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THESE THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS UP TO US

I slip into the water and shit is it ever cold. The pool is usually comfortable, unless Jean is leading the class, then it's like a hot tub because she thinks the more we sweat the more calories we burn. I grow even colder when Emily walks to the side of the pool where she stands when she leads our class. Emily who's just finished her third year in kinesiology. Whose limbs are longer than a giraffe's neck. Whose skin looks like she's just lathered cocoa butter all over it. Not like my pockmarked thighs.

Fuck.

"Luísa!" My cousin Connie spins her seven-month pregnant belly around, and crap, I must've said that out loud.

"What?" I ask loudly to block all the *fucks* echoing off the glass walls. "It's freaking freezing in this pool. I signed up for aquafit, not a polar plunge."

"I think it's perfect in here." Connie's half floating on her back, her belly rising from the water like Mount Etna, that always-erupting Italian volcano.

"You would," I say as Emily fiddles with her phone and Lorde's "Royals" thumps through the wireless speakers.

Connie is pregnant with her second child. During warm up she tells me this is her last. When I ask her what that means—is she getting her tubes tied? Is Jeremy getting snipped?—she brushes me off and says the details don't matter. What matters, she says, is that she's decided. Hearing her say that—so easy, so free—makes the water feel five degrees colder.

We are like sisters, Connie and me. A month apart, the only children in our respective families until Connie's parents had surprise twins when she was six. Having siblings is the

first thing Connie did without me, and she's never looked back. I try not to blame her, but it's hard not to feel left behind even now as Connie's belly surfaces from the water like a rising phoenix.

My son Carlos is eight. When I look at Carlos with his hair like frothy sawdust spume, I think about being a new mom again: the sleepless nights, the constant crying, the never-ending laundry, the dirty bottles and mastitis, the stretch marks that all the vitamin E in the world couldn't fix despite the late-night commercials preying on a new mother's insecurity, and *damn*, I think, *I'd do it all again in a second*. But these things are not always up to us.

Fifteen years ago, I thought I'd be popping out babies so fast, Graham and I would have to upgrade our six-bedroom house on Chestnut Park. But back then ten percent of women my age had trouble getting and staying pregnant—a statistic I looked up once to make myself feel better. Graham always said he was happy with our little family. But every sound in our six-bedroom house echoed before I put up the grass cloth wallpaper. Graham won't sell the place. He grew up there so asking him to move is like asking him to fly coach—neither is ever going to happen. I make the best of the six bedrooms. One is a home office, one a home gym, another a guest room, then there's our large suite and Carlos' room. There's still one room that's empty, that has a window that was long ago painted shut that Graham and I tried to pry open with a butter knife, but couldn't, that Graham said we could replace if we ever had to, with walls covered in white wallpaper with black-printed elephants that in one corner look like they're melting because of a small roof leak where the flashing pulled away from the chimney that's now been patched, or so Graham tells me. But none of the duct work leads there, so I keep the door closed so it doesn't suck up the heat from the rest of the place.

"All right! Now that we're warmed up, let's move into our big ski arms." Emily is doing scissor jumps on the pool deck and

I badly want her to slip. Does she even know what it's like to land hard on your ass?

"Big ski arms, Luísa! Work that core!" Emily's voice throbs through her headset mic.

I've been coming to this class with Connie for six months. Connie wouldn't do spin classes anymore when she got pregnant so here I am, too young for a water aerobics class, but my body too broken to have any more children. I hate everything about being here, hate pretending like I'm cross-country skiing in water, hate Elaine in front of me. Elaine, who is of the generation of women who wears makeup everywhere—even the pool—pushes her upper body out of the water like a synchronous swimmer, and I want to tell her to settle down, this isn't a televised event.

Connie ski jumps over. "Jeremy and I are going to the Elora Mill for our anniversary next weekend. Do you guys want to join us? This is a big one right? Fifteen years?"

"Yep." I swing my arms higher, dig my knees lower to thrust out of the water and damn if I don't look like Elaine right now, save for the Miami pink lipstick. "But Connie—"

"Great. I'll change the reservation to four."

