

BREATHING WATER

Dad calls me Billy-the-Fish. He says if I stay under water any longer, that's what I'll turn into.

I think I'd like that. To be a fish. To live, quiet, in this liquid world, where cotton wool sounds and dimpled shadows are the only hint of what's going on above.

When my chest starts to burn and my heart thumps in my ears; when I know I'm about to give in, to burst up through the water to suck in deep, searing breaths of air—then, I imagine it. A tingling, just behind my ears. The skin stretching tighter until suddenly it tears—rips apart under the strain. There will be no pain, just the silky slip of water as it flows into a space at the back of my head. The burning will cool, and I'll let the last air in my lungs bubble out between my lips. I'll look up and watch it rise to the blue of the surface. I am full of water. I am breathing water. My gills must have been there all the time, ready, waiting for their covering of skin to peel back and set them free. But not this time. I lunge for air, gasping great drags of it until the pain in my chest subsides and my heartbeat slows.

"How long?" I ask, when I can.

Dad's sitting on the side of the pool, dangling his long white legs into the water, his watch in his hand.

"One fifty-four point five. That's your best yet. So close!"

I can't see his eyes, only an image of myself in his blue reflective sunglasses, but I know from the way his forehead is wrinkling upwards and his eyebrows have gone high that he is surprised and impressed.

"Well done, mate." He pushes his sunglasses up onto his head, and now his eyes crinkle up in a big smile. "Great job. You'll break two minutes by the end of the week, I reckon."

"Yeah, I reckon I will. Time me again?"

Dad shakes his head. "You've got to know when to rest when you're in training. Besides, I'm getting too hot. I'm going in for a swim. Fancy a race?"

"Nah, might get out for a bit. Can I have an ice cream?"

"Okay. So long as you get one for me, too. I'll just do a quick couple of lengths." He puts his sunglasses and watch down by the side of the pool.

"Grab those as you go, will you, stick them on my sunbed? There's some money in my shorts pocket."

He bows his head, straightens his arms and dives. The water ripples behind him, but there's hardly a splash. I watch to see how far he will get. His body is long, like a spear. He reaches the end, turns and surfaces; he heads back towards me in a lazy front crawl, his arms dipping impossibly slowly. I wish I could do that. The only way I know to stop myself sinking is to churn through the water as fast as I can. I pull myself up onto the ladder. The top rung's above the waterline and it burns my feet as I clamber up.

I time the ice-cream run to perfection. As I weave through the obstacle course of sunbeds and flip-flops I have to keep licking my 99 to stop it dripping down my arm, but I get back to our chairs just as Dad's drying his

back. His hair is sticking up all over, like someone in a cartoon who's seen a ghost.

"Nice shades, dude," he says, as I hand him his Magnum. He reaches his other hand out for his glasses. The light burns white without them, reflecting off the pale flagstones. I feel it spike my eyes. I screw them up against the glare as Dad unwraps his ice-cream. It's already melted a bit at the bottom, and he licks at the chocolate that's oozing around the stick.

"This is the life, eh?" says Dad, leaning back in his lounge.

"How many days have we got left?" I ask, leaning back in mine. I bite into my flake: it's sweet and mushy with heat.

"What's today? Wednesday? We fly back Sunday. Three days." He looks over to me; there's a shard of chocolate on his chin, melting into his holiday stubble. In his blue lenses I am reflected in duplicate.

"You missing Mum?" he asks.

My two selves shake their heads. "Nah, it's not that. Well, a bit." I feel disloyal whatever I say. "No, just wondering how much more time we've got, that's all. I like to know where I am."

Dad nods and looks away again, his tongue catching the white stuff that is dribbling down his lolly stick.

"Good idea, Billy. If you know how much time you've got, you can make sure you enjoy every moment."

I swallow down the last of my cone then lie back and close my eyes. I hope Mum's okay. I should have texted her this morning, but we were late getting up, and I didn't want to miss breakfast. I love having all those choices. We're

definitely getting our money's worth, Dad says. I'll text her when we get back to the room. She'll be at work, now, anyway.

"Wish I had," he says.

"Wish you'd what, Dad?"

"Enjoyed every moment. Understood where I was, and how good a place it was to be."

I slide my eyes over sideways to look at him. "When d'you mean?"

"When we were all together, Bill. Me, your mum. You. It was a great place, but I didn't know it. And I forgot to enjoy every moment."

I think about the screaming and shouting and swearing that went on downstairs and wonder if he's remembering straight. "I thought you hated Farmwell Close? Far-Too-Close, you called it, remember? Everyone on top of each other."

"I don't mean the actual, geographical place, Billy, I mean the place in *life*."

