

It was our third day of hiking and Andy and I were lost on the side of the mountain. It was still raining. It had been raining for two days. I hunched over and climbed along the rocks on my hands and knees. As I climbed, I thought about Mr. Wadmuller. I thought about how his nose had collapsed when I punched him.

Mr. Wadmuller liked to sit by himself on one of the benches, staring out at the passing cars. He was near blind with cataracts and had to open his eyes very wide to see anything at all. “Good morning, Mr. Wadmuller.” I’d call out to him from a distance so as not to startle him as I walked over from the parking lot. He’d wait until he heard my footsteps before reaching out and groping the air for my arm. His hands were almost translucent, but when he gripped my hand, I’d have to clench and squeeze back just so that he wouldn’t crush my fingers. He’d pull himself up off the bench and steady himself against my shoulder. “Are you ready to go swimming?”

I could hear Andy yelling from behind me through the rain and fog. His family moved away when I was fifteen because Andy had almost killed a boy who went to a different high school. It happened at a football game. Andy walked up to the boy without saying anything and hit him with a chunk of concrete. I watched Andy walk right up behind him. The boy had his long blond hair pulled back behind his ears and I could see his face when the concrete caught the side of his head. It was like Andy had turned off the boy’s lights. His whole face went slack before he fell to the ground. Andy hit him right above the ear and when the boy fell to the ground, Andy kicked him twice in the head.

At the trial, the boy was seated next to his parents in a wheelchair. He had been wheeled up to the table in such a way so that he could face Andy across the room. His mother reached over every couple of minutes to smooth out his hair whether it needed to be or not. Andy had cracked the boy’s skull. The boy now had trouble reading and found it difficult to stay awake.

He needed the wheelchair because his knees would lock sometimes when he'd try to walk. Andy apologized to his family, but he didn't seem sorry to me. If I were the boy, I would have wished that I were dead. I would have wished that Andy had just killed me with that piece of concrete.

Andy served almost two years in a juvenile detention center and when he was released, he didn't come back to school. His family didn't tell anyone that they were moving and I didn't see him again until after college. I ran into him in a downtown bar. He said that my ears gave me away. After a few beers, we made plans to catch up and go hiking.

"Where are you?" Andy screamed. When I tried to stand up and wave to him, the wind almost knocked me off balance. "I can't see you!" He was fifty feet behind me skimming across the rocks in the fog. "I can't see you!" He yelled.

Mr. Wadmuller would bob in the shallow end of the pool in the lane closest to my lifeguard chair. I never saw his head go underwater. He'd stay in the pool for hours just bobbing. Sometimes he would half-heartedly doggy paddle to where the bottom of the pool started to sloped down into the deep end. Then he'd paddle himself in a circle and come back to the shallow end and bob again.

When the swim team came in to take their lanes, Mr. Wadmuller would stop bobbing. He'd lean back with his elbows resting on the side of the pool. He tried to watch them practice, but because of his eyes, he couldn't see them all. Each time that he heard one of them swim past in an adjacent lane, he'd whisper "Good job."

He'd ask me to help him out of the pool and I'd shuffle him back up the ramp in the shallow end and into the locker room. The swim team's coach told me that Mr. Wadmuller made some of the boys uncomfortable. He'd supposedly stare at them as they showered. It

didn't seem like a big deal to me because he was almost blind, but some of the swimmers' parents complained.

"My daughter can't pick me up today," he told me, "and I don't know how to take the bus." He waited for me in the lobby and we walked out together to my car. I usually had an hour for lunch, but my manager told me that I could take two hours if I drove Mr. Wadmuller home.

