

Grappling with Moby Dick

“But I don’t wanna go to summer camp.”

I wanted to stay home, I told Mom. I wanted to stay home and eat blueberries on Granddaddy’s farm and chase his cows. I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I didn’t like the beds at camp or the mosquitos. I told her the crafts were stupid. I hated their food.

But Mom was sending my little sister and me anyway. Though it would cost her checkbook dearly, it was a point of pride for my single mother of four to sign us up for a week at Cherokee Camp in the hills of Pennsylvania.

But every year, I hated it.

The only part I didn’t hate was the pre-camp ritual of purchasing “resort wear” at thrift and resale shops: shorts, some shirts, perhaps sandals or sneakers, and a bathing suit. Sometimes pickings were slim, but usually, after several excursions, Mom managed to find what we needed. Then she could triumphantly crow, “It’s true, girls. One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.”

But the summer I was ten, we found no treasures, though we had thoroughly scoured all the resale shops and the Salvation Army.

“Girls, you know we can’t afford retail, so we’ll just have to make do. But swimsuits, hmm, that’s a problem.”

My sister could squish into my suit from last year, but Mom had to put on her thinking cap for a solution for me. “Well,” she said slowly, “I think the best thing to do is for you to wear my old suit.”

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Mom never threw anything away, so she easily unearthed her ancient suit from the cedar chest in her bedroom. White and heavy, it was wider and longer than I thought I'd ever be. I grudgingly dressed in the behemoth with its molded cups, pointing up and out, located nowhere near where my prepubescent breasts would eventually bloom. Mom efficiently stitched the straps up.

My sister pointed and guffawed, but furious tears smeared my glasses. "No! This thing is just too awful. I won't wear it, Mom, you can't make me wear it! I'm not going!" Then, imagining the other kids' taunts, I wheedled, "Mom, you'll save lots of money if we stay home . . ."

"Listen, most girls would just love a week away from their little brothers constantly pestering them, and I've already paid so whether you want to go or not is beside the point. So, let's get packin'."

So, we packed, and under Mom's supervision, I shoved the despised suit I named Moby Dick into my duffle. Mom drove us to camp; I resentfully refused her goodbye hug.

I promised myself I'd be as miserable as possible, but camp was lush with pine trees, its lake and pool sparkled with diamonds of sunshine, and it was at least ten degrees cooler than at home. That first day, I made a lanyard and ate hot dogs for dinner. Perhaps this wasn't going to be so bad.

But the next day, well, the next day, swimming lessons were scheduled to begin, and I was the flat-chested Ahab confronting Moby Dick.

Cowering in my cabin, huddled on my bunk in the loathsome outfit, praying for invisibility, I was spotted anyway by my counselor, BarbaraAnne. It was her job to get me to the pool, and somehow, she got me there, albeit wrapped in the blanket from my bunk.

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Because I was a non-swimmer, I was in a class filled with little kids, all of us beginning swimmers, then about six or seven years old. They each held on to the edge of the shallow end blowing bubbles and kicking furiously. Quickly, I unshrouded, set my glasses on the grass, and self-consciously slipped into the cool water. I grabbed the side and kicked like they did, watching the cups of Mom's bathing suit swell with the chlorinated water and then collapse against my flat chest each time I rose and sank. I knew I looked ridiculous.

But surprisingly, no one noticed. Not the mini-swimmers. Not even the swimming teacher. She was eyeing the handsome lifeguard, flirting, and utterly ignoring her little charges. Occasionally she'd issue a command, "Girls, get your faces wet," or, "Paddle across the pool," spoken whilst chatting up the bronze god in the deck chair.

Naturally, I took full advantage of her inattention. The little swimmers to my right and left, those in real bathing suits, obligingly followed instructions. They stroked and kicked. They paddled. Their faces got wet. But me? I hopped on one foot across the shallow end of the pool and kicked with the other leg, splashing up a storm, laying sorta horizontal, hiding myself in the froth. I did look a bit like I was swimming.

Miraculously this ruse worked for four days' worth of lessons. "No one even notices me!" I thought. "This is working!"

At the end of each class, I waited until the little ones were busy chit-chatting with each other before grabbing my glasses and blanket and dashing back to my cabin to rip ol' Moby off, the straps' stitches loosening each day, but who cared? My week of camp would soon be over, and I would be going home.

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That last morning, Saturday, I gleefully packed my bag on the already stripped bunk. The despised bathing suit lay at the bottom of my duffle in a mangled, damp ball and I thought, “Hot diggity, I will never have to wear this monster again!”

