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## Thanks for Covering Your Lane

I can't believe my luck that the TV reporter is interviewing me for the local program *Heard in the Street*, because this week's question is one I have a pretty good answer for, "What animal would you most like to be in your next lifetime?"

Sea Otter! What can I say? If you've seen sea otters for even five minutes you know what I mean. The way they float on their backs with their whiskery dog heads scoping around like they are in charge of the whole ocean. Not in charge of exactly, maybe indifferent is more the right word. Like they are saying, Don't bother me with your little non-sea otter concerns. Because I am eating shellfish, cracking open crabs and lobsters with rocks and using my own belly as a table, I am grooming myself, I am meditating, I am floating on my giant water bed, maybe I am just maintaining my position from the shore. But if I choose to at any second, I could launch straight down to the bottom like a reverse cruise missile because I'm an unbelievably great swimmer too. I have the most valuable fur in the universe but I'm free now because I'm a protected species. By the way, my ancestors spit in your general direction for nearly hunting us into extinction.

Let me say that I love shellfish as much as sea otters do, but here in the VA hospital, the cafeteria only serves fish sticks on Fridays. We took a field trip once to the beach, south of San Francisco, but I didn't see any real otters, I have only seen them on TV documentaries and in captivity, in the aquarium. I don't tell all this to the reporter or speak as a sea otter to him. I can never think of the right things to say at the time.

Even during the interview I'm excited to

imagine how I will look on TV. I wonder if I'll sound normal, or if it will be obvious that I suffer from Memory Lapses along with Skin Rashes, Problems Thinking and Concentrating, Flashbacks of Gulf War, and Genital Itch. I know the other guys at the hospital will get a kick out of seeing a closeup of my pink squarish face on the 6 o'clock news, repeated at 11 o'clock, *Heard in the Street*, with my name below in a little caption. My name is Les Moore.

The thing is, when I reach down my shirt to show the reporter my dog tags, they are missing. Holy crap. Fifteen years around my neck, then gone just like that!

My mother, who died recently, told me once she wanted to be a seagull in her next lifetime. Seagulls can fly like I do only in my dreams, she said. Plus they soar over the world's most beautiful scenery, and they eat anything they goddamn please. My mother was a Quaker and "goddamn please" was the strongest she ever swore. Later I realized that what seagulls eat is all the crap left over from what the other critters, like sea otters, don't want to eat, but that doesn't stop me from thinking of my mother whenever I see a seagull, which is pretty often in the Bay Area.

I won't say anything more about my mother. I want to leave her out of it. This is the very kind of thing Mimi, our therapist for Group, warned me about when she suggested I write up the whole thing—how one thing leads to another and another and pretty soon you don't know what belongs in your story and what doesn't. She says to just go ahead and put it all down, then we'll fix it up later.

"Try to tell the story that nobody else can tell except you, Les."

"What story is that?" I say.

"Tell about the dog tags," Mimi says, eyeing me above the retro little hornrimmed glasses on the end of her nose. Today she has red and purple hair spikes, and I am distracted by the way her black-painted lips move as she speaks. I guess she looks more like a Punk Librarian than a Clinical Psychologist, but I like Mimi anyway.

**O**K we're waiting for Mimi in the Group Room, me and Mickey and Jimbo and Spam, when *Heard in the Street* comes

on at the end of the 6 o'clock news. I pop in a tape to record my 15 seconds of fame.

"Sea otter, huh, Les?" Mickey says, carefully avoiding b's and m's, the sounds he stutters on. These are special Speech Disorders called *betacism* and *mytacism*. In combination Mickey calls them *betamytacism*, a true diagnostic rarity, which he wrote down for me since he can't say it. Mickey is especially handy with the psychological jargon, like the way jail prisoners study the law to help get themselves released. He is equally expert with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Gulf War Syndrome, and like me he supposedly has some combination of both. The stuttering comes from his childhood although he says the war made it worse.

Jimbo's a short, wiry old black guy, with wrinkles like worms on his forehead, and he has wrapped his skinny arms around himself into a kind of chocolate cocoon. He rocks back and forth, nearly tipping over his chair. After seeing me on TV, Jimbo lets out his piercing hyena laugh that shows his crooked white teeth, gums, and tonsils. This is called Inappropriate Affect.

I replay the tape and Jimbo takes a long breath and does it again. His tonsils are purple.

