



Swimming Lessons

Meryl McQueen

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'Look at Mommy, Serena! See how high I'm pushing you, all the way up to the sky.' Monique Johnston stepped back to watch her thirteen-month-old daughter on the swings. Stretching her hands over her head, Monique yawned and outlined a seagull crawling across the blue. Attention again on her daughter, Monique held arms stiff at her sides and followed the idle of the swing as it sputtered.

Too late, Monique reached for the chains holding the safety swing. Serena erupted in a siren, an animal in a steel trap wail that caught the attention of another young mother tending to her toddler in the sandbox. With a sympathetic grimace, she shrugged at Monique and said, 'Guess your daughter really loves the swing, huh? How do you tear her away?'

Sending Serena back to the invisible stars with a frantic push, Monique scraped up a tired grin. 'You know how kids are,' she mumbled, raising an eyebrow.

'Yeah, sure. Sometimes, though, you gotta be firm. Zachary, let's go. Time for snack and snuggles, honey.'

The toddler puppy dog eyed his mother into one more slide. Two. She laughed and called out to Monique again,

'Exactly. Zach knows that I'm powerless against that sweet pout and his 'more, more, more, pleeeeeeaaassssee Mommy!' Most of the time when he gives me that look I just melt.'

The mother and son negotiated a final flying leap off the top of the slide. The little boy rolled as he landed, giggling and rubbing the sand from his hands. Monique waved a limp goodbye and felt her face melt into exhaustion.

She hadn't slept much the night before. Or the night before that, or an unbroken string of nights before those to week thirty of her first pregnancy. Serena was anything but living up to her namesake. Monique and Scott laughed the first few weeks, when their new baby mewled with wet, immature lungs in a meek imitation of a hungry cat.

The ear infections started while Scott was in Miami on business. Three a.m., and ten-week-old Serena had howled herself quiet. Monique carried her child against her skin under her sweatshirt, singing and rocking.

A spiked fever, a rush to the ER, and an intern who saw them as the sun came up at six.

‘Serena’s got otitis media—a little unusual in such a young infant, but we see this sometimes with preemies. Give her a few drops of baby Tylenol to see if she’ll sleep, and make an appointment with your pediatrician later today if the fever hasn’t broken.’

That was the first of many sleepless nights. Most, if Monique dared to pin them all together in her head. The paper doll cutouts of days, weeks, months balled up in her fist. The swing slowed, and Monique reached for Serena.

It was an exact science, the physical contact with her child. As Monique’s hands circled Serena’s waist, the scream again. Uninterrupted for breath, it stabbed her heart for the three and a half seconds it took for Monique to deposit her child on the ground. Off switch, shut down, shh.

Most afternoons, she spent at the park. Correction. Most afternoons, rain, shine, and even one desperate day of sleet and snow, Monique took her daughter to the park and let the swing cradle her to a close approximation of calm. As long as she could stand it—an hour, sometimes three—Monique stood guard over her daughter and let the pendulum rock them both into a stupor.

After the ear infections, which slapped them once a month or more with fever and dehydration, came the silence. At ten months, Serena found something to swallow all the noise in a room. Her timid newborn kitten cries, her downpour of goosebump owl screeching, gone. Scott noticed it first.

‘Honey? Honey, can you come in here for a second?’

‘What is it, Scott?’

‘Look, Mon. At Serena. She likes the box.’

A discarded cardboard container, recent home to their new DVD player, lay with its flaps open on the rug against the couch. Their daughter, slow to walk but quick to wriggle her way along the floor with one foot

on the ground and one knee underneath her belly, lay on her side. Two pudgy pink fingers outstretched, she traced the edge of the box.

Scott rolled over to Serena and stroked her back with his palm. At the touch, the baby stiffened and threw herself onto her back, a helpless turtle. Monique rushed from the doorway and scooped up her daughter. The crying shifted gears, scraping against their eardrums as it battled its way through Serena's ragged gasps for air. 'Jeez, Scott, you scared her! Can't you see she was enjoying that?'

'Mon, I didn't mean to startle her! Here, let me make up with my sweet baby girl, okay?' He held out his arms and took Serena from her mother. The infant squirmed and twisted, screaming. 'Okay, okay Serena. Here, sweetheart, let's look at the box.'

