

## Swimmers

Phil calls his daughter-in-law every afternoon around three. He sits in his green easy chair, in the living room, in front of the muted TV show. He's read all of the sports section.

"How are you?" he says into the phone. "Everything all right?"

"I'm fine," she says. "He was kicking a little this morning."

"Really?" he says. "He is?"

"He stops in the afternoon. I think he takes a nap."

"You sleeping all right?"

"It's all I do. Still." She tells him she just dropped the sixth volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, which she's been reading in bed for the last three months. Knocked it off the bedside table onto the floor. Her feet are tangled in covers. "I can feel him hiccup," she says suddenly. Her father-in-law laughs.

"Really hiccups?" he says. "You're feeling that?"

"I swear. I have no idea what else it could be." Phil laughs again. He tells her to take care of herself. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Thank you," she says. "I can't think of anything." He pictures her in the dim bedroom, the single window to the outside, the ragged branch of the tree, now that September has come, and she's seven months along. Lying in bed, still. He hangs up the phone and tells Dora his wife: "She's good. The baby's good. He's hiccupping."

"Thank God," his wife says. "Why would he hiccup? Is that normal?"

"What," Phil says, "you think she's drinking gin and tonics in bed?"

“I didn’t mean that,” Dora says.

Phil settles around in the chair, and with the remote, unmutes the TV. He thinks of the baby, wrapped up tight in his daughter-in-law’s womb, feeling her heartbeat, his feet tucked one over the other, waiting. With the hiccups, no less. Floating in the warm dark. His heart aches for love of this unseen child.

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The Danvers Birches was the beach where all the Greek families went to have their Sunday picnic. A small dirty ocean beach, cluttered with boulders, where the women who worked in the mills came on Sunday to sit, rest their sore feet that had spread out from standing on concrete all week. Watch the children screaming and throwing sand, in the surf. The brave older boys swimming in the water.

After the War was over, in 1945, he came to swim hoping he could get back the use of his feet, that the War had given a fungus to in the South Pacific. Something that grew on his toenails, indomitable and ugly, making them drop off. The doctor had asked him if he had any problems, on discharge, and he’d said No, thinking the fungus would go away. But it hadn’t.

Birches grew mightily and wildly near the water, across the sandy path, despite the salt, the smoke from barbecues, the thousand footprints of the children, running away from parents, running toward their friends, away from their triple-deckers whose stairs they clambered up and down all week, with the neighbors from Greece or Italy, who could hear everything. The factories along the river would never close, and there was need for plastics. Shoes. Laces made of jute. Webbing, canvas punctured with grommets. Machine belts. The factory whistles blew at five to eight, and five to five, signaling the change of shifts. You heard them in your sleep, and

growing up there you were sure these whistles blew all over the world, all over the known universe.

Phil lay in his bed, twenty years old, listening to the twilight approach, thinking it was time for his evening class at the community college. Roused himself to collect his textbook, Chemistry. Grab a piece of cold lamb his mother had tucked into a piece of Wonder Bread and left on the table. He ate it going down the stairs.

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In the industrial city, it was not unusual to see men missing fingers. His father, for example, had been missing his right-hand pinkie. The conductor on the streetcar Phil took that evening was missing two segments of his forefinger, and his thumb. Phil, who took that same streetcar every evening, did not stare. He thought about his father's hand, and how he said it was hard to re-learn how to shave. Hold a razor without hurting yourself.

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His daughter-in-law, Cindy, has lost two babies. Her two miscarriages have taught the family humility. She tells him now that with this third pregnancy, she's been following a chart.

"If you want this baby," her friend had told her, quoting her own obstetrician, "you'll get into bed for the next six months, and you won't lift anything heavier than a piece of paper." She reported this to Phil, the last time she came for Sunday dinner. Now she's taken to her bed, she calls it. Like something out of Victorian England. Phil calls in the afternoons, and he tries to keep out of his voice that he is worried, that there is fear.

His daughter-in-law tells him she has been following a chart on fetal development, tracing the growth of the baby inside her from a grub, with flippers, to a child, a form that she thinks the baby will never reach. Month four, the first prod from inside, that she knows

immediately is a small elbow or foot. The first person she tells is Phil. “He moved today,” she tells him on the phone. His voice almost breaks. “Really?” he says. “Really?”

