

13-3 /RFS

## Three Friends Meet

*DONALD PFARRER*

The Honorable Eric Michelsen, Democrat of Connecticut, poured wine for the couple who were to be his guests for the weekend. Then he poured himself a glass, looked at the man across the table and said: “You are aware, Dan, I presume, that your wife and I were once on intimate terms.”

“You mean lovers,” Dan Wheeler said as if correcting Eric Michelsen’s diction.

“I see, you prefer plain language. ‘Intimate terms’ is too evasive. But ‘lovers’ is a euphemism too. So I will simply say that Ronnie would spread her legs and I --”

“Eric!” Veronica Bard cried.

“Of course I know it,” Dan Wheeler said, in control of his voice if not the color of his face. “She has told me the whole story.”

“All of it? I don’t doubt she told you a fact here and there, but the ‘whole story’?”

“I am confident she told me everything essential, yes,” Dan Wheeler affirmed. “Ronnie is truthful with me, as I am with her. I’m surprised you would try to undermine our trust in one another.”

“I’m not, not at all,” Eric Michelsen said. “Trust — mutual trust— must be beautiful and reassuring”

Dan looked at Veronica and said: “I suggest we leave.”

“Wait,” she said and turned to Eric Michelsen, saying: “Eric, is this really necessary?”

“I think it is. We could have a pleasant weekend if we clear the air first. This is a special day, with the hurricane out at sea making such a hellish disturbance.”

“I think we should go,” Dan Wheeler repeated gently to Veronica.

Their bags lay unopened on the bed in the guest room.

“Please,” Eric Michelsen urged, “this is a rare chance to see a majestic surf, and a flying, horizontal rain, and to get blown off our feet unless we hang together. Listen to the rain beating on the windows. Listen to the surf! We can go out on the dunes and witness it all from a place of perfect safety. Please don’t talk of leaving.”

Dan Wheeler looked to his wife for a decision.

She spoke with sympathy, firmness. “Dan,” she said, “we are three friends. Let’s heal the wounds rather than tear them open. We came in friendship, and maybe Eric is right, that we must learn to accept what happened without regret.”

“I never said *without regret*,” Eric Michelsen observed, gazing directly at her.

“All right, all right,” Veronica said, “but surely the truth is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Dan Wheeler took her hand and said: “Are you ashamed, Ronnie?”

“No, why should I be? But I am surprised --” addressing Eric -- “that you would invite us up here and then speak so coarsely.” And turning again to her husband she said, “I hope you aren’t hurt.”

“I am not, but frankly, Eric, I don’t see the need for this. ‘Clear the air’ of what?”

“Well -- jealousy? Anger?”

“Maybe you’re angry but I am not. And how could I be jealous of a relationship that seemed to me at the time to be perfectly natural and happy? I did not love Ronnie then as I do now, and if she loved you, well, that’s happiness. Having experienced so little of it before I -- offered my love to Ronnie -- and she offered hers to me -- it would be strange if I should find anything to envy or resent in a relationship that made her happy before I -- You see my point.”

“What makes you think she was happy? Happy lovers do not dump their partners.”

“I didn’t dump you, Eric,” Veronica said in a voice that was urgent, almost frightened.

“Somehow I got that impression when you said No and walked out. But listen. Stay. It’d be a pity to miss the storm.”

“Well is it --” Veronica hesitated -- “are we really safe here?”

“Quite safe. This cottage survived the hurricanes of 1938 and 1955, and all the years since. It’s a sturdy little place built well above the highest tides -- whatever they call those --”

“Springtides,” Dan Wheeler supplied.

“And above the storm surge, so yes, the house is perfectly safe and tonight we’ll dine by candlelight if the power goes off, just the three of us in our snug little hideaway with the wind howling over us, drinking Alsatian wine and enjoying a meal that I had the foresight to cook this morning, in case of a blackout. And I have oil lamps so we can read in bed if we wish and yes, we are safe out on the dunes too.”

Dan Wheeler interjected: “By ‘read in bed’ -- what exactly do you have in mind? Because if you’re picturing some --”

“I simply mean you and Ronnie in your room and me in mine. But in the meantime --” he consulted his watch -- “the day is declining. Hmm, already past four. -- Listen to that!”

