

S C U B A  
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Thirty stories up, sitting next to a wall-sized window staring out at the dirty Chicago rain, Jack sat at a long table with tense men and women who listened to each other with the intensity of sharks smelling blood. The rain, the murky air . . . it reminded Jack of the ocean at 85 fathoms; dark, grey, barren. The animal life imitating plant life. Jack stared out the window and tried to pretend he wasn't in a three piece Italian wool suit that made him chafe and itch.

"Jack," a voice said.

He blinked, and turned toward the people in the room. Everyone was staring at him. "Yes?" he said.

A few muttered in disgust, the rest looked bored. There were business suits, long and short hair; blond, brown, black; some faces had glasses, others had carefully trimmed beards and mustaches. Eyes darted, roamed, stared un-focused. The man conducting the meeting had gone prematurely gray, had sharp blue eyes, glasses, sharp nose and chin. Wrinkles were beginning to form along his hollow cheeks. "Your department's phone bill," he said to Jack.

"What about it?"

"You haven't been listening. I would appreciate it if you'd pay attention here."

"Sorry," Jack muttered. "I've been working late."

"Working late? On what?"

Jack didn't have an answer. It had been a spontaneous lie, he had nothing to back it up. Long, silent seconds proclaimed his guilt.

Neil Cromwell smiled. "Go get some coffee and when you're awake I'll talk to you in my office. You've got . . ." he glanced at his watch ". . . twenty-five minutes."

Jack felt his cheeks burning. It was like being sent out of class for being a bad boy. "I'll be okay," he said. "What were you asking me?"

"No. I'll talk to you later. Go on, you're dismissed."

Jack got up and walked around the table, ignoring the looks he was being given. Pushing the door open, passing through, letting it close itself behind him.

#

He stopped at the coffee machine and noticed the new girl, the blonde, and realized she was smiling at him. What was her name? Christie? Looked like a soap-opera princess, all T&A plus make-up and mousse. "Pour you some coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you." He took one of the company cups, held it out as she poured.

"You need this stuff really bad?"

"It shows, doesn't it."

"A little." She smiled again, all her pearly whites shining up at him. This baffled Jack. If she wanted to make it by seducing key executives, she was picking the wrong guy.

"My wife usually makes me a pot before I leave," he told her, making an emphasis on the word "wife." "I have a little thermos and I finish it during the commute downtown."

"Really, you shouldn't depend on coffee so much as a stimulant," she said. "What you need is vitamin B-12."

"Yeah, I remember B-12. I used to take a lot of vitamins when I was diving."

"Diving?"

"I used to be a diving instructor. Scuba diving."

"Oh?" She seemed very interested. "How did you get from there to here?"

Jack grimaced. "It's a long story," he said, and turned to leave.

"There's no short version?" she asked, following him.

"Well . . . DGD Corp bought my father's family business, and I came with the deal."

"They bought your diving school?"

"Oh, no, it was the Harvest division, my father's company. They wanted him to keep running it, but he was too ill by that time. I was signed in his place."

"So you've got a contract with the company?"

"Yes."

"So they can't fire you, can they?"

"Not for a few more years, at least. When the contract expires." He stopped and looked at her suspiciously. "Why would they fire me?"

"No reason I can think of." She winked at him, then walked off toward whatever mysterious position she'd been hired for.

#

He passed through the commons, which was filled with people in their cubicles, and entered his office. His position rated a office and a receptionist, but they'd laid his receptionist off. He now shared a secretary with 5 other men in the sales department, and all she did was litter his desk with "While You Were Out" memos. He sifted through them, sending the majority fluttering into the waste basket. Bill collectors, people wanting money. They called all day.

Jack closed his office door behind him, sat in solitude at his desk with his coffee. He was going to have to start seeing the psychologist again, he could feel the panic coming on. Deep breathing and meditation weren't enough anymore; he was out of control. The sensations of sinking and drowning were coming back.

He sat and stared out the window, fighting it.

It was ghosts, he knew. Real ghosts. Ghosts were the cause of his problems.

Jack knew there was such a thing as ghosts. He could prove it, he had physical evidence in his wallet. The money in his wallet, the money he and his wife spent on groceries, it was ghost money. It was money that wasn't really there.

