

TRIBUTARY

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I can't stand the sight of the river any longer.

It is no longer beautiful, like I once believed.

I fear if I stay here for one more day—with the constant rushing of the water heckling me, taunting me to come closer, making my teeth clench—I will go mad.

How could I have ever found this place peaceful?

The cottage is my only solace, its warm walls wrapped around me. Memories of happier times are etched into the worn floor. I watch the water from my window. It constantly draws my gaze, even as I try to ignore it and go about my day. But my eyes wander of their own accord, always keeping the river in sight. I trick myself into believing that a watchful eye holds any power over it at all.

Here at the river's edge, children come to play, unaware of the dangers lurking close by—unaware of the rocks, the current, the cold that rips your breath from your lungs and the blood from your skin.

But the children are innocent, young and so naive. The parents who watch over them are clueless. I watch them from afar, not daring to leave the protection of my small home, but I feel like screaming. Screaming at them all: stay away, it is not safe. It will lure you in and whisper false promises from its depths. Entice you in on hot summer days then steal your soul and leave a broken black hole where a person once was.

It torments me day and night, this body of water. The monster living in the shadows of my life.

Shrieks and screams echo through the air, slapping me in the face and making me leap from my chair. I rush to the door and throw it open wide but all I see are the children running and chasing each

other, blissful smiles on their upturned faces. Giggles and shrieks of joy bounce off the water. My heart slows and finally returns to a steady beat as I grip the doorframe and realise no-one has been sucked under—no-one is gasping for air, shrieking with their last final breaths and screaming for someone to save them.

There is no going back. No peace can be found in this place any longer. A lifetime of hopes and dreams echo around me and reflect off the surface of the river. It is quiet now at the end of the day. Everyone has gone home—to sleep with heavy limbs from running and swimming, with happy dreams of the day floating through their minds.

My time has finally come and the water beckons; now a black, flat mirror, hiding secrets in its depths, no longer tempting people in with its warmth.

The night air is cold, which seems fitting and so very far removed from the hot summer day when everything changed and my heart shattered into thousands of pieces. Shards of grief still stab my chest and make it hard to breathe, to think, to live.

I leave the cottage for the last time and as I say goodbye I clearly remember my beautiful young boy, so bright and full of life, leaping into the water, calling out for me to join him—*come in Mum, please come in!*

I pull the heavy wooden door shut behind me and sigh in relief at the thud. The sound of closure, of endings, of no more days always spent with one ear on the river.

As I walk towards the river—slowly, listening to the quiet gurgle—I picture my husband, my earnest, loving, best friend.

I watch as he dives into the river, grabbing our boy.

The current pulling on them both.

The panic that makes it hard to breathe as their heads bob under, under and under again.

I walk slowly towards my tormentor and my solace.

My throat closes over as I remember the way the river came alive and took them away from me forever. The water laps my feet and I see their faces once more.