

Mouth to Mouth

by Michael Kimball

Excerpt

Randy was twenty feet down, his left arm sucked into the drainpipe to the top of his shoulder. As deep as he was, the pressure of twenty feet of water trying to rush through the pipe prevented him from pulling his arm out. So now he sat twisted on the rocky bottom, his head crooked against the concrete, facing the bright, rippling sky. His wetsuit was torn at the top of his shoulder, where the threaded end of the pipe had cut into his flesh, and blood darkened the water around the wound, oozing like smoke out of the tear in the suit. But Randy could no longer feel any sensation in the arm, which had gone from cold to practically numb. His right arm curled around his chest, trying to warm himself. His whole body shivered.

As Neal swam down toward him, Randy gazed up listlessly, his chest rising and falling, bubbles of carbon dioxide breaking quietly from his regulator. He watched Neal stop about three feet above him, hovering there. Randy unfolded his left arm from his body and gave him a thumbs-up sign. You got me, bub. You win.

Neal held up five fingers, then tapped his wrist—five minutes, in diving code—which meant help was on its way.

Randy nodded, gave him another thumbs-up. Hope I can wait five minutes, man. Mattera-fact, I'm ready to go up now.

Neal turned away and kicked for the surface. Randy watched his dark body grow smaller as it rippled up into the light. Then everything got quiet again. No sound but the cold air coming out of the scuba tank into his lungs, then going out again. In and out. In and out. And the ridiculous fucking cold. Randy rubbed his chest briskly with his free hand. Didn't do much good. He was shivering like crazy.

So, five minutes and they'd get him out. Probably Rooftop was on his way. Randy looked down at his gauge. Five minutes. Cuttin it kinda close, boys. In fact, it was already getting harder to breathe, as if someone was standing behind him, pinching his air hose. He looked at the gauge again, trying to see if it was five minutes or four. Looked more like four. He raised his face to the sky, watching for Rooftop. Then a sudden thought came to him, uninvited and entirely unwelcome. More than a thought, it was a feeling, and his entire body jerked with a monstrous jolt of fear.

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"He's got five minutes!" Neal shouted when he broke the surface. The water was an inch lower than the top of the dam. The pond lay still.

"Maybe we can winch him out," Scott said. "Hook up to one of those trees." He stepped down to the diving rock, beside Ellen, and dropped the scuba tank in the water.

"You'll tear his arm off," Neal told him, swimming over to retrieve the tank. "There's five hundred pounds of pressure trying to pull him through the pipe."

"Well, what the hell are we gonna do?" Scott yelled.

"Is it just his arm that's stuck?" Ellen asked.

"Up to his shoulder," Scott answered. "Give Neal the mask."

She dropped the mask into Neal's hands. He spat on the glass and rubbed it around with his fingers, then pulled the strap over his head.

"Pump it out," Ellen said.

Neal stared up at her. She turned to Scott.

"Get the fire trucks down here," she said. "If we can lower the pressure--"

"The trucks are in the parade, they'll never get here in time," Scott told her. He clawed the top of his head with both hands.

"Can we break through the dam?" Ellen asked him. "From the other side--break through to relieve the pressure?"

Scott looked down at Neal, questioning.

"Rock and concrete," Neal said skeptically.

"It's worth a try," Scott said. "Neal, go down and tell him we're gonna get him out. Ellen, stay by the phone. I'll get the pickaxe." Scott climbed back up the bank, then ran off toward the house.

Ellen looked down at Neal in the water, the telephone tight in her hand, her body shivering despite the full sunlight on her back. While birds sang obliviously all around her, she watched a flurry of bubbles break against the dam. She thought of her wounded sheep sprawled in the pasture waiting to die, the way it had breathed.

"Neal, get him out," she said evenly.

"We're doing everything we can."

She stared at him. He gave nothing away. Gulping a quick breath of air, she dived into the water and, when she'd surfaced, said, "Give me the tank."

"Ellen, don't go down there."

"Give me the tank."

Their eyes met.

"Sit on the rock, I'll help you put it on," he told her. She swam over and hoisted herself up, and Neal handed the heavy tank up to her. She fit her arms through the straps, then pulled the weight belt around her waist, snapped the latch and pulled it tight. Neal stripped the mask off his forehead and handed it to her. She pulled it down over her face, fit the regulator in her mouth, slipped off the rock and went under, pulling a deep breath of compressed air into her lungs and blowing it forcefully out, as she turned and kicked for the bottom. At first, she saw Randy only as a vague, black shape in the surrounding darkness, but the deeper she swam, the more acclimated to the darkness she grew, so by the time she was five feet from him, she saw something that made her stop just out of his reach.

He was sitting stiffly on the bottom with his right side pressed tight against the dam and his left fist clenched against his shoulder, facing up at her with his eyes shut and a horrible grimace on his face. Ellen might have thought him dead, were it not for the small bubbling from his regulator or the rapid rise and fall of the chest. Then she realized what he was doing. His wetsuit was sliced open in

three places at the shoulder, like the gill slits of a shark, and slender threads of blood curled off the blade where he held a knife to his flesh.

She let herself descend another inch, until her shadow darkened Randy's face. His eyes opened. Suddenly the knife blade flashed up at her. She pushed herself back. But she knew by the sorrowful look in his eyes that he was not attacking her. He was trying to hand her his knife. He motioned to his shoulder, his eyes desperately pleading. He wanted her to amputate his arm.

