

## **DROWNING**

Wednesdays rolled up so fast for William. Thursdays were reprieves, a vista of six full days without a Wednesday, but then as the weekend waned the next Wednesday would begin to rise in his mind like a chill moon. A sinking feeling in his middle would grow in intensity and become palpably sharp by Tuesday night. Then, it would actually be Wednesday morning and all day the sinking feeling would recur, sharpening and deepening each time, forcing his breaths to come shallower and shallower. It would have invaded his whole being by the time his last high school class let out. At home, he waited in his room, protected by familiarity and distance from the cold public pool for a few last hours until his father's car rolled to a halt, honked, and waited, idling, in front of the house.

Then he and his father would be in the car and cruising through the already dark evening--for it was deep winter, and very cold. The two of them would hardly speak. For himself, he tried to submerge his consciousness in the brittle winter scenery, to distract himself from what lay ahead--the chilly, chlorinated water, the sharply echoing shouts, the impossible things the instructors kept asking him to do.... During the trip, he might manage to say, "It's really hard, Dad," and then hear his father say, "You'll do fine" with the tired finality that followed a long day's work, and then they'd slow and stop before the large gray building and he'd descend the iron stairs with his gym bag, sliding his fingers along walls painted so thick with enamel that they seemed cut from rubber.

Down he went, each Wednesday, and it was always the same. The other boys would be shouting and laughing as they got into their swimming trunks. Their voices, strong and confident, rang off the locker room's tiled walls. It was unnerving to him just how noisy they were. Usually, their shouting was in response to something Tony, the solid, middle-aged instructor, had said to bait them.

The baiting was delivered in a soft-spoken voice. Tony might quietly announce that he was going to drag one of them around under the water until he begged for mercy. He would out-dive, out-swim, out-last one of them or the other, and that boast would make the evening's target hoot. But Tony never challenged

him. Instead, when he noticed him among the others, there again and getting into his suit, Tony would peer at him as if he didn't recognize him. "Back for more, William?" he might say. And William would answer little more than "Yep."

William always pushed out a few hearty greetings to the other boys. In the face of their mild surprise at his returning after the preceding week's struggles, he would force his eyes up, force the strange weight of them up until he could meet the eyes of the other boys--all older, all bigger, smooth-muscled from years of swimming--and get some sort of greeting out. And his greeting would always be returned, because the others were kind, surprisingly kind. If they said little to him when he first arrived, it was because they too were surprised to see him there again.

Why was he there? He had never even liked swimming, and now he was nine-tenths the way through a lifesaving course that he was sure to fail. He could never have shown interest in attending such a course. He did know that his father could not swim, and he remembered some discussion involving regret about that fact, the importance of knowing how, and the money that could be made from summer jobs as a lifeguard. This night would be especially bad because it was the final night of testing. But at least it was the last night. On the other side of the evening's final shower, he could sense a vague form of freedom, a sweetness tainted with failure's bitterness.

As they all moved to the pool, William caught his reflection in one of the heavy mirrors secured to the walls with tarnished rivets. He tried as always not to look at his reflection, but the fact of his weekly struggling forced him to assess himself physically. The image in the mirror threw back a length of paleness, from his flesh-colored cap to his toe tips, broken only by the vivid color of his trunks, a bright red band that embarrassed him because it seemed to signal a bravura he did not feel. He was thin, and no amount of scrutiny or willing would make him huskier. His ribs pushed out distinctly against his thin white sides. Once he'd asked Tony blithely, "How'm I doin'?" as he toweled off after another frustrating night. Tony was not one to mince words. "You're too small, kid. You're just not strong enough for this game."

That response might have provided his chance for escape, something he could have brought back to his father to get himself released. But Tony's choice of words had stung--too small, not strong enough. He had not felt insulted exactly, but surely misjudged. Thin, certainly, but not small. And he was strong, for his size. He wanted to prove Tony wrong.

During the warm-up laps, following the sharp shock of the cold water, he compared himself to the others gliding by on either side of him. All of them moved flat along the surface, lifting their shoulders and reaching out to pull themselves along, while he needed half his strength just to keep from sinking to the bottom. It occurred to him, as it had before, that he was not as buoyant as they. Could such a thing be possible? And how could he explain such a concept to his father? How could something like "I don't float as well as the other guys" ever sound like anything but a coward's excuse?

So he had stayed on, both duty-bound and challenged, through one miserable episode after another. A few weeks ago they had finished the lesson with racing laps, and he had leapt out in front, churning down the lane and on his way back before the others had finished the first length. In his eagerness he forgot everything he knew about pacing. He was soon exhausted, and then reduced to finishing up with breast-stroking long after the others had caught up with him and passed on, stroking measuredly.

