

'Beautifully captures the heart of the intimacies  
found inside the world of cold water'

GILLY McARTHUR

THE  
COLD  
FIX

SARA BARNES



# THE COLD FIX

DRAWING STRENGTH  
FROM COLD-WATER  
SWIMMING AND  
IMMERSION

SARA BARNES



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield  
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SARA BARNES

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I am broken, but have never felt more whole  
Mum, Dad, Emily, Robin and Baloo



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# THE TARN

Patchwork black, grey and white mountains loomed in a semicircle around Bowscale Tarn: a mix of black and grey gabbro and granite, white snow and ice. Ravens hiding in deep crevices watched the solitary woman approach the brink of this north-facing tarn and come to a standstill. They waited.

I wanted to catch my breath, gather my thoughts and decide on my entry point. Only I knew why I had stopped. Only I understood how much reaching this point 240 metres up a Lakeland fell on a cold Saturday in December meant to me. Fear of my legs failing me halfway up the snow- and ice-covered bridleway, as they had the previous February because of crippling pain, still haunted me. Lack of confidence to negotiate the icy roads to the start of the bridleway had oozed into me as the road conditions deteriorated. Uneasiness that doing this on my own in the middle of winter was utterly foolhardy had twisted my sense of adventure. But grit and determination to drag myself up on to the next level of physical and emotional recovery had forced a hasty, but considered, packing of my rucksack with essential winter mountain and swimming kit. Then I had swiftly heaved it into the boot of my car before I changed my mind.

Now, on the edge of this eerily quiet, almost holy tarn, I felt humbled. My legs had proved to be strong enough, my fitness levels high enough and the joy I felt in my heart rich enough. All I had to do now was choose the right entry point and check my exit was the same or better. I knew the tarn bed dropped off sharply from the bank, and not surprisingly, this knowledge only fed my fear of deep water. In places, there was what looked like solid ice on the surface so I couldn't see what was below. I reminded myself that this adventure was mostly about completing the walk and less about the swim.

Having said that, my body ached to be immersed in that dark, cold water, to scrunch semi-frozen slush with my bare feet and to feel completely alive on this day of celebration.

A large lump of granite had rolled down the steep mountainside thousands, maybe millions of years ago and its gently sloping shape invited me to rest awhile. It was also in exactly the right place, just beside the tarn's outflow, Tarn Sike. I knew this end was shallow. Suddenly, I felt excited and brave again. Coming here on my own had indeed added a risk factor, but it had also motivated and driven me to climb, literally, out of my comfort zone and rediscover a world that had been out of reach for too long.

Slowly, I stripped off my human layers, folding each piece of clothing carefully in the right order for putting back on when I was frozen post-swim. This deliberate, almost ceremonial, derobing allowed me time to calm my heart rate, breathe more slowly and enjoy the moment. I didn't need anyone else there; I was in a very happy place in my head. To wear neoprene swim socks or not? Life had narrowed to essential decisions only.

Voices broke into my thoughts, and for a moment I felt irritated. I'd planned a solitary, inward-focused experience. I craned my head round to see who was coming up the path: a middle-aged couple with their dog trotting on ahead. The black spaniel ran up to me and sniffed around, but didn't jump up. I had tensed as soon as I saw it approaching me, fearing its claws on my bare legs.

'Morning,' called the woman cheerfully. 'Are you going for a swim?'

To deny my imminent plunge, given that I was just wearing a black swimsuit and a navy bobble hat, would have been churlish to say the least, and although part of me went immediately on the defensive because I didn't want to alarm anyone by swimming alone in winter conditions, the other half leapt into sociable mode, eager to share my passion.

'Yes, just a dip, here, where it's shallow.' I pointed to the black water a short distance from my bare feet, which were now rather cold. I needed to either get in or put some clothes back on.

'Do you mind if I come in with you?' The woman's request took me by surprise and without thinking I responded with an enthusiastic, 'Yes, of course. Are you a swimmer?'

## THE TARN

Her husband nodded and raised his eyes skywards. 'She gets in everywhere; I just hold her towel.'

With a smile, I waited by my rock while the woman quickly stripped down to sturdy black sports bra and knickers. Suddenly, my solitary swim had become something else, something actually rather exciting and heart-warming. She was so thrilled to have found me by the tarn, she said, as she picked her way across the frozen grass and loose stones towards me.

