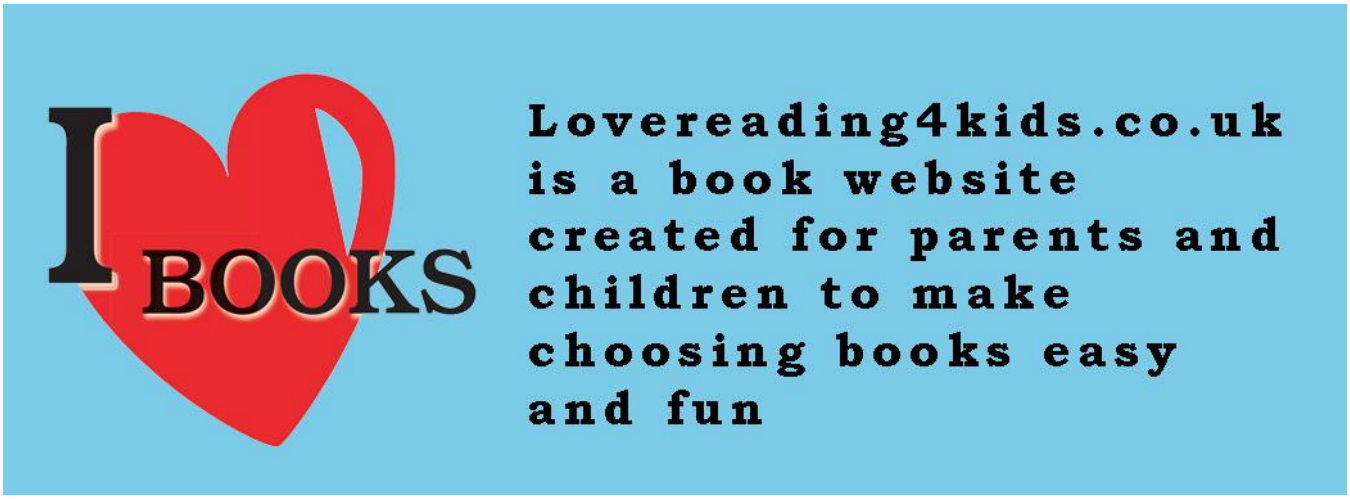


Opening extract from

Phantom Limbs

Written by

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When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancelled woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanished sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoanèd moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 30"

1

WHEN I FINALLY HEARD FROM MEG, IT WAS May, historically her month of choice for upending my universe. It was the ungodly hour of swim o'clock – I was checking my messages in the dark with one eye half open, synapses barely firing, when the sight of Meg's name in my inbox jolted me awake. But with Dara due at any moment to lasso me for another morning of abuse in the pool, there was no time to process Meg's brief message, let alone respond. I grabbed a pack of blueberry Pop-Tarts from the kitchen cabinet and headed out.

The morning was a hazy purple, chilly enough to make my breath mist. I guided the screen door closed so it wouldn't bang and wake my parents – a pointless gesture, since Dara's style of arrival in her ancient, souped-up Corolla could jar the fillings right out of your teeth. I tossed my backpack

and my swim bag under the magnolia and sat down to wait for her. I reread Meg's message, then turned my eyes to the house next door that I still thought of as hers.

It was the first time I'd heard from her since we said goodbye in her bedroom, just us and the dust bunnies that had been hiding under the furniture, her parents waiting outside with the moving truck. I clung to her in that empty, echoing room as if the last thing that mattered to me in all the world was being taken away. Which, after the cluster-fuck of the preceding year, it basically was. And there wasn't enough thirteen-year-old swagger in the known universe to keep me from bawling.

Minutes later they pulled away, Meg gazing out the window at me through teary eyes. She might as well have driven right off the face of the earth, because I never heard from her again. Until now, that is. A mere three years and four months later, not that I was keeping track.

Moving on was never my strong suit.

I opened my Pop-Tarts and gazed at the horizon's pink glow, breathing in the smell of rain and earth. On the branches above me, I could just make out the fat magnolia buds. Any day now they would explode into a fucking carnival of white and pink flowers – a spectacle that had kicked me in the nuts for the last three years. But now? Now I didn't know how to feel about it.

Four springs before, the most amazing thing happened

under this tree. My best friend and I were moving out of childhood and into uncharted territory. Our bodies were catching up with us – Meg's more overtly than mine, but what I lacked in physical maturity I made up for with a Herculean imagination. I was thinking less and less about whatever used to occupy my preadolescent mind and more and more about stuff that would have made Meg blush if she knew. Like how she'd look in a bikini that coming summer. And the way she smelled, all warm sun and green apples and something heady, like a secret I wanted in on. And – mostly – what it would feel like to kiss her. I could not tame this preoccupation no matter how hard I tried. It was like shoveling smoke.

