, but I killed myself.

This is how I die.

My lungs filled with chlorinated water and the world went dark.

When I opened my eyes, I was standing in the center of the pool. Amazed, I turned to the ladder, which was once again lazily bobbing up and down, and then to Lauren, who was once again glaring at me from the porch.

"You didn't think I was really going to fall for that again, did you?"
To this day, I don't know how I escaped.

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When I think of hell, I don't feel flames surrounding me or hear people screaming for help. Instead I'm trapped behind block four in a humid, dimly lit natatorium where my nostrils have been sentenced to the ceaseless scent of chlorine.

And there's cheering. My parents, my teammates, my midget Russian swim coach. With this cheering comes pressure and for all eternity I must endure the weight of it. I'm only wearing a Speedo, but it feels like I'm equipped with a bullet proof vest. My stomach is in knots that anxiety crafted specifically for the occasion and I'm impossibly exhausted, but the 200 Individual Medley is about to start and I'm the favorite to win despite

only being a high school sophomore. The idea of being the best typically excites people, but not me. It only makes things worse, only adds to the pressure. But once the race is over, the misery washes away as I dry off with my maroon and gold team towel, a rectangular piece of heaven after any swim. Regardless of whether I win or lose, only one fact matters—it's over.

Standing behind block four, I look down at my four-foot, ten-inch coach, Oleg. His wispy blond hair looks thinner than usual, but I refrain from making my typical Donald Trump joke. He gives me a quick pep talk while twirling his neon orange timer around his pudgy index finger. First clockwise, then counterclockwise.

My eyes follow the stopwatch as he babbles on about how I should swim my race. Kick hard, *gotcha*. Don't breathe off of the walls, *sure*. Be like a bull and assert dominance, *no probl*—wait, what? No time to ask questions though.

“Swimmers, step up.”

This is one of my least favorite sentences, next to “Yes, we put nuts in our pistachio ice cream” and “Let's pregame with flavored vodka.” Reluctantly, I lower my absurdly tight goggles over my eyes and step up onto the slippery block.

“Two laps butterfly, two laps backstroke, two laps breaststroke, and two laps of any stoke other than the first three. Swimmers, take your mark...”

I blackout.

From the moment my body hits the water to when I finish the race, I remember nothing. It was painful, which is evident from my aching muscles, and I lost, but it's over. Nothing else matters. I hop out of my watery nightmare, walk over to the sidelines, and reach for my towel. Right as my hand grasps the dry cotton, I'm transported back to block four and the neon orange timer continues to twirl.

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It was the third day of my family's two-week trip through the Hawaiian Islands when we landed in Kauai. As we pulled up to the resort, we were greeted by multiple stereotypical Hawaiian brochure scenes. There were attractive women wearing hula skirts and holding leis; surfers conquering massive waves in the distance; and mysterious bright flowers that looked like they were painted by the Easter Bunny. As I stepped out of the van and into the balmy Pacific air, I ignored the leis, the flowers, and the surfers. I was only focused on one thing: the waves.

Eight feet tall, they were absolutely dominating everyone in their path. Teenagers were propelled down the shore on their boogie boards and adults were struggling to stand after each wave crashed into them. Knowing full-well that these waves would destroy my puny sixteen-year-old self,

I ran to my room, changed into my bathing suit, and had the warm white sand between my toes within five minutes.

The tide was violent, but I wasn't afraid. Water and I had a love/hate relationship that went back years. Despite hating the sport of swimming, it gave me a growing dependency upon the physical feeling of being submerged. I cursed every second of the miserable freestyle set during practice, but once it was over, I wouldn't run to the escape of the locker-room like everyone else. Instead, I would wait until the water was calm, slowly make my way to the center, and sink. Staring at the ceiling through the still pool water became a post-practice ritual for me in high school. After looking at the pool floor for hours while swimming, I appreciated the sanctuary of staring at the black square ceiling tiles. It turned out that my freedom was in my jail cell. The small shift in perspective made all the difference in my perception of the pool. It kept me calm when life was crazy. But in Hawaii our roles reversed. Life in the Aloha State was calm, so it only made sense that water was crazy.