I was tempted to take her hand so that we could walk in together, but I hardly knew her! The thought made me laugh and then I counted: one, two, three! In we walked, gasping as the slush grazed our feet and then our calves. So far so good, though – the bottom of the lake here was firm, if a little tricky because of the stones. I closed my eyes for a moment and breathed in deeply, one step closer to relaxing before the cold water bit in as it reached the top of my thighs. Caroline (she'd introduced herself as we were standing on the edge) let out an 'Ooooh!' as her nether regions met semi-frozen tarn. Then it was my turn to gasp, being slightly taller. The shared experience of doing something so ridiculous as walking half naked into water so cold that it could kill you in minutes if you accidentally fell in, did something to normal social filters. In this moment we were connected and nothing else mattered. Her husband and dog stood in silence on the bank, but they may as well have been warming themselves by the fire in the pub, so unaware of them were we.

Our feet were sliding about inelegantly, but we gripped each other to keep balance and then we found the 'boggy bit'! It was each to her own now and in we fell, face-planting the tarn and taking a few panicky strokes before standing up again and shrieking at each other. 'Oh my God! That's cold.'

This place of brooding crags and staring ravens echoed with our chatter and squeals as we each revelled in being there, in having met each other, in sharing this amazing experience. Caroline's husband was taking photographs and I had my GoPro – everything was being recorded digitally and emotionally.

But although I loved what we were doing, a part of me still wanted a few moments in the tarn alone. It was Caroline who said, 'Thank you so much for letting me join you, but don't you want to be here on your own?'

She understood, as swimmers seem to. I smiled and nodded. 'Thank you,' I added.

I felt good, not cold, and I could still feel my fingers and toes. But we had stirred up silt and floating debris with all our bouncing about and I wanted transparent, icy water around my body. Bowscale is one of the clearest tarns I've swum in; the water quality is unequalled, except perhaps by Wastwater. Time to brave the deep! I walked barefoot along the snowy pathway for a hundred metres or so until I reached clear water; so clear that I could see the bottom between the floating pieces of ice.

Excitement bubbled in my belly and once more I was in the moment, resetting my state of mind to accept the water on my skin. This time it felt warmer, which was all relative, of course, considering further out the tarn was completely frozen over. I couldn't wait to sink down and immerse right up to my chin. At that point I closed my eyes and allowed my body to relax as it adjusted once again to the cold. The metallic smell of icy water floated up into my nostrils: I inhaled it until the back of my throat smarted from the cold. Silence surrounded me above and below, or so it seemed, until my ears tuned in to the minute crackles of shifting ice, the faint murmurs of the couple as the woman dressed and sipped the hot drink her husband insisted she have, an occasional breath of air as the wind ebbed and flowed and, to my relief, my own heartbeat.

I don't write a gratitude journal or routinely give thanks when I dip, but that day felt special for so many more reasons than I could have anticipated when I got up that morning. The strength of mind I had needed to even get myself out of the house, let alone walk up the frozen bridleway, felt overwhelming. I was close to tears at what I'd been able to achieve. This was the 'no turning back point' in my journey to rediscovering a physical life in the Lake District.

## BEFORE

Out on my bike I felt free and as strong as anyone else I knew. My legs and willpower could take me up Pyrenean cols and mountain passes steadily, never fast, but I always got to the top and felt elated. Descending was even more thrilling because I was never sure whether I'd make it down in one piece – a blip in the road surface and I'd be over the handlebars – descending always played games with my mind.

On an August sunrise, the Giant of Provence hunkered down under a soon-to-be cerulean blue sky, mild and complacent for once. Fortuitous for me as I crept out of the still-sleeping gite in cycling socks, not wanting to disturb my family at this crazy, still-night hour. White cycling shoes in one hand, handlebar bag in the other, I couldn't help but grin to myself at the adventure I had waited so long for. My original plan, for which I had relentlessly trained, was to attempt to climb the mountain by three different routes in the same day and become a member of the prestigious Club des Cinglés du Ventoux (which literally translates as the 'Mont Ventoux Crazy Club'). Each route is approximately twenty-one kilometres with gradients reaching ten per cent as the tarmac climbs through pine forests and open mountain slopes to the summit at 1,910 metres. Success is definitely not guaranteed and many cyclists are forced to submit to the mountain's fierce and unpredictable weather patterns, which are partly down to its geographical position – in the middle of a plain with no other mountain nearby. The so-called 'bald mountain' is a bit of a monster!

