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## SWIMMING LESSONS

Judy Belk

It was 4:30 on Thursday afternoon. Naomi was trying to decide if she should attend the second class of her weekly adult swimming lessons. She had about five minutes to make up her mind, catch her train, drive to the Y, change, and-practice her assigned homework of blowing bubbles underwater. Naomi had neglected the assignment because when she left class last week she wasn't sure she would return. She was still undecided.

She took a deep breath and tried to remember all the reasons she had thought taking swimming lessons was such a good idea. Reason #1: she couldn't swim. Reason #2: She loved being around the water, and was tired of being afraid of something she loved so much. Reason #3: She wanted to prove her mother wrong. Naomi was raised by the motto "Black hair and water don't mix." And for most of Naomi's childhood the two didn't. Her mother went to great lengths to insure that, with the exception of a monthly shampoo, water would never touch Naomi's hair. Learning to swim had been out of the question.

Naomi still wasn't sure about the class. Neither the teacher nor the students were exactly what she had been expecting. The teacher was 65, overweight, white, a matronly grandmother-type named Baxter who seemed oblivious that half of her butt was falling out of her yellow striped bikini bottom.

Not once during the class did Baxter get in the water. She instructed them from the edge of the pool. While she seemed nice enough, she didn't quite fit the image of a swim instructor that Naomi had in mind. But Naomi had immediately felt guilty about being so judgmental. As part of Naomi's self-improvement plan, she was working hard on avoiding rushing to judgment so quickly, when faced with people or situations that made her uncomfortable.

So what was it about Baxter that rubbed her the wrong way? Was it her age, her weight, or the fact that she sat on her ass during the entire class? Naomi hoped it was the latter because she didn't like to think of herself as a person who disliked someone just because they were old or fat. Now laziness, especially when it's on your dime...that seemed a perfectly fine nonjudgmental response.

There were five other students in the class, including two other black women. Another surprise. Naomi had just assumed that she would be the only black person. Again, Naomi found herself trying to figure why that, too, had made her uneasy. After all, did she think she would be the only black person in town who wanted to learn how to swim? One had a head full of blonde waves splattered on the top of her head with the help of a black rhinestone hair band; and the other had long dreadlocks pulled back in a ponytail. Naomi's chemically

processed hair was protected by not one, but two snug swimming caps. There were three other students including two white women, and a short Asian man who was wearing such large oversized swim trunks that Naomi found herself wishing he would exchange bottoms with Baxter for the physical and visual comfort of all concerned.

Most of the first class was taken up with introductions. Baxter had assembled the class in the shallow part of the pool. She, of course, sat on the edge. Everyone was asked to share their names, and why they were interested in learning how to swim. When it was Naomi's turn, she shared the first two reasons, but decided to skip the part about her mother.

The last person to speak was the black woman with dreadlocks.

"My name is Racism," she said in a surprisingly cheerful voice.

Heads and eyes immediately went down as if everyone collectively had to look for something important at the bottom of the pool. When Naomi got up enough nerve to slowly raise her head, she caught the eye of Blondie, who was rolling her eyes and shaking her head. Naomi quickly looked away.

Baxter just smiled her politically correct smile, and started writing on her clipboard, "Racism, that's nice. Now do you spell that: R-a-c-i-s-m?"

"Yes."

"Oh, just like it sounds," replied Baxter in a too cheerful voice.

"Yes, and that's just like it is," said Racism in an equally cheery voice.

Right on cue, heads and eyes went down again looking for that imaginary something on the bottom of the pool.

Then Baxter did the only thing that she could do. She changed the subject.

"So, Racism, tell us why you're interested in learning how to swim."

Without missing a beat, Racism excitedly shared her plans.

"I recently purchased a thirty-two-foot sailboat and in six months I'm hoping to sail it solo to the South Pacific. I thought it would be helpful to learn how to swim before leaving."

There was a long silence. Naomi avoided looking in the direction of Blondie and tried her best to stay nonjudgmental.

"Well, you've come to the right place. Let's get started. Okay everyone, on the count of three, blow bubbles!"

