

Echo
Liam Betts Virott

Jun 12 9:32 P.M.

Six months housebound but still believe Echo acceptance is coming. On sun-up, spent ~two hours in bed refreshing mail app, watching little loading wheel spin. Hoping for: Dear Olivia, congratulations! But nothing.

Not much temp dysreg today. Still wasted eight-plus hrs on YouTube. Scrolled through profile of Dream Body Girl (@kinseyb22) ten to thirteen times. Did not exercise—pool still a cesspool. Heatwave still waving. Another ninety-degree California summer afternoon, lost.

From kitchen, Mom sings her faith songs while making my dinner:

Repeat after me!

We are drops. We are drops.

Of one ocean. Of one ocean.

We are leaves . . .

She tells me no one is alone. She tells me whole world is hoping, reaching for sun. Every birthday she's taken me camping at Redwood Nat. Park (RNP) to see the tallest trees and their neural root networks, because (her words): We are so lucky to live in the valley where life hopes the most!

Well, guess what? Next bday in three weeks. Time running out.

Mom (today): What about car trip to RNP? Just rented a new lease, climate controlled! Or how about birthday backyard pool party? Clean it up and call your old high school friends?

Did not tell her: have not spoken to a person my age in half a year. Did not tell her: my hope is on a waitlist.

Jun 13 6:06 P.M.

Was scrolling TikTok in living room not doing PT exercises (sorry) when Pool Boy came into backyard.

Couldn't believe eyes. Stood up and peeked at him through Venetian blinds slits: six foot plus, mesomorphic, deeply tanned face/body sculpted like literal Greek demigod. Wore this weird bucket hat with a neck cape.

He kneeled and scooped dead oak leaves from slimy chlorine with skimmer. Pool = disaster. Vomit green w/ rotting liner, caked in plant detritus and infested with water striders. Mom kept saying she would take care of it herself all spring. Excuse: new UX job, church choir practice, weekends preparing care packs for unhoused, full-time feeder of me.

Watched Pool Boy for a while. He lifted pool bot from the water, gentle. Unplugged long trailing cord, careful. Umbilical situation. Like a robotic birth.

My hands purpled while looking. Chest shivers + legs violently shook, so had to sit back down on couch with Mom's blanket. Maybe: overate pasta lunch? AC on too much? Vitamin D supplement too high, depleting magnesium? Missed Allegra dose? IDK. Had the coldness all AM, began approx. 10:47 in right forearm.

But then, a nice thing: Pool Boy so hot, took off shirt! Sweaty sheen over bronzed naked abdominals! Sandy hair falling over ears! Green eyes!

Stared at him as he stared at his pool reflection staring back at him. Pool Boy gazed for long time. Flexing. Examining own hands.

But then he turned.

And caught me looking.

FUCK.

Dived into sofa. When finally glanced up, Pool Boy gone.

Should just leave it at that: lovely natural occurrence to admire, like Oakland sunset over foothills, like big buck ingesting front yard roses, like perfect 98.6°F on infrared thermometer, etc. But no. Mind will not allow it. Only thoughts = how easily he could bend over, how easily he could squat and move and stand in all that heat.

Days on Echo waitlist += 1.

Jun 13 10:31 P.M. (edited)

List of Things To Do With New Body. (When Healthy Bucket List? Brainstorm acronym. Maybe Operation: Touch Grass?)

1. ***BDAY REDWOOD CAMPING IN TENTS AT RNP!!!*** (w/ Mom)
2. Ice Cream + Pizza outdoor brunch (w/ Mom)
3. Guitar/singing on beach (w/ Mom)
4. Hot shower. Hour-long. Let water rush over body, have shower thoughts, etc.
5. San Francisco Date with Pool Boy. Science Museum. Cable Cars. Ocean Beach. Golden Gate.

More cliché = better

Jun 13 2:10 A.M.

Did he smile at me? Misremembering? Stupid to feel happy. But maybe, next Friday when Pool Boy comes, can go outside to talk to him? Maybe, we hit it off, maybe he finally cleans pool and we do pool stuff? Prob not what Neuro had in mind wrt exercises.

Hope: can make lunch for myself tomorrow. Hope: Cali heatwave ends soon. Hope: even if hot tomorrow, no heat rash. Remember: girl of past lives on. She is me. Mom: you are perfect just the way you are. Yuck. Ugh. OK. Good night now. Good night!

Jun 14 7:05 P.M.

Should just kill myself. Barely slept. Duvetless, shirtless, etc., still hot/dry as Satan's asshole. Pressed wet towel to temples, licked gums with Biotene.

On sun-up, listened to Amazon van sputter around cul-de-sac, red dawnlight bleeding through blind slats. Looked at @kinseyb22's selfies again. Refreshed mail app. Still nothing wrt Echo.

Hour later Mom in doorway, singing with smile at 95 percent, wooden tray of breakfast (1.5 cup GF granola + 8 oz flax/fruit smoothie) in hands, and asking the inevitable:

How Do You Feel?

