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**A wonderfully amusing, timeless story written by a grateful aquaphobic whom Christina cured …**

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**Little Beast: A Biography**

When I was very small, a beast took up residence inside me. I can’t say where exactly. At first, his presence was only a common childish fear of the water. He was unobtrusive. He was easy to appease: I never went out beyond my knees at the beach and I faked a well-timed flu each March on the day of the swimming carnival.

As I grew, so did my beast. Every time I refused to get in the pool; every time I opted to walk along the sand while the others sploshed in the froth; every time my Dad tried to carry me out beyond my depth to feel the surge of the surf from the safety of his arms and I squirmed and kicked out of terror rather than gleeful protest, my beast gained strength and settled in. He sensed I was unlikely to put up a fight and so he went from pesky tenant to immovable squatter.

He set to work convincing me that water was sinister, malevolent. Specifically, he was of the opinion that there was nothing more dangerous or unnatural, than submerging my face. For thirty years now I’ve let my secret beast have things his way.

An offshoot of aquaphobia, my fear of getting my face wet has been a source of humiliation for as long as I can remember. Imagine. A thirty-year-old Australian who has never willingly put her face in the water, never learned to paddle, to kick, to stroke. I had tried to float on my back on occasion, but I felt the water lapping at the base of my skull and a few seconds was all I could manage.

When I reveal the truth to anyone, which is rare, the first question is where did the fear come from? I still can’t answer that. Apparently I witnessed my sister almost drown when I was very young although I don’t remember it. I’m not sure how much truth is in this particular instalment of the Nelson Family Chronicles but I have leaned on it heavily as an excuse if people ever probe.

What happens when I get in a pool? In the ocean? First of all, my fear surfaces as a mild surge of adrenaline and a sudden need to piss. Then I stay where it’s shallow and I wince dramatically when someone goes in for the good-natured face splash, or looks as though they’re about to, or when I suspect them of wanting to, which is constantly. And I survey my surroundings: there are ten-year-old kids doing handstands, their legs poking up like reeds. There are teenage girls trying to topple each other from the shoulders of their boyfriends. There are sixty-year-old men making their way down the slow lane like big-bellied tadpoles. And in a final attempt to get me out of there, my beast says: they’re all looking at you. They’re all wondering why there is a grown woman in a bikini, wide-eyed and stock-still by the steps, blocking everyone’s way. They know.

On top of the fear that breeds humiliation that breeds secrecy, the worst part of being a non-swimmer is The Part Where You Miss Out on All the Fun. As kids, my brother and sister would fling their towels onto the sand and charge towards the ocean leading with their grins. They would challenge each other to run into the surf until they lost their footing and felt the swoosh of water overhead. I stayed on the sand collecting shells, cursing that cowardly beast as it tried to convince me that the construction of a pippy necklace was just as fun as swimming out beyond the breakers.

The joylessness continued past childhood and interrupted every summer, every beach holiday of my adult life. Four years ago I went to the Maldives for a friend’s wedding. From the back deck of their bungalow, it was possible to wade into the Arabian sea where the water was so clear, they could count the blue and yellow stripes on the flanks of the fish waggling at their ankles. Come and snorkel, they said. Don’t you want to see the coral? Who wouldn’t want to see the coral? Instead I sat on the back step, committed to documenting their shenanigans by taking artful photographs, which they were having too much fun to do themselves.

Two months ago I was given a rare opportunity to confront my fear. I was travelling on the South West Coast of Sri Lanka and I met Christina, an English swimming teacher and lifesaver. We were guests at the same lunch and, as we passed bowls of coconut sambal and cashew curry across the table, I confessed. I let her see my beast. The whole thing: I’m afraid of the water. I’m horribly afraid. I’ve never learned to swim. Never really put my head in. She looked at me with stern and tired eyes. She said did you know that in Sri Lanka alone, women and girls accounted for eighty per cent of drownings in the Tsunami?

When Christina heard this statistic in 2004, she packed up her life and moved to Sri Lanka where she began to offer free swimming lessons to women. She is a tenacious believer in the right of every man, woman and child to learn what she terms the basic life skill of water safety and is visibly distressed by how few Sri Lankan women ever do. They don’t like to bare so much skin. They have no time. They see swimming as a frivolous hobby and its relevance to their lives and landscape is lost.

