

What Follows

Lucy Hagan

For weeks, the word follows me. No matter how far I walk, it trails a half-step behind me. The sound of the word mingles with every crunch of gravel underfoot and every rustle of eucalyptus above, echoing a beat after every step I take:

Redundant.

Redundant.

Redundant.

I've been here before – *I was the best*. I know how bad it can get – *I still wasn't good enough* – and I know what I have to do to keep the darkness at bay. Movement, that's what I need – *I was the best; I still wasn't good enough* – and lots of it. *Redundant, redundant, redundant.*

Last year, when we were all locked inside, I sought freedom and sunlight by running along the river that bisects my city. This time, I'm sick. Still recovering from a virus (not *The Virus*, as I assure everyone and myself), I know from past mistakes that my lungs will not hold up to running. Walking, slowly, is the best I can do. Only, at such a slow pace, the word can keep up with me easily. There it is again, following me like someone else's dog, preventing me from ever quite relaxing into this new life of leisure.

I open Seek.com and burst into tears. *I can't do this again. There is nowhere left for me.* Close my laptop, get in the car, head for the beach.

The plan was only to walk, but the water looks so inviting that I don't even try to resist. There's nobody around – *everyone else has a meaningful role to play in the world, everyone but me* – so I strip down to my undies and dash for the water. I approach it the way I want to approach everything in life – without hesitation. We're getting into autumn now, and the water is starting to bite, but something primal drives me forward. I walk – *no, this is more than that, I am more than that* – I stride until the ocean licks at my waist, then, without pausing to wonder if what I'm doing is completely crazy, I dive.

And for a moment –

The word is gone.

There is nothing behind, ahead, or around me.

Except for the cold.

And the silence.

Oh, the silence.

My face breaks through the surface. I gasp against the shocking cold, and then I begin to laugh. What I'm doing barely constitutes as swimming – I dive and splash like an otter at play, and when my lungs inevitably begin to protest, I flip onto my back and float. Joy courses through me like it had never left. A new word comes to me now, cavorting around me and buoying me up.

This.

I thought I had learned to be suspicious of hope, knowing how we use it to distract and blind ourselves to reality. Hope is what makes people join cults and pyramid schemes. Hope is what stopped me from coming home from my travels to say goodbye before she died. Hope is the thing people waste what might have been a good enough life waiting for. And yet.

I cannot stay away from the water. Every day I find an excuse to drive to the beach and throw myself into the ocean, and every day my failure, my redundancy, feels smaller. Before I know it, I have pinned my hope to the water. I may not have much to offer the world right now: I cannot donate to charity or 'play my part' get the economy back on track. I haven't applied for any jobs, and I haven't written a single word. I am still grieving for my old life, and it's been so long since I was well. But this I can do. I don't have to go down the dark path again. Winter, failure, boredom: I do not have to be crushed by it all again.

I join a group who meets every Wednesday morning at sunrise for a swim and a coffee. I'm the only person there wearing a wetsuit, which makes me shy and embarrassed at first, but soon becomes a conversation starter. In the line for a coffee a guy asks me what I love most about the man I've just married. Shockingly, he isn't trying to challenge my choices. He genuinely wants to hear my answer, so I give it as honestly as I can. He writes down the title of my book, though I'm not sure that he will be able to get a copy now that the second-to-last bookstore in the city is gone.

My father and I pack our wetsuits and masks and drive to Port Noarlunga. When I was a child, we used to laugh through our snorkels at the row of fishing lines on one side of the border

of the National Park, and the huge school of fish congregating on the other. Most of the fish have disappeared now, but the water is clear and I feel so alive. Diving down, I spy a gummy shark and an abandoned anchor. I run my hands through the kelp and listen to my breathing amplified by the snorkel and think of nothing but, *this*.

Whenever I post on Instagram about my swims, my follower count jumps up. I call my swims the ‘daily dips’, and all of a sudden I’m being told by total strangers how amazing and inspiring I am. I pretend to laugh it off. Surf brands start appearing in my DMs with vague ‘opportunities’ to ‘collaborate’. While I’m swimming, ideas and stories begin swirling around my head for the first time in months. I begin to think, *there could really be something here*. I’m not sure yet what that something might be, but I trust my instincts enough by now to know a path to something good when I see it. A routine begins to form around suiting up, driving to the beach, walking, swimming, posting, washing my wetsuit and hanging it out to dry for tomorrow. The word that used to follow me is barely a whisper now; I’d rather swim than commute anyway.

