

Life(guard) Lessons

By Maverick

“Oh, no!”

Polly followed Lucy’s gaze until it fell on Tabitha Cumberbatch, their schoolmate at John J. MacArthur High. Upon seeing her, Polly parroted her friend’s words:

“Oh, no!”

Tabitha was a year ahead of the junior duo and the school’s resident ‘Queen B.’ At least to anyone younger, poorer, or less attractive which--as an upper-class, upper-classman with a plastic surgeon father--was basically anyone with a locker.

The girls watched from their elevated poolside perches as the braided brunette strode purposefully through the gate and past the “Lifeguard Wanted” sign.

“Maybe she’s just here to swim?” Polly posed.

“Not likely,” Lucy said. Never mind that she wasn’t wearing a swimsuit or carrying a changing bag, someone like Tabitha Cumberbatch would never deign to swim in a public pool.

Sure enough, Tabitha paraded past the pool, the locker rooms, and straight to the lifeguard station where she shook hands with Dean Fairborn, the hunky head lifeguard.

“Oh, no!” the girls said in unison.

“Wait a minute,” Lucy said, suddenly striking an optimistic tone. “Remember Tabitha’s old nickname for Dean?”

Dean Fairborn was a senior like Tabitha, but that hadn’t spared him her scorn and ridicule--at least up until the previous summer when he got the lifeguard job. The chlorine cleared his complexion; the sun lightened his hair and tanned his skin; and the exercise, coupled with a four-inch growth spurt, transitioned him from chump to champ.

“Stillborn!” Polly remembered a bit too loudly.

Lucy scowled at her plump pal and waited for the turned heads of swimmers and sunbathers to turn away. “This may turn out better than we think.”

Dean led the buxom brat to a picnic table on the far side of the pool where they sat and chatted like old friends. The girls couldn’t hear what was being said but were so transfixed by the proceedings that it was good the weekend crowd was sparse. A struggling swimmer would surely have drowned.

“C’mon, Dean, lower the boom.” Lucy squinted and leaned forward in her chair, nearly belly flopping into the pool. Since contacts and chlorine don’t mix, she rarely wore them to work; however, she wished she’d risked it today. Witnessing Dean rebuff Tabitha was worth ruined

contacts. Heck, it would make a whole summer whistling at rambunctious kids while getting whistled at by rambunctious men worthwhile. Unable to get a clear view, she turned to Polly and her bird's eye, "What's going on?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid."

Tabitha hit Dean with every trick in her flirty fascist's playbook: The head-cocked puppy; the laughing arm touch; the lean-in/lean-back leg-cross combo. It was masterful. The black belt around Tabitha's waif-waist may have been Prada, but it was still black. And if the goofy grin on Dean's blushing face was any indication, it was going to be a short fight.

Stay strong, Dean, Polly thought.

As if imbued by her fortitude, Dean frowned as Tabitha handed him a crumpled one-page resume folded like origami to fit in her tiny Chanel purse. Polly's had been six-pages, filled to the brim with references and certifications.

"What's happening?!?"

Now it was Polly's turn to scowl at her friend.

Dean flipped the ragged document over, looking for more as Polly dug what remained of her nails into the wood railing of the trellis tower. Just as it looked like Dean might KO Tabitha with a single shake of his head, she unleashed a doe-eyed, lower-lip bite combo--

And Dean held out his hand to congratulate her on filling the summer's final lifeguard position.

"Son of a *bitch!*"

Apparently, the handshake and subsequent hug were demonstrative enough that even Lucy could see them. Of course, she would have had to been deaf, too, not to hear Tabitha's squeals of delight.

As Lucy wilted under the gaze of angry mothers, Dean waved for the girls to come meet his recruit.

The lifeguard ladders were only four-rungs high, but the climb down felt like a decent into hell. With graduation only weeks away, Lucy and Polly figured they were finally rid of Tabitha's torment. Now they'd have to endure it the whole summer.

