

Ten Seconds

by Caspar von Wrede

Jack's father was mowing the lawn. He was using a strimmer, which is essentially a shaft with a motor and a handle at one end and a rotating head at the other. Attached to this head are two yellow plastic filaments which spin very quickly and do the cutting, or rather, the chopping. Jack's father always used this curious machine for cutting the grass around their holiday home, even though he could have easily borrowed a proper lawn mower. The strimmer made a penetrating high-pitched whine, which sooner or later got on everybody's nerves, and people referred to it as "the sewing machine" behind Jack's father's back.

It was a glorious day, late afternoon, and the smell of fresh, pulped grass was everywhere. Jack's father was wearing a plastic helmet with an attached protective mesh for his face. The sweat ran out from under the mesh and soaked his tee shirt, which was plastered with tiny bits of grass. Jack watched his father. He was deep in thought, and a slight frown creased his forehead. He was thinking about his brother, Patrick, and about the challenge that Patrick had set him this morning.

Jack spotted a small flower in the path of the strimmer. It was around a meter away from the spinning filaments, nestling between the long blades of grass and weeds. It was not a particularly pretty flower, but Jack thought about the fact that within moments it would be mashed into something unidentifiable. Ten seconds he guessed, until the flower died. Four more sweeps of the strimmer.

Those blades of grass that were only nicked by the strimmer fell forwards gracefully, almost in slow motion, onto the newly cleared patch of lawn. Then they were totally chopped up as the strimmer came back on the return sweep. Jack was momentarily fascinated by way the grass fell in long ranks as the hissing filaments swept by. He imagined that that was the way that soldiers died, marching orderly into enemy fire. The flower would not end this way. It was too close to the ground; it had no way to drop. It would simply be there one moment, and would be gone the next. Jack thought about the challenge. He knew he wouldn't do it, as surely as the flower was going to be chopped up.

Patrick was sixteen, whilst Jack was a year younger. All who knew Patrick, including Jack, were sure that he would go far one day. He was intelligent, he was brilliant at sport, he played two musical instruments. Not that Jack was a failure, a black sheep, or anything like that, but Patrick was exceptional. He was also very lucky. His biggest stroke of luck to date had come a year ago. Patrick was standing in a car park and was about to photograph a sports car when a passenger jet had screeched out of the sky and crashed into a house not more than a kilometre away. 100 people had instantly been killed in the boiling inferno that resulted, and Patrick had seen all of it, from a perfect vantage point. He had also taken three pictures, something he couldn't even remember doing. And as it turned out those pictures were superb. They showed everything, from the moment before the impact to the devastation that followed, and the general consensus was that even a professional with hours of preparation could not have done a better job. The pictures made it onto just about every newspaper, magazine and television broadcast in the western hemisphere, and Patrick briefly became a celebrity. Apart from winning 2 international competitions he was paid a lot of money, although the exact amount was a secret. Jack's parents had paid it into a trust fund. Not even Patrick knew how much it was, but he and Jack estimated that it was around twenty thousand pounds, at the very least.

That was Patrick's luckiest break, but he had had others, and there would be more in the future. He would go far one day. He was very competitive, as was Jack, and that was why they often set each other challenges. Mostly Patrick would win, but not always, and it was for those moments that Jack lived for. But this time he would lose, and lose badly.

The challenge was simple. They were both to swim out into the deep water beyond the Big Stone, dive down, touch the bottom and return with a handful of mud as proof. The problem was that Jack was scared of deep water, and Patrick knew this. Jack imagined the scene and felt slightly nauseous. He hated the fact that when you were swimming in the sea you had no idea what was below you. If you looked down you merely stared into an inky void that yielded no secrets. You could be in shallow water or you could be swimming over some bottomless chasm; you wouldn't know which. He hated the fact that there was always a layer of warm water at the surface but below it the temperature suddenly dropped. He imagined swimming through this invisible boundary, the cold water engulfing him, making the skin of his head tighten and his lungs contract. The bottom was 4 metres under the surface; they had measured it from the rowing boat using a stone tied to a rope. Not too deep but nonetheless deep enough to make Jack weak with fear. At that depth the water would be utterly silent, crushing and black. And what about the bottom itself, what about driving his fingers into that cold clinging muck that had accumulated undisturbed for centuries. What if there was something down there? What if he stuck his hand into a giant clam which snapped shut and trapped him to die an awful lonely death? What if he thrust his arm into the maw of some nightmarish beast? What if there was a body down there, and he found himself touching a dead face? Jack's forehead was prickling, because he was beginning to sweat. The horror scenarios were marching through his head at a great pace, each with more detail than the last. There could be some kind of cave down there, and what if he swam into it? He would carry on swimming down and down and suddenly realise that he didn't have enough air to return to the surface.

