

Mike Cartmell

Pulled Under

He held his breath for as long as he could and kicked towards the surface. It seemed impossibly far away. *I can't die like this*, he thought. *It was just a slip*. A freak accident. The circumstances had conspired against him. He couldn't die. It would be too tragic.

He fought and struggled. Something cold grabbed his leg. When it began to pull him in the wrong direction, he conceded that he was going to drown.

*

Ida met her brother for coffee. It was something they had kept to every Saturday since he'd moved back to Blackpool. She was going through a tough time, and it comforted her to have regular company that she could rely upon. She hoped he felt the same way, though it was not always easy to tell.

"Mark, I've seen the paper. Another body washed up on shore. You don't have to hide it."

Ida had watched him fidget nervously with the newspaper in front of him for the best part of ten minutes and read the signs. He hadn't touched his coffee.

"Ah." He showed her a sympathetic smile. "I know. I just wasn't sure how you'd react."

"It's been six months now. I've stopped looking for his name in the paper. I doubt they'll ever find his body."

Mark was proud of his sister. Although he hardly knew Kelvin, he knew how much he'd meant to her. In her circumstances, he didn't think he'd have been able to cope as well as she seemed to be. He sipped tentatively at his coffee.

"This one's strange though," Ida said, opening the paper to the story of the most recent drowning. "Found by a jogger at 7am, identified by a business card in his wallet. Doesn't say how he drowned because nobody saw it. There was nobody looking for him."

Not like six months ago, Mark thought. The lifeboats and police helicopters searched for days without finding anything.

Ida continued, "It makes you wonder though, doesn't it? This happens a lot, we read about it all the time, but how many are never found, just go missing? What happens to them?"

Mark imagined then he was on the edge of the pier. He knelt down and leaned over to look at the sea. He imagined that he could see the missing, pale faces of the lost, bobbing lifelessly beneath the surface. There were too many to count.

He did not answer her.

*

That evening, it rained heavily. Ida had difficulty sleeping most nights since the accident but this was the worst it had been. Rain bombarded her window and she could hear it rushing like a waterfall outside. She looked out at the streetlamp and saw the water pouring under its illumination.

She immediately began to worry as she recalled her earlier conversation. *How many go missing?* The conditions were bad. The thought that another person might drown was suffocating her imagination. In the darkness, who would see them? They would be shadows, hidden from sight, their screams suppressed under the noise of the waves. She didn't want another to go missing.

Ida got changed quickly and left the house. It was cold and she pulled up the collar of her coat in defense. She heard cars as they drove through puddles, the noise of water being collected and sprayed underneath tyres. Although it was dark, it was not late. There were still people on the streets.

The fairground lights of the pier made her feel nostalgic. She had not been there at night since she was a teenager. Of course, it looked different now. Severe storms had wrecked part of the jetty, and there had been several fires causing damage. The sign was still burnt in places.

A group of youths were gathered by the entrance to the arcade. Ida made her way towards it, intending to pass through shelter to the other side of the pier. She ignored the wolf-whistles and lewd remarks that came from one of them. It must have surprised them seeing someone like her - not much older, but not one of them - on the pier alone. She had been in their shoes once, saw it from their eyes. In a way, she was glad to see the tradition had continued.

Ida continued past the flashing arcade machines that jingled retro sound effects in a hungry plea for coins. She took a coin from her pocket and placed it carefully into a coin-pusher. She watched with interest as it fell, ricocheted off the metal pegs and fell onto the moving platform. When it was pushed, her coin fell off the side.

Ida could see the spray coming off the sea. It was still raining heavily. She did not like the chances of anyone surviving if they were to fall on a night like this. Warily, she approached the end of the pier where she could see just see figures moving through the barrier of rain. Crazy, but perhaps they too had their reasons.

Closer, Ida could see that two children were playing near the railings. At first she could not believe it. Who would be so irresponsible to leave their kids alone on the pier, after the news today? She went over and called to them.

The children did stop to listen to her, but they looked bemused. They were older than she had first thought by some years, and did not seem to understand why what they did was any of her business. One of them glared at her dismissively.

"Please, just stay away from the edge," Ida repeated, the desperation in her tone becoming obvious. "It's too dangerous."

They walked away from her and back towards the arcade. Ida felt some relief, at least.

"I was just about to do that," said a voice from over her shoulder. Looking round, she saw a long-grey-haired man wearing fluorescent orange waterproofs. She wondered where he had come from.

"God knows what they're doing out here on a night like this," he continued, "Are you all right? You look a little lost."

Ida had no real answer to that. "I couldn't sleep," was all she could manage.

The man hesitated. "Oh dear, I'm sorry. You were in the papers not long back, weren't you?"

Ida nodded.

"I know it doesn't help you to hear it love, but I know a bit of what you're going through. Lost my dad in a lifeboat accident when I was a kid."

He sighed.

"For months I had the worst nightmares. I'm lying in bed and hear this faint dripping noise but I can't tell where it's coming from. Just keeps getting louder. Then I see there's cracks in all the walls where the water's getting through.

