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Ripeness is All

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Sometimes, to get to sleep, Liebowitz would try to remember incidents from his past, incidents that resonated like a baseball bat flung into wall, incidents mainly from his youth that like most people's seemed marked as much by acne as with futility and occasional bursts of courage and nobility. Last night, as he lay in bed, waiting for sleep to descend upon him, Liebowitz remembered an incident from his adolescence. Once, during a high school swimming class, they all were required to perform a dive off the high board. Most of the students — cold, shivering, indifferent because it was 8 o'clock in the morning and they had just been torn from the warm covers of their beds an hour before — numbly consented to do it. And so there were any number of dives, falls, drops, flips, and spins from the high board. The students stood in line like milk bottles before the tall ladder, up the ladder, and finally onto the board. At the end of the line was Malovitz, all 375 pounds of him, the butt of too many jokes, the epitome of athletic failure, not the proverbial tub, but a vat of lard. Malovitz stood at the end of the line, muttering to Liebowitz who stood freezing in front of him.

"I'm not going to do it," said Malovitz. "I can't do it," he said as sophomore after sophomore flung himself from the board and tumbled down into the aqua-blue water.

Malovitz was afraid, terrified of heights, of the seemingly infinite distance between the high board and the water. And Liebowitz wondered what would happen. Would Malovitz dive? Or would he show irrational courage and remain firmly rooted to the ground? Liebowitz himself had no courage and knew that he would never be faced with this kind of situation. He would dive and like the rest of his classmates not think twice about it. But Malovitz, he was doomed endlessly to face high dives. Liebowitz then wondered if Malovitz could swim. As he waddled near the bottom of the ladder, Liebowitz turned and poked a thin finger into Malovitz's yielding flab.

"Can you swim?" Liebowitz whispered.

But Malovitz didn't hear him. His eyes — like those of St. Sebastian — gazed upward into the infinite blue of the pool's skylight, as he awaited his own sure martyrdom. Then Liebowitz turned away and fixed his sight on Scott Whitman's creviced mole, which seemed to stare back at him from a goosebumped shoulder blade.

Finally, after some time a kind of despair crept over Malovitz, and he looked out at the water, Malovitz himself a black speck in the blue tile, and he flushed at his own cowardice. "I'll take the time an athlete needs," he shouted, and he crossed the board. He was a black speck in the blue tile, that lorded over himself into the pool who after a minute had drowned. For a moment, he was Malovitz.

And Malovitz was a kind of shamans in pictures, the swimming pool was a kind of shrines to his chest. Malovitz was a kind of icon at the end of the ladder.
Finally, after Liebowitz, much like a scrawny bird of prey, had thrown himself at the water, Malovitz stood alone. He hadn't even stepped onto the ladder. Youstman, the burly swim coach, who stood along the side of the Pool, a whistle dangling on his bare chest like a crucifix, his legs spread wide, barked at Malovitz, "Get up there and dive!" Malovitz just shook his head.

Youstman, in charge, stalked over to the ladder, while the rest of the class, still dripping, waited near the lockerroom door across the pool. Youstman, who claimed he was a black belt, came up to Malovitz and said, "Look, Malovitz, either you dive off that board or I use you for karate practice. I swear," Youstman said, "I'll break your arm."

Malovitz took a long look up the ladder, then looked back at Youstman, then said, "I'll take the broken arm." And at that moment Liebowitz saw perhaps for the first time a kind of courage in Malovitz that he didn't think existed in the world. He looked at the water in the pool, he gazed up at the strange overhead lamps illuminating the blue tile of the pool deck, he looked back to see the cool steel of the bleachers that lorded it over the pool, and then he looked back at Malovitz who had made himself into an untouchable, a dead man, a thwarter of the Youstmans of the world, who after a moment yelled, "Get up that ladder!"

For a moment Malovitz wavered. He couldn't decide what was worse — his fear of the water or his fear of Youstman. Then Youstman bellowed again. "Get up that ladder!"

And Malovitz got.

He got like a child cowered by an angry parent. He carried his bulk up step by step, slowly, without dignity or carriage. For Malovitz this was a death march, the end of the line, the last chance cafe, the sun going down in the west. His flab shimmied as he walked the length of the board, the aura of the other divers now absent. Everyone stared up: this was interesting, Malovitz was going to dive. Or something. He stood at the end of the board, facing the water. He couldn't see well — he was without his glasses — so the water below looked white and blurry.

Youstman, who had climbed after him, prodding him, stood at the top of the ladder, staring at Malovitz's massive back across the length of the board, and said, "We're not leaving until you dive off that board."

So Malovitz stared out over the water. To Liebowitz he looked like some of the African shamans in the National Geographics he had so feverishly fingered through, looking for pictures of naked African women, their breasts like funnels hanging from their chests. Malovitz looked incantatory, like a rabbi making his last benediction, poised at the end of the blue diving board, his madman coach hollering for him to "Dive!
Dive!” like Glenn Ford in *Torpedo Run* or like Ernest Borgnine in *Run Silent, Run Deep*.

And then Malovitz flew. He had rolled himself, like a giant weight, into a foetal ball and then had flung himself into the air. There was Malovitz, extended into the air like an immense flat tire, suspended for one beatific moment over the whole world; and then he dropped, and as he dropped he spread himself out, like a bear rug, and he hit the water at full extension, spreadeagled as they say, crucifying himself into the cool chlorine-blue water, which then smashed up against the sides of the pool, crashing over the bluegreen edges and over the still feet of his fellow sophomores. Malovitz had belly flopped into the water, had hit it straight on, like a truck into the side of a brick wall, and he displaced what seemed like half the water in the pool. Even Youstman was speechless. The class, awed, moved like an oil slick towards the pool, and everyone looked over the edge. For a moment Malovitz was a green blur, somewhere near the bottom, motionless above the red guidelines that spanned the length of the pool. But then he swam to the surface, a bleached whale, and paddled to the ladder at the pool’s side. He climbed out, his chest blushing like a tongue, blood-red, and scampered into the lockerroom, the door closing behind him like a complaint. And then Liebowitz looked back at the water, which had settled into itself. Calm and quiet, the students followed Malovitz into the lockerroom. It was something to remember, the day Malovitz had dived off the high board. It was something that they all knew they would never forget, that sight of flesh hurling itself down into the water, the smack of flesh on wave, the moment of impact, and then it was over. The memory swam through Liebowitz’s mind again and again. The portrait of Malovitz mid-air, what it must have been like for him those mad seconds as the water approached, and then when he hit the screen of liquid and plunged through — these images flashed through Liebowitz’s mind like instant replays. They made him forget for a moment that his wife had left him, that he lived in a one-room studio on the letter streets and the rent was due, that he had eaten a ham sandwich for dinner and had tried to write a bad poem about it, that he saw no future except the future — a long dark alley of shade and fear. But now he was content. He felt as though he would be able to get to sleep. And he settled into his bed, his head nestling into his pillow, and his feet reaching out for the cool spots at the foot of the bed, and Liebowitz settled into sleep, his arms wrapped around himself like Malovitz before the fall. And the world was good. And quiet. And peaceful.