

Hannah Burgess, Short Story First Place, 2021

A Plunge into Icy Waters

Joshua Hain, 16.

My Dad was gone.

It was just me and Mom and we were all alone.

I had a bad head injury from the accident.

I would have to learn to speak all over again, if I was able to relearn at all.

I was also going to have to go to a new high school in Rocky Ford, Colorado.

The facts made me numb.

It was after that first day of school when they came after me.

It had been snowing all morning and afternoon, and the ground was blanketed in a layer of snow. I was standing on the little bridge that crowed a stream running through my neighborhood. It wasn't a very good bridge; it was old and railed only on one side and needed a new sanding and paint job. But I liked it. I stood there for several minutes, taking in the view.

"Hey you. The new kid."

Startled, I whirled around to see Travis Dennis from school sauntering up the slope of the little bridge toward me. His brother, Mike, was right behind him. When they came to where I stood, Travis stopped and crossed his arms.

Mike came to the other side of me. He crossed his arms as well, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smirk.

I stared hard at Mike for several seconds, and he stared back, a stupid grin slathered across his face.

"Hey, Travis," Mike said. "This is the one that still thinks he's a little kid, huh?"

I paused and stared, confused.

Mike glanced back at Travis. "Yeah," he went on, "I saw him that first day of school. He was hugging his *mommy*." He sneered, and his friend grinned with a chuckle.

A fire of anger kindled in my chest. My jaw clenched. I eyed them hatefully, which only made them chuckle more.

“What’s wrong, *little kid*?” Travis said in a distastefully playful voice, “You get your feelings hurt? You gonna cry?” His twin and he shared a hearty laugh.

I felt the heat rush to my face. I balled up my fists until I felt my pulse in my palms. Did I look like a little kid to them? I could teach them to not mess with me ever again. I could pound them until they whimpered like puppies and went crawling into a corner to cry. I turned it over in my mind. But... what would Mom think? She was already dealing with so much. I couldn’t do that to her.

“Hah!” Mike said, “Maybe he would cry if we gave him a little dunk in the water!”

Travis chuckled.

My heart began to beat rapidly. I took a step backwards but there was no place to go. My hands brushed the wooden rail at my back.

Travis’ hands shot out and he grabbed my arm. I felt Mike grab my other and they dragged me away from the rail, dragged me toward the other edge—the open edge—of the bridge.

“You scared of the water? Too cold for you?” Travis taunted, giving me a shove.

My stomach twisted into a knot as my toes danced on the edge. The stream’s icy waters flowed threateningly below. My hands grappled wildly for a hold—and found Mike. I clutched at his shoulder, grabbed it, and wrenched myself back on balance, stumbling away from the edge. But my force sent Mike for a scramble. His hand flew to my elbow as his body began to pitch over the edge of the bridge. His eyes were wild with terror. He clawed into my arm for a hold.

And I saw only one thing: someone was falling.

Snapping into action, I seized his arm and yanked him up with what leverage I could muster; which may have been a little bit too much. Mike swayed back on his heels. His fingers still clutched my sleeve. Travis held onto my shoulder, frozen in the moment. And then...

And then Mike slipped. In a split second his shoes lost traction on the snow and his feet flew out from under him and he plummeted down, down past the bridge, the back of his head smacking loudly on its wooden edge on his way down, down into the stream with a tremendous *splash!* And he was gone, enveloped in foam.

Stunned, I gaped after him. Travis’ hand fell from my shoulder. He crouched down with his hands on his knees, peering over the edge. “Mike!” he called. But the stream bubbled quietly onward in its course. Mike had vanished. The stream had swallowed him in its depths. “*Mike!*” Travis called again, his voice breaking in alarm. But Mike didn’t answer. He didn’t even show himself.

Quickly straightening, Travis glanced around madly. His hand went to his head and he clutched at his hair. His fiery eyes fell on me and he shouted, “Do something!”

Then he turned and hurried down the slope of the bridge, scattering snow with his strides.

At once my mind kicked into gear. *Do something! Do something... what to do...* I bolted to the other edge of the bridge, catching myself on the rail, and bent down over it to search the water below. My eyes scanned the soft ripples on the surface. It was quiet, and cold, and lifeless as before.

