

## PIKE

### How to survive predators, parents and other disasters

The winter of Emily's tenth birthday, the atmosphere changed. Conversations would stop when she entered a room. Her parents nagged more than usual. And, worst of all, they would not answer questions. When Emily asked what they were doing at half-term, her mum looked uncomfortable and said "I'm not sure." When Emily's brother Tom asked if he could do guitar lessons, she said, "We'll have to wait and see."

Most problems in Emily's life had a beginning and an end. If people at school were horrible, they turned on someone else after a while. When her parents were mean, they became nice again at some point. So, when the atmosphere changed, Emily didn't expect it to last – Mum and Dad would sort out their argument or whatever it was, and everything would become normal again.

Except it didn't. The secret conversations continued, and she'd overhear phrases that she either didn't understand or didn't want to understand: "pay the mortgage", "talk to the bank". She knew what the words meant, of course; she just didn't know what they meant in relation to her own life. Most worrying of all was the snatch of conversation Emily heard one day when her parents did not spot her quickly enough: "Don't say anything to the childr..." Her father's sentence skidded to a halt as she walked into the kitchen.

As her parents became more and more wrapped up in their muttered conversations and the number of "We'll have to wait and see" answers increased, Tom also began to withdraw. On the rare occasions when he emerged from the teenage fug of his bedroom, he too seemed shut away. When she asked him what Mum and Dad's conversations meant, he didn't want to talk about it. "Maybe they're getting divorced," he shrugged, before starting another computer game.

Emily felt herself abandoned in a world that seemed less safe than before. All through that winter and even when spring came, she was cold, as if someone had left the door open. The nights seemed longer and darker, and she began to be afraid of things – of burglars breaking in at night, of not being able to do things at school. Where would she live if Mum and Dad got divorced? What if they had cancer and weren't getting divorced at all? What would happen to her if they died?

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"Tom, Emily. Dad and I want to talk to you." Mum's voice sounded strange.

"I'm in the middle of a game."

"NOW," snapped Mum.

Tom slammed his Nintendo shut. "You made me die."

Dad opened his mouth to shout, but closed it again as Mum gave him a look. Emily felt her cheeks go red, as they always did when she was scared. This was it – the unknown disaster that had been haunting her for months was about to happen. She mustn't cry, she mustn't cry, she mustn't ...she bit her lip hard in advance of the news.

"You know about the recession ... the business is struggling ... credit crunch ... get a loan ... try to keep it going ... tighten our belts ..."

The words went on and on, but Emily was happy. They're not getting divorced, she thought. They're not going to die, she rejoiced. But she looked at Tom and he didn't look as pleased as she did. He looked furious, in fact, as he snarled: "You're cancelling the holiday?"

Tom had been excited about going to the States for months – for years. He had planned the clothes he would buy, the computer games he would bring back, the

levels of coolness he would gain from going there. For him, this was worse than divorce, this was total humiliation.

"We can't spend that sort of money when we don't know what will happen to the business."

Tom stormed out of the room, and Emily heard his bedroom door slam. Another fine, she thought.

"But we *are* going somewhere – we're going to a cottage in England. It'll be fun ..."

"Yeah, right," thought Emily. She wasn't convinced, and she knew Tom wouldn't be, either.

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"The rooms are tiny."

"It smells."

"The TV doesn't work."

The tour of the cottage was over in about two minutes. Virtually every surface had a note stuck to it, giving instructions about not letting pets upstairs and not wasting hot water. Emily thought there were probably hidden CCTV cameras, to show the owners if you put your feet on the sofa or forgot to turn off a light.

Emily decided to look at the garden. The back door was stiff, and she kicked the bottom to open it (remembering too late that she might be filmed by the evil owners' CCTV system). As she stepped into the long, slightly overgrown garden, it was as if someone had switched on a light. The mustiness of the unloved cottage vanished, and so did the bad feeling of their journey and arrival. The bright sunlight dazzled Emily's eyes, but everything she saw told her this was the garden of her dreams. There was a climbing tree. There was a muddy pond. An old summer house. And best of all,

when she squeezed through the trees at the end, she saw a river. Emily thought she had been transported to the pages of a book.

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"There's a river."

Tom did not look up.

"THERE'S A RIVER."

"Uh-huh."

"IN THE GARDEN."

