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Opening Extract from...

THE LIDO

Written by Libby Page

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THE LIDO

LIBBY PAGE

Sometimes, the only way to change your life is to swim outside the lanes . . .

'Joyous and uplifting'
SARAH WINMAN

THE LIDO

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FOR ALEX PAGE
MY SWIMMING SISTER

CHAPTER 1

Step out of Brixton underground station and it is a carnival of steel drums, the white noise of traffic and that man on the corner shouting, 'God loves you', even to the unlovable.

'Tickets for the Brixton Academy tonight,' yells a ticket tout at the station entrance. 'Buying and selling, tickets for the Brixton Academy!' Commuters shake their heads at promoters and preachers who try to thrust leaflets into their clenched hands. You push through the crowds and walk past the Rastafarian selling incense and records outside Starbucks. Across the road is Morley's, the independent department store that has stood on the street for years. 'Love Brixton' glows in neon lights in the nearby window of TK Maxx.

Today spring flowers bloom in buckets at the flower stand: daffodils, tulips and fat peonies. The florist is an old man in a dark green apron with soil under his nails and a gold chain around his neck. Whatever the weather, he sells 'sorry's and

‘I love you’s at a reasonable price. Wrap it up in brown paper and tie it up with ribbon.

Next to the station is Electric Avenue: it heaves with people and market stalls selling everything from vegetables to phone chargers. The air smells of sweet melons and the tang of fish. The fish lie on beds of ice, turning it from white to pink throughout the day and reminding you that you should never eat pink snow either.

Market traders fling prices across the street at each other, discounts thrown like frisbees. Catch it quick and throw it back.

‘Three for a tenner, threeforatenner.’

‘Don’t miss out, three for a fiver, THREEFORAFIVER.’

‘Three for a fiver? I’ve got five for a fiver!’

A young mother with a baby pulls a shopping trolley behind her through the market, navigating the flattened cardboard boxes and fallen banana leaves. She walks slowly, occasionally stopping to examine vegetables, picking them up and turning them over like a dog breeder might examine a puppy. The chosen ones get exchanged for coins fished out of her purse. A man takes a photo of a stand, his eyes fixed on the colours of the vegetables seen through the lens of his camera phone. He then veers away to buy frozen food in Iceland.

On the other side of the street Kate walks quickly in the opposite direction, heading home from her job as a journalist at the *Brixton Chronicle*. She doesn’t have time to examine vegetables. Or maybe she just wouldn’t know what to look for. It may be spring, but Kate is living under a cloud. It follows her wherever she goes and however hard she tries she can’t

seem to outrun it. She weaves through the crowds, desperate to make it back to her house and to close the door behind her and climb into bed. When she is not at work, her bed is where she spends most of her time. On the street, she attempts to block out the sounds around her, trying not to let them fill her up and overwhelm her. She keeps her head down and focuses on the pavement.

'Excuse me,' she says, stepping past a plump elderly woman without looking up.

'Sorry,' says Rosemary, letting Kate pass. She watches the back of the young woman hurrying away – the woman is petite with a mid-length light brown ponytail flicking behind her with the speed of her walk. Rosemary smiles, remembering what it was like to be in a rush. At eighty-six, she rarely goes anywhere fast. Instead she carries her shopping and walks slowly away from the market and towards her flat on the edge of Brockwell Park. She is dressed plainly but neatly in trousers, comfortable shoes and a spring mackintosh, her thin, wavy grey hair pulled back from her face and secured with a clip. Over time her body has changed to the point that she barely recognises it any more, but her eyes are still the same – bright blue and smiling even when her mouth isn't.

Today is Rosemary's shopping day. She has made the rounds of all her favourite shops and stalls, said hello to Ellis the fruit and veg man and collected her weekly brown bag of food. She has popped into the second-hand bookshop run by Frank and his partner Jermaine. The three of them chatted for a while, Rosemary sharing the window seat with their golden retriever Sprout and looking along the shelves for something new or

something she might have missed last week. She likes stopping there and breathing in the musty old smell of hundreds of books.