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This was after his cancer diagnosis, that came four years ago. After three bouts of chemotherapy. Many years after the time spent breathing all day in the badly-ventilated lab where he worked as a chemist in his twenties and thirties. Where the lab chemists all knew the smell wasn't right. The odor was sickening, toluene, particles that seemed to coat your lungs, to make Phil and two of his fellow lab assistants vomit sometimes in the afternoons. It was too expensive to fix, the area manager said. The ventilation is up to code. We can't fix the building, and the fumes aren't that noxious. We have the air samples. And besides, it was too expensive for the company to fix. The company had cold war defense contracts and left its name on radar installations, sensors, missile parts. The cold war. We can't fix the lab, they told their chemists, after they had complained a third, fourth, fifth time. And it isn't that noxious anyway.

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The bone of his chest was the first place it showed. A lump, like a golf ball. But that was years later and beyond proving.

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You were lucky to get a good job, after World War Two. After night school, and driving the Buick to the installation with the radar towers, four towns over where the company had its labs. The gatehouse you needed an ID to get through. He felt blessed to have the two hundred dollars a week. It allowed him to get married, to a girl from his neighborhood. It allowed him to buy a small house in a small town, and paint the bricks around the foundation after he left the job in the defense plant, and went to work in her family's business, a shoe store.

“You don’t want to be driving all that way,” his wife Dora told him. “Something might happen. You don’t know. With all the crazy people on the road.” He knew he was making a mistake but it made her happy. It was in the name of domestic appeasement. He was overqualified. Truthfully, he was bored at the shoe store. It was an endless round of inventory, orders, customers who went to the bigger stores, eventually. “We knew it was over when they opened a Wal-Mart,” Dora told Cindy once. When Cindy was a new person in their family, a new bride, sitting nervously beside their son Alex. Wanting to please them. “We knew it was over.” This was Dora who, the year before, had wept for four days when Alex said he was getting married.

“She’s too old,” Dora said.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Phil said. “The last one was too homely, the one before that was too flighty. You should be glad he’s getting married at all.” He was thinking about grandchildren. The little ghosts he’d almost gotten used to never having materialize. His friends had them, filled their living rooms with the commercial photos of the children with their tiny teeth, and the fake studio background of piles of cushions, or sparkling Christmas snow. The uncomfortable-looking Sunday clothes. The smiling little ones, with brown eyes, most of them, being Greek. He had wanted that, and decided not to want it too much. If God would give it to him, good. If not, then let him accept God’s will.

“As I see it,” he told his friend Dean, who was showing him new pictures of his three grandchildren, “for any mother, no girl is good enough for her son. And for any father, just about *any* girl is good enough for his son.” Dean had slapped his knee, nearly spilled his coffee in the Styrofoam cup at the parish council meeting. There among all the men who weekly gathered

around the long metal-legged tables in the fluorescent light. You didn't complain to God, if there wasn't a grandson. Granddaughter.

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His daughter-in-law calls him first, some days, when she can't sleep in the afternoons. She's watched a soap opera on television. She's read a book. He's listening, every word from her a reassurance. "How are *you*?" she presses. "Oh, just fine," he says. There's no point in upsetting a young woman, upsetting her baby. "I'm fine."

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Phil had found the lump in his chest a year after his son got married. The lump was the size of a ping-pong ball. He was shaving, he'd just finished a shower. He looked at himself in the steamy mirror over the sink. His razor clicked as he set it down. *This wasn't here before*, he thought. It was a cyst. But hard. He finished shaving, knowing he'd have to mention it to Dora. The next morning, he told her, and she said it was nothing. They'd go to the doctor, whom they'd seen for twenty years. The doctor was in charge, he was the expert. After church, Phil watched the Red Sox game and his son—who was coming later and later each week—called to see if there was anything he could bring for Sunday dinner. Cindy, his new daughter-in-law, who didn't look happy when they came every week for dinner, watched the games with them in the afternoons, and did the cross-word puzzle in the Parade section of the Boston Globe. She read the section about movie stars. This was a ritual, every week. He suspected she didn't like coming to see them.

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Three times a week, he is driven by Dean and his wife, a couple they have known for years, to the cancer institute for chemo. It's dripped in through a portacath in his chest that he

wears all the time. Dean drives him in Dean's white Buick. Dean's wife, Artemisia, Artie, sits in the back with Dora, and they comment on what women on the street are wearing. Phil thinks of his portacath, which has been in so long he has to wash it carefully in the shower, as a wound, like Christ's wound. Although he'd never mention this.

