

The Drowning © Kate Barker 2006

Chapter One

I must have fallen asleep. As incredible as that seems, it's the only explanation for what happened. Fell asleep or passed out—not from pain, exhaustion or any of the usual reasons—but just to escape. I believe my mind simply turned itself off. Right then, I've had enough, it said. I imagine it in the voice of my mother, clipped and British and terribly pragmatic. "*Right then, I've had enough,*" as if I had just broken one of her mother's Staffordshire porcelains through an act of teenaged awkwardness—a swung knapsack or a fumbled nerfball in the sitting room. It was always the sitting room in our house, never the living room or, god forbid, the den. "*Wild animals have dens,*" Mum said. "*Right then, I've had enough,*" and I was tossed out. Made to rake leaves or mow the lawn or shovel the walk, depending on the season. "*Be of use for a change, you little toad.*" And out I would go. "Right then, I've had enough," my brain sanely said, and threw me out, unplugging me from my body until I woke, gagging.

It was the smell. It clogged the back of my throat making me retch. It was so dark—impossible to tell where the sea met the sky. Above, massive plumed grey clouds rolled by, obliterating the stars, moon and horizon. I had no idea what the smell was, but it permeated everything. I wiped my face with the back of my forearm and found it emanated from my own skin. I vomited again but there was nothing left in me so I retched stomach gas and bile and shook with the violence of someone pulled in from a blizzard. I pushed myself up, though my arms were stiff and sore, just trying to gulp fresh air. But it hung all around, a nauseating cloud of—what? My brain was soggy. I knew the smell but couldn't conjure the word for it. Eventually, it came to me. Jet fuel.

I must have been out there all night, or pretty close to 12 hours. Not that my watch worked. I know I looked at it just before the crash, at 6:38 p.m. For some perverse reason, I wanted to know the moment of our deaths. Because I was certain we were about to die. I was almost right. I was half right. Phyllis died, with her hand clasped so tightly around mine I would have been dragged down with my sister's corpse if I hadn't broken her fingers. Phyllis and 225 others did die, on or around 6:38 p.m. on June 24, 1996. It was a Wednesday.

For the first half hour in the water I didn't encounter anything from the plane, not even a pillow. There was remarkably little wreckage. That surprised me. I thought there should be more floating detritus. A wide seat, perhaps, with a Lazy-boy style footrest from business class, like the one I took such guilty pleasure in, stretching out and thinking about the poor bastards in economy. I was always one of those poor bastards in economy, on the rare occasion when I flew without Phyllis. But there was nothing. I just kept treading water, hoping that someone would come along. Occasionally I called out. The sky was just turning pink around the edges when I glimpsed something about 100 feet to my right. I thought it was an arm. Someone was out there. I shouted and started to swim. I looked up and shouted again. It was someone. I could make out a form in the water, now about 30 feet ahead. I swam right up to him before I realized it was a body. Face down, his back was smoking. He had been barbecued in jet fuel. He floated past. A few minutes later the sun set and I was treading water in the dark. Something bumped into me. It felt like someone had grazed my shoulder with her hand. Instincts made me grope without looking first to see what it was. I half expected to close my fingers around a warm human hand, reaching down to me from the safety of a life raft. My fingers did

close around a hand, specifically, the thumb of a woman's hand. But it was cold. I turned to find myself grasping a severed arm. After that I didn't touch the people and the bits of people that bumped into me now and then. None of them breathed, at any rate. None of the few bodies I came across in those first hours were clad in yellow life jackets, not to be inflated before departing the aircraft—not even a flight attendant's body, the one who had demonstrated the pre-flight safety check.

I'm a good swimmer. Actually, I'm an excellent swimmer. I can eggbeater my shoulders right out of the water and keep it up for more than just a few seconds. I also knew that didn't matter. I was alone, in the dark, without a lifejacket in the Pacific Ocean, about half way between Brisbane, Australia and L.A. So I waited to die. Not that I was going to make the process easy on myself. I fought it, which was pointless, but instincts took over. So I expended as little energy as possible, drownproofing and sculling in place, wondering how long it would take and hoping it was death by drowning rather than shark. My head started to get heavy and lifting it to take a breath was becoming work, so I floated on my back for a while. But the sound of the ocean in my ears was too lonely, so I flipped back over and took a few deep breaths to wake myself up. And that was when an unlikely raft crested by in front of me, a few hundred feet away. It was a door from the wreck. I had been in the water for about five hours.

At first I thought it was a mirage, some desperate hallucinatory effect of being pickled in jet fuel. I was surprised when my hand struck its solid surface. I felt all around the edges, taking a while to realize it was a door, either torn off its moorings on impact or, more improbably, opened by a survivor. Clambering up onto it proved to be a challenge. It was far from stable, and I kept upending myself back into the water. After

about half a dozen tries, I finally managed to slither into place. I lay there, spread-eagled and face down on the metallic shell and that's when my brain took over. "Right then, I've had enough," it said, and I passed out.

