

“Congratulations, Dean! Pool attendance is up 125% over last year. What do you attribute that to?”

Miles Stanovich, the middle-aged director of the city’s Parks and Recreation Department, sat with Dean in a tiny office adjoined to the break room. Every summer, around Labor Day, Mr. Stanovich inspected the facility and reviewed its season with the manager. Depending on how things went, it could be the last discussion they ever had.

“Well,” Dean said, fidgeting uncomfortably. “We had a hot summer.”

“It helped the lifeguards you hired were pretty hot, too, though, am I right?” Mr. Stanovich winked. He would have added a nudge had he been sitting any closer.

Dean smiled at his shoes. “I suppose so, sir.”

“Except for the tubby one.” Mr. Stanovich said, brushing his well-groomed mustache with a finger. “How did she slip through the cracks?”

“Polly’s a great lifeguard. And she’s actually dropped a bit of weight—”

“No, not Polly. She’s got a nice swimmer’s build.” Mr. Stanovich held up a wrinkly piece of paper. “This girl. Tabitha.” He waved her flimsy resume in his hand. “You certainly didn’t hire her for her credentials.”

“No, sir.”

“Then what was it? Some fat girl quota I’m unaware of?”

“No, sir.”

“Did she even pass the swimming test?”

“Uh...I don’t think she took it.”

“Jesus, Dean! Fire her fat ass!”

“I can’t do that, sir,” Dean said, addressing his shoes again.

“Fine, then I will.” Mr. Stanovich stood and aimed his index finger between Dean’s eyes. “Right after I fire you.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean gulped. “It was just an oversight on my end. Is there any way that you could give her a chance to pass it? She’s an exceptional swimmer.”

“Fine.” Mr. Stanovich holstered his finger. “But if she fails, I’ll need TWO new lifeguards for next summer.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Stanovich strode purposefully to the pool while Dean scurried behind like a puppy. It was closing time and the place was abuzz with activity. Polly and Lucy gathered trash while the remaining guests packed their belongings and headed for the exit. Tabitha sat hunched in her lifeguard chair, unmoved by the proceedings.

“Excuse me, honey?” Mr. Stanovich waved to Tabitha from across the water.

Tabitha sat up straight and pressed an index finger to the mouth of her cavernous cleavage.

“Yes, you sweetie. I need you to come talk with me.”

Tabitha extricated herself from the chair, descended the ladder, and sloshed through the wade pool towards them. Mr. Stanovich checked his watch.

“Yes, sir?” Tabitha huffed upon her eventual arrival.

“I was going over your paperwork with Dean and noticed you never completed your swimming test.”

Tabitha glanced to Dean. “He said it was just a formality.”

“Did he?” Mr. Stanovich glared at the humbled hunk. “Well, regardless, we’re going to need you to complete that.”

“Now?” Tabitha’s question was answered with volume-speaking silence. “I just ate nachos. Aren’t you supposed to wait forty-five minutes after eating?”

Mr. Stanovich eyed Tabitha’s figure. “Honey, I doubt that time will ever come.”

“It’s OK,” Dean interjected. “It’s easy.”

Tabitha nibbled a thumbnail, the least fattening thing she’d munched in months. “What do I have to do?”

“I’ll show you over at the big pool,” Mr. Stanovich said.

Tabitha’s eyes widened. “The big pool?”

“Yes, if you’re going to swim laps you have to do them in the Olympic pool.”

“Laps?”

“Dean, when we’re finished you may want to check Tabitha for swimmer’s ear.”

“Mr. Stanovich?” Lucy interrupted. She and Polly had picked-up all the trash within earshot. “We’ve finished the shutdown procedures. Mind if we watch?”

“Sure. In fact, you can time her.” Mr. Stanovich handed Lucy his iPhone. “I don’t want any bias,” he added, glaring at Dean.

Tabitha’s jaw dropped. “But...but...Lucy’s been trying to get me fired since day one.”

“Is that so?” The appreciative look Mr. Stanovich gave Lucy belied his accusatory tone. “Then why don’t you take video, too, in case I need to review it later?”

“Yes, sir!”

Lucy and Polly hustled to the bleachers overlooking the pool while Mr. Stanovich and Dean made their way to the deep end. Tabitha, looking as unhinged as her jaw, waddled after them.

“I need you to tread water for two-minutes,” Mr. Stanovich said upon their arrival.

A cautious smile spread across Tabitha’s face. That wasn’t so bad.

“Using just your legs.”

Tabitha’s incredulous gaze darted between Dean and Mr. Stanovich. “Is that even possible?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Mr. Stanovich said.