I stretch my arms like I'm reaching for the straps of Elaine's red flowered bathing suit. There's no way Graham and I are going to dinner with them, but Connie won't listen. I'll try to tell her later maybe, after I've ordered a mimosa at brunch and Connie's giving me a lecture about day drinking. For now, I jump and thrust, my body shaking and unsteady every time I land.

"Yes Luísa, great job! I don't think I've ever seen you go that high!" Emily bellows. She's been jumping with us from the pool deck the whole time and her breath is easy and effortless. Maybe I'll start swimming to have Emily's limitless energy, so my body will feel capable and strong. Useful.

Emily moves onto another exercise. She hunches and runs on the spot, tucks her elbows and jabs at the air in front of her flat stomach. *Finally*, I think, *one I can easily do*, because

I've been running on the spot ever since Graham and I were married.

A month after I turned 21, Graham and I married under a canopy of white lilies (his mother's favourite) on his family's country estate in King City, north of Toronto. My gown had been worn by every McNaughton bride for three generations. I didn't complain. My Portuguese immigrant parents could barely afford the five hundred dollars they insisted on giving me as a wedding gift. At 31, Graham was the last of his siblings to get married, so the menu had long been set: caviar canapes, lobster bisque, rare Kobe beef, and a croquembouche filled with three different pastry creams wrapped in caramel as voluminous as the crinoline under my dress. I had pictured baked Alaska with sparklers for dessert and Boney M's "Rasputin" playing as the servers brought it out, but Graham's mother tucked her silver hair behind her ear and smiled.

"That's very nice dear. It sounds more appropriate for your first anniversary." She spun a pearl earring Graham told me a former Prime Minister's wife had gifted his mother for her fortieth wedding anniversary the previous year.

Graham had pushed for the baked Alaska, but his mother wouldn't back down from tradition. But later that night, when it was just us, he stepped out of our hotel bathroom holding a plate of baked Alaska, a sparkler fizzing little shooting stars that landed on his palm while a waterfall drumbeat and clapping from Boney M's Rasputin thumped through his phone. Graham's mother had her traditions but so did Graham, and that was one he kept for nearly fifteen years.

I am so tired of this and, finally, Emily tells us to rest.

"Well that one's getting easier," says Connie. "I think I did twice as many as you."

I want to throttle her but opt for pettiness instead. "You're really breaking out this time, eh?"

She blinks at me. "What's gotten into you today?"

Before I answer, Emily moves on to jumping side twists and I hear a familiar waterfall drumbeat. Boney M's "Rasputin" throbs through the speakers and I want to sink to the bottom of the pool, fill my ears with water instead of the beat, even if it means the water will be sloshing in my ears for days, leaving me dizzy and unsteady until it leaks out. But I don't because Connie would dive down and her Mount Etna belly would lift us until we erupt through the surface. Then I'd have to explain myself.

Connie is chronically optimistic, always telling me to be grateful I had a son, a strong marriage, the house on Chestnut Park, like I don't have a right to grieve. It's exhausting listening to her, feeling like I have to keep up appearances, like I should be fine with the shifting tectonic plates of my life when I thought everything had been settled. Shouldn't I at least get to rage about the life I wanted? Shouldn't I at least get to mourn the loss of the children I never had?

I can't get into it with Connie right now. Connie, who gets to decide when she's done having kids, who's never had to lie about why she didn't have more children, whose husband is always home for dinner. And so I jump and twist, twist and jump, splash water onto my face, flick it toward my ears, hoping some will get trapped in my canals and the world will fade away and it'll just be my ragged breath pounding through my body and not Boney M.