The words penetrated Tom's teenage force field in a way that Emily's words rarely did. Still not wishing to show too much enthusiasm, he slouched after her. But as he walked down the length of the garden, a transformation began. Reaching the riverbank, he threw a handful of stones into the river, swung on a branch, and exclaimed "Cool" when he spotted a rope swing. Tom began to turn from hostile teenage alien back into boy and brother.

On the first afternoon Emily and Tom stayed mainly on the riverbank. They had competitions to see who could make the biggest splash. They did target practice with tree trunks and stones. They raced sticks, watching them drift on the current until they became wedged against the bank or stuck behind larger sticks and logs. They vied to see who could slide down the muddy bank the furthest, the quickest, or the most dramatically – the category chosen by Tom, depending on what he had just done. They argued over who had swung highest on the rope swing.

Everything involved counting points or beating their previous record or outdoing each other, and most things involved Tom winning, but Emily was happy with this. This

was how Tom was, this was how they played together, and it was good to have him back.

Once Tom had proved that thirteen-year-old boys were superior to ten-year-old girls, their pace slowed. At first, the river and the river bank had just been a new venue for Tom's competitions, but now Emily and Tom began to connect with the place itself. Neither of them actively decided to do this, and neither of them really knew that it was happening, but after finishing the rope swing contest, Tom stood still on the river bank. Emily, in response, relaxed as well and looked around. She saw the signs of life going on around her – holes in the bank where things must live, flowers that were smaller than the freckles on her arm, rings and bubbles in the water where fish had come to the surface.

For the rest of the afternoon, Emily and Tom explored. They put leaves and bits of grass in front of the holes in the bank, as bait for the inhabitants. They noticed different smells: how the water and the shade smelled green and woody, while the earth in the sun smelled of dust and summer. They made assault courses for beetles and centipedes, and watched them climb over twigs and stones twice their size, as they struggled to get back to wherever they lived.

Emily had once seen a television programme about a man who studied a single square metre of his garden. He went there every day of the year, and made lists of the different plants and insects he saw. Thinking he was boring and weird, she had switched over to another programme, but she remembered him now, as she and Tom examined the life around them. They noticed more and more signs of life – different plants, bugs of different sizes and colours and shapes which looked like tiny versions of prehistoric creatures.

They also studied the river itself. Even though the water was moving slowly, there were mini-whirlpools, spots where the surface was as smooth as a mirror, and others where there was turbulence underneath the surface. Whereas rivers at home in Scotland

rushed to the sea, swollen by melting snow and long days of rain, this river was in no hurry to get anywhere else; it had its own life here.

Occasionally, the need for competition returned – Tom’s beetle proved faster than Emily’s of course, and he could spit chewed up leaves almost a metre further than she could – but mostly they did things together, forgetting age difference and their parents and their problems back at the damp, depressing cottage.

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The good thing about having parents in the middle of a financial crisis was that they didn’t get in your way. On a normal holiday, they would have tried to join in with Emily and Tom, spoiling everything of course, by telling them so-called interesting facts about wildlife or reminding them that a beetle was a living creature which shouldn’t be made to do assault courses. Nowadays, Mum and Dad were too busy with their stress and financial planning to join in with anything, and with Tom being friendly, Emily rejoiced.

So as soon as Tom and Emily were up the next morning, they set off down the garden, taking with them all the instant food they could find – bread, a packet of biscuits, and a bottle of Coke. Again, Emily felt transported to the pages of a book, to a world where children went camping by themselves and had adventures, where the sun always shone, and where nobody spent their nights worrying about being poor or homeless or not being able to cope with things.

As usual, Tom was in charge. They would build a dam, he announced, so first they needed to gather materials. They dragged branches to the river’s edge and piled them next to a log that was already half in and half out of the water. But the water by the bank already moved so sluggishly that the dam hardly made any difference. A few twigs and leaves banked up behind their branches, but the pattern of the

water's movement scarcely changed. As the sun grew hotter, the prospect of the dam being built – and of it actually being a good one – became more remote.

When Emily and Tom abandoned the dam, they took turns on the rope swing. The rope hung heavy and damp from an ancient-looking tree on the part of the bank that shelved most steeply down to the water. To swing on it, you stood on a rotting tree stump higher up the bank and leapt into space, searching with your feet for the safety of the large knot at the bottom of the rope. At the furthest point of your swing you flew high over the river, before the pendulum movement of the rope took you back towards the tree stump.

