

Swimming Lessons

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It was time to learn to swim.

Or at least that's what Nana thought. Little did she know of my horrid fear of water, of the way I shuddered at the feeling of water slipping over my hair and down my back, my refusal to take a shower, for, at the time, the sensation felt like tiny needles pricking into my skin. I had no intentions of learning to swim, of dunking my head under the water, water filling my nostrils and eyes and mouth and ears. So many places where pool water doesn't belong.

During the car ride, my anxiety escalated with each breath of perfume-soaked air, courtesy of Nana's fragrance affinity. Even driving under telephone poles spurred many an anxious thought. Can electrical wires transfer their deadly energy onto people? You know what, they probably can. I'm most definitely collecting electrical energy, which will shock me to death upon entering the pool. How can I relax when I'm going to explode, and on such a nice day?

In attempt to distract my mind from these wicked thoughts, I called upon my old friend Invisible Shadow Man. He ran in time with the car, speeding alongside us in the sunshine, hopping from one patch of grass to the next. Because, everyone knows, stepping onto the pavement is a Shadow Man death-sentence.

We eventually arrived at the scene of my upcoming electrocution, as deemed by Shadow Man's abrupt disappearance. After changing into our pink one-piece bathing suits and putting on wretched sunblock (the bane of all children's outdoor existences), we emerged beside the concrete pool.

My year-and-a-half younger sister Hannah and I scurried to the shallow edge of the pool, to a place of not safety, but where the risk of drowning was lesser. We ignored Nana, who was already in the pool, looking as graceful as a fifty-year-old woman in a Speedo is able to.

What a thrill it was, sitting on the pool's concrete lip and watching other people laugh and swim into the forbidden deep end. We sat, content in the sunshine, pumping our short legs back and forth, ignoring the useless Dora the Explorer floaties wrapped around our arms.

I eventually traveled down the pool's three concrete steps, my fear of electrocution temporarily forgotten. Fortunately, I was tall enough for my head to be kept above the water's terrifying surface. I walked around, my small fingers wrapped around the pool's concrete lip, the water pressure punching my stomach where the water jets resided.

Hannah, too small and frightened to venture out, stayed on her step. As I made my way back to her, I felt hands on my body, lifting me, holding me. The hands of a person who would not leave the pool without teaching me to swim, whose perfume even stank in the chlorinated water. I tried to escape, to return to the safety of my sister, but what use is a child's squirming in the hands of a determined grandmother? So I was lifted up, told, "It's okay. I've got you. I won't let you drown."

I tried to say no, to claw my way out of Nana's grasp, but who could stop a sweet grandmother, a sheep, from teaching her frightened lamb of a granddaughter to swim? So my shaking, convulsing body was held up, my stomach lifted. I was told, "Paddle your arms and legs. Doggie paddle!" By that point, I still hadn't responded and my breathing went shallow. I feared drowning, the touch of my nana's hands, and the fate in store for Hannah. I was a lost cause, incapable of learning to swim. But I already knew that. Somehow my shaking body was returned to my sister, who witnessed my pool struggle, her eyes full of terror. Hannah: the next victim.

This day at the pool showed the difference of Hannah's demeanor and mine. My silent suffering and squirming juxtaposed Hannah's violent screaming, her tell-it-how-it-is attitude toward life. Nana picked her up the same as me, but felt the need to dunk her under the chlorinated water, happily saying, "Dunk!," as though Hannah was a basketball. *My Sister the Basketball: a novel.*

I watched Hannah contort and splash in the water, both of us unable to do anything about it. I mean, if I went over there, then what? Nana would have two victims. Maybe she wasn't a sheep after all, but a wolf.

Hannah's torture was shorter than mine, though, for her screaming morphed into crying, and we can't attract attention, now. Nothing to see here. Just two little lambs afraid of the water. Aren't they cute? Such darlings.

By that point, our time at the pool was over, Hannah distraught and I tactfully quiet as we were corralled back to the pool house. We followed Nana back into the old wood-paneled bathroom to change out of our bathing suits. Nana set her sunglasses and ball cap down onto the beach bag before entering the bathroom stall, leaving me and Hannah alone in the main bathroom area.

Now, what I did next is something I will never forget, something that shocked even me. I was Big Sister Rebecca, failed protector of lambs smaller than I. I was too young, too innocent to speak my mind, so I did the next best thing: with confidence, with poise, I picked up those left-behind sunglasses and hat and marched into the handicap stall. Without hesitation, I threw them both into the toilet, amused by the resounding sound of sunglasses-on-toilet-bowl.

Nana walked out of her own bathroom stall in time to see me flushing her belongings, her sunglasses and hat spinning in the toilet water. I don't know what I thought would come of this, but the idea of flushing Nana's belongings was as close to a revenge scheme as I could muster. You dunk my sister in the pool, I dunk your shit down the shitter. Good luck enjoying the sunshine now! This moment, the kind that evil laughter would best accompany, was ruined by the look of utter disgust on Nana's face. What was little lamb doing, throwing things in the toilet? Oh my. Nana put her hand to her crucifix pendant, praying for the forgiveness of my toilet-dunking soul. I don't recall the words she said or how a certain soaking wet hat and sunglasses were extracted from the handicap stall toilet, but I remember the strong emotions coursing through my body. The realization that I was no longer a defenseless lamb brought with it uncertainty and a bit of guilt.

We eventually arrived home, Nana's report to Mom including neither dunking of the pool nor toilet variety. It was our little secret, one that I would not tell another soul until I was later dragged to Confession, where I admitted my master plan to a Catholic priest. He actually erupted into laughter and promised the forgiveness of God, at the cost of saying a

few Hail Marys. Mom actually asked me what he was laughing at, as our altar session was visible to the parish, but I just shrugged my shoulders. It was our little secret: mine, Nana's and God's, and with it resulted in the fact that I never got my sea legs. □