

Swim Your Lights Out

by [Anne-Christine Hoff](#) (March 2021)



A Bigger Splash, David Hockney, 1967

I

Sarah hadn't meant to find the agreement in her father's bedside drawer. She had been looking for nail clippers, and on her way back from her parents' bathroom, she had stopped by her father's nightstand. She knew she shouldn't have looked in the drawer, but no one was around, and no one would know. Her mother was downstairs on the phone, and her father was

upstairs in his office, as he always was, working, always working, just as he always was.

Darling:

As you know, I am sorry that I can't agree to your leaving home to be away from Aug. 27 to Sept. 2. I might not have felt that way if we had been able to reach, before your leaving, a general understanding about current and future travel and absences from home and adequate notice of such travel and absences. I also do not agree to any in-town absences outside normal business hours, and, of course, object to all future similar travel.

When you return, you may want to give me your comments on the enclosed draft agreement. I present it to you to show that there are options available to you which, while painful, are real possibilities and worth considering if you don't wish to reach a general understanding that fits within the framework of a more orthodox marriage relationship. It is not intended as any further act of rejection and dismissal from me to you. It is only a choice of lesser pain that brings me to this point: I feel unequal to the demands of a more modern relationship you may have in mind, and contrary to your beliefs, I feel quite silly in the role of jail warden.

Love, Ivan

She flipped the page to find a document dated one day later than the handwritten cover letter and entitled "Draft Separation Agreement." Scanning the pages quickly, Sarah could tell that her father was very upset. She could tell this because he had written in his definitions paragraph that she was born sixteen years after she was actually born, and he had not caught the error although he had gotten the month and day correct.

In the most recent years of the marriage, Ivan has

experienced perceived personal and business reverses. Katherine has felt rejected and neglected and tried to establish an independent career by undertaking a number of new professional and civil pursuits. The couple have been unable to agree in advance on a mutually satisfactory plan for continued travel, professional and civic activity by Katherine.

As she read this passage, Sarah suddenly understood that what she had thought were the theatrics of her father had actually been expressions of real anguish. She suddenly remembered how he had come into the kitchen a few weeks ago as she was making breakfast and said, "We lost Katherine." The statement had made her heart plunge into her stomach as she had thought that her mother had been killed unexpectedly, but she soon realized the statement was only hyperbole, and her mother was only away for a few days working as a translator for the Olympic Organizing Committee.

She continued to scan the document, this time in search of information for where she was in their plans for separation. Then, she saw the sentence that answered that question. "The Couple shall have joint care, custody and guardianship of Sarah." Joint Custody—ugh. She imagined how she would be eating out for days at the times she lived with her dad. The last time she had tried to make something for the both of them to eat, he had dismissed the food as "red" and therefore inedible.

And her mom, what would become of her mom? She could not see her working full time for the Olympic Organizing Committee. What would she do? Would they move back to Austria? The thought of being far from her dad made her terrified. She knew very well that her father would sink into a depression and drink and then, what if he harmed himself? She wished she could erase this document from her memory, but now that she had seen it, she could not "un-see" it.

Sarah shall live with Katherine, but Ivan shall have the right to visit said child at any and all reasonable times on reasonable advance notice to Katherine. In addition, upon like notice, Ivan shall be entitled to have Sarah's exclusive company annually for an aggregate period of not less than six (6) weeks during the child's summer vacation, or other vacations from school, so long as this period does not interfere with Sarah's schooling. Ivan's right to Sarah's company shall be optional with him, and his failure to exercise such rights on occasion for whatever reason shall not be construed as a waiver of the right as herein provided. During such time as the child shall be in the care of Katherine or Ivan, each shall be free to travel with her anywhere within the continental U.S. or any foreign country, provided, however, that each shall keep the other informed of the child's whereabouts at all times and advise the other in advance of plans and itinerary.

So that was it then: She would live with her mom, but her dad could take her to dinner or to a football game or wherever, when he wanted, so long as her mom was given enough time to prepare for his coming. She shuddered a little at the thought of so much one-on-one time with both her parents. Where was her sister, and why was she not written into the agreement? She would be home from college in the summers. Couldn't they both be part of this great experiment in single parenting? Dora might have a boyfriend. She might have medical internships (She was a pre-med freshman at Cornell University). She would soon be striking out on her own, and Sarah would be left here to face her parents' separation without her. Oh why, why could this not have happened earlier? Or later? Why now? She still had a sizeable chunk of high school to go, and no compatriot of her own with whom to face it, and to make matters worse, the swim meet was just two days away. She would be riding on the bus to the competition, but which of her parents would attend? She could not bear the thought of yet again swimming with no one in the stands to

cheer for her. Would her father come, or would her mother? With all this going on, she knew very well that they would not come together.