A great thud told the “whole story” of a wave braking vertically on the beach, dropping tons of water straight down in true Atlantic fashion and sending vibrations through the frame of the cottage.

They were on the Rhode Island coast in a place Eric Michelsen had inherited from his uncle only a year ago. The legacy came at an opportune time and was in fact a stimulus to a life-changing decision. Eric Michelsen decided, and duly announced to his constituency in Connecticut, that he would not seek re-election as its representative in the US House.

Veronica Bard announced: “I’m for a walk in the storm, but first, Eric, now that we’re face to face you’ve got to explain yourself. Can you really abandon a career you spent so many years creating? Surely you still care about — well, about the country.”

“Let me explain that at dinner,” he said, looking again at his watch.

“That’s my question too,” Dan Wheeler threw in. “You must have a plan.”

“I did, until two years ago.”

Glancing at Veronica Eric imagined he saw uneasiness, guilt. “Two years ago” could only refer to the time when she “dumped” him.

Dan Wheeler said, “Of course you’ll have a dozen good offers.”

“I’m not looking for a good offer. I’ve been thinking I’ll teach in a high school.”

“Never!” Dan Wheeler almost shouted. “After the power and glory of Washington, head waiters saying, ‘This way, Congressman, your table is ready,’ reserved parking at the airport and -- bury yourself in a high school teaching what?”

“Civics, or whatever they call it today. The arts and duties of citizenship. During my career in bombast I often said that the most vital person in a democracy is the high school civics teacher.”

“You are doing vital work in Congress as one of the few moderates left in this venomous age,” Dan argued.

“Right, but a moderate today is a homeless wanderer. You try to bridge the gulf but it’s too wide.”

“But teachers have to be certified by a mindless bureaucracy,” Dan Wheeler protested. “You’d waste years taking stupid courses in education technique or whatever. You should teach in a college.”

“Or a private school,” Veronica said.

“The need is in the public schools. If I teach, that’s where it’ll be.”

“God, he wants to be a foot soldier,” Dan exclaimed. “You were made to be a general, not a corporal. I have always respected you as one of the few in Congress who were doing the nation’s work — or or trying to — given the corruption of the system -- but all political systems are more or less --”

“Corrupt, yes.”

“In a broader sense, yes, but --”

“If it’s corrupt,” said Veronica Bard, “stay and fight it.”

“Which I have done for eighteen years, with a slip or two here and there. I was such a good fund-raiser, as you know, Ronnie -- and you, Dan,” he added, “that it does raise a question: If all those pressure groups and millionaires gave me money, maybe they thought they had bought their man. And maybe they were right.”

“Bullshit!” Veronica Bard exclaimed.

“Ah -- the lady hits upon the perfect word.”

“Ronnie should know,” Dan Wheeler said.

Veronica Bard had been Eric Michelsen’s chief of staff in Washington -- until two years ago.

“Anyway,” Michelsen continued, “why go to Congress if your main job is to raise money for your next campaign? Did that ever strike you, Dan?”

“That strikes everybody. But it’s a necessary evil — in the present system.”

“I would like to believe,” said Eric Michelsen, “that no evil is necessary. But that wasn’t my real reason, or only part of it.”

Veronica cast an apprehensive glance at Eric.

“My whole plan had been shattered,” said Eric. “I had hoped to stay in Congress and spend another decade working on one or two issues --”

“Which were?” Dan Wheeler cut in.

“It doesn’t matter. You think deeply on a problem, you see what must be done, that’s the critical thing. But from then on it’s all a campaign to enlist support, and utterly superficial. It’s tedious and it grinds you into dust, unless you’re a natural.”

“You are a natural,” Dan asserted.

“You mean a natural-born politician? Let’s hope not. I’m an introvert. Ask your wife.”

“Not an introvert, a thinker, a brooder,” Veronica said. “But Dan” --

And Eric observed that she never called her husband by pet names —

“Dan,” she said, “don’t push too hard. If he’s calling himself an introvert it means he wants to be one, at least temporarily.”