But I was ready for a monster of a ride: Malaucène was going to be my first starting point and I already knew how I'd tackle it: plenty of water, a few snacks, a few photo opportunity stops (probably not officially

allowed, but in my book I'd still have climbed the mountain and reached the summit) and above all else by zoning out, allowing my mind to travel to a nicer place, leaving my legs, lungs and heart to do the work.

It was how I'd climbed El Tiede, Col d'Aspin and numerous other epic and classic routes around Europe. Distance became irrelevant so long as I allowed myself the above essentials. And it made solo cycling less lonely.

Being zoned out and pedalling steadily in a comfortable low gear were working perfectly and I knew my heart rate was not being pushed anywhere near my limit, but I saw no reason to work harder. Why make it any more painful than it already was? The small white placards every now and again indicating the gradient had remained at seven per cent, but on the way up towards Chalet Renard every fibre of my body knew that the gradient had increased. Sure enough, the next placard grimly reported ten per cent.

Now it was even harder to zone out. My heart rate had increased so that I could hear the blood pulsing through my temples; my fingers gripped the handlebars as if by pushing down I would be propelled forwards faster. My legs ached from the additional effort and even though I dropped a gear or two, nothing seemed to alleviate the pain and urge to unclip and give up. I knew there were four more kilometres at this gradient and if I didn't calm myself down and settle into a relaxed rhythm, I'd blow up.

The hardest battle I'd ever faced on a bike began.

First, I controlled my breathing by consciously slowing it down and deliberately drawing in more air through my nose and blowing it out in long blasts through my mouth. My muscles became more oxygenated and my vision cleared, leaving me free to focus on the tarmac ahead as it rose up and up.

There are no bends on this part of the climb and the road is quite wide. On the left-hand side a few trees protect you from any wind, and on the right is a steep bank of reddy-coloured rock and sand, where road-making machinery has gouged out the mountainside. You can see what lies ahead and it is terrifying.

No respite from the toil of turning the pedals, listening to the scrunch-scrunch of tyres on the hot, dusty tarmac.

Determined to stay seated on the saddle, I chose a gear that I could

sustain and forced my mind to journey somewhere else – a shady orchard with a long wooden table laid out ready for lunch. On it were hand-painted ceramic plates, long-stemmed wine glasses, bowls of ripe cherry tomatoes, sweet peppers and grapes. Every time I felt the pain intruding, I added another delicious dish: garlic-scented couscous, pan-fried goat's cheese and delicately dressed green salad leaves.

And that was how I reached the top of the Giant of Provence in my fifty-second year, quite possibly the best cerebrally fed cyclist ever to have conquered the monster.

More importantly, it was the last monster I ever conquered on a bike. Those legs that had powered me up the mountain were breaking down inside, cartilage was being eaten by a disease and pain started to become my daily torturer.

To unravel from this level of fitness and strength and watch myself become increasingly immobile broke me into thousands of pieces, emotionally and physically.

Today, more than five years after surgery, I know that I will never cycle at this level again, I will never have the privilege of calling myself a Mont Ventoux Crazy, but do you know what? Even on that historical August day in 2013, my thought processes had started to change. Halfway up the road from Malaucène, I made the decision to not take on the massive three-way cycle ride I had worked so hard for. Why was I willing to do that? Because it didn't feel right to spend the whole day away from my family, expect them to drive around after me, watch me suffer on the climbs and then to have to put up with me being too tired to join in their fun on what was after all meant to be a holiday. For too many years I had stolen hours from them that could have been 'mum and kids' hours, instead of 'mum obsessively cycling' hours.

What had I been running away from? Because that was the question that had kept me awake the night before my Ventoux Challenge: what was I afraid of if I just stopped, full stop?

# STOPPING

I'm alive.

No pain.

Don't feel sick.

Can I move my legs?

Ow!

