

### *Kryptonite Woman*

A weekend and the pool is busy. Jane stands in line waiting to have her card punched, shuffling the big hemp bag full of books, sunscreen, and snacks on the floor in front of her. She has waved her son in—no reason for him to stand in line, hopping on one foot and then the other. Jane can hear the shrieks, the laughter, the parents' eternal admonition—"Don't run, walk!" The cement around the pool throws up a white, glaring light, but the pool itself, particularly the deep end, the end shaded by trees, is as dark and deliciously inviting as if it were spring-fed in the middle of a forest.

Her friends are already in the pool, and Jane hurriedly slaps on sunscreen. She grabs a Styrofoam noodle and jumps in, paddling over to the floating ring of middle-aged women wearing hats and dark glasses. They look like a coven, Jane thinks, like the witches in *Macbeth*, only these witches swap recipes, homeopathic treatments for hot flashes, and tips for dealing with recalcitrant teenagers. These witches come to consensus about which high school teachers their children should avoid, and pass judgment on the various divorces and remarriages in the town. Jane slips into her place in the circle, sighing with relief at having achieved this moment. She lets go of the day's various and multiple irritations—the bank overdraft, the dog vomit on the new rug, her son's whining and her husband's grumpiness. The water embraces her, as does the laconic, familiar chatter.

The topic of discussion right now is the stick-figure woman, a woman so thin that when she turns sideways, she nearly disappears. She'd been sighted a few days ago and

is back again. No one knows who she is; she has never been seen to mix with anyone at the pool.

“There must be something wrong with her,” Lucy says, her voice lowered.

“Anorexia?” Pat queries, her eyebrows arched.

“Cancer?” suggests Connie, ever generous.

Jane and Lucy shrug.

“It makes me physically ill,” says Rebecca, “I can’t look.”

But Jane, behind her sunglasses, looks. The woman has a greenish tint—Jane noticed this without her sunglasses. Her joints stick out beneath tanned, leathery skin, and when she walks Jane can see the ball joint of her hip moving in its socket. Her rib cage protrudes over the cavity of her diaphragm, and the knobs of her spine look to Jane like the xylophone one of her children used to play. The woman is tall, and she wears a black bikini. In one nostril a diamond twinkles. Her black hair sits on her head in a perfect pageboy. There is a jarring incongruity between her body and her presentation—an attention to detail, an elegance, an almost defiant nakedness—that shocks Jane.

Pat, so thin you can count almost count *her* ribs, says, “She makes me look almost voluptuous.”

“Can you have anorexia in your thirties?” Lucy asks.

“I saw her eating carrots,” Pat reports, and a communal ‘ah-hah’ goes up, as if this means something, as if her condition is something the woman has brought on herself, something they can blame her for.

Pat is a bit fanatical about what she eats, what she lets her kids eat. Jane has sometimes wondered if she has an eating disorder.

“It is a terrible disease,” Jane says, finally, remembering her anorexic student. The poor girl had walked like a robot, as if she didn’t inhabit her body but operated it, the way giant puppets are moved by an unseen puppeteer.

Rebecca says, “Why does she come here?”

“She has a daughter—that little girl,” Pat points surreptitiously to a bright haired little girl of about four in a pink bathing suit with neon hearts. “I recognize the nanny from Alexandra’s art camp. I used to chat her up when she came to pick up the kid. I always wondered who the mother was.”

The women all watch as the nanny, a young robust blonde woman, and the child jump into the water. The nanny pulls her charge on a purple noodle in great swoops through the water. The child shrieks with glee, screams for more. The Kryptonite woman, for that is how Jane thinks of her now, lies on a lounge with a book, her sunglasses swallowing her face, a face which looks to Jane as if it is carved in wood.

The women float, suddenly quiet, each retreating behind her sunglasses. After a little while, Pat swims over to where the nanny is catching the little girl as she jumps off the side of the pool. The women all watch as she talks with the nanny, her back to the child and mother. Pat swims back. “It’s cancer,” she says, whispering, “terminal.”

A sort of poisonous gas drifts over them. They try not to look in the direction of the woman. Their uncharacteristic silence in the floating circle persists. Jane makes herself look at all the whole, healthy bodies playing effortlessly around them, but something about the woman fascinates her. It is as if she is not recognizably human, but something not quite-- a freak. Her own revulsion sickens her, surprises her. It isn’t the woman’s fault she has cancer. She is brave, so brave to come to the pool with her child,

to insist on living while she is dying. And yet it hurts to look at her, it almost makes Jane angry to be so disturbed.