The passing door was coincidence number one in the story that brought me here. Coincidence number two was my queasy nature, easily nauseated to the point of vomiting from unpleasant smells. And jet fuel, up close and personal, when it coats the water, raft, you and everything in its path is unpleasant in the extreme. It smells almost nothing like the residual whiff you get near runways in the same way that the smell of skunk on a warm July evening wafting up through an open car window is nothing compared to the eye-watering stench of the stuff rising off the snout of a freshly sprayed dog. It is an entity and a vile one when you are floating in the stink of it.

It I hadn't woken retching the remnants of two Baileys on ice precisely when I did, I would not have lifted my face from the door of a Boeing 747 to see an unmistakable line of white on the horizon. I blinked. I rubbed my eyes, making them sting with another dose of jet fuel, retched again and lifted my torso up from my silver raft to stare fiercely ahead. The line of white was far off. A long ways. Maybe further, since I am hardly nautical and knew what any urban dwelling 29-year-old would be expected to know about judging distance at sea, and at night to boot. I wondered if it was a mirage, but thought they only happen in the desert. I wasn't thirsty enough to be imagining mirages in the middle of the Pacific. At least, not yet. Besides, the silver raft hadn't been a figment of my imagination. And I wasn't thinking desperately of rescue and salvation. I had, most sensibly, been asleep. So my mind wasn't conjuring something

for comfort. I was oddly in no need of comfort. I was quite comfortably numb, if a little chilled.

The white line was not constant, I realized with curiosity. It ran along for a while, then tapered off at both ends into blackness, resuming again, then breaking, and continuing on until it disappeared. My jet fuel drugged brain struggled to comprehend this oddity until I had damn nearly floated past the white line. “Land.” I said it aloud, like the hero’s sidekick everyone knows will die in the last quarter of the movie, once his usefulness has been played out. The sidekick never lives. Only Mel Gibson, Tom Cruise and Bruce Willis can live. And the hero never says something like “Land!” out loud. Never. It’s not cool. But I have never been cool and it had to be land of some sort. To say it out loud made it real, made me believe it, even if it was only a sandbar—something that made the waves break white in that expanse of endless gray. I tried to kick and paddle the raft towards the white line, but I was not blessed with the necessary proportions. My arms are rather stubby, like the rest of me. I clock in at just under five foot three and my silver door raft was at least six feet in length. I hunkered forward and tried to only use my arms as paddles, but quickly upended myself into the black water.

I had the same feeling then I did as a child, on one of our trips to Florida in the March break, when I would take a night time swim. My mother would go out to the pool and sit watching while I jumped in. And always, in that second I was airborne, I panicked, irrationally fearing a shark or alligator had somehow got in the pool. And I’d swim like hell to the other side and hop out. “*That was quick.*” My mother would smile and hold the towel out for me with both hands. I’d run into the towel and feel her closing it snugly around me, with a short rub to my back, her version of a hug. My fear of sharks was

entirely reasonable under these circumstances so I scrambled back aboard my Boeing 747 life raft door breathing heavily. I scanned the water for fins, not that their absence gave me much comfort. As any addict of The Learning Channel can confirm, sharks attack from below. I squinted into the horizon. Nothing. And the white line was about to disappear.

“*Right then.*” My mother spoke through me. The next thing I did had nothing to do with me and everything to do with her. It was as though she had taken over my body and sensibly chose the only logical course of action, because I could not. “*Buck up and swim,*” is what she said.

So I swam. Front crawl at first, but that was too tiring and the splashing could attract the dreaded sharks. I breast stroked, mostly at first, then a little side stroke. I had the white line in my sights, and though I wasn’t drifting past it as I feared I would, I couldn’t say it seemed to be getting any closer either.

Fortunately, the one regular form of exercise I do is swim. Every Tuesday and Thursday morning before reporting dutifully to my gray paneled office pod at 8:30 a.m., I went to the Y and swam 80 lengths, non-stop, front crawl. I was rather proud of this, at one time. It took me 45 minutes. Not a bad workout, though I’m hardly healthy. I smoked then, was fond of rye and ginger and never passed up a beer when offered. I was slightly podgy around the middle and smoked close to a pack a day, but damn it, I could swim. Maybe that was my third lucky break. Maybe not. It was a hell of a lot further than 80 lengths at the Y.

As I tired, I started to play tricks on myself to keep going. They were the same sorts of games I employed when I ran cross country in high school, a hundred years

before. “Get up this hill, then you’re almost half way there,” turned into “swim another 20 strokes, and you’re a third of the way.” I kept this up for hours. A couple of times, the white line slipped a little to the left, so I swam harder, usually front crawl, until it evened out again. Those were the worst moments. I was so afraid of watching the white line slip out of sight, terrified I wouldn’t be able to claw it back into view. But I did, every time, or rather, my mother did, channeled through me. “*For godssake, stop grizzling. It won’t do you any good.*” I heard that as though she were in the water with me, when the white line slipped past me the last time, when I almost gave up and started to cry. “*Buck up, Margaret!*” I bucked. My thighs ached, my shoulders screamed and my biceps felt as though they had been ripped open, but I dug in and did a power crawl for several minutes, against the current which felt stronger than it had before. I decided to crawl the rest of the way because breast stroke just wasn’t cutting it. “It’s not far now,” I lied to myself. “Just swim.”