On a warm night in May, right under this magnolia, it happened. The memory of that kiss still made my stomach flip over. What would it be like to see her now? What was she like? It figured that just when I started to face the fact that maybe I'd never see her again, she was coming back to town.

The squeal of tires in the distance signaled Dara's imminent arrival. I got up, tossing the remains of my Pop-Tarts into the bushes and brushing the crumbs off my jacket. She screeched around the street corner, then barreled into my driveway with an eleventh-hour turn, nearly running me over. I leaped out of the way as she skidded to a stop.

"Jesus!" I yelled. "You almost killed me." I glanced up at

the house. If my mom had seen that, my days of riding with Dara would be over.

Dara poked her head out the window. "You shouldn't stand in the driveway," she said.

"I was on the grass." I pointed to the tire tracks in the yard, just visible in the first light of day.

She gestured me toward the car with the stump that remained of her left arm. "Come on, get in. I need doughnuts."

I tugged on the rusted door and climbed in, buckling my seat belt as tight as it would go – the wisdom of experience. "How come *you* get to have doughnuts?" She never let *me* eat crap before practice. Knowingly, anyway. I considered my Pop-Tart indiscretions to be my own personal business.

I reached over and turned down the stereo, which was blasting the Rolling Stones. In Dara's car, I was never in the right decade. Jagger was crooning "Miss You," which wasn't going to help me stop thinking about Meg. Haunted? Dreaming? Waiting? I could have written the lyrics myself.

"*I* get to have doughnuts," Dara explained in a prickly tone, "because it doesn't matter what *I* eat."

Arguing was as pointless as it was tempting. In Dara's view, I was a career swimmer whereas she was a has-been – an aspiring Olympic hopeful whose career was tragically cut short. So while my body was to be regarded as a temple, hers was more like a motel for transients.

She jammed the gearshift into reverse and glanced at me

as she turned to back out of the driveway. "Dude. You look like shit," she said. "Did you just get up?"

Did I just get up? What the hell time did *she* get up? I'd stumbled out of bed about four minutes before she showed up. Oh, for just one freaking morning off … But Dara would have dragged me to the pool by the nipple if she had to. Like an Olympic swimmer, Otis Mueller didn't take days off. Unlike an Olympic swimmer, Otis Mueller would never make it to the Olympics. But try telling Dara Svetcova that.

She blinked at me, all round blue eyes and milky-pale skin, as she backed into the street.

"It's barely morning, Dara. Of course I just got up."

She peered over at my lap, an impish smile on her face. "Do you still have morning log?"

I cringed. "God, Dara, it's morning *wood*. And no," I said, shoving her head back to her side of the car. "Eyes on the road, pervert."

She shifted into first and set us in motion with a burnout loud enough to wake the dead – as if I didn't have a hard enough time convincing my parents that, contrary to appearances, Dara was a safe driver. She enjoyed few things more than making noise with her car. She navigated our little town like it was the Indy 500, revving the engine and tearing around corners and dumping the clutch. There was no mistaking the one-armed tyrant and her unlikely choice of transmission: the stick shift.

"So how long does it last?" she asked, blowing through the stop sign at the corner. "Do you have to jack off every morning to get it to go back down?"

I ignored her. Was nothing sacred? Apparently not, and I only had myself to blame. Dara had no brothers, she'd never had a boyfriend, and she had no patience for reading. I was the source of her knowledge about "morning wood" – and pretty much everything else about the male body.

In the pursuit of the kind of education you don't get in school, Dara and I played a game that went like this: she'd ask me something, and then I got to ask her something back, or the other way around. It was understood that the purpose of this game was to procure information of a sexual nature, but given our collective lack of experience having sex with other people, all that was left to discuss was our experience having sex with ourselves. As a result, we'd learned a lot about the workings of the opposite gender's body – although in truth, I wasn't convinced it was the male physique that interested her most. Her eyes often seemed to gravitate toward the same places on other girls that I was always trying my damnedest not to look at.

Dara turned into the Dunkin' Donuts lot and parked diagonally across the perpendicular lines. "Come in with me," she said, climbing out of the car and slamming the door. She was wearing her "Kiss My Splash" T-shirt with no jacket, even though it couldn't have been fifty degrees out.