She heard a sound. Was it footsteps? Quickly, she flipped the pages back and placed the cover sheet on top of the agreement. Her father with his legal paper, she had to be careful to make sure the top corner of the legal paper aligned with the 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 11 agreement. Carefully, she placed all the papers in the drawer and stood up, turning as fast as she could to hear her father opening the door.

“Oh sorry, Sarah, I just need some AA batteries,” he said.

She was confused for a moment. Why was he apologizing to her? Wasn't she the one in his room? Wasn't she the one who had invaded his privacy and read about his most crushing blow? She saw his blue big toe, and he stood there for a moment looking at her and then continued walking through the white French doors and into the bathroom with the long wall-to-wall mirror.

Her father had not been the same since taking the job in South Carolina. He used to be given to outbursts of rage. Once when she was seven, she left her shoes in the middle of the hallway. On the way in, he tripped on them. Those shoes wound up hurled far and away into the bushes somewhere. “No noisy eating,” he would say, and other statements that made Sarah nervous that she would fail to be graceful enough and then experience that look of disappointment. But now he was different. He almost never had outbursts of rage, and he actually listened when she talked. Instead of finding faults, he was prone to self-criticism and a desire to please. The family had less money now, but she could say without hesitation that her father had become nicer in his time in South Carolina.

She watched him place the big shoe box of batteries on the enormous white king-sized bed. Then she saw him sort of fall onto the bed, his shoes and ankles hanging off the edge. With two fingers, he picked up a AA battery, placed it into the tester, and then threw it back into the box.

“We really need to sort these out,” he said.

She thought of asking him whether he was coming to the meet on Thursday, and then she remembered the contract, the wording of that sentence: “Ivan’s right to Sarah’s company shall be optional with him...” It was a long drive to Milledgeville, Georgia, and since her father and mother were separating, they would likely not be traveling together.

“Did you need something?” her father asked distractedly.

“No, I just came for nail clippers,” she said and turned and walked out the door.

II

The next day at swim practice, before stretching, Coach Gruskin had the entire team circle up for his usual pre-swim meet pep talk. Coach Gruskin had once been an Olympic hopeful. He had swam competitively at University of North Carolina and even coached at UNC for years before coming to her high school. He had red hair, a belly, a deep baritone voice, tons of freckles, and red sideburns that came down to his jowls. Sarah and Coach Gruskin had a distant kind of relationship. She asked him what her time was and then he told her what the clock told him. As far back as she could remember, she had never had a conversation with him beyond that, and he had been coaching her for years because he coached her swim team in the summers as well.

She knew already she was an alternate for the last event, the freestyle relay. Last time they had swam at the

military school in Milledgeville, the winner of the girls and boys' freestyle relays had determined the winner of the meet. Her team was undefeated, and Coach Gruskin, she knew, wanted to keep it that way. She had the 100 Butterfly and the 200 Freestyle as her other two events, and she had not yet qualified for the state meet. This was the last meet of the season, and if she didn't qualify, well, that meant that she had failed to improve because she had gone to state last year in the 200 Freestyle.

The assistant coach, Kracken, was a big Christian on campus. He had a bowl haircut, blonde hair, and a squarish kind of face. He was well over six feet tall and always wore a suit and tie to swim practice even though the Aquatics Center was usually humid. He was also in charge of the Friday Morning Fellowship club, and he played a role in the FCA, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, that met on Thursday evenings. (The fellowship was sometimes so popular that students had to sit on the floor during the meetings.)

"Some of you haven't been eating properly. I don't want to hear reports of any of you losing weight. You need strength for practice. You need strength for the meet tomorrow." She noticed Kracken, the assistant coach's eyes boring into her.

Stop looking at me, she thought. Stop making an example out of me. Kracken was not the only one noticing a problem. Last week, her friend Jen had asked her if she was alright, and all she had done was walk down the hall in the girl's school.

"Why?" Sarah said. "Do I not look alright?"

"You're getting too thin," Jen said. "It doesn't look healthy."

