

Kobus Moolman

THE SWIMMING LESSON

to Julia

24° C

Her name was Maggie. She smelled of cigarettes not perfume. She held me in her arms. And I floated.

Lap 1

I would have never dared call her by her name. Though she insisted. I was brought up properly. I called all women older than myself Tannie. And all older men Oom. She was nobody's Tannie though. So we settled on Auntie. Auntie Maggie.

Lap 3

They lived next door. Auntie Maggie and Uncle John, who had been stricken with polio as a young man and played the drums in a jazz band in his spare time, and their two daughters, Rayne, who was the same age as my older sister and teased her mercilessly, and Janine, who was two years younger than me. There was also a relative of Aunt Maggie's who stayed over with them, although an infrequent visitor. I never knew his name. His real name that is. I only ever called him by his stage name. I was allowed to. It would have been strange calling him Oom. Oom Tickey the Clown.

Lap 5

Tickey was a midget. I think I only met him once. When he visited next door. And I was about to have my lesson. He was sitting on the low wall of the veranda. A cigar in his one hand and a quart of beer in the other. He was staring off into the distance and only nodded when Auntie Maggie introduced me. I saw him more frequently in his shows though. When the Big Top visited town. The Boswell-Wilkie circus with its lions and its elephants and its white horses with plumed headdresses and coiffed tails and its trapeze artists swinging through the air in shiny gold costumes. And the ubiquitous smell of popcorn and sawdust and animal shit.

Lap 7

My costume was black. It was tight. It squeezed my testicles. It had a white drawstring that I tied in the front in a bow. The way I did on my boots. I would put my costume on at home. And then walk next door. Up the long gravel driveway just in my small costume and my big black boots and with a towel around my shoulders. And no matter how carefully or slowly I walked, the gravel always made a loud noise beneath my big boots. And made me feel as if all the eyes in the world were watching me.

Lap 9

I also had water-wings. That I carried in my hand. They were made of very thin plastic. Mine were blue. My sister's were red. Although she did not use hers anymore. She did not need them. You put your arms through them and then pushed them right up to the top of your arm, around your biceps, and then Auntie Maggie would blow through the small clear valve and they would puff up quickly and become tight. Your arms would stick out like a scarecrow then. But it was better than drowning Auntie Maggie said, so I must just shaddup. Auntie Maggie used to say shaddup quite a lot. Especially to the two girls. And even to Uncle John. My mother would have never said that to my father. I don't know what would have happened if she had.

Lap 11

Some kids also wore a plastic inflatable ring around their middle. Together with their water-wings. I didn't have one. I thought they were for sissies. But I had seen children got up in this way somewhere. I can't be certain where though. It can't have been at the public pool in Pine Street because I'd only ever gone there years later as an adult. When I watched the boys jumping off the high-diving board. (I couldn't even bring myself to use the small one.) *Check me! Check me! Check me!* they always shouted. Before plummeting through the air like bright red stones. And there was an older woman who walked around in a bikini unaware that her pubic hair was sticking out of the side of her costume. I wasn't sure whether to look or to look away. But I was glad that for once at least somebody else was being stared at.

Lap 13

I was forever losing my water-wings. That's what my mother said. You are forever losing your wings, you nincompoop. I swear you'd lose your head

if it wasn't attached to your body. That made me laugh. The thought of me walking around without a head. Bumping into things and falling over. More so than usual.

Lap 15

Auntie Maggie wore an old black one-piece costume. It was rough and smelled of mothballs. Even in the water. She wore this when she gave me my lessons. But one day when I was looking over the concrete wall that separated our two yards (I think I was practising spying) I saw her and the two girls. They were all wearing bikinis. Brightly coloured tops and bottoms. My father said it was shameful for women to walk around like that. They may as well be in their underwear. That's what my father said. My sister had a blue one-piece costume with little daisies up the side. And a little white skirt sewn around the bottom.