I followed her inside, lured by the sweet, yeasty aromas. The cases overflowed with fresh, tender doughnuts; my eyes lingered longingly over the chocolate ones with their crackled glaze before I spotted the Bavarian Kreme – Meg's favorite. She would put away two of them with a large caramel iced coffee and then insist that her eyeballs were vibrating in the sockets. She'd press my fingertips to her closed eyes and say, "See? Can you feel it?" I smiled, remembering. Dork. Of course I couldn't feel it. But when I was that close to her, vibrating eyeballs – real or imagined – were the last things on my mind.

Dara ordered two jelly doughnuts and a multigrain bagel. Not hard to guess which was for me.

The counter guy tried not to stare, but it's a fact that stumps where limbs are supposed to be are riveting – a reality that didn't escape Dara.

She waved her stump at him. "You wanna touch it?"

I would have laughed at his horrified expression if I didn't feel so bad for him. He was a small guy, Pakistani, maybe, and he barely looked old enough to have a job. He backed up so fast, it was a miracle he didn't end up in the doughnuts with his ass all coated in custard.

When he handed Dara her change, he said timidly, "What happened to your arm?"

Oh boy.

She met his eyes for a long moment, then said, "It just

fell off. I woke up to this thud in the middle of the night. It had fallen right onto the floor." She nodded. "Doctor said it was probably from eating too much sugar. Too many doughnuts." She shoved the change – more than five bucks – into the tip jar. His bewildered expression as he registered her response made me want to punch her in the head.

You'd never guess by looking at her how merciless she was – she had a face as sweet as a rose, until she opened her mouth and let the knives fly out.

I followed her out to the car. "You know, you could cut people a little slack."

"What the hell does he need slack for?" She stuck the doughnut bag under her stump and opened her door. "He has two arms and his whole idiot life ahead of him. The world's his fucking oyster."

"People don't see stumps every day, Dara."

Dara's arm ended just above the elbow. It wasn't horrendous, as stumps go; it was round and fairly smooth save for some scars. And it was useful, too: she could carry things with it, hold beer bottles for opening, help with steering when she needed to shift while turning – things she wouldn't be able to do if the amputation had been higher. The problem was one of visibility. I, like most people, carried my damage on the inside. But Dara wore hers on her sleeve. Literally.

She took her doughnuts out of the bag and bit into one.

"You know," I said, staring as she licked jelly from the corner of her mouth, "it's not like one doughnut would kill me."

"Baby," she said, turning the ignition and revving the engine, "you get your hundred breast cut, and I'll buy you all the doughnuts you want. Shift."

I reached over and did the shifting, which was my job whenever Dara multitasked with her one good arm. "I have until next February to qualify for state," I pointed out, eyeballing her other doughnut nestled on the white bag near the gearshift. Its sugary surface sparkled and winked – I swear it was flirting with me. My bagel tasted like a damp dog biscuit.

"State? State's the least of my worries." She glanced over at me. "Oh, Christ," she said, rolling her eyes. "Here." She held out the doughnut, using her stump to steady the wheel.

I snapped up the doughnut before she changed her mind. "Why?"

"Because you're killing me with those fucking puppy eyes."

"No," I said, chomping into the doughnut, "I meant, why is state the least of your worries?"

"You'll have no trouble qualifying for state if you get to where you need to be by the end of the summer."

"Which is?" I was confused; I had already qualified for the summer championship meet.

"Well, you'll have to drop about four seconds this summer

to stay on track to qualify for Junior Nationals by next summer. After J-Nats, all we need is to drop three more seconds to qualify you for Olympic Trials."

I managed to not laugh out loud. Dara was asking me to drop ten seconds in a race that took just over a minute. I just wanted to cut the two seconds that would get me to the high school state meet. And maybe make finals my senior year. But Trials? Ever? Pure delusion.

Somehow it seemed to escape Dara that this whole Olympics thing was ridiculous – I'd never be that good. She was the real talent. I'd just needed something to do after Meg left, something to get me out of the house, which had become an unbearable place, and to get me out of my head, which was even worse. Swimming kept me from drowning. I liked it. Sometimes I even loved it. And yes, I wanted to kick ass in high school swimming – maybe even college swimming if I was good enough. But that's about as far as my swimming aspirations went. Unfortunately, I'd let myself be Dara's pet project for three years, and she was looking for the payoff, which to her meant only one thing: the Olympics. She didn't care if it was in one year or five or nine; it was the pot of gold at the end of her rainbow, her raison d'fucking être. And I was the leprechaun who was supposed to take her there.

