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Swimming Pool

MICHAEL DONOHUE

It was a place where the old invariably met the young. Those in their 20s, 30s and 40s had long absconded to fashionable leisure centres and health clubs. The badly heated, public subsidised baths hadn't been substantially renovated since they were opened at the turn of the century. It could be argued that the clientele hadn't varied either. The old with their flesh hanging still moved slowly, graciously across the pool; while the young, flesh gleaming, combed its length with youthful exuberance.

Jim was still giving the old pool a run for its money. At fifty he hadn't quite been relegated to swimming widths, still managing five to ten lengths on a good day. He usually frequented the baths in the evenings, escaping from his noisy office to the relative serenity of being alone with the water. He often wondered why he didn't choose a less hectic profession than head of an admissions department in a university. It seemed his whole life was a battering from parents who believed their children were more academically gifted than they were or the children themselves driven to question every step of the admission process. And yet he could have chosen any career, gaining a degree when such things were difficult to come by, especially for anyone with a working class background.

Maybe this was the reason he believed so fervently in education. Four little years could separate you from doing some menial job for the rest of your life or having what one might call a career. It was the socialist in him that really drove his vocation. Yes, education was imperative to creating a more equal society; and such realisations as this kept him buoyant.

The other reason for Jim's pool visits was to admire the bodies of the young men whose forms he could study in three phases. The first was in the

water where the athletic movement of their limbs could be examined, then in the showers a more close-up examination was conducted, and finally in the changing room their going-home clothes revealed their personality, putting a life with the body.

He had been late to discover the beauty of men. He followed the conventional route, or rather did what was expected of him, and married, producing a son in the first year. However the desires bubbling below the surface boiled over when Jim embarked on an affair with a male student, causing a scandal at the university. His wife took the news calmly and encouraged him to follow his heart; his son never forgave him for breaking up the family, and their contact dwindled, then fizzled out. Jim hoped that changing attitudes towards homosexuality would soften his son's reasons for hating him. Such thoughts swam through his mind as he ploughed on to make his goal of ten lengths, as if in accomplishing this, everything else would fall into place as well.

It was a source of annoyance to him that when he was young and beautiful, he didn't know who he was. As he studied the sculpted bodies of the young men in the showers he would think, 'I was like that. I was as beautiful as him, but I wasn't aware. I couldn't express myself. I couldn't enjoy my body.' He had gotten to a stage where he had reinvented the young Jim as an athletic Adonis who would join others in a mutual appreciation of themselves. They were always swimming together in lakes, rivers and seas. Such fantasies were enhanced by great art, such as Seurat's *Les Baigneurs*, the paintings of Henry Scott Tuke and the infamous skinny-dipping scene in the movie version of *A Room With A View*. He knew that to acknowledge his body

at that time would have meant acknowledging the desires that went along with it. He became in effect someone who lived from the neck up. When he finally allowed himself to feel his body, and particularly his sexual organs which freed up everything else, he was approaching middle age.

Romance hadn't exactly fallen into his lap either. Being a late debutante he encountered no welcoming committee from the gay community. His options ranged from the young and beautiful who of course stirred his interest, but all they were interested in was his pocket. Men his own age who were still on the scene he found slightly ridiculous, most like him having a delayed adolescence. Slightly older men frightened him for the simple reason that he had never had his youth and couldn't face the prospect of retirement. He also went off the rails for a period exploring the more promiscuous side of gay life -- saunas, parks and public toilets -- where sex was more readily available and twenty years of pent up desire could find an outlet. He hadn't so much given up as confined himself to the limitations of his predicament. Who wants old people? Not even old people. And he was no different to the rest of them.

