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The Marine And The Orphan

The stories of Rob Jones and Oksana Masters are remarkable, and if they also prove inspirational, that's fine with them. But they have another narrative they prefer, the one that has brought them together to the brink of Paralympic rowing gold

MICHAEL ROSENBERG

On a sun-rinsed, windless morning in Charlottesville, Va., Oksana Masters and Rob Jones are preparing to put themselves through severe physical pain, but first they must remove their legs. They sit on a dock by the Rivanna Reservoir and pull off their prosthetic limbs. Then they walk on their stubs and slide into their boats.

They are honing their rowing skills in a bid for a gold medal in the mixed-doubles sculls at the upcoming Paralympics in London ... well, no. That is not quite right. Oksana and Rob know how to row. They are working on rowing *together*.

"Your heartbeats need to match," Oksana says. "You're two people, but you have to row as one. It's like saying, 'Close your eyes, hold the hand of your partner and walk just like they do: left foot, right foot.'"

This is the key to rowing. When rowers are out of sync, the boat feels heavy. The goal is to glide. Oksana, 23, and Rob, 26, have practiced rowing with their eyes shut, to feel each other's movements. They have made subtle, almost imperceptible adjustments—to the thickness of the grip on their oars, to the height of their seats, to the length and force and frequency of their strokes. They are seeking perfection in a world that seldom grants it.

They want their strokes, their thoughts and their goals to align. "I want to know what motivates him and what drives him," Oksana says. But in their 14 months together, she has not asked many questions about the past, and neither has Rob.

"She has other people she can talk to about things that bother her," Rob says. "I don't expect I am one of those people."

They do know the basic facts of their journeys. They don't know the details—the demons and hungers, the tragedy and beauty. Maybe they should close their eyes, hold each other's hands and walk just as they once did. Left foot, right foot....

Oksana Alexandrovna Bondarchuk was born in Khmelnytsky, Ukraine, on June 19, 1989, with six toes on each foot, five webbed fingers on each hand and no thumbs. She also had a condition called tibial hemimelia, in which one limb—in this case, her left leg—was six inches shorter than the other. Both of Oksana's legs were missing weight-bearing bones, and the knee floated in her C-shaped left leg.

Her parents took one look at her and checked out of her life. They put her in an orphanage. She was transferred to another orphanage, and then to a third, where she was frequently beaten.

Men at the orphanage raped her regularly, sometimes more than once a day, while the women who worked there pretended not to notice.

Sometimes a police officer would knock on the orphanage door and tell everybody to stay inside because the nearby nuclear power plant had a leak. The orphanage was also less than 200 miles from another plant, Chernobyl, site of the most famous nuclear meltdown in history. The warnings were too late for Oksana. As she would find out years later, radiation poisoning had caused her birth defects.

Doctors attempted to lengthen her left leg by affixing pins through surgically fractured bones in the limb. The pins, which protruded from the leg, were attached to a ring-shaped apparatus; every week the doctors would turn the screws on the apparatus, which widened the space between the bones. Eventually, it was believed, the bones would knit. The treatment was not effective, but Oksana tried to embrace the body that her parents had rejected and surgeons could not fix. She called her left leg "my little foot," and occasionally she used its toes to brush her hair.

In Buffalo a single woman named Gay Masters, a speech pathology professor, was looking to adopt. She had wanted a newborn, not a six-year-old, but when a couple who had adopted a Russian child showed her a picture of Oksana, she said, "That's my child." She began making arrangements to bring the girl to the U.S.

At the orphanage Oksana was handed a picture of Gay and told she would live with this woman. But Ukraine, in an effort to minimize child trafficking and other abuses, had suspended foreign adoptions. Workers at the orphanage did not tell Oksana about the moratorium; instead they told her that her new mother did not wish to pick up such a bad girl, a girl who would sneak out to get food when she was supposed to be in bed.

Ukraine's ban was not lifted for nearly two years. When Gay's application was finally approved and she arrived at Oksana's orphanage late one night in January 1997, she found the little girl sleeping in a sweater in the freezing building. She woke Oksana, who looked up and spoke in Ukrainian, "I know who you are. You're my mother. I have a picture."

