

## Under Pressure

He was late again. I saw Pete's dark red Jeep appear through a gap in the trees where the river had eaten into the bank. He sped over the ruddy brown scar which undermined the road's thinly metallised surface. A moment later he had disappeared behind the dense green curtain of vegetation that covered the whole slope down to the water's edge. I checked my watch – it was gone 8 o'clock already.

The others had seen him too, and there was the start of movement as they breathed out, stood up and stretched, the period of waiting coming to an end. A fly which had been buzzing me persistently settled for an instant on my hand to drink from the sheen of perspiration before I waved it away.

A few minutes later Pete turned into the compound, circling smoothly over the rough stones which crunched and ground under his tyres as he pulled neatly into a space. He stepped out and walked over efficiently but unhurried, clean-shaven and in freshly pressed jeans and a brilliant white t-shirt.

“Hi guys – are we all ready to go?” he said, as if he had no idea we'd all been here since half past.

Without answering, Enrique turned his back and set off on foot towards the dam wall, phoning the control room as he went. I stood up and Pete and I walked down to the sandy

red bank where we hopped aboard the launch. Leo started the motor which blew out a sooty cloud of diesel exhaust, and we set off towards the diving barge.

The river was wide above the dam wall, but we were working on the nearside today, at a draw-off tower, so there was only a short stretch of water to cross. As we made our way and the shoreline receded, the gently sloping wooded banks came further into view, stretching into the distance. The dull flat empty countryside behind them remained hidden out of sight.

The thin green line of the woods along the water's edge led the eye naturally upstream until, at some distance it faded into the same warm haze which welded the steely sheen of the river to the dusty blue sky. It was an elemental, watery landscape until you looked downstream, where the view was interrupted by the dirty grey of the massive concrete dam wall, looming above us, behind the tower. To an observer on the other side of the dam, the energetic discharge would indicate the huge weight of water which it held back, ready to burst forth. On our side, the boat chugged softly over still tranquil waters which gave no clue about their hidden potential.

We sat on benches opposite each other without talking. I was still feeling moody about having been kept waiting, but not enough to say something about it. Over the top of my book, I noticed Pete stretch out his arm to look at his watch, raise his eyebrows and pull a face. He saw me looking and gave a shrug and a cheeky grin which stood for an apology. I'd seen that expression plenty of times. Lateness was his great weakness.

As we came up to the barge I slid a bookmark into my paperback. Leo cut the engine and cruised the last few metres. The only sound was of water washing past the sides

of the boat and lapping against the diving barge. Then the gentle bump between the two vessels as they met. Pete, who was in his wetsuit by now, called out to Victor, already on the barge, to help us offload our kit and climb up.

It was a talent of Pete's, to be so damn likeable and easy-going that it was hard to tick him off. Despite all his experience and skills, he had held onto a naivety which made him seem younger than his years. He didn't wear responsibility too well, but he made up for it with charm instead, notwithstanding slip-ups like today's. Maybe that's why even Enrique was soft on him.

In any case, I owed him, for he had somehow wangled this contract for us both, six thousand miles from home. A bit of warm water work in subtropical South America would see us both right through the winter, he said, a world away from the freezing northern latitudes which were our usual habitat. He was older and had a lot of skills to bargain with, not that we needed them much today, but the work so far had been varied and interesting. Tagging along with him as my mentor over the last few years had been a great learning experience for me, and we got on well together, so we'd become regular buddies.

Enrique caught up within a few minutes, having taken the land route and walked along the wall to our mooring. He climbed nimbly down the ladder and jumped aboard. His hair was still dark and he kept himself in good shape, although he was short and naturally thick-set. He wore a shirt with a collar as a token towards being in charge, but it remained open-necked. He was much older than the rest of us and took a fatherly interest in us all. That included discipline when it was called for. I glanced up at him to see if he had cooled off yet and caught his eye. "What do you call a man who's always late for work?" he asked me in his

accented English, obviously aiming the remark at Pete, and not too subtly.

The word tardy sprang to mind and seemed to have an obvious translation, if it kept its meaning, but while I was still wondering whether dilatory might have more of an edge to it, Pete took over: “Mister Bus,” he chipped in.

I clapped my hand to my eyes and groaned. “I can tell you’re a dad. Please save those for Charlie and Amy,” I begged.