His wife Peggy, Miss Cameron Cove of 1992, didn't understand. She saw money in the account, she saw a deposit that was his paycheck, and she thought they had money and so she would spend it. She couldn't understand that it was money that was already spent, already gone. She spent more. He spent more, because he had no choice; they must continue living. Now checks were bouncing, bills were going unpaid for months, and still he kept slipping behind. It was out of control.

Yesterday a nice young woman came into his office and asked if he were Jack Buchman. He admitted he was --- he felt no reason to hide anything from her, he took her to be one of his wife's friends --- and the woman handed him an envelope and rushed out of his office as if it were about to explode. It was a summons, he was being sued. His car payments were behind and the finance company had lost its patience. It would probably be repossessed any day now.

Jack had an attack right after the woman had left. He felt he

couldn't breathe, like he was literally drowning. He came to his senses sometime later, found himself on the floor behind his desk. He had passed out.

It was \$60 to see the psychologist. Cash, up front. His psychologist knew why Jack was having problems and didn't intend on become one of them (he said). Jack figured he could be telling the truth, but really he believed that the \$60 was more important to the psychologist than Jack's mental stability.

#

Outside his office window it was as murky as Cameron Reef. Dirty rain poured down on gray concrete leaving gray streaks on windows, dissolved traces of the building itself. The rain ate away at the stone, at the pavement; it ate away at Jack's car, seven months old and already the paint was faded, oxidized from the acid in the air. Jack stared at the rain, but in his mind he was seeing Cameron Reef at 85 fathoms, the deepest dive he'd ever made. At 85 fathoms the ocean was black, the water cold and murky with plankton and dead matter that drifted down from the surface to the cold, motionless bottom. The bottom was gray, soft mud lumped together in shapes from the subconscious mind --- it looked like the place your soul goes to when it dies, the soul resting like a lump of mud next to the other lumps of mud, dead, featureless, undisturbed for millennia.

It was during that dive that Jack had an attack of nitrogen narcosis, almost killing him. He hadn't gone diving since. He had fully intended on going back down --- nothing in his mind was telling him to give up diving --- but this was when his father sold the company due to illness and had sent for Jack to help. Now he was here in Chicago, trapped, instead of going back and challenging the reef. Jack sipped his coffee, staring out the window. He preferred the reef, narcosis and all; narcosis was, at least, an enemy that could be anticipated.

#

Jack's boss, Neil Cromwell, was a giant in his own mind. When he closed his eyes and pictured himself he saw this enormous, inflated figure, like a parade float, sitting in a giant chair at a fifty-foot desk while everyone else in his sight went about their jobs at his feet. They were tiny, fragile little people who all scurried about carrying out his will.

When Neil pictured Jack Buchman in his mind, he saw an anomaly, a misshapen cancerous figure that didn't belong, bigger than the others but still dwarfed by himself, a flaw in the perfection of his world. Jack knocked on Neil's door and let himself into Neil's office, and Neil stared at him the same way he'd stare at the one last remaining piece of a puzzle that would not fit into its hole. "You're fifteen minutes late," he snapped at Jack.

"I'm sorry." Jack looked pre-occupied. He looked sick, there was no color in his face.

"You know, Jack, you're just not cut out for this job. There's no reason in the world that you have to stick with it."

"I have a contract that says I have to stick with it."

Neil sighed. "I'm more than willing to let you out of the contract."

"I thought I came here to get my ass chewed about a phone bill."

"You're here to get your ass chewed for being a fool. You're

not doing yourself any good by staying in this position, you're not doing your division any good, and you're in my way."

"Oh, power games."

"I've got ways of getting you out of here, Jack. I can play hardball." He stared at Jack intensely, trying to sear him with his eyes. His stare did not have the desired effect.

"If you got ways, go ahead and use them," Jack said. "I can't sell my father's stock, and that's it." He shrugged, and was silent for a moment. "You want to know the truth? I want out as much as you want me out, but I'm trapped. My father was a very dominant man, worse than you. I was always fighting to live my own life, but somehow I always ended up living for him. He's had absolute power over me all my life, and when he started getting sick and decided to sell out I thought, this is it, this is my chance to get out of the way. I was in college studying to be a marine biologist. But he put me in his place in the contract. When he was on his deathbed I thought, finally I will be free of him. I was glad he was dying, it was time for him to die. I thought it was proper of him to refuse to go to the hospital. But on his deathbed he tells me, 'Watch over the company,' he says, 'It's part of me, it's been my life. As long as the company is alive, I'll be alive.' Then he died. Any other person who dies, dies. But not him. He's still here. He is this division of DGD, he is Harvest. He still has absolute power over my life. Still."

