

THE DROWNED MAN

Bill Mesce, Jr.

It was still dark when the first ferry of the morning pulled out. On the enclosed passenger deck, over the well where a handful of cars were parked, Cy got a cup of foul-tasting black coffee at the snack bar and stood at one of the windows. He was alone on the deck; the handful of other early-morning passengers—must be commuters this early, he guessed—had stayed bundled up inside their cars. He could feel the vibration of the ferry's engines, the slight, queasy effect of the waves on the boat, but there was no sense of forward motion. Once the Cape May terminal had disappeared behind them, the ferry was a lone island of light suspended in a black void.

He threw the coffee away before it was half gone, stepped out onto the promenade, pulled the broad collar of his bridge coat up around his face, shelter against the stinging wind coming across the water. He flexed his fingers buried deep in his coat pockets, told himself the dull aches weren't age, that

he'd grown stiff on the long drive, that it was, indeed, cold and, anybody would've felt the same.

Even as he told himself this again and again, he knew none of it to be true.

After a while, on the south side of the bay, he could see the lights of the ferry out of Lewes passing them by in the distance, marking the halfway point of the trip.

The sky went from black to gray, an unbroken sheet of dour clouds, and below them, the waters of Delaware Bay turned a similarly cold, metallic colorlessness. In the distance, Cy could now see the shadows of large tankers anchored far out in the bay, each waiting its turn to come up the river to offload at the refineries near Philadelphia and Camden.

He had never liked being on open water. Whenever he found himself there, a discomforting picture always appeared in his head. There he was, his little white body treading in place at the surface. Below him, quickly growing from a slight tint to utter blackness, were the deeps, unmeasured and immeasurable, a bottomless abyss so vast it could swallow anything mortal: a person, a ferry, a *Titanic*, Atlantis if you believed in that kind of thing; anything. And down there, hidden in the dark, things killed each other day in and day out. Your big fear was that—for no particularly good reason—one of those things

might glance upward and see, way, way above, those two, pale flailing legs. Every summer a story came in from somewhere in the world proving that once in a while those things that lived down deep occasionally came to the surface for a kill. Out on the big water, you were not only vulnerable, you were also so god-awfully small. For no particularly good reason, you could get pulled under without leaving a ripple.

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He found the garden apartment complex on the far side of Lewes. The buildings were laid out in lazy curls around frozen ponds and hillocks of wilted grass. There were little footbridges and plastic sunflowers with petals whirring in the wind.

He left his car in the lot and walked tiredly, his heavy-treading feet crunching on rock salt. He stopped on one of the footbridges and breathed deeply, clearing stale air from his lungs. He coughed, stretched, his head tilted back, looking up toward the gray-masked sky.

His cigarette case flashed silver, even in the dull grayness. He lit a cigarette, the matching lighter also flashing, and when he was half-done, he tossed the glowing stub away, then found the door with her number, rang the buzzer.

“Who is it?”

He stood in front of the peephole. A chain rattled on the other side. The dead bolt slid clear, and the door swung open.

“Hi, Tish.”

“Cy...”

“Merry Christmas.”

She was older, but her face had thinned nicely. She was doing herself up in a different way. Her brown hair—now with a wisp of gray—was short. Her make-up was relaxed, too. Just a few, deft touches. Maybe she finally believed she was pretty.

She had her coat on, arms filled with papers, notebooks, a bulging briefcase of cracked leather. “I was just leaving.”

“So I see.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, sure. Just thought I’d drop in, you know, surprise you, season’s greetings sort of thing.”

“You surprised me all right. I’m sorry. Come on in.” She stood aside, letting him into the foyer, then closed the door after him. She looked at her watch.

“Work?” he asked. “What’re you doing now?”

“I teach, Cy. I’ve been teaching for quite a while.”

“You better go,” he said. “I don’t want you to be late.” He reached for the door.

She put a hand out, holding it closed. “You look like hell.”

“Just tired.”

“Did you drive all night?”

He gave a meaningless non-answer of a shrug.

She took in the rumpled suit through his open coat, frowned at his red eyes and unshaven chin. “You shouldn’t go back on the road in your shape. Why don’t you crash here and get some rest? See what’s in the fridge.” Now she reached for the doorknob. “Help yourself. Clean up. Get some sleep...”

“Good idea. Uh, where’s the baby?”

“I switch off with a girlfriend taking our kids to daycare. You missed her by about fifteen minutes.”

