

## DREAD AND COMRADES

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John Remenis watched the kids loitering at the water's edge and thought, no, you don't really want to swim do you. Josh wanted to paddle, but Sophie and Mark had to stop him because of the way the water sucked down the slope of wet sand, bulged high up above the level of the beach and bellied out like a gassy stomach after a night on the grog. The sun was still warm, but the pipe of the CSBP jetty cast a stretching shadow on the sand. The kids hunched their bare shoulders as if they were already cold. Remenis watched the bruised water, blotched with torn seaweed, rear up behind their dejected heads, before swelling down and out around the concrete pylons near to the shore. The whole scene looked somehow angry and sore. No, the kids didn't want to swim. Of course they didn't want to swim. They could all see the sign, about 30 feet out, quite close actually, attached to a pole sticking out from the first pylon, a superb seagull perched on top of it –

### DANGER DEEP WATER

Remenis knew he'd made his point when Mark wandered up the sand to him. "Dad, can we go to Safety Bay?"

He stared at his son's cheek until it reddened. "Why? I like it here."

As he watched the unhappy boy return to his siblings, any remorse he felt was negated by the satisfaction of his point: that if the kids really wanted to swim they would swim. This was a beach, what was wrong with it? But he knew they wouldn't, and that was his point; that they didn't really want to do what they said they wanted to do. They wanted to go to Safety Bay or Palm beach, not swim. He hated two-faced talk.

He sat on the sand dressed in the same charcoal grey trousers, purple paisley pattern shirt and black zip-up cardigan he'd worn for weeks. He could smell the stale cigarette smoke, sweat and Brut coming off them, but didn't care; no work in weeks so what was the point? The blokes at the TAB all smelt the same, only the wife and kids complained. But the wife was in hospital with their fourth, so the kids he was stuck with; these lazy, spoilt, ungrateful kids. Why not teach them a lesson about life. That's life, he would tell them; that jetty and that steel pipe sticking out to sea. None of you are looking at it of course, heads down, kicking wet sand, muttering about how much you hate me. You think it's ugly don't you? Well that's your meals. That's the roof over your heads.

Remenis liked this place because he knew he was alone. The beach extended to a shoulder of low dune about a hundred yards north and no one walked on it. The only movement, apart from the sea, was a plume of gassy smoke jetting over the dunes and climbing in the sky. A wind-hazed headland could be seen beyond

the beach dotted with boilers, wharves and smoking grey pipes. Far out to sea the glinting slivers of three bulk carriers hung on the sunlit horizon.

It was the jetty he'd come to admire. He loved its simplicity and the total absence of fussiness in its design. The sense of its rigidity in the turmoil of sea and wind moved him. So he was infuriated that the kids refused to look at it. He thought it was a beautiful thing. He'd welded three of the long lintels that were supporting the pipe way out there, so this was his creation; he'd even had two apprentices under him as if he was a boss. Looking at it now made him appreciate the Russian concept of workers owning the products of their own labour. Though that only made sense if you didn't think about it too deeply. What would he do with that thing if he owned it? Fish off it? Better to collect a wage and it's someone else's responsibility. But it was still his, in some strange way, especially now he was doing nothing and getting nothing for it. There it still was, the titanic weight of that curved steel resting on concrete pylons stuck like massive pins in the green flesh of the sea; under the water, the square concrete sleepers crushing deep into the earth's bedrock. This place was real. More real than the blocked gutters and dripping taps he was expected to fix at home. More real than the kids moping around in pajamas or the bedroom stinking of the wife's spew. Those things just slipped out of his mind here, leaving him empty and clear. So stuff the kids! They could swim out and disappear as far he was concerned. They weren't real, they were blind to what was real. Only he could see what was real. He could recall as if it was yesterday sitting on that strut, right here on this beach, welding those lintels, feeling the sea wind buffet his shoulders and neck, breathing the beautiful fumes of sparkling weld. He could even recall The Shadows' *Apache* running insistently through his mind every time he'd donned the visor and watched that white dot creep across the purple haze. He felt like a twentieth century Vulcan, making landforms with fire and steel. Other teams had worked on different parts of the structure, and the whole thing slowly winched out on pontoons. Counting each section as the length between pylons, he guessed his section was about the fourth one out, say about 500 feet. He could swim that, easy. Now that would be something to show the kids!

