The wonderful and exciting stories in this short story collection were written by students from Russia, Italy, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Argentina, Serbia and Ukraine, as part of the Macmillan Education Short Story Writing Competition.

The competition ran from March until August in 2014. A big well done and thank you to the winners of this competition:

- Victoria Bratenchuk
- Umberto Settembrini
- Kim Jaqueline Weiler
- Ann
- Uma Hamzić
- Alyona Gulyayeva
- Soledad Mariana Blanco
- Simone Löhlein
- Teodora
- Anna
- Ivashina

Short Story Writing Competition

Category: 13 years and older
MACMILLAN READERS

Short Story Writing Competition

CATEGORY: 13 YEARS AND OLDER
The Macmillan Readers provide a choice of enjoyable reading materials for learners of English. The series is published at six levels – Starter, Beginner, Elementary, Pre-intermediate, Intermediate and Upper Intermediate.

**Short Story Writing Competition**

In 2014, Macmillan Education organised an international Short Story Writing Competition for schools and individual students. Students were asked to create their own fictional short story with sport as the theme. The 10 best stories in the category 13 years and older feature in this short story collection.

The overall winner in this category is Victoria Bratenchuk from Russia, with her story *Dreaming about Swimming or Becoming Mr. Archibald*. Ivashina from Russia won the prize for best illustration which features on the cover of this collection.

For more information, visit www.macmillanenglish.com/readers
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1. Dreaming about Swimming or Becoming Mr. Archibald

By Victoria Bratenchuk, Russia

Freddie’s chubby cheeks had never been a source of pride of the Archibald banking family.

“I can’t remember fat children in our kin”, said Mr. Archibald and adjusted his old pince-nez. From time to time he’d been studying Freddie, who looked like a fluffy French bread roll, and today accidentally sprinkled water on his son’s face from a baby bottle. But instead of being frightened, the child laughed. Mr. Archibald couldn’t believe his eyes and repeated his recent action. Freddie laughed even louder. He’d been bathed before, but that day was special, as it was the first time he realized how pleasant the tickle of water could be.

Mrs. Archibald reassured her husband that their son would certainly follow in his famous ancestors’ footsteps, and the plumpness always made a financier more significant, which was a sign of high earnings.

Freddie learned to talk, read and count early. And how could he not, if every evening Mr. Archibald showed him how much he’d earned by using his ancient abacus. But what Freddie loved more than anything else was water: while the adults were hiding under umbrellas, he joyfully ran in the rain. One day, while walking along the lake, Freddie saw the kids swinging on a rope, tied to a thick branch of an oak, and jumping off into the water. “Suzy!” someone called. Freddie noticed a little girl in a blue bathing suit. She waved to someone and jumped from a small pier into the lake. Freddie couldn’t take his eyes off the way she’s gliding under the water. “If I could do the same!” he was thinking as his mother was taking him away.

Even when Fred was in his forties, and his belly resembled a balloon at a children’s party, and from ‘Fred’ he’d become ‘Mr. Archibald’, his dream still lived there, on the lake. There was no other road for Fred but to work in the Bank, although that road turned aside and led him to the ‘white-collar’ job and not so high salary.

Despite the fact that Fred always had dinner with his colleagues, he was detached and couldn’t keep up a conversation about buying a house,
a car or some clothes. All Mr. Archibald needed was a pair of business suits and a couple of shirts, as there was no such thing that could hide someone’s double chin or, on the contrary, open to the world a dreamy heart. While other people surrounded themselves with the desert of rubbish things, Fred put his salary into a safe, which he opened twice a month: to take some money for food and to put there another bank roll.

Every morning Fred enjoyed his cappuccino in an outdoor cafe and read the sports news section in a daily newspaper. One day he came across a note: “To all amateur swimmers! Every man aged 40 to 45 can take part in The Freestyle Swimming Competition. There are 2 months left to apply!” Mr. Archibald even jumped from joy. His neighbors gave him a puzzled look, while he, squealing with delight, showed them the note, but all the snobby visitors got back to their newspapers. However, Fred was convinced that those people, deep in their hearts, knew how difficult it was to reach the dream, when you’d become ‘Mr. Archibald’.

On the same day Fred quit his job and decided to live on his saved up money. He finally enrolled in swimming classes for beginners. Mr. Archibald had never seen so many children in one place! At first he felt uncomfortable, but then noticed that, unlike adults, the kids weren’t interested in his age or his clumsiness. Everyone called him ‘Fred’ and he loved it. As the weeks passed, Mr. Archibald was mastering new swimming techniques, and wearing a swimming cap made him feel like he was the happiest man on earth.

There came the day of competition. Fred was inexplicably calm, although his belly stood out from the slender row of athletes. The judges were announced: “Ladies and Gentlemen! Please welcome our Chief Judge, a national champion, our pride – Suzy Whitm-o-o-re!” A beautiful woman in a blue dress waved to the audience. Fred turned pale when he recognized the mermaid-girl from the lake. Mr. Archibald wilted and shyly covered himself with his hands. But he couldn’t run away and give up on his dream to swim.

