

Surface Tension

by Meg McKinlay



WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

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The day that I was born, they drowned my town.

The mayor flipped the lever and everybody cheered. There were streamers and balloons and a really lame brass band. The people of Old Lower Grange ate sausages and potato salad while they watched their lives sink beneath a wall of water.

I didn't see the town take its last gulping breath. No one in my family did.

That was my fault of course. There was no way around it.

I was early, you see. I was eight weeks early and no one was expecting to see me that day.

Mum and Dad were going about their business, trying to decide whether it was morbid or festive to go

and watch their old lives disappear under fifty-seven metres of water, when all of a sudden I was coming.

Mum yelled for Dad and he left the plate he was making half-done on the table, where it would later crack down the centre.

Years later, they presented it to me on my birthday as a keepsake, the way other kids get their booties bronzed or their tiny handprints preserved in colourful plaster.

Here, they said, have this broken plate as a symbol of your birth. It would have been better but you kind of got in the way.

Okay, they didn't actually say that, but I knew it's what they were thinking.

Because of me, while everyone else was gathering at the dam, we were busy racing in the other direction. We were speeding through New Lower Grange, which had been thrown up just six kilometres east of the lever-flipping festivities – hey, presto! – like someone had snapped open a page in a pop-up book. We were zipping past the instant lawns and the empty swimming pool and the hollow shells of buildings out onto the highway and then all the way over to Lenton, the closest town with anything resembling a hospital,

for my inconvenient birth.

By the time Mum and Dad brought me home, things were different. There was electricity in the supermarket and water in the pool. Below the ground's hard surface, the lawn was sending down its tiny, invisible roots.

It was almost like a real town.

If she didn't look too closely, my sister Hannah could pretend this was the street where she came off her bike when she was six; my brother Elijah could tell himself the ridges in the twisty gum tree out the front were from the old tyre swing he used to ride to the moon and back.

But there was no history here, not really.

When Mum and Dad laughed about the time Elijah threw a wad of mashed potato at Hannah, they all turned and stared at the back wall of the kitchen, then looked away again. There was supposed to be a stain on the wallpaper there, a fat circle of damp that had never quite come off.

But all those stories were dead and drowned. The mashed potato and the green-and-orange 1960s wallpaper had been replaced by easy-clean tiles with a trendy mosaic border. Our old lives were fifty-seven

metres underwater at the bottom of a lake and no one could bring themselves to care any more.

No one except me.

When I was little, I used to dream about our house all the way down there in the mud. I pored over the photo albums lining the bookshelves in the hall and wondered what it all looked like now – the twisty old gum tree, the hairpin bend, the tree house out the back that would have been mine.

When I first heard the story of Atlantis, I caught my breath. I took a lump of Dad's clay and made a model of a mermaid, only with short hair, like mine. In kindergarten, I drew pictures of us underwater. I drew all of us standing out the front of the house holding hands under a bright sun and Mrs Morganstern gave me a gold star for excellence. Then I took a thick crayon and drowned us all in blue.

I never lived in Old Lower Grange but I felt like I had. Like I should have. Like those two things were sort of the same.

And even though you couldn't see the damp patches on the walls any more, I knew they were under there somewhere.

You'd think that when you sink something under five thousand swimming pools' worth of water it'd be drowned and gone. You'd think it would be done with. But somewhere inside me I knew – that you can't just drown a town and call it over. That eventually, things have a way of floating to the surface.

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It was the seven-bandaid swim that finally sunk me.

I could have handled four, five, even six. Six had been my record until then.

It wasn't a record I'd wanted to break.

I cruised the last few metres in a slow breaststroke, keeping my head above water like a grandma, all the better not to see disgusting floating bandaids with. I reached for the wall, slapping the tiles with both hands the way I'd learned in swimming classes.

"Exactly level," our PE teacher always said, leaning over us with a stopwatch like we were in the Olympics or something. "Or – *bam!* – disqualified!"

No one was really sure why he was teaching us this stuff. Most of us hadn't quite mastered the frog kick yet.

Max Cartwright still swallowed water when he opened his mouth to breathe.

When we asked Mr Henshall why it mattered, he shook his head. It was just one of those rules. Don't question, just do it. You could blitz the field, finishing half a lap ahead of second place, but if your hands weren't level on the wall or you got out before the whistle blew, it was all over.

I don't know why I kept doing it. I couldn't help myself, even when I wasn't actually racing, even when I was just doing my *six laps a day without fail, Cassie, okay?*

Six laps, every day over summer, up and down in my faded blue Speedos while everyone else hung out on the grass in their stripy bikinis, or dived and splashed and did bombies around me.

