

# Floating

A LIFE REGAINED

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*For Keeley*



# PROLOGUE



The blinds were not doing their job. A shaft of sunlight breached the wooden slats as I stirred and fumbled around on the bedside table for my watch: 4.12 a.m. I lifted myself onto my left elbow, took a swig of stale water from the glass I'd left out the previous evening, and sighed.

Keeley, my wife, was sound asleep next to me. Her breath caught in her throat with a rhythmic click, her arms raised above her head the way she always slept. Her dark brown hair spread out across the pillow.

I moved carefully so as not to wake her, pushed my pillows back onto the headrest and sat upright. Through the break in the blinds I could see a bright blue sky emerging. It was midsummer, almost a year since I had quit my job as a journalist to go freelance, and my mind was full to bursting with worry.

Thoughts zipped across my brain like plane contrails. Every time I tried to follow one I would lose it as another hove into view. I would chase that one and then the next one. My mind could not settle. I had been awake all of five minutes and already I could not stop this swell of anxiety from lifting me up and taking me out into the depths with it.

Work was what made me most anxious. What was I really doing? In the past month I had written 'news' articles about the chipset of an unreleased smartphone and covered the launch of a new Bluetooth speaker. To my mind, everything I had set out to do when I had decided

to become a journalist at the age of nineteen was gone. I had failed to amount to anything as a music writer, made a fool of myself while trying to learn to drive when working for a major motoring magazine and wound up presenting corporate videos from big brands to pay the bills.

Where was the glamour, the excitement, the buzz I had always wanted from working in London? What had happened to my dreams? I was struggling to equate the need to make money with what I was doing in order to get it. I felt as if I needed to grow up and be more mature, but just thinking about it brought me down.

To compound it all, the regular writing I had been doing on the latest technology trends for a friend's website had ended. Budgets had been slashed. I looked down at Keeley. She always believed in me and told me how well I was doing. But despite the fact that I loved her, I couldn't agree. I had never wanted to write about technology. But it had always paid OK, and now I worked for myself I had to find cash somehow. I had learnt on short work placements, and then over a series of full-time roles, that I hated the confines of the office. The rules. The politics. The clock-watching. But with this regular source of income gone, would I have to go back? How would I cover the rent otherwise? Would I have enough money to still go out, to go on holiday? How could we ever save to buy a house or have enough money to bring up kids in the future? Were these things I could even give her?

Keeley worked full time as a journalist. We would be OK. But I felt a strong sense of responsibility towards her to make everything right. To be in control. To show her I could provide. To make life predictable. That way, I believed, worry would stop and life would begin.

She had never asked this of me. But I worried all of the time about it. I wanted to make sure that everything was easy for her, for us. She was loving, warm, caring, supportive, and had always been there since we had got together at the end of our time together at journalism college.

I knew I was being overly harsh on myself, that my thoughts were needlessly cruel, but still I chased them, one after another, after another. Why was I not as successful as the people I used to work with? Success to

me was working for big publications, going on glamorous assignments, interviewing my favourite bands; not having to churn out copy about phones, games consoles and speakers, or doing ‘advertorials’ to make ends meet. I believed, misguidedly it turned out, that ‘successful’ people didn’t need to indulge in the everyday, the things that help pay the bills.

Why had I not done what I always said I would do and become a travel writer, follow in the footsteps of my literary heroes like Paul Theroux, seeing new places, meeting new people, learning new things and writing about them for a voracious readership? Could I ever do this? Surely not. I felt I had become trapped in a professional rut – failed to live up to the lofty expectations that I had set for myself.

I could never tell anyone this. It felt easier to lie in the dawn light and allow my mind to crank through the gears. I wasn’t sure if Keeley would understand, but I didn’t know why I felt like that. She was the best thing that had ever happened to me. A vivacious, life-affirming presence whose calm assurance and beautiful, glittering blue eyes made my stomach flip whenever I thought about her.

I felt guilty for not telling her how anxious I was and how, when she went to work every day, I felt an enormous sense of guilt for having all of this time on my hands to chase editors, to come up with killer story ideas, to be the person I always thought I could be, when instead all I would do was sit on the sofa and feel low. I felt ashamed of the whole sorry mess.

