

Fishboy

By Paul Jenkins

“Why? Why do I have to go? I’m fourteen. You can’t MAKE me go”

Andrew had never spoken to his Dad like this before. Ever. It just wasn’t what happened in this house.

Graham gave an instruction – Andrew, his younger brother and his Mum for that matter pretty much did it. He had this tone that just made people...do things. He wasn’t a bully. He wasn’t even really that scary. He was...forceful. Graham was direct. Graham was organised. Graham was a man who knew what he wanted and usually got it.

Right now, what Graham wanted was for Andrew to get out of bed, get dressed and get in the car. They were already late and the pool would be opening for them in less than twenty minutes.

“You have nationals in six weeks and you’re lazing about like you had all the time in the world. You’ve got a quarter of a second to find before the end of March. How will do you that in your pyjamas?”

Nationals. Urgh. All the way back to Manchester again. Another weekend of be there, register for this, speak to this sponsor or that sponsor, be nice to the lottery people. It was exhausting. And that was before he’d even done any swimming.

“Can I not just have ONE day off? Seriously! It’s EVERY morning. No other kid in my school has to get up at 5:30 every day just so they can go swimming to enter some stupid gala and win some stupid medal. Everyone else is NORMAL.”

Katie was normal. Katie got to do normal things like arrive at school late or hang out at the park with everyone at the end of the day. Katie got to be rubbish at PE and go to the shopping mall on a Saturday afternoon with people in her year group. Katie could eat chips on the way home from school and not worry about whether they were the wrong type of carbs or not.

She could just concentrate on being really pretty and smiling all the way through Science on a Tuesday afternoon. She could focus all her attention on having bright blue eyes and wearing just the right amount of mascara that the teachers didn’t notice. She could spend her days choosing just the right bobble for that silky, shiny brown hair that Andrew had spent so much time staring at during the Maths exam last week.

You wouldn’t see Katie in a swimming pool at 5:30 on a Friday morning. That kind of punishment was reserved for saddos like him.

“Andrew!”

“What?!? I told you. I’m not going”

He pulled the duvet over his head as if hiding from his Dad was going to make the problem go away. As if a thin barrier of quilted cotton could fix anything that happened yesterday break time.

Fishboy.

That’s what she’d called him. In front of everyone in the corridor. Kids in his class, a couple of teachers, some randomer from Year 7. All of them witnessed it. All of them smirked. Some of them (including one of the teachers) laughed. They’d all heard how it went.

“Y’alright? Listen I was thinking... Are you busy at lunch? Do you fancy hanging out and maybe... doing something?”

“Not with you, Fishboy”

They all saw her deliver the killer line with perfect timing. They’d seen the turn, the swish of the ponytail, the effortless way she glided through the double doors towards the assembly hall. Four short words and he was toast.

Andrew had put himself out there and now he was the joke of the school.

So yeah. Right now, the medals didn’t matter. The trophies and certificates and all the newspaper cuttings Mum had stuck up on the wall didn’t matter. Getting to the GB team ready for the Olympics next year? He couldn’t care less.

For his part Graham took a deep breath and gently pulled the duvet back to see Andrew’s now puffy eyes. The tears weren’t there yet, but they were coming. The man who always had a plan took a slight diversion.

“How about we take a rest weekend? You’re due one. You’ve been working hard. We can see how you feel on Monday? Maybe swimming when there’s other things on your mind wouldn’t be the best?”

Andrew looked up at his Dad and pounced.

He’d never wanted a hug more.