

Sink or Swim: How taking the (literal) plunge changed one commitmentphobe's life.

By Kathy Flann

Here was the fact: I couldn't swim. But my brain, as if it were a high paid defense attorney, never asked me a question that would reveal this fact. When the topic of swimming came up, my brain re-framed the issue something like this: "If someone chucked me in a lake, would I drown?" In the movies, people who couldn't swim always sunk, a flurry of arms and gasps. It was kind of ironic the way their faces contorted into gasping fish lips.

That wasn't me.

In the Cardinal Forest townhouse complex, where I'd grown up the only child of a single mother, I spent summers splashing around the pool across the street with my friends. I could tread water.

In short, I had the same skills as my parents, who both came from blue-collar Midwestern backgrounds. My dad's post-divorce apartment complexes sometimes had pools, too. Neither of my parents was afraid of the water, but neither was especially fond of it, either, and I had never seen either of them swim a stroke. My dad had a particular aversion to boats. But we did do a lot of hiking and camping, often with guest appearances from the people they were dating. My favorite activity was reading books, because I could escape from my oft-changing outer world. By the time I was ten, I had moved ten times and lost four cats and dogs to various fates in the process.

As I got older, I developed another self-enclosed world in running, something I could do anywhere—just me and a pair of shoes and my dog. Everywhere I moved—and I moved another twelve times by the time I was in my thirties—reading and running were the constants. I did countless half marathons and 10ks. I did the London Marathon when I lived overseas. I plowed through novels and short stories and memoirs, like watching other people through windows when I ran city streets.

Here was another fact: I had a commitment problem. I threw myself headlong into trysts with alcoholics, musicians, and people hung up on their exes—all guys who liked something else better than they liked me.

And those nice, dependable guys who helped me move and fixed my smoke detectors and let me borrow their cars and who wanted to be loved back? Ugh. They were *needy*. After a decade of being single, it did start to seem like the common denominator could be me. But my brain-attorney reframed this issue as well. I just hadn't met the right person. I hadn't lived in the right place yet to meet someone with whom I was compatible. The best thing to do? Move.

Howard was a 6'2" Chinese-American family practice physician who collected sneakers and music and toys and movies and obscure T-shirts, and we met a few years after I moved to Baltimore. Within three weeks of our first date, he said to me one morning, "I love you." There was that familiar pull in my chest, like the voicebox of a doll whose girl has pulled the string. *Run, run, run.* But I was so tired. And Howard was so cute with his horn-rimmed glasses. It wasn't his fault that he was so wonderful and funny and kind. And I spoke back to it for the first time: *What happens if I don't?*

Every week, I was pretty sure I would dump him and every week, sometimes breaking into a sweat as I thought about it, a voice that didn't come from the mechanical box said, *What if I don't?*

And then months passed and a year. We moved in together, and we got engaged, both of us in our forties.

All of the sitting I'd done in order to read and write caught up with me right around then, in the months before our wedding. I had sciatic pain. I couldn't run like before. Running wasn't the culprit, but it was hindering recovery. My physical therapist suggested swimming.

Not only was it going to be touch and go fitting into that 1950's style knee-length wedding dress I'd bought on Amazon for \$100, but I was in pain. It was both mental and physical. I mourned my favorite pastimes, and sometimes I did them anyway and paid the price. That was how I found myself one December day with my finger hovering over the mouse and a hitch in my throat as I stared at the Groupon for adult swim classes at the Michael Phelps Swim School. I clicked "purchase" and then thought *What have I done?*

For weeks, I fretted about what kind of people would be in an adult swim class at a pool where Olympians trained. I tried to imagine worst-case scenarios—would everyone be much better than I was? Had I made a terrible mistake? When I got there, everyone was like me—adults (age twenties through sixties) who had messed themselves up somehow, often through accidents or else sports like yoga or biking.

It wasn't until we got in the pool and had to put our faces in the water—our *faces*—that I realized I'd been worried about the wrong thing. The full-blown truth broke out like hives. Water flooded my nose, and the chlorine burned my sinuses. My stomach had the sensation of falling even though I could touch the bottom.

I can't swim. I hadn't known it before.