Dad takes a big breath, then lets it out loud, like he's blowing off steam. "The place in life. The relationship. You, me, your mum. We had something good, and I ... I didn't realise how good till it was gone."

I've heard this before but usually late at night, when he's had a few beers in front of the football. He sits on my bed and I just lie there, half asleep and half listening: I've never had to answer before.

"But still, Candy's great, isn't she?" I say, as bright as I can manage. I give him a nudge. "Good enough to eat, eh?"

Dad's head whips round and he lifts up his glasses. His eyes are bleary but his look is sharp as a blade. "Where the hell did you hear that turn of phrase? That one of your mum's?"

As if. “No, one of yours. You said: ‘I don’t love your mum any more. I love someone else. Her name’s Candy, and you’ll love her too. She’s just like her name. Good enough to eat.’”

Dad lies back again. He takes another one of those big breaths, and sighs. “God, Billy. What are you, a human bloody sound recorder?” He’s quiet for ages, then says: “Candy was a mistake. I made a mistake, Billy.”

Dad is not one to own up to stuff—it’s always someone else’s fault. I feel a surge of panic, wondering how to answer. Then understanding dawns. “Oh, did I get her ticket?”

The last-minute rush-around and mad search for my passport suddenly make sense. I’m happy to have got to the bottom of things—tied up the loose ends, as Mum would say—but Dad looks at me like I just stabbed him.

“You think that’s why you’re here? God, the poison that woman injects into you! No. You are not on Candy’s ticket. You were always coming. End of.”

It’s so bright my eyes are burning. They’re all watery and I can’t see anything. “Can I borrow your sunnies for a bit, Dad? My eyes hurt.”

He hands them over. I wait to let him check his reflection in the mirrored lenses before I lie down. He smooths his spiky hair flat.

“Looking good, Dad,” I say.

“You too, son.” He’s quiet for a bit, then says “Do you think she’d ever have me back?”

“Candy? How should I know?”

“No, not Candy. Your mum.”

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I stare at him. My mouth hangs open and I can't find how to close it. It seems like he's looking into my eyes, but I know all he's really seeing is his reflection. So I say it: "I wouldn't hold your breath."

He's silent for a moment, then we both laugh.

The burn of the sun on my skin reminds me of the orange spiral of heat on the cooker when the ring's turned up high. I feel water running down my back; it must be sweat, not swimming pool water, as the rest of me is dry.

"I'm roasting," says Dad.

"Me too."

"Christ! Sun cream!" Dad sits up and rummages through his pile of stuff.

"Up!" he orders.

It's not like when Mum does it—a measured dose and loads of careful rubbing in. This is man-screening. He splats lotion onto me, like he's doing one of those modern paintings, then slaps it from side to side. His palms are rough and my skin tingles where they've been. He lifts the glasses from my nose, settles them back on his own, then gloops a last dose of sunscreen into his hand.

"That's way too much. I'll look like a zombie if you put all that on my face."

"It goes clear when you rub it in."

"No it doesn't—look at me!" I point to the smeary white expanse of my front.

"Okay, okay. Just a bit at a time, then."

He dips his fingers into his palm, and, gentler than I've ever known, he strokes them down my nose. I close my eyes; I can feel his breath on my face. His fingers brush first my right cheek, then my left. He waits a beat.

I open my eyes. He's got his left hand raised in a salute and he's smiling.

"Have you just given me war paint?"

"How, Big Chief Billy-the-Fish. No fear of um sun now."

I lift my hand and am about to start kidding around, too, when his face straightens. I look into the lenses of his glasses, and behind my own striped cheeks I see a brown stomach, pierced with a gold ring.

"Hey, Renata," he says.

I rub my face with my lifted hand then turn around. Renata's lanky, and tanned dark. She's not pretty—too many sharp angles for that— but Dad likes her: I know, because he's sucked in his stomach.

"Another day in paradise, eh?" he says.

Her smile is vague: she's looking around for a lounge.

"Care to join us? Shall I pull up a sunbed for you?" Dad asks. Renata flashes her white teeth. I can see Dad's face reflected in the lenses of her sunglasses. She must be reflected in his. Maybe they go on for ever, reflected to eternity in each other's glitzy shades.

She sits on the end of his bed to wait. Silence doesn't bother her, the way it does me. I feel the itch to fill it. "Did it hurt?" I ask.

"What?"

"The ring. In your belly button."

She shrugs. "Not too bad. You have to focus on the end result. Then the pain, it don't matter so much."

"Oh." I let as much time go by as I can bear. "What's Germany like?"

She shrugs again. "Boring. That's why I'm here."