That's what the doctor said. Not the part about the bathers and the bombies. I don't think she really thought it through that far. She just said six laps. That it would be good for me. For my lungs, which weren't quite ready to be born when I was, and had given me trouble ever since.

The doctor said it, so Mum said it too.

When you feel like you can't breathe, that's when you dig in. That's when it's doing you good.

My own theory was that when I felt like I couldn't breathe, I should probably stop and take it easy for a while. Luckily, Mum didn't come to the pool with me these days; she just gave advice from a distance then went back to her marking.

I reached behind to squeeze water from my hair and took a deep, ragged breath. Something caught in my throat and I coughed, once, then twice, then again and again in short, staccato barks.

I clamped my mouth shut and felt the coughs detonate inside, puffing out my cheeks like tiny explosions. I hooked my fingers over the edge of the pool and hunched in towards the side, hoping no one would notice.

Yeah, this was doing me good.

Voices yelled and feet slapped across the concrete. I lifted my head to peer over the edge. Liam Price was stumbling over himself, slipping on the wet tiles, falling towards me.

I pushed backwards and down. I felt him land in the water above, then plunge down, one knee clipping the

edge of my shoulder.

For a few seconds, we were tangled underwater, a mess of arms and legs and frantic bubbles.

When I broke the surface, there were faces leaning over the edge of the pool.

Amber and Emily. Laughing.

“Sorry,” Liam said. “They pushed me.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Emily teased.

“This.” Liam’s hand sliced through the water, sending up a shower of spray.

“Hey!” Amber jumped back. She was grinning. They were just mucking around, the way kids did. At least, kids who hadn’t spent half their lives in hospital or doing laps or being told by their mothers to take a break and not get overexcited, not to push themselves too hard. Unless, of course, you were doing your six and it was time to *dig in*.

Amber patted at the damp patches spreading across her rainbow-striped bikini.

“Oh well, I guess I’m wet now.”

She took a step forward and dived in, arcing over my head into the water behind me. I turned to watch, the way I always did when Amber swam, when she cruised

down the pool with a stroke that cut through the water like it wasn't there, a stroke that was smooth and fast and kind of *accidental*, as if she wasn't even trying.

It wasn't fair that someone who didn't care at all could swim like that.

I looked back at Liam. Then again, lots of things weren't fair, when you thought about it.

As I turned, he headed past me towards the ladder and hauled himself out, his board shorts flapping around him.

They were too long, those shorts. Too long to be cool, too long to be comfortable. Too long to swim in without them suckering in and sticking to his legs. He was always pulling at them, peeling them off his wet skin with one hand, holding them up at the waist with the other.

I heard Emily whispering about it in class one day. "His mother buys them a size too big. So they won't show."

I didn't know if that was true, but the shorts did the job, anyway. You couldn't see Liam's scars.

Everyone knew they were under there, though, even if he kept them covered. Even if he had long ago found

a way of walking, a jerky kind of rhythm that smoothed out his limp so it was almost invisible. It didn't matter what any of us saw or didn't see. Because what happened to Liam's family was a story the whole town knew and couldn't forget if it tried.

Liam took a long step out of the pool, skipping the top step of the ladder. As he left the water behind, he gathered the waistband of his shorts around him, pulling the drawstring in tightly, seamlessly, like he wasn't even thinking about it, like this task, of keeping his too-large shorts up, of hiding his scars, was as natural to him as breathing.

He shot a glance behind him as he went, back at me. To see if I was watching, maybe? To see if I cared?

I wasn't. I didn't.

I was watching the water he'd pulled himself out of, the way it surged and pooled and settled back into itself.

I was watching the bandaid floating in his wake, coming towards me across the surface like a homing pigeon.

Seven?

I grandma-stroked my way to the ladder and hung off it for a minute, stretching my arms until they tingled.

Then I hauled myself out, not bothering to look back.

I wouldn't be coming here tomorrow. I had a better idea, one that had been sitting quietly in the back of my mind for I wasn't sure how long. Maybe always.

I would still do my six laps, or something like it. Up at the lake, it would be harder to measure, but it would be better, in so many ways.

It would be still and peaceful.

It would be bandaid-free.

It would be other things, too, but I wasn't going to think about that now.

I wasn't going to think about the empty streets and the broken buildings, the way they had turned themselves over to fish and weed and who knows what else. It didn't matter what was down there below me in the quiet dark. Everyone knew that swimming was about staying on the surface.