This was not his game, he was too eager and he didn't float well. He always got it wrong, he always did the wrong thing. Last week they'd started the final testing, and it could have been so simple. Everyone had been instructed to bring a set of street clothes to wear in the pool to demonstrate removing certain pieces while treading water and then using the shirt as a float. The others had brought slip-on shoes and baggy pants, joking about how easily they'd shuck them--and there he was with tennis shoes and jeans. Once in the water, the jeans turned into a second skin and the tennis shoes into lead weights. And he'd even laced the shoes--just as neatly and as tightly as if he'd come for a game of tennis. It took forever, ducking and sputtering and sinking, to get the wet laces loose. He worked out of the clothes for another eternity, nearly breathing water, until, with the last of his

strength, he finally got the shirt off and fashioned it into a float. When he struggled out of the pool, Tony's assistant, Rick, explained that he had barely made the time limit. Actually, William was surprised because he'd been sure, as he flailed on alone while the others waited, that he'd surely exceeded it. He had gone on only because he'd been determined to finish at least.

But finish what? Not even his few successes were really successes. When they were being taught how to break free from a victim's panic hold, leveraging in liquid against the mass of another treading body, for once his thin build worked to his advantage. He discovered that he could slither out of another's grip. He even slipped one of Tony's iron hammerlocks, though he could not imagine ever twisting a struggling man about and getting him flat upon the surface as he would have to for the final test. Still, he could break the holds, and that was something. But then, when they were sent in pairs to practice, one boy passively to accept the other's grip and then attempt to break it, he'd gotten carried away. Riding his earlier success, he lunged at his partner and clamped onto his head ferociously, forcing him under the water. In the next moment, Rick was shouting at him because he hadn't noticed that the poor guy was pinching his arm, the signal for surrender. At poolside again, he huddled in embarrassment. It was supposed to have been practice, not a fight to the death.

He went through the warm-up laps, trying not to think anymore, trying to conserve his strength for the final test. He imagined that he could feel the chlorine coating his skin and even adding a modicum of drag. This was not a friendly element to him; he did not slip into it, or through it, but managed it at best. He listened to his own breathing, the burbling of released bubbles, trying to distract himself from thinking.

Then they were called out, and all of the students lined up along the edge of the pool. Tony addressed them, as he always did, from the tip of the low diving board. He perched out there like an aging bird of prey, perhaps an osprey by a marsh's edge, head curls bristling and gray, sharp features and squinting brown eyes. At his waist were a few thin folds of skin, brown even in winter--a body shaped by a lifetime of water and sunlight.

"As you guys all know, this is the night for the final test."

William cried out, "I wish you'd told me, Tony. I have a prior engagement."

He got a laugh from the other boys, and Tony shook his head. "Get serious," he said, but not too seriously. "Now, you all wait in the locker room, and we call you out one by one."

"Don't call us, we'll call you," one of the boys shouted, and everyone laughed again.

"When you come out, you'll be facing an emergency situation, a swimmer drowning in the pool. There's two parts--properly aiding the victim is the first part. The second part is towing the victim six times around the pool and bringing him out, checking for breathing, administering CPR if required. That clear?"

Everyone nodded. They'd heard it before. When they rose to go to the locker room, William found himself beside Rick. "Just keep cool, William," he said quietly. Did he sense his anxiety? William thought he must look blue from the cold, he was fighting off outright shivering. Rick spoke with his hands open, as if he were handing William a simple, graspable shape. "All you've got to do is remember what you learned."

"Okay, okay." He stared ahead, at nothing.

Rick grabbed him by the back of the neck and shook him. "Ease up! Just remember what you learned." William smiled gratefully and shrugged loose, but when he tried to remember what he'd learned those things which stuck in his mind were the ones he feared most to demonstrate--subduing a panicked victim, getting him to the surface and on his back and then dragging him through the water without drowning himself. Rick said in a low voice, "Contact with the victim is a last resort."

William nodded, gave him the thumbs up. Then he waited in the locker room with the others where each took out his towel and gripped it in their hands or draped it over his shoulders. Soon, Rick appeared in the doorway to the pool and called for Ralph, a tall rangy boy who wore his swimming cap pulled up into a pillbox.

"I knew I'd be first." Ralph rose and dropped his towel. "Good old alphabetical order."

"Come on!," said Rick. "Somebody's drowning out here."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Ralph strolled slowly towards the door.