Tabitha grudgingly tottered to the pool’s edge. She hoped for a “never mind” or “just kidding,” but all she got from Dean was, “It helps if you tuck your hands under your armpits.” If looks could kill, he would have been vaporized.

After a deep breath, Tabitha jumped into the water with a sizable splash (Lucy and Polly were glad they hadn’t sat in the first row) before popping to the surface like a cork. Her newfound buoyancy surprised her--pleasantly considering the circumstances—and though she would never admit it to Dean, tucking her hands under her armpits DID help. It pushed her God-given floatation devices to the surface and provided a place to rest her chin.

Of course, Lucy happily captured it all on camera.

“Are you using the wide angle?” Polly whispered.

“Shhh.” Lucy struggled to keep the phone steady while stifling laughter.

For a bit, it looked like Tabitha would sail through the challenge on her breast barge, but soon her flabby gams, which churned like butter beneath her, began to falter. As they slowed, their weight pulled Tabitha under. First her chest, then her neck, then her chin, and then the final flotation fat around her facial features...

“Time!” Lucy yelled. There were still fifteen seconds to go.

Polly cast a furrowed brow at her friend. Lucy merely shrugged. Whether Lucy’s gesture was a moment of compassion or a desire to prolong Tabitha’s agony remains a point of conjecture to this day.

“Jesus, help me, Dean!” Tabitha had swum to the edge but was having trouble getting out.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Stanovich interjected. “As part of the test you must enter and exit the pool without assistance.”

Dean shrugged helplessly as Tabitha shook her head and mouthed the word, ‘fuck.’

“Besides,” Mr. Stanovich continued. “You need to stay in for part two.”

“Part *TWO*?”

“Definitely swimmer’s ear,” Mr. Stanovich said to Dean.

“What do I have to do now?”

“300 yards continuous swim.”

“How many laps is that?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean said. “Do you need some water?”

“I’ve got plenty, thanks!” Tabitha snapped.

She pushed hard from the side, as much to get away from Dean as to begin part two. Instead of gliding gracefully, however, her barge-like body created a wake that stalled her momentum. A flurry of flailing limbs kept her moving forward, but after half a lap her legs were like anchors and her arms tired of compensating. She switched to breaststroke, which helped, but she was slowly losing power like one of those wind-up bathtub frogs.

Had she not glimpsed Lucy and Polly waving from the bleachers, she would have quit altogether.

“What kind of stroke is *that*?” Polly asked.

Lucy shrugged. “The Flopping Flounder?” Tabitha may not have quit, but her body was giving up one limb at a time. As a result, her form grew increasingly unorthodox.

As Tabitha struggled, Lucy transitioned from bemused to irritated. The test was supposed to be completed freestyle or breaststroke, not whatever weird amalgam Tabitha was performing. The guys weren’t even watching. Mr. Stanovich had stepped away to make a call and Dean was messing with his phone.

When Tabitha flipped onto her back, a clear violation of the rules, Lucy was ready to end the sham. That’s when a message from Dean appeared on Mr. Stanovich’s phone:

“Please forward me a copy!”

Dean flashed her a smile and a thumbs-up. Not sure what to make of it, Lucy kept filming.

Five minutes later she was still filming. The challenge had devolved into a sad endurance test between Tabitha and Mr. Stanovich’s phone. The phone was at 10%; Tabitha seemed to be at much less.

“I’m done,” Tabitha gasped, clutching the side where Dean stood.

“You did it! That was the last lap.”

“It was?” Tabitha found it strange 300 yards would end on an odd lap, but she certainly wasn’t going to complain.

“She finished, Mr. Stanovich!” Dean shouted to the mustachioed manager who was still on his phone. “Now all you have to do is rescue Bob.”

‘Bob’ was the life-size dummy the facility used for rescue and CPR training. Contrary to his ironic nickname, Bob sank like a stone.

“I can’t, Dean.” Tabitha looked as if she might vomit. “I quit.”

“Then I’m afraid you’re both fired.” Mr. Stanovich appeared at the edge of the pool holding Bob. “I can’t trust the judgment of someone who would willingly hire someone so...unfit for the job.”

Tabitha’s body went rigid as if jolted with electricity. “Throw the dummy in the pool,” she hissed at Dean.

“What? I can’t do tha—Oh, gotcha.” Dean took Bob from Mr. Stanovich and gave him a mighty heave. He belly-flopped, bubbled, then quickly settled to the bottom.

Tabitha pushed from the side with renewed purpose. She treaded water above Bob's body for a few seconds, taking deep breaths, then ducked her head and dove. Or least she tried to. Her top half disappeared, but her butt merely rotated on the surface--its pale moon shining blindingly bright in the sunset light--as her weary legs failed to overcome its buoyancy.

