

W. D. VALGARDSON

AN ACT OF MERCY

W. D. Valgardson (1939-) was born in Winnipeg and raised in Gimli, Manitoba—a fishing village on Lake Winnipeg founded by Icelandic settlers. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from United College (now the University of Winnipeg) in 1960 and spent several years teaching English at various rural schools. He also earned a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Manitoba in 1966 and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1969. From 1971 to 1974 he taught at Cottey College in Nevada, Missouri, while continuing to publish stories in various magazines. The following story was published in the autumn 1971 issue and included in the collection *Blood-flowers* (1973).

JUST AFTER ONE O’CLOCK, the screaming of the wind fell to a thin whine, then stopped altogether, and Neils Bergstrom woke up afraid. For twenty-four hours he had waited for this moment, but now, as he lay rigid in his sleeping bag, he half-wished the wind would start again, delaying the trip that would have to be made.

All day and night a northeast wind had torn at the land, snapping off frozen tamarack trees with sharp rifle-like sounds, whirling dead leaves and twigs into the air, whipping the lake to a frenzy of freezing spray. Now, as Neils strained to the sound of the surf, picking out the interlocking rhythms of the lake, he could hear pauses growing between the breaking waves. That meant they were slowing down, running under their own weight, and not being driven before the wind. It was the first sign that they were dying. The surface of the lake would roll for hours, but the space between the waves would increase, their crests would fall, and some time soon it would be possible to launch one of the open boats.

On the other side of the tarpaper wall that separated the bedrooms of the cabin, Neils could hear his brother Helgi getting up. A minute later, the

outside door banged shut.

Neils jackknifed out of his sleeping bag. Although it was only four hours since they had gone to bed, the cabin was so cold that he shivered convulsively and his breath steamed. He dressed quickly, then went into the single room that served them as kitchen, living, and dining room, raked over the ashes for some coals, stuffed slabs of birch into the stove and had coffee ready when Helgi came back.

Although Neils was only eighteen and his brother was twenty-eight, they looked surprisingly alike. Both had long pale blond hair and blue Scandinavian eyes, large ears, and long, narrow heads. They were both over six feet, but did not look it because of their heavy shoulders and arms and deep chests. The difference between them was minor. Helgi's hair had receded to a narrow widow's peak, his nose had been broken and set slightly to one side, and the corners of his eyes were deeply creased with innumerable squint lines. Neils' face was unmarked. Both men had wide mouths with full lower lips that, if they had been frivolous, would have made them look as if they were constantly sulking. Their dark, windburnt skin contrasted sharply with their blondness.

Neils put two mugs of coffee on the table, pushed across a tin of Carnation milk and a box of sugar lumps. Helgi picked up four lumps with his left hand. His right hand had only a thumb and index finger. When he was fourteen, his other fingers had been crushed between two boats. Since no doctor was available, his father had numbed him with whisky and amputated the fingers with a filleting knife.

Neils lit the gas lamp. Its sharp hiss filled the room and the light threw everything—the sofa, stove, plank table, benches—into sharp relief.

“How soon?” Neils asked.

“Dawn. Maybe half an hour later. It'll settle here quicker than on the other side.” Helgi reached with his left foot, hooked a fish box full of nets toward him. As he checked to see how badly the top net had been damaged in the last storm, he said, “We'll leave as soon as we can get a boat onto the water.”

Neils knew that he could not sleep if he went back to bed so he got a piece of canvas, dropped the net onto it, and they began clearing it of sticks and weeds. The lamplight distorted Helgi, making him all highlights and deep shadows so that there were no middle planes, no soft greys, only sharp angles in pools of darkness. The appropriateness of it pleased Neils for he

felt it showed Helgi as they all were—extremes created by isolation and constant struggle.

