

GOING THE DISTANCE





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Length after length

This is an extract from a novel about a teenage girl called Jess. The story begins when Jess is at her local swimming pool.

Half-past nine in the morning and the pool was crowded already. That was the down-side to summer holidays, especially hot ones like this, but she knew she shouldn't grumble: she'd been here since six thirty, together with the usual hard-core of serious swimmers, and she'd managed a leisurely four miles without interruption.

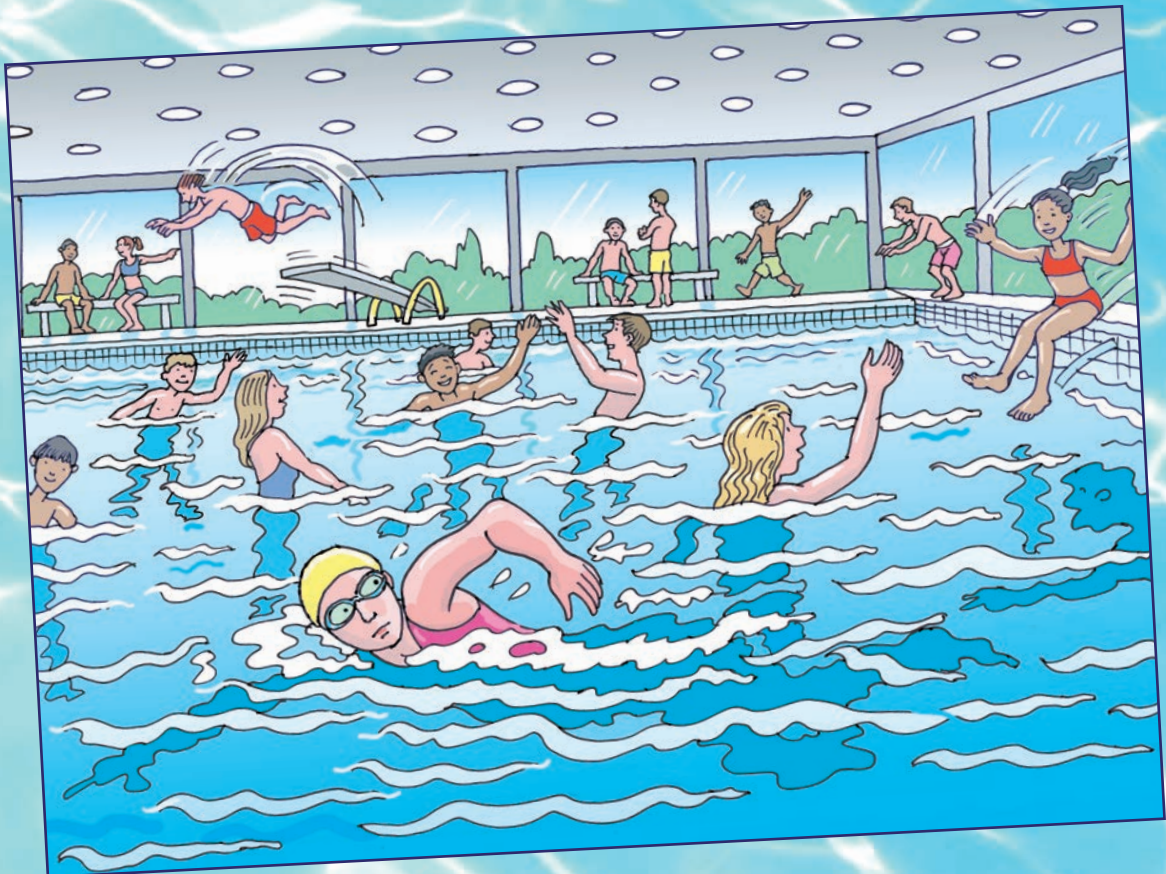
But she did grumble; the mere sight of all these people flopping in like lemmings made her want to shout with frustration. She wasn't ready to stop yet, not by a long way. She had energy left and she wanted to use it.

She stuck to her lane, doggedly ploughing length after length, trying to ignore the splash of other swimmers. Sometimes she'd found that if she just forced herself to keep swimming up and down her lane without stopping or swerving, the other users of the pool seemed by some collective telepathy to accept the space as hers, and leave it to her. But that wouldn't work today: they seemed to be jumping in by the score. Another quarter of an hour and it would be unbearable.

She locked into her stroke and drove herself on, her breath beating its practised rhythm in time with the strokes, as even as the chime of a clock. In for a gulp of oxygen, her mouth twisted upwards to snap its life from the air, then face down again and the long exhalation to a slow, steady count, bubbles teasing her lips like tiny fish.

She loved this rhythm; she needed it. It kept her thoughts on track when they started to wander. Sometimes, when things were going well and she was feeling secure in herself and had something pleasant to think about, she was happy to let them wander; but if she was tiring or feeling vulnerable or worrying, she focused on that rhythm and it settled her, sometimes even when she wasn't swimming.

But she was always swimming. She needed to swim. To be deprived of swimming would be like a perverse kind of drowning. She loved the sensation of power and speed, the feeling of glistening in a bed of foam, even the strange isolation of mind in this watery cocoon. Distance swimming was as much about will as about technique; and she knew she was strong in both. All she needed now, to set that will alight, was a big swimming challenge; something to test herself against. Something she could one day be proud of.



Pamela Gillilan wrote this poem about long distance swimming in a different kind of pool - a 'sea-pool'. There are not very many of these around the country. They are 'tidal' pools which fill up with seawater at every high tide. When the tide goes down, the sun heats the water and makes an ideal swimming pool, without the dangers of waves or unexpected currents.



