

Mother, may I go out to swim?

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Mother, may I go out to swim?

A Story by Dick Tyner

Gregory watched the gentle splash of the wavelets against the tangle of tree roots along the short bank. Though the day had been hot and the water was inviting, the boy made no effort to change from his sweaty gym togs to the Riviera trunks dropped on the log beside him. He had untied and loosed one dirty sneaker but had remained with his breast resting on his knees.

A maple leaf boat docked at a root; another wavelet from the slow-moving stream turned it around until the current caught it and carried it into the swifter shallows at the far edge of the pool. Gregory straightened up to watch the leaf join its fellows in the next lower pool.

Gregory James liked to swim. He had spent most of his summers at the pools and beaches of the resorts where his mother carried him on vacations. During the winter holidays he swam in the pools at the Y or the hotels of whatever city his father was playing. He liked the water and had a natural grace though he made no effort to acquire any form. He resisted the offers of pool attendants and guards to coach him. He cared only for the water as an escape, a release; there he was his own master. Like most amphibians, he hid from molestation by friend or foe in the watery depths; and when even there too many pressed around him, he found some other pool or beach in which to hide.

So today he had left his playmates in order to swim in this quiet pool a few yards downstream from where the school authorities had prepared more elaborate facilities. He could hear the others now as they scrambled out of their play clothing. They would return to the gymnasium for showers and dressing for dinner; but Coach had permitted them to come to the creek bank to change to swimsuits.

Gregory knew from the voices and cries of the boys how the change was being made. A shriek told him that someone had goosed Georgie Powers who needed only a finger wagged at him to send him into paroxysms of vocal agony. He heard Donald Jones boasting about the growing symptoms of his manhood. A thrashing through the brush gave evidence that someone had made off with Emory Field's trunks. His shouts of protest were soon lost in the splashing of the others who were ready for swimming.

These antics Gregory always found distasteful. He could never take part in them. Usually he changed his clothing near his locker and calmly ignored the horseplay around him. During his earlier years at school, some of the boys had teased him. He never fought back but some older boy always took his part, shaming the offender into retreat. Gradually he learned to protect himself, not by any violent actions but by commanding respect for himself as a person. He never quite understood this strength he had; but he supposed his foes unconsciously admired in him the very qualities they pretended to despise.

Now in his final year at the school, Gregory was not required to take any part in the athletic activities. Actually there was no formal program,

no competition with other schools. But this year, a coach had been hired to encourage more vigorous participation in sports. Coach also taught Gregory's class in American History and was master of his dormitory. After Coach asked in chapel the second day of the fall term for the older boys to report to the playfield that afternoon, Gregory found himself in shorts and sneakers huddling with the others around the sweat-shirted coach who was explaining Speedball, a game resembling soccer and basketball. Surprising himself as well as his schoolmates, Gregory was quite adept at the game; endurance and wind, built up by hours in the water, served him well. He was soon the first choice of captains taking turns choosing the teams.

Though he soon grew to resent this interest in him, this crush of others about him every afternoon, he reported faithfully. Afterwards, remembering the confusion and the coarse humor of the shower room, the pointless effort of playing the game itself, he would resolve to go next afternoon to study in the library; but he never went. And even more unexplainable was the habit he had fallen into of joining the other fellows in their discussions of the afternoon's game, the prowess of the players, the expert guidance of the coach. He did not, however, go with the others to visit Coach in the master's rooms after study hour. He always went directly to his own room as tired of his companions as from the strenuous play.

Today had been particularly tiring. Some of the better players had been detained in classrooms by teachers who were extracting some effort from them on behalf of their studies. Gregory's team had been weak, and he had tried to compensate for the others by greater effort than ever. It had been hot. There was no wind and the sun seemed to burn the very grass on which they ran. Coach had finally relented and suggested they get their suits and go for a swim. This was an unusual concession. The pool had been officially closed with the first frosts which were followed by a cold rain. But with the onset of Indian summer, Coach took it on himself to re-open it.

The boys had been overjoyed and quickly forgot their exhaustion in their haste to cool off in the clear, cold water. Gregory was as pleased and excited as the rest. He had got his briefs from his locker and had been among the first to take the path through the woods to the creek. It had been only at the last moment he had slipped aside through the undergrowth to this small back-water pool he had discovered years before and kept as his own.

The boys at the pool were quieter now. The enthusiasts were swimming earnestly; the others were lying on the sand at the far shore. Gregory watched another bright leaf float across the pool, through the swift current, to the calm water below. Wishing he could follow but too tired to make the effort now, he slid to the ground pulling the Riviera with him to sit on. As he did so he heard someone coming behind him and turned his head in time to see the coach break through the brush. He struggled to get up but was restrained by the man's big hand on his shoulder.

'Stay where you are, Greg. It is better to cool off before hitting that cold water.'

Coach sat on the log and looked down at the boy.

'I've been looking for you,' he said.

Gregory had always been anxious to avoid being alone with the coach; but now he felt happy that the man had been looking for him. He liked to be called Greg, too. No one ever did; more often his hecklers had sung his full name, giving extra value to each syllable.

