

GOLDEN POINT AWARD 2005

Battle was seven when his three-year-old brother, Brandon, drowned in their grandmother's pool in Shreveport, LA. "As I got older I wanted a tattoo, but I wanted it to mean something," says Battle, 24. "I had a picture of my brother that I kept losing. I thought if I got his portrait on my arm he would always be with me." Battle got the tattoo before his freshman year at Notre Dame in 1998. "The guy did a great job, I've gotten a lot of compliments," he says. And of Brandon he said, "You never get over it. Every day, he crosses my mind." - CNN News

I bought the house out in the Arizonian suburbia, cheap, during the property slump a few years back. My wife and I love it – warm stucco walls, knobbly under my fingers, a red roof and cable TV with both sports and soaps. But the best thing about my house is the pool in my backyard, liquid light sparkling in the bright Arizona morning. It reminds me of Grandma's pool back up in Los Angeles, long ago, surrounded by tall hedges, with a barbeque pit by its side. The memory is sharp and distinct, hard shadows on whitewashed walls. Here, there are days in the summer when it gets so bright, you squint up into the sky and you can't even see the sun.

Sometimes, when I go swimming in the pool in my backyard, I'll do this thing – it's something I think only I do. It's pretty strange, doing this, I know, and sometimes, I'll wonder how many other people do it too. This is what I do: In the middle of the pool, I'll just stop and tread water for a while, thinking. Then I'll just stop. Everything. Stop treading water, just like that. When people swim, it's impossible for them not to move. If you don't move, they think, you'll sink. Just like a shark. Sharks have got to keep moving to survive, you know. Push water through their little cartilage gills and all that - I watched a show about it on the Discovery Channel. But that isn't true for us humans. We're made of bones and meat and fat, and if we just relax and lie back, we'll usually float as easy as

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can be. But lots of people don't know that. They just keep thrashing and thrashing away, moving as if their lives depended on it. We aren't sharks though. We thrash like that, and we drown.

So that's what I do. In the middle of the pool, I'd stop swimming laps, stop swimming, period. I'd touch the tattoo on my right arm with my left hand, and I'd begin to thrash around, like I've forgotten how to swim, and I'll swallow some water and just sink. Just sink into the pool, let my whole body immerse into the clear chlorinated water, and blow out all the air in my lungs, and just thrash. Thrash like a drowning person, like a three-year old playing pretend with his brother. I'd feel the panic rising in me, and the chlorine stings my eyes and sometimes, I worry that in the middle of all this, I'd really forget how to swim, and I'd really drown. But usually, I sink to the bottom of the pool, and just sit there in my trunks, thinking. Thrashing around in the water is more tiring than you'd suspect. I'd lie at the bottom of the pool, flat out and stare out of the water, looking at the sun in the sky staring back at me questioningly, as if he were wondering what I was doing. It was really peaceful, those moments underwater, all alone, isolated, and silent like a lonely island in the middle of an ocean. I couldn't even hear the lawn mower, or the sound of a barbeque, or the screams of children. Everything was a pale blue and white and shimmered, and the sky above me, flaring, dappled and beautiful. I could almost fall asleep, but then I'd really drown. And when I ran out of air, and my lungs screamed in near-agony, I'd slowly allow myself to surface, because you see, though I do crazy things, it doesn't mean I'm really crazy. I slowly surface, and to me it seems like I'm falling into the sky.

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Then I get out of the pool and towel off, and do all the usual things I do in my place, like changing, packing my gear and doing some housework. I say goodbye to my wife and head out to practice. See, I'm the wide receiver for the Arizona Cardinals, and a damned good one too. That's what I always tell myself, like I was told to. Positive reinforcement or something like that, that's what my shrink says. Tell myself I'm the best, and I'll become the best, you know what I'm saying? I tell my shrink lots of things, things that I don't even tell my wife - like what I feel about the other guys on the team, and about troubles at home, and quarrels with the old lady, and being benched for the pre-season games earlier this season, all that stuff. I even tell him about my tattoo. But I never tell him about what I do in the swimming pool at home. I don't tell anyone about that.

For practice, we watch some game video of our preseason games, and coach goes through our mistakes and corrects them. I try not to doze off in the darkness of the video room, because I didn't play the preseason, so I didn't make any mistakes. Still, I try to learn from the other guys, because my shrink told me to keep an open mind. After that, we hit the field and coach has us run some laps, just like we did in college, then we warm up and chuck the ball around. We go through a few plays, first without opposition then with, and I run a few routes and hook up with the quarterback once or twice. I like training. It gives me a sense of power, and I know what to do and when. I always know what to do.

After practice, the team troops to the locker room. For a pro team, they still behave as if they're in college. I may as well say they behave like high-schoolers, because college

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kids behave like high-schoolers. So we're all pretty childish. Most of them have never held a real job before, sure, they've gone through college and got some pretty degrees, but straight after college, they went into football, and they've been in football all their lives. Some haven't even finished college. That's cool with me though, because they aren't me, and I got no right to tell them what they should be doing, you know? They're team-mates, not my kids. So I just let them be and they'll be all right. That's what I tell them, and I tell myself. Everything will be all right. In the locker room, it's a different thing every day. You'd think we've known each other long enough, but the team, it's like a living, dynamic organism, like coach said. We get players retiring and rookies coming in every year, and players getting signed to fill up the depth charts and so you see new faces in the locker room everyday. It's alive, the locker room is. Alive and kicking. But for me, what's same every time, the only constant is that someone will comment about my tattoo. My tat. Rookies ogle at it, and even the vets, my buddies who've seen it a hundred times still can't get over it. Because you see, my tattoo is the best tattoo any tattoo artist has done. It's perfect. It belongs there, framed on my right deltoid and bicep, a dark greenish blue that looks like black on my dark, brown skin. It's a picture of a face.

