

Swimming

The first chapter of Singing School, a draft novel by Sam Magavern

You must habit yourself to the dazzle of light . . .

Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, and rise again and nod
to me and shout, and laughingly dash with your hair.

– Walt Whitman

Maggie Gee had just been swimming; she felt clean and good. It was only the third day of law school, but, already, she had found a lovely outdoor pool on the UCLA campus and resolved to do laps there three times a week. She was wearing a casual, robin's-egg blue dress. It wasn't fashionable, but it was – she hoped – tasteful and attractive.

Carrying her tray from the food court, she scanned the brick patio for an open table, but they were all occupied. She looked to see if there was anyone she recognized from her section.

Alone at one of the black metal tables she noticed “Mr. Grene,” who sat two seats down from her in Professor Simon’s criminal law class. She knew his last name because Professor Simon had called on him in class that day; he had not exactly distinguished himself, but he had not been an arrogant jerk, either.

Mr. Grene was short and thin, with long, wavy brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a large nose. He was wearing slightly torn jeans, a frayed white shirt, and a faded jean jacket. It was a bit of a “look,” but it wasn't a bad one.

“Mind if I join you?” she asked. “Maggie Gee.” She put out her small, cool hand, and he shook it, looking a little baffled.

“Noah G.,” he said, smiling.

“Gee?” she asked. “I thought you were Mr. Grene.”

“I am,” he said, looking even more confused.

“Ah!” she said, “You thought I was giving you my initial, so you gave me yours. No, *Gee* is the whole name.”

“I'm sorry,” he said.

Off to a roaring start, she thought, feeling too bold, somehow. But she liked the way he said *sorry*, with a pained, crooked smile.

“How do you like Professor Simon?” she asked, gesturing toward the copy of *Discipline and Punish* that Noah had been reading. That was the easiest way for members of Section 3 to get a quick impression of one another – to talk about Professor Simon. Some, like Fowler Jackson, were loudly scandalized that Simon was making them read an abstruse, trendy, French book of theory before reading any cases.

“I like him,” said Noah, squinting at her in the bright sunlight.

“Are you from around here?”

“No, I’m from St. Paul.”

“Got sick of the cold?”

“No, I don’t mind the cold.”

“Oh.”

“How about you?” Noah asked. “How did you end up here?”

“I came out here with my husband.” She checked to see if he looked disappointed by the mention of a husband; it was hard to tell.

“We were working on a documentary film project.”

Noah seemed a bit interested.

“But he turned out to be gay, so I divorced him and applied to law school.”

That got him.

“Wow,” he said, but ignored the obvious topic. “What was the film project?”

“It’s called the Survivors’ Project; they’re interviewing as many Holocaust survivors as they can on videotape and archiving it.”

“Wow,” he said again. “How did you get into that?”

Noah had just dripped salsa on his white shirt; he was helplessly dabbing at it with a wet napkin, which only made the stain spread.

“It’s a long story,” said Maggie.

“I’ve got time.”

“Did you ever hear of the Italian author, Primo Levi?”

“Yeah, I read *Survival in Auschwitz* this summer.”

“It’s a beautiful book, isn’t it?”

“Beautiful?” He had to think about that. “Yeah, I guess.”

“So sad the way he died.”

“Yeah.”

Primo Levi had fallen or jumped down the stairwell of his apartment building in April. Ironically, his mysterious death – and all the publicity about it – had made him more popular than ever, winning him a host of new readers, like Noah. Maggie had first read Levi’s work at Brandeis, where she majored in Italian Literature. Fascinated, she had written her thesis about him. That was how she met her ex-husband, Stephen, a Holocaust Studies major, and how she ended up working with him on the Survivors’ Project after they graduated.

They sat out on the sun-struck patio, eating their tacos and discussing the Holocaust and suicide. It was not how people flirted in the movies. But Noah was starting to look more steadily into her eyes, and Maggie was feeling glad. Glad she had got contact lenses, glad she had cut her hair, glad she had started swimming again, glad she had discovered, at age twenty-five, that she could be attractive.

