

## **The Swim Teacher**

**Hanna Louise**

Her eyes are as grey as the city beneath a blanket of North Sea haar. This is the first thing you notice about her. The second is the depth of her fear. Though the water is only waist high she clings to the edge of the pool, trembling.

‘You’ve got to get your shoulders under to acclimatise,’ you say, bobbing up and down to demonstrate.

She mirrors you tentatively. The water is freezing.

‘Keep moving,’ you say, bringing one knee then the other up to the surface in an exaggerated march.

She grimaces, then half-heartedly marches with one white-knuckled hand still gripping the side of the pool. You haven’t taught many adults—lessons are mostly attended by little kids who haven’t yet learned to be afraid. With children, it’s a question of getting them to trust you, then making it exciting enough that they don’t think too hard. Some are momentarily anxious, but it’s easy enough to dispel. *Look*, you say, and demonstrate for the child the very thing you’re asking them to do. *See? Nothing bad will happen.* Adults don’t trust so easily. Adult bodies hold decades worth of fear. You look at the woman with the North Sea eyes and try to guess how many: early- to mid-thirties, you think she is.

Over thirty excruciating minutes you test the edges of her fear, searching for a way in, a place where it might soften into curiosity, where you might gently encourage her to push beyond it. You ask her to put her mouth in the water and blow bubbles, to walk a width of the pool wrapped in a

long, worm-shaped float, to glide forward holding one side of a kickboard while you hold the other and let her feet drift up behind her. She will not do this last part.

‘What are you afraid will happen?’

She imagines her torso will sink forward as her legs come up behind, that she’ll find her face submerged in the water, that she won’t be able to get herself back to a standing position. She is afraid that she will forget to hold her breath. That her body, like some ungovernable, alien thing, will turn against her and insist upon drowning itself.

‘I just know I’m going to inhale when I shouldn’t,’ she says.

That’s when you realise the challenge goes beyond getting her to trust you or the water. She doesn’t trust her own body. This is unimaginable to you: your body has been the one thing you could always rely on. When other people turned their backs, when your mind became fickle and reckless, you could always count on your body to walk or run or swim you back to stasis. It was your body that brought you here, to Aberdeen. To this job in a council-run pool five hundred miles from the life you left after that letter came and split your mind in two.

When the clock hits half past the hour you tell her you’re out of time. She did well to come along. You hope she’ll continue because it’s never too late; we can all learn, no matter what the little voice in our head tries to tell us. She climbs out of the pool, wraps herself in a towel and looks back at you.

‘Thanks for being so patient.’

‘You did good today, Anna. Same time next week?’

She nods before scurrying off to the warm showers, back to her life on dry land. You wonder what her job is, who she lives with, if they ever saw her as vulnerable as you saw her just then.

She is your third lesson of the day. Marked neatly on the timetable with the letter *A* (for adult) and the word *aquaphobic* scribbled in pencil next to her name. In the outside world, she could be anyone.

Later, in your rented bedsit on Hardgate, you pull down the murphy bed at eight p.m. and climb in. There is nothing left that you owe the day. You've worked, gone to a meeting, ran five kilometres and eaten a double serving of tomato pasta. You consider the book on the worktop a mere few feet from the end of your bed, but you cannot summon the enthusiasm to reach for it. Instead, you pull the duvet around yourself and watch the spring light fade through the open window. It was the evening light that made you take this place over the others you viewed. All equally depressing, if you let yourself follow that line of thinking (which you never do), but there was something magic about this little room with its west-facing window. The heady orange glow of a sunset always reminds you this life might be worth living, after all— one day at a time, like they tell you in the meetings.

You were already fragile when the letter came. The sight of it on your desk at the recruitment agency was all it took to upend your life. First, his handwriting, which sent you spinning out to the pub on your lunchbreak. You'd know it anywhere, after all the letters he sent you over the years. Asking for forgiveness, for understanding. You didn't want to open it, but Lisa made you. She put aside your last fight and sat beside you, her hand on your knee as you slit the envelope and the past leaked into the room, poisonous. A two-week bender, then. Blackout after blackout, Lisa enraged and you sorrier and sorrier each time until one night, blind drunk, you told her you couldn't commit to a baby after all. You didn't want to, not really, not in your heart of hearts. You had only been pretending, hoping the act would stick. You drank to drown out the fear it wouldn't. You were sorry, so sorry sorry sorry. Lisa sobbed and threw things. She screamed, low and guttural: fuck you for letting her believe in this life. The last thing Lisa said to you: you're not him; it wouldn't have to be the same. But you saw your fate scrawled in his arthritic hand, cycles repeating, the same tired words on page after discoloured page. That's when your body took over, silenced your mind and packed a case. It was all you could do to spare her, to spare yourself.