"But what scared me most was this feeling like I was being pulled down. Down through my bed almost. And it was that that woke me, not the water."

Ida shivered.

"Ah, sorry. Last thing you want to hear is me going on about it."

"No, it's just - I'm OK. What were you saying?"

"Well, I think that feeling never really went away. I almost came to... not *like* it, but accept it, I think. And for some reason I'm still on this pier and can't seem to leave it."

He smiled, changing his tone.

"Ah, now I don't know what I'm talking about. I suppose what I'm trying to say is if it can, you know," His voice trailed off again, not wanting to speak the words. "Just be careful, love. Pretty nasty out there tonight."

With that, the man left Ida to her thoughts. She watched as a giant wave rose up and crashed against the jetty. A girl who was standing too close gave a shocked cry as it splashed her. It was only then that Ida realised her clothes were drenched and that she'd been standing outside in the rain for too long.

*

It was not until several weeks later that those thoughts came back to Ida. The rain was again pelting down, darkening the pavements outside. She stood and looked at the window, watching the raindrops trickle; slowly at first, then quickly as they collected and formed together. It reminded her of the games she used to play with her brother when they were young, guessing which of the raindrops would fall first.

It took her a while to notice the dog in her field of vision, in her own garden. It was not one she recognised from the neighbourhood, and there didn't seem to be anybody nearby that could have been walking it. Ida watched it for a while as it strolled in front of her house. It moved slowly, disinterestedly. She knocked on the glass, but did not get a reaction. Reluctantly, she went outside.

The dog looked up at her, but held its ground. As Ida approached to check the collar on its tag, she found herself feeling a strange sadness for it. It didn't look hurt, but there was something about the dog that worried her. Its fur was completely drenched with rain, dripping from every part of its body to the puddle it stood in.

Every part of its body.

Water seemed to be coming off the dog at a rate that defied the rain that fell. It was as if it had just emerged from the sea.

She lifted its collar and dialled the number from the tag into her phone. As it rang, she left the dog and returned to the shelter of her house.

A man answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"I think I've found your dog in my garden," Ida said, looking at the dog through the rain-soaked window.

Ida heard a shocked gasp on the other end of the line, then the sound of someone clearing their throat.

The man spoke solemnly: "Think you've got the wrong number. We don't have a dog."

"Oh," Ida said, repeating the number she had dialled to make sure. "It's a brown Spaniel, looking very wet."

"Jesus Christ, is this some sort of sick wind-up? Our Jack's been dead since... since he fucking *drowned*. Fuck me."

The phone cut off. Ida clutched the handset to her chest, staring open-mouthed at the dog in her garden. She could hardly see its legs for the amount of water pouring from its fur. But it was definitely there - she had touched it. It must be *someone's* dog.

Ida coaxed the dog around the side of house and into the outhouse to dry off. The dog didn't complain, but it looked healthy. She went to find something to feed it. *Does it still need to eat?* she asked herself. *Does it still need to eat, if it's dead?*

*

Two days passed, and the dog was still there. It hadn't touched its food.

Ida felt guilty for keeping it, but she was afraid to ask for help after her experience with the phone call. She eventually told herself that she was being selfish, and could not keep the dog in her outhouse for any longer, which she had no desire to do anyway. Looking at it made her depressed. The dog seemed to emanate sadness.

She called her brother.

"Mark, I need you to come over. Something's happened."

"Ida? What's the matter?"

"I found this dog in my garden and I called the owners and they said-" She was aware that her voice was shaking. "He said they didn't have a dog, that it drowned. It's not eating anything. I don't know what to do."

"What kind of dog is it?"

"It's a brown Cocker Spaniel... called Jack."

There was a pause, and Ida heard typing.

"Mark?"

"Ah, thought so. Just *Googled* it. There was a story about a dog that drowned off the Pier last November. Jumped in after a ball. Then the kid panicked and jumped in after it. He drowned too."

"Shit. Oh shit."

"Hey, don't worry about it. They're obviously just trying to scare you. There's some pretty sick people out there that'll do anything to get a kick. I'll be right over; I'll take it to the RSPCA or something."

"Thanks."

Ida waited until she saw her brother's car pull up in the drive, unable to think of anything but the dog. She remembered the newspaper story now; it had upset her at the time. She wondered if it was just a hoax or a terrible coincidence that the dog ended up in front of *her* house.

When Ida answered the door, Mark could see the worry on her face. He realised then how serious she was taking it, and that he hadn't done much to lift that feeling.

She led him to the outhouse where the dog laid still. They exchanged awkward glances with each other, both wanting to say something to break the tension or explain away their fears, but the distinct feeling of wrongness left them unable to do so.

Ida stood outside as Mark opened the door and went over to the dog. He bent down next to it. It stirred and looked round. On looking at the dog's face he too felt a sudden sadness; a sinking feeling that he could not attribute to any feature of the dog itself, nor to any thought he was having.

