

Swimsuit

My mother could not swim. She was born 10 yards from the ocean, her grandfather's home, *Jasmine Cottage*, being at the very end of Church Street in the fortress of Galle, in Ceylon. If she stood on the second floor balcony and threw a stone it could clear ten feet of road and land on the ramparts that held the sea at bay. On tiptoe, she could catch a glimpse of the waves that hurled themselves against granite walls and burst into white foam. During the day, Umma breathed in the smell of crab shells drying in the sun. At night, the currents of the Indian Ocean sweeping in and out lulled her to sleep.



Nonfiction

by

Yasmin

Azad

Christian women and Buddhist women walked along the walls of the ramparts made their way down the steps that led to the sheltered cove on the west side of the Fort that was the ladies' bathing place. They hoisted their sarees above their calves, buried their toes in the sand, and let the water swirl around their ankles. If a huge wave sped ashore, they shrieked and staggered back, then held hands and giggled. "Muslim women don't do that," my mother said. I never saw her set foot in salt water.

I can swim under water. I learned to do that much during the days when I was a little girl and free to bathe in the sea.

On Saturday mornings, with the sky just breaking into light, and the wind blowing into our faces, my older brother Bunche and I ran out of our house, dashed across the ramparts and bounced down a jagged flight of cement stairs, to Bathiri cove. Three steps before the bottom, we yelled "One, two, three," and leapt onto the cool soft sand.

Bunche, who was eleven when we first began to go to the sea on our own, was learning to be a lifeguard. Some years ago, while he was seated on a jetty of the Galle harbor, an older boy had come from behind and thrown him into the water: twelve feet deep, slimy green and awash in the potatoes and onions that fell from cargo ships. Bunche thrashed around, sank, bobbed up and went

down again. When it looked like he might drown, he was hauled out. He coughed up spit and water; someone placed a hand on his shoulder as he gulped mouthfuls of air. Then he was thrown in again. Eventually, he learned to swim.

“You can’t drown here if you tried,” Bunche always said as we piled our slippers and towels on a ledge and looked out into the ocean. The beach was only a sliver of sand between the ramparts and sea, but beneath the turquoise water that spread endlessly out, a coral reef provided dozens of sheltered bathing places.

While Bunche swam out, I waded into a calm inlet and stopped before the water went over my shoulders. Then I took a deep breath, put my head in, and cleaved a path through water that was as balmy as the tropical air above. My hair streamed back. Buoyant in watery space, I stretched my arms outwards and kicked; there was nothing to stop me from moving in any direction I wanted. Back and forth I swam, coming up for air and putting my head in again. When at last I stepped out, my body felt suddenly heavy.

Between bouts of swimming underwater, I crunched seashells beneath my feet and searched the sandy bottom of the ocean floor for colored pebbles. Bunchy had headed far out and swam back from beyond with pink coral flowers in one hand. He could swim like that, with one arm up. You had to learn to do that, if you wanted to save people from drowning, is what he said.

When the sun had climbed overhead, and the skin on our fingers was ridged like the back of seashells, we came out of the water for the last time and walked home, our towels over our shoulders and sand clinging to our sun-baked arms.

“Now that you can swim underwater,” Bunche said, “you must learn how to keep your head up; then you can go further out.” I nodded as I pulled seaweed out of my hair. “I will—very soon.”

I had said that even on the last day I was allowed to go to the sea.

The problem with the ocean, Umma always said, was that it could not be screened off. It was so open, that no respectable female could bathe in it. During the days of blazing heat, when wisps of hair curled up against damp foreheads and petticoats clung to moist skin, the Muslim women of the Fort yearned not for the cool breezes of the sea, but the *nalla thanni*, the good water, that brimmed

from inland springs. Umma's uncle, Cassim Master, had on his country estate a well with water so fresh, people came from all over to bathe. We gathered our female relatives and went there for our "bathing party" picnics.

Although we could just as well have gone by car, rattling along in a bull-driven wagon, jostling against each other when the wheels went over potholes, seemed more in keeping with the spirit of this outing. Sometime in the morning, before the sun got too hot, a row of bullock carts lined up in front of our house and we clambered in: the elderly first, the married women next, the maidens last of all. The children sat on whatever lap was available. I settled back against my Aunt Zain Marmee, who never cared that I crumpled her saree. She put her arms around me and clasped her hands.