At the signal, participants jumped from the starting platform. Fred straightened out his body, and just when he wanted to make a stroke with his right arm, he inhaled through his nose, then gulped water reflexively and began to choke. Fred’s head was aching, and he felt like a wounded sperm whale that would soon reach the bottom. Suddenly someone’s
hands pulled Fred up. And then he fell deeper into the darkness... Once Fred opened his eyes, he saw worried people leaning over him, and only Suzy, wet with water, smiled at him.

After this ridiculous incident Mr. Archibald sat on a bench, wrapped in a towel, and watched the Award Ceremony. A bald man with a red mustache received congratulations.

Soon the sports arena got empty. Fred placed his feet in the water, creating slight ripples. He was sad. Not just because he hadn’t won the competition, but mostly because Suzy hadn’t seen him swimming. “Let it be, buddy!” said Fred to himself and dove into the water. First he swam front crawl, then breaststroke and afterwards rolled onto his back, eyes closed, enjoying the cool embrace of water. When Fred decided to get out of the pool, he peeped out of its side and saw Suzy, sitting on the edge and never taking her eyes off him ...

Those days had long gone, and other apple-cheeked kids run around the Archibald house, almost knocking off the lovely photographs from the fireplace. On one of them, Fred demonstrates a bunch of gold medals, while on another picture he hugs his wife, Mrs. Archibald, a brave swimmer – Suzy Archibald.
Dear Dad,

I was at the park with Leo yesterday; we played football, just like we did all of us together before you left for the front.

Mum hasn’t felt well since we moved to grandmother’s, because of our economic situation: she works with grandfather at the factory and I’m still at school. We could no longer afford to pay the rent and of course the salaries for the Charlie Ernst’s football team too.

Blackpool after all, is a beautiful city. There are a lot of places, where you can play football with friends, and although now my only friend is hairy and has four legs, he is a great player, when he doesn’t bite the ball. I’m fifteen years old and “I’ll make friends quickly”, says mum. I hope I receive soon a letter from you. I miss you so much.

Alan

Alan faced the first day in the new school. When he came home, he dropped his dad a line, as he used to do.

Dear Dad,

I made friends with five boys: Luke, John, Paul, Ricky and Richard. We played together and they told me about the football selections in Blackpool: many famous youth teams are looking for very capable players. Paul says I’m very good at playing football and if an observer saw me playing, he would certainly write my name on his list.

I haven’t received any letters from you yet. We’re all waiting for you. Mum says you’ll come home early because the British troops have already been called back for a long time. But I’m not a child anymore and I know when she lies.

I love you daddy.
Alan
The war didn’t seem to stop. There seemed to be complications, which people already knew about.

Blackpool, 23rd May 1942

Dear Dad,

I was at the park today and I was obviously playing football with Leo, when I heard some people talking about many missing English soldiers. Mum isn’t letting me listen to the radio. She always invents a good excuse to change the radio station, when there is some war news. My friends and I organized a football match at the soccer small field, where you took me when I was a child. Can you imagine me in an important team, in an enormous football stadium with the cheers of the fans, daddy? It would be a dream.

I study and play football everywhere: I ran the risk of breaking mum’s flower pot one thousand times, playing at home; she wanted to kill me.

Love, Alan

Alan’s mother was depressed; nevertheless she tried by all means to hide the truth from her son. He’s only a little boy and she was worried about his reaction.

Blackpool, 27th November 1942

Dear Dad,

A war memorial was erected in the park with the name of the fallen and the disappeared, including yours, dad. But I believe in your return.

The football match was funny. The small soccer field is as I remembered: the green grass and the lines just repainted. Today the boys asked me who taught me to play football so well and I told them about our workouts.

I keep on writing to you, because I’m sure you’ll receive all my letters, when you’re found again. And when you’ll come home we’ll remove your name from that stone in the park together.

Alan

It’s been almost a year and half since Alan’s dad disappeared. However, the young man didn’t stop writing, thanks to his strong conviction.
Blackpool, 12th February 1943

Dear Dad,

I received a letter: “We carefully observed you, playing football at the Blackpool soccer field and we consider you’re up to our expectations. This is why the Liverpool’s youth team would be happy to have you for the next regional football league. Please contact us as soon as possible...” My dream is coming true. They’ll pay all the costs and they’ll give me a small salary to begin with. Mum always tells me with tears in her eyes: “If only your father could see now what a little man you’ve become.” My 1st match will be at home, against Manchester’s youth team and there will be a lot of people at the stadium. I hope I don’t make a bad impression.

I miss you dad.

Love, Alan

The boy was afraid of the idea of taking to the field for the first time in such an enormous stadium with such a big audience of supporters.

The great day came finally. The team walked out onto the field with a black band on their arms in honour of the fallen. The match started and Alan suddenly showed great skill with the ball.

