

Chairman's Prize Entry

Sink or Swim-The Knitted Swimming Costume

I am not sure what had worried me more, the prospect of being immersed in six feet of water or the outfit I was expected to wear while drowning. The night before the lesson I had stared glumly at my reflection in the bedroom mirror. I was wearing my swimming costume, more accurately it was my Aunty Gladys' swimming costume. What an interesting word 'costume' is outside of a serialisation of Jane Austen or a fancy- dress party; certainly, when my younger brother had seen me in it he had laughed loudly and shouted 'what have you come as?'

Aunty Gladys was my mother's youngest sister and she had last worn the 'cossie' around 1940 which I imagined was around the time when those people wishing to bathe had been pushed out to sea in a wheeled hut. The costume had been lovingly knitted by her mother, my Nanna in 'royal' blue wool with a white trim on the legs.

'Royal blue?' Princess Anne, whom I admired enormously, would not have been seen dead in it. One of our school history lessons had touched on 'Hereward the Wake' and I thought perhaps Mrs Wake might have worn such a garment in the privacy of her own home.

However this was 1965, I was thirteen and wanted to be cool. I lived in Liverpool for goodness sake, a really cool place and not just because of the bitterly cold climate. I was on first name terms with the Beatles, well alright, that was a slight exaggeration but I did have an autographed photo of Ken Dodd after his appearance at the local music shop 'The Pop Inn'.

I already knew that my classmates would either be wearing a stretchy black ‘take me seriously I am in training for the Olympics’ or a ruched front floral ‘ooh look at me with a detachable skirt’ type of costume. I had taken home the letter informing parents of the commencement of swimming lessons with a feeling of dread.

My mother had rummaged about in my bedroom, which like the rest of the house, resembled a bomb- damaged furniture- shop- cum grocers. At night I slept alongside two dressing tables, a travelling trunk, three wardrobes, three fireside chairs (I was expecting Goldilocks at any moment), a crate of two- pin plugs, roll upon roll of mismatched wallpaper , ‘because you never know’, gigantic rolls of linoleum and at least 24 jars of home made pickled onions.

‘You are not sporty’, said my mother, ‘you can wear your Aunty Gladys’s old costume, I’m not wasting money on a new one’. She thrust a really unpromising package at me. Words cannot accurately convey my dismay. ‘Try it on, I want to see if it fits’, she said, removing the sorry garment from its brown paper bag. I tried it on.

I wondered silently if we should invite in the people from next door. They had no television so visual humour for them was limited to Mr- Next- Door forcing Rex their dog into a woolly coat before taking a trip to the local park. As I pondered on this while simultaneously trying to clench my buttocks and suck in my stomach, to effect a more pleasing appearance it dawned on me that Rex and I had a lot in common ; we both lived with sadists and were both forced to wear inappropriate knitwear for the purposes of public humiliation.

I fought the urge to fling myself out of the bedroom window, reasoning that by the time I had manoeuvred the wardrobes out of the way I would have been too exhausted to jump and even

if I had managed to, no doubt the Ambulance crew would have been too busy laughing at me lying on the pavement in all my garter stitched glory, I would never have survived a trip to the hospital.

As I joined my classmates the next morning on the walk to the swimming- baths I thought at least I had been spared uncle George's critical eye and commentary on the latest episode of what was proving to be my very trying life. George was Nanna's much younger brother and owned the special title of godfather, partly I am sure, due to my parents' belief that he would see my brother and I 'right' financially. Sadly, although a skinflint in terms of pocket- money and Christmas or Birthdays he was magnificently generous in criticisms of how we looked, what we wore, my rock- cakes, my brother's metalwork ash- trays, how we spoke and any minor disasters. We would stand mute in Nanna's kitchen while bachelor childless George gave us the benefit of his wisdom.

We were also the unwilling audience to his comedy routine. 'Do ye wet yer-self when ye wash?' Or 'Hoo meny beans mek five?' and more mystifyingly and rather unsettling 'Do ye ken wur I've hidden the sixpence?' All of this delivered in a thick Scottish accent despite the fact he had lived in Liverpool from a very young age. My father referred to him as 'Rob Roy'. So I thanked goodness that George was not planning a trip to the swimming- baths on a school day.