Carlos was a colicky baby. Some days I left him in his crib, his hands tight little fists next to his ears, while I stood in the shower and let the hot water run over me to block out those cries. My stomach was a searing mess back then. It got so bad I stopped travelling with Graham for work. Before Carlos, I went with him everywhere—Aruba, Belgium, France—but after Carlos we couldn't put a wailing baby on a flight. My mother came by every day, but I was mostly alone with Carlos and his tightly screwed face and wrinkled skin, whose nub of a head flushed so red when he screeched it looked like a ripe

plum picked fresh from one of the trees on our property. If I wasn't humming softly to him while he nursed, if I didn't rock him while I snacked on baby carrots, he'd fill like a balloon then release all that air in hot noisy gasps that went on long after I expected him deflate.

I tried to stick it out, I tried. But I moved in with my parents for the rest of Graham's trip.

"I feel like a failure," I moaned to my mother the first night as she put cooled fennel tea into a dropper.

"Why?" She was playing peek-a-boo with Carlos and when he opened his mouth to laugh, she squirted the tea from the dropper on the inside of his cheek.

"I should be able to do this on my own."

"Says who? Listen Luísa, the day your baby is born you become a mother. But you become a parent over time, with experience, with each decision."

I've had to make many decisions since then and they weren't always the right ones. I decided my stomach pain was only stress, not fibroids, decided to ignore my own body when Graham's doctor said it was nothing. I'm still deciding what to do next, deciding who I am now. What does life look like when someone else gets to decide whether you're still a woman?

"Okay!" Emily says. "Let's get that core working with some forty-five-degree kicks!"

I decide that I hate Emily as she flips her legs like she's a can-can girl.

"Keep the core tight for this one, ladies. We'll keep this up for thirty seconds, but if your core is burning and you need a break, take a two-second rest!"

Two seconds? Elaine and Connie mirror Emily's movements, but I just can't. I feel like the chest deep water is rising past my shoulders and to my chin. I imagine that soon I'll drown. I wade to the side and slide up onto the edge of the pool deck.

"I need a minute," I tell Emily before she chides me for taking a longer break.

Emily frowns but Connie calls, “Take all the time you need, I’ll do extra for you!” and Elaine laughs. My chest knocks with Connie’s betrayal. We argue like sisters, but we’ve always been each other’s life preservers.

On my wedding day I almost bailed. Graham’s family thought I was marrying his money, and his mother wasn’t quiet about the fact that she didn’t think my Portuguese family quite fit with hers. I was drowning in self-doubt, but it was Connie who settled me.

“Hey.” She squeezed my hand. “They’re lucky to be getting you.”

Then she walked down the aisle ahead of me, leading the way.

I got pregnant again soon after Carlos was born. But I found blood in the toilet one morning. When I told Graham, he rubbed his thumb across my cheek.

“It’s okay,” he said, “we’ll try again.”

I remember his thumb had a blister that felt cool and smooth but also smelled faintly of tobacco even though I’d never seen him smoke.

I had three more miscarriages, and each time Graham ran me a bath and made my favourite herbal tea spiked with a shot of Dalmore, the twelve-year-old single malt he always kept on hand.

One night after he arrived home late from a work trip, Graham slept in the guest room so he wouldn’t disturb me. The next morning, I had tea instead of coffee so I wouldn’t wake him grinding beans. He got up around noon, scratching his stubbled face, asking the time, and offered to spend a few days in the guest room.

“Jet lag. Don’t want to disturb you.” He kissed the top of my head.

By then, we were both used to sleeping alone.

Emily is sitting on a chair bringing her heels toward her bum. Frog kicks. My least favourite exercise in the pool, partly because I can't do them without losing my balance and partly because these are Emily's favourite, so we do them in one-minute bursts.

My stomach is still a simmering mess, but I lift my heels off the pool floor.

"Touch your butt Luísa," Emily calls.

"I am," I say, huffing.

"I can see through the water Luísa and you're not doing it right. Heels to bum, heels to bum."

For a second I think she says, *I can see right through you Luísa*, and I wonder what my barren body looks like, if Emily sees my scarred uterus, my faulty ovaries, my cracked and leaking heart.

Over the past year, the house on Chestnut Park has gotten colder. Graham had always kept it at twenty-three degrees Celsius because I had poor circulation, but a few months ago he dropped the thermostat to seventeen because he found it too stuffy, so I walked around the house draped in knit shawls and sipping hot teas spiked with Dalmore that I fixed myself.