And that was that. A black woman named Racism who couldn't swim getting ready to sail solo to the South Pacific in a thirty-two-foot sailboat, and the only response from a group of five seemingly intelligent adults was to stick their heads underwater and blow bubbles.

At the end of the class, Baxter had asked each of them to pair off to practice floating. By default, Naomi had ended up with Racism. The two white girls moved as far away from Racism as they could. Blondie grabbed the Asian guy by his trunks and literally pulled him over to her side of the pool. Naomi and

Racism both managed uncomfortable, weak, "oh well" smiles. They had only ten minutes to practice before Baxter blew the whistle signaling the end of class and reminding them to practice their bubbles and floating throughout the week.

Now, with the clock in her office ticking away, Naomi knew her indecisiveness about returning to class was all wrapped around her conflicted feelings about Racism. She felt both curious and intimidated by this strange sister. Maybe swimming and Naomi were just not meant to be. First, she had to deal with her mother, now she had to deal with Racism.

In the end Naomi decided to go to class. After all, she had paid for six weeks of swimming lessons. It was too late to get her money back, and she was still determined to prove her mother wrong.

She boarded the crowded standing-room-only subway, slowly making her way to the back of the car. As she tried to balance her briefcase and gym bag, a tap on her shoulder startled her. She almost didn't recognize the smartly dressed Blondie with her hair now careening down her shoulders. As Blondie threw back her hair, narrowly missing swiping off the glasses of an older white man, she whispered to Naomi, "So did you practice blowing your bubbles?"

Surprised, Naomi smiled. "Oh, hi. No, I was a bad girl. I didn't do my homework. I wasn't even sure I was coming back today."

"Do you think our friend will be back?"

Naomi pretended to look confused, but knew exactly who she was talking about.

"You know," Blondie leaned over to whisper again, "Miss Racism. You have to admit that's some weird shit."

"Yeah. It is pretty strange. But maybe her parents were trying to make a statement."

"Please. Statement my ass. Now what parent with any common sense is going to name her little black girl Racism? That's some shit she dreamed up. I bet her name was Mary or Bertha."

Blondie paused and laughed out loud. "Now I'll take that back. If my parents named me Bertha, Racism might not sound so bad. But you get my point. She made that shit up herself. And it makes us all look stupid. And I hate looking stupid—especially in front of white people."

"So you don't think that's her real name, huh?"

"Hell, no. If that's her real name, then I'm going to sail a thirty-two-foot boat across the Pacific by myself. You don't believe that shit, either, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't given it much thought. Why would she lie about something like that, though?"

Blondie pointed to her head. "Because, she's crazy. Crazy. Crazy."

As the train pulled into their stop, they began elbowing their way to the front of the train. Once outside, Blondie turned toward her. "Hey, I'm sorry I forgot your name."

"Naomi."

"Naomi. Now that's a nice name."

The next few swimming lessons were rough. Everyone seemed to have progressed to the deep end except Naomi. It wasn't for a lack of trying though. By the third lesson Naomi believed Baxter when she announced to the class that they were ready to take the plunge—in eight feet. Baxter sat in her usual place on the edge of the pool reassuring everyone that in her 30 years of teaching, everyone who went down always came back up.

Naomi thought those were pretty good odds, so when it was her turn to take the plunge, she closed her eyes, held her breath and jumped. She did go down. But she never came back up. As she panicked, and tried her best to get back to the surface that seemed miles away, she thought to herself what a silly place to die. At the bottom of the Eastside YMCA pool.

Eventually Baxter pulled her out and exclaimed to the entire class, "Well, I guess we got ourselves a real sinker here." She banished Naomi back to the shallow end of the pool to practice floating, telling her she would be over soon to check on her progress. Of course she never came. But Racism did.

Holding desperately to the edge of the pool, Racism slowly made her way to Naomi. "Hey, you want some company?"

"You sure you want to associate with us sinkers over here?"

"That wasn't a very nice thing for her to say. It's probably the first time in thirty years she had to get her fat ass in the water."

They both laughed and leaned back on the edge of the pool, kicking the water.

"But I think she might be right. I hit the water and I go right down. Remember years ago what some sports guy said—blacks just aren't buoyant. Maybe he was right."

"You know you can't let people define who you are or what you can or can't do—especially when they throw that racism stuff in your face."