It's the face that I touch every time I score a touchdown. My wife has a picture of me in her purse. It shows me standing alone in the endzone, the crowd a blur in the background, tears streaming down my face as I touch the tattoo on my arm. I remember that moment – I had just scored a late winning touchdown for the Cardinals and the reporters began calling the face on my arm my lucky tattoo. But it's a lot more than that.

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I remember the day I decided to get it. I was in college, four years ago. The face, it kept slipping out of my mind. I kept losing it, cigarette smoke vanishing into the dry Arizonian air. The smoke used to be a picture of a face. It kept getting harder and harder for me to remember the face. That's what time does to memories. They're like a bar of soap, memories. The harder you grip to them, the more likely they are to squirt right out of your hand and onto the shower floor and down the drain. So I decided to get it tattooed onto me, permanent-like, so I'd never ever forget what the face would look like. Or even if I did, I'd just have to look at my arm and I'd remember again, a memory on my skin.

The tattoo parlour was a small, white place that looked a lot like a dentist's office, its walls plastered with pictures of tattoos, tattoo designs and personal photos. It was a pretty cool place, and it looked clean, not like the seedy, dank stuff you'd imagine a tattoo parlour to be. The tattoo artist called himself Mickey. He was bald and bespectacled, a skinny, pale guy with lots of piercings all over his face. They caught your eye, the piercings, especially the one on his tongue. When he spoke, his tongue flicked in and out and I'd catch a glimpse of silver. Strangely, he didn't have a single tattoo, and he told me that he couldn't find someone who'd tattoo one as well as he could. When I pressed him, he told me that he was scared of the pain.

Then he asked me what I wanted, and I showed him the picture I'd brought. He studied it for a moment, and asked if I was sure I wanted it, and offered an alternative design - that dagger and dragon stuff, which was the in thing then. But I said no thanks, I'll stick to the

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picture. He shrugged and said he'd do his best. And it was really his best work. It was as if it willed his hand to draw it into existence, he told me when he finished it.

The tattoo artist had swabbed the skin with alcohol first, and used a brand new needle. Then he drew the outline, and slowly filled up the details, the picture tacked onto a stand next to me. The needle was sharp and it burnt, a tingling, sharp pain that wasn't unbearable. I kept twisting my head to the right to see how he was doing. Slowly, the face took shape. After six hours and two smoke breaks for the artist, it was done. And it was done perfect, the round, smiling face of a three-year old with his curly hair and laughing eyes.

I went back to the tattoo parlour a second time the next day for another hour to really finish up the job properly, and the artist obliged, adding the kid's name and the necessary dates under the picture. It wasn't a picture anymore after that, no simple tattoo. It had become a memorial. My girlfriend saw it that night in the glow of the study light, cuddling with me in bed. She had leaned across my body, not weighing a thing, and stroked the face on my arm. She whispered into my ear that she would have loved to meet him, then kissed it with her perfect lips. I then knew she was the girl I was going to marry.

In the locker room during summer training camp this year, a rookie barely out of high school looked at the tat, and asked me if I was into kids, with a tattoo of a small kid on my arm like that. Then he laughed, trying to build rapport and camaraderie, like coach

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had asked us to. He was just joking, but my punch smashed him into his locker door, breaking the mirror and his nose, and bruising my own hand pretty badly. My teammates ostracized the poor kid forever, and Coach suspended me for the preseason.

Every time I look at the little face on my arm, I remember, as clear as yesterday, though it happened more than sixteen years ago.

I remember Grandma's house in Los Angeles, adults shouting at the TV, the woody smell of barbecue, glass doors that I used to run into, wooden patios, green-carpeted gardens with their short palm trees and cloudless skies. The sun a blistering ball of fire in the sky, and the swimming pool, glistening and shimmering, looking cool and inviting and forbidden. A guilty pleasure, quickly replaced by sheer exuberance and joy as I slid through the water like a dark, brown fish, and splashed with the recklessness of youth. And with the recklessness of youth, my younger brother dived in to join me, not knowing how to swim.

He was just three years old and the king of the world, prince of the house, and victim of the pool. I thought he was playing with me, thrashing away like that, then sinking to the bottom of the pool, still and motionless. It was a cool trick, I thought at that time, because when we played cops and robbers he'd love to get shot and play dead. But I never knew three-year-olds didn't play such games in the swimming pool. I got real scared when he stopped moving, and by the time I dived down, pulled him up and dragged him out of the pool, he wasn't breathing anymore. Maybe if I knew CPR or stuff like that, I could have

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saved him. Seven-year-olds don't know CPR. They don't know anything, and like a dumb, know-nothing seven-year-old, I just screamed and screamed and screamed. Because I was real scared, I didn't know what to do, and I knew everything would never ever be all right.

After the funeral, my grandmother filled up the pool with cement. Now it's a green, carpet lawn and we still go there to play some touch football before a barbeque. But I didn't swim again for a long, long time. It's kind of weird, because slowly, I began to swim again in college for rehabilitation when I tore my knee ligament, and that's when I began to lose my brother's face. So I put it on my arm, and now he's always by my side. Maybe it was guilt, like my shrink says, and maybe it wasn't. At least, this way I won't forget him, I reason, and it'll be like he's always there, living through me, something like that. But mainly he's on my arm because he was my brother, and brothers are supposed to take care of each other.

So I lie at the bottom of the pool, staring up into the sun flickering and shimmering through the clear water, and my left hand on the tattoo. I can feel a pulse, beating slowly but surely. And as my breath runs out in crystalline bubbles, I let myself float slowly up to the surface, falling into the sky and into the arms of my brother, all grown up.

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