

# In My Element

Stephanie Benjamin, MD, MA\*

\*Corresponding Author.



0196-0644/\$-see front matter

Copyright © 2018 by the American College of Emergency Physicians.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annemergmed.2018.10.022>

[Ann Emerg Med. 2019;73:416.]

My sister Janna is in her wheelchair, my mom gently singing to her. My brother Geoffrey is lying nearby in his hospital bed. Peeking in through the plastic bars, looking at his small fists curled up against his forearms, I ask my mom, "Why can't the doctors make them better?" As they lay dying, my 4-year-old brain thinks indignantly, "If I were a doctor, I would fix my siblings."

Flipping around on the floor, then high on the balance beam, then flying over the vault, and then swinging around the uneven bars. My red velour competition leotard sparkles. I've just turned 8. Concentration is key. An inch miscalculation and I will fall and it will hurt—a lot. Everyone is watching with bated breath. The pressure heightens the stakes, making it more fun.

I watch, concerned, as my sister Felissa lies crying on an emergency department hospital bed. Her right thigh is blistered and raw from a fresh scald burn, the result of a poorly balanced pot of hot tea slipping off the edge of a lazy Susan at a Chinese food restaurant. I hold her hand. My 10-year-old brain is mesmerized, watching the dead skin carefully get debrided and her wound gently dressed in bright white gauze.

Nothing but anger exists when my siblings die. First my brother Geoffrey, followed by sweet Janna a few years later. What other tween has already been to so many funerals? I feel alone. And screw medicine. It's useless. What's the point? I'm going to be a writer instead.

I am slowly lifted 152 feet into the air by a crane. The adrenaline pulses through me as I free fall downward toward the target sign painted on the ground. The bungee cord tugs on my harness, swinging me to safety at the last moment. Don't tell my parents I went bungee jumping in high school.

September 11, 2001. I'm in NY. Where is my dad? I feel restless sitting in my 12th-grade history class. I'm watching the emergency medicine responders on TV. I have no useful skills. I see heroes being made and I am jealous of those capable of helping. Dad eventually makes it home safe from lower Manhattan.

All my focus is on my opponent. My épée is poised in my right hand, ready to attack. If I lose this bout I'm

eliminated from the 2002 Junior Olympics. All eyes are on me, judging my every move. High stakes. Every move is critical. I worked so hard to get here. The endorphins are fueling my energy and concentration.

What do you take when evacuating? The rain is thundering down harder and harder. Hurricane Katrina is quickly approaching Tulane. I call my parents to assure them that I'm OK. I wait out the storm in Atlanta and watch on television as the floodwaters destroy my home, my beloved New Orleans, and my senior year of college.

A hundred feet deep, surrounded by schools of fish and black-tipped reef sharks. Visibility isn't great today and a strong current hints at a coming storm. I explore the shipwreck of RMS *Rhone*, trying to piece together its history and subsequent demise. Breathing underwater is a new favorite hobby.

In graduate school, getting my degree in psychology. I focus on working with survivors of trauma. But the scars have already settled in for these patients. The main event has already happened. I need to get involved earlier. I need to be present earlier. Time to reconsider medical school.

Climbing a hundred feet into the air, gripping the rocks with my blistered and bleeding fingertips. My forearms are sore, my toes ache, and I'm wearing out. I'm terrified of falling but the urge to seek new heights is overwhelming, so I press on. The view is amazing up here.

In medical school, now rotating through the ED. There is a nonstop buzz of activity. Every manner of injury and illness appears. The residents move seamlessly between tasks, thriving on the pandemonium, adrenaline junkies in their element. Time stops. A moment of clarity strikes. The pieces of a puzzle I didn't know I was completing snap into position.

Unleash the chaos. Bring the fear. Push me to keep learning. Anger me when I fail. Make my pulse race. Inspire me to better myself. Watch me perform. Show me the unknown. Bring me the lows. Stretch my synapses. Bring me the highs. Have it all come together in one place. All my moments add up to this: I am an emergency physician.

*Author affiliations:* From the University of California, San Francisco–Fresno, Fresno, CA.