

honestly
ben

B I L L K O N I G S B E R G

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According to the swim instructor at the Gilford gym, I had the worst buoyancy of any human he'd ever seen.

My brother, Luke, and I got one lesson each as our Christmas present, mostly because Luke wanted to learn. I wasn't so sure I needed to add swimming to my life, as I'd gotten along just fine without it for seventeen years. Also, it was three degrees outside, so the idea of being in a bathing suit, even inside, was not appealing. I offered my lesson to Luke, but he wanted us to do it together, so I gave it a try.

The instructor, maybe two years older than me, had a thick beard, like you could hide a full-grown blue jay in there. "You don't have to be afraid of the water. All people somewhat float. It's Archenemies's law," the guy said, and I resisted the urge to correct him by saying, "Archimedes." When you attend a fancy boarding school, it's best not to be a know-it-all on your winter break.

He got the class to kick our way to the deep end while holding on to kickboards, and then he took them away and we all clung to the pool's edge as if we were hanging over the Grand Canyon. He modeled treading water, which looked like riding a bike, except if you fall off,

you drown. He showed us that if we somehow fell to the bottom, we could use our arms and legs to propel us upward. Then, one at a time, he told us to let go of the edge.

“You’ll see how your natural buoyancy kicks in, and your fear will just melt away,” he promised.

I was at the end of the line, and while some took more prodding than others, each person took a deep breath and let go. Just as he predicted, everyone sunk a bit and then rose up until the crowns of their heads poked to the surface. Then they thrashed around in some approximation of water treading until their mouths were above the blue, gasping for oxygen, and the instructor helped them reach the side again.

Luke went before me. He’s about seventy pounds skinnier, and he did fine. He didn’t even thrash that much on his way back up.

“Wicked awesome. Just like riding a bicycle,” he said, his legs pedaling water even after he reached the edge.

This was ironic for him to say and not of great solace to me, as we were both taught to ride a bike by our dad, who took us to the top of a gravelly hill near our farm and told us to sit down, stop our whining, and start pedaling. Mom had four gashed knees to nurse that night, and she was not assuaged when Dad shrugged and said, “It’s how my father taught me.”

When it was my turn to tread water, I did what the guy said. I let go.

I sunk directly to the bottom of the pool in three seconds flat. My butt hit the bottom, I bounced up maybe a foot, and then I re-sunk.

Like a stone. Like a thick, Czechoslovakian stone.

There was something almost comfortable about sitting on the pool floor, even with all the chlorinated water I’d swallowed and the lack of oxygen down there. Like for a simple moment, nothing was

pulling at me. I was just Ben-at-the-bottom-of-the-pool, and I opened my eyes, saw the light blue world around me, and thought, *Yes. This.* A part of me actively chose not to push myself up to the surface.

Then I felt the instructor's frenetic arms under my armpits, and I launched myself up with my legs, and we drifted the six or so feet back to the surface.

"What are your bones made of?" he asked, once his gasping for air subsided and I was safely clinging to the side again.

I wiped the water from my eyes. I have learned from a lifetime of being a Carver that questions don't always require a response. Science classes taught me that my bones are made of collagen and calcium, the same stuff as other people's bones. The only difference is that I am large—like six foot two, two hundred fifteen pounds—and I am Czech.

We are a dense people.

My mom's specialty is Czech dumplings, the densest food known to man. They're flour, milk, mashed potatoes, and eggs, made into a loaf and boiled, and their general purpose is soaking up gravy. One could build a well-insulated shack out of them.

I am convinced that in many, many ways—buoyancy included—I am a Czech dumpling.

I mentally checked out of the lesson after twenty minutes, when I found myself unable to do the simplest things in water—breathing, kicking—and my thoughts dove into the same dark abyss they'd been in for much of the day.

