lovereading.co.uk

The Hour Before Dawn

Sara MacDonald

Published by HarperCollins

Extract is copyright of the Author

PROLOGUE

Fleur treads water in the deep end as the twins slowly climb to the diving board. An older girl goes up behind them to make sure they don't fall.

Fleur is laughing at their excitement. Nikki jumps first, plummets downwards, hits the water and keeps going down. Fleur hauls her up to the surface and she opens her mouth and screams with joy.

Fleur sits her on the edge of the pool and swims back to the middle for Saffie. Saffie leaps and lands almost into Fleur's arms and Fleur scoops her up before she sinks. The onlookers round the pool clap their hands; it is an amazing sight to see toddlers jumping from the diving board.

'We did it! We did it!' they both cry.

Fleur swims to the edge and pulls herself out and sits next to them. 'You're so brave! I'm so proud of you!'

'Now you! Now you, Mummy!'

Fleur looks at them, small brown bodies, wrists and ankles round and babyish still, their fair hair plastered to their heads. They could both swim before they could walk. They have no fear of the water, no fear of anything. She is suffused

with love, overtaken; wants to pull them to her and bite into those plump legs and arms, bury her head in their wet little stomachs.

'OK. But go back to the rug and get your armbands first.'

She watches them run noisily away over the grass; watches heads turn as they always do at the two identical little figures. When they return she blows up their bands, then blows a raspberry on each brown stomach making them shriek.

'Go and sit on the edge of the shallow end, you noisy little girls, and don't jump in until I've dived and I'm in the water. You know the rules. I mean it. If you jump in before I'm in the water, no more diving board.'

The twins nod solemnly and Fleur walks away and climbs the ladder to the top board. Over to her right the sea glitters over the Straits of Malacca and sounds from the naval base below reach her. It is late in the afternoon and a cooling wind is coming from the sea, ruffling the palm trees, touching her wet skin like a whisper. Colours are softening over the grass and families, some with amahs, sit scattered on towels and rugs around the pool, reading, talking quietly, and waiting for the men to finish work and join them.

Fleur stands poised, eyes almost shut, dark hair, dark skin, in a white bikini. She raises her arms, thinking about her movements and the alignment of her body as only a dancer does. She pauses, the diving board rocks, and then in perfect slow motion her body bends, jumps and turns in a perfect arc as she dives, breaking the water with hardly a splash.

She isn't aware of the watchers, of the men turning from the bar, of the women stopping for a moment, of the children, their mouths open in admiration. She is only aware

of this small act of precision reminding her of what her body can do.

When she surfaces, the twins are swimming like small, fat beetles towards her, racing to see who can get to her first. She laughs and propels herself towards them and when her feet touch the bottom she holds her arms wide, turning her face upwards away from their splashes. They grab her arms.

'I won!'

'No, I won!'

'You both won,' she says, clasping them to her. 'Now let's go and get dry because Daddy will be here any moment.'

She plonks them on the side and they start to pull their armbands off. When she looks up David is standing in his uniform watching them, his eyes shielded by dark glasses. Her heart turns over as it always does when she sees him from a distance. She thinks, '*Oh God, he's mine*.'

The twins haven't seen him yet and Fleur knows why he hasn't called out. He likes to watch them. He likes to watch them when they are unaware because he too cannot quite believe in this happiness.

She smiles and the twins turn to see who she is smiling at, then squeak and jump up and run across the grass to him. He scoops them up and walks towards Fleur, laughing.

'Ugh! Horrid, beastly little wet rats.'

'No, no! Peapods. We're peapods.'

'You jolly well are not! Peapods are nice and dry and green.' He drops them beside their armbands, takes off his dark glasses and bends and puts out a hand to pull Fleur out of the water.

'Hi, you.' He kisses her nose, his eyes amused, and Fleur wants to wind her arms round him, press her body to him; the feeling is visceral and overpowering.

'Are you going in?'

'Yes, I'll cool off for ten minutes while you get these rats dressed. Can you get me a beer, darling? I'm parched.'

He walks back with her across the grass where the shadows are lengthening and goes to change. Fleur dresses the twins and gets out their colouring books. She walks over to the outside bar to get them cold drinks and the twins turn and watch her.

She has wrapped a thin, filmy piece of material across her hips and people turn as she passes. The young Malay waiter who is clearing the tables hurries back to the bar so that he can serve her. He carries the tray all the way back across the grass for her and places it on the table beside the twins.

'Hello, babies,' he says. He says it every time and they say in unison,

'Not babies.' And he laughs and gives Fleur his glittering smile and swaggers laconically away.

Fleur lies on her stomach in the last rays of the sun, soporific, listening to the different voices coming to her as the day fades. She can hear David's voice faintly talking to someone as he swims. They will be talking helicopters or flight rotas or new pilots or the boss.

The twins move closer, their warm bodies touch her on each side. Saffie has her thumb in her mouth. They are both getting sleepy. Fleur puts her arms around them both.

What should she wear tonight? They are driving into Singapore with friends to have a meal and walk around night markets before going dancing.

How many times has she worn the green Chinese silk dress? It is ages since they've been into the city . . . maybe she will get some material for a new dress . . .

'I love you, sweet peas,' she murmurs, drawing the twins even closer so that they seem welded and part of her.

'Blub you.'

'Blub you, Mummy.'

The day is drawing to a close. People are leaving. It is the gap between afternoon and evening when only the single officers prop up the bar for a little longer before they too go and change for dinner. She hears Laura's voice in her head.

'You're throwing your life away. I can't believe that after all those hard years of training you can just . . . give it all up . . . What a waste! You're a born dancer . . . You'll regret it, Fleur. One day you'll wake up and regret it . . .'

She hears David return, pick up a towel, drip near her feet. He takes a deep drink of his beer. He is humming under his breath.

Fleur smiles. *I don't regret it, Mum. I've never regretted it for one single second. I'm so happy I want to burst.*

As she thinks this, she remembers someone saying, *Never, ever say out loud that you're happy because a jealous God will hear and strike you down*. The sun goes suddenly, slips behind the sea and all is black and white.

I didn't say it out loud. I only thought it so it doesn't count.

Fleur sits up and David smiles. 'I guess I'd better swallow this beer and get my three sleepy women home . . .'