"You're talking nonsense."

"He's here. His ghost is here."

"Ghosts." Neil half-chuckled. "You've got more to worry about than ghosts."

"I can prove to you that ghosts exist."

"Get out of my office," Neil said, suddenly irritable. "Go on, get out of here." In his mind he saw himself pushing this little misshapen out of his immediate area, out into the broader range of his sphere of influence. With Jack out of his office, he picked up the phone and dialed his new employee. In his mind he saw his enormous inflated hand nudging a figure with exaggerated breasts, setting it into action. It made its way though his sphere of influence to carry out his will.

#

Jack spent the rest of the day falsifying receipts to turn in for an expense reimbursement. The woman he turned it in to looked at it skeptically but made no comment. He ducked out of the office a half-hour early and headed for his car, only to find that another car had wrecked into it. He stopped and stood motionless in the acid rain, unbelieving. He would not have been surprised to find the car missing, taken by the repo men --- but to find it sitting there with a giant dent in the driver's side door was a shock. The car that had hit his was still there, its driver waiting.

She saw him and got out of her car to talk. It was the new girl, Christie. She was crying. "I'm sorry. Mine's a rental, it came with insurance. I'll make sure yours is fixed."

"The whole side of my car is bashed-in."

"I know, I'm sorry. This rain, it made the road slick, and the front wheels slid. I'm sorry." She walked up and grabbed his hands, holding them. She stared into his eyes, her expression asking for forgiveness. She was so earnest that he suddenly felt bad for her.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"I'm really shaken up." He could feel her tremble, it wasn't

a lie. "I really need a drink," she said. "Let me buy you a drink. Don't say no."

Jack helped her push her car into a parking place near his and then walked with her to a bar at the top of the Hilton building a few blocks away. By the time they were seated both were soaking wet with the rain. To Jack it felt like salt water. It was heavy, thick, and stayed cold. He ordered double martinis for both of them and wondered how he was going to explain this to his wife.

"This is so nice of you," Christie was telling him. "I hope you're not mad at me."

"No, I'm not mad." Truth was he wasn't; the shock of the situation had knocked him out of his rut. Not only was she paying for the drinks, there was a good chance her insurance company might pay off the car.

Christie's hair hung in wet, blond spikes down over her face. Her mascara had run just a little, and somehow it was sexy, intimate. Jack didn't want her to fix it. He only half-listened as she explained over and over again about the rental car, and how she had wrecked. He felt light, relaxed. They ordered drinks again, and then again.

At some hazy point Jack noticed a change. Christie had started picking invisible flecks of lint off his suit, and he had been compelled to compliment her on her ear rings, and then the color of her eyes. They had admitted to each other verbally and openly that they were getting along quite well. Jack knew these were the warning signs, but he was ignoring them. He was quite conscious of himself ignoring them, but he couldn't bring himself to care. It's like nitrogen narcosis, he thought. Drunk on air, oblivious to immediate danger. He put his fourth martini glass down, empty, and thought he'd had enough. I should be leaving, he thought. I should go call my wife. Instead he sat there, letting it continue.

They were facing each other on the bar stools. Their legs were touching. She leaned forward and kissed him. "We have a lot in common," she said. "We both want to be somewhere else."

Jack thought, In bed?

"You want to be diving again, and I always wanted to act. You know, this is neat. I feel like I've known you for a long time."

"Same here," Jack said. "I feel it too." He did, vaguely. He didn't know if he felt that way simply because she suggested it, but it was there.

"I spent several years in Hollywood, you know, trying to be 'discovered.' I got a few jobs doing commercials, nothing much."

The bar tender wanted to know if they wanted more. Christie ordered refills without asking Jack. Jack thought, what the hell, one more is okay. "You ever been married?"

"Yes. I married a born-again Christian. That was a long time ago, I was too young to get married."

Jack waited for her to ask about his marriage. She didn't. "Any children?" he asked.

"No. When I was married I got pregnant. I couldn't handle it, I freaked out. I had too many plans, too much to do, you know? That's when I left him. I left him, got an abortion, moved out to Hollywood. When the divorce went through I didn't even get alimony . . . but I left him, he didn't leave me. I didn't care, really, I was just glad to get out of it."

