



## Floater

A few blocks south of the George Washington Bridge was where I first saw the police boat anchored close to shore. I realized something must have been going on ahead of me and knew I'd be there soon enough to see what it was. I was on an early Sunday morning bike ride in June. Coming back from the northern tip of Manhattan, I wanted to get home before the day got too hot. There's a well-defined bike path running the length of the island from the Battery alongside the Hudson River up to Inwood Hill Park. At places, the path runs close to the river, and it was at one of these narrow strips where I saw the boat.

As I continued, some flashing lights came into view through the trees; emergency vehicles, I supposed. The path is just wide enough for a car, and I soon saw Fire Department vehicles, a police car, and a Parks Department pick-up truck crowded into it. The truck was too wide for me to pedal around, so I got off of my bike and walked it on the grass between the path and the river. The firefighters and police officers at the site were calm and didn't seem to be in emergency mode. I thought I might have come upon an inter-agency training exercise. Up ahead, I saw a rescue basket stretcher on the ground. There was something on it that I at first assumed might have been a mannequin that's used for training. I'd been involved in a number of training scenarios when I worked in emergency operations for the City and remembered the mannequins being flesh-coloured and made to look as life-like as possible. This mannequin was the wrong colour, and the atmosphere was sombre.

It was the body of a man lying prone on the stretcher, wearing black shoes and pants, no shirt and still dripping water. As I came closer, I got the hint of a not unpleasant organic smell that brought to mind past swims in freshwater lakes and rivers. His head was respectfully covered with a towel, and his arms which

extended off the stretcher were crossed above his head on the grass. I'd once worked with an NYPD Harbor Unit officer who told me his ideas on "floaters." He said he felt it was a natural instinct for someone to hold their breath when they jump into water, even if they intended suicide. Having that lungful of air at the time of death, he thought, would cause the body to float after making contact with the water. If on the other hand, they screamed on the way down, as some no doubt did, they would empty their lungs of air and sink after they hit the water. Although this was just his theory, he said it was a fact that bodies which had sunk, would float to the surface in spring when the water temperature rose, encouraging the growth of bacteria and gases in their torso. So, it wasn't a mannequin; it was one of those spring-time floaters I saw lying there.

Powerfully built, tall and robust, he had no bruises, scars or tattoos. His exposed flesh was completely hairless, probably the result of being underwater for some time. His skin was unblemished and the smooth texture and colour of bluish-grey Carrara marble. His torso and arms were well-muscled and his hands, lying against the new spring grass, were manicured and flawless, strong yet delicate. These were hands Michelangelo could have used as models for the Jesus in his La Pietà. And in fact, all of what I saw of this body lying on the grassy shore, with its marble colouring and fine proportions, looked to me more like a sculpture than a corpse.

I wondered how he came to this end. Was he a suicide, or perhaps an accident or murder victim? It could be that a wallet in his pocket contained some water-logged identification. Were people who cared about him wondering where he was and searching for him? Maybe someone who loved him was still waiting for him to come home? I went through all of the New York papers for days afterward, hoping to find answers. There was nothing. He was just another floater.