But her parents hadn't said anything. Now two different people from her school were telling her she had a

problem. She was not as bad as Cameron Krayton, though. Cameron almost died and had to stay in a hospital for over a month. Her hair fell out and her voice changed, becoming squeaky and weak. She didn't not eat. No, she just ate a severely regimented diet, two poppy seed muffins for breakfast every day and for lunch crackers and cheese. There were many other girls who ate less and still were not scary skinny.

"Some of you all could be faster if you ate less," said Coach Oscar. She saw the assistant coach scanning the room and then his eyes hovering at her friend Jackie.

Jackie hadn't made state yet either, and Sarah didn't know if she wanted to. The coaches were getting into their business. Coach Kracken had no right to tell her them how to eat, she thought. These were sensitive subjects, and why weren't the boys targeted just like the girls? she thought.

"Some of you put other things into your body that are equally bad. Some of you enjoy too many spirits on weekends. Others of you might be putting things into your body that could get you into even more trouble than the spirits. Now you might be getting away with this for now, but your body notices. Your body is as strong as it's going to be with all the training you do, but when you put those other things into your body, you bet against yourself, against your own wins and your own abilities," said the coach.

Now she saw both Coach Oscar and Coach Kracken honing in on the boys, not the girls. This part of the pep talk was for them, not her side of the Aquatics Wing. Who had told Coach Oscar about the parties? Who told him about Isaac and the other first relay's marijuana use?

Isaac was by far the best-looking guy on the team. His body was utter perfection. You could see his stomach muscles even when he sat leaning forward Indian style as he was doing right now, and he was well over six feet tall and had

beautiful strong pronounced shoulders, and yet he was totally without any depth. She had seen him at the party last weekend bringing multiple girls back into the woods with him, stumbling along, just as the girls were, but he was a god on this swim team, and Sarah knew she would need to submit to the hierarchy or else be punished.

She was not sure her parents understood how “Lord of the Flies” the team could be. One of the swim moms last year at the state meet had asked her friend Jasper, another swimmer, to stay she would have sex with the mom’s son if he won the 200 Butterfly. Sarah attended a Christian school, but many of the swim moms had nothing Christian about them. In fact, many of them had utter contempt for Christianity. They just sent their kids to the school because their husbands raked in the money, and the school had a reputation for getting its graduates into good colleges that would allow their kids to rake in the money as well.

Her mom never sat with the other moms at the meets. She always sat alone and with her glasses on because she was near sighted. She remembered that her mom had once sat with her other moms, but she afterwards had nothing good to say about the experience. She felt that they were too pushy and they only talked about their children. Maybe that was why she had stopped coming to the meets. Neither one of her parents did well with Atlanta old south fake Christianity, and they never seemed to be able to get below the surface with any of them.

“So, we’re tapering off today before the meet tomorrow because tomorrow is the day when we find out if we’re going to remain undefeated. We need a win tomorrow and we need everyone to put in everything they have. Alright, we’re going to start off with a 200 warm up. I want to see your stroke as long as it can be. I want you to stretch your arms as far as they can be, and I want to see you all preparing mentally for battle tomorrow,” said the coach.

Coach Gruskin always loved the war metaphors when speaking of swim meets.

III

That night she imagined her main swim events, the 200 freestyle: If she stayed strong on the third lap, if she stayed tough, if she didn't give up, if she worked with the water, if she glided and kicked hard, if she swam close enough, but not too close, to the end wall for her flip turns. She could not afford to lose any ground on her turns, especially the fifth and sixth one, the last two flip turns, when she would be tired from being near the end of the race.

She suddenly saw herself at the meet tomorrow, and there was Rudy Jacobs, by far the best swimmer in the division and maybe even the state. Sarah remembered him so well from state last year. He was easily 6'7 or 6'8 and had long shoulder-length chestnut colored hair, a gorgeous molded stomach, and the typical beautiful wide swimmers' shoulders. He had taken home firsts in all his events. At the last meet with Ridgewood, Sarah hadn't seen him and the rumor was that he was training in California and that he would not be swimming in Georgia all year. She wished she could just catch a glimpse of him and that he would be injured and unable to swim because if he did swim for Ridgewood, Hamilton would definitely lose. Her school had barely won the last time they swam against each other, but if Rudy swam for them, Hamilton would be finished, and so would their record of being undefeated. Coach would never forgive them for a loss this late in the season.

