

Swimmer

On the fifteen-mile drive to Mercy Hospital, in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., I stay silent, same as Nicole. After thirty years of marriage, I don't have to ask why. We park in a handicapped spot—our first time with that blue sign waving—and walk up. With the quick, final steps of people on an unwanted mission, we trek through freshly-painted hallways, winding through *nephrology*, *ophthalmology*, *osteoarthritis*—elderly men stumbling out, with wives or wifeless, as if struck by the suddenness of disease—then pace to Sarah's third-floor office at the end of the hall. My mind's packed with clouds, dark roads, endless water. Losing names, losing facts, like a half-filled sieve. *And yet the mind's not supposed to go*—I point Nicole to the elevator, and we step in. Henry, my son, asked to come, and I told him I'd spare him this at least. This he didn't need to see. A push of that silver button: the artificial voice says *third floor, going up* in a childlike voice, a voice so small and crystalline it could have been mine.

Friday afternoon. I've taken the latest possible appointment Sarah had (delayed already a couple of times, with various unbelievable excuses). It's my second time seeing her. As we head down the hallway, I shiver, wanting and not wanting to meet. How have we ended up here, of all places, moving like mummies through morgue-frozen air, eating artificially-flavored oatmeal, after a lifetime of less dire days? When can we drive back to Leaf Lake, catch its blue-green sheen, its schools of cold, fresh fish, again?

"Good afternoon," Nicole says, stepping in front of me when Sarah opens, voice sweet as tea with the ice taken out.

"Same," Sarah says, more laconic than ever, with a sort of *I-haven't-forgotten* smile. "Glad you've decided to come back."

Her white coat is open, revealing a black collared shirt underneath, and her dark clogs thump in quick progression as she guides us in. I look at her again, calibrate: she can't be more than thirty-five. Her face isn't pretty, but unusual, with a turned-up nose that looks somewhat doglike, and freckled skin so transparent I can almost see her bones.

"It's the least I could do," I say, although part of me wants to take a step back—one step, two—get a running start, and hightail it out. But I'm no gazelle, far from it, and leaving would be embarrassing. Still, Sarah bugs me. She's pleasant enough, but there's something cold and clinical about her, something that makes me wonder if she isn't just too serious for me.

“Should we sit?” Nicole says, still in the doorway, hands fingering her jacket buttons, as if struggling to keep herself at peace. She’s overdressed, her white jacket the same one she wore to a wedding this past summer, and black heels a bit too tall for her. All of a sudden, I feel a rush of guilt, for having allowed her to be a part of these meetings, to come with me. I’ve always taken on the difficult tasks myself.

“Oh, sorry,” Sarah says, sweeping her arms wide. “Please do.”

She moves aside, while Nicole barrels forward and drops down in one of the straight-armed chairs facing the particleboard desk. Twelve years together, and I’m still not sure what’s on her mind, nor what my diagnosis means for her. Sure, we’ve talked about it, the way people do, but the messy details—the actual progression of motor neurons dying, and the way I’m going to need a wheelchair, and going to lose my ability to make love to her—we’ve left unsaid. I’m glad, in a way, but I know we can’t keep this up long.

I take the other chair. Sitting takes me five seconds, ten. My range of motion: less than before, for sure, but terrible? Not terrible. I bent my right arm at the elbow, the left. Still okay. *Stay dark and quiet, calm, implacable*: that what I’ve told myself. Easy to say. I think of Egyptian pharaohs, headed into the afterlife, clutching toy boats and cats, and wonder how they’re holding up down there. Maybe they’ve got a message for me, scribbled in hieroglyphics, something like *hey, listen up. It’s not bad down here*.

After we sit, Sarah settles in, swiveling her chair, as if nervous to be talking to us. The office has been stripped of pleasantries, or maybe never had them. No blue and pink abstract paintings like in dentists’ offices. No happy and frowning faces and a one to ten rating, on a poster saying, *How do you feel?* Only a few tacked-up posters reading *Safe Swallowing Tips* and a stack of hardback medical texts, piled a foot and a half high.

