

On the Edge

I nearly drowned as a child.

I think I was about five years old when it happened. We lived on Tamborine Mountain, so it wasn't exactly conducive to learning how to swim. There was no public pool back then and I'm sure the weather was much cooler and it rained a lot more.

I had swimming lessons at the Southport Public Pool which was behind the Tum Tum Restaurant in Southport's centre. We'd always laugh when my elder brother quipped,

"Fill your tumtum at The Tum Tum!"

The car ride each week was via a treacherous, steep road down the mountainside and I suffered badly from motion sickness. My ears just wouldn't pop! Consequently, I felt queasy before even putting a toe in the water. My brothers were in a different group to me and I felt out of sorts because of this.

As a shy kid and a measly pre-schooler, I was petrified of the water and ran from the cranky instructor, locking myself in our red Falcon in the carpark. Mum bashed on the windows and pleaded with me to unlock the door. When she finally coaxed me out, my punishment was swift and harsh. The swimming teacher forced me to swim in the deepest part of the pool, so my fear of the water was absolutely compounded from that point.

The day was warm and my Uncle Michael, mum's cousin, was visiting from Sydney. To us as kids, Sydney was just about as exotic as you could ever get. And to add to this novel curiosity, he drove a Jaguar with electric windows. Our parents always wondered how he came by his money to afford such extravagances. They called him unreliable and entitled and guessed his mother gifted him the finances to live a life beyond his means. We just thought he was so cool and laughed readily at his childish jokes. Perhaps he managed to get along with kids because he hadn't forgotten how to be one himself.

We loved to ride in that Jag and play with the windows! He never chipped us for

doing the wrong thing, hence we were free to fiddle and experiment with the new-fangled winders.

Mum and dad were having a rest one Sunday afternoon. They were dairy farmers, running one hundred and twenty moon-eyed Jersey cows on a property called Redlands. This was a rare opportunity to have a break from their hectic schedule of milking twice a day, by utilising a visiting relative for child minding duties. Uncle Mike was charged with our welfare and had strict directives that under no circumstances was he to take us to St. Bernard's pool for a dip. The pool was carved into a creek bed and riddled with rocks and very deep in parts. The water was tainted with volcanic-red silt from the muddy creek running through it and visibility was less than zero. It's still there, I think; the pool I mean.

Good old Uncle Mike was easy to manipulate and probably not the most dependable person to mind three tearaways. We easily talked him into taking us to the south end of the mountain for a swim. He'd need to explain to mum and dad and shoulder the fallout for intentionally defying specific orders later on. He wasn't exactly the ideal role model for three energetic youngsters. After all he was the designated adult. He was in charge. Alas, he was just a child in grown-ups' clothes.

He drove us to the creek-pool, about a ten-minute journey from the north end to south of the mountain. We messed with the windows all the way there- up, down, up, down, up down. We giggled and fidgeted as our excitement bubbled over. I'm not sure seatbelts were mandatory back then. Probably not...

Finally, we arrived. We threw our towels down and didn't wait for any safety pep-talks from our Driver. We jumped in feet first, quickly but carefully. We were thrilled to splash into the cold, cold water, aware from previous visits that you never, ever dive head first into this murky waterway. Our parents had grilled us before each swimming session with warnings and coaching of what to do and what definitely not to do. There was no such

avuncular guidance on this particular day. We hadn't hung around long enough for it anyway.

Although the day was balmy, jumping into the water took our breaths away. The water on the mountain was its own sort of cold. Memories of the taps freezing under our primary school underscore how cold our mountain home could be. I actually think this water source was from a natural spring coming from the guts of the mountain. Consequently, brr, it was always really, really icy cold!

The boys were both confident swimmers; happy days! I hung around the concrete edge at the corner and tested my swimming lesson knowledge. I was delighted and eventually my body adjusted to the shock of the change in temperature. I never strayed far from where I could touch the slimy boulder bottom or reach the safety of the cement poolside. I did this for what seemed like ages but no doubt it wasn't. Everything seems like an age when you're five years old. In due course I wanted to test to see if I could swim a width like my brothers were doing. They appeared to be having so much fun racing back and forth and mucking around together. Anyone with older siblings knows the magnetic pull of wanting to follow in their brethren's sometimes tenuous footsteps.

I pushed off from my sanctuary- border. Stroke, stroke, stroke, oh yeah, I'm swimming! Stroke, stroke, stroke...

All of a sudden unfathomable fear gripped me. My checkered swimming history caught up with me. Thoughts about 'the deep' water beneath me induced severe anxiety-ridden terror. Instead of stroking, I was panicking and thrashing about. The more I struggled the more frightened I became, the more water I swallowed. To say I was in grave trouble is grossly understating the situation...I'd taken my last breath and I was going down, down, down.

Years later this experience would inform my reaction to such movies as Jaws and The Poseidon Adventure. I'd always have someone further out from the beach than me when

bathing in the ocean. Some poor soul would be out there in deeper waves to shield me from any possible shark attack. Little did I know that sharks don't recognise such rules and boundaries and they might simply breach my protection system by moving in from either side and sampling my skinny little body as a delicious entrée. And of course, I would never ever go on a cruise ship...

It's a weird feeling- drowning. I can't say if my life flashed before my eyes. I don't recollect that it did. Perhaps I hadn't lived enough life for this phenomenon to occur. I know I felt helpless. I know my predicament was dire. I know I just wanted my mum!

As I was going under for the last time the arms of my wayward uncle were around me, dragging me to safety. I remember coughing and spluttering and crying and saying I was alright. Truth be told I wasn't alright. It was a traumatic experience for any little person, and the fact it is recalled with such clarity now corroborates this point.

I wanted my mother. I needed her reassurance and her warm, tender hug. I'd have to wait quite some time for both things.

We went straight home post the dunking. Glumly and somewhat delicately, we walked, into the storm of Max and Barbara who were now wide awake, suspicious of our whereabouts and somewhat frantic. Their wrath was real and potent. My brothers were sent to their respective rooms to think about what they'd done. I'm pretty sure they copped a hiding too. For my starring role in the day's events, I don't remember any spanking. In fact, I don't recall being struck by either parent...ever. Perhaps my dear mother and father were just pleased I was okay; glad to see me alive and able to be cautioned to learn a ream of life lessons from this terrible incident.

It could have been a different story to tell. It would be a much sadder story...and it wouldn't be me telling it now. What if I'd dropped beneath the water and disappeared in that gloomy pond and the eyes of my lackadaisical uncle didn't see exactly where? They wouldn't

find me until they dragged the watercourse later on...

Intuitively I lay low and went to my bedroom, overseeing my own isolation and separation from the world outside of my bedroom's four walls. Of course, it wasn't long after the extended cacophony of raised voices that I fell asleep. It was a big day for a little kid.

Uncle Mike was unceremoniously dressed down. I don't recall any more rides in the Jag after that.