

Swimmer's Bliss

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Growing up in California provides unlimited access to sunshine, marijuana, and swimming pools. Consequently, we were outside a lot and learned, among other things, to swim at a very young age. I say this not to flaunt my skill as a swimmer but to express my credentials as a connoisseur of swimming pools. This is important because when I say that I have just been swimming in the nicest pool I've ever been swimming in, it's no exaggeration. I know what I'm talking about.

I can't think of a time when I didn't know how to swim. We lived in Texas for a while and I have few memories of swimming at that time, but I don't think this means I didn't know how. I do remember taking swimming lessons early on in my childhood, but there's no memory of trauma, no sense that I didn't want to go to lessons or get in the pool, no sense that it was too cold to put on a suit and pad barefoot out on to a wet deck. It was as though I was there to improve my swimming, not to start from scratch. My father was a lifeguard and competitive swimmer in college. Tragically, my mom lost her baby brother at a very young age. He drowned, as she stood by helpless, unable to swim, when he fell in the apartment complex swimming pool. You can bet we knew how to swim.

In the salad days when my dad was pretending we had money, we lived in an expensive new subdivision of an expensive old town. We had a five-bedroom house with a rec room and a pool table and a swimming pool in the back yard. Not for us the kidney shaped oversized bathtub. Not for us the figure eight shaped pool. No, my father insisted that when our pool went in, it was to be a pool one could SWIM in. It was rectangular, long and straight, and took up the better part of the large back yard. There was a lot of discussion, perhaps argument, about its placement and how to keep my baby brother from falling in. When it was finished, it was the pride of the neighborhood. Early mornings would find my father, who was tall and strong, splashing water over the sides of the pool into the hedges as he swam laps back and forth, back and forth, alternating between crawl and butterfly strokes. I've never been able to master the butterfly stroke.

Often, during the nine months out of the year that the pool was in full use, I would come home and see someone's kids, anyone's kids, splashing around in the shallow end. It was the 70's and being good Jewish liberals, my parents had friends of all colors. One day I came home to see two medium brown kids I didn't recognize (there were others that I did) paddling around in the shallow end while my mom had coffee with one of her college professors. I looked at them, looked at him, and asked, rather harmlessly I thought, whose kids they were. I then received a scathing lecture from the professor, who had much darker skin color than his kids, on race politics and what sort of conclusions could or could not be made about those kids based on their color. I really did just wonder whose kids they were. A black man at the table and black kids in the pool did not imply a relationship between them any more than had the kids or the man been white. Years later when I retold this story to my mom she shook her head and said, yeah, that sounds like him, he had a real chip on his shoulder about race politics.

Excepting my youngest brother, we took lessons at the Los Gatos High School swimming pool. The little one learned at Water Babies. I remember watching as he was strapped in to a life vest and water wings and chucked, unceremoniously, it to their teaching pool. It was a crusade for my mother. We would swim or else. No method was too extreme to ensure that we knew how. My dad coached my middle brother for swim team and he took home medal after medal, sometimes weeping about how he'd only taken second. My older sister learned synchronized swimming. I just swam, like I do now, without design or speed. I took swimming whenever it was offered as a PE option, winter or summer. I swam in a series of high school pools while being shuffled about during the divorce. No one ever worried that I, or any of the siblings, would drown, while swimming in apartment complex pools where my father had his bachelor apartments.

While I was trying to raise my grade point average so where I could attend university, (did I mention the sunshine and the marijuana?) I swam at Foothill Community College. I rode my bike up to the Los Altos hills campus daily, parked it on the deck, and swam back and forth in their pool with a view. It was set in a bunker-like depression on the hill side and sided with concrete, open on one end. It wasn't attractive, but it was protected from the wind so that even on the coldest clear February day, you could dry out on the deck without freezing. You could lean up against the siding and feel the heat that the concrete had absorbed.

When I finally got to university, I was devastated by the quality of the pool there. It was a dingy indoor affair, the deck was always wet, the pool was not quite long enough, and in spite of the fact that it was protected from the weather, it always seemed cold there. I stuck it out with the swimming/PE option while ground was being broken on another part of campus for a new, Olympic sized outdoor pool.

When the new pool was finally opened, I fell in love. The locker rooms were clean and dry and warm, the decks drained properly, there was sufficient protection from the wind, and the pool was immaculate. The tile was alternating sky blue and sunny yellow, the plaster was white and uncracked. The lane lines were taut and all the floats were intact. Every day that I was on campus I swam, regardless of weather. My final year in college, I had attained swimmer's bliss. I had many hours of studio classes in the morning and a long mid-day break. At 11, I would take my lunch and my gym bag to the pool. I would swim for as long as I felt like swimming, it could be half an hour, it could be an hour and a half, I really had no idea. Then, weather permitting (and this being California, most of the time it was) I would eat my lunch while I dried off in the sun. After lunch I had an art history lecture. Art history lectures usually take place in dark rooms with slide projectors and academics who are passionate about surface embellishments on third century Chinese ceramics or some such thing. I would sit near the wall, put my head on the desk, and take a 45 minute nap. By the miracle of osmosis, I passed art history and even better, I put together a thesis show of paintings, most of which sold in the six months after I graduated. They were of the swimming pool. The lane lines. The reflection of the light in the water. The patterns of the tile at the bottom of the pool. I had developed a serious relationship with that pool and I was heartbroken when I graduated.