“He pushes too hard,” said Eric, “because that’s what journalists do. I lost my inspiration, and that’s all there is to it.”

“But why?” Dan Wheeler asked. “I’m genuinely interested, not as a journalist but as a friend.”

“Oh yes,” said Eric, “we’re friends, you and I.”

“We were until five minutes ago, or so I believed. Are you saying we are not?”

“Not at all. You, I and Ronnie are such good friends that I suggest we go out and face the storm together, witness nature’s rage from a safe perch on the dunes. Did you ever ask yourself why nature should be enraged? Eh? *Nature* is nothing but the name we give to the structure of the universe. Why should nature be enraged at itself? It sounds crazy.

“Anyway, let’s wash the cobwebs from our brains. The storm center is seventy-five or a hundred miles out to sea. We have nothing to fear unless it’s pure power that scares you. Like it



The dune that intervened was the dune he intended to climb this afternoon. He explained this to Ronnie and Dan, while they chose raincoats and hats from the jumble in the closet.

He was putting on his own raincoat when he saw that Veronica was standing like a doll while Dan Wheeler rolled up the sleeves of her slicker.

Staring at her -- unable to take his eyes off her -- Eric thought: "That was the idea, to get used to it, so get used to it."

Veronica straightened her sleeves, altering Dan's arrangement, then tied the strings on the broad-brimmed fisherman's hat Eric had given her. Seeing her face under that theatrical hat, with the bow tied under her chin, Eric received a sharper stab than he had expected. He turned away to absorb the shock.

When next he looked at Veronica she was looking at him from under the silly hat, and he was sure he was seeing -- love -- in her eyes -- and he felt the leap in his chest. "I'm sure of it!" he exclaimed silently, having forgotten the wretched misery of a few seconds ago. She could not look at him *that way* except in love. "Why did she marry this damned scribbler? She loves me!"

Then he opened the door. The wind tore it out of his grasp and sent it crashing against the wall of the house. He grabbed it and shouted:

"We'll go around the pond. Once we reach the pond -- it'll take ten minutes to get around it. There's a path. Then we'll be at the base of the big dune. Then, up."

They set off in single file along a trail through dense brush; the still-green leaves trembled under the wind. Flying sand and rain stung Eric's face. When he turned to look at Veronica he saw her raise her hand to protect her eyes -- but she looked straight at him under the bill of the hat -- with those intelligent, happy eyes -- her skin was red and shining in the slanting rain -- and an expression was on her face, in her honest eyes -- of a love that was so deep-set in her heart that she couldn't hide it even in the presence of her husband.

She was moving with amazing ease over the soft sand -- looking at Eric as if to say: "I'm right behind you."

Eric continued forward, the path sloping downward and curving toward the pond. As a boy Eric used to catch frogs in this pond. It disturbed him to realize he couldn't remember what he had done with his captives, set them free in home waters or killed them. He insisted he would remember if he had killed even one frog.

The path became a flowing stream. He stopped, and Veronica and Dan crowded forward.

“What’s up?” Dan asked.

“I’ve never seen water here,” said Eric, as if to himself. “The pond must be overflowing.”

“Fresh water or salt?”

“Must be brackish,” said Eric, and he filled his hand and tasted the water.

So did Dan, who said, “It’s sea water. It must communicate with the ocean.”

“No,” said Eric, “unless there’s an underground channel. The old-timers tell different stories about that.” But he was looking, pondering — at the swift little stream at their feet. He said aloud: “I wonder if the outer wall has been breached.”

“What wall?” said Dan — carefully.

“Can we go around?” Ronnie asked looking at the brush, which was thick as a jungle. “We’d need a machete to get through.”

So they doubled back and took a higher path and climbed a dune from which they could see the pond. It was restive; it was generating little whitecaps of its own.

Eric bent close and shouted: “It’s been breached. Look there.”

The wall of sand on the seaward side had been opened to a width of ten or twenty yards and the surf was doing its wild ballet in the breachway. Giving no hint of how this affected him Eric said, “We’ll go this way.” He did not wait for a second opinion or look back to see if they were following.

