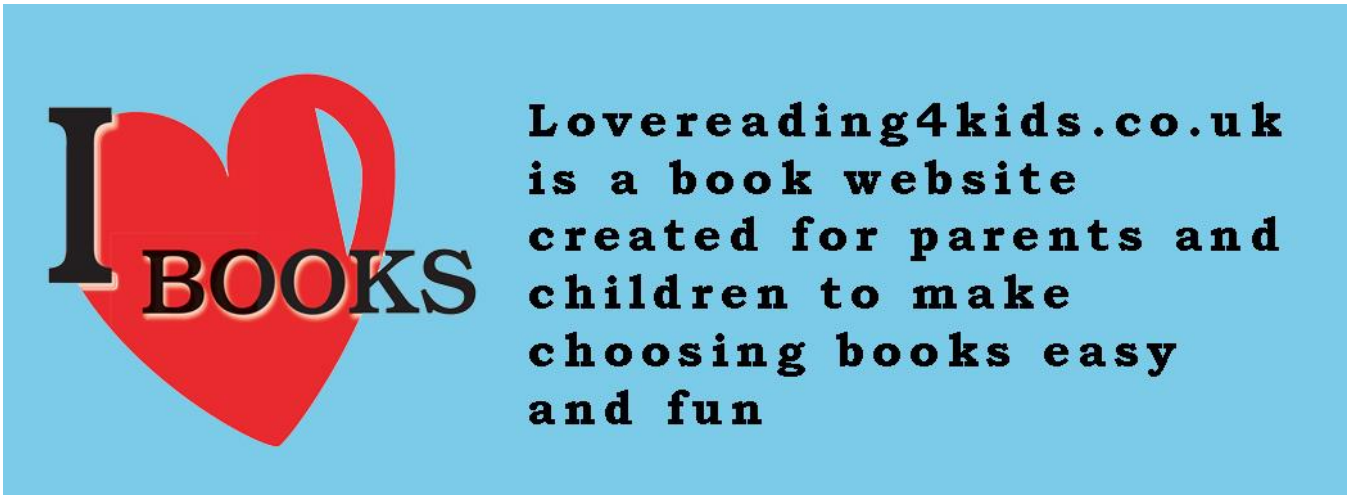


Opening extract from

Girl Out of Water

Written by

Nat Luurtsema

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated, as they may result in injury.

First published 2016 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2016 Nat Luurtsema
Cover images: goggles © 2016 LWA/Larry Williams/Getty Images;
hair © 2016 moodboard/Getty Images;
face © 2016 Hill Street Studios/Getty Images

The right of Nat Luurtsema to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Sabon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6652-5

www.walker.co.uk

PROLOGUE

You'd think it would feel weird being nearly naked in front of so many people, but it doesn't.

I ping my swimsuit straps for luck, once right, twice left, walk out poolside and take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar tang of chlorine and feet. It sounds gross, but that smell is so exciting: I'm where I belong.

I'm one of the fastest swimmers in my county. That's why I'm here – trying out for High Performance Training Camp, which will set me on my way to Team GB. I've wanted this for as long as I can remember. So … you know, no pressure, not a big deal, whatev.

I think I'm sweating inside my ears.

I pad along the side of the pool watching other swimmers power up and down; they look so strong,

they're not so much swimming as punching their way through the water.

We're all in a vast… I want to use the word palace. I'm going to. It's a palace made of glass, filled with four Olympic-sized swimming pools. Basically my dream home. The sound of splashing and shouting bounces off the walls. Ninety per cent of the people in this room are having the most important day of their lives.

I look around for my best friend, Hannah, and spot her by the changing rooms. I give her a quick smile. She does an elaborate mime of puking into the pool. Feeling a bit queasy, then. An official eyes her disapprovingly.

I tuck a stray hair into my swimming cap with a shaking hand.

Hannah rotates her shoulders backwards and then forwards. She swims butterfly, which gives you really big shoulders, but she's not self-conscious about it – she just wears men's T-shirts. People love Hannah. She's fun. She has thick, blonde curly hair and big blue eyes and she never stops talking. She's been my best friend since we were six, and now, looking at how nervous she is, I find myself feeling protective even though I'm in the same position.

Well, not exactly the same: her parents are really

pushy. She tries to ignore it or it would drive her mad. Mine reckon swimming is less important than – well, LOADS of stuff.

