

Ephraim

# THE ANATOMY OF DROWNING.

CONTENT WARNINGS: drowning, (temporary) child death, child abuse & neglect, addiction, unhealthy coping mechanisms.

## THE TRAGEDY OF BROOK, A comic stage performance in all acts.

The Audience waits, expectant, salivating. A stage that is the sea, a pool, a shower stall and still a stage. An audience member's drool drips from their lip & lands on their lap.

Enter **BROOK**, stage left. They walk like a convict towards the gallows. Limbs shaking, in just their underwear. Water drips down onto the square tiles of the floor as they make their way to the middle of the stage, soaked. They stand & squint against the harsh floodlights.

**BROOK, hoarse:** Not again.

*Pause for laughter.*

The Audience snickers.

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** You untidy the floor, sweetheart.

*(Silence.)*

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** You're not supposed to be here.

**BROOK** sobs, more water soiling the floor as they kneel, face in hands.

**BROOK, muffled by their hands:** I want to be loved by someone. I'm like you.

*(But they know they aren't like her. Everybody calls her a saint.)*

The sound of a shower being turned on. **BROOK** screams in response. It is, above the pain, anger and fear, a scream of the devastation they feel at this inevitability.

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** I remember when you were six & suddenly refused baths. Silly little BROOK. Your father & I were so proud when you wanted to start showering instead. Like a grownup!

**BROOK** coughs & hacks & vomits water onto the stage.

*(When BROOK was six, they wanted to play in the pool in their garden. Mother&Father told them to just go ahead, they'll come join them once the call is done.*

*They'll be right with them once their work is finished.*

*They dove into the water & played, until, from one moment to the next, their muscles cramped.*

*They drowned quietly, willing for their useless little arms & legs to move, to stay afloat. Chlorine burning their throat & nostrils as they were sinking into oblivion.*

*BROOK woke up to the arctic glare of the automatic pool lights turning on.*

*And then they were no longer BROOK. They were an animal, fighting to survive, a sudden burst of energy that let them reach up & they kicked kicked kicked, toward the only place not covered in baby blue square tiles. Their hand slapped the surface of the pool, & when their head breached the surface, there was a torrent of water expelling from their lungs, & then – a first breath of sweet air, & BROOK didn't even feel their lungs burning anymore, the oxygen such bliss*

*that they could barely concentrate on making it to the edge, hoisting themselves up & laying down on the ground next to the water.*

*They just breathed, staring up at the dark sky, feeling a rush they had never felt before.*

*Finally, BROOK decided to go inside. They didn't feel cold, but their limbs were shaking. The lights in the house were bright. They were cold & their lungs were burning. When they entered the house to look for Mother&Father they found Mother in the study, working on her computer. She glanced up & saw them standing there, frowning at the puddle of water at their feet.*

*'Don't stand there dripping, you're ruining the hardwood floor.'*

*She didn't mention the pool or the late time.*

*They went & dried up in the bathroom, lips blue. & still their corners raised in a dopy smile, air in their lungs the greatest sensation BROOK had ever experienced.*

*The smile stayed until they woke up the next morning from a nightmare of square tiles.*

*They refused baths after, & their parents snapped after one too many tantrums. Mother's words were harsh & Father just yelled & yelled. At bath time BROOK was dunked in the water despite their thrashing.*

*They proclaimed they wanted to shower instead when it was next time for a bath, earning smiles from Mother&Father.*

*For the next few years, BROOK would wonder if what happened had merely been a too vivid nightmare after they went swimming & fell asleep by the pool.*

*So it goes.)*

**BROOK, gasping:** My breath still smells like chlorine after all these years. You're supposed to be a saint.

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** Nothing is ever enough.

**BROOK:** I don't want this anymore. I'm different.

*Pause for laughter.*

The Audience cackles.

*(They never forgot the absolute delight they felt after finally coming up to the surface back then. Air replacing the water in their lungs.)*

**BROOKS'S MOTHER, offstage:** This is what you made of love. You were what you were to be.

**BROOK** leans their head on the floor tiles, whining.

*(BROOK started swimming again after their 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was as much fun as it used to be when they were younger, & cramping legs & square tiles were memories they rarely visited. But the memory of oxygen finally filling their airways was something BROOK thought of constantly.*

*They read books about divers & their lungs & they wanted. They had dreams of snorkels, of underwater caves.*

*The next time they went swimming in their pool, when they were taking steps down the ladder, they drew a deep breath before dropping that last foot that completely submerged their head. The water surrounded them & they instantly felt its cool pressure against their eardrums. BROOK had to hold themselves down, gripping the ladder tightly, as their body instinctually demanded they go up for air again. They stayed there, until there were small black spots at the edge of their vision & the chlorine water was tickling their nostrils.*

*Finally, BROOK pushed themselves up & took a deep, delicious breath of summer air. A distant smile on their face as they sat at the edge of the pool, looking into the water.*

*BROOK noticed a small beetle in the water, next to their leg. They watched it squirm, its oil-shiny chitin carapace glinting in the glittering pool water. Eventually, it stopped moving.*

*BROOK went into the house for something to eat, smile still pulling at their lips.*

*They called it the Ladder Game. The rules were simple: You have to hold your breath for as long as you can, while holding yourself underwater. It quickly became their favourite thing to do. They started to count the seconds until they had to go up, challenging themselves to go longer & longer. The air above the surface tasted sweeter the longer they went without. But it still never was as good as that time when they could first relish in it, when they were six.)*

**BROOK:** Please let me go.

**SAOIRSE, A FRIEND, offstage:** This is all you have left. You reap what you sow.

**BROOK** stands up, stares out into the Audience.

**BROOK:** I am sorry. I-

**BROOK** coughs up more water.

*Pause for laughter.*

The audience howls.

