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Illustration by Tommy Sweeney

When you are ten years old and it's June of '57, no one explains anything. Like why our 17-year-old babysitter, Nan, played I'm Going to Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair on the phonograph over and over again at night like it was special to her. And just what, I wondered, was the connection between water and romance anyway?

The waters of nearby Lake Mendota were blue and deep as the waters of the musical South Pacific, and in the geography of my imagination, they were somehow related. Sometimes girls couldn't go near it, but clearly the lake was attractive to them, and made them more attractive in return. That's why they flocked to the beach, and why the boys and cars followed them.

The sun was healthy then. Tan was terrific. Summer skin glowed with warm coppers. Soft towels draped over graceful shoulders. The air was fragrant with perfume, lip gloss and baby oil, as apparently oblivious girls in pairs descended the wooden stairs that went down from the east end of the bridge on Mendota Drive. Nearby, boys along the roadway crouched and flicked Kool ashes on the gravel, or sipped soda, or leaned back against the cars in the shade of the elms, flipping their hair back out of their eyes with a free hand, talking about the jobs or girls they had, or hoped to get, or the fathers that might buy them or lend them the cars that would make everything possible. Everything meant cruising with girls, parking (which sounded dull), and having "submarine races," which sounded like fun and made everyone laugh. But when I laughed too, they said: "How come you're laughing, squirt?" And laughed again.

While I was learning to swim, they were dreaming of car fins.

And the way they talked about girls was very different from the way they talked to them. Among themselves, they were masterful, confident, all-knowing when it came to dealing with girls; but if a girl approached, and conversation was called for, a curious tension rippled under this suave exterior. Beneath the sunny grins, the nonchalance and the need to play two audiences, you could see that they were lost at sea, filled with a powerful hunger, and something almost like pain.

Tenderness was okay in the songs on the radio, but not something you talked to anyone about if you felt it. Softness or weakness of any kind was held in contempt whether you were a boy of five or a man of fifty. Flirting, I imagined, must be a lot like being thrown in the lake when you were learning to swim, you swam or sank by virtue of manly courage alone.

I remember one morning they pulled us out of swimming classes to the upper deck of the beach house, when a storm moved in over the lake, purpling and cooling the air above the dark water. The pillared roof kept off the rain, and while the thunder rolled and we huddled under our towels, one of the junior lifeguards told us a story to pass the time until the weather cleared. He made up a tale about a man who became angry because his wife never cooked dinner right. Then one night, the man became so enraged he seized his dinner knife from the table and stabbed his wife to death right in front of the children. The story haunted me for a long time. For days after the event, my mother wondered why I didn't touch my table knife, and why I watched my father vigorously sawing at his meat and potatoes with a horror I was barely able to suppress. Was this what it meant to be a man? To be so full of passion and rage that murder might happen at the drop of an underdone chop? If true love happened-would it last forever?

How I felt about the lake and everything came to a head when I went down with my brother to watch the girls rehearsing the water ballet early one night that July. We stood on the upper deck, looking down to where the spotlights played across the water, and where the local gym teacher, Dick Miyagawa (sturdy, popular, smiling), rehearsed his charges by megaphone, striding briskly on the pier in his flowered shirt and khaki shorts to the life guard tower and back, calling out: "Stroke, stroke, good! Okay! And turn, turn good! Okay! All together now" In the background, ukulele music crackled from the loudspeakers and a deep velvet voice, "wowing" as if in a time warp, sang about "heavenly" bodies, while the girls with their ruffled pastel caps covering their hair, glided back and forth to the music through the pink oil of evening, as if moving there forever would be the most natural thing in the world.

I felt delight for sure -- but also fear, because I knew the magic of the lake could be cruel as well as kind. I was a bony child who sank the moment I was not flailing vigorously in the water. A girl who lived not far from us had drowned near here just weeks before. People said she had been unhappy in love, but no one knew for sure. She was a lonely young woman who had a habit of taking long mermaid-like swims by moonlight, and one night the lake had taken her. The following day the lifeguards found her bobbing lifeless against the pier, her red hair floating

like a halo about her head.

So I couldn't help but think of her as the ukulele played and I watched the girls weaving a spell in the water with their long legs and delicately synchronized arms, splashing and laughing when they got it all screwed up and had to begin all over again. And then Mr. Miyagawa made a joke, and they laughed harder. And for a while my fear went away Suddenly they were simply people having fun in the water, and I wanted to leap the railing and join them in the lake, where they might laugh to me and souse me with their spray.

Rod Clark, Editor

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