

# **honestly** *ben*

B I L L K O N I G S B E R G



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# 1

**According** to the swim instructor at the Gilford gym, I had the worst buoyancy of any human he'd ever seen.

My brother, Luke, and I got one lesson each as our Christmas present, mostly because Luke wanted to learn. I wasn't so sure I needed to add swimming to my life, as I'd gotten along just fine without it for seventeen years. Also, it was three degrees outside, so the idea of being in a bathing suit, even inside, was not appealing. I offered my lesson to Luke, but he wanted us to do it together, so I gave it a try.

The instructor, maybe two years older than me, had a thick beard, like you could hide a full-grown blue jay in there. "You don't have to be afraid of the water. All people somewhat float. It's Archenemies's law," the guy said, and I resisted the urge to correct him by saying, "Archimedes." When you attend a fancy boarding school, it's best not to be a know-it-all on your winter break.

He got the class to kick our way to the deep end while holding on to kickboards, and then he took them away and we all clung to the pool's edge as if we were hanging over the Grand Canyon. He modeled treading water, which looked like riding a bike, except if you fall off,

you drown. He showed us that if we somehow fell to the bottom, we could use our arms and legs to propel us upward. Then, one at a time, he told us to let go of the edge.

“You’ll see how your natural buoyancy kicks in, and your fear will just melt away,” he promised.

I was at the end of the line, and while some took more prodding than others, each person took a deep breath and let go. Just as he predicted, everyone sunk a bit and then rose up until the crowns of their heads poked to the surface. Then they thrashed around in some approximation of water treading until their mouths were above the blue, gasping for oxygen, and the instructor helped them reach the side again.

Luke went before me. He’s about seventy pounds skinnier, and he did fine. He didn’t even thrash that much on his way back up.

“Wicked awesome. Just like riding a bicycle,” he said, his legs pedaling water even after he reached the edge.

This was ironic for him to say and not of great solace to me, as we were both taught to ride a bike by our dad, who took us to the top of a gravelly hill near our farm and told us to sit down, stop our whining, and start pedaling. Mom had four gashed knees to nurse that night, and she was not assuaged when Dad shrugged and said, “It’s how my father taught me.”

When it was my turn to tread water, I did what the guy said. I let go.

I sunk directly to the bottom of the pool in three seconds flat. My butt hit the bottom, I bounced up maybe a foot, and then I re-sunk.

Like a stone. Like a thick, Czechoslovakian stone.

There was something almost comfortable about sitting on the pool floor, even with all the chlorinated water I’d swallowed and the lack of oxygen down there. Like for a simple moment, nothing was

pulling at me. I was just Ben-at-the-bottom-of-the-pool, and I opened my eyes, saw the light blue world around me, and thought, *Yes. This.* A part of me actively chose not to push myself up to the surface.

Then I felt the instructor's frenetic arms under my armpits, and I launched myself up with my legs, and we drifted the six or so feet back to the surface.

"What are your bones made of?" he asked, once his gasping for air subsided and I was safely clinging to the side again.

I wiped the water from my eyes. I have learned from a lifetime of being a Carver that questions don't always require a response. Science classes taught me that my bones are made of collagen and calcium, the same stuff as other people's bones. The only difference is that I am large — like six foot two, two hundred fifteen pounds — and I am Czech.

We are a dense people.

My mom's specialty is Czech dumplings, the densest food known to man. They're flour, milk, mashed potatoes, and eggs, made into a loaf and boiled, and their general purpose is soaking up gravy. One could build a well-insulated shack out of them.

I am convinced that in many, many ways — buoyancy included — I am a Czech dumpling.

I mentally checked out of the lesson after twenty minutes, when I found myself unable to do the simplest things in water — breathing, kicking — and my thoughts dove into the same dark abyss they'd been in for much of the day.

That morning, my dad came into our room while Luke was in the bathroom and sat down on my bed. I smiled, still feeling warm from Christmas, five days before. Our family is big on tradition, and our Christmas tradition is waking up, bundling up in lots of clothing,

and getting in Dad's brown Ford truck. Mom gets to-go cups from our store and fills them with steaming hot chocolate, and we huddle in the truck, me and Luke in the back, Mom and Dad up front, our breath and the steam from the drinks crisply visible. Dad drives slowly through the roads of Alton for an hour or so, and we *watch the crops grow*, as he likes to say. There's something perfect about the silence, all of us together, witnessing the pristine, snow-filled fields *out there*, while we're safe and warm *in here*.

It's not fancy, but it's always in those moments that I most feel like a Carver. We're quiet, but we're together. And then we go home and Luke and I open our present, which is usually a "simultaneous," which means we open them at the same time, and we usually get the same thing, as we did this year with the swimming lesson.

Call it simple. But yeah, I kinda love our Christmas.

But when I smiled at Dad as he sat down on my bed this morning, he didn't smile back.

"Got your report card yesterday," he said.

"Oh." My heart dropped.

"Benny," he said. "How did that happen?"

I sucked in my teeth. "That" was a C plus in the first semester of BC calculus. Prior to last semester, I'd been a straight-A student, but this past fall I got a little sidetracked by my new and suddenly exciting social life at boarding school. Suddenly I was a straight-A student with one C plus that stood out like a sore  $dy/dx$ . I'd gone from possible valedictorian to also-ran.

"I know," I mumbled, averting my eyes. "I'm sorry."

He shook his thin, grizzled face at me. "That's not good enough, Benny. You know what this world does with a C-plus student? It spits him out. You need to fix this."