He was gone for ten minutes when Rick appeared again. Another boy was called out, then another, and William knew he was next. As he waited through each long minute, he previewed what might soon occur. In an hour he'd be getting into the car with his father, and before that moment he needed to perform in such a way that he could tell his father that he'd passed the course. He'd have to break a victim's adrenaline-fed grip, secure his opposite wrist, twist and pull the forearm across the victim's body to turn the him around, then quickly plant his own right hip at the small of the victim's back and, kicking quickly, get the two of them to the surface, then....

Rick appeared. "You're on, William."

William rose, dropping his towel to the bench behind him. "Good luck, Will," said one of the remaining boys. "Go get 'em," said another. He walked towards Rick--past the open showers, the doorway to the toilets. As he passed the younger instructor, he just heard him say "Take it slow," and then he was in the pool area with its garish light and hard tiles. At the edge of his vision, Tony and the previously tested boys sat together on the benches high to the left side of the pool, like a small audience at a local play. In the pool itself, toward the far side, a large man was slowly rising and falling in the water as if swimming in a drunken, ineffectual way. This was the man he had to save.

William had hesitated just long enough to take in the room, and now he moved quickly towards the pool's edge. The short journey was not easy because he had to step around a number of objects strewn about the floor. In exasperation, he jumped over a long aluminum rod, an inner tube, and a blue paddle-board. As he jumped into the water he thought he heard a groan from the little gallery on the bench. Was he going too slowly? He should certainly have walked around to the far side rather than wasting his strength, as he now was, by swimming the whole length of the pool.

No matter now, he was on his way. It was a relief to be in action. He reached the drowning man and discovered him to be overweight and middle-aged, with a

fringe of gray hair surrounding a broad bald spot. The man rose and fell in the water before him like a large old walrus. William reached for him, bracing for the expected grip of desperation, but when he laid hold of the man's wrist he struggled only briefly, then went limp. William worked the man about, twisting his arm behind him then lunging against him with frog kicks until the man's bulk tilted upwards towards the surface. Gasping, he slithered beneath the man and, pressing sideways with his hip, gradually moved him flat upon the surface of the water. Then he pulled the victim's head against his own shoulder and reached across his chest with his right arm. He was supposed to slide his right hand under the man's left armpit and, by splaying his fingers, lock his right arm in place for towing. But the man was so broad that William could only get his hand on the far side of his chest where the doughy flesh kept slipping under his fingers. He had no choice but to continue towing with a partial grip.

Slowly, they began to progress together around the pool. The pace was excruciatingly slow. With every six scissor kicks, William felt he'd moved the man only a yard or so. It was like towing a barge. His right hand kept sliding along the man's chest, so he was continually readjusting his grip while trying to keep the man's bulk from pressing his own head under. As it was, he was gulping a good deal of chlorinated water, but he was determined to keep the victim's face above the surface.

On and on they went. By the third lap, William's right arm felt as numb as a rubber hose. His fingers could barely grip. But this was the half-way mark, wasn't it? It occurred to him, as he gasped and pulled, that the important thing was to save the drowning person, not just to demonstrate perfect technique. The worst thing, the very worst thing, would be to fail to get him to the imaginary poolside or shore. He began to stretch out more rhythmically. He no longer cared whether his positioning was correct or elegant; during the fourth circuit he even flopped onto his back, resting a bit by frog kicking while holding onto the man's shoulders. By the fifth, he'd rested his right arm enough to replace it across the man's chest. But he was going so slowly. He saw that Rick and Tony were standing together and talking, neither of them even watching him. The boys on the bench were muttering to each

other while facing him with disinterested looks. They were bored. They were waiting for him to finish.

He hurried through the final circuit as best he could, but it took all of his remaining strength to inch down the last lap and reach the side. There was not an ounce of energy left to pull the man from the pool. William hung on the side, panting, holding the man's limp crossed arms to the pool's side. "I'll get you up in a minute," he whispered between gasps.

Then the big man came alive. He smiled at William and simply pushed off into the water again. "Here, William," said Rick. He was standing above him at the pool's edge and reaching down. William grasped his hand and Rick hoisted him from the pool.

As William stood uncertainly on his tired legs, Rick grabbed him by the ears and shook his head gently. Was he about to be congratulated? He smiled to think that in some awkward way he'd managed to save a life, that he could, if he were strolling along a beach and discovered someone drowning, actually do the deed, when into his face Rick whispered hoarsely, "The last resort, the last resort, is direct contact with the victim. Don't you remember?" Then he slapped William on his swimming cap and walked off towards the locker room door.

"Over here." It was Tony calling from behind him.

Still breathing hard, William turned and walked slowly towards the bench where the other boys waited. As he reached them, Ralph made room for him. The next boy, Dean, had been called from the locker room by then and was already in the pool area. Ralph whispered to William, "The stuff. You should have used the stuff."

