

## DEPTH CHARGE

CRAIG BERNARDINI

It had been the hottest summer since three years before he was born. He hadn't thought he could get enough breath, the air so thick and moist, like the world was a giant's greenhouse cellar. He had learned not to swallow his breath, not to tighten up his chest. On an August day he started four times. Three false starts, but on the fourth he was sure. Fifty meters isn't that far, anyway, and the water is warm and clear.<sup>1</sup>

"It didn't settle with me," Alexis said: "it didn't sound right." He slid his elbows unhindered and leaned against the bar. "Last Thursday, I think it was: an Indian incense vendor told me Cyrano de Bergerac was a black man. Do you know who Cyrano de Bergerac is?"

Gavin nodded, but he didn't know.

"It was like he told me to beware the Ides of March, you know?"<sup>2</sup>

Gavin nodded again, but he didn't know.

"I mean, if I was Julius Caesar—are you going to light that?"<sup>3</sup>

Gavin was what Alexis called thick; heavy-set, yes, but something more. Lines had begun to weave into his smooth black skin, marks of sun and time, like the finest furrows from a clay knife; and the first silver hairs had settled, subtly, into the half-dome of black wire. He owned the bar, the Satellite Lounge, and had been its sole proprietor and tender for five years last week.<sup>4</sup> "I'll light it when you shut up."

"All right," and Alexis held out his hands. "All right." He watched the match dip and crown the shot glass, how the liquor lapped the flame.<sup>5</sup> "I

thought afterwards, what if he's right? I thought of Shakespeare again, damn it! and it didn't settle with me, like the thought went bad and gave me the runs in my brain."

Gavin nodded, cornered into a smile and lost in the shuffle of a soliloquy. He was thinking about the drink.<sup>6</sup>

"Now I'm not saying that lessens my faith in or fear of the white or black man, respectively—"

"You're losing it," said Gavin, "you're losing it. Drink up, Alex."

"Son of a bitch . . . drop it."<sup>7</sup>

Gavin held the flaming shot like a candlestick over a half-filled glass of beer.

"I mean the shot," Alexis said, and he rested one hand loose around his glass.

Gavin let go: the flame extinguished in a kind of bloated beer lava lamp, the smaller glass bobbed inside the larger as he drew his hand away, and the drinks mixed and foamed into a piss-colored whitewater sea.<sup>8</sup> Alexis hunched, drank until the foam had settled on the bottoms of the glasses. These were tasting better, like Gavin was coming closer to the perfect balance of beer, liquor and showmanship with each try. In his mouth the drink was Heaven, but he was starting to feel bloated and sick.

He heard applause, but the bar was empty, except for two girls at a window seat that had been here the night through, and a bum passed out on the toilet, or so Gavin said. Gavin was holding a couple of quarters over the jukebox. He was putting on an old live tune, something mellow, maybe Frampton. Alexis wiped his sleeve across his face and turned in his stool.<sup>9</sup>

"Why don't you open it up?" he said, and motioned to the record coming down on the arm.

"Too much trouble. 'Sides, I'm trying to get rid of some change."

Alexis looked through his glasses. "Son-of-a-bitch, Gavin. I didn't get to finish what I was saying."<sup>10</sup>

"Finish it now."

"The moment, Gavin. The moment is gone."

"The soul," said Gavin, and he walked up to Alexis, and leaned close to him on the bar. "The soul was going quicker than you could talk. 'Sides, you forgot by now, anyway." Because that was Gavin's firmest conviction as a bartender and bar owner; that liquor, at least most liquor, had a soul, and once the tumbler was lit the blue crest of the flame meant it was on its way out, and up, to wherever the hell liquor heaven was. You don't want to lose the soul of your drink, he'd say, that's bad, very bad. But seeing as some liquor had none, it was best to know if it took flame first. If it didn't take flame he'd let it go.<sup>11</sup>

"I didn't forget," Alexis said. "What about a molotov cocktail?"

"A molotov cocktail," Gavin repeated. He was wiping the counter with a stiff towel. Then: "It's gonna break out if you stuff towels down the throat." He

pointed with his towel in his hand: "You see what I'm saying? If it's in there it's gonna come out, once you give it the chance. When it goes out it's gone. That"—he pointed at the glass with a glass—"was almost gone. I saved your ass, again."

"All right," said Alexis. "What about beer?"