As they came to know each other, Oksana kept talking about Lainey—so much that Gay asked the orphanage workers who Lainey was. She was told that Lainey was Oksana's best friend. She had gotten sick and died. The adoption facilitator claimed that after Oksana's parents left her in the orphanage, they had two more children, a boy and a girl, and both were healthy. The implication: Oksana's birth defects were a genetic fluke, not the result of radiation poisoning.

As they crossed the Atlantic, Oksana watched the in-flight movie, *Fly Away Home*. In Buffalo she insisted on sleeping with her mother every night. She tried to act like a happy child, but she did not know how. She laughed wildly, sometimes inappropriately. Once, Oksana ran into the kitchen, hit her head on a table and fell backward three feet. Then she stood up and laughed. She had taught herself not to cry. In Ukraine tears brought beatings.

Doctors had told Gay that her daughter's legs would have to be amputated because they couldn't support her weight, but Gay was reluctant to approve the procedure. "I said, 'I'm not bringing her to a new country with a new language, then cutting off her legs,'" Gay says.

Shortly after Oksana moved to Buffalo, surgeons moved the innermost finger on each hand to where her thumbs should have been. She did not have muscles in her fingers and her hands were scarred from multiple skin grafts. But at least she could use them for such everyday tasks as writing and holding a cup. Gay also eventually consented to having Oksana's left leg amputated. Doctors explained that they would fit her for a prosthetic leg, but an eight-year-old doesn't understand prostheses. Oksana told herself she would get a new, flesh-and-bone leg.

When she woke from surgery, she looked down for her new leg and saw nothing. Her "little foot" was gone. She was angry at the woman who had saved her. Why did Gay ask the doctor to cut off her leg? Wasn't she pretty enough? Oksana went back to the house where she lived with her mother, two cats and her dolls. She gave all her dolls the same name: Lainey.

Rob Jones grew up in little Lovettsville, Va., on his family's 200-acre farm. He lived with his mom, Carol; his stepfather, Steve; his older sister, Alison; and his younger half brother, Steve Jr. Three aunts, two uncles, three cousins and two grandparents also lived on the land.

Rob and Alison would walk to their grandparents' house to play cards, and they would have baseball, kickball and football games with their cousins. For a while, his mother and stepdad ran a horseback-riding company on the property, and Rob and Alison would clean the stalls. Their grandparents put a pond behind their house, and Rob and Alison would go there to swim, fish and ride a paddleboat.

"It was awesome," Alison says. "I loved where we grew up."

Every other weekend Alison and Rob would visit their father, Lenny, who lived in Ellicott City, Md. He would play soccer with them and take them to movies and Orioles games.

Rob was a shy, tiny kid, so small that when he was 10, his parents took him to the doctor to see if there was something wrong with him. The doctor said he would grow, which he did. Rob played soccer and baseball because he liked them, wrestled a bit and played football as a freshman because his stepdad wanted him to do it. But by 10th grade he had given up organized sports entirely. He mostly just wanted to play computer games, like the futuristic *Fallout* series and *Deus Ex*. He built two computers out of parts he bought on the Internet.

He was a bright student who didn't have to study much, which allowed him to play video games for two or three hours a day, almost every day, a habit that would continue right through his first two years at Virginia Tech.

Rob planned to major in computer science with the hopes of becoming a video-game developer. And so his mother was surprised one day when talk turned to Rob's career and he replied, "I might just join the Marines."

There is no good place to be a child amputee, but icy Buffalo is particularly rough, and so when Oksana was 12, Gay decided to move south, to Kentucky, where she took a job at the University of Louisville. Oksana was angry. She liked Buffalo. In Louisville she would be the one-legged new kid with an accent. And there was this too: She was about to lose a piece of her other leg.

Oksana had been told by doctors to expect a below-knee amputation, and she was at peace with that. She figured with one knee she could still be active and be able to run and ride her bike. But after she was sedated, the doctor asked Gay if he could amputate above the knee. Oksana was not lucid enough to process his words. When she woke up, she looked down and was stunned again. Most of her right leg was gone. "The realization that I'm never going to run again, the feeling through my hair when you run ... you're still a kid," she says. "You still have so much life to live."

She worried she would never get to feel like a woman. She thought of the high heels she would never wear and the school dances she could only watch. While Oksana fretted about her future, her mother worried about her past. Soon after they moved to Louisville, Oksana had needed a shot in her leg, and when a male

orderly entered the room to hold her down, Gay saw her daughter overcome by terror. Gay says she knew immediately: Oksana had been molested. But Oksana denied it.

