

LOU ABERCROMBIE

Coming  
Up  
For  
Air

A black and white illustration of a scuba diver swimming upwards. The diver is on the left side of the cover, wearing a dark wetsuit and fins, with long hair flowing behind her. She is surrounded by numerous small fish swimming in the same upward direction. The background is white, and the overall style is minimalist and artistic.

LITTLE TIGER  
LONDON



# Part 1

## APNOEA

**APNOEA** [*AP-nee-uh*]

### **Noun**

The scientific term for holding your breath.  
Literally meaning 'without air'.

### **Pathology**

The suspension of breathing as occurs in diving mammals.



The top half of the page features a light, artistic illustration. At the top, there are stylized, wavy lines representing water's surface. Below this, several small, simple fish are scattered across the space, some swimming upwards and others downwards. The overall tone is soft and ethereal, matching the underwater theme of the text below.

# One Full Breath

Picture this: a girl lying under the water, body relaxed, her fair hair floating serenely while her last full breath pulsates in her veins. Calmly, she contemplates her life, enjoying the stillness and sense of peace that washes over her. The seconds pass by into minutes and still she doesn't come up for air. Is she a fish or perhaps a mermaid? Whatever she is, she seems to belong under the water.

Cut to a shot of me trying awkwardly to stay beneath the five centimetres of water that I'd managed to run before it got cold. Most definitely not the glamorous image that I'd imagined. Wearing nothing but goggles in the bath isn't exactly a strong look.

Holding my breath underwater while going over the events of my day, the way a director might run through the dailies of a film shoot, is my absolute favourite thing

to do. With my view limited to what's right in front of me, and only an inner monologue to narrate the story, it's like viewing my life through the lens. It gives me a new perspective and enables me to focus on what's really important. It's funny how much I can relax like this.

I'm forever imagining myself in a movie. A montage of best mates giggling over a burger; the lone main character, i.e. me, running in a city park; the main character, me again, staring out of the window pensively, with some sort of emotive music to accompany the shot. Wouldn't it be great if we actually did have soundtracks to our lives? You'd certainly know what was coming next if you heard the ominous sound of violins striking up...

*Mississippi eighty-two, Mississippi eighty-three.*

So goes the count in my head while I focus on what the sequel to my London life is going to look like.

Min, my insanely creative, chaos-inducing, fun-loving, stuck-in-adolescence mother, has lost her job – she was a producer for a large Soho post house – and is relocating us to her hometown, some 300 miles away from everything I love and cherish. It's somewhere I've never been and – cue the violins – the place where my dad died before I was born. Min calls it a hellhole on the edge of the world and had vowed never to go there again, but she's rather prone to dramatic outbursts, so you can't take her word for anything. That reminds me: I should look the town up. As an aspiring documentary maker, it's important to

have more than one point of view.

The thing is, I love where we live. It might only be a tiny one-bed apartment, but it's on Wardour Street, slap bang in the middle of everything. It's Min's favourite story actually, how it was purely down to her having the gift of the gab that we got to live here. How, when starting out as a runner, she made friends with Bob, an up-and-coming director, who also dabbled in property development. Quite how she talked him into letting her rent our one I don't know, but they've been friends ever since and here we are fifteen years later...

*Mississippi one-thirty-one, Mississippi one-thirty-two.*

When she first told me that her boss had sacked her, my immediate thought was that it was my fault. Robin's never really liked me hanging round the edit suites and as of last month, when I asked a visiting celeb for an autograph, I've been banned. Not surprising I suppose, given it's a sackable offence and I'm just an annoying fifteen-year-old hanger-on. But it was the presenter from a TV show I'm obsessed with: *Big Mother*, a reality show where children who think their mums are the best get them to go on telly and compete, doing things like baking, running and the odd outdoor extreme sport thrown in for good measure.

*Mississippi one-fifty-two, Mississippi one-fifty-three.*

This change has been coming for some time. Min's been burning the candle at both ends and has said for ages that post-production is a young person's game. I just wasn't prepared for her to make such a big alteration to our lives.

I've got friends here, a Saturday job, school even. But, with Bob selling our flat to release equity for a film he's planning, and Min without a penny of savings, we've got no choice.

*Mississippi one-seventy-five...*

I've been under for nearly three minutes now and my insides are spasming, telling me to come up for air. But I hold on, and just about make it to three and a half minutes before I burst to the surface, gasping for breath.

"Yes!" I yell with a triumphant punch, ignoring the slosh of water over the side of the bath.

"You still in there?" asks Min, picking her way over to the loo where she perches, knickers round her ankles – she'll take any audience she can get – the hem of her vintage dress soaking up the spilled bathwater like a sponge.

"Personal best," I pant, still recovering my breath.

She frowns. "I hope you didn't use up all the hot water."