On the night he left for good, a stream of sunlight poured through the kitchen window and particles of dust danced in the evening glow. You sat at the table and watched time move the light around the kitchen, shadows lengthening as the colours deepened then died. Then the light faded, following your father's footsteps, and you were alone with the sound of the wind chime swaying in the blue-dark and a slight chill from the open window. In the hours between then and morning, you waited for the inevitable: when the social worker would come for you, put your things in bin liners, bundle it all into the boot of a car. That light was the last thing that was yours before they took you to your first temporary home. It lives in you, even now. Beautiful, so beautiful. Despite everything, beautiful.

You let the falling dark pull you into sleep. In dreams you are drinking again and Lisa is angry; she alternates between shouting and crying. Over and over, your life comes apart at the seams. Then you startle awake, gasp for air, peel off the t-shirt soaked in salty sweat and fumble your way to the sink for a glass of water.

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'Edinburgh originally, but I was in London twelve years before I moved here.'

On Anna's fourth week of lessons, she relaxes enough to start asking questions about you. She wears goggles, a swim cap and a nose clip. Calls herself ridiculous but says it's the only way she can put her head underwater.

'So that would make you, what—'

'Thirty-four.'

'And you just moved here, to Aberdeen?'

'Yeh.'

'Have you family here?'

'No.'

‘Friends?’

You shake your head.

‘No-one at all?’

‘Just me,’ – you summon a smile – ‘fresh start and all.’

You can’t see her expression beneath all the swimming paraphernalia, but you imagine one of disbelief. Who moves to Aberdeen in their mid-thirties to be a swimming instructor? You hold two kickboards out to your anxious student.

‘Enough talking, I want to see you swim a width.’

By which you mean kick her legs while holding the floats on one side, with you holding the other and pulling her along. You’ve been working up to this; the moment when her legs break the surface of the water. She adjusts her goggles, re clips the peg on her nose. Presses her cap down at the back, tucks a stray mousey curl beneath.

‘You promise you won’t let go?’

‘Of course not. It wouldn’t help either of us to make you more afraid.’

Each time you’ve tried this she’s managed the glide, a few kicks, but stopped short of letting her body lie flat on the water’s surface. She only needs to do it once, you think, just to see nothing bad will happen, like when the kids see you swim and realise there’s no danger in what you’re asking them to do; Anna only needs to witness herself move through water to believe that she can. She breathes in, leans forward, pushes off the wall and glides.

‘I’ve got you. I’m holding the floats. I won’t let go.’

You watch her legs turn in a mad cycling motion, not the neat little kicks you showed her. Still, it’s something.

‘Great Anna, but straighten your legs’ – she does, a fraction – ‘Yes, now higher, kick kick kick.’

Then you hear it, a small splash as the sole of her foot breaks the water, first one then the other, her own efforts propelling her forward. You could gradually let go of the floats, you think. It’s all her now. But she has to trust you.

‘Yes!’ you say, stopping her at the pool’s other side. ‘You did it!’

It’s a small milestone, an inch of progress. A tiny triumph over fear. She grins, breathless, bashful, a little kid grin. She has a gap between her two front teeth. You have her practice exhaling underwater for the last few minutes, then it’s half past the hour and she’s scrambling out of the pool.

‘Hey,’ she says, looking back over her shoulder. ‘I’m going to a bar tonight with some friends to see a local band play. You’re welcome to join us, if you’d like? Bar’s called the Blue Lamp, gig starts at seven.’

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People need people, that’s what Lesley who chairs the meetings always says, but you’ve learned it’s easier to not need, to not want. To simply survive. The possibility of connection ignites a longing that wasn’t there before; like smoking, it creates the craving it means to relieve. That’s how dependency begins. Best to stay home, you think, even as you smooth the creases from your one good shirt. And what about her friends? What if they hold you up to the light and find you lacking?

Outside, swollen clouds hang low over the city and the granite shimmers against the sky. All the buildings here are carved from the same cold, clean stone. You imagine the granite could hold up against anything as you walk the mile or so to the bar without a jacket, North Sea wind lashing your bare arms and the backs of your legs. You arrive a little after seven. She looks up as you come through the door. Surrounded by friends, she raises a hand, stands to greet you, shoves a pile of coats aside to make room for you to sit. Smiles that gap-toothed smile of hers.