Hannah's standing next to me now. She grins and pulls at the front of my swimming cap. I fold my arms and pretend to ignore her. She pulls the elastic six inches away from my forehead and I brace myself for her to snap it, but instead she nudges her face next to mine and starts trying to pull my swimming cap over her head as well as mine. Ridiculous human being. This is why I bring spare caps.

I can't keep a straight face. I start giggling and help her pull the thick elastic further over her head. It hurts – her nose is digging hard into my cheekbone – but I'm determined to get it on. *Beep!* Hannah's eyes widen at the sound of the whistle. This is her race!

She hurriedly pulls her head away, causing her own swimming cap to ping off and nearly land in the nearest pool. I can see a couple of officials looking at us, unimpressed. *Sor-ree.* Just trying to lighten a very heavy mood here. I dive to retrieve Hannah's cap while she fights her frizzy mop into a bun.

We hug quickly and she hurries to the pool where the butterfly swimmers are waiting by the diving blocks.

Some serious shoulders amongst that lot.

Now I'm alone and back to feeling sick about my own race. I tuck my ears into my swimming cap and everything becomes a smooth roar. An official comes to check my name against a list on her clipboard. I can't help but notice that she has a very fluffy top lip. She catches me staring at it and I quickly look down.

"Louise?" she asks.

"Brown," I say to her shoe, and she ticks my name off.

She must be one of only ten people in the whole place who aren't feeling hysterical. If the fire alarm went off, I swear we'd all run around in circles, screaming and slapping our own faces.

My race is called next and I join a line of girls who look just like me. Tall girls with no hips, no boobs and frizzy hair are the norm here. I'm going to fit in so well in the training camp! Finally, someone to borrow clothes off.

I look around for Hannah's and my coach, Debs. She's standing by the pool where I'll be doing my race, arms folded, staring intently at me. She gives me a nod. She's not the most affectionate person: that nod means, "Go on, Lou, I know you can do it! Supportive things, etc!"

Up on the blocks I scuff my feet and stare dead ahead. You swim no one's race but your own.

The official nods and I bend into my dive, wrapping my fingertips over the edge of the block and swaying gently to loosen my hips. There's a pause that feels never ending and I focus on the spot in the water where I want my dive to take me.

The starting pistol bangs, there's an explosion of power from my legs and I dive hard. I can hear the block rattle as I push away from it with all my strength. A cold, hard slap against my thighs and I spring into butterfly stroke. Hannah's faster at this, but I'm pretty good too. I whip my arms up and over my head. My fingers cut into the water in front of my face. As my arms pull down, my hips tilt and my legs kick together like a mermaid's tail. This is the closest I ever get to elegant.

Backstroke now, my second fastest stroke, and I hold my head steady as I stare up at the ceiling. I practised this last night when everyone else had finished training. I count signposts on the ceiling so I don't ram my head into the side of the pool and slow myself down. Debs says this is the mindset of a consummate pro.

I had to google consummate. It's either a compliment or a French soup.

I feel so happy when I swim, strong and graceful and like everything is right with the world. This is my Thing.

The individual medley is a strange race. Most people are slowest on their breaststroke, fastest on the crawl. I'm the other way around, so I always pull ahead on laps five and six, hopefully opening up enough of a lead that some freakish monkey-armed girl with a devastating crawl time can't catch me on seven and eight.

And here's seven and eight – harder when everyone's so powerful; the water is churning and throwing me about. So much for feeling graceful, this is like fighting water. But I can't sense anyone on the left or right of me. I must have pulled ahead. Excellent: it's all going to plan.

Now it's about hanging on to this lead. I carve my right hand back past my face to make a groove in the water just long enough to turn my head and grab a huge, ragged breath. It's difficult in this choppy water so each time I'm just praying I find air. I can't afford to choke.

Final lap and now I'm completely in my rhythm, I know the end is approaching but I have to keep swimming my hardest so no one catches me. I don't care if I smash my head into the edge of the pool – anything to maintain this speed to the end. My wrist hits something

hard with a crack that I feel down to my hip, but I've done it.

I've done it! I've won.

I fling my head out of the water, rip off my swimming cap and goggles, squeeze the water from my eyes and look behind me. That's my first thought: how far behind are they?

But there's no one there.

They're all next to me. Everyone. There is *no one* behind me, no one still swimming.