There was a long silence. Baxter had dismissed the class, leaving only Racism and Naomi alone in the pool. Racism, staring straight ahead, broke the silence first.

"It's a reminder no matter where I am it always seems to find a way to creep into my life—usually uninvited."

"I have a feeling we're not talking about swimming anymore."

"I'm just answering the question you're dying to ask."

"Well, it must have been rough growing up with a name like Racism."

Racism burst out laughing, showcasing the whitest and straightest teeth Naomi had ever seen.

"Now Naomi, what mother in her right mind would name her little black girl Racism?"

Naomi almost said: And what grown woman would go around calling herself Racism if she didn't have to? But she didn't say what she was thinking. She was beginning to like this strange sister and she figured she would find out her full story sooner or later. She was right.

"I'm sure you're thinking—then why in the hell would anyone with any sense change her name from Sarabeth to Racism."

Naomi, relieved that it wasn't Mary or Bertha, didn't quite know what to say so she said what she was thinking.

"I didn't know about the Sarabeth part. It's a lovely name."

They slowly made their way out of the pool, shivering as they grabbed for their towels.

"Naomi, I loved the name Sarabeth. But I hate racism more. It's my way of keeping it on the agenda. Front and center."

"But that's an awful big burden for you to carry."

"It's a burden we all carry. I just force people to say what it is. Every time they say my name—maybe, just maybe they'll think about it. Hey I don't want to get all preachy. Besides, it's freezing. I need to get dressed."

The locker room was deserted. They showered quickly. Racism towel-dried her dreads and watched with amusement as Naomi first combed conditioner, and then detangling solution throughout her hair. She then leaned over the sink as she rinsed it all out under the faucet. Next came Naomi's megawatt blow-dryer and finally her hot curling iron.

"Naomi, you have to do this every time you go swimming? Have you ever thought about just going natural?"

"Well, I had a 'fro in college, but I just don't have the face for it. But this does get kind of old after awhile. You know what my theory is: as far as swimming and black women goes, it doesn't have anything to do with buoyancy. It's the hair thing. If we can just stop worrying about our hair, I'm convinced buoyancy will follow."

"Now you're talking, sister." They gave each other a high five.

"How about grabbing a cup of tea?"

"You're on."

Over the next six months, their friendship flourished. In spite of their different tastes in hairstyles, lifestyles and names—they developed a deep respect and affection for each other in selecting a road the other could admire from afar, but had no desire to travel. Racism was fascinated by Naomi's success in the corporate world and Naomi could only look on in amazement as Racism readied her boat for a solo Pacific voyage crossing. Racism also proved to be one of the most nonjudgmental individuals Naomi had ever encountered—always providing unconditional support. In that regard, she was a role model for Naomi.

Over time, Racism's name became a burden they both shared. Once when trying to get Racism's attention on a crowded street where they were

scheduled to meet for their weekly tea date, Naomi, standing in front of a new coffee café, spotted Racism across the street and without thinking yelled, "Racism, over here! Racism, over here!"

A hush came over the café and soon swept over the entire block. A nervous twenty-something red-faced white manager quickly appeared at Naomi's side whispering, "Ma'am I apologize if we've offended you in any way. We've just opened. We're an equal opportunity establishment. What can I do?"

Naomi just smiled and said, "Well, I'm glad to hear that. You keep up the good work. I'll make sure to pass the word."

Racism, with her dreadlocks swinging in the wind, ran across the street and greeted Naomi with a warm hug.

"This gentlemen wants to know if there's anything he can do for us."

Racism looked confused. "Two Chai with soy?"

The manager looked at both of them. "Is that all?"

"Yep, for the time being."

"Thank you so much. Thank you so much. We really are trying to do the right thing." Looking relieved, he quickly disappeared to place the order.

"What was that all about?"

"Take one guess. I guess you didn't notice the foot traffic coming to a dead stop, huh?"

Racism surveyed the crowd, noting a few remaining stares.

"Like I said. It keeps it front and center."

They both smiled.

Three weeks later Racism sailed for Marquesas Islands and Naomi sporting her new Afro, took her second plunge in the deep end. This time she came back up.