English being his second language, Enrique took a little longer to process the joke. His scowl softened as the cogs in his mind went round and then he broke into a smile and laughed a little, in his gruff way. He shook his head and waved a finger in admonishment. “Every time I warn you, it makes no difference, you never listen. One day...” he left the threat hanging. But Pete was forgiven already and Enrique busied himself with the equipment checks.

“Actually Pete,” I turned to him, “can we do a swap this morning and I’ll do the next turn? I feel like finishing this.” I held up my book by way of an explanation. Pete agreed, and Enrique just shrugged to show his assent.

The morning was warming up quickly, so I set up my sun umbrella and plastic deck chair and sat back to admire the scenery, such as it was. The dive barge was crowded with our equipment, including a large compressor, several equipment lockers and Enrique’s control cubicle, which provided a little extra shelter from the hot sun. The water flow around the tower was shut off in our designated work area, and as it settled a brownish foam stuck to the edges of the rafts of floating trash which drifted lazily in the calm water around us.

“Did you know that crocodiles actually construct piles of twigs to hide under so they can ambush their prey?” I asked.

Pete looked up. “But there’s no crocs here, right?”

“There are caimans.”

“What’s a caiman?”

“A crocodile.”

He did a double-take and we both laughed.



We were working with surface-supplied air, pumped to us through a so-called umbilical, which was a bundle of tubes including a lifeline, a gas tube and various bits of wire to allow for two-way communications. Leo and Victor were our line tenders, who helped us both on and off with our equipment and stayed topside at all times. Although I was now the back-up diver, I still had to be ready to jump in at a moment’s notice and so I was kitted up fully, and feeling the warmth. The only piece of equipment I skipped at this point was my mask.

Leo and Victor were gossiping with each other in Spanish and although I couldn’t keep up with them, I was reasonably certain the conversation was about last night’s football. Leo rarely wore anything except his local team’s shirt. Their high spirits suggested they were happy with the result.

Meanwhile, Enrique pulled out the job plan, cleared his throat and, when he had our attention, began to read out loud: “Pete, main diver: Descend shot line. Locate mid-level draw-off inlet at 20 metres. Check for flows. Clean trash bar. Ascend and locate top level draw-off at 8 metres. Check for flows. Clean trash bar. Ascend to surface with decompression stops at 6 metres and 3 metres. OK?”

“Yes boss,” Pete answered.

“Marc, back-up diver. You seen the emergency plan?”

“Yes boss,” I answered.

Enrique carried on with the checklist: “Control room and site maintenance confirmed draw-off valves are closed and locked out ... Let’s go – ¡*Largarse!*” He clapped his hands.

Victor fitted Pete’s helmet over his suit, checked the communications channel and Pete was off, climbing down into the water, pausing at the waterline only to check water seals and set the dial on his orange-faced diver’s watch. His attitude to time-keeping below the water bore no resemblance to when he was on dry land. Enrique flicked the comms channel over to the speakers on deck and as Pete disappeared from view we listened to the steady hypnotic draw and release of his regulated breathing.

I settled down to a lazy morning and opened my book again. I’d picked up a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* for being set in roughly this part of the world, give or take three thousand miles. I found him surprisingly empathetic: a liberal-minded man for his era. His family wanted him to choose a profession instead of a life of adventure, as some would see it, and it irked me slightly to recall the arguments with my parents when I had made a similarly unwise choice, from their point of view.

The sun climbed higher and the warmth built up. Pete finished clearing the lower section and moved up to start work at the higher level. A lot of vegetation had come down the river in the last few weeks and had collected on the screens which were there to stop it from clogging valves and pipes deeper inside the dam. We were engaged for more skilled work, but it was a simple enough task to clean up the guards while we had our operations set up. I could hear over the deck speakers that Pete was struggling to clear the top-level inlet, which had a large quantity of wedged material, where trash had mixed with sediment. My line tender Leo had taken the launch out a few metres and was using it to help

pull the mass of debris clear using a rope and irons which Pete was hooking on from below, as best he could.

After a while, Enrique came up to me. “Marc – this is taking too long. Can you go down? Help move this stuff. I will get Leo back,” he said. He turned and waved towards the boat which at that moment was tugging on the ropes.



As he did, a yelp of surprise from Pete burst out of the deck speakers, followed by a cry of alarm and pain. Pete’s harness wire twitched and began to straighten like a line when the fisherman’s quarry strikes. Victor, Pete’s line tender, leapt forward ready to start pulling him in.

