



WATERMARKS
Life, Death and Swimming

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SUBMERGED

I am in water, submerged and suspended. It feels too tight. There are murmurs, doors bang, there's the thump thump of going up and down the stairs. Clattering, of cutlery on plates, the coal scuttle, a poker. Voices in different registers, and sometimes silence. An owl, right outside in the dark air. On the radiogram, Tchaikovsky. I kick in a desultory way, my heart's not in it. The womb gets fuller and tighter still, I am outgrowing the jar and I can't stop. Even I realise that. And I'm not at all sure what happens next. There's this serpentine connection to my host, cumbersome, lolloping

around my limbs, my face, floating round my neck. There's the noise of an organ, muffled. There's a pulse of sustenance, of care, and in the background there's unease and fear. And then the camel scrabble of kneeling, a lot of gabbling and frankincense, and bells ring. My mother is in her own envelope of faith, and hope.

When it happens I'm waterless. The jar empties, and I'm slithery, viscous, amniotic. I'm hurtled, crushed and squeezed beyond bearing. All I can hear is,

'Bear down, bear down. That's it. Just breathe. That's good. Pant. Pant. Now breathe. And . . . push.'

Voices with a hint of panic in them, under a surface of sensibleness and a whiff of the nobility of suffering. There are the noises of pain. God is mentioned. The bed is ready to receive the fifth child. Two girls, two boys already, they wonder which I am. They pray, they are always praying.

'In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.' They pray, 'Hail Mary, full of grace.'

I slip out to my mother bellowing. I taste blood. There is air all of a sudden, a gasping shock like crawling out of the primeval swamp, with fins and gills and webbed feet. Air is too much for me, then it's not. The lightbulb light cuts into me like ice. I have emerged, and it's all shocking and strange. The taps run on full in the bathroom. They cut us apart. I'm slippery. They dry me, I'm a girl. They wrap me up. Too tight, but it loosens. They bathe my mother's face with a flannel. There's a glass of water on the bedside table reflecting the light. There are tears in my mother's eyes. She stares and stares into my face.

‘Hello, you. Hello, little one.’

A tall shape, like a shadow, of my father stands by the window. It rains, splattering the windowpanes. It’s dark outside.

In the future I will give birth to children myself. In pregnancy I will swim, letting the water bear the increasing weight and form. Proud of my shape as I pull myself up out of the pool, seal slick. Training in breathwork, preparing for the marathon of birth. Up and down the pool I will swim, counting, growing, my child’s body adrift in me. In transition, that worrying limbo between the cervix being fully open and being allowed to push, I will want to cross my legs and go home, want them all to go away. I will throw a bloody pad across the room, and the nurse in short white wellies will look shocked. In my mind my baby might turn out to be a fish or a monkey, and then everyone will know I am not human after all.

My first day. Daylight is a cloak of mist. And milk, yellowy, watery, sweet. Mine. My father brings a breakfast tray. I meet my older siblings, they meet me. Each fingernail is so very small, I clutch without understanding. When my navy sister sees the black sticky mess in the nappy she will be disgusted although she must be used to nappies and baby shit. I wet myself happily, it’s warm. My mother is trying to balance her Graham Greene novel as she feeds me. People come and look at me. My grandmother, wearing a special shirt with little birds on it, says babies like patterns. And there is talk about baptism. For Catholics the unbaptised child is not good enough for heaven. So I am new and perfect, but not.

Soon enough my mother is weary, clumping down the stairs, are the boys wearing clean shorts, and the girls' dresses ironed? All the shoes are polished in a line by my father in shirtsleeves in the back kitchen. We don't have a car, so we walk to church. It's chilly, echoey, stone-cold. It smells of polish, candle wax, ashes, and earth. I have godparents now. I bleat because the water splashed on my head is stone-cold, and they all pray over me. I am not struck by a thunderbolt of God's love or light, although Mary was possibly in the corner of the bedroom when I was born. There is only a chipped plaster statue of her in a niche in the church. Her hands stuck in that double blessing pose, she wears a tawdry necklace. The heavens open on the way home, it's winter. I am a January Sales baby. My birthday is too close to Christmas and New Year, all everyone longs for is an ordinary normal day with nothing to celebrate. A day that isn't special, with no pressure. My baptism is an anticlimax. The water a dribble. Even the cake is dry.

My eldest son won't be baptised. When he is ten days old we'll go swimming, and standing in the pool I will let him go, release him from my hands into the warm chlorine-sharp water. And he will sink down and then float up, and swim, waddling like a soft creature taking steps on another planet. He'll be the best swimmer, Tom, a high diver.

SEASIDE

Now I have a younger brother, so there's six of us children. Quickly we become 'the Little Ones'. My father manages a bookshop, the owner has a flat in Filey on the Yorkshire coast, and so we get to go to the seaside in August. For two whole weeks, my father comes for one. The four youngest go in a taxi to the station with the navy trunk. You can pull out the top drawer and it has all our swimming costumes in it. The older ones walk to the station, and we meet up and sit on the long bench with green Twiglet iron struts and wait for the train. There's our trunk, there are bags, there are lots of

bags, and coats. There are steam trains. The whole platform fills up with steam hissing. There are whistles and stoking and clanking and the engine is beautifully grotesque. We sit in a compartment holding sandwiches in brown paper bags. The countryside hurtles by backwards, I can't quite believe we are the ones moving. We have to change trains at Seamer. The navy trunk is like a butler accompanying us, stoic and loyal. Finally we are in Filey, craning to see if we can see the sea. There's another taxi, craning from the back of that too, I see a glimpse, a strip of it, but 'hurry up now', we're at the flat. It's upstairs and all lino. We tramp around the rooms. I'm squeaking with excitement, my sister says stop squeaking. Oh, I can't wait to get to the sea.