I knew where this guilt and shame came from. My parents had never made me feel like this, but fourteen years of being taught at Catholic schools had instilled in me the sense that I should feel bad whenever I wasn’t doing something constructive or productive with my time. That to me meant working, or pushing towards a goal. Leisure and downtime were to be frowned upon as a waste of precious minutes, hours, days. This feeling had proved useful when I had first gone freelance, pushing me on to work harder for longer. But now I just felt guilty for feeling that I hadn’t done a good enough job of striking out on my own. My work felt meaningless, and because I had made work my biggest focus,

it felt like life had lost meaning too. I was realising, slowly, that all this worrying had made me depressed.

But most of all I felt that this anxiety, this burgeoning depression, was nothing but narcissism. I needed to simply buck up my ideas and knuckle down, I thought. People like me don't feel like this, I told myself. Not people who've had a happy childhood with loving parents. Not people who have strong, loving relationships. That thought played over and over in my mind like a mantra. It made me feel like more of a failure, yes, but I thought that by repeating it, I would remind myself of all the good things in my life, which would make me feel better. It didn't. I knew, deep down, I needed to tell Keeley how low I felt, but I didn't want to disappoint her. I was too embarrassed. I was aware that she knew that something wasn't right, but I knew she didn't know the full extent of my despair.

I looked over at her. She was still sound asleep. I rolled back over and looked at my watch: 5.03 a.m. I closed my eyes, followed the contrails of my mind and tried to get some sleep. I needed help, but I wasn't sure how to ask for it or what it would even look like if I did.

A tadpole dashed over my feet as I lowered them gingerly into the water. The first step of the metal ladder was cold, the green murk of Hampstead mixed pond below. I stood stock still and held on to the railings, staring out to the far-off boundary rope and the causeway beyond. Shaggy dogs shook themselves dry, while coots and moorhens scuffled in the undergrowth. Far below, I imagined a pike hiding in the depths, waiting for its moment to strike.

I looked down. There was now a swarm of tadpoles crowding around my toes. I stifled a nervous giggle and dropped my feet lower, one step at a time, before they were groping for metal and I could go no further. With that, I pushed off and felt the cold wrap itself around my chest, my arms, my legs.

I fell in love with wild swimming over one glorious summer in 2010. I swapped the strictures of the indoor pool for open water on a sticky

London weekend, the kind where the city forgets how to behave itself and people wander around as if every street corner is a beach. At her suggestion, Keeley and I took an overheated Tube north to Belsize Park and spilled out onto Hampstead Heath with the rest of the hordes who had come to cool off in its ponds' deep waters. We had always wanted to come here, and with the weather as it was, it seemed like the ideal way to spend the day.

This was my first time swimming outside in anything other than the sea, and as I swam from the steps towards the nearest tethered life ring, I felt buoyed up by the green water, any concerns about what swam beneath lost in a summer reverie. Teenagers screamed and shouted from the grass verge where they lay stretched out on towels, sunbathing and preening as if their lives depended on it.

I felt the cold keenly but kicked on to the far rope, eighty metres away from the safety of the concrete jetty, grasping hold and letting my legs sink and take a rest. I was gripped by an endorphin rush as I closed my eyes, yellows and reds throbbing as the sun's rays hit my eyelids. As I swam back, my strong stroke fast becoming something akin to a doggy paddle, I realised that this was something I wanted to do again and again. Swimming in the local pool had helped me get fit, but outdoor swimming could offer something more – a mental and emotional buzz to match the sweet ache of limbs.

In the weeks that followed, as summer stretched into autumn, I returned to Hampstead regularly. I came on wet days as well as dry, nosing through the flotsam and shrugging off the brush of dead leaves and errant weeds while the rain popped off the surface.

I would swim a serviceable if basic breaststroke, my head out and my neck snapped back so that I could see what was happening around me. This was partly through fear of what lay beneath in the deep green murk of the pond, and partly out of necessity – as my front crawl wasn't really up to much.

Having your head up and out has its advantages, though, even if it can leave you with a sharp neck ache. It gives you time to enjoy what's

around you – the wildlife, the shouts of the people on the banks, the scorching rays of late summer sun – and for me it adds to the meditative aspect of wild swimming: it strips everything back to its essence and allows me to just be in the water at that moment, like a duck pottering along the surface. Everything else melts away and becomes irrelevant.

I swam further and for longer every time, relishing the fact that I could lose myself in the moment, my body forced to focus on simply staying alive, my mind going quiet.

More than that: the simplicity of it all eased the anxiety which was causing me to wake at night, following the contrails of my mind as I turned over worries about my work, money and life. The water soothed this worry like nothing else.

