

SIMPLY STORIES – Ocean Descent

Craft Area in Focus: Subtext

Read the story below to see this craft element in action

Subtext — What Is Deliberately Not Said

The most powerful things in a story are often the things the story refuses to say. Subtext is the layer of meaning that operates below the surface of the prose — carried in gesture, in omission, in the gap between what a character does and what the reader understands. When subtext is working, the reader feels the weight of something unnamed. The story trusts the reader to assemble the meaning from the evidence. It never explains. It never has to.

Story Details

Genre	Literary Fiction
Subgenre	Psychological / Occupational Realism
Narrative Tone	Terse, compressed, elegiac
POV	Third person limited
Story Length	Approximately 850 words
Why This Piece	A man’s decision to end his life is never named — only accumulated in gesture, omission, and a final act the reader must complete alone.

Ocean Descent

Sea surges rocked the *Vale II* as it pushed past quay walls into the gulf from New Orleans, cutting into the offshore breeze and misty drizzle. Harrison leaned against the tank racks on the dive deck to steady himself against the rolls as he inspected and lubricated the tether reels his life depended on. He squinted at seabirds wheeling overhead. Those flying rats that crapped on the deck every time the ship left port.

He'd waited four months before coming back to work. Four months since Emily died in a fiery car wreck. His wife burned beyond recognition, they'd told him. In those months, he cursed the sad, covered casseroles delivered by neighbors he barely knew. Food offered as permission to snoop. This morning, he cursed the whipping salt spray. He'd returned to the boat with a decision.

The word that never appears in this story is introduced here by its absence. Harrison has returned with a decision. The reader is not told what it is. The sentence lands with the weight of something final, then the story moves on — to seabirds, to lunch, to Jacques. This is subtext establishing its contract with the reader: meaning will be carried below the surface. The reader feels the decision without naming it, the way a diver feels pressure before depth registers on a gauge.

On a two-day run to Star Spar 146, Harrison would make the dive to detach the pipeline from the oil wellhead before the platform lifted off the seafloor.

“Whatcha fer lunch?”

The familiar voice pulled him from a personal cold deep. Turning to Jacques, he asked, "Choices?"

"Poke chop an shrimp creole."

"How long's the creole been simmering?"

"Couple few hours."

"Not long enough. I'll take a chop. One. And rice."

Jacques hooked his thumbs into a grease-crust ed apron. "Weather's gone be good morrow."

"S'pose so," Harrison said. "Send David up. Get his nose outta that phone."

"He in the wheelhouse, chattin' da skipper."

Harrison spat. "Never shoulda vouched for him."

Emily had shown extreme love and kindness to the nephew. Before leaving for work on the day she died, she reminded Harrison of his promise to guide fatherless David. Now, disgusted, Harrison tossed the grease gun onto a tarp and headed for the dive shack.

* * *

Orange slid to red as the sun dipped below the horizon. Another day breathing in and out, standing at the rail. Another day closer.

Three sentences. No subject named, no destination given. "Another day closer" is the story's most exposed moment of subtext — and it passes in three words before the next scene begins. The reader absorbs it as mood. On second reading it is a countdown. The story never corrects either interpretation. That sustained ambiguity is subtext doing its full work.

A spark flared aft. Someone smoking. Then the silhouette moved. David.

Harrison strode toward him. Came from behind. Slammed a wrench down on the rail near David's hand. A clang and a dent. Cigarette fell into the water.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Harrison said. "Are you stupid?" Pointing at the spare gas tank, he wanted to do more than scare him. Wanted to toss him overboard, might have, if the boy didn't share Emily's blood.

David's face crumpled. Not anger. Exhaustion. "I'm sorry. I just—"

He looked like Emily had after her mother's funeral. Holding together by threads.

Harrison's anger drained. "Get below. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

* * *

Dive Master Devers sat at the moon pool, testing shackles, marrying the hoist cable to the tool basket. Along the deck lay the first hundred feet of umbilical snaking to air tanks and tether connections.

"Channel?" Devers asked.

"Six," confirmed the topside platform watch.

"Comm check," Harrison said. His radio voice carried two hundred feet up to the oil rig platform and into the dive monitor's headset. Harrison took his last gulp of free air before the helmet was lowered.

"Connecting primary," said Devers.

"Check," replied Harrison.

"Secondary."

“Check.”

“Permission to dive?” asked Devers.

The rig monitor confirmed. “Dive authorized.”

The flag went up. Devers signaled the crane. The tool basket swung to the moon pool. Was lowered. The hoist reel squealed. Ten minutes after basket touchdown, Harrison was positioned over the pool. A thumbs-up. Then, dipping below, darkness swallowed him.

Every fifty feet was called out and confirmed. At one hundred, Harrison switched on his lamp. At three hundred, he caught the glow of the basket light on the muddy bottom.

The turnover point. The big squeeze. Where surface light vanished. Where divers were separated from those above. Into a world that held no mercy for the reckless or desperate.

A month ago, Harrison had decided this would be his last descent. One last dive. Emily would understand.

Air hissed through the manifold, balancing life and death. He flexed his fingers, scissored his legs against the cold.

Touching down, Harrison stood motionless in the bottom silt. Thirty seconds. Just breathing.

“Are you down?” Devers asked. “Everything okay?”

“Slack twenty,” Harrison said.

“Slack twenty,” Devers replied.

Scrap littered the seabed. Decades of dropped tools and junk projected. Broken teeth in muddy gums.

Harrison trudged to the basket, retrieved a hammer, an impact wrench, and a pry bar. He found a concrete base, followed its bevel toward the wellhead.

"Moving."

"Check."

Each step dragged in the mud. Easy to stop walking. Stop answering. Stop breathing.

Harrison followed a tension cable across the rig centerline. He counted steps. Thirty. Forty. Creole burned up his throat. When the word surfaced, he despised it. Emily burned in that wreck.

"Sonofabitch," he muttered.

"You okay?" Devers asked.

"Halfway." Ten minutes later: "Wellhead."

"How's it look?"

"Shitty."

"Time?"

"Eight bolts. Forty-five."

"I'll call breaks every fifteen."

"Check."

Harrison worked methodically. Two decades of muscle memory. Emily used to joke that he was more comfortable down here than in their bed. She'd been right. Up there, he was incomplete. Down here, the pressure held him together.

The final bolt dropped. The flanges held. Harrison jammed the pry bar and heaved. The coupling broke, spilling black into the slow current. He stepped back ten feet.

"Haul pipe away."

"Haul pipe away," repeated the platform watch.

As the pipeline lifted, Harrison looked up. No one would ever come here again. Up there was air without Emily. He reached for the lamp switch. Turned it off.

The story ends on an action, not a declaration. Harrison turns off his lamp three hundred feet underwater, alone, his job complete, with no reason left to surface. The word suicide never appears. The decision Harrison returned to the boat with is never named. The reader understands everything. This is what subtext earns across a story — the right to end without explaining, because the explanation has been accumulating in the negative space all along. The reader does not read the ending. They feel it arrive.