And what could be said?

Lay awake nightlong overheating, dreaming of synchronized swimming with Pool Boy?

Small intestine scorching with fire-breath of invisible tapeworm?

Forearms heavy as deep-sea anchors?

(Why did it feel good, to see desperation in her eyes, decrease in her smile percentage due to delay in answer?)

Really drew out subsequent pause. Looked around bedroom, at cork board with pinned Mayo Clinic rejection letter, at Polaroids of ghosted high school friends. And finally at ninth birthday gift from Mom: framed photo of us under redwoods at RNP, kid me on her shoulders, reaching up rashless at sun—not taken down even after mid-year UCX drop-out, why? Because hopeful reminder? Or because guilt from constant FOV exposure = necessary punishment?

Me (finally): Good.

Mom: Amazing! Last night was the coolest in months. Things are turning around!

Me:

Mom: How did your exercises go?

Me:

Me: Good.

Mom: You didn't try them. Again.

She set the tray down. She had on that kitsch baptism shirt ("Made New") with a cross logo in a water droplet.

Me: I literally can't sweat. I need the pool.

Mom (sighing): I told you, I called the Valley Pools guy. He finally came by yesterday but said he's going to shock the water next week. I blew up at him. What was the point of the first visit? Just to wait for him to come a second time?

Me: It's no big deal.

Mom: Yes. Yes it is.

Neurologist (on new patient video call last week): Where do you live?
Me: Montclair Hills.
Neuro: Do you have a pool?
Me: I have access to one. (Not wanting to profess Mom's tech salary/my Great Privilege. Why? Shameful to be able to afford endless convalescence?)
Neuro: Perfect. I'll be sending you some water exercises. I also put in a referral for autonomic testing.
Mom: That's it? What do we do about her temperature problem? She can't even shower!
Neuro: How about a lukewarm bath? I love baths. I honestly prefer them to showers, if you want to know my opinion.
Mom (in bedroom, today): What about Ramirez? The functional doctor?
Me: Your church friend who prays to light beings on Polaris? His test kits were just mailed.
Mom (not reacting): That's great! What else does he want you to do?
Me: Buy 800 bucks of snake oil pills. He said there's a power outage in my mitochondria. Said I need to get on the Magic School Bus and dance with the flagella to restart the system!
Mom: And have you ordered these supplements?
Me: No.
Mom sunk fingers deep into temples.
Did not say: am not doing nothing, for nothing. Have a plan. Soon we will go birthday camping at RNP like we always have, eat ice cream/pizza in summer heat and walk hand-in-hand under tallest hopeful trees and sing repeat-after-mes into soft morning breezes!
Instead: You have no idea how this feels.
Mom quiet. Praying? Outside, family of turkeys made daily pilgrimage across dried sunned-out scabs of lawn grass.

Jun 14 3:12 A.M.

Dug up old diagnosis: post-viral dysautonomia. Soooo helpful. How to tell real feelings from fake?

Jun 15 11:25 P.M.

Spent whole day in bed stalking Pool Boy. Nothing. Tried to find social media online by searching pool company. Website super outdated: HTML shell, blue gradient background, Times New Roman font. Missing/broken hyperlinks. One number under "Contact Us." Called twice—no answer, no answering machine.

Only thing found was an inactive Facebook of one Fred Jones, listed as employee of "Angel Pools." 64-year-old male. No friends. Nothing on account, except for one photo. Older guy (Fred?) and middle schooler (untagged) running on beach, both airplane arms and 200-percent smiles. Little seagull shit on kid's shirt. No caption. Location tag = LA.

Is this Pool Boy? If so, puberty hit like extinction-level meteor.

Jun 16 12:42 P.M.

Mom bought me new handheld portable fan, equipped w/ 180-degree radial spritz tech. Works great, but told her kinda janky. Maybe will finally be able to help her put out trash bins, fetch post, etc.

No emails wrt Echo. Maybe: didn't exaggerate condition enough on application?

Scheduled autonomic testing with Stanford. First available appointment: December 14. Took literally an hour (patients called patients for reason). Transferred from operator to operator, each asking for name/address/DOB. Over and over. Full name. Address. Date of birth. This is apparently all it takes to confirm identity.

Jun 17 9:09 P.M.

T-Minus 2 days until second coming of Pool Boy.

Another day wasted on Reddit, scrolling through post-op pictures of celebrity nose jobs/face lifts. Deleted app. Deleted Snapchat too. Taped over bathroom mirror with loose insurance letters. Still, spent ~1 hour looking at @kinseyb22's old Hawaii trip pictures.

Mouth so dry. Prob drank 5 gallons of RO water. Still dry. Mom added water to make rice + beans dinner sloppy so easier to masticate.

Didn't see her much. She went sunrise hiking foothills with choir friends, then spent whole day downtown with @justicesquad (cringe) delivering water bottles for heat. Invited me to help with "community service." No thanks. No savior complex/influencer altruism for me.