After the bookshop she shares a piece of cake with her friend Hope in their favourite coffee shop in Brixton Village, the covered market behind Electric Avenue. To Rosemary and Hope it is still Granville Arcade, the old market and the only place where Hope could find the Caribbean foods she so missed when she first moved to Brixton when she was twelve. It is now filled with independent restaurants, shops and stall-holders. The change still unsettles them but they like the coffee shop where the young barista knows their orders and starts making them as soon as he sees them approaching through the window. And the cake is delicious.

Once Rosemary steps inside the Village she is hit by the smell of cooking spices and the noise of people talking and eating at tables in the passageways – the same noises and smells she has become accustomed to through her weekly visits. The market is airy and some restaurants provide blankets that people drape over their shoulders or laps as they eat. Strings of lights hang from the high ceiling, making it feel like a Christmas market even in the spring.

Hope and Rosemary drink their coffee and chat, Hope talking proudly about her granddaughter Aiesha and her daughter Jamila – busy as usual with work. Rosemary fondly remembers Jamila, her goddaughter, passing her final medical exams. She had sent her flowers with a card that read, 'Dear Doctor …'

Hope and Rosemary reminisce about when they worked in the library together, as they do every week.

‘Do you remember the first time Robert plucked up the courage to ask you out?’ says Rosemary with a smile. Hope’s husband Robert had been a bus driver before retiring a few years ago, and when they were both young he would visit the library every few days after his shift, looking around eagerly for Hope’s hourglass figure.

‘It took him long enough,’ says Hope. ‘I’ll always remember how you used to disappear up a ladder and stack books when he was there so he’d be forced to speak to me.’

The two women laugh together, both of them relishing this part of their week. But now Rosemary’s feet hurt and she is ready to be home.

‘Same time next week?’ says Rosemary as they part, hugging her friend and realising that at sixty-eight, Hope too is now an old woman. She squeezes her a little tighter – to Rosemary she will always be the cheerful young girl who started at the library when she was eighteen and whom Rosemary had taken under her wing.

‘Same time next week?’ says Hope, giving a final wave as she turns off down the street to collect Aiesha from school (the favourite part of her day).

Rosemary passes the queues for the bus stops and crosses the junction where the old cinema stands on the corner, the names of this week’s films spelt out in white letters on the black board. Opposite is a large square where elderly men sit in chairs and smoke while teenagers skateboard around them.

As she gets further away from the station, shops turn into terraced houses and blocks of flats. Eventually she reaches the Hootananny, the rickety old pub famous for its live music.

The smell of marijuana floats from the benches outside where groups sit and drink pints and smoke. Here she turns left and joins the road that wraps around the edge of the park and leads to the tower block where she lives.

The lift, often broken, is working and she is relieved.

Rosemary has lived in the flat for most of her life. She moved there with her husband George when the block was newly built and they were newly married. The front door leads straight into the living room, where the most noticeable thing is the bookshelf that runs the full length of the right hand wall.

The kitchen next to it fits a table, two chairs and a television that rests on the washing machine. When Rosemary has unpacked her shopping she crosses the living room, opens the doors and steps onto the balcony. Her navy swimming costume hangs from the washing line like a flag. There are plants out here: just a few potted lavender, nothing too extravagant – it wouldn't suit her. From here Rosemary can see Brockwell Park stretching ahead of her, a view that takes her far from the noise and the crowds at Electric Avenue.

Spring is starting to bloom and the park wears a new green coat. She can see trees, tennis courts, a garden and a small hill with an old house that used to be a manor and is now used for events and for selling ice cream and snacks to sticky-fingered children. Two railways loop around the park: the real one that crosses South London and a miniature one that is only for the summer and very small children. The sun is just starting to set and Rosemary can see people taking after-work walks, enjoying the lengthening days. Runners make their way up the hill and down again. And on the edge of the park closest to her balcony

a low redbrick building wraps its arms around a perfect blue rectangle of water. The pool is striped with ropes that split the lanes and she can see towels dotted on the decking. Swimmers float in the water like petals. It is a place she knows well. It is the lido, her lido.