"And Hollywood didn't work out."

"It could have. I enjoyed it when I did work. But I had to support myself so I got this job, and the job took over my life. Had to be upwardly mobile, you see. Now here I am in Chicago. I guess the next step is New York."

"Ever act locally?"

"I don't have the time, anymore. Maybe after this job I'll be able to save up enough . . ." She shrugged, finished her drink. "I'll be right back," she said, standing up. "I've got to find the little girl's room." She walked off, her hips swaying back and forth, back and forth.

"I've got to get out of here," Jack mumbled to himself. He looked at his watch. It was almost 9 o'clock, he should have called his wife. She was going to be worried. Jack started to get off the barstool but stopped, hanging on the edge. He pulled himself back up, settling back in. He couldn't call her. He had no idea of what to tell her.

This is bad, he thought. This is no longer innocent. I've got to go. Still, he didn't move. It felt safe, it felt like he'd escaped the pressures, that they couldn't find him where he was. Christie walked around the corner and right up to him, putting her arms around his neck and kissing him. When she pulled back she showed him something in her hand, a hotel key with a bright orange tag. She dangled it right in front of his face. Her eyes were bright, glassy things, full of joy. She was smiling so warmly. Jack slid off the bar stool and followed where she led.

#

The room was very nice. It was large, warm, and totally dark when the curtains were pulled. Despite being in a building with a population equaling that of most small mid-western towns, it was utterly silent.

They were naked on top of the covers, she was curled against him on the side opposite the door. Their hands still ran up and down each other's bodies, caressing warm skin and nerves still tingling. Warm air blew down from a vent in the ceiling, a breath of luxury.

"We ought to send up for champagne," she said. "I love champagne. I love expensive champagne. The more expensive it is, the more I love it."

"My father loved this really expensive champagne from France that came in a black bottle. He could only get it every other year, because it was a very small vineyard. Sometimes he'd have it flown over special order. I remember the last year he did that the bill was more than a vacation cruise."

"Your father was rich. Did you inherit it all?"

"No. I just inherited all his problems. Champagne and cigars were the only things he ever spent money on, other than his company. He was always pouring money back into it. Now all that money is shares of DGD stock."

"How did he die? In bed with a blond?" She nudged him.

Jack laughed. "No, it's funnier than that. He died of pneumonia because he didn't believe he was sick enough to go to a hospital." But that's not the truth, he thought. Dad knew he was going to die. I think he wanted to die. I think that after all those years he couldn't handle it anymore. He wanted out.

There was an odd scratching sound. A key in a lock. Before Jack could react the room door swung wide open and a man with an auto-advance camera and an electronic flash was taking seven pictures per second. Jack froze in shock. Christie reacted in a strange way; she climbed half over him with her body and posed in sexual positions.

The roll of film exposed, the man dashed out the door, slamming it behind him. Christie pushed herself off of Jack and slid into the darkness away from him. The room was again quiet,

and seemed even darker than before. Horrible, blotchy afterimages of the flash haunted Jack's eyes. The warm air blowing down on him now seemed like the sickly breath of a giant, inflated menace.

"I'm so sorry, Jack," Christie said in a small voice, lost in the dark. "I like you. I'm sorry this happened."

Jack said nothing. The pressure was returning, the air bubbling away. He felt it like a pressure on his face, like a diving mask being shoved into his cheeks and forehead by the overwhelming pressure.

"The job I took when I was in Hollywood was as a pornographic actress," Christie was saying. "I'm a very good actress, I could have made it, but I've never had the will power to stay on that great straight and narrow, you know? From there I began working conventions, I was a 'escort' girl. That was three to five hundred dollars a night, Jack. I couldn't turn that down, I was starving. Out here in Chicago I get more, much more. I'm a star here, Jack. Isn't that strange? I'm a star."

Jack was drowning. He was literally drowning. The air had turned to water, and it was in his throat.

"Don't hate me," Christie said.

Jack scrambled in a panic to the bathroom, bumping into walls and tripping. In the bathroom he closed the door and turned on the light. He stared at himself in the mirror; naked, beaded with water. His eyes bulged. He vomited salt water into the sink, vomited, vomited. It kept coming out, it seemed it would never end.

His career was dead, his car wrecked, his marriage stained. In all these years he had never cheated on his wife. He couldn't handle it. He couldn't believe he'd let himself do something like this.