The half-mile

I was twelve when I swam the half-mile,
up and down the tide-fed cold concrete
pool, with a slow steady side-stroke.
My father counted the lengths,
at first from the deep-end board
and then, as I moved more laboriously,
pacing alongside, urging me on.

The race was only against myself
and distance. The grainy salt water,
though not translucent like the chlorinated
blue lidos of town, buoyed me helpfully,
lapped softly against the bath's grey sides
variegated with embedded hardcore pebbles.
I swam from goal to alternate goal; he counted.

When he called enough I scrambled
over the sharp shutter-cast lip,
shuddered into a dry towel, drank
the words of praise. The planks
of the changing-room walls
were warm to touch. It had seemed to be
a great deal of swimming; still does.

In the previous texts, you have read about children who were undertaking a very difficult physical challenge. In this magazine article, you can read about a similar experience from a father's point of view.

A triathlon is a sporting event in which the participants do a three-in-one race of swimming, cycling and running – one after the other. In this case, a 400m swim, a 23km cycle and a 4km run.

TRIATHLON – WILL DAD MAKE IT?

On a wet Friday in June, Maddy (eight), home from school, waves a piece of paper under my nose:

"Daddy, Daddy, let's do a triathlon! Can we? Can we? Oh please!"



Naturally, I am about to snatch the paper from her hand and burn it but Caitlin (22) and Niall (15) – fatally present – make an interception.

"It's only down the road, Dad. Everyone's doing triathlons now," says Niall.

Reluctantly, I take a look. There are races to suit all ages and talents, plus photographs of families apparently enjoying themselves.

"You can easily do the cycling," offers Caitlin. "You'll have residual fitness from the cycling you did last year."

Residual fitness sounds like some nasty sludge at the bottom of my drink bottle. Not only has my wonderful road bike barely moved since last year but I have a bad back and am making regular visits to the doctor.

Down to business:

A week later, nevertheless, we are all in training. Another week later and Caitlin asks: "What did we talk about before we all decided to take part in the triathlon?" There is a silence: no one can remember. I love that phenomenon – the way something can take over your entire life for a few weeks, then disappear. My backache has gone and I am fully engaged. I buy *Triathlon* magazine to seek out the best advice. 'Transition' is crucial. I have to practise moving from swimming to cycling, and cycling to running.

We all manage a swim in the river Ouse, but none of us feels like leaping on a bike afterwards. Maddy has a hot chocolate, a chapter of *The Hobbit*, then falls asleep.

On the day of the race:

At 9am, Caitlin and I are down at the lake for our race. She's looking like a frightened rabbit, and I'm sure I am too. Neither of us is sure we can finish. Fortunately, there are other first-timers there, happy to poke fun at themselves and their limited chances of survival.

Not everyone, however, is a novice. Earlier, as we prepared our bikes in the transition zone, we noted that some competitors had laid out their kit in perfect order on a towel. Others had neat arrays of power foods, tiny spaceman sachets of edible rocket fuel.

I tuck my slab of Grandma's fruitcake out of sight inside my shiny new running shoes. Just seeing the shoes sitting there is a constant reminder that I have done no training whatsoever for the run – any training, I had figured, would only exacerbate my dormant back injury. Now, that decision feels a little rash.

Back at the lake we are briefed by the race director and then enter the water. It's not too cold. Mud is warm. Dig in toes. Is this the start line? Should I be at the front? Sorry I can't hear with my goggles on. Klaxon. Go! Face down. It's totally black down there. I wouldn't mess with my toenails, mate. Ouch! Eurgh, a creature! No, only weed. Look up. Oh, it's that way, is it? Around the red marker. Turn for home. Don't think I can keep this front crawl going much longer.

The 'crawl' technique was discovered by Europeans when a Native American swimmer named Flying Gull was invited to London in 1844 to race some Victorian gentlemen in one of the city's newfangled swimming pools. The American thrashed the pants off the Englishmen, who condemned his novel speedy stroke as 'ungentlemanly' and 'barbaric'. Ha! Now I'm panting and only capable of gentlemanly breaststroke and everyone is going past me. Barbarians.

Finally it is over. I jog up the grassy hill to the transition area. This is now a scene of desperate activity, but I refuse to be hurried, taking energy from my secret weapons: fruitcake and cherry juice. Niall and Maddy are screaming at me from behind a barrier, "Get on with it, Dad! Faster!"

Eventually I get on the bike and start the ride: a superb circuit taking in views of the North York Moors. There are a few nasty, short climbs, but several long descents too. I slow down a little, only too aware that I have the run to come.



Back in transition, I rip off my bike shoes and jam on my running shoes. Ooops. The rest of Grandma's fruitcake! I remove the shoes and scrape out the fruitcake. I tie my laces and throw off my cycle shirt. Ready.

The first half mile is excruciating. I get stomach ache and feel horrible. Fortunately the course is downhill, then flat. I stop and massage my stomach then set off again. After a long, slow hill I pass a series of lakes before a final push up to the finish.

I don't feel too bad, really. Race adrenaline is still zinging through my veins. I've come a creditable 69th, out of 250-ish. Caitlin also finishes well, as do Niall and Maddy in their races for 13-15 year olds and 8-10 year olds.



We end the day lazing on the lawn, chattering excitedly and watching the medal ceremonies to which, one day, some of us may aspire. Later I chat to the organiser, who tells me that 700 competitors attended, and that "some families are even doing a whole series of five triathlons throughout the summer".

I'm going to think about that.

That night, putting Maddy to bed, I lift down *The Hobbit* for our usual chapter, but she pushes it away.

"I want *Triathlon* magazine," she says. "Is there a section for 8-to-10-year-olds?"



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