

Laps

The pool heater is broken. This is good. It's January and too cold for the water aerobics ladies without the heater. This means they're down to two lanes instead of their usual four, and it practically guarantees they won't commandeer a fifth lane. Still, three tight-lipped matriarchs insist on springing jumping jacks in the icy water. They can't afford to leave those two lanes empty and vulnerable to lap swimmers. There's an aquatic turf war at the Y.

A large, popular aerobics class uses the lap pool weekday mornings. It's been there since the Y opened a few years ago. This past fall, another water aerobics group moved from the warm-water pool to the lap swim pool (the Y actually has three pools—an embarrassment of riches). The new instructor, a feisty spark-plug-type woman, claimed that it's not *aerobic* to exercise in warm water. So now there are two straight hours of water aerobics in the lap pool—which, on the surface, seems fine.

The problem is that the second class changed the schedule and usurped lap lanes. Folks who used to swim freely are now compressed four in a lane. When it's like that, people who show up to swim leave rather than wait or circle. So it looks like two lanes is plenty for the five or six people in the water. But that's not counting the three people who walked out. It also ignores the increasing ire of the circling swimmers.

I live a split-screen life now. There's the voice that says, *This is hard*. Just crash on the couch; let bad TV wash over you. Your dad is gone. The world is unsafe and mean. Family is broken. Food has no taste. Life isn't real. Then another voice says, *Show up anyway*. Get out of bed and write anyway. Pack the kids' lunches anyway. Keep swimming. These voices dictate, narrate my day simultaneously: This is hard. Show up. Quit. Keep breathing. Even standing barefoot on the pool deck, assessing the better lane to join, I consider finding an empty stall in the ladies' room in which to ball up and cry instead of swim.

Two days before Thanksgiving, my 64-year-old father—who had beaten cancer only a couple years earlier—died of a heart attack. He and Mom had spent the morning running errands, shopping, getting ready for the holiday. Dad would smoke a turkey, I would bring two pies, and Mom was making everything else (including a second turkey, just for leftovers). My four kids were already coloring place mats and crafting centerpieces. After returning home and unloading the groceries and packages, Dad sat on the small pretty sofa in front of the gas fire to rest. He dozed off and woke to a massive heart attack. Mom was with him. There was no prolonged passing away, no gradual fade. Dad was there, and then he wasn't.

There's this alternate world where he is still alive. In the morning, he opens the paper, folds it to the cryptogram for Mom, and places it beside her coffee. He makes bad puns, shows up with tools to fix something in my house, and radiates with pride at the kids' school events. He

finishes the hardcover spy thriller on his bedside table and puts his scuffed wallet in the back pocket of his jeans. His hearing aid is in his ear, not sounding in the night like a distant tinny alarm from the paper bag of clothes he wore to the hospital.

Retreat. Hide. Keep swimming.

I drag myself to the pool from muscle memory. Can mourners wear a bathing suit? I don't know how to do this, but what is my alternative? I need to rep the lap swimmers, a body in the water.

I twist and tuck shoulder-length hair into the tight silicone cap, then thumbs stretch my suit to cover my backside. Using the heels of my hands, I press goggles into eye sockets. I crack my knee once, my neck twice, and I am in the water. You can cry and swim at the same time. It's just very inefficient.

We lap swimmers are upset about our lost lanes, but have little recourse. Several of us gather at the shallow end, glaring at the older women raising and lowering their arms.

"Why do they need so much space?"

"Half of them aren't even exercising. They're just chatting."

"We've got to write e-mails. Nothing will change unless we complain."

"You think I haven't tried? Those ladies are one of the biggest groups at the Y. They get bused in. They've nothing better to do than call the Y and vent."

"We don't have an instructor," I say. "They have two advocates when the schedule's made. No one's in there saying what lap swimmers need."

From her side of the pool deck, Spark Plug lifts alternate knees in the air and scowls at us as much as she encourages her aerobicizers.

I recount this drama to my husband later, both because of the intense emotion and utter stupidity involved.

"The lap swimmers need to unionize," he suggests. "You can be Norma Rae."

I get sucked into a vortex by noon if I don't swim in the morning. When I'm done, I'm still sad. I still don't know how to do this. But I've gone three miles. That's something.

One particular day, it takes forty minutes to find parking. Then it's another fifteen minutes in the childcare line (which is actually good for that queue). Fifty minutes after what I thought would be the start of my swim, I am silently weeping in the drop off line. The woman behind me leans in, whispers, "Parking will get better after January."