The net was dry and as Neils worked the mesh through his hands, stretching it between them, dirt and bits of weed fell onto the tarp. They worked in silence, each knowing automatically to slow down or speed up. So sensitive were they to each other's need that the net and its shadows might have been a vast web of nerves connecting them. In spite of, or, perhaps, because of, the difference in their ages, they were closer than if they had been twins. The isolation and the early loss of their mother had helped to do that.

With no one to stay ashore with Neils, it had been necessary for him to go everywhere that Helgi went, and so his entire world had been his brother and his brother's boat. His father, even though they were Lutheran, had found him such a nuisance that he had wanted to give Neils to the nuns at the nearest convent.

"Do you think the old bastard's dead?" Neils asked suddenly. He said it without bitterness, but there was no attempt to hide his dislike.

Helgi was holding a tangle with his good hand and using his right hand to work loose the tight lump of mesh. His finger and thumb darted and jabbed like the beak of a robin after a worm. "I hope so," he replied.

Neils nodded. If their father, after a day and night on the lake, was not dead, he would be suffering terribly from exposure. It was a fate you wished no man. As soon as it was possible, they would begin their search. If they found nothing, they would take a boat to the nearest camp with a two-way radio and call for assistance. There was no use asking for assistance now because help would have to come by air and no plane could land until the lake was calm. That would not be before dusk, and that, in turn, meant no help until the next morning for no one would attempt a night landing.

What infuriated Neils was that if it had not been for their father's greed, he would have been ashore when the storm struck. There had been plenty of warning. The barometer had dropped steadily for two hours and, in spite of the heavy cloud cover, the sky had taken on the peculiar yellow glow they had long ago learned to fear. Their father, determined to get the last few nets out of the water before the lake froze over, had alternately bullied and cajoled them. In defiance they had climbed down to the shingle beach where their boats were moored and after pulling them as high as possible, had turned them over. They knew that unless the cliff collapsed, the boats would

be safe.

In a rage that turned his face a dark red and made the spiderweb of veins on cheeks stand out like purple roots, he tried to force them to go with him. He was a formidable figure and at one time they would have obeyed, driven by their fear of his violence. Like themselves, he was a big man, but more heavy set, more like a weight lifter with an overdeveloped torso which was beginning to degenerate. Too much beer had added a paunch. His eyes were wide set with heavy lids and thick eyebrows, but the most striking thing about him was his expression. Years of constant dislike for the world had turned his mouth down at the corners and given him a permanent sneer. When he opened his mouth, he bared front teeth permanently stained with snuff.

Unable to force them to comply, he attacked their most sensitive spot, an area of their lives that before had always been inviolate. “Gutless sons-of-bitches,” he screamed. “Your mother humped for an Indian, you black bastards. All she knew was how to spread her legs.”

They had already started up the path with Helgi in the lead, then Neils, and their father following, shaking his fist and shouting. There was little room to manoeuvre, but Neils spun on one foot, catching hold of the cliff with his left hand. As he turned, he drove a vicious right to his father’s face. Caught off-balance, his father sprawled backwards, bounced, and rolled to the beach.

Neils would have gone down to the beach to slug it out, but Helgi caught his arm and led him away. Behind them, their father climbed to his feet, his mouth splashed with blood. They ignored his curses.

Neils was infuriated. His only memories of his mother were through stories told him by Helgi, and these were coloured with Helgi’s love for her. As a child he had been obsessed with the belief that one day his mother would return on the boat that had taken her away. That dream faded in the face of reality, but it still lurked beneath the surface, appearing in dreams, making her few remaining personal effects—an old photograph, a pair of blue gloves, a silver spoon with Helga inscribed on the handle—precious to them. The numerous times their father had disappeared only to return with a blowsy woman from one of the towns further south was close to being a personal insult.