On her return, requested my guitar-playing/singing in living room. Declined. Got into argument about doing things for joy, to remind you of old self! But that's exactly the point. Don't want to remember.

Jun 18 5:51 P.M.

Almost passed out trying to take shower for first time in a week. Modulated temp carefully, opening/closing glass door to evacuate steam, rotating sit/stand on shower seat, etc. Didn't matter. Dropped shampoo from trembles. Retinal burn. Didn't want to, but called Mom on phone, she came down with bathrobe, carried me to bed, layered blankets like cocoon. But shaking did not stop. Spine like a guitar string plucked, struck and hammered. Again. Mom crawled in, trying to mute it with heat. Again. Wet unwashed hair and doubled heart thumps in the dark. Vibrating. Too hot. Had to get away. Your ears, I love your ears, your sweet little ears, my mother and I had ears just like your ears, these little ears, and when you were little when you were falling asleep you would pinch my earlobe just like this yes yes you would, and when you woke up you had a look like you could hear the whole world.

Jun 19 9:21 P.M.

Second Coming of the Pool Boy!

Semi-successful?? IDK. Picked out floral blue two-piece from basket of high school clothes. Put on SPF 50 foundation/sunscreen blend to hide acne scars on cheeks/collarbone (been so long in house, it's wrong shade) alone. Mom gone for Juneteenth thing in city.

90 degrees outside so moved pool chair to patch of shadows cast by oak tree. Sun-stored heat radiated off speckled concrete, reddening bare feet. Laid (lay?) down with Hydroflask.

Approx 12:30 P.M., sighted Pool Boy opening rear gate. Imagined jaw dropping at seeing me, etc, but he just paused, waved, and carried net/brush/pole kit forward. Same perfect bronzed muscles (which activated intestinal butterflies). Wearing same weird bucket hat w/ neck cape.

Me: Sorry! Didn't know you were coming.

Pool Boy: That's fine. Hope I didn't shock you (haha).

Both of us looked into the murky algae-infested pool. Water striders glided across surface. Oak leaves congealed at bottom.

Me: Wouldn't it be easier to just drain and refill it?

PB: And waste all that water? Most pools aren't so far gone. They just need some love. Not that anyone in the valley cares. They buy all this beauty, then let it rot.

He smiled (~30 percent) as if embarrassed of own sincerity, then started dissolving dose of cal-hypo in orange bucket.

Overhead, sun's movement rotated shadows left, throwing body into hot light. But was not going to give up on first outside convo in months. Distracted him by asking why he chose this job.

PB (pouring mixture around edge of pool, nervously?): Great business here. Big income gap. High property tax. Crazy clients.

Me: I guess I'm not a counterexample.

PB: Well. I wasn't the one sunbathing out by a cesspool.

Me (sun heat blazing into skin): And I wasn't the one who checked myself out in the reflection of a cesspool.

PB:

PB: Honestly, yours is so bad I can't even see a reflection.

His bucket emptied, he reclined in deck chair adjacent. Pool water bubbled into cloudy cerulean soup.

Me: My Mom always says, lying is a sin.

PB: And spying on people isn't?
Chest itching big time. Used gluteus to scoot chair over to shade. Made comically loud scooch noise.
Me: Spying? On my own backyard? On strange person entering gate?
PB: Strange?
Me:
Chest blazed with hives. Whole body shuddering. Did he notice?
Trembling. Had to seek shade.
Stood up abruptly and nearly toppled into chemical green water. Pool Boy lunged and caught my wrist.
PB: You alright?
Me (dizzy): Yeah. Fine.
Quickly turned around. Didn't want to leave. Convo had accomplished nothing. But still left, legs wobbling. Glanced back through blinds once inside, but PB just stared at pool now in recovery, at poolbot he'd disconnected from cord to clean, which rested inert by diving board.
Stood breathing heavy on AC vent to cool down. Forgot to bring Mom's handheld mini fan. Forgot to ask PB for his name. Or did he just not give it?

Jun 20 9:45 P.M.

Avg outside temp: 100.4 F. T-Minus 30 days until birthday. Still nothing wrt Echo.
Mom asked me to go to late night church service w/ her. Touted AC capability of new car, etc. Declined. Secretly wanted to go. But knew: would ruin night with temp issue.
Instead, sat on toilet and looked at photos of @kinseyb22. Face ratio = golden. Will there be side effects (nausea, brain fog, psychosis) of switch? Tried Googling, not much result.
Pulled up photo of Pool Boy covertly snapped during shocking. Stared at his arms, biceps/triceps brachii, tracing veins like rivers up to shirtsleeve. Relistened to voice memo of our convo. Looked up whether Cali is one-party consent recording state (it's not).

Jun 21 1:19 P.M.

