

SINK OR SWIM

(1990)

by Su Friedrich

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Please Note:

Each title word (like **ZYGOTE**) appears on a title card at the beginning of the story, so they should be translated/included.

Some sections have no accompanying text; these are indicated.

ZYGOTE

The Greek god Zeus had a wife named Hera, but he also had numerous love affairs and many illegitimate children. Furthermore, he had one child who was born without a mother. This was his daughter Athena, the goddess of war and justice, who sprang from his head fully grown and dressed for battle. She became chief of the three virgin goddesses and was known as a fierce and ruthless warrior. Because she was his favorite child, Zeus entrusted her to carry his shield, which was awful to behold, and his weapon, the deadly thunderbolt.

Y CHROMOSOME

(no story with this section)

X CHROMOSOME

(no story with this section)

WITNESS

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.

When she was good
She was very, very good
And when she was bad
She was horrid.

VIRGIN

When the girl went out to play, the water running in the gutter was the Nile River. Her tree house was a harem filled with beautiful women wrapped in silk and covered in jewels. When she got on her bicycle, the girl rode bareback on a great, black stallion. Whenever she swam near the jetty, she saw mermaids with golden hair darting through underwater caverns. And her father was the smartest and most handsome man she'd ever met.

UTOPIA

The girl and her sister were forbidden to eat sugar, and their father refused to buy a television set, but once a week they were transported into a world of pleasure.

On Friday night at 7:30, they went across the hall to the home of an elderly man. He took them first to the kitchen, where they were allowed to make their own ice cream sundaes. He always gave them several flavors of ice cream and toppings, and assorted fruits and nuts and sprinkles to choose from.

When everything was ready, they carried their sundaes into the living room. The lights were turned off, the TV was turned on, and they sat in the dark for an hour and watched Don Ameche's Flying Circus Show.

TEMPTATION

On her seventh birthday, the girl's father gave her a book about Greek mythology. She would sit in the closet and read the stories long after being sent to bed. One night, her father came home late from work and caught her in the middle of a chapter. He lay down on the bed, put his hands behind his head, and asked her to tell him her favorite myth.

It was the story of Atalanta, who was abandoned at birth because her father had wanted a son. She was left in the forest to die, but was discovered by a female bear and raised to become a great athlete and hunter. When her father heard the news, he realized that she was as good as a man, and took her back into his home.

Atalanta had vowed never to marry, and would race any man who hoped to win her hand. Although they were punished by death for losing the race, many men tried and failed. But Aphrodite, the goddess of love, thought it was time for Atalanta to lose both the race and her heart, and so she offered to help a young man named Hippomenes.

On the appointed day, he came armed with three apples made of solid gold. The race began, and as soon as Atalanta overtook Hippomenes, he dropped the first apple at her feet. She stopped to retrieve the precious fruit and then soon caught up with him, but he threw the second apple across her path. She decided to stop once again, but now it became more difficult to overtake him. When she did, he threw the last apple far from the track. Atalanta couldn't resist veering from her course, but as a result she lost the race and was forced to accept his hand in marriage.

SEDUCTION

The girl's father had fallen asleep while she told the story of Atalanta, so he didn't get to hear the end of it.

Atalanta was married soon after losing the race and, to her surprise, she found happiness in her new life with Hippomenes. Because the power of Aphrodite had brought them together, they were obliged to pay homage to her. But like most newlyweds, they thought only of each other and neglected to fulfill their sacred duties. The goddess of love took offense at their behavior and in revenge she turned them both into lions.

REALISM

One day the girl told her father that she wanted to learn to swim. That evening they went to the university pool. He took her to the deep end, explained the principles of kicking and breathing, said she'd have to get back all by herself, and then tossed her in.

She panicked and thrashed around for a while, but finally managed to keep her head above water. From that day on, she was a devoted swimmer.