Below them they had heard an outboard roar into life. The sound deepened as the motor was thrown into gear, and, in a minute, the boat came into

view. A faint breeze sprang up, then after rippling the water, died, and where the land had been quiet before, it now was filled with an intense silence. High above them, the clouds began tumbling and twisting. The green skiff headed east, its prow throwing up a line of white water, its driver crouched in a black, formless pile, everything about him hidden by his nor'westers. They watched impassively as he stopped at the first buoy pole with its white, numbered flag and began to lift. He pulled in the buoy, the anchor, and half the net before the storm struck. All this time the barometer had continued to fall.

There was no gradual rising of wind. It was as though the wind had burst a dam directly behind them. The cabin shuddered with the force of the first blow, and the storm door flung open, shattering both glass and wood as it struck the cabin wall. Before them, the surface of the lake disintegrated, turned white as spray was swept into the air. Waves sprang up, and the wind tore them apart so that the lake seemed to be blanketed by explosions.

Like a kite in a violent storm, the boat and its hunched figure swung wildly on the nylon line. Helgi grabbed the binoculars, looked, then handed them to Neils. The boat was being wrenched sideways and backwards. Even as Neils watched, his father, to save himself from being overturned, pulled a filleting knife from inside his jacket and cut the line. Then, flinging himself to his knees he crawled to the stern and started the motor. During the few moments it had taken him to free himself, the waves had grown to five feet. Neils knew that in the bitter cold of freezing spray, his father must be nearly blind.

“He’ll drown,” Helgi said. “We have to help him.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Neils replied fiercely. “Nothing can be done now. If he can’t get into shore from where he is then neither can we. We’ll have to wait out the storm.”

The wind continued to rise, ripping at everything with a manic scream. A poplar close to the edge of the cliffs, rigid with weeks of frost, shattered close to the base and was flung into the lake. The green skiff rose to the crest, then disappeared. In a moment, it appeared again, its bow rising high into the air only to plunge like a dropped stone. With their binoculars they could see that the boat was already glazed with ice. All objects were so cold that as soon as the water struck them it froze. As long as the ice did not become heavy enough to sink the boat and as long as his nor'westers kept him dry, their father would be all right. However, if he became wet, he was nearly

certain to die from exposure. Of the two deaths, drowning was much preferable.

For half an hour they watched the skiff lunging at the waves, then sleet swept over them, obscuring everything beyond the cabin windows. When it lifted, snow, the consistency of fine powder, swirled over the water. Try as they might, they could see nothing. Both of them, knowing their father's skill, doubted if the boat would sink in the open, but there was no fighting the wind. The boat would be driven to the northeast to founder on the cliffs. At most there were three small coves with gently sloping beaches where a boat might land safely, but even in calm weather getting to them was dangerous and only a miracle would let a boat land safely in rough weather. The cliffs were not large, rising only thirty feet from the lake's surface, but the distance might as well have been a thousand feet for there was no way of scaling the black walls. At their base, the water was fifty feet deep.

Now, the wind had stopped as suddenly as it started. At dawn the sky was the colour of tarnished silver, the lake was an ugly grey. The debris along the foot of the cliffs testified to the violence of the storm. Along with driftwood and uprooted weeds like rotting black snakes, pieces of nets and finished lumber rose and fell with the passing of every crest.

They used the backs of hatchets to clear a skiff of ice, then tipped the boat over and piled in blankets, a change of clothing, and a thermos of coffee mixed with whisky. Behind them the ragged gooseberry bushes which struggled from the cracks in the rock were coated so heavily with ice that many had torn loose under the weight. Ice rimmed the rocks and was piled along the cliffs. Within a few days, the entire lake would be frozen over.

The lake was still pitching heavily and waves broke in long rolling lines, shooting plumes of spray into the air. The constant boom and crash of water on rock was deafening, but the sharp whine of their outboard as it started cut through everything. Together, they huddled in the stern as spray rattled against them like hail. When Neils looked back, the land was black with frost, the trees shrivelled, and ice clung to the cliffs like massive growths. Within minutes they passed the buoy which marked the far end of the net their father had been lifting when the storm struck. Ice had tipped it to one side and the white flag was frozen in a tight coil around the narrow pole.

