

Learning to Swim

Ali Giles

Carol Marshall hated weekends.

She always woke up on Saturday feeling light and hopeful, and went to bed dissatisfied and usually drunk.

Sundays were infinitely worse; these were the days of clinging hangovers and the tail-end of arguments and work looming the next day. Days of mowing the lawn and washing the car and of course, Sunday bloody dinner. When had it all become such a ritual? So set in stone? Sometimes she thought she might scream and never stop.

"Just for once," she said to her husband John, "I wish we could go out somewhere. Or to Bridget's. Let *her* cook a vegan Sunday dinner for her bloody boyfriend."

The thought of her daughter Bridget brought on mild anxiety.

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"Oh mum! What are you wearing?"

"Jeans and a t shirt."

"I meant they're a bit tight."

"I've lost weight...I fancied showcasing my fantastic legs. What do you think, John?"

"Whatever you feel comfy in, I suppose." John Marshall carefully spooned brussel sprouts onto his plate. "Is there any horseradish?"

"Well, I think you look great," said Martin.

Bridget pulled a face. "Don't go getting too skinny; it doesn't suit women when they get older. You'll end up looking like Jan West."

"Speaking of which," John said, "I was speaking to Bob West and looks like they're definitely getting divorced."

"She should have kicked him out years ago," said Bridget, "he's a dick."

"He's going to lose everything."

"So's she."

"She gets to keep the house."

"It's not about the material stuff," Carol interjected, "Bob's a boring idiot. It'll do him good, shake him up a bit. Your father wants to watch out I don't do the same."

"I felt sorry for him," John said, "he's going through a proper crisis."

Carol Marshall watched her husband placidly eating his food and thought, any idiot can face a crisis; it's this day-to-day living that wears you out.

"A crisis keeps you on your toes," she said, "it means you're still alive. I mean, don't you ever think there's got to be more to life? Plodding along doing the same old things. It's a bit like...slowly drowning."

John looked at Carol's wine glass and said drily, "Is that your second or third?"

His glasses had steamed up and there were drips of gravy in his moustache. Beneath it, his mouth curled a little meanly.

“I’ll get the horseradish,” she muttered.

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Maybe she shouldn’t have had that third glass. Maybe that third glass was the reason she got a bit tearful out in the kitchen. Fuck them all, she thought, digging out her pack of emergency cigarettes from the kitchen drawer.

Turning for the back door she almost cannoned into Martin. He put out his hands to steady her, but then kept them there on her shoulders.

“Keep swimming,” he whispered. And kissed her. It wasn’t a long or particularly passionate kiss; she barely responded, turning her head away in a panic. Embarrassing really. Her hair caught in the spice rack and she thought she might even have tutted as she pushed him away. But she felt herself open, like a flower.

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Bridget said, “What’s going on with your hair? It’s all sticking up at the back.”

“Is it?” And she laughed and put a hand to the back of her head, a little flustered, and in that moment they all fell silent and stared at her.

“What?” she said, and laughed again. A little giddily, she thought.

And she’s looking over her daughter’s shoulder at her reflection in the dining-room window, and it’s no longer the face of a million other middle-aged women; women you see every day shopping in Tesco, or mowing their lawns, or washing their cars.

She imagined that they all could see it.