I opened my eyes and moved my head on the pillow, licking my lips, which were a bit dry, and my throat was sore from being intubated during surgery. I lifted my left hand to look at the intravenous cannula, taped on with a tube coming out of it, feeding me painkillers. My eyes closed again and I sighed, partly out of relief it was over, partly from post-op sleepiness.

Reassuring noises: telephone, voices, various beeps, whirring machines, and one that I didn't recognise, coming from halfway down the bed. That was when I started to drift back into reality. The rhythmic pumping noise was connected to the gentle squeezing and releasing of the cuffs wrapped around my lower legs: they were connected to the Intermittent Pneumatic Compression machine to help prevent DVT. But I couldn't be bothered to lift the sheet to take a peek.

When I signed the yellow consent form to have major surgery on both legs at the same time in February 2017, I had no idea how awful the post-op recovery period would actually be. Nor did I ever imagine that it would be the start of an incredible journey of hope, self-discovery and healing.

At the age of fifty-three I became extremely bow-legged and I could hardly walk. I was diagnosed with severe osteoarthritis in both inner knee joints. Cycling and running had become impossible, places like Mont Ventoux a distant memory. Everyday activities, including cooking, going up



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and down stairs, doing the washing, gardening and getting in and out of the bath or shower, were excruciating. I lived off painkillers to numb everything and to help me sleep.

My consultant gave me some stark choices. Do nothing, the pain would increase, and my mobility would decrease until I was in a wheelchair anyway. Have one leg operated on at a time and the recovery would be far easier, but possibly take longer.

Or – SNAP, SNAP! – have a bilateral osteotomy and be prepared for short-term pain for long-term gain. There were no guarantees for how successful the operation would be, but he was confident I would get my ‘Eureka’ moment within six months.

With either procedure, he insisted on my being completely non-weight-bearing for at least eight weeks post-op to allow the broken tibia time to mesh and heal. If I had both legs done at once, I would have to use a wheelchair. To be honest, this didn’t really mean anything to me. I had no idea how not being able to bear weight would affect me on a daily basis.

The consultant thought I had the ‘right’ character to go for the bilateral option. Apparently, because I was athletic and had the mindset to challenge myself physically on a regular basis, he felt I would be able to cope with the difficult recovery. What neither of us knew or even expected was that this ‘difficult’ recovery would be never-ending.

Back to a chilly, grey Lancastrian afternoon in the hospital, nearly at the end of day one. I thought I’d be allowed out on day four. I’d borrowed two wheelchairs. My plan was to keep one upstairs to move around the large, open-plan kitchen, dining and sitting room, and the lightweight one downstairs to get from my bedroom to the en-suite bathroom.

Gingerly, I lifted the sheet to take a look at my legs. I tried bending them up, but it hurt too much and I winced. How on earth was I going to have a pee? I pressed the buzzer that lay on the bedcovers. After a few minutes, a nurse arrived, smiling and asking what I wanted.

No, hang on a minute, I thought, as she started to help me out of bed. I’ve just had both legs broken; it’s not a good idea to stand up and walk. Hasn’t anyone told her that I need to be non-weight-bearing?!

Was it my imagination, or was she overly brusque when I asked her to bring me a bedpan? She didn't seem bothered that I couldn't pee, but suggested I try drinking more water and offered to come back later so we could try again.

What was she going to do? Push down on my bladder for me? I knew from bitter experience that it was not going to work – I could drink my bladder into full capacity, it'd go into shock and I'd need a catheter. They might as well have done it there and then and saved me from all the pain and anguish I knew I'd experience over the next few hours.

But it wasn't until late that night that they relented and the catheter relieved me of 869 millilitres – no wonder the pain in my lower body had become intolerable.

So that was day one. The pain level had gone up to a strong eight out of ten by the time the lights were dimmed and the nurses did their rounds.

As expected, on day four I was allowed home as I'd finally managed to pee all on my own. My daughter had driven down in my mother's car to collect me. Brave, I thought; she was not used to driving an automatic, but we had no other option. I was a little worried about how she was going to manage the wheelchair. I am five foot ten, not light, and she had no experience of this sort of thing. With a little help from the nurses and with me behaving and doing what I was told, I was safely installed in the front passenger seat and Emily squeezed the wheelchair into the back.

