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## Swimming Lessons

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## Swimming Lessons

### Author Bio

Eleanor Gross is a junior Anthropology major and French minor with a very nosy, very fat orange cat called Mr. C who enjoys releasing frightened live animals in the house.

## Swimming Lessons

ELEANOR GROSS

When I was six years old, my mother would take me to the swimming pool, and I always made it a point not to go to the deep end. Tip-toeing my way further and further into the water, I would keep my chin well above the surface, and turn around if I felt I might be fully submerged. Seeing my reluctance to actually swim, my mother began encouraging me to paddle my way towards her in the pool, with the promise of catching me when I reached her. This thin woman, standing at 5'10 with a serious demeanor about her most hours of the day, was intent on teaching me this valuable skill. Despite her strong Celtic heritage, her face and neck were almost completely free of freckles and moles -- a tribute to my grandmother's insistence on sunscreen and hats whenever my mother would venture outside. Her deep, chocolate brown hair, streaked with delicate bits of gray framing the sides of her face, was always kept at shoulder-length or above, and she made a point of only ever letting the tips of her strands get wet in the pool. She rotated between wearing her thin-framed glasses and contacts, and though she had her ears pierced, she adorned only her fingers with jewelry, dotting them with a few of the meticulously selected silver rings she had collected over her lifetime.

Her eagerness for my ability to swim resulted in me doggy-paddling towards her in my pink and green swimsuit, laden with SpongeBob-themed flowers, with my bright purple goggles haphazardly pulled over my eyes. Every time I thought I would reach her outstretched arms and she would catch me, she took a step back, forcing me to continue my struggle towards her, splashing and pleading for her to relieve me of this mission.

When she realized her lessons weren't giving me the level of swimming competence that she desired, she enrolled me in lessons at the local pool. The pool was just a ten-minute walk down some quiet suburban neighborhood roads from my middle-class home in Maryland. I remember the walk back every weekend, goggles situated just above my forehead, hair stiff and dripping with chlorinated water, with my froggy towel wrapped tightly around my shivering shoulders. The towel had a hood designed to make the wearer resemble a green tree frog, with large eyes popping out from the top. My flip-flops

would squeak and squelch every time I took a step. The sun would shine between the dense branches of the pear trees lining the streets, warming me as it passed over my skin.

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The idea was that each student would swim across the pool from the shallow end to the deep end and then swim off to the side to pull themselves out. I was already uncomfortable with swimming in front of everyone in my class, even swimming alone in front of my instructor. I didn't like having that many eyes on me at once.

As I swam out, I thought about how much I desperately wanted this whole thing to be over. How much I despised swimming lessons and having to be in the freezing water every week. When I reached the deep end, I dutifully turned to my left to swim towards the edge, as my instructor asked the next student to swim out to the deep end. Ducking under the rope of buoys, I realized my goggles weren't quite as tight as I would have liked, and water began to tickle my bottom eyelashes as I quickly brought my head back above the surface. I could hear the student who had gone after me splashing violently as they kicked their back feet like propellers. I knew that pulling myself out of the water was going to be difficult, so I decided to rest for a minute to catch my breath, hanging onto the side of the pool.

Unfortunately, this pool was lined with slick, baby blue tiles. When wet, they provided as much traction as black ice in the winter. After throwing my hand up to grasp the side and hold myself above the water, I felt my fingertips slip. I took a quick breath before I was submerged, but the bottom was too far away for me to bounce off of if I wanted to breathe air in my next breath, so I kicked my feet under myself to get to the surface as the water seeping under my goggle lenses stung my eyes. Contorting my face in pain only dislodged my goggles more, making room for a rush of chlorinated pool water that blinded me.

I began to panic.

My heart thumped in my chest and deafened my ears. I cracked my eyes open to slits in my goggles and only saw the bright outline of the sun's rays beaming down on me. I kicked with everything I had and turned my face to the sky. Bringing my mouth just above the surface, I took a gasping breath and waved my arms and legs underwater to maintain my position. I swung my left arm wildly to feel for the edge of the pool, scraping my fingertips and nails on the rough concrete of the inner wall. Pushing upwards against it for traction, I brought my

full head above the water for a second attempt at breathing. I could see the student who had swum after me standing on the edge of the pool only ten feet in front of me, watching the other students take their turns.

The water in my goggles began to dribble down my face, as the seal between my cheekbones and the rubber broke once again. Blinking rapidly, with tears welling up in my eyes, I whipped my right arm around to meet my left at the edge of the pool, still kicking my feet as hard as I could. My hands slipped from the tiles and again I went under, this time breathing too late and instead swallowing water instead of air. My lungs burned like they were on fire and it felt like someone was scraping my inner eyelids with their fingernails. My chest tightened and a scream lodged itself in my throat.

