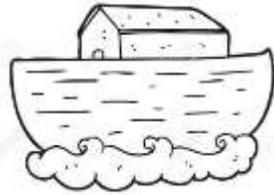


ARC
ARC



BY **LINDSAY** WINCHERAUK

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SINK OR SWIM

NAME	MONIKER	HEIGHT	WEIGHT
El Guapo	Black Widow	5' 7"	118 lbs
EYES	HAIR	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	CAREER
Green	Ginger	England	Soccer Mum

The sun rises. The sky towers above in a deliciously different hue. The past is lost as the survivors are embraced by lush foliage and the warmth of a new day. Yesterday's nightmare, gone, lost somewhere in the galaxy above this new reality.

HEADCOUNTS

6 *One, two, three, check... one, two, three, check... repeat.*

OUT OF SEQUENCE

One, two, no three, check... one, two, three, four, check.

TOTAL

Five-hundred-eighty-four.

Can't be right?

Five-hundred-eighty-five was the count in the holding area.

Who's missing?

Velvet, tall, blonde, vivacious, frothy, with shimmering blue eyes wanders through the collection of fresh faces who are trying to compute the meaning of this new, unfamiliar territory—confusion adorns each face she passes as languages waft through the air around her. Nothing makes sense. There is no recollection of before. Yet, despite the confusion, something is resonating in the air; it is as if they have inhabited this confusing, beautiful, native soil for decades.

Where is the past?

What am I?

Who am I?

What is the future?

A tear forms and caresses her left cheek, passing over her delicate lips; the tea tastes sweet. Life moves forward.

Luxury engulfs all. Language and colour provide barriers without a hint of animosity. Equal seems to be the definition: Equal in technology; equal in resources; similar in opportunity; equal in love – and most important, equal in spirit. New, meant, history was to be scripted by five-hundred-eighty-five perfectly created survivors, *equally*.

Frantically, Taran screams out.

Gerry, Gerry....

Her panic intensifies.

Gerry Deluxe.

Where is Gerry Deluxe?"

She gasps for air.

Every breath consumes her spirit as she fears it may be her last. Taran nears perfection, dark flowing hair, breathtaking curves, tanned, with an angelic voice lathered in a hint of sexuality. Her voice seduces. Why am I screaming for a man I don't know? – crossed her mind.

Calmness began to consume Gerry Deluxe. He found himself swallowed by the ocean, and the clarity of his dream was breathtaking.

Where am I?

Panic and confusion had given way to an accessible, relaxed, blissful state. He didn't compute the exact moment panic ceased, and consciousness arrived. He wanted to live. He was sure he was dead. The light was beaming into the watery grave. In the distant world above, he floated in a manipulated beat to the waves thrusting overhead. Reality skewed his dream-like state. Puzzlement was his first recognizable emotion.

He recalled the hard crash of the vessel as it hit the water of this new earth. He recalled the ship coming apart at the seams and the water rushing in as all others broke free from their seats and were ejected. He remembered watching the others swimming away

frantically as the ship burst out of the water, only to be filled again and begin to sink to its final resting place. He remembered the light coming only to be replaced by darkness on six occasions, and on each return to light – the sky blasted forth in a slightly different shade. He indeed must've been drugged.

As the vessel sank, Gerry had struggled to survive – he had hit his head hard on the water at the point of impact and fought to remain awake. He flailed his arms frantically. He kicked his legs... he couldn't kick; his legs were secured, trapped in the fabric of a frayed seat belt. Somehow, on impact, his release was refused as a neighbouring belt mysteriously had been wrapped around his ankles. Gerry would undoubtedly succumb to his new prison. Sent to solitary confinement and secured by a single frayed belt, he passed out.

Time lost relevance. It was when he regained consciousness, he found himself floating. Vaguely he retraced his release.

How did I break free?

A water creature clawed and chewed on the belt, clawed, and chewed, occasionally breaking Gerry's skin, sending blood floating past Gerry's face. Gerry first felt intense pain, only to be eventually greeted by freedom. It wasn't time for him to die. He had a purpose.

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Where am I?

He asked again.

He had been riding in a car with Johnny Fox.

He had just met Johnny.

Johnny was eager to tell me about his life and calmly stated he had done hard time in.

Why were you incarcerated?

I came home from work and headed up to my room on the third floor. I laid out my goods: a bag a blow to the right, next to the blow, my rigs. Five beautiful joints lined up in perfect order on the left: cigarettes; cold ones in the fridge. I wanted to go up.

I made a right-hand turn and looked at Johnny, riveted by with his tale.

I popped the cap off a beer, tilted back, and took a swig. I puffed on a cigarette, drawing in the flavour-infused death of nicotine. I toked. I slammed a rig into my veins. Instantaneously a warm rush of cocaine entered my veins. I began to climb.

Johnny's eyes sparkled as he relived his story.

I never missed work. I was a functioning addict. In my life, I host a roster of demons. I took another toke and looked down to the street below. I saw a white van parked on the corner, engine idling. Two cretins were standing beside it, one large, balding, gruff. The other skinny, slimy, both lowlifes. They were forcing two girls into the van. The girls were resisting. I slammed another rig into my veins, continued my climb, took another swig, and started my descent to the street below.

He took a deep breath and continued.

The slimy one passed me on my way out the door. He entered my building, leaving the big guy by himself. I turned around the back of the van and put my boots so far up his ass they came out his mouth. I went into a fit of blind rage and didn't stop beating him until his movement ceased. The girls thanked me and ran away. I backstepped into my building; the second scumbag was in the communal washroom on my floor. I confronted him and did what needed to be done. He paid for his vile indiscretions.

What did you do to him?

Gerry asked.