Mom's wacko friend's (functional doctor's) test kits finally came in post: NutrEval, Cyrex, Access Medical. All require bodily fluids: blood/urine/serum.
Started with NutrEval. Peed into cup in bathroom (missed on first try). Pipetted pee into three plastic vials and placed in biohazard bag in freezer next to Mom's favorite strawberry ice cream. Told Mom they were lime popsicles (risky).
Didn't know whether to put pee cup in dishwasher or if that was gross. Sounded gross. So just put it outside in backyard behind oak tree. Recall: hiding dinner veggies inside couch as kid, Mom had to buy a brand new one because of stench. Never told her!
Dreading blood draw for test kits, but thinking good things. Had outside convo for >10 min w/ PB! Tests maybe will get answers!? Can't let Mom see uptick in smile percentage.
Saw turkey family again on front lawn today. So many turkeys desperate for water, in heatwave. Little baby turkey trailing behind, so cute.
Pool now a misty white-green. Drinkable?

Jun 22 7:34 P.M.

Have developed bad habit at dinner of examining stomach topography by lifting shirt up to collarbone to check for red aftermath of heat rash. Mom likes to poke my belly button. Annoying.
Tonight did not eat immediately (room temp potato soup). Decided to risk bringing up Echo in passing to gauge her reaction.
Stupid decision. Mom immediately shut it down.
Me: But I heard on Reddit Tom Cruise and some other famous people are users.
Mom (smile at 0 percent): And if Tom Cruise jumped off a bridge, would you jump with him?
Did not say: You can trust Tom Cruise. Tom Cruise never uses a stunt double.

Mom went on long rant about soul/life after death. Once in June, told her desire for a green burial in tree seed pod at RNP and she vetoed even this. Not even cremation allowed, with her beliefs. Body/mind/spirit connection fundamental to afterlife, supposedly. No Freaky Friday stuff allowed.

Me: But what about the Trinity? Don't you believe that Jesus was God, or God came down in a mortal body to say hi or whatever?

Mom: No. I'm Unitarian, honey.

Jun 23 2:37 P.M.

Phlebotomist = disaster.

Arose freezing (had to fast ~10 hours) and Mom carried me + my "lime popsicles" into Jeep. Drove to third-party drug testing lab in Oakland, through tent cities in underpasses.

Shivered whole time. Sat in waiting area with few other patients/potential addicts. Confirmed identity by reciting full name/address/DOB. Tried to guess if anybody was in Echo rental or not. How to tell, from outside? Guess the point is, can't tell.

Stepped up shaky to medical chair. Phlebotomist looked younger than PB. Fanned out ten glass vials across table. Cap colors: lavender, lime, lilac.

Me (Weasleyly): Bloody hell!

Mom: Why do they need that much?

Phleb (shrugs): It's just what the instructions say!

Stabbed me five times before a vein cooperated. Horrible. Stanford Labs so much better: one poke, no pain. Nearly passed out and had to stop mid-extraction of fluids (only completed 8/10, so CBC will come back invalid . . .)

Mom held my trembling hand on ride home, singing along to her faith songs. *Unite the hearts* . . . *Unite the hearts* . . . This time, averted eyes from tents, from man rolling shopping cart uphill in 100-degree heat, etc. Instead daydreamed of PB.

Mom: Your hands are so soft.

Me (drawing hand away): CeraVe. Moisturizer.

Jun 24 9:13 P.M.

After another failed shower, finally let Mom run bath for me. She measured perfect 95 on IR thermometer, then let simmer. Stepped in shivering, and she looked away, sitting silent on mat. Then reached out with loofah/soap, and scrubbed back, slowly, in circles.

Steamed up silence for ~10 min. Breathed in/out, a nerve calmer.

Mom: Do you remember, in second grade when you didn't ever want to untie your braid? All that beautiful golden hair—my hair, your grandmother's hair, and you wanted it bound up forever, to swing around and hit people with.

Jun 25 8:47 P.M.

Pool Boy Strikes Back??

Approx 96 degrees today. Knew it was too hot. Big mistake. But didn't want to miss PB. Plus, this time had a plan. Last week, had plotted area of shade distribution in backyard. Accounted for oak tree rotating shade + moving cloud coverage. Based on weather forecast, predicted two continuously shaded sub-areas. And last night, pre-positioned two pool chairs in said sub-areas.

Smile at 100 percent all morning. Hid it from Mom. Just before his weekly time (noon), dug out red one-piece. Applied makeup/SPF sunscreen. Donned visor + shades. Got Mom's misting fan. All set! But when walked outside, PB already there.

Early.

Finished already. Sitting in pool chair. Poolside.

HE MOVED.

THE CHAIRS.

He sat left, grinned-up, feet propped on right chair. Same bronzed biceps bulging. Same neck-flapped bucket hat. He waved, pointing at the pool.

Transformation = insane. Great Bug Exodus. No dead plants or algae. Water completely clear, reflecting the infinite blue sky, brushed across by plumes of cirri.

Walked up to sit adjacent PB. And there were our faces, staring back at us. His smile 200 percent. My own, unseen for days, looking exactly like Mom.

PB: Pools are the world's eyes in which the world's look back at the world looking back—

Me: How long you been staring?

