

Courtney Sender

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## *Osmium Schwartz on Her Back*

Weight *n.* the force of gravity on an object

1.

My heart weighs one hundred pounds today.

I am lying flat on my back in the basement, next to the treadmill and the ankle weights. The floor here is the most structurally sound in the house, so it's where my dad says I have to go when my heart gets this heavy. Next to me, Dad is doing squats on my sister Henna's yoga mat. I'm counting for him. "Forty-two." Every time he rises out of a squat, he talks to me. Every time he dips into one, I talk to him.

"Balmy out," he says, sweat gathering on his bald forehead above his sweatband. Only the photos atop the piano remember him with the red hair I can see up his nostrils. "Ides of March. First nice day since the frost. If you're stuck inside, Osmo, at least do your bench presses."

"I'm meditating," I say in Henna's airy voice, but I pick up the two dumbbells beside me, each as heavy as my heart, and extend my arms above my head. I don't yet tell him why I've grown so dense today. "Forty-three."

Before this September, Dad used to lighten me. Talking to him while he pounded the treadmill would raise me from my back to my knees to my feet, restoring my heart to a normal nine ounces—lighter than the sloshing soda cans Dad had me benching as a toddler. It used to be, sometimes, that talking to Dad turned my heart *so* light that I'd end up high on the tips of my sock-toes, fluttering *en pointe* up the basement stairs. This made Henna—twice monthly needing new pointe shoes because of the blood—so outraged that she finally quit ballet and took up yoga.

But now, talking to Dad doesn't relieve any weight. Though we don't speak this truth, we both know it. We pretend it's not forever. He just keeps talking, and I just keep answering.

"Think I'll replace some trampoline springs this afternoon," says Dad, knees unfurling.

"Sixty-three," I say. The low ceiling here is silver-studded, puckered with the empty potted-plant hooks Dad hung last year, too weak for our collapsed ferns. "I'll help as soon as I can get up."

Dad rises, exhales, misses his line, dips, then says, straining, "What time's Bryan coming over?"

I feel the concrete under my back, cold. I feel myself descend even more inexorably into it. When your heart is as dense as cement, you have a very particular relationship to gravity. Gravity reaches through your ribcage and grabs you by the chest and yanks, and when you think it can't pull any harder, well, it phones a friend.

"Bryan's not coming," I say, and gravity and its friend sorrow bungee-jump along the tight-packed sinews of my heart.

The very first day I met Bryan, at cross-country preseason this past September, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd swallowed a bottle of seltzer. My heels went soft. When the wind blew, the balls of my feet dragged along the sidewalk. Henna rode me piggyback to school so I wouldn't ruin my racing flats.

The very first time Bryan kissed me, he had to run and find a stepladder in Coach Pinsky's toolshed, because I'd floated to the ceiling just outside the locker room.

"What happened?" Dad said when Bryan delivered me to my doorstep like a balloon, his belt a makeshift string between us.

My head thumped our door frame. I said, "Gravity let go."

"If Bryan's not coming anymore," Dad says, locking his knees and squaring his feet beneath his shoulders before his final squat, "we'll figure something out."

I wait for Dad to describe his magic something, but he only lies next to me on the floor in his old Danceworx Dad! shorts, two heartbeats spent there beside me, then cradles his head in his hands and does a curl-up, his face furrowed in a grimace even before I remember to say, "One."

## 2.

For six days after the Ides, my heart-weight sproings dangerously, hope to despair, before it bottoms out. I manage to attend two days of school and one spring track practice all week.

“It can’t get heavier than this!” says Dad on Tuesday night, nudging the double-beam balance from 256 pounds to 312.

It can.

“Only one way to go from here,” says Dad, when on Thursday he can’t lift me anymore, Henna helping him heave me onto the scale that reads 404, “and that’s down.”

It’s up.

Back when Dad could fix me, my record heart-high was thirty-six pounds. That was last spring, the day of Henna’s self-proclaimed final recital. I was light enough that I could still lie face-up on the ground floor and participate in dinner conversation, catching bits of salmon Dad free-threw into my open mouth.

But today, March 21, my heart becomes so heavy that our scale can’t weigh it anymore.

That’s when Henna says, “I’m giving up.” She regards me from the lowest basement stair. “Leave her, Dad, she’s seventeen. She can be home without us.”

Dad and Henna are debating going for a hike. Henna has just earned her vinyasa teaching certification, and this is how my family celebrates: hiking, biking, climbing, rollerblading.

From my position on the floor, I see Dad rest one hand on the old ballet barre on the wall, shaking his head. “Oz?” he says. “You wanna try sitting up?”