When they went to New Hampshire the following summer, she spent most of her time at a nearby lake. The water was a strange orange color, but it was sweet and cool, and the banks were lined with birch and pine trees.

Her father could swim all the way across, but sometimes he would stay near the shore with her, or sun himself on a raft while she practiced her dives. One afternoon, as she watched the water dry on her skin, he began to tell her about water moccasins. They live in nests at the bottom of lakes, he said, and if someone happens to come swimming by, they rush to the surface and cover the person with poisonous bites. The girl stared at the water and wondered whether they could even bite through her bathing suit.

That evening, she read the encyclopedia entry and discovered that water moccasins live primarily in the South and a few Midwestern states. Her mother explained that this meant they were thousands of miles away from her, but a geography lesson wasn't enough to comfort the girl.

QUICKSAND

One evening, the girl's father took her to see a movie about a man who invents a machine in which he can travel through time. When he gets to the year 20,000 he discovers a world full of beautiful, happy and passive people. He also finds a library full of rotting, unused books and realizes that the beautiful people no longer understand or care about the principles of western civilization. As a result, they devote their lives to pleasure and then let themselves be eaten by green monsters who live in underground caverns.

The relationship between the two groups is simple: Every time the monsters get hungry they ring a siren and the beautiful people rise like zombies and march into the caverns to their death.

The girl was terrified by the wail of the siren and didn't want to see the people get slaughtered like animals. Closing her eyes, she begged to leave the theater. Her father reached over, pulled her hands from her face, and insisted that she watch the rest of the movie.

PEDAGOGY

The girl loved to play games and also loved to win. It gave her a special thrill whenever she beat a boy in a race or a wrestling match. They always expected her to give in first, but she'd let them break her arm before she cried "Uncle!"

Her father didn't like to play games but he was fond of chess and offered to teach it to her. Unlike the boys, he expected her to be an aggressive opponent. The girl was happy to have a game to play with him and took his lessons seriously. After many attempts, she beat him for the first time. The victory tasted sweet until she realized that the price of it had been her favorite opponent. From that day on, he never played with her again.

OBLIVION

Because he was an anthropologist and linguist, the girl's father told her many stories about how other people celebrate the rites of childbirth, puberty, marriage and death. She liked to imagine being an Indian or an African girl dancing and singing in one of those ceremonies. By comparison, American rituals began to seem dull and superficial. She thought that might be why he took so little interest in trimming their Christmas tree or going to mass with her on Father's Day.

But one year he suggested that she have an ice skating party for her birthday. When they got to the rink, all her friends lined up for a chance to skate with him. The girl offered to go at the end and drank some hot chocolate while they circled past. Her friends seemed to be enjoying themselves, but when her turn came she was surprised at how fast he skated. She couldn't keep up with him and couldn't convince him to slow down. After a while, she just let herself be pulled along over the bumpy ice.

NATURE

One summer, her father went away to teach at a different university in the Midwest. A few miles from the campus, there was an abandoned quarry which had been filled by the spring rains. He set out alone one evening, hoping to go for a swim under the full moon. At the quarry, a sign was posted warning people not to enter the water. Her father was hot and tired after the long hike, but decided to wait and ask someone about it. When he did, they told him he was a very lucky man. The previous

summer, a visiting professor had gone there for a swim and was attacked and killed by a nest of water moccasins.

MEMORY: Part One

The girl's father had a sister whom he loved very much. As children, they lived on a farm in New England and went swimming during the summer at a neighbor's pool, which was fed by ice cold spring water.

His sister usually waited until he finished his chores, but one day she went alone, knowing that he would come by soon after. She ran quickly down the unpaved road and was covered with dust and sweat by the time she arrived. It was a hot afternoon, but the pool was deserted. She tore off her clothes, dove into the icy water, and died immediately of a heart attack.

When her brother came back from work that day, no one was at home. He expected to find everyone at the pool, and started walking towards the neighbor's house. He heard a scream. He started to run. The screams grew louder. He raced into the front yard and saw his mother kneeling on the ground beside the lifeless body of his sister.

