SHORT STORY

The Disruption of Public Order

by Lucy Braun



"how come you say what i was thinking yesterday" by Agnes Schneidewind

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

It only takes one asshole to ruin a good thing for everybody else.

Today the water is surprisingly warm. After everyone's heating bill went up thanks to the Ukraine war, the pool must have received that sweet heating benefits money issued by the government to turn up the temperature again. I let go of the ladder and push myself off the edge into the next open lane. Multiple wet heads are sticking out from the water's surface, their attached bodies frogging ahead, and they set a sharp contrast to the sleepy blue of the pool. My arms and legs start their all too familiar routine. Through the high windows the late afternoon sun glistens on the water's surface, its reflected rays dancing a choreography of wiggly white lines on the pool's wooden ceiling. I inhale the chlorine-heavy air around me and focus on my body. How graciously it moves, how my strengthened arms cut through the water, how my legs coordinately work through their rhythm, again and again and again. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

But then, a disturbance in the peace. A wave comes crashing at me and I yank up my head just in time to avoid its wet slap in my face. The source of this commotion, a white-haired retiree, sturdily swims past me. As the younger, quicker, and agile one of us, it is of course my job to give him the space he needs in our shared lane. How silly of me not to look out for him. Of course. The traffic in here is crazy. To avoid collisions, all swimmers have to take breaks from time to time. Most people are polite about it, everyone watching out for each other. But, apparently, not this man in my lane. No, he swims ahead as if he owned the place and ignores multiple stares and eyerolls. There is an air of superiority to him. A part of me wants to test out what would happen if I didn't move to the side. Would he yield at the last moment? Or is he secretly into crashing into people? You never know what old men are up to.

I fight off a number of smaller waves coming from the lane to my right. Two overweight middle-aged women are swimming next to each other. My five-year-old nephew would be faster in the water than them. One could easily serve them cake and tea as they chatter away about the dreadful dress Elise had worn the other day. I overtake them, reach the end of my lane, and push myself off again from the pool's wall. Each time I pass by them the chatty ladies cover a different topic. How expensive everything has become in the past months. A terrible inflation, isn't it? And the overpriced flowers her husband had gotten her turned out to be rotten within 24 hours. Such a shame, a shame, indeed. What a waste.

Focus on you, I remind myself. It's just me and the waves. Back and forth I go, listening to my own breath, feeling my heart beating in my chest, a constant flicker to remind me I'm alive. But, of course, it's not just me. It never is. To the far right a fluff of maroon hair sticks out of the water. That would be Lydia. I rely on her for getting here. My license is still

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

confiscated as I wait for the penalty to pass and only one bus per hour drives to this place. She is a rancid woman who never learned to savor silence. Not one second can pass on our 20-minute drive without her voice filling the car. I nod and smile along, whatever keeps her mood up, until we reach the parking lot. What can you do? I avoid her in the changing rooms and pick a lane I know she won't swim in. Although there are no signs designated for them, all swimmers seem to have internalized the pool's lane assignment rules. From right to left, the lanes of the pool are ordered by speed. The slow swimmers keep to the two right lanes, the medium swimmers like me swim in the two middle ones, and the two to the very left are reserved for the sprinters who swim the front crawl. You don't want to get in their way. Even I know that much. This rule of speed works in my favor, as Lydia swims even slower than the buoyant double trouble next to me. Can you imagine me having to listen to her chatter even in the water? As if the two car rides weren't punishment enough.

Row after row I glide through the water, allowing my mind to wander. Outside the wet warmth of this pool, life is frustratingly disappointing. At work my boss is constantly breathing down my neck. At home my narrow walls inch closer together ever so slightly every day. Someday I'm sure they will smother me in my sleep. That is, if I get to sleep at all. Sometimes I lie awake at night, wide-eyed, begging my brain to finally slow down, but the gears keep churning on problems I can't resolve. Money, bills, food, prices, living, conditions. It's the weight of the world on my shoulders. The government tells us to save gas to keep the heating bills low. Turn off the lights if you don't need them. Wear three sweaters if you need them. Electric bills are out of control. Russia is out of control. Eleven euros for a kilogram of red bell peppers. When I close my eyes, the world is still there, waiting for me, and its problems are still there, waiting for me. Always. Reminding me that it's not enough. But that's just it, isn't it? Either you keep swimming, or you drown.

