

How to Lose

Natalie woke that morning with blood between her thighs and dripping down her legs. Usually she can predict her periods, but her body's out of whack¹ from the abandoned fertility treatments. AJ wants her to watch him practice holding his breath in the bathtub, so she sits on the toilet lid. He wears his blue swim trunks. "It feels good," he says, stepping in. "Not too hot," he adds, reminding Natalie that he's better off – at eight – filling the bathtub and gauging² the temperature himself. He closes his eyes, holds his breath, and slides below the water, legs still bent in the short tub, his hands fisted at his sides. She watches his eyes open and widen. A second later he's sitting up, shaking his dark wet hair, saying, "I opened my eyes underwater!" Plugging his nose with thumb and forefinger this time, he descends again, cheeks air-puffed, eyes squeezed shut. She feels him counting, practicing, determined. [...]

Bad Luck Thursday, AJ calls today, because his swim lessons are on Thursdays after school. He's the only one in his class who hasn't gone underwater. This is his last chance or else he's a Guppy again, quarantined to the wading pool blowing bubbles with the toddlers. "I can't be a wuss³," he told Natalie. For the past week he's been practicing holding his breath in the bathtub and counting to ten. [...]

The other day AJ told Natalie that he believed he was fat. They had a serious discussion. [...] She swore she'd let AJ know if he got fat. But later he wanted to talk again. He'd decided that she wouldn't tell him the truth.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because," he said, "you're my aunt and don't want to hurt my feelings. You feel bad already and sad for me like everyone else does." He didn't say because his mom died, but she knew that that was what he meant. AJ calls Natalie *Mom* in public now – he's been doing so for over a year, and living with her coming on two⁴ – so people won't talk or ask questions. But in private she's still Aunt Natalie, because they both feel an unspoken devotion to his real mother, no matter how much she fucked up.

"You're wrong," Natalie told AJ. "You can trust me. As your aunt and your legal guardian, I'm obligated to tell you if you're fat, because it's a health risk and my responsibility is to keep you healthy." This seemed to appease him.

AJ dresses and then sits for his breakfast, his usual: a toasted chocolate chip bagel with cream cheese on his favorite SpongeBob⁵ plastic plate and a matching pebbled plastic cup of orange juice. Natalie believes – like AJ's therapist once told her – that a busy schedule and a routine are best for grief and trauma, and she and AJ both appreciate their rituals. They've been late to school too much, and Natalie urges AJ to hurry and eat. [...]

"Here," Natalie says, running a towel over AJ's head, and he ducks, saying, "Stop." But then he holds still and lets her dry his hair, his glance granting her permission. He picks at his bagel and takes little sips of orange juice, delaying on purpose. They both hate the school drop-off. Saying goodbye is difficult, more so lately. Does it have to do with the second anniversary of her sister's death? They've tried not saying goodbye, walking together to class, not walking together, feigned indifference⁶, pep talks and affectionate sendoffs, hand-holding assurances,

¹ *out of whack*: ude af balance

² justere

³ tøsedreng

⁴ *coming on two*: tætt på to (år)

⁵ SvampeBob Firkant (animationsfigur)

⁶ *feigned indifference*: har ladet, som om de var ligeglade

40 simply touching pinkies one last time in a coded I-love-you goodbye. His brave and sweet expression, how he tries not to be afraid – tries not to cry – devastates her, and most of the time she drives away from the school in tears.

In the buildup to drop-off the tension escalates, and this morning he says, “I hate school, I wish it would burn,” and she says, “Eat your bagel.” Her husband, Phil, a production assistant, works long hours and travels and is barely home, so he can’t take over the drop-offs like the school counselor⁷ suggested. [...]

On the drive to school, AJ apologizes and then stares out the passenger window. It’s the usual blue-skied Southern California morning, a few white bushy clouds and the palm fronds⁸ shimmering.

50 He says, “You don’t think I can do it?”

“You can,” she says. “You’ve been practicing.”

He faces her. “What if I can’t?”

“Really,” she says. “You’ve been practicing.”

“A pool is harder.”

55 “Lots of people have trouble learning to swim,” she says.

“The noise under the water is different than the bath,” he says. “It sounds” – he considers, then decides – “like a big empty space that can swallow me.”

She’s about to respond when he adds, “I hate that sound.”

“The noise won’t swallow you. I promise.”

60 He gives her a patient look.

“You want to skip it?”

He looks out the window again.

“I won’t be disappointed,” she says, in case. She knows he knows she has a policy against quitting. “We can do private lessons.”

65 “I don’t want to be a wuss,” he says.

“Please stop using that word.”

They’re silent for a minute.

“What if I buy earplugs? That might help. People wear them in the pool all the time.”

He nods thoughtfully and she’s pleased. [...]

70 They’re on time and AJ tells her not to park the car, meaning he’ll get out at the drop-off on his own, she shouldn’t walk with him today. He has his look – I’m going to be brave, it says, I’m trying, I’m doing my best, because I love you and need you and need you and love you – and she feels herself clenching as she pulls the car to the curb. He steps out – resolute – and gives her a grim look. There’s something wizened⁹ and sad in his expression, some finality¹⁰, acceptance, and incomprehension, and she feels the equivalent blooming inside her. [...]