There were certain bodies he had become accustomed to looking at over years he'd been frequenting the baths, some he'd even seen develop from pre-adolescence into men. His current favourites were a group of fifteen to sixteen year olds who he tended to encounter at least once a week. They were a mixed-race group, which made for comparisons in the body structure. There was an Indian (skinny), African (bony), Caucasian (stocky) and another Caucasian -- who was more difficult to define in that he had a perfect body. He seemed to embody the best of the rest and made for a sculpture, his body

being a moving art form. All these boys Jim soon realised were English, but if their accents had lost the link with their ancestors their body structures served as a reminder. A slight tingle of delight erupted in him whenever he encountered them, their outlines becoming, after a time, old friends. It was a friendship that became over familiar. One evening as Jim was in the middle of a sub conscious ogle, one of the boys confronted him with, "Looking at something?"

Jim's world suddenly crumbled. He'd been caught out as the lurch he was, the old lascivious, peeping Tom he'd become, hankering after his lost youth in their beauty. Worse still, the respectability he normally cloaked himself in, the university etiquette, the cosy sweater, intellectual snobbery was unmasked to reveal an erect throbbing penis. He mumbled something inaudible and fumbled for his glasses as if for a cliff edge. To add to the calamity they fell and the same boy stepped forward and crushed them into the watery floor. The boys laughed and felt quite macho. It never occurred to them that Jim was doing exactly what they did to every girl that came within their radius; and one might add, with a far more critical, misogynous eye.

As he was leaving he was unfortunate enough to encounter this same group, huddled around the front entrance. He expected them to throw a few insults and was in half a mind to confront them. He knew they would probably laugh it off, but he might get through to some of them -- education was his trade after all. As soon as he came into view they immediately began pointing and sniggering. Jim, like a lion, arched his back and prepared for battle. However, being without his glasses he missed the steps in front of him and fell in a heap at their feet. This was the highlight of their day and they hooted with

glee halfway down the street. Presently they noticed one of their crew missing and looked back to see the perfect body stooped over the old man.

“Are you coming Sean?” shouted one.

“Don’t bother, he’s only an old faggott!” shouted another.

“He’s gonna want you as his bum-chum,” chimed the joker of the group.

But Sean ignored them as he powerfully hoisted Jim onto his shoulder. They rounded on their friend.

“Get a grip, Sean.”

“You’re losing it, man.”

“Let’s get out of here before it spreads to us”, said the joker, and they wandered off.

Jim was extremely agitated. One humiliation at the hands of youth was bad enough -- he’d even found the resolve to fight back -- but two found his resolve wanting.

“Are you hurt?” Sean asked him.

“Of course I’m hurt, I can barely stand!” Jim snapped back waspishly.

“Do you live nearby?”

“Round the corner... Lower, lower you’re hurting my shoulder!”

When they reached Jim’s house, Sean wanted to leave the old man but was afraid to let go his grip, lest he should be blamed for causing another injury.

Jim showed him no mercy in the forgiveness stakes. He may have been human enough to clean up his mess, but not human enough to stop the mess happening. It was an awful sight, a decent, intelligent, accomplished

gentleman brought low by group of ignorant teenagers. It was society who put the levers in place.

He ordered Sean to procure towels, salts and a basin of hot water, and when he felt some relief for his injury he asked the boy his name. Sean was relieved as this amounted to a token of forgiveness. He couldn't but be moved by the distress he'd caused. He was doubly embarrassed to have treated a man who had such a sumptuous, beautiful house so cheaply.

Jim's next demand was a cup of tea; and Sean, unprompted, poured himself one. To Jim's surprise the boy led the conversation, which eventually turned on education, being common to them both. Jim found it strange that no one had suggested further education as an option for the boy. He surmised it was probably due to his working class background, coming as he did from a family of Irish emigrant builders. It may well have been a miracle that he was allowed to continue in education up to this point.

As the conversation rolled on Jim couldn't help but notice the tone of yearning in the young man's voice. This old faggot who they mercilessly mocked and tormented offered Sean an escape route, a window, an avenue into that space that's so rarely tapped in us, that may take a lifetime to reach: our potential. The young man sat rigid in his seat, feeling an invisible glue pass between them.

As a ruse to continue their budding friendship Jim ushered his young companion into his garden, where a rather prominent hedge was screaming for a haircut. Sean agreed to return at the weekend and thus began his role as Jim's odd-job man.

