

SHORT STORY NIGHT



"THE FALLS"
GEORGE SAUNDERS



DANGER
DEEP WATER



NO
SWIMMING

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The Falls

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January 15, 1996

Morse found it nerve-racking to cross the St. Jude grounds just as the school was being dismissed, because he felt that if he smiled at the uniformed Catholic children they might think he was a wacko or pervert and if he didn't smile they might think he was an old grouch made bitter by the world, which surely, he felt, by certain yardsticks, he was. Sometimes he wasn't entirely sure that he wasn't even a wacko of sorts, although certainly he wasn't a pervert. Of that he was certain. Or relatively certain. Being overly certain, he was relatively sure, was what eventually made one a wacko. So humility was the thing, he thought, arranging his face into what he thought would pass for the expression of a man thinking fondly of his own youth, a face devoid of wackiness or perversion, humility was the thing.

The school sat among maples on a hillside that sloped down to the wide Taganac River, which narrowed and picked up speed and crashed over Bryce Falls a mile downstream near Morse's small rental house, his embarrassingly small rental house, actually, which nevertheless was the best he could do and for which he knew he should be grateful, although at times he wasn't a bit grateful and wondered where he'd gone wrong, although at other times he was quite pleased with the crooked little blue shack covered with peeling lead paint and felt great pity for the poor stiff renting hazardous shitholes even smaller than his hazardous shithole, which was how he felt now as he came down into the bright sunlight and continued his pleasant walk home along the green river lined with expensive mansions whose owners he deeply resented.

Morse was tall and thin and as gray and sepulchral as a church about to be condemned. His pants were too short, and his face periodically broke into a tense, involuntary grin that quickly receded, as if he had just suffered a sharp pain. At work he was known to punctuate his conversations with brief wild laughs and gusts of inchoate enthusiasm and subsequent embarrassment, expressed by a sudden plunging of his hands into his pockets, after which he would yank his hands out of his pockets, too ashamed of his own shame to stand there merely grimacing for even an instant longer.

From behind him on the path came a series of arrhythmic whacking steps. He glanced back to find Aldo Cummings, an odd duck who, though nearly forty, still lived with his mother. Cummings didn't work and had his bangs cut straight across

and wore gym shorts even in the dead of winter. Morse hoped Cummings wouldn't collar him. When Cummings didn't collar him, and in fact passed by without even returning his nervous, self-effacing grin, Morse felt guilty for having suspected Cummings of wanting to collar him, then miffed that Cummings, who collared even the city-hall cleaning staff, hadn't tried to collar him. Had he done something to offend Cummings? It worried him that Cummings might not like him, and it worried him that he was worried about whether a nut like Cummings liked him. Was he some kind of worrywart? It worried him. Why should he be worried when all he was doing was going home to enjoy his beautiful children without a care in the world, although on the other hand there was Robert's piano recital, which was sure to be a disaster, since Robert never practiced and they had no piano and weren't even sure where or when the recital was and Annie, God bless her, had eaten the cardboard keyboard he'd made for Robert to practice on. When he got home he would make Robert a new cardboard keyboard and beg him to practice. He might even order him to practice. He might even order him to make his own cardboard keyboard, then practice, although this was unlikely, because when he became forceful with Robert, Robert blubbered, and Morse loved Robert so much he couldn't stand to see him blubbering, although if he didn't become forceful with Robert, Robert tended to lie on his bed with his baseball glove over his face.

Good God, but life could be less than easy, not that he was unaware that it could certainly be a lot worse, but to go about in such a state, pulse high, face red, worried sick that someone would notice how nervous one was, was certainly less than ideal, and he felt sure that his body was secreting all kinds of harmful chemicals and that the more he worried about the harmful chemicals the faster they were pouring out of wherever it was they came from.

When he got home, he would sit on the steps and enjoy a few minutes of centered breathing while reciting his mantra, which was "calm down calm down," before the kids came running out and grabbed his legs and sometimes even bit him quite hard in their excitement and Ruth came out to remind him in an angry tone that he wasn't the only one who'd worked all day, and as he walked he gazed out at the beautiful Taganac in an effort to absorb something of her serenity but instead found himself obsessing about the faulty latch on the gate, which theoretically could allow Annie to toddle out of the yard and into the river, and he pictured himself weeping on the shore, and to eradicate this thought started manically whistling "The Stars and Stripes Forever," while slapping his hands against his sides.