In an instant, the atmosphere became charged. Enrique shouted to Leo to hurry back, then he ran for the intercom. In a controlled but urgent voice, he asked Pete to tell him what had happened. All that came back were cries of pain, and then abruptly the sound died completely. Surprised and nonplussed, Enrique toggled the communications between the deck speakers and the small intercom unit, and then back again, but there was still no sound.

Victor called out and we all turned towards him. He was pulling on the line, bringing the umbilical up without resistance. Then the realisation came with a thud: Pete’s line was broken.

Whatever was happening down below, we knew we were working against the clock now. Pete had had a reserve cylinder of air with him that might be good for up to an hour, if he was conserving air. Or half that, if his heart was thumping like mine.

Leo had come back to the barge by now and had run over to me. I pulled my face mask over my head and he hooked

up my breathing equipment. Enrique placed himself between me and the water. The creases on his face seemed deeper and his eyes bored into me. He pushed a rescue tether into my hand.

“OK Marc. I think maybe something fell on him or the inlet is opened or some other leak pulled him in. You got to get the tether to him now. Be calm. Talk to me, all the time. Start from the wall and work out to the end. You know to test for water flows. Don’t hurry. Don’t get yourself in trouble. I am calling for another diver now.” He pushed a length of frayed rope into my other hand – an impromptu method to check ahead for deadly water flows that could grab you and suddenly suck you in.

“Yes boss,” I answered, mechanically.

Enrique had begun calling the control room before I entered the river. I descended headfirst through the green water, between shafts of sunlight which penetrated the upper levels, following the shot line into the darkness. The long-learned discipline of controlling my breathing helped to calm me and the pulse thudding in my ears began to abate. There was near silence down there, except for the hiss of my regulator and the metallic gurgle of air bubbles rising from my mask.

I very quickly reached the point from where the inlet pipe protruded and I began to work my way out more slowly, testing ahead of me. The piece of frayed rope flopped limply and I progressed further along. It was pretty dark and the visibility was poor due to the stirred up sediment. As I reached the end of the pipe, I held my rope-detector ahead of me and felt the tug of a strong current drawing on it. The rope bent and twisted down towards where the trash grille should have been attached to the end of the pipe. Except that the grille wasn’t there, the inlet was open and water was

being sucked in through it. It was a worst-case scenario: it seemed like the inlet valve must have been opened, even though we'd checked it and seen it locked out. I immediately recalled that the valve mechanism had stuck not fully screwed down. We'd checked it but the operators were sure this valve screw never went all the way down. And so we'd double-checked for water flows already and they were OK too. But I could see now that Pete must have been pulled into the pipe. Quite likely he was trapped inside by the rush of water, sucked into the darkness of the inlet, or possibly even gone right through it. I wasn't sure if that would be possible.

I reported the situation up to Enrique and then began to think how to pass the rescue tether down to where Pete might be, without being pulled in myself. Like when you put a hand over a plug hole in the bath, you would scarcely feel the suction of the water until it suddenly snatched you in with a bang.

How would Pete even be able to see the tether in the dark, if he were capable of looking? An idea came to me. I switched on my spare torch and clipped it onto the end of the tether, then pushed it out in front of the inlet, where the current immediately dragged it in.

That was something, at least. The body of the torch added enough drag for the current to pull the line along down inside the inlet. I could feel a little tension in the line, enough to help it travel into the pipe. I counted hand over hand as I paid it out, until after about twenty feet it became loose and I was no longer sure if it was still travelling. I wound it halfway back in, then tried again. Again it stopped after twenty feet, which wasn't far enough. It wasn't working, but I could think of nothing else to do, other than keep on trying.

And so I persisted. As time ticked by, a feeling of helplessness overtook the initial sense of desperation. Alone

in the green depths, an arm's length away from the deadly current, I could neither save Pete nor quit trying. He was my sole responsibility and I couldn't look to anyone else to help. I felt hollow, ashamed of my powerlessness and inability.

My training should have prevented me, but for a while I lost track of time. The nightmare seemed endless. Then eventually I realised that the inlet current was reducing.

"Enrique, what's happening? The water flow is slowing down," I asked through the intercom.

"The guys from the control room are shutting the valve. They think it was jammed maybe," he replied. "Marc, another diver will be with you in a few minutes. If the flow has stopped then I will ask you to go in and look for Pete."