"Beer's not liquor, Alex. It's a working man's drink."

"Working men have no soul?"

"You're getting confused."

"Yeah, I am."

Gavin poured a beer.

"You a working man, Gavin?"

"If talking is work," he answered, "then yeah. I'm a working man."

One of the girls at the window seat had staggered over.<sup>12</sup> "What's the occasion?" He looked at her. "It's Monday night, there's got to be some occasion . . . "but he couldn't make out the rest, it was too slurred.<sup>13</sup>

"The occasion is, I'm twenty-one."

"Twenty-one today?"

"Yes."

"Congratulationszz . . ." She held up one hand, and one finger, and swayed. "Haven't I seen you here before?"

He tipped his head, and measured her with his eyes. "Yes?"

She looked at Gavin, but he was wiping the bar, holding his head down. "You're twenty-one," she said. "I want a kiss, with tongue."

Did she make that up? he thought. She was swaying and smiling, her hair was dark, her eyes nearly black, she was pretty, very European. He obliged, and met her mouth with his, a little open. When Gavin laughed he held up his middle finger in any direction. His tongue was numb, more numb than his skin, but he thought the feeling, a warm wet together, was there, and he shut his eyes.

The kiss went on for longer than either of them expected, so long, it seemed they would move up the sexual ladder. But he pulled away, finally, and opened up his eyes to see her stagger back a step. She pulled up a strap of her dress that was loose by her arm, brushed herself off, and combed her hair with her fingers, self-conscious, childlike. "I'm going to throw up," she announced.<sup>14</sup>

Gavin didn't laugh until after she was gone, and if holding it in had made him think of sexual stress, then letting it out was as rewarding as it was painful. He laughed away the smell of her perfume, pungent like skunk cabbage to him. The bar, he often thought, had the rich and stale smell of the pages of a damp old paperback.<sup>15</sup>

"I was that good," Alexis said, and he laughed too, a little flustered, listening for sounds in the bathroom and trying to convince himself he wasn't.

"Poor boy," said Gavin. "Lemme make you a drink. Make you feel better. What can I getcha, son?"

"Sir the usual sir." Which meant the usual for tonight, because the usual usual was a Lawngiland ice tea ("nostalgia," Alexis would say, and stir vehemently), and depth charges were for the occasion.

Gavin lined up another glass of beer, and another ounce of Amaretto teased with half an ounce of 151. "Now you gotta promise me," he said, "that your words of wisdom ain't gonna go longer than this Bacardi can burn."<sup>16</sup>

Alexis considered. "How long is that?"

"Never let it run its course, Alex."

"Then how do you know if it ever goes out?"

"All fires go out."

"If you're worried about how long it burns," Alexis said, "why don't you use more Bacardi?" but he was smiling and laughing already, and he did a half a spin in his stool.

Gavin bit off his smile. "That time again. Talk to me."

"Light it. I've got nothing to say."

"Isn't that a nice surprise," said Gavin, "Alex has nothing to say. I think that means something, I do." He struck a match and waved it over the liquor, let the fire climb to his fingers before shaking it out. He tried a second match, but the shot stayed cold.

"Hell, it does mean something." Alexis smiled a drunken smile, the kind that sculpts his face in wet clay.<sup>17</sup>

The girls had left without coming over again; Gavin shuffled the bum out the door, holding his pants up for him. It was one-thirty, last call, and Alexis was the only one left, a typical Monday night.<sup>18</sup>

Gavin turned up the jukebox like he always did, the Monday night one-thirty ritual. He started to shuffle his feet to an upbeat reggae tune this time, but Alexis preferred the Frampton.

"You dance like an old man."

"You ain't got the right no more, to call me old. Not at twenty-one, you ain't." He doubled his step.

"Twenty-one and a day. My birthday's come and gone."

"A-lex," Gavin sang, "three years in my bar, and he ain't learned to shut up and drink, drink, drink like e'ryone e-helse."

"Three years and still talking! I thought all black, I said, I thought all black people could da-hance . . ."<sup>19</sup>

Gavin stopped. He mocked a wounded look. "You come out and try-hy," he teased, "before you get, I said, you get hemorrhoids on stoo-hool."

"I'm too drunk, I'll fall da-hown, I said da-hown."

"Ain't nothing wrong with falling down in my bar, friend," Gavin said, but he picked up the rhythm again. "You fallen down in here plenny o' times befo-

hore, yes befo-ho-hore."

