

Bully Beef

As a child, I loved swimming and always looked forward to Wednesdays, when I would frequent the swimming pool in our town after school, enjoying the discount price. At least I used to love swimming until a traumatic incident occurred. I was around eleven, going on twelve. It was summer and the days were sunny. One Wednesday, towel and trunks under arm, I queued up with the other children outside the pool. My turn came. As soon as my ticket buzzed out of the box-office machine, I grabbed it and impatiently bustled off inside.

Down the hall, I could hear great splashing and the shrill echoes of boisterous children with their excited voices rising to fill to capacity the expansive, bright skylight. After placing my clothes in the locker, the immediate task was to take an unpleasant, if obligatory shower. It was always super-cold. To get to the main pool it was necessary to walk through a little mini-pool with six inches of water. The water was unbelievably cold, occasioning a sharp intake of breath and would just about freeze your ankles.

After this little ordeal, only six short steps remained to get to the pool, with its relatively warm water. As always, I joyously anticipated my first dive. On this particular day, the pool was thronged. I tried to pick a spot that wasn't too crowded and dived in at the deep end. I swam a couple of lengths, and then floated around idly, daydreaming. Now, as a child I had a very vivid imagination. It was easy for me to imagine stories, situations, or anything really, that involved creating reality on the mental plane, for good or ill. This ability was to prove inopportune with regard to the incident to come.

I decided to swim the breadth of the pool down near the shallow end. Half-way across, my stroke was cut short by a heavy body that suddenly blocked my path. It had surfaced like a submarine, with some degree of violence, displacing in its wake a great quantity of water. After the impact my hand began to sting. Disoriented and not a little peeved, I addressed the owner of this body, and impulsively blurted out, "Hey, watch where you're going!"

A big rosy-cheeked boy now stared at me with a pair of droopy, unexpressive eyes. He said nothing, but spat off to the side. He was strong-looking, a little taller, but much rounder than I. I was skinny. My mother always insisted there wasn't a pick on me. Having said my piece, I started to move off and away, incident over. He immediately mirrored my action, moving to block my path. He planted his hands on his sides. He confronted me, asking what I was going to do about it. Again, he spat off to the side, waiting for my response. "-Do about what?" I replied, looking at him with dismay. I began to have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. A peace-loving child, I didn't want any trouble.

Without a word, he grabbed me by the back of the neck with a powerful hand, firmly ducking my head under the water. It was an act that offered a clear sensation of permanence. Panicking, I desperately resisted with all my might. All sounds ceased. If only screams could be heard under water, everyone would have heard me.

He showed no signs of releasing me any time soon. I assumed therefore, quite rightly, that he intended to drown me, and that if I didn't manage to free myself soon, drown indeed I would. Where was the pool attendant? He was nowhere in sight, naturally. They are supposed to be alert to trouble, especially since they blow their whistles all the time for all kinds of trivia and nonsense. Where was he when I needed him?

Millions of bubbles gurgled up by my head as I was forced to exhale. With an unbearable tightness in my chest, I was on the point of taking in water. With nothing to lose, I flailed out with all my might, and (not entirely intentionally) hit him under the jaw with my palm heel. He reeled back, releasing his grip in the process. My head now surfaced. How I gasped, inhaling as sharply and deeply as do babies who after crying so much, lose their breath and momentarily fall silent. I began seeing stars and coughing water.

Disoriented, but now free, I started to pull myself up onto the bank. My assailant's recovery from my retaliation was swift. He seized me by an arm and dragged me back down into the water. Now I knew that a steel pipe bordered the length and breadth of the pool, and was at arm's length. It was something I might grab onto. I swiftly shot out my right arm, and successfully secured an iron death-grip on the pipe, my only chance of survival. My captor now quickly began trying to prize my fingers away, the better to perform his job of ending my short life. If he succeeded in hauling me away from the 'security pipe' into deeper water, I was finished.

