

# Floater

by Brett Garcia Rose

*Click...click. Pay attention please. What I am about to tell you may save your life.*

The metallic voice screeches through the crackling speakers overhead as yellow inflatable vests are passed about, little rubber things more likely to choke a dolphin to death than preserve one of us. My shipmates watch in foggy-eyed misunderstanding, sucking on salty blow-tubes that have touched a thousand puckered lips. They raise their hands like schoolchildren, waiting to ask questions to which they already have the answers.

*In case of an emergency says the disembodied voice, inflate your life preserver and proceed in an orderly fashion to the lifeboats and await further instructions.*

People sway and swoon en masse, teetering on cone-shaped legs. Nine in the morning and half of them are already drunk. Vacation dazed, tomato-breath drunk, slathered in greasy sun block. A thousand miles from anywhere and all they can talk about is home. They're so full of shit even the sharks wouldn't eat them.

Vodka is lighter than water, but alcoholics don't float. Every year thousands of them die in bathtubs, saving countless others who would have been squashed by their sport utility hybrids racing back from the liquor store. In the morgue, they freeze a whole magnitude slower than the rest of us, too. But the crew, well, they have to try.

*Follow your group leader to your designated station, says the voice, don't run or push or shove...if this were an actual emergency you'd have plenty of time.* If we were sinking, you'd have hours at least. More than enough time to reach the elusive lifeboats and choose your shipmates based solely on their ability to float and keep their mouths shut.

As the voice scratches along I'm already sprinting in the opposite direction of the group, pushing aside land whales strangling in their too-small yellow vests. I need to be anyplace but here, this orgy of hope, this floating palace of Prozac and cholesterol and middle-aged

toddlers. They already *know* the drill. Eat. Sleep. Drink. Spend. Vote improperly and fuck your children.

Half these people, they'd probably bring luggage on the rafts, spend the last minutes of their lives blowing on the zippers as they dipped and bobbed in the Caribbean sun.

*Don't panic*, the metal voice tells me. *There is no need*.

I called my travel agent because I was already in a panic. Who better to get me out of a bad place in a hurry? Therapy takes years, at least. And I've yet to find a travel therapist, someone to come along with me on the short-path to healing.

Go on a cruise, she'd said.

I told her I'd jump. She laughed.

It's like an airplane, I said, only the windows open.

She smiled and swiped my Visa.

*In the unlikely event of an emergency*, the voice says, *you'll have several hours at least*. Unless of course there's a fire. Then the bulkhead doors will slam shut and, well, you can guess the rest.

The truth is that there are not enough inflatable boats to save the three thousand people on board. Titanic-era guidelines did not take into account the ever-expanding girth of the voyaging American. If they could fit in the seats these people would have taken an airplane and already be at their destination stuffing themselves into group comas with imported American cuisine. Add to their gluttonous personal mass the bulk of several decaying life preservers strung around their circumference and we'd be lucky to get five into each raft.

That the life rafts are manufactured in some third-world country from recycled condoms by tortured children who already wish us dead is just one rock in my pants. I couldn't be happier.

Me steaming towards the exit is like a rat knifing through trash.

The important thing is not to panic. You will not survive an iceberg or a hurricane or a killer whale or global warming or space-based weaponry. The sun is bad for you. Pornography causes blisters on the brain. The world is running out of clean water anyway so you might as well get used to the salt.

The important thing is that you remain calm and retain your life. Everyone is worth saving. Relax.

Have a Mohito. Call your lawyer.

The important thing to realize is that your wife is no safer with a female gynecologist than she would be with a rabid hyena.

I spend the next few hours on deck, measuring the distance of the railing with my thumb and pinky fingers and performing dubious calculations in my head. What I really need is a watermelon to measure the trajectory. I need wind and speed numbers to calculate the lateral force required to actually *reach* the water. Just because I'm suicidal doesn't mean I don't care about whacking my head on some service railing ten stories down. The fact that I'm going to jump doesn't lessen my fear of propellers or a broken back.