PB: I think you mean, thank you. It'll be swimmable tomorrow!

Overhead hot noon sunlight fell through oak branches directly on pool chair (he picked very suboptimal positioning).

Me (chest already itching): This is awkward but I never got your name.

PB: Call me John.

Me: Hi John. I'm Olivia. Call me Liv.

John: I already knew that. I sort of asked your Mom.

Me: She tell you anything else?

John: Nope. You're a total enigma.

Already hot. Tried to covertly spray self with misting fan, but sprayed too hard and got face 80 percent soaked. John laughed.

Me (licking up lip-mist): Well, I'm not very impressive. I've lived here my whole life. I'm a grad student at UCX studying CS.

Did not tell him about classes or ML research. Long nights at GRAIL with Laura studying transformers, simulations. Worked hard summerlong to build dam against past. Any recall of old self = flood risk. Could not think of days end of fall sem in the ED, after the first exertional heatstroke: triple-fans drying throat, Mom fetching icepacks, etc.

Me (cont.): Are you in school?

John: No. Never got to go. Would've loved to study religions though.

Me: Religions?

John (nodding): I've tried out most of the Abrahamic ones. Nothing really fit so far.

Whole body grew stiff and saliva dried up in mouth. Heat already unbearable. But was not going to admit defeat. Was going to push. Was going to complete small talk. Make a joke!

Me (slowly): So you're theistically polyamorous.

John: Huh? I don't think so. I'm very loyal. I was celibate as a Christian. I fasted as a Baha'i. I meditated every day as a Buddhist.

Did not say: And are you still celibate?

Instead said nothing. Couldn't speak.

John: I like all the afterlife stuff. The Dharmic idea is my favorite.

Me (stuttering): With how I've lived, I'll be coming back as our pool robot.

He squinted at me, then said something about reincarnation and ghosts or maybe goats?

Couldn't follow. FOV was shrinking. Vision darkening, as if sun snuffing out. Hot wave flushing over body, all nerves tingling. Told myself: this feeling will pass. Nothing is wrong.

Jun 25 9:23 P.M.

Remember: plexiglass-muted bangs of fists on sliding door. Revving heartbeat. Weightlessness. Hands under back/legs. Old pool truck with peeling vinyl-wrapped valley logo. Chlorinated smell. Sunlit bronze hand gripping stick-shift. Rush of freeway wind. Lying in backseat: lumpy pillow, cans under seats, sleeping bag?

Then: sucked out window. Falling, falling, down and then up blinking into the cold whites of ER.

Alive. Swaddled in cooling blankets, heaped with blue ice packs. Shivering as John argued with nurse wrt cold-water immersion/IV insertion. IR thermometer beeped over forehead.

John (smile 100 percent): You're right as rain. I'm sure your insurance is great.

Temp stabilized. Ended up no IV. Not serious enough. Still—when waiting in sitting room for discharge, John brought me water cup, hospital robe/blankets to wear over bathing suit.

So many bodies in waiting room. Hunched woman in motorized chair. Older man in Hawaiian shirt curled on floor, twitching. Couple muttering eating takeout Chipotle w/ chopsticks.

Didn't call Mom. Just sat next to John, drinking and apologizing.

He drove me home and dam finally broke. He didn't ask. All just came rushing out. Negative tests. Dead-ends w/ specialists. Appointments so far out. Mayo Clinic rejection. Echo waitlist.

Exaggerated condition, grossly, dramatically. Stepping outside = death, any exertion = death, etc. John listened. Said nothing. Cranked his ancient AC.

Passed old Montclair high school, old friends' gated houses. Didn't look. Just talked and talked at him until he pulled into driveway/parked. Knew then: messed it all up. Pool = clean, no reason to ever see PB again. He fetched water bottle from backseat, asked if he should wait until Mom's return. Told him no. Told him all fine. Shouldn't see me crying. Didn't ask him about his sleeping bag.

Was honest w/ Mom when she got home. Mistake. She exploded. Was at Sunday service when it happened. Shouted, why didn't you call? Why didn't you call? I would've been there in a heartbeat.

Jun 27 1:37 A.M.

Lost days submerged in Internet void. Like early summer: just look up and nightfall. Old CBT guy told me to be forgiving. Retell the story. Self-love. But how to forgive squandering of life? Of waste of youth? Of continuous bedrotting, in hope of new body?

Outside bedroom blinds, heatwave still waving. No water for front lawn turkeys.

Thought all day about calling Valley Pools but didn't. Watched (while eating Mom's beet soup (for the iron (because of blood loss))): Livestream fail compilations. TikToks of Reddit posts narrated over Subway Surfer/Minecraft parkour clips. Better bodies dancing, better bodies at beach. Brain melting. Thought language devolving: skibidi gyatt rizzler ya ya ya.

Jun 28 11:16 P.M.

Sat quiet at dinner (potato/veggie roast).

Mom: I've told the pool company to stop coming.

Window open a crack because hot from oven = cool breeze giving me shakes but said nothing about it.