He put his hand on my shoulder and we walked across the parking lot to my car. I opened the passenger side door for him and guided his head as he sat down so that he wouldn't hit it. "I live across from the middle school," he said. He found the seatbelt and buckled himself while I put his duffle bag in my trunk. "My daughter called and told me that they needed her to stay at work," he said. "She's a nurse at Paoli Hospital. She definitely could have been a doctor with her grades, but she wanted to be a nurse." I drove past the pond to the end of the street and waited for two school buses to pass. "I taught my daughter how to swim in that same pool back there. She wasn't three years old, but she jumped off of the side all by herself. She didn't even want me to catch her. She'd push my arms away and wouldn't grab for me until she came up for air." He smiled out at the windshield. "She was always a very good swimmer." He shook his head right to left. "She'd never let me go to any of her swim meets. If I wanted to see her swim, I'd have to sneak in and watch from under the bleachers." He rubbed his eyes like he was trying to remember what it was like being able to see something clearly in between something else. "Are you too old for the swim team?" He asked and I started to shake my head. "I'm a couple of years too old," I said. We made a right and followed the road up the hill. Mr. Wadmuller reached over and gripped the underside of my right arm. "You don't feel too old to me." He held tight and moved his hand around my arm. "Did you swim the butterfly stroke?" At the stop

sign, I peeled his fingers off of my arm. He kept smiling and put his hand back into his lap.

“Those are the arms of someone who can swim butterfly.” He nodded and I turned the car left.

“My house is just on the other side of the soccer field.” I slowed the car down to pass the school buses waiting just off of the road on the gravel. “It has green shutters.” I parked in his driveway and Mr. Wadmuller fumbled with the seatbelt, pretending not to be able to press the button on the buckle hard enough. “Can you help me with my seatbelt?” He asked. I leaned over and undid his seatbelt with my thumb. “Thank you.” He waited for me to walk around and open the passenger door. I helped him out of the car and he held onto my shoulder while I got his duffle bag from the trunk. “Let me make you a cup of coffee. You have time, don’t you? I make a very good cup of coffee.”

Andy ducked behind a ridge. “Can we camp?” he asked. He crouched down inside of his poncho, eating the granola bar from his pocket. We both wanted to stop, but it was too early. We needed to keep moving until it was dark.

Mr. Wadmuller’s house keys were attached to a rubber bracelet around his wrist. He kept missing the lock with the key. I took the key on his wrist and unlocked the door. “I can navigate from here.” He tried not to use the wall for support, but had to feel along the edge of the doorway so that he wouldn’t run into the corner. I had never been inside of a blind man’s house. It was very organized and clean and he had bookshelves floor to ceiling. “I wrote some of those books,” he said and walked his hands along the wall into the kitchen. “I’m a writer. Did you know that?”

The rain turned into sleet and then back into rain. It was the kind of ice-cold rain that stung through my poncho. When we drove up to the mountain, it had been warm enough to keep the car windows open. Now it was so cold, it was almost snowing.

I tasted the coffee. “My first novel was about torturing Nazis. It’s on the second shelf from the bottom with the blue dust jacket.” He pointed to the shelf, but all of the books looked the same from across the room. “It was autobiographical. I worked for the OSS during World War II. We tortured captured Nazi officers in a basement in London. We saved a lot of Allied lives.” He felt for his cup and blew on the coffee to cool it. “People still refer to me as a novelist, but I consider myself more of a poet.” He straightened in his chair and began to recite a poem that he had written. When he finished, he grinned bearing his gums. “Writing poetry is a lot like swimming,” he said. “Both take discipline and technique to do well. Anyone can rhyme two words together, just like anyone can float, but if you want to win the race you have to know what you’re doing. You have to practice.” Mr. Wadmuller sipped his coffee slowly and his Adam’s apple nodded up and down as the coffee slid down his throat. He adjusted himself and turned toward me and coughed. “Do you have pretty hair?” He asked. I stood up and thanked him for the coffee. “Wait, let me get one of my books. I’ll sign it for you.” He asked me to help him off the couch, but when he got up he didn’t let go. He held onto my hand and just smiled as he pulled himself close and brushed my nose with his mouth. I pulled back, but he kept hold of my hand and with his other hand grabbed a fist full of my hair pulling my head sideways and close to his face. He didn’t say anything. He just kept smiling.