The wake was held at their home, and throughout the following nights he sat and watched over her. No one blamed him for her death, but he carried the burden of guilt and loss for many years.

MEMORY: Part Two

Twenty years later, the girl's father wrote about poem about the first week in the life of his firstborn child.

He describes walking the streets with her, sitting quietly as she takes a bottle, and staring into her dark eyes. He realizes that no one can predict the course of a child's life, but tries to imagine her as a young girl running off to school or as a grown woman with a life of her own. He ends the meditation by saying, "All this must come as the questions are answered, but now there is only the quiet face that replaces a drowned sister at last."

LOSS

The girl liked to sleep late, eat between meals, keep her room messy, and fight with her sister. She made her mother miserable but couldn't stop doing what she wanted to do. Her father didn't seem to care as much, because he spent most of his time at the office. Once in a while, though, he would come home in the middle of a huge fight and the girl's mother would beg him to do something about her crazy children.

Since threats and minor punishments had almost no effect, he decided one evening to try a different approach. While the girls continued to fight, he went into the bathroom and turned on the faucets. A few minutes later he went down the hall, grabbed the girls by their hair, dragged them into the bathroom, and made them kneel beside the tub. After warning them not to disobey their mother anymore, he pushed their faces into the water.

The girl started to scream. The screaming made her start choking. She kicked and punched at his legs and tried to wrench her head away, but his hands were large and strong. No. She would have to keep perfectly still now, because every move she made took away another breath. There was a pain spreading through her chest, a pressure building in her head, Let me go, I never meant to be so bad, I just get like this sometimes, Let me go, I would have said I was sorry, Please let me go! Her eyes were wide open, her lungs were going to explode, she was grabbing wildly at the air and screaming into the water when she suddenly felt his grip loosen on her neck.

She dropped to the floor, coughing and shivering. Her sister sat across from her in a puddle of cold water while her mother stood nearby screaming and crying.

KINSHIP

(This section uses a song by Franz Schubert. The recording is in German; underlined letters are where *umlauts* belong. The text below is simply for information--*IT SHOULD NOT BE TRANSLATED* for any screening of the film.)

"Gretchen Am Spinrade"

"Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel"

Meine Ruh' ist hin

My peace is gone

Mein Herz ist schwer
Ich finde, ich finde sie nimmer
Und nimmermehr.

My heart is heavy
I can never find peace
And will never again.

Wo ich ihn nicht hab'
Ist mir das Grab
Die ganze Welt
Ist mir vergallt.

Wherever he leaves
Becomes a grave;
The whole wide world
Is gall to me.

Mein armer Kopf
Ist mir verrückt
Mein armer Sinn
Ist mir zerstückt.

My poor head
Is coming loose,
My poor mind
Is shattered.

Meine Ruh' ist hin
(etc. as per above)

My peace is gone
(etc.)

Nach ihm nur schau' ich
Zum fenster hinaus,
Nach ihm nur geh' ich
Aus dem Haus.

I look out the window
Just to see him,
I leave the house
Only to find him.

Sein hoher Gang,
Sein edle' Gestalt,
Seines Mundes Lächeln,
Seiner Augen Gewalt,
Und seiner Rede
Zauberfluss,
Seine Handedruck,
Und ach, sein Kuss!

His manly stride,
His nobel form,
The smile on his lips,
The power in his eyes,
The magic flow
Of his talk,
The clasp of his hand,
And oh, his kiss!

Meine Ruh' ist hin
(etc.)

My peace is gone
(etc.)

Mein Busen drängt
Sich nach ihm hin;
Ach dürft ich fassen
Und halten ihn!
Und küssen ihn
So wie ich wollt,
An seinen Küssen
Vergehen sollt'!

My bosom aches
So much for him;
Ah, could I but grasp him
And hold him!
And kiss him
Just as I want,
To melt away
Beneath his kisses!

