

## A LIKENESS IN STONE

Vaughan didn't know precisely what it was that attracted him to diving, but, whatever it was, he never seemed to tire of it. Maybe that was because his stint with the navy had enabled him to experience some of the most impressive diving environments the world had to offer, or maybe it was just that he was addicted to the rush of adrenalin that pumped through him when water closed over his head.

He had felt the familiar rush a few moments ago when he and Saunders had entered the reservoir at Marshfield, but he had felt something else, too – a sinking sensation that wasn't entirely due to the tanks pulling him down. It was more an instinct than a feeling, a sixth sense that came to him whenever he was working in a stretch of water notorious for its ability to extinguish human life.

His first reaction was to wonder whether to junk the dive – but, not unreasonably, once they hit the surface, Saunders would want to know why. Like himself, he was an ex-navy man, so Vaughan didn't really want to have to say he just felt there was something wrong. He was hardly likely to be impressed and Vaughan didn't want him thinking that maybe he was losing his bottle, but the feeling, the instinct, was strong, and although there was nothing to suggest that this reservoir was any more dangerous than many they had dived in, there was a peculiar stillness to the water, a certain gloom that couldn't entirely be explained by the lack of light.

Above them, the skin of the water was broken by rain, and the sky producing it was doing little to penetrate the depths and light their way. It was oppressive, but at first Vaughan couldn't quite put his finger on why. And then it came to him: the thing that was strange about this particular reservoir was the lack of fish. No dark, slow carp gliding like shadows into even darker shadows and becoming one with them.

An instructor had once told him to let an absence of fish serve as a warning. It was unnatural, and could usually be attributed to pollution or predator. Consequently, when he had once been diving for pleasure off the coast of Mozambique, the realisation that, quite suddenly, the fish had disappeared had frozen him to immobility. He had tried to sense from the feel of the water what it was that had frightened them, and when a Bull shark loomed towards him, everything he had ever heard about them flashed instantly to mind. He knew, for instance, that they rarely attacked with the ferocity of the Great White but cruised round their victim, taking a

foot, and then perhaps a hand, and possibly severing a leg just below the knee before losing interest, leaving the limbs to rot and the victim a torso. He had panicked then and had thrashed for the shore, certain that at any moment he would feel the mouth closing on one of his limbs; but the terrible pain had never come. Instead, he had felt a dull thud against his right leg and he collapsed onto the beach, sobbing with fear and afraid to look at what he was certain would be a stump.

There had been blood, but no stump – just shredded skin where the shark had brushed against him, its skin like glass paper.

Vaughan had been deeply ashamed then, ashamed that people on the beach had heard him crying like a woman, and he had tried to block the memory out. But the stillness of the water had logged itself into his memory under ‘useful information’, and he felt it now as the house came into view. It was marked on records kept by Thames Water as having been submerged when Marshfield became a reservoir. With luck it would produce some saleable items and make the dive worthwhile.

They circled it slowly, each of them noticing that the door frames and windows had rotted away, the glass having fallen to become covered by silt, and in his search for a suitable entrance, Vaughan looked up, the weight of the water making what should have been a quick, automatic movement a heavy, thoughtful process. He reached out to touch the walls and feel how the lichen had given a soft covering to the brick, and then he pushed upwards, Saunders behind him.

As they swam over the roof, he looked down and, in seeing the tiles pass beneath him, he had a feeling that was the nearest he could come to describing an out-of-body experience. It was something he had felt before, but never quite so strongly, and was the sort of sensation a person might have in a dream: that of rising out of the material body and wondering whether death would be like this.

The weight of the tanks pulled them down at the back of the house, and after pausing for a moment to consider their options, they dived through a window, the gentlest of efforts easing them through and into a kitchen that had been left partly furnished. There was an old oven still plugged into the wall, a cupboard containing tins minus their labels, and clothes left rotting in a washing machine.

At some point, the kitchen had been modernised with Formica-topped units that had warped in the water. The sink was stainless steel, the greyness of the metal melting into the greyness of a wallpaper that rubbed away to the touch. Flimsy net curtains billowed with every movement, and Vaughan touched one gently. It fell from the runner and draped on his arm, falling apart and drifting to the floor even as he tried to free himself from it.

He was afraid. He didn’t know why, but there had been occasions when he had dived to sunken vessels, and once in the living quarters, he had

experienced the same unease, as though the former occupants might materialise, ethereal things, no more than an imprint on the water.

He got a grip on himself, and after signalling to Saunders he led the way to a room off the kitchen, finding it fully furnished. A Bakerlite clock on a brick mantelpiece led his eye to a cheap framed print still hanging over the fireplace: a doe-eyed woman leaning against a tree, the water distorting the scene so that tendrils of her hair appeared to float through the glass towards him.

He pushed away and swam over an armchair to reach a long narrow hall. At the far end, a watery light showed where the door had been and it lit their way to stairs that disappeared into darkness. He hesitated, and now came something that made him feel that he really was in the middle of some bizarre dream – he swam up the stairs.

On the landing, he paused to get his bearings before flipping his way slowly into the first of several rooms. It was empty and he backed out, signalling that they should try the next. This one yielded a mattress dumped by a far wall, a clock radio beside it and a pile of what might have been blankets.

Unwilling to be left there alone, he followed Saunders into a bathroom that was small and tiled, the cupboard over the sink having nothing to offer but a pack of razors, a toothbrush.