CHAPTER 2

Every morning on her walk to work Kate passes unknown faces as they wait for the buses or dash out of houses and into parked cars. But there are the familiar ones, too. She sees them every day, their changing outfits and hairstyles like the changing weather, marking the passing of time.

On the high street she passes a very tall blond man with a high forehead who wears a black leather jacket, whatever the weather. Depending on whether she is on time or running late she might pass him at different points along the street. If she passes him when she is at one end of the high street she knows she has time to stop and get a coffee; if she passes him at the other she picks up her pace, breaking into a half-walk, half-run.

Then there is the young woman with dark hair and an animated face who nods her head to her music and sometimes sings along. Often she is accompanied by a young man in Doc Martens. When he is with her she hangs her headphones

around her neck and talks to him, her arm linked through his. Today she is alone.

As they pass each other Kate nearly nods, but then she remembers she doesn't know this woman. She doesn't know her name, or where she heads every morning in the opposite direction to Kate. They have never met but her face is as familiar as the H&M on the high street, the cinema or the market. She is just as much a part of Brixton as the bricks that build it.

The spring sky suddenly clouds and it starts to rain. Kate curses herself – she left her umbrella at home. The shower quickly soaks her and she arrives at the *Brixton Chronicle* office dripping. As she arrives she passes Jay, the paper's photographer, on the stairs. He smiles at her, his mouth traced by a strawberry-blond beard, his curly hair a wild halo around his head. He is tall and broad but soft around the edges, taking up most of the space in the stairwell. They haven't worked together much but they always say hello in the morning and nod or wave if they pass each other in Brixton. He always seems to be smiling and even on her worst days it makes her smile too, even if she can't quite get her mouth to show it.

'Morning!' he says as they squeeze past each other on the stairs. His voice is thick with a strong South London accent.

'Morning. Are you off?'

'Yes, I've got an assignment to do,' he gestures at the camera bag on his shoulder, 'for a review. A new restaurant is opening on the site of an old pub. My dad said he remembers drinking there when he was my age.'

'OK, well see you later,' replies Kate. 'And don't forget your—'

Before she can finish he gestures at an umbrella hooked on the back of his rucksack.

She nods and heads up into the office.

'Been swimming, have you?' asks her editor as she sheds her wet coat on the back of her chair.

Phil Harris is a man whose body hasn't been treated with much kindness. His cheeks are a permanent shade of purple. It is the same colour as the claret that he glugs every night at the local pub with his wife, or, as the rumour goes, sometimes with Not His Wife. You can see steak and chips sitting around his middle like a rubber life ring that will eventually drag him to his death. He is not rich – he never managed to make it up the national newspaper ladder – but his wealth is in the eating and drinking.

She shakes her head. 'No, just got caught in the rain. I can't really swim.'

This is a lie. She can swim. If she fell into a pool by accident she could make her way to the side. She understands the basic principles of where your arms and legs should go to keep you afloat. She just hasn't been swimming since she was a teenager. They had lessons at school but as soon as she could make the decision to stop, she did. It happened around puberty when the girls' bodies felt to them like uncomfortable clothes they'd love to wriggle out of. She remembers the transformation: the giggling rabble became a subdued group by the water's edge, arms wrapped around themselves to cover the shame of their perfect, hideous bodies.