When I first allowed Hampstead's waters to envelop me, I was the lowest I had been in my life. It was not long after that sleepless early dawn, and things felt difficult and at times hopeless. I felt ashamed that I felt like this and kept things bottled up. I didn't tell Keeley. I didn't tell family. I didn't tell my friends.

Days would pass without my getting further than the newsagent, trawling the same web pages and social networks over and over for a sense of purpose. I was lost, lonely and in desperate need of help. Getting into the water, giving myself up to the pond's buoyant green depths, pushed these feelings away. When I was in the water, there was no worry. My only concerns lay in keeping my arms moving and my legs kicking. There was a sense of boundless possibility, a lightening and easing of myself which I no longer felt on dry land. I wasn't in sole control of my situation, the water was, and I found such thoughts immensely satisfying.

I could date the swell of anxiety I was struggling with almost to the day. When I was a postgraduate student, studying journalism and readying myself for the brave, terrifying world of career and adult life I made a pact with myself. By the time I was twenty-seven, I would be a freelance journalist. I would be my own boss, I would answer only to myself and my life would be perfect.

I achieved my goal six months after my twenty-seventh birthday, after five years of writing for magazines and websites about topics as diverse as poker, cars and technology, none of which held any particular appeal for me. On my first day working for myself I started work at ten in the morning and was in the pub by two. I thought that I had gamed the system, cheated my way out of a day-to-day existence of which I had grown weary. I looked at myself as a happy retiree, forty years ahead of schedule.

What I soon discovered was that I derived all my self-worth and my self-esteem from my work. I didn't like the work I had to do to get paid. At first, hacking out news stories and writing puff pieces about everything from car adverts to an Asian tech company's latest 3D telly didn't matter, because I was my own boss and had time to do something new and exciting, whatever that was. But rather than seizing the opportunity to do something for myself, to take my career and my life in new and interesting directions, I froze. The boundaries between work and home had blurred to the point where I couldn't separate them any more. I wanted to work for myself, but I didn't know what I wanted to do beyond journalism. I'd never given it any thought.

My anxiety manifested itself as inertia. And inertia came through comparison. Comparison with peers, comparison with journalists, editors and writers that I believed I could never hope to be as good as. Social media is both your best friend and your worst enemy when you work from home and spend most of your time alone. I began to trawl news feeds and read articles I wished I had written and look at people I knew professionally on Facebook and Twitter with an endless sense of envy, coupled with the feeling that I could never, ever measure up.

I tried to fall back on an old mantra from Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, my favourite book as a teenager. 'Comparisons are odious,' was Japhy Ryder's wise line whenever Ray Smith, *The Dharma Bums'* Kerouac conduit, cast an envious eye over someone else's life. I played that line over and over in my head while I read another article and dreamt of another life where I was 'a success', where I had a more 'glamorous' job,

wrote about things like travel and music rather than smartphones and games consoles. Yet still I allowed jealousy and worry to frighten me away from making my life better. I became depressed and fearful.

Soon this professional inertia spread to my day-to-day life. I would rise early and see Keeley off to work, before quickly completing the regular daily writing jobs I had taken to cover the rent and pay the bills. News about smartphone tariffs. List features about mobile apps. I told myself that, if I wanted to be a serious journalist it was time to read, develop ideas and write. To start something. Instead, I sat on the sofa and stared out at London stretching in front of me from the fifth-floor window of our flat, afraid to go outside in case I got caught bunking off – by whom I wasn't sure. I had made myself anxious thinking about what others thought of me, as if they were judging me for making my own schedule and working to my own beat. I knew it was preposterous to think like that, but I did it anyway. Worrying, I believed, made things better.

I developed a strong line in self-loathing. I would beat myself up for not casting around for work, for failing to come up with good ideas, for not living the freelance life I had always dreamt of. I stopped leaving the flat on weekdays, except for quick local errands. It just felt easier to stay in and hide away and succumb to that deep sense of guilt about wasting time, about not making enough of the gift I had somehow been granted.

Working alone was proving to be dangerous. It drove me to retreat into myself and becoming lost in a dark world where I felt useless, incapable and, worst of all, embarrassed to tell anyone how I felt. Seeking professional help felt, at that time, pointless to me. To my mind, this was all in my head. I was the only person who had ever felt like this and I was making it all up.