O könnt ich ihn küssen
So wie ich wollt,
An seinen Küssen
Vergehen sollt!
An seinen Küssen
Vergehen sollt!

Oh could I but kiss him
Just as I want,
To melt away
Beneath his kisses!
To melt away
Beneath his kisses!

Meine Ruh' ist hin
Mein Herz ist schwer.

My peace is gone
My heart is numb.

JOURNALISM

On her tenth birthday, the girl's sister gave her a diary with a green cloth cover. It came with a lock and a small key, which she hid carefully under the bed. On the first page she scrawled a large note that declared: "If anybody reads this diary, they are very mean. It is personal!"

For the most part, the girl filled it with stories about doing punishment assignments, fighting with the

boys, and playing with her friends. Because she didn't write every day, there were still empty pages left when her parents told her they were getting a divorce.

The girl was too ashamed to tell anyone and even kept it a secret from her best friend for more than a year, but she did confess it to her diary. It felt as if the act of writing it down would make it really come true, so she used a pencil instead of her favorite cartridge pen.

The next time she looked inside, the entry had been erased. Her mother was the only possible suspect.

INSANITY

The girls were out of control, the house was falling apart, nothing made sense anymore. In the middle of dinner, their mother would burst into tears and say, "Maybe I should kill myself. Then he'd realize what he's doing to us."

Early one evening, her father came over to pick up a few things. The girl hoped he would stay for a while, but her parents got into a fight and he left a short time later.

Her mother was furious and called the girl and her sister onto the front porch. She opened one of the casement windows and had the two girls climb onto the sill. As she held her arms around their waists, they stared in fear at the sidewalk far below. Their father was halfway down the block by now and their mother had to scream to get his attention. He stopped, turned around slowly, and looked up at them. The girl had an urge to wave, but she felt her mother's grip tighten around her waist. Then her mother leaned forward and began to shout down at him, "You think you can just leave us like this, just walk away from your home and you kids, but what if we all jumped out the window now and landed in a pile at your feet? How would you feel then?"

The girl waited for her father to do or say something, but he just stared at them for another long moment and then shook his head and walked away.

HOMEWORK

One of the first things to enter the house after her father left was a black and white TV. And because her mother had gone back to work, the girl could come home every afternoon and spend hours

watching her favorite shows. She also started getting a small allowance, which she spent entirely on candy.

GHOSTS

(This story is shown being typed, rather than read as a voiceover)

Dear Dad,

After you left us, Mom used to come home from work, make us dinner, send us to our rooms and then sit in the living room in that dark orange armchair and play an album of Schubert Lieder over and over again.

There was one song I particularly loved. I never knew what the lyrics meant but it was the one that made Mom cry the most. We would come in and tell her we loved her and we promised to be good so that you would come back again.

I recently got a translation of that song, "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel". Do you know it already? It's the one about the woman who yearns for her absent lover and feels she cannot live without him.

It's so strange to have such an ecstatic melody accompany those tragic lyrics. But maybe that's what makes it so powerful: It captures perfectly the conflict between memory and the present.

Love,

P.S. I wish that I could mail you this letter.

FLESH

After the divorce papers came through, her parents never spoke to each other and her father never came to their house. The girl started seeing him again a few years later, but only on rare occasions.

One evening he took her to a Japanese restaurant, introduced her to his second wife and asked if she'd like to go with them on a trip to Mexico. She felt nervous at the thought of being around his wife, but agreed to the plan. He called a few weeks later to say that his wife had decided to stay at home, and

so they went alone.

The girl was proud to be with her father and he seemed happy to give her a complete tour of Mexico City. At the end of a hot and tiring week, they headed for Acapulco.

The first day on the beach, the girl was approached by a young boy wearing a pale yellow shirt and a thin gold chain. He didn't speak any English and she only knew how to say "please" and "thank you". After a few hours with him, she realized that she had forgotten to meet her father for lunch.