Her: The water is perfect now. So you can finally start your exercises. By the way, did those test kits Doctor Ramirez ordered ever come back? The ones with all the blood vials.

Under table, calmed nerves by feeling ridges of redwood slab dining table (from RNP). Each ridge = many years. Traversed thousands with fingers, from Jesus to computer invention.

Her: Given any more thought to your birthday? Only a few more weeks!

Pocket buzz. Text from unrecognized #.

how do you feel, goldilocks?

Jun 29 10:58 A.M.

Return of the Pool Boy!!

NO TIME. FaceTimed for ~1 hr last night wrt Echo. Will transcribe convo later.

Mom had me on lockdown all day. Did she hear us?? She didn't go to choir practice this morning or downtown for @justicesquad water delivery. Stayed home, singing from living room again and again: *We are drops. We are drops.*

Jun 30 12:21 A.M.

How did he get off waitlist, and not me? Maybe: his condition = life-threatening? How does he afford that body rental, if he lives in pool truck? Why clean pools in first place? Believe him? How could not have seen it? How so stupid? Hindsight = 20/20. But who expects salvation to wander into backyard?

John said: won't forget old self, after switch with loaner. Still, worried. Must remember: high school surprise bday pool party planned by Mom. All friends over and Victor bought me inflatable sex doll. Mom didn't think gift funny. Victor putting blindfold on me, his breath on neck so close. Wild swing. Piñata catapulting from backward oak branch into pool, then jumping in, Victor jumping in after, eating soggy candy together, sex doll floating in deep end, friends flashing iPhone lights, poolbot spraying us, etc. What was Victor doing now?

Must remember: RNP trips with Mom. Redwood hike and Mom teaching guitar. Hot pain in fingertips from Elixir strings, singing like wolves into tallest trees. Black sky with stars cloud cloaked. Cold, so cold next to her in tent after fire snuffed. Rain drops falling from heaven. Mom slipping her old oven mitts over my hands, getting close in sleeping bag. Must keep this girl close. Whatever happens next. Will not lose this kid. This kid lives in me. Remember.

Jul 1 2:10 A.M.

Waited for Mom to sleep then crept to backyard pool chair. Perfect temp night wind. Eczema of stars reflected overhead as John opened fence behind ~70 degrees (to prevent creak) and sat adjacent.

Pool light lit us in weak green glow. John took brown sweater off, revealing white tank top + cross necklace. One simple motion (dorsi to deltoid to traps to biceps) = million electrical signals in correct sequence.

John: Here.

He showed me iPhone (old model, no FaceID). Somewhere far, premature fireworks boomed. Heart leapt, but everything hushed again. No light from Mom's window.

On home screen was the white-flower app logo.

BIN 000987 24F. C: Athlete. 176 cm / 60 kg. VO2 max 68 ml/kg/min. NS/ND.

Me (scrolling): You weren't lying.

BIN 000089 28M. C: Photogenic. BFP 18 percent. Orthodontic index 98/100. Circum. S/ND.

Him: Why would I lie?

BIN 000635 19M/F. C: Universal. H: Brown. E: Brown. S: Fitzpatrick Type III. S/D.

He swiped over to profile. There was his original body, unrecognizable—lanky, short. Full-body paralysis from an atlas (C1 vertebra) injury, sustained at a camp in the Sierra Nevada mountains when he was a kid.

Him: That's me. Held somewhere in San Francisco, right now.

Oak tree limbs shuddered in low wind. Leaves fell, drifting into pool.

Him (on phone last night): I thought a lot about what you said. It's so horrible, so unjust how they never believe you. How they gaslight you. How something invisible is completely ignored.

BIN 000020 70. C: Elder. V: Presbyopia corrected to 20/25. VO2 Max: 22 ml/kg/min.

Him: Listen. Their algorithm isn't fair. But I can help you. Come with me to the city. I want to be your referral.

Whole body shaking—not from temp. Should have told him of my great, hyperbolic lies. Not dying. Not disfigured. Not even close. Should have told him the fault was all mine, for six months wasting away, for six months banking on a lottery ticket. Neuro: All tests normal. Not terminal or even bed-bound. In grand beach of humanoid suffering, mine = grain of sand. So many deserved so much more.

Should have told him.

But didn't. Instead, hugged him hard, his smile 200 percent when we stood up and my two hands of my two arms pushed him into pool but he grabbed me along with him and shock of the clean chlorinated water lit up all nerves and we swam until freezing and he pulled me out soaking and untangled poolbot cord and hushed my laughing and got me a towel for shaking and then was off into darkness.

Shook for ~10 min after. Worth it.

Mom (at RNP): We are so lucky to live in the valley where the trees hope the most.

Jul 2 10:19 A.M.

Dreamed: hiding submerged in pool during firestorm, dark sky/water, trying to swim up to breach for air, but missing arms at sides, no feet, sinking, no poolbot, oak tree torching.

Jul 3 7:54 P.M.

