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Category: Short Story

Caved

This story is based on real events and real people who survived them.

JUNE 22nd

I felt a small droplet of sweat trickle down my temple. I suppose I'm lucky it's not hotter than it usually is at this time of day. Pong passed me the ball from across the field and I narrowly dodged Mig as he charged for the futbol. I found myself on a breakaway with our keeper, Bew and narrowly chipped in a corner shot before he could grab it away from my feet. A few of my teammates congratulated me, but at the end of a long futbol practice, we were all too tired to make any such effort.

"Hyud thãhî reã dũ yà, Dom!" Stop making us look bad, Dom! Exclaimed Adul from his position beside me. Coach Ek called to us from the sidelines,

"Everyone, come over here!" We all did as he instructed and went into a huddle around our coach. "Good practice today. Our next game is on Sunday so be ready. Practice is dismissed for tonight." Some of the boys immediately began dispersing but the oldest boy, Peerapat- although everyone calls him Night- exclaimed,

"Wait everyone. My birthday is tomorrow. I was thinking we could go take a quick hike into the Thang Luang Non caves as a mini celebration." Coach Ek chimed in,

"I don't know if that's such a good idea. There's rain on the forecast for tomorrow and those caves can flood easily." Night retorted with,

"Nah, we'll be fine. We could be back in two hours tops. No would even know we were gone." Mig clearly agreed with anything that got us out of practice tomorrow, so he said,

"That sounds like a great idea. We just can't tell our parents, or they'll kill us." There was a small whisper carried between my teammates and it was agreed that we should go into the caves the following day in celebration for Night's birthday. Coach Ek claimed,

"Fine. I clearly can't stop you, but I am going with you just to make sure nothing bad happens." We all dispersed to our respective locations and went to sleep that night with not a care in the world.

JUNE 23rd

I woke up the next morning thoroughly underwhelmed for the spread of events planned for the preceding day.

"S̄wãsdĩ txn chêã khã, Titan. How did you sleep?"

"Fine, I suppose."

"Are you going to Night's party after soccer practice today?"

"Something like that. What time is it?"

“About 6:50. You need to get to school. I’ll see you after practice.”

I stumbled throughout the remainder of my day, my thoughts resorting to only one location; the Thuang Luang Caves. I never truly desired to go spelunking and I dreaded the caves ever since the initiation hosted there earlier in the season. But, being the youngest in the congregation, I didn’t want to be deemed immature, so accepted the invitation, nonetheless. That afternoon at 4:00, all 13 of us made our entrance into the cave system. The brooding clouds above loomed ominously, reminding me of Coach’s warning of rain. I half considered saying something about it, but decided against it, given the previous concern. We wandered into the underground.

Outside, rain began coming down in sheets, unbeknownst to all those inside of the caves.

I never really saw myself as the disagreeable type. I go with the flow mostly and do what everyone else does; well except for religion. I’m the only Christian on my team. We hiked farther into the caves.

“Hey Adul, come check this out!” Dom exclaimed. I looked over to where some of the boys were looking at the wall and saw our names scribbled into the wall from initiation. I laughed but a pang of fear struck me squarely in the chest as I realized that we had never been past this point in the caves. I shrugged it off and assumed that Night knew what he was doing. We reached a beach about 2/3 of the way into the cave system when coach announced,

“We should probably be turning around. We’ve gone far enough.” Night called,

“Wait! We should write our names in this portion of the wall so we can remember how far we made it.” We all did just that and once we were satisfied with our writing, I turned around to lead us out. I readied myself to step down to our hike but was met with... Water? I screamed at the freezing liquid tingling my foot and backed up. Coach shined his light at me and saw the encroaching water as well.

“Get to higher ground now!” We all scrambled up the rocks and farther up the beach. The rain must have flooded the caves, I thought to myself. With a sinking sensation, I slowly came to accept the looming truth. We were trapped.

Outside of the caves, the boy’s parents noticed they had been gone for quite a while. They tracked their location to the Thuang Luang Caves and found all thirteen abandoned bikes. The alarm was sounded.

