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# THE TALE OF TRUTHWATER LAKE



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*For Becky and Chrissy,  
my curry-night queens*



1.  
SUMMER, 2032  
POLLY

Late one night when it's too hot to sleep, I catch my brother climbing over our balcony. He's about to lower himself on to the neighbour's wheelie bin when he sees me watching.

'Go back to bed, Polly!' Joel hisses.

'No chance.' I've spotted the towel under his arm, the bag on his shoulder, a dead giveaway that he's going to the beach.

'You can't come,' he protests. 'You can't even swim.'

'I did fifty metres at the pool today, *actually*,' I say though I don't mention how tough it was.

Joel sighs. 'Okay! Come! Just . . . you know . . . be *quiet*?'

I mime zipping my mouth shut. Though Joel and I are unmistakably related – curly dark hair, Dad's green eyes

and Mum's bumpy nose – I'm very much the chatty one, it's true. Also, it's the middle of the night, and my device shows the temperature's twenty-five degrees, so it's way too hot to argue.

The heatwave started just before we broke up for the summer, the last days of term spent melting in classrooms as hot as griddles. It's five weeks into the holidays now, and we've spent most of it stuck inside our tiny flat. The government brought in an emergency law that says when the temperature is over forty-two we have to stay indoors.

'*Another* ruddy lockdown!' was how Dad reacted to the news.

When I was a baby, there'd been a killer virus that meant no one could go out for months. Back then we didn't even have a garden – and still don't – which makes the fact my parents run an actual gardening business sort of weird.

Yet we *do* live across the road from the sea – the English Channel, to be exact. In winter, when there's a storm, the waves crash against our windows and the sea floods our street, all foamy brown and briny. And it rains and rains and rains – sometimes for days on end, sometimes all at once in a downpour – and eventually the drains bubble and the city floods too. It's why Mum insisted I learn how to swim.

'Don't roll your eyes, Pol,' she'd chided. 'If you got stuck in a flood one day, it could save your life.'

Which might be true, though so is Mum's knack for spotting every potential catastrophe.

This summer, it's the heatwave that's done the damage, burning shoulders, scorching lawns, melting pavements. People say the weather never used to be like this. It's on the news constantly: droughts in Sudan, rising sea levels in the Bahamas, footage of flooded homes and starving people and animals. There's no denying we've made a mess of our planet.

Still, it's nice to see my brother smiling for once, his teeth glinting in the dark.

'I s'pose you can raise the alarm if I drown,' Joel admits. 'Though realistically, you're the one more likely to—'

'All right,' I interrupt. 'You're the better swimmer. Point made.'

He's also a better cook, better at schoolwork, better at everything. I'm the average one in our family.

The beach is steep, shingle, on the other side of a main, well-lit road. We reach it down some steps. The shush of the sea, in and out, is restful, like sleep breathing, and at the water's edge I let the tide lap my toes. On the horizon, the red lights of the wind turbines wink, and I wonder if anyone has ever swum out to them.

'You know it's illegal to swim the English Channel if you're under sixteen?' I say, remembering a random fact from earlier when I was online, avoiding homework.

Our teacher set us this task to ask an elderly person about their life – proud moments and regrets, that sort of stuff. I don't know any old people, only Miss Gee, who's just moved in downstairs, and she's not very friendly.

Joel kicks the shingle. 'No Channel swimming for us tonight, then?'

'Nope. The first person to swim the English Channel was Captain Matthew Webb in 1875. Bet you didn't know that.'

'I didn't.'

'And,' I choose a flat pebble, skim it across the water, 'it took him nearly *twenty-two* hours! That's almost a *whole* day – like three mealtimes and a night's sleep, and a day at school. Imagine being in the sea all that time!'

'Hmmm.'

It's the idea of anyone swimming so far that I can't get my head round, especially when I struggle to do a length at the pool. All that water underneath you, not knowing what's down there lurking; the very idea makes me shudder. I imagine, just as Mum would, tomorrow's tragic *Evening Argus* headline:

*LOCAL GIRL POLLY CARRAWAY, 12,  
LOST IN CHANNEL SWIM ACCIDENT*

I back away from the water's edge.

'You know what?' I decide. 'Someone should stay here and guard our stuff. You go on in.'

Joel reads me instantly. 'Thought you were getting better at swimming.'

'I am. Sort of.'

'We're not swimming to France. You'll be all right.'

Joel sets off in the direction of the old pier. I follow, with a niggling feeling that this is where he wants to swim. Years ago, before I was born, most of the pier burned down, and what's left sits a few metres offshore like a giant iron cage. I'd prefer somewhere more open, without the seaweed or bars of rusting metal looming over us. And I certainly don't want to go in by myself.

'Wait for me!' I cry, hurrying to catch up.

