

Down the lift to ground, through corridor after corridor, card swipes to open doors, along a glass-walled passage that had a view to the hospital courtyard garden, *very nice*, another card swipe, a short corridor, a locked door, a secret knock, *ta-ta-ta, ta, ta, ta-ta-ta*, a special password, *grey squirrel*, and we were in.

I had my board shorts on ready to go. 'You wait here, I'm gonna put my bathers on,' said the Rock Goddess, without thinking it through – I'm in a wheelchair, I can't walk, I'm not going anywhere.

It was as hot as an oven in there; you could have defrosted a steak in under an hour, windows were steamed, the water was toasty and we were about to have our first hydrotherapy session in the hospital's, close to boiling point, heated pool.

The Rock Goddess returned with her cossie on and an aura of determination, 'okay let's get started,' then wheeled me over to the hydraulic crane-like lifting chair that stood beside the pool.

Now, I was pretty excited about doing therapy in the hydro pool. 'It's very good for you,' the nurses would say, 'it's like doing ten physio sessions in one.' But looking at the lifting chair that was going to transfer me from the firm, hard, reliable floor into the water didn't exactly inflate my dinghy, *is this thing even safe!* No armrests to support myself with, no harness and no handrail to hold onto, just a flat metre-wide bench to sit upright on and a backrest to lean against. The Rock Goddess must have had more faith in me than I had in myself. 'It's okay, you can do this, it'll be fine,' she grinned.

I had endured four weeks of daily one-on-one physiotherapy sessions with the Goddess, retraining my limp-biscuit body to sit up, sculpting my torso back into shape, awakening it from its dormant slumber. 'Tighten those rib muscles, straighten your spine,' she'd chant, seated behind, tandem, her basketball-gripped hands wrapped around my rib cage, softly swaying me from side to side, buttock to buttock, moulding me like Play-Doh, my legs dangling over the bed's edge. 'Gentle, slow, easy, pause, hold and back again.' It felt like we were doing nothing, just slow dancing from a seated position to an imaginary love song. This went on for weeks, day after day, hour after hour, minute by minute and then, whata-ya-know, hooray, hooray, slowly, like watching grass grow, I achieved sitting up, all by myself, on my own, Pat-Malone, and now that I could proudly sit up all I wanted to do was sit up, sit up, sit up. But, as I watched her dismantle my wheelchair arms in preparation to shuttle me across onto the lifting chair,

I doubted whether I had the gonads – all I wanted to do was leg it, leg it, leg it, out of there ... if I were able.

She stepped in close, bent into me and braced her arms around my upper torso, slow dance position, but this time face to face, collarbone to collarbone, my chin on her shoulder as I waited for her familiar signal, ‘ready?’ We had it down to a fine art, practised the shuttle manoeuvre dozens of times, wheelchair to bed, bed to wheelchair, wheelchair to table chair, table chair to wheelchair, so on, so on. A neat little flat foot-long board was used to slide me on my butt across to wherever they wanted to position me, tucked beneath my thigh and bridged to the destination. ‘Okay, one, two, three,’ all I had to do was keep still and play scarecrow.

I don’t recall if the board was used for the shuttle manoeuvre across to the lifting chair. I couldn’t think about much else other than to just hold on, there was a lot happening all at the same time and my NQR brain couldn’t process it fast enough. Ceiling fans spun, attempting to circulate the concrete slab air, thick and heavy, other patients in the pool with their physios, orders barked, *raise your arm, lift your leg*, making the most out of the ‘ten physio sessions in one,’ philosophy. The activity ricocheted against the perspiring walls into a sloppy mess of noise. Sensory overload.

I sat dead still on the chair, bracing myself against the backrest while holding on for dear life to the edge of the seat. I swear my grip was so tight I reckon I left a handprint.

An assistant operated the control buttons to the chair, *left, right, up, down*, while the Rock Goddess waited for me in the water, watching like a hawk, ready to pounce if I should have a Humpty Dumpty fall, put me back together again.

The hydraulics began to push the chair out and over the water, its crane arms extended like a sleepy morning stretch pivoting me above the surface ready to be anchored into the pool. I was still holding on for the dearest of life, imprint getting deeper.

My dangling feet hit the water first, it was hot, you could have boiled pasta in it, up my shins, knees, thighs, and soon I was all in with my head spinning as fast as the ceiling fans, thick and heavy.

Confused, disorientated, didn’t know which way was up, I heard a voice. ‘It’s okay, I’ve got you, just relax.’ The Rock Goddess pounced, grabbed me, pulled me off the

seat like a mother lifting her child out of a highchair, all the king's horses, all the king's men, putting me back together again.