I clung to the security pipe for safety, with both legs as well as hands now tightly copper-fastened to it. Though try as he might, my tormentor was unable to wrest away my grip. He eventually desisted in that attempt. Momentarily defeated, he now towered over me. As I lay there supine, expecting immediate retribution, instead, he just leaned forward, his face jutting in close to mine. Motionless, he stared at me, to intimidate. He achieved this alright. Absolute terror and suspense competed in my breast. Now I thought, "I'm done for".

I looked up at him, shivering. Funnily, he didn't look angry, though I had just hit him as hard as I could. However, he did raise an eyebrow, perhaps a little surprised, even stunned at the nerve of me hitting him. Amazingly, it was as though he now looked at me more with curiosity than intent, much like a giant holds a captured butterfly in his hand, carefully studying his prey before deciding what to do with it. I sensed his enjoyment of my terror. He imbibed it.

I began to study him too. It occurred to me that, just as in the comics, I might hit him all day and he would just stand there. As I looked into those cold, dead shark's eyes, he reminded me of a hit man. I could easily imagine him casually screwing on a silencer to carry out a contract job. His skin was olive-colored, now reddened front and back by belly-flops and back-flops, and otherwise primitive contact with the water. His hair was black with a fringe in a crude bowl haircut that reminded me of a character called Bully Beef from a popular comic at the time called "The Dandy". From then on, in my mind, that's what I called him, but not to his face. It seemed perfect for him.

Suddenly, the sharp pitch of a whistle made him turn. The pool attendant appeared and walked down in our direction looking angry, but alas, not to chastise this bully, but someone else for chewing gum. What a huge transgression. By the expression on the attendant's face, if he were a judge this might receive the death penalty. To my immense relief, Bully Beef's face began to recede from mine. Had the proximity of the attendant made him stop, at least for the time being? Could it be that he was going to leave things at that? Perhaps my submissiveness and his dominance were enough to placate him. Or was it that he could see I was one in substance with the security pipe, a truly immovable object, and sensed my determination never to be separated from it.

Maybe I was just too much trouble. Wrinkling his nose and mouth, he menaced. "If I ever see you again...". He left the threat vague. He didn't need to finish the sentence, for I did so silently in my head. I just knew it had to end with "-you're dead!" I didn't care what he said, as long as my head was above water. He pushed back, straightened up, and then sank low in the water, eyes just above the surface. Treading water, he stared at me intently from a distance. He pushed forward slowly, and then submerged. In dread, I waited for him to come up again right under me, but there was no sign of him. I had no idea what he was going to do. To me, he was an alligator. Disquieted at losing sight of him among the many swimmers who were jumping, running, and dive-bombing, I was too afraid to move a muscle. My eyes darted nervously. I had to know where he was.

Then I thought if he had wanted to do anything further, he would surely have done it by now. I could bear the waiting no longer. I made a lightning break for it, splashing my way up the steps. I made it. I now stood on the bank away from the edge, hyperventilating, chlorine stinging my eyes. I retreated from the edge, scrutinizing everybody. I waited some minutes. There was no sign of him anywhere. I thought: how weird. How could he just disappear like that? Could he have left and I just didn't see him go. There were, after all, four exits.

What if I get back into the water and he's still there waiting for me? Perhaps he is amphibious, and can stay under the water for hours, stalking. The tension was too great. Upset, teeth chattering, I fled to the changing rooms sobbing. I got dressed and went to leave. I cautiously looked around every corner, especially out the main door. The pool building was located on a side street. Outside, I saw nobody. I fully expected Bully Beef to appear out of thin air. I took a few fearful steps now, gaining a little confidence. Then I ran at full tilt until I got to the main street, where there was safety in numbers. Merging with the crowd, my relief was indescribable.

