

“A Swimming Pool”

by Aditya Desai

You sit at the pool and wonder if it all came too late. At this hour, your favorite, the night is quiet because it is still a Tuesday and people have work tomorrow but you’ve slid up with your two fingers in your hand and sat on a chair in the dark, listening to the little pops of grasshoppers puncturing the water that’s collected at the bottom of a crater that’s sat in your backyard for what now, a year? The doctor said swimming would help Mindy better improve her back and after that accident it already cost about ten thousand to fix the car and how much more in hospital bills. They stuck her in therapy for a couple weeks extra to do what, those same twists and stretches she did in gymnastics for two weeks before deciding she didn’t like it, and at the time you’d been sour and strict and wanted her to make good on the fees but her mother was more understanding and told you, “it’s because the other girls keep saying she smells when she sweats,” which was a comment you heard pretty often enough in the locker room, so who’s feeling glum now? The night is quiet and you take a sip. It’s hot and muggy and barely Easter has gone by, so what’s keeping you so long. You could’ve jumped in for a couple laps and cooled off and the kids could’ve had an Easter hunt last weekend, but that might have been another thing their mother would’ve argued about: “we’re not American, we don’t go to church, I don’t really know what the fuss of the rabbit is all about.” But she always supported the pool, and what was America if not a land where everyone had a backyard and in that backyard everyone had a swimming pool? Mind you, of course you wouldn’t have ever bothered if the car hadn’t spun off wildly and nearly fractured Mindy’s back. Her mother, a scrupulous talent for being tortured by calamities her own precaution could’ve avoided, felt guilty for the whole thing and you did too, so there was no argument this time.

Truth was it wasn't even her fault, really, this time. No really. She had to repeat it that way to convince herself later at night when she was still up, mostly because you were snoring so hard. It wasn't the nostrils so much as the flaps of skin in your gullet, rattling around like roof shingles in a typhoon. But she took this as God's way of saying she had to lay and think about her choices behind the wheel. But there were so many things to consider: Was it 10 and 2 or 9 and 3? What was the they way they'd said in the driving classes at the Holiday Inn and which was the more auspicious combination of numbers? Thought she'd never been good with numbers. If Mindy wasn't wearing her seatbelt was it her own fault or should a girl of eleven know well enough to put it on by herself? It was too much to juggle and she was a woman who learned long ago she had few such mental talents and it was best not to waste time trying to create new ones. At least perhaps Sarah would take in some swimming and that might help that gimpy walk she had from the fractured pelvis she suffered coming out of the womb. Again, who else was there to blame? But luckily by this point your snoring settled and she got to sleep before the guilt settled in like grout in her thumbnails.

But then Mindy woke up ahead of schedule, which was unusual for her because she had the most inconvenient habit of falling asleep in reverse – at night you would have to make rounds around the house during his two-am bathroom trip just to make sure she wasn't watching TV or reading books in the laundry room in the basement, which you shunned heavily but always forgot to elaborate it wasn't about the books but rather the big roaches that tended to cuddle in the dryer's warmth. But then in the mornings you could only get her out of bed with bribes that they would be leaving for a trip to New York or go visit cousin Bhavika in New Jersey and these were encroachments on her privilege she couldn't endure, so she'd snap up and be deadly sullen the rest of the day while you had to plead, "but honey

how could you ever believe such a thing like that? I know that if we were *really* going to go, you would have been up without even the smallest hassle at all.”

They said it wasn't a coma but something less severe but when she kept sleeping past one night into the next of course what else is it but a coma? It wasn't grand or announced or with shock and awe but she quietly opened her eyes one morning when no one was around and got up and walked out of her bed, smiling and peaceful and you thought what a shame she's so comfortable in this horrible place and doubled your efforts. They brought in a B-team to help the A-team of diggers and before the hole was cleaned out others had started some of the tiling and stuck a few pipes into the earth and you wondered if this was how train tracks were cut into mountains or telephone cables lain on the seabed and you thought, we are making civilization here as we damn well should! But maybe those twists and stretches had been for something because Mindy bounced up and out of therapy a lot earlier than two weeks and was back home before they'd even finished digging the ground. It was pretty sad to let go of that contractor who'd been so nice at the swimming pool store, nodding at everything you said and giving boring explanations to questions you mostly tuned out because you'd already committed to this damn foolish crusade so what's the point of being picky?

The overtime cost a lot more than you expected but luckily the wife still swallowed it all and the kids were so distracted by the idea of the pool they wouldn't miss a birthday party or two so you took it on yourself to finish it all up.

A year later mounds of dirt have made a perimeter around the garden which you didn't bother cleaning up during the cold winter but now here they were sprouting small green fingers as if earth itself was clawing to get you for leaving such a wound bare and dry.