Natalie’s supposed to work on designing a website, but when she gets home from buying the earplugs, she can’t concentrate. At her desk, underneath a stack of papers, she finds a form she’d filled out for AJ’s baseball coach. She hadn’t turned it in, instead filling out another with a more generic¹¹, more acceptable response. There’s an X over the form, but she can still read it:

⁷ vejleder

⁸ *palm fronds*: palmeblade

⁹ viscent

¹⁰ uigenkaldelighed

¹¹ generelt

80 *Are there any personal or physical problems I should know (or conference privately) about?*

My sister, AJ's mother, died last year of an accidental overdose. AJ found her. He said she looked like a mannequin of his mom. He can't look at pictures yet. Therapist says this is normal.

85 *She was the youngest; I'm the oldest.*

This morning I noticed his breath smelled and I said, "Have you been brushing your teeth?" Yes, he said, but he's brushing with water only! I'm in over my head.

Natalie crumples the form and throws it in the trash. She liked AJ's baseball coach, with his practical, military-like sense of discipline. He wore a cumbersome metal back brace¹² over his fancy shirts to the games and practices, and at the preliminary parent meeting, he said that though he wanted and expected to win, baseball wasn't just about winning. "It's also about learning how to lose," he said. [...] Natalie got in the habit of waiting in her car for AJ. During the games she volunteered in the snack stand, pouring boiling water into Cup-a-Soups and making hot chocolates. AJ wanted to quit, and he purposely lost his bat, admitting he let it roll from the trunk when he was supposed to be putting it away. [...] Despite everything, they finished the season. AJ keeps his trophy on the bedstand next to his lamp.

Phil calls during his break. "Don't worry," he says. "He'll be okay. Whether he makes it or not." [...]

100 "He's putting too much pressure on himself," Phil continues.

"He's got the doggy paddle¹³ down," Natalie says.

"Good!"

"The other kids in his class are already younger than him. Imagine having to be a Guppy again." [...]

105 "A month from now, he won't remember," Phil says. "It won't matter."

"I wish," says Natalie. "He says the sound underwater has an emptiness that's going to swallow him. So I bought earplugs."

"It's probably related to Gina," he says.

"Isn't everything?" Natalie says. [...]

110 AJ reminds Natalie of her sister. [...] She decides to tell AJ, saying, "You remind me of your mom." As soon as she speaks, remorse¹⁴ and pity stir, and she worries that she's upset him. He's at the dining room table, picking at a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, not wanting to eat too much or too soon before swim class. [...]

"You remind me of her, too," AJ says.

115 She's surprised.

He takes a sip of his water and then asks: "Why don't you and Uncle Phil have kids?" He sees something in her face and says, "Sorry."

"It's okay," she says. "We've tried."

120 He nods. "I like Uncle Phil," he says, peeling the bread from his sandwich. "Mom used to say," he says, "that you were the responsible one, Aunt Caroline the ordinary one, and she – Mom – the bad one."

¹² *cumbersome metal back brace*: klodset metalrygstøtte

¹³ *doggy paddle*: hundesvømning

¹⁴ *dårlig samvittighed*

“Your mom always thought she was worse than she was,” she says.

AJ says, “My teacher says everything happens for a reason. But I don’t think so.”

125 “That’s stupid,” Natalie agrees, adding, “and not true. Bad things happen for no reason.” He seems uncertain, so she adds: “Your mother didn’t mean to leave you.”

“Okay,” he says, looking away.

130 Natalie sits in the stands and watches with the other parents and spectators. She wears her darkest sunglasses in case she gets emotional. The instructor, Emiliano, is a high school junior from the water polo team – the lessons are at the outdoor high school pool – and he takes AJ aside near the showers, sensing his nervousness, giving him a pep talk. [...] AJ nods solemnly. He’s wearing his earplugs, but she knows he can hear, and his swim goggles are perched on his head like glasses, kicking up his hair. Seven other students have showered and assembled in the shallow end, waiting. The water is bright and sparkly and smells of chlorine.

135 Emiliano leads AJ to the steps and they wade in. Natalie feels her stomach constrict, understanding that AJ is going first while the others watch. Emiliano demonstrates floating on his own back; then it’s AJ’s turn, and he flips to his back and floats with Emiliano’s hands beneath him but not quite touching. He’s doing very well. His blue swim trunks – the same ones he wore all week to practice in the bathtub – inflate a bit. The kids are in a circle around them, the water undulating in little waves. Next AJ stands and pulls his swim goggles down to cover his eyes. He grasps the side of the pool and kicks his legs, and when she sees that his face is down in the water, her chest balloons with anticipation. She loves him and will always love him and he is hers and she is his. Then he lets go of the side and submerges below the water and she counts with him: one, two, three, four – imagining the terrible sound, a pulsing nothing that swallowed her sister – and he’s up again at ten. Emiliano is smiling, and AJ, she sees, has pulled off his goggles and is searching for her face. She lifts from the stands and sees him see her – his stare incredulous¹⁵, his smile growing, his arm lifting, and his hand with the goggles waving. Her legs tremble as she goes to him.

(2018)

¹⁵ vantro