

Breathing for a Living: A Memoir

by Laura Rothenberg, '03

I'm on a new athletic kick. This is my third time swimming in the past week and a half—not so bad. I've also been doing the bike in the gym, which the doctors have been trying to convince me to do for years. Kat tries to get me to stretch first, but I've never been patient. It's cold when toes go in, but once I start my breast-stroke, it's refreshing. I start thinking. Well, I took lessons for a while at the 92nd Street Y. That's where I learned to do the crawl. Now I get out of breath if I try to do it. Last March I was in the Caribbean and the water was the same aqua color as this, except it didn't smell like chlorine, I couldn't always touch the bottom, and tickling fish surrounded me. I even saw a stingray once—scary. One lap down, twenty-nine to go.

Right now is my mid-life crisis. I will be nineteen tomorrow and it scares me. Most will probably read that sentence and think I am overreacting, or being melodramatic. But technically I should have had this crisis five years ago—my mid-life expectancy according to average statistics. However, most have a mid-life crisis at age forty and some die at sixty-five, so I imagine it's okay to be a little late. Had I been born ten years earlier, in 1971, I would've had my mid-life crisis at age five. How does a kindergartner have a mid-life crisis? Friends tell me not to worry, that I should be more optimistic. I sat in my dorm room this morning with Irish Breakfast tea in my Coffee Exchange mug, my sky blue carpet scattered with papers, books newly bought from the bookstore, and an unmade bed. I'm just your typical college student.

Except that I can't look back on my life from an old age. The minute I begin to hypothesize about when and where and who—it upsets me. I often imagine scenarios in my head as I fall asleep—my lung collapses, they rush me to the hospital, I have to take a leave of absence, or I suddenly spike a high fever and I'm coughing up blood....I could go on and on, but it would only produce queasiness. I think about death every day. I've even written a poem about my funeral. Part of me wants to grow as old as I can, to live, but the other part is worried about living. As I get older it will be worse; walking to the corner will tire me, coughing will never cease, breathing without oxygen will be impossible. I will look like I have CF. Slowly I will notice and feel the differences more—what happens when I want to have children? I don't want to have twenty godchildren and not one of my own. So I look back from now, my mid-life point and evaluate.

Summarizing all that I've done in life is pointless. Instead I will highlight moments, as I highlighted my hair the other week. I was a bossy child, to the point that family friends even had to take orders. My favorite books were, by far, Curious George Goes to the Hospital and Madeline, not to mention one from a book club we belonged to about a bunny who got an invisible bag for Christmas. My father would read and recite poetry to me as I was falling asleep during my elementary school years—I rarely ever liked to be alone. To this day, he claims it is because of him that I like writing. He insisted on telling my poetry teacher at UVA this fact before we headed home that summer—it was a long drive during which we stopped to eat lunch in Baltimore, which I'd never seen before. My dad constantly wants to share what he knows. I am the same way.

Twenty to go. I'm getting tired, but I think I can stick to my original goal. Rest for a few minutes, watch the girl in the Speedo sprint by effortlessly, spit a few times, and dive deep.

Letter writing started when I went to Camp Nashoba North in Maine for three weeks. I was eleven and in a cabin with girls who were all twelve, except for Beth, who was thirteen. We lip-synched to "Baby Got Back" and everyone was shocked. Even then I got more mail than most kids, and the trend continued the following summer when I returned. At Wellesley, Bennington and UVA it was the same—I was the one who was always writing letters, especially in more recent years with lists of 150-200 people to write to in a matter of weeks. When I find a letter in my mailbox at Brown, or when I scour the mail that arrives on our doorstep in New York—much later in the day than it should—and find one, I smile. Others smile across the country, or even across Central Park, when they get my letters, especially since I decorate them with stickers and decorative stamps. Connecting to friends when apart, as I will with Lauren over email while she's away in Asia for four months, is a must for me.

I learned to drive where I learned to ride my bike—the Jersey shore. Beach Haven's familiar main drag is where I biked for years each morning to get cheese and the paper from Rommel's Liquor store, cold cuts at Beal's, now called Murphy's, the supermarket, and picked up danishes, croissants, maybe even a pie for dinner, from Jack's Bakery. So crowded in the mornings that sometimes my number would be forty when they were only on twenty-five. Now I drive. This tradition, like the one of seeing how many states' license plates we could find on the island each year and making a list, or corn on the cob for dinner and breakfast, was something to look forward to. I only missed one summer there. I was six, got horribly dehydrated, and had to be hospitalized—the first time since I was a baby—for three days. My parents rushed me back to Dr. Smith's sixty-ninth street office and he said in his nasal voice, *Laura, you look like a prune! I wish I could say the same for your father.* Humor makes acidic difficulties more basic.

Ten left. At a certain point the laps go faster, I think because I get so caught up in thoughts that I forget to keep count, and then suddenly I've done four instead of two. My mom used to tell me that *a watched pot never boils*. I think she's right.

My prom was as I wanted it to be. I nervously asked my friend Will to go with me to it on the phone one night in March. I'd been putting it off for weeks. I don't think I even said it at first, just, *So, do you want to, well, you know?* And of course he was confused. He arrived at EB's house late. All the dates were wearing tuxedos and had bought corsages. I was worried he wouldn't bring one because I hadn't reminded him. In he walked, smelling like a cigarette, in his tie and jacket with the biggest corsage of the night—a rose with heather. It matched my pale purple, strapless gown perfectly. The prom itself was not what was special. In all actuality it was small, since my graduating class of forty was all girls and not even

everyone came or brought a date, and composed of a mediocre dinner, and dancing, which is not exactly my thing.

We arrived at Cynthia's after-party in a cab. The rest of the evening consisted of dancing in her living room, having a bit too much to drink, talking on her patio, hearing stern voices yell from adjacent windows that we should *Shut up!* and taking walks with Will. Yes, I talked about death on my prom night, and he fell asleep leaned against a stoop, with me leaning on him. The sunrise may seem corny to others, but it being my first all-nighter, it was a must. I stumbled with Will's help to the East River promenade—across from which I'd gone to school for thirteen long years. Eventually we were all there—sitting on benches, lying on a broken box if you were EB, Cynthia and Susan, or dancing together like me and Will.

Two more laps to go now and then I will pull myself out of the pool and sit in the sauna to dry off, gossip with Kat, and think some more. Sweat is cleansing.

So, back to my crisis....here I am, at college, and I can't write about the future. I can't even make one up because I fear I will jinx myself. Kate had to have a lung transplant when she was 19, Marcy had to take a year off, Elizabeth Fleuren died a few months before graduation from some small college in North Carolina. At the funeral her mother told me that I have to be the survivor for all my friends who did not make it. I felt pressured, although I know she didn't mean to put any on me. Do I really want to be the only one left?

I'm on my way back to the dorm now—jeans, fuzzy Patagonia jacket, hat to keep my wet hair protected. I made it through my laps—I didn't think at points that I would, but I did. Yup, just the typical college student about to have her birthday away from home for the first time.