After that, I didn't go to the pool again for six months, but I was very angry. As a result, a great desire was sparked in me to learn Karate. I was fascinated at the prospect of learning the secrets of oriental self-defense. I began reading about how to smash tiles and wood with my bare hands, and how to toughen them up by steeping them in brine, turning them into lethal weapons. I began steeping my small, bony hands every day. Martial expertise would not take long, I surmised. I found some spare bathroom tiles and began smashing them, considering this an extraordinary feat for an eleven-year-old.

My confidence grew. "Ha-so"! The Karate war-cry was very effective and had been known to stop wild animals dead in their tracks. If need arose, it would work on Bully Beef too. After practicing Karate for months, I spontaneously decided to visit the pool again, one Tuesday. I went in late, with about half an hour to closing time. Inside, the pool was already half-empty. I cautiously looked around. To my great relief, there was no sign of Bully Beef. The life-guard was present, looking at his watch. I began to relax. With a growing sense of freedom, I dived in at the deep end and swam around.

I tried to expunge the past incident from my mind, determined to enjoy my time. However, when I arrived at the shallow end, my hand had occasion to touch the security pipe. This simple action was the trigger that was to cause me to instantly re-live my extremely traumatic memories. What if he *is* here... and under the water, like an alligator hiding in the rushes, waiting to surface and pounce on that little baby deer? What if he's crawling over to me on the bottom right now, and about to grab my heels and silently drag me to his underwater lair. With all the noise, no-one would even notice my screams.

My grip on the security pipe tightened. I kept a hawk's eye on everything that moved. I watched other children of my own age in deeper water holding their noses and sinking down, blowing out bubbles. Their free oblivious-to-danger activities now seemed to me unthinkable. Were they not afraid of Bully Beef? Didn't they realize he might be around? After a while, though, I settled down and my conviction grew that I was Bully-free. I then mused that it was actually far better for him that he wasn't here, -a lucky man indeed, because I had been practicing the deadly Karate chop, and its concomitant death-cry.

I gritted my teeth and slowly went through the motion of making a fist. In my mind's eye, I began telling Bully Beef in no uncertain terms that he had better get out of my face, for reasons that might soon become clear. I found this new heroic identity I had forged very satisfying. I now had what every bully had, -serious bravery and courage. It felt great. I wouldn't back down, no matter what the outcome. If I didn't back down, then he would. I relaxed my grip on the security pipe now, and melted into the water, floating on my back.

I quickly expunged from my consciousness the invasive thought that this new bravery might evaporate in a real confrontation. I closed my eyes, still smiling to myself, the enactment of my

imaginary showdown complete. I came to rest under the jutting rim of the pool's edge, at the exact spot where the prior incident had taken place, and looked out on all the pool activity.

Just then, a gob of spit landed in the water right in front of me, followed by another, then another. How disgusting, I thought. Above me I could see a set of toes wriggling up and down. I peered out. To my utter disbelief and horror, standing right over me, and looking straight ahead, was Bully Beef, for all the world.

My heart stopped momentarily, and then seemed to burst out of its cage. Panicking, I deeply prayed he hadn't seen me. I clutched the security pipe, and lay low under the pool's edge, which had just enough room to conceal me. I didn't want to lose sight of him under any circumstances. He was squinting under the brightness of the pool skylight, peaking his hand over his eyes, as if looking for someone. He looked different now. His hair was shorter, his cheeks were not as rosy, and he seemed to have lost weight, no doubt from fear of meeting me again. In spite of his changed appearance, there was still that unmistakable hint of recognition that told me it was definitely him. How to leave now without his seeing me? In my paranoia, I was sure he was looking for *me*.

Could he be so spiteful as to remember a trivial transgression all these months since? Or was he only sorry for not finishing the job he started? Maybe he would have better luck this time. I closed my eyes and continued praying he wouldn't spot me. The toes disappeared, now re-appearing further over on the bank, to my great relief. My heartbeat slowed.

