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How To Face Your Fear Of Water



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As A Child

You're shaking, your skin is gray-blue gooseflesh, matching the cloudy Illinois sky, and you can't see the bottom of the pool. Maybe there isn't a bottom. You're a third grader surrounded by kindergartners in your first swim lesson. The other kids — wild, joyful little animals — are aliens to you. You're the last kid to get in, when a smiling instructor comes over and makes you. You try not to cry.

The instructors lead the group in playing “ring-around-the-rosie.” For a minute, it seems fun. A game! Then you learn “Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down!” means dunking your head underwater. You've never dunked before. It feels like surrendering your senses, succumbing to death.

From this day on, bodies of water are your enemy.

When it's time again for the “ashes,” you fake lowering your body enough under the water to fool the instructors, but when the instructors squat down, you slowly rise for air. You think you are fooling them, repeatedly, every day, all week. You wish that instead of playing this game, you could play the one where you designate something as lava, and jump around to “keep off the lava.” The water would be the lava.

At the end of the week, you're given a progress sheet to give to your parents. It looks like a board game, with curvy arrow paths and cartoon drawings of kids at different swimming achievement levels. Yours marks you on the first step, where all the pawns would start (*if only it were a game!*). It is a drawing of a smiling child in the water, not exactly swimming. He's just existing, vertically; *flailing*, you guess, in the water. But, he's *smiling*. The level says you are “getting comfortable with water.” Baloney. You will never be

comfortable with lava. But your mom says she's proud of you, for getting in the water at all.

Your mom has her own struggles with the water. When she was a child, floating face down in a public pool, another kid jumped on her back, causing her to take in water, panic, and never set foot in anything deeper than a bathtub again. She had to face her own fears just in signing you up for these lessons, at your dad's prodding.

Every swim party invitation is met with dread. Your RSVP is "no" every time, from fourth grade to high school, and coming up with different excuses is exhausting: "We're busy," or even "I'm having my period and my mom won't let me wear tampons." What you wish you could say is "GO DROWN BY YOURSELVES, MORONS, NO THANK YOU."

You envision all your friends jumping into the water, carefree, and naive, like the ominous party scene in a horror film just before everyone gets slaughtered.

Finally, in tenth grade, in Missouri, you give in. You go to a friend's small party in her backyard pool. There are a handful of friends, and you trust them. You know you've been avoiding something they want to convince you is fun. There is a part of you that hopes maybe the water isn't so bad. "We can teach you!" they say eagerly. So many heroes.

You try. You *thrash*, and once you come up, you're met with silence and dropped jaws. You have managed to almost drown in three feet of water,

almost get eaten alive by the lava. “Told you,” you say, as if you know something about the water they don’t. As if the water has different physical rules for you, and chooses to be selectively cruel. You’re proudly unteachable.

As An Adult

After college, you move to the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes. You love it, except for two things: the winter weather, and the thousands of lakes. Everyone you meet is a native Minnesotan. Everyone you meet is comfortable with water. You know at least five people who have boats of some kind, and a dude who is a river guide, and another dude who does fucking competitive kayaking. Not even winter is a relief; these crazies drive their vehicles on the ice, for fun, or for fishing, *or you think, for falling through ice to drown*. You become a very indoor person and watch a lot of TV, taking refuge in imaginary settings.

You marry. You think about having kids. You don’t want to pass on your mother’s fear of the water to another generation, and watch pool party invites bring tears to your adult house. You want your future kids to enjoy lava as the water it was intended it to be.

You say this to your best friend. She confesses she also doesn’t know how to swim. You decide to try weekly semi-private swim lessons together, at a nearby swim school for children. Thankfully it’s late enough at night the pool is empty. You joke that you need a drink to relax, and offer to pose, with your friend, for an imagined brochure that features the two of you sipping

cocktails, advertising the adult lesson option. Your instructor finds this idea less funny than you and your friend do.

When you say you're afraid to put your head underwater, the instructor is surprised but patient, and lets you start by pouring water over your face, from a primary-colored plastic cup. This is what they do with frightened children, she explains. It's just like when you shower. You're not insulted. This instructor has instantly earned your trust.

By the way, your friend can actually swim. Maybe not perfectly, but, still.

Liar.

Sweet friend.

You go back weekly for months, together. One day you even swim a little, a few feet. It's exhausting and exhilarating. Your friend cheers!

And now that you've done it, you feel you've achieved your goal and never want to do it again. You stall. You're not sure it was worth how your heart felt when you did it, beating like a tribal drum warning of coming death.

Eventually your friend, who now works on triathlon swim training during your shared session, bows out. You thank her for the time she gave you. You quit together.

After having your child, back again in Illinois, you get brave again and inquire around about swim lessons. A fitness center reassures you over the phone, “all levels are welcome” and tells you you won’t feel pressured there. But two minutes into the first class, the instructor says, “Now float on your back” and your stomach flutters and your heart is in your throat and your eyes burn.

If you can’t trust something when you look at it, how can you trust it at your back?

You don’t comply. You wait for the instructor to notice your panic, and tell her the best you can do is pseudo-float on your back by the steps, holding onto the metal stair rail. She looks immediately exhausted.

You last a few more months, shifting from group lessons to private, without much success. Your instructor suffers a moment of despair in which she tells you to get in the shallow hot tub and ride a noodle around like an imaginary seahorse.

You decide this means she wants to quit you. You do not return.

