Balance on the Stour

by Rebecca Lyons-Campbell

The drag, the scrape, the smack of plastic hitting water. Cold droplets splash up my legs, a sharp breath in. Left to right I rock, finding balance. Don't fall in. A push against the paddle, and then the ease of gliding. Smooth through the ripples, out into the open. Ducks scatter, light glitters, trees sway. Onwards, into the thick of people. Some up to their waist pretending to be sharks, others strapped in boats too scared of the deep. Under the bridge, children fly as they jump, crashing into the depths with shrill screams. Push forward, angle the board; a cluster, trying to find a way through. Dense. Not even the swans can escape. Shoulders ache, ankles protest, wanting to flop dramatically. Six weeks out of hospital. A test. A hope I might get my life back. A prayer to the water gods of Dedham, for a clear path, for that child with the football to not launch it at my head.

And then freedom: current dragging, fresh air that smells like home. Gaining speed, the world moves by in greens and blues. Cows drink by the river's edge, some half in, watching, amused. Fingers reach out to graze, just the space between. A silent hello.

A glance to the world below, silver glints dancing like flames tangled in the weeds. I falter; I wobble. A tilt as water comes rushing up. A splash. It's cold, fresh. Awake. Hands find the board, grasp on, feet free. A splutter and a cough. Laughing, smiling.

The tug to pull everything over to the shore. Feet catch on the mud, sliding, slipping as it squelches between toes. Such heaviness as both arms pull. Falling backwards onto the grass, arms up letting the sun drift over. Warm.

‘Come on!’ a friend shouts. Waiting. Standing on the water so easily.

Renewed energy. A steadying hand as feet clamber back aboard, paddle dug down deep. The release and the surge. Through winding corners, dodging broken branches.

Ducking low, collapsing onto knees, praying not to fall. Drips slicking the board, feet fizzing as blood pools. Frantic wobbling to get a better position, my body tense as balance is restored.

Trees expand arms out wide as the path narrows; a breath in and out, it opens like a painting. A bridge. Wooden, curved and old. Ladies taking photos, a man on a stool painting. Constable country. Fields wide but full of life. Children running, the cafe staff desperate for a break. The smell of freshly ground coffee. A slow descent to find a space on the landing. One pole to grasp, to help steady as muddy feet clamber off, bare and soggy. A body that sways even when the ground is hard. Board tied. A hand held tightly and a blue sky. Worn out, but happy. Relief: I'd won. My body had carried me. A journey made. A rest, then the perilous return. Through shrieks of laughter, joy, and a football to the face.