Looked up referral process. No FAQ. PB: Referral = guarantee. Current userbase = only extremes. Critically rich (for profit) or critically infirm (for altruism). PB: You kill two birds.

Jul 4 9:31 P.M.

Another cool night. Heatwave lifting?? (weather app = stormfront approaching)
Went for first time in months on outing w/ Mom to watch fireworks for Independence Day. Mom so excited. On way over (in climate-controlled new lease), she gave lecture about birth of America. Of importance of *United States*, and how California should under no circumstance secede.

Me: There's a reason it's called New England.

Fireworks metamorphosed in night sky. From flowers, to dragons, to waves, then bursting into black, detritus falling into Lake Merritt. Thought of PB. Flames. Limbs.

Stopped looking up. Instead, watched crowd of bodies reclined on hill. Imagined: looking up history of their elements, tracing blood iron and flesh carbon back to volcanoes and stars and Big Bang.

Mom (seeing me shivering): You getting cold?

She leaned in, too close, and pinched my earlobe. Looked at her purse, her thin wallet w/ debit card/RNP picture. T-Minus two weeks until own birthday. Unwillingly conceived of circumstances of own conception.

Jul 5 11:35 A.M.

On sun-up, refreshed mail app for last time wrt Echo. Message top of inbox. White flower logo. Blue hyperlink.

Accepted terms/conditions. Won't get to switch with @kinseyb22. Didn't match.

Still, should be happy. Why not happy?

PB text: ready, goldilocks? :)

Jul 5 2:22 A.M.

2128 Mission Circuit, Sector 7
Mission Bay District
San Francisco, CA 94158

Jul 6 5:38 A.M.

we're not gone we're on the bay bridge
i understand where you're coming from. i'm so sorry i made you feel this way. please. i love you. i love yo

no you are the best ever and i'm so lucky

i already got us spots at our site. i'll only be gone for weekend. i'll be right back. please

Jul 10 1:31 A.M.

Bounding out marble steps of the Ritz and taking his hand and bolting down hilly SF roads saturated in noonlight. Street vendored triple-decked strawberry/lemon ice cream cones + greasy pizza. Wrapping whole tongue around scoops, shoving into face and smearing around, PB stunned, licking his wetly. Sweat glands hyperactivating, damp underarms, salt dripping into mouth. Sharing an electric BIRD scooter with my hands on his waist, fingering underneath his shirt the transversus abdomini, the V groove hand holds, the male hip's grin terminating in erection. Cable car cables striping big blue sky. Bell-ringing man in half-torn shirt proclaiming the second coming. Sprinting shirtless down the Golden Gate Bridge walkway, past popped-eye drivers, not caring, just basking in perfect chemical to kinetic conversion. On beach below, jumping into subzero surf from which above, suicide is committed. Freezing cold no longer sapping but electrifying limbs. Suntanning bare backed for ~2 hrs, riding tandem bike w/ wheels spinning infinity signs. Chowling down on California ghost peppers (no stipulation against in contract) for dinner and evacuating intestines of mucosal lining, laughing/choking/spitting up body fluids. Joining buskers in sunset duets and belting our lungs out to street-side applause. Late night rave clubs and drunk out of my mind just bouncing on these striated calves/thighs, trying to guess which famous souls are here behind the perfect flesh, and PB's grabbing me and the LED strobe's on a 360 degree sprinkler rotation delivering neural ganglia collapse, all this aggressive health thrashing until we're in the Uber XL back to the hotel, my head sunk in his shoulder, and clenching my teeth so he doesn't see me crying, lying in the

king bed with embroidered covers up to my neck when he comes out of the walk-in shower to fuck me, flipping on top of him and the only thought is he could have lied, he could be anybody, anywhere, and as he does it this woman's, this new body's memory thrusts into me: a crowning ring of hypogastric nerve-fire, and in my eyes the bloodied water of a blow-up kiddie pool and an apartment window and the wiry man she loves holding safety scissors and my little baby not crying and his fingers deep in her upside-down throat slick with amniotic fluid and then a spitting and shaking out and a shaking head and only blue blue blue.

Jul 11 4:31 P.M. (edited)

List of Things To Do With New Body. (When Healthy Bucket List? Brainstorm acronym. Maybe Operation: Touch Grass?)

1. ***BDAY REDWOOD CAMPING IN TENTS AT RNP!!!*** (w/ Mom)
2. Escape CA (w/ PB)

Jul 11 12:23 A.M.

i just wanted to tell you i'm ok
i just wanted to tell you i'm ok and i love you
i just wanted to tell you i may not see you for a while

Jul 12 3:05 P.M.

Typing from train. Don't know why, when everything ruined.
Last day of my rental today. Mom's card declining. Had to go back to SF for switch back. Instead, stood at BART station w/ PB, rushing wind from our approaching terminal car, standing side by side in our hoods/masks. Spent all night mapping out-of-state journey across Cal border.

Me: I think I love you.

Him:

Him (staring at self in train windows): Listen.