Cummings bobbed past the restored gristmill, pleased at having so decisively snubbed Morse, a smug member of the power élite in this conspiratorial Village, one of the league of oppressive oppressors who wouldn't know the lot of the struggling artist if the lot of the struggling artist came up with great and beleaguered dignity and bit him on the polyester ass. Over the Pine Street bridge was a fat cloud. To an interviewer in his head, Cummings said he felt the possible rain made the fine bright day even finer and brighter because of the possibility of its loss. The possibility of its ephemeral loss. The ephemeral loss of the day to the fleeting passages of time. Preening time. Preening nascent time, the blackguard. Time made wastrels of us all, did it not, with its gaunt cheeks and its tombly reverberations and its admonishing glances with bony fingers. Bony fingers pointed as if in admonishment, as if to say, "I admonish you to recall your own eventual nascent death, which being on its way is forthcoming. Forthcoming, mortal coil, and don't think its ghastly pall won't settle on your furrowed brow, *pronto*, once I select your fated number from my very dusty book with this selfsame bony finger with which I'm pointing at you now, you vanity of vanities, you luster, you shirker of duties as you shuffle after your worldly pleasure centers."

That was some good stuff, if only he could remember it through the rest of his stroll and the coming storm, to scrawl in a passionate hand in his yellow pad. He thought with longing ardor of his blank yellow pad, he thought. He thought with longing ardor of his blank yellow pad on which, this selfsame day, his fame would be wrought, no, on which, this selfsame day, the first meagre scrawlings which would presage his nascent burgeoning fame would be wrought, or rather writ, and someday someone would dig up his yellow pad and virtually cry eureka when they realized what a teeming fragment of minutiae, and yet crucial minutiae, had been found, and wouldn't all kinds of literary women in short black jackets want to meet him then!

In the future he must always remember to bring his pad everywhere.

The town had spent a mint on the riverfront, and now the burbling, smashing Taganac ran past a nail salon in a restored gristmill and a café in a former coal tower and a quaint public square where some high-school boys with odd haircuts were trying to kick a soccer ball into the partly open window of a parked Colt with a joy so belligerent and obnoxious that it seemed they believed themselves the first boys ever to walk the face of the earth, which Morse found worrisome. What if Annie grew up and brought one of these freaks home? Not one of these exact freaks, of course, since they were approximately fifteen years her senior, although it was possible that at twenty she could bring home one of these exact freaks, who would then be approximately thirty-five, albeit over Morse's dead body, although in his heart he

knew he wouldn't make a stink about it even if she did bring home one of the freaky snots who had just succeeded in kicking the ball into the Colt and were now jumping around joyfully bumping their bare chests together while grunting like walruses, and in fact he knew perfectly well that, rather than expel the thirty-five-year-old freak from his home, he would likely offer him coffee or a soft drink in an attempt to dissuade him from corrupting Annie, who for God's sake was just a baby, because Morse knew very well the kind of man he was at heart, timid of conflict, conciliatory to a fault, pathetically gullible, and with a pang he remembered Len Beck, who senior year had tricked him into painting his ass blue. If there had actually been a secret Blue-Asser's Club, if the ass-painting had in fact been required for membership, it would have been bad enough, but to find out on the eve of one's prom that one had painted one's ass blue simply for the amusement of a clique of unfeeling swimmers who subsequently supplied certain photographs to one's prom date, that was too much, and he had been glad, quite glad actually, at least at first, when Beck, drunk, had tried and failed to swim to Foley's Snag and been swept over the Falls in the dark of night, the great tragedy of their senior year, a tragedy that had mercifully eclipsed Morse's blue ass in the class's collective memory.

Two red-headed girls sailed by in a green canoe, drifting with the current. They yelled something to him, and he waved. Had they yelled something insulting? Certainly it was possible. Certainly today's children had no respect for authority, although one had to admit there was always Ben Akbar, their neighbor, a little Pakistani genius who sometimes made Morse look askance at Robert. Ben was an all-state cellist, on the wrestling team, who was unfailingly sweet to smaller kids and tole-painted and could do a one-handed pushup. Ah, Ben Shmen, Morse thought, ten Bens weren't worth a single Robert, although he couldn't think of one area in which Robert was superior or even equal to Ben, the little smarty-pants, although certainly he had nothing against Ben, Ben being a mere boy, but if Ben thought for a minute that his being more accomplished and friendly and talented than Robert somehow entitled him to lord it over Robert, Ben had another think coming, not that Ben had ever actually lorded it over Robert. On the contrary, Robert often lorded it over Ben, or tried to, although he always failed, because Ben was too sharp to be taken in by a little con man like Robert, and Morse's face reddened at the realization that he had just characterized his own son as a con man.

