

Unheard of

The tension in the board feels the same as always, firm, but giving way just enough to suggest the power it holds. My toes curl habitually on the rough surface with pent-up energy, the same way I've always started a dive since I was six years old. The water looks the same too, still and gleaming as glass, broken only by the hose's spray used for spotting. I inhale and tighten my muscles, a parade of emotions sending adrenaline through my limbs – concentration, determination, excitement, fear. But something feels off. I shift my weight, realign my spine, raise my eyes, the nervous habits I've picked up when I can't start a dive. The ones my teammates constantly joke about. Only then do I notice my partner halfway through her hurdle on the twin board.

We'd always liked imagining the side-by-side three-metre springboards as twins, ever since our coach had given them the name. Twins ourselves, we'd always liked the idea of the two boards standing tall together, perfectly in sync when you knew how the board would respond to your touch, like the two of us. Always, in both our dives and our thought processes, we knew exactly how the other would act. That, I realized as I turned away from the pool, was what felt different earlier. An electric spark of dread pushed through my fingers and worry dropped into my stomach with the thought of missing my sister's usually-louder-than-needed count. We were out of sync. I bit my lip, already anticipating her reaction nervously. My sister was a patient person, but 'I didn't hear you shout a metre next to me' was too embarrassing to say.

Repetition, I've learned, is key to executing a clean dive, so I readied halfway up the board and copied Isla for the benefit of my muscle memory. Pulling hard with my arms the second I was fully submerged, I righted myself in the water. I didn't surface

right away as I normally do, my muscles itching to move and stretch. I was suddenly craving the calm the pool's bottom provided. Letting the cold water shock my too-hot face, worry began to infest my mind. Two months ago, I'd been diagnosed with hearing loss. The audiologist doesn't know what caused it (this is apparently very common in kids and teens. Go figure!), but it will almost certainly get worse over time. I'd never experienced it quite like today, though, and the thought of it made me clench my hands in worry. How much longer would I be able to dive if I couldn't stay in sync with my partner? I started swimming upward, needing the physical touch of the water on my skin for grounding. I broke the surface and took in a breath, pulling myself onto the deck soaked and slippery courtesy of Isla. Following her trail of damp footprints, I saw her halted halfway up the board's stairs. I matched her focused gaze as I moved to join her. At first, the sight of my mother conversing with Coach Otto seemed normal enough. Was this the two of us falling further out of sync, me not understanding what she saw in the bleachers? I grabbed the chipped railing. My grasp on the rough, blue paint felt comfortably familiar, the surface so well known to me after years of climbing these steps. My stomach churned, and I really, really, wanted to dry off and forget this practice.

Some days, I flew up these stairs, bouncing with energy and feeling incredibly light. Some days, today included, I felt more like a trudge. As I took the first heavy step towards the top, I sensed a wet tap on my bare shoulder. Instinctually, I knew it was Isla, her way of getting my attention. I placed my hand on her fingers, my way of responding.

"Gwen. Coach Otto's been calling you; I think he wants to talk to you and mom together."

“What? I didn’t hear him!” my answer came reflexively, too quickly for me to formulate a reply. Nervously spinning back towards the bleachers, Isla took my hand, but I could tell it was apprehensive. I knew her well enough that I could practically see the wheels turning in her mind, putting together the less-than-optimal state of my hearing. Now that I was turned towards where my mother and coach were standing, I was able to make out Coach Otto’s calls.

“Can you come over for a sec, Gwendolyn?” His serious, somewhat hopeful tone immediately threatened to spend me spiralling into hypotheticals. He had been working with young divers long enough that most of his corrections seemed offhand, almost second-nature, but this clearly had nothing to do with my last dive. I took in a breath, and my whole body tingled with the miserable anticipation of what Coach Otto might want of me. I started back down the stairs, something that usually mans you chickened out of a dive (it’s affectionately called ‘The Walk of Shame’ by my fellow divers). Normally, I hated platform diving, but right then I was wishing I had been all the way up on ten-metre, instead of just one flight up. Reaching the last step way too quickly, I crossed the deck to stand awkwardly beside my mother.

