

## LIFE, STILL

Halted just inside the doorway, Matt stared at his wife's twin, Angie, her large, fit, sixty-two-year-old, black-Speedo-clad body billowing on the turbulence of the hot tub in the Birmingham Medical Center Inn.

He wanted to grab Angie's head and hold it underwater till she drowned.

"Damn you, Angie, how could you put such a notion in Jody's mind?"

For the past five days, Matt's wife, Jody, had been lying in the University of Alabama Hospital, her neck broken. One hour ago, at the eight p.m. visiting period, Angie had said to Jody, "You don't want to be just a bystander in life, right?"

Jody's eyes had fixed on Angie's, then swam in their orbits, taking in Matt, the white ceiling, and the machines that surrounded her. She'd returned her gaze to Angie and, unable to shake or nod her head, slowly blinked twice. Yes.

Soon after that, Angie had arranged for Jody's doctors to speak with the family late the following night about taking Jody off the ventilator.

Killing her.

Angie gently flutter kicked, her gray-blond hair floating in ropes, like Medusa coils.

"Why can't you understand Jody's feelings?" Angie said, her voice, normally forceful, a whisper over the babbling water. "No athlete wants a life with only their eyes moving."

"She's not just an athlete, dammit. She's your sister. She's aunt to your child. For God's sake, she's my wife."

No one in Jody's ICU room had seemed to hear his own words. "How the hell are you a bystander in life simply because you're not capable of moving your own two feet?" he'd said. "You're a bystander if you're goddamn not participating in life," he'd said. And when Jody and Angie had continued to ignore him, he'd shouted, "Jesus, it's not like any of us here are hot on the trail for the fucking cure of cancer!"

Angie hauled her five-foot-ten one-hundred-and-eighty-pounds out of the hot tub and scooped up a hotel towel from the deck. "She wants to be more than a relationship."

"Fine. She will be. Long as she keeps in mind she's more than the abilities she lost." He'd tried to tell Jody this, too, at the eight o'clock visit.

"She's had a good life," Angie said. "She's at peace with the decision."

"She's got plenty of good life left in her, dammit."

Angie squeezed her eyes closed, reminding Matt of when the two of them, in a small room off the Neurosurgery ICU, got the news Jody was permanently paralyzed. Angie had slid to the floor, her hands covering her face, shoulders shaking.

Matt turned and stalked out the pool's exit.

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Matt congratulated himself: unbeknownst to Angie, he'd gotten Jody's doctor's permission for an extra visit. A little past midnight, Matt entered the glassed-off, single-occupancy, white-white room in the ICU. He gave Jody a hug, but with all the machines and all the tubes coming from her body and the width of Jody's hospital bed, it wasn't a decent one. God, maybe she didn't want a hug. It'd remind her she couldn't feel anything below her Adam's apple.

He rubbed his arms. The room was freezing, and the ventilator made a racket, causing the occupants of the room to shout their words to be heard. Except, Jody couldn't speak. Jesus, having to keep his thoughts bottled up in his head would drive him nuts.

"Eventually you'll be able to talk with a portable ventilator," Matt said, "like Christopher Reeve. Anything Superman can do, Superwoman can do."

Jody's lips tightened, but Matt plowed on.

"Before that, we can get you a special computer that responds to eye blinks, and you'll be able to quickly spell out words. But until then, what we can do is, I'll say the letters of the alphabet fairly rapidly, and you blink when you want to pick out that letter. Oh. I forgot something. What to do to indicate you're done with a word." Matt thought a moment. He smiled. "Stick out your tongue."

Jody closed her eyes and kept them closed.

"Jody, don't--" Matt stopped himself from saying, "be an asshole." He leaned way over and kissed her cheek through his face mask. "Jody, remember your Catalina swim?" A month ago, in mid-August, Jody and Angie had attempted the ten-hour swim in sixty-nine degree water. Angie had given up. "After five hours, you were ready to throw in the suit. But you got past it. Well, fate has handed you a set-back here. You going to throw your life away because of it?"

Jody blinked rapidly. Matt guessed she wanted to try his eye-blink game. She spelled out, GO AWA, and then closed her eyes.

Jesus, maybe bringing up the Catalina swim had been a bad idea. It'd been Jody's test for next summer's attempt to become the oldest female swimmer to conquer the English Channel.