The girl on my left looks bored, the one on the right is casually cleaning her goggles with spit. Oh my… *One of them is already out of the pool!* I did that once, against a rubbish team in Swindon that was so slow I got out before the last girl had finished. Debs had a go at me for that. Unsportspersonlike, she said.

Debs! Where is she, where's my coach? Maybe I swam extra lengths by mistake? That must be it. Hilarious, of course that's what happened. Dumb but understandable on a high-pressure day. This is not a Big Deal. Shall I talk to someone, an official? Where is everyone going? Coach! Debs! Hello? No one is looking me in the eye. Did I *die* in that pool, am I a ghost?

I might as well be. I came last. For the first time since

I started competing at ten years old, I was the slowest swimmer. I'm weak and cold, my legs heavy as the adrenalin drops out of me. I don't know what to do, where to go…

I have to find Hannah. I look around frantically for her. There she is! She's throwing back her hair, laughing and shaking hands with an official, who's handing her a slip of paper. She must have won her race. She catches my eye and her smile fades.

My best friend and I want to kill her.

1

My pillow smells. I should've changed the pillowcase weeks ago but I haven't and now it smells of my head. Which I did not realize was so smelly.

I can hear my family moving around downstairs, slamming drawers and clattering bowls. I'm not used to these morning noises because I'd usually be up at 5 a.m. and training by 6 a.m. Forty lengths of breaststroke, forty backstroke, forty crawl, ten butterfly, then a quick shower, sleepwalk through school and back in the pool by 4 p.m. YOLO!

But I haven't swum since the time trials three weeks ago and now I'm stuck with a surprising number of useless hours. Who knew days were so long? I sometimes used to wonder what I was missing as I pounded out the lengths in the pool. Now I know: NOTHING.

Except I'd never met our postman before, and he has a lot of nose hair. That's it.

My name's Lou and I am a fifteen-year-old ex-swimmer. I have an older sister, Lavender. Yup, Lou and Lav. We have a brother called Toilet.

That's a lie. It's just me, Lav, Mum and Dad, in a small semi-detached house in the most boring town in the world.

So this summer I stopped swimming and met our postman. And finally got all that crying done that I'd been meaning to do for ages, so that's good, isn't it? Plus I really explored the concept of Lying in Bed All Day Feeling Nothing But Despair. A summer lived right to the edges.

It's the first day of school today. I'd mark the occasion by wearing a dress, but I don't own one. In our most private moments, Hannah and I have accepted that the only way we'll find a dress to fit our shoulders is if we go to that cross-dressing shop in town. They've got nice stuff in the window. (We'll cut the labels out.)

It's also my first day without Hannah, as she's already left for High Performance Training Camp. Mum says that now we're separated for a bit I'll come

out of Hannah's shadow, but she doesn't understand. I liked it there!

Going back to school would be fine if Hannah hadn't got through the time trials either. We could face it together, maybe hint that the competition was a big conspiracy. That we were *too* fast; we'd have threatened international relations at the next Olympics when we smashed everyone out of the water with our awesome times.

"Yeah, well, Russia," we'd have said, with careful looks around us. "They do *not* like silver, if you know what I'm saying." Then we'd have tugged our fedoras down and skulked off to double maths.

Wonder if the other side of my pillow is less smelly? I flip it. Nope.

But now Hannah has gone to the camp without me and I won't see her all term. We're so far away from each other! She's in Dorset and I'm in Essex. She's heading to the Olympics and I'm heading to the bathroom.

Miraculously, it's free – pretty impressive in a house of four people, three of whom take showers you could time with a calendar.

I'm still using that special harsh shampoo for swimmers, the stuff that strips the chlorine out of your hair.

Money is a bit tight at the moment so I have to use it all up first, and we seem to have found a never-ending bottle. I soap my head and reflect that it really doesn't help that the smell reminds me of my old life.

I step out of the shower, fold a towel dress around me (the only kind I fit cos it's sleeveless) and scuff my feet along the hallway. The carpet is a bit worn in patches, so I'm careful not to catch my toe in a snagged thread. No one needs to start their day hopping and screaming.

I open my clothes drawer and drag out some jeans and a T-shirt. I don't have any "nice" clothes. Ever since I was eleven I've been caught up in some desperate, endless growth spurt. There's no point buying decent clothes because they probably won't fit in a month's time. I'm 5'11" and *still* growing.

It's fine: if I ever get a boyfriend I can carry him when he's tired.