The stadium lights dazzled him and the screams confused him. Halftime: it is a draw and the coach gives his final pep talk. The match resumed: fifteen minutes went by and then another thirty. The clock is running just like the players. Alan conquered the ball and went under the kop. He wasn’t able to discern the faces or the voices but he suddenly heard a voice in particular. He couldn’t believe it but he was sure it was a familiar voice. The boy scored the victory goal in a minute from the end, with a straight shot in the top right-hand corner. He looked again at the fans but he recognized only his mum and his grandparents. At the end of the match, he got back to the changing-room with a smile on his lips and the tears in his eyes and he celebrated the victory with his team. He knew his dad had been at that match, as he’s with him every day. He can’t see him with his eyes or hear him with his ears, but he will always be able to feel him with his mind and his heart.
3. The Importance of Sports

By Kim Jaqueline Weiler, Germany

Her heart was beating fast; her hands were sweating as she ran around the corner of the shed to check if she could see him somewhere on the hills. But somehow she already knew he wouldn’t be there. As a mother, she felt something was wrong. He had gone to bed early, long before the other family members. And this morning, he had made his bed more diligently than ever before. She had noticed that he had taken with him not only his jacket, but his boots and the warm fur. Immediately she ran outside and looked for him at the animal cage, at his friend’s shed, at the well in the center of the small community, at the creek in the valley, at his favorite oak tree and in the cave next to the village. He was gone. It felt as if a part of her heart had been torn out. She didn’t know what to do, not even what to think.

Where had he gone … and why? Apparently he hadn’t been forced to. Had he had an accident? Completely desperate, Ameera started to scream: “Vishal! My boy! … Come back to me! Vishal!” No answer. She couldn’t stop screaming even though her throat was feeling terribly dry. At this moment, everybody in the small village was wide awake. Ameera’s daughters came running up to the entrance of the cave where their mother couldn’t keep herself on her feet anymore.

Other villagers arrived. While most of them were worried about Ameera, one of them said quietly to himself: “So now, it has happened.” Suddenly the crowd turned quiet. “What has happened? Do you know where Vishal has gone?” The man stepped forward. He was a 40-year old, quite solitary shepherd who spent most of his time on the upper hills, playing the flute. “I’ve observed him throughout the past few weeks. He had changed. Last month, there were some sportsmen from the far west. They were racing up and down the hills on very modern, huge bicycles with broad wheels. I’ve seen him talking to them.” The others wondered: “Why should he run away then? … He was a good boy!”

But in the evening, when Ameera lay down on her mattress she started thinking about the shepherd’s words. Was he right? Had her son left the village in order to follow the western people? Did he like them? She remembered that her son had always wanted to have a bicycle when he was younger, but Ameera couldn’t afford it. And if she could, it
would have been an old, used one, nothing to ride up and down the hills with. Was Vishal still dreaming of such a bicycle? She didn’t know that it meant that much to him. Doesn’t he have everything he needs? Isn’t he lucky to live in the holy land of Vrindouvandari, the homeland of the goddess of nature? Ameera wondered how her son couldn’t appreciate this gift. She almost got upset. Then, she began to worry. Vishal was only 14 years old and he hadn’t left the area of the village at any time before.

The next day, Ameera made a decision. She wanted to go find her son. After putting some food, water and blankets into a backpack, she was ready to leave. Determined, she took off. But already after a ten-minute walk out of the village, she found Vishal, sitting on a huge rock. His clothes were covered with mud and were torn in several places. “He must have been wandering around the whole night”, Ameera thought. She warily sat down next to him. For a few minutes, they both sat there quietly watching the rising sun. Then, Ameera said: “Please, let me know how you feel.” Hesitantly, the young boy began to talk about the strong impression the western tourists had left on him. During the past few weeks he had considered his life at the village more and more meaningless. He recognized that he’d probably never see the huge bridge and the ocean the athletes were talking about. He imagined what it would be like to have a bicycle, taking a person over hundreds of miles. The tourists had told him he was very talented and could be successful in western sports; he could even make a lot of money with sports! How unimaginable! So Vishal had begun to dream of another life. He didn’t want to stay a farmer like all of his ancestors and raise his kids within the 120 acres the village was located in. Ameera couldn’t reply, she just didn’t understand... And even though her son agreed to come back home, they didn’t speak another word.

In the evening, Ameera went on a walk. While watching the sunset, she saw a bird seemingly fly into the sun, which was so far away on the horizon. And suddenly she began to understand and to regret. On his way towards the sun, she thought, this bird passes so many fields, so many herds, other villages, other populations, towns, cities, maybe an ocean. Ameera had never gotten to see any of that. Finally, the mother took a deep breath and her mind became as clear as it had never felt before. Even though she hadn’t had the chance to see these other parts of the
world, her son could. So Ameera decided to support Vishal. They made an appointment at the sports school in the next city, which was a 5-hour walk away. Even though he’d never believed it, Vishal happened to be one of the lucky students to receive a scholarship. A few months later, the whole village celebrated his farewell.