Ultimately, I came to realise that my anxiety was related to my inability to deal with events and emotions that were fleeting. I placed obsessive emphasis on the smallest details. I could work myself into a state of extreme worry about everything from making a phone call to paying the gas bill to whether I'd offended someone by asking them to pay me on time for work I had completed months previously.

I had somehow taught myself to believe that I could worry things right. A deep fog settled over me that would not lift. It felt like living with a permanent, low-level hangover.

Life continued along these similar lines for a couple of years. The feelings came in waves, and there were times when my self-worth and my self-belief came back briefly, buoyed by an interesting commission or long days spent with Keeley, walking around the commons of south-west London or lolling on the benches around Tooting Bec Lido.

Without her, I often wonder what would have happened to me, whether I would have even discovered swimming in the way that I did on that sunny afternoon at Hampstead. I felt enormous guilt for feeling continually anxious and hateful towards myself when this woman was only ever supportive, encouraging and full of love. She was the one who had joined me on my first swim, who had suggested we go to Hampstead to break the torpor of a too-hot summer's day, and I felt I owed it to her as much as myself to try and make myself feel better again.

I had lost all the confidence I had built up in my early twenties. My natural extrovert state was undermined by a growing willingness to go into myself. I felt drained of enthusiasm for anything. I knew this upset Keeley as much it upset me. She could see how low I was, even if it took me a long time to be honest about my anxiety and depression. Her solicitude for me at my lowest moments knew no bounds, but I had to find a way to fix myself. I did not believe that it was fair to ask her to do that for me.

In swimming, I found the only thing that truly broke me out of my anxious cycle for longer than a few moments. There was a long, deep burn of satisfaction and calm that followed in the wake of my bow wave. So I swam to fix myself, to cure myself and to make myself a better person in my own eyes. In the water there was nothing. My mind was empty and I floated without thinking. I could just be, without perceived judgement.

That first swimming summer was beginning to taper off, but my willingness to paddle on until the cloak of winter wrapped itself over London led me to investigate more about wild swimming and its benefits.

I began buying guidebooks and scouring the web for information on heated pools, hidden river swims and like-minded swimmers.

It was on one such search that I discovered the name of Roger Deakin. Deakin's *Waterlog* kept cropping up again and again, mentioned as a hallowed text for those looking to eschew the echo chamber of the indoor pool for something more visceral. I tracked down a copy and devoured it in a two-day session, imagining myself swimming in all of the far-off destinations he visited: the sweeping bays of the Isles of Scilly; the roaring of the Gulf of Corryvreckan; and the moat (really two ponds) which ran along the back and front of Walnut Tree Farm, his Elizabethan farmhouse in Suffolk.

Deakin, it seemed, was the archetypal English eccentric. He appeared to care little for what others thought of him and ploughed a singular furrow, swimming in lakes, rivers, streams and canals which he saw as representing a Britain that was fast disappearing in the late 1990s. He was a zoologist, a natural historian educated at Cambridge and a man with a deep and intimate knowledge of the British countryside.

This much I garnered from the 330 pages of *Waterlog*. But as much as Roger's evocative writing about place, I found his musings on how swimming could affect life profound and helpful.

'You see and experience things when you're swimming in a way that is completely different from any other,' he wrote. 'You are *in* nature, part and parcel of it, in a far more complete and intense way than on dry land, and your sense of the present is overwhelming.'

This was the same survival instinct I had felt deeply in Hampstead mixed pond.

But more than that, it was Roger's insistence that 'water has always held the magical power to cure. ... I can dive in with a long face and what feels like a terminal case of depression, and come out a whistling idiot', that hit me hardest. It was as if those lines were written directly for my benefit, almost twenty years after they had first been written in Roger's creaking home. If I had been interested before, I was obsessed now. I took up the concept of wild swimming with a religious zeal.

I read and reread Roger's book until my copy of *Waterlog* became tattered, its pages falling out. I carried it with me on the swims I'd take across London, reading it whenever I found myself anxious and unable to put on my swimming shorts and take a quick dip. Roger's words acted as a quick fix whenever I found myself feeling low.

It was on a midweek jaunt at Hampstead mixed pond, while swimming along the boundary rope and lying on my back to catch the sun as it peeped through bubbling cloud, that I first thought of retracing Roger's footsteps on a grand journey across the UK. I loved swimming at Hampstead, but the shouts of kids diving in off the jetty was puncturing the mood somewhat. A swim in Roger's footsteps would give me the opportunity to see the Britain he had discovered and also the chance to see how much, if at all, it had changed in the intervening twenty years. Wild swimming was booming, thanks in no small part to Roger's work, and I wanted to see if attitudes towards it had changed too.