It felt so good to be home. It wasn't easy getting the wheelchair plus me up the outside steps into my room, but with Emily, my mother and my son, Robin, all pulling and pushing, we made it. And, by using the bright yellow plastic banana board supplied by the physiotherapist in the hospital, I transferred myself from the wheelchair on to the bed.

But I couldn't stay in bed forever. I was going to have to work out how to get myself around so that I could do basic daily tasks independently. The first and most urgent manoeuvre was from bed to wheelchair to toilet and then from toilet back to wheelchair. And that was when the bond between Emily and me got tested on a new level. This is not something you want anyone else to witness, let alone your daughter. There inevitably comes a

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time for all parents and their offspring when the roles are reversed, but this was premature and one of the hardest things I've had to do, much harder than exposing your body to the medical profession during pregnancy and childbirth.

Oh God. This recovery was going to be difficult, humiliating and painful.

My every need was going to have to be met by my daughter or my mother. It was just dawning on me how helpless I had become. I did not want anyone to see me naked, sitting on the toilet or struggling to wash myself in the shower sitting on a stool. Thank God every member of my family seemed to be blessed with a down-to-earth sense of humour.

That first evening, post-shower, without any hints or suggestions from me, Emily filled a washing-up bowl with warm water and spa crystals and gave me a foot pamper, which included rubbing spa cream into my feet. I had never had anyone do this for me before. She sat cross-legged on the bathroom floor in front of my wheelchair, and told me to put my feet in the bowl and let her do the washing. Music from her phone wafted in from my bedroom and I allowed myself to be looked after.

My first night was easy; I was still spaced out with a cocktail of drugs, so relatively pain-free. But as this wore off over the next few days I found that it was at night that my mind started to play games with me.

Nothing can prepare you for how awful you feel alone in the night. The weight of your loneliness suffocates you. The yearning for this to be over frustrates you. The fear of the unknown eats away at you from the inside out. I had questions that I was too scared or embarrassed to ask: will anyone fall in love with me again? Will I be able to walk up mountains again? Will I ever cycle up an alpine pass again? And what about sex? I guess I'd better take reverse cowgirl off my bucket list now.

These were dangerous, self-destructive questions that were born out of being scared of the future and what it now held, private questions that I had no one to ask. So I kept them buried deeply inside me and just took more painkillers to bring the relief of sleep. But I knew that when I woke, the questions would surface again.

And then I remembered I had been discharged from hospital with some liquid morphine in case the pain exceeded the reach of all the other

painkillers I was swallowing. My mother had jokingly (I think) asked me whether I'd give her the bottle if I didn't use it. 'Just in case,' she half laughed, but I guessed at what she was thinking.

It helped me to sleep.

When I was a little girl, I wrote a short story about being a mouse living on the tracks of the London Underground. I think I'd been influenced by Mary Norton's book *The Borrowers*. My mouse had a daily struggle to keep clean and he was deaf. He scampered about on the tracks searching for titbits, and as soon as he sensed the slightest tremor he jumped down into the dirt and lay as flat as he could, often under a discarded cigarette packet.

I think in the end he misjudged the tremor and got flattened anyway, but that's another story. I have always had a very vivid imagination, so I found it easy to miniaturise myself, grow fur, whiskers, beady black eyes and nimble, pink paws.

The only way I knew how it felt to be an eel, on the other hand, was because I started to dream about them after taking the liquid morphine that night. The dreams were vivid and I was the eel.

In my dreams I could dive down into black water without hesitation, fearless, fast and strong. On the riverbed I wriggled about looking for food, turning over stones and pebbles with my head, flicking my tail to catch up with a fleeing fish or frog. Bored of the depths, I swam up towards the glittering surface of the water, brushing carelessly through lacy weeds. Nothing clung or stuck to my silky smooth body; I was invincible and bold.

As I lost the feeling of weightlessness and speed, I knew I was waking up, coming out of the dream. My brain reconnected to the broken bones in my legs and pain entered my world once more. The heaviness of immobility pressed me into the mattress and I needed to turn over, ease my aching back and hips. The night was over and another day was beginning. But in my dreams I was an eel: vibrant, strong and free.