Lap 17

It was a circular plastic pool, reinforced with a wire frame. The pool was sunk into the ground except for the last foot or so which was bordered in bricks. The water was cold always. And green. Not from neglect. But from the reflections of the shrubs and the bushes that grew close and overhung the water in some places. Like an exotic island advert at the cinema. Complete with cigarettes. And everybody walking about barefoot in brightly coloured costumes. Laughing.

Lap 19

Auntie Maggie smoked cigarillos. I can't remember what brand they were. I think it sounded foreign. Like the name of an imported car. But perhaps I'm getting confused with the green Chev El Camino that Uncle John owned. (I don't think that car was imported though.) It had a white canopy at the back. And once I drove in the back with my sister and with Rayne and Janine. I can't remember where we were going. Maybe to town. To the library or to King's **sports** to buy a set of tennis balls or a cricket bat. It would definitely not have been to Sunday School. My mother said that although they were nice people, Auntie Maggie and Uncle John were not saved. They took the name of the Lord in vain. And they drank alcohol. So we shouldn't spend too much time with them. But I didn't know what she meant by saved. Auntie Maggie certainly saved me by teaching me to swim. I remember you had to climb over the tail-gate of their car because it could

not open. Maybe it was broken. Maybe it was just stuck. I can't remember. But if it was stuck Uncle John could have opened it because he had very strong hands. So I don't know. Uncle John played the drums so maybe that made his hands strong. Also maybe because he walked with crutches.

Lap 21

I didn't need to use crutches all the time. Like Uncle John. I only used them after an operation. To my ankle or my knee. When my leg was in plaster-of-paris and I was not allowed to put any pressure on it. I hated the wooden ones that came under your arms and made you walk like a penguin. The best ones were the silver aluminium ones that clipped around your biceps. They were very light. Which was good. But they made a metallic clicking noise when you walked. So that when you walked down the school corridor you knew that everyone knew you were coming.

Lap 23

In biology they taught us that about seventy percent of the human body is water. In geography we learned that the earth is actually more liquid than solid. That all the planets and the stars and the asteroids and the moons float about in space as if on a dark tide. Carried away further and further from our tiny beginnings. I liked all these ideas though I didn't understand them. I liked to think that I wasn't walking. That I wasn't even ever falling. But that all the time I was floating. Suspended really. Like one of those trapeze artists in their gold costumes who came on after Tickey the Clown had tripped over his shoes. And fallen flat on his white face.

Lap 25

Auntie Maggie's skin gave off the smell of tobacco. The way other women's skin smelled of soap. Or onions. Or sour milk. Or Johnson & Johnson's baby powder. The way my mother did. Because my father got hay-fever from all perfumes and scented soaps. Except Lifebuoy. Which my mother refused point-blank to use. That's soap for poor people she said. Who live in the square railways houses in Prestbury. Or in Oribi Village. Where her parents lived.

Lap 27

There are a whole lot of different types of cigarette smell. There's the smell on your shirt after you've been in a busy bar all night. There's the smell of

the ashtray in your car after you've been to the beach for a weekend with your friends. Then there's the smell of your grandparents' house. They drank tea and smoked cigarettes and played cards all day. So the smell was part of the house itself. Part of the wallpaper. Part of the linoleum floor. In Oribi Village. But then there's also another type of cigarette smell. A smell you sometimes remember very clearly. And sometimes forget. The smell of smoky hair. Long dark hair tied up in a bun. Or loose at night falling down the back of a long white gown. A thin gown that slides up eagerly over long strong legs. Up. Up. Up.

Lap 29

Kick! Kick! Kick! Kick! Kick! Auntie Maggie shouted in her gruff smoky voice. *Lift your head up. Up! Up! Up!* As I floated in her arms. On the green water. In her strong, bare arms. Up and down.

Lap 31

Up and down on the dark green waves. Up and down. Up and...

Lap 33

Below me the water is clear. I can see the white rectangular tiles on the bottom. The sun slides bright yellow discs rapidly across the bottom. Like a game. My arms are strong. They pull me through the water. They are doing all the work. My legs drag behind me. *Kick, kick kick*, Maggie used to say. In her gruff voice. But my legs were stronger then. They're worn out now. Forty years later. It's all I can do to keep them straight out behind me. To stop them sinking and slowing me down.

