

Under each day ran a silent chill, just beneath the surface.  
He should have seen it before.

**Editors' Note**

*This story received an Honorable Mention in the Sunstone Fiction Contest.*

I

Sixteen hours. As he hung up the phone Richard tried to say "Oh God" but his mouth merely formed the words. Yet even for this soundless blasphemy he was ashamed.

He walked dazedly down to his room. Vic was in that water sixteen hours. He had only been dead two hours when they found the boat. A shiver started at the back of Richard's jaw, spread over his temples and across his forehead. For several seconds he thought he would be sick.

Until the phone call it had been one o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, with an hour before he had to report to the warehouse. A normal, stuffy August day that would make unloading the railroad car a sweaty operation. For most people it was still a normal Wednesday; the disc jockey on the radio was saying, "We're over the hump; it's downhill to the weekend."

But it hadn't been normal. It never was normal, any more than yesterday or Monday. Under each day ran a silent chill, just beneath the surface. He should have seen it before. Some people must have seen.

Richard turned off the radio. If dawn had only come two hours earlier...but it had not. And there wasn't any such thing as normal.

The fact was slipping away from him, so he slammed it down in the front of his mind: Vic was dead. How had Vic looked when they pulled him out of the water? Richard thought he could guess. They must have found him with his head limp, torso hanging beneath the surface, arms outstretched. His eyes must have stared at them with the haggard, vacant gaze of the drowned.

Richard jumped up and ran into the skinny yellow bathroom. Afterwards he rinsed his mouth, came back, and sat heavily on the cot. The room looked grey and smaller than it was. Vic had said he didn't understand why Richard took a room like this; nobody should live like this. Vic had borrowed money and bought a house. He rented out the upstairs and basement, and with the rents made his house and tuition payments, living on a

loan. You have to think big, he said, the implication guilelessly intended.

Vic's father was vice-president of a bank. Not that Vic flaunted it. He worked hard and made good grades, and Richard liked him in spite of his implications. There was a basement room in the house available to Richard any time at half-rent plus yard work.

But not any more. Richard could not assimilate this truth. He tried to picture Vic's round, ebullient presence weighted down with defeat. This, too, was impossible. He could picture Vic the moment he realized the girl was in trouble and dove in for her. He could imagine the girl getting to the boat and the other couple trying to steady the craft. But then, the unforeseen: not one of those squalls for which the lake was infamous but a mere wind, a quick little wind that never died down. They threw out the anchor and paddled with their wrists, but the boat drifted further, leaving Vic behind. The friend dove once and nearly drowned as well. Richard could see Vic's steadiness when Vic realized he could no longer hear their voices.

Probably Vic never knew he was going to drown. Probably he hadn't drowned. Even without the jacket and the ski he could have gone into deadman's float. He would have held it indefinitely—unless a current had taken him and the jacket under. But a current didn't. Because after fifteen and a half hours he was still alive. He didn't drown. He died of exhaustion.

Richard stood and shook his head like a wet dog. He hadn't eaten the previous evening because it took effort to cook potatoes and he had no money for a can of spaghetti. He took the peeler from the single kitchenette drawer and scooped several slices of potato. This disgusted him; he threw potato and peeler into the sink and went back to his cot.

Vic could have made it. He knew the technique. He was stubby and tough and could have lasted half the night on technique alone. He might have found a drifting log when his life jacket became soaked—they hadn't recovered the life jacket. He wouldn't have fought. He'd have been sly in the same way he put the Sunday School manual away and composed his own lessons. He had grit. He had medical school ahead and a girl he ad-

Rebecca Cornwall

# The Drowning



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as the lowering of his body temperature.

mired. He would have aimed for shore and swam and rested, swimming only to the point of diminishing endurance. His endurance would have been twice as long as Richard's.

Richard thought of the carload. He ought to call the warehouse; they still had time to get someone from Manpower. But he needed the money—he'd go down himself.

What did Vic do when, after an hour, the cursed wind was still against him and he was no closer to shore? Fear would not have grabbed Vic as it might somebody else. It would have crept into him against his will, cool, relentless as the lowering of his body temperature. How would his face have looked, four hours into the night out on that lake?

It was impossible. Richard couldn't picture Vic's face.

## II

Richard looked at the clock through the bend of his arm. They needed him on the dock in twenty minutes. He took the stairs three at a time, running around the corner of the house and up into the foyer where the phone table stood. He waited on the last digit to be sure of his voice.

"D & R Warehouse."