Matt kissed Jody's cheek again. "Good night," he said, sweet-toned. "See you in less than ten hours." Jody kept her eyes shut.

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Five minutes late for the 10 a.m. visiting half-hour because he'd been trying to expedite delivery of an "eye blink computer," Matt scrambled into the ICU's visitor wear that sat on a cart outside Jody's room--piss-yellow gown and cap, plus mask and gloves. Through the window of the room next to Jody's, he saw a stranger. Last night, the room had been empty, the belongings of the young man who'd been in there gone. During every previous visiting period Matt had come to, he'd run into the man's parents in the waiting room. Their son had been in a truck wreck, they'd said. He'd rattled around the inside of the truck like a pebble then flown out window. Medically, nothing was wrong with their son, they'd said, except he wouldn't wake. The nursing rotation had changed, and the new nurse said she didn't know what happened to the young man.

Jesus, it felt odd to have the kid up and disappear. One day you're here, the next gone.

And few marked your passing.

Jesus, that was part of Jody's problem. Might as well off herself now, since her name would never appear in the record books for the English Channel swim for all to see for years to come. Damn all athletes and their distorted values! What was important was she was here, alive, aware.

Already standing at the head of Jody's bed, Angie stroked Jody's hair, all smiles for the patient. Yes, by all means send Jody out of this world with a smile.

"Katy sends her love," Angie said to Jody.

Damn Katy. If not for her fucking marriage last week, they wouldn't be in Alabama. Jody would've never dived off the board at the YMCA. Jody wouldn't have smacked the bottom with her head, one-hundred-and-eighty pounds impacting on delicate neck bones.

Matt touched Jody's cheek; she was refusing to look at him. She'd always been this way, refusing his overtures when she was deeply angry with him, angry because she felt she was right about something and he didn't agree.

But to do this to him the last day she intended to be on earth!

Matt swallowed back his anger and hurt. If he vented, Jody would get more stubborn. Jesus, he wouldn't put it past her to go to her death without acknowledging him.

"Jody, remember your first marathon swim?" Matt asked.

"We shouldn't talk about swimming," Angie said in a voice as cold as the room.

"I think it's exactly what we should talk about."

Jody rolled her eyes, in a way that through the years Matt had come to interpret as "better we go ahead and humor him." Angie let out a huff, which Matt ignored.

"Do you remember, babe?" Matt said. "Pool swimmer swallows lake."

Jody still wasn't looking at him, but a familiar twitch of her lips set Matt to smiling. If the ventilator had allowed her, she'd be snorting. Good.

Stroking Jody's face, he retold the story, their story, filling in with details she'd given him over the years:

Ten summers ago, Jody and Angie traveled north of Toronto for a Masters swimmers' camp. Jody entered the season-ending 5K across-the-lake swim competition; Angie served as Jody's accompanying kayaker to keep her on course. Jody found the experience nauseating--a stiff breeze blew over the waters, and Jody felt she traveled up and down five times the distance she traveled forward.

Near the finish, all kayaks were required to peel off and dock away from the swimmers. Jody, able to see clearly only about six inches in front of her without her glasses, put her head

down and aimed for shore. When she lifted her head, she had no idea where the finish line was. She shouted, but all she could hear was the roar of the crowd. She gave up on finding the official finish line and stroked for land. Minutes later, when she turned her head to take a breath, a man yelled "Hey!" in her face, and she startled upright and treaded water.

Also treading water, Matt, a widower come up to collect his son from the age-group swimmers' camp, had grinned at her. "Saw you from the beach," he'd said. "You need prescription goggles."

"Don't need them in a pool," she'd said.

Matt had laughed, and a few years later she told him she'd loved his laugh immediately--thought he sounded like a hyena on nitrous oxide. They swam to the finish, Jody keeping her head in line with Matt's shoulder so he could guide the way.

Once on land, Jody threw up. "I'll never do an open water race again," Jody had said.

Matt, discarding the paper bag he'd appropriated for her to throw up into, had chuckled. "I love open water swims," he'd said. "Earlier this month, me and two other La Jolla Club members swam a relay across the Catalina Channel."

"La Jolla!" Jody had said. "My husband's mother lives in San Diego. We visit often."

