

# FICTION

## Swim Lesson

*Tim Tomlinson*

I can't swim. When I try, when I throw one arm out over my head and reach into the water before me, I start to sink at my middle, then my head, and by the time I switch to the other arm, which I see swimmers do—which *is* swimming—I'm thrashing and spitting and panicking and I reach down with my feet for the bottom. But today at the beach I discover that if I stay close to shore and extend my arms below the water's surface my fingertips can reach the bottom, and by pressing my fingers into the bottom my chest and head stay easily afloat. And further, by squeezing my fingertips toward my palms I propel myself forward, making it appear as if I'm heading in a direction that I actually determine. I *look* like I'm swimming.

"Mom," I call, "look."

Mom is right at the shore. When I'm in the water, she's never more than a few feet away. She wears dark green sunglasses and a rubber swim cap on her head, its smooth white surface ornamented with clusters of rubber flowers. She wears the cap more as a precaution than a necessity. She never enters the water past her knees. From that depth, she leans forward and splashes water on her chest. She looks up from her conversation with Mrs. Quillen, our neighbor. Mrs. Quillen wears a wide-brimmed straw hat and white ointment on her nose.

"I see you," she says.

"I'm swimming," I tell her. "Can you see?"

She says, "I can see."

"But where are your arms?" Mrs. Quillen says. She mimics the motion of swimming by rotating her shoulders and alternately reaching her arms forward into the air.

"I'm doing it this way," I tell her.

I turn myself around and head in the other direction.

Mrs. Quillen says, "Oh."

Mom says, "I didn't know you could swim."

“I taught myself.”

Mrs. Quillen says, “You didn’t take lessons?”

“I didn’t need to,” I tell her.

“Maybe you can teach my Dawn,” she says.

I say OK.

“But you won’t take her too deep,” Mrs. Quillen says, “will you?”

I promise I won’t.

Mrs. Quillen says, “She’s just a girl.”

I say I know.

I go back and forth a few more times. I think about how easy it is to look like you’re swimming. I think about how easy it is to fool Mom. I tell her something, she believes it. I’m not sure if that’s the same as lying. It’s how I stay out of trouble.

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The Quillens live across the street. Mr. Quillen works for the telephone company. Mrs. Quillen stays home and talks with Mom on the telephone. She stands at the Quillens’ picture window looking at Mom. Mom stands at our kitchen window looking back. Sometimes Dawn is in the front yard running through a sprinkler with George. George is seven, Dawn is five, I’m six.

One time I was in the Quillens’ house. Mrs. Quillen was at the picture window looking across the street at Mom in the kitchen. Dawn was in her room, “changing,” Mrs. Quillen said. When I went in, Dawn was on her bed. She had her t-shirt on, but no pants or underpants. She fell to her back, giggling and kicking at the air until her legs stopped and I looked at her and she looked at me looking at her for what felt like a very long time. Then Mrs. Quillen came in. “Off you go, Clifford,” she said. “Boys wait outside when girls are changing.”

The rest of that day was a blur, a let-down. We played, I don’t know, cards. We colored. We had baloney sandwiches and a glass of Bosco. There was something on my mind. I didn’t know exactly what it was, but in a vague sense I understood that it was connected to what I had seen, to what Dawn had shown me.

After lunch I went home and played checkers with my brother Wally, who beat me up because he could—Wally was eight—and because I won.

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We're on the way to the beach, Mrs. Quillen driving, Mom alongside. Mrs. Quillen's window is down. Mom's is up. She doesn't like the wind to mess up her hair.

I'm in the back with George and Wally. The car is small, Dawn sits on my lap. Like George, she wears a bathing suit but no shirt. The back seat is warm and the car's soft hum makes me feel like I need to pee. I think I can wait until we get in the water.

Mrs. Quillen says, "Cliff, are you going to teach Dawn to swim today?"

Wally says, "He can't swim."

I say, "Neither can you."

Mrs. Quillen says, "We saw him swim last week."

Wally says, "Over his head?"

Mrs. Quillen says she doesn't know how deep I was, but that I was certainly swimming.

Wally says, "He practically drowns in the bathtub."

Mom says, "Leave him alone."

"But he does," Wally says.

Mrs. Quillen says, "I don't want him going out deep, not while he's teaching Dawn."

In my lap, Dawn is bouncing up and down. She can't wait for her first lesson.

I say, "I think I have to pee."

Mom looks in the rearview mirror. "We're almost at the beach," she says.

"Hold it in, you sissy," Wally says.

Dawn bounces again and I feel ... something. It's like a spasm that I expect to be followed by a warm puddle. I prepare to feel deep mortification. I prepare for Wally's expert and relentless humiliation. But nothing else happens.

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At the beach Mom says, “OK, now you can go.”

I say I don’t have to anymore.

She says, “Go anyway.”

I say I’ll go in the water.

“You don’t go in the water,” she tells me.

Wally says, “But isn’t that where babies go?”

He and George snicker, then run for the water.

“Hurry up,” Mrs. Quillen tells me. “Dawn wants to start lessons.”

I go to the bathroom. It’s made of cinder blocks held together with mortar. There’s no roof. Spider webs hang in the corners, wasps hum above the sink. I go into a booth without a door and when I’m sure no one’s looking, I pull out the front of my bathing suit. I expect to find, or at least to feel a puddle, but there’s nothing.

When I go back out, Dawn is in the water up to her waist. Wally and George are thrashing the surface in what looks like a race to the ropes. When they get there, the lifeguard stands and blows his whistle. There are signs that say “No Hanging on the Ropes.”

“Go ahead, Cliff,” Mrs. Quillen says. “Dawn’s waiting.”

Slowly I peel the t-shirt over my head. It shows Paladin of *Have Gun, Will Travel*.

“Wait,” Mom says. “You need sunscreen.”

She takes a brown plastic bottle of Coppertone from a straw bag and squeezes a cool line on my back. I like the way it feels when Mom rubs me, but she knows I hate it when she rubs me on the beach.

“Is Wally wearing any?” I ask.

She says, “Never mind what your brother’s doing.”

By the time I get to the water, George and Wally are back near shore. George is testing out how loud rocks sound when you bang them together under the surface. Wally is showing Dawn how to swim. She rotates her arms in the water just past her head. Wally holds her steady with one hand underneath her belly, the other at the waistband of her bathing suit, which he pulls high

enough for him to lean forward and study her milk-white buttocks. There's a look on his face that was the look on my face when I was in the room with Dawn.

I sit down in the shallow water where you can still see your feet on the bottom. I feel like I want to kill Wally. I wonder when I'll be able to. I wonder what happened to all that pee. I wonder why they have ropes if you're not allowed to hang onto them. I wonder if I approached them, would Wally allow me to look, too.