Flapping my arms and legs wildly I paddled once more to the surface and through my water-logged goggles I caught the eye of the swimmer who was standing on the edge of the pool near me. The student who had followed the one after me was standing with them. I began to cough and choke, spitting up what I had just swallowed. They just looked away and resumed their passive observance of the other students performing their swimming skills.

Breathing hard, my lungs burning and my chest aching from the water and my effort to stay afloat, I tried once more for the edge of the pool. This time I threw my arms as far over the edge as I could manage, scraping my armpits and chest on the rough inner wall the same way my fingertips had earlier. I could feel my hands slipping so I used my bare feet to clamber up the wall and pulled myself forward as hard as I possibly could. Crawling out of the pool in an ungraceful heap, I lay sputtering and coughing on the hard concrete while I tried to catch my breath. My limbs buzzed and felt as cold as ice.

The sun beat down on me, this time no longer a warm, welcome relief during the walk home from the pool, but a guilty bystander. I turned to look back at the pool and saw my instructor never noticed me, or, if she did, she paid me no mind. She wore her blonde hair in a tight bun at the back of her head, and her scarlet Lifeguard one-piece complimented the pink undertones in her pale skin.

Scrambling to get away from the edge, frustration and panic and terror bubbled from my stomach up to my throat, becoming a blind rage to conceal the fear that threatened to consume me. I ripped my goggles off and let tears stream down my face, only distinguishable from the pool water by their temperature and flavor: hot and salty. My nose ran and everything ached, and I willed my stiff muscles to move.

I rushed as quickly as I could to the girl's bathroom, walking

because running was against the rules. I breathed in chokes and hiccups and kept my sobs quiet by swallowing them as they appeared. The bathroom was only illuminated by skylights, and the floor was wet and slimy against my raw, bare feet. I was alone and I was glad, but unimaginably disappointed by it. I was glad because it meant I could deal with this on my own and save myself the embarrassment of having someone see me cry, but I was disappointed for the same reason. Nobody helped me. They saw me and they didn't help me. They would have watched me drown and never given me a second thought. I had no friends in that class, but I had thought that surely my instructor would notice and save me. She didn't.

I let the sobs break from my throat and my eyes began to throb and ache. Water dripped from me and burned my scraped hands and knees, my red underarms, and the fronts of my shoulders. I hated this place. I cried and cried until a headache arrived, hammering the inside of my skull.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I drew my goggles back down over my eyes to cover how red and puffy they had become. I had no clue how long I had been gone, but nobody seemed to notice. The instructor was on the second to last student and I stood far from the edge, away from the growing group of students with my arms crossed over my chest, hands tucked underneath them. I didn't bother wiping my nose. Every time the fear and humiliation would threaten to emerge again in the form of tears, I would shove it down and away deep inside my chest, which only served to make it ache even more. I decided never to tell the instructor or my parents. I decided to try to forget about it.

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I still had to continue my swimming lessons after that day. On the last day of class, we had to jump into the deep end from the diving board and swim to the edge, while the instructor stayed afloat with her own convenient rescue buoy.

Oh no. I was *not* jumping back in there.

There was an incentive, they told me. I would get a full-size donut after I swam out of the pool on my own and completed the course. Nope.

I climbed the three steps up the diving board to reach the long paddle that would drop me into the pool. Clinging to the railing, I refused to take another step. I refused to even get far enough onto the diving board that I could look down at the pool.

My father was there at my last lesson that day, sitting in a lawn chair with khaki shorts, brown flip-flops, and a grey t-shirt on. His arms and neck carried the echo of an old tan ingrained in his skin long ago from lack of sun protection, and he wore sunglasses that attached to his bifocals, a product of the early-2000's. His gray hair had been cropped into a sensible cut that needed no work upon waking up, but he still insisted on gelling it down each morning before work. Upon seeing my refusal to budge, he offered some encouraging words.

"Go ahead, sweetie! You can do it!" He shouted from his seat. Other parents joined in to try to coax me out to the edge. The instructor called my name and reminded me of the donuts. Students behind me began to grow impatient, but their complaints did nothing.

"She's taking too long," one grumbled.

"Can we just go?" another whined.

There was no way I was *jumping* back into this hellhole.

Finally, my dad drew himself out of his relaxed position and began to walk to the diving board halfway across the pool from where he had been seated. All the while he encouraged me with hands shooing me towards the edge and pleas, promising that it was so simple, so easy to do. All I had to do was jump. It wasn't that bad. He didn't understand. My father, the man who had grown up on the coast of southern California, racing his older brother to the ocean before sunrise every morning to go surfing in the icy Pacific Ocean. No. This man would not understand my fear of the water.