If Henna had asked, I’d have laughed in her face. For Dad, I make the effort. My skull pulls off the ground, my neck cranes toward my stomach, my bent knees pry up my glutes and abs. Dad pushes my upper back from behind, but even with his help I can only incline forty-five degrees before I have to tell him I think my ribs will crack. He lowers me gently back to the floor.

Henna leaves for Pascack Hill. Dad stays with me, talking about the perennials by the mailbox that are hanging their bulbous heads this year. I can tell he wants to follow my sister, so after a while I say, “I think I’m feeling lighter, Dad,” and I use all the considerable arm strength I’ve got to lift my

chest, for a fraction of a second, a fraction of an inch off the floor. “You go ahead with Henna. I’ll catch you later.”

Another pretense we both know isn’t true.

Dad throws a blanket over me, because the basement gets drafty in March, and nudges the phone, a wooden spoon, a pot, and two dumbbells my way. “Why can’t I help you, Osmo?” Dad asks from the top of the basement stairs—except he doesn’t, I only nightmare that he does, because the answer’s so loud it bears silencing: I grew up.

The other answer is I found out about his big lie.

Dad’s always loved sports, Henna’s been a fitness nut since she was born, and I’ve gone along uncomplainingly because they’re the only family I’ve got. Racquetball, tennis, soccer, softball, cross-country, basketball: I’m minorly skilled at them all, against my natural impulses and abilities. Dad stocks football jerseys like emergency paper towels in the hallway closets. Henna reads *Pilates* magazine in splits on the stairs. I pick up the weights perpetually lying in the halls, attach them to whichever body part fits the Velcro straps, and pace the living room.

Turns out, Dad was pudgy from the day he was born until the moment I was. And Henna? She was all-state preschool chess champion.

When I was born, the doctor cradled me with some difficulty, cut the cord, and promptly dropped me. Dad’s very first act of athleticism was lunging to catch his baby—nine pounds at birth, fifteen at the trauma of the cut cord, six at the moment he held me in his arms and felt my heart go light.

The doctor said that maintaining equilibrium was a battle I’d have to learn to fight early and keep fighting all my life, like diabetes.

But the person on the other end of the cord was not Dad’s wife. She was not Dad’s girlfriend. She was a woman who’d sat on the lonely barstool opposite his one drunken night, derided Dad’s glee at the new weight in her belly, and said she’d keep the baby now if he’d keep it and her older daughter later.

So Dad knew one thing with more foresight than my cardiologist: the heart grows heavier with age. Other people have to build the strength, over the course of a lifetime, to hold up their chins. I’d have to build the strength to hold up my heart.

While Dad and Henna are gone, I perform the kind of exercise I only practice when I’m alone. I make myself heavy and light. I think of that woman—what she did to Dad, how there’s a part of me and Henna that’s also a part of her,

how maybe it's that ugly her-part that elicits Dad's devotion to us both—and I feel gravity swing from my chest.

Then I think of Bryan, who spent the fall semester educating me on his version of the truth: The world's densest metal is iridium. The heart generates the most powerful electromagnetic field in the human body. Its electricity can register for miles.

These memories used to make me go light, but now gravity laughs and pumps its legs. Thinking doesn't help. There's something in me deeper than thought—denser than thought—and that's the truth that Bryan doesn't love me and he never will.

I found out about Dad's big lie from Bryan.

We were in the weight room this past Tuesday after practice, March 18, our first hour together since the day of my hundred-pound heart. We navigated the distance and closeness we were allowed. I was feeling weightily stable, despite our silence. Bryan was adding five pounds to a ten-pound barbell.

At last, he spoke. "I always thought it'd be the brain," he said, bowing too low to pull off a proper bent-over row.

Though Bryan is on the track team with me, he is not an athlete. He's skinny and long, made to triple-jump at the junior-varsity level. I'd never seen him in the weight room throughout the fall and winter seasons past.

I pointed to his head. "That couldn't shock a frayed wire," I said, though before him I, too, might have thought the brain's electricity could trounce the heart's: all those feeble neurons firing.

I lay on my back on a low, flat bench, but not because I was feeling heavy. Bryan was speaking to me; my ribcage rose off the vinyl upholstery.

"Do me a favor," I called to Bryan across the room. "Hold me down."

His barbell clattered from his hands. "Excuse me?"

"Step on me," I said. "Look, I'm floating, I can't work this way. I need to exercise."

He obeyed, coming into view on my left side. I was used to looking down at him, floating above him; I'd never seen him from below. A small patch of beard under his chin glinted red. He raised one foot, paused midair like Henna in one of her yoga poses—Reconsidering Lover—then navigated the foot clear over me. I tried not to peer up between his legs. Straddled Girl, I mused, my chest rising to his knees at the thought.

