



The Chokes

by Aaron Garretson

My son Bernard and his young wife flew in from Chicago last week for Thanksgiving. We were at the table with a turkey in front of us, and stuffing, and peas, and cranberry sauce, and we were all silently picking at our food when my daughter-in-law suddenly turned to me with a concerned look on her face. She's at that station in life where one begins to consider names for children.

"Why did you name Bernard, Bernard?" she asked.

In hindsight, I should have just shrugged my shoulders and kept my head down. But as I was already intoxicated by the wine, and the food, and the radiant youth at the table with me, I told the truth. "He was an old friend of mine," I said.

"Really?" said Bernard, lowering his fork. "You never told me that."

"Didn't I?"

Sam, my wife, immediately flashed me a look. She couldn't believe I'd just admitted this.

"He was an old friend I used to work with," I said, color rising in my cheeks. "This was back when I was still diving. So it was, you know, a long time ago." I shoveled food into my mouth, hoping this would put an end to the discussion.

"Is he still around?" my daughter-in-law asked. "Are you still friends?"

I turned to Sam for help, but she didn't offer any. "No," I said, shaking my head. "He died just before we were married. He was a good friend."

"God, I can't believe you never told me this." Bernard pushed his plate away from him.

"I can't either," I said. "I thought you knew."

Everyone likes to hear how someone died; it's human nature. In my opinion there's nothing smaller than an obituary that leaves out the cause of death. But I've always believed that, in conversation, it's improper to inquire. My daughter-in-law, however, has no such qualms.

"How did he die?" she asked.

"Yes, how did he die?" Sam echoed. Like any good wife of 33 years, she reached to move the bottle of wine beyond my grasp. This wasn't punishment—she'd had as much say in naming Bernard as I did—but at some point over the years, silently, and separately, we had come to dissociate our son's name from the man who inspired it.

"How did he die?" I said, stirring at the potatoes on my plate. "There was an accident. He was under the water and someone turned the air off. They didn't realize he was still down there."

This was mostly true. Someone did turn the air off on him and it was unintentional, but it wasn't how he died.

Bernard looked at me seriously. "Was it you?" he asked. "Did you turn the air off on him?"

"Of course not," I assured him. "It was some new kid we'd hired."

They had no reason on earth not to believe this but I could see them staring at each other out of the corners of their eyes, holding hands under the table in newlywed collusion, certain that I'd named my son after a man I'd killed. Worst of all, they didn't even seem surprised—as though they'd always suspected me of various acts of manslaughter.

Three days before Bernard died, he and I were sitting on the edge of a diving boat having lunch together. He was peeling a bag of oranges, throwing the rinds over his shoulder into the water, while I spooned soup out of a Thermos. We were tied beneath the Goethals Bridge, between Staten Island and New Jersey, working for the Port Authority. It was our job to inspect and maintain the below-water parts of all the bridges, piers, and tunnels in the Tri-State area. It was a sea diver's dream job, really: no sweaty bunks, no rotten food, no six weeks at sea. We worked 9 to 5 and then went home in the evenings.

Despite the November chill in the air, Bernard was wearing sandals and no shirt. His last name was Pollizotto, so I imagine he was mostly Italian, but on deck he used to walk around like a goddamn Viking—showing off his physique, and the curled locks of gray hair that covered his chest. He was tall and thick, with tremendous, meaty hands. And though we were all pretty good-sized back then, Bernard dwarfed us. He made us look like sissies, and the way he commanded himself made him seem even bigger.

We'd been sitting together in silence for probably ten minutes when I turned to look at him, with his craggy eyes and mangled nose that looked something like the fist of a three-year-old.

"Have you ever caught a leaf falling from a tree?" I asked him.

Bernard shook his head.

"I caught one this morning," I said. "A big, yellow maple leaf. It fell right into my hand on the way to the train."

He was focused on his oranges. He always peeled them all first, usually six or eight at a time, before eating any of them. Then staring out over the boat, snuffing the salty air through his nose, he'd slowly pry them apart and consume them, wedge by wedge. He and I were the only two topside. We had both taken the early shift and dived first thing in the morning. Besides Kitt, the foreman, and Old Skelly, who helped out on deck, there were, in all, six of us divers: Bernard and I, Steve-osh, Nicko, Pojansky, and Al something-or-other, I don't remember. Kitt and Skelly were having lunch in the cabin, and the other four were under the water.

