

New Depths

I never realized the blood would be green. That was the first thought flashing in my head as the spear punctured his flesh. The moment everything went to hell. The moment I'll never forget.

Our first mistake was telling Rob's dad that we were experienced divers. Mike and I were no strangers to swimming or snorkeling, so we didn't think there was much of a learning curve. Diving lessons were expensive though, and required weeks of training that didn't fit our schedule. The end of college crept closer. Rob's offer wouldn't come again. This was our moment to make some memories.

So Mike and I drove down to Jacksonville on a Friday afternoon with the weather forecast for Saturday looking favorable. While Rob's dad grilled steaks and sipped on warm bourbon, the three of us gathered in the garage for a dark and hurried scuba tutorial. I didn't hear or see everything, but Mike seemed to grasp Rob's instructions, so I followed suit with nods and an occasional "hell yea."

After steaks with Rob's family, the three of us ventured out to Jacksonville's finest strip club. His dad didn't know where we were going and probably wouldn't have cared anyway. The place was called *The Gold Club*, but every color of the rainbow flashed and gyrated across the stage. I sipped on a beer, trying to avoid getting too drunk. I didn't know much about diving, but I did know it wasn't good to be hung-over or have alcohol-thinned blood. Rob quashed my

precautions though by bringing over a round of Patron shots. I surrendered to his judgment. I trusted Rob when it came to diving; it had always been his thing.

Until that night I had never received a private lap dance. Being a broke college kid, I was typically the guy making five dollars last my entire stay—a dollar each for the five best looking girls in the joint. Needless to say, I never received much attention at strip clubs. But this night the private dance was financed by Rob and all for me. I assumed I knew why, though I tried not to let it show. I should probably disclose that a month ago Rob slept with my girlfriend of two years, Sarah, while we were going through a rough patch. Rob and I were roommates and supposed friends at the time. It was my understanding that he thought I suspected some random tool from Louisiana to be the other man. I liked to keep it that way for the time; not sure why. Actually, one reason: Rob was a full-grown country boy, similar to Ronnie Van Zandt, without the long hair and muttonchops; I, on the other hand, had a stature more akin to Townes Van Zandt, without the heroin. That wasn't the only reason though. I told myself I was waiting for the perfect time to confront him. Nonetheless, I would take his generous lap dance offer; it was time for new adventures.

“We got a first timer here!” Mike yelled over the music, lighting a smoke and slapping me on the back.

“No need for all that,” I whispered, snatching his cigarette as I left to follow the stripper.

Ariel took my hand and gently walked us into one of the dark rooms. The tight, blonde gymnast spun around my lap. I gazed at the glitter and admired her breasts falling out below my chin. The urge to motor boat was strong.

“What are you in town for, sweetie?”

I took a sip of beer to regain the ability to speak.

“Diving a wreck out in the Atlantic tomorrow.”

As soon as the words left my mouth I felt like a Navy frogman in town on a special ops mission, carelessly revealing the details to the naïve dame with the sweet smelling perfume. I assumed she was impressed and in awe at the wonders I would encounter the next day. That was until she went into excruciating detail about her first diving experience at age fifteen with her father and sister in Key West. I heard the whole travel log and received several pointers, even diving tips that Rob failed to mention. She became the teacher. Thankfully, and sadly, this was how I learned about the bends—apparently I missed that important portion of the garage tutorial—with Ariel informing me of the safety stops needed to let the nitrogen in your blood adjust to the pressure changes. Seemed like essential knowledge that one venturing to dive should know, and for this, I was grateful. Notwithstanding, I had long since deflated, in my ego and in my pants. Whatever training, if any, strippers undergo should inform them not to reveal the details of their wholesome family vacations while naked and ass-clapping. Something about it disrupts the fantasy, morphing lust into awkward positions. That was my first, and last, private lap dance.

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The next morning we were on the boat by seven. I didn't feel great, but not as hung-over as I feared. The cool morning air helped to relieve the shakes.

“Look over by that dock!” Mike yelled in my ear, disrupting my meditation.

Two large manatees blew breaths up from the glass-like water.

“Think we'll see any of those while diving?” he turned to Rob.

“They won't be where we're going. We'll be about 80 feet deep.”