Even though Tabitha hadn't come up with the disdainful nickname 'Portly Polly' (that was courtesy of Colby Gatlin back in 3rd grade), she revived it in High School just like straight hair and ripped denim. When Polly mistakenly sat too close to Tabitha's lunchtime clique as a Freshman, one of her minions held up Saltines and asked, "Polly want a cracker?" to which Tabitha added, after sizing Polly up, "I think she'd rather have a Twinkie." 'Portly Polly' was back.

Lucy, an athletic and outspoken Tomboy, wasn't as wide a target for Tabitha's teasing (apart from generic "four-eyes" comments) until the following year, when the sophomore slumped an abundance of junk on her trunk and became the butt of her jokes. Having missed out on the

genius that was ‘Portly Polly,’ Tabitha quickly coined “Lucy-caboosie.” Lucy, to her credit, treated the nickname like a badge of honor, proudly shaking her tush whenever it was uttered and turning it from derisive to affectionate. (A fact that drove Tabitha crazy.) Still, the bottom-heavy betty would have preferred not to have so much attention drawn to her...asset.

Nevertheless, the girls tried to remain optimistic as they trudged around the pool. They never thought Tabitha would take a job, much less one that required interaction with the hoi polloi. Maybe she was changing. Maybe now that she was getting ready to graduate—stepping into adulthood—she was finally growing-up.

“Hiya Bitches!” Tabitha gave princess waves with both hands, middle fingers extended, as the girls approached.

So much for growing up.

“Uh, Tabitha, we try to keep swearing to a minimum while on duty,” Dean said. “Right, Lucy?”

Lucy looked at her feet as Tabitha batted her baby blues and pouted, “Sorry.”

“No problem, Tabitha” Dean blushed. “Do you know our other lifeguards, Lucy and Polly?”

The silence was as loud as the fire-engine red swimsuits blaring Lucy and Polly’s imperfections. The Lycra one-pieces were designed to be functional, not flattering, and since the cold temperatures had only recently given way the girls looked a wider shade of pale. They fidgeted under Tabitha’s scrutinous gaze.

Dean cleared his throat. “I take it you do.”

Lucy folded her arms indignantly while simultaneously squeezing a touch of cleavage on her otherwise flat chest. “Did she complete the swimming test?”

The confused look on Tabitha’s face made it obvious she had not.

“It’s just a formality,” Dean assured Tabitha. “You can take it anytime.”

“You made us rescue a dummy off the deep end!” Polly whined.

Tabitha mirrored Lucy’s arm fold, trumping her shallow valley with a deep canyon. “Which of you was the dummy? ‘Cause you’re both off the deep end!”

Dean stifled a chuckle. “Look, whatever differences we’ve had in the past, we’re starting with a clean slate.”

Tabitha eyed Polly’s paunch. “Did you say, ‘clean plate’?”

“You little—” Lucy lunged towards Tabitha.

“I said CLEAN SLATE!” Dean yelled, stepping between the combatants. Though neither would admit it, both Lucy and Tabitha eased up, allowing the muscley stud to separate them. “Now, shake on it!”

The girls huffed and puffed, but ultimately grasped hands...each hiding a grimace as they gripped as hard as possible.

“I wonder if they’re hiring at Burger World?” Lucy popped a fry in her mouth as she pondered potential employment.

“Nah,” Polly said, noshing a French fry of her own. “I hear they have a full staff.”

Lucy arched her brow and smiled, “In more ways than one.” She was referring to the greasy spoon’s infamous reputation for fattening its female employees. A few of its victims were legendary.

“That isn’t very nice.” Polly threw half of her fry back on the pile they were sharing.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Lucy cast a sympathetic gaze at her chunky chum. “I’m just frustrated.”

School let out in two weeks and time was running out to find decent summer jobs. Most of the coveted ones had already been filled.

Until the prior weekend, they thought they had one. The girls submitted their applications before the community pool’s winter covers were even taken off. Getting early consideration meant taking their swimming tests in icy water and working weekends while the facility ramped-up its hours, but it seemed a small price to pay for a summer soaking up rays by the pool.

