

Swimming Lessons

by Ajay Nair

What she remembers from when she was ten years old, when she went to learn swimming, is this.

The pool was a murky green shade, as if the water had been filtered through a moss-sieve. Five feet deep at one end and twenty two feet at the other. Was the slope gradual or were there steps? The idea of steps under water flashed an unbidden image of a giant shark wearing swimming trunks, walking on its tail, carefully making its way across the length of the pool. She loved water and she couldn't wait to learn swimming.

On the third day, after two days of furiously pedalling her legs while holding onto a railing at the shallow end, they marched her down to the deep one. There were two trainers. One was over fifty years old, with a grey cotton moustache and cauliflower ears. He smelled of garlic and after-shave. His swimming trunks were a dull white, with a pair of small palm prints on them. He looked at her funny, but then his eyes were misaligned and he looked at everything funny. The other trainer was thin but with an incongruous pot-belly. His skin was a pallid sack and on his chest he sported two enormous dark brown nipples that resembled burnt coins. He laughed nervously and often and his right hand shivered intermittently as if it'd been touched by a ghost.

They attached a float around her mid-riff — a wooden cylinder with its surface pitted, and a thick blue rope passing through its length and tied behind her back. She stood at the edge of the pool while the trainers slipped inside it, bobbing up and down, holding onto a steel pipe skirting the wall of the pool. They asked her to jump.

When she looked into the water, a scream went off in her head. She closed her eyes and jumped. She went under, swallowing water. When she opened her eyes, she saw the legs of the two trainers locked together and they were one creature. She could hear the younger man talk about his mother-in-law dying of cancer. She surfaced and screamed for help but they did not even turn to look at her. She sank again. The water tasted metallic, and though she was trying to swim, her limbs didn't respond. The water got in everywhere and it burnt her. After what seemed like several minutes, she came up again and with a furious thrash she inched towards the railing and found it with her small hands. The trainers looked at her and smiled and they were still one creature with four legs and two heads. The old man's left eye moved in sync with the younger one's right eye.

She never went back to the pool again. She developed a fear of water. She could not even stand under a shower after that because it made her lungs seize up.

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She looked up at the ceiling with one eye. Her right leg was broken in two places and the doctor said that at least two ribs had cracked, maybe three. The gauzy material that bandaged her face snacked on her skin with a slurp, or so she thought. She'd been driving too fast and it'd been raining too heavily. Now, she had to wait till her bones healed and her skin grew back. The ceiling was painted moss-green and that had triggered one memory. She had two months to go in this bed and there was that incident with the dogs and the one where her boyfriend had broken her nose. There were so many things to remember about her father and mother and belts and knuckles. She smiled her special, secret smile. She preferred this kind of pain to the other kind.