Parents scattered applause and cheers between his words, and the instructor gestured more aggressively for me to come to her in the pool. Again, I refused. When would these people learn? I weighed my options and decided I would rather walk away a failure than get back in the deep end. I turned to walk back down the steps but found the other students waiting eagerly on them, ready to take their turns at the diving board. A young boy in red swimming trunks and grey goggles blocked my way completely by having one hand on either side of the railing, one foot waiting impatiently on the diving board and the other poised for action on the final step.

My father reached the diving board as I had come to my decision and walked over to the railing on the side of the board where I was standing, folding his arms over it and laying his head down upon his hands to look up at me.

"Sweetie, would it be better if I just threw you in? Everyone else is waiting for their turn..." He implored in a hushed tone.

"I can't do it," I replied.

"Here, can I throw you in? That way you won't have to jump,

and we can get this over with," he said, raising his eyebrows and cocking his head to the side as if he had just had a wonderful idea. He leaned towards me as he said it, and a smile quirked his mouth upwards, as if this was some fun game he had just suggested, and not what I viewed as certain death.

"No!" I knew it was futile, but I tried to argue anyway. Every bone in my body was against this, and my muscles strained against my fear.

"Here, let me come up there and help you," he said as he quietly convinced the other children to move aside so he could walk onto the board with me. "I've got her!" He yelled down to the instructor. A resounding cheer erupted from the parents waiting anxiously for my turn to end.

"You can do it!" A large woman in a dark business suit and wide, square sunglasses yelled.

"Go on!" Another woman in a white skirt and a tennis visor cried.

My father took my hand and pried me from the safety of the railing, walking me halfway across the board until he could see the water below.

"Ready?" He questioned.

I gave a huff of anger and crossed my arms across my inflated chest in a defiant display. He chuckled and sighed, and I knew there was nothing more I could do. I was going into this pool one way or another. I looked up at him and as he lifted me under my arms into the air. At the sight of the water the panic returned in a wave of fear. I flashed back to when I was scrambling for the edge, choking and coughing, and my legs and arms flailed as I screamed in terror.

I gasped as I was heaved through the air and hurled like a wet rag. My body flew sideways, and I waited for the impact. Cold swept through me like needles as I shot down into the water, and I tried to focus on clawing my way to the surface as quickly as possible. When I finally brought my head above the surface my father was back in his seat, patiently waiting for me at the side of the pool. The instructor treaded water next to me as I doggy-paddled to the edge. This time I had the luxury of a ladder to use to climb out.

I stalked out of the pool, passed my father and passed the donut stand. When I was finally in the bathroom again, I began to hyperventilate, and hot tears rushed down my cheeks for the second time in this god-forsaken place. I remembered everything. My limbs went numb and my chest burned. I choked on air as if it were water. My vision was spotted with black and I tried to stay quiet so nobody would



know I was having this episode. I was too embarrassed for people to know that I, a big girl, was crying.

I must have been in there for too long, because when I walked out, my dad was standing outside the entryway, looking worried. I avoided making eye contact with him and only asked for my froggy towel. The towel that had been a quiet comfort through all of this, the symbol that I was done with the pool that day.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?” His most common question when I cry, even to this day. He stretched out his arms to me and I collapsed into them, sobbing. I refused to tell him the truth. I was too ashamed. Too ashamed to raise my head and explain that I was afraid of the water, that I was panic-stricken at the sight of the pool, at the mere *thought* of that calm, contained body of water. What would he say? This man who was only truly at home with waves crashing down on his head, with salt water in his eyes, his hair, his nose. The pool lay still, watching me silently, menacingly, as I let myself melt into a sniffling, choking bucket of liquid in my father’s arms.

“I hated it,” was the only answer I gave him.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, I didn’t know it was that bad. I wouldn’t have made you do it if I knew it scared you so much,” he whispered. He rubbed my back to try to calm me down and waited for my sobs to subside into quiet gasps for air. He’s a kind man. He always has been. But I wasn’t going to worry him with the truth of what had happened to me.

I accepted my lie that it was the diving board that I hated so much. It was the height of the diving board. Nothing more. I worked hard to forget it, but the echoes of that moment still ring true in my heart thumping wildly inside my chest every time I swim into a deep body of water. It haunts me with my reluctance to submerge my head, with the lump that I swallow every time I expect land beneath my feet and find nothing but water, nothing but a thick liquid swishing between my paddling feet.