



## Memory Laps

Summers on the swim team.

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I always told myself that when I hit fifty I was going to discover opera, not just casually but full force: studying the composers, learning Italian, maybe even buying a cape. It seemed like something an older person could really sink his teeth into—that's why I put it off for so long. Then I turned fifty, and, instead of opera, I discovered swimming. Or, rather, I *rediscovered* swimming. I've known how to do it since I was ten, and took lessons at the Raleigh Country Club. There was a better place, the Carolina Country Club, but I don't believe they admitted Yankees. Jews, either, if my memory serves me correctly. The only blacks I recall were employees, and they were known to everyone, even children, by their first names. The man behind the bar was Ike. You were eleven-year-old Mr. Sedaris.



The better country club operated on the principle that Raleigh mattered, that its old families were fine ones, and that they needed a place where they could enjoy one another's company without being pawed at. Had we not found this laughable, our country club might have felt desperate. Instead, its attitude was: Look at how much money you saved by not being good enough!

I can't speak for the two clubs' golf courses, but their pools were the same size, and on a hot, windless afternoon you could probably smell them from an equal distance. Chlorine pits is what they were. Chemical baths. In the deep end my sisters and I would dive for nickels. Toss one in and by the time we reached it half of Jefferson's face would be eaten away. Come lunchtime, we'd line up at the snack bar, our hair the texture of cotton candy, our small, burning eyes like little cranberries.

I took my lessons in June of 1966, the first year of our membership. By the following summer, I was on the swim team. This sounds like an accomplishment, but I believe that in 1967 anyone could be on the Raleigh Country Club team. All you had to do was show up and wear an orange Speedo.

Before my first practice, I put swimming in the same category as walking and riding a bike: things one did to get from place to place. I never thought of how well I was doing them. It was only in competing that an activity became fraught and self-conscious. More accurately, it was only in competing with boys. I was fine against girls, especially if they were younger than me. Younger than me and physically challenged was even better. Give me a female opponent with a first-grade education and a leg brace, and I would churn that water like a speedboat. When it came to winning, I never split hairs.

Most of my ribbons were for good sportsmanship, a backhanded compliment if ever there was one. As the starting gun was raised, I would look at my competitors twitching at their places. Parents would shout their boozy encouragement from the sidelines, and it would occur to me that one of us would have to lose, that I could do that for these people. For, whether I placed or came in last, all I ultimately felt was relief. The race was over, and now I could go home. Then the next meet would be announced, and it would start again: the sleepless nights, the stomach aches, a crippling and all-encompassing sense of doom. My sisters Lisa and Gretchen were on the team as well, but I don't think it bothered them as much. For me, every meet day was the same. "Mom"—this said with a groan, like someone calling out from beneath a boulder—"I don't feel too good. Maybe we should."

"Oh, no you don't."

If I had been trying to get out of school, she'd have at least allowed me to plead my case, but then she had no presence at school. At the club she was front and center, laughing it up with Ike at the bar and with the girls in the restaurant beside the putting green. Once summer got going, we'd spend all day at the pool, us swimming and her broasting on one of the deck chairs. Every so often, she'd go into the water to cool off, but she didn't know how to swim and didn't trust us not to drag her under. So she'd sit waist-deep in the kiddie pool, dropping her cigarette ash onto the wet pavement and dissolving it with her finger.

There was a good-sized group of women like her, and they were united in their desire to be left alone. Run to your mother with a complaint, and before she could speak one of the others would say, "Oh, come on now. Let's not be a tattletale," or, "You would have lost that tooth anyway. Now get back into the water." I think of them in that terrible heat, no umbrellas, just sunglasses and bottles of tanning oil that left them smelling like coconuts.

The pool was a land of women and children until swim meets, which usually started at six. Then drinks would be ordered and the dads would arrive. For most of the fathers, this was just one more thing they had to turn up for. Their son was likely on his school's football or basketball team. Maybe he played baseball as well. For my dad, though, this was it, and, the way I saw it, he should have been grateful. Look at all the time my fear of sports was affording him—weekends and evenings free.