He gently laid her down on the plush navy rug and held her hand against the box. 'See, there it is...there's the box. Happy now?'

Concentrating on how the scene played out between father and daughter Monique whispered, 'It worked, Scott. She's fascinated!'

Monique cleared the table and sat down to read the latest National Geographic with Vivaldi in the background. Scott washed up in the kitchen. Twenty minutes, thirty, forty. Serena lay on her side, sliding the index and middle fingers of her left hand back and forth across the edge of the box.

Scott walked into the living room, drying his hands. 'She asleep?'

'No, still enthralled with that box. Forget all her stuffed animals or rattles. This is the calmest she's been for months.' They let her lie there, stroking the cardboard, until she fell asleep. Monique carried her up to bed.

Boxes, swings, and mashed bananas: three instant cures for their child's fussing. She wouldn't eat much else, and eight months of continuous ear infections had delayed her speech. At Serena's first checkup after she turned one, the doctor had prepared to tell them that was all it was. He never got the chance, because the truth was louder than all of his pat reassurances.

They sat on the rigid fake leather chairs in Dr. Speroni's office, across from his cluttered laminate desk. Unwilling to be constrained on her parents' laps, Serena rocked on the floor at their feet. The office smelled of baby powder and disinfectant, a sweet, itchy scent that crawled up their noses and dared them to sneeze. Phil Speroni, tall enough to stoop through doorways and skinny enough to invite comparisons with skeletons, hunched forward in his swivel chair.

'Scott, Monique: I'll level with you. Serena has what appears to be a slight developmental delay.'

Monique already knew. This, and more. She waited. Scott protested. 'What does that mean? How do you know? How can we...?'

Their pediatrician shuffled his hands. 'As you are both aware, those chronic ear infections have contributed to Serena's late onset speech development. But over the past few months, I've observed something else. The walking, for instance...'

Scott tensed. 'That could be anything—I've read the books, doc, and lots of kids don't walk until fifteen months. Serena's ready to, she's building the confidence, she...'

Monique patted his arm and whispered, 'Honey? Honey, it's alright, Dr. Speroni's just trying to help.'
Scott's voice found its stride and he reached for Serena. 'My daughter's fine, she...'

The wave of helpless rage and terror slammed the three adults without warning. Serena's cries grew to tsunamis, battering her parents and pinning the doctor to his chair. Above the screeching, Monique yelled at Scott. 'Put her down, for God's sake, put her down!'

On contact with the ground, they were all deaf in the sudden quiet. The clock ticking, the traffic noise three floors below, a distant phone: each of these reclaimed space in their perceptions. Monique found her voice first.

'She's not fine, Scott. She has never been fine, not since the obstetrician placed her on my chest after she was born and she wriggled to escape me.'

The tears popped from lowered lids, pearls that drooped and swelled as they dropped into Monique's lap. 'Remember, Scott? Barely ten minutes old and she couldn't stand me. Not a sound, not a single whimper when she was born, until sheer hunger drove her to me. Look at our daughter, Scott. Look at her now, and tell me she's fine.'

Her husband watched the clock on the clean gray wall, the second hand keeping perfect time with his disciplined breath. Four in, four out. Four in, four...

Dr. Speroni unfurled his full height and covered the three steps to kneel between Scott and Monique. 'Your wife is right, Scott. Look at Serena.'

The toddler sat uncertainly, propped against one leg of the metal desk. Her right fist flapped open and closed at eye level, an inch from her face. The hand blurred, snapping wide and shut like stuttering frame film. Serena's eyes were on something else—a single straight line in the patterned rug, parallel to her leg. Her left hand drew over it, up and back, up and back.

The three watched. A minute, two. Turning to Scott, their doctor asked softly, 'How often do you see that hand motion?'

Hearing the gates lock around him, Scott surrendered. 'Whenever she's upset. Not every day, not if she's calm, she...'

Dr. Speroni pressed on. 'Every day, Monique?' The mother's nod was enough.

'I see her following that straight line on the pattern there. Is this something she does at home, too?'

The child's father knew the answers to these questions. 'Yes.' The cardboard box story spilled out. 'And swings,' said Monique. 'She likes swings.'

‘On the playground? Do they make her laugh? Any sign of her communicating that she wants more?’