"Well, well," Matt had said with a smile. "Next time you're in the neighborhood, come up to the cove. You'll find me there every morning 7 a.m."

They'd spent a companionable hour hunting down Angie and Jody's husband, Hugh, and then they'd said goodbye.

Three years later--seven years ago--Hugh's mother became ill, and Hugh insisted he and Jody move in with her. Never before parted from Angie and lonesome for her, Jody found Matt right where he'd said he be. Jody, before this always sensitive about her size, soon discovered

that her big opera-diva body was perfect for ocean swimming, the extra weight helping to keep her warm and thus increasing her stamina. She and Matt became training partners and, fired by her competitive spirit, Matt pushed himself more than ever before. But he'd had to admit her drive exceeded his own.

Three years later, Hugh passed away. A year after that--three years ago--Jody and Matt married.

"Best three years of my life," Matt said, mentally adding that they would've been even better years if Angie hadn't been a part of them. The year after he and Jody married, Katy graduated from college, Angie got divorced, and Angie moved to San Diego to be near her twin.

Angie finished scribbling on a pad of paper and held it up to him. *And now Jody can't swim, can't compete*, she'd written. *What is your problem? Why can't we just have a pleasant last day?*

A pleasant last day? He wanted to slap Angie.

"I want you to remember Catalina," Matt said to Jody, referring again to her swim a month ago. "Twenty-one miles that defeated the great Florence Chadwick on her first attempt at age thirty-three. Twenty-one miles that fewer than two hundred swimmers have conquered since first done in 1927."

Jody and Angie had begun the swim at midnight. Matt, in a kayak with green glo-stick dangling, had served as guide. The dark water--flat, ideal--glowed blue around their bodies, millions of the Channel's bioluminescent plankton lighting up upon disturbance. Matt had thought Jody never so beautiful. His big, bold Tinkerbell.

Five hours into the swim, about halfway done, Angie grew cold, nauseous. She admitted defeat, draping herself across the bow of the kayak until she had the energy to pull herself in-- Matt gave her minimal assistance, not wanting to delay Jody.

As he'd been doing, at the next feeding break Matt clapped and cheered and shouted to Jody that she was awesome. But Angie sat bundled in towels and blankets, sullen. The next time Jody took a ten-second guzzle of diluted Gatorade, she seemed somber, eyeing her sister, and when she resumed swimming, her pace fell way off. Matt snarled at Angie, saying she was selfish not to cheer Jody on, accusing her of trying to ruin Jody's chance. At the next Gatorade feeding, although swimming in the dark spooked Matt, he jumped into the water, telling Jody he'd swim the rest of the way with her and Angie would guide the kayak. This was news to Angie, but as he and Jody swam off with picked-up pace, Angie took up the paddle. The last forty minutes of the swim, Angie again jumped in. Disgusted, Matt again took up the paddle, knowing exactly why Angie had chosen to swim the last segment--though later, Jody chided him that he always attributed the worst of motivations to Angie because he was jealous of their closeness, that Angie wasn't seeking glory but only wanted to share in Jody's happiness. Jody swam that last segment faster than she'd swum any other, and at the end, Angie and a spent Jody had crawled on all fours onto a beach full of sharp, nasty, slippery rocks, to the cheers of their fellow La Jolla swim mates and the local press.

"What did you tell me," Matt said, "when I said you'd conquered the channel?" Jody finally turned her eyes to his, and Matt stroked her hair. "Tell me, Jody. Tell me what you said."

"Matt, leave her alone," Angie said.

"Shut up, Angie. Jody, babe, tell me what you said."

Over the next few minutes, Jody blinked out, I DID NOT CONQUER THE SEA I CONQUERED MYSELF



"Right, babe." He pulled aside his mask and kissed away the tear running down her cheek. Oh, Jesus, he didn't want this to have happened. Surely he'd wake up from this bad dream? Or, maybe Jody really was hurt, but only a little, and she'd soon be walking out of the hospital with him?

Oh, Jesus, don't let her choose to die.

A nurse came and hustled Angie out--evidently visiting time had ended minutes ago. The nurse repeated to Matt that he must leave. He kissed Jody's lips. At the doorway, he watched the nurse feed an IV needle into a vein on Jody's limp hand.