In retrospect, I was never an awful swimmer, just average. I'd come in third sometimes, and once or twice, if I was part of a relay team, we'd place first, though I could hardly take credit. Occasionally, we'd have intra-club races, us against us, and in those, as in the larger meets, the star was a boy named Greg Sakas, who was my size but a few years younger, with pale-yellow hair and legs no thicker than jumper cables. "God, that Greg Sakas, did you see him go?" my father said on the way home from my first meet. "Man alive, that kid is *faaaantastic*."

In the beginning, it didn't bother me. Greg wasn't stuck up. His father was decent enough, and everyone adored his mother. She was one of the few moms who could get away with wearing a bikini, a chocolate-colored one that, as the summer advanced, made it look as if she were naked. "That son of yours is really something," I heard my father say to her after the second meet. "You ought to bring a movie camera out here and film him sometime."

On the way home, he repeated the conversation to my mother. "I said to her, 'Send the footage to a professional swimming coach, and he'll be chomping at the bit! Your boy is the real thing. Olympic material, I'm telling you. He's got speed, personality, the whole package.' "

O.K., I thought. *You can shut up about Greg Sakas now.*

We had a station wagon at the time, and my sister Gretchen and I were in what we called the way-back—the spot where groceries usually went. When she was a baby, a dog bit her face and left her with a scar that was almost invisible until she got a tan. Then it looked like someone had chalked the number "1" four times on her cheek and put a strike mark through them.

"It's the kids swimming *against* him I feel sorry for," my father continued. "Those clowns didn't stand a chance. And did you hear what he said when they handed him his blue ribbon? Who the hell knew Greg Sakas could be so funny? Good-looking, too. Just an all-around four-star individual."

When she was young, my sister was what we called chunky, and the longer my dad carried on about Greg the better it seemed to draw attention to it. "Hey," I called. "Gretchen's in a sunbeam. Does anybody else smell bacon frying?"

My sister looked at me like, *Weren't we friends just two minutes ago? Where is this coming from?*

"Maybe Mom should put her on a diet," I said. "That way she won't be so fat."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," my father said.

My mother, newly pregnant and feeling somewhat chunky herself, put her two cents in, and I settled back, triumphant. This was the advantage of having a large family. You didn't want to focus attention on Lisa—Miss Perfect—but there were three, and, later, four others to go after, all younger, and all with their particular faults: buckteeth, failing grades. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Even if I wound up getting punished, it was still a way of changing the channel, switching in this case from "The Greg Show" to "The David Show," which was today sponsored by Gretchen's weight problem. Meanwhile, my sisters had their own channels to change, and when it got to be too much, when our parents could no longer take it, they'd open the car door and throw us out. The spot they favored—had actually blackened with their tire treads—was at the bottom of a steep hill. The distance home wasn't all that great, half a mile, maybe, but it seemed twice as long when it was hot or raining, or, worse yet, during a thunderstorm. "Aw, it's just heat lightning," our father would say. "That's not going to kill anybody. Now get the hell out of my car."

Neighbors would pass, and when they honked I'd remember that I was in my Speedo. Then I'd wrap my towel around my waist like a skirt and remind my sisters that this was not girlish but *Egyptian*, thank you very much.

Drawing attention to Gretchen's weight was the sort of behavior my mother referred to as "stirring the turd," and I did it a lot that summer. *Dad wants Greg Sakas to be his son instead of me*, I'd think, and in response I made myself the kind of kid that nobody could like.

"What on earth has gotten into you?" my mother kept asking.

I wanted to tell her, but more than that I wanted her to notice it on her own. *How can you not?* I kept wondering. *It's all he ever talks about.*

The next swim meet was a replay of the first two. Coming home, I was once again in the way-back—anything to put some distance between myself and my father. “I’ll tell you what—that Greg is magic. Success is written all over his face, and when it happens I’m going to say, ‘Hey, buddy, remember me? I’m the one who first realized how special you are.’ “

He talked as if he actually knew stuff about swimming, like he was a talent scout for Poseidon or something. “The butterfly’s his strong suit, but let’s not discount his crawl, or, hell, even his breaststroke, for that matter. Seeing that kid in the water is like seeing a shark!”