Jack watched the flower and knew that as surely as it was about to die, he could not do the challenge. There was no point in even attempting it: better to admit from the start that he couldn't do it and retain a tiny bit of dignity. He forced himself to think of something else, and suddenly he remembered what had happened that morning. He had gone down to the beach to collect a towel that he had forgotten there and had surprised Johanna in the little beach hut. He had opened the door hoping to find the towel inside but was instead greeted by the sight of her, getting changed. She had been totally naked.

Johanna was 15, like Jack, and everybody, including Patrick, was secretly in love with her. She had an undefinable appeal about her, even though she was not strikingly pretty. They had not exchanged a word this morning, they had merely stared and Jack's eyes had wondered up and down her body. Twice. She been swimming and was covered in goose pimples. He knew that the image of her slim curves would stay with him for a long time to come. However, it was what she *did* that had made the most impression: Initially Jack had absentmindedly torn open the door, expecting the hut to be empty, and she had gasped with surprise. Both her hands had instinctively leapt up to cover herself. But she had consciously stopped them. The startled look had left her face and something very different had replaced it. Then she had reached up, slowly and with great purpose, and had squeezed one of her breasts. It was so shocking and unexpected that Jack had been completely helpless. For maybe three more seconds he had stood transfixed before he had turned around and fled, his face burning. What had shocked him almost as much was the feeling that had totally overwhelmed him in that moment. *Touch her*, a voice had screamed in his head. He had almost taken an involuntary step forward before reason had managed to intervene. What would it have felt like?

Jack felt himself stirring in his shorts, and decided to think about Johanna later, when he was alone. The flower had 5 more seconds. He thought about what he, Patrick and their cousin Philipp had done last evening. They had gone fishing with the boat and had taken a pack of cigarettes with them. It had been the first time that Jack had smoked and it had made him very ill, but nonetheless, he had liked it. He had smoked the first one just as the sun was setting and he was sitting back in the front of the boat. Patrick and Philipp had still been fishing and he had listened to the hiss of the lines as they had cast their lures into the water. Their shoes had crunched with the sand that lay in the bottom of the fibreglass boat. Jack had stared into the

spectacular sunset and had puffed away, proud that the smoke was not making him cough. Then he had suddenly felt drunk, really drunk. So that was what cigarettes did to you. Cool, quite frankly. The drunkenness went away again after he had finished, and so he smoked another cigarette a little while later. Again that light-headedness, only less this time. Then he had smoked a third and after that he had felt ill. All the way back home he had felt worse and worse until he had realised with horror that he was going to throw up. And then behind the house it happened: a mass of undigested gleaming white spaghetti was the result. The little heap would still be there now and he briefly wondered if he should go and admire it. It would probably be covered with flies by now.

Jack continued to stare at the little flower and the strimmer that was now less than two sweeps away. He wondered what could save it from its doom. Maybe if the strimmer ran out of petrol or his mother came out of the house saying his father had a telephone call. But these things were not going to happen. The flower would be killed by the strimmer and Jack would not take up Patrick's challenge. He felt sad. He knew how smug Patrick would be. He knew what Patrick would say.

He paused in his thoughts for a moment and immediately the image of Johanna was in his mind again. Her nostrils had flared slightly when she had touched herself. The hairs on her arms had been standing up. Goose bumps. Nipples. Breathing. Real life.

Why had she done that? Could it be that she liked him? Him and her. Her and him. Alone. The beach hut. He thought how his brother would react. He personally thought he was more good-looking than Patrick; about the one thing that he had on his brother. Oh please, God.

Suddenly Jack leapt forward, and his father gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Jack!! What the hell are you doing? This thing is dangerous!" The strimmer was puttering away, idle.

"Sorry, but I thought I had seen something in the grass" he got down on his knees and poked around between some blades of grass. "Looked like something made of silver, but it's not here. I just imagined it, sorry!"

And with that he walked away, and his father returned to his strimming. In Jack's hand was the flower which he had picked without his father noticing. He had spontaneously decided that he would do the challenge after all, even if it killed him. Twirling the stem of the little plant between his fingers, he went off to find his brother.