'That might be a problem,' says Phil. 'We've got a job for you at the lido. Of course, it's not essential that you swim – but it

might help you get into the story more, you know, understand what all the fuss is about …'

Kate tastes chlorine and the fear of getting semi-naked in front of her school classmates. Without explaining, Phil throws a folded leaflet across the pile of books separating their desks. It lands on her keyboard. On the front is a black-and-white photograph of an open-air swimming pool. There is a high diving board and a man is captured mid-flight, his arms outstretched like the wings of a swallow. Inside is a colour photo of what Kate assumes is the lido today: bright blue water and children with their arms on the side, legs kicking vigorously.

'Save our lido' is handwritten in large letters on the leaflet. She reads the text inside: 'Our lido, open since 1937, is under threat. The council have announced troubled finances and a private bid to buy the building from a property company, Paradise Living. They want to turn our beloved lido into a private members' gym. Will we stand for it? If you think you can help the campaign, speak to staff at Brockwell Lido.'

'The Swimmers of Brockwell Lido', is signed in neat writing at the bottom. Kate thinks the whole thing looks as though it has been made with a pair of scissors and a photocopier. It is an accurate assumption.

'You want me to write about this?' asks Kate.

Kate currently reports for the *Brixton Chronicle* on missing pets, scheduled road works or planning notices. The bits that go near the back, but not right at the back where the sport is. The bits that people don't read. They are not stories she would show the tutors who taught her journalism master's. Her mum

still collects them in a scrapbook though, which makes it even worse.

'When you're famous you'll be glad I kept these,' she would say, and Kate would sink further into the embarrassment that she wore like a coat.

'Yes,' says Phil, 'I think there's something good in this. You know Paradise Living have already built four blocks in Brixton? They're selling the flats for millions. They think having a private members' gym at Brockwell Lido will help them sell the flats for even more money.'

He turns to Kate.

'So, you said you wanted a story,' he says. 'This is your story.'

Stories were Kate's friends before she found a way with people. She searched them out, hiding among them in the library and tucking herself into their pages. She folded herself into the shape of Hermione Granger or George from the Famous Five or Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey* and tried to be them for a day. When she started secondary school her friends were the characters she met in the pages of her books. They sat with her in the library as she snuck mouthfuls of sandwich behind books so the librarian wouldn't see. (The librarian always saw, but pretended not to.)

Now she tells other people's stories. Even if it's just interviewing someone about their lost cat, Kate always finds it interesting. Often people are surprised by the questions she asks them. 'What is your earliest memory of Smudge?' 'How do you think your life would have been different if you hadn't bought Milo?' 'If Bailey could talk, but could only say one sentence, what do you think he would say?'

Usually her interviews get edited to just the most basic information – 'Smudge, a 3-year old tabby, has been missing from the Oliver household since 3 September. Reward offered' – but she keeps the stories in her head, turning them over like the pages of a beloved old book.

This story is like a ball thrown to her from the editor, and she is not going drop it.

CHAPTER 3

A swimming pool looks lost without its swimmers. It is early and the lifeguard is rolling back the cover, sleepy and silent as he tugs at the plastic. From her spot on her balcony Rosemary can see the mist rising from the surface as though the water is a living thing that breathes. The sky might be blue but the air is still as cold as a shrug. She wraps her hands around her bowl of porridge and watches the lifeguard tucking down into his fleece and then returning inside as soon as the job is done and the water is free.

It is silent until the pair of mallards arrive, skittering along the surface as they land. They have the pool to themselves. Rosemary likes to watch them in the mornings, the two birds enjoying the emptiness of the pool as sunshine is shaken like confetti onto the water.

Eventually the first swimmers arrive. They are quiet, partly through sleep and partly in respect of the stillness and the

mallards. They know the ducks well and swim around them until the pair decide it is time to leave and run away along the water and fly over the lido walls.

The lifeguard surveys the pool from his chair like a tennis umpire on his throne. Watching the swimmers go up and down is his morning meditation, and Rosemary's too. She finishes her porridge, heads inside and takes her swimming bag from its spot by the door.