Polly put on the sunglasses resting atop her head. The last time she saw such a disobedient ass was on her grandfather's farm.

Lucy kept filming. And filming. She couldn't remember how much time she and Polly had been given, but it certainly wasn't this much. Bob was definitely a goner.

"Alright, that's enough, sweetie," Mr. Stanovich said after yet another failed attempt to break the water's surface.

Tabitha defiantly tried once more before returning to the side, her eyes red with chlorine and tears.

"She already failed," Mr. Stanovich said. "You might as well help her out."

"Nah," Dean said. Instead he looked to the bleachers to make sure Lucy was still filming.

Each time Tabitha lifted her torso from the water, the weight of her soggy bottom dragged her back in. Her ass had betrayed her at sea, and now was betraying her efforts to reach land. In desperation, Tabitha rested her breasts on the edge and, after multiple attempts, flung a meaty leg up to join them. From there, she was able to roll onto the deck and onto her back.

As Lucy watched through the viewfinder, she couldn't help but think how Tabitha looked like a beached whale. Well, 'whale' might be extreme, but with her belly heaving above her and her flabby breasts sliding down its slope (and nearly spilling from her suit), she was approaching elephant seal territory. Either way, she looked pathetic. Even more pathetic was how Dean and Mr. Stanovich made no effort to help or console her. They stared at her with detached bemusement, like she was a blubbery SeaWorld attraction.

With Mr. Stanovich's phone on fumes, Lucy stopped recording--

And tapped the trash icon.

"Your phone died, Mr. Stanovich," Lucy said, returning the device to its owner. "I don't know if it all recorded."

"Damn," he said. "I wanted that for posterity."

Dean helped Tabitha to her feet, but she shrugged off his attempts to cover her shoulders with a towel. She scurried away towards the locker room as fast as her thick rubbery legs would allow, but couldn't lose Dean, who she kept waving away like a pesky house fly.

As Lucy and Mr. Stanovich watched the duo shamble to the locker rooms for the final time, Mr. Stanovich said, "Whatever possessed Dean to hire a porker like that? It just got him fired."

Lucy understood Mr. Stanovich's question was rhetorical, but the situation reminded her of something her family's pastor had said in a sermon some weeks before, "When seeking revenge, you should dig two graves."

"What?"

"Never mind." Lucy discarded the memory with a shake of her head. "So, you need a new head lifeguard?"

THE END

Epilogue:

After Tabitha and Dean's dismissal, Lucy was, indeed, promoted to Head Lifeguard. Of course, only two weeks remained in the season, and since Mr. Stanovich didn't want to hire anyone else before the pool shuttered only Polly was left to be head of, but the title and raise, however brief, were nice. It also gave her seniority the following summer when she re-hired Polly and filled the remainder of her staff with qualified people. (Sure, one of them was Patrick Lowe, a hunky water polo player she had her eye on, but at least he was qualified.) Attendance was down, but the pool ran efficiently and there were no incidents.

Tabitha basically disappeared. Throughout her senior year, she bragged about studying abroad after graduation, so everyone assumed she was off waddling across Europe on Daddy's dime. However, shortly after the pool closed, so did Dr. Cumberbatch's clinic ("Hard to sell lipo when your daughter's a hippo," Polly mused) and their home in the hills went up for sale. Soon, all trace of the family was gone, and the only things left were rumors:

"Dr. Cumberbatch was so embarrassed he left town!"

"I hear he cut Tabitha out of his will."

"I hear Tabitha and Dean eloped."

"I hear they moved to Switzerland."

“I hear she was at the Piggly Wiggly. And she’s HUGE!”

The last one proved the most popular. There were sightings of Tabitha for years, each one reporting her bigger and fatter than the last. With every telling, Tabitha’s tale grew more monstrous, until it reached folkloric proportions like Big Foot or Chupacabra. When a rumor started one fall that Tabitha was housebound in an apartment complex near the edge of town, it became a popular dare for kids to trick-or-treat there. According to local legend, little Jimmy Tucker was never seen again after knocking on her door too close to midnight. Apparently, his candy-filled bag and belly were too much for ‘Flabby Tabby’ to resist after her supply of treats had run out.

Lucy never took part in such hyperbolic hearsay, of course. Tabitha and her Father were simply gone, never to return. Dean eventually reappeared, however, taking a shift manager position at the Piggly Wiggly. (This immediately vaulted him above Les Tucker and Chuck Steadman as the town’s most eligible bachelor.) Though they would share a smile and a few kind words whenever Lucy shopped, Dean was coy whenever Lucy asked about Tabitha.

“We grew apart,” is all he would say, and then he would quickly busy himself stocking shelves, assisting customers...

Or delivering groceries to the outskirts of town.

