

# The *Swimmer*

By *Louis* Fantasia

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... In this first-person narrative, a swimmer in his fifties reflects on his life and mortality after he dies from a brain-eating amoeba. NOT a spoiler so no need to get your panties in a bunch. The play begins thus –*

(On screen or voiced): People Magazine: July 25, 2019 “...man dies after contracting an illness from a brain- eating amoeba after swimming...”

*So, as you can guess it’s not as much about the deadly event as what comes before it and how this guy got in deep with the swimming in the first place.*

“You know, swimming as a metaphor for life - especially a fucked up one.” – The Swimmer

*Louis Fantasia’s extended monologue The Swimmer is part of a larger collection, DREAMS FROM A SLEEP TO COME, but feels complete in and of itself. It’s wistful and bittersweet (because we get to know him and like him and he dies), but it isn’t a downer as there is wisdom, wit, and stuff to learn. For instance, did you know they make waterproof contact lenses? Oh, I should mention that the play is subtitled parenthetically, “with apologies to Burt Lancaster.” Chew on that for a minute, why don’t you? Time’s up. Now read the damn play.*

“Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive....” – The Swimmer

**"The Swimmer"**

**(with apologies to Burt Lancaster)**

**from**

**"Dreams from a Sleep to Come"**

*(on screen or voiced)*

*"People Magazine: July 25, 2019"*

*"...man dies after contracting an illness from a brain-eating amoeba after swimming..."*

*"While extremely rare, Naegleria fowleri can lead to death — but there are precautions people can take to avoid contracting the amoeba."*

*A male SWIMMER, 50's, slightly over-weight, with a grey goatee, enters. He wears swimmer's goggles lifted onto the top of his forehead, a not too tight pair of trunks, and the kind of sandals you can walk in water with. He seems fine, but he keeps rolling out his neck and shoulders, as if to get out a stiffness there.*

*Occasionally he will scratch his ear, or shake his head, as if to get the water out.*

*He has a towel around his neck, and an inflated orange swimmer's buoy is tethered to his left ankle. During the monologue he towels off, takes a fleece or terrycloth jacket out of an old Boy Scout backpack, and gets dressed. First, he digs into his backpack for a tattered book.*

#### THE SWIMMER

Deakin? Do you know Roger Deakin? The Brit? He wrote a book - "*Water Log*" - about how he swam in almost every pond and pool and stream in Britain. He wanted to be like Burt Lancaster in "The Swimmer." The movie? After the John Cheever story? You know, swimming as a metaphor for life - especially a fucked up one. *(opens and reads a quote)*

"I grew convinced that following water, flowing with it, would be a way of getting under the skin of things, of learning something new."

Right! Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive.... Check the water temperature before you go in. Never dive. Don't jump. Swim upstream first, so the current can carry you back when you are tired... Let people

know where you're going, and how long you'll be gone. Swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive.... *(he tosses the book)*

Buuuuull-shit! I checked, I looked, I knew. After almost two years of wild swimming, I had the drill down pat, and I still died. *(He towels off.)*

I never learned to swim as a kid, but I did learn Latin. I was an altar boy, and read Caesar, Catullus and Ovid in the original. So I knew, when they said "*Naegleria fowleri*" that I was fucked. "*Naegleria fowleri*," subset of the phylum Percolozoa: a shape-shifting amoeba flagellate excavate, that turns - under certain conditions - from an inactive cyst to a trophozoite. Translation: you're fucked and dead in a week.

The amoebas are usually harmless, but every now and then they get worked up, literally, and take their revenge. A storm dumps pollution into a lake, drought slows down a river, too much mud builds up in a pond, or chemicals, as in my case, leech into ground water. *Naegleria fowleri*, a phylum Percolozoa trophozoic. As I said, Latin for... *(he rolls out shoulders; shakes out his ears)*

I don't blame my parents. It wasn't their fault I never learned to swim. They never did, not their generation. "What? I'm gonna cruise on the Queen Mary?", my mother would say. My brother learned to swim later when he bought a house with a pool, but that's another story.

The only person who liked to swim was of my Uncle Pete, my mother's sister's husband. He had been a Marine and a paratrooper, and was a good swimmer, and liked to go to the lake, but nobody would go with him. His daughters were into tennis and soft ball, and his wife - my aunt - was like my mother, and never learned to swim. So...

One day, my uncle asked my brother and me if we wanted to go to the lake with him. My brother said no (he was always pretty direct), but I said ok, even though I couldn't swim. Just to keep him company. He went half way out into the lake and back a couple of times, and then said, "Come on. I'll teach you." But he really didn't have any patience and we both came back in a foul mood. He never asked any of us again, and after a few years he just stopped going and would do things like paint his house in the summer instead.