“Oh. Uh, Tish... I was sorry to hear. About Alan.”

Her eyes flickered away, and she shrugged. She opened the door, letting the cold come in.

“I guess I should’ve said something then,” he said. He thought of telling her about his ride down for the funeral, sitting in his car at a distance, invisible.

She looked at her watch again.

“You go, Tish,” he said.

She started to leave, but didn't. “You're *sure* everything's—”

“Fine. Positive. I just thought I'd pop in. Call it a holiday whim. What time'll you be back?”

She thought a moment. “There's a holiday assembly after classes today, then the faculty's supposed to... I don't think until after six.”

“This daycare place, they'll take care of her all that time?”

“My girlfriend'll pick her up and watch her until I come by. I'll try to get out early. See you about six.”

She started down the walk. He stayed in the doorway and watched.

She turned back toward him. She was concerned, which was nice to see. Less nice, he could also see she hadn't believed a word that had come out of his mouth. She walked to the parking lot to her small, brown Toyota as sensible as her shoes. When she'd driven off, he closed the door.

He drifted around the living room to a small artificial Christmas tree on an end table. Two dozen or so Christmas cards stood underneath, including an enormous one of construction paper handmade by one of her classes. It was signed with a splatter of barely legible names.

Along one wall was a put-it-together-yourself wall unit for the TV and some cheap stereo equipment, with framed photographs along the top shelf of the wall unit. Among them: Tish holding her daughter, still a soft and shapeless infant. Hugging Tish, a tall, lean man with a gaunt face, hair a lifeless wisp, and eyes—despite his smile—dull, the cancer already well at work.

He poked around the kitchen, the kid's room, the bathroom, saving her bedroom for last. He flicked through her clothes in the closet, then went through her dresser. There was a strongbox tucked in the rear of the bottom drawer. It wasn't locked. Inside were a few hundred dollars in cash, insurance policies, a pink slip for her car, official-looking documents from her school, birth certificates, a copy of her husband's will and one of her own, and her divorce decree.

He picked up the wills, looked at Tish's, thought how odd it looked with this other last name. You should be used to that by now, he told himself. He didn't open it.

He picked up the divorce decree; didn't open that either. Even after twelve years, just holding it brought the letters clear into his head: SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, KINGS COUNTY, Patricia Alice O'Brien Keely plaintiff against Cyril Michael Keely...

He couldn't remember what he'd done with his copy.

Patricia Alice O'Brien Keely *against* Cyril Michael Keely. That *against* always stung.

He put everything back in the box the way he'd found it, slid it back into place in the drawer.

He shook off his coat, sat on the unmade bed, and started to take off his wingtips, smiling at how they still carried some of the shine he'd gotten the morning before from the bootblack who worked his floor, then stopped. He picked up his coat and shuffled out to the living room. He hung his suit jacket over the back of a chair, bundled up his coat at one end of the sofa. He pulled off his shoes, stretched out on the cushions, lay his head on his bundled coat.

He was asleep before his eyes finished closing.

§

Cy heard the front door open. "In here," he called.

He set down the spatula, turned; she was in the kitchen doorway. Her hand swallowed the hand of a slightly bigger, more defined version of the little girl he'd seen in the photos in the living room. The girl had Tish's straight, loose brown hair, small, pug nose, her full-lipped mouth now pursed into a puzzled pout. But he didn't know the eyes: wide, curious, a burning ice-blue.

“Hello,” Cy said.

The little girl took a step back from the new face, tucking herself behind her mother’s coat.

“This is my friend I told you was visiting,” her mother said. “Say hello.”

The girl shuffled across the kitchen flat-footedly and held out a splayed hand, which she seemed ready to pull back at the slightest perceived threat.

“Hi.”

Cy took the offered hand gingerly. “Hi yourself.”

“I’m Mithelle.”

“Hi, Michelle. I’m Cy.”

“Is it OK if Cy has dinner with us?” Tish asked.

The little girl shrugged, pulling her hand back, not at all enthusiastic at the prospect.

“OK. Go hang up your coat and wash your hands.”

The girl shuffled out slowly, stopping to look back over her shoulder for a last, studying look at Cy.

Cy felt better after she was out of the room and her little cold eyes were off him. “A friend of Mommy’s?”

“Feel free to explain it all to her.”

“Maybe in a few years. How old did you say she is?”

“I didn’t.” Tish shrugged off her coat and went into the living room. “She’ll turn four in February.”