I stab a wide-toothed comb gently into my hair because I haven't got time to cut knots out. My hair doesn't grow down, it grows *out*, like Hannah's.

Neither of us looks like the princess in a fairy tale, we look like the enchanted vines that covered her castle for a hundred years.

It was always comforting to have a best friend who

looked as different as me. And we never minded because we had swimming; we had a Thing. Now my Thing is gone and so is my friend.

I can't delay this much longer. I'm going to have to eat some breakfast and then … gah … SCHOOL. I swing around the end of the banister and can't help smiling when I catch sight of my family.

The kitchen is too small for the four of us – we only fit in there if everyone stays very still. If you actually want to move, elbows will get jogged and cereal will get tipped down backs. You know your house is cramped when you can start making a sandwich and end up in a food fight.

Dad is cooking (carefully), Mum's reading a book and Lavender is trowelling make-up on to her ridiculously beautiful face. They look like they're in an advert. They don't need a Thing – everyone's just grateful they get to look at them.

I'm proud of them but wish I didn't look adopted.

Mum is half-Indonesian, all curves, shiny hair and smooth, brown skin, while Dad looks like a doctor on an American TV show. Good chin, nice teeth. Admittedly he has a bit of a belly these days, but he just holds his breath for photos. Lavender is sixteen, with

glossy black hair, proper boobs and a tattoo that Mum and Dad don't know about.

Nature made her and then, a year later, took the same ingredients and made me. It's baffling. Good thing they didn't have a third child: it would probably have a face like a knee.

"Morning…" I sigh at the room, and they mumble back sleepily. Dad slides a brick of scrambled egg onto my plate as I sit down, while Mum subtly slides Lav's make-up bag away from her.

"Enough, Lavender."

"A little more highlighter and blush and I'm *done*, I swear."

Mum keeps reading as she drops the make-up bag into a drawer next to her. Lav looks mutinous, but she's still got her mascara wand, so she makes good use of it before Mum can reunite it with the bottle.

The mood in the kitchen is a little … well … moody. Lav's grounded because she was caught sneaking out late at night with a bottle of Malibu. She swears she wasn't going to drink it, but what else – walk it? As Mum said, if she's taking bottles of rum for midnight walks, she should be kept indoors for her own safety.

I poke up a forkful of egg and stare at it. Eyes down,

I say, "Um. Caaaan *I*…"

"No," Mum says.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

Mum imitates my voice with annoying accuracy. "Can I not go to school today or maybe ever, can I just get a job instead, and we'll lie and tell everyone at school that I changed my name, had plastic surgery and made it into Team GB after all?"

Damn. Spot on.

Lavender finishes applying her thirty-second coat of mascara and leans towards me as if she's going to impart the secret of immortality.

Expectations low, I lean towards her.

"It's going to be OK at school," she says.

"Really?"

"Yes. Because no one cares about your swimming. Only you think it's a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal!"

"Shut up, I'm trying to help you. I swear, if anyone even *mentions* swimming – which they won't – and you tell them what happened, they'll say, 'Huh.' And they won't ever think of it again. It's boring. No one cares. Amelia Bond from 12K? She had her big hairy face mole removed over the summer. *That* is interesting."

I'm unconvinced but not willing to have an argument about it. She's wrong; it's not true that no one cares. Hannah cares. Hannah understands that swimming is extremely important. But thinking about Hannah feels like poking a blister, so I make myself stop.

Dad slings the saucepan into the sink. He does all the cooking: Mum's speciality dish is food poisoning.

"You girls ready to leave for school in ten?"

"Shotgun!"

"Lav! You always sit in the front!"

"Yes. Because I always call shotgun. Please stop me if this confuses you."

"Fine. Infinity shotgun!"

"You can't call infinity shotgun, everyone knows that," says Mum. "Now off you go."

"Are you home tonight, Mum?" I ask.

"Uh, no, I have a—"

"Daa-aate!" we all chorus.

"So go on," Lav says, "what's his name?"

Mum hesitates.

"It's OK, Flora," says Dad, kindly. "If you don't know it, you don't have to pretend."

"You could check his wallet when he goes to the toilet?" Lav suggests.

"Though if he takes it with him he's possibly not coming back," I add.

Mum gives out three death stares and returns to her book.

Yeah, date. It's a bit odd in this house.