Swimming outdoors had become a mainstream activity since Roger undertook his journey in the mid-1990s. The subject of countless broadsheet articles and glossy magazine spreads, wild swimming now had its own guidebooks. It was no longer a niche activity for borderline eccentrics. The mixed pond's popularity surely proved it.

As my journey began to gain momentum and take over my life in a way I could not have foreseen, I visited countless lidos and river-swimming spots where dozens of swimmers ploughed up and down or simply lolled in the shallows. Lido culture, so long something suppressed – pools filled with concrete and art deco gems left to rot and return to nature – was booming. London wasn't shutting outdoor pools any more, as it was in Roger's time, but opening them. In the years it took me to retrace Roger's breaststrokes, the capital gained a fabulous new unchlorinated pool on a building site in King's Cross, while swimming campaigners raised funds for a bath on the South Bank of the Thames.

Saltdean Lido near Brighton was set to reopen and millions of pounds were raised to restore Penzance's spectacular triangular pool after it was

destroyed by storms lashing in from the Atlantic. There seemed to be a willingness to accept that chucking yourself into cold water was not something bizarre, but rather something to be embraced, a bracing way to see our landscape anew. I appeared to have come to wild swimming at just the right time.

But beyond the notion of investigating our nation's new-found love affair with cold water, I believed that tackling Roger's nationwide pilgrimage would be a way to fix my anxiety once and for all, to make that post-swim high last forever. I fast developed a strong faith in the power of water to cure, taking Roger's words as gospel; Britain's rivers, beaches, lakes and lidos offering the chance of a regular baptism to protect me against the worries I battled daily. If a weekly swim at Hampstead allowed me to come back to myself for a few hours, what could a huge, all-encompassing journey do?

At that point I believed that swimming across the country could be the panacea for all my anxieties. That if I swam everywhere Roger had, I would be cured and could live a life without the scourge of constant worry. One which didn't mean days on end beating myself up over trivial details and feeling guilty for doing as I pleased.

While it certainly started that way, I quickly learnt that I'd need things other than swimming to make myself better. I was to discover that the physical and mental journeys I had undertaken, while closely related, were not quite the same. Swimming administered first aid, but it was an unexpected event that occurred during my adventure which would finally help me to arrive where I am now, capable of recognising my anxiety and coping with it. Finding that essential cure went beyond just soaking myself in cold water. But without undertaking the trip and immersing myself in his journey, I am convinced that I would not have made it at all.

Beyond the need to get out of my own head and break away from my obsessions and anxieties, I thought such a long trip could be a great way to learn more about Britain's waterways and their place in nature too. Unlike Roger, I am not a naturalist. I've got a second-class history degree

and come from a new town in Essex, and although I love the outdoors, my knowledge of birdlife and Britain's flora and fauna is cursory at best. This would be a great way to learn. Spending time with the coots of Hampstead Heath had made me hungry to know more about their cohorts, both on and under the water, and swimming seemed like the perfect opportunity way do so. It was, as Roger said, all about being *in* the scene.

There would be obstacles. My inability to drive was definitely one of them, making the hardest-to-reach places all but impossible to get to. (Or so I believed on that day in Hampstead mixed pond. In fact, my failure to as much as learn how to release a handbrake would turn out to be an advantage in fixing the longstanding loneliness I felt keenly during my working days in London, when I went into my shell and worried myself senseless.)

There was also the fact I could swim little more than a kilometre without my arms feeling as if they were going to fall off. My swimming skills were hardly Olympic standard, and while I knew that wasn't what was required, I knew that tackling some of Roger's more challenging swims would need a level of stamina and skill which I lacked. Some time in lido fast lanes would be required.

And, of course, there was Roger's absence. Roger died after a short illness in 2006 and, in my own, self-inflated way, I felt this would be a fitting tribute to him. A way to thank him for pointing out a way to make myself better and lighten the worries about work, status and responsibility I had loaded myself with.

My mind was buzzing with possibility when I first resolved to swim in Roger's wake. In the afterglow of the initial decision, it all seemed so easy. I had no real plan, no concept of it taking any longer than the nine months it had taken Roger to complete, and an overwhelming sense of excitement. I had no idea at the time that this would be a trip that would become more obsessive than my love for the book on which it was based and change me in ways I could not imagine possible. It was time to go swimming.