Unfortunately, the prospect held the same charm for that bitch, Tabitha.

The girls’ eyes drifted to her lunch table, where she sat with her cronies, enjoying her own plate of fries delivered by Dean Fairborn. Scuttlebutt on the bubble butt was her father insisted she get a summer job after wasting the previous one lounging by the family pool. He anticipated she would work at his clinic (perhaps modeling the cute button nose that materialized between 10th and 11th grade), but instead she duped that daffy Dean into hiring her for what she wanted to do for free. The irony wasn’t lost on Tabitha, and she bragged about it to everyone.

Everyone except Dean, of course.

“I’m SO disappointed in that boy.” Lucy picked her teeth with the pointy edge of a fry. “I thought he was a smarter cookie.”

Polly sighed and fished the unfinished fry from the pile and back into her mouth. “He’s just like any other boy. When a hot girl’s around, their brains melt.”

“Never mind she wouldn’t give him the time of day last year.”

“He’s got something she wants now.” Polly was referring to Dean’s posh poolside position, but with his sun-kissed blonde hair, dimpled ‘ah-shucks’ smile, and corn-fed physique, Tabitha didn’t seem to mind feasting fries from his fingers.

The truth was the girls were jealous. They thought working with Dean would be a fringe benefit. Now it looked like a tag-team.

“Dean says to put out the sign boards and turn on the pumps.”

Saturday was Tabitha’s first day on the job and she was already barking orders.

“Why can’t you do it?” Polly asked.

“Dean wants to debrief me in the locker room before we open.”

Lucy watched Tabitha scurry off like a kid on Christmas morning. “I’ll bet he does.”

Grudgingly, the girls pulled signage marked ‘No Diving,’ ‘No Running,’ and ‘No Swearing’ from the supply closet. They noticed none forbade the hog-tying and strangulation of co-workers.

“Tell me again why we didn’t fucking quit?” Polly asked as she forcefully planted a ‘No Swearing’ sign into position.



Although they had seriously considered it, their last-minute employment options were either too menial, too manual, or ‘too Manuel’ (Polly’s response when Lucy suggested they try day labor). Ultimately, they decided to give their new co-worker a chance. How bad could she be?

“Dean also said to check the chlorine levels,” Tabitha said after emerging from the locker room. “He doesn’t want me getting a chemical burn on my first day.”

Pretty bad.

Tabitha spent her first shift mugging poolside like a cover model for Sports Illustrated. The lack of a photographer didn’t seem to matter; she was more than happy to pose for mental pictures taken by Dean and the other men in attendance. At one point, Lucy had to rescue a toddler whose distracted father had allowed him to slip into the deep end.

She could hardly blame him. She was distracted by Tabitha, too.



Lucy and Polly often joked about how unflattering the lifeguard swimsuits were, but Tabitha revealed the hard-bodied truth: they were unworthy wearers. The spandex that pinched Polly's rolls and folds caressed Tabitha's curves like wet silk, while the high-waisted cut that made Lucy's trunk look junky followed Tabitha's firm contours like a rainbow, arching to a crescendo above each cheek before descending to a paradisiacal point in front.

It wasn't fair.

Neither was the way Tabitha conveniently cozied up to Dean before closing, right when it was time to drag in the lane dividers for the lap pool, retrieve the sign boards, and clean the locker rooms.

As bad as Tabitha's first day on the job was for Lucy and Polly, her second day was worse. Dean assigned her lifeguard chair #1, which overlooked the kiddie pool and was the only chair fitted with a canopy. It was a coveted spot as there was little risk of incident in 6" of water and even less risk of sunburn. Ostensibly, Dean stationed her there because she had little training in deep water rescue, but the girls felt he wanted her near the entrance to attract attention.

It worked. Attendance doubled the following weekend despite temperatures barely reaching 70. The pool was suddenly filled with pasty white guys squeezed into last summer's suits, sucking in their stomachs, and trying not to shiver.