He smacked the doorframe with his palm. "Jesus, don't just stick things in her, tell her what you're doing. Talk to her!"

He snatched up Angie's pad of paper and wrote the doctors and nurses a note to that effect, castigating the medical personnel for their dehumanizing behavior. He slapped the note on top of Jody's medical chart.

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Nearly mowing down an old lady who stepped into his path, Matt ran through the hospital waiting room to the elevator. He needed to get online in his hotel room, having only four and a half hours before the next visit in which to marshal more arguments. Only six hours after that, at 9 p.m., the "death conference" with Jody's doctors would convene. If it came to it, he'd force Jody to go on. He'd get lawyers, somehow prove she wasn't competent to make a life-or-death decision--

Angie's hand closed around his bicep and jerked him to face her.

"Why are you trying to condemn her to such a life?" Angie said.

He broke away from her and stepped into the elevator, ignoring the other passengers.

"Just because she won't be able to function the way she used to--"

"You're scared to let her go, Matt. That's understandable." Angie laid her hand on him again, gently. He jerked away from her touch.

"There's no reason to let her go, dammit. She's intelligent, she'll get passionate about new interests. You don't have the right to say such a life isn't worth it."

"Jody does."

Angie's voice held a quaver, which Matt didn't want to hear. He knew that ever since the accident, tears could be heard misting through each word he himself spoke, if you were a person who listened hard.

He thin-lipped a smile at Angie. "You've always resented playing second fiddle. Well, now you can try to match her swimming feats without her around to top them, isn't that right? Maybe you think you could drum up more sympathy publicity as the surviving 'Wonder Twin'?"

The elevator stopped on their floor, and Angie stalked out ahead of him, arms crossed over her breasts, head tucked, body hunched over. Jody used to hunch that way before she'd gotten to know him, trying to minimize her size.

Angie swung on him. "Look, shithead, for all her talent, Jody's always been insecure. *I* was the one who talked her out of her down moods, *I* was the one who pushed her."

To his eyes, Angie had always tried to subtly sabotage Jody, and when that clearly wasn't going to work, tried to refocus the limelight to include her. But Matt held his tongue, saying only, "You don't love her enough to encourage her to live."

"Dammit, Matt, she can't do what makes her happy."

Angie pressed her hand to her mouth, and her Adam's apple bobbed convulsively, like a buoy tossed about by rough seas. A resonant despair rose in Matt, and he struggled to choke it down.

"She's lived a rich life," Angie said. "But the life that would await her now . . ." Angie's voice trailed off, then returned resolute. "Better to go out at the top of her game. It takes more courage to trust in God and go home to Him than to hang onto life out of fear of the unknown."

"It's not courage to die, it's giving up, dammit. It's courage to persevere despite obstacles. It's courage to create a good life out of the shit you've been dealt." Matt didn't believe in this "going home to God" crap. This was the only trip you made, baby. Get from it all you can and don't check out until you have no choice.

Life would become more work, he admitted. In fundamental ways, Jody would be a 180-pound infant. She'd have to be bathed and fed and peed and pooped. But he'd be damned if he'd sacrifice Jody because of that.

Angie spun away. "Half my soul's been ripped out. My beautiful, vital Jody gone--"

"Beautiful, vital Jody is still here!"

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Matt shoved away from his desk at the inn. His friend Bart had e-mailed him, pointing him to Angie's blog, in which Angie had laid out the events of the past six days from her fucking skewed point of view. Comments had been left, such as:

*Imagine the horror of being fully conscious and in such a state. A fate much worse than death.*

and

*Better to die than be miserable every minute of the day. It's an act of love to support her in her choice to go and not selfishly keep her alive.*

Every goddamn fool on the planet could comment on a blog. Ignoramuses!

Matt suddenly stopped his pacing, as if he'd been struck in the chest with a hammer.

Jesus. Before Jody's accident his comments would've been similarly ignorant.

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At three o'clock, Matt stood stiffly at Jody's bedside, knowing he must present quite a sight: eyes puffed as if he'd been swimming without goggles in saltwater, due to lack of sleep and the occasional crying jag; his normally clean-shaven face sprouting white and dark bristles; his jowly jaw set in determination.