I wasn't surprised last week when Graham told me he wanted a divorce, but I was when he told me he'd met someone, and she was pregnant.

It made me remember the time I bought Carlos a high-end laptop to play Minecraft. The first time, everything booted up smoothly and Carlos happily played all day. But the next morning, the laptop wouldn't start with the same easy chime. It was just a black screen no matter which combination of buttons tech support told me to press.

"Looks like you got a dud," the tech support worker said after an hour. "Bring it back and we'll set you up with a new one."

The store made the trade just like that. When Carlos booted up the new laptop, his face settled with such relief when

the machine chimed turning on. He logged into his Minecraft account and found everything there just the way he'd left it, this world he had worked so hard to create still intact, and I wonder if that's how Graham felt when he traded me in for someone else.

Emily is tossing us pool noodles as we wade into the deep end. She's never had us out here before and I worry whether Connie can handle it because she's never been much of a swimmer.

"We've gone through a series of movements and now we're going to put everything together," Emily says.

"Here?" My voice is tinny.

"Yes, of course here." Emily rolls her eyes. "Use the pool noodles for support if you have to."

"You know Connie's pregnant right?"

"It's fine, I don't mind," Connie says.

"You're the only one not trying Luísa," Emily says. "Your body can do a lot if you just push yourself a little."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I shout. I front crawl to the edge, climb out and face Emily. Her mouth is partly open, and she keeps looking over my shoulder. I wonder if someone is coming up behind me, if I'll be sucker-punched again.

"Luísa!" Connie splashes behind me. I ignore her. If she's drowning, she'll have to save herself.

"You know what?" I jab the pool noodle into Emily's chest, and she backs up. "There are things my body can do and a whole hell of a lot it can't. And guess what? That's normal. I'm not some twenty-year-old university student with a tight ass. I'm a woman who's constipated if she doesn't drink Metamucil every day. Oh, don't make that face. We all shit Emily, so you can take your long limbs and your sure feet and ski arm your way to hell."

I throw the pool noodle into the water, grab my towel from the bench and head to the changeroom.

"Luísa, wait!" Connie calls after me.

I strip off my bathing suit and stand in the shower. The

cold water turns my skin numb. I rub shampoo in my hair, scrub so hard I expect my scalp to bleed. I let the shampoo run in my eyes, let it sting, then let my tears rinse everything away. I howl into the shower head, clutch my aching stomach.

The shower curtain pulls back and Connie is there. She turns off the water, wraps me in a towel and leads me to a bench.

“I’m never coming back here again,” I say.

“Well, that’s good because Emily told me not to bring you back here again,” Connie says, and for a moment, we laugh.

“What’s going on?” Connie whispers, pulling wet strands of hair from my face.

“Graham’s leaving me. He’s having a baby with someone else.” I clutch Connie’s enormous belly. I feel her baby moving, something I haven’t felt since I was pregnant with Carlos, and the loss of each miscarriage hits me all over again. Connie doesn’t say anything, just rubs my wet back as I press my head to her belly. I’m relieved she doesn’t tell me to be grateful that I have Carlos, that she just lets me cry while I suck in the bitter scent of chlorine. My sobs echo in the changeroom and I feel like I’m being haunted by all the children I never had.

“Who am I now?” I whisper into Connie’s belly.

Connie’s pruned hand rubs my clammy back. “You’re a mother, a daughter, and my very best friend. Whatever you do, whoever you are, it’s enough.”

I pull away and she sits next to me, anchoring me under her shoulder.

“We’ll sort everything out together, we always have,” she whispers. And I nod because I know that’s true.

Connie fishes her tear-free conditioner from her pool bag, squirts some into her palms and rubs them together. She runs the vanilla-scented cream through my hair. She starts gently, separating each knot with her fingers before sliding the comb through, going section by section, working first her fingers through my hair, then the comb. Over and over, until all the knots are gone.