Because down at the shore the kids had given up. Josh no longer tried to get into the water and was building sand castles instead. The two older kids sat on the sand, their slumping backs facing him. Reminis noted the cheeks squashed despondently on fists, and he snorted at their transparent ploy; trying to pity him into taking them to the paddling pool.

If only he'd brought his bathers, then he could swim out there, show them how you do it. He scanned the beach and dunes for other people. No one. Why not do it naked? Swim out there, admire his work, let the swell bring him back. Easy. Yes, that's it! That'll be the kids' lesson of the day!

Suddenly energised Reminis leapt to his feet and quickly stripped off. The breeze caressed his body, he realised why the kids were complaining. But this is how you fight the cold, he thought as he trotted to the water's edge. The wet sand squished under his feet until he came to the slope, and paused, studying the wall of murky green water as it swelled back like a vast lung taking in air. He stepped into the white scum of swirling surf which was still sucking back. Already it pulled on his ankles. He heard one of the kids call "Dad?" but he didn't look over at them. He knew they'd all stood up and were watching him. The slope descended quickly into the water and in two steps he was up to his waist. If anyone saw him now at least

they couldn't tell if he had bathers on or not.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

The water was warm and the swell strong, slinging around his thighs and pulling. Another two steps and it was lapping over his shoulders. He heard Sophie start to cry, a needy, panic-stricken sobbing, but still he didn't look at them, the wind was already snatching their voices away. You don't need to be scared of this sea, he thought at them, as if that could somehow soothe them. The slope of the sea-bed was steep, the sand subsiding under his toes. Warm sea water slapped his nose and mouth. With a quick flex of his knees he kicked out and was floating.

Despite the accumulating years of smoking, drinking and inadequate exercise, Remenis still had supreme confidence in his strength as a swimmer. Nonetheless a thrill of panic shook him as he realised there was now no bottom below him. It felt like a short tussle with an alternate self who wanted to immediately swim back and feel the sand under its feet. Instead he closed his eyes and ducked his head under the water. Kicking decisively he propelled himself forward with four freestyle strokes until he was beyond hesitation. Snorting and shaking the water from his face, he treaded strongly and opened his eyes. The kids and the beach were hidden behind a rising mound of water. Only the tops of the dunes and the paling afternoon sky could be seen. Out at sea, the three bulk carriers sat like tiny dashes in a wash of blue and gold stratosphere. The jetty filled most of the view to his left. The first pylon was still about 10 feet away, the DEEP WATER sign almost above him. The water was jelly green in a darkening strata to black below. He guessed it must be thirty foot here. Shutting his mind to that sightless depth he swam further, head under water, holding his breath for three strokes, before expelling a scrambling rush of bubbles over his face and, on the skyward arc of the fourth stroke, snapping his face out of the water and inhaling with a whoop. Four times he did this before he stopped again and treaded. He was directly in line with the first pylon now. But already he was puffed. That was not good, he run the risk of cramping if he kept that up. He was swimming too hard, too intensely, and it wasn't going to get him there any faster than if he relaxed and swum slow strokes. So he closed his eyes and breathed slow deep breaths, coursing his arms and kicking his legs in long deliberate circles.

He swam: head down, *stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe! stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!* He sensed the first pylon and the DEEP WATER sign receding behind him. He didn't look up towards the second pylon because the fact was it looked a long long way. He knew enough about the sea to realise that distances from the shore look completely different from the water. But it was still sobering when you see it. He'd be in open sea once he got there. The pylon would be no sanctuary either; a smooth cylinder of steel-capped concrete plunging sheer into the water. And then there was another whole section to swim after that. Curiously, one of the bulk carriers looked a lot closer than before; he could actually make out its prow and the smudge of smoke from its funnel. Best not think about anything and just swim. That was how the marathon swimmers did it; they didn't think of distances, just what they were doing, their breathing and their actions.

*Stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe! Stroke stroke exhale stroke, breathe!* The little panic-self implored in its stopped-up section of his mind, *what are you doing? You're going further out!* But that wasn't him. That was the doubter, all the bullshit of the world, the whining unhappy wife and those mollicoddled kids,

holding him back, making him fail. He'd been losing for too long now; he was going to win this and stuff everything else. His confidence in his strength was supreme, he made this thing, he wasn't going to let it defeat him. *Stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!*

The swell was pushing him closer to the jetty. He had to maintain this distance parallel to it otherwise he'd just go under it and be pushed away. Before long the extra effort made his chest hurt and his heart pound uncomfortably; he had to rest again. The second pylon was still a way off, but there was nothing he could do about it for now. Curving backwards he let his legs and belly float to the surface until he could feel the cold air on his penis. He knew that by resting like this he was giving himself up to the swell and so the energy he'd save would have to be spent again getting back to the line. But he had to rest, that was that. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to make it after all.

The water glugged and slopped around his ears, lulling him to resignation. After a while he opened his eyes and saw a seagull hovering nearby in the upside-down sky, its beak and the tips of its wings pointing at the water, talons stretched for the prey. He began to cry. Poor Mark and Sophie, poor little Josh, who once gave him a black-eye while acting like a frog. He cried and cried for them because he loved them so. And his little daughter Michelle, he cried for her because she would never know him. But he was no use to them anymore. He was too old and slow, he would never get those jobs again. It was too painful watching them go hungry and the house fall apart. It was better he go this way, the Roman way.

“Let me go!” he sobbed at their faces. “Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!”

*You must start swimming back now!*

No, I'm too far out now, I'll never make it back.

*You must! You must!*

And then he laughed, it echoed strangely in his submerged ears. He somersaulted around in the water, came up and shook his fist at the jetty. “You won't beat me like that!” he shouted. “I'll show you! You're mine, I made you!”

With the renewed energy of madness he looked around and sized up his position again; the pylon about fifty feet away, the swell pushing and pushing against him. He noted also that that ship was even closer now. No more than five mile out by the looks of it.

With a furious porpoise-leap, he swam – *stroke stroke, exhale-stroke, breathe! Stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!* He didn't stop when his lungs began to burst – *stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!* Dizziness washed through his mind, clouding his eyes, his arms and legs became wobbly – *stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!* He floated, face a wide mouth hole gasping on the lip of water like a stranded fish. The second pylon was too far away. He was dying. How ridiculous. No plan. Just all of a sudden he's dying. This is it, I'm lost. Goodbye everyone, goodbye kids, goodbye Diane, I'm going now, 'bye bye, farewell, *addio addio adiós señores!*

But I'm still going to get you you bastard! I own you, I can do anything I want with you, I can fish off you, I can even blow you up if I want to – *stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!* All the other blokes who worked on you too, Mick, Des, Gary, Kevin, Ronaldo, Luigi they own you too, the workers of the world swim out and take what's yours! *Stroke stroke exhale-stroke, breathe!*

He was passing under the jetty now, flotsam on the swell. The unreachable lintels were above him, he felt the cold shade slide off his back, to be replaced by the faded warmth of the sunlight on the other side. His head was underwater, lungs filled and flowing with sea. He watched his slow hand claw the green clinging water, a tape of seaweed wrapped around a finger. He was drowned.

A jarring thud on his head woke him up. He'd made it to the pylon after all. No! Gasping and lifting his head from the water he saw he'd collided with a long reef of red steel, rivets the size of his head along the side. Another shadow began passing over him. He looked up. Towering in the dizzy sky was the prow of a bulk carrier; he'd washed up against its icebreaker. He heard a splash a couple of feet away. He looked across the rim of water; a white life-buoy bobbed about attached to a rope dangling up towards the curve of the hull. He swam to the buoy and slid through it. He heard men shouting in a foreign language. More ropes and a harness slapped onto the water. Tangling them around his body he was pulled out of the water, blue, wet and naked as the day he was born. He could see the big Cyrillic letters printed on the hull, the little white-capped heads of the sailors watching as they winched him to the workers' paradise.