

33A imagines himself climbing out of the pool epically. In slow motion, his hair and limbs droop under the weight of water that rolls off and his sleek figure rises defiantly against the downward pull.

‘Hey Ribs! You want mommy to bring you a towel?’

Ribs snaps suddenly to find himself standing at the edge of the pool shivering in his speedo and desiring very much for his mommy to bring him a towel. ‘Fuck you Socks,’ he returns, and grins. And he runs over to Socks at the other end of the pool by the changerooms where he’s already plotting how to sneak up behind him and crack a towel against his ass.

Socks is arguably a slightly better name than Ribs because it’s less obvious what it refers to. Socks acquired his name nine years ago when he and Ribs had both first been enrolled against their wishes in the same after-school swimming academy as fragile little boys who could hardly stay afloat at the deep end of the wave pool. When told to do a lap to demonstrate their swimming ability on the first day, they clung to the colourful ropes that marked the boundaries of each lane. The floats would simply roll towards whichever side they clung to and their grasp would roll off with it, these little boys desperately clawing at the round floats which just rolled as fast as they clawed. The swim instructor watching this pathetic performance, a stern and totally hairless man with a body that looked like someone hung him upside down at birth, literally slapped his own smooth and pale face so hard that for the rest of the lesson there was a red imprint of his hand over his face. Socks and I couldn’t stop laughing. What’s even better is that whenever Coach Bowling Ball snapped and asked what you little rats thought was so funny, he would scrunch up his nose and wrinkle his forehead in a way that kinda looked like the hand was giving us the bird and we’d burst into a fit of yet more unstoppable laughter. Coach’s facial reaction to this only made us laugh harder.

One of his early forms of discipline was to hold us by our skulls, one in each hand, and shove our heads underwater until the little foamy bubbles of uncontrollable laughter turned into big rolling air pockets of uncontrollable choking. We’d emerge eventually coughing up water but still with a smug grin that the water could never quite seem to wash off.

It was at one of these early swimming lessons with this Coach Chupa Chups that Socks came in late for some reason that Socks first became Socks, and thenceforth, his old name, whatever boring thing it was, didn’t matter to me. We were all trying to swim front crawl and Coach Caillou was covering his face in embarrassment at what he was seeing through his fingers. Gasping for breath in between strokes and with my eyes stinging because the goggles I wore were cracked hand-me-downs from my grandpa, I saw Socks’ unusually lifeless figure missing his drawstring bag and dragging a towel that was definitely not his own across the wet floor on his way to the changeroom. He didn’t seem to even notice that his towel was accumulating a moist ball of hair and mildew, nor that Coach Shaolin Monk was barking at him to hurry the fuck up you little shit. Eventually, he disappeared into the steamy air of the changeroom, though, something about the way he looked made me worry he might never come out. Thankfully, he

did. Only, when he reappeared, he was wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs with Thomas the Tank Engine on the crotch and a pair of red socks. The bottoms of the socks were already covered in hair and there was somebody's band-aid stuck to one of them. This time, when Coach Mystical Orb ordered him to get his sorry ass in the water, he drearily obliged. I still remember the way the water climbed and soaked his socks before his ankles were even fully submerged, and then the way that Thomas the Tank Engine's always smiling face contorted as Socks lowered himself further into the pool. The pool felt unusually septic and cold that day.

Coach went ballistic. The other kids were snickering about the briefs. I paddled over.

'Hey, nice socks.'

He looked away and didn't respond at first.

'No I mean it, I like your socks.'

'Stop it. I know I'm such an idiot, I forgot to take them off'

'Come on I'm serious. I wish I had socks like that. Mine all have holes in them or they're really uncomfy because mom just tries to fix the holes when I ask her for new ones.'

'...'

'I wonder why we don't all wear socks when we swim.'

'...'

'I mean, my feet get kinda cold. You know what I mean?'

'You're always cold when we swim. See? Even now, you're shivering and your lips are blue.'

'Yeah, but if I wore socks at least my feet would be warm.'

I grinned toothily. He smiled a bit too.

'You're right. Maybe I'll bring you a pair next ti—' and a sudden shove brought us both underwater.

I didn't even notice the scrunched up face glaring down at us and screaming obscenities. Down here, we were safe from all that hullabaloo above. If one did look up, they'd see a silly face, all wonky and wavy. If one bothered to listen, they'd hear a funny voice, all muffled and speaking gibberish. We didn't look up, nor did we listen. But we turned as far as we could to face each other and smiled two soft smiles. We didn't dare laugh, though. We wanted to hold our breaths down there for as long as possible.