Sweaty palms slipping against each other in a panicked attempt to hold on, Monique shook her head. ‘She doesn’t laugh. I’ve never seen her laugh. It’s like there’s an on switch, and an off switch. Serena’s either off in her own world, slapping her hands and tracing straight lines, or...’

‘Or screaming?’ More gentle now, his fingers squeezing Monique’s shoulder.

The two parents had used up all their words. It was science’s turn, the doctor’s turn. He filled in the gaps and found them the language that would frame the rest of their lives. ‘I’m going to recommend that you see a colleague of mine in Boston as soon as possible. He’s a pediatrician, specializing in children with autistic behavior. I am not qualified to make a definitive diagnosis—and please understand, I want to rule out every possible alternative before deciding on the best course of action for Serena and your family.’

Scott laughed, a jagged, deep-throated rumble that made his wife shrink in her chair and draw her knees up protectively onto the seat. ‘Autistic? That’s ridiculous! I want a second opinion.’

He stood, pulling Monique halfway out of her seat, and turned to go. ‘Thank you for your time, Dr. Speroni. We’ll be in touch. Or not.’

‘Stay, Scott. Listen to what he’s saying. And will you please, please look at Serena? What do you see?’

‘What are you talking about, Mon? Let’s get the hell out of here, right now.’

‘No.’

‘Fine. Suit yourself.’ He threw the keys on the desk and reached for the door. ‘I’ll walk.’

One last effort to bind him close and make an ally for the struggle that lay ahead. His wife tilted her chin at him and said slowly, 'We might be a little while longer here. Take Serena with you? Go ahead, Scott, see if your little girl will go with her daddy without screaming blue murder. What feels safer for her, you or those goddamn straight black lines on the rug?'

He was beaten. He slouched into his seat. 'Okay, doc. What is this autism thing, anyway?'

The explanation was short. The appointment with the referral physician was urgent. The two-hour car ride to Boston that Tuesday was long. Serena fought them every moment, scratching and biting as they buckled her in. Pulling in for gas just outside the city, Monique reached into her purse.

'I have an idea. Fill up while I try something, okay Scott?'

Monique pulled a blank piece of paper from her index card sized notebook, and drew double-thick lines with her blue ballpoint pen. She climbed in next to Serena, who had subsided into periodic shrieks. 'Here you go, sweetheart. Straight lines, see Serena? Heavy, orderly, perfect straight lines.'

With the lightest touch possible, Monique cupped her daughter's hands around the piece of paper. Serena's fingers tensed at the contact, but her gaze found the object in her grasp before settling on Monique's impromptu artwork. Serena relaxed, left hand index finger trace-retracing. When Scott returned, the car was as quiet as the doctor's office had been when he'd put Serena back on the floor.

'How did you...,' he whispered, clicking his seatbelt and pulling onto the freeway.

Monique's voice broke as she matched his volume. Gulping, she said, 'Magic. Sad, desperate magic for our lost baby daughter, Scott.' Her husband glanced in the rearview mirror, and set determined dry eyes dead ahead.

At Serena's third birthday, the Johnstons celebrated more than extra candles on the cake. Two autistic specialists, three tutors, one speech/language pathologist, one physical therapist and thousands of hours with their online support group later, the Johnstons had made progress. Patience, perseverance and the structure of Applied Behavioral Analysis had given them tools to cope with their daughter, if not commune with her.

Serena's deficits had also become clearer in the two years since diagnosis. She had a vocabulary of about a dozen words, and she continued to hand flap and trace straight lines. The unabated screaming had stopped, because Serena had some limited vocabulary to tell them what she wanted. Her gross motor skills were still below age level, although she had tested in the low normal intelligence range on standard IQ scores.

Monique and Scott watched Serena as she sat still in her chair at the kid-sized table in the special nursery school. Her six classmates, three other autistic children, two with Down's syndrome and one toddler with an acquired brain injury from a car accident, clustered around the cake.

Well-trained to their children's sensitivities, the parents sang 'Happy Birthday' in hushed voices and substituted hand waving for the traditional applause at the end.

Serena allowed her father to lean across the table and touch her hand. He guided her palm to his face and placed it on his chin. She pulled away, but did not cry out. 'Serena? Look at me, Serena, and you can have a piece of cake.'