At the bottom of the road are the Crescent Gardens. We can see the sea, and it never ends. The gardens are overlooked by vanilla ice-cream terraces, we skirt round flower beds along the warm path then follow the steps down. Down, round this corner, round the bend, down, and down some more. There are 104 steps, I think. And then we come out across the road from the promenade with the railings, and there's the boating pool. And Filey Bay spread out before us glistening and wet. The sand licked by the tide. There's Flamborough Head at one side, and the Brigg at the other. The beach held in their claws. There's the horizon, and the frills of tiny edge waves on the flat sea. It's calm, it's sunny, it's sandy, salty, fishy, it's all there. And I want to run.

We walk along trailing our bundles, the blankets, the towels, drinks, more sandwiches, buckets and spades, the cricket bat, the wickets, the bails, the balls. I want to drop

everything and just run. Down the cobblestones into the tunnel and out onto the beach, we turn right and find our spot and unpack. I changed into my blue swimsuit with the fish on the hip at the flat, slipping on the lino with excitement. So I can peel off my shorts and jumper, throw them down in our new mini home at the beach. Mum has a book and the bags and they are parked along the grey whale curve of the wall so she can lean back and watch and sunbathe and snooze. And I run, the tide's half out and has left those crumpled ridges like mini desert dunes that are hell to walk on, but I'm running. There's a spell in my head, I'm spellbound. The first touch, toes sinking, cool waves, rivulets, and white and clear and that sound of being washed by it all, the air the sun the sand the salt the water. It's holy. My older brothers are wrestling, splashing and shouting at each other, I don't care, their noise sails out on the air. One sister is wading, the other is back at the promenade wall with my mother, arranging her hair. My little brother hums as we stand in it, beside each other, and are embraced. This is the holiday, now. We are in the sea, it's in us.

In Filey we join the library temporarily each year. Books have to be had, my mother has to have books. Of course we go to church and the Filey priest listens to all our confessions. At low tide we walk to the Brigg with Tata, my Polish father. Following the seaweed-strewn undulating concrete path, up and down, across mussel beds, transfixed by the miniature worlds of rock pools and along to the very end, so we can go round the corner of the headland that's like an old sleeping reptile. There is a wooden cabin painted grass-green where

someone sits and sells purple-wrapped Cadbury's chocolate. We get this as a reward for all the walking. Sitting on the other side on the rocks Tata shares it out, counting, snapping the squares apart. I wee behind a rock, my brothers point and laugh, I grimace, and they point and laugh some more.

We climb along and there's the Emperor's Pool, a stone shelf askew, of emerald water named for Constantine. I want to bathe there, to bask. To be a creature of the deep, an empress with handmaidens. Tata says it's much too slippery. We troop back to Filey along the clifftop. Climbing the iron ladder, rusty, treacherous, wobbly, vertigo-inducing. The path up the cliff is a long nose, with rabbit holes and gravelly muddy grass, it requires surefooted balance. I don't have it, my feet hurt. They've been hurting a while. The others laugh, imitate my whines, my pleas to be carried or to stop and rest. There's no more chocolate.

This curve of the bay is made of the profiles of stern elders with aquiline features, clay faces that watch forever. We pass the yacht club yachts' halyards tinkering in the breeze. And it's possible to get back to the harbour because I'm high sitting on my father's shoulders now. At Coble Landing there's ice cream, candy floss, and Corrigan's, the amusement arcade with pyramids of pennies, miniature cranes tantalisingly about to snare a prize, but never quite. Metal horse races, flashing lights and bleeps, whirrs and the smell of cigarettes. There's the lifeboat, you can climb a ladder to look at it properly, painted navy and white with a swooping belly. The fishermen wear waders and the tractor rescues the boats as they come in on the tide with great chains, and my father sits

with us on the sea wall and stares. While my older brothers whack each other with a tennis ball. They are never tired.

My mother has stayed behind on the beach, just sitting, knitting, reading, snoozing even, she's on holiday, she takes it seriously. My father is watered down by all the space and the air, even when he shouts or chases my sister with a cricket stump. I never mind so much about him in Filey. At the bakery here there are floury baps, my mother makes prawn cocktail sauce and crams fresh prawns inside. This is my quintessential mother, leaning back into the curve of the promenade wall, chewing a bap with a bit of lettuce hanging out the side, tea from the tartan-patterned thermos beside her, a library book, a rug, sandals off, and sandy toes. Staring out occasionally at the sea and the sky, watching her children from a blessed distance. She very rarely goes all the way in, to swim. Mostly she stands in the shallows, water lapping her ankles, towels and jumpers slung around her like ropes. I wish I had known her when she was girlish, less responsible, less tired or likely to be cross. I wish I had known her without being interrupted. I have to go all the way in, I have to try to swim.

Sand in the beds amongst all the sheets and blankets, sand between your toes, sand in your clothes, your hair, sand on the lino. Scratchy, gritty, irritating, sand in your shoes. I keep two small heaps in my shoes on purpose, to take back to York, for after the holiday. Real beach sand. Not the stuff delivered in heaps and wheelbarrowed to the sandpit in the garden. In the future, on a wide Welsh beach I will become a grain of sand in a giant egg timer inside a huge round mandala drawn

out with garden rakes. Someone with a drone will film the sand, us people, falling through, marking the time that will be running out.

On the last night in Filey we trail along to the Vinery, a café in a greenhouse, and eat Knickerbocker Glories. Real grapes hang from the roof, there is salt in our hair and on our skins. We are dreading going home, licking the tall glasses and our spoons clean.