

"Drift"

By
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Ultraviolet radiation bathed a bearded gentleman's upper back. Haggard and unconditioned frizz pointed out days of hygienic deficiency. His crouched position on the floating metal was reminiscent of *The Thinker*, but there was no poetry to contemplate. He was yearning to see terrain and society once more. He recalled childhood memories... careless moments of appreciating the outdoors without the consequences of the real world. It wasn't this scorching hot when he was younger. Now, this hunched adult cooked his skin to a meat red, damning that he ditched his cramping suit and tie long ago.

The buoyant alloy mass conducted thermal energy efficiently. The shiny hull dipped every few minutes with a rogue wave, concentrating the light's cruelty further. At least the man wasn't treading water.

A speck inched nearer to the white floating object and its tanning man. This spot on the horizon was unnoticed.

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Graham thought he knew the ocean. He was bred with the love of marine life and seamanship. Once on a guided aquarium tour, he was educated on the means of surviving the limitless ocean perils by way of reducing exposure and, of course, a positive attitude. He huffed. His arms

were burning from the sun and lactic acid. He was more brains than brawn now—years of lethargy to aid the cause. If the pace was steady, he would reach the target by high noon.

There was opened packaging in neat little stacks crammed into the edges of the life raft, out of the way. Tired, paddling arms were encrusting with the ionic compounds that comprised the great omnipresent solution. The issue at hand was not food, but whether to use the towel now, or save it for an emergency.

What was the need to link up with this other derelict? He had everything he wanted here, and all to himself. He knew where the raft would end up soon. *How big was the Indian Ocean to that of the others?* The fuzzy man was now clearly in sight. His back was turned.

Mr. Sunburn should have heard me by now. The indifference of the figure (on what looked like a gray wing) puzzled Graham. He offered a yell. A slow, simple hand raise was the only response from the dark-haired, brawny figure. Not even a turning of the head in acknowledgement. Minutes later, the floating masses collided.

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The seaplane settled into the water. The shoreline was tranquil, brilliant and sandy. A figure emerged from the

aircraft's bosom and eased his legs into the clear bay. The black luggage held high, he arrived onto the beach with little wake. The briefcase holder embarked moments later, carefree.

The assassin's makeshift plan was brutal and effective. The killer would be far from the accident, and the plane would never be found.

The passenger a few meters from the cockpit, however, was unaware of the timed poison drugging. Fortunately for him, it would be two more long hours until the pilot's last gasp. The stowaway would survive because the pontoon he clenched would break off at the proper low altitude to leave him in one piece.

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Between large heaves, Graham critiqued the wordless creature: "You know, you could have made your way towards my raft... saved my energy."

The criticism activated the mute. He turned to greet his new traveling companion, and within seconds, he recognized a classmate. A thousand or more synapses summoned Graham Marcus—attitudes and instincts...what he liked...who he banged or at least tried to bang. *Was Graham was the kind of person to recognize a nobody after decades of disregard?* That was important. Jim Luis Garcia Panza played dumb.

A quiet cough was the initial auditory exchange. Then: "Bem vindo".

Hesitation came, then:

"...Oh, I should have known," under his breath.

Graham boiled underneath with the thoughts of a thieving Latino scoundrel that would more than likely swipe his stash.

Before Graham spoke again, he realized the man wasn't very brown-toned. He had more of a white outline of dress slacks along his lower body. *Spanish, maybe?* Graham scratched waiting on an emergency, and wiped his arms with the towel. They shook hands.

"How did you get here," he pointed at the debris.

A restrained look appeared on Jim's face, but it resembled confusion to the American. *There was no reason he should know.*

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No fishes surfaced at all. Occasionally there was a splash, but nothing decisive enough for proof of life. A floating coconut was the first hint the void was alive. Graham wouldn't have plucked it out of the ocean so quickly if he knew the succulent fish below was using the husk as shade and a source of plankton.

The jack dove and disappeared. Marcus wasn't worthless, though. He knew what a particular coconut meant to a soldier during the Pacific Campaign, for instance. His arm was wet again.

"Can you swim well?"

The man waited for a response, then demonstrated the freestyle swimming stroke.