Dad's heading back, dragging a white sunbed through the throng.

Annoyance trails behind him like a dark cloud where he's made people move to let him through, but he doesn't notice. He's so happy; I should have told him about the chocolate on his chin. He lines the sunbed up next to his own. "Thank you, sweetie." Renata blows him a kiss. Her fingers are long and thin, her nails polished in sparkly silver flakes, like someone dipped them in glitter.

Dad sits again and lies back, his stomach still pulled in tight. I trail my finger through the white lotion on my stomach and draw myself a six pack. "Anyone fancy a swim?" I say.

"Not right now, Bill. Just enjoying the rays."

I close my eyes and let the sun beat down on my skin for a few moments, imagining myself basted and crisped like Mum's Sunday chicken. "Okay if I go feed the fish?"

"Sure, of course, go ahead." Dad doesn't hesitate.

I jump up, and head into the bar. It's so dark after the sunlight, it's like I've gone blind. I stand just inside the door and blink my eyes. I can't see him: I feel my shoulders droop.

"Hey, my friend, is that you?"

I turn. Silhouetted in the sunlight I see Mahmoud. His smile is like a crescent moon. In his hand is a tray, full of empty bottles and glasses. I stand straight again.

"Hey, Mahmoud, how're you doing?"

We high-five, then he comes inside. His dark eyes crinkle at the edges when he smiles, like Dad's, though when Mahmoud stops smiling his crinkles disappear.

"Sorry I'm late, Mahmoud—we slept in."

"That's what I told the fish just now," he says, putting the tray down on the polished bar. "I said, 'Mr Billy had a late night, and first he has his training to do. So no grumbling.'" Mahmoud shakes his head. "But you know what fish are like." He reaches behind the till for the fish food then hands me the canister. Wordlessly, we head out through the glass doors that lead to the courtyard.

The marble is hot beneath the soles of my feet. The pond at the pale courtyard's centre sparkles in the yellow light, the soft trickle of the fountain cool and soothing. Between the green saucers of the lily pad leaves the fish shimmer, orange and gold. Some waft, trailing fronds of frilly tail and fin; others dart, arrow-like, between them.

I unscrew the cap and dip my fingers into the tin, taking just the right-sized pinch of coloured flakes. I scatter them carefully over the surface of the water, which begins to heave with the bodies of the hungry fish, their mouths gaping at the surface. A second and a third pinch, then I close the tub. They would eat more, but that would make them sick. Mahmoud gives a tiny nod of approval as I screw the lid back on. We sit on the walled edge to watch the fish eat.

"They look like jewels," I say.

My favourite wrestles his way through the writhing bodies to nibble on a red flake just beside me. He's flouncy, but not too much: his body is speckled,

orange, black and brown, and his fins waft, but not in a girly way—more like a genteel royal wave. I watch his mouth open and close around the flake of food. If it's true that goldfish have only a three-second memory, then right now he's enjoying the most perfect moment of his life. One minute he was swimming around with the mob, feeling a bit peckish, and the next food came falling from heaven—from the god of the day, Billy-the-Fish. I wonder if he has really forgotten everything that happened four seconds ago. It must be amazing, to just keep going round and round: surprised each time by the silky touch of the lily-leaf you brush against and the delicious new taste of food on your tongue; feeling, over and over, the joy of meeting the girl-fish of your dreams. And never to remember what went wrong on your last circuit: the girl of your dreams turning you down; the flake of food that turned out to be a dead leaf. I gaze into his glassy eyes and think of all the things I would forget.

“So, how long today, Billy?”

“One fifty-four and a half. So close!”

Mahmoud whistles. “Just five-and-a-half seconds to go? But that's nothing, Billy! Nothing at all. You will manage two minutes today, I'm sure of it. And you must come and tell me, okay? So tonight I can bring a celebration cake to your table—with two candles—like I do when it's a birthday.”

I grin. I'll get Dad to take a photo, send it to Mum. “Awesome,” I say. I lift my hand and we high-five again, then I jump down. “I'd better get some practice in. See you later, Mahmoud.”

Renata's got her legs splayed out wide across the sun bed, I guess for tanning purposes. I have to turn sideways to get past.

"Hey Dad, you wanna come time me again?"

He looks up from the newspaper he's holding at arms' length to read. He looks pleased to see me.

"Yeah, good idea mate." He looks over to Renata, as if to say something, but she's got her headphones on and he just puts his paper down and stands.

We sit side by side on the edge of the pool to talk tactics.

"Apparently, your diaphragm's the secret," Dad says. "Renata explained it to me while you were feeding the fish."

"Renata? What does she know about holding your breath?"