The discussion has resumed now, and the women are comparing notes about the new principal at the high school, but Jane has lost interest. The heat is punishing; she doesn't know how the Kryptonite Woman can stand not getting into the water. But Jane herself is beginning to pickle. She gets out and dries off, finds a lounge chair in the shade, and opens her book. She looks forward to this moment all day, the stolen minutes between work and home when she can sink into a book. She begins to read, forcing herself to focus on the words, to not think about the Kryptonite Woman, to will herself back to Nebraska, to the winter of the book. The writer is saying something about trying to wake up from a dream to "the fiction we call the real world." She likes that line. She turns the phrase over in her mind, thinking about her own life-- what is real, what is fiction.

Then, suddenly, a child's high-pitched scream startles Jane out of her novel into the real world. She looks up. It is the Kryptonite woman's daughter, red-faced and defiant, her little hands balled into fists, yelling at her mother, "No, no, no, I won't go, I won't!" And her poor cartoon character of a mother leans over from her great height, the hip bones jutting from her bikini, trying to stay calm, trying to reason with her child. Jane feels her stomach knot. There is something naked and shameful about the scene, this maternal loss of control, and something distressingly familiar.

A fissure opens up in Jane, in her composure, in the fiction she tells herself about her life as a mother. Reluctantly, she is plunged back to the days when her first child was small. Everything with Zoe at four had been a struggle. It was the terrible twos doubled.

Funny how she has forgotten those days, has put them behind her, but now all the raw feelings come bubbling up. Once, Jane fantasized about leaving Zoe on the side of the road, she was so worn out by the child's militant defiance. She remembers it clearly: the Queen Anne's lace and the daisies in the field and how she pulled onto the shoulder, almost convincing herself that Zoe would like the field, she was that deranged. She pulled over and got out of the car with Zoe, and, instead of leaving her there, they picked a big bouquet of flowers.

The activity had distracted Zoe and given Jane time to cool off, and back in the car, she'd kissed Zoe as she buckled her into the car seat, then turned on the "Mama Mia!" CD and they laughed and sang together, Jane pushing down the knowledge of her rage and the sickening guilt she felt. Then a stowaway bee stung her daughter, and there was crying again, snot running down the child's red, swollen face, her cries whimpers now, pathetic. They raced home, and she carried Zoe in, making a paste of baking soda and water, and Jane was so grateful for the bee, for this chance to prove to herself that she really was a good mother.

The Kryptonite woman's child's tantrum escalates. She is hysterical now, stomping her feet, her bright pink bathing suit dripping, her head with its golden curls swinging violently. Where, oh, where is the nanny? Jane thinks, feeling desperate for the woman. The Kryptonite woman sinks down onto the foot of the chaise lounge, her taut, chiseled face inscrutable behind the large sunglasses. Jane imagines that she is working hard to gather her energies, that she is summoning them from the far corners of her body. The Kryptonite woman reaches out skeletal arms and places two large bony hands on the child's shoulders. Jane can see the pain patch puckering under the woman's arm. The

woman speaks softly to the child, but the child wrenches her shoulders away, turns her back on her mother, her arms folded, her bottom lip sticking out. Her whole little body quivers with outrage.

There seems to Jane to be a sudden lull in the usual full-throttle noise of the pool. It as if everyone at the pool is holding their breath. As if everyone is watching and waiting.

Now Jane feels like jumping up and swatting the screaming child, shaking her until her teeth rattle. Bad enough that the whole pool is scrutinizing the woman, without having to prove in this most impossible of arenas that she is also a good mother. Jane imagines slapping the child and saying, “Your mother is dying! Be nice!” Or better yet, she could go over to the woman and talk to her, commiserate, chat. Dilute the tension. That’s what she would do with almost anyone else, even someone she didn’t know. But she doesn’t. She sits there, paralyzed.

The Kryptonite Woman lets her arms fall away from the child. She stands up slowly, letting the little girl scream, and begins methodically folding towels, gathering sunscreen, pool toys, juicy-juice boxes and half-eaten popcorn. She slips a black and white striped cover up over her emaciated body, puts on white gladiator sandals. The nanny reappears, and the woman directs her, calmly, regally. The nanny picks up the still-scowling, hiccupping child, hooking the small legs over one hip, and the Kryptonite woman, laden with bags, leads them out of the pool.

Jane wants to follow, wants to salute the Kryptonite woman, to tell her she is sorry she was repulsed. Jane wants to believe that the next time she sees her, she will stop and talk, ask her what she is reading, chat about the weather. She will casually tell her

about Zoe, let her know that she's been through four-year-old hell, too, and they will laugh together. Jane imagines introducing the Kryptonite woman to the coven, how she would float among them, safe in the circle.

But something in her knows that that, too, is a fiction. She bows her head and pretends to read.