After having another child, and sending your first child to her own lessons at age two at a child’s swim school, you inquire there if they give lessons to adults. They say yes; you sign up and try again.

You have to keep trying. You don't want your daughter or son to need your help in a pool one day and not be able to save them.

With three other strangers, you share a swim instructor. He's very attractive. He is also friendly, funny, and patient with your fears. You decide the time is right for you to transform into a mermaid. This time you will learn to swim. You will not disappoint him.

He disappears after three weekly lessons. His replacement says he has moved away. His replacement is... different. When you meet him, the word "weasel" comes to mind subconsciously. He's arrogant, and way too young. Is he even voting age? When you explain to him exactly how afraid you feel, he is not patient. He says, "I'm gonna push you. I'm your coach, that's what I'm here to do." You think "*Fuck you, Coach Weasel, hand over those swim noodles, they are my only advocates now.*"

You show up sporadically for lessons, on confident days, even though you pay for your absent days. And then an email arrives: the pool will no longer offer adult lessons. No reason is given. You know it's your fault, somehow. Maybe you didn't believe enough in the kindness of water. Maybe water, like Santa Claus, only works well if it senses people believe in it.

You decide not to give up lessons right now. You look into a swim center. The water is deeper, colder, and is not salt water like your kids' swim school pool. There are no blown up starfish hanging from the ceiling here. Instructors are independent contractors. You submit a request form, and ask for a

female. A man calls you, and you return his call after no women instructors call you.

In person, he is a talkative older man, and quirky. He teaches you some floating and freestyle strokes, you make some progress, but it's the same as with the other teachers — you show them you finally can do something and they immediately want you to move on. *“Why can't I just do this, repeatedly, until I'm bored, and no longer afraid?”* you think and sometimes say. Swim lessons are always frightening when right after you learn something it's time to push yourself out of the barely-comfort zone. Then the old man will go off on a tangent about how much he loves his karate class. How does it relate? You don't know. One day he shows off his karate moves on you just after the lesson when you're still in your suit, wet after class, trying to keep covered with a towel.

You want to be done with both swimming and surprise karate lessons.

Your husband can swim. On your tenth anniversary in Maui, your husband asks the hotel concierge about snorkeling. You tell the concierge you can't swim. The concierge tells you you can snorkel anyway, using a bodyboard and being led by one of the instructors. You're intrigued, and hate being a buzzkill. You decide to brave up. It's always easy at the sign up! The hard part comes later, the reality.

At the snorkeling orientation, there are two bodyboards, but you're not invited to use one, even though you've explained the concierge's promise. The two instructors offer you only a floatation belt for help. You have been

betrayed with no reason. You're in a group of ten people, and you're the only freak who's been tricked into registering for snorkeling when you can't swim.

You gear up, with the mask and the flippers and the stupid belt. Your husband is excited and asks an instructor to take your picture together. Later you will look at that picture and remark at your visible fear and anger — anger at yourself for signing up and not listening to your intuition.

You can't see with the mask, you can't walk with the flippers, and you're supposed to walk straight into the waves, with nothing to hold. As you trip over large rocks in your path with your sea monster feet, you hold back tears to prevent mask fogging and visual handicap. Your husband glances back at you. You look at him and just shake your head. "I can't," you mime, choking on the words. *Always this. Can't.*

Desperate to keep the group together, one of the instructors offers you the bodyboard now. You thank her throughout the whole session.

She tows you out toward the ocean. After some hyperventilating, learning to breathe in a snorkel, you eventually calm yourself. If nothing else, you have learned to calm yourself.

It's amazing, this view underwater. You're *flying*. The bottom of the ocean fades further and further away, and you don't fall. The instructors dive to bring up sea cucumbers and other creatures to observe and rest them on the bodyboard, right in front of you. A sea turtle comes nearby and you almost kick its face trying to maneuver away to give it space, because you have no clue how to move in water.

It is a beautiful mess.

Back at home, instead of being inspired to take more lessons, you decide you'll just bring a bodyboard everywhere. And what's the point of getting in a stupid pool with no chance of a sea turtle encounter?

As Both

Your daughter, having learned to swim, joins a swim team. There is a *whole team* of kids and parents who *celebrate water*. Lava lovers.

She glides across the water. She's actually pretty fast.

Your jaw drops open at this miracle.

Your daughter is not afraid.

Your daughter. Is not afraid.

Your son, now taking lessons, says he's afraid of the deep end.

You tell him that's okay. One day he won't be afraid.

And one day, he isn't. He's joyful, jumping in any chance he can.

And you're flying, the pull of your fears fading further and further away.

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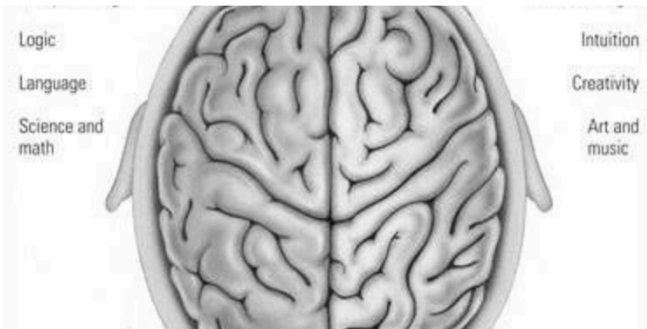
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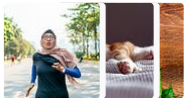
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