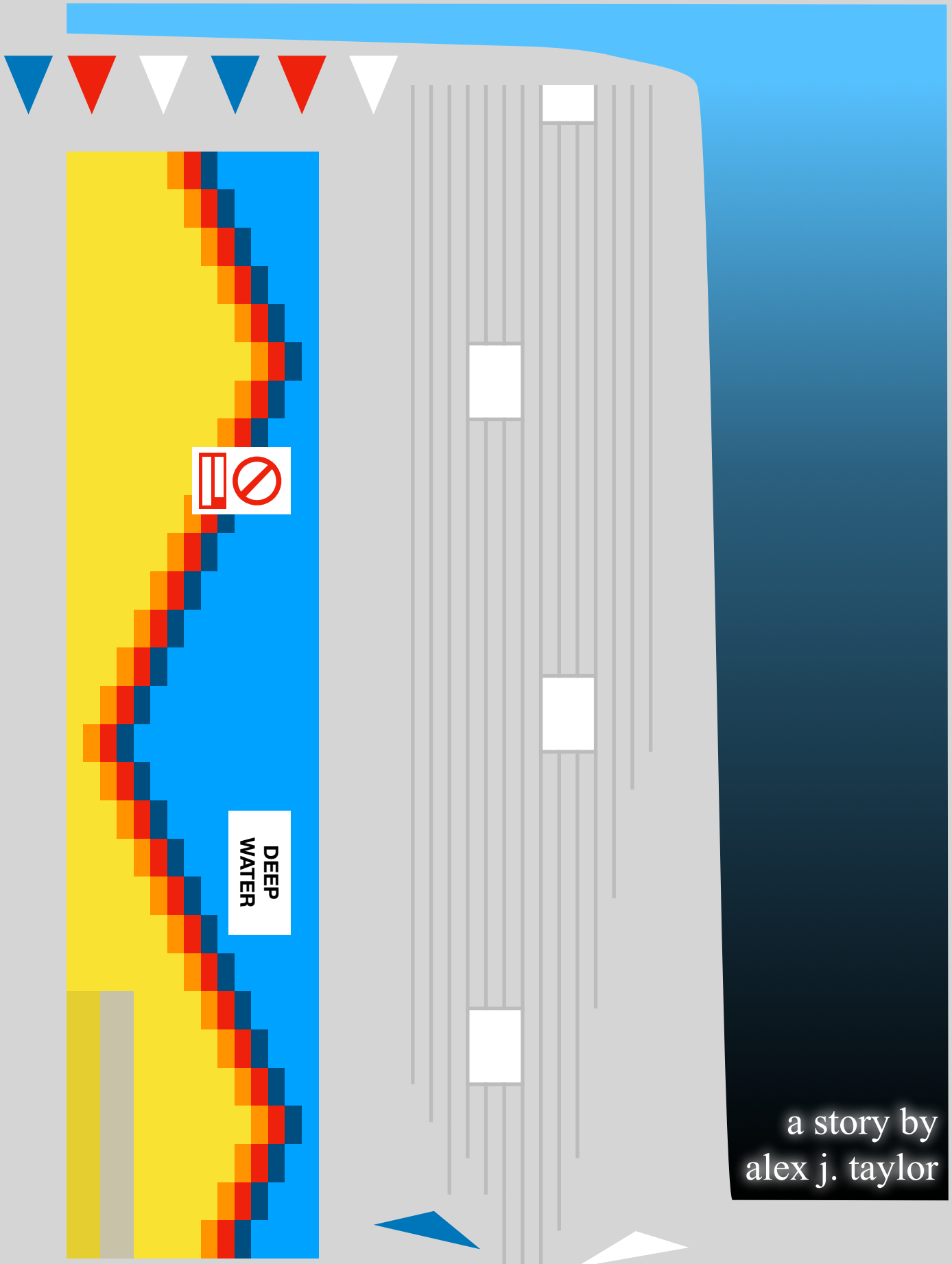




# TWELVE FEET UNDER



a story by  
alex j. taylor

Hello, Alex here. I've got something different for you today, something more personally central to me than the usual satire and criticism. This is a story of when I was on the other end of that stick, and it may not seem like too much of a struggle to most people, but I want to reinforce this point - general criticism is fine, personal criticism is delicate.