They crossed the lake in a northeast line, then turned north and worked their way along the shore. Here, the cliffs were a series of shattered blocks as large as two and three storey houses, blocks which tipped randomly in

every direction. Erosion had cut large pieces from the cliffs so that there was no regularity to the surface. Cracks six feet wide ran inland. In some places there were large shelves, in others, deep undercuts.

In front of the cliffs occasional jagged pieces of rock broke the surface of the troughs. Helgi kept the boat well away from these for if the boat crashed against them, the boards would shatter. Neils sat in the bow, holding an oar over the side so that he could, if necessary, shove them away from danger. The waves had fallen to a gentle roll that ran beneath them, rocking the boat sideways, but Neils was not cheered. The cliffs were like the rotten stumps of teeth and even the slightest wind could crush them when they had so little room to manoeuvre. Above them, the sky had been swept clean and the sun was an intense red ball.

An hour after they had reached the east side, Neils found a foot-long piece of his father's boat. There was no mistaking the dark green paint. After that they found a number of pieces, none as large as the first, some no more than six inches long. Except for their eyes, which darted back and forth, scanning every dark patch of water, they hardly moved. Because their pace was so painstakingly slow, the motor was cut back to a throaty growl. As many fragments as appeared, there were not a normal amount. The water should have been filled with them. When they found no more dark green pieces of wood for a quarter of a mile, they turned in a tight circle and wordlessly headed south.

Neils understood. With the wind from the northeast, the wreckage would be well east of the actual sight where the boat foundered. This time, they hugged the cliffs and Neils wielded the oar constantly to save them from being flung on rocks which ripped through the troughs.

The water in the shadow of the cliffs was black, but here and there where there were gaps, the water was puddled with the red of the sun. The constant motion of the boat and the intense cold made Neils drowsy. He shook himself, rubbed his cheeks briskly to keep them from freezing, then grinned at the irony of their working so hard to find their father.

As far as Neils was concerned, they owed him nothing. He had never been anything but a tyrant, exploiting them both for whatever he could get out of them. One of his bitterest memories was being left alone at Christmas while their father skated into town for a two-week drunk. The loneliness for a four-year-old had been frightening, but Helgi, although he had been only fourteen had done what he could. Their diet had been potatoes and canned

meat. On Christmas day Helgi had given Neils a handful of raisins he had hoarded and a fisherman he had carved from driftwood and clothed from scraps of cloth. As Neils grew older and he understood more, he became increasingly bitter.

When Helgi turned eighteen, he tried to take his share of the camp and was beaten mercilessly. When he was nineteen, he tried and lost again. For a year and a half he bided his time, watching and weighing his own and his father's strength. The third time, their father tried to stop him, but his time had passed. Though he fought savagely, it was Helgi's feet and fists that won and it was Helgi who took one-half of the equipment. At that time, Helgi also announced that when Neils was ready to fish for himself, one-third of the equipment would be his. The division into thirds had taken place on Neils' sixteenth birthday, but this time with them both pitted against him, their father had done no more than impotently complain that they were thieves. Having once been soundly beaten, he kept his distance.

"There!"

Neils jerked part way around to see where Helgi was pointing. Well back in a deep crack in the rock, there was a huddled shape. The entrance was easily large enough for the boat, and the space behind it was a good twelve feet wide. Where the water ended, a series of shelves climbed to a sheer face. The distance from the last shelf to the top of the cliff was no more than ten feet, but it was slick with ice and impossible to climb without help.

At the entrance, Helgi cut the motor, and by using the heavy oars like canoe paddles, they worked their way past the entrance. The water inside the rocks was littered with broken wood from the boat. Neils, from his position in the bow, could clearly see his father's form. He had obviously not been flung into place by the waves for he was sitting with his back to the wall, his hands in his lap, his head on his knees. In an attempt to escape the spray he had pushed himself as far back into the crevice as possible.

