

2016 Doris Betts Fiction Prize Winner

THE ANDERSON KID

by Anita Collins

WITH ART BY BARBARA TYROLER

We're having trouble finding the Anderson kid. Evan, his name is. It's been a day in the water, rotating divers every thirty minutes, and no sign. I can't hardly stand to walk by the kid's folks. Hurry, his momma said to me all day yesterday, standing up close looking up into my face. Please, please, hurry. She grabbed my arm as if to push me back in the water. She was beyond panicked, thinking I've got to find her kid before his breath runs out. It doesn't take ten minutes for someone to die when it's May and the water as cold as it is, but hours go by, days, and those mommas and daddies are begging you to hurry. They don't want you to eat. They don't want you to sleep. It doesn't cross their minds that hurrying might make me drown my own self. They can't help it. I would do the same.

The sky's just turning pink behind the trees when I get to the lake, and the Anderson kid's parents are already there, probably haven't left since we all got here before dawn yesterday. The Andersons are sitting close together on a log where the sand ends and the woods begin. Yesterday, each time I saw them they were holding each other, Mrs. Anderson crying into her husband's shoulder. But now they're sitting quiet, holding tin mugs of coffee, and staring out at the lake. They notice me and nod, and Mr. Anderson gets up and comes over. He's a big man and towers over me, and I'm not what you'd call short. His eyes are red around the edges and bloodshot, and his chin is covered in gray stubble. He shakes my hand and asks about our plans for the day. I point out to the area we'll be focusing on, tell him about the currents and so on, and he looks out to the lake and nods. Victoria and I appreciate what you're doing, he says, looking out at the lake instead of at me. We'd have been sending Evan off to Parris Island for boot camp in a few days, he says, and he tells me again what a strong swimmer Evan was. Then he walks back over to his wife and sits down beside her on the log.

I walk over to the rest of the dive team, who are by the boat at the edge of the lake, suiting up. There's Ben and Barry, who work as a team, and me and Jerry. Jerry and I have only been partners for a few months, just since Gray quit. Then there's Mike, our quartermaster and driver. Besides me, Mike has been at this the longest, nearly four years. But then Mike doesn't go in the water. He helps keep our equipment in good condition and he drives the boat. Recovery diving is hard on a man, and most don't last long. It's dangerous and cold and sometimes gruesome. Some teams get paid a little bit, but not us. So we work our forty hours at the body shop or the fire department or the school, do our practice dives once a month, and then come dive when we're called. Most men can't take it more than a couple years. Me, I'm going on twenty years. When I started, diving recovery teams were a new idea, taking over from the grappling hooks and rope they used to use. They used to call it "rescue diving," but it doesn't take long to figure out there's not much rescue about it.

Jerry sees me walking over, and he comes and slaps me on the back. Jerry's solid, a decent guy with a pretty young wife and two young'uns at home. Jerry and I went to school together, and we both go to First Baptist, but we're still learning to read each other in the water. Sometimes I catch a look on Jerry's face that says he's wondering how he compares. See, Gray and I were dive partners near ten years, and friends since we could walk. When we dived, we just knew what the other needed, no matter who was in the water or who was guiding the tether.

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