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Early one morning in late March, Pia forced my hand.

A slapping spring wind ushered me through the heavy doors of the YMCA lobby as the minute hand of the yellowing 1950s-era clock over the check-in desk snapped to 7:09. Head down and on task to be in my preferred lane by precisely 7:15, I rushed along the glass corridor next to the pool. The chemical stink leaked from the ancient windows, as did the muffled shrieks of children and the lifeguard's whistle. I felt cosseted by the shabby walls, by my self-righteous routine, by the fact that I'd ousted myself from my warm bed to face another tedious day head-on. Small victories.

I'd just squeezed myself into my old-lady swimsuit when the phone in my bag began to bleat. I dug it out. The screen pulsed with the image of Pia Zanderlee ski-racing down a double black diamond slope somewhere in Banff.

My choices? Answer it now or play phone tag for another week. Pia was that friend you love with a twinge of resentment. The sparkly one who never has time for you unless it's on her schedule, but you like her too much to flush her down the friendship toilet.

"Wow, a phone call—from you!" I said as I mercilessly assessed

my middle-aged pudge in the greasy mirror. “To what do I owe the honor?”

Of course I knew the reason. Five unanswered texts.

Pia laughed. “Hey, Win, listen. We need to make our reservations. Like, by tomorrow.”

I fished around in my swim bag for my goggles. “Yeah, I haven’t—”

“I get it. Nature’s not your thing, but you’re going to love it once you’re out there. Rachel and Sandra are chomping at the bit to go, but they have to make their travel plans. We all do.”

With a shudder, I recalled my frantic Google search the night before for Winnegosset River Rafting, Maine.

No results.

“Just wondering why this place doesn’t have some kind of website. I mean, is it legit?” I asked, my voice coming out all high and tinny. Already I was ashamed of my wussiness. “I’d hate to get all the way up there and find out this is some sort of shady operation—”

I could feel her roll her eyes. “Wini, just because some place or something or someone doesn’t have a website doesn’t mean they don’t exist.” She sounded windblown, breathless. I pictured her power walking through her Cambridge neighborhood, wrist weights flashing neon. “It’s a big old world out there. One of the reasons this place is so awesome is because no one knows about it yet, so it’s not booked solid before the snow’s even melted. That’s why there’s space for the weekend we all want, get it? This year, it’s the world’s best-kept secret—next year, forget it!”

“I don’t know, Pia . . .” I glanced at the time: 7:14.

She laughed, softening to me now. “Look, the guy who runs the white-water tours is a good friend of my dad—he’s my dad’s friend’s son, I mean, so it’s cool.”

“Can’t believe Rachel would want to—”

“Are you crazy? She’s dying to go. And Sandra? Please. She’d get on a plane right now if she could.”

With a wave of affection I pictured my last Skype with Sandra: kids running around screaming in the background, papers to correct stacked next to her. When I brought up the trip, she’d groaned, *Hell, yes, I’m game for anything – just get me out of Dodge!*

“Wini, listen up: Next year—I promise, we’ll go to a beach somewhere. Cancún, Key West, you choose. Do nothing and just bake.”

“Look, Pia, I’m at the pool and I’m going to lose my lane—”

“Okay. Swim. Then call me.”

I tucked my flyaway dirty-blond bob—the compromise cut for all hopelessly shitty hair—under my bathing cap, then hustled my stuff into a locker and slammed it shut. *Do nothing and just bake.* Did she really think that was all I was interested in? Who was the one who rented the bike the last time we went to the Cape? Just me, as I recalled, while all of them sat around the rental pouring more and more tequila into the blender each day. And my God—we were all pushing forty—shouldn’t *awesome* and *cool* be in the rearview mirror by now?

I crossed the slimy tiles of the dressing room and pushed open the swinging doors to the pool. The air hit me, muggy and warm, dense with chlorine that barely masked an underwhiff of urine and sweat. Children laughed and punched at the blue water in the shallow end as I padded over to my favorite lane, which was . . . occupied.

It was 7:16 and frog man had beat me to it. Fuck.

For close to a year, this nonagenarian ear, nose, and throat doc-

tor and I had been locked in a mostly silent daily battle over the best lane—far left-hand side, under the skylights—from 7:15 to 8:00 each weekday morning. Usually I was the victor, something about which I'd felt ridiculous glee. We'd only ever exchanged the briefest of greetings; both of us getting to the Y a notch earlier each day. I imagined we both craved this mindless exercise, thoughts freed by the calming boredom of swimming and near weightlessness.

But today I'd lost the battle. I plopped down on a hard plastic seat, pouting inside but feigning serenity as I watched him slap through his slow-motion crawl. He appeared to lose steam near the end of a lap, then climbed the ladder out of the pool as only a ninety-year-old can: with careful deliberation in every step. As I watched the water drip off his flat ass and down his pencil legs, I realized that he was making his way to me, or rather to a stack of towels next to me, and in a few seconds I'd pretty much have to talk to him. He uncorked his goggles with a soft sucking sound. I noticed his eyes seemed a bit wearier than usual, even for a man his age who had just worked his daily laps.

"How are you?" I shifted in my seat, conscious of my bathing cap squeezing my head and distorting my face as I stole the odd glance at the deliciously empty lane.

"I'm well, thank you. Though very sad today."

I studied him more closely now, caught off guard by his intimate tone. "Why?"

Though his expression was grim, I wasn't prepared for what he said.

"I just lost my daughter to cancer."

"I'm sorry," I choked out. I felt socked in the soft fleshy parts; smacked off the rails of my deeply grooved routine and whipped around to face something I didn't want to see.

He took a towel and poked at his ears with it. A gold cross hung from a glimmering chain around his thin neck, the skin white and rubbery looking. “It was a long struggle. Part of me is glad it’s over.” He squinted at me as if seeing me for the first time. “She was about your age,” he added, turning to walk away before I could utter a word of comfort. I watched him travel in his flap step the length of the pool to the men’s lockers, his head held down so low I could barely see the top of it.

My hands trembled as I gripped the steel ladder and made my way down into the antiseptic blue. I pushed off. Eyes shut tight and heart pumping, I watched the words *She was about your age* hover in my brain until the letters dissolved into nothingness. The horror of his offhand observation numbed me as I turned and floated on my back, breathing heavily in the oppressive air. As I slogged joylessly through my laps, I thought of my own father rolling his eyes when I said I was afraid of sleepaway camp, of third grade, of walking on grass barefoot “because of worms.” As cold as he could be to my brother and me, not a thing on earth seemed to frighten him.

I had barely toweled myself off when my phone lit up with a text from Pia. A question mark, that was it. Followed by three more. Methodically I removed my work clothes from my locker, arranging them neatly on the bench behind me. I pulled off my bathing cap, sat down, and picked up the phone.

My thumbs hovered over the keys as I shivered in the overheated locker room. I took a deep breath—shampoo, rubber, mold, a sting of disinfectant—and slowly let it out, a sharp pain lodging in my gut. I couldn’t tell which was worse, the fear of being left behind by my friends as they dashed away on some überbonding, unforgettable adventure, or the inevitable self-loathing if I stayed behind like some gutless wimp—safe, always safe—half-fucking-

dead with safety. Why couldn't I just say yes to a camping trip with three of my best friends? What was I so afraid of?

Pool water dripped from my hair, beading on the phone as I commanded myself to text something.

Anything.

I watched my fingers as they typed, **Okay, I'm in**, and pressed send.