Afterward, I sat in the car and cried, a release of adrenaline that left my arms weak. *Run,* said the voice. *Don't go back.*

I can't, I told it with a sigh. *I literally can't run anymore.*

As part of the swimming lesson, we were to come to Meadowbrook Aquatic Complex, where the classes were held, and practice what we'd learned three times a week. "I'll be checking the sign-in sheet to see that you've done it," said the instructor, a woman with the tanned skin and sun-blond hair of the swimming-advantaged.

It's embarrassing to admit that as a kid, I always earned "Outstanding" on the "Respects Authority" portion of my report card. The swim teacher's comment tripped a switch just as powerful as that voice box in my chest. My tendency to be "no trouble" or "like a small adult" was one that my parents seemed especially to prize as they navigated their divorce and subsequent dating lives. Plus, they both had that Midwestern work ethic, and it was something I'd inherited just as much as my inability to swim. My dad's advice was always along the lines of, "No matter what you're going through, good or bad, it'll be over soon. So relish it or endure it." Quitting something, once you'd started, wasn't an option. Except for relationships. All three of us had quit quite a few of those—me probably most of all. But I was trapped in this relationship with myself and the pain that shot down my leg.

So I showed up, coughing and sputtering and crying underwater, three times a week. At one point, a swim coach I had never met crouched down by the edge and said, "You're moving through the water like a dead body."

"I *feel* like a dead body."

"Let's work on some breathing exercises."

Breathing. Good idea.

Within six weeks, I was swimming, though it should be noted that every time something new was introduced, a technique or a new stroke, I went back to sucking up water and panicking as if someone had shoved me from a high rise.

One day as I practiced on my own, I spied a familiar figure at the far end of the pool, standing on the deck. Even though I couldn't make out his face, he was unmistakably Michael Phelps, with that familiar long torso and the defined muscles and broad shoulders that I'd seen along with the rest of America so many times on TV.

As he walked past the lane where I swam, I thrust an elbow up on the deck and clung there. "I have to thank you," I said. "I've learned to swim because of you." This probably made it sound like I was a fan girl, which I wasn't, though I had watched his performances with admiration, like everyone else. Mainly, it was that his name had lent credibility to the Groupon, and I probably wouldn't have clicked if not for that.

He couldn't have been kinder, lively brown eyes twinkling as he told me what a great sport he thought swimming was and asked me questions about my particular class. Behind him stood a petite and striking brunette in a red swim suit, waiting there with the sweet countenance of someone who loved that people loved someone she loved.

I couldn't quite articulate what it meant to learn to swim, partly because I was still figuring it out. Was it that I was learning to be afraid? To experience the sensation of risking my life in order to figure out if I was actually just risking garden variety loss of control? I'd had so much control when I was running and reading and living on my own. Or did I? Maybe I was simply learning to respect the authority of my own voice instead of someone else's or that mysterious and misguided one in my chest that had perhaps served me well as a child, but didn't anymore.

"I never thought I'd be swimming," I said, trying to express it again. The truth was, I never thought I *wasn't* swimming. Until I was. What else had I not understood about myself? I wondered if someone like me, someone who hadn't realized something so basic about herself, the fact that she couldn't swim, could really be any good at marriage.

Now, the woman behind Michael Phelps perked up a little. Her attention shifted to me, to what I'd said, to something in my voice. Her eyes met mine and her mouth opened, the way a person's does when she's deciding whether to say something. "We've been together for a few years," she said, gesturing to Phelps. "I've never been in the water with him until today."

"How was that for you?"

She stepped closer, closed the gap behind him, and she smiled at me. "A little scary!"

"I'll bet," I said, pondering what it would be like to get in a lane with the most decorated Olympic swimmer boyfriend in all of history—to get into the one place where the differences between you would never be more measurable.

In that moment, Michael Phelps dissolved and this woman—Nicole Johnson, who would be announced his fiancé within a few weeks and later give birth to their son, Boomer—crystallized and sharpened. She had leapt, not into the unknown, but into something she knew for sure would be challenging.

It made me think about Howard, whose Olympic feat was to hang in there with my Olympic fears, no matter how I flailed.

My brain liked to pretend that I was hovering on the precipice, just dipping a toe. But here was the fact: I, too, had already taken the plunge. And some days, I even tried a shaky backstroke, reaching overhead toward the opposite end of the pool, unable to see where I'd been or where I was going, risking the dreaded splash in the face that, it was turning out, hadn't yet killed me. It was, I was learning bit by bit, lap by lap, possible for safety to exist even in deep waters.