

The Value in Continued Effort

Marina loves the smell of chlorine in the morning. Her arms ache, but she will not stop. So far, she has counted to two-thousand-five-hundred and twenty: four hundred and eighty to go. Automated; one stroke at a time, one stroke, one stroke. Up and out of the water, grab a breath, smell that chlorine chemical nirvana, yes, high, hold a breath, sink back under, drive on... one stroke... and that is how she strives forward. She will do three-thousand and fifty today, as always, just before the end, she will throw an extra fifty in.

The others swimming in the lanes beside her are irrelevant. The coach runs tramlines along the poolside, windmilling his arms, shouting “go for gold” and other inanities to his future stars. Marina ignores him. This is how she achieves things. Marina is someone who, when set a goal, will not stop until successful. Afterwards, climbing out, the initial towelling down of her wet skin, she only then looks around to take in the failures already heading for the showers. The quitters, the not-try-hard-enoughs, and the few who give their all, and still it is not sufficient. She lets her thoughts linger on them: they confuse her the most. Find another sport: this is obviously not for you. If you understand the value in continued effort, then all you need to do is find the right thing.

Her father sits high on the back-benches, a measured distance apart from the other parents. The trial over, he looks to them as they are commiserating and congratulating each other. Clenched teeth and false smiles all around. No one approaches him. He has been dying for a smoke. The cigarette pack has been screaming “let me out” from inside his jacket pocket. His daughter long ago vowed never to be a smoker, unable to imagine why someone would want to do that to their lungs. This was so her, continuing on when others had already stopped. He knew he couldn't leave before, but now... perhaps, now there is time to slide away, have a quick smoke as he waits for her by the car. Oh, for the pleasure of lighting up a Marlboro.

His wife had insisted they call her Marina. The fish girl, born in the water, land, unnatural to her, upon which she stumbles and trips over her own gangly, growing longer legs. Her mother's legs, her mother's grit, she is the pearl pulled from that shell. Marina was proving herself well named. Now that she has passed her thirteenth birthday, she can, at last, join the teenager group, but already she is the coach's favourite, ready to steal a place in the team from someone much older. How they will hate her.

Marina would know. She is probably suspicious he is about to commit his crime already. She will smell him as soon as they are in the car. Just one smoke, the pack demands, "Come on, let's go." Who'll know? Marina will. He has become a man who prays for the days to grow older. He longs for his child to loosen up, for her hormones to rebel, for her to start at least one day with teenage listlessness. No sign of it yet. The five AM starts are killing him. The Coach approaches his daughter, showering her in more praise than is needed. The father instinctively distrusts the man and prays for the day when the coach will quietly pull him aside; and confide, "Marina's distracted. Her mind seems to be on other things."

Oh, Christ, let her discover boys soon, or girls, no matter, or saving the planet, whatever. Unleash him from this competing pack of sports fiends, vicariously living through their children's achievements. Bewildered at his child's preternatural talent: their own children's efforts displaced in their wonderment. The marvel that is Marina. How they look askance at him: what a quare fellow he is, how can he be so removed from all of this? He just wants his little girl back, the little girl he has lost to the water.

The coach leaves, and Marina stops, turns and suddenly smiles up at her father, throws an ecstatic wave at him before she shrouds herself in the towel and heads for the showers. Addiction falls silent in him. He smiles back, but she is gone. Briefly, she was his little girl again. He saunters over to the other parents, will allow himself a little bathe in the reflected glory of her achievements.