The 95-year-old women sitting on a rock in front of the cave smiling at her grandchildren remembers how proud she had been that day. “Yes, my dears, that was when everything changed, when the first reporters came here to figure out where that prodigy came from.”
4. Breathe

By Ann, Russia

“After walks and swims I feel much younger, and most importantly, I feel that body movements massage and refresh my mind.”

Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky

One, two, three ... Puff. One, two, three ... Puff. The signal. Forward! Ready ... the water today is surprisingly cool, sweet, it is my soulmate. How I missed it! Man up! Neck, hands, fingers, do not forget to stretch. Something is wrong, I hear nothing. Only the heart, my own heart. Why does it hammer? It had to get used to competitions. Maybe it is because I’ve returned? Yes, returning is always difficult, anywhere. One, two, three ... Breathe evenly; don’t be out of breath, not today. You’re stronger than this, go faster, even faster. Don’t think, don’t think ... Well, again. Chase away the memories, it happens to everybody. And you’re strong, come on. Here it is, the moment ... Turn. No fuss, it’s just a turn, this time you do it right. No wonder, you’ve been working for the goal for so long, and here it is ... the Olympics. Not all in vain, not in vain, you must do it, bring yourself and swim. One, two, three ... Puff. Breath, only that is important now. Forget it, no, don’t think that it is important; the responsibility presses you as a heavy load. Now think only about water and its waves; about your body, always firm and elastic, but at the same time smooth and soft; think about breathing and ... Yes, the turn – slip. ... think about breathing, breathe: one, two, three ... Puff. Half way ...

How I have changed. I promised to myself not to think, okay, I have a couple of seconds though. It has been four years ago, and I am not the same. Olympics in London. That unfortunate turn. Crimson water. The injury. Curious eyes. The hospital. An open fracture. The operation. A turning point. Physiotherapy is long and painful. Then a turmoil, recovery, trainings: the first, second, third... and the Olympics. How could I think that I would be here.

But now, the Olympics, and what am I doing here? Hard work, and what for, who needs it? One, two, three ... Puff. Breathe, the last mile ...

Only me and water. This is my battle with myself. Strict discipline. Water helps me all my life: when I lost loved ones, I touched water, and
the pain went away. All athletes think only about winning, I think about breathing. Water helps me to breathe. Even after the injury, I thought only about the pool. Sport saves my head from evil thoughts, it cleans my mind. Water is my salvation. Sport is my element. Swimming is my life. The last meters. Breathe deeper. The acceleration. I need a victory, victory over my fears, over my own body. Breathe ... One, two, three ... Puff, faster, faster! Acceleration! Go faster, sharper, faster ... The hand. The tile. Here we are! Signal ... The end of the race. I did it. I have won this battle. Myself. My body went limp. The main thing now is to breathe ... One, two, three ... Puff, one, two, three ...
5. Venomous

By Uma Hamzić, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Water.

Water was her favorite element, her most known ‘frenemy’, her soothing lullaby. Water was what she had grown up next to, what her zodiac sign represented. Water was the color of her eyes, the ripple of her laugh. Water let her make a living of what she loved.

Water was her. Simple as that. And this particular area was her favorite.

She tests the temperature with a toe, slips it in and hangs for a second before immersing her whole foot. It’s colder than usual, but she accounts that to the fact it’s night, and doesn’t think about it.

She’s twenty three next week. Her body clings to the wetsuit, blue and silver along her sides. Despite it being impractical, she lets her honey colored hair down while swimming, enjoying the cool fingers running along her scalp. Her goggles are perched on the crest of her forehead, a color matching headband. Around her neck is a camera encased in a protective plastic case, next to her feet swimming fins are propped up against the side of the boat.

It’s midnight, and it’s time to get to work.

She pauses as she contemplates that, head slightly veering to the side. What most people thought was simply a hobby was, in fact, a sport: free diving, while not widely known or practiced it was still there. It was as natural as breathing to stop breathing, pun not intended. She had started taking her camera with her a few years back, and made a name for herself in the photography industry. While her parents could grouch and moan about her not having a respectable job, she quite liked where she was now, and had more than enough money to pay the bills and rent and such.

It’s not like her dad did anything else other than read the newspaper.

Either way, her photos were becoming higher in demand. She needed a fresh angle, and at once the answer had seemed obvious.

Night Photos.

Not everyone thought so. Who cares?

With a start, she realizes half her leg is already in the water. She slides it out, kicks on the fins, adjusts the goggles and lazily drops. The sudden change of temperature is a bit of a shock, but as she drifts she becomes
used to it. She lets her breath halfway out and watches the dancing bubbles pop.

She kicks once to reach the surface, drinking in the crisp air before doing a one eighty and diving down. It’s dark, and she lifts the camera to set the flashlight on a higher level. In this area, the bottom is close and absolutely seethes in coral.

