



THE RIPPLE  
EFFECT



Gavin Major

PERERA-HUSSEIN  
PUBLISHING HOUSE



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COLOMBO



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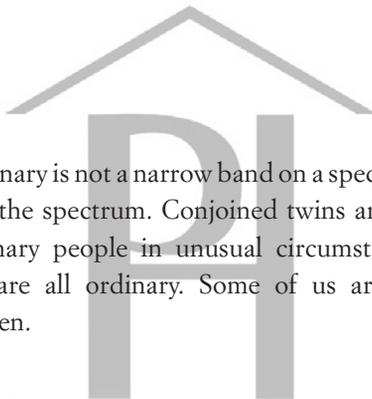


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*To Thushy, because she shot-gunned it, to Max who listened and to Ben, who was too busy living his own adventure to know I was writing it. And of course, to Therssy. Everything I am is because of you.*

*All the characters in this book exist only in my head. Any resemblance to real people is just a spooky coincidence. If you think you recognise yourself in these pages, you are wrong. The characters are a mishmash of everyone who ever lived.*

*Thalagamma is a spelling mistake.*



Ordinary is not a narrow band on a spectrum.  
It is the spectrum. Conjoined twins are two  
ordinary people in unusual circumstances.  
We are all ordinary. Some of us are just  
broken.

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# 1

Sam Benson was 56 years old and lived on his own on the Isle of Skye. Sam thought the Isle of Skye was the most beautiful place on the surface of his planet. He loved the hills and lochs, the birds and the trout in the burns.

People? He could take or leave them as his mood dictated. He had friends, but most of all enjoyed his own company.

His children, a boy and a girl, had grown up and left home long ago. He was reasonably pleased with the job he and his ex-wife had done in raising them. They appeared to be well-balanced, ordinary people showing no more than the average tendency towards being broken.

Sam and his wife separated seven years ago when their youngest child, the girl, left home. It seemed to him that their duty to their genes had been served and both had lost the ability and the inclination to procreate further. The biological deceit called love had lost its ability to deceive. That tingling excitement a new relationship brings had vanished and been replaced by something people tried to say was stronger. But Sam knew it wasn't. Their relationship had followed a very ordinary pattern. Biologically, they were spent. Sam felt content that he had done his job. His genes were out there mingling in the gene pool of humanity. He hoped that his mingled well.

For as long as Sam could remember, his wife's default response to any contentious issue had been to crank up the volume. It was a fantastic strategy, but it left little room for compromise. The family home had become a mosh-pit for two antagonists. He felt they might

as well live the rest of their pointless lives separately. Not in a quest to be happier, but simply to be somewhere quieter. Luckily, his wife felt the same.

If you could plot Sam's life on a graph it would most accurately be described by a slowly descending straight line where time was on the X-axis and enthusiasm for life on the Y-axis. Very little rocked his boat. The joys and sorrows of life passed him by and left as much impression on him as drops of water on a newly polished car.

Sam lived modestly. He had been in business throughout his working life and had done well enough to keep things comfortable for those around him. It had not always been easy, but he had managed to maintain a respectable distance between his family and hard times. The effort had taken its toll. As well as being biologically spent, life had left Sam feeling emotionally jaded.

When he and his wife had sold the business, they set off independently on their own terminal paths. Like Pacific salmon after spawning, they left without purpose or direction. Sam's meanderings had brought him to Skye where he bought a small house outside a small village and now lived amongst ordinary people. A few of these people were badly broken, mostly by whisky and cheap vodka. For about a year Sam had been broken by whisky, but he was fixed now. The only things ailing him were the cumulative effects of age and a growing insensitivity to the suffering of other people. But since his genes were out there doing their bit, he didn't really mind, and he knew that this was just what nature had intended for him all along. Some of the ordinary people he knew called it fate. Sam called it biology. Sam's faith in biology was absolute. Its complexity and beauty pleased him. Biology to the exclusion of everything else helped him pinpoint precisely his worth in the great scheme of things. Having sown his seed, he knew his worth was zero. And far from troubling him, it infused his consciousness like a desensitizing balm.

One of the things that Sam did enjoy, was riding motorcycles. Not fast or aggressively, which he considered to be an act of questionable morality, but steadily and for long distances. Unusually for his age he

had the urinary constitution of a camel and if fuel tanks could be made big enough he could probably ride for twelve hours without a break.

He entered a kind of meditation the moment he sat on a bike and this got deeper and more therapeutic the longer he rode. Cold and rain were things to be accepted and then, ultimately ignored. He never challenged them because there was no point. If it was raining, he got wet. There was nothing he could do about it, so he concentrated instead on the road and its surface unrolling beneath his boots.