They left it together, flipping effortlessly into the master bedroom, a pair of ghosts whose presence moved the water, which in turn lifted the sheets from the bed so that they rose in a childhood fantasy of horror. He saw them out of the corner of his eye but couldn't bring himself to turn his head a fraction, afraid of what he might see in the way that a child is afraid of looking into a mirror as he runs past.

He fixed his attention on a tall fitted wardrobe, reached it in a few slow strokes and tried the knob. Tarnished to blackness with time, it fitted into this hand neatly, the brass having oxidised to a roughness that brought the shark's skin to mind. There was a knack to it and he struggled with it before the latch lifted, but finally he managed to open the door, the weight of the water making hard work of what should have been a simple task. He stepped back as it fell from hinges that had rusted through, and when the silt had settled, he stared at what it concealed, Saunders directly behind him, his view of the wardrobe obscured.

It wasn't real. He decided that almost instantly. It had been left there for a joke, and if he were to touch it his hands would confirm what his mind knew to be true: that the face was one of those masks people wear to parties at Hallowe'en. It would be plastic, stiff and unyielding, not flesh, soft and rotting as his eyes would have him believe.

He reached out, took hold of the lower jaw as if to pull the mask from a stuffed-stocking head, and wanted to deny that it had come away in his hand; that what he was holding was a piece of corpse, long dead. And then

came the rush of bubbles, a yell carried to Saunders' ears by water that distorted the sound, but did nothing to diminish the horror it conveyed.

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**B**y the time he left the office, the traffic nosing its way out of Oxford had come to a complete standstill. Roadworks? An accident? Gilmore didn't know. He only knew that tonight he would walk into an empty house; that what Sue had taken when she left was merely the handful of things she had brought when she moved in less than a year ago, but that the house would echo regardless.

He hadn't loved her. He knew that. Maybe she had known it too, the observation that it was hard to live with a ghost being a conclusion she had come to within weeks of their having first met. *Who is this woman, this woman you never talk about?*

He could have lied to get her off his back. He could, for instance, have said it was any one of the women who had preceded her, and he might have added that each of them had left him a note on the fridge.

Why the fridge? he wondered. Was it its position in the sparse kitchen, the certainty that if left there it would be seen? Or was it merely the fact that the magnetic snowman that clung to the enamel was ideal for securing a note?

Not that he needed one. He knew the signs. With all of them he had known, sometimes weeks in advance, that they were about to vacate his life. *You never say what you feel.*

Initially, she had accepted his reserve, but as her feelings for him grew, she had started to try to 'get through', as she put it. He could have told her she was wasting her time, just as he could also have told her that ultimately there would come a day when he would drive home to find the house dark, cold and devoid of the Sue who had finally joined the long list of women who had given up on him.

He caught his reflection in the windscreen, the face looking unfamiliar, distorted by the glass. It was the face of a man in his prime, the kind of face that attracted women easily because it gave the impression that he had everything under his firm, unflappable control.

Ironic, really.

The traffic moved and he eased along behind the car in front, heading home, but only by degrees, taking the longer routes, shooting off down side roads he'd never seen before, reluctant to face the fridge.

Eventually, inevitably, he pulled into the drive of a semi that was identical to every other red-brick, three-bedroomed box in the crescent, and he felt, as he always felt: that it wasn't home. He had lived there for several years now, yet his attitude towards it was similar to that of his attitude towards the women who had lived there with him – he could have left at a moment's notice, and without a backward glance.

He parked in front of the garage, locked the car, and entered the house to find the door to the kitchen closed. He couldn't remember having shut it, or why he had done it. Maybe it was the look of control that peered out from the white plaster face.

In a moment of decisiveness, he pulled sharply at the thin, lined paper. It whipped from under the snowman, leaving him undisturbed, and without reading it, Gilmore screwed it tight and threw it into a pedal bin. He knew the contents by heart in any case. It wasn't as if he'd read it over and over: merely that it would be like every other note that had ever been left on the fridge. Only the signatures differed.

Unusually for him, he poured himself a drink and took it into the sitting room. The furnishings were plain, comfortable, and now devoid of the female touch, and as he sank into the sofa he used the remote in order to catch the news.

Later, he was to have no recollection of what came before the item relating to Marshfield. He remembered only that the slate-grey water seemed, for a moment, to have risen without warning to swallow him whole, and then it was gone, a different item of news wiping it from the screen to leave him listening, without comprehension, to accounts of other catastrophes, disasters that would presumably devastate others in the way that Marshfield had devastated him.

He turned it off, sat there, and suddenly thought of Sue and her whining accusation: "Who is this woman?"

On evenings like these, wintry, cold, and typical for November, he had sometimes felt like answering that question. The trouble was, he could hardly picture her face now, but he could remember things about her. He could remember, for instance, that her hair had been short, dark, and moussed into an urchin look, and that she had been thinner than he would have liked. He could remember also that she had possessed a self-assurance that is common among women who are not only beautiful, but clever; and since she had been reading English at Somerville College, Oxford, there could be little doubt that she had indeed been clever.

Why couldn't he forget her?

He didn't know, just as he didn't know why he had never been able to bring himself to go to the police and tell them what they had failed to drag out of him twenty years ago.

He had sometimes longed to do it, but the consequences would overwhelm him. And so he lived this lie, this lie that was smeared on the surface of his existence like a suffocating veneer, distorting what lay beneath it so that nobody saw the nature of what it contained.

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*A Likeness in Stone* was nominated for the prestigious American Edgar Allan Poe Award in the category of Best Novel. It was adapted by the BBC, and screened in September 2000.