“We’ll collect your voice,” Sarah says, in an almost robotic tone, “one way or the other. Voice banking is known to drastically improve patients’ quality of life. Even in the later stages. Your case, I imagine, will be no different. The only question is which method to choose.”

Voice banking—the term practically nobody knows, unless they’re a researcher, or ill. “It’s like words are money,” Nicole said when she first heard the term. She’s right. The way it works, if you have a disease where you’ll lose your voice, you record words and phrases to be replayed later, so you can keep sounding like yourself. You don’t lose the words when you withdraw them—they stay in wait, like dogs at the door, ready for you to use them again.

The old process, the one almost everyone's been using, meant you had to record every word and phrase individually. *Help, flower, nice to meet you, goddammit, goodbye.* Anything you might want to say, you had to think of in advance, then stick those words into the computer, so they could pop out whenever you needed them. A defense against silence, but a pretty tedious one—and what if you wanted to say something you'd never thought of? You're basically screwed.

The new way, called *voice synthesis*, sounds way more natural, like a computer imitating a man. You can make a whole new voice, so the computer sounds like a new version of you: flowing, words slipping into words like water into water, nothing cutting them apart, nothing stopping them. At least that's what the scientists say, in the dozens of reports I've skimmed, and I try my best to trust them. The best part: if I can get this voice right, it can be a donor voice, given as a baseline to others with damaged voices. Their partial voices will be infused with my cadences, and they'll begin to sound like themselves all over again.

Sounds simple enough. But given my profession, and my obsession with sound—I've been in radio for thirty years—I want a crystalline voice and nothing less.

In the three weeks since my diagnosis, I've spent more time researching symptoms than I ever did in the past twenty years. ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, a *progressive neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord*. A Greek word—a meaning *no*, *myo* meaning *muscle*, and *trophic* meaning *nourishment*. Stick all that together, and you've got a mess of muscles not being fed, of getting starved, no matter how much you eat.

Meaning what? Meaning, my body will get weaker, and eventually—anywhere from a few months to over five years—I'll stop being able to move. In all that time, my mind will probably stay free and clear. Get this: I'll be able to think fine, have thoughts river through me, but my body will stay totally still. At some point, I'll be like a big glass box, or a spaceship, immobile but freakishly there. Read the brochures, and they'll tell you: *average life expectancy from the time of diagnosis: three to five years*. Lots of people get less than that.

Last week, while I was in one of these research binges, Nicole padded into my office and laid one hand over my shoulder, one across my back, like she used to do when we first met. Her touch singed down to my toes, although I tried not to react. Was she thinking back to our years together, our long dark spots of silence, our arguments, our dreams—of all the single built-up days we'd lived? Was she thinking of Henry, to the moment he was born, with a scream so

enormous it seemed to take his entire body over? Or of his daughter Erin, running circles around the room till she collapses, gobbling ice cream, moving fast and hopeful through the world?

Of how they'll lose me soon enough? How we won't play catch out on the lawn in summertime, with a sea-colored ball, letting the air clang between us, the sun blaze deep into the whites of our eyes? And that ball hanging between us, hanging in late light, for one second, two—then arcing down, with a clean, stiff drop, reminding us, all over, of gravity—that ball will linger on, even after my death?

Who knows. Nicole sat for a second, biting her lip, thoughts opaque as pebbles, then with a heaving sigh, up and left. Off to the kitchen to chop some radishes for a summer salad.

Stuffing me with vitamins, she is. I tried to tell her no vitamins would cure what I've got, but she humphed, like she knew more about healing than I ever would. After twenty years in nursing, she knows her stuff. She senses things I don't even say. But there are some parts I still haven't told her, like how hard I have to work not to pound the table, pound and curse my own body's desertion, and how much fight—how much fire, really—I've still got, and how often I stay up at night, convinced that my disease is no an illusion, and that someone, great god or weary angel, is going to swoop down, spout out a few spells, and burn it away from me.

Now she sits beside me, clutching my hand in a jumpy way. Together, we stare forward, a copy of insurance paperwork on my lap, like a portrait of the American Gothic, hospital-style.

