

# The Lazy River by Zadie Smith

Fiction, December 11, 2017 The New Yorker, December 18 & 25, 2017 Issue

We're submerged, all of us. You, me, the children, our friends, their children, everybody else. Sometimes we get out: for lunch, to read or to tan, never for very long. Then we all climb back into the metaphor. The Lazy River is a circle, it is wet, it has an artificial current. Even if you don't move you will get somewhere and then return to wherever you started, and if we may speak of the depth of a metaphor, well, then, it is about three feet deep, excepting a brief stretch at which point it rises to six feet four. Here children scream—clinging to the walls or the nearest adult—until it is three feet deep once more. Round and round we go. All life is in here, flowing. Flowing!

Responses vary. Most of us float in the direction of the current, swimming a little, or walking, or treading water. Many employ some form of flotation device—rubber rings, tubes, rafts—placing these items strategically under their arms or necks or backsides, creating buoyancy, and thus rendering what is already almost effortless easier still. Life is struggle! But we are on vacation, from life and from struggle both. We are “going with the flow.” And having entered the Lazy River we must have a flotation device, even though we know, rationally, that the artificial current is buoyancy enough. Still, we want one. Branded floats, too-large floats, comically shaped floats. They are a novelty, a luxury: they fill the time. We will complete many revolutions before their charm wears off—and for a few lucky souls it never will. For the rest of us, the moment arrives when we come to see that the lifeguard was right: these devices are too large; they are awkward to manage, tiresome. The plain fact is that we will all be carried along by the Lazy River, at the same rate, under the same relentless Spanish sun, forever, until we are not.

Some take this principle of universal flow to an extreme. They play dead—head down, limbs limp, making no effort whatsoever—and in this manner discover that even a corpse goes round. A few people—less tattooed, often university educated—make a point of turning the other way, intent upon thrashing out a stroke against the current, never advancing, instead holding their place, if only for a moment, as the others float past. It's a pose: it can't last long. I heard one man with a fashionable haircut say he could swim the whole length backward. I heard his hipster wife dare him to do it. They had time for such games, having no children. But when he turned and made the attempt he was swept away within the minute.

The Lazy River is a metaphor and at the same time a real body of artificial water, in an all-inclusive hotel, in Almería, somewhere in southern Spain. We do not leave the hotel (except to buy flotation devices). The plan is to beat our hotel at its own game. What you do is you do this: you drink so much alcohol that your accommodation is effectively free. (Only the most vulgar among us speak this plan aloud but we are all on board.) For in this hotel we are all British, we are en masse, we are unashamed. We enjoy one another's company. There is nobody French or German here to see us at the buffet, rejecting paella and swordfish in favor of sausages and chips, nor anyone to judge us as we lie on our loungers, turning from the concept of literature toward the reality of sudoku. One of our tribe, an older gentleman, has a portrait of Amy Winehouse on each shin, and we do not judge him, not at all, how could we? We do not have so many saints of Amy's calibre left to us; we cherish her. She was one of the few who expressed our pain without ridiculing or diminishing it. It is therefore fitting that in the evenings, during the brief spell in which we emerge from the Lazy River, we will, at karaoke hour, belt out her famous torch songs—full-throated, already drunk—content in the knowledge that later, much later, when all of this is over, these same beloved verses will be sung at our funerals.

But karaoke was last night; tonight we have a magician. He pulls rabbits from places, unexpected places. We go to sleep and dream of rabbits, wake up, reenter the Lazy River. You've heard of the circle of life? This is like that. Round and round we go. No, we have not seen the Moorish ruins. Nor will we be travelling into those bare, arid mountains. Not one soul among us has read the recent novel set right here, in Almería, nor do we have any intention of doing so. We will not be judged. The Lazy River is a non-judgment zone. This does not mean, however, that we are blind. For we, too, saw the polytunnels—from the coach, on the way in from the airport—and we saw the Africans who work here, alone or in pairs, riding their bicycles in the merciless sun, moving between the polytunnels. Peering at them, I leaned my head against the shuddering glass of my window and, as in the fable of the burning bush, saw instead of the Africans a mirage. It was a vision of a little punnet of baby tomatoes, wrapped in plastic. Floating just outside my window, in the almost-desert, among the Moorish ruins. Familiar in aspect, it was as real to me as my own hand. And upon that punnet I saw a bar code, and just above that bar code was written *PRODUCT OF SPAIN—ALMERÍA*. The vision passed. It was of no use to me or anyone, at that moment, on our vacation. For who are we to—and who are you to—and who are they to ask us—and whosoever casts the first—