Gay sent her daughter to therapy. Oksana drew a picture of a very dark room with a crack and a man's shadow looming over a bed. The memories returned in a flood, at unpredictable times. Once, as Gay and Oksana drove on the highway, Oksana suddenly screamed, "Get down! Get down!" She had visions of the men who had assaulted her.

"I would think, It's them, coming to get me!" she says. "The mind is really powerful. I mean, I literally *saw* them."

Like most teenagers, Oksana was painfully self-aware. She hid her prosthetic legs by wearing pants, even during the hot Kentucky summers. But classmates wondered: Why does she walk funny? She was prepared with a story if they discovered her condition. She would tell them that she had been an extra in a crocodile movie, and the crocodile attacked her.

She did not look like an athlete, but she discovered she was—not just in talent but also in spirit. She had started rowing for fun at 13, before her second amputation, even though she had trouble gripping the oars. After that surgery, she rowed competitively, purposefully—especially when she climbed into a single scull.

When Oksana was alone on the water, nobody could tell her what to do. Nobody could abandon her. Nobody could help her. The boat moved as fast as she made it move. Rowing without any lower-body muscles was hard—sometimes excruciating. But she welcomed the challenge. As Oksana attacked the water, the central theme of her early life was inverted. She could be as violent as she wanted, while everything around her stayed serene.

Carol couldn't believe it. The Marines? *Rob?*

She had always said that if the U.S. held another draft, she would move to Canada rather than let them take her boys. The first time Rob mentioned the Marines, she didn't think he was serious. But here he was, a junior at Virginia Tech, standing on the back deck of the house before dinner with something to say to his sister. He had already signed up.

"Definitely shocking," Alison says.

Even now, Rob can't explain his decision. He had spent *days, weeks, years* in front of a computer. He was not selfish. That would not be fair to say. He was ... self-contained. He had lived within his own whims and desires, and it started to feel terribly wrong. "I realized that there are things out there that are more important than me," he says. "[In high school] I didn't really have as much empathy. That's a good word. That is the best way to describe it."

He pauses.

"I don't think it's unusual."

A few of his friends had joined the Marines. Rob read *Brotherhood of Heroes* by Bill Sloan, about the Battle at Peleliu in World War II, and he decided, *That's it, the Marines*. He was not especially political. He had no strong feelings about the right or wrong, or even the *why*, of his country's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; he just wanted to live through the *what* of them.

An Air Force recruiter tried to sign Rob up, but he was only interested in the Marines. ("I wanted to be a part of the best," he says.) If he had waited until his graduation from Virginia Tech in the spring of 2007, he could have tried to become an officer, as Carol hoped when she could not dissuade him from enlisting as a reservist. He would have had more of a leadership role that way. But Rob wanted to be a grunt. And he wanted to deploy as soon as possible.

When he learned that the reservist drill center near Virginia Tech only trained combat engineers, he was disappointed because he thought combat engineers just did construction. He wanted the infantry. His superiors assured him: You will be on the front lines.

In January 2008, Rob went to Habbaniya, Iraq, as a lance corporal specializing in IED (improvised explosive device) detection. He also found weapon caches and safely removed them, and his battalion helped police the area, a violent enclave in the Sunni Triangle west of Baghdad. But by that time the Iraq War had crested. After two months, he started thinking, *If I haven't been shot at yet, it probably won't happen*. One day he heard that a Humvee had exploded and two Marines he did not know died, and the danger seemed real. But then it faded again. Rob did not feel like a man at war. Before he left Iraq, he told his pals, *Afghanistan. I have to go to Afghanistan*.

His tour of duty ended in August '08, and upon returning home, he applied for a variety of jobs and finally got one, installing traffic counters for the Virginia Department of Transportation. He was just killing time until he could go overseas. He was assigned to a base in Twentynine Palms, Calif., in January 2010, having been promoted to corporal. After just one deployment, he was more experienced than many of his fellow Marines.

In April 2010 he went to Afghanistan. First his battalion established patrol bases and built them up. They cleared fields and blew up trees. Then came war, undeniable and raw. Marines noticed Taliban soldiers meeting early in the mornings, planning their next attack. Firefights ensued.

"You always wonder how you're going to react the first time, but I wasn't disappointed with myself," Rob says. "I did what I was supposed to do: shot back."