"Let's *us* be the Sea Otters, Les," Spam says. He's a large, pale hairy man like you may picture a Russian. You don't usually notice how big he is because Spam's shy and he slouches like an ape, making the hair from his neck and back tuft out over the collar of his shirt.

"You've got the fur coat for it all right, Spam!" I say. Since Spam's hair is all gray and white, I guess he would have to be an albino sea otter.

Spam and Jimbo are from the Vietnam War, which is when they discovered PTSD. Mickey says they used to call it Shell Shock or Battle Fatigue for the even older and mostly dead guys from previous wars. We are in an experimental program overseen by Mimi that puts some of the Vietnam guys (Spam and Jimbo) with us Persian Gulf guys (me and Mickey), for going on field trips together to participate in the local community, sort of like a Coalition Joint Operation. What we do is swim three times a week at the community pool down the street.

"Fur coat," Spam repeats, he does that a lot

(repeat things), and that's how the swimming group becomes the Sea Otters, and how I come to be writing this story, the only one I've ever written, despite my Deteriorated Penmanship, Difficulty Finding Words, and Excessive Salivation.

A few days later, Mimi announces that we're on probation at the pool. Because it's the second time, the VA authorities are calling it Strike Two.

"Strike Three and you're out," Mimi says, glitter sparkling from her eyelids. "Suspended, end of story." It is both a warning and an appeal to modify our behavior at the pool, at least for a while until we get off probation.

A group of sea otters is called a *raft*, which you can really picture, a whole bunch of otters floating on their backs and tied up together in the kelp to keep them from drifting apart in the waves or in a storm. The male and female sea otters make up separate rafts except at mating time. When they mate the male bites and holds the female's mouth and nose so she can't get away, for like an hour of rough sea otter lovemaking, leaving the female's snout bloody and scarred. This is normal for them, but people do not want to hear about cute, furry sea otters raping each other, so maybe Mimi will take this part out when she fixes the story up.

Our latest transgression is nothing violent, like Strike One it's just a minor violation of Pool Rules or some kind of locker room incident. But one of the regular customers has filed a complaint in writing. Mimi says when they do that, the pool people have to respond officially to protect themselves from a possible lawsuit.

"Especially when the customer who complains is a lawyer," Mimi says.

"Lawyer," Spam says.

I don't know what the head male of a sea otter raft is called. Top dog? I have to ask Mickey to look it up on the Internet, he is helping me with the sea otter facts. Mickey's got the techie skills despite growing up with gangs in East LA, I don't think I mentioned that he's Mexican (his real name is Miguel). He got talked into enlisting by a "green card recruiter" who told him he could become a US citizen and go to college after Desert Storm, but he ended up here.

Mickey may be the smartest, but I was chosen head of the swim group for my Leadership Potential. Plus I have been on TV now. So I ask Mimi if I can conduct some private sessions of just me and the guys before each swim.

I figure what have we got to lose? If you've played baseball you know that with Two Strikes you need to protect the plate, swing at anything you can reach, so you don't get called out on one that's close. If you want to make the decision yourself instead of leaving it up to the ump, you'd rather go down swinging—at least that way you have a chance to hit one out of the park.

Mimi says OK so I will start with Public Shower Etiquette.

“All right Otters!” I say. You need to picture that the men's locker room at the pool has the same kind of communal center-pole shower we have at the hospital. “*One*: do not stare at other men's penises in the shower. If you are caught staring at another man's penis, avert your eyes in a sideways glance as if you were looking around at everything in general and his penis just happened to be in your field of vision.”

Spam can detect minute differences in penis size and likes to catalogue them for us on the way back to the hospital. This is an exception to his general shyness. He says a name, describes someone's swimming style, or simply points to them, then offers his assessment of their whanger with his thumb and index finger, or thumb and pinkie spread apart for the larger specimens, as if he's measuring fish. If you don't pay close enough attention, he elbows you and repeats the fish measurements right in your face, then cracks up. You might even admire this kind of boyish enthusiasm in a 60-something polar bear of a man, but the problem is sometimes he starts doing it in the locker room before we leave. The staring and the measuring can be disturbing to the normal people who might be there, let's say your suburban dad and his preteen boy whose membership in the dick department is still a hairless little pencil-stub.

“*Two*: do not spend too much time washing your own penis.”

“*Three*: in washing your penis, do not

simulate any motion that may be remotely suggestive of masturbation.”

“Masturbation,” Spam says.