The two sat as they were without saying a word. Because he had always been uncomfortable in the presence of older people, men especially, Greg had always talked volubly and inanely to them. He had tried to cover his embarrassment and was only made more embarrassed by his inadequacy. But now he felt a strange ease and great calm. He looked at the quiet water and knew the man was watching both him and the water. He was not distressed by this attention; he was reassured.

To Greg's mind came all the causes for his loneliness, his need to hide, the strain and distress of living in his little world. He sought to tell Coach about them; but as he looked up to speak, he no longer felt the urgency to unburden himself. It was as though the man had read his very thoughts and had absolved him of the guilt, relieved him of the pressure. The events of his life seemed to lose their importance and to slip into positions as episodes in which he took part rather than as the calamities he had always considered them. The divorce of his parents, the possessiveness of his mother, the aloofness of his father, no longer weighed upon him. He had been saved.

He started to speak again to thank Coach when the man jumped to his feet and cried,

'All right, bud; last one in is an old maid.'

Coach pulled his sweat-shirt over his head revealing a fine pair of shoulders, muscled arms, and well-haired chest. Quickly he unbuckled his belt, unzipped his pants, and let them fall. He pulled down a heavy jockstrap and stepped out of it and the pants at the same time.

Greg had not moved. He gazed in wonder at the narrow hips, the man-sized loins, the like of which he had always wanted to see but never had. He had seen his father dressed to play Shakespeare. The codpiece had fascinated him but he had never dared examine one, even when it hung in the wardrobe. Now he knew.

Straightening up from taking off his shoes, Coach urged the boy,

'Get moving, Greg. It is almost time for first call.'

'I guess I didn't bring my suit,' Greg murmured, pretending to look around.

'I didn't either. Come on.'

Coach put his hands under Greg's arms and lifted him to his feet. The boy stripped off his shorts, unfastened his other sneaker and kicked them off both. Then he stood erect to face the watching man, showing all his boyish grace. Coach lifted his fingers to his brow, saluting him.

'Good boy!'

Then he dove high and cut the water beyond the roots along the shore. Greg followed. Like two young seals they swam about the small

pool. Together they explored the sandy bottom; they played follow the leader through the submerged roots; they floated side by side on the surface. At last they climbed up to sit on a partially submerged root with their legs still in the water.

'You can do anything well, Greg, that you want to do.'

Greg wanted to tell him that he could do anything in the world if only he, Coach, were there to watch and help him; but before he could get his feelings into the words he wanted, the school bell rang.

'That's first call,' Coach exclaimed, climbing up to his clothing. 'I've got to get back to see that the little fellows are ready. Come on, Greg.'

Greg got slowly up the bank, watching the man cover himself with the bulky clothing of his profession. He got back into his gymsuit and sat down on his trunks to put on his sneakers. As he was lacing up the second one, Coach patted his shoulder and said,

'See you soon, Greg.'

Then he slipped away through the brush. Greg got to his feet, picked up the briefs, and made his way back to the trail to the school. As he emerged from the thicket, he met a group of swimmers who had put on only their shoes and were carrying their clothing. They greeted him with a hail of questions:

'Greg- where ya been? Didn't ya even take off your clothes. Whatsa matter? Ya sick? Didya see Coach?'

Greg had ignored their noisy questioning; but hearing the coach named, he asked.

'What about Coach?'

'He came to the pool and watched us for a while and then asked where you was.'

'What did you tell him?'

'Nobody'd seen ya. Georgie said maybe you'd took a shower and gone to the dorm.'

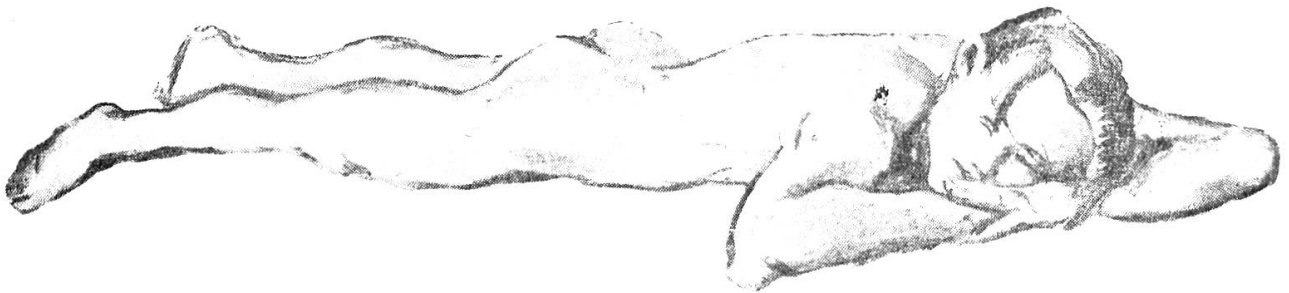
'What did he say then?'

'Nothin. He just sat round and then went back to school.'

'When was that?'

'Oh, when the first bell rang.'

During this exchange, most of the boys had crowded together in the path. Breaking through them with impatient shoving, Greg broke away and ran toward the school.



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