If it had not been for Helgi's sharp warning, Neils would have jumped out of the boat. When Helgi came forward, he leaned over the gunwale and struck the rock with his hatchet. Although the water was not covered with ice, the rock beneath it was, a slick, polished ice that offered no grip whatsoever. Methodically, Helgi broke a path for them, pounding ice loose, then sliding the edge of the hatchet under and flicking the ice away. Neils came behind with the thermos. It took fifteen minutes to get to their father.

When, at last, they forced the coffee into his throat, he gagged, swal-

lowed, and opened unseeing eyes. Helgi caught his father's cheeks in his hand and squeezed. Neils poured more coffee into their father's mouth. His face was badly frostbitten, and he was to suffer as the skin sloughed away, but Neils knew that he would be all right in a couple of months if that was all that was wrong with him.

In spite of having wished his father dead, Neils felt a sense of relief. Their father tried to speak, but his words were no more than a hoarse croak. They could not make out what he was saying. Again they forced coffee into his mouth. This time he consciously swallowed and his eyes focused on Helgi's face. Helgi leaned close, placing his ear to the barely moving lips.

"What's he saying?" Neils asked, unconsciously lowering his own voice.

"He wants us to push him into the lake."

Neils was dumbfounded. To have lived through so much and then give up made no sense. "Why?"

"I don't know." Helgi leaned close to his father's ear and said, "Why? Why do you want to be pushed in?"

"Push." Neils could see the stiff lips forming the word over and over again, mechanically, as if that thought was the only one left in that ravaged face.

Helgi lifted first the left then the right sleeve of his father's nor'westers, and they had part of their answer. Somehow, perhaps in leaping from the disintegrating boat to the rocks, he had lost one of his heavy mittens and soaked his arm to the elbow. The hand was a marble talon. Together, they felt his legs. They too had been soaked. They were as stiff and cold as wet cardboard that had been left out overnight. They would have to come off.

Neils knew then why their father wanted them to push him into that terrible darkness a few feet away. With one arm missing and no legs, he would be totally dependent.

Helgi tried to lift his father from the rock but the rubber, imprisoned in the ice, held him in place. With his axe, Helgi cut their father free. When he had finished, he said, "Let me get behind. You take his feet."

"Will you?" Neils whispered, glancing at the water. "No one would ever know."

"No," Helgi answered curtly. "Come on, we'll take him to Deer Island and radio for a doctor."

"He'll suffer hell," Neils replied. "He'll never be good for anything. He

won't even be able to take care of himself."

"No. I won't have him on my conscience."

Neils refused to pick up his father's feet. "What if it was me? Would you do it for me?"

Helgi looked away. He nodded. "Yes," he said quietly, "but not him."

Their father's eyes had clouded again, and he began making guttural, choking sounds—desperate sounds that needed no words to be understood. They lifted him into the boat and laid him on a blanket. Neils covered him.

Helgi had put down his axe. As he turned to get it, his right leg shot out from underneath him. He spun sideways, reached with his right hand, but could not hold onto the boat with only a thumb and finger and crashed on one shoulder into the water. Neils leaped for the bow, threw himself half over the gunwale, his hand outstretched, but it closed helplessly on water. Neils jammed an oar deep into the water, sweeping it along the side of the boat, ready if a hand grabbed it, to pull frantically, but there was nothing but the weight of water on the blade.

Neils dropped the oar and fell into a sitting position in the bottom of the boat. For half an hour he sat there, unable to believe what had happened. Time and again, a scream rose inside him, but when he opened his mouth nothing came out.

Finally, he pulled himself upright. His father's eyes were shut, but his mouth was still pursing, forming the word push, only his voice was stronger and Neils could distinctly hear the request.

His father shook his head from side to side. He choked with the effort, but finally managed to say, "Neils. Push."

"No," Neils yelled, his voice thin with rage. He could have done it before Helgi had died for then his hatred had been contained, tempered with mercy.

Now there was no mercy in him.