

The Pop Girls

By Meredith Downes

I always see them when I come up for air. Those girls that lie on the lawn next to the pool, all through the holidays. Their towels are spread out, their bodies glistening with sprayed-on sunscreen beneath their string bikinis. They're trying to get tans but not the big C so it takes all summer for them to reach the level of brown they crave. They call themselves the pop girls – short for popular. I'm sure they heard that on Netflix or something. None of them is that original. I know because sometimes I hear a snatch of their talk too, as I turn my head and my arm takes the next stroke, or when I stop to rest beneath the starting block.

Madison wants to break up with her boyfriend. He doesn't pay her enough attention. Tayla says Zach's been paying her attention plenty so she should for sure move on. Ashlee likes to go on about her follower stats and how she's this close to landing a deal with some makeup company. And there's always one or other of them wondering if she should dye her hair or cut it. I think they take turns with that one. Everyone raves it would look *gorge* but no one ever does it. It's a relief to put my head under the cool blue again and block out what they're saying. By now, I've really heard it all before.

At the other end of the pool, there's a lot less going on. Usually, just one girl that sits on the bench sometimes. She wears jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, no matter how hot it is, and a scarf wound around her head. I've seen women dressed like that on the bus. It's some sort of religious thing, though I'm not sure which one. She sits there waiting for her little brother to finish his swimming lessons. I know because he came up to her once from the shallow pool, a scrawny kid with his hair spiked up and trunks dripping water down his legs. I caught her wrapping a towel around him but missed when they left.

You're probably thinking I must do a lot of laps to know so much about what's happening around the pool. And you'd be right. I swim a lot. I'm here every day, even when my squad's not training. My head's pretty much in the water 24/7, even when it's not, and I don't really care about much else. I'm hoping to make it to regionals next year. The good thing about the holidays is I get to do some easy laps, without my coach looming over the top of me. But of course I can't do much about all the other kids who think the pool is the place to be too and never even dip a toe in. I wonder what the point of that is but I don't wonder for too long. I've got other stuff to think about. Like my stroke and how many days until the next meet.

If the pop girls are still hanging around when I leave the pool, they've always got something to say about it. Apparently, I look like a guy with my shortish hair and bulky shoulders. I wish I *could* rip through the pool like some of the guys. They've never seen a swimsuit like mine except on old ladies. It's an Olympic-style racerback. Oh, and I stink of chlorine. That last one might be true but I'm never really out of the water long enough to know the diff. And chlorine smells a whole lot better than the flowery funk that wafts up my nostrils whenever I pass their group.

As the holidays wear on, even the pop girls start getting bored of themselves. They take up flirting with the guy behind the counter, who's old enough to go to Uni. They pose in the kiddie pool and shoot Insta photos of each other. They even try to swim some laps but quit after two or three, resorting to splash fights I bet they're hoping some passing hunk will see. Then one day, I spy them heading down to the benches, giggling like a pack of hyenas. For them, giggling is like a second language or breathing. They arrange themselves behind the

girl who's waiting there. They don't look like they're talking to her, more like they're talking about her. No surprise.

They guess she's bald under her scarf. Or she has a disease like Will Smith's wife. Or maybe she thinks hair's evil. She might be pretty if she only took that thing off. By the time I lap back again, something new has started up, some sort of game where only the pop girls know the rules — their favourite kind. The pop girls lean in trying to touch the girl's head. When the girl turns around, they act like nothing happened or pretend to check their manis or fumble for a dropped phone. And every time the girl turns back again, there's a chorus of giggles behind her, pop girl style.

When I stop to catch my breath at the end of the pool, I see the game's gone up a notch. One of the pop girls, Madison, the one with the boyfriend, takes a hard swipe at the girl's head. No joking this time. The girl jerks away as Madison brandishes a hairpin, a few long black strands of hair still attached. I watch the girl's scarf slip and fall, fluttering through the air like some sort of bird, over and away, to touch down in the water. The pop girls celebrate, giving each other limp high-5s.

Something twists in me then, down in my gut, right where the butterflies get me before a comp. I take a breath and dive. My hand grabs the silky cloth that floats and winds around my fingers. I hold it up, paddling it over to the girl now bent at the water's edge, and slap it down on the tiles. "Here you go." The girl barely glances my way, her brown eyes blank and her face tight. She wrings out the sopping piece of fabric and tucks it carefully around her head again.

When she stands, the pop girls crack up some more, hoping she'll cry. Even if she did, you couldn't tell. Her scarf is sending drips of its own down her face and shirt. Without a word, she walks away towards the shallow pool, where the kids are still learning. I stare at the pop girls for a sec before I disappear back under the water. Only Madison stares back, her lip curled into a pouty smirk.

The next day when I get to the pool, the pop girls are on the lawn again, soaking up the rays like nothing happened. They ignore me when I walk past as if I'm not worth even jeering at now. I wonder how long that will last. I plunge in and begin my laps in the pool, communing with the blue and following the straight black lines I know so well. When I go to flip turn at the other end, I see two legs in black lycra, dangling in the water. I come to the surface and look up into a shy smile. The girl from the bench is now the girl on the edge of the pool, wearing a long swimsuit and a bathing cap.

"My name's Shereena," she says. "Can I swim with you?"

I shrug my shoulders, making ripples. "Sure. If you want. I'm pretty fast though."

"I know." As she slips into the water, there is a swell of whispers and stifled laughter up on the lawn. The pop girls have seen what we're up to.

Shereena and I look at each other and almost laugh too.

"Come on," I say.

We duck our heads underwater, bubbles of air escaping our mouths, and let the whispers and words just wash away.