A thrill passed through him, deep down and up through his chest. He was still elated by what he had seen in Ronnie’s eyes. He thought something like: “To hell with the plan, to hell with austerity! Even if I’m wrong, to hell with all that, even if I’m wrong.” He slogged through the sand, thrilled by the image of the breached pond and enjoying the sting in his eyes, glancing at the pond to his right and aiming for the dune ahead, thinking what a transformation the pond had undergone, from the smooth, warm, level surface he had always known to a froth of torment. In the level below language his mind was saying, “Great! God damn! Life!” From this path he could not see the breachway but imagined it — wondering if the flow was in or out. Whatever — it had to be a sluicing torrent of sea water thirty yards wide and three feet deep.

This vision made him more eager to climb the big dune -- to listen for the blare of the foghorn from the lighthouse on the point -- to front the seaborne wind, see the pond entire and watch the surf rolling in.

But the moment you say “Life!” you realize that a dead love is death itself. If she loved anybody it was surely her husband. Eric turned abruptly and looked. She glanced up and smiled at him. She smiled! He said to himself vehemently: “Shut up!” To his pathetic hope.

He began climbing. He churned and stumbled upward till he reached the top and entered the realm of the free wind.

Ronnie was crawling behind him. She dug in at the top, and paused on her hands and knees. Dan stood beside Eric swaying.

Dan said something Eric did not catch. Eric bent closer and Dan said, “My God, the surf.”

Veronica rose to her feet and clung to her husband, looking with narrowed eyes at the sea. She circled Eric’s waist with her free arm, and the three friends formed a bulwark against the gusts of rain-laden wind. The ocean was bright with the spindrift, wave crests ripped off by the wind and scattered into a fine white mist. The rain, the fog, the scudding vapors shrouded the white shaft of the lighthouse that stood on a point less than a mile away.

They were facing the ocean, with the pond behind them and the lighthouse point to their right.

Eric could not hear the foghorn. The lighthouse marked the tip of a point jutting five- or six-hundred yards into the open sea. The point itself had no beach. It was defended against storms by a necklace of gigantic boulders that had been cut from the mother granite of a nearby hill. The point reached out into the sea, and the surf struck the rocks at an angle. The sharp-hewn granite corners formed a ragged barrier that sent the waves leaping as if in terror.

But the action of the surf assaulting the beach at the feet of the three spectators was different. Here the great combers ran in in regular ranks, rolling at mindless speed straight toward the level sand. They rose before they broke -- changed shape before they broke -- seemed to Eric’s eye to hesitate before they broke -- but they did break. And when they broke they dropped straight down, and their burden recoiled upward and was caught by the wind. This upward recoil was what Eric Michelsen had seen from his cottage.

A high wave advanced on the shore, rising like a drunken man who lurches to his feet and threatens his wife with a terrible blow -- seeming to grow bigger and more menacing as he comes nearer -- but then he staggers and falls -- the wave curls over its crest and drops in a

cascade of white energy. The immeasurable mass explodes in self-destruction, turning the dark green water to white foam and the silent menace to a thunder of impotent rage.

Dan Wheeler said: "Do you still want to go out there and dance like a curlew?"

"Actually," said Eric Michelsen, "I'm thinking of something better."

"Stop right there, Eric, please," said Veronica.

Dan said: "What are you thinking?"

"Be quiet, Dan," Veronica said. "You don't know him."

"No, he doesn't know me and maybe I don't know him." Eric let his eyes roam over the cosmic turbulence of the surf. Then he looked out toward the Sound, searching for the gap between Block Island and Montauk Point. He could not see it.

"If a swimmer could get beyond the break line," Eric said, "it'd be quite a ride."

"If!" Ronnie cried, and Eric felt her grip on him tighten.

"Watch this one," said Eric.

An incoming wave gained height and velocity as they stood in awe on their eminence. They awaited the breaking of the magnificent parabola. Its lacquered green surface strained upward in a single harmonious lift and overhung itself. It had already come too far to allow of any ending but a catastrophe -- no curling, sidewise unfurling such as might have been possible in Brazil or Hawaii -- certainly no recession, only the inevitable drop. And so it happened, a vertical collapse of the entire body, the sublime curvature degenerating in a single moment into a booming fall.