Two of the cart-man's old sarongs were hung on ropes and drawn across the front and back to screen us all, especially the maidens, from the men who might be walking on the road. Unmarried older girls were the most secluded from the world outside, most shielded from the sight of strange men. Stacked in a corner were the lunch parcels that had been made that morning. Packed in steamed banana leaves, the still-warm rice and curry filled the air with an aroma that gave us some relief from the smells of old straw, dried cow dung, and the cart-man's unwashed clothes. When it was time to set off, he swished his stick and prodded the bulls between their hind legs. We were on our way, to Grand-uncle Cassim Master's bungalow where the air smelled of tree bark and newly cut grass.

Whether at her uncle's well, or in the bathroom at home, when my mother bathed, she wore a bathing cloth: three yards of thin cotton draped under her arms and knotted above her chest. It fell in folds that she could lift up or move aside to soap and scrub her body. *Allah who could see everything, is more deserving than the people, so you should be modest before Him*, the religious people had said.

I had never seen a grown woman bathe in anything else until I went one morning to Closenburg Bay, with my Christian school friend, Penny.

Closenburg was a part of the ocean deep near the Galle harbor that the Dutch, who had once colonized our country of Ceylon, had called *Kloffenburg*, "citadel on which the sea roars." The huge waves that came speeding ashore made it a favorite spot for sea bathers and one Sunday, Penny and I gathered towels and pails, and piled into her family's blue Holden—her father behind

the wheel, her mother, whom I called “Aunty June,” seated beside him. We rode past the old market of the bazaar, towards the wharves where the boats were anchored. As the road narrowed and climbed, we leaned out to catch a glimpse of the white cliffs and coconut groves that came into view. Soon, the car made a sharp turn into a graveled path and screeched to a halt. Penny and I jumped out and buried our ankles in golden sand.

While we stood on the shore to watch the waves, Aunty June walked to a secluded spot behind a tree. When she came back, she no longer had on the printed dress she had worn that morning. She was wearing a swimsuit. Only very little of her was covered, or so it seemed to me. A silky red material stretched across her chest and stomach, dipped below her neckline, and curved over her hips. Against the dark cloth was the endless white flesh. I stood still and stared. I had never before seen a grown woman’s thighs.

Penny came over and tugged my arm. “Let’s jump the waves,” she said, as we ran into the water. With mouths wide open and hands held high, we shrieked “Heere they come!” as we lurched over a rush of white foam. Pummeled to the ground, we rolled in the sand and laughed hysterically.

I didn’t own a swimsuit. No girl in our family did. I wore my petticoat for sea bathing, and that’s what I had on at Cloisenburg. Its thick cotton skirt floated around me in the water, and though I pushed it down again and again, always ballooned back. Sand collected along the seams and weighed me down. “Wait, wait,” I told Penny while I hurried to remove the gritty clumps. She shook her head and jumped a wave on her own.

On the beach, Penny thrust a finger under the elastic of her swimsuit, smoothed it down and bounded over driftwood in her bare legs. I held my soggy petticoat to one side and followed, the wet cloth clinging to my legs and bunching up between my thighs. Though I ran as fast as I could, I could not keep up with her.

I asked Umma if I could have a swimsuit.

She said she would have to think about it—it was not something that anyone in our families wore. When days went by and I didn’t see her “thinking about it,” I explained how much easier it made bathing in the sea, and how Penny had two of them, and couldn’t I just have one? She said she

understood about the way the petticoat would bunch up, and she would ask my father. And he thought about it for a while and said, “Well, alright, if it makes her happy, she’s still little; it’s not as though she will be going to the sea after she becomes a big girl.”

My swimsuit was blue with straps that tied at the back and a ruffled skirt that fell from the hips. I wore it in my bedroom and twirled. I kicked my legs high and spread them wide. The elastic stayed smooth around my upper leg; the cloth was snug against my body.

“What is elder sister thinking, letting her daughter wear such a thing?” I overheard my aunt Shachi saying to her husband. “She might as well be wearing nothing at all.”

Great-uncle Cassim Master’s well was set so far back from the main road, it made even Umma happy. To get to it, we tramped through a long field of wet grass. Not only was the well situated far behind the house, but much to everyone’s satisfaction, surrounded on three sides by a tall parapet wall and screened off at the entrance with thatched coconut leaves as well. We could change without any danger to our modesty.

As the women and maidens prepared to bathe, Umma held her bathing cloth up high in front, clamped between her teeth. Behind the cloth, she undid her blouse and dropped it. Next, she loosened the pleats of her saree. Then, in the seconds it took for six yards of fabric to fall on the floor, she released the bathing cloth from her mouth, whisked it under her arm and tied it over the chest. No one had seen much more of her than when she was fully clothed.

I didn’t have my swimsuit with me—the one I had got only months before. Umma had said no, she didn’t want me wearing it when my cousins and aunts were around. It wasn’t, she firmly said, something anyone wore for a bath at a well; and it wasn’t, she reminded me, something any of our relatives wore for a bath of any kind.