He was warming up, throwing his arms about. I thought: he's preparing to dive. Go on! Go on! Dive! Dive! I couldn't make my bid for freedom until he did. Yet he just stayed there. Time went by oh-so-slowly, the seconds like minutes, the minutes like hours. I bit my lip. I thought this seeming eternity would never end. Then the toes momentarily disappeared and came back, once again right above me. Again my heartbeat was like a bass drum in my chest. Another gob of spit landed in front of me, and another, landing now almost with regularity. This reminded me of the famous Chinese water torture.

A heavy splash in front of me heralded the end of eternity, and Bully Beef's heavy body plunged into three feet of water. -Go! Go! Go! The little deer saw its chance to make a bid for freedom. Just as quickly, the alligator turned, its radar sensing the disturbance. With cunning and treachery expressed in its evil, half-shut eyes, it locked onto the deer's co-ordinates. The merciless reptile skewed back through the water directly towards the deer, cutting off its exit at the pool steps.

Once again, I tightly clasped the security pipe, assuming the same emergency position as on my last visit. The reptile now fenced me in with both hands, with no possible escape. Wide-eyed, Bully Beef scrutinized me. "I know you, don't I?" he said. I said nothing. I was petrified but didn't want to give him the satisfaction of shrieking or pleading. He looked around, obviously checking for the attendant, who was naturally nowhere in sight. I sensed my aggressor's growing intent to drown me this time.

A vision of my own demise now came to me. In the empty pool, I saw my lifeless body floating face down, unattended. The life-guard had not even noticed. The pool had closed and my floating corpse was not found until morning. These pathetic images were fleeting but vivid and clear. The sound of the attendant's whistle jolted my attention back to the real situation, which was more petrifying than my brief self-pitying reverie. This was the signal for all to leave. Three people got out and slowly walked down the steps to the changing rooms.

The attendant walked ahead of them, and disappeared down the steps. What?? Where has he gone? Why has he gone?? If I were to be murdered here today, it would be little compensation to me that the attendant might get fired for doing an atrocious job. Oh! Why was he never around when I needed him? I now gripped the security pipe as never before with strength super-human, awaiting with conviction, that a fast arm would soon submerge me. It wouldn't really matter how long I could hold my breath. Bully Beef was stronger and could keep me under very casually.

The reason I had been so sure he was going to drown me before, was his strong intent, combined with the unfeeling expression on his face. His was the face of one without conflicts, and to whom killing was a mere reflex action. I was certain he'd thought there wasn't any good reason not to drown me. Now, he wouldn't be thwarted twice. The pool's waves subsided and we both watched the last stragglers disappear down the steps. Bully Beef impatiently bided his time, waiting for his moment.

Then, something uncharacteristic happened to me. In this limit situation, a strange courage overtook me. I acted before him. "Do you want to settle this outside?" I said. This took him aback. Again, he raised an eyebrow on that stupid face of his. Bullies tend to have extremely stupid faces, even if they do happen to be clever and treacherous. He withdrew a pace, and simultaneously, I let go of the security pipe and straightened. Words were superfluous for Bully Beef. He was practically pre-verbal. He just made a gesture with his fat, pudgy head, throwing it back and off to the side, giving me to understand: "Right. Let's go outside".

I couldn't believe he had agreed to postpone my murder. More incredibly, I could scarcely believe I had actually thrown down the gauntlet, like a true medieval knight and challenged this thickhead to a fight. Entirely unlike me, it was as if someone else had taken possession of me. It seemed like an instinctive impulse on my part to buy time. Still less could I believe that I was not at this moment in the process of drowning, while this brute nonchalantly whistled a tune.

What have I done, I thought? I'll have to fight him, -there's no backing down now. Well, I could always run away and live to fight another day, as the wise old adage goes, but it was too late. I was committed. I had never had a hiding before, but had spoken with someone who had. He told me "a hiding isn't so bad, -it's just a hiding". So I remembered that, and thought: if I fight, I could even survive the encounter. However, as I sized up this brutal savage, I now began to doubt it.

