

The following is Chapter 1 from Susan Rava's *Swimming Solo*.

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A note from Susan Rava

Almost all family names and family caregiver names are unchanged. Certain names and identifying traits of care providers and family friends have been changed for privacy's sake. Names of all nursing institutions have also been changed.

I have recreated conversations, events, and impressions from my journal, our records, my husband's notes, and my memory. For conciseness, I have combined certain events.

Some family events that occurred prior to my knowledge of my Italian in-laws' family and milieu are a composite of family history, lore, and my imagination. Other events that I knew from hearsay have been woven into this work of creative nonfiction.

SWIMMING SOLO

Chapter 1

Swimming to Milwaukee

1993

I suspected that my father-in-law, Paul, was failing mentally when he set out swimming straight across Lake Michigan to Milwaukee, more than sixty miles away.

One morning in July 1993, I sat alone on the porch watching the lake for signs of what the day would bring. I wondered if the horizon would be clear enough to track oil freighters with my binoculars. What would the waves, so still and almost soundless, bring in the afternoon? My eyes lighted on a swimmer in the lake straight down from our cottage. Effortless and even, the person's crawl stroke pulled through the flat surface of the water as the swimmer aimed across Lake Michigan toward Milwaukee. I recognized the stroke, then the back of the head with its balding spot and silvery gray hair, then the man's shoulders, not broad nor muscular, an old man's back still strong enough to stroke, pull, stroke, pull out into Lake Michigan. Paul, it was Paul; it had to be Paul, who loved to swim. There on a table by the front door of our cottage lay his watch, his hearing aids, and his glasses. Paul lifted his head with each breath, then stroked as he swam toward Milwaukee.

Barefoot, I raced down the steps and over the dunes to the beach. Paul's striped towel was neatly folded at the shore, his Italian sandals next to it. I began to wave my arms and shout, "Paul. Paul, turn around. You're too far away.!"

But Paul had set his aids—ears, eyes, watch—on a table where they announced that he had entered a world with no outside stimuli except the cool, calm lake to bathe

him, to float him with almost no resistance on that quiet summer morning. Paul didn't react to my yelling. Then, as if an inner voice had spoken, he pulled the water so as to turn 180 degrees and head back to the beach. My hard-beating heart slowed, I swallowed, and tried to calm myself. I wondered what I would have done if Paul had not turned back. I took a deep breath.

Paul came ashore. He shook himself like a dog. A Venetian by birth, Paul was fair-skinned like many northern Italians and had little body hair. He greeted me, dried himself, slid his feet into his sandals and said: "Now I'm going for a walk."

"Wait a minute, Paul. Wait. I was really worried. Nobody knew you had gone swimming. I just happened to see you from the porch."

"I enjoy a morning swim." His English was precise in spite of his Italian accent that lingered even after more than fifty years in the United States.

"Paul, we have a rule: no swimming alone. You have the same rule in your pool at home in St. Louis. It's even more important in this big lake. Please, Paul, don't swim alone. Someone is always around to watch."

"That's nice of you. I'm going for my walk now."

I watched Paul set off along the shore, his short, contained step like a European unaccustomed to the miles of unpopulated beach stretching wide ahead of him. He could walk miles north with his mincing gait until he reached a rivulet cutting into Lake Michigan. That would stop him because the rivulet was icy cold and too deep to ford, too wide to jump. But I knew that nothing else would stop Paul. My own father had spoken to me about Paul when my husband John and I were dating: "He won't let go once he gets an idea in his head." I translated that to mean "difficult as a person." In the freshness

of my love for my husband-to-be, I had no ears for negative comments about John or his family.

At lunchtime—Paul never missed lunch or any other meal—Paul reappeared, set his glasses on his nose, hooked up his hearing aids, put on his watch, donned a flowered Hawaiian shirt, a memento of a tropical trip, and joined the family. During that summer of 1993, the visits of my parents, John’s parents, two of our three children, and several of their friends overlapped for a few days at our cottage.

“Well, John,” I announced as we all sat down outside at a large picnic table, “your dad tried to swim to Milwaukee. I explained to him the no-solo-swimming rule.”