“We have a new diver starting this afternoon. Isadora. Nine years old... starting diving for the first time,” Coach Otto began. I felt my jaw clench with frustration. I’d told Coach Otto how important lip reading was for my hearing, yet here he was, burying his face in attendance sheets. I sidestepped towards the bleachers, physically moving away from thoughts of ignorant teachers to clear my mind for the conversation. Finally looking up from his mess of papers, he continued,

“She has moderate hearing loss. She lip reads, uses some sign language, but still communicates verbally as well. I wondered if you would be willing to coach her once a week, after your practice. You would have the opportunity to practice your sign language and lip reading, and she would get to work with someone who best knows how to support her.” He looked up expectantly, but I didn’t yet have an answer for him. In my mind, there were so many problems with this. I was only 16. I didn’t know much sign language. What would Isla do for the hour I was coaching? I didn’t know how to teach a nine-year-old!

“Gwen,” my mother’s voice sounded. Only her firm but encouraging tone could cut through my endless worries, no matter what they were about. I turned towards her, hoping she could give me some guidance.

“Personally, I think it’s a great idea. You’ve been so worried about learning how to sign, in case your hearing worsens. You need to practice it.” Her decisive, clear answer was amazing to hear. So often, the only advice adults have to give is vague and unhelpful. Nervous energy built up in my hands, and I began to stretch and wring them as I thought about the proposition.

“Sure, I’ll try,” I found myself answering, shocked at the confidence that suddenly flowed through me, unknotting my clenched stomach and travelling out my fingers. If Coach Otto was asking, and *my* often-blunt mother was supporting, they have to believe that I’m capable of coaching. A smile turned up the corners of Coach Otto’s mouth, hinting at relief. My jaw tightened for the second time. Coach Otto seemed to believe that coaching kids requiring accommodations was a burden. I sighed, finally releasing the tension I’d been feeling all day. My eyes wandering as Coach Otto set to assembling

the papers I'd need, I noticed a small girl half-skipping towards the pool. She quickly bounded up the stairs of the bleachers, her loose, chocolate-coloured hair flying behind her. If this was Isadora, she was going to make an excellent diver. My hands still fidgeting, I climbed the steps to greet her. I was able to introduce myself with my limited sign language, forming my name letter by letter.

"Are you Isadora?" I asked aloud, "I'm going to be your coach."

"You sign?" she asked, clearly excited. "I do, too! I *am* Isadora, but I like Isa better." She paused, spelling out the three letters with her right hand. "I've never met any coach who signs before. Are you fluent?"

"No, not quite. I was hoping you could teach me," I replied, my words heavy with the hopelessness of learning an entire language before I can no longer use my first. "Before we start, how do you want to communicate? Is talking okay, or should I try signing?" She paused, considering.

"Talking's okay. I've grown up lip reading, and my hearing isn't completely gone yet." she told me after a moment. I smiled, startled by how amazing it felt to have someone else who understood the nerve-racking, edge-of-change situation I was in. My smile dropped as I recognized the light feeling that filled my body, the same one that came when Isla and I were in sync.

"Why don't you take off your sandals and wait on deck for me? We'll start warm-ups in a minute," I told her, signing what I could for practice. She nodded, but before bounding back down the grey stairs, she began to repeat my directions in sign.

“Thank you,” I signed back, grateful for the new vocabulary. As I moved towards my yellow backpack several feet away, I copied the phrases Isadora had shown me. With each movement of my fingers, a sense of satisfaction lifted my mood. It actually felt amazing to sign, learning these words that may be useful for me. Shaking my head in disbelief, I pulled on shorts and a t-shirt over my now-dry bathing suit.