He sat along the band of my sports bra.

“Could you grab me a hundred pounds?” I said. He did, split between two fifties. “Each.”

Bryan raised one eyebrow but complied, with some difficulty. I gripped one weight in each hand and paralleled my upper arms with the floor, then pressed the dumbbells up before his nose—ten times, twenty. Bryan watched in evident surprise. I expected him to comment on my freakish strength, but instead he said: “Why bench presses?”

I lowered my arms. “They’re the exercise my Dad’s always told me to do.”

“To strengthen your chest muscles,” said Bryan. “What does he expect you to have to support in there, a boulder?”

*Expect.* Bryan, full of false facts, had finally hit on a real one: Dad must always have known what was going to happen to my heart. He must have been preparing me and Henna and himself all my life. I tried to breathe. *A boulder.*

Alone in the basement, I thumb a message to Bryan. He and I have set up an emergency texting system, a single word—*Distress!*—that means, *Come now.*

When Bryan says hello, I sit up for the first time since Tuesday. “I thought you weren’t coming over anymore,” I say, Dad’s blanket falling to my lap.

Bryan glances at his cell phone. “You wrote *Distress!*” He peers around the basement as if expecting to find Henna, bleeding on a yoga mat. “So what’s wrong?”

What’s wrong is this:

The girl Bryan loves now is named Emily. She is a varsity pole-vaulter and an enigma. She doesn’t frown or smirk or smile; she barely speaks. She nods this shallow nod, says “Mmmm,” if she says anything at all.

I cannot be enigmatic. I could purse my lips and hum all I wanted, but if Bryan took my hand I would float to the plant hooks in the ceiling, and if he let go I’d collapse so suddenly to the basement floor that I might as well have told him, *There is nothing you can do to make me not love you.*

So he’s done nothing.

I tell Bryan only, “I’ve had a heart-weight off the scales for seven hours now.”

He’s unimpressed. “You look fine to me.”

I don’t say, *That’s because you’re here in my basement,* but I can already feel the impending need to lie down. Bryan jogs three gawky steps in place, then flings his arms out in front of him and lifts one knee.

“You pole-vaulting now?” I say.

Even before he affirms, I understand that this is why he’s logging time in the weight room. Maybe because I say nothing, struggling as I am to hold myself upright, Bryan says, “I also signed up for summer swim team.”

I let myself recline. Swimming. The only sport Dad never pushed on me, after a first-grade pool party when I almost drowned.

“Butterfly?” I say, channeling Emily the pole-vaulter, not letting my voice convey my sadness. I picture his body sliding up and down through the water, those skinny arms like wings.

“Next time you *Distress* me, Oz,” says Bryan, “make sure it’s really an emergency.”

“It is,” I tell him. I lay one hand on my wild-thudding chest. “It hurts.”

Bryan stretches his calf against the wall.

Because I know that he will leave, I work my arms.

Dad and Henna come back home.

“Bryan!” I hear Dad say from upstairs, warmly, because he knows Bryan can lighten me—but also because, since the first day Bryan toted me home, Dad has welcomed him like a son. He’s invited Bryan on family camping trips, loaned him sleeping bags and corn-hole boards, bought him his first baseball glove.

But today, Bryan doesn’t stay to chat. I hear the old piano reverberate to the bang of the front door in its frame.

“Two-fifty, Oz?” Dad says, when he finds me bench-pressing in the basement. “Impressive.”

“Gorilla arms, chicken legs,” says Henna.

“Don’t mock your sister,” says Dad, appraising me for signs of sudden weight gain. He doesn’t have to worry; just as he can’t make me lighter anymore, Henna can’t make me heavier.

I watch my sister cross her wrists and shrug her shoulders as she climbs up to the kitchen. She wants to be able to break me as much as Dad wants to be able to fix me. I suspect their desires will amount to the same thing.

Here is a list of truths:

My father and my sister don’t have a hold on gravity anymore.

The densest material on Earth is the element osmium.

Despite my dad’s most stringent preparations, I don’t have the strength to fix my heart.

## 3.

My heart weighs one thousand pounds today, according to the new industrial scale beside the treadmill.

It is March 31. Noon. Dad's worried I'll crack the basement floor, so he's fortified the concrete with extra cement. He talks and talks and talks to me. He even brings me boys: a teller he met at the bank; a rappeller he met at the gym.

Still I've grown heavier and heavier. When Dad, Henna, and the complicated pulley system of their design together hoist me onto the scale, it blinks dazedly before displaying the four digits.

