
Twenty-minute Hero

This is about Louise. Louise, it could be said, was my first love. It could be said, at least, if you used my working definition of love (1980–87), that being a wistful, mildly nauseating feeling held about a person long after a single conversation. These were eight years when I met people only once, and I don't know why. I guess they never asked for my number.

Louise was the first girl I took outside at a school dance. First of two. Same thing happened both times. Conversation. And Louise wasn't much of a talker.

I meant to ask her friend to come outside, but that's okay. I was a bit nervous, and I twitched at the critical moment and ended up looking at Louise. Looking up at Louise. Louise was much bigger than her friend, who was distinctly medium-sized. But Louise was big in a particular way, a big-across-the-shoulders way, a punching-out-sides-of-beef, winning-the-woodchop-at-the-Ekka way.

Louise, it turned out, was the eighteenth-best breaststroker in the world over two hundred metres. And I didn't want to tell her, but I wasn't world-ranked in anything. As my mother once said to me as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, 'No matter how many of those things you squeeze, no-one else counts theirs, so it won't be a world record.'

We walked outside, Louise and me. And next to her I felt pared-back, ultimately flimsy, not much bigger than a piece of bent wire, a little pipe-cleaner boy. Louise, though all I ever really saw were her shoulders, had muscles. Excellent muscles, in places where, all my life, I'll just have skin.

We got ourselves a couple of cups of Tang and we sat on the grass, in full view of the assembly hall, as required. And I waited for Louise to take the initiative. After all, I'd done my bit. I'd got us out here. Wasn't that enough? Minutes passed. Maybe not.

Pretty good Tang, she said eventually, hinting that she wasn't the world's greatest conversationalist.

And I said. Yeah, hinting that I wasn't, either.

Don't get to drink much Tang, she said. Training diet.

She told me she ate fourteen Weetbix for breakfast. Louise was the first person I ever met who ate fourteen Weetbix for breakfast. And still the only one. I tried it the next day and I slowed down after three, and had to lie down mid-way through five. Lying there thinking, thinking, that Louise, she's nine Weetbix and a million laps ahead of me already today, and it's only eight-thirty.

But I lay there thinking more than that. Thinking about the dream she told me she always dreams, of a long, black line, shattered every thirty-two seconds by a tumbleturn. Thinking about her shoulders and how I wanted to dream about her shoulders, or to have her shoulders, or be near her shoulders. Any of these would have been fine, as long as I didn't get hurt. Thinking about her brown eyes and her delicate eyebrows, hinting at the Louise that might have been, had she not had that breaststroke ranking and done all those laps. The smaller, inside Louise, who didn't talk much, but who, I suspected, thought about things a lot. I liked them both—big, muscle Louise, and small, thinking Louise—the whole Louise package was fine by me.

And I thought about the time the night before when I'd said something funny, slightly funny, and she gave me a bit of a slug on the shoulder. Well, when it left her it was a pat, but when it got to me it was more of a slug and I did fall over briefly and end up with a lot of grass on my back.

And she had to go home and I went inside, inside to my friends, and I was a hero for twenty minutes, a girl outside and all that grass on my back. A hero for twenty minutes till they found Michael Morgan down by the lockers, nude and with a girl similarly clad and a mostly empty bottle of vodka. And my hero status vanished like a Weetbix at Louise's place round breakfast time.

But worse things have happened, and Louise was special. I planned to think about her for months, and I did. I knew I'd see her again. We'd gone outside together, hadn't we? And I did see her again. About twelve hundred Weetbix later, in Moscow. I was in the lounge room, but Louise was in Moscow and we were together two minutes and twelve seconds. And Louise, despite the shoulders, looked much smaller than the East Germans.

And I cheered all four laps of her heat but she finished ninth-fastest overall, missing out on the final by one spot.

And it was a bad moment, a bad moment for both of us, when she got out of the pool and looked up at the board and saw her time, even though it was the best she'd ever done. And I wanted to tell her—I wanted to tell her but I wasn't in Moscow—I wanted to tell her that in the end it didn't matter. That a win would have been fine, well, great, but that what I actually liked was Louise.

And I'd been a hero myself, for about twenty minutes. I'd had my time in the spotlight but, Louise, it's so fleeting anyway, for most of us. Michael Morgan might be a hero forever, long after his suspension at least, but that's okay. That's not what it's about. It's about time on the grass, talking, Tang, minutes on end when you want to ask for her number or maybe give her yours, whatever it is you do, but you don't quite know how. Next time, maybe. Next time I'll take the chance. Because if you don't take the chance you're not even a contender. Louise took the chance, trained all those months and she was still just what I wanted.

Nick Earls