She snaps a few quick pictures, a third of her breath already gone. Moving south-west (according to the compass slash watch on her wrist, thanks cousin Lou) she follows a trail of scuttling tracks, the sand already folding over the least recent. Further along she finds a small crab and snaps a photo against the sand; it comes out stunningly well, the closest track half gone, becoming clearer as it grows darker, and the crab’s shell luminescent in the fuzzy background. She observes it as she swims upwards for another breath.

She repeats the routine three more times before something changes. She’s half a kilometer from her boat when she sees it; it being a small dark circle, roughly a meter in diameter. She sinks, curious, and shines the light in. The beam is broken by an unusual type of coral, bleached white with red, black, and yellow stripes around the base. With a click, a video is started and the beginning flash contrast blinds her.

She soon goes back to normal when the stripes stir.

To be honest, she already had a suspicion of the ‘coral.’ Most likely it was some sort of aquatic snake wrapped around bleached coral, but she had no actual proof until it moved. There were other, smaller shapes, entangled with the first.

A coral snake.
A mother coral snake with her kids.
A very annoyed mother coral snake with her kids.
Oh no!

The snakes slide towards her, and she panics, kicking off in an attempt to flee before they decide she’s target practice. She knows that the coral snake is fatally venomous and that it is very shy and prefers to flee than to fight. She knows that they tend to squeeze their victims instead of lashing out, a constrictor rather than a viper. She knows that the best thing to do is to remain calm and back away slowly.

Apparently, the snake doesn’t know that.
With a gasp that has her losing her remaining oxygen, she looks down to find the mother wrapped around her legs, fangs at the ready and as she watches they pierce the flesh on the back.

She screams.

She screams because it hurts and the others are following her example, biting and squeezing and she can’t get them off and the water is pouring down her lungs and she can’t breathe and she screams and screams until they let go.

She collapses on the boat in three minutes, numbness leaking through her body. She knows she should call for help. She knows she should pull herself all the way up, warm up, drive back home at the least.

But she can’t.

So she stays there, alone, shivering, as phantoms squeeze her body and she slips, falling through the water she loves.

Her camera is still recording.
6. Tony Becomes a Sportsman

By Alyona Gulyayeva, Kazakhstan

Once little giraffe Tony went out for a walk. The sun was shining and Tony felt very happy.

Then he saw leopards running in the savanna. “I want to run too!”, decided Tony. So he reached the leopards and started running with them. But soon he felt very tired because the leopards were running so fast and he couldn’t keep pace with them. Tony sat sadly at the grass. “I am not so good at running as the leopards are”, he thought.

But then he saw frogs. They were jumping all together and looked so happy doing it! So Tony thought, “Maybe I can jump as the frogs do!” And he joined them. But soon he felt very tired again. The frogs were jumping so high that Tony couldn’t follow them. He sat again at the grass. “Sport is not for me. I can’t jump as the frogs do”, he thought.

But then he saw crocodiles swimming in the lake. “Let’s try swimming”, Tony decided. And he began doing all his best to swim with the crocodiles. But finally his hands started to become heavier and heavier. But the crocodiles were still enjoying their swimming and looked not tired at all. “Eh, swimming is not for me too”, thought Tony sadly.

But then he saw kangaroos playing tennis. “Wow, it looks so funny! I want to be a tennis player”, decided Tony. And he began playing with the kangaroos. But finally he started to feel himself as a squeezed orange. But the kangaroos looked like they never felt tired. Tony laid down at the grass and started to look at the sky feeling very depressed.

But then he saw monkeys climbing the rock. “Hmm, maybe I should try climbing”, decided Tony. And he began climbing with the monkeys. But his hooves were not so good for climbing as the monkeys’ fingers. And finally Tony fell down at the grass. “I am good for nothing”, he sighed.

But then he saw ostriches riding bikes. “Hey, I didn’t try biking yet”, exclaimed Tony. He felt very happy again because he still had a chance to become good in something. So he started to bike with the ostriches. But their legs were so strong and they were biking so fast that soon they were hidden in the dusty cloud far from Tony.

Tony’s best friend, Freddy parrot, found him sitting sadly at the lake shore. “Hey, Tony, let’s have fun”. “I can’t do anything”, Tony sighed. “I am good for nothing”. And he told his friend how he had tried running,
jumping, swimming, playing tennis, climbing and biking, but was not the best one in anything. “I have an idea!”, said a clever Freddy. “Keep calm and enjoy, I’ll arrange everything”.

So Freddy flew around all the savanna and announced to everyone: “The first time ever! Tomorrow in the morning we will have an unbelievable multi-sports competition!”

The next morning when all the savanna gathered at the field, Freddy explained the rules. “Now you will have a multi-sports competition. You should start with running then continue with jumping, swimming, playing tennis, climbing and biking! And all this is coming without any stops”.

The competition began. The leopards were the fastest in running but they couldn’t climb at all. The frogs were the best at jumping but they couldn’t ride a bike. The crocodiles were the best swimmers but playing tennis was definitely not for them. The kangaroos and ostriches were afraid of swimming, and the monkeys were running even worse than Tony did. So in the end Tony was the only one who could do everything and he became the first ever multi-sports champion of the savanna.