I can't recall. I blanked out as I shot for the stars above. I took another smack. A toke of a joint. And a shot of liquid, and then headed down to the Sunrise Pub. I sat at the bar at the pub, blood staining my shirt and knuckles. I shot back scotch and swigged beers. The police arrived. They chanted my name.

Johnny Fox. Are you Johnny Fox?

They took me outside, asked me where I lived, then escorted me to my home. The haze was beginning to lift. We climbed the stairs as I dropped from the sky. The slimy punk was a bloody mess – out cold – lying on the floor of my room – a butcher knife lay next to his scalp. My room was dripping in blood. I took control of the situation – doing what needed to be done – I have no regrets. You don't fuck with women.

Did the man die?

Gerry asked

Johnny paused, opened the car door, and stepped onto the sidewalk. Johnny looked back at me; the devil was in his eyes

Unfortunately, no.

Gerry was now floating upwards toward the sky. The lingering after-effects of his concussion slowly subsided; however, he had entered a wonderful, peaceful, and vivid state of bliss.

The movement was no longer attainable.

He gave in to the comfort of death.

He accepted his mortality.

The continuation was no longer in his control.

He decided to enjoy it.

His body felt no pain.

Floating effortlessly was perfection.

Dreaming of Johnny, a man he had only met two days before, was undoubtedly only a product of his overactive imagination. Colours flashed and recoiled.

Blues turned to gray.

Black turned to blood red.

10 Clouds formed above, capturing the shadows of hundreds of survivors. His ascent continued...

Mumbled voices echoed above, and the sound of waves slamming into a shoreline became clear.

Gerry, where's Gerry? I love you, Gerry? Please find Gerry.

The voices faded, and sadness ensued. Time was up.

I'm dying?

He wanted the voices to return.

The clouds lifted and blasted away – only clear, remained above. He'd been immersed for an eternity, yet, his lungs remained dry, and breathing remained effortless.

I certainly must be dead?

Logic dictates reality. The water warmed and embraced him.

He smiled.

Death wasn't awful.

He shouted out.

Em pleh.

He was met by no sound.

His words were jumbled.

He tried again – still nothing.

The water's embrace tightened.

His life began to flash before his eyes.

He had no past, only a brief moment went by.

One memory, unchallenged, existed.

A vision of a man, tanned, hardened by the sun, stood above him. Veins protruded from this man's skull. He was troubled but calm and relaxed at the same time.

I've been sent on a mission. You must die. It is my responsibility to assure others of that outcome. Your time is now. It is nothing personal.

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Gerry screamed.

Em pleh.

Still no sound.

He closed his eyes, opened them, the man was gone; imagination had taken control.

Gerry examined his life.

He didn't exist. A life without a past was nothing? No accomplishments. No family. No love. He tried to remain calm. He tried to relax. He wanted to cry. Drugs, a dream, a fantasy, had to be the answer?

He reasoned death can't come until the story of life is told. Memory must return before succumbing.

I mustn't be dead?

He fought off the terror that was charging toward him. Could Johnny Fox and the hardened man be responsible for his demise? What are their motives? He couldn't muster a past. Thus, a solution escaped him.

He looked right, left, right and left again. Nothing. He tried again to kick and flail. He

was frozen. The water warmed. Hours passed. His lungs remained dry.

He felt crippling pain.

Blood floated past his face.

The pain intensified more.

His arms began to flail.

The voices returned.

They strengthened.

Louder, louder...

Gerry. Gerry. Gerry!

His breathing became frantic. I'm alive? His lungs filled with water. He gasped for survival. Each gasp brought the conclusion nearer. Good or bad? Beginning or end? He was drowning. He closed his eyes, he once again stopped fighting, the light grew brighter as the pace of his climb accelerated.

Gerry. Gerry. Gerry. Over there!

The voices grew, and the accents intensified.

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He told himself to fight. He began to fight again. With each flail, his breathing became shallow. Time was nearly up. Resistance brought pain and life. Giving in brought calm. He continued to resist. He wanted his past back.

He started to grasp upward, reaching to the sky, trying to find something to hold onto.

The water began to rush over him.

Sounds became clear.

The water roared.

His movements slowed as the resistance of the water became increasingly fluid.

There. I see him. Go. Go. Go.

Panic was holding hands with death.

Time was up.

The fight was ending.

Gerry began to float again.

Calm returned.

It's a miracle. How? How is this possible? He's been down for far too long.

A man whose skin had been hardened by the sun, emphatically stated, in a heavily accented voice. Gerry grasped his leg and pulled himself out of the water. The shore was off in the near distance.

A miracle. It wasn't his time.

Gerry gasped again.

Water spat out of his mouth.

He struggled for air.

His rescuers clutched his arms and pulled him to dryness.

I'm El Guapo. This is Johnny Fox. Welcome back. I mean... welcome to the new....

His breaths eased as his pulse returned to normal. Life continued with the past still being vacant.

He shouldn't have survived?

Gerry turned and looked toward El Guapo; he found eyes of steel. Fear came over him. El Guapo linked his past. He was a key. He searched his mind. Empty. Nothing... it must be a product of his imagination.

Thank you. Thanks for not giving up. I thought I'd died. I'm alive, right?

Gerry bit down on his tongue and then his lip; he tasted blood. It tasted sweet.

You're alive.

I am alive!

Logically, impossible, implausible.

The logic was vacant, much like the past.

Velvet ran up and hugged Gerry tightly.

He felt loved.

Where am I?

Gerry's fist was clenched. He didn't remember gripping it. He looked down, opened his hand; he was clutching a necklace, black cord, a pendent, meticulous, silver, a star, *he thought*, inside of a circle. At least he thought it was a star. The left side was missing.

A tear rolled over his left cheek...