Without a facial expression, his daughter obeyed. Her eyes traveled around Scott's face for a few moments, landed on the mole above his right eyebrow, and locked on. She didn't blink, flicker, or look away. Her parents were used to this gaze—looking through them, focusing on a minor detail instead of their faces as a whole. Scott praised Serena for her response. 'Good job, Serena. Good looking, good looking at Daddy. Here's a piece of cake. See, banana cake—you like that!'

After the party, Monique and Scott stood talking with Denise Fuchs, Serena's primary classroom teacher. 'She's come a long way in the last year. How are the sentence strips coming? Any more symbol recognition or sequencing?'

Ruffling her gray-streaked hair behind her ears, Monique replied, 'Not more than the four or five words that she picked up over the last few months. It seems to be stagnating. We have managed to maintain the eating, sleeping and quiet room routines, but she's reached some sort of plateau. Any suggestions?'

Scott stood wordlessly beside his wife. These conversations usually left him out, although this one was crowded with fewer acronyms than most. ABA, ADDHD, DPT, ToMM—all shorthand to describe his beautiful, lonely child, locked inside her own mind and unable or unwilling to kiss him goodnight. He wasn't even sure that Serena knew who either of them was—there was a fancy word for that too, something about face recognition. Another long word meaning loss, pain, and helplessness. Too many words for that, in the three years since Serena's birth.

It didn't help that he'd had to travel for work lately, business trips to San Francisco and Tucson that kept him away for a week or ten days at a time. Or that airports were full of families with smiling toddlers and chattering kids. With an effort, like heaving a piano up a steep flight of stairs, Scott tuned back into to Denise and Monique's conversation string.

'Actually, I do have an idea that might be a good next step. I've noticed Serena playing at the water table quite a lot. She loves to run her hands through the wet, and I've even had to hold her off from climbing all the way in a time or two! Is she like that at bathtime?'

Raising her eyebrows and frowning, Monique backed away from the thought. 'No! She absolutely hates it—and now that she's getting bigger it takes two of us to hold her in.'

Denise nodded. 'Exactly. While you hold her in. With Serena, that's part of the terror—the unwanted contact. She's like a trapped animal in the tub—the more she struggles, the harder you force her to stay.'

Scott interrupted. 'So what are you getting at, Denise? Another routine to smooth out the jagged progress of Serena's development?'

Turning to face Serena's father, Denise continued, 'Not at all. I'm pointing out that if it's water that Serena wants, it's water she should get. The Y has a terrific swim class for developmentally delayed children under five starting up next month—and I think that Serena could really benefit from the opportunity to be in the pool.'

'Denise, excuse me, but are you nuts? All those people, all that noise? Serena would be totally overwhelmed!'

'Like I said, Scott, it's a special class. Maximum four students, one teacher and one assistant. They hold the class early Sunday mornings, before the pool opens to the public. So yes, there'd be three other students and two strange adults in with Serena—but she's doing much better, and I think that with a little preparation and coaching she would handle it just fine. What do you say? I can call and reserve her a spot.'

The Johnstons arrived at the pool at seven-thirty on a Sunday in April. It didn't disrupt their schedule much: Serena had been up since five, and they'd stopped attending church after Serena was born. Scott parked the van in the empty lot and turned off the engine. 'Well, here goes nothing.'

Monique attacked without pause. 'Nothing? Fine, Scott, if you're going to be so goddamn negative maybe you should have stayed home.' Unwillingly, her pitch rose and singed Serena's hearing.

'Great, Mon! Now look what you've done, she'll be out of control for the rest of the morning. This was a stupid idea to begin with, and now...'

'Shut up, Scott. Drive around the block for a few minutes, Serena'll be fine. Right, sweetheart?'

Ten minutes later, they were back at the Y. A few other cars had pulled up, and their occupants sat huddled behind foggy windows and their own family dramas. Serena flapped her hand and stroked the trail of raindrops on her side window.

The class only had two students, Serena and a four-year-old high functioning autistic boy named John. The teacher, a second-year physical

therapy student from the local community college, introduced herself and laid down the rules.

‘Welcome, everyone. Hello, Serena. Hello, John.’ Using two fingers to orient the children to her gaze, she walked the parents through the structure of the class. ‘I’m Kelly, and this is Cecilia. We’re going to start off getting the kids used to being in the water. John’s all set—if you’ll get Serena into her bathing suit we’ll be all ready to go.’