"This is Richard. Listen, I..." His voice broke.

Florence's voice was instantly alarmed. "Is something wrong?"

"My—friend drowned."

"The student? We heard it on the news. I'll tell D.R. you can't get down. He'll understand."

"Thanks." Richard replaced the telephone, returned deliberately to his room, and lay stomach against the cot.

## III

When he awoke there was a pallor over the room. He remembered, laid back the blanket, swung his legs slowly over the edge of the cot. He looked at the clock. Could it have been only two hours since he'd learned? Stiffly he donned and tied his tennis shoes. His shoulders ached.

He locked the door; med books were expensive. From the landing he heard dishes rattling through the window of the Houstons' apartment. He tapped on their door.

"Hello, Rich—" Bob stopped on seeing his face.

"Could I borrow a dollar?" Richard asked.

"Hey, sure, I owe you a buck. If we got change. Sally, you got a dollar?"

Sally came out of the kitchen. She was brown, plain, and pregnant. "I think so. Hi, Richard," she said with careful nonchalance. She disappeared into the short hall and came back with her purse and a handful of coins.

"Thanks."

"Sure," Bob said. "Sorry we hadn't gotten back to you. Just got paid yesterday."

"It's okay. See you later."

"Sure." Bob followed him onto the landing. "Say, fella, you all right?"

"Yeah." Richard paused on the bottom step, turning toward him. "Vic Moyer drowned."

Bob's lower lip fell an inch beyond its usual droop. "Vic—Moyer?"

"This morning in Utah Lake."

"Good G—"

"He got separated from the boat. When they got to him at daylight he was barely dead."

Bob stared in stupid astonishment. Richard left him on the landing. He walked briskly toward the quickie market, feeling a grim pleasure at Bob's shock. Halfway down the block he kicked a beer can across the street.

He looked for a cheap brand of soup. Between cans he saw Vic's friends in the boat, calling repeatedly to keep contact in the dusk. In the waves Vic conserved energy while they all searched the boat, searched the water, for a way to get to him, but nothing came to them. They prayed for the wind to die down and it blew steadily.

The blonde cashier smiled. Her smile pierced Richard; the skin about his face and down his back turned shivery and he longed for someone to touch him the way his grandmother used to stroke the back of his neck when he was a boy getting sleepy in Sacramento Meeting. He hung his head, following the cashier's movements with his eyes as she bagged his soup and newspaper. Then he hurried out.

Swiftly he walked not towards his room but east toward the administration building. Walking helped, dissipating some of the mass in his chest. Three-twenty classes had just let out and the walks were fairly crowded. He kept his eyes lowered. In the basement of the administration building he bent over a marble drinking fountain. He could feel four hallways converging on him.

With his two remaining quarters he popped a sandwich from the vending machine, unwrapping and gulping it down with several swallows of water. Then he strode out of the building and continued east, across a massive, half-deserted parking lot. At last, at its furthest fringe, there were no more people.

He became aware that it was damnably hot. His levis chafed at the crotch. He swatted at the perspiration along his forehead. What was the matter with the friends? They should have tried harder—they could have gotten in the water and kicked the boat to him! They should have taken off their clothes and made a lifeline! Why had the sheriff taken so long to search?—did they think Vic would be dead? They should have phoned someone who knew! They should have phoned Richard!

A fraternity stud passed by in a yellow Porsche. Richard set off running. In a minute he was across the bend and halfway up the road. Where another road cut across and down into Federal Heights he stopped running and took a dozen deep breaths. He had been along this road, but coming the other way, many times. He took it periodically to break the monotony of the route through the campus. Occasionally he would ride through Federal Heights on his bicycle and stare at the big sedate homes and mildly envy the people who lived in them. Today the houses looked seedy.

Near the country clubhouse he started jogging,

## Where was mercy to toy with a person like that?

slower this time to save breath. He wanted to make it to the hills before slowing down. He needed to get into the mountains.

Finally he was on a real slope. He would go to the lime kilns; not a soul would be there. Walking was easier when he reached the road to the university letter. The road ended twenty yards short, but he climbed to the top of the large white "U," sitting knees bent, the paper bag between his legs, his gym shoes braced against the concrete. Below, the city spread in orderly, tree-muted plots like the sea of an aerial photograph. Holy Cross Hospital was an island of red tile and white plaster.

Closer to the hills was the Federal Heights chapel. Once he had taken a girl to a fireside there. She hadn't been full of giggles and arm-hanging—why hadn't he called her again? She must be married by now. She had talked some, looking at him with eyes that estimated.