“So we're going with the new process,” I say, keeping my voice at an even pitch: no catches, no coughs. I've rehearsed these words in my mind, spent hours in the mirror, mouthing them, but it doesn't matter: I sound nervous, rushed. “The synthesis, right?”

“That's your best option, yes,” Sarah says, standing to grab a textbook. She talks with such certainty, it's like we've already gotten started. “To record words now to be synthesized later. If we can get enough single words recorded, we'll be able to create any new word in the English language that we want, in your tone of voice exactly. That means you won't be limited to saying only the words you've recorded. Any words you can think of—any words you can type, or eyeblink—you can say, in sentences that sound like you do now.”

“Eyeblink?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, mouth tinged downwards, “in the later stages.”

“Right.”

My heart thuds. Why hadn't I thought about that?

“The problem is,” Sarah continues—slower now—“doing so much recording can weaken you. If you aren’t careful, you might even shorten your life.”

Nicole jiggles her gold bracelets up her arms, so the room clangs with sound. The light from the single skylight hits her face, leaving her half in shadow. She’s always been the implacable one, coming back from twelve-hour shifts at the ER without a complaint. And now—I shake my head, trying to clear it, trying not to think about those two words, *shorten* and *life*—but my right foot reminds me, the heel, dragging when I walk, making me have to pull it up, to teach it, every time. And they say it’ll only get worse.

“What I’m worried about’s the poverty of it all,” Nicole says. There’s something oddly foreign about her expression: she looks like she’d expected to wake up on a beach, or *en route* to a safari, anywhere but here. “The fact that we’ve got so few choices. Like we’re sunk. Why say any more than the most basic stuff? Who cares about his voice at this point?”

“I get it,” I say. “But it’s something I’ve always wanted,” I say, wishing we’d had this conversation earlier. “A legacy. You know, if I get the synthesis finished, I can donate it?”

“I’d rather have *you* living.”

“That’s not in the cards.”

“But what if you can’t finish? What if—”

“Then I won’t talk,” I say, steadying myself on the plastic chair arms. “Or I’ll use whatever robotic voice they’ve got.”

“Well, I don’t want that for you.”

“Believe me, I don’t either—”

“The technology we’ve got now will amaze you,” Sarah says, pulling out a raft of computer printouts and pointing to a series of squares packed with zigzaggy lines. “Customized synthetic voices. Patients will sound like themselves, but newly understandable. We’ve even found a way to get your emotions across—you’ll record the same words, sounding happy, sad, and neutral, and then you’ll get to pick which one you want. And you’re right. Not only will you get to use the new voice, but your recordings—as long as they’re high enough quality—will be used as a donor voice for those in need.”

“But what about the risks?” I ask, taking a page from her and scanning the squares. The slope of each line plunges down. My hand drips with sweat. A cold, spidery sense charts through my veins. Nerves, maybe, or maybe an early warning, a forecast of thunderstorms, disease. That

hand opens, balls shut, tests itself. What if my hand totally stops working? What's a hand anyway? What, other than an appendage of the actual me?

"It's a balancing act," Sarah says, glancing from the page to me and back, as if trying to decide how much I see, and exactly how stressed I am. "The more you speak, the more you'll weaken yourself. With ALS, muscle weakness can snowball. You can think about speaking like any other activity. Pretty soon, it can start getting strenuous. Pushing too hard can wear you out. At some point, sooner rather than later, you might not be able to speak at all."

"That's horrible," Nicole says.

"I'm only being honest." Sarah looks weepy. "I'd rather be upfront with you."

All of a sudden, watching them, I feel totally distant, like I'm mutating into a whale, or some other uncomfortable creature. A creature who struggles to breathe. Floating through deep clouds, clouds in which there are hardly any free spaces, and no openings. Thirty years of broadcasting my voice—nationally, internationally—telling everyone else's life histories, their greatest moments—and now I'll have no voice at all.

"What about the stories I want to tell?" I ask. They've been marinating in my mind for years: a dozen or more, stories I'd wanted to tell Henry and Erin, but never formulated.