His battalion was in the Sangin District in southern Afghanistan, pushing toward the Helmand River. Rob did not need reminders of the perils that lurked beneath his feet, or the reasons he signed up. One July day, his buddy Daniel Jones was injured in an IED blast. An hour later, before Rob even heard about Daniel, another Marine stepped on an IED. But this Marine got lucky, because only the blasting cap exploded, and then Rob stepped in to clear the area, and that was when an IED blew his legs off.

Rob heard himself scream, but his mind felt disconnected from his body. He checked his vitals. Hands: still there. Penis: still there. But his legs were gone. He could not stomach the thought of what the future held. And so, in his shock and delirium, he asked one Corps brother after another to do him the ultimate favor.

"Kill me!"

"Just kill me!"

"Put one in my brain!"

He was injected with morphine and helicoptered to his base. He was then flown to Germany, where he was too sedated to grasp what had happened. By the time he arrived at Bethesda (Md.) Naval Hospital three days later, he had changed his mind. He wanted to live again.

Alison visited and expected to cry. Then she saw his face and realized: Her kid brother would be O.K. His mother and sister went to his first physical-therapy session, in July 2010. Rob said he would walk into a Marine Corps ball in November. Carol thought, You're just setting yourself up to fail, but she kept her doubts to herself. That November, her son, by then fitted with prostheses, walked into three Marine Corps balls—in Washington; Roanoke, Va.; and Las Vegas. Soon after, he started rowing, first for the workout, then because "it was a sport I thought I could compete in."

In public, together or apart, Rob and Oksana are objects of fascination for the full-bodied. Strangers are baffled by Oksana's beauty, as though her face, too, should be deformed. They often stare.

And yet, they don't really see her.

She was shopping at a Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft store recently when a man walked up to her and said, "I just want to say, you just made my day. And I want to say thank you." He tried to slip her \$20. She was uncomfortable. She made his day? How? By shopping?

"I've gotten a lot of people saying, 'That is awesome. You're so brave,'" Oksana says. "I hate when people say *brave*. I'm not brave. I'm just living my life. Why is that brave?"

She smiles and says, "Just because I have badass legs ... that could probably kill you...."

Oh, if they only knew the story, the whole story, going back to the orphanage ... but no. Who wants to be defined by the worst things that ever happened to them?

Oksana is still angry about the second amputation above the knee, but she made a decision: She would not waste a single day of her life ever again. "You don't get any second chances," she says. "You better not f--- up on the first one."

Strangers may focus on what she is missing, but hell, what are *they* missing? Are they busting their butts twice a day to be the best in the world at something, as she is?

Rob has it easier, in a sense. He is not as prone to feeling judged, so he doesn't mind the questions. When children ask about his prosthetic legs, he tells them his mom was a person but his dad was a robot, and so he is half-man, half-robot.

Adults' eyes do the math: crew cut + no legs + upright bearing = soldier. They view his missing legs as an achievement. They thank Rob, salute him and, with incredible frequency, try to pay him. *Here is 50 bucks. Thank you.... Here is a hundred. Buy yourself dinner. Thank you.* They don't realize that he doesn't want their money, that his entire sense of purpose revolves around not taking their money. For a long time, he refused. Then he decided that was wrong. Why should he deny them the joy of helping another person?

So now he accepts donations. But the cash does not stay in his pocket for long. If a stranger hands him \$100 and Rob's dinner bill is \$24.46, he leaves \$75.54 as a tip.

What would he do with money anyway? He doesn't see the point of "stuff that doesn't have a use ... stuff you put up on a wall and display." He travels with an acoustic guitar and an iPad, but not much else. He has two duffel bags of clothes but doesn't wear most of them. He thinks he might give most of his clothes away too.

Rob lives on the \$4,100 a month he gets from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and he enjoys living in hotels. When he and Oksana finished training in Orlando last winter, he went to the bank, cashed his

monthly check, put it all inside a card that he wrote out in Spanish using Google Translator. Then he left the entire \$4,100 for the cleaning woman at his hotel. He did not even know her name.

Sometimes Oksana will reach down to scratch her ankle, only to discover again that the ankle isn't there. And sometimes she and Rob each feel bursts of pain in legs they no longer have. This is a common phenomenon for amputees. It is called phantom pain. "Your brain is just amazing," Oksana says. "It still thinks your legs are there."