Alexis came to him, unsure if he was trying to prove something. He moved like a novice skater, trying to walk on the blades, to his parents on the ice. Holding his head, too: his vision as skewed as his balance, spinning before trying to spin.

With a fourth and final try he clasped Gavin's hands, and they danced through this song, and then three more. Gavin had force-fed that tacky horse-shoe jukebox, pumped in a half hour's worth of music. They never noticed the cop who peered in the window and watched until his coffee was cold.<sup>20</sup>

They collapsed into bar stools, Gavin with a glass of water. He practiced a conditional abstinence on Mondays, and Mondays always lasted until 2:30 a.m.<sup>21</sup> Alexis panted quietly and hung his head low, but when Gavin nudged him he looked over and snorted.

"Silly fuckin day. Silly head."

Gavin didn't smile, but nudged again and said, "Gringo," to Alexis. "Up. Last chance to dance."

"Lemme sleep . . ."

"Last chance ever."

"Says who?"

"Says you." Then he hesitated, changed his tone, and dropped his voice. "You did."<sup>22</sup>

"When?"

Gavin finished the water and spoke. "Nights I had to call cabs for you. And drag you into 'em, and give the cabby money and directions 'sides."

"Slander," Alexis said.

Gavin stared through the glasses, the Bacardi and Amaretto bottles and near-empty beers. He held out his hands like they were evidence. "I don't know Shakespeare. But I know Alex. I got a headache three years old from hearing you talk."<sup>23</sup>

Alexis worked up to a shrug. "Two years of which I don't remember."<sup>24</sup>

"You forget about the numbers?" Alexis woke up and fixed on him, a dead-man's stare. "I didn't forget about the numbers. I quizzed you on those dumb fuckin numbers. Last time last week. Checker cab, and I don't know why. Am I ringing bells?"<sup>25</sup>

Alexis said, "The numbers. I take it I don't slur." He was running a finger on the edge of a glass, like he was trying to make it sing. "I don't lie, not when I'm drunk, not even guilt-lying."

"You said you were scared."

Alexis smiled. "I told you. I don't lie."

"You're scared, Alex. You said so yourself."<sup>26</sup>

"So, don't tell me about it."

"One night you grabbed me, Alex," and he reached out his hands and

pulled Alexis by the collar, "just like this, only you were hanging off me. You said, 'I'm scared, Gavin. O Jesus,' you said, 'I'm scared.' You started crying, Alex—"

"I told you," and he struck Gavin's hand away, "I don't want to know—"

"But you should know, goddamnit!" Gavin shut his eyes and opened them, expecting to see a different face, maybe.<sup>27</sup> "Which Alex was that talking, huh? And which one is it now?"

"One and the same," said Alexis. He hit his fingers against the wet of the bar. In memory of a cigarette. Sighed heavy. "Quiz me."

The black man shook his head. "Won't do it."

"Last week, Checker cab. You just said so."

Gavin put his head down, like he had when the girl came to the bar, like he always did when he didn't want to speak. He kneaded the stiff towel with one hand.

"C'mon, Gavin. Take me through the numbers. Tonight, tonight, or did you forget?"

"I didn't forget about the numbers," said Gavin, and he leaned close to Alexis, who shrugged back, expecting his collar to be grabbed again. "I figured you forgot, because I never said anything about it. I figured it was drunk talk." He leaned back. "It's like dying, Alex, you try not to think about it, even if you know you gotta deal with it someday."

"You don't just have to deal with it. You have to do it."<sup>28</sup>

"That's because God says so!" Gavin snapped, and he pointed at the ceiling, to the single slow turning fan. "God doesn't say you have to pull a bullshit stunt to prove anything."<sup>29</sup>

"Quiz me!" Alexis screamed, and smiled thickly when Gavin held fast to his promise:

"I won't do it!"

"One," said Alexis; and quickly and quietly, as a bedtime prayer: "bolt the doors. Two, brace for collision. Three, quick breaths—three quick breaths. Four, the seatbelt comes off. Five, crack the windows. Six pop my ears, seven wait—eight big breath, nine windows down, ten—"<sup>30</sup>

"There's not gonna be a ten," said Gavin. "Don't you see that?"