“Okay Isa,” I signed to her, standing up on five-metre, “Keep your body tight, you need to squeeze all your muscles.” After leading her through warm-ups, Isadora had eagerly asked to jump off the first platform. As much as I wanted to capitalize on her fearlessness now, I needed to know that she could hold her position. Nevertheless, she happily scampered to the stiff one-metre board. I taught her, verbally at first, how to properly jump. Stomach tight. Arms straight. Chin level. Eyes up. Each time she splashed into the freezing pool, she popped eagerly to the surface, translating my corrections to sign. Finally, after her one and three metre jumps proved to be excellent, I sent her hurrying excitedly up to the tower. While I waited for her to reach the board, I sat down next to Isla on the hard bleachers.

“I can sign ‘keep your legs straight’, or ‘squeeze your stomach’.... It’s amazing! I always half-expected to never learn sign, but it kind of feels like I may actually do it now. It’s like the disbelief you feel when Coach Otto actually likes a dive.” I told her, grinning. All this hope had pushed some of the fear from earlier away, replacing it with energy that had my feet tapping on the deck. I turned to Isla, wanting her support and excitement too. Her gaze was locked on her bright orange flip flops.

“That’s great, Gwen,” she started, looking up at me. I knew her words were sincere, but she bit down on the ‘n’ in my nickname. Ever since we were little, she’d

always done that when she was upset. I nudged her, my way of coaxing out the full story. She leaned against my side, her way of responding.

“I know this is hard on you. You know that I know... but it’s no picnic for me either. I never really thought things would change that much, until today. We’re so out of sync. I don’t want our dives to change!” She stopped, and I knew that ‘our dives’ was loaded with more than competition.

“Well,” I began, “Wait a few years, and Isadora can take my place.” Isla laughed. Somehow, it spoke full paragraphs when she wanted it to. “I’m going to miss your laugh the most.” The words tumbled out, the very first thing I thought after I was diagnosed.

“Gwendolyn!” Isadora called, her voice tiny from across the pool. I stood up, wanting to scream after finally speaking that thought, one that carried a note of finality I’d been trying to avoid. Breathing hard, I planted my feet on the deck and looked towards Isadora. Once she saw that I was watching, she signed that she was ready, her hands shaking so much with excitement she could barely form the words.

“Okay,” I signed back, “Jump on three, Isa.” The instant she finished the countdown, she sprang from the board, hitting the water a second later. Despite every part of me shaking with the fear of losing... something, not quite my sister, not quite my hearing, Isadora’s jump forced a little bit of happiness into my heart. She broke the surface, gasping, and I laughed when I realized it was from excitement rather than holding her breath. She whipped her head towards me, signing from across the pool.

“That was so fun! Can I do it again? Do we have time? Can I go higher?” With shocking ease, I signed back, each movement of my hands easing some of the anger

held in my muscles. From the second I was old enough to walk, I'd always had the need to move. I'd spent years tapping my feet, twisting my hands, pacing. Before I'd needed to use it, all sign language did was remind me of the huge wall blocking me from seeing what my future would be like. But now... It seemed to fit perfectly. Talking to Isadora through it just felt right, the way I felt when the board feels the same, the water looks the same, my toes curl in anticipation, and I'm in sync with Isla. It releases the energy constantly held in my muscles, sending a different parade of emotions through me. Calm. Peace. Satisfaction.

After I'd sent Isadora off with her father, Isla and I headed towards the changing room ourselves. I yanked the heavy door open, but the force sent my bag swinging off my shoulder. The two of us immediately burst into laughter, adding it to the mental tally of how many times I'd done the exact same thing before. For the first time, I carefully watched Isla as she laughed. Her hair fell over one shoulder. Her blue-green eyes squinted. Her nose wrinkled, just a little. Those were the signs of Isla's laugh, and hers alone. As the door pushed a frigid gust of air onto our backs, I decided that seeing Isla's laugh was almost as good as hearing it. For me, it meant things were going to be okay.