The three friends stood silent. Had three human beings anywhere on the globe seen just one such career -- from the gathering of force, to the swift rising of the profile, to the over-leaning of the crest, to the thud of colossal weight at the climax -- they would have said they'd witnessed a miracle.

"Just take a look -- at this moment," Eric said, waiting: "Now! If you were to dive into it at that precise moment --"

"You'd be in the *Times* tomorrow morning," Veronica said.

"I don't think so. I've done it hundreds of times," said Eric.

"Surely not in this state of the sea," said Dan.

"I've done it too," Veronica pursued, "when the sea was half asleep."

Eric went on as if he hadn't heard: "Of course," he said, "it'd be a long swim under water before you'd break out."

"Too long," Dan claimed. "If the wave was six feet high it'd be O.K. We've all done it. You dive beneath the surface, where the energy is, and let the wave pass over you. The wave travels over the surface like wind over a field of wheat; the wheat is never uprooted and the water isn't moved by the wave. Not yet. Only the wave moves. You swim under it and come out in the trough that precedes the next wave. By that time the wave has broken — behind you."

"Yes," Eric ruminated, "like a ripple of wind over a field of wheat."

"Eric," said Veronica, "you can't be serious."

"Do you love life so little?" Dan Wheeler asked smiling.

Eric turned and the eyes of the two men met.

Eric said, "I don't know if I love life, I suppose I do. But there are people -- one person -- that I do love."

"Then don't talk nonsense," Veronica admonished him, and he felt the grip of her arm around his body.

"Anyway," Dan argued, "some of the waves out there beyond the break line are foaming. You could be overwhelmed out there too."

"Right," Eric agreed with a laugh, "beyond the break line but breaking anyway. Illegal waves!"

"And maybe deadly," said Dan.

"Dan, will you please not mention death? Eric is serious."

"So am I," Dan said.

"Yes," Eric assented, "I am serious. I think a good swimmer could get through the break line by swimming under it. As for the waves that break out there beyond it, you just drop straight down and the break passes harmlessly over you. Surely you've done that, Dan."

"I have," he said repeating the obvious, "but never in such a sea as this."

"You've done it, Ronnie," Eric Michelsen persisted. "We've done it together."

"Yes, but never in such a sea as this," she echoed, and her caring eyes rested on his, as if this was the moment when he'd come to his senses.

Eric went on: "Anyway, Dan, a little danger is an element of a big life."

“What you’re proposing is not a little danger. Frankly I think there’s something sick about it.”

“Oho, sick!” Eric laughed. “Excuse me a moment, my friends,” and he extricated himself from their embrace and strode in long sliding paces down the shoreward side of the dune.

Veronica watched him descend, wondering what was up now, but Dan distracted her, saying:

“Was it absolutely necessary for you to put your arm around him? Were you afraid he’d blow away?”

As he spoke he staggered under a strong gust and grabbed Veronica’s arm. He retained his grip as she said:

“Not ‘absolutely necessary’ -- but --”

Dan staggered under a new gust then he said, “But what?”

Veronica’s eyes met Dan’s and she said, “Yes, it was necessary.”

“I don’t understand. You and I could --”

“Hold each other? Yes. We’d be quite steady together, as we are now. But the way you’re squeezing my arm, Dan, is uncomfortable.”

“Sorry.” He let go and they stood as individuals in the rain-driving wind.

Veronica said: “I am getting cold.”

“Yes, you are cold.”

“Dan. Please. No more of this.”

“No more of what, Ronnie?”

“I’m starting to shiver. I am not cold in any other way.”

“Why did you insist we accept his invitation?”

“Do you want me to say, ‘Because I still love him’? Do you intend to drive us into that terrible, dark, totally --”

“I want that? Are you out of your mind?”

“No, I’m perfectly sane,” came Eric’s voice as he suddenly appeared again and stood beside them. He wore only a tight set of “jockey” underwear. His cockandballs had sought the warmth of his body but still made a rough lump in the white cotton.

“Eric, please, please don’t” Veronica pleaded.

