



SUDDENLY NOT SCARED AND HOLDING ON Mark Gallacher

Suddenly the world cartwheels in a black wall of water and I reach out blindly. I am raised up and slammed down again like a piece of wood, a rotten piece of driftwood. Pain lights up my skull like a white flare and I cry out and the wall of water thunders and hisses behind me, slackening its terrible grip.

Insane details rush in. Rain driving into my face. Throat burning. The wind howling. My feet slipping and sliding on a ragged edge of broken concrete pier wall. My left arm jammed between an exposed loop of steel rod jutting out from the tear in the wall.

A coil of orange rope cuts and bites into my right hand as I'm pulled, not quite over the edge, into the lunging dark that is the sea come to claim me.

Below me John's face is a white moon in a boiling black sky. He still has a grip on the orange rope in the water. A wave slaps him against the pier side and ploughs him under.

The orange rope suddenly tight and biting into my hand. The wind screaming like a witch. My feet slipping and sliding.

I want to shout at him. Tell him it was a stupid thing. All of it. But all I can do is spit and curse. All I can do is hold on.

In library period Kathy comes over to my table by the big windows where I can look out and see the other kids at the street corner smoking and messing about. She doesn't say anything at first, just looks at me.

What you reading?

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

Heavy stuff, Kathy says and leans against the table and wipes a chalk mark from her blue skirt.

What you reading? I look up at her, her short dark hair and her dark eyes and her perfume thick and heady.

It's just a crummy book, James.

Kathy walks away again and she looks back to catch me watching her and smiles and cocks one of her hips out and she laughs. She holds the door to the library open.

I'll see you around, James.

I can see John and the others down in the street smoking and fooling around. Kathy comes out of the school and crosses the road and she kisses John and leans against him and laughs. She lights a cigarette and looks up at the library window.

John breaks through the surface, spitting and kicking. He laughs wildly.

Can't you pull me up? Hey! Can't you?

Feet. Arm. Can't. Can't.

Oh shit.

John twists in the water, sees the next wave like a black tower falling from the sky. He turns his back to it and looks up. His face is pale and disbelieving.

Shit. Shit. He closes his mouth.

A great roll of seawater whirls around him. The wave heaves against the pier side and goes back out and John comes up again kicking and thrashing. He fights to get some sort of hold on the pier wall, but there's nothing to grip. He twists in the water, searching for a way. He tries anyway. He tries to climb up.

The rope bites into my hand and my feet slip and dance on the ragged edge.

My arm begins to buckle.

Nonono don't! Hold on! Just hold on.

Another wave folds over him and pulls him under and it takes forever for the wave to break up and roll back out again.

I close my eyes, try to make the world be quiet and still. I don't know how long I hang like this. I look down again and John's mouth is working words but I don't hear what he's saying. Don't care. I wish I knew what to do. But all I can do is hold on. All I can do is shut my eyes and not let go.

Kathy catches up with me on the way home from school and asks if I'll walk with her. I ask her where John is and she just shrugs. We cross the park and sit on a bench and smoke.

How come you're such a loner?

I don't know, I tell her. Maybe I'm comfortable with my own company. Or maybe I'm just a sad git.

Kathy laughs. Honesty gets you no sympathy, James. You're good

looking. All the girls say so. Are you scared of girls, James? Is that why you don't have a girlfriend?

I'm only scared of the girls I like.

What about me?

Right now I'm terrified.

Kathy laughs and leans closer and looks around the park. There's a dance on tonight at the Beach Pavilion. Some of us are meeting up first at the Bandstand to drink some beer. I want you to come.

What makes you think I'll fit in?

Kathy stands up and swings her back over her shoulder and suddenly she leans towards me, lets her hand rest on my neck. There's no-one around.

So?

So kiss me stupid.

John is screaming something but I won't open my eyes. I won't.

The others are already there when I come around the back of the old Bandstand. They are drinking in the dark and laughing. There is a single dim yellow neon streetlight by the path at the side of the Bandstand.

John claps me on the back. Good to see you, book man. Ready to come out of your bedroom and join the world then? Just teasing you. Really we're glad to see you. Got any cigarettes?

I pass my cigarettes around and open a can of beer and the others watch me as I drink.

Kathy holds a litre bottle of cider by the bottleneck and tips it shakily to her mouth and drinks and burps and laughs and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

The other kid Billy has cut himself shaving earlier and dabs his chin with a piece of tissue paper. Shirley Thompson is with him and she's pissed off about something but she's not saying what it is. I guess maybe she's mad at him or just because she's seventeen in a small town.

They talk about music, what records they'll ask for at the dance. They moan about the new chemistry teacher with his dandruff and bad body odour.

John flicks his cigarette away and it strikes something wet and hisses briefly. He pops open his last can of beer and drinks most of it in one go and leans against the Bandstand.

Kathy watches him.

Come on, he says. Let's go.

We walk onto the promenade, the wind blowing around us hard and rain hissing in the sand dunes and the sea beyond churning in the darkness.

Billy throws an empty can towards the beach and the wind snatches it and spits it back at him and he ducks. Christ! he yells. A real storm tonight!

Shirley falls back to tie a bootlace and drinks from a half bottle of vodka and staggers after us. As I look back at her Kathy comes alongside and bumps into me and puts her arm around my waist to steady herself.

Sorry, she says and smiles.

Billy sees it but looks away and lights a cigarette.

John has found a length of oily orange rope lying on the promenade and picks it up and swings it around and whoops and hollers. He grins

at Kathy but she gives him a cool look.

Come on! John shouts and begins to run and we go after him, along the promenade, strung out one after the other in the wind and rain. As we reach the pier, instead of crossing the car park to the Beach Pavilion John jumps onto a bench and then climbs onto the pier wall.

I slow down and the others bunch up behind me and Kathy has her hands in my back, laughing sweetly in my ear.

Go on, she says and pushes me.

I climb up onto the pier wall while the others shout and laugh. The wind swirls and snaps and sea spray streams from the tops of big waves. The sea is wild and angry.

John looks back and grins as I catch up with him. He leans into the wind with his arms raised. I reach out for the trailing end of the rope. I can't quite get the right grip on it. I can't quite hold on. Then I get it and wrap it around my hand and we're pulling on either end of the rope, facing one another.

Someone is screaming. Someone is shouting.

I open my eyes.

John turns in the water and sees something massive rise out of the dark. A monster of wind and water.

James let go! Let go.

The pain is everywhere. In my chest and arms and head. It's unforgiving and unbearable.

John just stares at the big wave coming in.

Don't let go! others come back with help!

John twists around. He looks up at the pier and shakes his head.

I let go of the steel rod and grip the rope with both hands. My feet dance and slide on the ragged edge of concrete. It's like we're dangling over the edge of the world.

The wave rises out of the heaving mass of water, thundering, and sea spray streams from the dark blade edge top of it. A darkness on the move.

Pull. Please. God. Pull.

John is saying something. Not your fault. Let go. Look at me. I'm not scared.

He isn't too. There isn't anything I can see, nothing in his white face. He lets go of the rope.

I fall into a cave of churning water and a force elemental spins me backwards like a child's doll. Over and over. Then I spill suddenly out of the cave onto the concrete walkway of pier. Black foaming water surges over me across the pier, down into the sea on the other side.

I turn over onto my belly and water surges around me and water runs from my clothes and from my mouth.

I rise up and I can see figures moving with torches. The night storm flexes and flares. The figures come to the tear, where the ugly tooth shaped pattern of the broken pier wall lets the sea thunder through. Torchlight touches briefly Kathy's appalled face and she steps back.

They tell me to hold on. Hold on.

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