He concentrated on his position on the road, pulling out wide towards the centre on unsighted left-hand bends and tight into the verge for right handers. He rode to make himself more visible and to increase his own forward visibility. He rode well and defensively and the satisfaction he got from doing this to the best of his ability trumped any discomforts the journey might throw at him. If it was wet, he rode better. If it was cold, he concentrated more.

The bike Sam rode was made by ordinary people who were famous for being punctual and efficient and who supposedly loved beer and sausages above all else, but who allegedly had no sense of humour. That was fine by Sam. There were two main things he looked for in a bike. The first was reliability. The fewer times a bike broke down, the more he appreciated it. His bike seemed bomb-proof. With the appropriate nourishment and care it went on and on and rarely gave a hint of its own limitations. At its heart was a 798cc parallel twin engine made by a company who also made engines for aircraft. Sam guessed reliability would be an important consideration for the people who used these same engines to defy gravity.

The other thing he wanted in a bike was entirely subjective. It was simply this – how much did the machine make him smile?

There were many motorcycle magazines on the shelves of the newsagents over on the east coast in Inverness. Some catered for people like Sam who liked to explore their world on bikes. Others pampered the egos of individuals who hooned around like demented gremlins, spending as much time on one wheel as two. The thing all these periodicals shared, and without which they would all quickly have

been out of business, was their futile efforts to describe and quantify how much different bikes made them smile. The universally accepted term for this was the ‘grin-factor’.

An important thing to understand is that if the grin-factor was at all quantifiable, there would probably only ever have been three or four different models of bikes in the world.

Sam’s bike had such a big grin-factor for him that sometimes at night he would go out into his shed, turn on the lights and just smile at his bike. Some might have described Sam’s feelings for his bike as love, but Sam knew it was just appreciation. There was no deceit.

If it wasn’t for something small being where it shouldn’t have been, things might well have carried on for him in this way, straight-lining inexorably to a point where something in his body gave up the ghost. It was something so small most people would probably never have noticed it.

Sam used Italian oil in the Austrian engine of his German bike to ride in Scotland. There were many good reasons why he could have chosen this particular oil, but in truth it was because of the fantastical logo on the oil can. It was a fire-breathing dog with six legs. Sam discovered it was designed in the 1950s by a man called Luigi Brogini, who cleverly died before telling anyone what his magical beast was supposed to mean. The dog made Sam smile. It too had a grin-factor. Sam imagined Luigi had been pleasingly eccentric.

He was decanting the oil from the second of his three, one-litre cans into a long-spouted jug. If he didn’t use the jug, he ended up spilling the oil over the bike and the floor.

He kept the plastic oil cans on the workbench at the back of his shed. He bought them in packs of four – three for an oil change and one as a spare to top up as and when necessary. The Austrian engine makers were so clever that his bike almost never needed to be topped up. So, after three service intervals Sam had three spare oil cans which he liked to think of as a free oil change. He enjoyed these more than the others and this time was one of the freebies.

Sam felt satisfied as he watched the steady flow of the synthetic lubricant from the can into the jug. He stared into the translucent liquid in the way a jeweller considers the heart of a perfect gem stone. And, like the jeweller, he saw no flaws.

And then he did. The viscous amber flow was interrupted. A ripple passed down the arc that the oil described. Soot in the sugar bowl. He stopped pouring and put the oil can down on the workbench. His movement was tentative as he raised the jug and tilted the top of it towards him to see the offending inclusion. What he saw was like a slap in the face. The virtuous cycle of man, oil and bike had been breached. For an emotionally jaded man, he felt remarkably indignant.

At the bottom of the jug, resting insolently in the angle between the tilted base and the side, was an olive stone. An olive stone in the oil, even Italian oil, was anathema. This was not like the surprise you might get when cracking an egg into a frying pan and seeing a double-yolker. This was like cracking an egg into a frying pan and seeing a hamster leap out. It shouldn't happen. It was inexplicable. Worse, it was a fracture in the bond of total trust that Sam had in his bike and the nourishment he put into it. It exposed his vulnerability.

When he came to Skye, Sam had welcomed the freedom from his marital responsibilities. It had made him selfish. But increasingly, this lazy, hollow, new-found freedom was turning out to be, unexpectedly, far from liberating. It brought with it a new responsibility – that of accepting the consequences of his choices and he was beginning to understand that only by accepting this responsibility, was there any chance of changing his life for the better. Blaming the oil company would be a forfeit of this right to change.

So in pursuit of true liberation, he obeyed his soul and his soul told him that the best thing to do was to go to Italy and give someone their olive stone back.