The maroon fluff is getting closer. At first I thought I only imagined it, but now I see her clearly. Lydia is carefully maneuvering between the other swimmers like a Smart between regular cars during rush hour. Her excited eyes are searching for me as she enters the lane next to mine and swims towards me. Why didn't I choose the one bordering the crawl swimmers to keep a bigger distance between us? This one is on me, I suppose.

"Oh, it's crowded today, isn't it?" she shouts at me over the echoing noise of lapping waves and the huffing and puffing of adults trying to keep up their form.

I smile and nod at her as I swim by. Did she swim all the way to my lane just to tell me that? She couldn't have waited for the ride back? How will I ever know peace without her constant comments about all things trivial?

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Waves! I turn my head just in time to avoid the swinging arm of the retiree. We get so close I can count the hairs growing out of his ears. I hastily roll my body to the side, away from his. His leg kicks mine. I am too stunned to call him out. Now I have my answer. He definitely won't yield. This sudden evasive move has cost me the continuity of my rhythm. I pant and hover in the water, trying to calm my breath and racing heart. Idiot! I could have hit him! Should have? I should have said something. I cough up a bit of water, its chlorine burning at the back of my nose. My stomach nags. Something ought to be done about this.

Above us the lifeguards glimpse at the heads dancing in the water through a wide window in their office. I study their faces as I get back to swimming and move past them. Mostly bored middle-aged men who glance over us in-between their ongoing conversations with each other. Every so often one of them leaves their little box and struts around the swimmer's pool all the way to the non-swimmer's and back to the office. A cute little round to get steps in, I suppose. A Fitband watch around the wrist and low-hanging belly fat seem indicators for this. The lifesaver glows in a bright orange above the empty non-swimmer's pool. I am surprised there are no children here, but I for one don't miss the high-pitched screaming and screeching of playing brats being amplified by the high ceilings of the pool building. Dodging bone-headed 80-year-olds in the water is stressful enough.

As I'm reaching the end of yet another row, the pain in my back swells up again. One hour of swimming is not enough to counterbalance the daily shifts at the check-out. It does not matter whether I stand or sit while scanning barcodes all day. The pain still comes through every time. Customers carefully watch my hands work but won't look at *me* while they can't wait to leave the store to get on with their day. To them I'm not even really there. That's what a bachelor's degree gets you. Eight to nine hours a day of beep-beep, "That would be € 48,90." Five days a week. It's the recession, they say. You'll find a better job soon. It's only temporary. Think ahead. At least you're already paying towards your pension. Don't even get me started about my pension. We all know that it won't be enough once it's our turn. This system is not built to hold space for all of us. Another problem I can't resolve. The hunger in my stomach flares up. The walls come closer. Breathe! Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Next to me Lydia goes for a quick dive and comes back up seconds later, coughing and flailing with her thin hair flatly sticking to her forehead, but with a wide smile on her face. What is there to smile about, I wonder. Maybe she met a clown at the bottom of the pool.

"The water is so nice and warm this week, isn't it?"

I suppress a groan. Yes Lydia, yes, very well observed. Why am I stuck with this 50-something-year-old lady? Of course, I know why. It's the consequence of my own actions. I

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

guess I should be glad that they only confiscated my license after everything that happened. Everyone has a bad day. And if that bad day involves some idiot cutting you off and scratching your car, sometimes you just explode. Police said they don't see women getting into physical brawls with middle-aged men often. Maybe they were a little impressed. That asshole was much taller than me and yet I landed a punch on his left ear. Brought him down real quick, I can tell you that much. They don't expect us "petite cuties" to stand up for ourselves. And although I had been wronged, the one who was stuck with the car repair bill, authorities still decided to punish both him and me. Call that justice.

The next week we come in, the water isn't as crowded. Fewer heads bobbing around. But as I get inside and swim towards my usual lane, there he is again. My stomach turns and twists as I watch him approach me. Hunger. I stop moving. Am I cursed? White hair, stern look, head held high. Swimming in his own private pool. Or so he thinks. He pierces through a couple of chatty women and their conversations. They stop and give him an irritated look as he passes through before resuming their little floating *Kaffeeklatsch.* Glad I'm not the only one who is disgruntled by this man, I pick another lane. Not today. Waves are splashing over from the crawl swimmers. I turn my head to the side to avoid the burn of chlorinated water in my eyes. It's this stupid old man who forces me to swim over here. The pit in my stomach deepens. I wonder at which point in his life he had picked up this habit of ignoring others. Of failing to see them, around him, as fellow human beings with their own right for space. Did he never learn to take turns? I wonder if he understands what it feels like to be pushed to the side. To be looked through and ignored. He didn't even spare me a glance when he crashed into me last week.