So until I rustled up the cojones to kill Dara's dream and face the consequences, I'd be getting up before the freakin' roosters.

"Hand me my bag," Dara said, gesturing toward the backseat. When I gave it to her, she leaned forward and stuck her stump into the wheel to steer and dug into the purse with her right hand. As the car veered perilously out of the lane lines, she pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was a schedule, mapped out day by day to the smallest detail. "We'll do dryland three times a week and work on technique between morning and evening practice. If we don't cut corners and don't skip Sundays, we can do it – I know we can."

The girl was certifiable. The Senior Championship meet was two months away!

I stared at the paper. My whole summer, sunrise to sunset, right before my eyes.

It's not like Dara had never done this before – pushed me to my limits, taken over my every waking hour. And I'd always let her. Even during summer, when everyone else sort of takes it easy. But Meg's message had changed everything. If she was coming back for three weeks, there was no way I'd be spending all my time with Dara. Not if I had anything to say about it.

"You're not gonna be here to train me next year," I pointed out. "What happens then?" It was going to take a hell of a lot more than just a summer's worth of hard work to get me to Junior Nationals – and an absolute miracle for me to qualify for Olympic Trials. And Grinnell would

be waiting for Dara in August, which actually kind of surprised me because I didn't think she had the grades. But I was relieved they wanted her. Sometimes to me Dara going to college sounded like the beginning of a long, relaxing vacation.

"Don't worry about that."

"Why not?" It seemed like a fair question. Why push myself to chase the impossible if she wasn't going to be around to see this through?

"Because, don't worry about it!"

Dara logic.

As she blathered on about my summer in her POW camp, my thoughts lingered on Meg. *What happened to her?* We'd been practically inseparable for nearly three years. Did she really just forget me? If I was supposed to give up on her at some point, I never got the memo. I guess a guy with half a brain would consider the long silence "the memo." If not that, then the football player might have driven the point home.

Since last year, when she finally appeared on Facebook, Meg had been posting pictures of herself with some padded Neanderthal. That they weren't just friends was agonizingly clear. I, on the other hand, had been a lone wolf this whole time, unless you count the companionship of an eighteen-year-old dictator of frankly indeterminate sexual orientation.

"… and between practices we can grab lunch at that

pizza buffet a few blocks from the pool – they have a salad bar…"

We were almost at the high school. The sun rose over the horizon, streaking orange and yellow through the remaining purple. It was a new day, in all sorts of ways. And as much as I was loath to bring up Meg to Dara, I knew that Dara, with all her grand plans for me this summer, would need to know sometime.

"So guess what?" I said, shifting into second as Dara slowed to turn into the parking lot. "Meg's coming back to Willow Grove." It felt weird to say it, like I was making it up. "For three weeks. Apparently."

"You know what that means?" Dara asked, tires squealing as she rounded the edge of the lot and sped into a parking space, stopping so suddenly that the seat belt nearly sliced me in half. She thrust the gear into first and yanked up the parking brake.

"It means," she continued, grabbing her stuff from the backseat, "you need to knock off more than two seconds in the next three months. Do you realize how much work that's going to take? Your turns still suck, and your starts aren't great, either. Sometimes your breakout is sort of fucked up."

She wasn't even listening to me.

She got out of the car, slammed the door, and strode toward the school, her muscular little ass doing its famous *swish-swish*. I grabbed my bags and ran after her.

"Did you hear what I said?" I asked. "Meg's coming back. So I might be kind of busy while she's here." I hoped that wasn't just wishful thinking.

"Meg who?" She yanked open the door to the athletic entrance.

Man, she really knew how to piss me off. Dara knew perfectly well Meg who. She'd heard plenty about Meg, although it hadn't taken long before she lost patience and told me that love was for chumps and to get over it already.

"*Meg* Meg," I answered.

"You mean the girl who landed you in therapy?" she said without looking back. "The girl you write all the froofy poetry for?"

I followed her down the hallway toward the pool, gritting my teeth. Calling my poetry "froofy" was one of Dara's cheap go-to's for emasculating me. And I was in therapy before Meg even left.

"Yes," I said, catching up with her. "And it's kind of a big deal. If you were my friend, you'd be happy for me."

She whirled around and faced me. "You know what? Fuck you. I've been here for you every fucking day since that girl left you in the dust. So don't give me that *if you were my friend* shit – don't talk to me about who your friends are. *I'm* your fucking friend. Which is more than you can say about her."

She started walking again. When she reached the locker

room, she turned back to me. "God, Mueller." She shook her head at me like I was pathetic, tragic. "She never even looked back."