The friends were sitting happily under the tree. Tony was absolutely satisfied. “Now I know. It is not important to be the best! It’s much more important to be able to do different kind of sports together!”, he thought.

Since that time Tony was running, jumping, swimming, playing tennis, climbing and biking. And even if he wasn’t the best one he enjoyed it a lot! And what else is sport for?!
David was ten years old and he loved football. It was his favourite sport. He didn’t miss any match on TV and his bedroom walls were covered with football players posters. However, he was not good at football. He didn’t run fast because he was very short. As well as this, he was clumsy and he always tripped over the other players or slipped over on the pitch. Moreover, he wore glasses. Of course, when he played football he didn’t wear them so he couldn’t distinguish the ball or calculate the distance between him and the other players.

When his friends played football and they had to choose the players, he was the last one to be chosen. This didn’t happen to Kevin. Everybody wanted to play with him because he was the best. Kevin wanted to be a professional football player and he trained hard. David always congratulated him on scoring goals but Kevin didn’t pay much attention to him. He gazed at David and tried to remember the boy’s name. Was this tiny boy Daniel or David? Or Dennis or Donald?

One day, the PE teacher said that all the boys in the class were going to take part in a school tournament. Kevin was appointed captain and David, substitute. Although David wanted to play a more active role in the team, he wasn’t sad because his parents had bought him a new pair of football boots.

The tournament started with a victory and then, it was followed by another, and another. And to their surprise, they had to play the final match. It wasn’t an easy match. The rival team was so good that it scored the first goal. David didn’t worry because he was sure that they were going to reach a draw and eventually, a victory. Kevin, the captain, was nervous and started to make mistakes. However, he succeeded in scoring a goal and the first half ended with a draw.

In the interval, their teacher gave them some instructions and he decided to change some players. David sat next to him in order to watch the second half, which turned out to be as troublesome as the first half. Kevin tried to score a second goal but he couldn’t. The PE teacher was very worried. He thought that he had to do something immediately. He looked at David and decided to make the last change. David couldn’t
believe his luck. He was going to play his first official match! He took off his glasses and gave them to the teacher.

In the last minute, Kevin received the ball. He ran fast and when he was near the goal he raised his eyes. He had two options: either to kick the ball or to pass it to a player who was nearer to the goal. The player was this boy called... What was this boy called? Daniel, Dennis or David? Well, the boy’s name wasn’t important now. Kevin passed the ball to the boy. David distinguished something round which was thrown towards him. He realized it was the ball. He jumped and headed it into the goal. People started to shout and David didn’t understand what had happened. Then, Kevin hugged him and told him, “David, we won, we are the champions!”
8. The Fear of Losing

By Simone Löhlein, Germany

It was a warm summer day. Like every morning Sue got up at 6:30 am. She extended her arms to the ceiling and stretched her neck. The sun shone through her window. It seemed to be a wonderful day. Sue went in the kitchen with a springy step and devoured her breakfast. After she had brushed her teeth, she still had some time left. She checked her bag one last time before she left the house. She walked along the long tranquil street and rejoiced in the singing of the birds. At the bus station she met her best friend Jessica. They had been best friends for about five years now and they never exhaust topics of conversations.

That morning Jessica was particularly excited. When she recognized Sue coming down the street, she started walking in her direction. After a short hug to welcome Sue, Jessica began to tell her the news.

“You know my brother and the voluntary organization he’s working for, don’t you? Next weekend they’re hosting a big football match for a good cause. Seven teams have already accepted the invitation. And the volunteers of the organization are going to play, too.”

“Sounds great.”

“Yes! But the best is yet to come. They still need two players to complete the team. And I told him that you and me ...”

“Oh no. Are you serious?”

Sue was surprised and not only in a positive way. When they played football in school, they always had a lot of fun, but they had never been in a real competition.

But Jessica was exuberant.

“This will be so funny. We’ll get a team jersey – well, it will be a shirt in the same colour.”

Jessica smiled. Sue was still a bit skeptical. Playing in a team always means that everyone is dependent on your performance. What if they lose the game because of her mistakes? What if everybody was disappointed? Sue wasn’t unathletic. She had played badminton for eight years, she liked to go swimming and bicycling but she had always avoided team sports for fear of losing. She knew that the others would never say a word even if she was responsible for the failure. Especially this was one of the...
things she feared most. Sue was able to stand the truth but she couldn’t bear the situation that everybody was disappointed just because of her.

Jessica noticed the concern in the face of her best friend.

“Hey Sue, what’s biting you?”

“It’s just, what if we lose due to my mistakes?”

“Oh don’t worry about it. We are all amateurs doing this just for fun!”

She looked in Sues eyes and strengthened her words with a slight nod and an amiable smile.