Joel strolls on, oblivious, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched under his too-big T-shirt. He's been miles away all summer, my brother, lost inside his head. Mum says he's being a typical teenager, but I can't help thinking there's more to it somehow. When we're level with the old pier, Joel stops and takes off his T-shirt, steps out of his jeans. He's got trunks on underneath. 'You coming?'

I hesitate.

‘C’mon, Pol,’ he coaxes. ‘You said you swam fifty metres.’

I tighten my ponytail. Fifty metres in a pool isn’t the same as in the sea, in the dark, and anyway, it wasn’t *exactly* fifty metres, and I did stop when the water went up my nose. Sasha, who’s meant to be my friend, laughed so much the lifeguard told her off. I didn’t find it funny, but the rest of our swimming class did. Ten people all laughing at me.

‘You know I’m no good at this,’ I said to her afterwards. ‘And you making fun of me in front of everyone really didn’t help.’

‘I’m sorry, okay?’ she said, but I could still see the laughter in her face. I told her so too.

That was when she flipped.

‘It’s not all about you, Polly!’

We haven’t spoken since.

It’s imagining Sasha’s reaction when I tell her I’ve swum around the pier that persuades me in the end.

‘Just don’t swim off and leave me,’ I warn my brother. ‘Or pretend to be a shark.’

Joel gives me an ‘as if I would’ look.

I slip off my sandals. I didn’t get the chance to change into my costume, so I go in wearing my pyjamas. The

thin cotton puffs up, all air, but once my shoulders are under and I start to swim, I realise Joel is right: I can do this. He’s just ahead of me, his arm a white flash as it breaks the water. Together, we aim for the outline of the pier. I try not to think about the water getting deeper beneath us or that if I put my feet down now there’ll be nothing to stand on.

Instead, I focus on the horizon: it’s what a Channel swimmer does, so the internet told me, eyes and brain always on what’s up ahead. My arms move slowly; my body feels awkward in the water. Though I splash and kick, I’m barely moving, but at least I’m not drowning. I do my best not to wonder how far down the seabed is, or notice the pier’s legs giving off a slimy glimmer in the darkness. A few more strokes and we’re almost level with the furthest point of the pier. I’m actually *enjoying* how cool the sea feels. We’ve all been so hot, so bad-tempered for weeks, but this is just delicious.

‘All right, Polly Rogers?’ Joel calls. It’s his stupid nickname for me. ‘Want to keep going?’

‘Maybe, I’ll—’

There’s a flash above us.

‘Geez!’ Joel cries.

My first thought is it’s lightning. A cold, sickly panic creeps up from my feet. Now my arms don’t want to



work properly, and I can't find a way to keep my chin above the water. The flash comes again, just above us on the pier. It's a camera flash, I realise, from someone's device. There are voices, laughter, the creak and ting of someone clambering across the metalwork.

'Might have guessed,' Joel mutters.

Something tells me he knows who's up there. I swallow water, start coughing. Joel swoops towards me, tipping me backwards, crooking a hand under my jaw. We lurch about, a tangle of bumping elbows and too many legs.

'Thought you could swim,' Joel hisses.

I can't speak. Can't breathe.

The camera flashes again. And again.

I'm drowning, I think, and someone's taking pictures. My arms and legs are too heavy to move, yet Joel finds the right stroke to swim us away from the pier.

'It's all right, I've got you,' my brother murmurs.

Somehow he gets us back to the beach. When I see the street lights, the cars parked along the seafront road, for one bewildering second I think we've made it to France. Then I feel the shingle beneath my feet. My legs are so wobbly I have to crawl up the beach on my hands and knees, coughing up a whole ocean of water.

Joel stands for a moment, stunned.

'I'm fine, thanks for asking,' I mutter. I'm never going

swimming again, not ever. No matter how hot I get or how long this heatwave lasts.

Joel reaches for his clothes.

'Don't you dare tell anyone what's just happened,' he says, trembling so much it scares me.

'I won't,' I say.

We'll both be in mega trouble if our parents find out where we've been. But when I look at Joel properly, it's not me he's staring at, it's the pier again.

'Who was it up there?' I ask.

Joel bites his lip. 'No one.'

He's lying. I heard them laughing. *And* they were taking photos of us.

\*

It's worse than photos. The next morning there's a murky film clip posted online of me thrashing about in the sea, and Joel struggling to keep me from sinking. I feel sick, and guilty at all the comments under the post, all the likes. It's my fault this has happened. My fault for following him down to the beach when all he wanted was a quiet swim by himself.

'*I am* sorry,' I try to tell him. I feel terrible. This is far worse than falling out with Sasha.

Normally Joel doesn't get angry, but this has really bothered him, and he bats away my apology.

'Save it, Pol. I'm never going anywhere with you again, so don't ask,' he replies.

True to his word, Joel keeps his promise for the next couple of days, and I keep mine. I don't tell a soul what happened on the beach that night: well, only you.