My Worst Fear

I never learned to swim in my childhood, and I dreaded every moment when I had to exploit this disability. So when swimming classes were required at third grade in Cynwyd Elementary School, I took every opportunity to miss them. My teacher, Mrs. Mogul, granted leave at first, nodding silently to my requests with her usual puzzled yet stern face. As I ran out of excuses--I once told her that I had forgotten my swimming trunks, while I held them in my hands--Mrs. Mogul caught my intentions. One day, I meekly asked, "Can I not go swimming today?" She looked at me with the same expression on her face. "Sit down, Mr. Chen. And shut up!" she barked. Disappointed, I returned to my seat. From that day on, I had to endure an hour of swimming lessons per week.

On Tuesdays, the entire third class would squeeze into two small buses, and then we were driven to the indoor pool of one of the many community colleges of Philadelphia. We walked inside the white and "graffiti-less" building and into the locker room where the boys and the girls split up. As we changed our clothes, a few boys giggled at their first glimpses of nude bodies. When we were finished, the teachers made us line up, did a head-count, and escorted us onto the tiled walks around the pool. Trying to look enthusiastic, I was the first to jump into the cold water.

Instructors at the pool were patient, though they never spent much time with the beginners. After all, there were only three in the group. While the teachers were busy elsewhere, I used the time to do what I could do: I tried to tip-toe down the sloped floor of
the pool until my nose would submerge if I took another step. It became my goal to travel around the whole pool, either by learning eventually to swim across it or by waiting until I was tall enough to walk its entire length.

When the instructors did come to the beginners, the workouts were simple: we held on to the edge of the pool and kicked in the water. Eventually, we would swim across the short side of the pool while an instructor kept our bodies afloat. Without somebody at my side, my legs would instinctively try to touch the bottom of the pool, attempting to "water-walk." Perhaps because I was too self-conscious about floating in water, I was never eager to swim. The idea that something as massive as a human body floating escaped my childish reasoning. Boats and warships floated because they were designed to float. I stubbornly held the notion that we are not boats and therefore do not swim.

The other third graders, beside the beginners, were ignorant of my existence. Daniel Nelson, my best friend, however, knew my predicament and tried to be supportive in his sarcastic ways. During these lessons, he would swim up behind me and suddenly push my head into the water. In what seemed like endless minutes, I groped for Daniel's arm in the dark, murky, blueness of the water. Finally, I would break free and surface, while gasping madly for air. "See! I knew you could hold your breath!" he would say with his ever-present smile and swim away. It was my tolerance of and my ability to laugh at his jokes that kept our friendship together.

A few weeks after the swimming lessons had ended, Daniel asked me to come to his birthday party and to go swimming before the
actual affair. Trying not to disappoint my friend and not to act cowardly, I accepted. On that fateful day, I arrived at the massive brown door of his two-story house with my gift, which I do not remember, whose identity I have forgotten.

Minutes later, everyone else arrived, and Mrs. Nelson along with other parents drove the party to a pre-determined spot. I was angered when I saw the same white building again. I heard Daniel mention my name and laugh. At that time, I felt a genuine hatred for that particular swimming pool. Little did I know, I would hate it even worse before the day was over.

Several minutes later, I changed into my shorts and was out on the tiled sidewalks of the pool. Most of Daniel's friends were already in the water. I jumped into the cold water. The rest of the people were playing water polo. Alone, I was determined to reach the spot where the game was taking place. Knowing that I couldn't swim across, I did what I knew to propel myself in water: I walked. Soon, I was tip-toeing to keep my head above the water. Still determined, I began to do little hops to stay afloat. Suddenly, my feet did not land on the smooth bottom of the pool.

My first thought was that I was in serious trouble. Soon, I was frantically kicking my legs to touch the floor. I panicked when water got into my nose. I instinctively tried to breathe through my mouth when I realized I was swallowing water rather than air. I swallowed a lot of water, and perhaps at that time I was hoping to drink enough of it to lower the water level. I was, in short, desperate. Although trying not to attract attention, I finally shouted "Help!" Unfortunately, nearby two girls were
playing lifeguards and they, too, were screaming, "Help!" The other children and lifeguards were playing water polo too noisily to notice me or the girls. The situation seemed hopeless, until I saw a girl swimming past me. Submerged, I could see her brightly colored swimsuit. I decided to grab hold of her leg. Her leg slipped away, and she probably never noticed who grabbed it. At last, still submerged yet exhausted, I did the unexpected: I fainted.

Sometime later, I woke to the sound of a paramedic calling my name. I realized that I was sitting on the lap of Mr. Nelson while Daniel and a few of his guests were standing around me. "He's going to be fine," I remember the paramedic saying. Then, there was the sound of another man whom I never saw directly: "I found him there ... asleep." The paramedic left and I never found out what happened while I was unconscious.

I was excited both at the attention I had just been given and at the possibility that I could have been dead. Daniel smiled at me and asked, "How ya feeling, Chenie?" I nodded dizzily in reply. In the locker room, my other friends did not receive my story as I hoped they would. I could have been dead; I even mentioned the possibility of being on the news. Apparently my situation was not as serious as it had seemed to me. Several boys merely laughed and said that the chlorine content of the water made me drowsy.

Years later, I finally did learn to swim. My accident had motivated me to conquer my fear. By ridding myself of my disability, I had also learned the lesson of self-control. I have never again panicked or fainted in the face of crisis again.