

**FIG
SWIMS**

**THE
WORLD**

FOR THE ORIGINAL DAB DABS AND OUR THREE GRIMDARK DRAGONS...

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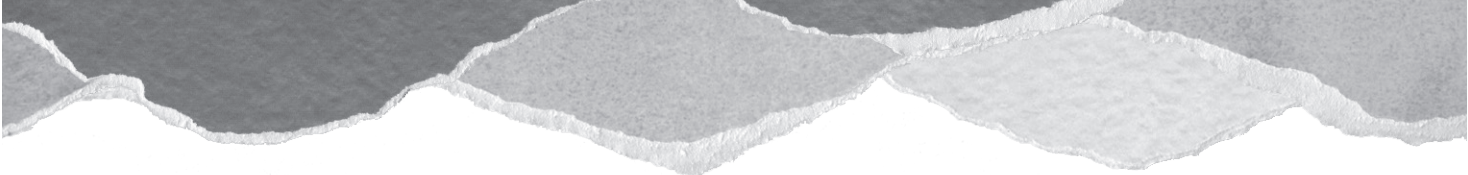
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Lou Abercrombie

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stripes




PART 1

SINK OR SWIM

“Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed
by the things you didn’t do than the ones you did do.”

Mark Twain





RESOLUTIONS

At just under five foot, and with pretty much everything right about her, my best friend Stella is about as different from me as you can get. Even in school uniform, she looks chic and elegant, while I'm like an awkward giant.

"Fig!" she giggles, extracting herself from my enormous hug. But I'm just so thrilled to see my one and only friend after ten days of being stuck at home. "Gutted you couldn't come to the party," she says. "What happened?"

"Mubla happened," I mutter. "Her usual *You don't need to see the date change to know a new year has begun*. She doesn't trust me, Stella. I'm fifteen and she still thinks I need supervising!"

I'm sick of my mother controlling me. She's hacked into my life for too long, insisting on her 'It's my way or the highway' rules; on me having to follow *her* timetable; dressing the way *she* suggests; achieving the New Year's resolutions *she* makes for me.

“She hacked into my phone,” I tell Stella, who gasps. “It was supposed to be the one private area of my life. Dab Dabs promised he’d get her to leave my phone alone.”

“What was she looking for?”

I smile grimly. “She wanted to check whether I had a boyfriend. Now that *would* have been a hideous betrayal, but – shock, horror! – the truth was far worse. That I *don’t* have one. And that I’m the biggest nerd in school.”

“You’re not,” murmurs Stella but I know she’s only being kind.

“D’you know what she said?” I continue. “‘You’re a loser, Lemony. And I was always so popular at school. I expected more from a Fitzsherbert...’ Honestly, I came *this* close to pointing out how ironic it is that my *bullying* mother was disappointed that I’m being *bullied* at school.”

“What *did* you say then?”

I shrug. “Shouted at her for calling me Lemony.”

“Why won’t she call you Fig?” asks Stella, frowning. “Your family’s all about the nicknames.”

“Dunno,” I sigh. “I should start calling her Mother. See how she likes it...”

Of course I probably won’t. Jago, my little brother, gave her the name Mubla because he felt sorry for her after I’d given Dab Dabs his nickname.

Stella grins sympathetically and changes the subject. “Good Crimbo?”

“Effervescent,” I say. “You?”

“Meritorious,” she replies.

Every day we try to out-word each other. It’s a game we’ve been playing ever since Year Five, when Mubla put me into the World Championship Spelling Bee competition. I had to read every page of the *Oxford Dictionary* for eight months but faltered at the World Quarter Finals, on the rather easy word ‘neurotic’. For the record, I got stage fright, and put the ‘e’ and the ‘u’ the wrong way round. Hilarious really, since Mubla uses the word to describe me all the time.

“I’ve made the mother of all resolutions,” I say. “It’s going to blow your mind!”

Stella frowns. “You can’t mean you actually *like* the resolution Mubla’s given you?” She cringes. “It’s not another maths challenge, is it?”

She’s referring to last year when Mubla wanted me to be the youngest person to get an A* in maths A level. I got an A. I do love maths, though. Give me an algebra problem and I will happily sit there for hours.

“God, no,” I laugh. “She’s signed me up for acting classes. Wants me to get over my ‘silly stage fright’.”

“You? Acting! Is she insane?” Then the bell sounds for registration and Stella turns to me. “So what *is* your resolution?”

“I’m going to swim the world,” I reply.

“Flip, Fig!” she shrieks. “Where’d that come from?”