While the class were racking their brains over the Math tasks, Sue looked out of the window and tried to remember her last competition. It was in the primary school. They had to run a relay. 150 feet in front of the finish line, she stumbled. Two other children got ahead of her and her team was relegated to third place. Nobody ever said a word but the shame burned like fire inside her. Every time she looked back on this day, she felt the glances of her deeply disappointed classmates. Sue let her mind wander until Jessica nudged her.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, all right. Let’s solve this annoying exercise!”

After school they talked about the match again. Sue banished her memories and tried to share Jessica’s enthusiasm.

Back at home, Sue lay in her bed and thought about her options. She could not refuse the invitation, Jessica was so delighted and looking forward to it. Sue decided to let the day come; hoping somebody else would be there who would like to play instead of her.

On Saturday she woke up early. The sun had not even risen. Her family was still sleeping and the house was strangely silent. She put on her shorts and the turquoise t-shirt Jessica gave her the day before. Sue liked the colour and eyed her reflection in the mirror for a while.

At half past eleven Jessica rang the doorbell. She was wearing her sports clothes and had a big honest smile on her face. Sue took her sports bag, shouted goodbye to her family and closed the door behind her.

When the two girls arrived at the sports field, the most of the other teams were already there. Sue discovered her team mates and the girls went over to introduce themselves. Sue’s first impression was that they were funny. All were very kind and a bit crazy.

The rules were very easy: every team consisted of at least seven people. One match lasted 20 minutes and if the ball passed the goal line, the team got a goal.
Sue’s plan to avoid playing did not work out because they had a team of exactly seven people. At the beginning she was really scared about what the other people might think. But soon she recognized that nobody judges any activity of the others. Everybody gave as much as they could. For the first time in her life, Sue felt like part of a team and simultaneously part of the whole. She forgot her fears and ran twice as fast as usual. If she lost the ball, she fought to get it back and if not, it did not matter. Sue and Jessica laughed after every goal no matter for which team.

In the end they won half of the matches and got the fourth place. Even if they lost the semi-final, Sue was exuberantly happy because she lost something more significant – her fear of losing.
Fifth grade. Chess national finals. I’m up against Rachel. As expected.

I hate it when people say stuff like “Oh, chess isn’t a sport”, or “You can’t get tired from playing chess, you can only get bored”. I mean, have you ever actually played chess? Like, really got into it? If you haven’t, no wonder you don’t understand how much of a sport chess is.

The judge announces the beginning of the game. I’m approaching the table, skillfully avoiding Rachel’s looks. We shake hands. She’s full of confidence, while I’m barely managing to calm my hands. I know that I’m better than her, but why do I always lose?

Not only is chess a sport, but it’s one of the few out there in which everyone can find their place, in which it doesn’t matter if you were born tall or short, fast or slow, big or small. It doesn’t matter if you’re in a wheelchair, or if your knees are getting old, or if you can’t see very well. In chess, the only thing that matters is your actual skill, the passion, how much time you’ve put into it. And if that didn’t convince you that chess is a sport, let me put it this way. Do you know that feeling you get when you realise the football player standing in front of you is two times bigger than you? Or when all of the players of the opposing basketball team are 7 feet tall, and you’re usually ‘the-tallest-guy-in-the-room’ 6.5 have never seemed so small before? Well, that’s how I’m feeling right now.

She pulls her hand out of the handshake, like she’s just trying to get this over with. We sit, and the clock starts ticking. She moves one of her pawns and arrogantly hits the clock, while I’m still shaking like a twig. I’m not even trying to focus on the board, I’m just trying to calm myself, hoping she hasn’t yet noticed how scared I am. And did it suddenly get a 100 degrees colder in here? I somehow manage to get myself together and do the next move.

This is ridiculous. I’m fighting for the title of the national champion, and all I can think about is how my hands are getting sweaty? And it’s not just any kind of sweat. It’s cold sweat. The water of cowards. The smell of fear. And it is so frustrating. Why do I always do this to myself? I know I am better. Why do I keep losing? It’s not the fear anymore, it is anger. I’m angry because she always manages to suffocate me with her confidence. Well, I’ve had enough. I look at Rachel, and I see in her eyes something
that was never there before. Or at least I haven’t noticed it until now. Fear. She is scared. It has probably been there the whole time. I felt like a fish suddenly realising it was surrounded by water the whole time. It just failed to see it. Well Rachel, you are a better actress. I give you that. But me, I am the better chess player. And I am going to win this.

Suddenly, it’s all like taking candy from a baby. She is doing all the work. It’s like she is surrendering. Was I doing this all these years? Suddenly, I see it. I see the winning combination. I look at Rachel, then at the board, then at Rachel again. Oh, she saw it, too. But there is nothing she can do about it.

I’ve got 6 seconds left on the clock, but that does not worry me at all. Because this, this is where it all ends. I look at Rachel with a satisfied smile on my face. Her hands are probably ice cold, because I would know. Been there, done that. But not this time. I take the queen, and like that last-second slam-dunk in basketball, like that standing-ovations-receiving home run, or that finishing double backflip of a snowboarder, I slam that queen on the board, like it’s the last thing I’m ever going to hold. Checkmate.

