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THE EYES OF LIFE

by

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Howie was dying. He knew he was. There wasn't anything he could do about it. He would live a while longer, a few minutes, a few hours, perhaps, and then he would die. Just as simple as that. Not half so complex as the life he would have to live if he didn't die. Dying is never as complex as living.

Howie wasn't as angry at the fact that he had to die as he was at the way in which he had to die. He had often pictured to himself how he would prefer to leave. Most of us do, if we think about it at all. And we might just as well, once in a while anyway. Die from a roaring drunk, one you never wake up from. No hangover to worry about. You get foggier and foggier, and finally, you're out. And that's it. But out here in a

small fishing dory in the middle of the worst blizzard that had hit the North Atlantic for years - not much to drink here.

He could see dying from a quick bullet through the heart. One you don't know is coming, and one minute you're there, and the next you're up making apologies to St. Peter. That wouldn't be too bad, but to sit out there, slowly freezing to death, watching down your nose at the tiny pellets of ice that clung there like so many pearls, and wondering just how long it would be before they closed up your nose completely. Might just as well be clogged with ice as dirt, though.

Well, one thing, the cold seemed more pleasant than painful now. It wasn't like it was at first, when you still expect that the Coast Guard or the schooner you are fishing off might pick you up, and you row like hell, trying to keep the blood circulating through your body. Of course, you have to row anyway, or the boat will be swamped. Keep the bow headed into the waves, and you stand a chance. So you row, trying to keep your mind off the cold and the snow and the ocean, but it's hard, because you are always expecting the rescue which is never going to come.

That was before, though; it isn't hard to think of other things now. It never is when you're dying. It's easy to look down at your hands which have frozen solid to the oar handles, and wonder what the boys on the "Wanderer" are doing now. Eating chow, probably. ~~That's today, Fri-~~
~~day?~~ Beans and hot rolls. And coffee. And to top off with, a big bottle of that warm, stomach-tingling Portuguese wine they always carry on these trips. It goes in your mouth, and then drops way down to your stomach before you feel it on your lips. And then, it burns like a brush fire, further and further down, and you try to stop the burning by taking another swallow. That's the big mistake. You have to wait

first. Then, try another.

The waves are huge, and they foam at the top like a mad dog frothing at the mouth. They act like a mad dog, too, rushing forward at you, and then dropping away, only to come quickly back with another lunge. They were more dangerous than a mad dog. The wind was strong, but it didn't make much noise. It couldn't. There wasn't anything for it to moan through, not trees, or dead grass, or anything. The only real noise that there was was the ^{sound} of the snow as it fell in huge hissing sheets, almost like rain, into the sea where it melted. There was a lot of it, but it was all swallowed up by the rough ocean, and it disappeared, never to be seen again. A lot of things are like that.

Much of the snow which fell into the bottom of the dory mixed with the water that had occasionally been shipped in over the side, and they both froze, till it was impossible to tell which had been snow and which water. This extra weight was bad, because it made the dory sink lower into the water, and this made a greater chance for shipping more water. But it was good, because it made the dory easier to keep headed into the waves. You had to take both points into consideration.

Howie could row automatically now. He didn't even have to think about it. No sense in thinking about it anyhow. No sense in thinking about anything as far as that goes. It never gets you anywhere. Except on a fishing trip which was going to end in your freezing your foolish body to hell and gone. That's all the good thinking does you.

Howie's body was dead already, except for that rowing motion in his arms, and that didn't count because he didn't know he was doing it. His mind, though, was fully alive. It was working overtime, just as though it knew there wasn't much time left to think all the thoughts it had wanted

to think ever since it had been old enough to know that there was such a thing. Of course, it was foolish to think, but how do you stop the thoughts from running through your head when you're dying. You can't! So why try? You just make dying that much harder.

The beach at home. The beach with the hot sun and the hotter sands, where you lie down and bake first one side and then the other. Where you buy a hotdog for a dime, and stand there a few minutes before you eat it, and just look at it, and wonder what a hotdog is anyhow. And what's it doing inside a bun, with mustard and relish smeared all over it. But you eat it anyway, while you look at all the women in their sexy bathing suits, until you see a fat woman, and then you wish she had a little more on, and perhaps the hotdog doesn't taste quite as good as before.

The steam baths, with the masseur who comes in and rolls you around, and pounds you, and the sweat comes out all over you. Then, you rinse with cold water, or hot would be even better, and you feel so fresh and clean. You feel so pure and virginal that you might almost think twice about going to bed with a woman. If you had a chance. But it's only idle thought. You know damn well that you would.

And it would be hot, and you would probably start sweating again, but you could sleep afterward if she was a nice girl, and maybe the sheets would be clean anyhow. And you'd still be warm when you wake up, but if she wasn't your wife, she might not be around any longer. You hope! And you have a bad taste in your mouth, like dead flowers.

The bar is the place, though. That's where the gang all hangs out. It's a nice bar, small and cozy with just the right distribution of just the right guys. No big drunks like they have in some bars, and they always expect you to let them sprawl all over you while they tell you their

troubles. God knows you have enough of them yourself without having to listen to someone else's. Why should you anyhow? But your bar isn't like that. No drunks, and none of the next worse thing in a bar, women. No women at your bar, you said, and you ~~never~~^{never} had any trouble about it either. Your bar was always warm, and the radiators would make pleasant little hissing sounds as the warm steam came out and hit the air.

It was much colder now, and Howie's face was almost completely obliterated by the snow which had melted and then frozen to it. You'd never know to look at Howie now that there were yellow oilskins under that big blob of snow which covered him from chin to foot, or that the miniature drift on his head covered a sou'wester. His head looked like he was wearing one of those old-fashioned hats women wore long ago- the big ones with the wide brims that kind of dipped down in front and back.

The cars were still moving slightly in the water, but it could have been the pushing and pulling action of the waves that was effecting this motion. Only a slight glint of blue eyes showed through the ice and snow which clung to Howie's eyebrows and cheekbones, and the sight had been blinded from them long ago. Perhaps, he thought, as a number of men do, ^{that} ~~that~~ there was nothing to look at in life anyhow. Man lives a life of blindness.

Howie was dying a little faster now. His body was already dead, but his mind still revolted at the idea. It must have been made of finer stuff. Something white fluttered out of the falling snow. It settled with some difficulty on the plunging stern of the dory, and stared intently at the white drift that was Howie, and at the blue eyes which still stared ahead unseeingly. What was a seagull doing out in a storm

like this. It must have been blown quite a way in this wind, and it must be hungry, for the surface fish which it lives on go down quite deep during bad storms. The seeing eyes of the gull stared into the unseeing eyes of Howie, and you could tell that it wanted them.

Seagulls are funny things. Take this one for example. He might be from Howie's home town. He might have wheeled and dipped over the same yacht club Howie belonged to. Yet, here he was, out here in the middle of the ocean, with probably the only thought in its head being where it was going to get something to eat. Survival of the fittest, perhaps. Does this mean that the seagull was more fit to survive than Howie, or that the seagull survived because of Howie? I don't know. I don't think anyone does.

Howie's eyes are gone now. A little trickle of frozen blood is all that is left to remind the elements that under this pile of ice and snow is all that remains of a member of the group that was meant to rule all the animals of the forest, and all the fish of the sea. Howie doesn't need eyes where he went. It's cold and dark there.

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