Emily loved rope swings. She would fly high and fearless, respected even by Tom. This swing was a good one; it was strong, and it was tied far enough out along the branch to prevent any risk of collision with the tree trunk, even if your swing was skewed.

Wanting to go ever higher, they pushed each other off the tree stump, but then Tom pushed her too early. Not ready, Emily's feet found air instead of the knot, and, as her legs flailed, her hands began to slip. The flesh on her palms was burning, and she knew her grip could not hold long enough to get back to the tree stump. Instead of flying through the air, she fell, her boldness gone. Tom yelled from the bank, but she had no idea whether he was giving her an instruction, telling her she was stupid, or just shouting wordlessly. She closed her eyes, trying to hide from what was happening.

The first thing Emily felt was the stinging slap of water as her bare legs hit the surface. Then she felt a second slap, this time from the water's coldness. And even though the fall and the impact took just seconds – maybe less – she had time to think of a long list of horrors: from was she going to land on the bank, to was the river so shallow here that she would break her leg on the bottom, to was she going to impale herself on various broken bottles or shopping trolleys submerged in the mud.

To her relief, none of those things happened. She crash-landed into the murky water, and felt soft, gritty mud at the bottom. As she rose back to the surface, she was breathless with cold and shock, but she also felt the exhilaration of surviving. Panic turned to excitement: far from being dead or a failure, she was the daredevil hero of an adventure. She half swam, half bounced to the bank.

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Until Emily fell, she and Tom had just thrown things at the river, or dipped their hands and feet in it. The fall opened up new possibilities. The water had tasted disgusting and was shockingly cold, but Emily's brief swim back to the bank had been fun. Not wanting to be left out, Tom hurled himself off the tree stump, let his feet hang loose instead of resting them on the knot, and let go. He bombed down into the water, hit the surface with legs and arms flapping, vanished, and then reappeared, whooping. He splashed her as he dived back towards the bank, bounded out and raced her to the tree stump ready for the next turn.

For a while, they leapt from the rope, hitting the water feet first, stomach first, in any contortion they could manage, and making stupid faces as they did so. Each time they experienced the same thrill – the concentration as they timed the jump, the anticipation as they waited for the jolt of the water's coldness, the jubilation as they came splashing and laughing back into the sunshine.

Eventually, Tom tired of the game, and after aimlessly throwing stones for a while, he devised their next challenge. They would swim to the other bank and back. If she was too scared, he would do it by himself. Though the river was not wide, the thought of crossing it had not occurred to Emily. The other bank seemed as remote as another country, to go there would be like crossing a frontier into someone else's world.

But, somehow, crossing a frontier was what Tom needed to do. By being the first to fall into the river, Emily had somehow made a connection with the water which he

had not. Only by leading a challenge like swimming to the other side could Tom make the river his river instead of hers.

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Tom led the way of course, and predictably, Emily joined him. She was eager to guarantee her place on the next adventure by showing him she was up to it, despite her age.

The first few metres of the swim were cold. Under the shade of the trees, the water was dark and still, there were bits of green floating on the surface and small black flies hovered just in front of her face. Her feet kicked against mud and stones and her knees occasionally scraped the bottom, but she didn't want to walk in case she sank into the sludge. As they came out from under the shade, though, the water became warmer and lighter. Sunlight turned the blackness of the water insects into dark greens and purples.

Emily began to enjoy herself. She felt the strength in her arms and legs as they cut through the water, and she loved the freedom to move them in any direction – it felt more three-dimensional than walking. This was real swimming, far from swimming pools, and the smell of chlorine and the whistles of the lifeguards. Emily didn't say it to Tom because he would have laughed or sneered, but this was swimming like a fish would swim.

As Emily reached the middle of the river, Tom, still ahead of her, stopped swimming and turned back towards her. He laughed and shouted something she couldn't hear.

"What?"

"I said watch out for pike. Remember the book at home."

Emily stopped. Pike. Of course, she remembered the book. She remembered every detail of the picture of the pike in Tom's old book - the dozens of sharp, needle teeth,

the way it was lurking in the weeds, camouflaged, ready to strike at anything that passed. She remembered the caption, that pike were unafraid to attack prey much bigger than themselves, and were sometimes cannibalistic. They were fish that belonged in nightmares or Greek myths, but now they were here instead – according to Tom.

