

1st Place - *Mama at the Swimming Hole*

by Pat Tyler

Smiling, I watch my seven-year-old grandson, Robert, suntanned and shivering at the shallow end of our city's community pool. He's waiting impatiently for his first swimming lesson to begin.

Sitting at the opposite end of the pool, near the diving board, I slip my hot feet into the cold, chlorinated water. Its temperature startles me. I grimace, closing my eyes against the surface glare, and my mind flashes back to another time and place where a subtle struggle once began.



It's a sizzling hot California day in August, 1945. Standing in our tiny kitchen I wipe my brow with a worn dinner napkin. We've just finished lunch. In our long hall Daddy removes his work boots, sticks a couch cushion under his head, and stretches out on the cool linoleum for his afternoon nap. Clearing the table, I nearly drop a dish as I daydream of our creek. I'm drawn to that creek like a metal chip to a magnet.

"Mama," I say "It's so hot! Can't we go to the swimming hole? Pleeeeeze?"

Mama peers at me over wire-rimmed glasses, giving me a look that says *don't push me again, young lady – you know I'm terrified of that water.*

Once Daddy said, with his voice all soft and low, that a long time ago, Mama's brother drowned in a creek like ours. She never got over it, he said. Daddy's patient with Mama. I want to be patient, too, but not today.

I'm not scared like she is, but she won't talk about that. Her fear pops up each summer like a living weed in our dead grass. I know its back. I can't see it, but I feel it. It stands between us like a barbed wire fence.

"No more pleeeeezes," Mama says. "Whining won't help." She stops and thinks a moment. "I'll turn the sprinkler on," she exclaims, like I was three years old, "And you can wear your new bathing suit. That'll cool you down." I can't believe she's serious.

"No, Mama," I'm begging now. "I want to really *swim!*"

Then she asks, "What if I fill the bathtub with cold water?" I don't roll my eyes, but I ask myself, *how dumb is that?*

"No! I want to swim for *real*. Pleeeeeze?" I tug at her parchment-thin apron. "Come on, Mama. The water level's already dropping. Next month the creek'll be dry."

Mama's eyebrows shoot up. Then her mouth flies open. "How do you know that, young lady? You didn't go near that creek by yourself, did you?" Hands on hips, she bends forward and says, "Look me in the eye." She swears that, without a doubt, this ritual reveals whether I'm telling God's honest truth, or flat-out lying. Well, let her look. This time, I'm honest as the day is long.

"No, Mama," I stand firm. "Daddy showed me. And that's the truth!" I stand on my left foot, bend my right leg up, and scratch inside my left knee, staring up into little black dots in the center of Mama's brown eyes. When she stops staring back, I guess she's accepted my statements as facts.

"Please, Mama," I persist, sensing she's about to recite all the chores that keep her away from me: cleaning house, feeding calves, pulling weeds, washing clothes - and that's just for starters. I've memorized Mama's chores in alphabetical order, and despite all the ways she says Daddy'll kill her if those chores don't get done, I don't believe a word she says. I should ask *her* to look *me* straight in the eye.

"Please, Mama," I'm about to give up when an idea born of desperation surfaces. "You can read your movie magazine while you watch me! You'll have fun. Honest. You will." I know I'm pushing the odds now, but I can't stop myself, knowing how Mama loves reading about the easy lives of the favorite movie stars she envies. I give her apron another firm tug, prepared to duck if I have to. But Mama surprises me. She looks down, unties her apron strings, and smiles. Mama's smile is like a buried treasure plowed to the surface by mistake. When she folds her apron over the back of the kitchen chair, I'm dumfounded.

"Well," she says, still smiling, "Maybe ..." But I don't wait for the end of *that* sentence. I'm already skipping down the hall, humming my happy tune, wondering where, in my tiny closet, I'd stuffed my brand new swim suit.

To this day, I don't know why Mama smiled and relented just then. Maybe she was amused by my relentless attempts to woo her. Or maybe she, too, welcomed any rare opportunity to relax for a minute or two. I'll never know for sure, but I'm guessing that Daddy, sometime during the passing years, may have finally convinced her that drowning and swimming were two different things.



I smell the warm, acrid scent of licorice weed as we cautiously wend our way through the clumps of dead grass on our parched adobe. Mama's carrying Daddy's moth-eaten army blanket, her latest movie magazine, and a dented canteen of ice-cold lemonade. I'm planning a great adventure as we cross the uneven ground.

I skip ahead of her, rolling the patched inner tube from Daddy's old Ford pickup while dragging my faded Mickey Mouse towel through dying prickly stickers. When I arrive at the

creek bank edging our neck-deep swimming hole I slide down the embankment and wait impatiently for Mama. Sweat trickles down into my two-piece, polka dot suit. I wish Mama would hurry.

“Don’t go in that water till I get situated,” Mama shouts from the top of the embankment, like I don’t already know the rules.

“I won’t. Hurry, Mama,” I say, as she slips and slides toward the bottom of the steep incline. Soon she’s beside me, huffing and puffing.