Everyone’s eyes were on me. In the midday sun, I saw my mother-in-law Silvia’s white hair aglow; the intense light smoothed the crags and wrinkles on her face. Next to her on the picnic bench sat my mother, natty I thought, in what she called “play clothes”: plaid Bermuda shorts, a shirt with matching trim, and sandals that picked up the blue in her shorts.

John looked at me. I knew his eyes were twinkling behind his sunglasses as I made this pronouncement to the family. He always kept his sunglasses on in Michigan until the sun was fully down—something about sensitivity to light. I suspected he liked the movie star image he could project with his wavy salt-and-pepper hair, dense eyebrows, and distinguished nose. John’s looks, even the mischievous ones, are Mediterranean.

John said, “I’m glad you told him, Suze.”

“House rules, Nonno,” said one of our children to his grandfather. Paul cut a tomato, spread cheese on bread. His head bent down slightly, casting a shadow on his fine features, pointed nose, and thin lips.

From the other end of the table, my father, George, pushed back and stretched his long legs. He cleared a space in front of himself. The rest of us wore shirts over swimsuits. My dad wore a once-tan sweater that hung shapelessly from his thin shoulders, a relic from college days. “Still perfectly good,” he said when I’d quizzed him about that sweater. “Your mother’s added some patches and darned the holes.” He’d pulled it over his head, mussing his white hair, which he’d probably tried to smooth with the palm of his hand. Even though his sweater looked rumpled, he sat tall—the senior statesman overlooking three generations of his family, in-laws, friends—and beyond the cottage, a ravine with birch, pine, and oak trees and past the sand dunes, a sliver of deep blue Lake Michigan.

Around the lunch table came a chorus, “House rule: no-solo-swimming,” followed by “Paul,” “Paolo,” “Nonno,” as if everyone assembled had joined a song of vacation consensus.

Paul concentrated on spearing a leaf of his salad. He circled his ankle back and forth. His feet were small and light-boned for a tall Italian, elegant in their woven sandals. He finished his bite, picked up his glass of water. He held it with a cock of his wrist. He might have been drinking Campari in a bar in Venice. Sweeping his arm around the group, he said, “I know. I know,” in a mock-sheepish tone.

I popped a cherry pit into my hand, then onto my plate. John watched his mother peel a peach and share slices around the table. I claimed that day's *New York Times* crossword puzzle for rest time. The young people noted that the wind had picked up.

"White caps," our son Will said. "I've got my boogie board."

"My turn to do dishes," said John. On vacation in Michigan, he loved to putter in the kitchen, arranging cheeses in a special container, preparing to barbecue. After lunch, he often set off alone on what he called a hunter-gatherer expedition to find the freshest local produce. He was triumphant when he returned with picked-that-morning raspberries for dessert or apricots sold on the edge of an orchard. For vegetables he favored a vendor who repeated: "We know you're on vacation incognito in our village. James Whitmore or Spencer Tracy. We just can't place you. All of us vendors know. You're a celebrity." I loved how much those outings pleased John.

"I'll help with dishes, John," Silvia volunteered.

John slid on the bench to sit close to his father. "I'm going into the kitchen, Papa. You understand our no-solo-swimming rule." He touched his father's arm in a gesture new to me: light in pressure, yet calming and protective.

After lunch, everyone scattered to siestas or sunbathing on the beach or riding waves. I installed myself on a rattan couch on the veranda with the puzzle, a long summer novel, and a blanket in case I got chilly. Not ten minutes into my quiet time, I heard the steady splash of a person wading into the lake, kicking up the surf. I sat bolt upright and peered through the pines down to the lake.

Paul was alone, swimming once again toward Milwaukee. As before, Paul eventually pivoted with a splash of kicking and swam back to shore.

A year or so later, Paul was afloat in his own inner world. Doctors tested him and then diagnosed him with probable Alzheimer's disease. No voices, no waving arms penetrated those waters. Yet, if he tuned in, he might on occasion be the polite, accommodating gentleman of long habit—only to dive back into his own private swim, aimed at a faraway shore from which no one could summon him.

That summer of Paul's solo swims was the last time we invited him to vacation with us in Pentwater, Michigan.