

*A Short Story*

# DANGEROUS PRESSURE

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TEEN & ADULT



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## Dangerous Pressure

I could hear my daughter yelling in the kitchen: “How could you be so dumb? You do everything your friends tell you to do, even when you know it’s stupid? What’s wrong with you?”

I peaked in and saw my fifteen year old grandson wilting under the sharp tongue and withering glare of his mother. “What’s the problem?” I said.

“He let some so-called friends pressure him into doing something so stupid, I can’t even talk about it.”

The anger that radiated from her was almost touchable even from where I was across the room and I knew how Jeff, my grandson, must be feeling.

“Everyone makes peer pressure mistakes, so perhaps you should take a breather and calm down a bit. I’m sure it’s not anywhere as bad as it seems at

this moment. Certainly not as bad as some of the mistakes I made at his age.”

They both just looked at me, so I continued. “I think it was 1968, maybe ’69 - - “

The boat was gone; our scuba tanks nearly empty and the shore so far away. We were in trouble! An hour ago if someone had told me that I’d be fighting for the life of a friend and possibly mine too - - well, I would have told them they were crazy. My life hadn’t flashed before my eyes, but the start of this whole mess and how one stupid thing leads to another did.

I was topping off the fuel tanks of my dad’s new speedboat when I heard footsteps on the dock behind me.

“Hey Frank, how about going for a spin?”

“Hi, Mike. I’d like to, but I have to ask my dad and he’s not home.”

“Come on. Just a quick run. You drive the boat all the time, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure, but I get OK first and - - ”

“Well come on then. Don’t be such a wimp. Besides, who’s to know anyway?”

“All right, all right, but just a quick one.”

“Great! I’ll be back in a second.”

I was busy in the bilge. The blower was on and I was checking a “telltale” for explosive fumes when Mike came on board with an unusually heavy thump. It wasn’t until we were well out of the cove and heading for “Man-of-War” reef that I

learned the reason for that thump. Mike had brought his scuba gear along.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Since we were going out anyway, I figured I might as well take a quick dive.”

“Now wait-a-minute, Mike. You know you’re not supposed to dive alone.”

“I see your gear and you’ve got a tank on board, don’t you?”

“The tank is my dad’s. Besides, we’re supposed to have an adult with us.”

“Listen, Frank. Both of us are certified and we are as fully trained as any of the adults that dive with us.”

“Junior certified! And Dad says I can’t dive without him or another adult. He made it a rule!”

“You can drive this boat, but you can’t dive with me. Don’t be such a - - oh never mind. I’ll dive by myself.”

“You forget about the buddy system?” Mike started breaking out his gear. “One of the first diving rules we learned?”

“So stop being such a baby and *be* a buddy.”

I dug out my stuff and the tank Dad keeps stowed aboard. “I don’t feel right about this, Mike.” All I got was a disgusted look.

We anchored near the “drop off” where the reef forms a sixty foot cliff under water. Mike went in first and by the time I made it to the anchor line, I saw the tips of his fins disappear over the edge. What’s the matter with him? We always buddy-up at the anchor. I wanted to inspect the anchor set, but I also did not want to lose Mike. I took off after my “buddy”.

The diving is super at Man-of-War. The warm water is clear and swarming with colorful fish. We explored shallow caves and alleys; snooping in on the homes of countless creatures: spiny lobster, blear eyes, red and yellow snappers, grouper that gawked back at us, delicate angel fish, moray eels that constantly opened and closed their toothy jaws, and even a nurse shark sleeping on the sandy bottom under a ledge. Near the end of the dive we were both startled when a large ray, buried and invisible in the sand, broke away. With its great wings flapping, it seemed to fly, cutting through the water as gracefully as an eagle through the air. It was then that Mike signaled to me that he was going on air reserve and we headed for the boat.

Following our bubbles up the face of the drop off, I looked up for the boat. I'd anchored here dozens of times, so I was positive we were at the right spot; yet I couldn't see the bottom of the boat anywhere. The anchor was found twenty feet from where it should have been and attached was only a short length of the line. Obviously the anchor hadn't set properly and because I didn't take the time at the start of the dive to check it, the boat had dragged. The rope had then chaffed against some coral, eventually parting, and we were almost three miles from shore without a boat.

There was a slight surface chop and I immediately started to blow up my vest. All I could think about was that I had lost the boat. My dad's boat. My dad's new, expensive boat. Gone because I'd been careless.

"Hey Frank, my vest won't inflate."