But Alexis was tapping the bar. He liked the way his ears had plugged, the way his skin felt thick, like he was wearing a wetsuit.<sup>31</sup> "C'mon," he said. "Depth charge." He pounded the bar, for service this time, instead of effect. "One for the road."<sup>32</sup> He went through the motions of the drink, striking his finger on the wood of the bar, and touching it to an invisible glass of invisible liquor.

"It's called a depth charge, Gavin."

Gavin gave a long exhale, something he thought he could see. "It's called a Dr. Pepper here in Baltimore," and Alexis said, "I know." He put the pieces one by one back on the bar. Maybe he'll get too drunk to drive, he thought, if

I keep him here, keep him drinking, until he can't even stand.<sup>33</sup>

"Regular Monday crowd," said Gavin, "me and you. Whaddya say we go head to head?"

Alexis smiled, and wondered if he'd seen through Gavin, just like Gavin wondered if Alexis had seen through him. "No can do," he said. "Maybe tomorrow."

Gavin shook his head.

"I know," said Alexis, and growled, "there's no tomorrow." It was a song, but he couldn't remember the name.<sup>34</sup>

The Coors clock chimed twice: the first gave Gavin a start, and the second coincided with the toilet's flush. He heard the bathroom door kicked behind him; one, two, he thought, and stopped there. He was staring at the glasses, empty or half-empty, and at the bottles of Bacardi and Amaretto. Random, they looked like the glass pieces of a game that had been interrupted.<sup>35</sup>

"I've been thinking about tonight," Alexis said. Gavin spun in his stool. "I tend to think clearly when I shit."

"Shitting sobers you up?"

"I said it helps me think clearly."

"You changed your mind," Gavin said. "You're gonna sit here and sober up. Then, you're gonna drive home and go to bed." But Alexis was soured. Try again, Gavin thought. "You're gonna drink with me this fine Tuesday morning. See the sun up. I'll keep open for that."

"I've been thinking about tonight since before I came to Baltimore."<sup>36</sup>

"You're gonna disappoint me, Alex."

"I changed my mind so many times," Alexis said, and scratched his Adam's apple in denial. Gavin felt he was getting towed Alexis' way, into a place stuck somewhere between a confession and a story. And then he heard Alexis say, "Did you ever hear of Russian roulette?" and he knew something was coming. He nodded, top-heavy.

"That's where it started." Alexis waited for Gavin to say something, and when he didn't Alexis said, "I'm not shitting you."

"I didn't say you were."

"Please, say I'm not."

"You're not shitting me."

"I had a friend who worked in the stockroom of a surplus store. He used to steal shit for us all the time. Knives, mostly: bayonets. We paid him for everything, so he kept taking. He had a machine gun in his closet, unassembled, in a little white box. So a handgun wasn't so tough, except that they don't come in pieces, I don't think.

"Cost me fifty dollars. It was like I bought myself a present for my eighteenth birthday, but it was something I needed, not something I wanted. Like getting socks."<sup>37</sup>

"Anyway, I didn't use it when I turned eighteen. I said I'd use it next year, or the year after. But nineteen is a prime number, right? And twenty is one less than twenty-one. So here I am, on a three year excuse." He held out his arms.

"Blackjack," said Gavin. "It's gambling."<sup>38</sup>

"Right!" Alexis palmed the bar, elbows up and lizardlike. "Russian roulette is luck: Luck is for pussies. It doesn't take guts to put a gun to your head just because you have a one in six chance of killing yourself. I want to do something that takes skill. Skill proves shit."<sup>39</sup> He whistled, and smiled to himself, at his passion. "But the trick is, I've still got the gun. So if I don't do this tonight—if I put it off again—I go home, put one, maybe two bullets in the chamber, spin it, and play until I lose." He made a gun with his hand.<sup>40</sup>

"Same Alex," said Gavin. "Still talking."

"Mm. But never talking shit."

"Hey, hey, I grew up in this city. I know what you're talking about ten times over. I used to do wild shit with my friends when I was young. We got knives and guns. Because almost all our fathers were veterans, Alex, and there ain't much difference between thirty years ago and today, except I'm looking back." He smiled, and his hand found the bar towel. "We even robbed a gas station one time. I ever tell you that?" Alexis shook his head. "My friend Jay worked the register, he dreamed it up. Inside job, cops never caught on. Nobody talked.

"We thought we were so old; you're not old, Alex."<sup>41</sup>

"How much did you get?"