Rosemary arrives at the lido at seven o'clock every morning. Once she is ready, she pushes open the changing room door and steps into the cold. She would dash if she could. Instead she walks to the edge, her feet arriving about three minutes after her mind. Her body is not as strong as her will: growing old has forced her into patience.

As she makes her way to the ladder she watches the other swimmers: a pool full of arms breaking the surface. Only the breaststrokers have faces that you can recognise.

Lowering herself down the ladder Rosemary feels like a tree in the wind. Her branches creak. She lets go and is taken by the water, letting its coldness surround her and getting used to the temperature before kicking smoothly off the side. She begins her steady swim into the mist. She can't see the deep end but knows that if she keeps kicking she will eventually reach it. Rosemary is eighty-six but in the water she is ageless.

Rosemary has lived in Brixton all her life. Even during the war she was one of the few children who stayed behind. Apart from times when the water was being siphoned by the fire brigade to put out local fires, the lido remained open, and she swam whenever she could. At first she felt guilty for being

in the water while her father and her friends' fathers were fighting. There were close calls too, like when the bombs fell at night on the park just beyond the lido and on Dulwich Road that ran alongside it. She remembers visiting the park the day after the hit and seeing families stumbling bleary-eyed among the rubble as their neighbours chipped in to help salvage any possessions from their destroyed homes.

But despite it all, the lido was there. And as the months passed it became impossible to remain sombre all the time – it was like sitting for too long in her Sunday best. Eventually she just had to fidget and untuck her blouse and scuff her shoes and be a teenager again. During those years the lido was quiet; Brixton's children were mainly evacuated outside the city to the safety of the countryside, and with the men away and women working, lifeguards were hard to come by. She often had the cool blue water to herself.

Over the wall of the lido she hears a bus pulling away from a bus stop. There is train noise too, a pause at Herne Hill before chugging round the corner to Loughborough Junction. Rosemary's life has been built inside the walls of these names. There are all the hills: Tulse Hill, Brixton Hill, Streatham Hill, Herne Hill. Then the 'villages': Dulwich, West Norwood, Tooting. The names taste as familiar as toothpaste in her mouth. She knows the bus numbers by their shape and the road names by their sounds – App-ach, Strad-ella, Dal-keith, Holling-bourne, Tal-ma.

She used to know all the shop fronts too, but they are becoming harder to remember. Sometimes she thinks someone is playing tricks on her. Every time somewhere she knew gets

replaced with something she doesn't, she has to scratch the old place off the map inside her head and replace it with the new estate agents or coffee shop. It is hard to keep track, but she tries. If she doesn't know these places she would be lost in a new city that is no longer hers. She wishes that there were some kind of recognition for all this information she has amassed in her life. If she emptied her mind of all the stored numbers and names and streets then perhaps she could learn something useful, like a new language or how to knit. Knitting could certainly be useful in the winter.

Rosemary swims a steady breaststroke, dipping her head in and out of the water and letting her ears fill with pool. She can see her fingers ahead of her wrinkling in the water, although she can't tell how much is the water and how much is just her age. Her wrinkles always surprise her. Young girls don't have wrinkles. She is a young girl swimming in the morning under the watchful gaze of the big old clock and the lifeguard who twiddles his whistle in his hand. She is swimming before heading to her job in the library – she will have to get changed quickly if she is to make it on time. Her hair will drip behind her as she makes her way up and down the shelves of books.

'Have you swum the Channel yet, Rosy?' George will say when she gets home in the evening.

'Still working on it.'

Now the library is closed though and George isn't here. She stops in the shallow end and leans against the wall before walking slowly to the ladder. She imagines this lido as a private, residents-only gym, and although she is used to the cold water, a shiver runs through her. When she climbs out she is no longer

young and is painfully aware of the existence of her knees. She never noticed that she had knees when she was young; like her free bus card it is a part of her life now that she resents. She still always pays for her bus ticket, on principle.

CHAPTER 4

Kate's walk home from work takes her through the housing estates that wrap around the high street. Every now and then as she walks past flats and down residential streets she glances up from the floor and into the windows of flats imagining the stories inside the buildings.

