

The Taste of Shame

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The dawn of the race day brought terror, uncertainty, and excitement to the hearts of this year's brave competitors. A year's-worth of hard training full of pain and endurance had led up to this great event. Each competitor had to run up and down a steep, rocky and dangerous mountain. During the descent, any slip could mean severe injury or death, so all athletes had to have great practice in rock hopping activities. Each one, however, would go to extremely dangerous efforts on the downhill run for the prize was substantial. Ten thousand dollars for the winner and, of course, the fame of being the event's champion. Second and third place were still viewed well, but the reward was nothing in comparison.

This year, the top three rivals were Rowan, Barry and Luke. Rowan was a local fitness trainer and karate teacher, very well known for his strong competitive nature. At thirty-five years old, he was considered the most likely person to win. Rowan himself was already sure that he would be the winner. However, despite being considered the most likely-the townspeople did not want Rowan to win for he was well known for his competitive streak and unkindness. Barry lived a few towns away from the event. He was ten years younger than Rowan and a keen athlete. He had not been running for such a long time as Rowan but enjoyed challenging himself with hard races. Luke lived a long way away but he had competed in the race eight times previously. He was considerably older than the others however, so he wasn't considered a threat.

The competitors met an hour before the race, greeting each other warmly but at the same time, knowing the other's thoughts. The top three competitors could not keep still waiting for the race to begin. They warmed themselves up running up and down the street.

When Luke went away for a minute, Rowan went up to Barry and whispered, 'The competition is between us, that guy Luke has no chance.'

Barry simply shrugged and said, 'Don't underestimate him, he isn't that old yet!'

Rowan looked at Barry in distaste, *I was only being friendly*, he thought, and stormed away.

There were many more competitors from all over the place, even different countries, for the race was very well known and the prizes well sort after. But the other competitors knew they didn't have a chance of winning.

As the race was about to begin, all competitors lined up at the starting line. The tension maximised. An official announced the rules of the race and shouted, 'Are you ready? Get set. Go!'

The whole mass of moving figures tore up the path towards the base of the mountain. Rowan pulled into the lead and by the base of the mountain, he was quite a way in front of Luke, who was closely followed by Barry. Rowan's face glowed with heat and internal happiness. He was ahead! Sweat streamed down the faces of all competitors as they began to climb the giant mountain under the cruelly hot sun.

Halfway up the mountain, Rowan kept a significant lead over the other two. Barry had now overtaken Luke and was creeping up on Rowan. At the top of the mountain, Rowan remained in front, but did not know that the other two had become desperate and put on full speed. Halfway down, Rowan heard footsteps coming behind him. It was the steepest and most treacherous part of the mountain track. Roots and soft sand made it extremely hard to keep on your feet. The footsteps kept gaining on him, but he could go no faster. Rowan realised that his only chance was for the runner behind him to trip and fall. A few seconds later, Barry appeared alongside him and Rowan realised that he had been beaten. At this split second, where Rowan began to taste the bitterness of defeat, he did a terrible thing. There was a loose root lying on the ground that Barry was about to step over. Rowan looked around and found tht they were alone. He lifted the root on one side, just as Barry was crossing over it, causing him to trip and fall. Rowan saw him fall far down the mountain and then right off the path out of sight. Rowan grinned, as a barb of guilt turned inside him. How had he been so quick as to see that root right there? Anyway, Barry was out of the race for now and that was for certain. He only hoped that he was not dead.

As he was contemplating this, footsteps again could be heard approaching. This time, he took off as fast as he could. Despite using all his efforts, he understood the runner behind him, Luke, was gaining on him. Fear gripped him again. He could not lose this race. It could not happen after all the hard training he had endured. Every muscle in his body was working. Luke was also working extremely hard. Sweat flooded him completely and he struggled to gain on

Rowan. Every step pained each man. The force driving Luke was that he still thought Barry was in front and that he had to catch two men instead of one.

Finally, at the base of the mountain, Luke overtook Rowan. Rowan could have wept in anger. But now he had more of a problem than losing. The guilt of the awful deed that he had done made his heart heavy with remorse. He had not even seen a single sign of Barry on the way down, perhaps, but he could not bring himself to think it. Surely the mountain couldn't have killed him.

Up in front of Rowan, Luke began to tire. It had been a great effort on his part to overtake Rowan. His legs ached and his head began to spin. And now it was his turn to hear the dreaded footsteps behind him. Rowan was gaining on him again and Luke still thought that he had to catch Barry as well. With the extra power of guilt pushing him on, Rowan overtook Luke with amazing speed. He could live with the guilt if he was the winner. He flew around the final bend and, to the immense applause of the crowd, sprinted down the final stretch towards the finish line. He thrust his arms in the air in victory, his success cheering him on from every direction. Guilt still hung over him annoyingly, but he just couldn't let that ruin this jubilant moment that he had forever been waiting for. Luke crossed the finish line a few seconds later. Both of them were given water and they sat down together.

'I guess you feel great in second place, better than I feel in third!' Luke said to Rowan.

'No, Barry didn't make it, I saw him have a fall. I would have helped him, but he fell too far off the track. I'm in first, you're in second.' Guilt filled his heart again and he tried to push it aside. *Success! The best moment, why did the silliness have to ruin it?*

'You actually didn't win, you're second! Barry must have picked himself up after his fall and kept going. I'm surprised you didn't see the man sitting over there under the tree, talking to all the people!' Luke was happy to break the news to the arrogant man.

Rowan jerked his head towards the tree. He could not believe it. There, under a tree, talking to the crowd, was the very same man that he had ensured would not win. Barry! *How is this possible?* Rowan thought. He got to his feet and did not speak a word to the gloating Luke. A sense of relief washes over him, but that was not enough to make up for the bitterness of defeat.