Mum and Dad divorced when I was little but are the nicest divorced couple. They never fight and they get on really well. I'm not sure why they divorced, but I don't want to ask in case the answer involves sex and I *never* stop being sick.

Dad lost his job last year and he's had to move in with us until he finds a new one. It's taking a lot longer than he thought it would. Sometimes when he leaves his email open I see all the rejections in his inbox.

It's not ideal, Lav and I having to share a room, but we don't say anything because we don't want to hurt his feelings. I worry about him. He gets up early every morning like he's still got a job and dresses in a suit and then just … I don't know … waits for the day to pass until we come home.

It's like having a smartly dressed but depressed dog.

Between me and him, this house hasn't been much fun this summer. No wonder Lav is taking bottles for walks and Mum is dating like the men are off to war.

It's awkward, actually, as Mum is really enjoying her job, she teaches creative writing to grown-ups. Which sounds like an easy job to me, but she says I haven't read enough bad sexy poetry to judge. (And no, she won't let me see it.)

We call goodbye to Mum and trudge out to the car. Lav forces me into the back, which is not easy. Three-door cars are such a lie – you can't call it three doors unless you see the boot as an acceptable way to get in.

Lavender fiddles with the radio until she finds a pirate station. It sounds like people shouting in a cramped space. As if she doesn't get enough of that at home.

"Oh, Lav, you're so alternative. I cannot get my head around how non-mainstream you are," I sigh, from behind my knees. "Move your seat forward."

Lav squeezes the lever and slowly pushes her seat back as far as it goes, crushing me into an even tighter S shape.

"It's garage, divvy."

"Is that the name of the music or just *where* they are? Come on, Lav, seat forward!"

"*Lavender!*" says Dad. "Move the seat forward or you can walk the rest of the way. Do you want to walk in those shoes? *Can* you walk in those shoes?"

I peer round to see what Dad's talking about. Lav is wearing studded black chunky boots. It looks like she's got weapons on her feet.

"Yes, I can! Not very far, or fast, or…"

"I don't know why you do that to your feet," Dad sighs.

"You don't get me, Mark," she sighs back dramatically.

"*Dad,*" he corrects her.

"No, Lav, *everyone* gets you," I say, defending him. "You're so instantly gettable that if you were an exam question everyone would be happy to see you. And that's the only time they'd be happy to— Ow! Legs, legs, legs!"

As Dad approaches the school gates I can see a tall boy with long hair, loitering. Lav slumps down in her seat.

"Drive, drive, drive!" she hisses.

"What?" Dad asks, but he continues past the school gates.

"Uh…"

"Was that Beau Michaels waiting for you?" I ask.

"Yes, and shut up. Dad, can you drop us at the back entrance, please?"

"Wait." Dad is puzzled. "Someone called their son *Beau* and that was allowed to happen?"

"Daa-aad!" Lav rolls her eyes.

"Like, no one was arrested? They were just allowed to do that to an innocent child?" he asks.

"You're not funny," Lav tells him firmly.

Dad circles a mini-roundabout and heads back to the main school entrance.

"No, no, no!" Lav slumps down in her seat again. "I mean, you're hilarious, Dad! Properly witty!"

"I think so," he agrees serenely, and we sail past the entrance again, poor Beau Michaels watching us with the dawning realization that all is not well in his love life.

Dad pulls up at the back entrance to school. Lav hops out and flips her seat forward and I unfold myself into a normal shape. Well, normal for me.

"Come on, LouLou," says Dad.

I pick at some dry skin on my lip and avoid his gaze. Maybe Dad will get bored of waiting and just let me sit quietly in the back of the car for a few years. Eventually I'll be old enough to shuffle forward and share the driving.

Lav leans down at my window.

"I *swear*," she says, "this isn't a big deal unless you make it a big deal. You *nearly* got to the Olympics. That's the closest anyone I know in this crappy little town has

ever got to achieving anything! No offence, Dad."

("No, that's fine.")

"So, please, just don't even *mention* it. Now the school day begins and you do not know me."

She wobbles away on her monstrous shoes. She looks like a gazelle, I can't imagine how daft I look when I clump along behind her. The gazelle and the mammoth, off on their adventures.

That thought makes me even sadder, so I push it aside and give Dad a brave smile. My dry lip splits and bleeds.

"It's going to be a good day," he promises.

"OK," I mumble through blood and the semi-clean tissue I find in the door handle. I clamber out of the car and follow Lav at the agreed distance of six feet.