A family have dinner in their front room, the glow from the television flashing on their faces and showing their expressions of surprise, sadness and boredom. A young girl practises on a second-hand violin, the surprising sound of Bach drifting from the fifth floor of a tower block.

On the floor below the violinist a couple smoke a joint on the balcony, passing it between them. They are fully dressed but have bare feet that are close to each other and almost touching like the rest of their bodies. The sweet smell is the first thing that the woman in the flat next door notices when she arrives home from work. She opens the balcony door, throws her coat

on the sofa and lies down on top of it, hands crossed over her stomach and breathing deeply.

In the kitchen of a ground floor flat an elderly couple eat their evening meal. They sit next to each other and both look out the window at a fox making its way across the communal garden. Once they have finished eating they hold hands under the table.

In a large townhouse a family is spread out across its rooms, each living in their own state but under the one flag. Next door two girls are dressing up, one as a princess and the other as Spiderman. The princess and Spiderman hold hands and bounce on the bed.

Behind some windows the stories are sad, behind others there is laughter and love that might not be loud or flashy but that sits quietly in the rooms like carpet.

As Kate walks she imagines that somewhere in the city, someone like her sits in their room alone and eats peanut butter from the jar. She wonders if any of these strangers would understand her if she told them the thing she can't tell her family – that some days she doesn't want to get up at all and that she has forgotten what it feels like to be happy.

Of course, she won't admit to anyone that she is lonely. You're not supposed to be lonely in your twenties. Your twenties are for making friends for life and having inappropriate boyfriends and reckless holidays where you drink shots off each other's stomachs, having The Best Time. She watches on Facebook as people celebrate birthdays and go out and it seems like they really are having the time of their lives. From her phone screen they seem to sparkle. It's as though all the life has been served up to other people and there are no scraps left

for her. Or at least that's how it feels. She doesn't tell anyone that often she feels like a sad, matted teddy bear you might see forgotten under a bench on the underground. She just wants someone to pick her up and take her home.

Kate lives in a house-share with four other people – two students and two who do something but she's not quite sure what. They come in at different times and shut their bedroom doors, occasionally passing on the way to the (one) bathroom. They are people that she has heard grunting in the heat of sex (thin walls) and whose pubic hairs she has untangled from the shower plug, but she doesn't know where they all came from before arriving here in this house, or what their favourite films are. She doesn't really know them at all.

And they certainly don't know her. But what is there to know really? Siblings: yes, one older sister, Erin. Parents: a mother, a stepfather, and a father who lives in Antigua with his girlfriend and who only phones on special occasions (birthdays, Christmas and graduations).

'Happy birthday, K.'

'Thanks, Dad. Still sunny there?'

'You bet. Still rainy there?'

'You bet.'

'I miss you.'

'OK. Bye, Dad.'

'Bye, Kate.'

Kate and Erin grew up in the Bristol suburbs with their mum and stepdad Brian. Their mum worked at a creative agency; she dressed in a riot of colours and liked to tell jokes. Brian

was always much quieter. He was an academic specialising in a specific timeframe in medieval history that Kate could never quite remember. He wore heavy wool jumpers and round glasses that he was very amused to hear from Erin had become popular among her school friends. Brian had moved in when Kate was seven and she was too young to question anything: her life then was something that happened to her, not something she realised she could influence herself. Erin, six years older, had been more wary, like a cat giving a visitor a wide berth and dashing under the sofa at any sudden movement. But over time the four of them had settled into the comfortable ease of family. They had their established roles and played them well: Kate's mother taking them to new galleries and asking them questions about what they thought of the pictures, how they made them feel; Brian reading aloud from the newspaper, offering to help with homework and occasionally slipping Erin some money so she could go out with her friends. Kate and Erin had their roles too: Kate the shy younger sister with her head in a book, Erin more aloof, bossing Kate about and handing her affection occasionally like biscuits given to a well-behaved dog. On Kate's first day at secondary school her older sister showed her how to adjust her uniform just the right way so she wouldn't display 'nerd' or 'mischief' in the length of her skirt or the number of stripes on her tie.