I hurried to unbutton my dress and step out in my petticoat, but I had to wait my turn. Grand-Aunt Mariam Marmee had to be bathed first and one of her nieces led her by the hand to a cement bench, warning her all the while about the algae on the concrete floor that circled the well. “Ah, we are glad you came; this *nalla thanni*, this pure water, will do you good,” the younger relatives all chorused. Loosening the minuscule knot of hair at the back of the head, the old lady sat still while cups of water were gently poured through grey strands.

Soon, it was time to draw water for everybody else and I stood by my aunt Shachi while she lowered the rope and hauled up a bucket full of water. It swayed, and for a minute looked like it might tip over, but was steadied with a firm grasp. I held my breath. The water came crashing on my head. My teeth chattered and my hair stood on end. Another bucket followed, then another. By the third torrent, the shock was over. I stopped hopping from foot to foot and put my tongue out to catch drops of water that were fresh and tangy and nearly sweet. Shachi picked up a smooth stone and asked me to raise my arms and lift my petticoat. “We need to get all the dirt out,” she said as she soaped me up and down and scrubbed my skin. I stretched out a foot and made patterns on the white foam that snaked its way into the drain.

When the children lined up to be wiped with the towels we shared, Zain Marmee came over. “I need to dry you thoroughly or you will catch cold,” she smiled, as she rubbed the fuzzy cloth into my hair and whipped my head in every direction to catch the last wet strand. Feeling clean and fresh I closed my eyes and leaned into her.

Soon it was time for lunch and we sat cross legged under the shade of a breadfruit tree to open our rice packets. I gobbled down fried prawns and pieces of roast beef and waited with everybody else until Grand Aunt Mariam Marmee was done chewing her food between toothless gums. When we were done, Shachi gathered up the banana leaves and ordered us to step back while she picked up fallen grains of rice. It would go to the chickens, not end up in the garbage—rice being what nourished us all.

As the sun warmed the grass I lay my head on Zain Marmee’s lap while she ran her broad fingers through my hair, untangling the knots, her hands moving in and out. In the distance I could see my petticoat hung up to dry between the bathing cloths. Within minutes I fell asleep.

The time came when I did not have to hide my swimsuit from my relatives. I no longer wore it. I no longer went to Bathiri Beach or Closenburg Bay. Umma gave away my bike. I was twelve years old, and had become a maiden. I was “brought inside.”

When Penny came by, I had to tell her: *I can’t go out anymore.*

“What do you mean *out*?” she asked.

“Outside the house.”

“Not even to my house?” Penny asked.

“No.”

I told Penny I was a “big girl” now and could not walk out to the front verandah, or take a letter from the postman or go anywhere by myself. During the day, I couldn’t walk on the road, even with a chaperone.

“Will you be going to school?” Penny asked.

“Yes, but my ayah will be riding with me in the car.”

“Can’t you go other places if your ayah comes with you?”

“No.”

“Then why do they let you go to school?”

“Because there are only girls there.”

It wasn’t too long before Penny stopped coming to see me at all.

“There’s nothing to do,” she said, after we spent a whole afternoon playing checkers and card games in my bedroom. She found a new friend who was free to roam with her.

Umma let me spend half an hour of the afternoon in the front hall, behind the big windows that looked out into the verandah. She said our maid would have to be with me too, so that I would not be alone, and I had to promise not to lean out so far that the people walking on the street could see. She also said I could stand there only if I had my veil on, properly, across my chest and over my head as it was supposed to be and not trailing on the floor or carelessly thrown across my shoulders as I wore it most of the time.

Sometimes, from where I stood at the window, I would see Penny and her new friend as they rode by on their bicycles. If they caught a glimpse of me behind the brass bars, they waved.

With nothing else to do, I paced up and down the inner courtyard, or turned over the few books I owned with a sickening feeling that I knew them all. Umma came up and put a hand on my shoulder. She said everybody eventually got used to being *brought inside*; she didn’t know any girl

who hadn't.

One afternoon, I looked for my swimsuit and found it, crumpled, in a corner of my dresser. When I held it up, I could tell that it would no longer fit me, but I squeezed myself into it all the same. The shoulder straps could barely be tied, and the bottom stretched up, taut, from above my thighs.

Before anybody could see me, I slipped out of my bedroom and got it into the water tank that was at the very back of the house. Though it was full, the water only came up to my waist and when I moved, my legs bumped into hard cement. I stood still for a long while. Then I pounded the surface with the palms of my hands and watched the water splash on all sides. In the silence, a few small ripples appeared on top and disappeared.

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