7-29-2016

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What Little Water Was Left

Abstract
We are talking about our childhoods, me, my father, and Marion, in the soba place on the second floor of Kansai Airport. I am here to see my grandmother, who has been in a hospital in Kyoto since the previous week. Marion is here for me, and my father is here to drive us both home. We left San Francisco fourteen hours ago and haven’t slept much, but the stories we tell are ones we have told many times before and so they come easy to us, and there is laughing, too, and it is the kind of laughing that doesn’t take much energy even when you’re beat.

Cover Page Footnote
"What Little Water Was Left" was originally published at Booth.
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Marion tells the story about the rooster on her uncle’s farm. My father about mixing
rocket fuel in his friend’s basement. But still our orders haven’t arrived, so the two of
them turn to me, and I say I will tell the one about the pool.

That’s a good one, my father says.

All right, Marion says, set the scene. Marion always wants a story to begin with the
scene.

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The scene: mid-summer, 1998. My father and I were in our yard putting together an
aboveground pool. My mother was in the garden, pulling some turnips, and just
around the corner Mr. and Mrs. Onishi were taking their dog for a walk. Late evening,
the cicadas were winding down, those black-and-white striped mosquitos that we killed by the thousands each summer just beginning to take their place.

My father was whistling “I Shall Be Released.” That’s the kind of mood he was in. He kept telling me about his foster parents’ backyard. This had been in Hartford, Connecticut, and my father lived there eight years between when his parents died and when he finally escaped to college. He told me how in the midst of the cigarette butts on the ground, the soot-filled bottles, the quiet resentment between his foster parents that turned to yelling every night, there had been a pool. The one good thing, he kept saying, about the entire place.

My father had gotten the pool from a friend who had decided he would sooner give it away than have it go on rotting in his shed. It was a huge circular structure about four feet high and twelve feet across. The inside was blue-and-white vinyl with streaks of black mold. The outside was sheet metal rusted to within a fraction of a millimeter of eating all the way through. I don’t want to sound spoiled or ungrateful, but I want to be honest. If you didn’t have the benefit of seeing it through the lens of my father’s fondest memories, it looked like the kind of thing you might keep a hippo in at a zoo, the kind of place where kids would throw candy wrappers and scraps of gum over the fence and when the hippo lifted its head above the water there would be stalks of months-old lettuce and empty soda cans in its jaws.

Then the Onishis—sixty-two-year-old long-time neighborhood residents whose house had been owned by their parents and grandparents and their great-grandparents before them—came around the corner with their coiffed Pomeranian straining at the leash. They turned toward my mother to nod hello and suddenly their footsteps stopped. Their jaws swung open like trapdoors.

Because of a pool? Marion says.

You have to understand, my father says. Aren’t too many of those in Kyoto.

Not private ones, I say. If there had been, they would’ve been hidden behind high walls in big estates up in the mountains, white-tiled and marble-corniced in an ocean of perfectly trimmed grass. It never even occurred to anyone back then that a pool could be something that wasn’t luxurious, a plaything for the rich.

You should have seen the people who filed by the next couple of days, my father says. The Onishis, the Koniwas, ten different elementary school kids, and Mr. Saruhashi . . .
The neighborhood cop came by three times a week as if he couldn’t be sure what might turn up next, I say. And then the Imamuras, the Hamadas . . . Mom used to say it was like living in a zoo. And then Dad would oblige by putting on his zebra-striped board shorts and going out in the middle of the day. He’d sink down in the water like a crocodile, and the neighbors would try to peer over the walls, wondering what it was.

Something I used to do in Hartford, my father says.

I know the routine, Marion says. Calms me down sometimes when I need it.

Yes, my father says. That’s what it was.

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My father understood the politics of the situation. He saw approval for the pool falling to dangerously low levels, and he knew he had to lobby key segments of the electorate if he wanted to prevent public sentiment from turning sour. So one day he came home with an electric-yellow boogie board held under one arm.

Son, he said, I want you to have this. He said it like he was giving me an heirloom, like it was his mother’s jewelry box or a souvenir from his father’s time in the war. He’d found it on the curb on his way to work, that in itself a miracle, probably the only boogie board in those days in all of Kyoto. There was a crease through the middle of it that meant it would fold up on itself when you pushed down on it, but still it floated well enough. My father said, Go on, take it for a spin, so I did.