Crowd of bodies swarming through station.

Me: What?

Him: I've changed my mind.

Lights blinking in 25 percent increments on tunnel roof.

Him: This is wrong.

PB stepping away into crowd. Automatic BART train doors sliding open (abbreviated version but pretty much how it went down). Doesn't he remember: hotel convos, when told him couldn't trust him, and he let own dam burst? LA Exodus. Ashes. This could be rebirth. Leave all behind. Make it new. New beginning.

Announcer's robo-voice on intercom: MIND THE GAP.

Jul 12 4:10 P.M.

do you ever see what he remembers?

Jul 13 1:07 A.M.

Returned to Oakland after sunset. Walked to Montclair from BART (never again) heart pumping at every shadow. Entered backyard through black gate. Like PB.

Had to be fast (sure w/ whatever they put in brain = trackable). Walked out onto speckled concrete, at perfect pH pool reflecting cloudy sky like giant eyeball: star-flecked iris, full moon = inverted pupil. Stood back. Didn't look at 004982. Didn't want memory leaks.

Mom's light out in room. Tried texting wrt RNP, no response. Crept under oak tree (past gross old pee cup from test kits) to her window, looked at bed through Venetian blinds.

No one home. Checked calendar.

Jul 14 11:19 A.M.

Took actual UberX (used last Apple ID credit) to Mom's church downtown. Driver tried small talk whole time. Annoying. Should just go driverless.

Church = small brick building crushed between two steel/glass apartments. Interfaith mural: tree w/ religious icon leaves. Oak door slightly ajar, spilling light, clatter and humming. Chalkboard squiggly sign: FREE SOUPPER!

Inside: folding tables in low light. Old pews pushed back to walls. Lines of bodies. Aprons doling lentil soup into styrofoam cups. Ice-cold canned water. Behind, an upraised stage, a choir—recognized some from @justicesquad posts.

And Mom. Eyes closed, singing tenor in a new song, praising sky, thanking sky for rain. Others not so good, off pitch, etc. But together: notes harmonized, crowd hushed during reverberation in old wooden ceiling beams. Remember: Mom gifting her own redwood guitar for bday. Mom (years ago): Will only sound better with age.

Me (after all over, people shuffling out, Mom + others cleaning up): Hi.

Mom (smile 100 percent): Welcome! A new face! Where are you from?

Me: Around here.

Mom:

Me: I used to go to UCX.

Mom (smile at zero percent): Oh! Well. It's a wonderful school. I'm glad you could join us.

Man w/ circular earrings stepped beside Mom, held hand, pinched her earlobe. Pretty sure = Ramirez? Functional doctor who ordered useless test kits that never came back??

Him (looking at her): Looks like the weather is finally turning around!

Mom (wiping eye): Can I help you? Would you like some dinner? We've got leftovers. Please stay as long as you like!

Should have said: It's me, your little girl, she is me, I am her, I'm here now, I can do it all now, everything you ever wanted me to, this is what we've been waiting for, let's do it!

But didn't. Instead, rushed out into street. Away from stuffy brick building, away from underpasses, away from bands of happy humans singing at moon hiding behind cloud front. Stretched out palms and felt first drizzle. Knew what was always true: Mom better off without me.

Jul 15 10:43 P.M.

Cannot fly—do not have her gov ID. Masked, took bus ride after bus ride. Never sure how close they are, but know they can track me. Did PB tell them anything? Still, turned phone on airplane, deactivated e-SIM, etc.

Slept roadside Sonoma gas station beneath trash-compactor overhang under dark sky. Rain streamed down all night, saturating clothes. Should never have done this. Wondered what they will charge me with. Grand theft autonomic?

Morning after, sopping breakfast in adjacent McDonald's. BIN 004982 mem leak: wiry dude + her (smiles at 200 percent) in booths ordering Happy Meals.

Stared until waiter approached asking for bill, then asked for bathroom code. And ran. And what it is like to run—to run and run the fogged-over California freeway, to sweat, to lick salt from palms. To be evolution's intention. To have all parts of body working: orgasmic organic organ orgy. To leave all behind.

Jul 17 8:36 P.M.

Made it to RNP, just in time for birthday. Phone waterlogged. Will die soon.

No service out here. They will never find me.

Still, wonder if too late to go back. Remember morning Mom asked to tell her how it feels. Now, somewhere in SF, one person in world knows exactly how it feels.

Can no longer tell which is real. Body 2: walking lost through towering redwoods, bark like varicose calves of giants, singing faith songs into mist. Body 1: locked in a cold barred room in city, shivering violent, limbs too heavy to move. My mind like two channels, my sight two layers superimposed. And then: voice from outside. A shadow, coming through slats of light. Mom. Mom has found B1, thanks to PB. She is hugging her where she sits shaking in some holding cell, keeping B1 safe during

switch—but I can feel her here in B2, miles away in RNP, pulling me close, asking me to repeat after her, as I run through roots of tallest trees, through showering rain, my temperature perfectly controlled.