But later that summer, I asked my parents if I could learn to swim. I was a Scout and swimming and life saving would be important if I wanted to be an Eagle Scout. My mother made her usual "Queen Mary" joke - only I, Mr. Big Shot, was going on the cruise this time. But she said she would discuss it with my father - which meant he would say yes, and so a couple of weeks later, I had change for the bus and a dollar for the lesson, with my swim suit and towel in my Cub Scout backpack. The coach met me at the door, showed me where the locker room was, told me to take a shower, and ... *(pause)*

Now, I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't anything like that. I wasn't molested by my swim coach or my priest or Scout master. Nothing like that. That would have been too obvious... too direct a cause and effect for screwing up my life. I didn't learn to swim because I wouldn't take my glasses off. *(beat; rolls his neck and shoulders)*.

There I was, getting undressed, going into the shower, drying off, putting on my suit, going out to the pool, all with my eyeglasses on. How else am I supposed to see where I'm going, except for those lenses the size of Coke bottle bottoms?

"Take 'em off an' jump in," the coach says. "Unhuh. Nope," says I. There's a very long pause, with a half a dozen kids all waiting to get in the water - and 'cause it's the Y, and they're all good, well-behaved kids, nobody says, "What's

the matter, four-eyes?”, or crap like that. There’s just this long pause, and then the coach says, “Okay, everybody else, in you go!” And they all jump in.

I think he thought that if he let it go, I would put down my glasses and join the team in a nice YMCA-kind of way, but I didn’t. He might let it go, but I didn’t. I put my towel around my neck, turned around, got dressed and went home. My mother asked, “How did it go?” I left the room without telling her anything. After dinner she asked me again. All I said was I changed my mind. I changed my mind. And that was that. After that, anyone me ask if I wanted to go to the beach or lake or something, I was busy... busy for nearly thirty years. *(beat; he dresses)* Then, when I turned forty, I decided I would learn how to swim. Just like that.

I probably should have gone into therapy instead, but I figured if I could... *(searches for the word)* correct... the failure of my youth, I could change who I might be for the next forty years. That... failure... might have been the defining moment of my life to that point. What if I had not been afraid to go out in a canoe with Margaret Golden at summer camp? What if I had gotten a Lifesaving Merit badge and become an Eagle scout and gone into politics? How many of those little failures does it take to add up to what we didn't become? And so I decided, like Burt Lancaster in "The Swimmer" to find my way home in the water.

The local Community College had a Saturday morning adult swim class and I signed up. But before going, the first thing I did was to buy CONTACT LENSES! Smart, huh? Waterproof contact lenses! I figured if I wanted to SUCCEED, I had to remove the OBSTACLES to success. And the glasses were one of those obstacles. So was dropping twenty pounds, but that’s another story. *(beat)*

The first Saturday, for my lesson, it was like I was 12 all over again. I almost didn’t go. Really. I was so terrified I threw up. My hands were shaking so much, I kept dropping my contact lenses in the bathroom sink. But I went! I am OVERCOMING my fears now, I said as I parked, abolishing the "body-shaming

ideas of our teenage years" and accepting "our selves as beautiful in our near nakedness," right? I strode into the gym, found the locker room. Stripped. Showered. Suited up and went out to meet my Nemesis. (*nods*) Yes, sir! And by the end of that summer, I was doing laps.

Laps! Laps!! Kee-rist! Is there anything more BORING than doing laps? For a year and half I did laps - twice a week. At first it was just 2 or 3 laps. That was the real accomplishment - that's when I should have stopped, and said, "There, I did it. I'm a swimmer." But, oh no. Not me.

I lost weight, stopped drinking, got married. Claudia and I did "laps" together. She was a much better swimmer than I was and taught me different strokes. Bonding, we called it. Love. Laps. Sharing. Together! (*beat*) I thought I would go out of my mind!

You can't change who you are, or how you got there. Yet, it had all seemed so simple -- too simple: buy the contacts, get the flip-flops, put on the trunks - and BOOM! - you're no longer the kid with the glasses who's afraid to swim. You can be the Eagle Scout now, the Mr. Big Shot on the Queen Mary! You do the laps and become someone... other... than who you were. (*beat*) Yeah, right. What had been the defining terror of my youth was now ancient history; worse, an anecdote. I had a wife, kids, and was over forty and healthy, for cryin' out loud. But who the fuck was I? The failure wasn't the swimming and the failure couldn't be fixed by the swimming... The failure was me. (*pause*)

"Read this," my wife said, when she handed me the Deakin book. She had already read it for her book club, which made it immediately suspect as far as I was concerned. But then she added, "It might save our marriage." So I read it.