Lap 35

Operations are meant to fix you. But after thirteen operations I think I'm actually worse off. I can't run as I used to be able to do when I was a child. I can't jump. Never mind hop. I remember Rayne once telling me (this was before Maggie got cancer and died, before John re-married and they moved away) that her father was fine before he went into hospital. He went in to have some very minor surgery. Appendix or tonsils or something equally inconsequential. And he came home paralysed from the waist down with polio. I don't know how that happens. Just one of those things, my mother always used to say when she was trying to explain the inexplicable. Just one of those things. Like why some children are born normal and others

are born with cleft palates or with holes in their heart or with water on the brain. Which isn't really water at all but actually cerebrospinal fluid — the clear fluid that surrounds the brain and the spinal cord.

Lap 37

I'm coming up to the end now. Just four more laps to go. Strange the kinds of things that go through your head when you're swimming up and down, up and down, in a public pool. When you were at school, and it came to the swimming lesson, you always had to ask permission to get out ten minutes before everyone else so that you had enough time to put on your boots. 'Please Miss...Please Sir...' Rushing, rushing. And then the lace snaps because you pulled it too hard. Or it comes out of one of the eyelets and you can't push it back because the plastic seal at the end has broken and the lace has frayed. Panic stations, your mother always called it. And then after John and the girls moved away, if you wanted to swim, you had to go across the road to the Dewar's. They were an elderly couple who had erected a circular plastic pool behind their house. The pool was not sunk into the ground, like Maggie's pool (I call it Maggie's pool for convenience, because of course it did not belong to her but to the whole family). There was a long ladder that you had to climb in order to get into the pool. The ladder was aluminium. In summer it got so hot that it burned your hands and the soles of your feet. Do you remember, there was a strip of black slasto paving around Maggie's pool? The paving got very hot in summer too. But you usually took off your boots sitting on the grass and then only had two or three steps on the hot slasto before you got to the pool. Where Maggie was already waiting for you. Smelling of cigarettes not perfume.

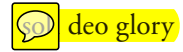
Lap 39

Auntie Maggie got cancer. Cancer was a swear word in our house. Because my mother's parents both succumbed to it. It was like saying shaddup. Auntie Maggie got thin. She stopped smoking. I stopped going over to her house for swimming lessons. When I saw her I wanted to shout at the top of my voice *Shaddup! Shaddup! Shaddup!* Just so that she would hear me above the noise of the disease that was eating through the tissue and the nerves in her liver and in her pancreas.

Lap 40

Maggie saved me. By teaching me to swim. Although nothing could save her from what was in her bloodstream. When I swam then I no longer walked lopsided. I no longer dragged my right foot. My right knee no longer buckled at every step. I no longer fell over. Flat on my face. Because I floated instead.

Finish.



—KOBUS MOOLMAN—

There is a poem on my laptop I started ten years ago. And have not been able to complete. It is a poem about water and about death. About a very good friend, a poet and musician, who drowned himself in the ocean. It is a poem about my own relationship with water, a medium which allows me a grace and strength and speed in my body which I have not been able to achieve elsewhere.

Because I have not been able to write that poem (and may never, I suspect), because I find swimming easier than walking, and because I seek to speak more closely in the language of my own arhythmic body, I decided to write a story instead that would somehow draw all of these ideas together.

But with the added element of memory. Not memory as the recovery of fact or memory as mechanism for releasing actuality. But memory as what Michael Hamburger, the German poet and translator, called “the darkroom for the development of fictions.”

In this way, “The Swimming Lesson” is more evocation than autobiography, more a kind of conjuring or calling up than an act of mimesis. The story works with what we usually term real-life characters (including myself), but it is not interested in what really happened. It is interested instead in how the past (childhood) intersects with the present, swims alongside the present, and also how the present (the adult swimming his daily lengths in the pool) makes the past understandable and even bearable.