I sprinted towards the ocean and dove headlong into the first of many eight-foot waves. When I did this the day before in Honolulu, I was able to swim underneath the wave, but that wasn't the case in Kauai. The wave deflected my attempt and spit me back out onto the shore with such force that my body made consecutive circular tumbles. But that wasn't going to stop me from trying again.

For the next hour, I was a tire that kept throwing itself back into the mouth of a monster that wanted nothing to do with it. I'd barrel in, it'd spew me out. Whether it was backwards, forwards, or sideways, I'd always roll away. Honestly, it's impressive that I didn't break my neck. The wipeouts hurt, but I was having too much fun to care about a few sand scrapes. There was something about surviving self-induced danger that made any minor injury worth the risk. Just as I was starting to get tired of voluntarily beating myself up, I saw it. In the distance, a colossal wave was forming, noticeably superior to the eight-footers that had dominated me all afternoon. Apparently I wasn't the only person to notice it because at least twenty-five of the thirty people around me began to find a safe spot further up the shore to avoid the impending collision of land and sea. I didn't want to watch the wave smash the sand, though—that'd be too easy. I wanted it to crash into me.

I wanted to roll.

The water around my feet began to rapidly recede back into the ocean as if it were being summoned by its master. The waves I had been battling turned out to be nothing more than the children of this one massive monster. They seemed to be afraid of her, but I wasn't. Just as she began to crest at around ten feet tall, I ran down the shore and dove head-first

into her stomach. As if I hit a force field, my body was launched backwards and, for the first time all day, I didn't roll. Instead, the wave body slammed me to the ground and propelled me up the beach on my back. For ten seconds, the world went dark as my ears, eyes, and mouth took on water while my back was assaulted by the sand. Finally, I began to slow down. When I opened my eyes, I was well beyond where the other waves had dumped me and I began to smile as I coughed up water. She may have thrown me further than her kids did, but I was still in one piece.

Satisfied with my victory over the mother of all waves, I began to push myself up, but was suddenly jerked back onto the sand. The undertow was pulling me into the water feet-first at an alarming speed. Normally this would just be another fun aspect of getting wiped out by a wave, but this time was different. This time a massive Hawaiian man was in front of me.

With no control of my body, I watched with horror as my stick-like self torpedoed towards the immense man. Wearing nothing but a tan Gilligan bucket hat and a pair of navy swim trunks, this Hawaiian looked like a retired sumo wrestler. With his back turned to me and the ocean roaring around him, he couldn't hear my screams to move. Although the undertow was no match for his mammoth body, I was. With perfect accuracy, my feet knocked him off of his. In slow motion, I watched his chubby arms fly up and his body lean right. Gravity came in with the assist, slamming the majority of his weight onto my right arm.

I heard a sickening *snap* and was swept away. That sound said it all—the fat guy broke my arm.

The pain was so severe that I couldn't get myself out of the water. My body was being pushed and pulled by the ebb and flow of the ocean, and I could barely catch my breath. I thought I was going to drown until a plump hand grabbed me by my left arm and pulled me out of the water. The fat man who fell on me had come to my rescue.

“You're a dumbass kid, you know that? This was your fault.”

He turned and waddled away. I never saw him again.

In too much pain to care about the tubby man's comment, I started walking back to my room. The bone wasn't protruding out of my skin, but there was a sizable lump that led me to believe that it couldn't be too far from breaking the surface. Halfway back to my resort, my eyesight became spotted and my legs gave way. Right before I blacked out, I saw my parents running towards me, their purple leis flapping around their necks like mini capes.

For the remainder of my time in Hawaii I wasn't allowed to be in the water past my waist. Half of me was happy because I didn't have to practice for three months, the other half missed looking at the world through a liquid lens. The water tore me in two.