

# CYRIL DABYDEEN

## At Swim

### 1

On the day I was born my mother lifted me up in her arms, admiring me for a moment, then threw me into the winding black-watered creek.

“Swim, you bugger,” I might have heard.

Rampaging alligators coming after me, and I had to swim in order to get out, to live another day. Thrashing, my right arm comes down hard!

It’s what I’ve been telling people ever since about my swimming style; and maybe the blackwatered creek or river has always been with me, the same tributary of the Orinoco or the Amazon.

This memory, or it’s just wishful thinking. My heart pounding, and young as I was, I had to swim and get out of the water, or face the consequences. Alligators’ jaws opened wide, then ready to snap shut!

Now each time I’m in the pool, the lifeguards eye me, no doubt considering what I’m up to with my inimitable swimming style. Don’t they?

Or do they have it out for me, one lifeguard in particular? I’m in the swimming pool again, in the North, as if destined to be here. Now don’t get me wrong, I’m a good swimmer. But that encounter on the first day of my life, my head bobbing up and down, and my feet and arms flailing in the wild urge to save myself... it was my real borning!

The male lifeguards know instinctively what I’ve been through; but this one, the same female, her eyes keep boring holes into me... as she walks up and down, following me all the way... from one end of the pool to another. Distances, really;

journeys yet in the making, I figure. Nineteen or twenty she is, and does she really want to know why I swim the way I do?

Deliberately I splash about.

She smiles. Oddly, I smile back at her, though I'm almost out of breath. I come to the shallow end of the pool once more, and I tell myself that I indeed swim well. But the lifeguard's eyes are still on me.

I begin the slow crawl once more, lifting my right arm over my head, then bringing it down hard. Alligators still rampaging, in the stygian murk of South American waters.

*Go on, tell her!*

One movie with me, too: *Creature from the Dark Lagoon*, set in the Amazon. Has she seen it? She looks sideways, then does a faint glance backwards. She's also looking at the regular swimmers who will race past me in no time, I can tell. And why can't I swim like them? Maybe it's why she's watching me like that.

Now I try to keep up with them, in my unique rhythm. But to no avail. Next I imagine swimming in the wide Atlantic, being somewhere near Cuba. Am I really? Sharks, barracuda, sword fish next to me! Faster I swim, my right arm coming down hard again. It's survival, you bet!

Instinctively I kick out, hitting a shark's head. The lifeguard watching me, and will she smile again? I concentrate on how beautiful she is... with a knockout of a body. Nicole's her name, I know, French-Canadian. Imagine her swimming next to me making graceful strides, her lithe body knifing through the water, as if she's born with fins on. And I try to follow her, don't I?

The ocean, then comes a far shore... Cuba, the sunfilled Caribbean.

Tell her this. And my mother's words yet coming to me from coastal ground.

*Swim, you bugger!*

Am I still in Canada?

*Where?*

Nicole, will she smile?

She knows my background, origins, I allow myself to think. Knows all about me indeed, the more she watches me.

Tell the other swimmers here in this swimming pool in Ottawa—the coldest capital city in the world, where it’s like Vostok, the Russian research base in Antarctica which boasts the coldest temperature ever recorded. Ah, Ottawa is colder!

I must swim hard now, as if to fight off the cold outside, though I am inside. I really am.

Others in the pool, at the shallow end, look at me; it’s their curiosity, nothing less. Some on the deck stretched out languorously are also watching me; and maybe I’m now the centre of attention because of my swimming style. I am South America attraction, indeed. Each one is taking note of me, how unique I am perhaps. Aren’t they?

A laugh or snicker, I hear. I keep doing my favourite breast stroke, and spurt water out of my mouth. Then it’s the crawl again, twenty strokes to one end of the pool, then another twenty to the opposite end.

Almost tireless I am. Nicole, well, she’s looking at me again, walking up and down.

*How am I doing?*

Suddenly it’s like being in the most sociable place in the city.

Really? Water everywhere, as I go under next, like a game I am playing with her, with everyone. Nicole is wondering how long I will remain under, as her eyes follow me down the entire length of the pool. One more time?

She keeps up her stride, as I want her to look at me only. It’s a real game we are playing. The same I’m playing with the others too?

She smiles, she knows what I’m thinking as I gulp in water, yet fantasize. Does she really know my background, about rampaging alligators coming after me in that first encounter? My mother, well, I think about her again.

Nicole’s about to reprimand me; and maybe she thinks I’m a sexist because of the thoughts I have. Now she indeed wants me to swim the correct way, doesn’t she?

*—Hey, you!*

I splash water, my right arm coming down hard once more.

*—You! It’s not like that!*

Christ, tell her about the Orinoco or the Amazon, and other rivers with stygian black waters: like the Demerara and Berbice, all I grew up with, Canadian rivers too, the Ottawa, St Lawrence, the Fraser, no? Canada indeed with thousands of lakes and rivers all around, the more I think about it. Go on, tell her!

I kick harder, smashing a real crocodilian's face.

Nicole is fascinated by all I'm telling her.

*There's more. Much more.*

Walking along she still is; then she stops to reflect, and what will I say to her next? The other swimmers also take note, they can't fool me.

But Nicole's eyes are rivetted on me.

No other.