Monique wasn’t impressed, having to start off so early with explanations. ‘Uh, Kelly—Serena loves that dress—any chance she can swim in it? We might have an easier time if we don’t try to set too many restrictions about what she can and cannot do right off the bat.’

With a grin and a soft laugh, the swimming instructor allayed Monique’s anxieties. ‘Of course, no problem at all! Serena and John are going to run the show here—if she wants to swim in her dress, fine by me. Our goal is to get them to love and trust the water, and we start by letting them know it’s fine to be just who they are. Sound okay?’

Five weeks in, Kelly decided that Serena was ready to put her face in the water. John and his family were out of town that weekend, and Monique was home in bed with a bad case of stomach flu. Scott coaxed Serena out of the van and into the warm pool area. ‘Come on, Serena, it’s swimming. You like swimming, don’t you?’

Scott mulled over his words. Like. What did ‘like’ mean for Serena? Was like only an absence of profound fear, brought on by a neurological disorder that amplified every sound, smell, and touch to monstrous proportions? He let it go. Serena seemed okay in the pool, and they hadn’t had any meltdowns during lessons. Getting her out of the water was always a much bigger fight than getting her in.

‘Hi, Scott. Hello, Serena. I see your wearing your favorite purple kitty-cat swimming dress this morning.’

Scott cringed at Kelly’s suggestion of a mask and snorkel. ‘She doesn’t even know how to blow bubbles—and how many normal three-year-olds know how to use one of those things? No way.’

Kelly persisted. ‘Scott, trust me. I’ve worked with lots of kids with autism like Serena, and most of the time they love the feel of the tight mask.’

It's soothing, I think. Comforting. One try, and if she hates it I'll give you two free lessons after the class finishes. What do you think?'

Seeing his daughter getting restless as she rocked on her heels at the edge of the pool, Scott relented. 'One try.'

Kelly approached Serena as she would a skittish horse, clucking and cooing. The child fixated on the bright blue rubber snorkel, and did not protest when Kelly placed the mask over her face. 'See, Scott? She's not afraid. Now Serena, I want you to walk into the water like we practiced, okay? Don't worry, I'm not going to touch you. Only the water will touch you, from your ankles to your knees to your waist.' Standing next to Serena, Kelly talked through the lesson. 'There, you're doing great. Now duck, head under, and breathe!'

Later, Scott would replay that scene in his head. Every time, it seemed that simple: mask on, snorkel on, in the water, four words 'duck/head under/breathe.' Impossible, for their child where every instruction was a labor of love, and teaching Serena to hold a spoon took six months at age two and a half.

Quietly, without disturbing the water, Kelly glanced at Scott. 'Done. You've got a brave little girl here, Scott. Did you see that?'

'I saw, I...'

Scott let the words slide back down into his chest as he stared at his daughter. Serena held her neck stiff against the surface of the pool, and waved her arms back and forth in the water. The ripples spread, licking the blue-tiled edge.

Kelly spoke, watchful eyes on Serena. 'This happens a lot. Being under like that in the pool seems to soothe some children like Serena more than anything—combination of the silence, and their complete control over the motion of the water, I guess. I usual give them at least twenty minutes—the pool is warm, and she's getting good exercise swishing her arms back and forth like that.'

'Leave her. As long as she wants to be there, leave her. Can I get in the pool beside her?'

'Sure. Take it slowly, though. She's got a rhythm now, and we don't want to disrupt it.'

Scott pulled off his t-shirt and lowered himself into the tepid water. He stood as close as he dared to Serena, feeling the wash of her currents sway his sure-footed stance. After forty minutes, he called to Kelly, 'Can I borrow your snorkel? I want to see what she sees down there.'

Tugging the mask firmly into place, Scott swung his body underwater. Serena's eyes were wide open, pupils dilated, and her head swept from side to side in time with the smooth arcs of her open palms.

Scott surfaced after a few minutes, frustrated that he couldn't locate the source of Serena's contentment but pleased that she'd found it at all. As he shook the water from his ears and pulled off the mask, his daughter raised her head. Dropping the snorkeling from her mouth and framing a cartoon ear-to-ear grin, she caught his eye through the glass.