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It's quite true that we, being British, could not point to the Lazy River on a map of Spain, but it is also true that we have no need to do so, for we leave the water only to buy flotation devices, as mentioned above. True, too, that most of us voted for Brexit and therefore cannot be sure if we will need a complicated visa to enter the Lazy River come next summer. This is something we will worry about next summer. Among us, there are a few souls from London, university educated and fond of things like metaphors and remaining in Europe and swimming against the current. Whenever this notable minority is not in the Lazy River, they warn their children off the endless chips and apply the highest-possible factor of sun cream. And even in water they like to maintain certain distinctions. They will not do the Macarena. They will not participate in the Zumba class. Some say they are joyless, others that they fear humiliation. But, to be fair, it is hard to dance in water. Either way, after eating—healthily—or buying a flotation device (unbranded), they will climb back into the metaphor with the rest, back into this watery Ouroboros, which, unlike the river of Heraclitus, is always the same no matter where you happen to step in it.

Yesterday the Lazy River was green. Nobody knows why. Theories abound. They all involve urine. Either the color is the consequence of urine or is the color of the chemical put in to disguise the urine or is the reaction of urine to chlorine or some other unknown chemical agent. I don't doubt urine is involved. I have peed in there myself. But it is not the urine that we find so disturbing. No, the sad consequence of the green is that it concentrates the mind in a very unpleasant way upon the fundamental artificiality of the Lazy River. Suddenly what had seemed quite natural—floating slowly in an unending circle, while listening to the hit of the summer, which itself happens to be called "Slowly"—seems not only unnatural but surpassingly odd. Less like a holiday from life than like some kind of terrible metaphor for it. This feeling is not limited to the few fans of metaphor present. It is shared by all. If I had to compare it with something, it would be the shame that came over Adam and Eve as they looked at themselves and realized for the first time that they were naked in the eyes of others.

*"I gave up my search for an honest man—now I'm trying to find a discontinued toner cartridge."*

What is the solution to life? How can it be lived "well"? Opposite our loungers are two bosomy girls, sisters. They arrive very early each morning, and instead of the common plastic loungers used by the rest of us they manage to nab one of the rare white four-poster beds that face the ocean. These sisters are eighteen and nineteen years old. Their outdoor bed sports gauzy white curtains on all four sides, to protect whoever lies upon it from the sun. But the sisters draw the curtains back, creating a stage, and lie out, perfecting their tans, often adjusting their bikini bottoms to check their progress, the thin line that separates brown stomach from pale groin. Blankly they gaze at their bare pubic mounds before lying back on the daybed.

The reason I bring them up is that in the context of the Lazy River they are unusually active. They spend more time on dry land than anyone else, principally taking pictures of each other on their phones. For the sisters, this business of photographs is a form of labor that fills each day to its limit, just as the Lazy River fills ours. It is an accounting of life that takes as long as life itself. "We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not." So said Heraclitus, and so say the sisters, as they move in and out of shot, catching the flow of things, framing themselves for a moment: as they are, and as they are not. Personally, I am moved by their industry. No one is paying them for their labor, yet this does not deter them. Like photographers' assistants at real photo shoots, first they prep the area, cleaning it, improving it, discussing the angle of the light, and, if necessary, they will even move the bed in order to crop from the shot anything unsightly: stray trash, old leaves, old people. Prepping the area takes some time. Because their phones have such depth of image, even a sweet wrapper many yards away must be removed. Then their props are gathered: pink flower petals, extravagant cocktails with photogenic umbrellas protruding from them, ice creams (to be photographed but not eaten), and, on one occasion, a book, held only for the duration of the photograph and—though perhaps only I noticed this—upside down. As they prep, each wears a heartbreaking pair of plain black spectacles. Once each girl is ready to pose, she hands her glasses to her sister. It is easy to say they make being young look like hard work, but wasn't it always hard work, even if the medium of its difficulty was different? At least they are making a project of their lives, a measurable project that can be liked or commented upon. What are we doing? Floating?