“She looks bigger than her pictures.”

“They’re old pictures. I stopped taking them after Alan died. I don’t know why.” She hung up her coat and dropped on the sofa near where she’d set her briefcase and papers.

“You should take new ones,” he said.

She kicked off her sensible shoes and rubbed the soles of her feet on the rug. “I can’t believe you still have the Buick. I saw it in the parking lot. It staggers the imagination that it still runs!”

“It runs. Remember when we took it up to Lake George for our first anniversary? I always thought of that trip as our *real* honeymoon.”

“We had a honeymoon, Cy.”

“We had a weekend at the Plaza and then that Monday I was back at work. That wasn’t much of a honeymoon.”

“I liked it.”

“So did I. It’s just... Well...” He shrugged, not really sure what he was trying to say.

“Hm. Table’s set,” she noted, “dinner’s on the stove...”

“I was thinking of answering the door wearing nothing but Saran wrap. I read somewhere husbands like that kind of thing.”

“That could’ve put me off dinner. What smells so fattening? Garlic bread?”

“Oh, crap...” He ran back to the kitchen, grabbed a pot holder and pulled a tray of slightly charred garlic bread from the oven.

“Mmmm.” She was behind him, looking over the pots on the stove. “Garlic bread, linguini, white clam sauce... You’ve been doing some shopping.”

“Kept me busy. I didn’t know what you were eating these days.”

“I’m trying to lose weight. I’m *always* trying to lose weight.”

“It shows. I mean you look good, Tish. You look nice.”

“Thank you.”

“I noticed from the fridge you’re trying to be careful, so I bought this special protein pasta or whatever the hell it’s called. It’s got added something. Supposed to be healthy, I guess.”

“Very considerate. Very commendable. Well...”

They’d run out of things to say.

“Why don’t I call you when it’s ready?” he asked.

“Good. I’ve got papers to mark, so...”

“Perfect. You do that, and I’ll let you know when it’s up.”

She went back to the living room and turned the stereo on, some easy listening goop. He heard the shuffle of papers.

When dinner was ready, Tish put Michelle on a booster seat, and they all sat to eat in the dining area.

Tish asked the girl about her day, but Michelle’s answers were mumbled and monosyllabic, her wide, curious eyes always returning to study Cy.

“Maybe she’s shy,” Cy said, although he didn’t feel like she was shy. The feeling he got from those eyes was, *Who the hell are you?*

“Usually, I can’t shut her up,” Tish said. “Are you feeling OK, Hon?” She laid the back of her hand on the girl’s forehead. “So, Cy, how’s the job? If I remember right, shouldn’t you be coming up on your twentieth?”

“Next month. Actually... I’m leaving.”

“Really?”

“You seem surprised.”

“I am. I mean, when we were—” She cut herself off, careful now about what she said in front of her daughter. “You used to talk about doing something else, but... I’d gotten to thinking you’d never really leave.”

“Next month, I’m gone.”

She caught something... in his voice? His face? He studied his plate.

“Where you goin’?” Michelle asked, but it didn’t sound like curiosity to Cy, not with the stare behind it.

“I’m retiring from my job,” Cy said, and put on a smile.

Michelle nodded, moving her fork through her linguini without eating any, keeping her eyes on Cy.

“Is it a retirement, Cy?” Tish asked. But he knew she knew.

He gave a sighing smile, a little embarrassed at being caught out. “Sort of. It’s been suggested I ‘seek out other opportunities.’ I knew it was coming. You look around and you’re the oldest person in your department, your boss is younger than you, *his* boss is younger than you, you kind of know...”

She nodded.

“It’s fine, though. I’m OK. I’ve done well. I don’t even have to work if I don’t want to. But I’ve been talking to some people, looking at a few things. Maybe I’ll finally get around to doing those other things I was always talking about.”

“You should.” Then she grinned. “Maybe you could celebrate your new-found freedom by getting a new car.”

“Wazza matter with your car?” Michelle asked.

“He just has a really old car,” Tish said.

“How about you?” Cy asked. “How’s your job?”

“Long hours, short money, but I like it. You know how that goes. Alan left us pretty well fixed. I’m like you; I don’t even have to work. But...” She paused, trying to figure out how to express it. “I always had my teaching certificate.”

“I remember.”

“I never used it. I thought it was my job to be your—” a quick concerned look to the little girl “—to be a wife; that’s all.”