‘I’m glad you came.’

You’re introduced to her friends; a series of names and handshakes. Somebody heading to the bar offers to buy you a drink. You decline; ask for a pint of water and brace for a round of questioning that does not come. In a moment of quiet you ask how they know one another. The

core group are colleagues, you learn. The rest are partners, friends and... whatever you are. They work in welfare rights. Anna does Tuesdays and Thursdays at the food bank, she tells you, and Wednesdays at the community centre.

‘I tell people what benefits they’re entitled to, make sure they know how to apply and how to fight it if the DWP tries to block their claim.’

You’ve passed a glass of water, then the others branch off into smaller conversations.

‘Why did you want to work in welfare?’

‘I’m good at paperwork,’ – she shrugs – ‘and I want poor people to have money and housing, which is becoming an increasingly unpopular opinion around here.’

‘Here and everywhere else,’ you say. Her words put you in mind of Lisa, who always said the hordes of scroungers in this country give the genuinely needy a bad press. But who were the genuinely needy? She could only ever identify the undeserving: the single-parent families on your street, the homeless man outside the underground.

‘And you,’ Anna says, ‘why did you become a swimming teacher?’

You tell her you swam competitively in high school, then took up teaching to pay your way through university.

‘It’s easy work to fall back on, when you’re between things.’

‘Ah. So, you’re between things. Aberdeen’s just a stopover, then?’

You shrug.

‘And here I thought you’d stick around to see me swim lengths.’

She touches your arm playfully, pulls you back from thoughts of what you left behind— Lisa’s two-bed flat in zone 3, salaried office job, afterwork pints. Trappings of a real life, solid and tangible. And what did you leave it for, really? Chlorinated water, the serenity prayer and the way the light looks when it fades outside your window.

‘You’ll be swimming lengths in no time, I’m sure of that’ – you smile, force yourself back – ‘where did your fear of water come from, anyway?’

‘Now that’s a story.’

You turn your body towards her, rest your arm on the back of the wooden bench you both sit on. Look deep into her eyes, grey and sparkling like the granite.

‘Tell me. I want to hear it.’

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‘For the longest time,’ she told you, ‘My body wasn’t mine.’

You lie awake later, her words coming back to you. In care you heard it all, stories that would live in you forever about the things people do to one another. The other kids’ lives made your pain look like nothing: dead mum, alcoholic dad who gave up and left you to the social workers, but no one ever put their hands on you in a way that made your skin crawl.

‘I became very rigid and fearful, couldn’t cope with anything that felt out of my control.’

Your childhood left you with a gnawing sense of impermanence, a flighty nature and a hunger for movement. Swimming was better than Ritalin at calming your racing mind. Hers cleaved her mind from her body, then a strange haze like the haar rolled in and settled, left her feeling like her mind was draped in gauze: there but not there, present but separate, unable to connect with the way things felt on her skin.

‘When you’re never in your body, you can’t trust it. Anyway— I made this list for turning thirty-five. All my fears. I’m going to face them one by one.’

She listed them: heights and driving and insects, unfamiliar places and public transport, deep bodies of water. All the things you have to contend with if you want to feel alive. How brave she is to push back against her fear, you thought, then said as much. You wanted to offer her something more than words, some small piece of you that might make her feel understood, so you told her about your father. The good and the bad of him: wild camping in the high season of his moods, then the inky-black winter months where depleted serotonin gave way to inertia. His shape



on the sofa and you tiptoeing past to clear away the cans and empty his ashtray. How it turned out he was nothing without your mother. After he left you started seeing him in the mirror, his gambler's smile and traitor's eyes. How afraid you became of your shared grey matter. You wanted Anna to know that you understood fear. The heft of it, the power it has to toss you around like waves on a wild and unforgiving sea.

Now, you wonder if you said too much. If perhaps you should only have listened. Back in your bedsit, watching pools of shadows form in the silver moonlight, you worry she'll start to see him in your face, in your movements, in the nervous cracking of knuckles and your restless limbs.

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'Most adults learn to swim with their head out of the water, like this—' you say, taking the kickboard from Anna to show her. 'Then when they learn to put their face in the water...' — you demonstrate kicking with the board, face submerged, then lift your head — 'they forget how to swim with their head up. What we're trying to achieve is both, alternating. Face in the water, kick kick kick, lift your head' — you inhale — 'keep kicking, face back underwater... and so on.'