Boy, oh boy, could life be a torture. Could life ever force a fellow into a strange, dark place from which he found himself doing graceless, unforgivable things like casting aspersions on his beloved firstborn. If only he could escape BlasCorp and do something significant, such as discovering a critical vaccine. But it was too late, and he had never been good at biology and in fact had flunked it twice. But some kind of

moment in the sun would certainly not be unwelcome. If only he could be a tortured prisoner of war who not only refused to talk but led the other prisoners in rousing hymns at great personal risk. If only he could witness an actual miracle or save the President from an assassin or win the Lotto and give it all to charity. If only he could be part of some great historical event like the codgers he saw on PBS who had been slugged in the Haymarket Riot or known Medgar Evers or lost beatific mothers on the Titanic. His childhood dreams had been so bright, he had hoped for so much, it couldn't be true that he was a nobody, although, on the other hand, what kind of somebody spends the best years of his life swearing at a photocopier? Not that he was complaining. Not that he was unaware he had plenty to be thankful for. He loved his children. He loved the way Ruth looked in bed by candlelight when he had wedged the laundry basket against the door that wouldn't shut because the house was settling alarmingly, loved the face she made when he entered her, loved the way she made light of the blue-ass story, although he didn't particularly love the way she sometimes trotted it out when they were fighting—for example, on the dreadful night when the piano had been repossessed—or the way she blamed his passivity for their poverty within earshot of the kids or the fact that at the height of her infatuation with Robert's karate instructor, Master Li, she had been dragging Robert to class as often as six times a week, the poor little exhausted guy, but the point was, in spite of certain difficulties he truly loved Ruth. So what if their bodies were failing and fattening and they undressed in the dark and Robert admired strapping athletes on television while looking askance at Morse's rounded, pimped back? It didn't matter, because someday, when Robert had a rounded, pimped back of his own, he would appreciate his father, who had subjugated his petty personal desires for the good of his family, although, God willing, Robert would have a decent career by then and could afford to join a gym and see a dermatologist.

And Morse stopped in his tracks, wondering what in the world two little girls were doing alone in a canoe speeding toward the Falls, apparently oarless.

Cummings walked along, gazing into a mythic dusky arboreal Wood that put him in mind of the archetypal vision he had numbered 114 in his "Book of Archetypal Visions," on which Mom that nitwit had recently spilled grape pop. Vision 114 concerned standing on the edge of an ancient dense Wood at twilight, with the safe harbor of one's abode behind and the deep Wild ahead, replete with dark fearsome bears looming from albeit dingy covens. What would that twitching nervous wage slave Morse think if he were to dip his dim brow into the heady brew that was the "Archetypal Visions"? Morse, ha, Cummings thought, I'm glad I'm not Morse, a dullard in corporate pants trudging home to his threadbare brats in the gathering loam, born, like the rest of his ilk with their feet of clay thrust down the maw of

conventionality, content to cheerfully work lemminglike in moribund cubicles while comparing their stocks and bonds between bouts of tedious lawnmowing, then chortling while holding their suckling brats to the Nintendo breast. That was a powerful image, Cummings thought, one that he might develop some brooding night into a herculean promise that some Hollywood smoothie would eat like a hotcake, so he could buy Mom a Lexus and go with someone leggy and blowsy to Paris after taking some time to build up his body with arm curls so as to captivate her physically as well as mentally, and in Paris the leggy girl, in perhaps tight leather pants, would sit on an old-time bed with a beautiful shawl or blanket around her shoulders and gaze at him with doe eyes as he stood on the balcony brooding about the Parisian rain and so forth, and wouldn't Morse and his ilk stew in considerable juice when he sent home a postcard just to be nice!