"I think it's good luck," I told Bernard. "I didn't even grab for it. I just put my hand out and it fell right into it. And when I bought a muffin by the piers they gave me a free coffee, and both my trains pulled into their stations as I reached the platform. And I'm supposed to go someplace nice with Samantha, tonight. She's taking *me* out, for a change. You believe that shit?" I chuckled, wanting him to find it as funny as I did. He didn't think it amusing, though. And, in truth, neither did I.

"Yeah," I went on, still trying to read his face, unsure of whether he was even listening, "I think she might. . . I don't know, it's pretty nuts, but I think she might be thinking of asking me to marry her." I knew almost for certain that she was planning to propose. And though I was already 30 years old, and pretty sure I was in love with her, it scared the hell out of me.

"I think she's getting impatient that I haven't asked her myself, yet," I said. "She's already threatened to do it. And she got us a table at Caravello's tonight, so. . . ."

Caravello's was a serious, overpriced little place in midtown, famous for its wine list, its striking burgundy interior, and its second coatroom for furs only.

Bernard threw the last of his orange peels into the water behind him. He nodded his head, to show that he understood, and an odd wave of warmth washed over me.

"You'll never guess what I got in the mail, yesterday," he said. He tore an orange in half and popped a wedge between his teeth. "That son-of-a-bitch kid sent me a package."

Four weeks earlier, Bernard had been on the river floor with a torch, working on a stress fracture. The rest of us had been out of the water for half-an-hour, already—and due to the fact that it was raining, and because it was October, and the Yankees were in the playoffs, we were all crammed into the deckhouse listening to the radio. It wasn't unusual for Bernard to stay under longer than us. He was older, and liked to make a point of showing us what lousy work ethics we had. This particular afternoon, though, while he was still under, and while the rest of us were huddled inside, the kid walked over and turned the air off on him. He was 17 and had been working only a couple of weeks as a deckhand (and probably shouldn't have been left unsupervised), but he thought someone had forgotten to shut the pump down, so he did it himself, without checking first to see if there were any hoses still going under the boat.

Five minutes passed before anyone noticed what he'd done. During a station break, Kitt perked his head up and asked why the pump wasn't still running.

"I just shut it off," said the kid.

"Is Bernard out already?"

There was a split second of silence before we scrambled to hoist Bernard to the surface. When we got him up his face was white as a Navy hat, and I think every one of us thought he was dead already. It sent a chill through our spines: we'd just murdered our captain. Yes, Kitt was the foreman, but Bernard was the one we all listened to. He was the one we all wanted to dive with, because when you went down with him you knew beyond a doubt you'd be coming up again. He'd already saved most of us at least once: Nicko got his hose crimped against a piling the year before, and I probably would have been entombed behind one of the Holland Tunnel airshafts if Bernard hadn't pulled me out of the way. And now, to show our appreciation, we'd all killed him, or at least we thought we had.

Short of throwing ourselves overboard, we ran around the deck with our heads unscrewed, digging through first aid kits in search of smelling salts and flare guns and ampoules of adrenaline. We were a panicky bunch. It was only the older guys, Kitt and Skelly, who remained calm enough to resuscitate him: Skelly gave him mouth-to-mouth while Kitt pumped his chest with both hands. When he came to, they called the hospital, and held his head, and threw a blanket over him.

No one noticed where the kid stood during all of this. I saw him disappear, though, as we loaded Bernard into the ambulance. With his watchman's cap pulled low over his eyes, he slipped away under the street lights. Except for a phone call to Kitt, to find out if Bernard was all right, no one had heard from him since. Until Bernard got his package.

The kid sent him a case of Scotch and a robe for his wife. Which only poured oil on the fire because Bernard had been divorced for two and a half years, and had given up drinking almost as long. He gave the robe to his mother, and the case of Scotch to those of us who helped pull him out: half the case to Skelly for his efforts, and a bottle each to the rest of us.

"I'm not satisfied," said Bernard. He held up a wedge to examine it in the sun, before putting it in his mouth. "I'm still waiting for him to apologize."

"He didn't send a note with that stuff?"

"I want him to tell me in person." He spit the seeds into his hand and threw them into the water.

"I'm sure he's just scared," I said. "I'd probably be scared, too."

"What's being scared got to do with it? He almost killed a man twice his size, he'd better be scared—that's no excuse. You ever wanna get bigger, you have to face up to what you've done in your life." He removed another peeled orange from his sack and tore it apart.