Then, this pleasant image vanished and instead, she saw Katie Johnson with a sling around her arm. Katie: the only girl who could save her from total humiliation. As of tonight, Coach Gruskin had Katie in for the last leg of the girls' 400 freestyle relay, the second to last event of the swim meet. Relays were worth more points than individual events, and

without Katie, well, the girls freestyle would have a tough time. Katie didn't train at Hamilton, but she swam in the meets and she was the fastest freestyler and breaststroker Hamilton had, and now her shoulder was pulled. She was seeing the doctor on Thursday, and if he said it was okay, she would still be able to swim in the relay. If not, Sarah would have to go in, and she was nowhere near as fast as Katie. If we lose, it will be my fault, thought Sarah. If we lose the relay, we may just lose the meet, and there will go our undefeated season, and it will be because of me. Sarah prayed a quick prayer to Jesus. *Please, Lord, let her shoulder be okay. Heal it all up by tomorrow, Jesus. It would be so great if you could do that for me, and whatever I said about Rudy just now, about his getting injured, please ignore it. Amen, Lord, amen.*

IV

The dream that she had that night confused her. In the dream she looked around and she saw an Olympic size pool and a sign that said, "Welcome, state swimmers!" Red headed, green-eyed butterfly swimmer Steve marched toward her in his green Speedo team suit, his big freckled shoulders glistening in the sunlight: "Go tell Jasper that I will win this race if she agrees to have sex with me." In the dream Sarah obediently agreed and went off in search of the very blond, very buxom, very blue eyed, very full lipped Jasper. (Her hair was almost whitish it was so blonde.) In the locker room, where she'd found her, she could see Jasper from far way shaking her head no, and then even yelling, "No way." When she came back to Steve and told him, he asked her to go back and ask again. "She won't do it," she said in the dream. "But I will. I'll take one for the team." "Take one for the team," she woke up saying this to herself and knew immediately today was the day of the big meet.

V

At breakfast, she asked her parents again if they were coming to the meet, but again she got no clear answer. Then, just before her ride came, after the kitchen was cleared out, she wrote down her name and the address of the swim meet on a piece of paper. She wrote down the time and then, all in caps, she wrote, "PLEASE COME! I'M COUNTING ON YOU BOTH TO BE THERE!" She heard the horn outside. Her friend Jen was there to pick her up. She left the note on the kitchen table and ran out of the house, laden with her swim bag on one side and her backpack on the other side.

VI

The swim meet began just normally, just as usual, and then the troubles started. Sarah saw Rudy—*the* Rudy—by the water foundation next to the stairwell. At first, she wasn't sure it was him, but as she stopped and turned, she took a hard look at him, and she knew it was definitely Rudy, and then her eyes fell to his feet. Oh no, she thought. Not that! What kind of a guy wears flip flops in November? Sarah knew already without even a thought: A guy swimming on a swim team, that's who.

"You're Rudy Jacobs," she said, and she was surprised with herself for saying it.

"Yeah," he said.

"I remember you," she said.

"Really, from where?"

"From state last year."

"Oh, you saw that?"

"Yeah, you won the 500 by two lengths of the pool."

"Yeah," he said matter-of-factly.

"My name's Sarah. I swim with Hamilton."

He held out his hand and she noticed when shaking that his hand was so soft, so downy and beautiful.

"See you around," he said.

"See you," she said.

As she turned toward the girls' locker room, she looked in the wall-to-wall mirrors on the way in and noticed something too horrible for words. She noticed that she had already put her swim cap on. She had tried to flirt with Rudy Jacobs with a bald rubber head. Oy vay, she thought to herself.

"What are you smiling about?" It was Steph standing in the first locker area. She was one year older than Sarah and a million times more confident.

"I just met Rudy Jacobs," Sarah said.

"Rudy Jacobs, shit. What's he doing here?" asked Steph.

"He's wearing flip flops. I'm pretty sure, he's swimming for Ridgewood."

"Oh man, the boys are dead. Did you tell Oscar?" asked Steph.

"No, it just happened a few seconds ago...What about Katie? Is she going to be able to swim?" Sarah asked.

"Doctor says she needs two more weeks, so you're in, kiddo," said Steph.

Sarah felt the blood leaving her body. She thought she might just faint and then she thought she needed to go to the bathroom. Am I fainting or pissing my pants? she wondered to herself.

VII

She looked all across the stands for her mother, but she only saw Steve, Steph, and Jackie's mothers, and no sign of her dad either.

"Sarah, we're warming up now. The relay teams are warming up separately. They want us to practice our transitions."

When she reached the girls, she took another look in the stands and noticed an attractive woman with short, styled auburn hair standing by the entrance, looking around.

"Close the door. There's a draft coming in," she heard someone yell. Was that her mom? Sarah couldn't tell from the distance.