Gavin walked behind the bar. He poured a beer and slid it. "Remember: God's way." Alexis sighed. "Things come natural. When you try'n force 'em—that's when they go wrong."<sup>42</sup>

"None of my friends from school are still living." And, nodding: "Things catch up to you." He poured a new shot of Amaretto and 151. "Drink up, Alex. It's been a half an hour, you must've thought of something to say." Twenty-eight dollars, Gavin thought.<sup>43</sup> Wouldn't cover a busted stool today.

"You know I had oatmeal for breakfast this morning?" Alexis said, brightly. "The last time I had oatmeal I must've been ten. Coming in from playing in the snow." He frowned. "It's good for you, too. Go ahead and light that."

Gavin struck a match, tipped it, and the soul appeared, phantom blue, dancing into and out of visible. It reminded him of the girls who danced with feathers: huge blue exotic plumes. Something he hadn't seen in a long time, or maybe only on TV.<sup>44</sup>

In Gavin's hand, the match smoldered and bled black. Alexis took the shot away, stopping Gavin with one hand.

"I'm doing this one."

"Hurry up," said Gavin. "Damn, that's a bright one."

"Is that better, that it's brighter?"



"Dunno," said Gavin. "Drop the shot."

"Does that mean it burns longer?"

"Drink it." Gavin reached out to take the glass away but Alexis stepped back, even in his stupor, and cupped his free hand around it, secreting it.<sup>45</sup> His stool fell back and cracked through the middle, a cold fleshy line down the darkstained wood.<sup>46</sup>

The flame rolled sideways and regained its balance: it had disappeared on parts of the surface, and Gavin had said, "Drink it" again, threateningly. But Alexis was backed almost against the Coors clock. Neither was looking at the other's face: they were staring at the shot, and over the shot at the flame, where it was dying. The glass had cracked.<sup>47</sup> It had done that before, from the heat, from the waiting. Then the flame went out.

Gavin spoke to the shot. "You broke the rules," he said, "and if that ain't enough . . ." He put his head down.<sup>48</sup> "Twenty-one years old, Alex. They call you a boy one day and a man the next. Something's not right with that. Because you're still a kid, thinks he's got to prove shit."

Kid? Alexis thought. "Kid?" He looked at Gavin with eyes so unlike a doll's, so full of life. A photograph of intensity; through silver, he burns. He drank the spent shot and rifled the empty glass against the bar, where it shattered.

Like someone had thrown a switch, he backed up one more step, stuttered the clock's free hands, turned his head on a cogwheel and marched out the door. Gavin picked up the phone and put it back down.<sup>49</sup>

Alexis fell lengthwise across the front seats and peeled himself up by the steering wheel, legless. The light in the car cast a reflection on the windshield, his face rising from a dark quarry.<sup>50</sup>

"So, I'm drunk," he said, and smiled, then frowned. His lips curled thick on the windshield, like clown's lips. Disembodied mouth beyond, floating in the city.<sup>51</sup> He puckered his lips, stretched his face, yanked his cheeks, clamped his mouth shut, teeth first. Then he shut his eyes.

"One, lock the doors," he whispered,<sup>52</sup> and shut and locked each, front and back. "Wait," he said. He swallowed air, and his head spun violently. He knew he was going to throw up, felt his throat constrict and open as he clawed for the latch to unlock the door.<sup>53</sup> And for the most part he made it out of the car. Even when he was puking the numbers ran through his head, backwards and forwards, as if he could reverse the process. "Ten," he said when his stomach was empty. "Out and up." He giggled and spit.

He looked to the sky, a clear night except for thin clouds scribbled across the moon. He saw Gavin, too, clean-up forsaken and bar closed, standing by the puke puddle at the open door.

They stared at one another like when the liquor had been between them.

But it was all around them now; they waded in an ocean of it.<sup>54</sup>

"Aren't you going to wish me luck?" Alexis said.