He was furious and warned her not to make the same mistake twice. The girl was afraid of him but the next day she was late for both lunch and dinner. He woke her up early the following morning and told her to pack her bags and meet him in the lobby. When she got there, he said they were leaving for Mexico City so that she could catch the next flight back to Chicago alone.

She sat by herself on the back of the bus and watched the coastline disappear. They didn't speak another word to each other until she left him at the gate and boarded the plane for home.

ENVY

The girl never told her father how it felt to be sent home from Mexico. Ten years later, she was surprised to find that he had written a poem about it, entitled "How You Wept, How Bitterly".

He begins the poem by calling her, "Remote as moonlight since I gutted the family with my exodus."

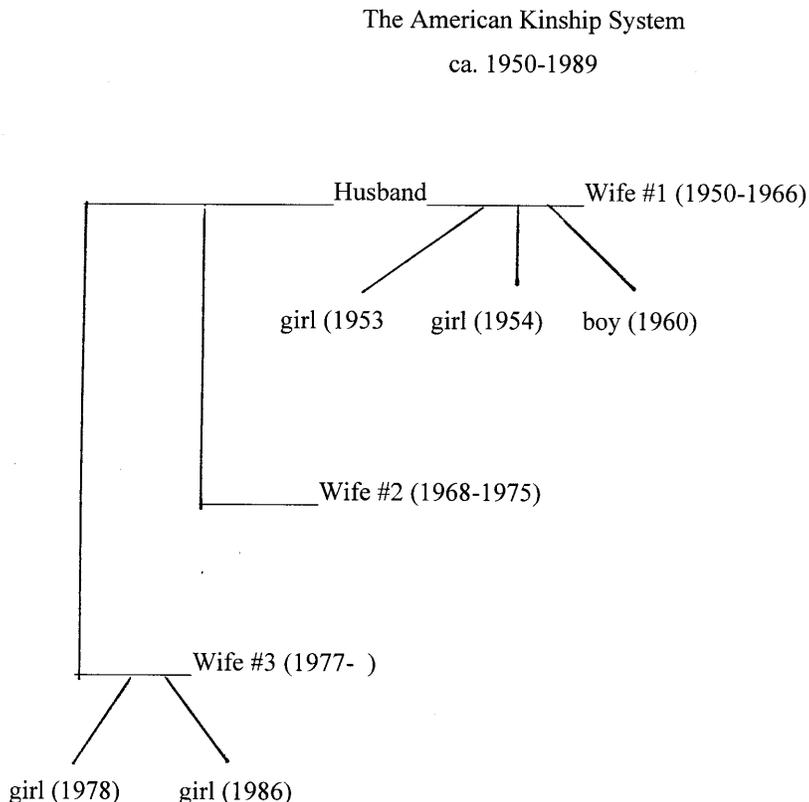
Later on he asks, "Did you need that Adonis of the beaches?"

And he ends the poem by declaring, "Your eyes at our parting condensed all children orphaned by divorce/ A glance through a film of tears at a father dwindling to a speck."

The girl had waited so long to get some kind of apology from him but this wasn't the one she imagined. He still didn't realize that he had been acting like a scorned and vengeful lover and that hers had not been the tears of an orphaned child, but those of a frustrated teenage girl who had had to pay for a crime she didn't commit.

DISCOVERY

The following chart appears on the screen before you hear the reading of the story of "Discovery".



(Discovery)

The girl had always looked forward to the evenings, when she would see her father and tell him about what she had done at school. She had been disappointed whenever he called before dinner to say he wanted to keep working for a few more hours. That meant she wouldn't see him for the rest of the night.

Many years later she went to the library and looked him up in the card catalogue. She wondered what he'd been writing while deciding to get a divorce. The only book available was a collection of articles entitled "Language, Context and the Imagination." She discovered that two of the books written that year involve the study of kinship systems. One is called "The Linguistic Reflex of Social Change:

From Tsarist to Soviet Russian Kinship." The other one is entitled "Proto-Indo-European Kinship."