Hello, Alex in 2021 here. I've got something different for you today, something more personally central to me than the usual satire and criticism. This is a story about a story when I thought I was on the other end of that stick, and it may not seem like too much of a struggle to most people, but I want to reinforce this point - if it doesn't seem like a struggle, if you aren't revisiting, rethinking, reanalysing, then what are you doing? Probably living. Things can be gone over, but you have to actually make them first.

It's interesting to know that even from a young-ish age I understood my primary modes of expression to be 'satire and criticism'. I guess that is sort of what I continue to do, to this day, what with *Ducc* and *Pink*. In fact, now that I think about it, satire seems like it's largely confined to schools, or at the very least, institutions which I understand. The worst thing is when someone does satire of something that they don't fully understand. You don't want satire to be obvious, necessarily, and being wrong in the things you're criticising is a great way to look silly. Also, did I really think this was self-critical in the way that my *York House Football Report* was critical towards football in general? I suppose so. There's something here, at least. And I like the point at the end - 'general criticism is fine'. Such was the way I was... Alright, now onto the full story. (Which contains some light grammatical editing.)

‘Tuesday. I hate Tuesday’

Like a bootleg version of the character ‘Garfield’, Tuesdays were my worst enemy for a good chunk of my formative years. The looming threat of that day hung over me like an old grandfather clock - predictable in its pattern, but oddly ominous nonetheless.

Honestly, I’m surprised I went through with the ‘bootleg’ joke. I remember worrying about whether it would be considered ‘too informal’ in the original version of the story. I also remember reading a lot of my creative writing outputs - especially the ones that I still had some residual memory of - and finding quite a lot of jokes in them. Poorly thought-out jokes, but still jokes. I still consider the reason that a lot of my writing doesn’t work is because I write it for myself. I write extremely self-centredly.

‘Tuesday, you’ve got maths, science, French and then...’ my mother said, tailing off as she knew the hour was about to chime. I paused, turned around and picked up my shorts. My swimming shorts.

I’d love to know how the people around me reacted to this. At the time, it was very easy to get inside my own head, and justify my hatred of the deep end as something that was innate to me and could never be coaxed out. But more recent readings of this story also idolise certain aspects of childhood, that things were simple, that experiences allowed the malleable world to change form, and that after a simple excursion to the deep end, things would be alright. But it’s not true! I’m nineteen years old as I write this, and the person in the story is much closer to nine than nineteen.

There was a lot of conversation between my parents and the teachers surrounding this. It's hard to find the balance between what was genuinely a bad idea for me to do (panic and scream in deep water) and what would have helped me get over it. I do remember, for a while at least, they said that I could sort of do what I wanted, perhaps in an effort to make me go to the deep end of my own accord. All I remember from this ill-fated attempt at making me realise my own shortcomings is that I pencil jumped into the shallower end for a while. After I was done, someone came up to me and said that I was jumping really close to the side of the pool and might clip the back of my head if I didn't jump further.

Now, I know what you're thinking, 'What's bad about swimming?'

It wasn't the fear of water, or the stern teachers observing your every stroke, splashing away at regular intervals like clockwork.

It was that sign. A sign that read "12ft. Deep End." That was the ominous, scary figure that kept me from enjoying something frankly I was quite good at. No traumatic events had happened there, the sign was the trauma. The way the tiles at the bottom of the pool slowly slipped down from 3 feet to 4, 4 to 5, 5 to 7 and then down to the deep, dark blue of 12 feet. It felt like the phrase 'six foot under' would apply to me doubly if I were to ever even momentarily veer into the deep end. The ropes separating the lanes out in the pool provided a false sense of security - they were little more than markers, rather than something I could cling to out of desperation.

The worst thing I remember is that there weren't actually horizontal lanes in the pool, nor vertical ones for us. No, the 'medium group' was just on the edge of the 'drop-off' area, where the water depth would go from four and a half feet to twelve in a short span. Swimming backstroke was the worst, because you didn't have anything to align yourself with while looking at the roof. There were markers, the roof was corrugated and peppered with small windows, but it was never enough to triangulate your position mid-lap. If you veered off course, you could very much find yourself in deep water - for most people, metaphorically, but for me, seriously.