Andy’s poncho had ripped. It ripped down the side when he tried to pull it over his pack and he was shaking from the wet and the cold. I stood over my bag, trying to block the rain while I looked for extra socks. “Put these on your hands and pull them up your arms as far as they’ll go.” The slope up the mountain looked the same as the slope down, covered in fog and rain. “We need to keep following the cairns.” Andy had put the socks on his hands, but it hadn’t helped his shaking. “Can you see the next cairn?” He asked. I stood up to look over the ridge.

The wind and rain rushed up the slope hitting me in face. “I see it,” I lied. “The next one is just over there.”

I tried to push him back but he held tight on my hand and so I hit him. I hit him hard in the middle of his face. His nose didn't explode with blood. It just kind of deflated back into face and he fell onto the couch. He was just lying on the couch with his eyes closed and I couldn't tell if he was breathing. I didn't want to check. I didn't want to get too close to him. It wouldn't take long for the police to figure out that I had hit him. My manager knew that I had driven him home. They would never believe that it was self-defense. I stood against the bookcase waiting for Mr. Wadmuller to move.

Andy slipped and the weight of his pack pulled him backwards. He didn't fall far, but it was far enough. When he landed he screamed and didn't stop until he was out of breath. I dropped my pack and lowered myself down. I saw his legs first. His legs were fluttering. His eyes were open and he was lying on his side propped up by his pack. I looked for blood and then cut the straps on his pack so that I could ease him down flat on his back. Andy had hit his head.

Finally he moved. “Who are you to hit me?” he asked and shifted himself upright on the couch. With the tip of his middle finger, he touched the little bit of blood pooling at his top lip. He felt around on top of the table for something to wipe his face. I pushed the stack of napkins across the table under one of his hands “I've kissed prettier boys than you. They begged me to kiss them.” He tried to stand up, but couldn't. He looked dizzy and sat back down before he fell over sideways. “I didn't do anything wrong,” he yelled. I stood still with my back up against the bookcase. Mr. Wadmuller tried again to stand up. This time he fell onto his side on the couch. “That's what you people don't get.” His nose continued to bleed while he lay on his side. Blood

dripped off of his face and soaked into the tan cushion as he tried to sit up. “What have you ever done? I’ve saved lives. You just watch me while I swim.” His milky white eyes spun with anger and dizziness. He writhed and rubbed his face into the blood on the couch. And then he rolled onto the floor in between the couch and the coffee table. “I can’t get up.”

As I closed the front door behind me, I could hear Mr. Wadmuller crying from the floor. At first it was soft, like a whine, but by the time I got back into my car it had grown into a full cry that could be heard from the street.

Andy’s breath slowed and it kept raining. I tried to pick him up and carry him over my shoulder, but he was too big. I pulled him up the rocks about five yards and then had to set him down. I tucked him against the ledge in my sleeping bag with an emergency blanket and stretched a tarp over him. “I never felt sorry for hitting him,” Andy told me our first night camping. “He just kept staring at me the entire football game. I remember thinking that I was going to stop him from staring. I was going to make sure that he never stared at me again.” Andy scraped the noodles from the bottom of the pot. “I know that it sounds horrible, but I always felt like he deserved it. Even in the courtroom, when he was just sitting there in his wheelchair staring at me with that dumb look on his face, I just kept thinking, ‘If I could, I’d stop your staring again. I’d knock you out that chair right there in the middle of the courtroom.’” Then Andy poured some water into the pot and then shook it out over the bushes next to the tents. “He was the one with the problem.”

As I crawled down the mountain, I imagined helping Andy out of a wheelchair and leading him down a ramp into a pool. I pulled him deeper and turned him over onto his back to float. I kept my hands under his back and head so that he didn’t sink as we swam into the deep end. Then I let go. I could have found the ranger station in time, but I didn’t.