I clutch my cell phone as they drop me again on the floor; I think about typing a message to Bryan—*Distress!*—but I don't. I know I've got only one more chance to use my signal. I count for Dad and lift my weights, and anybody watching us would think we're growing stronger.

Just after 10 PM, Dad offers to throw a pillow on the treadmill and sleep down here with me, in case the floor breaks. I tell him to head up to bed. He layers me in a sheet, a quilt, and a down blanket, brings me a cup of tea, positions the wooden spoon and the pot within easy reach, says, "You can still change your mind," switches off the light, and walks backward up the stairs, waving goodnight.

Without him, I watch the ceiling. The stars are hooks tonight, or vice versa, crooked fingers too distant to snatch me away from gravity. I try to force my hateful brain to sleep, but it buzzes like a socket.

I bang my wooden spoon on the pot: Dad's and my distress signal.

"Dad," I say, when he arrives at the bottom of the stairs. His face in the near-dark is all shadow, the hair in his nostrils colorless. "You always knew this would happen, didn't you?"

For once in our relationship, my father is silent. I say the thing I've been not-saying for two weeks. "If you knew," I begin, trying and failing to keep the accusation from my voice, "then why did you let me date Bryan at all?"

Five feet, eight inches above me, Dad's shadowface crumples. His knees crack as he sinks to the edge of the treadmill, and I picture him, round and red-headed, sitting quietly on the lip of the sidewalk outside a strange apartment



on the day he learned he'd be a father. Sliced through with rejection, quivering with tempered joy.

"You were so beautiful, Oz," says Dad. "When gravity let go."

His explanation isn't sufficient. I think of that woman who is half the reason I exist. It must be the *her* I carry in me that blames him for my thousand-pound heart. Dad must see her, too, because his voice breaks like a bone when he says, "I would have given anything to float like that."

My shoulders round upward on either side of my concave chest, which grows now even heavier. I lay both hands atop my weary breastbone. I want my Dad to have floated. I wish I could return to gravity's greedy hands every week I spent airborne, so Dad could have a single day. I sputter with the effort of expanding and contracting my lungs around my heavy heart.

Dad waits for my breath to stabilize before groaning to his feet and trudging, spine hunched, up the stairs. Neither of us says, *I'm sorry*.

*Distress!* I type to Bryan. The message soars from my phone to a satellite in space. Bryan can still do for Dad what he once did for me; Dad already has the necessary arm strength. Bryan can help launch Dad high above the pole vault pit, my earthbound father flying in the air.

I stay up waiting for Bryan that night, my heart growing heavier each moment I'm alone. I feel delirious with fatigue. I envision potted plants, tangled in the starry sky, crashing and crashing into tunnels in the dirt.

At some point in the night, Henna tiptoes down the basement stairs. "Oz?" she whispers, crouching inches over me, but I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. She wipes something wet off my cheek: I must be crying through my closed lids.

"Oh, Osmo," she says, her breath at my neck, and then the darkness of her form lifts. Though still feigning sleep, I millimeter my eyelids open: there's Henna, lightly grasping the old ballet barre, raising herself to the balls of her feet, turning and twirling. I am mesmerized. Yoga is so slow: steady, measured, poses struck and held. Now, my sister spins like an electron.

Henna stops. I watch as she lengthens upward, raising herself on bare feet to the smallest, flattest tips of her two big toes. Her ankles wobble. Gingerly, she lifts one hand off the barre, then the other. She windmills her arms once but stays upright. She raises her hands above her head, sharp-angling her wrists

to avoid the low ceiling. For an instant she stands, impossibly six-feet tall on the tips of her naked toes—then she topples soundlessly as a vine.

Bryan doesn't come.

4.

When you are what happens at the crossroads of hope and contempt, you have a very particular relationship to gravity.

Well past midnight on the first of April, gravity can pull your sister out of fifth position, your father out of hard-won form, and you clean through your concrete basement floor: down past the base of your dad's treadmill, past the time capsule filled with dandelion puffs you and Henna buried when you were kids, past the broken ice skates and the pipes and the tree roots and the water tables and the bones in the graves—down into the center of the Earth, where gravity keeps pulling you to your knees, curling you up, pulling you into yourself. Gravity can make your heart the very densest material on Earth. Gravity can attract your Dad all the way down to the center of the Earth where you are; gravity can pull your sister like a magnet right out of child's pose; gravity can loop them both around you like skin. Gravity can pull until you're certain its arms will break, but no matter how heavy your heart gets, *your* gravity cannot learn to relax, release the ones who love you, and let the weight of other elements pull them as it will.