I watched the sea cows grow smaller as Rob's dad accelerated the Boston Whaler, taking us through the pass and into the grand Atlantic. It was grand to me anyway. Growing up as a land-locked Smoky Mountain boy, the Atlantic was that fabled abyss separating the old world from the new and holding the original inhabitants of this world. From all outward appearances on that calm morning it seemed no different than a large lake back in Tennessee, but the exciting electricity and history of it all still rattled my dehydrated bones. I wanted to explore every inch of it, but also feared the mere thought of it. I was obsessed with something I just knew would kill me. And I loved it.

The forecast was spot on; a clear sky set up the back drop for a striking sunrise. Gulls called and followed our wake hoping for some easy breakfast. Mike and I were fulfilling a dream and no technicalities could stop us. We toasted our coffee cups as if they were champagne flutes and smiled into the sea breeze. Rob rolled his eyes at us, then jumped to his dad's instruction to secure a loose rope at the bow.

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As the Whaler cut across the waves at full throttle a few miles from shore, we spotted a pod of bottlenose dolphins breaching the surface in unison. Rob's dad slowed us down as if routine.

"Grab a mask!" Rob shouted, throwing his own over his eyes.

The three of us jumped in the ocean, suspended above unknown depths. I hastily readjusted my mask and tried to peer below. Before noticing any dolphins, I watched unsympathetic jellyfish envelope my body, each one stinging my legs as if they knew me and hated me.

“There’s jellies everywhere!” I cried above the surface, choking on saltwater as my mask fell off again.

But they were all under catching the show I was missing. Rob’s dad might’ve heard me, but I was too embarrassed and in a state to look back at the boat. I resituated and swam to the left, determined not to fail right out of the gate. That’s when I saw what I’ll probably never see again: two dolphins suspended in the water column, facing one another as if dancing, locked together just above their tails. I knew they were mating without ever having seen such a thing from a dolphin or ever having thought about how such a marine mammal gets it on. I no longer felt the jellyfish, or anything for that matter. I floated in the column with them, and they didn’t care. For a moment we were all lost in another time.

The male finished quickly just as we were all out of breath. Then, as if to boast and high-five his friends, he shot upwards, breaching the water five feet in the air, and performed a perfect somersault. He knew we were there and gladly shared his elation. I never felt closer to an alien species in my life. That was until Rob spoke up.

“Get you some, big boy!” he yelled, flinging off his mask.

My euphoric feeling dissipated. I’ll admit it wasn’t anything he said; just that it was Rob who said it. If it had been Mike, I probably would’ve high-fived him. But at the time I felt Rob shouldn’t belong; any connection was lost with him. Though, what really hurt was that he did belong; he was willing to follow his animal instincts and sully the accepted customs of friendship and moral codes. I was the one who didn’t belong, languishing in defeat and passive aggressive fantasies. So, the mere act of him speaking reminded me that he was still there and I shouldn’t be, ruining the moment and instantly bringing the jellyfish stings writhing to the forefront of my nerves.

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It took us about thirty minutes to reach the first dive spot. Below us sat a broken up barge as Mike and Rob's dad prepared to dive. I couldn't believe the time was here, but thankful I wasn't first. Rob watched as Mike fumbled his way through the equipment. I watched Rob's dad, taking mental notes so as not to tip off the captain when my turn came to ready the gear.

As the two dropped backwards off the sides, silence enveloped the rocking boat. After the dolphin mating experience, all the drama from the recent past was on my mind that shouldn't have been; everything I had planned to suppress until at least this trip was over. But now I wanted to hold Rob up against the railing and confront him. I wanted to scream Sarah's name to the Atlantic as if to rally unseen forces to my aid—and to see whose side they'd choose. But I did nothing of the sort. We shared a cigarette and laughed about last night's strippers. Then Rob revealed that he dated Ariel in high school.

"Her!" I laughed out smoke. "She needs to quit her night job. You know she told me all about her damn family diving trip from years ago."

"No shit!" he smiled, as if remembering an old joke. "I was the one who taught her how to dive. Back when her name was Melissa; before she changed it to a cartoon character."

