



state of GRACE

How one woman learns to defy the pull of gravity and becomes light off her feet

By Elisabeth Dalbey

I describe myself as uncoordinated. This is not out of false modesty — *au contraire*. During the bare-arms-and-legs days of summer, I am spotted with bruises, looking something like a black-and-blue Dalmatian. Gravity, while helpful in that it keeps me attached to the Earth, is rather uncooperative otherwise, singling me out for injury. I have tripped down the stairs with enough frequency that I'd probably be better off sliding down on my tush like a 2-year-old. I am attracted to walls and furniture like a magnet to steel. If the dishwasher door is open, I am certain to bash into it with my shin while rounding the corner to the refrigerator.

I also have my own version of Murphy's Law: Anything of mine that can get caught on something, will. My purse strap leaps onto the emergency brake

while I am exiting the car. I have been known on more than one occasion, when my sleeve catches on the doorknob, to slam a door in my own face. I stumble. I slip. In an effort to avoid dance-floor mishaps, I dance awkwardly by shaking my behind rather than moving my feet.

But when I'm swimming, it's utterly different. Freed of gravity's pitfalls, my legs and arms stroke in perfect unison. Up and down the lane I glide, lap after lap, weightlessly. The water and I are one — I don't fall, nothing gets caught or snagged, no new bruises appear. My only purpose in life is to keep a running total of the lengths, and if I miss a few, *que será será*.

Every year I join a group of girlfriends in California for a Palm Springs getaway

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weekend. On Saturday morning we actually fulfill our good intentions of working out. But while they head for activities like Spinning, step aerobics and kickboxing, I don my goggles and dive into the outdoor lap pool.

As I swim, the sky above is a brilliant blue, interrupted only by majestic palm trees. An hour slips away unnoticed and my friends, sweaty and bedraggled, seek me out. I, on the other hand, am pleasantly tired but without an ache, pain or drop of sweat. We give one another looks that say, "How could you torture yourself that way for an entire hour?" I realize they do not understand.

I've been floating — flying even — for one blissful, gravity-free hour. My mind is clear and untroubled, as worries and to-do lists have slid away as smoothly as my body moved through the water. I've captured a generous slice of peace and contentment that keeps me going for two days. Have I racked up an unprecedented number of laps? No. Have I set any speed records? Definitely not. But for a wonderful while, I have known what it is to be graceful.

Elisabeth Dalbey escapes gravity year-round at her gym's indoor pool near her home in Southern California.