"I know," Nicole says, forehead wrinkling like the skin of a pear. "The stories. But you've got to rest. I want you here as long as you can be—here and speaking—"

"I get it," I say. "For you. For Henry and Erin. But—"

"Your kids?" Sarah interrupts, leaning forward, as if preparing to interview me. A single skylight on the ceiling lets in a cloud.

"Child and grandchild," I say, conjuring a picture: Erin's eyes bright as a light-filled gazebo, hair a blond flash when she dances, which is practically all the time—Henry's face a muddle, often lost in thought, steel-wire-black hair, equally dark eyes, fixating on his science books, the differences between species, his rare fish. Most of his childhood I spent on planes: Indonesia, Argentina, Brazil. He used to joke that, when daddy came home from work, it was like getting to know a stranger all over again.

"They must be worried," Sarah says.

"Henry is, of course," I say, and then, with a small rush, "Erin doesn't know."

"How old is she?"

"Only six." The words stick in my mouth.

“Oh.” Sarah inhales, a breathy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Nicole says, taking the pages from me and fanning them out, as if they’d been given to her for making air.

“Erin’s so young. Got so much ahead of her.”

“True.” I breathe in hard and let my chest expand. Forty days since my diagnosis, and I still can’t wrap my mind around what I’ve got. It’s like I’m moving through warp speed, through a funny time capsule, where in half a second I think back to my childhood lake, and forward to Erin, to the ears that she’s got to grow into, to her pants that keep threatening not to fit, that grow shorter and show her ankles whenever I check.

After all these troubles, that’s what most sears me. The feeling that days with Erin will sweep off, and I won’t be able to catch them—that I’ll miss her and she’ll miss me, or worse—she won’t even know who I really am.

What will her memories be of me? Will she even have any? I can’t bear to think of her mind closing up, with a cold rush of water, no memory of me but a few photographs, some blurry images. She’s only been to Leaf Lake a couple of times, and those few times, we stayed an hour or so, no more. If only we could have lingered longer, I could have seen into her mind, and she into mine. Memories, I’d have told her, are more than what she sees on the lake’s surface, more than the rising of its ripples, the swish of what look like pebbles or bits of dirt, but which turn out, more often than not, to be leaves. But she’s too young to worry over the past, or the past’s troubles. Too young to want to cut into memory.

Nicole lays her arm over mine, in parallel, so our fingers meet. *You’re holding up?* she says, hoarse-voiced, in a near whisper. I nod. The rush of her cool skin frightens and soothes me. I’m glad she’s here, and yet part of me wishes she wasn’t. If only I could curl up like a sick animal and hibernate. If only I could hide this mess from her.

“Erin is quite a pixie,” Nicole says, with a strained cheer. “You’ll have to meet her.”

“I’d like that,” Sarah says. “Later on.”

That *later on* sounds ominous. But then again, anything with a future is ominous.

“We’ll get started tomorrow,” Sarah says. “If you’re ready.”

“Aren’t there other options?” Nicole asks.

“We’ve done voice banking for years with ALS patients, using the old methods,” Sarah says, taking the top textbook from a huge stack on her desk and flipping to a bookmarked page.

Managing Complex Degenerative Disorders. “They record words and phrases and—just as on a tape recorder—play them back. Synthesizing sounds more natural, but takes more time.”

“What about going back to the old way then?” Nicole says. “I can’t have him weakening. I’ll take a robotic voice over a perfect one anytime.”

“That’s certainly an option,” Sarah says, with a furtive glance at me. “It’s your husband who asked to be involved.”

“He *what?*” Nicole says, flushing as if after too much wine. “You didn’t.”

“I must have mentioned it,” I say. When I got the information about the synthesizing process, I knew she’d say no. I wanted to find out my options for myself. So I did what nearly everyone these days does, post-diagnosis—for weeks, from around midnight to two, while Nicole slept, I went online and read through the first twenty hits about voice banking. Then I called Sarah—telling Nicole nothing, feeling a heave of guilt at the lapse—and said I was game. Along the way, I found out way more than I wanted to know about the technicalities of voice banking: *fundamental frequencies, resonant peaks*. Everyone’s got a unique vocal identity, I discovered. A collection of learned habits and natural tones. That’s the reason I sound like me, and you sound like you. There’s a catch, though: if you can twist and turn the consonants and vowels enough, you can make somebody sound like somebody else.