One time, I forgot my normal shorts, so I had to don a flowery, flamboyant pair of Bermuda shorts, and I was called out almost immediately after setting foot on the pool edge. 'Taylor! What have you got on?' shouted Mr Turner. The shout elicited a laugh out of my classmates, and the clock struck once more, as if to mock me too. I was lucky that happened on the last lesson before the summer holidays, for my friends might remember that scenario as well as I do if it wasn't for a healthy summer dose of activity induced amnesia.

I think a lot of my writing style at this point has to do with reading and listening to a lot of Douglas Adams. It's very easy for me to copy certain writing styles, so much so, that it's definitely a problem. With an absence of material to 'bounce off of' I struggle to make things. It's easier for me to riff on something that's been done a hundred times in some way, and if I feel I can understand why it was done that way, then I'll do it another way. Perhaps this might be somewhat over-analysing myself, but I guess that's what we all do. There are no truly, utterly original ideas, by virtue of living in

a world with other people and things, there's always something to be stolen. Nothing is truly original, per se.

As we were out in the sun in the summer, Mr Turner, (who I will always remember because of his inability to talk at a normal volume) devised a plan to move me out of the middle group (which teetered on the 5 to 7 foot deep zone, so I was already physically out of my depth) and placed me in the group which traversed the deep end, and putting me out of my depth mentally, too.

Before I head into something about Mr Turner (who is the main object of satire in this story, despite the fact that almost nothing has been fictionalised), I'd like to mention a fact that some people pointed out to me in order to make me feel better about swimming in the deep water. They said - and, to be honest, might still believe - that deeper water is more buoyant at the top. And as someone with enough of a grasp of physics to understand that that might be possible, but not good enough of an understanding to realise there is nothing that supports this idea. 30cm, 30m, it matters not. Water is water, and you float according to the volume of water displaced.

Anyway, the thing about Mr Turner is that this story was written before a critical re-evaluation of Keblian life that I've undertaken as of late. At the time, Mr Turner was still a figure that I didn't really understand, it seemed like I was taking a more or less 'Nathan-istic' approach to analysing teachers. Rather than seeing them as people who sincerely wished for our self improvement, I saw them as people who wanted us to do things for no reason whatsoever, or perhaps for a reason that I had no personal alignment with at the

time, like physical fitness, or willpower, or just general character development. Of course, retroactively justifying the suffering of small children on the grounds of abstract 'character development' is always going to be a contentious point. Because, after all, it was not enjoyable for the most part. There would have been a hundred times where I would have skipped something at Keble in order to do something else more enjoyable. And the modern cynic in me wants to say, "But life isn't like that, little Alex." And he's right. It's hard to wonder what was enough and what was not. But for me, and my childhood, I think people like Mr Turner, despite their intimidating appearances, really did just want us to consider something outside of our comfort zones. And perhaps, once or twice, have a good chuckle at the rain-sopped klutzes roll around in the mud.

I returned in September and Tuesday came again, this time with a surprise like no other. They called out the register for each group to board the bus, and I waited for my name to be called out. (I was right at the end of my group) But nothing could be heard. The silence truly was deafening. They called the advanced group and my name didn't appear, even when my classmate Tariq Wild was called. I asked to look at the sheet. My name had been crossed off and re-written right at the bottom, below everyone else.

**This, I believe, did actually happen. It was horrifying.**

'Ah yes, Alex!' the more compassionate Mrs Edwards said 'You're in the deep end today!'

My heart sank twelve entire feet. And I was scared my body would too. The 10 minute coach trip to the swimming centre



felt like a 10 hour bus ride to death row. Only I wouldn't even get to choose my last meal. *You're not supposed to swim after eating, anyway.*

Actually, this bit is quite funny. I can't quite pin it down, but there's something about early-me humour that I haven't been able to replicate ever since. I think it's probably due to the fact that a lot of my more recent writings have been either not personally about me, or are just slightly better written. Either way, it would be nice to recapture a little bit of that.

After changing , we were lined up and set off to swim in register order. We were doing lengths, so I would just have to jump in and swim to the safety of the shallow end.

I counted down from 12, a signatory gesture to how many feet of pain I was about to experience. The clock chimed as my counting hit zero, and I jumped in.

Not to nitpick the story for plot devices, but the clock was silent. It was, however, a prominent feature of the room, it was pretty large, and at the deep end side of the pool at the time.

In no time at all, I had made it to the other side. My fear had made me a better swimmer! A true triumph, in every sense of the word. I told my parents, who then revelled in saying swimming as part of Tuesday timetable. And then came the swimming gala! I would be able to show my prowess to everyone else - the fear still motivated me.