I held the board out in front of me and kicked off the wall. I’d never seen a boogie board, but I had used a kickboard before in swimming practice so I tried it that way, folding my hands over the crease to try to keep it from bending. After I coasted for a few seconds, the board sank and I lost my balance, so I turned around and tried it again. Kick-slide-sink. Kick-slide-sink. Kick-slide-sink. I could feel the walls of the pool bending outward a little each time I kicked it.

Hey, my father said, cut it out, you’re gonna break something. But he didn’t stop me when I started up again a few minutes later.

Kick-slide-sink. I wanted to see whether I could coast from one end to the other, but I couldn’t quite manage it.
While I figured out the boogie board, my father sat on the ground and talked. The way we were positioned, I couldn’t see him and he couldn’t see me; it was just his voice coming up through the water, and I think maybe that was why he talked so much about things he’d never mentioned before. He talked about lying at the bottom of that pool in Hartford, watching the sky, seeing the wind rippling the clouds and the telephone wires and the tops of the trees. He told me how close his foster parents were to splitting up in those days and how the wife would storm out of the house twice a month with her two kids in tow, and how it would be just the husband brooding in the second-floor bedroom and my father left behind, careful not to make a sound when he slipped out through the screen door and lowered himself carefully into the water.

I can’t remember where my mother was then. I think she was on some kind of errand that day. She’d taken the car. I remember just my father making dinner that night, the two of us with folding chairs in the yard, swatting away mosquitoes in the dark.

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Cut to the chase, my father says.

All right, I say, I’m cutting.

Tell about the last day, my father says.

I will, I say, and then Marion jumps in to remind me about the scene.

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Midday, the end of August, hot as hell. I floated in the pool while my father was whacking weeds at the edge of the yard. Mother was in the garden again, tending to some summer squash. Around the corner: the Onishis, their yapping Pomeranian audible from a mile away. This was the moment, the split instant before everything began to change, before even the first hints of a strange suction, a little current, made it into my mind. I climbed on the boogie board, elbows locked, perfectly positioned. I kicked off the wall and gathered speed, only a couple of seconds to go before I finally managed to coast to the other side. I could almost touch the far wall, could almost reach out and grab it, and already my mind was letting out a celebratory whoop. I’m doing it! my mind yelled. I’m really doing it!

This was not to be.
The next moment: An unstoppable force pulled me back the way I had come, no sound except the whoomph of three thousand gallons of water collapsing in on itself like a liquid Hindenburg. I perched on the crest of it for the ride of my life.

My mother recoiled, the squash snatched out of her grip as the deluge began to reach for her waist. My father swung the weed whacker above his head like a weightlifter with a set of barbells. Mr. and Mrs. Onishi stared in disbelief as I zoomed between them like a boogie superman, their dog going nuts as the wave picked it off its feet and shoved the two of us like drag racers careening down the block.

A bright summer afternoon. The road like a river. Even the cicadas went silent for a moment in the trees. Mr. Onishi yelled after his dog.

Boss! he yelled. Boss! Come back!

But Boss, a limber-muscled puppy with fur slicked back by mud, was surfing to freedom and had no intention of turning around. The water drained away, and Boss kept moving, running down the road as fast as his little legs would take him, his leash trailing behind like a cape.

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No, says Marion.

God’s honest truth, I tell her.

And the dog? she says.

Ran all the way to Yamashina, says my father. Turns out that little bastard could really go if you supplied it with the right motivation. I was rooting for it to keep running and never get caught.

He’s laughing, we’re all laughing, but in my mind the memory is still going, past when the water receded and you could see the whole yard like a swamp, and I glance at my father across the table, and I can tell for an instant that he sees it, too. The way that after my mother left and I was still standing on the road, my father took a few steps into the twelve-foot puddle of vinyl and broken steel. The way he bent over, slowly with his feet apart so as not to lose his balance, and how he lowered himself down one last time so that his head was buried in what little water was left.
Me in my board shorts. The empty street. The long wait for my father to come up for air.

Gen Del Raye was born and raised in Kyoto, Japan, and currently lives in Berkeley, CA. His fiction can be found, among other places, in The Monarch Review, Buffalo Almanack, and at gendelraye.blogspot.com.