"Luck?" said Gavin. "Luck is for pussies, remember?"<sup>55</sup>

"Red light, stop." His buzz wasn't warm anymore. Maybe it wasn't a buzz at all. He had to piss. It was the only thing that reminded him of his birthday night, but he wondered where the urge had come from.<sup>56</sup>

"Forty feet," Gavin had said. "Forty feet and cold, it's cold in March. Remember the sea is cold in March." Alexis remembered Sunday night, the way he had spoken with an air of finality to his parents. He'd called a girl he'd met that summer and dated for a week, a girl he knew more by her phone number than by her name. Tonight wasn't the same, not at all, because he didn't hear the voices of his parents, or his ex- and double-ex-girlfriends, most of whom were weeklong party favors, anyway. Instead, he heard the voice of a fifty-year-old black man, native of the city; someone he saw two, sometimes three times a week like he'd visit a hooker. And while one or two of the two or three days were toss-ups between schoolwork and parties and dates, there was always Monday. It was never crowded on Mondays, and there was never an occasion, none except talking. Wasn't it fate that his twenty-first birthday had come on a Monday? or had he planned it that way from the start? He wondered what it was that kept him going back, if it was what Gavin said about the soul.<sup>57</sup>

There were five square blocks between himself and the inner harbor. The scene stood in dark grey and glass against the scribble-cloud sky, five blocks and a walkway away. The walkway was fronted by a thin iron railguard, a dip for the tracks of a streetcar, and a high curb. The curb set off a stage of brick that sloped once and dropped into ocean, ocean deep enough to hold a stranded clipper and a "Flying Tigers" painted U-boat, tourist attractions. There were lights woven on wires, strewn up and down buildings and on ship's masts, around the port to the other bank. The far bank was hazier, maybe a quarter of a mile further, but there was grand neon and smokestacks where the city rolled over.<sup>58</sup>

Behind him the city climbed up and away from the water, dipping at Monument Street, then rising again. He studied his eyes, reflected in the diver's mask of the mirror.

"Don't walk" flashed on the crosswalk, then froze when the cross-light turned yellow. Potty trained, he thought; just run the fucking thing.<sup>59</sup> He waited for the first light to turn, then ran three reds, and a fourth, but the crosswalk "don't walk" had frozen already, and he counted it as anticipation. The engine shifted; a stick, he thought, a stick, my kingdom for a stick.

The car bit the railguard in two, it was a six-cylinder American car, he thought hurrah for American engineering. Through the rail, and over the curb, knocking the car into a clumsy pushup, coming down on worn shocks to push up the rear and burn off half the oil pan. When the needle had finished danc-

ing it was down in the twenties. Traction on the brick was strong, though, and the slope meant another ten miles an hour.

There was the second when Alexis realized he had reached the point of no return, and that no matter what he did, nothing in the physical universe could stop this car from going over the edge. Instead of his life he saw colors, and faces without names; he smelled pipe and disinfectant.<sup>60</sup> The car's bones rattled, and under the racket he heard:

One, lock the door. Two, brace yourself. Three, etc.<sup>61</sup>

Before the front tires had left the last strip of brick, he had pounded the door latch to "locked" and molded himself to the seat. The car sailed into the night, a mechanical Flying Dutchman.<sup>62</sup> It hung there, the rattle disappeared, and the silence that followed was golden, my God, he thought, my first grade teacher would have had an orgasm in this kind of quiet, in this kind of still.<sup>63</sup> If the wheels were spinning he couldn't hear them, and if there was traffic in the city or people on the walkway he'd never known it. The car hitting the ocean felt a lot, he suspected, like the car hitting hard ground, except that the ocean swallowed the first five feet instead of grinding them into pulp. The car bobbed once so the ocean could froth, but he didn't see the part that stuck out, only what was underneath.

Four, goddamnit—what was four? He was sinking now, and fast. Three, he'd forgotten three, and he remembered that he'd forgotten three, but he also remembered that he'd forgotten four, and he remembered three and took three quick breaths, or gasps, and then three more gasps, as they did less take in air than they did make him dizzy.<sup>64</sup> He pressed his hands out against the windshield when the snake's-mouth tide swallowed the body of the car, and his screams were sealed, fossilized, in the pocket of air. The water was coming in, through imperfections in the engine and holes behind the trunk. The water was around his knees, and it was cold, because the sea is cold in March. It was dark, too. "Fucking nigger didn't tell me it was dark at night," he whispered, and giggled, and took it back all at once.

The car went completely under before all the air was gone, the weight pushing the pocket under the tide like a cook stuffing a turkey. He wondered how long it would take to sink, how long before the air would be gone. The first ten feet, the water at his chest, he watched the sinking, because the lights stayed on. He saw dark ripples in his beams of light, shapes moving back and forth. Then the lights flickered and shut off.