"Sarah, come on, we're waiting on you."

"Coming..."

Only one of the three girls in her relay only practiced at Hamilton. The other two practiced two hours per day at a swim club and two hours at Hamilton. They were way better than she was, and Coach Gruskin surely knew it. Too late to stop it now, thought Sarah. Got to try to blend in as much as possible. Got to swim my lights out, thought Sarah.

Just at that moment, just as she thought about swimming her lights out, she heard the crackling sound of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling stop, and she noticed that the periodic beeping of the scoreboard had stopped also. What in the world? she thought, realizing that the lights had gone out. For the swimmers in the pool, this was no problem because the skylights lit up the aquatics center just fine, but for those in the locker rooms, where there were no windows, there was total darkness.

Sarah and the girls continued practicing and Coach

Oscar was right there yelling in his deep baritone voice, "Ok, now! Don't you dare dive in without seeing her hand touch the wall. Don't you dare!"

Sarah wasn't worried about getting them disqualified. She knew if anything, she would be slow off the blocks. She would be too careful, and then she looked toward the stands, and she saw the strangest thing. She saw Rudy Jacobs hobbling out of the boys' locker room. He was being helped to walk by two of his teammates. One leg was bent off the ground, and his toes were pointed downward, as if showing that that foot was out of commission. Just above Rudy, she saw an even stranger sight. Her parents were sitting in the stands, smiling and waving at her. Was she dreaming? Lord, really, she thought to herself.

Her parents were here. Her father had seen her note, and her mother must have picked him up at work. She felt her heart exploding out of her body. Her parents had come. She had asked them to come and they had come. They hadn't let her down, and maybe even the separation agreement would be thrown in the trash and forgotten forever.

VIII

When the 400 girls relay event came, Sarah saw Katie out of the corner of her eye. Katie: the person who could save her from total humiliation, she had thought this to herself the night before, and now she realized something obvious that seemed to her at that moment profound. She understood now that the one person who could save her from total humiliation was herself. Her parents were there supporting her. Rudy Jacobs was just a person. Isaac Fitzgerald should not be put on a massive pedestal, and Steve Lennon's mom was an ass. It was so obvious now, but it had all been shrouded in a veil before.

IX

When she heard the buzzer go off and saw Allison, the

first leg of the 400 freestyle, dive in, she noticed, on the Hamilton side of the stands, everyone up and out of their seats, madly cheering, just as she was cheering from the deck below. Even her parents were out of their seats, although she did not see her parents' faces, and she doubted that they were yelling in public, but she didn't care. It was enough that they were there and they knew the focus of the moment was the girls' crucial, final relay race. Allison had at least a few yards' lead before Leonora dove in, and now Sarah was next on the block.

"Okay, Sarah, when you go in there, go in with all you have," her teammate Steph, the last swimmer in the relay, said to her. "We're all counting on you. We all love you. Stay focused on the third leg. Don't slow down on the third leg whatever you do."

Leonora was coming in strong, and she had kept the lead. It was Sarah's turn. Wait for it, wait for the touch. Boom! She dove in and the water felt good on all sides of her. Keep the lead. Keep the lead, thought Sarah. She could not see where Ridgewood was. It was like swimming with blinders on, and then at the wall, while doing her flip turn, she saw Ridgewood coming in closer. Every time she breathed, she could hear the stands roaring, almost in a frenzy. The third length, she saw the girl, her opponent, pulling ahead and the fourth length, Sarah kept steady and did not let her get any farther ahead. The last stroke she smashed the yellow pad and looked up to see Steph diving over her with a big silly grin on her face. Steph was the ultimate competitor. She loved to race and took nothing seriously.

The girls gave Sarah a hand out of the water, and she threw off the goggles and looked to the stands. She saw both her parents giving a thumbs up, and then turning around, she saw that Steph had made up the loss and was pulling ahead of Ridgewood.

Coach Gruskin was standing nearby with his clipboard. “Your best time by two seconds, Grosskopf. Looks like we’re going to need you at the state meet after all, but not in the 200, in the 100 free.”

So, Sarah made it to state after all, but not in the event she thought she would, in another race completely. The girls 400 freestyle won the relay race, and so did the boys. Hamilton beat Ridgeview and kept its undefeated record. After the meet, her parents and she stopped for pizza, and her mom asked her to tell them all about each of her races, to just retell the story just for the sake of it. She even asked her to explain to her what a flip turn was, and that felt great too.

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