Christie was knocking on the door. He could hear her muffled voice coming through. "Are you okay? Jack? Hello, Jack?"

He fell back against the wall, slid to the floor. His breath came in raw rasps. The room was rocking with the swells of the ocean. Clothes, he thought. Dress. He stood up, wavering, and opened the door, pushing past Christie without a word. She had turned on the lights and put on her clothes. He wandered frantically from place to place gathering his together and putting them on.

"You do hate me," she said. "Don't you."

"Did you wreck my car on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes, I do hate you."

She nodded, and turned and walked out of the room.

#

Jack reached his car and stopped, staring at the dent. It was large and horrible, made the car look like junk. The parking place beside his where he and Christie had pushed her car was empty. He stood there, staring.

The rain had stopped and now it was getting bitterly cold. I hate Chicago, he thought. We're moving back to Florida, goddamn it. I don't care how, we're just going to get in the car and go.

Jack had to get in on the passenger side because the driver's side door would not open. He was dizzy and light headed. It was hard to do anything because the ocean swells were throwing him off balance. The bulge on the inside of the driver's door elbowed him over; it was like trying to drive with a midget sitting to the left of him. The car started, thank god. He put it into gear and pulled out of the parking lot, on onto the street.

It was past 10:00 PM and the traffic was light. The expressway took him into the suburbs and within minutes he was home. What am I going to tell her? he thought. She's going to know. I didn't call, and I smell like sex. What am I going to tell her?

He pulled into the driveway and stopped, shutting off the engine. The ocean swells were bad here, large, as if blown by a storm. I ought to get away from the house and throw out a sea anchor, he thought. Jeeze, that's crazy, I'm in a car. I'm in a car. This is not a boat.

He sat there holding onto the steering wheel, and a large wave broke over the hood and washed over the windshield. Then the car tipped sickeningly and the water washed over the windshield again, but this time did not run off. Oh god, he thought. The car is sinking. I'm under water and the car is sinking. Oh god.

He tried the door handle but the door wouldn't budge. The pressure is holding it closed, he thought. The pressure's going to crush this car like an aluminum can. His shoes and legs felt wet, he looked down to see water rising from the floor boards. He tried the door again, but there was no way he was going to be able to open it. The window, he thought. Go through the window.

He turned the crank and water came streaming in, and the further the window went down the harder it pressed him into the seat. He was stomach down, holding his breath. The water poured over him. The car began to sink even faster. Jack could feel it in his guts, the feeling of falling, sinking. He hung on until the car was completely filled, then pulled himself through the window and swam up, fighting the suction of the sinking car. He could feel it dragging him down after it, but he fought, pulling himself up and to the side with sharp thrusts, and then he was rising.

The water around him was as black as outer space. His first thought was that he was deep, very deep, but then he remembered it was night time and that it would be black all the way up to the surface. I just have to keep my breath, he thought. Relax everything but my legs, and kick, kick, kick. Hold that breath. You can do it. You can hold it for a minute and a half. You can hold it longer if you have to.

Already his lungs were burning. It had been a long, long time since he'd last held his breath for a minute and a half. The water was cold, very cold. It was numbing his legs so that he couldn't tell if he were still kicking. He felt them with his hands to make sure.

His chest was beginning to spasm with the need to breathe. Don't panic, he thought. Panic and you drown. You'll drown 5 feet from the surface, you idiot. Keep swimming. Just keep going.

He broke surface just next to a capsized ship, a triangular wooden hull coated with barnacles and sea-growth. Storm waves were tossing the ship like a toy, the wind whipping water into a froth that flew into the air. His father was halfway up there, hanging on. Enraged, Jack crawled gasping up the barnacle-encrusted wood, his fingers digging in, wood under his fingernails. "You did it!" he yelled, gasping, at his father. "You did this!"

His father was old and weak. He began to slide off into the water.

"You did this on purpose! You want to die!"

His father moaned, still sliding.

"Don't you?"

His father was in the water now, sinking.

"Dad! Dad?"

There was the waves and the wind, and flashes of lightning.

"You're already gone!" Jack screamed. "You're a ghost,



goddamn it! A ghost! Why don't you stay dead!"

The storm wind howled and whistled, almost as if it were speaking.

"Jack?" a voice said.