“No, Eric, don’t. Taking a risk like this, and taking a life, even your own, would be an outrage against -- us -- Veronica, I mean --”

“Oh I’ll be fine, don’t worry about me. But all of a sudden I’m colder than hell so if you’ll excuse me I’m --”

“You are colder because the weather is changing. Ronnie’s cold too. So am I. The surf is higher and wilder. Look at it, for Christ’s sake.”

“Looks the same to me,” said Eric as his skin went rough with the chill.

His blue lips made a striking impression in his ruddy Nordic face. His hair had been darkened by the rain. His light blue eyes were narrowed against the blowing sand, so their startling color was less conspicuous. The crows’ feet around his eyes and the long scored creases in his forehead now seemed deeper. His teeth showed white in the smile.

“Wait, wait,” Dan cried, “let’s look at that gap before you do anything crazy.”

Dan ran along the top of the dune with the ocean on his left and the pond on the right, till he reached the gap in the seaward boundary of the pond.

Veronica took Eric’s hand and pulled him along. Presently all three stood gazing down on the breachway.

“Do you see?” Dan Wheeler demanded. “Look at it.”

“Yes, well, what?” Eric asked incorrigibly.

“The flow of the water, do you see the direction of the flow?”

“Looks like its going back out,” Eric said. “Going back home.”

“Exactly.”

“So the tide must be changing,” Veronica surmised.

“Here we stand,” said Dan Wheeler, “at the outer edge of a hurricane, on or near the autumnal equinox, at the changing of the tide, and you, Eric, propose to jump into a huge and -- wild -- I wouldn’t throw Tarzan into that surf if he were my worst enemy.”

“Ah, but I’m not your enemy. And as for the equinox and all that rubbish --”

“What are you saying?” Ronnie asked her husband.

“These are the conditions -- maybe a full moon too -- necessary for a riptide and God knows what crazy currents when all those forces collide.”

Ronnie took Eric’s hands in both her own but Eric broke her grip, saying:

“My teeth are chattering. I’ll be warmer swimming.”

“For a while,” said Dan, “till you exhaust yourself fighting the currents. Anyway there’s no point in suicide, my good friend, because she doesn’t love me, and I feel safe in surmising that she does love you.”

“I doubt it,” said Eric cheerfully. To Veronica he said: “We’ll ask the lady. Do you love your husband?”

“Yes, Eric.” And she was deep in his eyes.

Eric walked away saying: “Not that it matters to me.” He descended the seaward face of the dune in long, sliding strides.

He was in pretty good shape, this fifty-year-old legislator -- square, strong shoulders developed in his daily swimming routine, narrow hips and small taut buttocks, calves bulging with muscles earned on the football fields of his high school and college.

Ronnie and Dan watched him slow his pace to wade the knee-deep raceway at the gap. Veronica gasped when he threw up his arms and disappeared, then he struggled up and resumed wading, till he reached the other side and began trotting on the firm sand where the surf turned. He ran twenty or thirty yards, paused, and seemed to assess his chances -- and then this “voice of reason in the House” strode into the billows. He jumped when the first wave hit him, let it pass, walked a few paces with raised arms, began swimming -- and dived into the solid wall of a great wave.

Veronica watched for several seconds, till his head appeared on a rising wave.

She untied the bow under her chin, and the wind took her hat. She struggled out of her rubber coat and pulled her sweater up over her head, and it too went flying. As she began frantically undoing the buttons of her shirt Dan Wheeler took her by the shoulders with enough force to make her cry out -- but she ripped the last few buttons and struggled against his hold.

Dan Wheeler shook her and shouted: “Don’t go out there.”

She met his half-mad eyes with fury in her own and spoke in a voice the wind could not deflect, so Dan must have heard it with all clarity and shame.

“Take your hands off me,” she said and got rid of the shirt which flew away like an untethered sail.

He did let go, with a look of despair as she sat on the whirling sand, untied her shoes and pulled off her socks. She stood again, looking sideways at Dan, as if to ward off an attack, and stepped out of her jeans.

He grabbed her again but before he could speak she demanded:

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

In a rage he shook her, and her swaying, bare breasts rocked under the force of his anger.

“Coward!” she shouted. She broke free and ran sliding down the dune.