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By the time they got a chance to talk again, Nancy Tigue had organized them into a study group along with her and three other students: Tha, Nestor, and Rachel. The six of them had just finished their first review session out on the grass, under an old eucalyptus tree, and, after the other four left, Maggie and Noah lingered. He was wearing what seemed to be his uniform: tattered jeans, old button-down shirt, jean jacket. She thought she could see the faint outline of the salsa stain on his shirt; his detergent had not done its job.

“I have a theory about Primo Levi,” Maggie said. It was an odd topic to choose, but, then again, it had worked the first time.

“What’s that?”

“I think he fell.”

“Really?” asked Noah.

“Who kills himself by jumping three stories down an interior stairway?”

“People do it all sorts of odd ways,” said Noah, playing with a spear of grass.

“True, but he was a chemist,” Maggie said. “It would have been so much simpler and less violent to swallow some chemicals.”

“It may have been a sudden impulse.”

“The man survived Auschwitz.”

“People don’t just fall over railings.”

“How do you know?” asked Maggie.

“One of my friends jumped off a bridge last year.”

“Oh, no,” said Maggie.

“He had paranoid schizophrenia.”

“I’m so sorry.”

There was something almost aggressive about the way he had trumped her theory with his tragedy, but there was something intimate, something trusting, about it, too. He wouldn’t say that to just anyone. He was lying on the grass on one elbow, squinting up at her, while she sat cross-legged under the shaggy tree.

“His name was Pete; he was the drummer in our band.”

“What kind of band?”

“Acoustic punk.”

“What were you called?”

“The Big Sleep.”

“Isn’t that a movie?”

“Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. You like it?”

“I’ve never seen it,” said Maggie.

Noah squinted at her.

“But I’d like to,” she added, more softly.

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That Sunday morning they went with Nancy and her fiancée, Peerless, to Venice Beach. It was Nancy’s idea: she knew that Maggie liked Noah, and she thought this would be a nice, casual way for them to spend some time together outside of school.

Maggie thought Nancy was the most beautiful woman in their section. She was small and slim, with caramel skin, thick, shoulder-length hair, and fine-boned features. She was African-American, but she looked exotic, almost Egyptian. There was a rumor that she had appeared in *Italian Vogue* during college at USC. She and Maggie had bonded on the first day of school, when they each admitted that they suffered from panic attacks.

Peerless picked everyone up in his black 1973 Mercedes Benz and drove them down Venice Boulevard until it ended by the ocean. It was sunny but windy, with good-sized waves crashing on the beach.

They strolled up the boardwalk, which was just starting to get crowded. A stocky man in a pink tutu glided about on the roller rink, listening to music on his headphones. Tanned, oiled bodybuilders struck their poses and lifted free weights at Muscle Beach. They stopped and

listened to a guy in a turban and a long, flowing robe, as he played guitar and sang a soul version of “Fire and Rain.”

“Isn’t this what America was supposed to be?” Noah asked.

“What?” Nancy asked.

“The home of the freaks . . .”

But just then, one of the homeless men camping on the beach started yelling at the top of his lungs, “He’s dead!”

For some reason, Maggie assumed that the man was just insane, but Peerless vaulted over the boardwalk railing and ran to the screaming man, and Noah chased after him.

When they got back, Peer and Noah confirmed that an old man – at least, he looked old, with his long, gray beard – had died in his sleep. They went into the High Tide Head Shop and asked the guy at the register to call 911. That was about all they could do.

The four of them strolled down to Vincenzo’s – the outdoor café at the end of the boardwalk – and ordered brunch. But as they sat out in the sun, eating their omelets and chatting about law school, it was hard – it seemed wrong – to recover the sunny, romantic mood.

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One day that week, Maggie and Nancy were having lunch on the law school patio, between classes, and talking about Noah. Nancy said that she was sure he liked Maggie.

“But what about you?” she asked. “Are you interested?”

“Isn’t there something lost about him?” Maggie asked.

“Searching,” suggested Nancy.

“At the same time, something arrogant?”

“Not like Fowler.”

“God no, not like Fowler.”

“Noah used to sing in a band,” said Nancy. “So I think he’s used to having a bit of a persona. But that’s okay. Who doesn’t have a bit of a persona around here?”

“I don’t.”