The day came, and after doing length after length in heat after heat, the finale event came - the house relay. As you may know, I was in Belvedere (or red house, to the layman.)



My starting point was set, and I was ready to wreck the competition.

‘To the layman’ - good one, previous Alex.

But something was different. Now, I was to start at the shallow end and end at the deep end, something which I had never done before. I would have to plunge my head into the water and see the depth slip away beneath me, to see the tiles transition from the safe, inviting light blue to the ocean depths of dark blue.

The countdown began again, and I jumped. The fear pushed me on and held me back, wanting the event to be over without the fear of depth. I kept swimming until I tagged the next person in line, hauled myself out of the pool with great fear of slipping and falling back in.

I never went back to that place, and it never mattered to me that I didn't. I had proven myself to myself, to do it again would be vain.

Or because you were still afraid of deep water. Well, in pools at least. Deep water in terms of being out in the ocean is somehow fine to me - if I fall off a kayak, I'm all good, but throw me in a deep, featureless, tiled pool, and that's not all good.

So maybe that little nagging voice that told me to swim faster or Mr Turner's booming voice was responsible for my victory. Personal criticism is delicate and hard to get right,

but can motivate people to do what they thought they could not in the process.

What you're witnessing here is probably the very start of the reconsidering of what Keble was like. No longer just a work-hall interlaced with disparate fun breaks, but a serious institution in developing my character, one which (as of right now) seems to overshadow Westminster - probably by virtue of the sheer length of my residence there. I mean, by the time I left Keble, I had spent a good third of my life either in it, or occupied with things surrounding it. Not to mention all the people that I met.

No amount of facts about the extra buoyancy provided by deeper water could convince me. No amount of logic could shake my firm view that the deep end was the worst thing to exist.

Oh, wow, I hadn't read it all the way through before writing this, and, wow, huh, I guess you really did believe that. I mean, deeper water is more buoyant near the bottom, but nothing changes at the top.

But overall, I think that this is a really interesting piece of writing for going over as an account of how I thought about Keble as I really was outgrowing it. It was very easy for me to say that I was outgrowing Keble, even from the early days. I was, I wanted more out of my subjects, and instead of diving headfirst into more things, more knowledge, more whatever the syllabus would have accounted for, I started making things. I wonder how obvious it would be, looking back, that the thing I really wanted to do wasn't to become a chef, I didn't want to be a scientist, I didn't want to go into

engineering or something like that. A childhood obsession with the solar system should lead to an adult obsession with the world, rather than scurrying into the niches of -ologies. I may not have wanted to be a chef, but I wanted to be good at cooking.

You see, looking back, most of my desires have not been things into themselves, but desires for something beyond the physical concept with allows that thing to flourish. Butterflies might have been my 'thing' for a while, but the categorisation of the world and understanding of its components was what really interested me. Butterflies were just easy to get a hold of. You can see this sort of behaviour, all the way back to the start of me, seeing car models before my parents could, knowing Tom Lehrer's *The Elements*, all this stuff was not just specific, niche interests. It's just very easy to fall into those categories. Even writing, to a greater degree, tries to capture the world in these little capsules called 'words' and then valiantly tries to convey them to someone else. It's a hard process. But I think I've found the thing that I love doing.

On a slightly less grandiose note, it's also (in my view) interesting to think about how much of my experience is mediated by pools. Some of the best and worst times I've ever had have been in them. Think of the weird disparities. Centre Parcs versus Southgate Leisure Centre. Discovery Cove versus that Austrian pool which I got my tooth chipped in. It's strange, right? Even within the pool at Southgate, there's so much variety. Being allowed on the floats was the best thing ever, but if one of those floats were to veer into the deep end, then it would be one of the worst things to ever happen to me.

But one of the most important things that pervades almost all of this analysis is that it's... well... me talking about my interactions with the world. Which, if I'm being perfectly honest, isn't particularly interesting. Maybe it might be, if I was working towards illuminating some strange fact about the past, something which goes unmentioned in the story, but to be honest, there really isn't all that much that needs to be there. It's a mesh of different experiences. This isn't chronological, nor is it even explicitly *logical* in the slightest. Some of these things didn't happen. Others did happen. And they're both equally as important.