I suddenly felt queasy, realizing another layer as to why he offered her up for my private dance—he was trying to pay me back in some covert way simply to satisfy his own conscience, or worse, simply toying with me by releasing such a tease that he probably didn't even have to pay. Right then I was about to hold the cigarette butt up to his eye and curse him for all his sins, and lie to him that I banged the hell out of Ariel—or Melissa—in the back room last night, and that she raved about it being the best she'd ever had. I wanted him to hurt. But within that same moment Mike's breath released into the air.

“We got flounder!” he yelled, as usual, with a wide grin across his face. “A whole ringer full!”

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We rode another fifteen minutes on our way to the next dive spot. Rob helped his dad read the GPS, while Mike sat on the starboard side, smiling into the wind. I envied him in that moment for many reasons.

“So, how was it?” I asked, slapping his leg.

“Man, you’re going to love it! A whole different world down there.”

“Did you freak out at all?”

“No, nothing to it. And hot damn the Flounder! They’re just waiting for you on the bottom. Waiting for you stick them. If you can see them that is.”

I looked out at the dark blue waves making their way to the same shore from which we came. I started thinking about everything they hid and held.

“You ready, boys?” Rob’s dad asked as he throttled down the boat.

More than ever, I thought to myself, while clapping my hands to release the nerves. Mike covertly helped me as I tried to recall the correct sequence to donning my gear. Somehow Rob’s dad still thought we were experienced, licensed divers.

“Remember to breathe,” Mike said, just before I fell backwards into a different world.

I laughed in my mind as he said it, but then quickly realized the act of breathing underwater does not come so natural to a land mammal. Choppy, frantic breathes came out at first, unlike my snorkeling days. The equipment was new; the air tasted strange. Mike’s last words reverberated in my mind like a head trip. I almost panicked, but then developed a

breathing pattern and regained my wits. I started kicking forward and found Rob waiting near the anchor line. He gave me the signal to follow as we released the air from our vests and sank.

I became an astronaut approaching an unknown and possibly hostile world; breathing and watching. The murkiness of the water column gave way as we lowered above a sunken cargo ship. At that point it all became clear, and with the improved visibility my nerves relaxed. Spadefish, red snapper, and a few amberjack swarmed all around us as if holding a conference in which we were cautiously welcome. I couldn't stop from smiling; my teeth had to grip the regulator tightly to keep it from falling out.

Rob spotted a loggerhead sea turtle gliding near our flank and immediately handed me the spear gun while grabbing the back of her shell. Initially I assumed he had lost his mind, but remembered this was his thing. We were in his element. As Rob rode the ancient reptile across the wreck, I could see the fear in the turtle's eyes and the careless enjoyment in his.

I left them, sinking further down, observing the tiny worlds within worlds as I peered in closer to the structure of the ship. Clear shrimp and minnows scurried and hovered among the coral creating bustling cities that were indifferent to my observing eyes. As I listened to the mantra of my steady breathes, all I could think was that while I was wasting away in the warm classrooms of college, worrying about petty shit, these minute creatures were out here, miles from shore and nearly eighty feet below the surface, abiding within the domains created atop this wreckage. And this represented just a speck of a sample on the edge of the abyss. I wanted to immerse myself further but didn't know how. I wanted to change everything I had been doing up to that point. Then I saw Rob fake humping the old loggerhead and laughing out bubbles. I rolled my eyes and sank to the sandy bottom, placing the ship between us.

That's when I saw the goliath—a Goliath Grouper I am told—barely hidden under the bow of the old ship; his lips, the size of a child's forearms, rhythmically taking in the salt water to breathe. My heart pounded against my wetsuit. He had to be over 100 pounds. The moment was too rare to pass up. With my hands shaking, I carefully pulled back the gun's band and readied the spear as if I knew what the hell I was doing. I kicked my fins slowly, not wanting to come in too close or sudden. Then the Goliath stirred and I shot the spear into the watery haze.

That's when I saw the green blood. That's when I heard the effervescent scream protruding from Rob as his regulator flew from his mouth. The spear cut clean through the meat of his thigh. Green clouds of blood billowed from the wound. I had never realized that at that depth without the light of the sun the colors would change in such a way. Because of this, my mind almost didn't register the scene. Everything seemed foreign or fake. I approached nervously. Rob flashed a look of anger and confusion, mixed with a fearful plea of mercy underneath that placed his destiny in my hands. The hands that created the storm now had to provide the shelter.