His talk was supposedly directed at my mother, who’d stare out the window and sometimes sigh, “Oh, gosh, Lou. I don’t know.” She never said anything to keep the conversation going, so I could only believe that he was saying these things for my benefit. Why else would he be speaking so loudly, and catching my eye in the rearview mirror?

One week, while riding home, I took my sister Amy’s Barbie doll, tied her feet to the end of my beach towel, and lowered her out the way-back window, dragging her behind us as we drove along. Every so often I’d reel her back in and look at the damage—the way the asphalt had worn the hair off one side of her head, whittled her ski-jump nose down to nothing. *What*, I wondered, *was Greg up to at that exact moment?* Did his father like him as much as mine did? He was an only child, so chances were he got the star

treatment at home as well as at the club. I lowered the doll back out the window and let go of the towel. The car behind us honked, and I ducked down low and gave the driver the finger.

By mid-July, I was begging to quit the team, but my parents wouldn’t allow it. “Oh, you’re a good swimmer,” my mother said. “Not the best, maybe, but so what? Who wants to be the best at something you do in a bathing suit?”

In the winter, my Greek grandmother was hit by a car and moved from New York State to live with us. Bringing her to the club would have depressed people. With the gloomy black dresses and the long gray hair pinned into an Old Country bun, she was the human equivalent of a storm cloud. I thought she’d put a crimp in our upcoming pool schedule, but, when Memorial Day arrived, it was business as usual. “She’s a big girl,” my mother said. “Let her stay home by herself.”

“Well, shouldn’t we be back by five, just in case she falls down the stairs or something?” I didn’t want her to ruin my summer—just to keep me off the swim team. “I could come home and sit with her.”

“The hell you will,” my mother said. “A nice steep fall is just what I’m hoping for.”

I thought the birth of my brother Paul might limit our pool hours as well, but, again, no luck. It can’t have been healthy for a six-month-old in that hot sun. Maybe that’s why he never cried. He was in shock—the only baby I’d ever seen with a tan line. “Cute kid,” Greg said one afternoon, and I worried that he might win over Paul and my mother the way he had my father.

The summer of ‘68 was even worse than the one before it. The club started serving a once-a-week prime-rib dinner, dress-up—which meant my blue wool sports coat. Sweating over my fruit cocktail, I’d watch my father make his rounds, stopping at the Sakases’ table and laying his hand on Greg’s shoulder in a way he’d never once put it on mine. There weren’t many people I truly hated back then—thirty, maybe forty-five at most—and Greg was at the top of my list. The killer was that it wasn’t even my idea. I was being *forced* to hate him, or, rather, forced to hate myself for not being him. It’s not as if the two of us were all that different, really: same size, similar build. Greg wasn’t exceptional-looking. He was certainly no scholar. I was starting to see that he wasn’t all that great a swimmer, either. Fast enough, sure, but far too choppy. I brought this to my father’s attention, and he attributed my observation to sour grapes: “Maybe you should work on your own stroke before you start criticizing everyone else’s.”

*Things will be better when the summer is over*, I kept thinking. We continued going to the club for prime rib, but Greg wasn’t always there, and without the swimming there wasn’t as much for my dad to carry on about. When fall arrived, he got behind a boy in my Scout troop. But my father didn’t really understand what went on in Scouts. The most difficult thing we did that year was wrap potatoes in tinfoil, and I could wrap a potato just as well as the next guy. Then one night while watching “The Andy Williams Show” he came upon Donny Osmond.

"I just saw this kid on TV, and I mean to tell you he absolutely knocked my socks off. The singing, the dancing—this boy's going to be huge, you mark my words."

"You didn't discover him," I said the following evening at dinner. "If someone's on 'The Andy Williams Show,' it means they were *already* discovered. Stop trying to take credit."

"Well, someone's testy, aren't they?" My father lifted his drink off the table. "I wonder when Donny will be on the show again."

"It's the Osmond *Brothers*," I said. "Girls at school talk about them all the time. It's not a solo act—they're a group."

"Not without him, they're not. Donny's the thunderbolt. Take him out of the picture and they're nothing."

The next time they were on "The Andy Williams Show," my father flushed me out of my room and forced me to watch.

"Isn't he fantastic? Just look at that kid! God Almighty, can you believe it?"

