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Ripples

by Richard Lewis

After a week of heavy rain that had swollen the river Avon, it was one of those rare days when summertime delivered on its promise; drawing groups of people to the river bank like bees to nectar. Little did they know that soon the peace was about to be rudely broken.

High on the pipeline bridge, a shrieking trio of teenagers visited the scene. The brothers were looking for trouble and the youngest, Max, spotted a pile of concrete blocks left by workmen. Max was thirteen with a bush of wiry hair that stood out like rusted wire. Always trying to impress his older brothers, he shouted, "I'm gonna chuck one of those fuckers into the water, it'll make a wicked splash."

The brothers watched as Max struggled with the block.

"You'll never lift that over the railings, let me help." The eldest called.

"No, I can do it," Max replied.

"Oh, go on then, big shot."

True to his word Max dragged the block to the railing, his muscles straining until it sat proudly on the edge. Just for a second he seemed to think better of it but on turning to his brothers, let out a triumphant roar that echoed across the water, alerting the audience on the bank. He gave a push but at first the block didn't move, as if refusing to go along with the prank. Then finally it was falling through the air, like a divebomber, aiming to shatter the glassy face of the river.

The block hit the surface with a mighty smack, sending up a vertical spout of water, as if a depth charge had gone off, delivering large ripples to the water's edge and creating alarm bells for people sitting on the bank.

"This'll set the cat amongst the pigeons." Said one of the brothers.

Having captured everyone's attention, Max announced.

"I'm gonna climb this center support. It'll be easy, just watch me."

"You mad bastard," said the elder brother, worrying that things were getting out of hand. But before he could be stopped, Max was already hoisting himself up the steel structure like Spiderman, in a fearless display of foolhardiness.

He was making good progress until half way up, when the jagged edge of one of the girders caught on his jeans pocket, halting his climb. Instinctively he let go of the girder with his right hand to free himself but in a flash, his weight shifted and he lost his footing. This time there was no triumphant roar, more a haunting scream, as he plummeted down.

Unlike the concrete block, it was as sudden as a mountaineer being torn off a sheer rock face by the cruel wind. Max's cry was silenced as he broke the surface of the river, to be replaced by another loud splash, as the tangle of limbs disappeared from view, transmitting another series of ripples to the bank. The shock waves were consumed onlookers, now transfixed by the drama being played out upstream.

Though a warm summer's day, the water was extremely cold. The shock of hitting the water and the temperature, took Max's breath away as he disappeared beneath the surface. He'd been learning to swim but had so far managed only a handful of strokes in the swimming pool. A fast-flowing river was another matter altogether and he knew that this time he really had found trouble.

Up on the bridge, his brothers who were good swimmers were racing down to help. They ripped off their jackets and shoes and dived in off the bank, desperately trying to catch up with Max who was already a hundred yards down-stream, in the fast flowing, central stretch of the river. Max was wildly thrashing his arms, coughing and spluttering and quickly tiring from the effort.

On the bank, the horrified onlookers reached for their phones to call the emergency services but it was all happening too quickly. Max, now half submerged and losing consciousness was heading for the weir, which was less than fifty yards ahead, waiting to welcome him and send him over its slippery wall. His brothers were in hot pursuit but the river was winning the grim race.

Had he been strong enough to hold on this side of the weir, there may have been a chance but what with the river being swollen and with Max unable to resist, there was no way to prevent the inevitable. Seconds later, the force of the flow sent him over the wall, the brothers managing to swim to the safety of the bank just in time.

Everyone knew the danger of falling into the other side of the weir, where the boiling currents were determined to suck you under and hold you to the riverbed like a powerful magnet.

It would not be until the following day that divers recovered Max's body, having lowered the water level by diverting some of the flow and on that rare summer's day, the brother's lives changed forever.