Jody had blinked out that she wanted to speak to Matt alone, and Angie had left--reluctantly--but before Matt could present the arguments he'd prepared, Jody blinked her eyes furiously.

"What is it, babe?"

She blinked out, ID NEVR HLD U AGAIN

Never even reach out and touch him. For a moment he couldn't speak, his throat as closed up as if someone were throttling him. "You will hold me in your heart."

She scrunched her face, as if to deny he could be satisfied with that. Or maybe to deny *she* could.

WED NEVR HAV SX

"We'll eat chocolate together," Matt said. "You always said you'd rather eat chocolate than have sex."

WLDNT U MISS

He knew she was remembering how he liked to dance into their bedroom, grinding his hips, clad only in briefs with the lettering "Marathon swimmers do it longer," and growling she was "all woman."

"I'd miss you more," Matt said.

ID B XPENSV

"You're one of a kind," he said. "Irreplaceable."

IM ONL A HED

"A talking head," he said. He waggled his eyebrows.

HA HA IM LAFFIN MY HED OFF

The PA announced that the visiting period was over. Jesus, it'd taken a half hour to blink out that little conversation?

Matt twisted Jody's wedding band, which, since the hospital didn't allow her to wear jewelry, he wore on his pinkie. He slid the band onto her finger anyway, as if that would somehow bind her to him. In sickness and in health.

He held up her left hand with his, so she could view their wedding rings side-by-side. When he'd proposed, he'd told her he envisioned a small wedding--just them and the minister and Matt's friend Bart and, if they had to include her, Angie--on the beach at sunrise, all in the nude. Jody slapped his chest, playfully disgusted, and told him no way was she prancing about the sand buck naked. But she agreed to the "small wedding" and "beach at sunrise" parts. As soon as they said their I do's and the minister departed, Jody lifted her ankle-length sheath off over head and, buck naked, dashed into the water. Laughing uproariously, Matt and Bart had shucked their tuxes with all possible speed, dashed after her, been joined by a fully clothed Angie, and they'd frolicked in the surf, a bunch of idiots.

Matt stooped over Jody's bed, his head on her pillow, pressed to hers. "Jody, Jody, Jody," he crooned into her ear. "Don't leave me."

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Little Five Points lay a mile from the Medical Center Inn. Heading for Golden Temple Café, Matt, once he got clear of the UAB Hospital campus, broke into a brisk jog, knowing he'd pay for the run. Like Jody, he carried an extra twenty pounds of "marathoning" fat on a large-framed body--or at least he told himself that was the reason for his big belly--and the only running he normally did was across the beach and through the shallows until he dove into the water. But he felt the need to get the ol' blood moving again.

The way was uphill, the sidewalks broken and heaved upward as if by earthquake. Or as if the yard-long concrete segments were neck bones of the earth's body, shattered by the earth's movements and tree root growth. The rhyme "Step on a crack, break your Jody's back" circled round Matt's mind and, silly as he knew it to be, he rigorously avoided all cracks. By the time he reached Golden Temple, salty water drenched his T-shirt and running shorts as if he'd swum the La Jolla cove in them.

Jesus, how did these people stand the heat? Though late afternoon, it had to be eighty-five degrees and ninety percent humidity. Back home it'd be a mild seventy-two.

This was the first time he'd taken much notice of the weather since checking into the hotel. He couldn't even tell there *was* weather from Jody's room, since from the narrow slit of a window he could see only blue sky and the buildings of the UAB medical complex and on into the ocean of concrete that was downtown Birmingham. He should buy nature posters for Jody's room, maybe hang a plastic bag with goldfish from the TV bracket up in the corner--

Their conversation had been a good sign, right? She no longer planned on killing herself, right?

For the first time since the accident, Matt had the least bit of appetite. He ordered Tomato Florentine soup and strawberry-banana smoothie to go.

On his walk back, he took in the people on the streets--since Jody's accident, he'd taken notice of other people as little as he'd taken notice of the weather. Probably some relatives of patients found it a help to talk to the other families in the ICU waiting room, but he found it too much to bear.

Near the hospital, a panhandler stepped in Matt's path and demanded five dollars. Matt gave the guy a ten, though normally he would've pushed by. They were all in this together, trying to make sense out of their sometimes senseless lives, all with their own troubles, trying to get by in the ways they knew how.

