

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Ripples in the rapid, running water as the last of their stones sinks slowly to the bottom of the stream, disappearing from view. Laughter then pierces the silence that follows from the *splash* of the stone smacking the surface of the water below their feet to the silent, emptiness of the ripples. The swinging sixties. 1965.

They're by the old stream round the back of Jack's house, the one that runs around their entire town from high up in the country hills somewhere. They're ditching school again for one very important reason: to be here. Here at the stream.

It's beautiful. It's magical. It's the greatest place in the world. It's home. Here they all feel at peace. They feel safe. They felt a sort of...longing. This is where they belong. They all know that. Every single one of them.

Four friends: Jackie, Lil' Johnny, Mickey and Paul. They're all standing on the double arched stone bridge with all sorts of bad green stuff growing on it, the only one that crosses the stream, throwing stones they've collected from Jack's driveway into the belly of the stream below them until there's none left.

Eventually the laughter comes to a halt and they stand there in an odd silence wondering what to do next, the only form of noise being the running water lashing against small rocks in the shallow stream below. But then Mickey opens his mouth and they find themselves discussing the latest *Rolling Stones* song and Mickey reveals he'll be going to their next concert for his birthday and the moment of silence is broken.

And then there is laughter and they all turn to look at Jackie Boy who's sneakily drawn away from the group and climbed onto the short wall that acts as a railing and walks along it with his arms spread out like he's walking along the tightrope in a circus act.

Then they are all grinning and before they know it, laughing together and clapping their hands together in applause and having the time of their life.

Then Jack slips, vanishes over the edge and instantly the laughter has stopped.

There is a heavy *splash* in the stream below and Mickey is sure he hears a sound like a branch snapping and the remaining friends stare at the wall of the bridge, petrified, listening to the groans of pain it.

Johnny is first to gather enough courage to look over the wall and he is nervously followed by the others and God, they are all so scared. And each of them asks themselves, *Am I crying? Are those tears running down my face?*, and they all know they are.

Paul is the one who points his finger in Jack's direction for he is the most frightened and downright scared and sweet Jesus, is that blood? *Is that blood?*, he screams in his head and stumbles backwards from the wall, digging in his denim pockets for his inhaler but his hands are shaking too violently and his breathing is becoming heavier and heavier.

Mickey, whose vision is blurred with tears, sees this and goes to help but although his mouth is open no words will come out, *no words will come out*. He shouts for Johnny in his head but not even a whisper escapes his mouth. And God, Paul is on the ground now lying against the opposite wall and he must be suffocating, his whole body going into a ferocious spasm, his legs and arms shaking furiously and *Why aren't you turning around, Johnny? Why aren't you doing something?*

But Johnny won't turn around because his eyes are focused on Jackie Boy who's lying on his back in shallow stream, surrounded by small rocks, inhuman screams of agony roaring from his open mouth. And his arm, dear Jesus Christ, his arm is twisted in an impossible direction and oh yes, there's blood and that can't be bone, can it? *Can it?* But he knows that white stump piercing Jack's flesh at the elbow is bone and *Johnny, don't you dare be sick now, don't you dare*. He hears Paul heaving wildly behind him and Mickey sobbing deeply and God, he wants to lend a hand but his eyes won't be taken off their friend dying in the stream below and damn it all, what does he do?

What am I supposed to do, Mickey screams in his head as he crouches beside Paul whose arms and legs are splayed out and shaking angrily in an unearthly fashion, his face a colour it most definitely shouldn't be. Spittle flies from his mouth like a rabid dog as he tries to draw in air and fails and

God, Mickey has never been more horrified and never will as complete fear seizes him and his heart cannot take anymore as the fatal disease he's had since a baby finally beats him. He is granted one final thought and that is of the *Rolling Stones* and how he won't be seeing their concert after all and then the world turns black.

Paul has it now, has the inhaler and although his arms and legs continue to shake violently, although he's just witnessed the sudden death of one of his three friends, he's smiling. Through the tears and spit foaming from his mouth, he's smiling. He will beat the devil. *Yes, I will win today*, is what he thinks as he brings the plastic canister to his lips and presses down on that metallic cylinder. But none of that bitter tasting medicine hits the back of his throat and his face turns pale white as the smile also fades. Then he is clutching his throat and spraying spittle everywhere as he tries to call on Mickey for help. But Mickey just lies there, his dead eyes staring at the blue, cloudless sky. His arms and legs splay out again as he struggles against the devil and wheezing madly, he crawls towards Johnny but he can't hear him, won't. And then the choking worsens and his legs kick out spasmodically in all directions and *Why can't you hear me? Goddamn you-*

Johnny does in fact hear the choking behind but refuses to take his eyes off Jack and God, is it so hard to ignore Paul, God is it hard. Eventually there is only the inhuman screams of Jack and falls to his knees against the short wall, bursting into explosive tears and throwing up on his good leather trousers as the words of his father echo through his head: "*You ain't ever gonna be a man, boy! Never!*"

But all that brings is anger and he pulls himself to his feet and steps over the motionless bodies of Paul and Mickey and when he is off the bridge, bursts into a blind sprint, never once looking back at that damned bridge.

And now there is one.

Jackie doesn't understand. They're gone. All of them. God, he's cold. So cold. His arms. Hurts to move. Oh so painful. His head. Damp and sticky. Blood? He's stopped screaming. Voice becoming faint. Hurts to scream. Vision. Blurred. Blue sky turning grey. The rushing of water around him. Fainter and fainter. Water. Stream. Oh so beautiful. Stones. Ripples. Emptiness. Blackness.