The next time someone clucks their tongue at you and says this or that person took their own life, acknowledge that they have no idea what they're talking about. The selfish windbags texting their lovers at our funerals and raiding our closets and investment accounts, they're the ones who take our lives. We just let go of the other end.

Suicides, we're the cullers of life, the toilers cleaning your playground. We're the ultimate recyclers. We know what the world needs and it isn't us. We're no different, really, than anyone else; we just have less patience.

That's why you love us more when we're dead.

At dinner I am greeted by the Captain, with the usual misguided respect career seamen have for mariners traveling alone. He goes from table to table, swelling like a jellyfish with each huge gulp of air. He is the same age and size of all boat captains. Same hair, same bad skin, same voice. Trailing him is a beautiful woman of indeterminate age, dark circles of indulgence ringing hard, grey eyes. Her head swivel-jerks around like an exotic insect tasting the dank air, looking for something smaller than itself to swallow.

No reason not to wait for dessert.

He asks our table how we are. What we think of his beautiful boat. Waddling like a duck and rubbing his grand belly on the backs of our heads. The girl with the Raccoon eyes squeezes my shoulder

as she wiggles past, taking long, smooth strides, her head rotating as she slides by me. I smile unnoticed. Women this beautiful, they know they have no inner self. They know that what you get is significantly less than what you see. They use what they have skillfully and efficiently, embracing their void and enjoying the simplicity of adolescent power well into middle age.

How I feel is seasick. Murderous would be another word. How I feel is miserable divided by dead. How I feel is angry at everyone here for smiling and letting me die, and furious that they have six billion clones waiting to greet my corpse onshore. How I feel is if the captain is so unapologetically fat, he can have a portion of my appetite-sucking depression and drop me safely in the brig with some carrots and a magazine.

How I feel about the boat is that it's a really big diving board.

The next time someone asks you how you feel, just tell them.

After dinner Raccoon Girl finds me out by the railing running my numbers again. Moves into my personal space like she's got the lease.

Got a cigarette? She asks.

Those things will kill you, I say.

Raccoon Girl laughs. You're going to jump anyway. I can always tell. There's two or three on every trip.

She's not even an inch away now, talking into my ear over the roar of the water below. Her hair keeps blowing into my mouth, not smooth and sleek and sexy like you'd think, but stringy, processed, sticky stuff. The MSG of hair.

The Buddhists say suicide's a temporary solution to a permanent problem, she says.

Come with me and we'll see.

She just smiles and swivels her head. Our bodies touch in at least eight different places.

The next time you come home and catch your wife in bed with a same-sex caregiver, the thing to do is open all of the windows and call Animal Control. You may be tempted to remove the irritants

yourself, but depending on where you live it's probably illegal, and disposing of bodies takes a lot longer than you'd guess.

So who's the fat guy, I ask.

My father, she says. And you're better off jumping from the stern. It's safer. Faster.

I'm about to ask her where the fucking stern is when she grabs my chin and kisses me, gums grinding against my jawbone. Not one of those sweet, romantic, tentative kisses. Nothing gentle or promising. No discovery process. She's eating me, basically.

I can feel the blood pooling in my lower lip.

I've fucked other jumpers, she says. Some of the best sex of my life.

An emotional bulimic myself, I get the general idea.

*Make your way down to Cabana Level, folks, the voice says, for a special treat.*

Are you a jumper, I ask?

I was, she says. Now I'm a groupie.

I'm still processing this as I chew on her hair.

Cabana Level turns out to be one level below ours. The music is deafening, Abba's *Dancing Queen* ripping across the ocean, all treble, like shark's teeth on a blackboard scaring away all the nice fish. Might as well get a troupe of baboons and hand them all whistles and trumpets. They could also double as security, gobs of white muscle and all.