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What he hated, he told his daughter-in-law at Christmas, before she was pregnant, was the debriding. De breed, he pronounced it. They dug out what wasn't going to live, but it was still living. "Last time, the guy in the bed next to me," Phil said, "he just sees the nurse coming in with the hypodermic, and he goes, 'Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow.' She hasn't even given it to him yet." Phil adds, "And he was only in for a heart attack." He knew this was bad, but not as bad as what he dealt with. "Debriding," he said. "I hate when I see them coming." Later his daughter-in-law would look it up in the Merck manual, and see the spelling. That it was named after a Frenchman.

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Dora's dinner was almost ready, the zucchini casserole she'd duplicated exactly for forty years. The chicken breasts on the transfer-ware platter with the picture of the empty baby cradle, which he hadn't noticed until one day Cindy pointed it out. They ate around the kitchen table, because the dining room had Alex's stereo equipment in it, and Dora hadn't had the heart to put it away since he moved out two years ago. Dora served only margarine, so Phil wouldn't have a heart attack.

"Phil was a big swimmer," she told her daughter-in-law. "He loved to go out and swim in the ocean. Your father swam all the time," she turned to Alex. "I thought he'd drown. I didn't like it one bit."

Alex said, "I know, Ma. Stop talking about it."

"They don't want to hear about it," Phil said. His daughter-in-law imagined him swimming hard across the choppy waves, gray, beyond a line of huge boulders. Dora told Cindy her full name was Theodora. "They call it 'gift of God,' in Greek," she said. Alex rolled his eyes.

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Alex and Cindy visited him in the hospital the second time he was in, before she got pregnant. It was summer, he could see the trees coming into full green outside the sealed air-conditioned window. The floors of the room were shiny with excessive wax.

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In the night, he wakes up to the lights endlessly on in the hall, the monitor beside him, with the red lights, and he prays. Sometimes he thinks Jesus is walking down the hall, but it turns out, as he rouses from his dream, that it is an orderly, or a doctor, with that heavy tread. He uses the Lord's Prayer, in Greek that his mother taught him. In the three-decker house in Lynn, where he learned what it meant that he was from another country. You listened to the Italian bakers, who thought they were better than the Greeks. The street names, for the Irish. Sullivan Square. McMahan Avenue. Many years later, he had been pleased to read in *Newsweek* (not a Greek magazine, either, he told Dora) that Greek-Americans have the highest education level and the second-highest per-capita income in the United States.

"That's not counting in the crooks, Phil," she said. "Like that crook, Aristotle Onassis."

"He's not American," Phil said wearily.

"Well, you know what I mean."

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In the War, he remembers, the priest said to go to chapel with the Episcopalians, if you couldn't find a Greek service. But better not to go, than to worship with the Roman Catholics. Alex is still angry about the Fourth Crusade, and the sack of Constantinople in 1204, that he read about in the Encyclopedia Britannica. "The Pope, in fact, is not allowed in Greece, still," he said, "if that gives you any idea of the size of their wrongdoing."

In the War, Phil had been on a destroyer in the Pacific. They anchored off an island with no drinkable water. Hot as you ever felt, so your shirt stuck to your back. He'd let his feet dangle in the tide, off the breakwater, the wide and hot Pacific air reminding him of the beach back in Massachusetts. Even the gray, rocky beach, with the noisy wind.

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He was twenty-four. His mother's apartment had a stove that leaked a trace of gas from the pilot, that he repaired, a young man, studying chemistry at night at the kitchen table. He was taking courses. The gas gave him a headache, he said, getting out the wrench from the back closet. The pliers. His mother said he should open a window. "That's not a solution," he said to her in Greek. His sister Anastasia, Antzie, watched him later, newly come in from a dance at the Daughters of Penelope. She was livelier than he was, big breasted with dark eyes. She watched him, lying under the stove, and said, "You think you can fix it?" She was younger, she was the woman, but she had more fire than he had, and he knew it. The family knew it. Later she would send a bouquet of flowers to his fiancée, Dora, on their wedding day, and sign the card, "To the most beautiful girl in the world. Love, Phil." His fiancée would be pleased, but suspicious. Years later she would be told by Antzie that she'd sent it. "I'm not surprised," Dora said. "He could have sent it, after all. It sounded just like him." Antzie had a sense of how things should be done. "She bites the world in her teeth," his mother said. Approvingly. "Phil is our peacemaker."

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Phil swims across the narrow neck of the channel, in the surf. The waves lift him and set him down in their troughs. His arms are strong, his lungs feel like they can keep him swimming forever.