I like coming here. Escaping the nasty cold outside, you enter this soft warm place, a place that both challenges and comforts your aching body. I know Bernd, one of the lifeguards, back from high school. He almost didn't recognize me when I first approached him. We hadn't seen each other in so long! He got married and had two kids, got divorced, and packed on some *Kummerspeck.* I told him that even with the extra weight he still looks fantastic for his age and that I love the Fitband idea for counting extra steps to combat his sedentary lifestyle. We agreed to grab coffee soon. We have so much to catch up on!

The quick dive into the water is refreshing. Why more people don't dive in here is beyond me. They are missing out on a great thing for sure. I watch Kayla's frowning face as she swims past me. The poor thing can't seem to catch a break. Always so upset and dissatisfied.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

I get that she is angry, I would be angry in her position too. This is probably not what she imagined her post-college life to be like. But you don't always get what you want in life. At least not initially. Sometimes you've got to take a little detour. And sometimes you might even be pleasantly surprised where that detour leads you. I certainly did not picture myself as a cashier for 30 years, but here I am. With an aching back and an excellent memory of all the produce and bread numbers. 4967 for golden kiwis and 0467 for rye crust bread. Don't confuse them, they have different prices! It took poor Kayla forever to memorize them, but I'm always there for her to correct them if she lets me. I don't think many people appreciate these things anymore, especially with these new self-checkouts. But what can you do? There are some lighter moments during the day as well, you know. How excited elderly ladies get when they remember the coupon they cut out from the paper ad. Saving 70 cents here and there. Whatever it is that keeps them afloat, right? How about the sweet sip of your cucumber-infused water bottle when a customer takes a while to find their wallet. That is nice as well. Having a break to stand up and shake out those old legs. When they respond to your greeting smile with a smile. At the end of the day, we are all human, right?

I think it's important to remember these things. Cherish them, store them, hold on to them during bad days. But Kayla… I'm not sure if she can see any of that. She always seems so angry. And oh, so restless! She can hardly sit still in the car seat next to me. Constantly stands up while scanning items. I've been trying to tell her, standing only makes it worse, but she won't listen. Kayla thinks I don't notice her disdain for me, but I do. I think she needs more time to figure things out. She expects so much, both from the world and from herself. When problems and challenges are everything you see, how will you be able to find any of those great opportunities you've been promised? I do not envy this generation, I really don't. Back then, life wasn't as complex and fast as today. Not to mention all this existential angst they all have. Time isn't on their side yet. You can't really blame them for their lack of life experience now, can you? I guess no one ever pulled them aside to tell them that it's going to be alright eventually. I'm afraid life is never enough for them. But even beyond that there is something else about Kayla… I can't quite put my finger on it though. Something lurks inside her, just below the surface. Whatever it may be, I am afraid it might come out soon. Like the time she attacked that driver. I hope she will figure things out for herself. I gift her an extra wide smile as we swim past each other once again. What would it take for her to be happy?

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

The following week we arrive early. The pool is crowded again but I can't spot Mr. White Hair anywhere. Yes! I climb down the ladder, my hands shaking with excitement, and I swim around two senior citizens by the pool's edge before I make a right turn into my familiar lane. I share it with another man, possibly in his 60s, who also works his way through the water. When we pass by each other, we both make space and he gives me a short but friendly nod. See? It's not that hard.

For five lanes I get to enjoy a peaceful swim. Then I see him. Just on time. Bright blue trunks. He is slightly bent over from his old age, and outside the pool his movements are frail. My gaze is locked on him as he carefully places his towel on a wooden shelf and plods towards the pool ladder. Don't come here, don't come here, don't come here, I keep repeating in my head as he climbs down the ladder, slow as a tortoise. Any lane but this one. But my telepathic abilities leave much to be desired and of course he is a man of routine. He lets go of the ladder and swims right towards me. And, of course, just as in the past weeks, I yield. That's how one ought to behave. One lane, two lanes, three. I keep swimming around him. He doesn't look at me. Four lanes, five lanes, six lanes. The friendly nodder leaves our lane and exits the pool. Seven lanes, eight, nine… I can feel my anger rising, its heat simmering in my stomach once again. Hunger. My cheeks burn. As he comes closer, his wrinkled face fills up my entire vision. Why should I yield? Not this time. He has never once yielded. He comes closer. Now he is at arm's reach. My entire body itches to act. Almost. One final push of my legs and he's right there. His eyes widen in surprise. Now he can no longer ignore me.