Jimbo rears back for a quick hyena cackle, a sign he's paying attention, and I catch his big wet brown eye for a second (the real one, I forgot to say that one eye is plastic). I don't know how he developed his obsession with genital cleanliness, if that is what it is, I just don't want us to get kicked out of the pool for it. Jimbo was a Tunnel Rat in Vietnam, one of the worst jobs you could have in my opinion. I saw a TV documentary about it. They loved finding a small black guy for this. Jimbo could fit into the tunnels as easily as the Viet Cong, plus he blended into the dark, *plus* the gooks were freaked out by black guys in general. Jimbo shaved his head for the heat and the lice, which increased the freakout effect. Jimbo was a famous Tunnel Rat at Cu Chi, the biggest tunnel complex in the south, he has all the medals.

One day, the story goes, Jimbo disabled about a dozen booby-traps while mapping a huge wing of Cu Chi that went right under the US military base there, used up all his ammo chasing down a VC colonel, then had to kill the colonel's whole extended family in a tunnel nest in hand to hand combat. Supposedly you could hear the screams up on the surface. One of the colonel's family poked out Jimbo's eye with a stick. Then they set off an alarm that started blowing up section by section of the tunnel complex, at one point burying Jimbo alive. Somehow he dug his way out but hasn't said a word since.

I review a couple other points—Mickey has Severe Butt Acne, I don't know if this is another symptom of Gulf War Syndrome, but it's particularly annoying when he bends way over to rinse his ass—and then I sum up with, “In general, avoid any eccentric shower habits you may have developed from years of showering alone or in groups in the military. When in doubt, imitate the models who advertise shampoo or deodorant soaps on TV.”

Actually Spam is the only one who can achieve a true lather on his stomach and chest. The rest of us have to get the lather worked up in our pubic hair and then spread it up to the trunk real quick to make it look like the TV showers.

When it's nice out, we walk to the pool, maybe we swing our army-issue canvas bags, even the older guys. Spam slouches but still bounces way up on his toes when he walks, and Jimbo limps on his artificial leg, if I forgot to explain the he has only one leg (booby trap) in addition to one eye. Mickey's cheek bunches up on one side with Chronic Eye Twitch. I walk like a normal person though I do wear dark wraparound sunglasses for my Increased Sensitivity to Light and long sleeves because of Unexplained Rashes. People look at us from their cars and driveways and kitchen windows. Sometimes they come out of their houses to gather up kids from the yard or retrieve their dog that Spam is trying to feed.

Live Oak Community Pool is on a quiet residential street, also named Live Oak Lane, near the VA. The one-story pool building with the office and locker rooms looks almost like another house except it's on a bigger lot and behind a low chainlink fence, like we have at the hospital. In the backyard by the pool there's one of the Live Oak trees that the neighborhood and street are named for. I always look for trees of that kind on streets with tree names, and I believe this is the only one left on Live Oak Lane. I am afraid to touch it because Mickey says all the other trees died from a root disease, which I do not wish to get.

"You can't catch a tree disease, Les," Mickey says as we approach the pool. He claims to have some kind of Plant Kingdom knowledge from his extended family of illegal farmworkers. I still avoid touching the tree, or anywhere touched by squirrels or birds who have been in the tree.

"Disease is caused by germs, Mick, which are transferred by touch. I saw on a TV science show that, on a microscopic level, whenever two things touch they exchange tiny particles which have lives of their own." I tell him my theory of the Transitive Property of Touching, that is, if A touches B, and B touches C, then it's the same as A touching C.

"Which is why locker rooms are great for disease," I say. Once when I forgot my shower shoes I had to invent a special way of walking along the sides of my feet, to minimize skin contact where other people have walked. I

established safe areas, which I still use, places where I know I've stepped before, places where I can always retrace my steps around the locker room and past the tree area and around the pool.

"You're losing it man," Mickey says. We go inside to change.

"Germs you think are dead can come back to life," I say. "These are called Doormat Germs."

If I think about an idea like this long enough it becomes like a voice inside my head that I talk to.

"Dorm-m-m-mant, not doorm-m-m-mat," Mickey says, but I am no longer sure if I'm talking to the real Mickey or the one inside my head.

**A**lso: Do not spit, hawk, blow your nose, or urinate in the shower.

Do not stand on the benches in the locker room to get dressed or hop up and down to put your pants on.

Do not hang your wet bathing suit and towel on other people's clothes.