At first Dan couldn’t believe it, then he ran after her. Just before she reached the breachway she looked back. Seeing him in pursuit she ran into the stream, her gait changing to a knee-lifting drive through moving water, looking over her shoulder as a woman might who was being chased by a maniac. By the time Dan waded into the breachway she was already bowling her way into the surf.

Dan stumbled and fell in the swift, brackish stream, and when he looked up he still could not find her. He ran down the beach, ripping his clothes off, till he reached the place where she had entered, and he ran into the surf.

The first wave knocked him backwards. He fell — tasted salt and scrambled upright — salt was redolent of boyhood — snorting water and gasping — he was struggling to his feet when the next wave broke in front of him and sent forth a wall of surf and foam that hit him with terrific force, and he went down again. Regaining his footing he dived under the next wave, which was smaller than the others, and faced the next, a giant that was still rising. This one was going to break; Dan couldn’t reach it soon enough. Its height was like a house or a cliff -- and it was advancing with speed. He braced his neck and head with both arms and dropped to the bottom.

Down there in the water world he heard the crash of the wave and thanked God he had, because the sound was ahead and not upon him. But a force with vectors in all directions struck him with shocking violence. The thing rolled him along the bottom, abrading his skin. He lost orientation -- closed his eyes hard shut; when he opened his eyes he saw white fog and whirling tendrils of gauzy light. He could not swim up for air because he didn’t know which way was up. He endured -- forcing himself to keep his eyes open. He knew he was in an undertow because the bumping and scraping had stopped and he was traveling. He panicked; he thrust his feet out seeking the bottom, and found none. His bruised skin burned. A true sentence formed in his brain: “This is how people die.” He flailed his arms in a grotesque imitation of a crawl stroke, kicked his feet -- and broke the surface.

For all his knowledge of the sea he didn't understand the orbit of a wave. He didn't even know there was an orbit, an interior circular current, or that it was gaining speed in the shelving water. Diving deep into the heart of the next wave form he was adding his desperate energy to the circling wheel of the orbit. He dove to escape the plunging of the mass hanging above and, now, behind him. In four controlled strokes he broke out on the seaward side of the monster, in time to hear the plunge as it surrendered to the pull of gravity and dumped its mass vertically. At the same moment Dan entered the next trough. He had no choice but to give himself to it at a down angle. When he broke into the air again he could see it might be possible to ride the next one; so he stroked to rise with it. It was not yet concave. He thought he could make it. And he did, rising with the wave, resisting its shoreward pull and finally gliding down into the next trough.

Having learned the power of the troughs to suck him down and under he now swam hard to make himself independent of the orbital force. He succeeded again in rising with the wave, whose surface still formed a convexity. As he rose he turned his face to the land searching for Veronica among the crests that stretched between himself and the beach. He saw the leaping white surf that formed a skirt of death around the lighthouse point. He saw the dune, trees and houses -- and then he sank into a deep gray valley from which nothing was visible. He rested for a few seconds, then stroked seaward again. He partly climbed and partly rose with the next ridge, still convex, and just before reaching the top he looked again. He saw the lighthouse on the west. He saw the utility pole and houses on the beach road. On the uplift his eyes flicked back to the white frenzy circling the lighthouse point. "Rocks." To be driven onto the point would be butchery. And now, looking north, he appreciated for the first time how sharp the curvature of the beach was. It was crescent-shaped, with the concave side toward the ocean. On each rise he caught a view of the space enclosed by the crescent. Was Ronnie outside the break line, as Dan was, or inside?

Whether it was Death the Abstraction that he feared or the physical plunging of untold tons of water leaving him with a broken neck or suffocation or dismemberment on the rocks -- whatever it was, he did fear it.

In truth Dan's knowledge of the sea was a mere fragment. What he did not know would have appalled him. He did not know that the waves were rolling in from the Sound at thirty miles an hour, that their capacity to grow higher as they rolled was no illusion, that they were

higher on the shore side than on the sea side, therefore it was all worse than he could possibly estimate — that the bottom here sloped all too steeply, and the nearer the waves approached the shore the more power they possessed to propel a swimmer along their line of march — that the orbital motion in the waveform could pull him so deep there would be no escape — that a twenty-foot wave breaking on a coast such as this could pulverize a concrete sea wall. And his wife, his salvation as a man — she was — where was she?