With a perfect figure for turning heads, Tabitha proved the perfect figurehead. Dean even allowed her to wear bikini tops if they were coupled with regulation lifeguard bottoms.

"Why can't we wear bikini tops?" Lucy whined to Dean after Tabitha had left early.

Dean glanced dismissively towards her torso. "Do you WANT to?"

Lucy's face turned as red as her one-piece. "Not really." She'd been blessed with a washboard stomach, but God had granted her a matching chest. And without a plastic surgeon father there wasn't much she could do about it.

"What did he say?" Polly asked upon Lucy's return to where she reeled in rope floats.

"He said we could if we wanted."

"Oh. Are you?"

"Nah. You?"

"Me? No."

The girls worked in silence after that, resigned to pulling in buoys while Tabitha pulled in the boys.

"Someone's going to get hurt."

Polly followed Lucy's gaze to where Dean was running back and forth between the Snack Shack and Tabitha's ivory-colored lifeguard tower delivering the perched princess drinks, munchies, and plenty of slobbery smiles. There was no need for him to put her on a pedestal; she was already atop one, eating a cheeseburger and surveying the great unwashed as they cleansed in chlorine.

"Dean? Yeah, probably," Polly agreed. "Can't say I feel bad for him though. He's been a real jerk."

"Screw Dean!" Lucy waved her arms over the crowded pool. "I'm talking about all this."

The turgid water looked like it was filled with oversized Pop Rocks. A gangly teenager with mop-hair nearly cannonballed into a girl and her mother. Children ran across the deck then dove into a school of flesh before they could be admonished. It was chaos.

And summer hadn't even started.

An unseasonable start to June had people rushing for the pool's cool comfort and free eye-candy. They were already at capacity. Maybe even over capacity. Dean didn't seem to care. The only capacity he seemed concerned with was Tabitha's.

With Dean preoccupied with Tabitha and Tabitha preoccupied with herself, the onus for safety fell to Lucy and Polly. Their pleas to Dean for assistance were met with plastic megaphones and metal whistles. Neither did much to pierce the pool's cacophonous din and, after days of bellowing like failed carnival barkers, the girls gave up, choosing to focus for floundering bathers rather than calling out minor infractions.

"Busy day today," Tabitha said as she sashayed past the girls in the locker room at quitting time.

Lucy removed her whistle from around her neck and placed it on a shelf. "Yeah, working through that burger must have been tough."

"And all that pizza," Polly added, slipping from her sandals.

"That's right!" Lucy's face lit up like the neon sign at Burger World. "Careful, dearie. Or Pops may have to lipo love handles away."

Tabitha smirked dismissively as she opened her locker. "You wish."

They did wish. Unfortunately, the way Tabitha's waist neatly funneled into her shorts, their wish was more like a pipedream.

The girls stood transfixed as Tabitha slid her lifeguard shorts down the sleek contours of her thighs as if unveiling a sculpture. Then she bent into her locker as if to demonstrate they were merely well-chiseled plinths for the alabaster orbs resting atop them. Lucy and Polly had learned about the golden ratio in their math class spring semester, but it took Tabitha's divine proportions for them to fully understand it.

After shimmying into a low-cut sundress, Tabitha slammed her locker door, snapping the girls from their trance. "Well, I'm off to dinner with Dean." Tabitha's abrupt pirouette waved her tatas as she waved ta-ta. "Bye, bitches!"

Polly and Lucy watched in awe as Tabitha strutted down the hall like a runway model and exited with a 'hello world' fling of the locker room door, leaving them in stunned silence and still-soggy suits.

"Let's not change with her anymore," Polly finally said.

Lucy nodded, still staring down the hall. "Agreed."

The next few weeks, the girls didn't change immediately after their shift, instead enjoying unfettered laps in the Olympic pool after the facility's close. They didn't take it too seriously, pausing to rest and chat every few laps, but it proved a real boon to their health.