Except... I looked again. My eyes locked on the spot. The dark spot, just under the surface, directly under the bridge. *Except Mike was down there!*

My hands flew to the zipper on my coat. Finding it with my fingers, frozen and trembling, I tugged the zipper down and whipped off my coat, tossing it away on the wooden deck. The cold pricked through my clothes but I pushed the sensation away. I rushed to the open edge of the bridge and peered down into the stream. *Here goes.* I hesitated, allowing the cold to wash over my face and through my clothes. Did I really want to do this? That was Mike down there after all. Mike Dennis. The taunting, insulting kid I despised.

I shook my head. Not now. Never mind all that. Whoever it was, he was down there freezing, drowning in the water and he needed help. Now.

I sucked in a deep breath of the chilly air that almost hurt my lungs. And then I willed myself to step over the edge. I threw myself down, down into the water below. All the while my mind screamed *What are you doing!* And all the while I prepared myself desperately for—

Splash—the stream gulped me into its depths. At once I was overwhelmed with cold. *Cold!* Freezing, miserable, agonizing cold. My head was the last thing to dunk below the surface, and it was the first thing to come up again when I pushed through the surface gasping in shock. *Freezing, freezing, freezing* was all that ran through my mind at first. I treaded water like a mad man, partly because my wet clothes threatened to drag me under, and partly because I knew I had to move vigorously to keep myself from freezing into a block of ice.

I scanned the surface for Mike. He wasn't too hard to spot. His upper half had come up and was floating, his face down in the water, very still. I pressed toward him, swimming downstream. Mike's body floated gradually away, but I made it over to him. I took hold of one of his arms and pulled him to myself. His coat was as cold as the water around him. And he was still. Way too still.

Treading forcefully with my legs I reached across his shoulders, took his other arm, and turned him up in the water. His head lulled to one side. Water ran from his face and hair and dripped off his chin. His eyes were closed and his lips were parted listlessly. I refused to believe that he might very possibly be dead. *No... please, no...* I pushed with my legs, barely able to keep my head above the water as I brought his back to my chest and laced my arms under his. I kicked back and let his weight press onto my chest. His head sagged back onto my shoulder. I pushed through the water, pumping my

legs, buffeted by the flow of the stream, my chin bobbing in and out of the water under Mike's weight. The cold and the effort and the waves tiding over my face made me gasp for breath. But I kept going, pushed on toward the bank, pushed on through the icy water.

My heels at last brushed earth. I dragged Mike up out of the water, letting him slide down until his shoulders hung in the crooks of my elbows. My feet began to crunch in snow. Soon I was dragging his limp form up the gentle slope, away from the stream that flowed on as it had before.

Travis and I got Mike to return to consciousness. We helped him up and walked him home. Mrs. Dennis hurried us inside. She had us all sit by the fire while she fetched some dry clothes for Mike and I. Afterward we gathered around the fire and she passed out warm blankets and hot drinks.

Travis told her what had happened—minus the part about him and his brother trying to throw me off the bridge, of course. When Mrs. Dennis heard I'd gone in after Mike and pulled him out, she engulfed me in an embrace which practically suffocated me; but that was all right. Having a warm person wrap themselves around you when you're just recovering from a chilly dip in the stream isn't that bad at all.

Presently Travis sighed laboriously and turned to me.

"Josh."

I looked at him.

Travis glanced up at me and then back into the fire. He opened his mouth as if he would say more, but shook his head instead. He lifted his eyes and looked straight at me, his mouth a thin line. He put out a hand.

I blinked. I didn't know if I'd seen right. But I had. Travis was standing in front of me, staring at me, not glaring at me, and he was extending a hand. Travis extending a hand? To make amends? Why? I eyed him, begging an explanation or else for him to take his hand away.

Travis just waited. He said nothing. He didn't have to.

It was real. I had to believe it. Travis was extending a hand, extending an offer of peace. For what? For saving his brother? Maybe. What did it matter? I took his hand. And I thought, this is great. This is really great. I couldn't help the smile that crept onto my lips as we shook hands for the first time.

Travis averted his gaze, but before he turned away I noticed a look in his eye I hadn't seen before and a hint of a smile.