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Eric and Ronnie were treading water on the seaward side of the break line.

“Where’s Dan? Where’s Dan?” Ronnie screamed.

Trying to sound calm Eric said: “There’s no telling. Still on the beach, maybe.”

“No! He’s searching for me.”

“How do you know that? How could you know?”

“I know. He loves me.”

“So do I. That’s why we’ve got to get clear of the point. It’s our only chance.”

The lighthouse loomed above them. Eric repeated: “We’ve got to get around the point.

We swim seaward of the light then enter the calm water on the other side.”

“Where’s Dan? Where’s Dan?”

He saw that she was mad. He said, “We are drifting, don’t you see? Don’t you feel the current? Look at the light.”

She said, “So much higher.”

“The current, Ronnie,” spoken as if to a small child.

“No,” she said. “I’m going to find Dan.”

She started to swim but he grabbed her arm. She screamed, and he was ashamed. He let her go.

And she swam straight toward the beach, turning away from the wild dance of the surf on the rocks of the light house point. The sandy beach lay ahead, but she had to cross the break line to reach it.

Eric pursued her. She crested a giant and disappeared. Eric pulled back. She was two strokes from the break line. For one half a second he tasted desertion and it appalled him. He

said in his mind, “I’d rather be dead.” So he swam after her. His love poured strength into his arms and shoulders, and he climbed the convex side of the wave and powered himself over the crest into the concavity. With his last glimpse he searched and did not see her.

The wave broke and dumped him. That was all he knew — he was in a dream of noise — the choking woke him up — and the pain in his left shoulder. He could not stroke with it. He was still deafened by the boom and rush of the climax and disintegration of the wave form. He didn’t know where she was. His shoulder was on fire.

In the shadows of his mind he realized he wasn’t dead yet. Looking at the wild dance of the surf on the lighthouse point he saw death. It was clothed in white; its sound was the fog horn. To his right he imagined, without quite seeing, the smooth sand beach, the street light on the beach road. Had Ronnie reached it? There wasn’t enough time. She was still out here.

He tried to move his bad arm, he kicked frantically, he stroked with his good arm. He stared for a full second at the lighthouse, at the necklace of rocks in leaping, pulverized surf. He saw the white dance toward which he was being carried. Having seen it, he realized that only one idea enlightened him, there was but one destination.

He turned seaward, toward the Sound, the idea of Ronnie. He said her name in his mind. He dived into the concavity.

There was no hope in his mind, no belief in a benign outcome, no trust in a loving god. Then came a miracle. Deep in the wave form he touched her, he grasped her wrist. In shadows he could almost see her, see the sway of her body in the current and the waving of her hair, the slow dance of her legs. He saw or knew that her mouth was open and her eyelids were touched by the eddies. He held her with a fierce strength. He would never let her go. Flailing with his right arm, holding with his left hand, he tried to draw her near him, to press her breast against his body. He saw — and saw again — that her head was hanging loose on her neck — moving at the behest of the currents and eddies. He awaited the inevitable climax. All he had to do was hold. Her arms responded to the currents. Neither her face nor her eyes responded.

The wave released its full weight and power upon him and upon the woman as he gathered her into his arms. Tons of ocean, clouds of nearly invisible particles and streamers of uncertain colors — he saw her for the last time, her head responding to the influences of the currents and the climax — eyes open, mouth open, hair trailing. They were lost in the collapse of the wave form. He pressed her body to his chest.

Dan Wheeler was running on the beach shouting “Ronnie!” Each wave seemed as implacable as the last. He swept the beach with his gaze, he wiped the stinging salt from his eyes. He turned landward. Maybe she was — somewhere. The land was safety but she was in the water! Now the lights in the houses, and the streetlight on the Beach Road went dark. The sky was darkening.

He imagined her wading ashore, rushing to embrace him, each sharing the body heat of the other, a naked embrace of pure love and the joy of life. In the midst of this scene his rational mind said that if she wasn’t here she must be out there. He ran along the firm sand where the surf turned, crying for Ronnie.

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