Given the quirky layout of my house, on several floors with four different flights of stairs, I was confined to my bedroom for eight weeks. Those flights

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of stairs may as well have been the climb up Mount Everest. And my bedroom was Base Camp. At least I'd got to Base Camp!

Great, I thought, something to keep me busy, and surely it would be relatively easy to achieve the climb up to the kitchen and life as I had once known it? I'd just go up and down on my bum and somehow get into the wheelchair without putting my feet on the floor. And therein lay the problem: if you can't put your feet down, you have to rely on the strength of your arms and upper body. I bought some kettlebells.

In the meantime, I decided to practise on the three steps leading up to the next floor. Emily placed the banana board across from the wheelchair to the second step. Not quite. The banana board only just reached and my arms weren't yet strong enough to bear the weight of my body.

Second attempt.

With careful positioning of the wheelchair, I managed to slide across from the seat on to the banana board and then on to the step. Emily then whisked the banana board plus wheelchair out of the way. It was so tempting to push down with my heels, but I knew I mustn't. I was terrified of snapping my healing broken bones.

We thought for a few minutes about what to do next.

Emily placed an upside-down washing-up bowl with a cushion on top of it under my feet. The idea was for my legs to be relaxed on it, supported rather than under any pressure, which left me free to push down with my hands on to the step behind me. With an enormous heave I succeeded in dragging my bum up and on to the step. As planned, my legs followed me up. Emily moved the bowl back under my feet and I was able to get on to the landing.

I rolled about a bit, relishing just lying flat on the hard, carpeted floor. I called to Robin and my mother, who were upstairs in the kitchen, to come down and see me and share my joy (I learnt later my mother was cross because she thought we were messing about when she needed help getting lunch!). I could chat to my mother and Emily, although Emily was still bustling about and my mother was waiting for Emily to stop bustling before she put the broccoli on. But Emily, being Emily, was still bustling because she didn't think the broccoli was ready yet.

After a few days of hard work, finally I got myself upstairs into the kitchen and living room. Emily dragged the wheelchair up after me so that I didn't have to bum-shuffle across the floor like a tired old slug. We also installed a commode up there, tucked away discreetly by the grandfather clock in the corner. When it struck the hour, I peed.

It was early May 2017; three months post-op, I was now weight-bearing using crutches, but not allowed to drive. Emily had come home for a few days to check on how I was doing. It was a stunning spring day, with real warmth in the sun, but Crummock Water still holds its winter chill well into June. We were going to have a family trip to the lake, said Emily, for a potter and a picnic. I thought I might try and swim because it was something I could do 'without legs'. As a family, we've often swum in the lake and river pools, so neither of my children were surprised, and I was excited when they said they'd join me, but in their wetsuits.

From this end of the lake you can see right down to where Rannerdale Knotts juts out into the water, creating a small, sheltered cove, much loved by divers, swimmers and local teenagers on a summer evening.

Round the corner, Crummock continues and, as you follow the narrow road that teeters just above its dark waters, you can take a peek at the gentle fells of Rannerdale on your left and, on your right, the more rugged, roadless western side, which stretches up to Mellbreak and the lower fells of the High Stile range. After a period of wet weather, Scale Force and other mountain becks thunder down the fells, creating bright, white torrents that cut into the brown-green rocky slopes. I imagine the mountains' hearts have broken and there is no stopping their tears.

My son and daughter's pre-swim warm-ups made me laugh as I lolloped down to the water's edge, using a pair of crutches to help me across the pebbles to where Robin and Emily were strutting like supermodels posing for a new range of wetsuits: 'sun's out, guns out', pouting and flicking their hair.

Dropping my crutches on to the beach, I gesticulated impatiently and urged my children to get ready. 'Come on! Hurry up!' It was pretty nippy standing there in just a swimsuit; I needed to get in the water out of the slight

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breeze that seemed to have picked up. I was also worried about standing for too long on my half-mended legs without the support of crutches.

Excitement, trepidation, pain and impatience swirled around inside me as I started to walk in; I didn't want to fall or be pushed, but as Robin squealed past me, waving his arms in the way that only teenage boys can, the cold water splashed up on to my bare back and arms and I'm afraid I couldn't hold back some (to use our family term for it) 'non Boxing Day' language.