I get a hold of his neck and pull. My arm squishes down a panicked hiccup in his throat as I dive towards the pool floor. The peaceful quiet underwater drowns out the busy swishing of the above world. Bubbles swirl around us. Down, down, down we go. His legs and arms flail around, and his hands try to grab my face. I've got him locked in my right elbow. My legs fight against our buoyancy. He releases a muffled scream. A cascade of air bubbles leaves his mouth and drifts up towards the surface. Good. No one hears us here. He is so wriggly and surprisingly flexible for his age. Why didn't he yield to me? My feet hit the smooth tile floor and I push myself down again, pulling him a little closer to me. I have decided that we will stay. How deep is this pool? Deep enough for us. I keep holding him and he keeps fighting me. His legs grow weary. Our slow dance with a choreography he never learned. My stomach eases up. Above us headless bodies keep swimming on, each at their own tempo. His arms give in. The light blue of the pool encases us as my back touches the floor. My eyes and my throat start to burn. I don't have much time left.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

He grows limp just as I need to rise. I scream for help the second I break through the surface. Helping hands from above immediately grab and pull his lifeless body out of my arms. I cough up water. Other hands pull me out as well until I find myself sitting on the pool's edge. My heart is racing. I did it. I did it! I finally made him yield. Somebody drapes a towel over my shoulders. The office door squeaks. Running footsteps echo in the hall. People gather. Fearful whispers float around. One of the lifeguards starts chest compressions while another searches for a pulse. My throat burns from the chlorinated water I have swallowed. I violently blink to clear my vision as I'm being handed a water bottle. I take a sip.

"What happened?" a female voice shouts at me.

"I'm not sure," I say while catching my breath. "I saw him swim towards me and then he dove down. I don't know how much time passed but he wouldn't come up again. I couldn't see well because of the distortions, but I immediately went down to get him. Is he gonna make it?"

Nobody answers. The lifeguard feeling for his pulse has a hardened look on his face. It's Mr. FitBand belly fat. I watch the other lifeguard working on the old man's chest, the focused rhythm with which he pushes his ribcage down. I adjust my bikini top under the towel. While people rush around me, my heart slows down and a soft calm takes over. Inner stillness, I suppose. My stomach is peaceful. Lydia crouches down next to me and puts her hand around my shoulder. It's too warm. An ambulance arrives. They can only call the time. Lydia helps me to my feet and gently pushes my face away from the scene as we walk.

"You don't have to look at that. You did all you could."

"Yes," I say. I did.

And now I want to look.

The police calls me in for questioning a few days later.

"So, you mean to tell me that you didn't notice anything odd when he went down?" The detective in front of me gives me a suspicious stare.

"No," I insist. "But he and I shared a lane for a few weeks, and every now and then he had these moments where he seemed… confused? Like, he wouldn't notice me until we would literally crash into each other. Maybe those were early signs that something wasn't right with him. Should I have told someone? I just thought he would be, you know, a typical stubborn

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

pensioner.”

I closely monitor the tone of my voice. Clueless, a slightly higher pitch than usual, accompanied by nervous flickering served with a side of word-fumbling. They need to feel in control. No one expects a murder from the petite cutie. “I probably should have alerted others the second I saw him down there. But then a kind of instinct kicked in? I don’t know. It all happened so fast. I just knew I had to get to him, and there wasn’t much time.”

A part of me wishes that I could show him how capable I really am. But I know this one I cannot just strike down. Keep it up, breathe through it, avoid any collision.

I give him a sad smile. “I’m so sorry I don’t think I have any more information that would help you. This is all so sad. I feel for his family.”

The detective isn’t convinced, but without proof they must let me go. My heartbeat is calm as I exit the building. Lydia picks me up, and, without looking at me, drives me home.

After that we don’t go back swimming for a while. The pool temporarily closes out of respect for his family. The article in the local newspaper mentions something about heart complications. Eighty-two is a proud age. We all have to go at some point. When we return after a few weeks, flowers and candles have been left next to the pool’s entrance. Lydia doesn’t talk to me on the rides anymore. Does she know?

It only takes one asshole to ruin a good thing for everybody else.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.