To say I looked odd as I changed and ventured out of the cubicles on that chilly September morning would be to fall victim to understatement. Clad in Nanna's masterpiece with a grey rubber swimming hat and my pink national health spectacles along with an optimistic smile, I lumbered towards the pool and was greeted by an eerie silence. Then, one by one children

started to laugh, clutching themselves and each other, pointing. Ordinarily the sound of large numbers of children laughing would have been a wonderful thing, the noise bouncing off the walls and the water, but they were all laughing...at me! A few boys ready and waiting to be taken back to their school after their lesson whooped and cheered their appreciation of my appearance 'legs de luxe, de looks like ducks', they yelled; and 'yer couldn't stop a pig in a jigger', a reference to my slight bandiness of leg. In an attempt to join in the joke I tried out a few comic bathing- beauty poses at the waters edge but was interrupted by the appearance of our sports mistress, Miss hall, who was my second-favourite person in the whole world after Uncle George. My audience scattered, Miss Hall strode towards me wearing galoshes covering her smart black patent-leather stilettos, a V-necked jumper and a plastic-pleated overskirt. She looked like a cross-between Alma Cogan and a lampshade.

'You', she yelled at me, 'stop messing about, take off your spectacles and give them to me'. I did as I was told and lowering myself into the pool, spent the next thirty minutes fighting a losing battle with gravity and dignity as my costume took on more water than the Titanic. My floundering efforts to swim were hardly hampered by Miss Hall's encouraging remarks from the poolside, peppered with rhetorical questions, such as 'Do you want me to come in there and teach you a thing or two?' I quietly thought, 'Yes please, how to swim would be good, thank you for asking'. But, I kept this thought to myself, remembering my father's advice, 'nobody likes a smart-alec', when he had overheard me imparting pearls of wisdom to my brother about where he was going wrong in life. So I simply sighed and tried to look sheepish, which wasn't difficult. We had been reading 'Jane Eyre' in English, and I thought 'Lowood' School hadn't sounded that bad. Without my spectacles I could only stare blankly at Miss Hall, which seemed to infuriate her even more. All around me my classmates were having a wonderful time, and, if not exactly swimming they were not exactly drowning

either. I was now managing to swallow whatever water had not been trapped within the fluffy folds of my costume. The chlorine was making my eyes sting, I couldn't see, therefore I couldn't hear. In spite of arm-bands and two cork-boards, I was no swimmer. So then, perhaps if I stood with one foot on the bottom of the pool and splashed about a bit.....

Where was 'Sam Kydd' or 'John Mills' when you needed them? The only things missing from this particular World -War Two Film, were an oil-slick and brave communal-singing. I was minding my own business clinging to the side of the pool, when Miss Hall hove into view once more. I had been somewhat distracted; thinking about how large the memorial plaque would be in my memory, outside 'The Baths', when I had finally succumbed to a chlorine-induced cough and deep embarrassment. Miss Hall's voice cut through my reverie; 'you; yes you, the one in the ridiculous costume'. I thought that was a bit harsh and opened my mouth to say so, but thought better of it. 'You', shrieked Miss Hall, 'get out of the water immediately, you're not swimming, you're just hopping and splashing. Get out of the water now'. She stomped away in her galoshes without a backward glance, muttering something under her breath about detention, and so, like some gigantic knitted seal I left the pool and lurched back towards the changing cubicles, squelching and attempting to wring excess water out of my costume as I walked.

Once in the cubicle I peeled off Nanna's lovely masterpiece, hanging it on the back of the door to create an interesting feature. I could not remember being so completely wet since I had tripped and fallen into a stream at Girl-Guide Camp. I tried unsuccessfully to dry myself on the world's smallest towel, thoughtfully packed by my mother. A towel in stark contrast to myself; so small and thin and crispy it was like trying to dry myself on a piece of Ryvita.

Newly moist and beyond caring that I was wearing my panty-girdle back to front, I joined what I thought was the queue for the walk back to school, for I had neglected to collect my spectacles from Miss Hall. In doing so, I incurred her wrath once more. She came click-clacking over the tiles and made a hissing enquiry, out of ear-shot of the 'Maternisericordiae' school sports-mistress as to what I thought I was doing standing around with 'the catholics'.

Did I learn to swim? Of course not, and, over fifty years later I am still merely hopping and splashing and almost invariably in the wrong queue.