

## **“RIPPLES”**

**BY, G. THOMAS HEDLUND**

It was only a few yards, but it might as well have been an ancient distance for all that mattered. The only man Bryan trusted in this world was smiling patiently at him, arms wide in the promise of embrace. He could only see one half of his dad and that scared him. The water scared him. It wasn't natural, it wasn't solid. The water hid things in its depths, like the dark closet at night.

Bryan heard all sorts of stories from the kids at school. From the boogeyman hiding under his bed to sharks in the lake. From aliens chomping on brains to crabs nipping at toes. He couldn't believe he had allowed the water to drift up to his knees again. He looked at the rolling surface reflecting the world around it; trees, clouds, boats, and all things that made sense, things that were dry.

Bryan wondered what lurked below. He knew the other kids were just mean when they told so many lies. He knew the boogeyman didn't really exist (at least that's what he forced himself to believe). At six-years-old, he was beginning to understand about nightmares and fears and things that go bump in the night. He could turn on the light in his closet anytime he wanted to be sure there wasn't a slimy, fanged creature waiting to devour him. Out here there was no light to flick on. Out here there was only blind faith. And his dad.

“Come on, Bryan, you can do it,” Michael said as his smile slipped. He was beginning to wonder if his son would ever find enough courage to jump in and swim, or if he would always be afraid. Six times he tried to get Bryan in and each time the kid balked, turned and ran out to the safety of dry sand. The last two attempts Bryan had gone all the way up to his waist. Now, he couldn't seem to let the water get past his knees. “It's all right,” he said encouragingly. Michael wanted his son to trust him but something was blocking that trust.

As father and son looked at one another, Michael's arms dropped in defeat. Bryan's head followed. Time was up. “All right, Bryan, no more today.” He waded through the water to Bryan and

patted his shoulder as he passed. "We'll try again later." As his feet splashed through the edge of the water lapping against the soft, white sand, he turned to tell Bryan not to worry about it.

He froze, gaping at the open water. His heart actually stopped for a moment before the hammer fell and began to pound painfully in his chest. His eyes ripped across the beach, covering every inch of sand, grass, and water within the span of a few short seconds. "Bryan," he yelled. The sounds of laughter, chatting, and splashing returned, but no Bryan. "Bryan!" he tried again, this time the sounds returning grew thin. People were looking at him; he was drawing their attention.

The water where Bryan had been standing was nearly calm. A lone, fading ripple yawned outward in a perfect circle. He was gone. *It's impossible*, Michael thought. His back had been to Bryan for five seconds. His son, who hated the water, hated every idea about it, was gone. There was no way he jumped in.

"BRYAN!" he shrieked, cupping his hands around his mouth. By now everyone was watching him. Michael looked around at the vast array of faces. Nobody jumped to help. He couldn't understand why no one would help. "Has anyone seen my son?" he called out to them. A few heads shook, but most just stared at him. After a few moments, many began to drop their heads. "My God, my son is drowning. Somebody help me." Michael started to wade back into the water when a hand touched his shoulder. He stopped and turned to see an old friend.

"Steven, thank God," he grasped his friend's shoulders, "Bryan was just here. Now he's gone. I think he slipped under." He grabbed Steven's wrist and headed into the water. Steven resisted. As Michael let go, Steven grasped his elbow with his free hand.

"Michael, stop." The two men looked at each other, center stage in a play on the beach. All eyes were on them, even those bobbing in the water between the shore and the dock.

"But, ... Bryan ... is out there." He pointed to the open water, groping for hope.

"Michael, Bryan is gone. You know that. Bryan's gone." Steven's eyebrows lifted in pity.

He tried to speak, to deny it, to argue the fact that awaited him every morning and stared him down every night as he walked past that empty room in the house. He looked at his friend, his face

pleading for a lie, just one more little lie. Steven only watched him with empathy.

It was true. His only son had been gone almost a year and still there were times when he believed he could hear his laughter, could almost touch him, could smell him right next to him. His heart ached for the times lost and all the uncharted lands stolen away from father and son. Michael dropped down, splashing in the shallow depths of the shore, and wrapped his arms around his knees. He buried his face there. Activity around him recommenced gradually, suspicious and sympathetic glances in his direction diminished as the minutes passed. Steven dropped down next to his friend and placed a cool, wet hand on his shoulder.

"You need to get help, Michael. You need to get through this. Now. You can't keep torturing yourself like this." Michael's eyes welled with tears but just as had happened every day since he lost Bryan, he fought them back.

He sniffled and then spoke to the open water and to no one in particular, "I never taught him how to swim."

"Don't do this Mike," Steven shook his head.

"I mean we tried, but he could never muster enough courage to jump in. We spent a lot of time that summer, right here." He looked across the water brimming with waves and splashes, and fading ripples. "I think he was getting closer, until ..." the sentence trailed off.

"Until he got sick," Steven finished. Michael nodded, remembering those days so clearly. The persistent headaches that sprung up, the fevers, the chills; all the symptoms that eventually led a doctor to tell him and his wife that their only son had leukemia. Michael knew Bryan would've managed to swim one day, given the chance. He fought to survive for a year, yet in the end, nothing could save him.

"Know what he asked me just before ... you know, when he was lying in bed?" Steven shook his head. "He asked me who would teach him to swim when he died. He believed he'd be all alone. I told him he'd never be alone. What a crock." Then, after all that time, after choking back an ocean of them, the tears broke through like a torrential downpour on a late summer afternoon. He sat as gentle waves lapped around him and cried. His friend sat silent beside him. Michael needed to let it all out. He was a stubborn man, but everyone has a breaking point.

People cleared a wide berth around the two men, eyeing them carefully as they marched in and out of the water. Giddy laughter faded into the distance.

After several minutes, Michael regained control. He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands, and chuckled awkwardly. "Sorry about that. Man, I'm such an idiot."

"No, you're not. We've been waiting for this. Cheryl needed this from you." Michael turned to look at Bryan's mother, squatting in the sand twenty paces away, hands over her mouth, tears fresh in her eyes. Michael stood with Steven's help, and walked over to his wife. They fell into an embrace as Steven wandered away.

Michael and Cheryl held each other for the longest time, not hearing a sound. When they finally let go, Michael turned to the water. He knew that every fading ripple in the water would be his son jumping in for the first time.

He smiled.

He was proud of Bryan.