The neighbors have started to wonder if this is some kind of crazy motherland custom to sanctify your home, and it doesn't help that they see you out there night to night by yourself in the dark sipping booze while swatting away the flies. All kinds of creatures must have made their home in the dirt by now, you think. It might be an interesting science project to see what is there when you finally get rid of all of it. Sarah has recently taken a liking to bugs, disgusting hobby you think but marvelously the wife doesn't seem to have an issue because she too had a penchant for the pests when she was young. Your mother-in-law had told once a few years ago before she'd died about how she'd brought in a snake from the garden and kept it in a box and one day it got loose and the servant girl had to chase it with a broom against her will because she still held those superstitions that all snakes were Shiva's messengers on earth.

Odds are that Mindy still didn't have much of a clue what it was all about. Since she'd bounced back she'd become very reclusive toward you. Suddenly she was spending her days afterschool with an unknown cache of friends named Ashley and Shelby and Marcus who was black and you weren't too sure about, but it always was peculiar to you that she used to spend time with your friends' children, Anuja and Sameer and Srikanth. The other day she'd complained to her mother during a time you weren't there about how her name was plain and boring but you'd chosen these names because who wanted to go through life watching a teacher's mouth wrangle like a damp sponge trying to pronounce what you'd really would

have liked to name her, Sharayana, after your grandmother. You could have named her something more classic and made Mindy a nickname you figure, but now it was all too late.

You decide to pick up the pace on this project, but there is rain in the forecast for the next few days, and economy had made work a bit hard lately with exports getting new tariffs and suddenly the consignments of paan masala and crème biscuits were taking a few more calls to push through and get to the stores who'd remained your stalwart partners through the years. A trucking company from up in Pennsylvania turned out to be cheaper than the one in Teaneck but it also called for an extra day in delivery, and they didn't realize how brittle the biscuits or the packs of Maggi noodles were so you had to make those extra runs just to make sure the loaders weren't tossing boxes around like the Harlem Globetrotters.

The patio door opens behind you and you say you'll be in in a minute but it's not your wife. Sarah has come out and she sits next to you, as she'd done every now and then for reasons you're not too sure about. You find it hard to talk to her, because the pampering was always to Mindy and not her, who's still young enough to push her hair from her eyes with the backs of her wrists. She likes to sit at the edge of the pool and dangle her legs. Her mother worries she will fall in one day and break something, and what then, she asks?

Sarah, *beta*, you say, don't sit there. You will fall. "I'm sitting down," she answers. You can't think of any excuse to push the notion and your glass is empty so you get up and refill it.

When you come back she is gone. You call out in the darkness and get no answer. You hit the switch for the floodlights but you forgot the contractors snapped the wire while digging and it has stayed that way because even less than plumbing you are not one for electrical.

You peer down into the crater you forced into the ground and it doesn't look like a tiny

body is down there but your eyesight has been going recently, and probably because you insist on using the store-brand frames that hang on the rack next to the diarrhea medicine.

You go back inside and she's not there either, and not in the living room where your wife is watching a Hindi soap opera on the satellite TV, which having grown up in America you weren't too sure how she got a taste for. You ask her if she's seen Sarah and she says no, but you bite your tongue before saying she was out there with you, in the wilderness you've created.

Where is Mindy? You ask instead, because she was not there at dinner. Mindy is at Sam's house. And who is Sam? A friend from school. Why isn't she back? It's late. Well, call her then. It a recent string of hoisting arbitrary duties on you that once weren't a negotiation, and you assume it's because she's gotten afraid of being accountable for the girls anymore.

You do find her in the laundry room, behind the washing machine. She says, "Dad look, there's bugs back here!" and sure enough the roaches have made a little nest and they're crawling over each other in such a spasming mass it could be at least a hundred. Tomorrow you'll have that argument with your wife about whether to call pest control or just go to the Home Depot and get a jumbo bottle of the bug killer and she'll throw her hands up and say you know better. It's a dizzying moment of clairvoyance that paralyzes you and you sit down next to Sarah and just look at the bugs, fighting each other for a little space. You pour your glass of bourbon onto them, remembering you read somewhere that alcohol kills bugs but it doesn't seem to do much, and you find a small comfort in knowing even those wretched things enjoy drink as much as you.

You pick Sarah up and she wails but you take her to her room and make her go to sleep.

You ask her if she wants to help clear the piles of dirt around the pool tomorrow, and she isn't too interested. There might be bugs in there, you say, and while you make your pleas you can hear the door down the hall to Mindy's room open and shut.

Downstairs your wife has fallen asleep in front of the TV despite the crashes of thunder spelling doom for the TV family because the son had to pawn off the family jewels to help finance his dad's heart surgery, and you're a little deflated you know the story so well by osmosis despite never having actually seen a whole episode start to finish, and pour another drink to see the night through on your deckchair.

You awake to the sounds of crickets, surfing the pools deep below where you can't see them. But no, it's not the sound that woke you up. Mindy has come out on the porch, and stirred you awake. You recall she has done this before, the week before, or maybe further back. It seems familiar, all the same. But this time you do not stir from your chair. You still can't see her, as she is behind you, but the touch is clear: one too strong for Sarah, too willful for your wife. At first you cannot say anything because nothing comes to mind, but then when the words reach your tongue the patio door has slammed shut. You still do not get up.

