

The night I made a big splash in the Big Apple

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Here is some advice for anyone who is thinking of falling into a swimming pool. Do it with a swimming costume on; do it only in front of your family or friends; and do it knowing that the swimming pool exists.

I write as someone who, last Wednesday night, breached all three rules in spectacular fashion at the Soho House in New York, a club that is patronized by media people who pride themselves on looking cool. They like to be seen in the company of others who are equally self-possessed.

The Soho House has a roof terrace on which, it transpires, there is a swimming pool. The terrace has been covered with a giant marquee for the winter and you can have drinks under it. I was due to meet some friends at the club and they suggested a rendezvous up there.

Having ascended in the lift, I stepped out into a softly lit space. Peering across the floor, I scanned the tables to find my friends and started walking. I would like to record that I was completely sober.

On my right, I was vaguely aware of a square patch of luminous green. This being the Soho House, which is decorated in a willfully eccentric manner, it did not seem odd. To the extent that I registered it, it looked like an under-lit disco floor. I spotted a friend standing by a table on the other side of the green square, and I headed in that direction.

A moment later, I found

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myself under water.

When you see people on television, or even in real life, falling into swimming-pools, they normally wobble slowly at the edge, sometimes flailing their arms in a last-ditch effort to regain their balance. Then, overcome by gravity, they finally topple sideways and enter with a splash.

My immersion in the Soho House pool was completely unlike this. Since I did not realize it was there, I stepped confidently on to the surface of water and dropped vertically, landing on my feet on the bottom (it is only about four-feet deep).

This was such a peculiar sensory experience that – like a character passing through a vortex in a science-fiction film – I struggled for several seconds to work out what had happened. I was still standing, but my knees had bent upon impact, dipping my head under the surface, I was unhurt, but soaked.

As I gradually came to my senses, with my jacket and shirt now weighing heavily upon me, and the mobile phone in one pocket ruined, it began to occur to me that I was in trouble.

By chance, I had done something extravagantly humiliating in front of an audience with the means to make it known widely. In media parlance, compelling content had collided with powerful distribution.

On the content side, Hollywood is built around the idea that you must be able to grasp the

basic idea of a film immediately. Screenwriters hone the ability to pitch films to producers in a sentence: *Star Wars* meets *Gone With the Wind*, for example. Or, in this case, man meets swimming-pool.

As to distribution, at my table sat the publisher of Gawker, a website devoted to gossip about New York, and the head of public relations at a large Wall Street bank. Later on we were joined by the producer of a late-night television talk show. And that was just one table.

In short, my 15 minutes of infamy were assured. The story was up by 9am the next day on Gawker and that afternoon I got an e-mail from a friend on a magazine saying that a colleague had called to draw her attention to it. “What a terrific story,” he had said, and it is hard to disagree.

I hope it will last only 15 minutes – but momentary folly can endure for a painfully long time. Remember Dan Quayle innocently insisting that potato was spelt with an “e” at the end? Or Bill Clinton quibbling pointlessly about the meaning of the word “is”?

Perhaps I could sue the club for negligence and causing me mental trauma but, frankly, I should have looked where I was going. I would prefer to be known as “the distinguished columnist and author” but I accept that, henceforth, I am “the man who fell in the Soho House swimming pool”. Oh well, it has a ring to it.

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