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Opening Extract from...

Swimming Home

Written by Deborah Levy

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SWIMMING HOME

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‘Each morning in every family, men, women and children, *if they have nothing better to do*, tell each other their dreams. We are all at the mercy of the dream and we owe it to ourselves to submit its power to the waking state.’

– *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 1, December 1924

A MOUNTAIN ROAD. MIDNIGHT.

When Kitty Finch took her hand off the steering wheel and told him she loved him, he no longer knew if she was threatening him or having a conversation. Her silk dress was falling off her shoulders as she bent over the steering wheel. A rabbit ran across the road and the car swerved. He heard himself say, 'Why don't you pack a rucksack and see the poppy fields in Pakistan like you said you wanted to?'

'Yes,' she said.

He could smell petrol. Her hands swooped over the steering wheel like the seagulls they had counted from their room in the Hotel Negresco two hours ago.

She asked him to open his window so she could hear the insects calling to each other in the forest. He wound down the window and asked her, gently, to keep her eyes on the road.

'Yes,' she said again, her eyes now back on the road. And then she told him the nights were always 'soft' in the French Riviera. The days were hard and smelt of money.

He leaned his head out of the window and felt the cold mountain air sting his lips. Early humans had once lived in this forest that was now a road. They knew the past lived in rocks and trees and they knew desire made them awkward, mad, mysterious, messed up.

To have been so intimate with Kitty Finch had been a pleasure, a pain, a shock, an experiment, but most of all it had been a mistake. He asked her again to please, please, please drive him safely home to his wife and daughter.

'Yes,' she said. 'Life is only worth living because we hope it will get better and we'll all get home safely.'

ALPES-MARITIMES, FRANCE

July 1994

SATURDAY

Wild Life

The swimming pool in the grounds of the tourist villa was more like a pond than the languid blue pools in holiday brochures. A pond in the shape of a rectangle, carved from stone by a family of Italian stonecutters living in Antibes. The body was floating near the deep end, where a line of pine trees kept the water cool in their shade.

'Is it a bear?' Joe Jacobs waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the water. He could feel the sun burning into the shirt his Hindu tailor had made for him from a roll of raw silk. His back was on fire. Even the roads were melting in the July heatwave.

His daughter, Nina Jacobs, fourteen years old, standing at the edge of the pool in her new cherry-print bikini, glanced anxiously at her mother. Isabel Jacobs was unzipping her jeans as if she was about to dive in. At the same time she could see Mitchell and Laura, the two family friends sharing the villa with them for the summer, put down their mugs of

tea and walk towards the stone steps that led to the shallow end. Laura, a slender giantess at six foot three, kicked off her sandals and waded in up to her knees. A battered yellow lilo knocked against the mossy sides, scattering the bees that were in various stages of dying in the water.

'What do you think it is, Isabel?'

Nina could see from where she was standing that it was a woman swimming naked under the water. She was on her stomach, both arms stretched out like a starfish, her long hair floating like seaweed at the sides of her body.

'Jozef thinks she's a bear,' Isabel Jacobs replied in her detached war-correspondent voice.

'If it's a bear I'm going to have to shoot it.' Mitchell had recently purchased two antique Persian handguns at the flea market in Nice and shooting things was on his mind.

Yesterday they had all been discussing a newspaper article about a ninety-four-kilo bear that had walked down from the mountains in Los Angeles and taken a dip in a Hollywood actor's pool. The bear was on heat, according to the Los Angeles Animal Services. The actor had called the authorities. The bear was shot with a tranquilliser gun and then released in the nearby mountains. Joe Jacobs had wondered out loud what it was like to be tranquillised and then have to stumble home. Did it ever get home? Did it get dizzy and forgetful and start to hallucinate? Perhaps the barbiturate inserted inside the dart, also known as 'chemical capture', had made the bear's legs shake and jerk? Had the tranquilliser helped the bear cope with life's stressful events, calming its agitated mind so

that it now pleaded with the authorities to throw it small prey injected with barbiturate syrups? Joe had only stopped this riff when Mitchell stood on his toe. As far as Mitchell was concerned it was very, very hard to get the arsehole poet known to his readers as JHJ (Joe to every one else except his wife) to shut the fuck up.

Nina watched her mother dive into the murky green water and swim towards the woman. Saving the lives of bloated bodies floating in rivers was probably the sort of thing her mother did all the time. Apparently television ratings always went up when she was on the news. Her mother disappeared to Northern Ireland and Lebanon and Kuwait and then she came back as if she'd just nipped down the road to buy a pint of milk. Isabel Jacobs' hand was about to clasp the ankle of whoever it was floating in the pool. A sudden violent splash made Nina run to her father, who grasped her sunburnt shoulder, making her scream out loud. When a head emerged from the water, its mouth open and gasping for breath, for one panicked second she thought it was roaring like a bear.

A woman with dripping waist-length hair climbed out of the pool and ran to one of the plastic recliners. She looked like she might be in her early twenties, but it was hard to tell because she was frantically skipping from one chair to another, searching for her dress. It had fallen on to the paving stones but no one helped her because they were staring at her naked body. Nina felt light-headed in the fierce heat. The bittersweet smell of lavender drifted towards her, suffocating her as the sound of the woman's panting breath mingled with the drone of the

bees in the wilting flowers. It occurred to her she might be sun-sick, because she felt as if she was going to faint. In a blur she could see the woman's breasts were surprisingly full and round for someone so thin. Her long thighs were joined to the jutting hinges of her hips like the legs of the dolls she used to bend and twist as a child. The only thing that seemed real about the woman was the triangle of golden pubic hair glinting in the sun. The sight of it made Nina fold her arms across her chest and hunch her back in an effort to make her own body disappear.