She shook her head adamantly.

He waved the knife at her, insistent.

Equally insistent, Ellen refused again.

Behind his mask, his eyes seemed to glaze with sadness. He looked down at his shoulder again, then turned back to Ellen as if to continue the argument. She gestured back at him, that she wanted to give him the tank she was wearing. As she reached down to unbuckle her weight belt, suddenly his eyes flared and he lashed out, knife flashing.

She kicked back, just as a hand shot past her and captured Randy's wrist. In the flurry of bubbles, Ellen saw Neal pulling Randy's arm upward, while Randy's knife pecked furiously at him. Then Randy swung his legs up, as if trying to wrap them around Neal's neck, but when his right knee kicked up, his knife pierced his own thigh. Ellen saw a burst of bubbles expel from Randy's regulator as the blood inked thickly from his leg.

Clutching Randy's wrist with both hands, Neal pressed his feet against the convex face of the dam and pushed. From above, it might have looked like he was trying to pull Randy out of the pipe--if the men could have been seen, which they could not, as deep as they were.

Down in the dark, Ellen could see the knife tremble in Randy's hand; she could see the contortion of his face and how his arm actually seemed to stretch as his wetsuit ripped wider, the blood rushing out of his shoulder cut and streaming into the pipe. A sudden pop sounded, then a gurgling scream from Randy, and his wetsuit sleeve snapped free at the shoulder and was sucked into the drain. In the same instant, the knife dropped from his hand and floated to the bottom. Then Neal released his wrist and swam down to retrieve the weapon.

Floating in the fog of stirred-up silt, Ellen could nevertheless see Randy's eyes through their masks, gazing longingly at her, conveying a desperate understanding of his fate. She started removing her tank again, but Neal took hold of her arm. When she wheeled around and shook her head at him, he knocked on the tank, pointed to his wrist, then pointed up. She understood. Maximize the air in both tanks. She kicked for the top.

She broke into open and pulled the regulator from her mouth as Neal surfaced beside her, looking all around.

"Take this," he said, poking her hand with the handle of Randy's knife. "Hide it."

She scowled at him.

"Ellen, now," he said urgently.

She tore the mask from her face and slapped it on the water between them.

"You get him out of there," she whispered.

"Ellie!" Scott shouted, appearing on the ledge above them with a pickaxe in his hand. "What are you doing?"

She felt the knife handle slide into her palm again, and her heart pounded. She refused to take it.

"What are you doing in the water?" Scott shouted again, his face a bright, burning pink. He slammed the pickaxe onto the abutment under his feet. "I told you to man the phone!"

"We were trying to pull him out," she answered.

"Neal and I already tried. We need to conserve the air in that tank, now get up here."

Treading water, Ellen threw her shoulders back and wriggled out of the diving tank--Neal helped pulled it off--then took one powerful stroke to the diving rock and pulled herself onto her stomach. Lifting herself to her feet, she couldn't hide how her legs were shaking.

"How is he?" Scott asked her.

"Cold," Neal answered. "The seal's gone in his wetsuit."

"Don't either of you go down there anymore," Scott told him. "Neal, stay on the surface and watch his bubbles so you'll be ready to change tanks when he runs out of air." He turned back to Ellen as she stepped up onto the bank. "I know it goes against your goddamned nature," he told her, "but right now you've got to do what I say."

Jerking away from her, he marched around the end of the dam and dropped the pickaxe over the side. It rang angrily when it hit the rocky stream bed below. As he started lowering himself down the granite bank, Randy's knife clattered on the rock at her feet.

She turned back to the pond and glared at Neal, who was floating on the scuba tank.

"Ellen, get rid of it," he said quietly. She wanted to kick it back into the water.

"*Ellie, where are you?*" Scott shouted.

She kicked the knife underneath Randy's duffle bag as she stepped onto the abutment, where she could see Scott on the other side of the dam, pickaxe in hand, balancing over the rocks of the stream bed.

"Can you see bubbles?" he called up to her.

"Yes," Ellen answered, positioning herself so both Scott and Neal were in her sight. In fact, the curve in the dam allowed Ellen to see part of both faces of the structure: the near half of the pond face and the far half of the dry face, where the outlet pipe was located, a dark, eight-inch hole embedded in the granite blocks about three feet off the ground.

Scott chose a spot about five feet beyond the pipe, secured his footing on the slippery rock, then swung the pickaxe. The impact on the rock did nothing to the dam, but at the same moment, Ellen noticed a movement inside the pipe. She realized, to her horror, that she could see the tips of Randy's fingers beckoning, like pale earthworms, for the light. She visualized the thickness of the dam and imagined how far his arm must have been stretched.

Scott swung the pickaxe again, with a vicious grunt. This time its tip stuck between two keystones and held fast. Knowing the way the keystone rocks fit

together--the structure was actually strengthened by the force of the water--Ellen wondered how Scott could hope to break through. She looked down to the duffel, saw sunlight flash off the tip of the blade. If Randy died with a wound in his leg, she thought, and the knife were found . . .

“Ellen,” Neal called quietly.

She ignored him. *Hide it where?* She looked back toward the pasture, the house, the barn, the pump house . . .

“Scott!”

He attacked the dam again.

“Scott, I know how we can drain the pond!”