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Matt stood in the gray-walled waiting room, listening on his cell phone. He said "Thank you" then ended the call with the disability rights lawyer.

Angie's voice came from behind him. "I don't believe you. You'd turn this into a circus? Grant Jody her dignity, Matt."

Dignity? He cared nothing for dignity. He'd roar, howl, and grovel if it kept Jody alive.

"I'll hire lawyers to counter yours," Angie said. "I'll do everything to protect Jody's rights."

Matt strode forward toward the ICU for the 8 p.m. visiting period. He glanced back and saw Angie hustling toward the elevators. Off to find herself lawyers to "protect" Jody to death.

WHERS ANG, Jody blinked when he entered her room.

"Don't know," Matt said.

WHT WLD I DO

Matt slapped the ventilator a high-five, the opportunity to lay out his arguments having landed in his lap. "Continue your work as a sports psychologist. You can still teach all the skills-- goal-setting, relaxation, visualization, self-talk." He tapped her nose and added, "Skills you can brush up on in the meantime."

She curled her lip at him.

"Please don't think I'm insensitive to what you're going through," Matt said, drawing the bed blanket up higher over her shoulders. "And I'm certainly not blaming you. Even psychologists are allowed to get depressed."

Matt kissed her lips through his mask. "I know it all seems overwhelming, babe, but how do you swim the channel? You take one stroke. Then the next. Then the next. And then you accomplish something amazing. You are fully alive."

Pacing about the room and gesticulating largely, Matt launched into his more ambitious plans for the new life they'd have. He threw out the names of famous quadriplegics--Christopher Reeve, Stephen Hawking, Brooke Ellison. He regaled Jody with his vision of organizing "puff and sip" marathons, Jody and her fellow quadriplegics puffing and sipping through straw-like devices in order to race their motorized wheelchairs. He enthused over his idea to dust off his engineering degree and design a "puff and sip" watercraft she'd be able to navigate on her own, him cruising alongside in his kayak. By God, he could taste the salt air. He rose higher and higher on the wave of his words until he felt quite giddy. "You'll see, Jody, you'll see!"

He turned his eyes to her.

MAYB WE SHLD LET ME GO



Matt fell to his knees, the wave slapping him in the face and sucking him under. Spiraling him down and down. Scraping him along the bottom. Flaying him of will.

Of hope.

He remained inert, pain's captive, until at last he forced himself to raise his head. Jody had tears in her eyes.

Sudden anger lifted him to his feet. Goddamn her, how could she ask this of him?

He cupped her face in his hands, had to consciously force himself to be gentle. "Six months," he found himself saying. "Then if you decide--" He couldn't bring himself to say the words. "But now is too soon. You can't see things clearly. You can't know the possibilities. Please, Jody, one thing I'm sure of, babe, you can never use yourself up. All that passion and ambition you have will flow in another direction. Give yourself the chance to know that. Can you do that for me, babe?"

U R STUBRN

"Yes," he said. "Say yes."

Her eyes dropped from his, and in that cold room he broke into a sweat as she blinked normally for what seemed like an eternity. He finally couldn't take just standing there staring at eyes refusing to obey his will, so he paced, mopped his brow, thought he'd go mad listening to the roar of the ventilator, and every second or so threw a glance her way.

At last she returned her eyes to his, and he again cupped her face. She blinked s, and she blinked i, and he guessed aloud the "x."

She blinked slowly, once.

Then she blinked a second time.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Angie said from the doorway, and Matt reflexively tightened his hold on Jody's face.

Jody slowly blinked twice. Yes.

Matt laughed, hard. Or was he crying? He swiped his arm across his eyes. "I feel the need to mark the moment."

He pulled up the covers at the bottom of Jody's bed, revealing the white boots Jody had to wear to prevent foot drop. "I'm inscribing a motto," Matt said to Jody. "I'm having it tattooed on my butt, and I'm going to moon you every night."

*Nothing Great Is EZ*, Matt printed out across the toe of each boot, the phrase coined by Captain Matthew Webb, the first swimmer of the English Channel. Webb had endured twenty-two hours of bone-chilling water, jellyfish, choppy seas.

"Captain Webb ain't got fuck on us," Matt said.