Emily's swimming faltered. She lost her rhythm, and Tom in front of her suddenly looked remote and unreachable. Horrible, horrible Tom, why had he said that? Why had he made her do this? What would it feel like when the pike sunk its dozens of needle-like teeth into her toes or her foot? What else was underneath the water, lurking, camouflaged, ready to strike?

The river now looked wide and Emily felt small. Suddenly something brushed against her foot. Screaming, she kicked out sideways, trying to escape the unseen thing attacking her. She felt a sharp pain in her toe, as it struck something hard. "Tom, help, it's biting me," she shrieked, but her mouth was half underwater, and Tom didn't hear her. She choked as a mouthful of foul-tasting river water went down the wrong way, and she struggled to keep her head above water as she spluttered and coughed and tried to breathe again.

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Somehow, Emily managed to keep afloat. Her throat felt raw from the coughing, and her heart raced, but she began to breathe more easily. She trod water, and once she was calm, she realised her foot was fine. Nothing had bitten her, and she must have kicked a stone or log underneath the water. She didn't know what had touched her – a pike, a less vicious fish, some weed – but whatever it was had gone.

Relieved, Emily began to swim again, but even more than before, her arms felt tired. She tried to kick her legs through the water, but all the time they were expecting something to attack them, to brush against them. They lost all rhythm, knocked out of

time by the unseen dangers beneath the river's surface. Since she didn't know which vile thing she might touch, she couldn't even prepare herself for the shock. It could come from any side, take any form and texture, hurt any bit of her.

Tiredness overwhelmed Emily, and so did a feeling of hopelessness. The current that had looked so gentle before seemed stronger now, and looking at the bank behind her, she noticed how far she had drifted downstream. This was no longer a glory swim, but a battle she was losing. Now, everything about the river seemed hostile. Its brown, brackish surface must be sheltering hundreds of unseen horrors - stones to stub your toes on, water rats, weed that would wind itself around your feet and drown you, leeches, germs, biting crayfish, pike. More than the hardness of the swim, it was the fear of what might happen next that exhausted her because its weight piled itself on top of the other fears she'd felt for so many months.

Trying desperately to see into the murky depths of the river, Emily had stopped looking ahead at Tom and the bank. She lost track of time and distance, though she had the feeling that this swim would go on for ever. She still managed to move her arms and legs, and she still knew what she was aiming for - there was a chant going on inside her head, saying "I'll get to the bank, I'll get to the bank" - but it now seemed more like an idea than an actual place. In fact, she really didn't want to look ahead at the real bank because she didn't want the bad news of how far there was left to go. She swam on in a trance, crying, planning the horrible things she would say to Tom.

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A shout startled her.

"Beat you, you loser!"

Emily's attention rocketed back to the river and the sunshine. There, a few metres away was Tom, preening himself on the bank, smirking in triumph, not quite close

enough to touch, but close enough. Angry though she was with him, his voice banished her fears, drove away water rats, leeches, germs, weeds, and pike, and let the sun's rays cut through the shallow water in front of her. She could see the bottom, touch it, stand on it. She was there.

Emily let her feet drop down to the gravelly riverbed. Her toes squelched in the mud, and a flotsam of weed and old leaves stuck to her thighs. As she heaved her tired legs through the muddy water, she tripped over a hidden log, stubbed her toe and grazed her shin. But she felt no pain at all as she scrambled up the bank. Tom opened his mouth to mock, but for once realised this was not the time to tease. He gave her a high five.

"Well done."

Emily picked up a handful of grass and threw it at him. She sat down beside him on the riverbank, and they hugged their knees as the sun slowly dried them. The river looked different now. There was a patchwork of dark and light brown where sunlight came through the trees. Everything about it was benign, sleepy, welcoming. It suggested picnics, jaunts in rowing boats, long lazy afternoons in the sun.

Looking around at this side of the river, Emily saw that it was much the same as their own side. But it wasn't the same, it was a different country, a thousand miles and days away from where they had started. She felt bigger now, braver. She had survived the river, the pike, and all the other unseen disasters lurking – perhaps - in the muddy water.

She had beaten them. She could beat anything now.