"¿Pode você nadar?"

Jim stayed on his wet spot on the flotsam.

"Do you know who JFK was? John F. Kennedy?" Graham tried to connect.

"In World War II in the Pacific Ocean, he used a coconut," he pointed, "to send a message to the Navy. People on the island could easily take something like this across enemy lines.

"One little piece of survival information that stays with me."

There was something fitting about the silence thereafter.

Graham elaborated by carving "S-O-S" into the nut with some hard pointed plastic. He presented his signaling device to his co-captain. Then, a muted sigh.

Jim could read Graham Marcus' future well: This man was on the brink of meltdown. It was a common analysis and a well-known sub-emotion: trepidation. If

it wasn't dealt with, it could become a vicious scene.

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It was an unavoidable situation to Jim. Forces cried out. He had to tell. He had to do it wisely.

"I'm sorry. I have kept something from you," Jim now used his scraggly normal intonation. It was quick-breathed. *That accent was familiar.* Graham was overtaken by the breaking of the language barrier. He listened.

"I know you from Lakeland. Graham's lips held back. He remained attentive.

"We went to school together." Graham stood up. "Well... I do know someone in this hemisphere. I guess that's reassuring." There was a pause again, but eye contact and facial acceptance spoke of history.

"I was too stressed to see it, I suppose." He lied. Graham had lost his edge.

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"I have to ask," Jim said. "How did you get here?"

Graham responded to the inquiry slowly: "I am a scientist. I was here, I mean... on India soil doing geological work. But that's not important. What I do know is we will probably see Africa in a few days. The currents will make sure of

that." He decided not to delve into common grounds and memorable incidents.

"Why are you here? You're not hurt, so that must mean you caught a break."

"I am a doctor," Jim confessed. "I was flying west from Australia for supplies when the plane went down. I couldn't get to the controls—I went into the water early." An authentic scenario. Graham sighed, "Why the Spanish?"

"Portuguese," Jim corrected. "I was raised in Brazil. I apologize for using it when I knew you, but I didn't know *who* you were anymore.

"Sorry I didn't know you better from school," Graham Marcus lamented as he stared at the water-colors.

Jim retook the pose of deep thought. Graham sat down and exhaled. He stared down into the still water and looked up at the setting sun. Jim gazed downward.

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His loyal pistol was long gone. Miles down on the sea floor, dense mixtures would destroy the metals, if it wasn't buried in sand or silt. Microbes might devour the feast of fingerprint residue, too. What a fantastic evidence destroyer! The righteous weapon was now one with the depths.

Control is an easy thing with a loaded weapon. Name and status are insignificant when a barrel is at the ear. An outcast

that fails at everything can *be* everything with little investment and a clean background. No training, no instruction on weaponry or control. Even the toughest skin can't stop a bullet from a coward. This is the keystone of civilization. Would humanity have progressed without the unfair advantage?

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"Yearbook pictures never do the Honeys justice. It's the whole body, you know. The curves, the clothing and the walk. That's what my mind sees, what it wants."

"Raquel Hoffman," came silkily from Jim's lips.

"Oh, yeah. Good taste!

...are you married?"

Jim shook his head.

"Well go find her or Beth Ann and a priest!" Graham chuckled and Jim held back a smirk.

"Well, *I'm* not married," Graham added. "I hate wearing rings. I'm so paranoid about them being stuck. I freak out if it won't get past my knuckles. I guess that equates to my dread of marriage: I wouldn't want to lose a finger."

"You lose something worse than a finger, my friend," a subdued grin appeared.

Graham now had a picture of Jim from the past in his head. The kid never laughed.

Never in class and never at lunch. He drifted a lot. *Not a fighter.*

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Imagine one of those reserved, long-sleeved kids who avoids attention. In school, not even chess club could conceal him enough to fit his drab outfits and quiet pondering. When he walks through a public place, like an airport, he hides the cover of a book he loves. Love was anonymity. Ideas of fame that the regular boy relished weren't there. He would learn to regret it in adulthood, where customs demanded open and explicit men. The skill of changing would come, but arrive too late for the normal kind of life.