JUNE 24th

Now that we had officially confirmed we were trapped, there were only two things occupying our minds; water, and how mad our parents were going to be at us when we got out. We had to continually move back in the caves due to ever rising water. I didn’t tell the other boys this because many of them looked up to me, but rescue was unlikely. The currents were swift, the water was murky, the passages were hard to navigate, not to mention the fact that we didn’t even know if our parents knew where we were. Later that day, we were forced to dig a hole in the wall so we could huddle together and stay away from the encroaching water. We took stock of what little food and water we had left and sat, unsure of what to do next. All of a sudden, our only flashlight began to sputter. We all looked at each other with plain terror painted across our faces as the flashlight went out. Coach Ek tried to calm us saying,

“Don’t worry everyone, we have a little bit of food and clean drinking water dripping from the cave walls. I was a monk for years before I came to Thailand, so I know how to control your hunger. We can survive for a month without food, and we’ll be rescued far before that. Just relax and try to stay as still as possible.”

I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! Something bad was going to happen in these caves and I felt it, but didn’t say anything. Curse my foolish innocence. In the darkness, I slowly lost track of time. At first, I had been attempting to count minutes but gave up on that after I reached 56. Sanity slowly began to slip out of my grasp and I gave way to thoughts that shouldn’t be had by someone trying to survive a traumatic event. Quiet thought dissolved into panic, which slowly became tears. I couldn’t quite explain why I was crying, but Coach Ek helped me calm down after many failed attempts. Tears resolved themselves back into silence, and eventually, I fell asleep.

Outside, engineers attempt to drain the caves with an elaborate pipe system. When this doesn’t work, they send out an international call for help.

JUNE 25th

The last bits of food were handed out on the third day. Or was it the second... I had lost track of time in the darkness. Of course, it's not that I was ever trying to keep track. I looked around the group and decided it would be better to save my food for later. I prayed vigorously all day and sometimes all night too. God, if you're really out there, please help us get out of this. I'm just a boy. I don't want to die yet. Please, please, save us.

JUNE 26th

One more day has passed, I believe, and we still haven't seen any efforts of rescue from the outside world. I look around at where I assume my teammates still are and I hear soft whimpers coming from the corner. One of the younger boys, Pong, seemed to be crying. I asked,

"What's wrong?" He responded softly,

"I'm so hungry." I felt sorry for the small boy and suddenly remembered the piece of food I still had left in my pocket from the previous day. I decided he needed it more than I did and gave it to him. He murmured a quiet thank you and then ate it. I continued praying. Please, god, please. I don't want to die yet. I need your help to get through this. Please don't let us die. All of a sudden, my body felt incredibly weak and I didn't resist it. My world went black

Outside the caves, divers from America, Britain, and Australia have arrived at the scene. They begin plotting the best route to get into the caves and find the boys. They are not able to enter yet because of the strong currents.

JUNE 28th

I've lost all concept of time at this point. We spend our waking hours meditating and controlling our breathing, the same as we have been doing for days now. I'm worried about Adul. After he blacked out yesterday, he's barely woken up since. He shivers at night and somehow, he's even thinner than the rest of us. When he thinks everyone else is asleep, I hear him praying to himself. Occasionally we hear disturbing sounds from the caverns. It sounds like someone is trying to slurp the water out of the caves and the younger boys are convinced it's a monster. Coach Ek keeps telling us it means someone is trying to get into the cave system and rescue us but I'm afraid it means more water is gushing in. My fears build as I continue to imagine the possibility that rescuers will break in to find thirteen lifeless skeletons.

JUNE 30th

I really do fear that my sanity has begun to slip. Without my sense of sight to comfort my wandering mind, I find it impossible to think about anything but the increasing water level. I also worry about the fact that we will be so weak by the time rescuers find us, if they do, that escape will be impossible. I must move my mind to other matters, so I try to envision my surroundings. I attempt to envision the stalactites that hung from the ceiling and supply us with water. It is enough to make me consider if the water we have been surviving on is even clean. I suppose that we would know by now if it wasn't, but theoretically, it could be a slow dividing bacterium. I should move on to other objects. I know there are other boys huddled around me. I try to remember who is sitting directly on my sides. I believe to remember that Adul was sitting to my left... I feel bad for him. He talks to himself at night sometimes, but I can never discern what he was saying. He is incredibly thin and finds it hard to even sit up anymore. I do hope we'll be rescued soon because this waiting is torture.

Enough water has finally been drained from the caves for the divers to begin entering and scouting out possible routes.