"What?" Jack looked around, startled. It was his wife's voice.

"Jack? Jack?"

Jack looked down at his wife. Peggy was standing on the lawn, looking up at him. He was clinging to the mossy shingles of the roof, soaking wet and shivering from the cold.

"Jack, please come down." She was standing there in her nightgown and a robe, her arms folded across her chest against the cold. Her eyes were desperately worried, and she looked like she was fighting to remain calm.

"I'm . . . I'm not well, Peg."

"I know, sweetheart. It's okay. Please come down off the roof."

"I'm getting crazy again, it's worse than ever."

"It's okay, sweetheart. We'll work on it, just don't fall off the roof."

"I wrecked the car."

"I don't care. I want you safe in the house. When I get you safe in the house we'll talk."

"We're going in the morning, Peg," he said, edging toward the side of the house. "I don't care what it takes, we're going back to Florida. We're leaving."

"That's fine, that's wonderful. Please be careful."

"I'll go to the office tomorrow, straighten everything out, and then we'll leave." He had reached the edge, and was tentatively feeling for a place to put his foot on the fence. Peggy reached up and guided his foot to a secure foothold. "Let them repossess everything. We'll make a fresh start."

He made it down and she hugged him, then quickly led him inside. In the bedroom she helped him off with his sopping wet clothes. They smelt of sea water. She wrapped him in his long, thick terry cloth robe and gave him a hot brandy with honey and lemon. He sat on the bed with the television on, sipping on the brandy. "Thank you, honey. Thank you. I feel a lot better now."

The phone rang, and she went off in the next room to answer it. A moment later she came back in and turned the television volume down. "It's for you," she said. "It's Neil Cromwell."

Jack put the hot brandy down so he wouldn't spill it; his hands had started shaking. He swallowed, looking at their beside phone. You incredible bastard, he thought.

"Want me to tell him you're asleep?" Peggy asked.

"No," Jack said. He was afraid of what Cromwell might say to her if she got back on the phone with him. Jack reached out and picked up the receiver. "What?" he said.

"Hi Jack. How're you feeling?"

"What do you want?"

"I told you I had ways, Jack. The photographer was mine."

"I'm going to turn you into the police."

"You can't prove anything, and you're wife will still find out what happened."

Jack looked up at Peggy. She was staring at him. He could say nothing more to Cromwell, he could hardly breathe let alone talk. It was happening again.

"We'll talk about it in the morning, Jack," Cromwell said.

"Eight o'clock sharp, my office." The phone clicked, and the dial tone rang in his ear.

Jack dropped the phone and sprang out of bed toward the closet, sliding open the right-side door and dragging out his diving gear. Heavy metal bottles full of air clanged and clunked as he hastily made connections. His wife sat on the floor with him, holding him and rocking as he pulled desperate breaths from the regulator. He made more connections, opened valves, and handed one to her. She took it, put it to her mouth and breathed.

#

Neil Cromwell opened the envelope and spread the color 8 X 10's across his desk. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful woman. Jack Buchman looked like a child under her. His skin was so white in the glare of the flash pictures that he looked like a gawky little teenager who was raised underground by moles. Christie had phoned him last night when she got the room, and he'd sent the photographer right over. The photographer had developed the pictures immediately and delivered them this morning at sunrise.

In his mind Cromwell saw them scurrying about on the floor at his feet, little wind-up people, one with a camera and one with large breasts. They were pushing the anomalous, misshapen figure of Jack Buchman off of the playing board. Out of the game! he thought, and laughed.

He looked at his watch. It was 8:00 AM sharp. Any second now, he thought. Any second . . .

At 8:20 AM Cromwell was fuming. In his head he was kicking the misshapen balloon-like character of Jack Buchman around the room, bouncing him off walls and the furniture, but there wasn't a sharp enough object anywhere to rupture him . . .

Damn it, he thought. Where are you? He's doing this just to make me angry. He'll show up. He's not that big a fool.

At 8:40 AM Cromwell was getting depressed. He was concluding that Jack was not going to show up, and that he was going to have to go through with the ugly business of displaying copies of the photographs to Jack's wife. He was scooping the photos up and dismally putting them back in the manila envelope when he heard someone in the outer offices let out a sharp exclamation, and then laughter. The laughter grated on his nerves. He got up and went to the door, opening it. His receptionist was gone. Grim-faced and in an evil temper he tramped out into the common to find everybody in the office crowded around someone in a full frogman outfit. The frogman was walking slowly toward Cromwell's office, his every step making a flopping sound and his breathing amplified to where it sounded like a steam gate switching one way then another; keessshh-pooooo, keessshh-pooooo . . .