## 2

More details of my growing up, in a village close to a murky-brown river; and the image of it raining heavily, heavy drops of water coming down. So tropical. *Plop-plop-plop*; but it's sunshine too, and golden-hued my body is.

I'm swimming again in that same river as a grown person, never wanting to stop. Tufted vegetation. Water hyacinths with long roots like hair float about. Pothos, an old man's knotted beard, what else?

Tell Nicole how I once dove deep into that same river, then surfaced close to a thick patch of vegetation... where the alligators sometimes lurk. My head and upper body caught in the thick, knotted hyacinth.

Desperately I tried getting out!

This continuing fantasy: my being Sir Walter Raleigh too, searching for El Dorado, City of Gold. A sunken Spanish galleon's not far away, as I now look for treasure under water. My being a native also, Carib or Arawak, still swimming. More conquest yet to come!

But the reality of Ottawa comes back to me, with the pool's concrete walls all around. Suddenly I feel claustrophobic. *Nicole, do you see?*

My head tilts back, as I breathe harder, my mouth opening wide.

Gulping in air I am. My legs yet kick out, wildly.

*Lookout*, I want to say to the other swimmers, as my arms slap heavily.

*Here I come once again!*

Maybe Nicole is wondering why I don't take proper swimming lessons, as others do. Children, with Moms and Dads, all learning to swim the correct way from early, don't they?

But never so for me in the tropics.

More swimmers are around me, I figure, some doing their quick flip-overs as they reach one end of the pool, then they start on another length. So tireless they are, acrobatic too. And do they also want to "teach" me how to swim the correct way? They actually say that, one or two.

I shake my head, *No!*

Again I am swimming, now close to a mighty waterfall, Kaieteur: not unlike Niagara, or Angel Falls in Venezuela. Places I've come from, all territories with origins deep in me. Conquest itself I also contemplate. Do I really? Who was Cortez? Pizarro?

Swimmers pass by me, as I keep thinking. When I reach the other end, Nicole bends and taps me on the head as if at a rock.

—*You!*

Yes.

—*What are you up to?*

I'm still here, nowhere else. Indeed I'm in temperate Canada, I want to tell her. I must strain every muscle, to keep up with the others, I say.

But something is holding me back. Maybe I'm yet with Raleigh, still looking for El Dorado.

*Not looking for Atlantis?*

Nicole is alarmed when I go under again. Then I sense that she too wants to dive into the pool, to save me from drowning... as I start coughing.

*I've had enough for one day.*

### 3

See, I must do things the proper way, not splash about at will and distract the other swimmers. Nicole tells me to look at the other swimmers good!

But I stick to my own style, South American-born as I am. My mother still taking me to the edge of the river and throwing me in, remember? Once more... the Orinoco, the Amazon. Rivers are all. And who are the First Peoples?

Nicole laughs, and she yet sees me with the other swimmers coming around. The other lifeguards also come around, watching me as I pant. A large man comes next to me, his body like a barrel floating.

—*It's for your own benefit.*

What?

—*To swim correctly.*

I must be a *Canadian* swimmer, is that it?

—*Keep doing it!*

What more do they say? And once more I go underwater, and start swimming, as if heading for a cave. Do I invite the others to do the same, to come with me; and maybe we're all looking for El Dorado? Look for what's lost, but will never be found again? Atlantis I am also looking for now? We all are, come to think of it.

Nicole smiles, as I look back at her, her shapely legs, thighs.

The blurry sea or ocean, almost mythical. Manoa, the city, or the king of El Dorado. A straggly-bearded one, with pothos for hair no less.

Water-hyacinths all knotted together.

Not Odysseus... or Poseidon?

—*You, come up... from deep under!*

Voices calling out, and Nicole makes a face. She's worried, I can tell. And all the others are alarmed, aren't they?

But I keep swimming under... going into a lost kingdom, I imagine.

—*Come on up... or you will die if you stay under much longer.*

The streets with gold dust everywhere. A real El Dorado!

—*Can you hear me?*

Who's speaking? They're truly concerned, including the large barrel-sized man.

Slowly I surface, being out of breath.

—*Are you okay?*

I splutter and cough, as if it's my last breath.

Nicole forces a smile, relieved that I am safe.

How did I manage to stay under for so long?

Fingers point to me, and I'm embarrassed because of what I've been thinking. Nicole bends down, her face level with mine, making full eye-contact. Her freckles, mottled skin in places, lips curved in, as she looks at me, as if from one particular spot.

—*You must try swimming close to the surface.*

The others laugh. I yet try to catch my breath.

—*You must also learn to swim the correct way!*

Slowly I begin swimming in a circle, as if I've been doing this from a long time ago. My continuing circular motion, and they're not sure what to make of me now.

Does anyone, anywhere? Tell my mother this too, from my vantage point in Canada. *Go on.* Beginnings... without ending, I want to tell her.

I must!

The waters swirl around me. Rampaging alligators once more coming after me. It's all.

Nicole waves to me, in our continuing game, I can tell.

It's what I'm thinking now, and maybe yearning to be in another place also, if not Cuba, then somewhere else.

But I'm actually in this pool, this building with concrete walls all around. And the ones splayed out, languorously watching me, and it's no escape. Nicole has put them to it, I know, making it happen this way.

*Am I prepared to go under again?*