Heat bounced off the whitewash of the letter and hit him in the face. Over the Great Salt Lake a layer of air wallowed in the heat. He looked behind him and up to where the rise met blue and dropped into nothing. It made him wince.

Richard slid to the side of the letter and onto earth, shuffling down the slope to where it was not so steep and he could walk north again. Clusters of goldenrod seemed to shrivel in the sun.

From a small hollow the kiln trail started up the canyon. This wasn't a canyon really, not even a gulch, but a place between two hills. No respectable trees, but scrub oak whose leaves were half-eaten in ragged fancy patterns by some infestation. He'd have to walk fast. It was nearly five o'clock and he would have to be out by dusk. For now he felt the urgency to get as far into the canyon as possible.

When once he looked over his shoulder, the sun was already lower.

By the time he reached a junction his pace had slowed. One path continued up the gully, another wound to his right. He turned right toward the kilns, which he expected to find half-buried in the hillside, abandoned, and deteriorating. Two hundred feet away, in sight of the brick cylinders, he heard voices. Two men, one in a hard hat, talked and pointed.

Richard swung and marched back to the junction. On the way he stumbled on a pebble which, bending wearily, he snatched up and threw at the mountain, wrenching his arm.

Higher up the trail, far out of sight of the kilns, he sprawled in a patch of grass, heaving for breath. From here the entrance to the gully was obscured. Only the town of Magna was visible, halfway up the Oquirrh range which lined the west valley. The hurt gradually moved from chest to head. He slapped at a longfly buzzing his ear; it flew off into a bush.

He could not get his breath, and he thought of Vic. For Vic the night was interminable, the waves bellowing at him again and again. Vic had had ten hours of that. Richard's eyes ached from the unfairness of it. He made a long, careful attempt to get air.

Then it came. Against Richard's will, 'though it had hovered nearby all the way up the trail. Bringing anger and yet not anger but something deeper and far more frightening:

WHY? WHY IN HOLY HEAVEN SLAP A GUY ABOUT IN THE WATER LIKE THAT, 'TIL HE WAS BLUE IN THE GROIN AND NUMBED OUT OF HIS MIND? WHERE WAS MERCY TO TOY WITH A PERSON LIKE THAT?

Richard muttered these last words, and they startled him. His hair was wet, and he was embarrassed but also defiant. It hadn't been hovering just this afternoon but much longer. For a long, long time he had lived with it stashed away in a closet, permitting it out in careful moments which had become fewer as he became more and more careful. Now he was tired of it. It was choking him and he was weary to death of it.

WHY? WHY WOULD GOD DESERT HIS FRIEND, RICHARD'S FRIEND?

And why would He abandon Richard? For Richard had been floundering. Not just today but many days. On the outside he had a regulated life, a dedicated prim life, while inside he fought to keep the turbulence in check. For what purpose? It hurt to think how hard he tried and how futile it was. WHAT KIND OF LIFE WAS THIS, TO BE STRUGGLING ALL THE TIME JUST TO KEEP FROM GOING UNDER?

This was foolishness. He struggled in his mind. There was never anything real.

But it was real. He knew it, and God knew it. As far back as he could remember there had been the danger, only he couldn't have defined it if his life depended on it. He saw the tension in his mother's shoulders and the sullenness on his father's face. Now, as the faintest of breezes came up the grass, he felt suddenly close and cold. A dryness entered his throat, notch by notch, warning. It was an old feeling, so ancient it hugged him, and behind it, as the breeze died, there crept into his stomach a sensation of utter bleakness.

He took a deliberate breath. In his mind he ripped open his shirt, thrust his face skyward, and yelled. He did not really do it. Instead he sat up, unclenched his fists, and stared at them. For several minutes he sat, legs Indian-crossed, clenching and unclenching his fists. Then he wrapped his arms across his chest, squeezing



Allowed to thrash about in that water, desperate, angry,  
alive—undenied, uninterrupted, unabridged.

his shoulders, and began to rock back and forth, moaning quietly, "Oh God. Oh God, why?"

IV

It was six hours since he'd heard. The sun was nearly to the horizon. He thought of a night he'd spent working in the emergency room, a test they gave fledgling med students to scare off the weak-blooded. A girl had been in a wreck. They had tried valiantly, but she died on the way. Richard had watched as the interns worked over her body. Her face was flawless, with not a single external bruise. Her boyfriend had been brought in with her. During the night his leg was removed, but he lived. Maimed.