“Didn’t you test it before the dive? Don’t you do anything right? I mean this whole mess is *your* fault.” I didn’t know who I was mad at more, Mike or myself.

“Ditch your tank and we’ll head in.”

“My tank and regulator? No way!”

“We’ll stash them by the anchor and pick’em up later.”

“I’ll leave my weight belt, but these are brand new, so no way!” We can swim in under water. Staying shallow, I should have enough air to make it.”

I thought Mike was being dumb, again, but I agreed. He dropped his weights at the anchor and we started back to shore. Neither one of us realized how deceptively strong the current was. To swim against it took a lot of heavy breathing, using a lot of air. Half way and Mike drew his hand across his throat. Empty. Out of air. We continued on the surface with snorkels. I had no problem with my inflated vest, but Mike was having a hard time and yet he would not drop his tank.

Another twenty minutes and I could see he was tiring. Then, suddenly, he was under water. I couldn’t believe it. Instead of pulling his quick release to ditch the tank, he was struggling - - trying to claw his way back to the surface. I guess I was screaming. I kept hearing someone yelling “Mike, Mike, Mike”, as I frantically squeezed air out of my vest. And he kept going down. Finally I had enough air out of my vest and dove; mentally swearing at him for being such a jerk, forgetting all his training and for being so dumb!

I grabbed him by his hair, yanking really hard. I told myself it was to snap him out of his panic, but I confess it gave me an evil kind of satisfaction. I pulled the regulator out of my mouth; purged it; shoved it into Mike's mouth and purged again. He started to suck air. He appeared totally confused and helpless. I released his tank and we stopped sinking.

My worry now was would Mike be able to buddy breathe, sharing the regulator back and forth between us so we could slowly ascend. I gave him the "I need air" sign. He nodded and handed me the regulator. But almost before I could inhale, he signed to get it back. He was hyperventilating. I let him keep the regulator as long as I could. I signed, but he shook his head "no". Was I going to have to fight him for it? I tugged on the regulator and he reluctantly let go. After a couple of good pulls I handed it back.

To get us up, I had to time it properly. Every time Mike exhaled, I swam as hard as I could towards the surface, exhaling some myself and towing him along. It seemed to take forever: this breathe - - stop, exhale - - go, go, go. Although my lungs were on fire, I couldn't go any faster. Going up too fast meant the risk of an embolism. Capillaries rupture, letting air bubbles into the blood stream. It can lead to paralysis or death. I wasn't so desperate to chance that. Yet. And suddenly I was gulping in fresh air - - sweet, sweet air.

"Mike", I panted, "you OK?" His eyes were closed and I nearly panicked, thinking I'd lost him. But then he looked at me, making a weak attempt at a smile. I grinned. I let him continue to use the regulator until I wriggled out of my

vest, got it on him and popped the CO2 cartridge to quickly inflate it. When I gently worked the regulator out of his mouth, I saw that he had completely bitten through the silicone mouthpiece. Finally I released the scuba tank and I took a moment to watch it sink from sight. After losing his boat, I figured Dad wouldn't be any angrier at losing his tank, too.

"Mike, put your hands against my shoulder and I'll push you in." With mask, fins, snorkel and him being buoyed up by the vest, it wasn't hard swimming. However, knowing that time meant everything in recovering the boat, that made it a painfully slow swim. And it was mentally agonizing as well. I kept thinking of what I'd done. Here I'd let someone, who I thought was a friend, talk me into doing one wrong, stupid thing after another. The result? Losing a boat, scuba gear and very nearly Mike's life. As I swam towards shore, I thought that this was a friendship I would have to reconsider. I knew I could no longer place any faith in Mike's values. At least not as they were. Maybe he'll be different after this. Certainly I will. Either we end up as stronger friends, or no friends at all. One thing's for sure, I'll think for myself now, not just play along because it's easier.

What was bothering me most though was Dad. He'd be angry, sure, but already I could see the disappointed look on his face. I couldn't even think how awful it would be if he wouldn't ever trust or depend on me again. I'll have to work hard to earn back his trust and I will. We'll find the boat and I'll dive up that gear if it takes me all summer. It can't hurt to think positive, I guess, can it? I hope. But right then, it was just keep on kicking.



“So what happened next?”, both my daughter and grandson wanted to know.

“Was I right?”

“About what”, asked Jeff.

“What you did. Was it anything as dumb as this?” They both shook their heads “no”.

“I didn’t think so”, I said, and I walked out of the kitchen.