



The Drowned

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The Drowned

The enemy lay before him.

Calm, still, no wind in the air to push or pull, Luis stood looking out at his foe. It had taken him ten years to find the courage to make his way back here. Ten long years of longer nights and days that seemed to go by too quickly.

You made a promise, he told himself. It's time you made good.

He lifted a foot and slipped off one, then both of his shoes. Next came the socks.

He scrunched his toes on the damp wood of the pier.

Once it had been the best part of summer coming here. When they were fifteen they had spent that last summer part aquatic, in the water more than out. Sometimes they'd joked about sprouting gills.

He heard no laughter now.

He heard nothing. No birds in the trees, no rustle of the leaves. This was a summer day lost in time, frozen.

And he?

Yes, coming back here was time travel, it was a journey to the past, but ten years too late.

Luis pulled off his shirt and folded it neatly, he lay it down next to his shoes and socks.

There'd been no such formality as teenagers. They'd stripped, tossing their clothes in the air to land wherever they fell. That was how it had been.

And how it could never be again.

He'd had a family since then, one boy, one girl and one wife. He'd spent ten summers building a life, ten summers trying hard to forget.

But how could you forget?

There was no easy pause, or rewind for what had been witnessed. No easy way to forget about her, that summer day, the last summer day when he'd felt as though he were alive.

Luis undid his belt and folded it next to the shoes, socks and shirt. He undid the top button of his trousers and pulled them down. Soon they were stacked neatly next to the rest of his clothing.

He stared at them, thinking of his life now and his life ten summers before.

Everything had become neat, folded, just like his clothing. The days were just as organised. He knew exactly where he would be at any given time and what he would be doing. And he knew why.

Luis closed his eyes.

A man organised his life when he was afraid, that's what it was. There could be no surprises in a life if you wanted to avoid fear. No mistakes. You couldn't just throw your clothes into the air and let them land where they fell.

That way led to disaster.

He opened his eyes, and stared out at the lake.

Such a calm enemy, showing no malice. Placid, barely moving under the hot afternoon sun.

But still the enemy.

Still the taker of life, a murderer.

How many had died beneath the waters? How many screaming in silence only to drop like stones, unheard?

He knew of one. A girl from that summer long ago. The girl he'd pictured in all his futures, for the rest of his life.

The girl he spent ten more summers thinking of, trying to imagine how she'd disappeared.

He never could find the right image.

It was always her smile slowly fading under blue. An open mouth, a scream that couldn't be heard. Always quiet, never violent, never urgent enough.

But he knew it had to be.

He knew that drowning wasn't a quiet death, no, it was a struggle. Like gravity suddenly falling down upon your head. Like the world slowly, painfully crushing you.

And worst of all, he'd been there. His feet cooling in the water, a laugh in his throat, a smile on his face while she struggled beneath the blue water, while her last breaths were stolen and finally...

They never did find her body.

For a full week the police divers had combed the lake looking for her, and yet, nothing.

Where had that body gone? How could it have disappeared when the water was so contained, unable to move beyond its own boundaries?

He had crazy ideas back then, when the summer was about to end and he spent most of his nights crying himself to sleep.

She wasn't dead, no, that was too hard to believe. She had somehow become part of the lake. Through some unfathomable trick, when she had taken the water into her lungs she had merged with those same waters.

Of course, ten summers could dull any idea, and time had a habit of making teenage fantasies more impossible by the day.

Still...

Luis removed his boxer shorts and folded them neatly as he had folded everything else.

Naked, he stood, looking out at the enemy.

The time was fast approaching. All that was left on his body now was a wristwatch, and as he looked, the last minute ticked away.

Ten summers before, at noon, she had disappeared forever.

Now ten summers later he had returned to find her, to fight for her as he had been unable to do as a boy.

He undid the watch when there were ten seconds left, he placed it beside everything else.

He stepped toward the end of the pier, letting his toes grip the edge.

Ten summers ago they'd practiced diving. They'd dropped into this water without any fear. They'd opened their eyes beneath the blue and watched each other in that world where gravity was lessened.

And now he would repeat. He would jump, and open his eyes, and he would not drown, he would not go quietly.

He would find her.

And then the summers could return, all the dreams of the future would be his again, all those teenage fantasies would come true.

Luis placed his hands out in front.

He bent his knees.

And he dove.

Soon, eyes open, he saw the blue world.

Where are you, he thought? Come to me. Don't let it end like this...

But there was nothing in that blue world. No girl, no lost summer, no teenage fantasy made true.

And slowly, slowly, his mouth opened.

He felt the silent crush of the blue all around him.

No, I can't go yet. Not yet. She's here, I know she's...

The voice came through the water like the sound through a tin drum.

Her voice.

Her voice!

"You came back for me," she said.

He had.

"Forever?" she said.

He let his hand drift out in the water.

Forever was a summer and a girl he'd lost so long ago.

A summer he knew he would return to.

Luis nodded.

He opened his mouth wider.

He took her hand in his, and soon he was gone.

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