JULY 1st

I have never been close to death before. I wander through life, not a care in the world. I make my decisions, and they almost always have little to no effect on my life. But now, in these caves, I find myself thinking about all of the things I'll never get to do. I have lost almost all range of motion and I fear if we are here for much longer, I will die. All of a sudden, the water at our feet ripples and light emerges from the inky blackness. Divers! We scramble down the rocks to where they have emerged. I wince at the amount of light in my unacclimated eyes. One of the divers asks, in English,

"How many of you?" I knew I was the only boy in the group who knew how to speak English so I used all of my remaining strength to tell them,

“Thirteen.” The first diver responds,

“Thirteen? Brilliant!” They promised to bring food with them the next time they came. We were saved.

JULY 3rd

Today is my Birthday! As was promised, the divers brought food yesterday and they let us write letters to our parents. Today we got the responses. Mine said, “We miss you so much Dom! We will have pad krapao waiting for you when you get out! Much love!” I could not ask for a better birthday. We had food, light, letters, and every day brings us closer to rescue. I go to sleep tonight satisfied.

JULY 4th

On the morning of the seventh day, we woke up to await the divers, as usual. But today, we were met with three unfamiliar faces. Luckily, this time they all spoke Thai, so I could understand them as well. I had the option to take English in third grade and I regret not doing it now. The doctor treats any small wounds we had and tells us what is going on outside. Apparently, a small makeshift town has been set up outside the caves and local merchants have come to give out food to volunteers. Our parents and relatives are all being housed in tents and divers and rangers from all over the world have come to help us get out. They don’t know when we will be brought out, but we have plenty of resources to last us until we do.

JULY 6th

I’m glad, of course that we are being rescued, but I find myself worried because I know the only way to evacuate these caves is by swimming through the canals. Generally speaking, this is a fine idea, except for the fact that I don’t know how to swim. I know I should say something, but I’m almost positive that the divers know some of us can’t swim. Of course, I do know where not saying anything got me last time... I know we have technically been rescued, but for some reason, I feel just as trapped as ever.

JULY 7th

You’d be surprised the things you hear grown-ups talking about when they think you’re asleep. Last night, two of the Thai divers were talking with Coach Ek after midnight when they assumed, we were sleeping. Apparently, we’re being pulled out tomorrow. The locals say that around July 10th every year, these caves flood completely. Also, the oxygen level here is depleting rapidly and we could be dead within a matter of days if it runs out. The rain outside has stopped for a change, which was unusual for monsoon season, but if it continues, we might get flooded in completely. They will have to sedate us for evacuation tomorrow and we can only go through one at a time. However, they often spoke of how dangerous it would be after all the narrow caves had already taken the life of one highly trained diver. I am incredibly worried now, because if an expert diver died in these caves, how are thirteen boys who barely know how to swim going to get out?

JULY 8th

Evacuation. The word has been swirling about for the past few hours since we were told that we would be rescued officially today. The divers have been rushing in and out, preparing for the excavation of the caves. They let us decide what order we would be going out in, which has proven more of a task than the evacuation itself. We thought about drawing straws but that seemed too random. We also considered going youngest to oldest, but Titan didn’t like that idea much either. We finally decided that we would go by who lived the farthest away. The time came and I was the first one to go out. The doctor explained that they would give a small amount of anesthetic to each of us and we would then be given an oxygen mask and the divers would swim us through the caverns. I nodded in agreement as the needle was inserted into my arm, and the world went dark.

Over the next two days, all twelve boys and their coach were indeed evacuated from the Thuang Luang Caves. The boys were checked into a hospital thirty minutes away and were kept there for the next three days. Once they were released, they went back to life as normal.

JULY 13th

I could feel my shirt sticking to my back. It was a humid day after all the rain, and I was incredibly sweaty. It felt so good to sweat again. I didn’t mind at this point. Soccer practice had just been declared over for the day and I ran over to the sidelines where coach and the rest of my team were standing. Coach Ek announced,

“Good practice today everyone. You are dismissed.” We all started to walk away but we turned around when he said,

“I know we’ve been through a lot together over the past two weeks. I just wanted to let you know how proud I am for everything you did, and all the things you continue to do. You are incredible young men and I can’t wait to see what you will do in your lifetimes.”

I smiled. Being the nearest towards him, I pulled Coach into a giant hug, and the rest of the team joined me. This eventually evolved into a giant huddle that ended in us yelling our motto,

“All for one, all together, Wild Boars unite!”