

Big Breath

It's this kind of holiday: impossible-blue swimming pool, drunk on sugary cocktails by 2pm, spines of paperbacks melted and their pages gummed with sweat.

We haven't been away in a couple of years, and so each day has an unrealness about it. It's as though I'm on the edge of remembering something, of capturing a feeling I didn't know I'd lost. The heat leaves carmine patches where the sun cream's worn off: behind my knees, the back of my neck. The hotel is lovely – captivating in its characterlessness – and the swimming pool is the beating heart of it all.

It draws us out of our magnolia rooms each morning and onto the loungers we chose on the first day. From morning until night, I am never out of its glassy sights. It is the same for the other hotel guests. A pool! We don't have this at home. Make the most of it. We all recognise each other by now, though we pretend that we don't. We are determined to have a Really Good Time, all on our own.

This holiday was intended for us. Husband and wife. To talk, to connect. We *have* talked more. He asks about the book I'm reading, I agree to days out to waterfalls and little towns with histories of boot-making and other similar things. We're trying. He stubbed his toe on a nonsensical ledge in the bedroom on the second day, and things threatened to sour – but it's been better since then.

“Want a drink?” Rob asks, eyeing up the straw-topped bar at the far end of the pool. He wants me to say yes so that it's acceptable for him to have one. What I really want is a cup of tea, to drink it somewhere cold and for it to warm me, but to say so would defeat the spirit of trying to get on and have a Really Good Time, so I shake my head.

I stand up from my sun lounger. It takes more energy than I expect and my head buzzes with heat and lethargy. “Going in the pool,” I tell Rob.

The pool is the shape of a kidney and ringed with tiles that seem so unforgivable when wet, as they always are. Waiting for a cracked skull. I almost hear Rob say, *Jesus, you don't have to be so bloody dark all the time*. Bodies move around in the blue, splashing and dunking and paddling. A man in a swimming cap front-crawls relentlessly up and down, revealing his gasping face in the gap between strokes, scattering the languishers with barely concealed tuts. A baby is held an inch or so above the surface by a beaming mother. It thrashes its limbs, giggling.

It brings to mind one of the things I've been thinking about recently, which is the bradycardic response, part of the mammalian diving reflex. How some babies will hold their breath if suddenly submerged in water. Their bodies, tiny harbingers of silent knowledge, will slow down the heart and shift blood away from the less vital muscles to conserve oxygen. It is strange to think of their innate sturdiness while also knowing the impossible magic of bringing them into being, all the dark jewels of things that can – and do – go wrong. This mother takes no chances: her baby's fat toes only occasionally brush the water. It wriggles in ecstasy.

Across the pool, a woman sits on the side. Her long, tanned legs reflect the shards of light that dart across the pool's face. She is wearing an impractical swimming costume that plummets to reveal glistening cleavage;

a floppy hat that almost obscures all of her face. I can see her lips, though. Plump. God, how it must be to look like that. When I look over at Rob, he's watching her, too.

I wade into the shallow end. Cool water hugs at my knees. My sweat slicks into the water, polluting, spreading like oil.

The second thing I have been thinking about recently is cold water immersion therapy. I read an article about the athletes who sit in baths of ice after events, the Dutch man who said it could help you sleep. The next morning, bleary, I had a cold shower. I screamed with the horrible, clean shock of it, the way it seemed to strip skin, scour my brain and leave it new.

I push myself further into the water, body tensing as it rises over my hips, my midriff. The bottom half of my body is too cold, the top too hot. How fragile the body is, how petty, how precious. I keep walking until my toes slip off the tiles and I'm in the deep end. I suck in an inhale and put my head under.

The world is noise, garbled and slow. The legs of the other swimmers are luminous and silly, slightly embarrassing. The persistent swimming man windmills past me, churning up the water into gusts. The floor of the deep end slopes down and away from me, a cold and empty chamber.

The last thing I have been thinking of is the elderly ladies in Korea who go free diving for treasure. They're called haenyeo, which means women of the sea, and they drink coffee together on the shoreline every morning before taking their strong bodies into and under the water. They dive up to thirty metres and are rewarded by things like octopi and sea snails. I wonder what else they find, nestled in the swallowed places. I picture it all laid out on the pool floor – all the expensive crockery from shipwrecks, old coins with faces of dead monarchs, expensive and ruined things, things that never got to be what they were supposed to be. I force myself downwards, feeling the pressure build in my ears, my lungs itch, my eyes sting against the chlorine.

Somewhere above the waterline, Rob is eating through his roaming package by googling which bus to get to the war museum he's read about. He will always be googling how to get to the place he wants to go, and it will always be the most important thing to be doing. When we first got married, people said inane and well-meaning things like 'the key to a good marriage is compromise', and to Rob (only ever to Rob), 'if you're wondering whether your partner's right, they are.' I understand why, now. How difficult it would be to give advice which was actually true or useful. There are questions there aren't answers to. How can you love someone you no longer like? Is wanting to love someone better than actually doing it? What do you do when all the things you thought you'd have, and feel, and be, never materialise?

My muscles are burning from the constant downward motion. I curl myself up into a tight ball and sit on the floor of the pool, close my eyes against the sun. I think about the shrieks of babies learning to swim. I think about people numbing all the feelings out with cold water. I think about 90-year-old women, stronger than I'll ever be, showing each other the glittering pearls they found on the sea-bed. I think about all the things that are waiting back at home, and all the things that aren't. I think of the beautiful woman on the side of the pool and how her legs were just long enough to lift Rob's eyes from his phone and wonder how we ended up here.

The pressure in the back of my throat is building. Soon, I'll need to breathe. There is no treasure down here. No dirty coins, none of it.

I wait until I can't stand it anymore and then propel myself upward. I fight through the water, and it pushes back at me, angry now, duped. As if it had already claimed me. The water births and redeems and reveals. But it also hides, forgets, kills.

There's always a moment, when you rush back up to the surface all in a gulp – when you think you've left it too late, that you might not make it, that it's just that little bit too far, that you'll open your mouth and all the water will find itself inside you and make a home. A moment when you start to bargain – that everything will be different if you make it, you will be different, every second of every day, you'll try harder and you won't mind the bad things quite so much. You won't take anything for granted anymore. The underwater world tilts on its axis as your wish is denied.

But no. Burst, light, big breath. Too much oxygen, and you're surface-borne again, you're in the breathing world.

I guzzle air, greedy and loud, but no one is looking my way. My re-entry has been muffled by the aggressive swimming man. Rob is staring at his phone. The beautiful woman is leaning against the bar, drinking. My heartbeat slows and the endorphins rush – you're alive, you stupid thing! You're alive! – and the sense of urgency starts to fade, but I cradle it while it's there. A different kind of treasure, that feeling so close to possibility, to change, to freedom, but not quite.