"Why not ask Kitt where he lives and just show up there?" I suggested. "He's gotta have an address somewhere. . . Where'd they send his check?"

"He moved. He had a room in Queens, but he isn't there anymore. And he didn't put any address on what he sent me. Fucking kids. . . can't even answer for themselves. I wanna grab him by the collar and tell him to get a fucking desk job. . . Tell him to go to college with the other twats, before he gets somebody really killed." He was squeezing his fists, and I saw orange juice running down his arm.

Clearly, Bernard was still very upset. I was aware of this—and I even understood it. But I still failed somehow to comprehend it.

He prodded me with his elbow. "So what are you gonna do about tonight?" he asked. "You gonna let that girl ask you to marry her?"

Of all the memories that return to me accompanied by physical pain, and that refuse to atrophy with the passage of time, the memory of that night at Caravello's is the meanest.

Samantha was sitting at a table, sipping from a glass of wine when I arrived. She'd come straight from her job at the insurance office, but she'd changed into a black evening dress. She looked stunning. I spotted her the minute I came through the doors, and I should have been flattered, but my heart dropped at seeing her so nervous. She was toying with the flower arrangement, and I slumped into the chair across from her.

"Am I late?"

"You're never late," she said sarcastically. I was always late.

A waiter materialized and dragged a napkin across my lap.

"I'm glad you wanted to come here, again," I said. "I forgot how nice it is. God, will you look at these people! How was work, by the way? Is your boss still being a prick?"

"It was fine."

"I see you're having wine," I smiled. "Is this bottle for the both of us, or should I get my own?" This was my coward's trick: whenever any occasion called for being serious, and sensitive, I made every effort to be a comedian. Sam picked up the bottle and, with an exhausted sigh, filled my glass. After three years of dating me, she still had to do all the work.

"Is everything all right?" I asked. "Are you feeling O.K.?"

"I haven't been sleeping very well," she said.

"Your allergies acting up again?"

"Something like that."

"Well you look beautiful. Maybe we should take that cruise after all," I grinned. "Nothing to be allergic to in the middle of the ocean, right? Of course you might get seasick, but that'd probably wear off after a day or two. . ."

She glanced down at her menu. "I don't think it's allergies."

"Do you know what you want, yet?" I asked. "I feel like getting a steak, or something. . . you liked the swordfish last time, remember? Maybe it's not in season, though, I don't see it on here. . .ooh, they have abalone, you loved that when we. . ."

"Will you stop for a minute?"

"What?" I looked at her innocently.

"You're avoiding the subject," she said, arranging and re-arranging her silverware.

"Am I?"

"You are."

"What subject is that?"

Before Sam could answer, though, a busboy dropped a tray of dishes several tables behind us. Grateful for the distraction, I craned my neck to watch him pick up the mess of broken plates and spilled food.

"Why does he keep looking at you?" Sam asked.

I hadn't noticed, but the busboy was repeatedly peeking over his shoulder, smiling at us.

"Shit. I think I know him," I said. "I used to work with him." It was the kid. Acknowledging me with a nod, he backed his way toward the kitchen, nearly spilling his tray again.

"That's so funny," I told her. "Bernard and I were just talking about this guy."

"Will you look at me for a minute?" Sam asked. Her eyes were glistening—on the verge of tears—and she reached across to grip my hand. "Do you know why I wanted to come here?"

I shook my head.

"You really don't know what I wanted to talk to you about?"

I know I could have made it a hell of a lot easier on her, but I still didn't know what to tell her. I wasn't convinced she was the right one. . .that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I can't say why I didn't. . .I was just spooked by the whole thing. And as usually happens, the more one person wants something, the less the other person's inclined to give it.

"You don't have any idea what I wanted to ask you?"

"I don't," I said. "I mean, I suppose I might—did you want me to guess?"

"We've talked about this for a long time," a tear broke free of her lashes and dropped to the front of her blouse. "You know how much I love you. . .at least you'd better," she said. "And I think we've known each other—and been dating long enough—to know we're right for each other. . . don't we?"

There was a buzzing in my ears; my cheeks burned. Somehow, I still wasn't prepared for this. Even up to the last instant, I'd told myself she wouldn't have the guts to go through with it. My throat was in the process of caving in on my windpipe when I saw the kid leave the kitchen carrying an artichoke balanced on a plate. The way I remember it, the scene was perfectly choreographed: the in/out swing of the kitchen door matching the careful rhythm of the kid's steps matching the heartfelt pattern of Sam's proposal, "Will-you. . .be-my. . .hus-band?"

