

COME SWIMMER

Rebecca Arrowsmith

I count Grandmom's laps as a woman my age watches her toddler *kick, kick, kick* along the pool's perimeter. Water contains my grandmother in a way that nothing else can. She is confined to a space, a lane, an obvious suggestion of direction. And she can, without me getting anxious about her slipping on a stair or stealing from a stranger or getting lost in the aisles, just *go*.

Every moment outside of the pool requires me to be hyperaware. I strategically place her comb and powder in our locker so that she'll see them right away. I unclasp bras — hers, then mine. She may open another swimmer's locker and, boobs dangling, I pull her arm before she stuffs that foreign pair of socks into our bag again. I tug the swimsuit up her legs, or off; sometimes while mine still rests at the torso.

She may befriend a little girl and they play hide and go seek in the locker room. They are giggly and talkative and sometimes unknowingly rude, but the ladies seem to understand. They smile at me. Especially the older ones. They say, "I wish I had a daughter like you", or "My goodness, she is so lucky to have you." But they have no clue what this is. They don't know — if I were keeping score — that this wouldn't even begin to cover it.

“No! You’re kidding!” Grandmom says.

No, I am not kidding. You swam three laps.

“I did not swim that many laps. No way!”

You did. I promise.

“I’m doing another because I don’t think you’re right.”

Okay, Grandmom.

On the pool steps, she might high-five whichever stranger wades in. We see the same faces week after week. I wonder what the woman with the toddler wonders about her, about me. How different our lives are.

As a girl, I remember watching old women do aerobics at the YMCA. The pool in an echoey dome, clammy and deceptively cold. I hated swim lessons. Instead of swimming laps, I’d dip below the lane divider and watch the old women underwater, their loose limbs akimbo flapping. The other girls were such good swimmers. How did they push down on water like that? As long as I got from one side of the pool to the other without drowning, it doesn’t matter how I got there.

It was the spring of 2001. I know that because my mom spent a lot of time in Atlanta, watching her brother’s wife — Grandmom’s daughter-in-law — die. And it finally happened. Leslie died while I was at swim practice. Within the year, my mom, my brother and I would spend a lot of time visiting my uncle and my cousin in Atlanta.

At their house, Leslie became a closet of clothes, some zipped up in garment bags. Luggage, an overflowing Beanie Baby collection, and lighthouse trinkets of varying size, colour and style. They lined the baseboards. They made indentions in the guest room carpet. I’d never seen anyone collect things. I had so many questions. Why Beanie Babies? Why lighthouses? In hindsight, she probably collected Beanie Babies for the same reason everyone did in the 90s: She thought that they’d be worth something.

My last memory of Aunt Leslie might have been waving to unidentifiable figures on a departing cruise ship. My uncle took her on that cruise, just the two of them I've been told, as something special. A goodbye to the water, maybe. My brother and I spent that week at the beach with our cousin. I remember playing mermaid by myself in shallow pools, wads of sand getting stuck in the crotch of my bathing suit. At night, we slept in sleeping bags on the floor.

Sometimes I imagine myself on that cruise ship deck. It appears overcast, where temperature doesn't exist. Leslie and I overlook the water in lounge chairs. I have so many questions. How can a dying person look at the ocean? Look into everything and only see ripples collapse into nothing? I ask her why she loves lighthouses so much and she conjures a response, so loaded with meaning: "because they'll tell you where to go when the waves get rough."

With white plaqued laughter, Alzheimer's Disease invades my grandmother. Clouds her up. She walks in circles, "piddles around," as she would say, slamming the cabinets. She tries to fit bedsheets in the dishwasher; places empty glasses in the refrigerator. I find a forced roll of white trash bags on the toilet paper holder and think, as I often do: *Well, she was close.*

Daily, Grandmom asks if I've read *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. How many times will she ask me that? How many times will she say, "I have a copy around somewhere"? And I reply that I have it. And she asks why. You gave it to me. "I don't believe that I did." You did, I say. She gave me her copy years ago. I read it while studying abroad. I tell her: You gave me your copy years ago. I read it while studying abroad. Remember?

I never do give the book back. I'm afraid that she'll lose it. Also, I want it. I want it after she's gone. She's halfway there already. "When I finished it, I closed the book and just..." she folds her hands neatly in her lap, straightens her spine. "...sat."

I reread the fourth section of *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, the last act. It is foreboding — the swimmer, a salmon fish, will return to its home river to die. This is where we seem to dwell these days, the moments of in-between, where "the river that passes, and the river not yet reached are one and the same."

The grandmother I remember from my childhood feels ethereal, like a woman that I invented in my fantasies but who never really existed. She became an echoey wash of who she'd been. And I continue to take stock of the parts of her that die in a way that is bizarrely baptismal. Forcing myself into a thousand living funerals, I say goodbye to a piece of her, watch her submerge and then emerge from the water as someone a little less.

She doesn't even know it: we are living her fourth act.

Come swimmer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Arrowsmith is a writer from Atlanta, GA. She currently teaches and studies Creative writing at the University of South Florida. Her work is often an attempt to explore tenebrific relationships by illumination, education and candor.