Kate stayed in Bristol for university partly because it was cheaper to live at home, but also because she didn't feel ready to leave. After her degree she left for London to do a master's in journalism and then found a job at a local paper in Brixton.

When she moved to London Kate assumed she would meet

lots of people. But she has been here for over two years and it still hasn't happened. All she has are housemates who leave washing up to pile like a game of Jenga in the kitchen and think black mould is the perfect decoration for a bathroom.

Her friends from Bristol still lived there and they never wanted to come to London. They said they liked being where they knew everyone, and that Bristol was there if they wanted a night out. They thought London was expensive and didn't see the point. They were right about it being expensive, but Kate couldn't afford to keep visiting Bristol. About a year ago she'd stopped. No one seemed to notice and she hasn't spoken to her friends from Bristol since.

Kate's loneliness sometimes feels like indigestion, at other times it is a dull ache at the back of her eyes or a weight that makes her limbs feel too heavy for her body. When she must take the tube, she likes to read *Time Out* and imagine the things that she could be doing – perhaps going speed dating in Shoreditch, or dancing at a silent disco on the top of a building in the City, or learning how to crochet an ironic pair of pants at a cocktail bar that is also a retro events venue. But then she remembers that speed dating is just repeating your name and occupation to thirty strangers, that silent discos are less fun on your own, and that ironic pants are less ironic when it's only you laughing at them.

So instead after work each evening she heads straight home, unless the fridge is completely empty when she'll make a quick stop at the local supermarket, picking her favourite ready meal and whatever wine is on offer. She comes home, waits three minutes for her food to heat up in the microwave and then shuts her bedroom door.

Her bedroom is not big, but it is large enough for a double bed and a small desk. She doesn't have bookshelves, so piles of books are balanced precariously against one of the walls. On her desk there is a laptop and a scrawny potted plant that her mum bought her when she moved in. 'Bee happy in your new home', reads the tag still attached to the flowerpot, on a card shaped like a bee.

Once inside she opens the wine and sits on her bed watching documentaries with names like *The Boy who Wants to Cut off His Arm*. And she cries, because weirdly she knows exactly what it feels like to want to crawl out of your own body, or failing that, to chop it off and float away. Or maybe that's just the wine. Each night she drinks one glass too many, because it makes her head feel foggy which is better than being conscious of fear sitting on her shoulder and the cloud above her head.

She stays up late, staring into the glow of her laptop screen, hoping to find some comfort there, to feel a connection to people whose faces are also lit up by their computers. When she grows too tired of searching she closes the laptop and puts it next to her bed. Sometimes she keeps on crying, her pillow growing wet around her face. She tries to stay quiet so her flatmates don't hear but sometimes she finds herself gasping for air as though she is drowning. When she cries loudly like that she wonders whether part of her does want someone to hear: to knock on her door and scoop her up and tell her it will be OK. But no one ever does. Once she is empty of tears she lies in the dark with her eyes wide open, feeling completely numb. Eventually she falls asleep.

CHAPTER 5

The swimming club children are fearless. Rosemary watches them wriggling like tadpoles up and down the lanes. They are young enough to be completely unselfconscious as they stand on the edge waiting to dive in. Jostling each other, they pull their brightly coloured swimming caps tighter over their heads.

As she watches from the café she spots the natural athletes: the ones with bodies that are too long for them and torsos that taper to look the shape of ice cream cones. Some of the children are smaller and have little tummies that make hills of their swimming costumes, but their bravery still surprises her when they jump into the water. When the instructor blows his whistle they dive one after the other like knocked-over bottles, ever trusting that the water will greet them with a smile and that their bodies will respond and know what to do once they are submerged. Rosemary wishes she had that confidence in her body – she can't always rely on it doing what she tells it to.