And wouldn't the Village fall before him on repentant knees when T-shirts imprinted with his hard-won visage, his heraldic leonine visage, one might say, were available to all at the five-and-dime and he held court on the porch in a white Whitmanesque suit while Mom hovered behind him getting everything wrong about his work and proffering inane snacks to his manifold admirers, and wouldn't revenge be sweet when such former football players as Ned Wentz began begging him for lessons in the sonnet? And all that was required for these things to come to pass was some paper and pens and a quixotic blathering talent the likes of which would not be seen again soon, the critics would write, all of which he had in spades, and he rounded the last bend before the Falls, euphoric with his own possibilities, and saw a canoe the color of summer leaves ram the steep upstream wall of the Snag. The girls inside were thrown forward and shrieked with open mouths over frothing waves that would not let them be heard as the boat split open along some kind of seam and began taking on water in doomful fast quantities. Cummings stood stunned, his body electrified, hairs standing up on the back of his craning neck, thinking, I must do something, their faces are bloody, but what, such fast cold water, still I must do something, and he stumbled over the berm uncertainly, looking for help but finding only a farm field of tall dry corn.

Morse began to run. In all probability this was silly. In all probability the girls were safe onshore, or, if not, help was already on its way, although certainly it was possible that the girls were not safe onshore and help was not on its way, and in fact it was even possible that the help that was on its way was him, which was worrisome, because he had never been good under pressure and in a crisis often stood mentally debating possible options with his mouth hanging open. Come to think of it, it was possible, even probable, that the boat had already gone over the Falls or hit the Snag. He remembered the crew of the barge Fat Chance, rescued

via rope bridge in the early Carter years. He hoped several sweaty, decisive men were already on the scene and that one of them would send him off to make a phone call, although what if on the way he forgot the phone number and had to go back and ask the sweaty decisive man to repeat it? And what if this failure got back to Ruth and she was filled with shame and divorced him and forbade him to see the kids, who didn't want to see him anyway because he was such a panicky screwup? This was certainly not positive thinking. This was certainly an example of predestining failure via negativity. Because, who could tell, maybe he would stand in line assisting the decisive men and incur a nasty rope burn and go home a hero wearing a bandage, which might cause Ruth to regard him in a more favorable sexual light, and they would stay up all night celebrating his new manhood and exchanging sweet words between bouts of energetic lovemaking, although what kind of thing was that to be thinking at a time like this, with children's lives at stake? He was bad, that was for sure. There wasn't an earnest bone in his body. Other people were simpler and looked at the world with clearer eyes, but he was self-absorbed and insincere and mucked everything up, and he hoped this wasn't one more thing he was destined to muck up, because mucking up a rescue was altogether different from forgetting to mail out the invitations to your son's birthday party, which he had recently done, although certainly they had spent a small fortune rectifying the situation, stopping just short of putting an actual pony on Visa, but the point was, this was serious and he had to bear down. And throwing his thin legs out ahead of him, awkwardly bent at the waist, shirttails trailing behind and bum knee hurting, he remonstrated with himself to put aside all self-doubt and negativity and prepare to assist the decisive men in whatever way he could once he had rounded the bend and assessed the situation.

But when he rounded the bend and assessed the situation, he found no rope bridge or decisive men, only a canoe coming apart at the base of the Snag and two small girls in matching sweaters trying to bail with a bait bucket. What to do? This was a shocker. Go for help? Sprint to the Outlet Mall and call 911 from Knife World? There was no time. The canoe was sinking before his eyes. The girls would be drowned before he reached Route 8. Could one swim to the Snag? Certainly one could not. No one ever had. Was he a good swimmer? He was mediocre at best. Therefore he would have to run for help. But running was futile. Because there was no time. He had just decided that. And swimming was out of the question. Therefore the girls would die. They were basically dead. Although that couldn't be. That was too sad. What would become of the mother who this morning had dressed them in matching sweaters? How would she cope? Soon her girls would be nude and bruised and dead on a table. It was unthinkable. He thought of Robert nude and bruised and

dead on a table. What to do? He fiercely wished himself elsewhere. The girls saw him now and with their hands appeared to be trying to explain that they would be dead soon. My God, did they think he was blind? Did they think he was stupid? Was he their father? Did they think he was Christ? They were dead. They were frantic, calling out to him, but they were dead, as dead as the ancient dead, and he was alive, he was needed at home, it was a no-brainer, no one could possibly blame him for this one, and making a low sound of despair in his throat he kicked off his loafers and threw his long ugly body out across the water. ♦