That morning, my dad came into our room while Luke was in the bathroom and sat down on my bed. I smiled, still feeling warm from Christmas, five days before. Our family is big on tradition, and our Christmas tradition is waking up, bundling up in lots of clothing,

and getting in Dad's brown Ford truck. Mom gets to-go cups from our store and fills them with steaming hot chocolate, and we huddle in the truck, me and Luke in the back, Mom and Dad up front, our breath and the steam from the drinks crisply visible. Dad drives slowly through the roads of Alton for an hour or so, and we *watch the crops grow*, as he likes to say. There's something perfect about the silence, all of us together, witnessing the pristine, snow-filled fields *out there*, while we're safe and warm *in here*.

It's not fancy, but it's always in those moments that I most feel like a Carver. We're quiet, but we're together. And then we go home and Luke and I open our present, which is usually a "simultaneous," which means we open them at the same time, and we usually get the same thing, as we did this year with the swimming lesson.

Call it simple. But yeah, I kinda love our Christmas.

But when I smiled at Dad as he sat down on my bed this morning, he didn't smile back.

"Got your report card yesterday," he said.

"Oh." My heart dropped.

"Benny," he said. "How did that happen?"

I sucked in my teeth. "That" was a C plus in the first semester of BC calculus. Prior to last semester, I'd been a straight-A student, but this past fall I got a little sidetracked by my new and suddenly exciting social life at boarding school. Suddenly I was a straight-A student with one C plus that stood out like a sore dy/dx . I'd gone from possible valedictorian to also-ran.

"I know," I mumbled, averting my eyes. "I'm sorry."

He shook his thin, grizzled face at me. "That's not good enough, Benny. You know what this world does with a C-plus student? It spits him out. You need to fix this."

I didn't say anything. What was there to say? It was my fault. I hadn't done my best.

"I'm disappointed in you," he said. "I thought you were better than that."

I felt my rib cage expand and tighten, and I thought: *Maybe I'm not better than that?* And then my brain went on this little ride.

I screwed everything up. I'm so stupid. I won't stand out to colleges now. I won't get in anywhere good, and I definitely won't get a scholarship, and what kind of future does a brainy kid from a poor New Hampshire farm family have? Would we even have enough money to send me to community college? Shit shit shit.

My dad was staring at me, like he was waiting for me to speak. He's not big on emotional outpourings or anyone getting upset, so I swallowed that all down.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll fix this."

He shook his head and walked out of the room, and I closed my eyes and felt about three inches tall.

The worst thing was, he was right. I'd let him down. I'd let myself down. Dad worked so hard, and when I'd gotten a scholarship to Natick, he'd been proud. It was a sacrifice to not have me on the farm, but for an education and a chance at college? It was worth it, he'd said. And now I'd gone and possibly screwed everything up. And for what? For Rafe Goldberg? Jesus.

Rafe Goldberg. That was a name I'd be happy to forget.

When we finished the lesson and got changed in the locker room, Luke enthused about how wicked rad swimming was. I smiled and said, "Exceedingly rad."

After, as I drove us home to the farm across the frozen tundra in Gretchen, my old Chevy, and my brother talked nonstop about

video games he gets to play at the Tollesons, I re-played the scene for the millionth time. Three weeks ago, my dorm room. Rafe in tears. Me? None.

“It just kind of snowballed,” Rafe said, wiping a tear away. “It’s tough to tell someone something when you don’t tell them right away.”

Ya think? Is there a lesson there, maybe?

These flashbacks were happening a lot lately. Like I was hovering over the scene, watching it from the ceiling. The judge, maybe. The jury. Rafe’s jury. You don’t befriend a guy, make him drop all his defenses, and then, when pretty natural feelings develop, you don’t go, *Oh, by the way. Back in Boulder? I was openly gay. Have been for years. Used to do school talks about it. Oops, probably should have told you.*

Here I thought we were two explorers, charting some brave new world together. Turns out he’d already explored it and was just pretending. How wrong is that? I felt my blood pressure start to rise.

I hate you, Rafe Goldberg. With a fiery, burning passion that makes it hard to focus on anything else.

“Hey, Ben. Is it weird if I . . .” Luke leaned way back in the passenger’s seat. It creaked.