"Oh, there's a lot more to Renata than meets the eye," he says. We look across to where she's spread-eagled on the lounge. "Well, okay," he says, "I don't know if she's really an expert or anything. But she sounded very definite—"

"She always sounds definite."

"—and it made sense, what she said. Your diaphragm's used to going up and down all the time, so it freaks out when you suddenly stop it in the 'breathe in' position. It panics. You need to calm it down. Try letting just a little bit of air out, when you feel you're about to implode. That should fool it, let it relax enough to keep going for a bit longer."

"Worth trying, I suppose," I say.

"It's got to be. You're so close, just the tiniest thing could be all you need."

I drop into the water.

"Ready?" Dad's finger hovers over the button on his watch. "Go!"

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I dip below the surface. Dad's white feet dangle in front of my face; I can see the dark hairs on the knuckles of his toes. They make me want to laugh—they're not serious enough for this challenge. Maybe next time I should turn my back to him, but I like to gauge how well I'm doing from the swing of his legs. My ears are full of bubbles and the noise of Dad's feet kicking against the side. Someone starts messing about at the other end of the pool; I hear the muffled cracks of water being slapped and splashed.

I focus on Dad's feet, the soft to-and-fro of his kick as he measures out the seconds. The one-minute burn is just settling on my lungs when I see his feet stop moving. The sound at the other end is getting louder—it's distracting. I give up on this attempt and float to the surface.

Dad's not looking at me. His eyes are fixed somewhere behind my head, his forehead wrinkled, like he's confused. Just beyond him, I see the couple from our floor who got the lift to breakfast with us. We heard the man call his wife Lil, so we nicknamed them Lil and Large. He's holding an open newspaper—all pictures and big writing—but he's not reading, it's just dangling from his fingers. Lil's sitting up, holding her unfastened bikini top against her chest with her hand. They're both staring in my direction, too, but not at me. It's weird.

I hear that cracking noise again, and I realise now it's not in the water, it's in the air. Like fireworks. All at once, everything changes. To our right, at the far end of the pool, people burst into motion, clambering, toppling sunbeds on their side in their rush to get up. I can't see what they're running from.

Then he steps out of the trees, and his black clothes are like a dark gash in the brightness. He's swinging his body from side to side, like Dad cutting

long grass with the trimmer. I don't understand—then suddenly I do. He's like me, playing *Call of Duty*, wildly sweeping my machine gun back and forwards and shooting anything in sight. Only this is not a game. He has a real gun, and there are real bullets. A grey-haired lady with a big, cushiony bosom clutches her stomach and I see blood between her fingers. She falls over, and I can't see her any more.

At the corner of the pool, he turns. He's heading straight for us. Behind Dad, Lil screams, jumps up and starts to run. I know there's no time for me to get out of the pool. Dad knows it too. He turns to me. I see my white face staring back in the blue of his lenses, and he says "Dive, Billy. Right down. Now."

I take a deep breath and let myself drop to the bottom of the pool, but it's not deep enough and I know the man will see me. If I can see the coins Dad throws for me to dive for, then of course this man will be able to see me in my stupid Union Jack trunks. I curl into a ball as close to the edge as I can, pressing my hands against the rough wall to hold myself down. I hear a splash above my head and I look up. Dad's white legs are there, then his face, above mine in the water. He's taken off his glasses and all I can see is the green of his eyes, looking deep into mine. I try to pull him down further, right to the bottom with me, but he shakes his head. Then I understand; he's there to hide me. He wraps his feet into the silver rungs of the ladder to hold himself in place above me. And together, we hold our breath.

A dimpled shadow. Cotton wool sounds. A thump, then another; a juddering in the water, noise and movement at the same time. Dad lets his breath go. It bubbles from his mouth and already I know it was his last breath and I want to cry out but I can't because I know I have to keep mine in. The water

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above me is darkening but I mustn't think what it is. Dad's feet unravel from the ladder and he is drifting upwards, away from me. His arm trails and I catch his fingertips and I know I have to go with him, stay under him, and I rise with Dad to the surface. His body holds me down and I lie under him, the back of my head against his chest.

My lungs burn and my eyes are white hot and I feel as though I am being split open from the inside. I think of Dad, holding me safe, with chocolate on his chin; of Renata, dying with her legs wide open and music in her ears. I think of Mum, waiting for a text that never came. With a sob, I let free a bubble of air. It floats across Dad's chest then disappears. I watch it go and I realise that the pain has gone with it. She was right, Dad. That bit of breath—letting it out helps.

I am filling with water. Breathing water. With a flick of my long, silvery tail I burst into the light.