“You do,” Nancy corrected her.

“What?”

“The Great Brain.”

“Aah,” said Maggie, disappointed.

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That Friday night, Noah picked her up in his battered yellow Toyota and drove her to Café Angeli, a small Italian restaurant on Melrose Avenue, a chic but still slightly ragtag street with a mix of clothing stores, record stores, and restaurants. While they waited for their table, he ordered two champagne cocktails because, he said, that’s what Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman drink in *Casablanca*. Maggie suspected he had used that line before, but the drink – which was new to her – was delicious.

Noah mentioned a billboard they had seen while driving to the restaurant. It was a picture of a thin, tan, busty woman in a bikini; in giant block letters it said “BODY BY FORSHON.” Then, at the bottom, in smaller letters, it said “Dr. Milton Forshon, Cosmetic Surgeon.”

“My father is a cosmetic surgeon,” Maggie said.

Once again they were diving into strange conversational waters, but she couldn’t help it.

“They call him Dr. Nose.”

“Maybe I should see him,” said Noah.

“It’s mostly girls,” Maggie said. “A lot get it done right before college. Some as a high school graduation present. I knew a girl who got one for her Bat Mitzvah.”

“Yikes.”

“When I was sixteen, we were eating breakfast one day, and my father looked up from his *Wall Street Journal* and said, *You know, Maggie, I could do your eyes.*”

“Do your eyes?” Noah asked.

“Make them less Chinese.”

The two of them compared notes on their fathers. What she would have given to have a nice, roly-poly, loving father like Noah’s! After college, Bob Grene had let Noah work at Grene & Grene half-time so he could devote himself to his punk rock band. Now he was paying for him to go to law school. And when Noah graduated, his father would welcome him back to the firm, half-time again – this time so he could write poetry.

“You’ve got it made, Noah.”

“My friends think I’m selling out.”

“How so?”

“Quitting the band for law school.”

“But if you want to write poetry . . .”

“They don’t think much of poetry. No one reads it.”

“I do,” Maggie said. “Did you ever read Primo Levi’s poetry?”

“No.”

“It’s beautiful. I’ll show it to you sometime.”

Was that Noah’s foot under the table, up against hers, or was it the table leg? She didn’t move hers for a long time, in case it was his foot. It was the table leg, but, meanwhile, he was looking into her eyes, very happy. He took another bite of his gnocchi with asparagus.

“Delicious gnocchi,” he said. He pronounced it “not-chee,” but who cared? Everything was fine.

“What kind of poems do you write?” Maggie asked.

“My sister says I write short, sad, and weird poems.”

“Are those three different varieties?”

“No, every one is short, sad, and weird.”

“Will you show them to me?”

“I guess.”

“After dinner?”

“Sure. Fowler’s going to a late movie. He promised he won’t be home before midnight.”

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“I don’t have much to offer you,” Noah said, back at his apartment. “Would you like a little whiskey?”

“Umm, sure,” Maggie said.

Noah poured them each a little Maker’s Mark whiskey in big jam-jar glasses. They sat on a second-hand orange couch and looked at several of Noah’s poems.

They were as advertised: short, sad, and weird. One was about bored cows in a sparse pasture; another was about a moth with damp wings.

“They’re really good,” Maggie said, after she had read them twice.

“Thanks,” he said, with a wry, crooked smile.

Noah leaned over and kissed her. She wasn’t sure what to do with her hands, which were still holding the crinkly poem pages.

Noah was only the second man Maggie had kissed. She soon decided that he was a big improvement over her gay ex-husband, Stephen – at least in the kissing department.

They kissed for a long time on the orange couch. Then Noah turned off the overly bright lights, and they kissed some more.

“Do you want to take a shower?” Maggie asked.

“Do you think I need one?”

“No, I just thought you might enjoy one.”

“Hmm,” Noah pondered. “Okay.”

“Good.”

“How about you? Would you enjoy one?”

“Yes,” said Maggie.

It was a tiny shower – set in a tub with sliding glass doors, just like you find in cheap motels. A bit crowded, with two people. But Maggie complimented Noah on the pink tiles. And the warm water and soap felt good on their naked bodies.