The kid placed the artichoke on the table between us.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked him.

"I thought you might like an appetizer ♦?" the kid said.

He was terrified of me, and the artichoke was intended as a peace offering—though I perceived it as more of a life rope.

I turned to Sam: "This is the kid who almost killed Bernard. Remember I told you about that?"

"How is Bernard?" the kid asked. "Is he all right?"

"No thanks to you he is."

Sam dropped her napkin to the table, pushed back her chair, and rushed off in the direction of the restrooms.

"Do you know if he got my package?" the kid asked. The guy was absolutely oblivious.

I nodded.

"Did he say anything about it?"

"He's a recovering alcoholic," I told him, and ran after Sam. I opened the door to the women's bathroom and shouted her name. There was no answer. A payphone hung just beside the door, and I removed a list of names and numbers from my wallet.

"Hello."

"Bernard?"

"Yeah."

"I'm down at Caravello's," I whispered. "You're not gonna believe this. . . the kid's here."

"Is this Mike?"

"He's working as a busboy. I thought you might wanna know—in case you wanted to come down and have a little talk with him."

He was silent. I could hear the sound of chair springs, as though he'd either stood up or sat down.

"Did you tell him I was gonna come down there?" Bernard asked.

"Should I?"

Sam flew out of the bathroom and hurried past me. The hem of her dress brushed against my shins.

"Nah, I'm over it," said Bernard. "The kid can go to hell for all I care."

I hung up and followed after Sam. Before leaving the restaurant, she put a twenty on the table and told me not to call her anymore. Outside, she hailed a cab, and was about to climb inside when I grabbed her by the arm.

"I forgot to tell you," I said. "I caught a leaf today. It fell right into my hand." I honestly thought she would swoon at this. I thought that, as a woman, she couldn't fail to understand what an omen it was for good luck, how romantic an image it was. But she shook her arm free.

"That's really terrific," she said, then closed the cab door behind her and sped away.

I watched a number of empty cabs roll past, and considered jumping into one to chase after her. But I took the train home instead, and drank myself to sleep with Bernard's Scotch. Saturday morning I tried calling her but her mom said she was sleeping. When I called again, she had apparently gone out, and the third time I called I heard her in the background telling her mom to hang up. Which she did. I drove out to her house the next afternoon, and her mom refused to even open the door. She told me to go away, said that Sam didn't want to see me anymore, that it was wrong to go around harassing people.

On Monday, when I got to work, the boat was in total disarray. Most of the crew were sitting outside the deckhouse with panicked looks on their faces, while Kitt was up on the bow speaking to a couple of police officers, filling out a vandalism report. When he'd gotten there that morning he'd found the pump running, some of the equipment missing, and one of the hoses cut.

Skelly was quietly pacing back and forth by the railing. When he saw me he gripped me by the arm and escorted me to the stern. He shoved his wrinkled, leathery face into mine: "What do you know?" he spit at me. "Did you talk to Bernard?"

"Why don't you let go of my arm. . ."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I haven't even seen him!"

"But you called him Friday night, didn't you? From the restaurant?"

"So?" I asked. "How do you know?"

"We went with him to pick up the kid," Skelly said. "We took him out past the bight and dropped him under."

They gave him a Jupiter dip. It was something they used to do as a kind of hazing, back when Skelly and Bernard started diving. They'd taken the kid out, put a helmet and suit on him, loaded him with weights, tied his hands behind his back (to keep him from climbing the hose) and lowered him to the bottom of the inlet, eighty or a hundred feet under. They'd pretty much stopped doing it after OSHA got involved and turned everyone into safety experts. But it couldn't have been pleasant—getting lowered into pitch darkness, potentially getting an old sunken ship's mast driving up your ass. There was no way of knowing what was beneath you, which makes it sound dangerous, and stupid—but 99 per cent of the time it's the stupid shit you get away with. It's when you're being safe that you have to be careful. And anyway, the point of the dip wasn't the real dangers involved, so much as the imagined ones. Being all alone down there without any lights, your eyes start seeing blue whales and electric eels and Soviet subs and Loch Ness monsters. Everything around you looks like it's moving and crawling. The point was to terrify you, and there's no doubt they succeeded with the kid. It was a miserable thing to do to a person, but it was a rite of passage, a way of gaining membership into a club, and that could be a beautiful thing. If they'd gotten a hold

of me in time—which, by the way, I'm glad they didn't—I would've gone with them and helped.

