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Underwood

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The squabbling crows screamed and bickered from the tall pines outside the window of the old log cabin. Every sunrise, they started the day with the same squawking argument. Knowing there wouldn't be a resolution without a mediator, I decided to try and break it up. I picked up my now cold mug of black coffee, switched off the gaslight, and stepped out into the gray morning.

Noticing my entrance into the conversation and having no interest in my particular point of view, the pair of birds heaved themselves into the air with great black wings. They flew eastward over the channel, moving like a living shadow of the other. I walked to the edge of the water to see off the feathered belligerents. In the distance, the drone of a fog horn reverberated off the hills. The sound grew and crescendoed into a blast that could have felled the walls of Jericho. I sat on the rocky shore sipping my dark brew. The blanket of mist that hung over the old forest lifted itself up into the sky and became the clouds.

The far-off object on the horizon was just a black dot at my periphery as I sat and watched the clear Lake Huron water lap at the shore. The achingly cold water washed over the glacially tumbled granite and puddingstone, wetting the night's deposit of driftwood and flotsam.

The sky loomed.

A tanker slowly making its way along the horizon pulled my gaze in your direction. I watched the water lap at the shore, the wake from the great ship arriving with a little more gusto than the rest of its cohort. My eye drifted back to the ship again, and then up to the lighthouse on the horizon. The lighthouse had been draped in mist for days, but today I could make out the outline. I reached for my Bushnells to get a better look. Its tower of white blocks and red glass stood tall on the horizon. I scanned southward and caught the day-glo orange buoy rocking back and forth.

And then I saw you.

From my vantage, you appeared to be adjacent to the buoy. So small that you must have been quite a ways from it. You were so far off I couldn't make out your details. A seagull? A fishing boat? A distant iron tanker? For a solid minute, I tried steadying my view until finally resting my arms on the back of the bench to get you into focus.

And there you were.

Your tiny little dot of a head balanced on your shoulders, and the way it jerked asunder gave you away as human. Then I saw your arms waving frantically through the air. My heart fell into the pit of my stomach.

I searched the horizon for more signs of life – anything that could promise refuge. There was nothing. No one watching over you to make sure you were safe. No one to reach down and scoop you up into a boat where you could sigh and dry in the sun.

I looked away.

I began running as fast as I could toward the dock. The closest phone would be in town, but if I could just get to the boat, maybe... And then, as suddenly as I started running, I stopped and felt the life drain from my shoulders. I couldn't bear the thought. The sheer distance between us became the weight of our fateful situation. I was too far away to get to you in time. From my little scrap of land, the dock was a ten-minute run. Then to get the boat out of the bay. Then maybe another thirty minutes to the beach where I assumed you were. And that was on a good day. Today was not a good day. How could I even find you through the rough and chopping water? We could never meet.

I'd been to that beach many times before and had felt the tide tugging me away. The natural shape of the bay funnels the water around and out to the lake at incredible speed. The water is mostly safe, but in the middle of the narrow bay, the rip current can pull even the most experienced lake-goer hundreds of yards out into the deep. With the water so cold, a lone swimmer could get into trouble with ease. Maybe you were a tourist and didn't heed the warnings on the posts. Maybe your mother thought you were a strong swimmer and didn't watch you closely. I reached for my Bushnells to see if I could find you again. I figured that if you were all alone, at the least, I owed you my attention. I'd spend those last few moments with you.

I looked along the horizon. Lighthouse...buoy...you. You? You weren't there. I looked for five minutes. Back and forth across and down. Where did you go? Maybe you had floated further north and back around the bay. Maybe, you didn't.

I started walking toward the dock. I didn't see any need to rush. By the time I got to where I last saw you, there would be a search and rescue boat with you sitting on the deck, shivering and gasping for air, your shoulders wrapped tightly in a brightly colored towel. Or maybe I was too late. Either way, rushing would be futile. As I walked the wooded path, my feet fell onto the soft mossy ground, and I could smell the spruce and balsam in the air.

The boat rocked in the waves and softly bounced against the dock. I released the lines and pushed off, firing up the outboard and heading toward the spot on the horizon that had been you. As I sped along the shoreline, I kept searching for you with the binoculars, hoping I'd been mistaken and you were now safe and sound.

(right) *Sunset Boat Waves*. Samantha L. Egbert

Cunningham: Underwood

When I reached the little bay across the channel, there was no one in sight. Typically, early in the day, tourists weren't up and about, today appeared to be no exception. I scanned the beach and saw something piled above the tideline. I pulled in closer, threw the anchor, and waded to shore.

There in the sand sat the last vestiges of you. A faded blue beach towel and a pair of old leather sandals. I couldn't make out from the size of the sandal whether you were 16 or 60, a grandmother or a grandson. From the fraying edges of your towel, I could see that you had spent many a day beachside. I stared at your shoes for a while.

I walked the 20 yards or so to the path that led to the parking lot. At its starboard side, a tall wooden pole stood guard over the lonely beach. At the foot of the denuded pole, facedown in the sand, lay a sign. I flipped it over and read the red capital letters.

WARNING!
RIP CURRENTS
YOU COULD BE
SWEPT OUT
AND DROWN.