I stop the clock and look up. The judge is looking at me. Rachel is looking at me. Everyone is looking (except from my coach, he’s just there in the background bouncing up and down). Everyone is amazed. I am amazed. I won. I am the national champion. You see that gigantic trophy shining across the room? Mine. And you know what’s the best of all? I beat Rachel.
I've lost my leg. It was an accident. A simple, mundane accident. I didn’t even see that car coming... It’s still hard to believe. I sometimes even feel the twitch of the leg that is no longer there. Or I imagine it. Either way it’s not in the least bit comforting.

I look around my hospital room for the umpteenth time. It’s rather big, with three rectangular windows with plastic blinds attached to the top. The floor is covered with linoleum, which unpleasantly shimmers in the electric blue lights. Everything is too clean and sterile and smells of newly unwrapped bandages and medications. I have nightstands on both sides of the bed. One of them has flowers in a vase on it, some books and a bowl of fruit (Mom probably visited while I was still asleep). The other nightstand is filled with ‘Get well soon’ cards and lots of magazines. My attention turns to the first nightstand, where Mother left my unfinished books. I reach for the one at the top. I open it up, and something falls into my lap. Ah, yes, my bookmark. It is the picture of my first swimming tournament. I detachedly study the faded piece of paper.

It has me and my two best friends on it. And our coach, of course. Gosh, we’re so tiny there, no more than 5 or 6 years of age. But I remember that day well. That was the day I won my first medal. It was just a thin piece of plastic on a string and a number 1 on it. But to the little me on the picture it was the best medal in the whole world. That was the day I decided that this certainly shall not be my last victory. I knew from that day on that I was destined to be a great swimmer! I would win the golden medal in the Olympics, swim through the Panama channel, the possibilities were endless. And so, from that day on it was hard work, despite the fact that I was a little kid. Classes after school, classes on holidays, classes in the early mornings of the weekends. The coach was unforgiving, demanded discipline. But, in the end, holding a medal in your hands was making all those hours and hours spent in the swimming pool worth the effort.

I look outside the window. Seems like it’s all worthless now. I will never be able to swim again. I will never feel the adrenaline of the race
again. The sun is brightly shining outside, the birds are singing, I can even hear children laughing outside. Everything is so picture-perfect that it makes me almost cringe with aggravation. Why is life so unfair? Under normal circumstances I’d go to the pool to clear my head. When I’m angry, bored, confused, tense and heck, anything but dead, I usually go to the pool. Not anymore, apparently.

I just want to feel the water around me again. The gentle press of the goggles against my eyes, the feel of the waves.

Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, inhale. Again. Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, inhale. Oh. I’ve fallen asleep again. Oh, the irony, I even dream about swimming. I rub my eyes. Ah. Obviously, I’ve been crying in my sleep. Weird. I now can’t move without a crutch, I can’t run, I can’t pretty much do anything.

My thoughts are disturbed by the sudden knock at the door.

“Come in”, I call out. My voice sounds groggy and faint. I haven’t uttered a word in the past few days.

The person that comes in is one of the people I desperately do and do not want to see at the same time. It’s my coach.

“Hey there ... ”, he says. He seems to be a bit awkward at first, maybe because one of his best students is now lying in a hospital bed with a stub for a leg.

I remain silent. So does he. He just looks around the room, his gaze finally settling down on a chair at the far corner, so he snatches it and sets it in front of my bed. He sits down, but still says nothing. Neither do I.

After a long moment of silence, he asks: “So ... How’re you feeling?”

I take a sharp inhale of air. He asks as if I just hadn’t had the most crippling (in both senses) experience in my life.

“Ravishing.” – I dryly answer.

“Okay, then”, he drawls, raising an eyebrow. “So when do you check out?”, he says while munching on an apple he grabbed from the nightstand. Before I can even try to answer that, he swallows and says: “I do hope you understand that I’ll be waiting for you at the classes as soon as you get better, right?”

What?

“Coach ... I just ... ” I say, dumbfounded.

“So I’ve noticed”, he answers: “It’s not the end of your life. Nor the end of your career.”

“I... don’t follow.” Has he gone crazy?
He rolls his eyes in a manner that says “do I have to think for you too?”
“Get a prosthetic. We have those now, you know. Do you know how many successful swimmers are losing a limb these days?”
I’m silent. I really don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine my life like that ...
“Coach, I ... can’t”, I stutter.
Here goes the rolling of the eyes again.
“Listen. I get it. Tough luck. But, all in all, it depends only on you, whether you’ll spend your life like you’ve always wanted, or regretting that you didn’t try. Your choice.” – He says, as he turns on his heel and opens the door. Right before he steps out he says over his shoulder: “The classes start next Thursday, don’t be late”, and leaves.
I don’t know how much time passes. In the end, I fall back on the pillows and look out the window into the evening sun. I have a lot to think about.
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