Scott had no time to process minor miracles—a greater one awaited him. Holding her arms out towards him, gaze firmly fixed on his own red-rimmed eyes that still stung from the chlorine, Serena said, 'Daddy? Can we go home? I'm hungry and I need bananas now.'

Later, Monique would not believe him. Not until the next Sunday, when it was her turn at the Y, and after almost an hour in the water Serena kissed her mother on the cheek as she bobbed up from the pool. Kelly laughed off their frantic thanks.

'Really, it was nothing. That's all Serena's doing—we just opened a door for her, and she walked right through.'

Dr. Speroni had a clinical explanation, to do with crossed wires and appropriate sensory stimulation and temporary affective engagement. Scott found a rusty voice for prayer, and poured his gratitude into a willing priest's ear. Monique updated their web pages, and sent enthusiastic retelling of the story in e-mails to relatives and friends.

It didn't last long. Fifteen minutes, every week, their daughter found her way home to them. Monique and Scott kept a careful record of all her actions and her words—in those precious moments, Serena spoke to their hopes and their dreams. The scrapbook was a weekly reminder of who lived inside those blank walls—a weekly reminder of how much she needed them, and how much they needed her.

They tried to prolong the effects. For a year after that first communion, Scott and Monique tried medication, daily swims, sensory deprivation tanks, and acupuncture. They consulted with another dozen doctors, all of whom said the same thing. Temporary, unpredictable, take it for what it's worth. In the end, it was only Sunday mornings at the Y. Serena learned to swim: she grew tall, and her long, metronome strides scuttled her through the water like a seal. She swam in the Special Olympics when she was sixteen, and won gold, and stayed in her room for a week trying to shake the panic attacks from the crowds and the noise. She didn't compete again.

One Sunday in April, after a quiet family celebration of Serena's eighteenth birthday, Monique and Scott took her for a picnic by the river, about four miles from their house. A week later, Serena slept in on Sunday morning. Fumbling with the alarm clock as it shrilled six forty-five, Monique shook Scott.

'Wake up, hon. Serena's not up yet. I'm making banana pancakes—want some?'

Scott, a heavy sleeper, mumbled, 'Sure, yeah, whatever. What time is it?'

Monique put the coffee on and climbed the carpeted stairs to her daughter's room. The door was ajar, a compromise they'd come to after years of confused fighting about open or closed. Monique leaned her head around to watch Serena sleeping.

She wasn't there. Forgetting more than a decade of 'soft voice' training to placate her autistic child, Monique called out, 'Serena? Honey, where are you? Serena?'

She rushed to the bathroom, ripping the shower curtain from a few rings in her frenzy. Scott appeared, boxer shorts halfway up his legs and tugging a sweatshirt on. 'Mon, what's wrong? Is Serena sick?'

'She's not here, Scott! She's gone!' Monique's panic infected her husband, and they scoured the house before calling the police station.

In a small town, the cops don't bother with rigid administrative procedures about 'how long a missing person's been gone.' Missing was good enough. Brad McMann, deputy sheriff, was on the doorstep in less than ten minutes.

'Mr. and Mrs. Johnston, I need to know anything that might help us locate Serena.' He took notes standing up, refusing a cup of fresh coffee and tucking his hat under one arm. 'Thank you, Mrs. Johnston. Time for coffee when we find her, and then you can all have breakfast together. Deal?'

The police found her at two o'clock in the morning. The rain had swelled the river, and the official verdict was accidental drowning. Monique and Scott clutched each other on their faded blue and green floral sofa in the living room, phone hanging uselessly from a knotted cord. The early light had mottled the furniture though half-open blinds before someone was brave enough to say the words out loud.

'Scott?' Monique's question was muffled against her husband's curly gray hair, as he wept in her lap. 'Scott, there's something not quite...'

She tried again, rocking her husband as he shuddered, sat up, and swallowed his grief. 'There's something about the...I don't think...'

Scott covered her hands in his, and found his voice. 'Swimming lessons, Mon. Fifteen years of swimming lessons. The river might have crested—the river might have crested and surprised her.'

His wife stared past him. He took the shattered window of her belief to say the words. 'No. I don't think so, either. She could have beaten the current. She could have beaten the current, but she let it wash her away. We showed her the way in the pool.'

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