“Weird if you what?” I was glad to be brought out of my mind-rant. The sky was monochromatic gray in that inimitable New Hampshire way, like God never wanted you to forget the somber feel of the landscape.

“Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

Luke rocked his body forward and put his head in his hands, inches from the glove compartment. He scratched at his scalp. White flakes fell to the floor. He snowed.

“What if I like a girl, but . . .”

“But what?”

I moved to the right lane to let an asshole in a red Mini Cooper speed past. Luke and I were pretty close, but he wasn't one to ask big, personal questions. None of us Carvers were.

“What if she's fat?”

I cracked up a bit. “Who cares?”

“Everyone calls her Bulldozer.”

“That's rude.”

“Her real name is Julie, and I saw her crying by the fence at recess. The thing is, I always liked her, kinda, so I went up to her and asked if she had the math homework, and she gave it to me.”

I laughed. “So you made her feel better by asking her to give you her homework?”

Luke shrugged. “I had the homework done. I just didn't know what else to say to her.”

“That's actually pretty nice.”

“I dunno. So now I always ask her math questions, 'cause she's pretty good at math.”

“Sure.”

“I just don't know what to do next. And is it weird that I want to talk to her? I mean, everyone will make fun of me.”

“It's not weird. You like who you like. Don't worry about other people and what they think of you,” I said. “As for how? Ask her a question about her.”

“Like what?”

“Where do you live?”

He snorted. “I know where she lives. She lives in town.”

“I don't know. What she likes to do? Does Mom know that you like a girl? Dad?”

“No, thanks,” he said, and I laughed. I remembered being a fourteen-year-old Carver once, with all sorts of questions and no one to ask, except the Internet, which isn’t the same as asking an actual person who will talk to you about the answers. One spring morning I couldn’t take not knowing anymore. All these things happening, all these questions. I got up my courage and went out to where my dad was fixing a loose floorboard in the barn. I stood there watching him work, my arms crossed tightly across my chest and my eyes trained on a loose hay bale. Finally I said, “At what age did you get hair on your legs?”

Dad whacked a nail with his hammer and said nothing.

I sucked in my teeth. “At what age did you start to think about girls?”

“Looks like rain,” he said, not looking up. And then he whacked the nail again, even though I could tell it was already in all the way.

To this day, Dad has never had that talk with me.

“I know,” I said to Luke. “They aren’t so good for the big talks. If you ever need to talk . . .”

He shrugged and looked out the window.

“You’re a good brother,” he said after a while, and I felt a pang in my chest.

“You too.”

I loved my family. We got one another. They knew who I was. My dad can be a little demanding, but there are nice moments too. When you work on a farm for a living, you don’t have a lot of time for chatting. Sometimes less is more, like with Luke and me. That little conversation we’d just had was worth a thousand late-night talks with Rafe, and the proof of that was that just two months of sharing my deepest emotions with Rafe had led me *here*.

I thought about sitting on the bottom of the swimming pool, and

how in that moment it had felt like I'd be completely okay to not be here anymore. To not be anywhere. Which doesn't seem right, because it was one betrayal by a guy, and in the grand scheme of the universe, that doesn't amount to a parasite on an ant on the butt of an elephant. But at that moment in the pool, I sure did think it would be okay to cease to exist.

And that just didn't make sense.

I mean, I was Ben Carver, and I had so much. I was lucky enough to go to the Natick School on a full scholarship. If I kept my head down and got my calc grade back up, I'd be the first in my family to go to college, and then graduate school. The plan was to be a college history professor by twenty-five. And sticking to the plan was way more important than the fact that I wished I had someone I could talk to about the Rafe thing. About everything, really. About sitting at the bottom of the pool.

Because I can't do that. When you're Ben Carver, telling someone that for a fleeting moment you thought you loved a guy? Or telling someone you thought it might be okay to not be alive anymore? Those are big fucking deals. They're atomic bombs. And I don't drop atomic bombs on people. Rafe does. I don't.