She's wearing a fur-lined parka; her upper lip beads with sweat as a toddler repeatedly

yanks her arm. I give her a small smile and nod. This isn't really about parking though.

I miss Dad's delight in my kids. I miss seeing his face light up when he saw them. When Elizabeth, my oldest, was born, my mom wept as she held her first grandchild, saying she missed her own mother, who had died two months earlier. She wanted her mom to see Elizabeth. Lying on pillows in the hospital bed, full of love and newfound wonder, I said Grandmom surely could see her great-granddaughter. "No," Mom said. "I want to *see* her see Elizabeth."

I want to see Dad see the kids. I want to see that light and joy and love. I want to know there is good in the world.

One morning, several of us crammed in a single lane flagged down a lifeguard to ask when the pool schedule would return to normal. She said this was likely the new normal, since there were more exercisers than swimmers.

"There will always be more. That's a class."

"You're busing them in!"

"We need the space. It doesn't make sense to suddenly take lanes away."

"Everyone has to learn to share," the lifeguard said, twirling her whistle, not noting the irony of explaining this to four swimmers navigating one lane.

"I'm fine sharing," I retorted. "I'm from the old Y, where swimmers had one lane and we shared the pool with water aerobics, and water walkers, and swim lessons, and water babies, and lifeguard certification, and family swim, and summer camps—"

"That was only in the summer," the guard interrupts.

"Yes, that was the summer, but the point is that we can share. We want to know why we lost our lanes."

My fellow swimmers nod and murmur in agreement. One even shakes her fist.

Spark Plug must have seen our exchange with the lifeguard, because she was in rare form in the locker room. She jerked her head toward me—the sole lap swimmer in there—as she wove through clusters of toweling-off and baby-powdering women.

"Those swimmers can be six in a lane! Why are they so greedy? Take, take, take. Nothing is good enough for them," she spat. A pack of women who routinely discuss great-grandchildren slowly turned to inspect me.

No, we can't be six in a lane, I thought. I don't want a locker room argument with seniors though. With any luck, *I want to be them*—active in the pool—when I'm their age.

"They should come at a different time or use the gym," Spark Plug asserted to another

pocket in various stages of undress. “They. Are. So. Selfish!” More women turned to stare and discuss my greed.

Uh, no, I thought. Actually, I can’t come at a different time or use the gym, but that’s all beside the point. I hustled to clear the locker room. *This is insane*. This is more than insane. We are essentially fighting over a span of eight feet of pool water.

The tension intensifies when there is a misprint in the schedule that completely deletes lap swim on Tuesdays and Thursdays until 10 a.m. Even my fellow Sunday morning swimmers—who do their laps earlier than I during the week—are rallying against aerobics now.

We put our thirteen-year-old dog, Penny, to sleep at the end of December. Not that Dad and the dog are equal—but both are losses. I didn’t even think to bury her. Didn’t ask anything about her body. Just left the vet’s once her heart stopped beating. She had a tumor below her tail that began seeping; it created bloody fans and splatter throughout the sterile examining room. I thought I should use a tissue to clean the mess, but I didn’t have the strength. I just wanted to be out of there. The vet asked if I had ever been through this before. I said no, yet wanted to mention that yes, my dad died just a month ago. Heart attack. He was only sixty-four. I knew she meant a pet, though, so I didn’t say anything. I stayed by Penny’s face and ignored her trail of blood.

For a while, the kids still looked for Penny. They forget she was gone. Jack, really. Jack talked like she was still here. No one had the heart to correct him.

The kids are a challenge. Each has their grief, and I have mine, and I don’t know that I can absorb it all. The oldest, at nine, does not want hope now. She doesn’t want to hear about someone being alive in our heart. She wants her grandfather—Dziadzi—to be there for Christmas. Me too. But wanting does not make it so. We’re aching for something that is not reality. We have to meet this. We have to get through this in real life.

The kids aren’t especially bad; I’m just struggling to be present. Before, I could listen. Now I get annoyed. I don’t care about the LEGO creation. I don’t care why your friend was upset at recess. I don’t want to hear about the animal suit you’ll build when you are a grown-up. I’m too tired to discipline. My body is there, but I am gone. They are fed and clean. I am doing that. Mostly. And I am trying. I am going through the motions in the hope that the heart and brain will return and begin to follow.