In the hopes of learning something about his approach to family life, she carried the book to a nearby table. For an hour she tried to read through the first one, but couldn't understand a word he'd written.

COMPETITION

He did write one book which the girl read from cover to cover. It's a detailed study of Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love and desire, whom he compares with Demeter, the goddess of maternal love and devotion.

In the final chapter, he analyses the age-old schism between the two kinds of love. He points out that patriarchal cultures have always felt threatened by the coexistence of sexual desire and maternal devotion in a woman. He speculates that there may have been an earlier goddess who embodied the qualities of both Aphrodite and Demeter, and argues for the need to reintegrate those two states of being.

The book is dedicated to his third wife.

BIGAMY

Ever since the girl became a woman, she and her father have tried to remain on friendly terms. They write each other often and see each other rarely. They even exchange birthday and Christmas presents, although the woman doesn't send any to his third wife or their two daughters.

Last summer the woman had a job teaching in a city close to where her father lives. She invited him to come up for a visit and he offered to bring along his eleven-year-old daughter. The woman hadn't seen the girl for several years and said she looked forward to meeting her again.

The following Sunday she picked them up at the bus station and took them to her house for lunch. As they ate ham sandwiches in the yard, the woman sat quietly and listened to the conversation between her father and the young girl. No matter what they talked about, it came out sounding like a debate or a lecture.

The woman took another sip of lemonade. She wanted to join them but felt she was in the presence of something too familiar. Just then the father stopped the girl in mid-sentence to say that her story didn't interest him. The woman became rigid with fear. This was her childhood, being played out all

over again by the young girl. And then it occurred to her that the girl was the same age she had been when her father left their home so long ago.

She got up quickly, carried their plates into the kitchen and opened a bag of cookies. She was sure that her father would never leave his new family: He was older now and happily married. She looked out the window and saw that he had gone to lie down in the shade. At that moment, she didn't know whether to feel pity or envy for the young girl who sat alone in the sunshine trying to invent a more interesting story.

ATHENA / ATALANTA / APHRODITE

Every time the woman went back to that orange lake in the country, she would try to swim all the way across. Her father had done it many times, but whenever she got halfway over she'd start thinking about those water moccasins. No doubt they'd migrated all the way from Louisiana and were lying in wait for her as she neared the opposite shore.

On her last visit, she went with friends. For a few hours, the woman read and played around in the shallow waters, but then decided it was time to start her journey across the lake. As she swam, she began to worry...she fought with herself...the shore got further away...her legs began to cramp...he loves me in spite of this...he loves me not...I have to do this...I'll never make it...I'm halfway there...I want to rest.

It frightened her to stare into the deep water, so she turned over and began doing the backstroke. Then she thought, "Maybe the water moccasins will put me out of my misery. Or maybe I'll drown trying to do this. If that happens, will he realize what I wanted to accomplish? Will he know I was doing it for his sake?"

But she remembered her mother, who had held on to him so long after he was gone. Was it any different with her now, stuck in the middle of the lake and not knowing whether to go further or turn back?

She stopped swimming and began to float under the bright sky. The sun warmed her face and the water surrounded her like a lover's arms. She thought of her friends lying on the sandy beach and realized how tired she had become. It was time to start the long swim back to shore.

On the way, she only stopped once to turn around and watch her father as he beat a slow and steady path away from her through the dark orange water.

(Epilogue)

(There's no title to this section. This song is sung as a round which repeats six times.)

A,B,C,D,E,F,G

H,I,J,K,L,M,N,O,P

Q,R,S,T,U and V

W,X, and Y and Z

Now I've said my ABCs

Tell me what you think of me.

(see over for credits)

Closing credits:

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"Gretchen am Spinrade" by Franz Schubert, sung by Kathleen Ferrier

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