“It was that *Inspiring Women* seminar we had before Christmas,” I say. “The fourteen-year-old girl who became

the youngest person to sail round the world single-handedly. Got me thinking.”

“That’s a flipping awesome resolution,” says Stella. “My one sounds lame by comparison.”

“Why, what’s yours?”

“Drink more water, eat less sugar,” she replies.

We end up doubled over with laughter, until Stella stops suddenly. “Hang on. Isn’t there one tiny problem here?”

I grin. “Yeah. I can’t swim...”



NICKNAMES

Stella walks away, laughing her head off. I knew she'd understand. She's the only one who's ever got me. Unlike most of the people who go to this school. A few years ago, I overheard a conversation between a couple of clones in my class, Maisy and Daisy. They were having a good old giggle about how much of a *loser* I am. They started talking about Dab Dabs and how he freaked them out, and I finally realized why no one, except Stella, had ever come to my birthday parties. They were scared. Of the dead bodies in the basement. Seriously! I mean, they're *dead*.

Dab Dabs, you see, is an embalming artist (self-proclaimed) and a funeral director, which makes our house the *Fitzsherbert Family Funeral Home: Putting Your Mind and Body to Rest*. The basement is where the dead bodies go for him to work his magic on them. It's quite a fascinating place and I'm more than happy spending time down there. It's a bit like a theatre dressing room, with bright lights,

make-up and prosthetics everywhere. Dab Dabs has covered the walls with pictures of his creations. There are some really rather stunning portraits. You just have to see past the fact that all of his subjects are *dead*...

“Well, if it isn’t Grim!”

I turn towards the voice, my shoulders automatically sagging. It’s Cassandra, the so-called school beauty and one of the many girls who like to mock me. Grim is her nickname for me. Something to do with the Grim Reaper on account of Dab Dabs. By her side, acting like two simpering bodyguards, are Maisy and Daisy.

“Your dad work on any *dead* people recently?” Cassandra asks with wide eyes.

“What?”

“*Dead* people. Many of them for Christmas?” She takes a sidelong glance at her giggling mates.

“He doesn’t do funerals at Christmas,” I say. I don’t know why she’s so obsessed with death and me, so I add, “You’re welcome to come and have a look in the basement any time, though. I’m sure he’d give you a guided tour.”

Cassandra flushes red and mutters something about never being seen dead in my house. I’m desperate to say, “Your funeral *is* the most likely way you’re ever coming to my house.” But they’ve already stalked off.

Now I’m late for registration and I hate being late. My form tutor, Mr Harding, glares at me as I try to slope in unnoticed. Not easy when you’re me.

“Fitzsherbert!” He practically hisses my name through gritted teeth. “Perhaps you might try ‘being on time’ as your New Year’s resolution?”

“Sorry, Mr Harding,” I murmur. “Yes, Mr Harding.”

There’s only about two minutes left before the bell goes when Mr Harding hands me a yellow card and goes into protracted detail about how my skirt length is not school regulation and something needs to be done about it. Quite what I don’t know. I’m wearing the longest skirt they sell in the uniform shop.

As a result, I’m late for chemistry and have missed out on being put with a partner. Miss Denny looks desperately at the group, trying to resolve the issue. “Can’t have someone working on their own, can we? Billy, can you share with Fig, please?”

“Ew!” he shouts. “I’m not sharing with Bug!”

Bug is another of my nicknames. Apparently it stands for Big Ugly Giant. Charming. Fug is another variant. Oh, and there’s also Reaper, Boiled Sweet (on account of my name) and the usual obvious ones like Nerd, Jerk Face and Boff. Who knew one person could go by so many names?

“It’s Fig,” replies Miss Denny firmly. “And that’s enough of your nastiness. Come and sit here, please.”

Billy stomps across the room. “Fee-fi-fo-fum, Bug’s gonna make me look very dumb!”

“That’s enough!” shouts Miss Denny, glaring furiously round the room as everyone dissolves into laughter.

“It’s all right, Miss Denny,” I say. “Billy doesn’t need *me* to make him look dumb – he does that all on his own.” Well, that’s what I say inside my head. What comes out of my mouth is, “It’s all right, Miss Denny. I don’t mind working on my own...”



PLANNING

Telling Stella my resolution has brought it home: this is an enormous challenge. If I'm going to succeed, I've got a lot of planning to do. So, after school, I pull out the list of swims I've begun compiling and plot them on a map of the world.

But it soon becomes obvious that I'm not really going to swim across all the oceans and seas in the world. That's a long way – just over 40,000 kilometres. Plus there's all sorts of things in the sea that would happily have me for breakfast.