Anna nods, brow furrowed, eyes obscured by her steamed-up goggles. She can swim a width of the pool with the kickboard, fighting the water with frantic, exhausting kicks and her head tipped awkwardly back. She has shed the nose clip and learned to exhale through her nose underwater, though only while holding on to the poolside. After two months of lessons, you want her to swim a width with her face in the water, preparing for front crawl. You pass the board back, a challenge.

'Now you.'

She inhales, determined. Moves to the shallowest spot, close to the wall. 'Okay.'

When she swims you walk backwards, a mere foot ahead of her, hands held out an inch from her kickboard. You know she's safe, but her brain is still learning. Two months of twice weekly

lessons, progress measured in inches rather than miles. Anna's lessons remind you of the principles of sobriety: one day, or one tiny skill progression, at a time.

'When you're ready, push off the wall.'

She leans forward into the water, outstretched hands gripping the kickboard, legs rising behind her, kicking slowly at first then faster.

'Brilliant, but smaller kicks, less splashing.'

She corrects her legs, then inhales and dips her head towards the water. Exhales a stream of bubbles through her nose.

'Yes! Fantastic! Now come up for air...' – she does – '...now head forward and exhale again.'

She swims the final few meters to the pool's edge and draws her knees up to her chest before planting her feet firmly on the floor.

'That was great, Anna. You did it!'

She removes her goggles. Grinning, laughing, she claps her hands. 'I can't believe I did it!'

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The city warms slowly as the days lengthen in late spring. Sunlight offers the illusion of heat, but the cold North Sea wind still batters the granite, still whips your skin raw on your walks from Hardgate to the swimming pool. You move through the weeks, collecting days. One hundred and twenty-one of them, to be precise. Four months. Anna asks you to meet her at the beach on Sunday and bring your swimming stuff. She wants to celebrate your milestone, says she knows the perfect way to mark the occasion. You want to be proud, to trust in your choices, but you've been here before and you are afraid. You know how quickly a single bad decision can pull you under. What's four months after a lifetime of fucking up? Nothing, that's what. Still, you go to the beach because she asked you to, because it was kind of her to think of it.

The landmark she gave you was Footdee, a tiny fishing village at the beach's southernmost end. You walk along the seafront, past hordes of dog walkers and families, past dozens of food trucks setting up for the day, and you think that this might be the liveliest place in the city, the beach on a Sunday morning. You pass a shack full of surfboards and wetsuits, then a sauna with a dog dozing outside in a patch of cold sunlight. At the end of the promenade, you see her. She lifts an arm in greeting, and you do the same. When you reach her, you hug and exchange pleasantries about the weather and the setting, how many people there are on the beach.

'It's my favourite place,' she says, then: 'Congratulations, by the way. On your four months.'

You look down at your feet, mumble thanks. When you look up, she touches your arm, tells you how proud you should be. Four months isn't nothing, she says. You know that it's something, but you can't explain it, the way it all feels so fragile.

'You asked me why I was afraid of water, but not why I wanted to challenge my fear,' Anna says.

She looks to her right, towards the sea, and you follow her gaze. Below the promenade, on the beach, you see a large group clad in swimwear and walking towards the water.

'They meet here every Sunday to swim in the sea. My colleagues go; I've tagged along a few times but only for coffee after. It's a lovely community, something I've wanted to be part of for a long time.'

She turns towards the steps leading down to the beach and you follow. The wind lets up and for a moment you feel the sun on your arms, warm and medicinal. Together you walk towards the group and some raise their hand in greeting, welcoming you into the fold. You take off your shoes and t-shirt, remove your phone and keys from the pocket of your shorts. Leave your things in a neat pile beside Anna's handbag.

'Are you going in?' you ask her.

'I'm going to paddle.'

You join the crowd and move towards the sea as one. The first swimmers enter the waves, shrieking and gasping as freezing water washes over their skin. Then it's your turn. You stride in, the shock of the cold jolting your body fully awake. Grey waves lap and swirl, push you back towards the shore. You turn to look at Anna who has waded in up to her knees. She grins and gestures at the water behind you.

‘Go on, I’ll be here.’

You dive forward into the salted swell of an oncoming wave. You swim out, slow at first then gathering force as your body remembers its own strength. Around you, the other swimmers are warming up, the initial shock of cold giving way to a euphoric buzz. It's the kind of feeling that makes you think you could understand religion. The sea: your own higher power. And back on land, Anna waits for you. From the shoreline she watches with her North Sea eyes as you swim out to the horizon, then back towards her.