

The Last Meet

Jake glanced at his timer's sheet. 30.4 seconds was damned good for the butterfly.

"Josh Bell? Why have I never heard of him?" he asked Kathy, who was teamed up with him on lane six, operating the stop watch.

"Because you haven't been paying attention."

"Sad, but true."

"We've got some really good swimmers coming up. I think we'll be back in the red league in a couple of years."

"Unfortunately, I won't be around for that."

"How many years have you had a child swimming at Bayshore?"

"Sixteen. I wish I hadn't waited until the very end to become a timer. This really gets you involved in the meet. It forces you to pay attention, even when your kid isn't swimming."

The next swimmer finished the butterfly and Kathy read out his time to Jake, who dutifully jotted it down on his time sheet. Then he looked back up across the pool to where the opposing spectators were sitting. From where he stood, there was a man who bore an uncanny resemblance to someone whose last kid had finished with the team a few summers ago.

"Look over there in the Shark's section," he told Kathy. "See that guy in the third row from the front, sitting right next to the deep end? I swear, doesn't he look just like Mark Crouch?"

"Wow, you're right, he does from here. But that couldn't be Mark."

“No, he’d be sitting on the wrong side with the wrong wife, but it sure looks like him. Look, he’s standing up now. He even carries himself like Mark. The way he’s casually chewing a piece of gum, everything.”

“You’re right, he sure does. But that can’t be Mark.”

“No, it can’t”

The next swimmer dove in. Jake furrowed his brow as he looked at his sheet. “Do you know who that is?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s Jessie Sturges. This is the 13-14 girls now.”

“Gotcha.”

“See the older man with the blue jeans and the key chain on his hip and the plain white t-shirt standing over there?”

“Yes.”

“That’s her grandfather.”

“I always wondered who he was. Never have seen him in shorts. Even on a day as hot as this.”

“And you never will.”

“The way he dresses at these meets – he seems like a throwback to another time.”

“He is. He fled Czechoslovakia in the late sixties when the Soviets invaded. He still works as a maintenance man at the nursing home behind us. 33.45 is Jessie’s time.”

“Wow. It’s a shame I’m just getting to know who some of these people are at my final meet. But Mark I knew.”

“Everybody knew Mark.”

“I swear I think that’s him.”

“Couldn’t be.”

“No, I guess not.”

The butterfly heats went on to the 15-18 boys, and Jake learned to back off further from them, so that he and his time sheet wouldn’t get splashed when they dove in. Bayshore’s Dolphins were beating the Sharks handily now, which was a welcome change from a few years ago. The meet moved on to backstroke, then breaststroke, and then finally the individual medleys and the free relays to cap it off. All the while Jake kept looking across the pool at the man he thought was Mark. Despite his better judgement, Jake became convinced that the man was in fact Mark.

But it didn’t make any sense. All the years Jake had known Mark, he was such a straight up and down guy, a devout family man. His wife was straight laced, too, and both of his kids had turned out great. The most trouble the kids ever got into was the son coming out of a waterslide wrong one time and knocking out his two front teeth. And Mark himself was outgoing and easy to talk to, not at all like some of the parents at Bayshore, who could be rather cliquish. He was the last person you’d ever expect to divorce his wife and start over. Of course, that did happen these days with people you’d never suspect, Jake told himself.

However, as the meet wore on and the Dolphins’ lead over the Sharks got wider and wider, the man on the other side of the pool grew visibly agitated and stood up yelling more and more frequently. That was very unlike Mark, Jake thought, but he was still convinced it was him. When they got to the free relays, the Dolphins’ coach told Jake and Kathy they were done, as they would be no free relays in lane six.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure working with you, Kathy,” Jake said. “Now I’ve got to go over to the other side and get a better look at that guy.”

“Who? The one who looks like Mark?”

“Right.”

“Hah, you better keep your distance! He doesn’t look too happy right now. Besides, there’s no way that’s Mark.”

“I’ve still got to check it out. See ya.”

Jake casually walked around the pool to the other side as the free relays were going. He felt good that he had finally stepped up to the plate to be a timer on the last meet. He just regretted waiting sixteen years to do it. Sure, he’d worked the concession stand a shift or two each summer, as did his wife, so that they got the required number of volunteer hours. But now that swim meets were over for good for him, he wished he had done more. His wife didn’t feel that way. She had already left, as their son had swum his last heat earlier in the meet.

The Shark’s spectators were sitting by the deep end of the pool, which formed a T off the main part of the pool that was used for the meet. The man was standing, still very much agitated, but he was facing away from Jake. As Jake circled around the crowd to get a better view, the man turned away from him. Jake realized that he was turning to watch the swimmers, so he circled back and waited for the man to turn his way. When the man did, Jake did not see the soft, relaxed features and small eyes of Mark’s face. He realized that the man was not Mark as their eyes met. The man motioned for Jake to come over to where he was standing by the deep end. Jake did so.

“What the hell is your problem?” the man asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been staring at me for the whole goddamn meet! What’s your damn problem?”

“Rick, calm down,” the woman sitting next to him said.

“Sorry, I thought you were someone I knew.”

“It took you the whole fucking meet to figure out I’m not?”

“Again, I’m sorry if I was staring. From over there, you look just like someone I know.”

As Jake said that, the thinned-out crowd gave a faint roar as the last swimmer finished in the final free relay, which ended the meet with a very lopsided score in favor of the Dolphins.

“Well, I’m not, so you need to get the hell back over there. Here, take the short cut!” the man said as he shoved Jake into the water.

“Rick!” the woman shrieked.

“Let’s get out of here,” Rick said.

At the same time Jake fell into the deep end, the seniors on the team jumped in to take their traditional final lap, so a lot of people thought Jake had deliberately jumped in the pool to do his own victory lap with them. Jake could hear the laughter as he swam over to the side and pulled himself out of the pool. He could even hear his son yell, “Way to go, Dad!” As the shock dissipated, the embarrassment he felt was almost unbearable.

“Are you ok?” Kathy asked as she ran up to him.

“I can’t believe what just happened. That jackass actually pushed me in the pool.”

“He wasn’t Mark, was he,” she stated flatly.

“No, he wasn’t,” Jake said. He walked away from the pool to his car, avoiding eye contact with anyone, but trying to keep some semblance of a smile frozen on his face so that people would continue to think it was joke.

“So that’s what I get for being a timer,” he muttered to himself. “No good deed goes unpunished.”