Then one morning, I don’t wear my wetsuit to the Wednesday sunrise swim. My ability to get into cold water without hesitating has become an identifiable part of me, and I want to show it off. I dive into the water just fine, and it’s as wonderful as it ever is, but at home I can’t seem to get warm. I shiver through a scalding hot shower, then put on all my clothes and huddle in bed beneath all the blankets in my house. All day, I can hardly move. I don’t think I’m sick – I’ve been feeling healthier than ever recently, except for those random moments of nausea – but something is going on.

There’s nothing like spending an entire day in bed to make it feel like all one’s good work has come undone. *Swimming was the one thing I had going on*, says the cruel part of me, *the one thing I hadn’t failed at. And here I am, failing again*.

I speak to my father, a retired doctor, who surmises that I have hypothermia. It isn’t that cold. People swim at sunrise in the Arctic! Something strange is going on.

I text my husband: *My period is late*.

Surely not...

I take a day off from swimming, then go again the next day, wearing my wetsuit this time. That night, I pee on a stick. We don’t want to get too ahead of ourselves or feel too hopeful; we’ve been here before and have only ever been disappointed. For three minutes, we

leave the stick face-down and talk ourselves out of our excitement. Three long minutes pass. I flip the stick over, and we scream. Two lines.

I'd thought that what I felt while I was swimming was joy. But compared to this?

All I'd been looking for in ocean swimming was peace. Then, of course, my ego and ambition built it up into Something More. It became the thing I could do to build myself up, to Become Someone. Then, all of a sudden, I really *became someone*: the creator of this tiny little idea. The home in which this idea could grow to become a child.

Stubborn as I am, and early as it is, I try to keep swimming for another week, even if only to keep up appearances. I get hypothermia *again*, and finally I get the message. No more sunrise swimming. There's something I need to care for now, properly this time. I trade the freezing May ocean for aquarobics in a hydrotherapy pool. Morning sickness hits me, hard, and the thought of getting up before the sun to jump in the ocean becomes laughable. Hope becomes something new again, something necessary. Hope is what gently tells us that we don't need to check for blood on the sheets every morning. Hope is what makes it easy to give up gin and soft cheese. Hope is what makes us love immediately.

Everything, it seems, changes overnight. If I thought I needed to grieve the loss of my old life before, well, it was nothing compared to this. By the time this baby is weaned, my twenties will be over. No more backpacking or partying until sunrise. I know that I am ready for all that to be over, had been for some time, but saying goodbye is harder than I'd thought it would be.

I'm grateful for the excuse not to bother with job applications, but in darker moments I wonder if I'll ever be employable again. The world is not kind to those who leave work to have children. I've been here before. I know how hard it can be, how traumatic. What if I just... never go back? What would that make me? *Who* would that make me? What if, the most fearful part of me whimpers, I become so absorbed by this baby that I lose myself?

But then, the joy.

Oh, the joy.

Every piece of good news, every scrap of information, every change in my body.

All of it, all joy.

One unseasonably warm day I call my father, who agrees to meet me at the beach. We wriggle into our wetsuits, and I notice that my belly is poking out further than it used to. The

water is icy on our hands and feet and down the backs of our wetsuits, but my basal body temperature is so high these days that it feels like bathwater in no time.

The sand is pristine white, the water aquamarine. We stop to catch our breaths every twenty-five metres, and my father asks me again and again if I'm feeling alright. I have never felt so good. How lucky I am, I realise in this moment and in so many like it, to live in this place. To inhabit this body. To be loved by these people and to have this child growing inside me.

If the old word still follows me, I can no longer hear it. I have new words now, thousands of them. Some are beautiful, some are cruel, but now they balance and quieten each other. I'm not just one word – I don't have to be any of them. All there is for me to do right now is wait. When the sun returns, my baby will be born. She will grow, and so will I, and before too long I will take her down to the sea, to splash and gasp and squeal and laugh beneath the sunrise.

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