Do not touch where other people have put their used wet things.

**P**icture the pool surrounded by a painted concrete patio people can rent out for children's birthday parties etc., with a brick barbecue and lawn furniture. There are special hours for Family Swim, Lessons, and Adult Lap Swim which is us. For Lap Swim the lanes are marked Fast (me), Medium (Mickey), and Slow (Spam). The slowest of the Slow lanes (Jimbo), along one edge, is shallow the whole length and has a ramp in addition to a ladder. We call it the Retard Lane, though Mimi says we shouldn't.

I love swimming. I used to be a thrasher but I watched the good swimmers and taught myself to breathe on both sides, in a rhythm, now I can do laps until I lose track of the number and the time. You have the lane dividers to guide you, plastic ropes with doughnut floats, and the black-tiled lane lines on the bottom. If there are nice looking women in nearby lanes you can look at them through your goggles and they can't really tell. Sometimes I flip over on my back and then front then back again, twisting

like a sea otter.

Two differences between me and sea otters though. Number 1, I do not swim in my own toilet. Pools are clear and clean, like disinfectant. The ocean is dark with the crap of everything that lives in it, teeming with bacteria. I will have to get used to that if I die and actually become a sea otter, like my mother adjusting to a seagull diet. I know I said I wouldn't mention my mother again, but sometimes I wish I could talk to her about that, about adapting to life as a seagull. I hope it is everything she wished for.

Number 2, sea otters are outstanding divers. They can dive through water the way seagulls dive through the air. They hold their breath just like us but they can dive like a bullet 100 feet down, scrape a juicy sea urchin off the rocky seafloor, return to the surface and roll over on their backs and spin the urchin round and round in their paws to remove the stinging spines and then take a big juicy.... Uh-oh, better watch out for my mother swooping down to get that urchin!

Me, I stay on the surface. I tell this to Mimi as she looks over my story.

"Why, Les?" Mimi asks. She grips a pencil in one hand and twirls three or four of her earrings with the other, fingernails painted blue and orange today to go with her hair.

"I do not want to go down there."

"Down there," Mimi says, repeating things like Spam.

"I do not want a bunch of water over my head," I say. "I do not want all that pressure on my ears, on my lungs holding my breath. I do not want the chemicals burning my eyes, even through my goggles, like in Iraq."

Mimi underlines something and makes a note when I say *Iraq*.

"It doesn't matter anyway," I say, "because at the pool there is Absolutely No Diving Allowed, they have a sign."

I have a complete Memory Lapse as far as losing my dog tags. One day I had them, the next day with the TV reporter they are gone. I check for them all the time because it feels like they're still there against my collarbone, like Jimbo's Phantom Limb Syndrome. The purpose of dog tags is to identify you if you're killed or

badly fucked up in war. Now they say we're at war again, this time against Terror or Terrorism, I'm not sure which, but it seems we're at war all the time.

You could say people get a little superstitious with their dog tags. I have a routine where I roll them between my fingers a certain way, sort of like some people can twirl coins or poker chips on World Championship of Poker. I started doing it in Basic Training and refined my technique in Iraq. I can flip them end to end in both directions using the silencers for leverage, those are the little rubber gaskets that go around the edges and keep the tags from clanging together. When I do this it looks like I'm drumming my fingers on my collarbone.

The old dog tags made from World War II to the Vietnam War, which don't have silencers, had a little V-notch in the end of the metal. Supposedly the notch was for wedging between a dead soldier's front teeth. Then you opened the jaw and stuck the other end between the bottom teeth, and then kicked the guy's jaw shut permanently with the dog tags wedged in the teeth, that is the story you hear in the military.

Spam and Jimbo still have their notched tags so one day I ask Spam about it. I figure Spam should know because he got his nickname after his whole unit was ambushed on a Search and Destroy mission in Cambodia and he was picked up days later just sitting there among the bodies opening cans from everyone's c-rations.

"Spam, did you, um, go around and kick everyone's jaws shut with their dog tags?" I ask him straight out.

"No, Les."

"What *did* you do?"

"I guess I didn't do anything, I just waited for someone to come." Spam stares off into the distance like he's back in Vietnam and now I'm sorry I asked.

Mickey looks it up and finds that the V-notch was actually for holding the dog tags in the old embossing machine that printed out your name, service number, and blood type. "The jaw-kicking story is what you *gringos* call an Urban Legend," he says.