I became an aquatic robot. I turned off every nerve connecting my brain to my body, except the one that sent the command, “swim, goddamnit.” It was a zone I had entered and nothing mattered but my flutter kick, the steady rotation of my arms, the turn of my head to the left at every stroke to take on air. “*Swim, goddamnit.*” That was Mum again. I listened to her, as usual.

I started to get weird. The calm and rational voice that told me to swim another 100 strokes and I was almost there was losing its motivational power. So I reverted back to the ‘what ifs’ of my childhood. What if I could live alone in a castle and stay up past midnight? What if my real mother was Vanessa Redgrave? What if I could outrun a car? Specifically, I reverted back to approximately 1976 when a short-lived TV show called

The Man from Atlantis was on the air. I loved Aquaman, a.k.a. Patrick Duffy before *Dallas*. He had bizarre eyes from special contact lenses that made them bug out, an eerie and unnatural blue. But the reason I really loved his comic-book inspired super-hero character was because he could breathe under water. I fancied that. What if I could breathe under water, like the man from Atlantis? He also had a really cool way of swimming. It was a sort of under water dolphin kick that enabled him to swim as fast as a motor boat. Faster, maybe. I imitated it for my sister on one of the Florida trips. “Look Phyl, I’m Aquaman!” and I started semi dolphin kicking under water, alarming my mother, who thought I was in the throws of a seizure. So she sensibly jumped into the pool, with her handbag and all, to grab me firmly by the bathing suit straps and yank me sputtering to the surface.

“*No more Aquaman,*” she told me once I was safely deposited on a chaise lounge and forbidden to swim for the rest of the afternoon. Phyllis, my senior by two years, was viewed as an accomplice and made to sit out as well. She sulked at her feet, perched on the edge of the pool, but careful not to touch the water. There would have been hell to pay if she dangled so much as a toe in after Mum had ordered her not to. As soon as our mother was out of sight, to replenish her gin and tonic which had gone into the pool along with her handbag, Phyllis thumped me—hard. “Dick head,” is what she said. “Aquaman,” I corrected her. But it was no fun anymore. As usual, I had spoiled things.

In my mind, as I swam endlessly in that starless night, I was nine years old again, playing Aquaman for Phyllis’s amusement. I could see her as she was then, rake thin like our father and nut brown from the Florida sun, her long chestnut hair curling around the edges in the heat, her brown eyes crinkling in laughter. “Aquageek!” and she kicked her

thin legs at the edge of the pool, splashing me as I undulated past. Aquaman! I could feel the billowing resistance of the tee-shirt my mother made me wear in the water, in the days when Hawaiian tanning oil was fashionable and only albinos wore sun screen. Mum, being ever sensible, insisted I wear a tee-shirt to protect my fair skin from the sun. I was as fair as she was, blonder then. My hair was almost platinum to her natural honey colour. We tanned the same way too—to lightly done toast. And we had the same blue eyes and broad square shoulders. People would nod at us on the street, total strangers. Look at that. Because I was, in those days, her miniature carbon copy, minus the accent and the attitude. But on my own, I was fierce. I could accomplish unbelievable feats of superhuman strength. I was Aquaman, convulsing under water.

Pain jarred me back to reality. It was different from the pain of my body screaming at me to stop. It was a dull pain. It was my knee. I paused and bumped into something else. This time it was my foot, but it didn't hurt. The impact merely alerted me to my surroundings. I was entering into the surf, head on. I had reached land, or at least, coral. I tried to see through the boiling breakers that slammed me against the reef, then drew me back, but never far enough so I could see what was on the other side, if anything. Was it just a coral reef, after all that? Would I now not only drown, but beat myself into a pulpy mess on sharp coral as well? I almost started to cry again, when a larger swell carried me up. When I crested, I glimpsed a beach ahead. Most definitely a beach. Then I crashed back down onto the reef, my body rolling along the top and the coral cutting into me every foot of the way. Strangely, it didn't really hurt. My body had numbed in the cold sufficiently for me not to register pain. So despite the cuts and bruises to my hands, it was fairly easy to pull myself along, toward the beach some 300 yards

ahead. I cleared the coral and fell head first into a calm stretch of water. I mechanically crawled the rest of the way, until my feet touched sand and I stood, then fell face first into the water. My legs wouldn't hold me up. They had become jellified. So I pulled myself out of the ocean on my belly, like an antediluvian fish with newly sprouted gelatinous legs, gasping the strangeness of air.