“You never mentioned anything,” Nicole says, gripping my hand.

“Well, maybe not explicitly.” Her fingernails dig into my palm.

“So what, you made this decision without me?”

“The decision’s not totally made—”

“Oh, come on,” she says, glancing over at Sarah, as if expecting her to jump in, but she only shakes her head.

“I wasn’t trying to hide,” I tell her, knowing I probably was. I drop Nicole’s hand. She lets it stay flat on her lap. “I know it’s risky. But once I started reading about this project—I couldn’t stop. Couldn’t stop thinking about what it could mean.”

“If you’re not alive,” Nicole says, in a more bitter voice than I’ve ever heard, “it won’t mean anything.”

“True.” She’s got a point, of course. I drop my head. “But these days, some things start getting blurrier, and some get clearer. This voice business lights me up inside.”

It's my father I think about, although I don't mention him—the man who, for years, said he'd tell us his stories, but never managed before he left for Vietnam. Years later, when I asked my mother, she explained (with a quiet, slow voice, almost chanting, as if she'd had to calm herself down too) that she didn't know most of those stories either. Rather, he'd kept those stories silent, saying they were too painful to be discussed, and that not knowing them was a blessing. I didn't see that as a blessing, though, and still don't see.

“With such an early diagnosis, we can probably still preserve your voice, using the new method,” Sarah says. “We'll just have to be careful.”

“Hold on,” Nicole says. “We still need time.”

“So where's the balance?” I say, letting my voice crack. “How do we strike it right?”

“Regular checkups, for a start. Dr. Zeller will supervise, and I'll be your main contact on the voice banking process. As for the words—”

“You haven't decided yet, have you?” Nicole asks me.

“No,” I say, with a rise in my voice, “of course not. Planning ahead. Go on.”

“We'd need to start with the highest frequency,” Sarah says, ignoring the interruption, “those that occur most in the English language. Then we'll go to the less common ones. Unfortunately, the most frequent words aren't super exciting. Words like *the, an, yes, no, home, bathroom, day, night*. That's why along the way, I want to make sure you record what's meaningful to you. Get any special words down—any words you want to make certain sound right—and stories too. That way, even if we don't manage to finish the synthesis, we'll have at least those pieces down.”

“Stories?” My mind starts spinning off. “There are so many.”

“Nothing extensive,” she says, holding up a finger. “That's not the point. I'm talking a dozen, two dozen words. Inside jokes. Phrases that could comfort you later on.”

“Stories,” I say again, letting the word linger like summer. “Where would I start?”

“A few dozen words,” Nicole says, so the wind rushes out of me.

I sit still, still as ball of sugar, and stare at the yellow wall. Then I gaze back to see them both staring at me. I want to tell them how the world looks from under a large, flat shadow. How the desert looks when you're racing away, a hurt gazelle. My tongue lunges in every corner of my mouth, a big fat bundle. Misbehaving. Not mine. Not me.

“What if Henry and Erin could have my stories?” I ask. “I'm just saying.”

“You aren’t *just saying*,” Nicole says, with a worried half-smile.

“Okay...”

Nicole turns to Sarah, her index finger held up in a gesture I can’t read. She smells of the last perfume I bought her, sandalwood, mixed in with the faint reek of sweat. Her wedding ring shimmers. Ten years ago, almost to the day, we married, in an outdoor ceremony on Virginia Beach: a sunny day, until our vows came, and a gusty rainstorm hit. I want to put a pause on each of those past days, pause and replay, and clear off the forgetfulness, the dirt and grime, leaving only the cleanest, crispest images: vanilla cake spooling in the back of my mouth; crystalline frosting pinging down my throat, bells from the local church that rang out, signaling; then, forwarding through years, Henry, raised and whimpering, being born, and then to all the years I spent attending to the breaking story, crouching in a four-person helicopter, listening to the blades whirring over my head, and thinking only of who I’d interview, and whether all the batteries of my recording devices were at above fifty percent.