The frogman was Jack Buchman. Cromwell was dumbfounded. This is inexcusable, he thought. I must regain control of this situation.

"Okay everyone, Jack's little joke is funny but it's over now," Cromwell said. "I would like you all to get back to work, and you," he said to Jack, "I want you in my office right now!"

Jack plodded toward him, his enormous flippers making the most ridiculous noise. He entered Cromwell's office amid child-like giggles from the secretaries and sales people. Cromwell closed the door behind him, cutting off the sound. For a moment while he stood beside Jack in the silence he considered ripping the face mask off Jack's face. He finally decided he was above such petty gestures and, instead, walked over to his desk and sat down.

"I don't know what you have to gain from this, this . . . stunt."

Jack remained silent except for his amplified breathing.

Cromwell tried to stare him down, but he could only see his own face reflected in the glass of the mask. Bastard, he thought. You're trying to unnerve me. Well it isn't going to work. Cromwell took the envelope and dumped the pictures back onto the desk. The feeling of triumph he'd been expecting was not there. He forged on anyhow, saying, "Well, Jack, take a dive into these while you're standing there."

Jack made no move to look at the pictures.

"Look at them, Jack. What do you think?" Still no reply, no move to look at the photos. It doesn't matter, Cromwell thought, he knows what they show. "How long have you been married to, er . . . Peggy, isn't it? What will she think of these?"

Jack's amplified breathing echoed through the office. He made no reply, no gesture. The man has gone insane, Cromwell thought. He's lost touch with reality.

"Are you ready to sell your father's stock?"

Jack took several more breaths, then held one. He pulled the regulator out of his mouth, and said, "No." The word was followed by what Cromwell thought was smoke. "I'm not selling the stock, I'm leaving it where it is." Jack took another breath from the mouthpiece. "I'm here to tell you I'm leaving, which should make you happy."

"I don't care if you come or go, I want you to sell me that stock. If you don't, then these go to your wife. Period. Also, since it has come to this, I will set the price."

"Not selling." The smoke that came from his mouth was not smoke, it was streams of bubbles. They raced from his mouth to crowd together at the ceiling.

Cromwell stared, not understanding. He opened his mouth to speak, but choked on the words. Something was wrong.

"I'm leaving now," Jack said. He raised a few inches on his flippers, nudging himself upwards. He turned toward the door, fumbling with it to open it, then pulled himself through, swimming.

People in the outer offices gasped and dropped bundles of paper and cups full of coffee. Jack swam past them, kicking lightly with his fins. He made his way past the coffee machine, past the horrified figure of his shared secretary, and around the corner to a fire-escape window. He had trouble working the latch though his thick gloves, but he got it open.

Jack didn't look back. He swam through the window, out past the rusty iron fire escape, out into the wide area between the skyscrapers. He checked the gages on his right arm and began to rise slowly. Too fast and he would get the bends, too slow and he'd be out of air. I'll be okay, he thought. Don't panic and everything will be fine. He continued his slow ascent. He passed roof level of the building and beyond, peered down through the murk at the dirty roofs with their ventilation boxes and duct tubes, the TV antennas, the unlit neon signs. The image of the buildings faded as the pressure decreased, losing itself in the dark. Jack continued to rise. It felt good, he began to feel clear-headed.

This was a stupid risk, he thought. Stupid, stupid. Never go diving alone, never dive too deep without the right mixture.

Still upwards, rising slowly. The murk grew lighter, more blue. Then it was clear. Jack saw a shadow above him; he was almost to the surface. The shadow was the bottom of the boat. He broke surface right next to it, pulled off his mask and threw it up to his wife.

"You had me worried!" she said. "You were down a long time!"

"Had a bit of narcosis," he said. "I'm okay."

She reached out eagerly and helped pull him aboard, and while he was stripping off his gear she started the outboard engine and pointed the skiff back toward the island. His gear off, Jack reclined against the floatation pillows and basked in the warm tropical sunlight. Yes, he thought, it's good to be back home.

Behind them the bodies began bobbing up, one-by-one, from the drowned city below.

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