Skelly said the kid was fine when they pulled him up. He was a little shaken, and shivering in his limbs, but he was able to laugh about it. On their way driving him home he even told them it was fun, that they should all do it again next Friday night. Which spoke incredibly well of him. Everybody laughed, even Bernard, who was apparently friendly with him afterward. He talked seriously to the kid about coming back to the boat and working with them again. Everything was forgiven. They dropped him off and, before making sure he got inside all right, Bernard gave the kid a hug. A strong clap on the back. That's how benevolent he was about the whole thing. He hadn't meant anyone any harm.

But the kid died that night. Or the next morning, no one knows for sure. His roommate heard him coughing at some point and found him in his bed Saturday afternoon, his face and lips blue. My guess is he got the chokes. It can happen if you hold your breath on your way up—your lungs distend, and your alveoli tear at the branches. Steve-osh and Skelly both said they told him to stay calm and not forget to breathe, especially when they hoisted him, but he may not have heard. Or he may have been too scared to remember. And the chokes can be an insidious thing. It starts out small as a cough, even hours afterwards, and then ends with your lungs refusing to work altogether.

"So where's Bernard now?" I asked.

Skelly looked at me. "His damn car's parked on the road over there. He called last night and told me the police went by his place. . .said they found a pile of letters made out to him on the kid's desk."

"Did he tell them anything?"

"Why would he?"

"Do they suspect him?"

"You think I fucking know? They must be thinking something."

Skelly had guessed what happened as soon as Kitt showed him the severed hose. He pictured Bernard suited up and lowering himself into the water. Taking a load of weights and a flashlight, and walking out a few hundred yards, the length of his rope. When he couldn't go any further, he must have taken a deep breath, slashed his knife through the hose, and walked on with his tether cut.

I had tears in my eyes, and Skelly left me alone for a minute. When he returned, he brought Kitt and the two policemen with him.

"What's wrong with him?" Kitt asked, pointing at me. Skelly wiped his brow with his sleeve. "He's worried Bernard might be down there."

"Bullshit. Down where?"

"He thinks Bernard might have come early to get some work done—I don't know what he was doing. . .but his car's up there, and maybe when he went in his hose got caught on a snag or some boat cut across it."

"Why would he go down?" Kitt pushed me in the shoulder. "Did Bernard tell you he was

gonna go under? What the fuck would he do that for?"

"I don't think we should go anywhere until we find out if he is, though," said Skelly.

"Did you check his locker?" Kitt asked. We followed him into the cabin, where he wedged the door off Bernard's cubby. Inside were his shoes and clothes and wallet.

Kitt ordered us off the boat, and I called Sam on a pay phone. She hung up on me after the first three words. She didn't want anything to do with me anymore. Since I'd seen her, she'd been on two dates with two different guys. When I called again she had a receptionist answer. I told the receptionist who I was and what had happened. And she must have forwarded the message, because when I called a third time, Sam finally spoke to me.

"Are you serious?" she kept asking, and I kept trying to tell her, but I couldn't even get the words out anymore. She left work and picked me up in the old Corsair she used to drive—that always smelled of peppermint and damp leaves. And with sunlight pouring through the windshield, I climbed onto the lap of her skirt and sobbed on the shoulder of her sport coat. She took me to lunch, and later that evening—in spite of it all, or because of it—I asked her to marry me. It was a horrible, wonderful day.

We didn't go to the kid's funeral. I wanted to, but Sam didn't think it appropriate. We went to Bernard's, though. And it was inspiring. They never recovered his body, but his death was deemed an accident by the authorities; it was recorded just as Skelly had suggested. And no one ever tied him—or anyone else—to the kid's death, either. The coroners were stumped, and eventually attributed it to natural causes.

Respectful as it was, there was nothing somber about Bernard's funeral. The chapel was filled to capacity with divers he had worked with over the years, friends who had come to praise his life, and envy his burial at sea—untimely though it was. We sang *The Star of the Ocean* and *The Ship That Never Returned*, even if it was odd to be singing to the empty coffin of a man still weighted to the river floor, being dragged by the current out to sea. We sang all the louder.

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