‘Are you Rosemary?’

Rosemary turns away from the pool and looks up at the small young woman standing next to her. She is holding a notebook and pile of papers. Her clothes, in various shades of grey and black, look like they have fallen on her and her hair is tied back in a messy ponytail.

‘I hope you don’t mind me joining you?’ asks the young woman. ‘I was told at reception that you would be a good person to speak to about the lido.’

‘I am Rosemary, yes. What do you want to know about the lido?’

‘I’m Kate Matthews, I work for the local paper. We’re interested in writing about the potential closure of the pool. Did you make this?’

She holds up the ‘Save our lido’ leaflet.

Rosemary blushes. She feels embarrassed about the handwriting and the photocopying – she can see now that it looks amateurish.

‘I did. But I’m not sure if I can help you.’

There is a scraping of plastic on stone as Kate pulls out a chair and sits down. She follows Rosemary’s gaze into the pool.

‘They’re so cute,’ says Kate. ‘And good too.’ Together they turn to watch the children following the instructor shouting to ‘pull’ or ‘kick harder’. Despite being so small they are quick as fish.

‘I wanted to help.’ Rosemary watches the pool for a moment, the water white and frothing with busy feet and arms that are eager to please. The class is coming to the end of one set of lengths and the fastest children are already pulling themselves

out and hopping up and down on the side. The last swimmers continue to the end, kicking even harder than their faster classmates.

'I couldn't just sit here and do nothing. But I hear that Paradise Living are offering a lot of money, and that the council just can't afford to say no.'

Rosemary pauses, looking across at the water. The sun catches the surface and shines on the children as they swim eagerly up and down.

'Paradise Living.' Rosemary laughs. 'They clearly don't know anything about paradise.'

'I've heard about them,' says Kate. 'Our paper has written about them before – some swish new blocks they've built.' She pauses. 'I'd like to interview you, Rosemary,' she says.

'What do you want to interview me for?' replies Rosemary.

'It's for the paper. I think it would be nice to have a profile of you alongside the news story. It would make a great addition to the news piece to have a human story too – to hear from someone who's been coming here for years about what the lido means to them. I was told by the manager that you are the lido's most loyal swimmer. '

Rosemary smiles, thinking about Geoff, the lido manager whom she has come to know well. She then looks at Kate, wondering whether to trust her. She is naturally wary of reporters, although she has never actually spoken to one before. This young woman doesn't look like how Rosemary imagined a journalist to look. She looks like a child.

'How long have you been coming to the lido?' Kate asks.

'Oh, forever.'

Rosemary can't remember a time when the lido wasn't in her life – it is as much a part of her daily routine as the cup of tea she drinks on her balcony.

'Do you swim?' she asks Kate.

'Oh no, I don't really, I mean I …' Kate's voice trails off and she shrinks further into her chair. At the deep end a man does a perfect swallow dive into the water. Rosemary watches Kate anxiously watching the man. Her scruffy ponytail looks in need of a wash, and there are dark circles under her eyes. She sits low in her chair, her shoulders slightly sloped forwards as though they are trying to protect the rest of her body from something. Rosemary's previous wariness breaks like the surface of the water beneath the diver's splash.

'I'll do the interview if you go for a swim,' Rosemary says.

Kate looks startled, her brown eyes darting uncertainly. For a moment she is silent, but eventually she nods.

'OK,' she says slowly. 'When would work for you for the interview then?'

'No,' replies Rosemary. 'Swim first – then we'll sort a date. Here's my email address. Write to me once you've been for a swim. And don't worry. It's like riding a bike,' she says. 'You don't forget how to do it.'

As Rosemary heads back to her flat after saying goodbye to Kate she wonders why she forced the poor woman into the agreement. But there was something about Kate that made Rosemary think she was in great need of a swim.