

Before the Sun Rises

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4:00 a.m. My hand stretches across my body. With a rather dull tap, tap, tap, it blindly searches in the dark room. Sometimes, with a little too much satisfaction, I manage to grasp the pesky clock and throw it across the room, hoping to hear the batteries clatter on the floor and the sound of silence restored. When I first started my early morning swim practices back in September, it took me about seven loud blares before I managed to locate the source of this disrupting force. By the time Hanukkah rolled by, my personal best for disarming the clock was about a third of a blare.

4:15 a.m. I'm walking out of the house on a rather chilly December morning. The moon and the stars are suspended in the beautiful frozen New Hampshire sky. I walk carefully down to the car, trying to avoid the slippery ice. With my school bag in one hand and my swim bag slung over my shoulder, I make it to the car safely.

4:20 a.m. After a few minutes of defrosting, wiping off the midnight snow, and scraping away the ice from the windshield, I finally pull out of the driveway. Slowly, I drive through my quiet, sleepy town. It takes about two songs and one advertisement on the radio before I get out of town and onto some better roads. The unusual routine of waking up early on a frigid winter morning to go swimming in a less-than-adequately-heated pool soon becomes my norm. At the height of the season, I'm on the road to the pool seven times a week, three of those are at 4:00 in the morning, listening to the same songs play on the radio drive after drive.

4:45 a.m. I pull into the vacant parking lot. The team's coach and I have, over the season, perfected our timing for arrival. I sit in my car, listening to the fading lyrics of A-ha's "Take on

Me”, and watch for my coach’s headlights in my rearview mirror. Not until he has parked, gotten his bags together, and opened his door, do I dare to open mine to the New Hampshire winter.

4:55 a.m. I stand alone along the edge of the pool looking down at that wavy mirror lying at my toes. Beyond my reflection I see determination and commitment that push me to jump into the pool and shatter the mirror. The water is supposedly heated, but those who actually dive in know that they will be rewarded with a mini heart attack. In the mornings it's just me in the pool and my coach on deck playing our favorite songs and pointing out to me the finer details of breaststroke. Every now and then, another swimmer will join us, yet consistently, morning after morning, practice for me can only start when I’m in the water and my coach is on deck. I swim with passion, not because I am destined to be an Olympian, but because I find a value and significance in the meditative comfort of the rhythmic strokes and the water wrapping me like a cocoon.

6:45 a.m. I pull into the school’s parking lot, and exchange my chlorine scented swim bag for my backpack. This very early morning ritual is hard work, yes. There are certainly times when all I want to do is lie down and sleep, but with the knowledge that the sun is rising as I do lap after lap, I rejoice that I got up that morning. As the days get shorter and the nights get colder, this journey becomes a haven for deep thinking and reflection. At times when my life is in commotion, I find driving through the ghost towns in the pre-dawn night, and diving into the cold water to be worth the effort of turning off that pesky alarm clock.