But for being underwater I would have sweated. As it was, I merely shrank inside my suit. I knew someone had to do it, of course. Me. Pete could still be alive inside this steel sarcophagus, just. I checked my watch. I'd been down for nearly an hour. How could so much time have gone by already? But the thought of entering the inlet pipe made me feel sick with dread. The dark waters had played a trick on Pete, hidden the danger until he was in harm's way. The disturbance he made when clearing the trash must have shaken the inlet, dislodged the trash guard. Maybe. The valve was never shut properly, or wedged half open until something had dislodged the blockage. Another maybe, but feeling more likely now. But what if it was still partly blocked, waiting for another disturbance before something else – maybe me – dislodged the last obstacle?

"Enrique, are you sure they've closed it off properly?" I asked.

"Victor has gone to do a visual check," he replied.

Within a few minutes the new diver appeared. They told me his name was Gabriel. He was carrying a spare umbilical

and some extra lighting. He would take my place as backup, positioned at the entrance to the inlet, tendering both my line and the spare one while I made my way inside. Confirmation from Enrique followed soon after. It was all clear. Time for me to go in.

With a huge sense of foreboding, I discarded my reserve cylinder before entering the inlet. Without its bulk I would have more manoeuvring space inside the pipe – and face it, if the current flow began again then I was screwed in any case. Gabriel made as if to stop me, but I signed to him to let me get on with it, and to keep quiet about it.

Inside the duct was pitch dark, and my light penetrated only a short distance through the clouds of sediment. It was cramped, without enough room to turn around in. The first twenty feet were clear, and then I found a branch lodged inside the pipe, making a partial blockage against which many smaller pieces of trash had collected. I supposed that was where my torch and tether arrangement had become stuck previously. There was just enough room to squeeze past it without pulling it out, which I was loath to do. This kind of work was no good for anyone with claustrophobia. Then it was a further twenty feet down the pipe to the junction with the main valve, which is where I felt and then saw Pete's motionless body, floating gently in the murky sediment-clouded water. I peered down to the valve and saw it was now fully shut.

Pete had switched his air supply to his reserve cylinder, so he could have lasted for some time while he was pinned there. I went alongside him and connected his helmet to the new air supply, but he was either unconscious or dead, so the main job was to get him out of there quickly. I clipped the safety harness to him so that Gabriel could pull him gently back up the length of the inlet pipe. For myself I had to work my way

back up the pipe in reverse, the space inside being too tight to turn around. And so I led, walking with my hands against the inside of the duct, pulling Pete behind me and trying to keep us both from tangling with the umbilicals. Then after I was clear of the lodged branch, his reserve air cylinder caught against it. I don't know why I'd left it attached to him, but I had. I talked to Gabriel who let the tether go slack while I worked Pete loose and then back around the branch. The job was tricky in the near-dark and it was a tight squeeze. It demanded patience and burned time which we couldn't spare. Then, once he was through, I let Gabriel pull us quickly for the rest of the way until, finally, we cleared the entrance and together we took Pete straight up.

When we broke the surface there were suddenly a lot of new faces on the dive platform, and plenty of hands to haul Pete's limp body up and onto it.

Victor had Pete's helmet and harness off in seconds. His skin was quite blue. Then a guy who looked like a medic took over while we all stood and watched. The medic checked his vital signs and rolled him over to get any water out, though there was none to speak of. We carried our own defibrillator as part of the medical kit, which he used almost straightaway, although to no effect. Dead is dead, but to give him credit he went on trying for long after I thought there was any point. I began to wish he would leave Pete's body alone, to let him rest in peace.

Enrique meanwhile had checked Pete's reserve air cylinder. "Looks like he ran out of air," he said, his words flatly spoken, but his face showing the weight of worry and concentration. He checked the time and wrote a few words in his logbook.

After a while we loaded Pete's limp body onto a stretcher on the launch to take him back to the compound. No-one

talked. The drone of the launch motor and the slap of the bow against the water were the only sounds on the river.

An ambulance was waiting for us where we beached and we manhandled the stretcher off the craft and carried Pete up the bank. The medic appeared to be with the ambulance, as far as I could see, and they loaded Pete's body into the back. Enrique agreed to follow them in his pickup to the hospital.

Enrique turned to me. "You have done plenty today. I will go with him," he said. "You go home. Stay there. I will call you tomorrow."

I didn't want to hurry off, or to join the others talking through what they'd just witnessed, and so I waited in my car until they dispersed. Time passed as I watched the river, indifferent to the human tragedy, carry on flowing towards the implacable dam wall. The compound gradually emptied of vehicles, until only Pete's dark red Jeep was left behind.