

Lengths

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My childhood swim coach, Eric, would line us up along the pool wall—tiny fingers clasping smooth, wet tiles—and instruct us to kick by yelling *legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs!* like a Speedo Sergeant Major bellowing at his troops to march into a watery battle. We grumbled about it at the time, but that training fostered stamina and attitude for lifelong perseverance.

As an adult I swim for my own kicks. For the endorphin nirvana that floods, post-swim, through my veins. For the feeling of cool water caressing my warm skin as I dive in for the first time. For that unique taste of chlorine and salt on my lips. For the euphoric feeling of weightlessness as I duck down deep into the aquamarine. This year I mark on a chart each mile I swim. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. Counting lengths systematically, religiously.

When you turn eighteen, no one explains that you will feel that age inside forever. No one tells you that when you have kids you will shove aside the kid inside you. No one prepares you for the fact that your time will never be quite your own time again. Today I sheepishly return that overdue library book, rush to the store to pick up those mushrooms I forgot, drive twenty miles over the speed limit to get my kids to their dentist appointment on time, cook dinner while decoding third-grade math homework, and nag my daughter to practice her violin. My husband wants to watch Netflix, so I leave those emails.

Tomorrow the alarm shrills at 5:30. I sigh inwardly at repeating the day all over again. I want to burrow my head under the pillows, to fall back, back into the peaceful oblivion. But Eric's militant voice penetrates the darkness: *legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs, legs!*