Competing against celebrities, people who were not in any sense "real," was a losing game. I knew this as well as I knew my name and troop number, but the more my father carried on about Donny Osmond the more threatened and insignificant I felt. The thing was that he didn't even like that kind of music. "Well, normally, no," he said, when I brought it up. "Something about Donny, though, makes me like it." He paused. "And the hell of it is he's even younger than you are."

"A year younger."

"Well, that's still younger."

I'd never know if my father did this to hurt me or to spur me on, but on both fronts he was wildly successful. I remember being at the club in the summer of '69, the day that men walked on the moon. Someone put a TV on the lifeguard chair, and we all gathered around, me thinking that at least today something was bigger than Donny Osmond and Greg Sakas, who was actually now a little shorter than me.

That Labor Day, at the season's final intra-team meet, I beat Greg in the butterfly. "Were you watching? Did you see that? I won!"

"Maybe you did, but it was only by a hair," my father said on our way home that evening. "Besides, that was, what—one time out of fifty? I don't really see that you've got anything to brag about."

That's when I thought, *O.K., so that's how it is*. My dad was like the Marine Corps, only instead of tearing you to pieces and then putting you back together, he just did the first part and called it a day. Now it seems cruel, abusive even, but this all happened before the invention of self-esteem, which, frankly, I think is a little overrated.

I'm sure my father said plenty of normal things to me when I was growing up, but what stuck, probably because he said it, like, ten thousand times, was "Everything you touch turns to crap." His other catchphrase was "You know what you are? A big fat zero."

*I'll show you*, I remember thinking. Proving him wrong was what got me out of bed every morning, and when I failed it's what got me back on my feet. I remember calling in the summer of 2008 to tell him my book was No. 1 on the *Times* best-seller list.

"Well, it's not No. 1 on the *Wall Street Journal* list," he said.

"That's not really the list that book people turn to," I told him.

"The hell it isn't," he said. "I turn to it."

"And you're a book person?"

"I read. Sure."

I recalled the copy of "Putt to Win" gathering dust on the back seat of his car. "Of course you read," I said.

No. 1 on the *Times* list doesn't mean that your book is good—just that a lot of people bought it that week, people who were tricked, maybe, or were never too bright to begin with. It's not like winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, but still, if it's your kid, aren't you supposed to be happy and supportive?

Of course, it complicates things when a lot of that book is about you and what a buffoon you can be. No. 1 in this particular case meant that a whole lot of people just read about my father sitting around in his underpants and hitting people over the head with spoons. So maybe he had a right to be less than enthusiastic.

When I told him I'd started swimming again, my dad said, "Atta boy." This is the phrase he uses whenever I do something he thinks was his idea.

"I'm going back to college."

"Atta boy."

"I'm thinking of getting my teeth fixed."

"Atta boy."

"On second thought . . ." I always want to say.

It's not my father's approval that troubles me but my childlike hope that maybe this time it will last. He likes that I've started swimming again, so maybe he'll also like the house I bought ("Boy, they sure saw you coming") or the sports coat I picked up on my last trip to Japan ("You look like a goddam clown").

Greg Sakas would have got the same treatment eventually, as would any of the other would-be sons my father pitted me against throughout my adolescence. Once they got used to the sweet taste of his approval, he'd have no choice but to snatch it away, not because of anything they did but because it is in his nature. The guy sees a spark and just can't help but stomp it out.

I was in Las Vegas not long ago and looked up to see Donny Osmond smiling down at me from a billboard only slightly smaller than the sky. "You," I whispered.

In the hotel pool a few hours later, I thought of him as I swam my laps. Then I thought of Greg and was carried right back to the Raleigh Country Club. Labor Day, 1969. A big crowd for the intra-team meet, the air smelling of chlorine and smoke from the barbecue pit. The crummy part of swimming is that while you're doing it you can't really see much: the bottom of the pool, certainly, a smudged and fleeting bit of the outside world as you turn your head to breathe. But you can't pick things out—a man's face, for example, watching from the sidelines when, for the first time in your life, you pull ahead and win. ♦



David Sedaris contributes frequently to *The New Yorker*.

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