The water was barely four-feet deep, but it was deep enough for me to fear drowning. My unreliable limbs felt tied, bound, unable to control my own body in the buoyancy of the water. 'Take your time, don't panic, I've got you.' My tumble-dried brain still spinning, fast and furious, time warped.

'Are you okay? How do you feel?' I nodded unsurely. 'Take a few deep breaths, don't worry, it's perfectly normal for stroke survivors to feel dizzy at first, it takes a little getting used to.' Never in my entire life had I ever experienced dizziness quite like that. Even as she held me still, keeping me afloat, the after effect of the nerve-racking transition into the pool and the overwhelming intensity of the heated water punch-drunk me into a tumbling distant stupor. After a minute or two of deep breathing the surroundings began to form into recognisable shapes – understandable reality – and as I arose from the rotating state of consciousness, like a reassuring voice waking you from a deep sleep, the Rock Goddess' repeated words connected, 'good, just breathe, good, just breathe, good, just breathe,' message getting through.

'I'm going to fit these floaties around your arms and ankles. I want you to relax, let go of your body and let it float free. Don't worry I'll support you.' She stood behind me, hands clasped under my armpits as I let go, surrendered, drifting like a river-bound forest log, she held me steady, as solid as a rock.

'Can you spread your arms and legs into a starfish position?' Floating on my back, the water trickling at my ears made it very hard to hear. Muffled commands filtered through, gargled requests, just clear enough for me to unravel into some sense – *understandable reality*. 'Now raise your right leg and rotate your foot.' You could have thrown your laundry in along with a cap full of OMO, get the week's load done; the simple task would send my body into a contortionist twist, causing a whirlpool of a current that catapulted my brain back through the tumble dryer for a quick run on high. Confused, disorientated, didn't know which way was up, until I heard the voice, 'it's okay I've got you, just relax.'

We continued to work through a variety of oh-so simple but oh-so challenging exercises. While still floating on my back, I raised arms, lifted legs, bent knees, rotated feet, gasped for air, swallowed water, did the laundry, body collapsed, clam-shelled,

brain bounced around in my head, had mind-numbing dizziness, was overwhelmed, panicked, rattled, exhausted, exhilarated. I think you get the idea.

Another nifty little dance routine the Rock Goddess practiced on me in the pool had me completely baffled, and trust me she had many, so many it would have made the penguin from Happy Feet look like an amateur. This one wasn't a slow dance, no siree, it was fast, furious, almost violent. Standing positioned behind me, she wrapped her arms around my mid-section in a bear-hug. 'I want you to relax, allow your body to float free.' Her lips perched beside my left ear, command loud and clear, 'I'm gonna flip you sideways, over then back facing up. You just relax your body, let me do all the work.' I don't know where the hell this woman learnt this stuff, it was bizarre, odd. If you were watching from the sidelines, you'd think we were practising for some kind of peculiar aquatic wrestling competition, WAWC (World Aquatic Wrestling Championship), but I never questioned her methods, I just let her do her thing, obediently followed directions. 'Okay, you ready?' Then, in a swift, single motion, she flipped me like a pancake, golden brown, upwards and over, returning me to the floating free on my back position. 'Wow, that was scary.' She gave me a moment to nurse my flipped-pancake hangover.

'Okay, let's do it again, but this time I want you to lead the move.' I nodded unsurely. We practiced the routine several times, and each time my participation increased. While she maintained the bear-hug position, I had to lead the manoeuvre, beginning from left to right, projecting my left side up and over in a tumbling motion, trying to flip myself sideways and then resurfacing flat on my back.

Heavy duty wash cycle!

Ten years have rolled on by since my life took a dramatic turn. For the first two or three years the recovery period continued, then, I began to ask myself a few questions. *When does a recovery period end? Is it when you're fully recovered, or when you're satisfied at where you have reached, or when you just give up trying?* And what those questions revealed was – there is no end to recovery – a full recovery after a stroke is fairly unlikely, rare. Statistics say eighty-eight per cent of stroke survivors in Australia live with life-long disabilities.

The Rock Goddess did put me back together again – just not to how I was before the fall. She couldn't find all of the pieces, because some of the pieces were gone, some

of the pieces just wouldn't fit back together again. But she did give me hope – hope that I clung to as I had clung to the edges of the lift chair during that first, perilous dip into the pool. Hope that I would walk again. Hope that the constant pain would somehow ease, that my life would return to something resembling normal. Hope that there would no longer be a need for wheelchairs, lift boards or hydraulic chairs.

Her real name isn't important, it's irrelevant, as redundant as the everyday things I had taken for granted before stroke took them all away in one deadly blow.

The Rock Goddess was hope and that was all she had to be, and all that I needed her to be.