My humiliation was refreshing to Christina: “If only I could get the women over here to feel that”, she said. “They don’t even understand that this is a basic life skill they should already have.” She asked me how long I was staying in Sri Lanka (a month) and said she wanted to send me home a swimmer.

The next morning I stuffed a towel in my backpack and caught a bus to the coastal village of Ahangama where Christina lives and teaches. Unaccustomed to packing swimmers (they barely ever got wet; even purchasing them was a pointless and depressing excursion), I stood on the side of Christina’s pool in a singlet and knickers.

It was just the two of us. My humiliation had no place there. But of course the humiliation was never anything more than an excuse. The real obstacle was my fear, my weighty beast, indulged for so long now that he was beginning to outgrow me.

Christina held my hand as we waded. This was to convince my fear-riddled body and I that the entire pool, from one end to the other, was no higher than my waist.

We started small: splash your face as though you’re washing it. Put your mouth in. Now your nose. Try blowing out.

The first time I put my whole face in the water, she had to hold both my hands. And we’re not talking hold your breath and sit on the bottom of the pool. I was standing, feet planted, bending forward at the waist, being asked to dip my mouth, nose and eyes in for no more than a second. I clenched her hands. I said “okay” far too many times, and then I did it.

A few more goes at that, a bit more breathing out underwater, and then a demonstration of the mushroom float. A mushroom float, for those of you whose learn-to-swim days are far behind you, is when you bend forward at the waist, put your face in the water and pull your knees up to your chest. What automatically happens is that you tip ever-so-slightly forward, your back makes an arc like a mushroom top above the water and, after rocking back and forth for a few moments, your body finds its natural buoyancy level and settles on the surface, face in, hugging your knees. Face In.

When Christina demonstrated this, my beast, lulled by inaction for so long now, was awakened and palpable in my body. My breath changed. My rib cage stiffened and expanded. I was tensing the muscles in my face to avoid crying in front of a near stranger. I almost got out of the water. I had to cry. I needed to piss. I wanted to stop. Christina, floating face down, her shorts bloated and bobbing, looked to me exactly like a dead body. She stood up calmly. Without realising, I had backed away and was gripping the edge of the pool.

I shook my head and told her I couldn’t do it. In that moment, I believe Christina saw the full scale of the fight ahead of her. Every morning for three weeks I went to Christina’s pool. It took eight lessons before I was able to do a mushroom float. And it took fourteen lessons for Christina to confess that – in terms of the specific face-in-the-water phobia – I was the single most fearful student she had encountered in over twenty years of teaching swimming. By that time, I could do a semi-passable backstroke.

I still approach water with trepidation. The beast’s not dead. But he doesn’t live here anymore. Instead he comes to meet me like a reflection as I lower myself into a shallow end, as I wade out beyond my chest to where I can now safely float. And then, a little more reluctantly than he came, he goes away. Although not for good.

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And the humiliation is fading. Not only because I’m finally learning to swim, but because I’ve named its source. In the past two months I’ve told more people about my fear of water than I have in thirty years: in the face of all this naming and shaming, the burning secrecy I felt for thirty years has lost its stronghold and will – I hope – continue to weaken.

As for The Part Where You Miss Out on All the Fun, things are looking up. I’m not about to run at the ocean until I’m out of my depth, and if someone tried to wrestle me off a pair of shoulders into the deep end of a pool, I think I would be inconsolable with panic and urgently need a toilet.

But I’m starting to understand. I know now how it feels to glide on the surface of the water, face in, arms outstretched like a pencil. I know how the thick black stripe on the bottom of the pool becomes strange through the cloudy blue; this mundane fact is still a novelty to me.





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 I can lie on my back like a star. When the water nibbles the base of my skull I know it has no interest in swallowing me whole. Fifty metric tonnes of water and me, a small body, lighter still for the exorcising of a secret demon, drifting across the surface like a feather.

*Lucy Nelson is a writer, editor, dancer-in-the-dark and carbohydrate enthusiast. After studying Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University and completing an editorial internship with Sleepers Publishing in Melbourne, her work has appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Big Issue among others. Lucy is the 2014 recipient of the Templeberg residential writing fellowship.*

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