The Mountain View Community center pool wasn't a bad follow up. It was fairly new and just three blocks from my house. I bought a punch card and swam with the retired folks midmorning, talking with those wiry athletic old guys that ride their bikes everywhere and the stout old ladies that have survived breast cancer. I only thought that I had reached a zen state of swimming in college. These people were masters. I wore out long before they did and they'd make fun of me. Sure, I swam a little faster than they did, passing them on the days when we had to swim in circles to share out the lanes, but they had a determination that I could not match. They swam as though it was all they did. They'd set a pace and an hour later, they'd still be at it, after I'd showered and dressed and headed back to the studio. They're still at it now, I'm sure.

When I moved to Seattle, you can be sure that the first thing I did was seek out a pool. I had illusions that my California swimming style could continue in the rainy city to the north, but I was soon educated out of that idea. An outdoor pool is a seasonal pleasure in Seattle and there are few of them. Those that I know of are not near my home. I settled, after some frustrated research, on the YMCA pool near my house. It's indoors and poorly lit, and it's old, but it's clean and big and rarely very crowded. It's a swimmer's pool. I rejected the downtown pool because of its size and I found the community college pool laughable the first time I tried it. It's a bit of a sleeper, the YMCA pool, and I tried to leave it for a new, swanker fitness club, but I didn't like that pool, the acoustics were bad and it was a bit like swimming in a basement. A lot like swimming in a basement. I went back to the Y. It's loyal. It knows that you're there to swim and doesn't ask a lot of you. The Y pool is kind of like my old Toyota. It's not flashy, but it does exactly what you need it to do. It's also in a really diverse community and if I arrive before lap swimming starts, it's full of other people's kids. Whose kids are those, I can ask myself, while I wait.

A few weeks back I thought I'd found a pool that lived up to my college day standards. There's a very fancy health club near work, and a friend who's a member got me in past the guard dogs at the desk. I didn't like the carpeted walk out to the deck, but the pool itself was wonderful and situated in a giant solarium so it was almost like swimming outside. This fancy facility has a pool just for lap swimmers. It's not overheated like many multiuse pools are. I could get used to this, I thought, and I called the club to find out about the rates. It turns out I can't afford to get used to it, but I did think that it was the nicest pool I'd been in since college. Until yesterday, that is.

The last time I went to a spa, I'd been tricked. I'd been promised swimming. Swimming to me is swimming, bathing is something else. The grandmothers were going to the spa, I wasn't doing anything, they promised swimming, I packed my suit. Well, there was no swimming. Splashing about? Sitting with your back to high pressure jets? Sauna? Bathing? Yep. Swimming? None. Not one bit. I wasn't exactly devastated, a day at the spa with a couple of old Austrian ladies can be a mighty entertaining thing, but swimming it was not. So I was a bit hesitant when invited to the spa again, this time by a friend going for physical therapy. I asked a lot of questions and was assured that there would, indeed, be swimming. My father's kind of swimming. I again packed my suit and tried to check my skepticism. I paid about seven dollars, got some change for a locker, and went in through the turnstile. Of course, the first thing I saw was a man changing in to his suit. Some things in Europe will never cease causing me to stop and look twice – unisex locker rooms being one of them. I found the women's section, tried not to break any of the rules that were posted about the place (please don't do something in the changing cabins, please don't wear your shoes on the something, please shower before you use the something else), and suited up. I walked through the women's showers, which are indeed separate from the men's, rinsed off, and stepped out on the deck.

It had been snowing a lot, certainly more than I'm used to seeing, being a California girl by birth. The pool was flanked with high windows, maybe three stories worth, that looked out on to what must be a garden in the spring but was now buried in snow. Just to the right of the garden was an old, old, old building (we youthful Americans are impressed by the age of European architecture), the kind with the beams on the outside, and white plaster between them. It was still snowing hard. I was barefoot and in my swimsuit. I was a little too warm. I tied up my hair and got in the pool. It was tiled with tiny blue squares, the whole thing. No plaster. The decks were tiled too. Everything was clean and shiny. The water was salty. The pool is fed by a natural mineral spring that runs through this very traditional old village. It was warm and bubbly, but not like a Jacuzzi. The pool was a long rectangle, a swimmer's pool with the lanes marked out along the bottom in tile. I swam.

As a true critic of swimming pools, I have to say it was not a flawless pool. A rail runs the width of the pool at one end and at the other there's kind of a sloping shoulder. The rail is okay, but I think flip turners would find it annoying. I've never mastered the flip turn; I grab the wall and push off with my feet, so the shoulder on the opposite end was more troublesome. There's nothing to really grab on to. There are also no lane dividers. This means that the froggy old man practicing his backstroke can swim right in to you. The pool is huge though, so you've a good chance of avoiding this. About 1/3 of the way down, there's a row of jets that go off every 45 minutes or so, high pressure jets. Spa minded individuals take this time to stand over them, creating an interesting obstacle course, as you must swim between the ample old lady in the skirted black tank and the gentleman in the ancient trunks, meanwhile being buffered by the jets. The solution to this is actually pretty simple, especially if you're from the Pacific Northwest. Pretend you're a salmon. Upstream you go! Between the rocks, in to the current, and then you're on the other side. The jets run for about ten minutes, apparently to recirculate the water, and since the pool is so long, you may only go through them four or five times. Those are the only things I can think of that detracted from my swim and they are so minor that they only bear mentioning as further evidence of the excellence of this pool. After my swim, which was long and satisfying, I stretched out in one of the recliners on the deck and took a nap. Around me it snowed, the flakes getting bigger and fluffier, filling the garden, piling up on the branches of trees and tops of fence posts.