Phantom pain comes in various forms. When Oksana was a teenager, she got mad at Gay, and her brain told her that the woman standing in front of her was not her mom but was in fact an abuser from the orphanage. That was phantom pain. The nightmares about her last orphanage that she has even today: phantom pain. But the dread of going to sleep is real.

What about the life that Rob lost when he decided to join the Marines, a life of video-game making and company softball and working toward a big salary and four weeks of vacation? Phantom.

Rob and Oksana live every moment knowing that large pieces of them are gone and the rest could go at any time. They have a heightened awareness that we are all merely *currently* alive.

"You are just one little, tiny grass strand on this whole earth," Oksana says. "You're not guaranteed *anything*, let alone your white-picket-fence lifestyle that you want or whatever."

Sitting at an outdoor table at a café in a strip mall in Charlottesville, Rob says matter-of-factly, "Some things are more important than preserving your life. I'm not going to throw it away willy-nilly, but I would give it up for something important. Somebody I care about. Or a pregnant lady."

Rob is still not sure exactly why that IED exploded beneath him. If he stepped on it, then he thinks he should have discovered it first. But if the IED was radio controlled or command detonated, then there was nothing he could have done. Either way, he has no regrets. He doesn't even wish he had his legs back anymore. Since the injuries, too many good things have happened to him: rowing, the Paralympics, new friendships and experiences.

"I don't understand it," said Ben Kiernan, a friend and fellow Marine who was wounded by an IED blast in Afghanistan but did not lose any limbs. "It's amazing how resilient he is. If ever I'm in any sort of a bad [place], which doesn't happen very often now, I look at him. He is the first one to crack a joke."

Later, after she began rowing with Rob, Oksana decided her self-consciousness when she wore shorts in public was just phantom pain. She wears them all the time now.

The pain from her childhood is more complex. What about her birth parents? Do they ever reach for the daughter they gave up, only to discover again that she isn't there?

Her friend Lainey was definitely real, but the story of her getting sick and dying was phantom. Oksana knows the truth: One night Lainey and Oksana sneaked out to get food, and Oksana slipped and hit a chair. Men heard the noise and found Lainey. Oksana hid and heard them hit Lainey six times. They murdered her. "It was my fault," Oksana says. "I never forgave myself and probably never will forgive myself."

Oksana was a little girl at the time, parentless and abused. She knows that if she had rushed out to help Lainey, she might have been killed too. She was not responsible for the death of her friend. Blaming her childhood self—that is phantom pain. But it feels real, so real.

Last year, Oksana and her coach heard about a potential partner in the Washington area. Rob Jones had been rowing only for a few months, but he was naturally competitive and might help her get to the Paralympics.

Bob Hurley was skeptical. These things usually don't work out. But Oksana thought, *What if I don't go? What if that was my gold medal chance and I didn't pursue it?* So they flew to Washington. Rob and Oksana practiced for the first time. "They just meshed up perfectly," Hurley says. "It was like they had rowed together for years."

Rob told her up front that this was a one-and-done opportunity, that he was finished after the Paralympics, which begin next week in London. Rowing is not his passion; competing is. After the Paralympics, he will move on. He wants to compete in triathlons and bike cross-country. He wants to get a job and make enough money so he can give away his VA check every month.

In the meantime, after dozens of tweaks and refinements, they have a good shot at medaling. Oksana wants it because "people have always said what I can't do." Winning gold is her dream. Rob wants it largely for the same reason: It is her dream.

In the sporting sense, they are underdogs because they are both double amputees, and they are smaller than almost everybody in the other boats. But at the final Paralympic Qualification Regatta in Serbia in May, they won the 1,000-meter race by seven seconds. They realized then that it doesn't matter if other rowers are stronger or more powerful.

Sometimes the boat feels heavy. But there are days when Oksana and Rob are out on the water, practicing for London, and their torsos and arms and muscles and bones and brains all work as one, and....

Seven billion little, tiny human grass strands are currently alive, but at that moment it seems as if there are just the two of them: a girl left for dead and a boy who was trained to kill. If you saw them from the shore, you would not know how they got there. Boats do not tell life stories. You would see them from the waist up, so you probably wouldn't even realize they are missing their legs. And so you would not feel sympathy for them, and you would not be inspired. You would just see them gliding.