The thing about ships is that there aren't many makeshift weapons handy. Everything is lashed down or glued or permanently fashioned. There are no axe handles or pewter candlesticks or infected needles lying about. The ropes are too thick to be of any use. The steak knives have little rounded tips. Even the light bulbs live in tamper-proof cages.

It's day care for grownups.

And from suicide to homicide, it's pretty much a lateral move. Same process, same tools, no additional investment required. The car doesn't care who's tied up in the trunk. And between the baboon music and the gyrating fatties below, and me pinned up against the

railing by some stick-thin groupie cannibal, ramming this boat into a building somewhere is not outside the box.

Jumping seems kind of...selfish.

Raccoon Girl continues gnawing. I'm seasick and stuffed with bad food, but at least she smells good. After several more minutes, she bites me one last time and then takes my wrist and leads me back inside through a service door.

Downstairs in her room, right by the massive power plants groaning on the lowest level, she asks if I want to do it on the railing. I don't get her angle, but figure it doesn't matter all that much. The room is decorated permanently, murals on the wall, red painted ceiling, personal mutilation you wouldn't expect to find in a thousand-dollar-a-night floater.

She even has a refrigerator.

You live here? I ask.

She pushes me out onto the balcony, leaving her clothes behind her. The water is maybe 20 feet below us. She's so thin I can't tell where she ends and the railing begins.

Naked though, aside from the unfortunate hair, she's not so bad.

I expect her to start eating again, which is OK since I'm sitting on the railing anyway - it's either her or the sharks - but instead she sits in my lap and lays her head against my shoulder.

I could drag her down with me, but I don't.

Later we make love. Hungry, grasping, awkward love, but also sweet in a noir kind of way. She kisses me nicely this time, barely enough to keep the wound open, her hunger and my desperation becoming a shared ache between us that we wrap our tired bodies around and hold onto in the cold air.

I sleep through the night for the first time in months.

As the sun rises the ship slips into Isla de Roatan, Honduras, our first port of call. The horns blow deeply, long, slow moans awakening me and announcing our arrival to the resting natives below. I can feel the ship fighting against the thick ropes as she's nudged and wedged into place, snatched from the ocean and tied against her will. Next to the bed is a plain white towel twisted into the shape of

an animal. A towel monkey, in cruise-speak, plastic Mayan coin replicas for eyes.

In its folded mouth is a napkin scrawled in lipstick saying, simply, *Thank You*.

I stand on the balcony watching the colorful passengers disembark down the ramps like cattle into a slaughterhouse, the small island greedily lapping them up. Leaning over the railing and shielding my eyes from the sun, I search for Raccoon Girl in the dusty horizon until I can no longer make out individual bodies. The metal voice spouts continual warnings about money, about germs, about local customs and schedules and water and insects and food and sun poisoning. The ship settles against her bindings by inches in the slack tide.

When I finish dressing the voice changes to a woman's voice, lurid and insulting and vaguely Hispanic. I take the napkin and the coin eyes and make my way through the maze of corridors and gangways, down the dock and onto a wide, unpaved road ringed with child vendors.

All of us, we buy and haggle and peddle our bad Spanish in this vast poverty, collecting items we can get in any bodega back home. One of the children stops me with his hand up and offers candy. He is small and dirty, little more than cracked skin stretched taut over bent, fragile bones. He offers me swimming, exotic pets, toys, Viagra, companionship, coca leaves, he'll be my tour guide, my partner in crime. I hand him the fake coins along with some real ones and keep walking.

The boy is still at my side when I reach the end of the road. I take off my watch and hold it out to him, watching as he snatches it and slides it up above his bicep. A light wind carries fragments of the voice up into the hills, reminding us of the 3.5 hours we have left, and telling us yet again to be careful. I turn around and look at the ship one last time, a grotesque tumor clinging to the edge of the continent and blocking out the sun, uneasy natives dancing in her shadow and imagining the better worlds she's yet to go.

When I turn back, the boy is gone.

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