How far? he wondered. How deep? Four, four . . . he hammered the windows.<sup>65</sup> How many feet had he sunk? Crack the windows, he thought, but not like this. Wasn't it already too late for five? Forty feet, how much was that? Ocean bottoms aren't flat, they dip and split into valleys and trenches. And the harbor is studded with stone pylons, and not all of them come all the way to the top.

There were rocks on the bottom, too. He could get wedged between two

rocks without even enough room to squeeze out through an open window. Or he could go down so deep the windows would implode and kill him with glass.

Oh Jesus, he said, over and over again, like the Don't Walk sign at the dry corner of Charles and Lombard, oh Jesus.<sup>66</sup> Five, crack the windows, but it was too late for that, because he was doing a chin-up to breathe and opening the windows would drown him. He felt himself piss through his coldhard prick and shit his pants when the water came in the corners of his mouth.

Still falling? He wondered if he needed four, or six, or any even numbers. Maybe it was only the odds. But ten is even. But that's double digits, and that doesn't count.

Eight came before nine, deep breaths, but the breaths were full of salt and brine. It was too cold for a last deep breath, his chest was so tight in the freezing water. This is a false start, he screamed in his soaking brain, I want to start again.<sup>67</sup>

He rolled the window down as the water settled over his head, and his eyes adjusted to the dark, the cold, and the sting, and his being adjusted to the fear of the dark, and then to the ocean bottom, because he had finished falling, he thought. The numbers came back, but they were empty, they didn't mean anything. His hands had lost feeling. He saw into the dark, almost past the hood, to the steady rise and fall of the bottom.

The fear came back when he felt the pains in his chest, when the buoyancy pushed his waist against the locked seatbelt, when the cold started to feel less comfortable and more draining. It came back in questions, some the same as before (how deep), some new, because his brain had spent the twenty numb seconds looking for what scared him, what could wake him up. The sensation came back into his hands, he felt his muscles spasm and his heart kick in with a mouthful of air, and the thought that he was still alive and twenty-one.<sup>68</sup>

He panicked first, swallowing his air and fumbling for the seatbelt release. It took both thumbs to unlock and his whole body to shuffle off. This was something beyond panic, because he was sure he'd done all the screaming and shitting and pissing he could do for a week, and there was nothing left to be scared of, not now. He was in a world between, a slow motion world, mixed fear and euphoria, hypnotized by the slow, smooth motions of his arms, primitive, the stroke of a manta ray.

He pushed off the ceiling of the car, into the hole of the window, and on his way out his knee hit the dashboard. For all the car's imperfections there was something perfect in the wiring, something immaculate, because he jarred something there, and the light inside the car flickered and came on. Hallucinating, he thought, I'm dead and dreaming or tripping or just fucking crazy. Against the windshield he made out something dark and familiar. First he turned to swim, but before he was halfway out he turned back to the ghost reflection. His hair was sewn in white weeds over his head, his skin was pale and purple, livid, lavender. He had started a beard three days ago, but it had

grown full in the shadows of the reflection.<sup>69</sup> He reached out to touch the glass, but pulled his hand away before the fingers met, and turned to swim, frightened, and breathless.

In the ascent he didn't feel the things that brushed against him, because he couldn't see, and his skin couldn't feel, and the only knowledge of feeling was that of his own ribs being driven through his chest.<sup>70</sup> It was getting lighter out, like day was breaking. Now he did see his life, in a film instead of a flash. The faces had names, the smells were candy and corn. It was comfortable; it numbed the pain, one kind of pain, the way the buzz had before.<sup>71</sup>

Day did break: day for night, anyway, because the dark sky was almost blinding white when he exploded from the ocean twenty feet further than the car had entered. He turned a full breath into a scream.<sup>72</sup> The numb in his body turned to hot, the scream was so full of emotion as to be emotionless, like the colors mixing into white, or nulling to black.<sup>73</sup>

HE WAS WATCHING a piece of crumpled paper on the tide when they surrounded him with towels and forced him into an ambulance.<sup>74</sup> Confined at the one time in his life when he most felt like running and singing. He thought of Gavin on the way to the hospital. He saw other faces, too, but the one he remembered best was his own, in the windshield, for all he knew ten fathoms down and fifty years away.<sup>75</sup>

# Narrative Design



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