

# September Song

by P. David Hornik (March 2016)

1

Most women, when they leave their poolside chairs to go to the concession stand, wrap a towel around the lower part of their bodies so as not to be too provocative outside the domain of the pool itself. A minority, though, usually tourists, don't bother. When these women walk up to the concession stand, the men who hang around at the tables in front of it, and the one working in the stand itself, see the whole sight, the upper part and the lower part.

This happens in July, when the pool is crowded; it happens in September, too, when there are much fewer people at it. On a September afternoon, the only notable sight may be an Australian woman with short blond hair resting back in a chair in her bikini. She's not entirely young—late twenties, early thirties—but still looks good in the bikini. She's both drinking a drink that she ordered from the bar and smoking a cigarette. The hotel is one of the fanciest in Jerusalem; but she has a look of boredom about her, like someone passing through a small, drab town.

When she gets up to walk to the concession stand, she doesn't wrap a towel around herself. The men at the tables, and the one in the stand itself, ponder the text of her body: pale, slightly aged but still fit, imported from a far country, soon to return to it. They ponder, but they would never think of approaching her.

2

On a September afternoon, my son and I come to the pool. We've been coming to it since July, when I bought our memberships. Then, when the pool was crowded, my son would quickly get lost in the milling, splashing mass while I settled in a chair with a newspaper taken from a pile made available to the bathers. Now the pool is mostly empty; just a scattered swimmer here and there, a long swath of shadow over the water. My son, going into the water, is the same monotone of joy and activity that he was in the midst of summer. I settle into a chair, arrange

the newspaper in front of my face.

The Australian woman is sitting nearby. Her arms are propped on the armrests, one hand holding a cigarette. Her face looks glum, weary; it's not exactly pretty but has enough balance and harmony to be more than passable. Her body is interesting because it's just at the verge of becoming a body that's not advantageous to reveal; but only at the verge, not there yet, so that eyes are still drawn to it.

In thinking about whether or not to initiate a conversation with her, I wonder how it would look to my son to see his father sitting there talking with a strange blond woman in a bikini. My son, true, knows that his mother and I are not each other's mates anymore. He's also still so naive that he might not think anything much of it at all—just a friendly conversation. On the other hand, it would be an image that would stay in his mind and that he might draw inferences from later. Beyond that, I think of the complications that would be involved. I'd have to explain to her that I live nearby; and that means I'd probably have to ask her out on a date. Which is already getting complicated, especially since she's probably only here for a short time.

I keep reading my newspaper, keep glancing at her from time to time; I obey the conspiracy of silence, don't try to rebel against it. I don't try to traverse the distance between the constraints of life and her pale skin.

3

Toward six o'clock, closing time, the pool is almost empty. Among the few people (my son and I left an hour ago) still there are the Australian woman—still indolent in her chair, reading a paperback; and the lifeguard. The lifeguard is standing by the pool; soon he and his helper will have to start the task of closing it up for the night.

The lifeguard sees the shadow over the water; he hears the sounds of the September dusk—the car horns, the eerie prayer calls from mosques in the vicinity. It's not July anymore, that time of endless sunlight and crowds, when tourist women, one after another, would ask him how to open an umbrella, how to go about ordering a drink, how late the place would be open. It was very easy to start conversations with them, let one thing lead to another; in this way he had several successes over the summer.

But now there are fewer possibilities; these days the Australian woman is the only one, and he's not sure about her. It's that air she has about her—a sort of disdain for her surroundings, as if nothing in them really interests her. He also knows, from hearing her talk with someone else, that she's flying back to Australia in a day or two. On the one hand, this might intensify the feeling of nothing to lose by trying; on the other, it makes it easier to forgo it. He's already had his successes this year; he doesn't need to put himself out for some uppity Australian woman.

Dusk gathers, and the woman, across the water, sits in impassive isolation. Yes, she's going back soon. Was she really unapproachable, or did she want to be approached? What did she come here for — a few days of utter, disdainful tranquility; or a hope of some surprise, some quickening? No one knows; soon it will be too late to know. It's September.

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