Let's face it, the people who do this are losers. Either chubby girls who got laughed at at the pool (I sympathize, I really do!), or guys who are socially dense, or granola heads who somehow exist without having a job, or, like, the beautiful

people who go to some remote Scottish loch for a five minute swim and spend the rest of a four-hundred dollar dinner talking about it.

I was skeptical, but I did it, because I knew my wife was right, and if I didn't, one of us would be having an affair next. First I did the local pond, then part of the river by the boat house. Jezuz, when you walk in! Your whole body asks you if you are out of your mind, but you dive in and take, two, three, four, five good strokes and you're okay. You're good. You don't press your luck, you dry off, you go home. "Remember: swimming wild is only successful if you come out alive." I'd go once every six or seven weeks somewhere. I even went back home and swam in Uncle Pete's lake. Who knew he was the Roger Deakin of his day? Anyway, it kept me going; kept our marriage going.

And then, one day, there was this "new swim," that came up in the chat room: a place you just had to try. A stone quarry had flooded last winter because of the melting snow. The water was crystal, the sun warm and the serenity complete. Claudia said not to go there. She was worried about the chemicals that had been used in the quarry. She didn't like it. But you know me - stubborn and stupid. I told her I wouldn't go... but I went.

The kids were in school and Claudia was at work and I figured they'll never know, so I drive out, dive in, go under, roll back up and float on my back. I'm freezing and warm and frightened and at peace, all at the same time. Floating... And you think, I can do a minute of this, maybe two - and you do - and then you roll over and take those big strokes, strokes that would make your Uncle proud; making a loop - no laps here - back to the rocks; and, shivering, elated, happy, and clear like you've never been in your life, and, totally unaware that some squiggly little sucker has just started its journey up your nose and into your brain and is going to have breakfast, lunch and dinner there, you get out, happy to be alive... Alive, that is, for the rest of the week.

*(He untethers the buoy from his ankle, unplugs the stopper and squeezes the buoy to his chest, letting out all the air.)*

*Naegleria fowleri, a phylum Percolozoa trophozoic. Latin. Omnes Gallia in tres partes divisa est. O tempera! O mores! Carpe diem, asshole!*

Two days later the headaches started, then the fever and stiff neck. Then, the hallucinations. I started seeing my mother coming in and telling me it was time to get up and go to school. The worst was Day Four, with the seizures and vomiting. That was bad. Claudia and the kids were terrified. "I told you not to go. I told you," she kept saying, over and over. "I told you not to go."

Day Five was the coma. That was easy. It was like floating on your back and looking up, only with your glasses off... Blurry... But not afraid. Floating... And not afraid. Alone... and not afraid.

## **BLACKOUT**

June 2021

**THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...** *Over the course of 2019, I found myself "cutting out" - to use the obsolete phrase - newspaper stories about people who died in strange ways. Actually, all I did was bookmark the headlines. After I had collected a virtual "stack" of these stories, I found myself thinking about why these people, why this moment, why this method of their death? I was reminded of*

*Thornton Wilder's short novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, and Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, and thought I would try and give some of these people, whose deaths on the surface of it seemed more interesting than their lives, a chance to speak for "themselves," or a fictionalized version of somebody who died as they had. The "ground rules" I set for myself were to use only the facts of the given headline and nothing else: no personal references, names, dates, etc., from the lives of the real people involved.*

*The Swimmer is one of seven thematically related short plays that make up "Dreams from a Sleep to Come," a full-length play. Included in the evening are an Immigrant who falls from the wheel-well of a jumbo jet; an Old Lady beamed by a foul ball at a baseball game; a Child hit by her father's wayward golf ball; the Swimmer; three Women from the same family buried under a seaside cliff; a Bear struck by a speeding patrol car; and - after much deliberation - an ER Doctor who commits suicide from the stress of the Covid pandemic. Except for the manner of their unfortunate and unusual passings, everything about the characters in these plays is fictitious... Well... Not exactly fictitious: I didn't learn to swim as a kid because of my glasses. I did learn for my 40th birthday. My Uncle Pat (not Pete) was the Marine paratrooper... And the rest, well, is fiction... Really.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Louis Fantasia has produced and directed more than two hundred plays and operas worldwide. His books include, *Instant Shakespeare, Tragedy in the Age of Oprah, and Talking Shakespeare: Notes from a Journey*. He is also the General Editor of the series, *Playing Shakespeare's Characters* for Peter Lang Publishers. In 2003, the Council of Europe named the theatre collection at its library in the European Parliament in honor of Louis Fantasia, who holds both U.S. and European Union passports. In 2016 he was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for his contributions to German culture and theatre. *Dreams from a Sleep to Come* is his first play.