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Sol Singleton lived to work and hated it when his annual summer holiday came around. This might seem surprising to the outsider, for his job, judged by most criteria, was not a rewarding or fulfilling one. It was not capable of meeting deep and complex human needs, it involved no profession of oaths and there was no sense in which it could be seen as somehow furthering Life's great work. It involved no difficult skills that had to be developed over the years under the tutelage of a master. It was simply what it was, a lowly position within a company that existed to service the everyday needs of everyman.

It would be wrong to say that Sol's work stimulated him. There was no challenge in it, and no sense of achievement at the end of it, merely the satisfaction of a job well done. It was routine, with little happening in the course of the day that had not happened the day before, and a thousand times before that. The best that could be said was that his work engaged him from time to time. It can be counted a plus that his working environment was pleasant and harmonious and that his colleagues were agreeable, and occasionally kind and amusing. Sol's work, in short, went a long way to fill the time given to him on this earth and was the rock upon which his existence was built. In this he was not so different from the majority of the population.

Being removed from his routine workaday world created

an underlying sense of unease, which Sol countered by inventing new routines, so that the day did not lie before him as a blank sheet, or as something unknown that could throw surprises at him. Every two-week summer holiday was a challenge to occupy himself, and a test of patience. So he would return to work buoyed by the fact that the holiday was over for another year and things were back to normal. He would have been happy to forgo his holiday, but this was against company policy. It believed staff returned refreshed, both physically and mentally, from a long break, which was to the benefit of both employer and employee. Sol did not share this view, but there was nothing he could do to overturn the rule.

Sol received his name from his mother, who had studied astrology. The day after his birth she was well enough to draw up his horoscope and observe that the Sun was (as she put it) 'happily aspected and well positioned within the diurnal circle'. This led her to conclude that her son would be of a sunny disposition. As it turned out, he was not. On the contrary, he was rather cool and unemotional. He was drawn to sunny people, however, much preferring them to lunar types, whom he found to be touchy, moody and a tad cantankerous. As a teenager he thought about changing his name, but decided in the end not to. He might not be sunny, but he decided his given name could be taken as short for Solus, which was more appropriate to his character. For, although he liked other people, and generally got on well with others, he was just as happy to be alone; indeed, he was probably happier.

That Sol, come the summer holiday, did not seek, as millions do, the rejuvenating waters of a warm sea can be put down to an unfortunate incident in his childhood. When he was

a boy his family passed a fortnight each year at a seaside cottage. His father taught him to swim and also to row and paddle. Sol took particularly to a fibreglass kayak that even with the limited strength of a young boy he could control and propel with some ease. Each year, as he grew more confident, he would venture further out in his little craft – until one year, as he attempted to return to the shore, he found he was making no headway.

It was a calm, sunny day, with barely a swell, but no matter how hard he paddled he found himself being pushed out to sea, as if by a hidden hand, which was both perplexing and alarming. He was wondering what he could do when a passing motor boat slowed, steered towards him, and eventually stopped. Sol, who was close to tears, explained the difficulty and asked for help. He and his little craft were taken in tow and returned to the shore. His rescuer explained that the tide had turned. It was a strong tide – four-and-a-half knots. He would have exhausted himself attempting to combat it and eventually would have been carried a long way from the shore. Sol had heard of tides. He knew they went in and out, but hadn't appreciated they represented a danger.

Sol seemed none the worse for his scare, but the next night he had run screaming from a different sea – a subconscious sea, the *mare tenebrarum*, a nightmare – and sat bolt upright in his bed, sweating and short of breath. And the following night he dreamed he was being pulled helplessly into the appalling expanse of the Atlantic and toward the maw of a furiously spinning maelstrom.

Nor did it end there. The following spring he was with a school party on a day trip to the continent. At the ferry port, as he stepped on to the gangplank, he experienced once more the same irrational terror of his nightmare. He was impervious to all persuasion and reassurance and had to be taken back to the school. Within him had developed

a loathing for the sea, and for Thor the thundering god of tides and hidden, treacherous ocean currents. There were tides, Sol learned, that even fish couldn't swim against and which could drag large boats on to the rocks. There were tides that could draw a man down to icy depths where even an aqualung was of no use. There were tides that surged inland in towering waves, up rivers, seeking unsuspecting prey. There were tides that retreated far from the shore tempting individuals to examine the exposed sea-bed and, when they had been lured far enough, turned on them and made them run for their lives.

It reassured Sol that their menace could be countered with science. But if they were predictable, it was only up to a point, for there were occasions when the elements made a mockery of the mathematics.