Especially mentally.

Not only was swimming a great release from the stress of guarding twice as much pool as they were supposed to, it limited Tabitha's opportunities to trigger them. They no longer saw her in the locker room, and since Tabitha hardly helped with set-up or clean-up anyway, their direct dealings were reduced to nearly nil.

Of course, they couldn't ignore her completely. It was impossible to ignore the crowds around her platform or the way that derpy Dean fawned over her.

And it wasn't just Dean. A parade of dudes aged 15-50 were eager to offer tribute, presenting everything from smoothies to chili dogs at Tabitha's feet like she was some sort of sun goddess. Occasionally, she would reward their homage by descending from her perch and stretching while she cooled her feet in the kiddie pool, but for the most part she was content to flirt, fan, and feast from her throne, only coming down to relief herself of the copious Cokes and cookies she consumed. A fortuitous visit by Polly to an adjacent stall divulged that Princess Tabitha belched, farted, and groaned at a stubborn number two just like everyone else.

However, it was July 4th weekend that Polly dropped the bombshell that really started fireworks.

“Iyay inkthay abithatay isyay aininggay eightway!”

“What?!?”

Lucy had heard her. She had ocular issues but wasn't deaf. She'd even understood her. The girls had been proud purveyors of Pig Latin since grade school. Back then, they used it to gossip about boys and teachers, but had recently revived it when sharing sensitive information between their lifeguard stations, especially when it pertained to Dean and Tabitha. It was the content of the message that was hard to believe:

“Tabitha is gaining weight.”

Rather than repeat it, Polly puffed her chipmunk cheeks and pointed. Lucy focused on the main attraction in the shallow end's circus. Although she easily spotted Tabitha's pale visage amidst the kaleidoscope of colorful bathing suits and beach towels, she was just a big blur. Was she a bigger blur than before? Maybe. Or maybe her poor vision was just getting worse? Wait a minute--what was that shadowy crease around Tabitha's waist? And had her pool of admirers dried somewhat despite the jam-packed holiday weekend?



Lucy turned in her seat and shot her friend a smile and a thumbs-up, but she wasn't convinced until later that evening when she followed Tabitha into the locker room after the pool had

closed. At first, she couldn't find her. She typically kept a locker in the middle of the first aisle where anyone taking a shower, washing their hands, or using a stall was forced to parade past, but today she was nowhere to be found. As Lucy crept towards the last row, she finally heard Tabitha's whispered voice:

"I don't know. I'm afraid to weigh myself." There was a long pause followed by a sigh. "I asked. He said he couldn't do anything until I turn eighteen." Another pause. "September." Another sigh. "If I'm not careful, I'll be too fat for it to make a difference anyway."

Lucy skulked around the edge of the aisle. Tabitha sat hunched on the bench by the furthest locker, elbows on her knees, holding a phone in one hand and her dejected face in the other. Lucy's vision was terrible, but even she could see the fleshy folds bubbling over the elastic band of Tabitha's fire-red shorts.

"I'm glad you think this is funny, Pricilla. The only Rolls you have are in your garage."

Tabitha may have been losing her figure, but at least she hadn't lost her sense of humor. Lucy squinted. In addition to some fresh rolls, Tabitha also sported some new bulges, creases, and dimples.

"Well, I used to do Pilates with Consuela, but Dad fired her because I told him she was shrinking my clothes. Why do you keep laughing?!?"

Pricilla wasn't the only one. Lucy covered her mouth and scurried from the locker room before Tabitha could catch her—though that prospect seemed less likely now.

"Well?" Polly demanded upon her grinning friend's return.

"Tabitha isn't just gaining weight," Lucy huffed, catching her breath. "Tabitha's getting fat!"

Lucy's infectious smile spread to Polly. "Let's go swim some laps."

