

A Shrine Down Below

Contributed by The Old Wolf
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Driving back to Nang Ester's late that morning, I chuckled as I remembered what my son told me, after he spent a short time snorkeling with one of his uncles. "Daddy, Uncle James* got scared!" (*some names have been changed to protect the living – me!).

I already knew. The day before, I watched my brother head out to where the drop is with my teenage son. I noticed them investigating and having fun along the way. I was happy for the occasion. Content that family bonding is alive and well. Secure in the thought that the buddy system is adhered to. I looked as they were around the 25m distance. After a very short while, Bryan's uncle was heading straight back for shore.

It was quite a tense few seconds for me, as I realized that my son, at that moment, was out there alone. He is a good swimmer -- a skill born after years of regular swimming lessons. In spite of that knowledge, I stood up to venture out to call him in. Then I saw him follow his Uncle back. Safety and sensibility must have won. I later learned that my brother had told him that he was scared looking down at the darkness, at the edge of the precipice, and that they should turn back. I imagine Bryan wanted another quick look, an extra sortie, one more for the road. All was well that day.

But on a different day, at another family outing, at the very same place, one more time proved to be tragic. One more time, became the very last time.

One person in our dive team remembered him. Apparently, he always wanted to have a go at free diving, straight after a scuba dive. On that fateful day, he coaxed one of his friends to go with him for one more dive late in the afternoon.

"Kita ka anang buya sir? Diha ra gyud siya na kit-an."

There was a short period of silence in our troop. I caught one of our friends staring out at the bangka tied to a mooring buoy just in front of the adjacent property on our left. I seem to recall shaking my head in disbelief at the senseless loss of life.

They looked for him all night. In their outrigger canoes, local fisherman scoured the areas where they predicted the currents would take him. A diver found him the next day -- almost straight down from where they entered the water, gently lodged in some coral growth on the reef wall, at a depth somewhere between 15m to 18m.

Questions on the activity itself and theories on what ultimately happened were being thrown around, as we geared up for our afternoon dive. This friendly banter within our dive team is certainly not palatable to the relatives, yet to a certain extent, there also was a real feeling of loss and of waste. He was one of us. He was a diver. I sincerely felt for the mother.

As a parent, the vivid picture of a woman throwing herself to the ground, bawling and lamenting the loss of a child, rips my heart. And I was minutes away from going down to the same abyss with my first born.

We again talked about our plan for the dive, as we walked the first few meters in the water from the beach. The first stretch was sand and pebbles. It was a relatively easy walk on our boots and nothing to trample on. It was going to be an easy dive. The current wasn't strong. We intended to just drop down to 15m, and go with the flow, diving no more than 20m. It was also going to be an exploratory dive. Having decided that Nang Ester's was going to be our little corner in paradise, we needed to become experts of the local dive site -- the one right in front of us.

Midway from the shore to the ledge, there were already some corals. Despite still being in a relatively shallow depth, we put our fins on and proceeded to swim the rest of the way. No word was spoken, no orders given. Each member of the dive team knew that to stamp on ocean life is sacrilege, and despite the prevailing thoughts of the lost diver, I managed a smile. A small recognition that I was in good company. I was swimming on my back. At the distance, I could see the rest of our group, the non-divers. My wife was there, enjoying the company of our 2 year old son.

I then saw the edge of the sea cliff for the first time. It was indeed quite a contrast. Hovering right on top of it, there was the shallow part with white sand and some corals on one side, and on the other, darkness. You could see the wall disappear into the dark blue, and then on to the shadows. I remembered my brother saying that it was a pretty scary sight. He wasn't far from the truth. We then looked at each other. The whole team was ready. The signal was given to go under.

"Hala ka la-in di-ay ana uy! One time ma kita nimo sila, naa ra diha sa tubig, unya wa na dayun. Kuyawan sad ta kay dugay ra ba mo tunga," my wife remarked later that day.

It was the first time she was around to witness us diving. Thank God she didn't panic after half an hour, and called the authorities, alerted the coast guard, radioed the marines! One of our uncles did, when my brother (the diver, not Uncle James) and his buddy didn't surface after 30 minutes. Talk about mobilizing all the community's resources! But this will have to be another writer's story.

Somehow, we all knew to level off at around the 15-18m mark. I suspect it was there that we thought visibility was better. We proceeded as planned. Hovering, swimming gently, going with the flow. There was an empty, broken fishing basket and marine life was starting to colonize it. A few meters from that, a mangle of ropes. I surmised that the ropes are the opposite end of the mooring buoy. These were the signs I recollect of that particular area.

And it was around that depth range, that we saw a shrine -- a little plaque, and a small statue of the Blessed Virgin, evidently a token tribute to the drowned diver. It came as a surprise to me. The accident was talked about a lot since the day we arrived, and I certainly don't recall anybody telling me about this.

Needless to say, thoughts of my mortality started to creep in. I mentally ran through each of my diving gear, and as I did, I checked each item. Checked? I physically touched them. Maybe just an unconscious and silly ritual to reassure myself, but it was effective. Everything was there. I was going to be okay. I fanned the plaque and the statue with my gloved hand, to clear and clean the little shrine of muck and built up residue. I said a little prayer for a fallen diver. Ayo-ayo bai! Have a good one, mate! If I bump into your plaque again, I will tidy it up for sure.

The horizontal drift didn't really take us that far. With the slow current, it was also an easy swim back. I saw the mangle of ropes again, but didn't care to look for the plaque. I have paid my respects, and wanted to leave it at that. When we surfaced, everybody was in high spirits. I suppose this is the case after every successful dive.

We made it back to the part where we could walk. No more corals to worry about. It would have been a great day, but for the drunken man who approached us. He was splashing about, really trying to get a hold of his balance, and decided he was going to talk to the Puerto Rican first. I do believe he made us out to be foreigners, as he was really dishing out all of his English vocabulary.

"Ah, how much... er... you know... how much... dat one... how much you pay dat one," he finally managed to complete his question.

By this time, Mikee (yes Mikee, you are the Puerto Rican) was visibly annoyed.

"Where you get dat one!" the drunk was now on a roll!

"P15,000! That's the cost of the training. You have to get training!" Oh beauty! The 'Puerto Rican' snapped back in English!

It was like a slap to the face for the drunken would-be diver. He was visibly shaken at the suggestion that he cannot go diving just yet! Upset, he now zeroed in on me.

“How much? How much you pay por dat?” his lips were now puckering, using them to point to all the gadgetry on my back.

Considering this was Cebu, I was resigned to the fact that I must be Japanese to this fellow. Only foreigners, specially Japanese, can afford to go diving! Guys who look like Japanese and who go diving with Puerto Ricans, must be Japanese!

I thought that if this guy managed to venture out anywhere waste deep, he was going to end up eternally in the drink. And I decided that I will not waste any time underwater to attend to his plaque. One can only have a certain dose of morbid thoughts in a day. I certainly already had my fill.

“Adto didto ay, puwede ka maka abang ug diving gear didto,” pointing to the farthest point in the beach I could find. That did it for him. It was too much! A Japanese, fluent in Cebuano!

He sat down on the sand, and clasping the sea water with his hands, washed his face and hair, spitting out the salty taste that inevitably has to enter his wide gaping mouth. Some of his friends, annoyed of their mate’s antics, were now walking towards him.

Good to see the buddy system working.

About the Author: Ray Vincent Arriola is a Cebuano diver who currently resides in Auckland, New Zealand. He dreams of retiring in Cebu and spending the rest of his days exploring new underwater worlds.