Michelle was looking from Cy to Tish, and Cy could tell the girl was trying to decode what wasn’t getting said.

“I’m sorry—”

Tish waved it away. “It wasn’t you. Well, not entirely. That’s what I thought I was supposed to do. I like what I do now. I like that I’m *doing* something. Oh, the kids are often a pain in the ass—”

“Mom!” Michelle barked.

“I’m sorry, Hon,” Tish said to her daughter. “You’re right. Mommy used a bad word.” She smiled at Michelle, proud of her daughter, proud of the power her daughter had over her. “As I was saying, the kids can be a pain *in the neck*—” she looked over to Michelle, waiting for her approving nod “—and

their parents are worse, and there's as much political backbiting and bureaucratic b.s.—" a quick glance at Michelle to see if "b.s." passed muster "—as you ever saw at your office. But there are days when you connect with the kids, and..." She didn't know how to finish it, but Cy nodded, pretending to understand.

"I saw the Christmas card they made."

She beamed and dug into her linguini. "Home-cooked meal like this is a treat. I don't usually have time to make something decent. Even when I have a little time..." She flapped her lips tiredly. "I almost didn't get our Christmas tree. We didn't have one last year. Or the year before. You know..."

"I know."

"I wanted to have one this year. For my princess." She smiled, leaned over and ruffled the girl's hair. Michelle shrugged the hand off, embarrassed in front of Cy.

"Seeing anybody?" He thought he'd managed to make it sound casual.

"Not really. I mean, I go out once in a while, but..."

"Yeah."

"It's hard right now. I know it's been a while, but sometimes it doesn't feel that long."

“Sure.”

“And you?”

He twirled some linguini thoughtfully on his fork. Not enough garlic, he thought. “About the same.”

The little girl dropped her fork in her plate with a heavy clink and let out a very theatrical, very bored sigh.

“You want to go watch TV?” Tish asked and let her go.

Then Tish was clattering around in the kitchen, cleaning up. Cy was slouched on the sofa, and there was something warming against the cold night in the familiarity of that.

The little girl had her chubby fingers clamped around the TV remote. She kept stabbing the channel selector button, flipping between several channels running cartoons. She looked over at him; he smiled, pretending the constant flicking didn’t annoy the hell out of him.

When Tish finished in the kitchen, she came into the living room and put the little girl on her lap. They watched *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The mother and daughter chatted and giggled at the Claymation reindeer and his

luminescent nose, an odd elf that wanted to be a dentist, and a prospector looking for a peppermint mine. The little girl forgot about the man on the sofa. Her mother seemed to forget about him, too.

“Thanny Clauth!” Michelle called out, beaming and pointing at the ho-ho-ing Claymation figure on the screen.

“That’s right! Santa Claus! And he’ll be here in just a few days!” Tish tickled Michelle’s small, round belly. The girl tried to tickle her back.

“Ith a cow!” Michelle pointed at the reindeer.

“No! That’s a reindeer, silly!”

“Ith a *cow*!” Michelle thought this was a funny joke.

“Reindeer, you silly magilly!” Tish tickled her again.

“*Cow*!” Michelle laughed.

Cy turned to the window behind him.

After Rudolph led Santa off around the world, Tish took Michelle by the hand and brought her over to Cy. “Say goodnight to our guest.”

“G’nigh’.”

Cy put on a small smile. “Good night.”

Michelle looked over her shoulder at him as Tish led her out, those blue eyes still cold, cautious, studying. Cy turned away toward the TV.

After they left the room, he turned the set off, listened to the night's routine. Water ran in the bathroom and dresser drawers shuffled. There were some giggles, the boinging of bed springs, a few rhyming couplets of Dr. Seuss, whispered goodnights, the quiet smack of a kiss.

He turned on the stereo, twirled the dial until he found something quiet and easy.

When Tish came back, she was wearing a bulky, shapeless robe over baggy pajamas. She got something from the kitchen.

"Remember this?" he asked and pointed to the stereo: James Taylor singing "Fire and Rain." "I took you to see him. It was our first Valentine's Day. He was great, wasn't he? It was over in Jersey somewhere. Not the arena; he's not an arena kind of act. It was somewhere down the Parkway, wasn't it? Down around..."

She turned off the radio and smiled. Then she twisted her lips oddly, not in a nostalgic way, not... Not anything he could read. She dropped tiredly into the easy chair, legs tucked neatly under herself. She began spooning something out of the little jar she'd brought with her from the kitchen.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Dessert."

