

SWIMMING WITH THE FISHES

It was hot. Incredibly hot. So hot it felt like the devil's armpit. I could hear the cicada bugs humming in the nearby bushes. Their endless drone, a constant source of irritation. The sun beat down relentlessly, and I felt the steady trickle of sweat pooling at the base of my spine. Nearby, I caught the unmistakable scent of someone barbecuing and wondered at their sanity.

I opened the sliding glass door to the patio deck further and rolled my wheelchair towards the railing.

The lake stretched out before me, a mixture of vivid blues, shimmering because of the heat. On the other side of the lake, I could hear children laughing and squealing as they played in the water.

How I longed to be in the water like the children, carefree and happy, ready to play for hours, cooled from the merciless heat of the day.

The water was less than a hundred feet away, yet it might have been a hundred miles. Before the accident, I had spent most of my free time swimming either in this very lake or, in inclement weather, at the local community pool in the nearby town. Water was my happy place. My source of peace, I could resolve my problems, magically heal my soul, and let my spirit soar, merely by immersing myself in the water's delectable freshness. It mattered not if the water was warm and inviting or cool and refreshing. In its depths, I was free and whole.

The accident had changed all that. I was now chained to my wheelchair, and as far as I was concerned, there might well have been a prison wall with barbed wire as a barrier between myself and the lake.

I raised my T-shirt and dabbed gently at my eyes, no point feeling sorry for myself, I thought. It did absolutely no good and just made me more depressed. I recognized the mood; I was settling nicely into a blue funk. I knew it, but lacked the initiative, motivation, or whatever to pull myself up by my bootstraps, as my father used to tell me as a child.

After the accident, my handyman, Craig, had built ramps both in front of the house and at the back of the house, where I now sat overlooking the lake. The front ramp was short and wide, and I could easily navigate it into my bungalow.

The back ramp that led all the way down to the dock was long and steep, with no handrails on the sides. I was terribly afraid of it. It rattled like a roller coaster on its rapid ascent or descent.

My navigational skills in my wheelchair were still rudimentary at best, and I found myself still bashing into coffee tables or doorframes daily. The death-defying descent on the ramp to the lake was far beyond my current skills. Face it, I was grounded.

Grounded by my fears and my limitations, of which there were many.

Thankfully, my neighbour and Craig's wife, Shelley, would stop by frequently and do much of my shopping for me while she was out and about.

I could always depend on my granddaughter, Briar, for trips to the doctor, dentist, physiotherapist, or to the pharmacy.

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Briar was as feisty and prickly as her name implied. She was young, studying her college courses online, working part-time, and keeping an eye on her Grandma. She and I got along like a house on fire; we had that warm, strong bond, with years of accepting each other's idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and foibles, of which there were many in both of us.

I accepted her for the fiery person that she had always been from birth. She was born with red hair and a fiery personality that is so often fairly or unfairly associated with it. Her doating, but somewhat overwhelmed parents, aptly named her Briar because she screamed throughout her brief stay in the hospital nursery.

Speak of the devil, I thought as her car pulled into the driveway. I recognized the sound of the motor, as I had driven this same car for years and had given it to Briar when the doctors had told me that I would never be able to drive again. Moments later, Briar came charging through the house like the whirlwind that she was. She came through the sliding glass doors onto the porch, slamming the door and making the glass rattle loudly.

"Hey Grammy," she called out and enveloped me in her habitual way, with a bone-crushing hug.

"What's you doin'?" she asked in her sing-song voice.

"Just looking at the water," I confessed, "and wishing... wishing." I sighed regretfully.

"I know, it's a scorcher."

"It feels like Hell's front porch. Did you come for a swim?" I asked, looking at her shorts and loose T-shirt with some band name that I had never heard of before.

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She laughed loudly and said, "Of course I did," as she grabbed the edge of her T-shirt, revealing her bathing suit underneath.

"Have fun, sweetie," I said. "I wish I could join you."

"Then so you shall," she said as she grabbed the back of my wheelchair and started pushing it quickly down the ramp towards the lake. Faster and faster, the chair hurdled down the ramp with Briar running full tilt behind it.

"Briar, what are you doing?" I yelled, hanging on to the armrests until my fingers dug into the leather.

"You've been stuck in this chair for too long. It's time you had some fun," was her impudent reply.

"But I can't walk," I protested.

"You don't have to; all you have to do is swim."

By this time, we had reached the dock, and with our ceremony, Briar rolled the chair to the edge and, with the momentum of our downward journey, tilted the wheelchair and upended me into the lake.

I felt myself sinking to the bottom. Although it was only a moment in real time, everything seemed to be playing in slow motion. In the crystal clear water, I could see the legs of the dock and the little fish that liked to play hide and seek in its shade. Was I about to die, would I also ... "sleep with the fishes?" Above the water, I could hear the sounds of Briar chortling loudly with her typical impish laughter.

I wouldn't say I exactly panicked; after all, water had always been my "safe place," but I must confess that for those few seconds when I "swam with the fishes," it really seemed to me that it was in both senses of the proverbial phrase.

My legs didn't miraculously come back to life; the paralysis was still there, but my arms, stronger after the long months of manipulating my wheelchair, propelled me to the surface.

I drew a deep breath, then exploded, "Briar, what the..."

"Grammy," she broke in excitedly, "you're doing it! You're swimming! You're treading water! You're swimming."

"Briar," I began again, much louder. She had really gone too far this time. She was such a presumptuous, brazen, inappropriate girl.

"You're fine, and if you would settle down for a moment, you'd realize it."

"But I'm paralyzed, don't you remember?" I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

"But otherwise, you are strong and healthy," Briar reasoned. "Besides, it's sooo hot today, and I know you were dying to get in the water."

I continued to tread water for a moment and realized I wasn't about to drown. At least not yet. The water was nice, more than nice, it was...wonderful. I tried to remain angry with her, but the water lifted my spirits as it always did, and once again I was... one with the water. My broken soul healed. I flipped over on my back and did the backstroke a little way in the water. My body was still buoyant even though my legs dragged a little in the water. However, my strokes were powerful, despite my inability to kick my legs. I flipped over again, trying out my Australian crawl. It was slower, of course, without my previous powerful kick, but all things considered, I was pleased.

There was a big splash beside me as Briar cannon balled into the water, almost on top of me.

"It's beautiful," she shouted.

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We spent a long time in the water, swimming, laughing, and playing. I had forgotten how good it was to laugh and move freely.

A sudden thought struck me.

"Briar," I asked. "How am I going to get out? How am I going to get back in my chair?"

Her face sobered for a moment, and her mouth formed an O. "Oh no! I guess I forgot about that," she said seriously. Suddenly, she shouted and laughed at my concerned face. "Just kidding. Dad's coming at 5:00."

Briar, in her own way, knew exactly the adventure I needed. It wasn't a grand adventure. But for me ... it was enough.