I am circling with two guys this one time. In the next lane, two men, probably in their early sixties, are swimming. Next thing you know, an older woman, maybe in her late seventies, is in the lane with them, screaming at one of the men. They’re treading water—facing each other—and she’s yelling at him to turn around. The man isn’t moving. Each time I pass, they’re

still facing off, treading water. The man raises his hand like he's going to slap her—I panic, jerk myself from a stroke—but he swoops the water in front of her, splashing her face.

The next time I can see anything, the lifeguard is motioning them to the wall in the deep end, but the lady won't go. She's staying in the middle of the pool. The other swimmer in the lane is doing his laps. I hear the guard say, "I'm not mad at you." She makes it over to the wall.

The lifeguard has them at the wall for a while. Eventually the man starts doing his laps again. At the shallow end, I stop to drink water. The woman is down there now, complaining to the other man in her lane. "I don't even think I can swim now. I can't enjoy it." He nods sympathetically. I assume he'll suggest she leave the pool, but he doesn't. He sweeps his arm forward, gesturing for her to swim ahead of him.

There's only one guy in my lane now. He stops in the shallow end to stretch and catch his breath. I never talk with men in the pool, but this is too much. "Do you know what happened over there?" I ask, indicating the next lane.

He shakes water from his ears. Waits so I can repeat.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says. "I was swimming. Probably fight over circling." He pushes off the wall into his next lap.

Okay. I get it. Stay away from drama and just swim.

As I leave the pool, a young lifeguard grabs me. "That was in-sane," she says, and we both know she's taking about what happened in the other lane. "Just *in-sane*. I've seen people get mad, but that was—"

"Insane," I offer.

"Yes," she insists.

"What happened? I couldn't really see."

"It was over circling. What I think happened was the lady was really slow. And she was the new one in the lane. I mean, that's not supposed to matter—who was there first—but she was the new one who made them circle and she was really slow. So I think they were passing her and she got upset."

"Oh. Wow," I say. This is anticlimactic.

"I mean, I've seen fights—arguments—in the pool over circling, but this was insane."

"We need more lanes for swimmers," I interject. "It gets really intense during morning aerobics when we lose our lanes."

"Yeah. Good luck with that." She adjusts her foam rescue noodle to the other hip. "Water aerobics ladies are insane. They complain *all the time* about how they need more space. Which

doesn't make sense, because they don't use half the pool. I mean, they could put on belts and move into the deep end. But that was crazy just now—"

I leave my potential ally for the locker room. My chlorinated face is so dry it hurts.

I know Dad is gone. That doesn't stop me from looking for him. Some weak winter sun must have eluded thick clouds: In the pool area, light reflects off the glass office casement opposite the large picture window—and now it's magnified into a lighthouse beacon—and I think, *Is that Dad?* Is he showing me he is here? With me? I also think that is really dumb. I am looking for my father, and reflected sunlight, no matter how bright, is not him. This is just me, haunting the pool, trying not to drown because I am simultaneously crying and swimming.

I prefer underwater, although that time is brief—the duration of a held breath and long exhale. My movement creates bubbles outlined in white demi-lunes. This newly visible air churns, floats to the surface. The breath I take for granted rises before my eyes. Light is made visible too. Above water, daylight is unremarkable. Yet under the surface—shafts of sunlight separate and unify in a silent ballet. They penetrate the dark water, drawing attention to themselves, their glistening, lively movements. They reach the pool floor to create swirling shapes on white one-inch tiles, a protean mosaic. I want to stay here, see sunlight transform my pale skin, see water and light and air create something new. I need to breathe.

I surface. Signs of life become invisible again. It's just cinder block walls and apathetic guards and bodies with bad hips, bad knees shuffling on deck. Underwater, those same hips and knees bend and flex. Joints spring to life. Gravity loosens its grip and a broken form can fly. There is no weight, no pain. I can see underwater what I cannot see above. Each stroke is *moving through*. Each lap is an awkward lurch toward hope.

I am not surrendering my lane.

Kate McCorkle's work has appeared in *Juked*; *Marathon Literary Review*; *Midway Journal*; *New York Press*; *RKVERY Quarterly*; and *Sand Hill Review*, among other places. A 2015 Pushcart Prize nominee, she is currently working on a book about her experience as a 9/11 Army wife. The mother of four children under ten years of age, she swims to stay sane.