After the hedge, Jim's bathroom required a makeover and then the shed roof needed re-tiling. It was a hot summer and Sean, with what one might call a 'chappy wink', obliged Jim in the eye candy department, wearing little more than his football shorts and sneakers. His appeal was of course sexual, but his beauty was so perfect Jim would have found himself powerless if confronted with actually attaining it. The high for Jim was in having it around: like the other pieces of beautiful furniture he'd acquired through the years, it brought him comfort.

When the work was complete they would meet for a weekly 'study' conference in the kitchen. Although Jim would pay Sean for his work, it was understood that part of the payment involved Jim's supervision of his studies. Jim identified that he was good at technical and science subjects, weaker on languages, and advised him on what subject choices he should take in the autumn.

Sean's parents, however, had other ideas for his future. His father and two older brothers had won a large contract for refurbishing an office block and they decided it was just the job to break in their younger brother. The tensions that were bubbling below the surface exploded one night when Sean calmly announced at the dinner table that he intended on becoming an 'Educational Facilitator' -- it was one of those gobbledygook job titles he'd noticed in one of Jim's career prospectuses. He was told in no uncertain terms if that was his plan he could find somewhere else to lay his head at night, that there were going to be no grown up babies in this house. His father had been paying his way since he was thirteen and what did Sean think of that!

It was two in the morning when the adolescent lightly tapped on Jim's living room window. Jim was reposing in his favourite armchair, having spent the evening with friends discussing the rights and wrongs of the government's latest initiative to introduce 'top-up fees' for universities, meaning they were no longer free. Jim was vehemently against, and the reason was standing in his garden.

He listened to Sean's tale of woe, which included a few tears rolling down his perfect cheeks. He got the impression that Sean hadn't had the opportunity to open up before, such was his difficulty expressing his feelings. He appeared to be emerging from a dark pool, reaching for the sunlight, but still submerged. As no resolution surfaced, and as Sean refused to return home, Jim packed him off to the guest bedroom.

As Jim lay awake in his own bed, he pondered the problem. How does any adolescent rebel against their family? They run away. Where do they go? To some old queer? Society would never sanction it, never mind the family -- he'd have a group of Irish builders at his door ready to knock his block off. He couldn't find an immediate solution and drifted off. He awoke with a rustling of the sheets and turned to receive Sean's long, naked, slender body curling up beside him.

As Jim stood on the seashore a dolphin approached and called his name. He followed the animal and they covered miles and miles into vast, open water. As they swam faster and faster, and further and further, Jim's eyes filled with tears and he was soon sobbing uncontrollably. At that strange moment when a different consciousness can arrive in dreams, not waking, but maybe a realisation that one is dreaming, it occurred to him that he was

swimming alone. The dolphin he realised was in himself, that he had the capacity to reach out and find new shores on his own. The regret he'd been drowning in suddenly lifted. It wasn't in itself something to be regretted, but lived with.

He hardly saw his young friend afterwards. They crossed paths at the baths several times, when Jim received the information that Sean would be joining his father and brothers after Christmas. Jim wisely didn't push the subject, sensing he might push Sean into a crisis he couldn't cope with. His parents, or the world, had won this battle. And somehow as Jim watched the young Adonis cover the pool with fierce power and precision, he wasn't without hope that the water would gather the young swimmer into a rhythm that was conducive to his own movements, to his desires.

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BIOGRAPHY

Michael Donohue

Originally from Co. Kildare in Ireland, Michael studied Arts in University College Dublin before taking up a scholarship at The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York.

His poetry has been published in New York's Vice Magazine and on Soma Soma Scene, Quentin Crisp's Homepage and New Voice Writing Magazine on the Web.

His short story, *The Skylark*, has been broadcast on DSC Radio in Dublin. He was short listed for The Hennessey 2007, Ireland's premier new writing prize for his short story, *A Hotel in Mayfair*.

Michael currently lives in London and reads regularly at The Poetry Café. He has recently completed his first novel.