At sunrise your eyes open again. You do not realize until now that it comes up perfectly through the trees that cover your home from the small valley that dips in emptiness until the train tracks a hundred yards further. When Mindy was little you would, time to time, be halted at the cross walk as the cars rolled past, and you both would count silently and then

compare figures to see who was right. It's cool now, and shivers take you over. You sneeze and cough. You will not go to work today.

Inside your wife has already left; for years she has committed to the early shifts so she can be at home at night, and you took the later hours because money had to be made. The exports business was best suited for then; on the other side of the world you could catch the suppliers in the long hours of the day when they were too groggy to make sound decisions, and the clients were kept happy, since business in America was done on time and early.

Sarah has gone with your wife, dropped off at the school door so there is no lapse in her education, as if she was a flight risk. Ironically there is Mindy, her legs still swinging under the table because she hasn't yet grown and you doubt whether she ever will. Both of her parents have high stock and there is still time. She does not say anything as you walk in, but the tea pot sits in the sink, caked with dried milk submerged in soapy water, and you begin rinsing it off to help yourself to a cup. It is while you scrub she asks, "When will the pool be finished?"

"Would you like to swim in it?"

"Well, you started building it."

The milk is hard to scrape off. You wonder how your wife does this twice a day. You give up and look around, perhaps she has left you a cup.

"There was a cup of tea," Mindy says. "I drank it, sorry."

“it’s okay. I didn’t know you liked it.”

“It’s okay.”

She says it almost parroting you, and you miss those small inflections of Mumbai-ite she lost a long time ago.

“When is your school bus?”

“I’m getting a ride with Ashley.”

“Does Ashley have a car?”

“We’re thirteen. No one has a car.”

“So someone is going to take you then?”

You can’t understand why her answers are so elusive. Where did she learn this habit of political non-committal remarks?

“Let me drive you. Call her and tell her.”

“She doesn’t have a cell phone.”

Mindy got one last Christmas, that holiday you never celebrated until coming here and you dread throwing money at but you humor because how can your children be left out of the whole charade?

You wait for Ashley’s mother to pull up to the edge of your driveway, ironically in the silver Mercedes you had your eye on for a number of years but you now only see blinking its headlights back at you when you look at the unconnected flood lamps hanging above the depth markings. You tell her sorry for the runaround, and she is pleasant and says “nice to meet you!” and you realize this might be the first of your neighbors you’ve met aside from

the man next door who cuts your lawn for free, because he bought the big tractor and likes to drive it as much as possible.

The drive is quiet, but you pass the park and snowcone stand and wonder when it will be warm enough again to enjoy. You sneeze and cough the whole way there and notice each time Mindy holds her hand to her mouth.

“Are you and mom getting a divorce?”

Surprisingly, the question itself does not faze you. You instead answer her, in her own non-answer parlance, “We do not get divorced in our culture.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What do you mean you? You are Indian, too, aren’t you?”

“I’m Indian-American.”

“Well, so am I.”

So the conversation ends, agree to disagree.

As you reach the school, she says “I’m on the lacrosse team.”

“Ok, good.”

“I thought you’d want to know. My back feels good.”

“I will get the swimming pool finished.”

“It’s okay. I just don’t like having that ugly hole.”

You repeat your promise.

She shrugs, and gets off.

“I am not going to work today,” you add. “I can pick you up afterwards.”

“Okay, well tell mom. And I have practice so I won’t be done until five.”

She closes the door and before she’s entered the building she’s flanked by two other girls, one Ashley and one you assume might as well also be Ashley. In fact, next to each other, all three look alike.

Back home you scrub the pot down and make tea. It is bitter and not very strong, but you take it by the pool and sit down again to enjoy it best you can. You did make it heavy with ginger and masala, so it clears your nostrils, and you relax again in your chair and fall asleep.

You awaken, this time by your wife. You thank yourself silently you forgot to make the call, and inside Mindy is watching television, playing on her cell phone, unaware you’ve entered the room.

The next day you make the call. A truck pulls up at your driveway, and while you are on the phone with your partners chewing you out for not letting them know where you were all day, you watch the dumping bed tip over until it is perpendicular with the ground, and take in the stream of dirt pouring into the crater. It takes nearly an hour of constant pouring for the entire thing to be filled. You wonder most of all what Sarah will think, and if she will cry about the bugs that have been suffocated and snuffed out under tons of earth. You will tell her that deep below they are still alive, those creatures can be nasty pests and live off of each other until they can burrow their way back to the top. You chuckle at the broad metaphor for your own predicament.

It takes a couple weeks, but your wife seems to open up more now. She figures make use of the plot and make a vegetable garden during the summer, just like the one her parents had behind their bungalow in Junagadh. You smile and remember how you thought they were backward village folk who were in awe of your college degree and cosmopolitan upbringing, and how back then such credentials were all one needed to win over a family.