'Your dress is over there.' Joe Jacobs pointed to the pile of crumpled blue cotton lying under the recliner. They had all been staring at her for an embarrassingly long time. The woman grabbed it and deftly slipped the flimsy dress over her head.

'Thanks. I'm Kitty Finch by the way.'

What she actually said was I'm Kah Kah Kah and stammered on for ever until she got to Kitty Finch. Everyone couldn't wait for her to finish saying who she was.

Nina realised her mother was still in the pool. When she climbed up the stone steps, her wet swimming costume was covered in silver pine needles.

'I'm Isabel. My husband thought you were a bear.'

Joe Jacobs twisted his lips in an effort not to laugh.

'Of course I didn't think she was a bear.'

Kitty Finch's eyes were grey like the tinted windows of Mitchell's hire car, a Mercedes, parked on the gravel at the front of the villa.

'I hope you don't mind me using the pool. I've just

arrived and it's sooo hot. There's been a mistake with the rental dates.'

'What sort of mistake?' Laura glared at the young woman as if she had just been handed a parking ticket.

'Well, I thought I was staying here from this Saturday for a fortnight. But the caretaker . . .'

'If you can call a lazy stoned bastard like Jurgen a caretaker.' Just mentioning Jurgen's name brought Mitchell out in a disgusted sweat.

'Yeah. Jurgen says I've got the dates all wrong and now I'm going to lose my deposit.'

Jurgen was a German hippy who was never exact about anything. He described himself as 'a nature man' and always had his nose buried in *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse.

Mitchell wagged his finger at her. 'There are worse things than losing your deposit. We were about to have you sedated and driven up to the mountains.'

Kitty Finch lifted up the sole of her left foot and slowly pulled out a thorn. Her grey eyes searched for Nina, who was still hiding behind her father. And then she smiled.

'I like your bikini.' Her front teeth were crooked, snarled into each other, and her hair was drying into copper-coloured curls. 'What's your name?'

'Nina.'

'Do you think I look like a bear, Nina?' She clenched her right hand as if it was a paw and jabbed it at the cloudless blue sky. Her fingernails were painted dark green.

Nina shook her head and then swallowed her spit the wrong way and started to cough. Everyone sat down. Mitchell

on the ugly blue chair because he was the fattest and it was the biggest, Laura on the pink wicker chair, Isabel and Joe on the two white plastic recliners. Nina perched on the edge of her father's chair and fiddled with the five silver toe-rings Jurgen had given her that morning. They all had a place in the shade except Kitty Finch, who was crouching awkwardly on the burning paving stones.

'You haven't anywhere to sit. I'll find you a chair.' Isabel wrung the ends of her wet black hair. Drops of water glistened on her shoulders and then ran down her arm like a snake.

Kitty shook her head and blushed. 'Oh, don't bother. Pah pah please. I'm just waiting for Jurgen to come back with the name of a hotel for me and I'll be off.'

'Of course you must sit down.'

Laura, puzzled and uneasy, watched Isabel lug a heavy wooden chair covered in dust and cobwebs towards the pool. There were things in the way. A red bucket. A broken plant pot. Two canvas umbrellas wedged into lumps of concrete. No one helped her because they weren't quite sure what she was doing. Isabel, who had somehow managed to pin up her wet hair with a clip in the shape of a lily, was actually placing the wooden chair between her recliner and her husband's.

Kitty Finch glanced nervously at Isabel and then at Joe, as if she couldn't work out if she was being offered the chair or being forced to sit in it. She wiped away the cobwebs with the skirt of her dress for much too long and then finally sat down. Laura folded her hands in her lap as if preparing to interview an applicant for a job.

'Have you been here before?'

'Yes. I've been coming here for years.'

'Do you work?' Mitchell spat an olive pip into a bowl.

'I sort of work. I'm a botanist.'

Joe stroked the small shaving cut on his chin and smiled at her. 'There are some nice peculiar words in your profession.'

His voice was surprisingly gentle, as if he intuited Kitty Finch was offended by the way Laura and Mitchell were interrogating her.

'Yeah. Joe likes pe-cu-li-ar words cos he's a poet.' Mitchell said 'peculiar' as if imitating an aristocrat in a stupor.

Joe leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. 'Ignore him, Kitty.' He sounded as if he had been wounded in some inexplicable way. 'Everything is pe-cu-li-ar to Mitchell. Strangely enough, this makes him feel superior.'

Mitchell stuffed five olives into his mouth one after the other and then spat out the pips in Joe's direction as if they were little bullets from one of his minor guns.

'So in the meantime ' – Joe leaned forward now – 'perhaps you could tell us what you know about cotyledons?'

'Right.' Kitty's right eye winked at Nina when she said 'right'. 'Cotyledons are the first leaves on a seedling.' Her stammer seemed to have disappeared.

'Correct. And now for my favourite word . . . how would you describe a leaf?'

'Kitty,' Laura said sternly, 'there are lots of hotels, so you'd better go and find one.'

When Jurgen finally made his way through the gate, his silver dreadlocks tied back in a ponytail, he told them every hotel in the village was full until Thursday.