As we left the pool together, it felt to me as though I were leaving with a hangman. Another terrifying vision crowded in on me. In some deserted alley, I could feel his paralyzing punches

smash into my head and upper body, and the thud of his knee cracking into my ribs. In slow motion, I saw my groaning body fall to the ground in a sprawling heap. In my mind's eye, I followed my own storyline to its logical conclusion. In preparation for the final death-blow, I saw Bully Beef strain to lift a large rock to maximum height, and bring it down destructively on my skull from behind.

I imagined him pause for a few moments watching me breathe my last, making sure I was dead. I saw him light a cigarette, coolly view his handiwork, stub the cigarette with his foot, and casually saunter off, unconcerned. My reverie was broken when we went outside and came into the blinding sunlight. We agreed to go down Gerard Street, at the back of the pool. Though not a cul-de-sac, it indeed qualified as a deserted alley. This did not bode well. Bully Beef asked me about the fighting rules. I didn't know. I'd never been in a fight before. Well, yes, I had, in the sense of short scuffles that spontaneously break out, but I'd never actively volunteered before.

Back in those days, in the sixties, the combatants actually consulted each other on the rules to be observed, a very curious thing by today's standards. Was bully Beef honorable? Who knew? All this made me feel chivalrous, as though we were fighting for some noble cause, worth even laying down our lives for. At this stage, it was all about commitment. I had committed myself to engage this moron in mortal hand-to-hand combat.

So, we agreed to a set of rules. There was to be no kicking, and no hitting below the belt, just fisticuffs, that is, plain Marquis of Queensbury rules. Ironically, I couldn't include Karate in the rules because of the kicking. After all it was what I had been studying. Karate was out, but I could still use the Karate shapes and screams. It was also clever of me not to include wrestling, because I thought, if he lays hold of me, I'm dead. We laid our swimming trunks to one side. There were no cheering crowds, or princesses to win or lose. In fact there was no-one looking on. Perhaps Bully Beef didn't care whether anyone was looking. If he intended to kill me, maybe it was important to him that nobody was watching. On top, it struck me we had actually forgotten to agree to the most obvious rule: Thou shalt not kill.

As the start signal, I imagined someone dropping a handkerchief. Medieval trumpets sounded in my head. The fight began. We began circling and sizing each other up. He was definitely a lot heavier than I, -not obese, just pudgy, with fleshy, well-protected fists. I thought: if he were to hit a wall with those fists, they wouldn't get damaged at all. It would be the same as hitting it with boxing gloves. I now stared at him from between my own bony, taut, skeletal fists, clenching them tight. There was no meat on them whatsoever. I held the conviction that, were they even lucky enough to strike his hard, dense, board-like head, they would just shatter like glass.

More basically, I felt I could not afford to get hit even once if I was going to live. My best chance was to hit him cleanly from a distance, moving in and out. The idea was to protect myself at all costs. I would use my superior bobbing and weaving, ducking and dodging, shaping and shouting, and screaming and running away skills to avoid his fearsome blows, and choose my moment,

striking like a scorpion. I reckoned that since he was bigger and heavier, therefore, ipso facto, he would be slower. Not so. I was probably better, without doubt, at wetting my pants.

He started in, I started out. He threw a blow. I got out of the way. He threw another. I skipped back, dancing anti-clockwise. With every missed blow of his, I issued a blood-curdling Karate cat-cry. The whole fight thing took on a farcical, unreal aspect. My specialty was feinting, pretending to land a blow, getting the opponent to lower his defenses, then pretending to hit him elsewhere. He wasn't hitting me. I wasn't hitting him. The fight was well under way now. It was great. I was the king and in control.