In a surprising bit of modesty, Tabitha abandoned her bikini top/swimming shorts combo the following week. But while the siren red one-piece showed less skin, it called attention to where it had accumulated in the wrong places (something Lucy and Polly were all too familiar with). The clingy Lycra pronounced Tabitha's pooching tummy while its high-waisted cut accentuated her hips and thighs, which had grown pudgy and pasty beneath the shadowed canopy of her lifeguard perch.

While Lucy and Polly delighted at Tabitha's decaying figure, the pool's male attendees weren't amused. As Tabitha packed-on, the horndog crowd packed-up and by the middle of July she had

lost a sizable chunk of her audience. Lucy and Polly worried this might impede Tabitha's journey to becoming a 'sizable chunk' herself, but Dean busily picked up the slack for any drop in tributes. Tabitha may not have had Jeeves delivering her cocktails by the pool this summer, but Dean proved even more diligent in his doting.

At one point, Polly wondered aloud how Dean could afford to keep up Tabitha's decadent diet on a lifeguard's modest salary. "Is Dean buying all that food or growing a tab?"

"Both!" Lucy exclaimed, wiggling her brow like Groucho Marx.

The duo laughed at the joke the rest of the day and Tab-related puns joined Pig Latin as their go-to for barbs at the couple's expense. "Do you think Dean's putting that greasy pizza 'on his Tab'?" "How much longer will Dean be able to 'pick up his Tab'?" Etc., etc.



Though the girls contributed to Tabitha's dietary delinquency—the common area fridge employees shared became a dumping ground for sugary sodas and fattening goodies while morning donuts (one each for Dean, Lucy, and Polly, the rest for Tabitha) became routine—for the most part they were content to observe. Lucy even started wearing her contacts while on duty. Continually putting them in and taking them out was a pain, but it was worth it to see the turkey wattle developing beneath Tabitha's chin or the swell of her belly as it grew throughout the day on sodas, donuts, and the sundry snacks Dean bought her.

Then something strange happened. By August, word was out that fab Tab was going flab (guessing her gain became the girls' favorite game: Lucy said 35 pounds; Polly guessed 40), but the pool was more crowded than ever. Tabitha's audience had returned with a vengeance—literally! There was Tank Ferguson, a Lurch-like lineman for the school's football team who always wore his jersey to school ("so he could remember how to spell his name" according to Tabitha) bringing Tabitha cans of Coke. And was that little Ricky O'Bannon (who Tabitha once called "Paddy Melt" during a school assembly) buying her ice cream?

Of course, it never dawned on Tabitha this fresh wave of worship could be born of personal ire rather than sexual fire. She still thought she was doing everyone a favor on the occasions she lumbered down her ladder to rinse her greasy fingers (which left a sunscreen-like ooze on the pool's surface) or pinball past playing children (using her well-padded hips, butt and belly like bumpers) on her way to the bathroom to make room for more offerings. All she perceived were smiles and nods of approval from her adoring messes.

Stranger still, hunks that had paid Tabitha homage were now congregating around Lucy and Polly. Lucy initially dismissed them as callous culls. Weren't these the same meatheads who called the pool the "five and dime" (a reference to the hotness of the lifeguards) back in

June? Still, the attention was nice, as were the occasions she caught Tabitha casting jealous glances her way.

This male mindfulness inspired Polly and Lucy to close the remaining numerological gap between them and their plumping antagonist. They weren't in tight-and-toned territory yet, but their daily swimming sessions and had de-jiggled the junk in Lucy's trunk and firmed the flab on Polly's pleasing hourglass. They also sported a sun-tinged glow that sharply contrasted Tabitha's pallid complexion. With each passing day, more of Tabitha's entourage headed to the deep end while Tabitha got closer to going off it.

Lucy and Polly relished every moment. It was hard to believe what began as the worst summer ever had become the best.

Until the day it wasn't.

August 24th began like any other. Dean was off, so it was left to Polly and Lucy to scour the sides of the pool. Then, once the pool opened, they scoured Tabitha's sides for wear-and-tear to her bathing suit. A small vertical tear had appeared the previous week that, like Tabitha, was growing bigger each day. Pale flesh peeked from the slit like a waxing moon, growing fuller with every guzzle of Coke and bite of pizza. The dime-sized circle of flesh was now a nickel that begged for a Doughboy finger poke.