"I wonder what do *wetbacks* call it," I say. I have to remember to ask Mickey whether Jimbo as a black man would also be a *gringo*, or only me and Spam.

“Hey look at this, hajjis don’t eat pork,” Mickey says, ignoring me and following some side trail on the Internet about c-rations and SPAM, the canned meat product. C-rations is the old name for MREs (Meals, Ready to Eat), like gook is the old name for hajji, which is a *Middle Eastern* gook. Gooks and hajjis, these are the kinds of things you learn by putting Vietnam together with Iraq.

“That’s why they didn’t give us SPAM in the Gulf War,” Mickey says, he means in our MREs, “to please the M-M-Muslim countries in the Coalition.”

“Fascinating Mr. Braniac,” I say. I like to tease Mickey but I do hope he’ll get out of here some day because he’d be great in college with this stuff.

“Muslim,” Spam says.

**P**lus: Do not stop other swimmers to shake their hand and ask them how they’re doing.

Do not attempt the butterfly stroke unless you actually know how to do it.

Do not race people when they try to pass you.

**O**n TV they are showing the new Iraq War, it is much worse than the earlier one me and Mickey were in. Already the VA is overflowing with new PTSD cases, men and women now too with limbs blown off from roadside bombs and suicide bombers, and they are building a new wing on the hospital. There is a news story on the Rumeila Oil Fields, that is near Kuwait in southern Iraq, and suddenly I see myself back in Basra in Operation Desert Storm.

Let’s say we are doing mop-up, they have already bombed the crap out of the city, buildings are crumbled, there are bodies in the streets. You can hear concussion thuds in the distance where we are carpet-bombing the retreating Iraqi Army before the ceasefire. My orders are to cover Lane Romeo-Juliette-Niner (that is military talk for Lane RJ9, the name of this street on our surveillance map) until the battalion completes its sweep of the area. I find shade next to some kind of ruined government building or bank, the only trees are some palms in the distance by a dried-up canal. I squat down

to drink some water, and then I realize I’m alone for what seems like the first time in years. I twirl my dog tags quickly from thumb to pinkie, pinkie to thumb, I can do it with both hands without even thinking. Black clouds rise over the ruins and I feel a blast of hot sandy wind, smell the burning oil.

Across the street are two dead hajjis, Iraqi teenagers in bloody robes, maybe Shiite resistance fighters killed by the Republican Guard on their way out. The wind ruffles their clothes and their hair. I remember a picture of Armageddon from a Sunday School book when I was a kid, it had fires and darkened skies and people cowering by dead bodies, and now I think maybe I am seeing the future. Not Heaven but Armageddon. Death and Destruction, the caption said. I told my mother about the picture—she was trying me out with some other church, because there was no Friends Meeting (the name of Quaker church) available where we were living—and she said, “That’s just some people’s imagination.” The Quakers don’t care much about hellfire and brimstone. They think God lives inside of everyone. Also they are pacifists so they would refuse to fight in a war like this.

Burning oil and radioactive battlefields as far as you can see, toxic chemicals, dark swarms of sand flies carrying parasites, clouds of poisonous pesticides, Depleted Uranium dust from our weapons everywhere in the shrapnel, on the ground, in the smoke, in the air. My eyes sting inside my fogged up goggles, my nostrils are on fire, and I think, Why the fuck didn’t I become a Quaker?

I hear a voice saying Don’t forget to take your nerve gas pills, oh and by the way they may cause brain damage.

The Army doctors say there’s no such thing as Gulf War Syndrome, everything is in my head. I’m not sure, but sometimes, like now, I think I am talking to the TV.

**A**nd: Do not trap large fart bubbles underwater in your trunks then release them to make “volcanoes.”

Do not go into the office dripping wet to report small pieces of dirt, drowned insects, or dead leaves on the bottom of the pool.

Do not discuss politics with the lifeguards,  
or ask them on dates.

Do not pee in the pool.

**W**hen it's crowded you have to share a lane with several people and Circle Swim, which means go Counterclockwise around the center line. If I get stuck Circling with a couple assholes who won't let you pass even at the ends, sometimes I resort to the Retard Lane, where it's less crowded and you can just fly by people.

