

By the time Cass arrived at the pool, the old women were midway through their laps, their pastel swim caps bobbing like water lilies in the wake of their measured strokes.

She stripped out of her sweatpants, tossed them toward the heap of water noodles and life preservers. Cass glanced at the clock, rolled her eyes, pretending to be embarrassed about her inability to be on time, just in case anyone noticed. But no one ever did. No one cared that she was always late. She did not have to be reliable. Dependable. Punctual. Responsible. She found comfort in the fact that the other swimmers, especially Evelyn in lane seven, expected nothing of an expectant mother like her.

Cass didn't know the old woman in any meaningful way, didn't know where she lived or how long she'd worn that turquoise swim cap over her perfectly cropped bulb-white hair, yet Cass chose to share a lane with her when she joined the Y in her first trimester because Evelyn—her ballerina-thin arms cutting the water with soldier-like precision—was the one constant in her life.

Not that Evelyn knew this. They never spoke. Yet, Cass was certain Evelyn was never late to anything, never got obnoxious-drunk, never said the wrong thing, never ate Cheetos at 2 a.m., and had never made a mistake of any consequence. Evelyn made it look so easy—not just swimming, but *living*.

Cass slipped into the lane, belly facing the bottom of the pool. Here it was easier to ignore that soon, four more weeks, according to her gyno, she would be a mother. A Maternal Being! Caring for Another Life! The enormity of it floated away as Cass kept pace with Evelyn's steady breaststroke.

After, in the locker room, a few of the pregnant lappers chattered about their impending arrivals. Cass fake-smiled and fake-nodded her way through their discussion about the safest jogging strollers and the most effective method for losing the baby weight afterwards. She widened her eyes, she frowned, she voiced what she thought were the appropriate oohs and aahs at the appropriate times. The huge woman carrying twins who constantly asked the others if her nose

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was widening along with the rest of her—truthfully, it was—pointed to Cass’s toned shoulders and calves, leftovers from her high school swimming days. “How could you understand?” she asked. “You’re still so thin.”

Cass looked at her own reflection in the mirror, caught Evelyn’s gaze before Evelyn turned back to her locker. She was a stick figure in a lime green two-piece, circa Esther Williams and purchased at a vintage store in a panic-stricken moment after she’d taken the test, after she’d pressed her fists into her stomach, whispering “No, no, no.”

She was not One of Them. She was all arm-sticks and leg-sticks, and a small bubble in the middle with a dark vertical stripe running up her belly like a broken zipper. She longed to feel all the things the other pregnant lappers said they felt. Where was her glow? Where was her maternal instinct? Those feelings were late too—perhaps never to arrive.

She thought of the old Tupperware Shape-O Toy she had as a child, the one with the yellow cutout shapes that fit into the red and blue sphere. Her shape didn’t match any of the cutouts. She didn’t fit in here or out there beyond the pool. She wouldn’t buy that toy for Him/Her. There was too much room for failure.

What Evelyn was doing here was forgetting. Forgetting for at least thirty-two lengths, that the world—especially the bed, where she’d left her husband Manny to sleep off his morphine-pump breakfast—existed.

So, was it too much to ask to have your own lane, a space devoid of other life forms that were busy creating other life forms inside themselves? Was it too much to ask to be alone in a place where you weren’t reminded of *life*?

*Alone.* Evelyn knew the word horrified the young ones like Cass who for some inexplicable reason swam in her lane now. And it was her lane. She had been swimming in number seven at 6:30 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday before that girl was old enough to crawl.

Cass was an excellent swimmer, powerful given her current condition, probably seven or eight months along now. The young ones were a disruptive force, churning up the water with their busy, anxious strokes. Grace and patience were as foreign to them as the shorthand Evelyn scrawled on the back of the newspaper each afternoon as Manny’s hospice nurse explained the order and number of pills he would need that night.

The young ones raced against themselves, a concept she never understood. How they thought checking meaningless things off their do-it-before-I-die lists made them immune from getting old. She’d heard it called a *bucket list*, but she called it a *bucket of shit list*. If Manny had been able, he would’ve laughed, called her his prickly pear, and kissed her on the forehead. But those days were over; he was too ill to appreciate her sarcasm.