William sat and looked up, still puzzled. The drowning man was whooshing and rolling about uncertainly. Dean had picked up the long hook and now walked past the bench and towards the victim. He reached out with the hook and got it under the victim's stomach, but the man twisted slowly free. Gradually, he rolled out of reach of the hook. The boys on the bench laughed.

Dean looked across at Tony. "Is this the way it's going to go?"

"Come on," said Tony, smiling while the others laughed again.

Dean went all the way back and picked up an inner tube. Now from the near side the boy threw the tube to within a foot of the victim, but the big man just rolled about. "Take the tube!" Dean shouted, loudly, as they'd been trained to do. No response from the victim. From the far side, Dean shrugged at the gallery. "This guy's too stupid to save."

Everyone on the bench laughed hard. "Save the poor bastard!" one of them screamed.

"I'd rather purify the race."

"I'll purify you," said Tony. "Into the water!"

With another shrug, Dean boy stepped to the side of the pool and, dramatically pinching his nose, jumped feet first into the water.

"What a quality save," said Ralph, jabbing William with his elbow.

As if jerked awake, William responded with a delayed laugh. What had been an ordeal for him was such fun for the rest. It was clear to him now that he had failed the test at the moment he had jumped into the pool. He looked down the line of boys. Had any of them ever been nervous--really nervous? Now Dean was putt-putting around the pool, the man-barge cruising steadily through the bluish water. On the fifth circuit, the rescuer waved at the gallery and asked if anyone had a cigarette.

"Come on, it's getting late," said Tony.

Late, William reflected, probably because he himself had taken so long with his test. He watched as the final two boys came out, and passed with ease.

In the locker room, he quickly dried off after his shower. His shame forced him to hurry his escape. He was the only one who hadn't passed, it turned out, and he wanted to be gone. But the others were finishing quickly too. Why stay around? They'd get their certificates now, the job was done.

When William looked up, he saw Tony watching him. Reddening, he looked down again. "Pretty dumb, right Tony?"

"Don't take it hard. We got a saying for kids like you. Born under a dry star."

William laughed, flattered to be at least the object of the man's concern. Rick stood by, fresh from the shower and rubbing his thick hair with a towel. "Hey,

William, think about it. Do you really want to be pulling fat men around pools all your life?"

One of the boys laughed at that. "What about the babes, Tony? Did you ever rescue a real beauty?"

Tony, who never laughed out loud but only smiled in a serious way, stopped tying a shoe and thought a minute. "I've saved three lives, and not one girl among them. There was one jerk like you guys, banged his head showing off on a diving board, and two older guys, both at the beach. They swim out too far, panic in the riptide."

Occasionally, while others were talking, one of the boys would say something to William, "Tough luck" or "Next time, Will." They probably weren't surprised that he hadn't passed, but they seemed to be disappointed for him, and confused by the outcome. One of them said, "All that effort should have paid off." Perhaps it was disturbing to them that it hadn't. For their sakes, he kept bantering back, as if his insides hadn't collapsed.

But on the stairway, he caught Rick alone and asked, "Could I have another shot at the test?" His own voice embarrassed him; his shallow breathing squeezed the words into a hopeless, whiney tone.

Rick shook his head. "You'd have to take the course again."

William's father was waiting in the car out front. The other boys went off, their shoulders hunched to the cold, up the sidewalks, some to cars and some just walking on. They talked with one another, said goodbye, wished each other luck. One or two waved at William. "Fat ones, thousands of 'em," called Ralph, and pointed at him with raised brows. "Remember that." William smiled at him, and then reflected that he would never see these guys again. They were going off to a life where they would continue to run into each other--at pools and on beaches, where they would swap stories, horse around, flirt with girls. They would fill in for each other, get each other jobs. They would live in the world of water, while William lived only in the world of air. Now they were gone, and he walked alone to his father's car.

He'd already made up his mind not to beat around the bush. As he stepped into the car, he announced with a sigh, "Well, I didn't pass."

The car was running. His father did not move at first, and then he said "Huh," just that, and reached slowly for the gear shift. The silence stretched out as the car gradually moved forward.

The silence was hard, oppressive, as heavy as the big man he'd pulled forever through the bitter-tasting water. "It was really hard, Dad," he said, facing forward.

His father said, "I know. But I guess I still thought you'd pass."

He said nothing more, and William said nothing more. There would be fifteen more minutes or so of driving, the two of them occupying the same silent space. William stayed close to his door. As he watched the leafless trees sliding by, a silly thought kept running through his mind. People drown in water, people drown in air.