The Retard Lane is used mainly by (a) extremely fat people who jog and jiggle along the bottom and (b) actual disabled people like Jimbo, who has to disattach his artificial leg to swim. Let me say that little Jimbo loves that leg even though it's a ridiculous pink color, he is still waiting for an African American prosthetic. Anyway Jimbo doesn't seem to mind that we call it the Retard Lane, maybe because sometimes there are civilians worse off than him in the physically disabled department.

Take Captain Pike for example. I forget his real name, he is an attorney and dresses real nice. He must have his clothes custom tailored, because although his head is somewhat normal, his body is dwarf size and he has a back hump the size of a basketball, his spine is twisted like a pretzel, his arms and legs are skinny as pipes. He wears ankle-to-thigh steel braces and walks with two canes. I don't know if he was born like this or had some terrible accident. He walks so slowly that by the time he changes into his swimsuit, drags himself out to the pool on the canes, undoes the braces and clanks them onto the concrete next to Jimbo's pink fake leg, and works his way down the handrail into the Retard Lane, we can usually finish our laps, shower, and dress.

Spam named him Captain Pike from the original *Star Trek*. Nobody can remember the name of the woman that Captain Pike, the first captain of the *Enterprise*, falls in love with in the pilot episode. The woman is horribly injured in a starship crash then put back together all crooked and disfigured by the Talosians. The Talosians botch the job because they've never seen a human before, so they don't have a model. That is what they say, but they never explain why they would put her together so

crooked when the Talosians themselves are at least symmetrical. Anyway Pike himself is severely burned and mangled in a radiation accident and lives in a futuristic, full-life-support wheelchair. But the Talosians have the Power of Illusion or something so they can let Captain Pike and the deformed woman think they are young and beautiful again, fall in love, and live out the rest of their lives on Talos IV like they're normal. I wish we had some Talosians here.

**O**K so one of the dead Iraqi teenagers isn't really dead. He gets up and yells something at me, it sounds like *Mohammed!* or *Jihad!*, everything they say sounds like that, like they're clearing their throat all the time. He fires a round right into my leg before I can barely piss and shit my pants. You don't hear much about messing yourself, definitely not from the Embedded Reporters for the new war who are still babbling on the TV about Operation Whatever, but believe me this happens to a lot of people. It's like a bucket of ice water is dumped over me, I'm emptied out with fear, and then just as quickly my whole body is on fire with sweat and adrenaline.

What surprises me the most in this scene is how much the bullet hurts. It's like getting hit by a shovel full force. After that it's almost a relief to focus on the pain instead of my fear.

I let go my dog tags and pull up my M16 and squeeze off round after round, wildly at first but then homing in on the hajji, until the boy is really dead, this time for sure, his body jerking and bouncing with each hit.

Then let's say I empty the clip into the other kid too just to make sure.

When the medics come I am holding my leg, sitting in my own crap, and singing to myself, to the tune of "I Wish I Were an Oscar Meyer Weiner,"

*Oh I wish I were a Quaker like my moth-er.  
That is what I'd truly like to be.*

*'Cause if I were a Quaker like my moth-er,  
Everyone would be in love with me.*

I am still singing when they load me into the back of a Humvee.

Presently, the TV that was showing the new Iraq War changes to an SUV ad, then a preview for a new Reality Show where people injured in car wrecks will be brought to a fake hospital and

compete for medical care while trying to figure out who are the real doctors and nurses, something like that.

I go to the real hospital window and look down, we're on the third story if I forgot to mention that, and I see Mimi get into her car in the parking lot below. She moves the rearview mirror to check her hair and jewelry. I never thought before about how much maintenance her hair spikes and piercings might require. I doubt she'll leave this in the story, but I wonder for a second if she has a date after work.

**A**nd finally:  
Do not try to push or pull people's dogs into the pool, they are not allowed.

Do not spend too much time underwater ogling the women swimmers through your goggles.

Do not stand up on the lane dividers in the pool or try to walk on them like a tightrope or straddle them and bounce up and down yelling Whoopee Ride 'Em Cowboy.

Remember, Absolutely No Diving Allowed.

**T**oday it's raining so an orderly takes us in the van. I like going in the van because I can press my face against the tinted window and look back at the neighborhood people without them seeing me. When we get there Captain Pike is in the parking lot. He drives a specially-equipped bigass Buick. One day in summer he had shown us the hand controls for the gas and brakes.

"It's like Tiger Woods's Buick," he had said, meaning the one on TV, and he also showed us his golf clubs in the trunk. I think this stuck with us because, although he may be well off, Captain Pike looks about as much like Tiger Woods as we do.