"Inkthay it'llyay akemay ityay otay aborlay ayday?" Polly asked.

"Onay ayway," Lucy said.

The girls were still debating the odds of their unexpected summertime gift unwrapping itself before the seasonal facility's last hurrah, when Tabitha suddenly lurched forward in her chair like someone pushed her from behind. The girls expected her to splash into the water, but she stayed seated as her head, shoulders and arms dangled from the platform like she was attempting to touch her toes. Lucy assumed she had dropped her pizza into the water, but there was only one thing floating on its surface—

A young girl, face down.

"Shit!"

Lucy blew her whistle and dove into the water, its shrill shriek becoming a noiseless trail of bubbles as she broke the surface. Two strong strokes and she emerged in the shallow end where



she grabbed the girl—who was maybe four years-old and as light and as limp as a ragdoll—and hoisted her onto land. In an instant, Lucy was alongside her, pumping her chest.

“1...2...3...1...2...3.”

Lucy was vaguely aware of the cloud-like canopy covering them. "Please step back," someone said. Polly. Someone else was crying. The girl's mother perhaps.

“1...2...3...1...2...3.”

Lucy checked if the girl was breathing. She wasn't. Lucy tilted the girl's head and delivered two quick breaths into her mouth before continuing compressions.

“1...2...3...1...2...3.”

Suddenly, the girl erupted into a fit of coughs, spits, and sputters and the crowd erupted into gasps, claps, and cheers. The girl scrambled to her feet, unfazed and embarrassed by the attention, and Polly helped her find her family.

Lucy remained on her knees, as if in prayer, as the shadows closed in. “Nice work!” “Great job!” “You're a hero!”

She didn't feel like a hero. She felt nothing.

One by one, the shadows drifted away like clouds from a passing storm, until only one remained. The blubbing girl. Not the mother.

Tabitha.

Then Lucy *did* feel something. Anger. She scrambled to her feet, clutched Tabitha's meaty bicep, and whisked her away from the crowd.

“Where the fuck were you?”

“I...I...I”

“You, you, you, what?”

Fresh tears streamed down Tabitha's cheeks and dropped to the deck. “I got stuck.”

Tabitha turned her back to Lucy. Angry lines, as red as her bathing suit, ran horizontally across her backside just above and below her butt. Apparently, her ass had wedged in the gap between the platform's trellis seat and backing. The wound looked splintery, raw, and painful.

Lucy didn't care.

“Your being here is dangerous,” Lucy said, before turning towards the office. She intended to fill-out an incident report that would open Dean’s ‘love is blind’ eyes to that fact.

“Please don’t tell Dean.”

Lucy whipped around, intending to lay into Tabitha, but stopped short. Tabitha’s pool blue eyes were flooded with tears and her cheeks were as rosy as the wounded ones below her waist. She looked pathetic.

“Fine,” Lucy sighed. “But you need to get your act together...” Then she punctuated her final words with a Pillsbury poke of Tabitha’s belly:

“Flabby Tabby!”

Later that day, Lucy stewed on her lifeguard platform, barely acknowledging the waves and thumbs-up from the appreciative crowd. Her eyes bore into Tabitha, who cast a sheepish glance back at Lucy from her own platform.

Why did I give her a second chance? Lucy thought. Guilt? Pity? A combination of both? Then she ran through a series of ‘what ifs,’ that turned her anger to nausea: What if it had been my day off? What if I hadn’t worn my contacts? What if I had been distracted by Tabitha a few seconds longer?

Lucy shuttered. All she knew was it wasn’t going to happen again.

What she didn’t know was her regretful pardon was merely a stay of execution. Labor Day was looming, and the steady stream of ducks heading south suggested they were due for a hard fall.

Especially Tabitha.

“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 floatation 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.