There was a perfect calling, he realized, as time went on. No attachment and no regret. Holy spirits and foreign currency were his only traveling companions. It was a cruel job for a cruel world.

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Drowning a body wasn't that simple in open water: No leverage. A bathtub is superior. In a bath, a murderer can stand atop their waterlogged prey and apply body weight and time.

The confrontation in his head was violent. A full-scale war for raft supremacy. It was going to be wicked. Barbaric. Battle plans were now afloat.

"Did you know your father?"
"I didn't have one," Graham
replied.

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He wasn't more than 16, but he was a man. Someone who had felt the grit of dirt and the touch of a woman. Someone who had been through death first-hand. Hands that might have slain a beast or even another kid. In a few summers, if he hadn't already, he would be fathering a child.

And, I know what he's thinking: escape. So, I position two barrels toward his back: one at his cerebellum and one just above the left kidney. I can't do it here, so I nudge him to start walking. He looks confident, and this scares me. I can't chase them down like in my athletic days, and can't tag them like I used to.

He starts to hum, and it's an optimistic melody. He has something to live for, otherwise this would be over already. Maybe he's thinking too much or covering up fear. Stop. I need to focus on my reactions. Think about learning the ways. The methods haven't failed you. Stick to them.

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Graham opened his salted eyes. He saw the postcard Sun and felt the warm greeting written by low clouds. It wasn't the

light that brought him out of slumber, but the acoustical difference of his vessel. The metal was missing. Jim was gone.

The sky's edge gave no leads as to where and why. All he could remember was *when*. Several hours earlier in the morning, a minor creaking was the only evidence there was to this mysterious shove-off. It would have fully awakened any other untired marooner.

Marcus' neck was sore. He examined his ribcage and tested the pain receptors with his middle finger. The quarrel didn't go as planned. A truce.

For some reason, Graham cared greatly of his absent partner. That talk of youth was getting to him. Now there was nothing to do but dream of landfall.

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Graham was too experienced to resort to fisticuffs in his profession. Weapons were much cleaner and didn't leave a drop of sweat for forensic teams to study.

He damned Jim for not leaving him be. They could have both lived. He thought about the choice of fleeing on the plane. It would have never turned out this way if he stayed on the island.

Panza was hidden overboard under the vessel, with just the right angle to let his nostrils inhale the sea air. The morning glare had hidden him, as planned. He was going to take the raft. Graham had to go: He was designed to murder.

Graham's sixth sense was still sharp from last night's adrenaline surge, and he became aware the oncoming assaulter a split second before the wave of water splashed his stomach. Jim still had the advantage, and speared his opponent into the corner. His fists tried for a knockout. He didn't stop even when the dull blade appeared. When he saw blood, he knew that was enough.

"You're not a scientist."

"I know."

"Did you kill everyone on your plane?"

"No. Someone else did before I could get to the controls," Graham replied. "And all I could grab was this," he gestured toward the raft.

"Do you have any family," Graham asked, panting quietly.

"Not anymore."

"Me neither."

They never affected him the first few times. He had to be broken in to alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and even tobacco. His

pocketbook stayed fat: drugs weren't his fix. When you're paid millions to "smooth traffic" like he was, you shouldn't dip into the company well.

Killing a defenseless person, now that was a potent rush after the initial hit. They were *never* innocent. Usually very bad people. That breathing room of justification made homicide easy to swallow.

Don't get attached—don't stare into their fearful eyes. If you look too long, you're not going to be able to kill them. Just blast the other one kneeling right beside. Same effect.

A trick to shooting a person in the head was to glance, not stare, at the victim. Just enough to be accurate. It was simple if you knew how, and Graham learned from the best.

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Blood issued from the wound in breaths. Watching someone die is incredible. Human bodies are so biologically attuned that the lungs, heart and senses stay there to the end. The human body is even able to bleed, breathe and cry simultaneously. And this is what Graham did.

The last few breaths attempted a word, but only a wild animal yelping emerged from the panting and tearful grimace.

With Madagascar on the horizon, the raft began to sink. No longer seaworthy after the final struggle, it was part of countless tons of sea trash from a myriad of nations, developed and emerging countries alike.

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