Now Spam goes over to have another look at the buttons and levers in the driver's seat. Spam is somehow fascinated with Captain Pike, who pushes the door open and begins the long process of shifting his legs around to get out. Spam watches for a minute or two, then reaches down and scoops Captain Pike up like he's going to carry him to the locker room.

"Please put me down," Captain Pike says.

"Spam's only trying to help," I say.

"I don't want your help," Captain Pike says.

"He's an attorney," I remind Spam, who drops him back into the front seat like a live hand grenade, and all of a sudden I realize that Captain Pike must be the one who got us on probation in the first place.

"Attorney," Spam says, and a light goes on for him and Mickey too, *lawyer, written complaint, Strike Two*. We all look at each other.

"Fuck Tiger Woods!" I say to Captain Pike, in his face through the driver's window. It seems inadequate but it's all I can come up with, and it feels good. Captain Pike seems a little scared by the outburst, but Jimbo cracks up about Tiger Woods all the way into the locker room.

During the rainy season they keep the lane covers on the pool to preserve the heat. If there aren't very many people, like today, you have to uncover your own lane by rolling up the blue styrofoam, and then you're supposed to re-cover it when you're done. That's the hard part, getting out of the pool and crouching on the wet concrete, after you've gotten all warm, and rolling the mat back out again. In case you forget, in the winter months they put out a big sign on an easel, "Thanks for Covering Your Lane."

Mickey and I uncover our lanes quickly, we help Spam and Jimbo with theirs, then we all slide into the warm water and swim swim swim swim, Jimbo in the Retard Lane, Spam in the Slow Lane, Mickey in Medium, and me of course in the Fast Lane. After a while I notice something shiny on the bottom directly below, something metal stuck down in the drain. The drain is in the deepest part of the deep end, the number on the side says *9 Feet* which I suppose for the remainder of my human lifetime I will pronounce *Niner Feet* in my head.

Is it maybe a couple coins dropped from someone's trunks, like hidden treasure?

As I pass back and forth, turning my neck opposite ways to alternate my breathing, the light reflects off the metal at different angles through the leaves and dirt that collect around the drain. Now I can see there's also something attached to the coins, floating above the drain, waving in the water like sea urchin stingers. I feel this strange attraction, and I wonder if this is how sea otters spot their food. But for me the



bottom is like another universe, I'm hypnotized by the sparkling light in its wavy reflections. Even on this cloudy day the patterns of light shimmer on the pool floor like the constellations at night, you can see them almost right in your face, but you'd never try to actually go there. You'd never try to go there because it's too far and there's no air and you can't hold your breath that long, the pressure on your head and ears would be unbearable, your eyes would bulge out and burn when you opened them, your eyes would burn burn burn and your goggles would not protect you.

You'd never go there because the only way to get that deep, way down to the very drain of the deep end, would be to dive in from the side, all at once. You'd have to get physically out of the pool and dive in from the edge, but there's Absolutely No Diving Allowed says the sign, and thanks to Captain Pike the Sea Otters have Two Strikes already.

No, no, you'd never do it unless the shiny, shimmering objects beckon to you and say: Maybe I am your dog tags.

**R**eturning in the van everyone seems to realize we will be suspended from the pool. We are silent for a while. Then Spam starts doing Captain Pike with his fish measurements. We are well aware of the length and diameter of Captain Pike's surprising sausage pecker, along with Spam's exaggerated version of it, but Spam is very determined and animated in his presentation and we all start cracking up.

"Good one," Mickey says.

"Hup!" Jimbo says, his forehead wrinkling like strands of black licorice. It's almost like a hiccup yet more than that, and Mickey and Spam and I all turn to look at him, since if it counts as a *word*, which I'm not really sure it does, it would be Jimbo's first in over three decades. I will have to ask Mimi. If we show some signs of progress, then maybe she can get permission for a new experimental program like we had with the Sea Otters.

The rain stops, I unfog the window and see, above the trees, the construction workers start back to work on the rooftop of the new hospital wing. Looking through the van window is like watching TV. There far away a man pounds

nails in a steady rhythm. The air is thick like water, and across the distance the sound arrives at the top of his stroke instead of the bottom. I try to match my heartbeat to his hammering. You can do this for short periods of time if you try hard enough. It's a trick I guess, I don't know if it means anything. I think, my heart pounding, that after work these men will go home, have beers, and take showers.