"Oh, but there is a purpose to everything," murmured somebody in his mind, sweetly, a woman in one of those done-up brunette hairdos. "Each of us has a time." But her faith was pointed, chiding, and it made him defensive, silly as it was, since the lady was only a fantasy.

She denied him something. Something precious and only his, not describable but something he could taste. He could see Vic flailing in the water—flailing now, not cold-headed. For another maybe four hours allowed to thrash about in that water, desperate, angry, alive—undenied, uninterrupted, unabridged. It was not so horrible a death.

Richard was weeping now. His weeping became torrential. He had to stop rocking so that he could weep in large, heaving sobs.

V

The sun was touching the Great Salt Lake when he started down the canyon at eight-thirty, his buttocks sore from the rocking and sitting. Fortunately it would be dark by the time he reached civilization, for his eyes were swollen.

He picked his way carefully down the path. He ached under the ribs. Breathing came consciously.

Gone was the anger. There was a wryness left. The friends had done right. Undoubtedly they had tried—he would ask. The sheriff had done right. Richard could picture their faces as vividly as if he'd been present when the coroner announced Vic had been dead only a while. It was a fluke. Everything about it, as if somebody had arranged it. Vic must have had a ferocious will to survive.

In his room the clock read ten. Richard emptied the can of soup into his lone pan and set it on the burner. He wished for some juice or soda. Maybe he'd ask Sally—no. There were ice cubes in the little box freezer.

He ate languidly. It was not easy to devour canned soup. He had eaten canned soup three dinners a week for two and a half years. A great repugnance filled him: for the soup, for this scroungy gray room with its pink, slat-doored kitchenette, for the stingy yellow bathroom with paint peeling around the tub. He looked over to his cot and dresser in the corner. Never before had he cared that the walls were bare. Never had he bothered to put anything on them except the calendar by his desk. The calendar was a Rhode's Pharmaceutical glossy, very nice classical reproductions. No one could say he was without a finer sense.

Jokes did not remove the repugnance for this room, for two and a half years of getting up in it, brushing his teeth in the yellow bathroom, gobbling peanut-buttered bread in the pink-slatted kitchenette, going to classes, going to the warehouse, coming back here and studying until two or three or four a.m. Often he studied at the library. Sometimes he went to Mutual. Occasionally, very occasionally, he went on a date, but it had to be a Church party with ice cream afterwards; he simply had no money. Sunday he went to Priesthood Meeting and then came here and studied until Sacrament Meeting; after that he came again and studied late unless there was a fireside with a promising speaker. He studied with a passion which now seemed utterly meaningless.

He stripped to his underclothes and crawled onto the cot. He thought of Vic lying not in the oak post-bed bought at an auction, but in the mortuary where they were dressing him to make it easier for the survivors. But Vic's mother had already seen him. She'd have gone to the coroner's as soon as possible, identified the body, driven back to the Cottonwood holding her husband's hand, gone into her bedroom and cried privately. She would, at the viewing, take Richard's hand into her gloved one and look inquiringly into his eyes; she would pat his hand and smile a gentle, dignified smile, and he would walk toward the coffin, comforted.

Twice in the night he awoke. Once from a dream but, awake, he could not recall it. There was the oppression of the clock ticking. He sat up to orient himself, then lay back. With his eyes closed, air seemed to press upon him in currents until he could feel himself floating ceiling-high above the bed. Finally he arose, took a swig of water, returned to his cot and fell asleep.

At three o'clock he awoke, having dreamed it was raining. Outside water drops splintered on the wooden stairs and puddled in the cement bottom of the stairwell.

He lay in the dark listening to the splash of an occasional car. Light from the upstairs porch glistened on the raindrops outside his window. The glass was wet and shimmering.

He awoke finally at five a.m. It had been sixteen hours. The heaviness had subsided. He felt cleansed for now, but knew it would return. For a while it would return. He felt sorrow for the days and weeks ahead.

He looked at the bare gray wall above his bed. Today he would get a poster for that wall.

He arose and walked into the yellow bathroom and pushed the plug into the basin. In the mirror he saw a thin face with the black haggard shadow of a beard. He stared at the hazel eyes. The skin about them was slightly puffed, but they looked back at him, chastened. He looked steadily into them as a fullness entered his breast. His eyes grew wet. He stood at the mirror, tasting the tears and the fullness a minute before turning water into the basin.

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