But then BarbaraAnne tapped my shoulder. “Hey, why aren’t you at the pool for the parent swim demo? You’re going to be late. C’mon!”

She extricated Moby from my duffle and thrust the misshapen monster at me. My camouflage blanket was absent being washed for the next camper who would have my bunk, and I was trapped. “C’mon,” she repeated. “I’ll wait for you, and we can walk to the pool together.”

I plodded reluctantly to the cabin’s restroom to change and found Moby’s straps had resumed their original length. When I emerged, my suit held up with my arms crossed over my gaunt chest, BarbaraAnne simply knotted up the suit’s straps. “This isn’t a problem,” she said sympathetically. “It’s just a quick swim the length of the pool. No one will even notice.”

So, with my non-existent swimming skills, the despised Moby Dick still long on my skinny frame, and my arms shielding my pointy chest, she walked me to the pool.

Well, it’ll all be over soon, I reasoned. One way or another.

The deck and bleachers were mobbed: parents, siblings, counselors, campers, the entire world was there to watch me. I heard Mom shout from the bleachers, “Honey! Honey! You’ll do great!” Her voice infuriated me: this was all her fault.

“See, everyone has confidence in you. And look, your mom’s so proud.” BarbaraAnne gave me an extra little squeeze, saying, “Go! Have fun!” And with that, she wandered off into the multitude.

I was livid: my suit was hiked up to my chin, the knots touched my earlobes, and the heavy fabric rubbed in all the wrong places.

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And, I faced a major problem: I didn't know how to swim.

The mini-swimmers were waiting for my entrance, and the inattentive swimming teacher, whose name I never bothered to learn, called out, "Girls! Line up along the edge. When you hear my whistle, jump in and swim to the other side."

I deposited my glasses on a deck chair, and at her whistle, plunged to my death.

As I flailed at the water, I heard sloshy cheers and gurgled shouts from the stands: "Swim to the edge!" and "Wow!" and "Look at them go!"

Somehow. . . somehow, I managed to make it to the other side of the pool. So astonished was I, I stood up to flex my muscles like Popeye and awaited my due applause. But there were only goggles. The mini-swimmers already at the deck stared at me like wet mini-statues, snickering.

Because a strap had unknotted during my swim and drooped down one boney shoulder. Because unfettered, Ol' Moby hung low and floated unconfined around my ribs. Because one pink nipple stared up at the crowd.

"Mom! Mommy!"

With a sob, I gathered up my suit and crawled onto the deck.

"Mommy!"

The audience was now fully abuzz. But one voice soared above theirs: Mom's.

She raced through the crowd, gathering me in a towel she'd picked up on the way, her arms around me, her voice soothing. "It's okay, honey, no one cares, no one is interested. We're leaving anyway. Let's go."

The anonymous swimming instructor hastened to us, "No one even saw. It's over."

"It certainly is," came Mom's remorseful voice. "Yes, it certainly is."

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My sister handed me my glasses; BarbaraAnne and the swimming instructor with no name stood outside my cabin as I grabbed my duffle; me, weeping and gripping the awful suit and purloined towel; and Mom, guilt-ridden.

Our gray Chevy station wagon left clouds of piney dust behind as we streaked down the mountainside, Mom driving like Parnelli Jones. “Oh, how to explain this to you? I was trying to be resourceful, not, not . . . uncaring—I love you. Please, please forgive me. I never imagined, never thought . . . Oh, I tried to manage the best I could.” Then, softly, “I try to manage everything as best I can.” And with her voice bordering tears, “But please believe, honey, please,” she said as our eyes met in the rearview mirror, “I do the best I can for you kids. I manage as best I can. I’m sorry.”

Mothers don’t often admit their burdens to their children, do they? Sometimes though, their burdens become so heavy, or so obvious, that they must be acknowledged. Mostly, mothers quietly do what has to be done. They quietly manage as best they can.

Well, we didn’t go back to camp again after that escapade with Moby Dick. We spent our summers on Granddaddy’s farm eating enough blueberries to turn our poop blue. And Ol’ Moby? Well, the white monster simply vanished.

But forty-seven years later, when I was cleaning out Mom’s belongings after her death, I found a plastic bag tucked in the back of her closet. There inside was Moby Dick, and though disintegrating, its pointy cups still pointed up and out. Like I said, Mom never threw anything away.

Just for the heck of it, I put it on.

And, his time, it fit.

