

## A SUMMER AFTERNOON IN GEORGIA

By

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Imagine what this feels like. It's a July afternoon in South Georgia. The skies are clear, and the kids are chomping at the bit to go outside and play in the backyard pool. In spirit, you are one hundred percent behind them. In fact, after being cooped up inside with them all day, nothing could make you happier. The thing is, it's just too damn hot outside. Finally, about five o'clock you step out onto the back patio and decide it's time. The temperature has cooled off to a balmy 102 degrees and the sun, while still plenty hot, no longer feels like a blowtorch. Hallelujah. Because it's late afternoon and because you're a dad, and because you hate smearing sunscreen on everyone, you tell the kids to forget it and they run outside and jump in the water. The children, all four of them—your two daughters, ages twelve and six, and two other girls of similar ages, cousins of cousins of your wife or some such, are all good kids, behaving and having a blast. A half-hour goes by.

You think how nice it would feel to dunk yourself in the deep end and cool off a bit. You dog-ear the paperback you're reading and lay it down on the table with your sunglasses. The concrete burns the bottom of your feet as you make your way to the diving board then walk to the end and bounce up and down a few times. In younger days, you were a fairly good diver, could do flips and cutaways and gainers and twists and the such. That, however, was a long time ago, and this is just a little backyard board. You decide on something simple, a jackknife, take three steps backwards, gather yourself, and go. Your right foot hits the end of the board, which has a bit more spring in it than you'd imagined, or maybe you're just heavier than you'd like to admit. Either way it's all right. You shoot up into the air and, at the peak of your dive, bend over and touch your toes. You actually touched them, which both surprises and pleases you. And then it happens.

Bent over in midair, six feet above the water, time stops. You know this is true, because, at least in part of your mind it has never started back up. Your brain is on overdrive, sensing the environment as if processing every piece of digital 3-D data simultaneously from all 15 movies at the cinema megaplex then using it to make various calculations and scenarios, trying to find a formula that will allow you to survive in this world after you hit the water. Because, the problem is, while your brain may be working overtime, it's about the only thing working at all. You have lost control of all voluntary muscle function, which is to say your heart continues to beat, and you continue to breathe but that's about it. You can't talk. You can't move. You can only think.

For better or worse—you're not sure which it is, and it doesn't matter anyway—you fully understand what is going on. This is cataplexy, a part of the tetrad of narcolepsy symptoms, which occurs, to varying degrees, in about three-fourths of people who have the disorder. Like you. You've had partial cataplexy, the most common variety, innumerable times before, manifested as a little dip of the head, or a slight hesitation in your gait, or losing the grip on your pencil for just a moment. This, however, is different. This is the full-blown version.

After what seems like about four years hanging in midair you finally admit that, because you are totally paralyzed and helpless, you will not be able in any way, shape, or form to affect your own salvation. And so you silently start pleading with God to stop this nonsense before you hit the water, or for your children to notice the splat before your body starts to sink, and you begin to drown. Except you don't really believe in God, and you understand all too well it would take more than a dying father to pull the kids' concentration away from Marco Polo. With nothing better to do, you wonder what caused the episode. You understand that intense emotions, like laughing at a good joke or being angry, can trigger cataplexy. And you realize; you were so pleased with yourself, excited that you could still execute a near-perfect jackknife. You know this because the very moment you touched your toes is when it happened. That was the trigger. Useful information should you survive.

And then you're submerged. The water pours into your slack-jawed face, part of it goes down the esophagus and part of it down the windpipe. You cough and sputter and think this is good, because the children will hear. But they don't. If the thing about life flashing before your eyes is going to happen, you think, it should happen about now, but it doesn't. And you wonder, how could anyone reflect on their life in the midst of such panic? Though it feels like an hour, you've probably only been in the drink about five or ten seconds. Every motor neuron—the cells that tell the muscles to contract—in your brain is screaming and still nothing happens. They've been screaming continuously ever since that glorious and disastrous toe touching moment. All at once everything moves, your arms, your legs, your jaw closes so fast you even bite your tongue. The relief, the joy, and thank God even though you don't think he's really there and then the disappointment, the cruelty of it all as everything stops almost as soon as it started. This continues for a while, going off and on like a strobe. Gradually, the on-time starts to overtake the off time and you are spitting more water than you are swallowing and the edge of the pool is getting closer and closer. When you reach it, you hang there for a good while, this time a real five minutes or so, until you have enough strength to actually climb out. Eventually, you make your way back to the lounge chair, put on your glasses, and watch the children who, it seems, have been oblivious the entire epi-

sode. For the next hour they continue their blissful play while you stay dry. You don't read, however, for now is the time that life flashes before your eyes. You see all that you have and all you have to lose and you're thankful to be in the lounge chair. Then your wife comes and asks you why you're crying and you tell her.