Satisfied with my reaction, he turned and headed towards his sister.

Emily was cautious too, but mostly because she didn't want to get her hair wet, I thought. She shouted at Robin for splashing her and that's when I noticed she'd got her phone in her hand and was taking selfies – no wonder she was being cautious!

'Come on, Emily, get rid of your phone and let's swim!' I called.

'In a minute,' she responded.

More photos and more hair tossing.

I was up to my thighs now, embracing the chilli-pepper prickles popping wildly on my skin. Looking down through the clear water at my poor, scarred legs, I felt detached from them; they were no longer the focus of my world.

I breathed in deeply. Mossy, clean, soothing aromas filled my lungs: the water, the stones, the silty lakebed, the budding leaves dipping into the water.

My senses came alive.

Standing alone, in a world of my own, I trailed my hands delicately across the surface of the water, drawing a wide circle as my waist twisted from side to side. I could feel my body again, the way it wanted to move, pain-free, flexible and strong, just like the eel I had dreamt of.

A shudder passed down my back and I was brought back into the now.

I wanted someone else near me. As I stepped forward I could see that the water was getting deeper. And then dropped into dark. I don't like seeing that. I have an innate fear of deep water. It's about what else is in the water with you.

Robin came splashing back towards me with a wicked grin on his face and I knew that unless I immersed myself in the next second or two I was

going to get pushed in. Just before he could reach me, I bent my knees and down I went.

I tried to relax my breathing as the cold bit into my core. Swearing and gasping threatened to take over as my whole body fought to defend itself. My son splashed in next to me and I pushed him away, reminding him not to kick at my legs. Then there was Emily too, her hair piled on top of her head, grinning as she swam a graceful heads-up breaststroke towards us.

As we headed out into open water, I tried to quash the fear rising from my stomach and the dark thoughts that crawled out from the corners of my mind.

My imagination was kicking in and I was quite glad when Robin distracted me with a splash and a wriggle as he tried to touch the bottom. But he couldn't, so panicked and half swam, half splashed his way back to where he could stand – and then ran out. I turned round too, a little panicky myself, but Emily was calm and her presence reassured me.

I relaxed and could breathe normally. I floated on my back and looked up at the sky. Immediately, I felt composed and could refocus on my surroundings.

It was one of those days where the clouds floated freely, forming shapes high above me. The mountains and fells were a bright green in their spring clothes. Mellbreak, Grasmoor and Whiteside were all cloud-free and I was sure I could touch them.

I forgot where I was.

My legs floated out in front of me, pain-free. I didn't want to get out and have to put weight on them again, not just yet. In that moment, the water whispered something insane to me: it would help me on my journey back to full mobility. I didn't need to ask how. I just knew it to be true.

It took until May 2020, three years from that first swim in Crummock, for me to get some pain-free days, to walk again with a 'normal' gait, to finally begin to believe that I had a physical future. Three years of daily physiotherapy, on my own or with a sports therapist; three years of all-season swimming in the lake; and three years of training myself to withstand the bite of the cold as I walked into the water.



## STOPPING

Time to fall in love: with the water that was healing me and with the woman I was rediscovering inside my broken, hurting body.

I went through a difficult stage of having nightmares before each swim. I had to fight an internal battle: did the beach shelve gently down into the lake, or was there a steep drop-off and I'd be in God knows what depth of water? What else was swimming in there with me? Would it see my white legs dangling down? Not a chance! I *never* let my legs dangle – they're either kicking or curled up close to my body.

Those nightmares were worse if I was doing a winter night swim. I remember one particularly difficult occasion when I was meeting a friend for a mid-November dip. As I drove down the road that snakes close to the enormity of Crummock Water, the black hulk of Rannerdale Knotts threw a shadow over the water. Once parked up in the divers' car park, I got out of the car and waited for my friend. Looking up, I saw that more stars had broken free and it felt more comforting to look at them than the water I was about to submit to. Once my friend arrived, there was no turning back.

The air temperature was about 5 °C and the water in this, the deepest part of the lake, might just about have struggled to reach 5°.

There were a few large stones underwater to negotiate and the drop-off was, to put it politely, extreme. I had to commit to the water, stagger briefly and then swim. I tried not to swallow too much of the lake as my breathing sharpened, my legs found nothing below them, my arms didn't seem to have any pull to them and the fears started to flap like vampire bats in my imagination.