“What happened to your diet?”

“It’s baby custard.”

“I saw it in the fridge. I thought it was for the kid.”

“She’s a little old for baby food, Cy.”

“So are you.”

“True. Would you like some tea?”

“Coffee?”

“I don’t keep coffee. I have some herbal tea. Don’t make a face. Try it.”

“No, thank you.”

“It keeps you regular.” She grinned.

“Not a problem here. I, um, meant to tell you, to call...”

She waited.

“You know, to say how sorry I was about—”

“You said that this morning.” She looked into her jar of baby custard. “I appreciate your saying it.”

“How old was Michelle?”

“She’d just started walking. She won’t remember him. I have pictures, I’ll tell her stories, but she was too young. There won’t be anything for her to hold on to. It’s sad, but...” She shrugged, resigned. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s better

that way. She won't miss him." She dropped the spoon into the empty jar, set it on the coffee table. "What I like about teaching is I have her all the time in the summer."

"You took a chance having her... You know, because, well..."

"Because of my 'advanced years'?"

He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "I don't know I'd have said it like that."

Her eyes dropped into her lap. "Alan was already sick. We thought... We both thought there should be something... For after..." She shook her head, laughing at herself. "I don't know how to explain it without sounding silly."

"I miss you." It surprised him to realize he'd said it aloud. "It was no whim, me coming here."

"Really?" she asked, smirking. "Honest?"

"Don't make fun. I wanted to see you again."

She studied him. "What happened? Is this about the job?"

Yes, it was about the job, and yes, he had been seeing someone—There'd been several someones—and it was about all that and a hundred other things, too.

"No, it's not," she said, answering her own question, then she nodded and seemed to understand what even he didn't quite understand.

“I mean this as a compliment, and I hope you take it that way,” he said.

“You’re more astute than you used to be.”

“I teach kids, Cy. They’re worse than any of those hungry junior execs at your outfit. If you’re not sharp, they’ll eat you alive.”

They both laughed, and he was glad because he needed a laugh just then.

“There’s nothing here, Cy. There’s nothing left.”

“That’s a little too pat.”

She shrugged as if to say ‘tough.’

He was dying for a cigarette, but he figured you didn’t smoke in an herbal tea home.

He turned his head to the misted window glass. He rubbed a peephole with a knuckle. The grounds were covered with a thin layer of frost. The world was empty, quiet, lit by cold fluorescents along the walks and Christmas lights flashing red, green, yellow, and blue in apartment windows. “Do you remember our first Christmas?”

“After all this time—years, Cy—you didn’t honestly expect there’d still be something, did you?” she asked.

He kept looking out the window.

“I’m sorry, then,” she said.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I failed you, Cy. You don’t have to be nice about it. I did. I could make excuses. I was young. We both were. But I’m not sure excuses matter now. If it was today, maybe it’d come out differently. But it didn’t happen today. It was a long time ago.”

“I’ll leave in the morning, if that’s all right.”

“Fine.” She stood. “You know, you really should get rid of that car.”

He looked at her in her frumpy pajamas and frumpy bathrobe standing in the small living room of her messy little apartment, and he could see just how much time had passed, how long gone what had been between them was.

“Good night, Cy.”

He raised a hand, heard her bedroom door close.

He put the empty jar of baby custard in the kitchen sink, turned off the apartment lights, and stretched out on the sofa, massaging his knuckles, feeling a slight arthritic heat under his hand. He could hear her climb into bed and slip under the covers, the click of her night table light.

She didn’t need him. She didn’t *need* anybody. This was her place, her life.

It came to him that he didn’t really know her anymore.

The windows over the sofa where Cy lay were filled with the yellow light of morning, and it felt good and warming on his face. He sat up on the sofa, stretched.

The apartment was quiet. Tish and the little girl were gone. That's best, he thought.

He pulled on his wingtips, shook out his suit jacket and slipped it on, did the same for his bridge coat.

She'd left hot water on the stove, but he didn't bother. He pulled on his jacket and stood in the front doorway, looking around the apartment for a long moment. No sign he'd ever been there.

You go under and you don't even leave a ripple.

A native New Jerseyan, **Bill Mesce, Jr.** is an occasional author, even more occasional screenwriter and playwright. He is currently finishing up a one-year appointment to the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Maine at Farmington, after which he'll return to New Jersey where he adjuncts at several universities and colleges.