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One son, he has. One son, who married late. Barely at all. The future of his name, his family, hung on Cindy, this slender young woman who jogged at crazy hours, now reads novels in bed, strange books he's never heard of by French people. Sometimes he's cast back to the old street corner that shone in the light outside his bedroom window, as a child. The streetlamp that gave him light all night.

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Half awake and half asleep, he now re-visits the old neighborhood. In actuality, as he saw – during the last time he was driven through—it had been torn down to build brick, low-income housing. The movie theater was gone. The corner store boarded up with plywood, the Woolworth's gone to build a gas station. He and Dean were going to the annual meeting of the Ahepa, at Holy Trinity, the church of his childhood. Dean drove, chatting about the priest and his son, who had a drinking problem. "It just goes to show," Phil said. "There's no guarantee what people will go through." He hoped he was strong enough to make it through the meeting. The blank streets, unrolling in front of the car, he remembered as being full of children. Pain tugged at the muscles of his chest.

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It is possible that Jesus, being led to Calvary, Golgotha, had times when he prayed to a puzzling God, too. Possibly this illness is a crucifixion, too.

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*Pater imon, o en tyis uranyis, ayasthito to onoma su.* Our father, who art in heaven. In the twilight of the hospital, he has prayed. Driving his car, he has prayed, also, waiting at traffic lights. The words connect him to everyone, he thinks. Everyone who has ever wanted anything. Let me just live long enough to see the baby.

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This was how he found out: His daughter-in-law, the crazy jogger, visited him the day he came home from the hospital the third time. She brought a polyester fleece shirt he thought he'd never wear, and a green golf shirt he liked. The trouble with the golf shirt was that it didn't unbutton all the way down the front, but he wore it anyway, even if it rubbed the portacath. He later wore the polyester-fleece shirt, when he was much colder, freezing all the time, from his chemo cocktail.

This was the afternoon: When they were alone in the living room, her on the maroon sofa, she told him she was pregnant again, and she'd kept it a secret until twelve weeks had passed. "I think I'm out of the woods," she said. "That's what they tell me."

"Did you ask the doctor?" Phil said. His heart beat fast, despite the ongoing ache in his chest, he felt it clearly. Distinctly

"She says so far so good," Cindy said. Her hair was thick on her shoulders, in the light from the window, across from his easy chair. The TV was muted to a painting show his wife liked to watch, a famous Canadian who painted landscapes using a palette knife and the ends of his brushes. Phil took his daughter-in-law's hand, and they sat for a minute, until he controlled his urge to weep. Which he thought came from the chemo. "I'll be praying for you," he said. She

shook their hands, with their fingers laced together. A silent gesture like they were making a deal.

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A couple of weeks after the third chemo was finished, he could sit up all day and watch television. Sometimes he wanted a nap, but he was afraid to go to sleep, he told his wife. He was afraid he wouldn't wake up. Once, he cried, because he was tired, and the painkillers didn't work very well any more. The doctor hadn't called back with a new prescription. Dora was angry. "There's a bum, who doesn't take good care of his patients."

Phil said, "He's got other people to think about."

"Like who?" Dora said. "Who's more important than you?"

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He talks to his sister Antzie on the phone, where she is living in Missouri. She sounds worried, because her own husband, George, died from lung cancer when he was fifty-six. Antzie understands Phil's illness in a way Dora doesn't, he thinks. But he doesn't want to worry her, so he tells her they got it all out when they did the surgery. The chemo is precautionary. "Never mind about that," he says. "Cindy is going to have a baby."

"God willing," Antzie says.

"She's being very careful," Phil says. "She's not driving."

"That's good news," Antzie says. Dora is calling him to come to dinner, so he has to say goodbye. She's made a noodle casserole. A little too much garlic, but she's using less now, she tells him for the fifteenth time, because he said it gave him indigestion.

"That wasn't the way it was before," Dora says. Meaning, he guesses, that the chemo is changing him. But he knew that, right from the beginning. He wasn't going to be the same man,

ever again. The golf ball has shrunk, but it won't go away. His daughter-in-law thinks it's significant somehow that the tumor is right above his heart. The tumor, right above his breast bone, sits where radiation will punish his beating heart. It isn't going to go away.

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By October, after the chemo wears off, he feels better. He can drive his car. One Sunday he and his wife go to his son's house and bring homemade lamb stew for Cindy, who is finally out of bed. She sits on the sofa downstairs with her hands on her stomach. "It was the strangest thing," she says. "Last night, his elbow was poking me in the stomach. I think it was his elbow. Today, nothing. I guess he's asleep." Phil wants to touch her stomach, and she even invites him to, but he says, No, he can't. Later he wishes he had.