Sea Creatures to Avoid

1. Sea snakes – if they bite you, you have to know exactly which type to get the right antidote. Don't get me started on water moccasins...
2. Vampire fish aka piranhas – apparently they'll only

- attack you if you're bleeding or weeing, but I'm not taking any chances
3. Crocodiles — shudder
 4. Portuguese man-of-war jellyfish — imagine being stung slowly to death
 5. Sharks — I've already got one man-eating predator in my life (sorry Mubla). I don't need any more

There's also no way I'm swimming near the seventh and coldest continent, which doesn't even have any countries on it. No, I will just have to make do with choosing swims on the other six...

A quick internet search produces an astounding array of potential swims. Many of which I rule out immediately because I honestly can't imagine swimming more than ten kilometres in one go. Actually, I can't imagine swimming ten strokes, but I'll put that to one side for the moment. Clearly, I need some criteria for how to choose my swims.

Criteria

1. Interesting swimming names
2. Mixture of iconic swims and races
3. Interesting locations
4. At least one swim on every continent bar Antarctica
5. 10km maximum distance for any one swim

6. Twelve-month duration for entire adventure
7. Logical route round the world to minimize flying

With these in mind, I compile an enormous chart, laying out where and when each swimming event is in the world, along with the distance, event duration and entrance fee. And, by bedtime, I'm pretty certain I've got a list I can work with.

Fig's Swims Round the World

1. Dinosaur Island
2. The Jailhouse Rock
3. Mount Storm Rough Water
4. The Red Canyon swim series
5. La Isla Bonita
6. Turtle Bay
7. The Greatest Archipelago on Earth
Clearwater swim series
8. Malokodaidai Island 10k
9. The Big Swim series in the Land of Koalas
10. The Lazy River
11. The Cold Drop
12. The Whale Isles
13. The Hot Fjords
14. The Ancients Trail swims
15. Island-hopping

16. The Sunriser
17. The Mermaid Canal
18. The Pilgrimage
19. The Squirly Whirly
20. The Cross-continental

I've decided to ease myself in gently with the first one. It's organized by a company called Voyage of the Water Treaders, who will provide full coaching and lifeguard support in the event that I might actually drown. It's a month before the rest, giving me plenty of time to assess whether I really can do this. And it's only a two-hour train ride from home, unlike some of the journeys it looks likely I'm going to have to endure. I'm a nervous flyer, so I'll be taking the land route as much as possible...

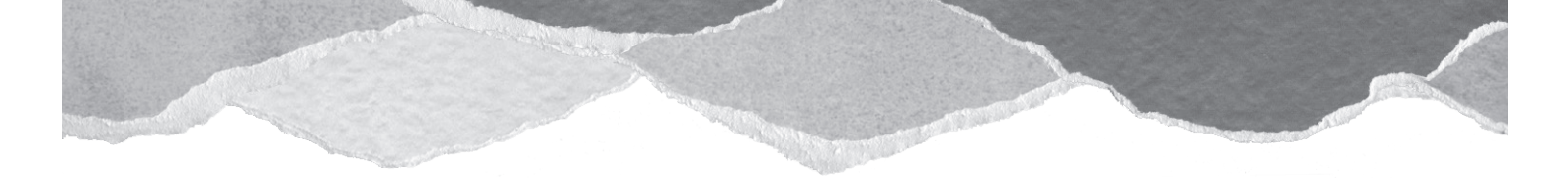
Just looking at the list sends excitement and nerves shimmying through me. I begin pacing round the room, feeling jittery. I can't wait to show Stella.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lou Abercrombie grew up in Essex, studied at Durham University, where she gained a first class Maths degree, and then moved to London, where she worked in television. Lou now lives in Bath with her husband, fantasy novelist Joe Abercrombie, and their three children.

As a portrait photographer, alongside projects such as Shooting the Undead (a series that required Lou to learn how to do zombie make-up) and Age Becomes Her (a series celebrating the older woman), Lou's camera has been deftly focused on a large number of children's, fantasy and crime authors.



Lou has always been a keen swimmer, but a chance reading of an article a few years ago, about Lord Byron, inspired her to follow in his footsteps and swim the Hellespont, a 5km stretch of water between Europe and Asia. Since then she has swum a 10km marathon swim down the River Dart, learned to free dive like a mermaid, swum round Burgh Island and Brownsea Island, competed in the annual Copenhagen TrygFonden swim and completed a night swim with glow sticks. She is always on the lookout for the next exciting swim.

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