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A three-minute stroll from the back door of the hotel is the boardwalk, where mild entertainments are offered in the evenings, should we need something to do in the few darkling hours in which the Lazy River is serviced, cleaned, and sterilized. One of these entertainments is, of course, the sea. But once you have entered the Lazy River, with all its pliability and ease, its sterilizing chlorine and swift yet manageable currents, it is very hard to accept the sea: its abundant salt, its marine life, those little islands of twisted plastic. Not to mention its overfished depths, ever-warming temperature, and infinite horizons, reminders of death itself. We pass it by. We walk the boardwalk instead, beyond the two ladies who plait hair, onward a few minutes more until we reach the trampolines. This is the longest distance we have walked since our vacation began. We do it “for the children.” And now we strap our children into harnesses and watch them bounce up and down on the metaphor, up and down, up and down, as we sit, on a low wall, facing them and the sea, legs dangling, sipping at tumblers of vodka, brought from the hotel, wondering if trampolines are not in the end a superior metaphor to lazy rivers. Life’s certainly an up-and-down, up-and-down sort of affair, although for children the downs seem to come as a surprise—almost as a delight, being so outrageous, so difficult to believe—whereas for us, sitting on the wall, clutching our tumblers, it’s the ups that have come to appear a little preposterous, hard to credit; they strike us as a cunning bit of misdirection, rarer than a blood-red moon.

Speaking of which, that night there was a blood-red moon. Don’t look at me: southern Spain has the highest ratio of metaphor to reality of any place I’ve ever known. There everything is in everything else. And we all looked up at the blood-red moon—that bad-faith moon of 2017—and each man and woman among us understood in that moment that there is no vacation you can take from a year such as this. Still, it was beautiful. It bathed our bouncing children in its red light and set the sea on fire.

Then the time ran out. The children were enraged, not understanding yet about time running out, kicking and scratching us as we unstrapped them from their harnesses. But we did not fold, we did not give in; no, we held them close, and accepted their rage, took it into our bodies, all of it, as we accept all their silly tantrums, as a substitute for the true outrage, which of course they do not yet know, because we have not yet told them, because we are on holiday—to which end we have come to a hotel with a lazy river. In truth, there is never a good moment. One day they will open a paper or a Web page and read for themselves about the year—2050 or so, according to the prophets—when the time will run out. A year when they will be no older than we are now. Not everything goes round and round. Some things go up and—

On the way back to the hotel, we stop by the ladies who plait hair, one from Senegal and the other from the Gambia. With the moon as red as it is, casting its cinematic light, we can glimpse the coast of their continent across the water from our own, but they did not cross this particular stretch of ocean, because it is even more treacherous than the one between Libya and Lampedusa, by which route they came. Just looking at them you can tell that they are both the type who could swim the Lazy River backward and all the way round. In fact, isn’t this what they have done? One is called Mariatou, the other Cynthia. For ten euros they will plait hair in cane rows or Senegalese twists or high-ridged Dutch braids. In our party, three want their hair done; the ladies get to work. The men are in the polytunnels. The tomatoes are in the supermarket. The moon is in the sky. The Brits are leaving Europe. We are on a “getaway.” We still believe in getaways. “It is hard in Spain,” Mariatou says, in answer to our queries. “Very hard.” “To live well?” Cynthia adds, pulling our daughter’s hair, making her yelp. “Is not easy.”

By the time we reach the gates of the hotel all is dark. A pair of identical twins, Rico and Rocco, in their twenties, with oily black curls and skinny white jeans—twin iPhones wedged in their tight pockets—have just finished their act and are packing up their boom box. “We come runner-up ‘X Factor’ Spain,” they say, in answer to our queries. “We are Tunisia for birth but now we are Spain.” We wish them well and good night, and divert our children’s eyes from the obscene bulge of those iPhones, the existence of which we have decided not to reveal to them for many years, or at least until they are twelve. At the elevators, we separate from our friends and their children and ascend to our room, which is the same as their room and everybody’s room, and put the children to bed and sit on the balcony with our laptops and our phones, where we look up his Twitter, as we have every night since January. Here and there, on other balconies, we spot other men and women on other loungers with other devices, engaged in much the same routine. Down below, the Lazy River runs, a neon blue, a crazy blue, a Facebook blue. In it stands a fully clothed man armed with a long mop—he is being held in place by another man, who grips him by the waist, so that the first man may angle his mop and position himself against the strong yet somniferous current and clean whatever scum we have left of ourselves off the sides.