

My Autobiography

Below is an extract from Martin Simpson's new book. Then and Now

In the green water, among the rushing bubbles he is looking at me still. His face shows white against the moss and weed fronds. As I watch, he mouths my name through the soundless water; an explosion of bubbles erupts from his mouth. They race forward and cling to my eyes and face and for a moment, I'm blind. Then they boil upwards the daylight and I can see again. And I just have time to catch his eyes once more as they turn away from me into the dark and his face is swallowed by the greenness all around

Max and I were on our bikes. Away from the Caravan site and down the hill road, out of the town. Passed the canal, the pubs, the derelict factory building. Max was always in front, me always behind. Under the flyover and the last estate and out into the September fields. The sun was shining and our legs were going and wind squeezing tears out of our eyes. It was a good run, good enough for sweat to break out on my back, and my leg muscles starting to complain. Through the brown fields, slower now. Max began to tire and I made up the gap coming up along side him. He was red in the face, grinning with concentration. We came to the little bridge over the river. There were willows by the water and unkempt meadow that didn't look too soft or wet. I was all for trying it, since the water was deep enough for fish, but Max said no he knew a better place. We cycled on. We ended up at a mill; I had been to the mill before. Dad had taken me there the last time we came away in the summer. Overgrown with weeds and thorn, the little path meandering along between two ugly electric fences. We wheeled our bikes up breathing fast, to join the dirt road, it ran flat over the cattle grid to the mill stream. The track was a public right of way, through the mill itself, behind its high walls was private and operational, supplying some little baking firm up town. Mens voices sounded over the red brick wall. The mill stream disappeared into a low slung arch in the stonework. We went round the side, passed the mill to the back of the building and the wheel. We stood on the brick wall looking down at the hellish cauldron of foam and churning milk. The wall was drenched in spray and the bricks were covered in a spongy wet moss. The wheel roared below the parapet, huge torrents erupting from the stream, rising out and upwards in an endless arc, then ducking away again, leaving us deafened. Max clambered out onto the stone lip above the water hanging his legs out over the edge, to feel light white spray on them. I joined him after a while it was the perfect thing to do as this cooled us off quickly after our ride.

Below the mill wheel was a sluice, and beyond that the stream continued along until it opened out into a shady mill pool, this was where Max intended us to fish "I saw some big ones here once." He flung his bike down at the foot of an apple tree and took his fishing rod from the pack that had been strapped to his back. There was a ring of apple trees each one hanging over the water. I looked at them ominously while Max fixed the bait. The apples on the branches which were hanging out over the water were ripe and ready. Max was ready. We sat down on the bank of the quiet pool and he made his first cast. The water was still and the sun reflected lazily off the surface. It was a beautiful afternoon. Sparrows sang from the trees and the sun beat down on our backs. However, we caught nothing. Every now and then, a big fat carp with

ghostly white eyes rose up slowly from the murky water and hovered just below our dangling bait. Not once did they try to take the bait, but just stared dumbly, before turning away and diving to the bottom once more. Max was not very good at fishing, I told him so too; so he threw his rod to one side and sulked.

The silence was finally broken when Max exclaimed he was hungry, "We should have bought some lunch with us" he murmured. "There are no shops for miles."

"There are plenty of apples"

Max was never one to resist a challenge. After a bit of scuffling and a couple of curses, Max clambered up on the tree "watch it, Max. you will be over the water." To which he replied "who dares get's the apples." He inched out along a sturdy branch until he sat about 2ft beyond the bank of the mill pool. There he wedged himself into position, plucked a juicy ripe apple from a nearby clump and shoved it into his mouth. In a matter of minutes he had devoured it. He spat out the pips into the water where it disappeared with a dull splat. I called for my share, but had to wait until he'd gobbled another one down before he threw me one. It tasted so sweet.

I sat on the ground between the tree and the edge and ate a couple more. Quite soon I'd lost my appetite. Whether or not it was the fruit, but I had a blunt ache in my stomach and could only wonder that Max kept popping apples into his mouth, undaunted by the sheer quantity. The fall of apple pips continued like a light rain.

Then the rain stopped. Max must have finally been stuffed. I looked up at him. He was very still on his perch, with his head tilted on one side. Surely he couldn't have fallen asleep? No, his eyes were wide open, and so was his mouth, and he was gazing down into the water which was six foot or so below him. His hands were white and gripped the branch as if he feared to fall. I followed his gaze to the pool, but saw only the reflection of the sunlight which hurt my eyes.

"What's up Max?" I called out sharply; Max seldom stopped to look at anything.

"Hey, Max pass us another."

There was no answer. I called again. Still he gazed down at the dreamy depths of the pool and made no move or sound. A pang of panic gripped my chest, though Max had often ignored me in the past, just as I had ignored him "Comon Max stop messin about say something. If this is a joke it aint funny. You look like a fool with your mouth open like that. Get a grip." I didn't know why I was so concerned, and that irritated me in itself. "Come on answer me....." Suddenly, Max swung his legs so that they were hanging off a branch and he was sitting looking down between them. And then with barely a pause, and with a brief break in concentrated gaze he gave a violent push forward and toppled into space.

He fell without a sound, and the waters of the mill pool closed in over him. I sprang to my feet with a cry of disbelief and leaned over the edge, scanning the surface. The bubbles faded out quickly and then there was nothing, the surface was still as calm as ever. I waited. Time froze at the edge of the pool. I waited, waited for his head to reappear.

A pigeon called, its sleepy voice cuts me like a knife and awakens me from my trance. Time started up again and I kicked off my shoes and dove into the pool. As I hit the water, the warm sun was peeled off my back as if I had been flayed. My body stung with the cold my ears rang with silence. All the commotion of the late summer day

were left behind. I opened my eyes and saw a emerald green emptiness nothing in sight apart from the long green fronds which tangle themselves up against my legs. I saw Max in the distance sinking, I swam towards them, However the hellish fronds would not liberate their grip on my legs. So I set about them with my fists, and tore myself away from them. I kicked upwards towards the dim daylight to catch my breath. The afternoon was two minutes older then when my feet had left the bank, However I knew it was to late. Max was gone. I swam to the edge and hauled myself out onto the hot stone, from wear I gazed stupidly at the calm waters of the mill pool, which had taken my friend forever.