Before her blanket hits the ground I jump in. I slip my backside into the inner tube and kick my feet with all my might, creating widening ripples until I get bored. Then I climb out, dash half way up the embankment, turn, race down to the edge of the water, and cannon ball onto its muddied surface. In an instant Mama, Katherine Hepburn, and Spencer Tracy, are awash in muddy creek water.

Mama shouts “Stop that splashing this minute, Patsy Ann.”

“Sorry,” I say, and stop for one second. Mama sits down, pries the pages of her squishy magazine apart, and tries again to read about her soggy Hollywood friends.

“Look what I can do,” I shout. I dive beneath the surface and stay under for my longest time ever. My chest threatens to explode. I finally surface, sputtering, coughing, and swiping murky water from my eyes. When they open, I see Mama. Her eyes are round as silver dollars. She’s marching back and forth at the very edge of the swimming hole.

“If you do that again, young lady,” Mama says, pointing her rigid index finger toward my wet nose, “We’re both going back to the house.”

“Okay,” I grumble, not sure she means business, but afraid to find out.

“You keep your head above water, where I can see it,” she says. “Understand? No more scary stuff.”

Oh, no, there she goes again, I think. I have to stop her, make her understand. “But Mama,” I remind her, “It’s not scary to me!”

“Did you hear me?” Her frown wrinkles grow deeper. I nod and hope she’ll stop, but she doesn’t.

“I’ve got things to do besides sit in this hot sun watching you and your scary tricks,” Mama says. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, praying not to hear another list of chores. I know better than to say something sassy, but I turn my back to her.

A while later I realize she’s stayed at our old swimming hole for at least an hour. Maybe more. I’m doing every scary trick I know, while Mama’s keeps drying her face, plus the faces of Katherine and Spencer, every other minute.

"Watch me, Mama. See? I bet you never saw this trick before!" Trying to stand on the old Ford inner tube, I slip, slide, and fall. Splat! When Mama puts her sprinkled magazine down for the twentieth time I'm sure I'm in trouble. But I'm not!

Mama says, "I *see!* I *hear* you! I'm *watching*." I'm shocked.

When she yells, "That's terrific," for the twenty-first time, I can tell she's not just being kind. I bet Daddy, over the years, has helped her outgrow the drowning nightmare. But I don't know for sure. What I feel though, despite the water's chill, is my chest warming up from the inside out.

I show Mama every trick I know: cannon balling, deep diving, the works. I'm doing what I love and Mama's telling me how great I'm doing it! Wait till Daddy hears this. He won't believe me when I tell him Mama sat and watched. Suddenly, I feel more important than her whole long list of chores.



Mama and the past vanish from my thoughts as a familiar shout draws me back to the moment. Robert approaches from the far side of our city pool, "Watch this, Nana!" Cloaked in contemporary items unheard of in my swimming hole days, he sports air-tight, rubber-rimmed goggles, and slaps webbed swim fins at the surface as he clings, white knuckled, to an unsinkable paddleboard, kicking his way to my deep end.

He finally reaches me, coughing and sputtering. When he stops at my feet and splashes me, memories of Mama evaporate.

"Watch this," he yells, as if I'm deaf, forcing his body to the bottom and keeping it there till *I'm* breathless. Finally he rockets to the surface, coughing, sputtering, and swiping chlorinated water from his eyes.

"Keep your head above water where I can see it," I say. "No more scary stuff."

"But Nana," he argues as his cough subsides, "It's not scary to me."

With those words other flashes of childhood memories return, and then, just as quickly, depart. "Oh, all right," I concede, smiling a smile he'll never understand. "Do it again. This time I'll count the seconds."

He clings to the paddleboard with his left hand, splays the fingers of his right hand, and gives me his high five. "Cool," he says, releases his hold on the board, pinches his nose closed, and feet first, plunges to the bottom a second time.

I count, "One, one thousand. Two, one thousand," growing anxious as I watch, thinking he's down too far, he's staying down too long. When he finally rockets to the surface and grabs his paddle board, gulping air, I sigh with relief. I don't scold him. I simply shout, "That was terrific," but he doesn't respond.

He grabs his board and paddles toward me again, drenching me as he approaches my dangling feet. Then I see his ear plugs. I lean forward, reach out, remove the one closest to me and ask, "Didn't you hear me?" He shakes his head, no. I repeat, "That was terrific, I said! Really terrific!"



As I speak those words Mama returns to mind for the last time, my fleeting memory of her reminding me that regardless of time or place, watching and listening are gifts. The reminder includes wrapping such gifts in a smile. I believe my Dad and her life eventually taught her that just like grownups, children need to feel seen, heard, and valued.

It's my hope that Robert, just a boy now, shivering in a city pool, will one day grow into a man who watches and listens and gifts his time, speaking encouraging words to someone special in his life. He may not speak them beside a swimming hole, or a city pool, but I'm betting he'll speak them to someone, somewhere. And I believe it's a bet I'll win.