He went to run his hand over its back, but recoiled when he felt that it was still very wet. It had not rained that day, yet his hand was dripping water from the briefest of touches. He turned to look at Ida but did not say anything; her expression told him that she had noticed it too.

Mark lifted the dog to its feet and walked it to his car. Neither Ida nor Mark spoke of it again.

*

The incident affected Ida badly, and she found herself becoming obsessed with the stories of the other drownings, both before and after Kelvin's death. That story she stayed away from for the time being, for the lack of answers they gave only frustrated her. At least with the others, the details were generally clearer - especially when it came to finding the body.

She acquired archived copies of the relevant newspapers from the library. On occasion she was asked after sympathetically, but she was always assisted in finding what she wanted. Every detail from the stories fascinated her, from the background of the victims to the steps leading to their death. It surprised her how many were just plain accidents, the result of a series of unfortunate events coupled with dangerous conditions. Very few deaths could have been considered to be suspicious, and those that were often had elements pointing to suicide.

She found the story of the dog that Mark had told her about. It was as he had said: child and dog, both drowned. There was a photo of the dog in the article, and seeing it she had no doubt that it was the same one.

Ida's nights became increasingly restless, especially on nights when the rain fell heavily. It was on one of these nights that she caught herself sleepwalking. She had walked

downstairs and through the kitchen to the back door. The sound of the rain woke her, and the first thing she saw was her own reflection in the door's small window. As her eyes focused on the window, she had to concentrate to separate her reflection from the raindrops. She watched them fall.

Mark sometimes called to speak to Ida, but their conversations were short and frivolous. They had stopped meeting regularly. Ida had distanced herself from the outside world, only going out when she had to.

*

It did not come as a shock to Ida to see her dead husband standing on her doorstep one day. There was just a faint feeling of realisation; the acknowledgement of something which she felt she had already known. His hair, clothes and skin were wet, dripping, as if he was standing underneath a shower. They did not exchange words, for no words could have expressed their feelings. Words belonged to the realm of reality, the living. Here, they did not seem to matter.

They embraced on the doorstep; an instinctive act that Ida welcomed. It felt natural, and in that moment all was forgotten. Nothing mattered but the present. They had been reunited and though she would have liked the circumstances to have been different, she had to accept what they now were, as she had gradually been learning since his death.

She felt the water through her own clothes as he held her, tasted it through his lips. He smelt of the sea. These were things she would get used to.

Over the following weeks, their lifestyle resembled something of an ordinary relationship. They talked; often of each other, but never of the past. They stayed inside and, out of necessity, ignored any visitors, though this did not bother Ida much. Even making love became familiar again.

Ida started taking on aspects of Kelvin's behaviour herself. He liked to leave taps running, and so she did not stop him. Their carpets and furniture became soaked. He slept for long periods of time, and she became aware that she no longer had trouble sleeping. The nights when it rained, she was most comfortable.

Kelvin did not eat, and Ida did not question this either. Over time, she too stopped eating. There was less reason to go outside, so she stayed indoors.

Ida lost a lot of weight. When she looked at her pale reflection, she could barely remember what she used to look like. That life seemed completely disconnected from the one she presently lived, a very long time ago in her past.

*

Mark came over one evening, having had no success in getting through on the telephone. He knew that his sister had not been coping well at all since the incident with the dog. He rang the doorbell and waited, but did not get an answer. He tried knocking; still no reply. Worried, he walked around the house and, finding that the back door was ajar, let himself in.

"Ida? Are you in?" He called as he entered the house. Still no reply. He climbed the stairs to her bedroom and knocked once, twice, before edging the door open. He did so cautiously; not so he would not disturb her if she happened to be sleeping, but because he was genuinely afraid. He did not know what to expect.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room. When they did so, he saw that the bedroom was empty. Clothes littered the floor. Among them, torn pages from a newspaper.

He checked the other rooms only briefly. The house looked abandoned. He partly blamed himself, for having seen the signs and not acting on them. His sister was in trouble, and he was too late.

In the bathroom, he found that all the taps had been left running, and the bath was overflowing. He knew without doubt then that he was not going to find her, and he cried out in despair. He slammed his hand against the medicine cabinet, shattering the glass, and bottles fell to the floor.

*

Ida walked with Kelvin along the pier. It seemed deserted. The pulsing, low rumbling of the waves was the only sound she could hear.

The cool wind caressed her face, and she inhaled deeply the fresh air. She had not missed the outside, but now that she was by the sea again, she felt a sense of belonging.

A dog ran up to them and followed by their side. She recognised it, and then became aware that there were others, too. Some in front of her, some behind, as if she followed a queue which others had since joined. They looked as she now did: pale and forlorn, but walked deliberately in their procession towards the sea. In front of her in the line an old, long-haired man looked around, and smiled at her; a smile that held understanding and sympathy.

One by one, they walked off the end of the pier and down into the water. The waves were still. Ida held Kelvin's hand tightly. They smiled at each other.