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In his bedroom, he tries to sleep. On the far wall, is the cross, next to the night table and the small television set. The flower crowns he and his wife wore when they got married are still in the frame box, hung on the wall. A white crown of flowers for him, and for her, held together by a long white ribbon. No dust can reach them when they are in the glass box, he thinks. Possibly they will haunt her when he is gone. He prays every morning for strength. The Lord's Prayer in Greek, lying on his back, summoning the strength for the present day. Thanking God for his blessings, his healthy son. The house that is paid for. The grandson growing inside his daughter-in-law. The room is quiet, faded curtains from years of sun. The street outside has the noises of children playing. They ride their bicycles in the street, and he thinks they shouldn't, with the cars.

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Alex calls them at seven o'clock in the morning, that they should come to the hospital. Cindy has gone into the labor room. Phil is finishing his coffee, when Dora tells him. A weight descends on his heart, that Cindy has to go through this. But he feels the spirit of the baby, too, as if it were talking to him. Dora re-applies her makeup, because she wants to look nice for the hospital. "Who's going to be looking at you?" Phil says. "Everyone's thinking about something else right now. Jeez."

They drive through the winter landscape, listening to the weather and the morning news. Swamps on either side of the car, with tall dead trees, bone white. A long back road to the town with the hospital, because Dora gets nervous driving on the Interstate. Phil is as excited as he can ever remember being. It sits in his stomach in a wave of heat. In his heart. What if something goes wrong? Dora pushes the buttons for the radio stations, and complains that she never will understand how they're set up in this new car. He imagines the hospital where his son was born, but knows this one is different. Newer. There's a morning rush hour getting down the suburban street to the hospital. His wife's profile as she looks out the window seems to him unaware of the size of this event.

The parking garage requires he punch a button to get a ticket, and it hurts his arm, his chest, after all the driving, to reach beyond the window of the car and poke a simple blue plastic button with a light on in it.

The hospital is busy with morning traffic in the corridors. Change of shift. "This isn't a very big place," Dora says. "They could have gone to a bigger hospital."

"It's all right," he says.

Alex finds them in the waiting room. He's wearing blue surgical scrubs. "I have to change again, after I went out," he complains.

“Just tell us where to go,” Phil says. “We’ll wait. We won’t be any trouble.”

He sits under a television set in the waiting room, watching a Spanish father across from them, with four beautiful children, eating Egg McMuffins from McDonalds. Phil decides their mother must be having another baby. Dora reads *The Ladies Home Journal*. Phil wishes he’d brought his painkillers.

Breakfast time turns to lunch time, turns to dinner time. The light outside the waiting room window goes into a cherry pink sunset, with roiling, troubled clouds that remind Phil of the Pacific. The sky goes almost dark, and then Alex appears in the doorway, still in scrubs, a surgical mask dangling off one ear.

“He’s born!” he says.

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Phil stands in the neo-natal unit corridor, looking at babies in pink or blue knitted caps. They look lonely to him, each sleeping in steel-cage cribs, with white blankets. Little red faces. Wrapped against the new cold. The nurse smiles at him, as she wheels in a baby with a blue cap. She brings him up to the edge of the glass, and smiles at Phil again. This baby is not sleeping. His eyes are brown, like Phil’s own. He has tiny fingers folded into little fists. He’s a long baby, Phil thinks. He’s taller than the others, already. Phil knows Dora and Alex are down talking to Cindy, and he will go, too, in a moment. He waves at the baby, who keeps his eyes open. He knows me, Phil thinks. He recognizes me. Phil would love to touch the baby, and pick him up, but the glass prevents. The situation prevents. But there will be time.

A woman and her husband, who introduce themselves as Cindy’s friends, join him at the nursery window.

“Isn’t he beautiful!” the woman says. “Are you Cindy’s father-in-law? She’s told me about you.”

“Yes,” Phil says.

“Aren’t you a lucky grandpa!” she laughs, offering him a handkerchief, which smells strangely of a sweet perfume.

“Keep it,” she says. They are leaving.

Phil blows his nose. He has forgotten to pray, he thinks. He has forgotten the simple thank you, the most important thing of all. Here in the nursery of clean steel, with the child who recognizes him. The small boy who has honored his side of the deal. We will go on, Phil thinks. And on, with me, despite, and on. The brown eyes see him there, wiping his own cheek, he is sure.