She tiptoes over to the sink where she begins the long and laborious process of getting ready for a night out. I used to love watching her do it while lying in the bath. An immaculate beehive hairdo, thick black eyeliner that wings out almost as far as her perfectly shaped eyebrows, pale foundation, dark eyes and barely there lips. It's a look all right. And she doesn't have any kind of skincare routine – except soap and water – at the end of a night. How she never breaks out in spots is beyond me.

"Come on," she says, chivvying me out of the bath. "Last night on the town. Let's make it one to remember..."





# Piscary Bay

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Town in England


## Description

**Piscary Bay** is a small bustling fishing harbour in south-west England. Known for its picturesque-postcard appearance, with candy-coloured houses nestling into the hillside surrounding an aquamarine bay that has been known to light up with bioluminescence under the right conditions. It has become an increasingly popular destination for tourists and city types looking to relocate for a quieter life. And who could blame them? Cheap housing, excellent waves for surfing and day trips along the coast to see the copious amounts of wildlife, including seals, dolphins and puffins. Just watch out for the rips *and* the locals...

Weather: 22 °C, Wind NE at 9 mph (14 km/h), 61% Humidity

Population: 20,342 (2011 census)

Local time: Sunday 23rd June 18:04



# A Night to Remember

That evening we do a walking tour of our favourite spots. This involves Min standing by patiently while I record little pieces to camera so that I never forget them. I think it's her way of saying thanks-for-not-going-teenage-ballistic on her. Not that I ever really do. That's more her area of expertise.

There are so many hidden places in London that tourists don't know about. Gothic churchyards where you can sit beneath the gaze of eerie gargoyles. Side streets leading to gardens bursting with flowers and wildlife. Min and I have a whole lifetime of memories in these spaces.

"D'you remember when we schlepped all the way to the Regent's Park playground and I immediately fell out of a tree you'd told me not to climb? And then you had to rush all the way back home, with me screaming in your arms

and blood gushing over your shoulder.”

“Never did get that out of my coat,” laughs Min. “It was my favourite as well.”

I squeeze her hand. “Sorry.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. You were only four, darling.” She says this with an accentuation on the ‘ah’ in the transatlantic-movie-star-from-the-golden-age-of-Hollywood sort of way. We have a shared passion for films, and we’ve been watching black-and-white movies every Sunday afternoon together since I can remember.

“D’you remember when I ran away and hid here?” I ask, as we arrive at our favourite bench in Phoenix Garden.

“Is that where you went?” gasps Min in mock horror, humouring me because we’ve replayed this scene many a time. “I was going spare by the time you got home. It was dark and I—”

“Had a client dinner you needed to get to,” I finish. “Yes, I remember.”

Min grabs my hand, her eyes urgently searching my face. Did I mention that she’s a bit dramatic? “No, it wasn’t like that,” she gasps. “I was worried about you.”

And so continues our reminiscing. Both of us trying not to discuss what comes next, though questions keep floating unbidden into my head. Like what am I going to do in a small fishing village where I know no one, losing all the friends I’ve worked so hard to make? But I push the worries away – I need to find a silver lining.

“If we’re going to live by the sea, we could get a dog,” I suggest tentatively, because Min’s always been against the idea. She doesn’t like the idea of more responsibility...

“Darling!” she shrieks, doubling over with laughter. “You crack me up!”

“I wasn’t joking.”

“Neither was I,” she retorts. “Now are you gonna put that phone down? Can’t eat and film, you know.”

*Looks to camera – speak for yourself...*



After dinner from our favourite Taiwanese street stall and then dipping into the Nellie Dean for Min to say goodbye to the landlord, we head home to face the daunting task of finishing packing up the flat. We find Bob waiting in the street, leaning against the door, dressed like half the TV industry in jeans, suit jacket, shirt and trainers.

“You’ve got a nerve,” Min spits venomously.

“I’ve come to say goodbye. Sunshine...” he coos, his gravelly voice catching on his nickname for me. “I’m gonna miss you.”

Min flounces past him, angrily showing the key in the door. “Make it about *her*, why don’t you? You’re making *both* of us homeless if you hadn’t noticed.”

Bob sighs. “I’m sorry. You know how hard it is getting a foot in the door of the film industry. I don’t want to be making entertainment shows for the rest of my life.”

He turns to me, producing a milkshake from behind his back. “You gonna invite me in or what? I brought your favourite...”

My eyes pop like saucers. “Peanut butter with extra whipped cream? Oh my God, Bob – I love you!” I shriek, pulling him into a hug.

“He’s not coming in,” mutters Min sulkily.

“Yes, he is,” I laugh. “Ignore her. Wouldn’t be our last night without you.”

“S’all right,” he says cheerily. “I brought something for her too.” And in the other hand he produces a bottle of wine.