“You’ll see how he is,” Nicole says to Sarah, leaning over the desk as if sharing an unwanted secret. “In broadcasting all his life, and now he can’t stop. A natural storyteller. A perfect candidate, you’d think, until he goes on and on about the trout in the lakes of Virginia, or about the aspens lining his childhood lake, and you’ll wish for quiet once in a while.”

“Seriously?” I ask.

“I’m just saying.” She smiles, but I can tell the smile is laced with fear.

“Nothing wrong with being passionate.”

“Or with trying to protect you.”

“Except I don’t want to be.”

“Maybe not, but—”

“But nothing,” I say. “I don’t.”

She strokes three fingers up my right arm, a gesture that always used to calm me, but now stirs a grimy irritation. How much, and how quickly, will this disease distance us from one another? How much, when I’m no longer able to touch?

“Look,” Sarah says, with an urgency that surprises me, “we’re all on edge. We want to keep you as strong as possible. That’s the priority. But meanwhile, we’ve got to make sure you say what you need to.”

“Sure,” I say, relieved, but with a whistling in my chest, a whistling hollow: are my lungs already weakening? “There’s definitely stuff I’d like to have recorded. Too much, like Nicole says. Stories like heirlooms, to pass down. And not only written, but spoken, in my voice.”

“Think about it,” Sarah says, taking the paper with the zigzags back. I’d forgotten I was holding it. When she glances down the page, her face shifts from light to dark. “Write your stories down, and then we’ll decide what to record. We’ll have to be selective, but that doesn’t mean we can’t record anything.”

“We’ll discuss it, the two of us,” Nicole says. “Then we’ll let you know.”

I nod, on instinct. That’s something I’ve gotten good at recently: nodding at doctors, at specialists, at practically anyone who comes near. *Sure, next Friday. Sure, another appointment.* That’s become my modus operandi, a total shift. Now I’m half me, half diagnosis. Now there’s a ghost running wild through my mind, ringing cymbals, tickling my ears, saying, *Tomorrow? Will you stay until tomorrow? Watch out: every day, you’ll be able to move a little less.* And I say *yes, say not fearful, say bring it on.* But that’s only what I say, not how I feel.

“Great,” Sarah says, passing me her card, black-lettered on a nearly blank space. “Here’s my number. I’ll schedule you for the same time next week. Call if there’s any change.”

“Sure,” I say, probably looking anything but sure.

Sarah creases the paper inside a manila folder, with a look of uncomfortable restraint. “Look, I can’t pretend to know what it’s like. But I’ve taken patients through this before. I think you’ll see, as you go along, there’s something to the process. Something meaningful that’ll rise up. You might be surprised. You might surprise yourself.”

“I guess you never know,” Nicole says, with the doubtful tone of someone who does. A beat of silence. She grabs my hand. “You coming?”

Her voice breaks in the middle, and from the look of her face, she’s got a minute or less before tears. I lace my fingers in hers. As hard as I can, I try for a strong grip. The skylight splashes sun onto her face. She releases. I look away. There are only a few things I’ll remember, in the end: my children’s faces, the look of Leaf Lake in summer, and Nicole in general, and Nicole in this moment, the two of us sitting, in front of Sarah, saying nothing, simply here.

“I’m coming,” I say, but stay seated, in the antiseptic air. The silence around us stirs me. What strength will I need, moving forward? How much will I be able to take? Those questions

hover before me: unanswered, unanswerable. I want to cut them with a freezing knife. How long will those questions hang before me? How long will I keep hanging on?

Blurry-headed, I tell Sarah goodbye, say we'll meet next week, and she half-smiles—the smile of someone who wants to say more—and says goodbye too.

A hand on my shoulder.

“It’s time,” Nicole says, in an echoing voice.

“Oh. Right.”

I get up, letting every muscle crane open, every bone, telling the jittering inside me to still. Whatever I have to live for darkens in me, darkens and stills. It feels like rising up from a swimming pool, that shaky feeling after you’ve just swum fifty laps, most of it freestyle, and rip off your swim cap, and feel the sudden rush of regular air.