I hesitated at first; still confused by what was before me. Then I handed Rob my second regulator so that he would remember to breathe properly. He followed my direction like a scared child on a turbulent plane. Then I saw the new arrivals that began circling on account of the blood. Like a demonic halo above us swam a school of barracudas with the light of a now foreign sun in the middle beckoning us as if the divine grace of heaven. I wanted to scream. Instead I looked into Rob's eyes. This time the anger had dissolved; it was only fear that showed and mercy he requested. That's when something primal in me overrode the controls of my soft, modern specimen and grabbed Rob by the shoulders and began hauling him to the surface. Dark green clouds blanketed our legs and fins. As we paused for our safety stop, I thanked Ariel for

her emasculating story and dive tips, and then noticed we had entered the ring of barracudas. They zipped like silver arrows in my peripheral. With each flash I prayed it wasn't a strike to flesh. Then I remembered the spear gun and began jabbing the beasts off with the barrel. I hit three soundly in the gills. They began to fear me. But the commotion also fueled more frenzy. One of the fish struck the muzzle, scraping off the edges with his fang-like teeth. I looked at Rob to ensure he was still conscious. His eyes remained still.

I didn't think of much while suspended in that ring of hell. No philosophical ponderings or epiphanies. Something primal drove my actions. I was like every other ill-fated creature, merely trying to survive another second within that violent mass of salt water. The green clouds made it hard to see, but I kept striking at every flash of silver that passed my view.

When we surfaced, the boat was absent from our horizon; only the Atlantic in all its vastness. The scene crushed my vain human heart with an overwhelming loneliness, briefly leaving me afloat in the immense indifference of the earth's moat. I felt better down below on the wreck. Rob started to breathe rapidly as if in shock. Then I heard Mike yelling behind us. And goddamn his loud ass never sounded so good.

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I counted the cracks in the wall while he slept deep within the effects of pain medication. I counted to avoid my own thoughts. Mike and Rob's family meandered about the hospital on different errands or stood outside smoking. I sat alone in a chair below the cracks, next to Rob.

"I'm sorry, Louis," he eventually spoke.

"For what?" I stammered, taken aback at his consciousness and choice of first words.

"You know."

"I know you're on a shit ton of pain pills."

“If it makes you feel any better, you—or any Joe for that matter—can screw my first love for 500 bucks and a Big Mac,” he slurred with a sad humor in his voice.

I stood up from my slouch and looked into his drugged eyes.

“I didn’t want to shoot you, Rob. I swear I didn’t mean to,” I said, lying through half of the statement.

“I know, Louis. You’re better than that.”

“Don’t give me too much credit now. I’m really not.”

“I know you’re good people. I do. That’s why I hate that—”

“This boy needs to get some rest!” the doctor ordered, bursting through the curtains like a breaching whale.

They both stared at me as I stood immobile for a moment. Part of me wished the doctor had never interrupted, but most of me didn’t care anymore. I grabbed my phone from the table.

“Thanks for saving me, Louis.”

I nodded and left the room for good.

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Mike and I drove around downtown Jacksonville for hours, knowing we didn’t want to go back and sit with Rob’s family at his house. We kept all the windows down, barely speaking, until we came to long red light.

“How about we go to *The Gold Club*? It’ll take your mind off things,” Mike offered, tapping on the steering wheel.

“Again?”

“Sure. Rob even told me to tell you Melissa was working tonight. Do you know who—”

“I guess that fool was serious after all.”

“Wait, who’s Melissa? What do you mean?”

“Nothing. It’s an old story. Even old as time.”

“Whatever, man. Where do you want to go?”

As we sat I looked at the reflection of our vehicle in the mirrored glass of an adjacent building. In that brief moment I couldn’t help but think of the Atlantic; from the dolphin’s ecstasy to the loggerhead’s concerned eyes to the indifferent horizon to the minute worlds within worlds to the reflections that flashed in the green clouds of blood just before meeting the gun barrel wielded by primitive hands. We all belong, I eventually nodded to myself, whether we realize it or not.

“Well? I can’t just idle forever!”

I lit a cigarette and turned to Mike, “Let’s just go to a regular bar and get drunk. Hell, maybe we’ll find some ladies of our own.”

“Now that sounds like a plan, captain! Glad to have you back!”

End