I could see my friend's head and shoulders moving out beyond where the ledges jutted out from the Knott. Already I knew that the expanse of cold, deep water between us was just too great for me to cross.

Who knew what was down there, thirty metres below me? Divers had once found a man's body there, his coat pockets weighted down with rocks, a note left in his parked car, 'Body in't lek'.

I couldn't do it.

I stopped, but didn't dare let my legs hang down.

The only things keeping me up were my tow float and the straining muscles in my neck and running across to my shoulders. Otherwise, I was

literally petrified. My legs were tightly curled up. My arms waggled about uselessly across the top few inches of water.

‘You alright?’

My companion’s voice sounded distant, but near enough to shake me from my dangerous state of immobility. I could see her head torch glinting, so I knew she was looking right at me and I could hear the concern in her voice.

‘Yes, yes, I’m fine.’

I think now, in hindsight, finding my voice gave me something tangible to hang on to in that black nothingness. I told myself that most swimmers find night swims difficult, especially when it is freezing in the water. But that night it was so cold that it almost didn’t feel like water, more like hot pepper clouds – weightless and prickly as my fingers passed through it and I almost (but only for a fragment of a nanosecond!) forgot where I was, not even consciously trying to steady my panting breath. I was awestruck by the feeling, the smell of the water, the deep darkness in which I was floating.

Above, the sky was bursting with white dots, slightly fuzzy where millions of stars nudged close together, and the deep dark indigo spaces in between seemed to shrink the more I stared. I had never seen so many stars, nor been so aware of my senses. Was this what it was like in a flotation tank? Total immersion? I wanted to lie there forever. I really had no concept of being in water. I could have just sunk down, down, down, right to the murky bottom.

I shuddered and swam back to the shore, until I was in water as shallow as I could possibly be in without beaching myself.

My children often tease me about what I would be if I were an animal – a manatee or dugong, apparently. Often mistaken by sailors for mermaids, I always reply in my defence.

Secretly, I’ve read up on these mysterious creatures. They’re marine mammals of the family called *Sirenia*, hence the first sailors were persuaded that manatees were sirens or mermaids. These enormous, and highly intelligent, vegetarians can be found in warm, coastal waters from East Africa to Australia – but rarely in the cold, deep and dark waters of the Lake District.

## STOPPING

But tonight, under a now-bold full moon, a star-filled sky and in the shallows of the scariest part of Crummock Water, an adult female, beautiful in her own way, rootled about amongst the algaed rocks and pebbles, searching for something and nothing. She floated on her back, staring up at the crinkly crags of Rannerdale Knotts, and drank in the shine of the moon, while her friend swam alone out in the depths.

Not a sound disturbed the swimmer and the mermaid, each cocooned in thought and no thought, emotions and no emotions, the ebb and flow of their internal tides calming and transforming.

As the months passed and clearly the operation had not been as successful as the consultant would have liked, it became increasingly important to my sense of well-being to get into the cold water. There, I felt no pain. Once immersed, I no longer had to lug around what felt like my 'useless' body.

Out of the water, I had issues with my body, not just in terms of mobility, but the reflection in the mirror told me I was now shaped like a man – an upside-down triangle. Wide shoulders, no waist and narrow hips.

The shape of me was not the shape I was before the operation. The top of my thighs had never touched before, but now when I walked I could feel thigh on thigh – right at the top. I always used to have a gap there – someone once told me it was sexy.

It was not that my legs had got fatter, but that the operation had realigned my legs so they were now straight down from top to toe. Prior to surgery, all my weight had been going down the inside knee joint and bone had been rubbing on bone with no cartilage left to cushion them – pain beyond belief.

Muscle mass and definition had gone from my buttocks, but unevenly. My right buttock had virtually disappeared. My running partner and I had once agreed to shoot each other if either of us got a mono bum. Where was she now when I needed her?

I thought of all the hours I'd been spending at home and, latterly, in the gym, exercising to try and rebuild the soft tissue that was now adjusting to my new alignment: quads, hamstrings, Achilles, ligaments, skin and every fibre of both legs below the knee.