Well, I fooled him all the time, pretending to hit him so much so, that he started to get really irritated. Especially when, to my repertoire I added special effects like the sound that real boxers make -sharply expelling compressed air from their nostrils, like someone urgently unblocking their nasal cavities. That really got to him, especially when timed to punching one fist with the other. I mean I was a professional. He started to copy my tactics. I was honored.

Suddenly, he lunged at me fast, and a vicious punch sent me reeling. Not that it hit me; it was just the wind of it! It was a frightening haymaker that round, pudgy people throw when they fight. It's not that they throw a punch with their arm. They throw their whole body at you, and when they miss, their body acquires a centrifugal force that wheels them around in a complete circle. I leaned back and watched him spin by me. As luck would have it, he lost his balance, slipped on a small stone and began to fall.

Issuing another cat-cry, I feigned a punch while he was on his way. I deftly put him on the ground by avoiding his punch. He could count himself lucky I didn't give him something to take with him on his way down. To my delight, he didn't get up. I sensed he was hurt. He'd fallen awkwardly and hit his shoulder on the pavement. He lay clutching it in apparent pain for a minute or two, eyes tightly shut. I towered over him now, he, vulnerable, I, menacing. I couldn't believe my luck. I now danced triumphantly on the spot. "Do you want more?" I said, with a sardonic grin.

Bully Beef slowly got up. I continued dancing on the spot, throwing shapes. It appeared the shoulder wasn't broken, but certainly momentarily useless. After this humiliation, it was obvious he wanted to stop, at least for the time being. "This is not over. Do you want to continue this some other day?" he said, saving face. The question produced in me both relief and dread. "Sure", I replied, with convincing, if false enthusiasm.

"-Let's make it next Saturday. Same place at five o'clock", I said. Bully Beef decisively responded, "-You're on. Five o'clock Saturday". I added "-I'll be there", my upper lip curling to express determination and authority. We shook hands, picked up our towels and left. Thus, at least for the moment, I spared Bully Beef further humiliation. I lived just over the road from the scene of

our encounter, and skipped home with joy in my heart that I had won the fight (or at least the first part) and that, more importantly, all my body parts were intact.

Time seemed to go so slowly from that Wednesday to the coming Saturday, yet so fast in its inevitability. Now the day had arrived and the appointed hour was nigh. I had never wanted to fight in the first place, but some alien persona who had originally taken over my mind, had again, in the name of honor, thrust upon me the awful burden of chivalrous commitment to monumental, asinine stupidity.

On the fateful day, as the trysting hour approached, I was at home with my friend Timmy. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I had told him the Bully Beef story. We played chess to take my mind off the whole thing. I watched the clock. Timmy check-mated me. We played another game. A pragmatic voice of returning sanity in my head said: "-Hey, do we really want to do this, -fight Bully Beef again"? The voice was right. I might not be so lucky this time. It was half past four now. Yet another imaginative, but not-so-funny comic-strip vision flooded my consciousness, -that of Bully Beef hammering my head into the ground like a spike, the cement cracking open to accommodate me.

"Check-mate" said Timmy again, a routine exclamation by now. Timmy rolled his eyes, and was getting frustrated at my lack of involvement in the game. I thought Timmy needs to walk a mile shaking in my shoes. It was now five minutes to five. I felt sick inside. I had an idea. Since I lived a very short distance from Gerard Street where I was supposed to meet my nemesis, I turned to Timmy. "Hey Timmy, could you do me a favor, and walk over by Gerard Street to see if he's there. You know, I don't want to feel foolish being the only one waiting over there", (I pretended).

Timmy agreed to nonchalantly walk up and down over there to see if there was a pudgy, menacing-looking thug with a bowl haircut standing on the corner. From the moment he left, I could hardly wait for Timmy to return fast enough with the dreaded news. He came back about fifteen minutes later, only to confirm the unexpected but joyful tidings that there was no-one there. I was now beside myself with joy and relief. This called for another game of chess. This time I checkmated Timmy in six moves. Can you believe it? Bully Beef was just too chicken to turn up.

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