*(When BROOK was 13, they went to their classmate Saoirse's birthday party by a lake behind her house.*

*They told the other kids about the ladder game, that it was a challenge, & whoever could hold their breath the longest, would win. They didn't have a ladder at the lake so they'd have to dive & try to keep themselves underwater.*

*The children all went into the murky water, & at the count of 3 they took a deep breath & dove down. BROOK was exhilarated, the lake was so different from*

*their pool, with mud & algae all around them only letting them barely see the shapes of the kids nearest to them.*

*BROOK had the most practice, so they were sure they were going to win.*

*As they waited until their vision was filled with spots, they saw the vague shape of a kid near them give up & swim back up.*

*When it was time, & their limbs were starting to feel heavy, they swam back up to breathe, & it was, as always, glorious. They didn't even take in everyone else around them, for a moment all they knew was the air in their throat.*

*When they became aware of their surroundings, they finally noticed no one was really looking at them. Everyone was there, swimming around them, Saoirse was crying out her little brother's name. BROOK hadn't even known he had been in the water with them.*

*They watched Saoirse's dad jump into the water & disappear, for a moment, before he came back up, with the little shape of Saoirse's brother in his arm.*

*BROOK watched as Saoirse's brother was quickly laid out on the wooden jetty, fingers a weird greyish colour & a piece of kelp clinging to his foot.*

*BROOK watched Saoirse's little brother's body jerk as their dad gave him chest compressions, until, finally, there were the sounds of hacking coughs & water spilling from the 9-year-old's mouth, followed by ragged breaths.*

*Everyone's parents were called, but the ambulance was there before any parents had arrived. BROOK watched the EMTs pack Saoirse's unresponsive brother away. The tips of his fingers were still grey, & there was bruising on his chest.*

*Saoirse & her family had to move after that. Their house wasn't accessible enough for the wheelchair*

*Sairse's brother had to use. This was the first time BROOK heard of the word hypoxia.*

*So it goes.)*

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** We were always proud when you brought your trophies home from the Swimming Competitions. It's important to keep active. Though I wish you didn't have such a single-minded focus on it. Keeping up with your schoolwork is important too. We shouldn't have let you sign up for the Diving Team when you were in High School.

**BROOK:** I don't know what you want to hear. Nothing is ever enough.

**BROOK'S MOTHER, offstage:** Nothing ever is.

*(BROOK joined the Swimming Team in their school. The coach was also a teacher at the local diving school, & she said they could join when they were a little older.*

*They wondered if she knew the feeling of gasping for breath as intimately as they did. If anyone did.)*

**BROOK:** I don't want to go back again & again & again & again.

*(They loved Swimming Team. BROOK was even lucky enough to have a pool at home so they could even practice outside of school. The skin on their palms was constantly wrinkled.*

*They stayed as long as they could at every practice, always the last out of the water. The coach always praised BROOK as her star swimmer. They begged to stay longer whenever they got the chance, & the coach let them sometimes, while she was doing paperwork.*

*One time, when BROOK was the only one staying late, she had to run to the teacher's lounge & told them she'd be right back. They swam another length, but when they tried to push off the pool tiles to turn back around, their foot got stuck in the pool's skimmer*

*filtration hatch. It's something the coach warned them about when they first joined, but they had completely forgotten about it.*

*They thrashed & dunked their head under the water, trying to pull their leg out. The angle was awkward & it felt like they were nearly dislocating their knee or hip when they tried to pull away while upright.*

*BROOK didn't even have the chance to take a big gulp of air before they were submerged, tearing at their foot trying to twist themselves out.*

*They thought of Saoirse's brother, of hypoxia, & the air that exited their mouth & nose was bubbling up around them. Their last ditch effort trying to get to the surface was futile & then their breath ran out & they were forced to breathe in the chlorine water around them. The last thing they saw was their hair drifting in front of their eyes & the pool lights.*

*They woke up an indefinite time later, floating, face down by the edge of the pool, foot still stuck. They turned their head & got a glorious desperate breath in, before, now with a clear mind, methodically pulling their leg out of the hatch. There were bruises where it'd been stuck & a few scratches from their own fingernails along their shin but BROOK didn't even feel it. They breathed deeply, letting themselves float on their back, staring at the blinding fluorescent lights above, & laughed in the bliss of oxygen.*

*When the coach came back not more than 5 minutes later, she didn't notice the bruises when she shooed them out of the water & towards the locker rooms, apologizing for taking longer than anticipated.*

*They giggled like a child at her antics, feeling more alive than ever before, & wished her a good evening when they were dressed & she locked up.*

*So it goes.)*