

Beneath
The Sand

By

Scott Zavoda

To: Whom it may concern,

I found this journal lying next to a surfboard under the Hermosa Pier. My gut says it should go to the FBI or other federal agency, but I don't know how to locate such entities. I read it, but it makes little sense to me. Thought it was best to give to local law enforcement.

Signed,

Anonymous.

Detective Marty Hedstrom opened the journal and began reading.

June 3rd, 1984

Oh, where do I begin? Nice beach weather today. I didn't go, but I sold three paintings. *That's* a blessing. Rent is two days late. Nothing cheap about a condo near the beach, not in Southern California.

I've to decided write everything down . . . just in case, I guess. I'm not one for diaries, though I did keep one in the war, but that's' another story.

I suppose I'm being precautious. That's okay, and maybe it's nothing, just an old man's imagination, but some strange things have happened lately. So I thought keeping a . . . what do they call it now? A memoir? A journal? Something like that could . . . help? I suppose if you're reading this, you might know.

Also, given these strange incidents, I need to cancel this weekend. See, they invited me to put my artworks on Redondo Beach for some festival. *They*, being the Lions Club or Chambers. One of those city things. Good money, exposure, etc. Easy right?

Not exactly. I won't *go* to the beach.

I'll tell you more tomorrow. It's late. Just got home from Mickey's Pub. Had the fish special and a few bottled beers. Chatted with TJ about this and that. He bartends on weeknights. Found he's getting married. Good for him. Nice kid, though he thinks I'm a crazy old fart, one step from the streets, two from the grave. Don't matter.

June 4th.

It's two o'clock, and I'm still home, cleaning. It's impossible to keep up with all this sand. I have to figure out where it's all coming from. (Yes, the beach. I know. Don't be smart.) I've been thinking it trickles through the roof, and today I had all the intentions of inspecting it, but I

stood in fear on my carport-sized lawn staring up at its awful pitch. I'm in no condition for such stunts. This condo's falling apart. My landlord is a real shithead.

The sand coats everything here constantly. It appears out of nowhere like the dust under your VHS or record player. It stings, too. Did you ever notice that? I didn't, but aging has its disadvantages.

Speaking of aging, I never considered it. Never feared it like the majority. When I was twenty, all I could think about was hot-rodding and women and Saturday nights. The Army came after that. I couldn't wait to kill some gooks, then, I couldn't wait to get out. In my thirties, I was just happy to *be* out. At forty-five, my body spoke mild threats to me, but hell, I'd gotten married, I was living, I had new hobbies, and I was out of the jungle. But now . . . now that I'm fifty-one, things are changing completely. I discussed this with TJ last night. *Was* it last night?

I don't give a shit about cars anymore. I don't watch sports, or gamble, or wear a ball cap with Vietnam Vet embroidered on it. The last nudie bar I went to was ten years ago for Harold's bachelor party. He was going into his fourth marriage. Harold was in my platoon. Harold's dead now. Heart complications, though I know different. Shell shock, obesity, and the stress of Cindy, that unfaithful, unfeeling bitch. I don't fish or boat or jog ten miles every morning. I can't. Now, I paint. I paint! Can you fucking believe that?

Aging is unpredictable.

I don't even date now. Not since Darlene. Darlene wasn't my wife. Samantha was, but she's gone too. It's not that I don't like women anymore or their companionship for that matter. I do. My head turns when a fine lady passes, and I still masturbate. Usually daily. But that's not the point. The point is . . .

Just a sec, need to use the john.

Okay, I'm back. This is frustrating. I went to the hall closet for a fresh roll of moon floss, toilet paper for you civilian types, and I nearly stepped on more sand! A tiny pyramid of it the height of a cigarette pack was just waiting the darkness. It's drifted to a sharp point the way sand piles-up in an hourglass. Probably blowing off the beach and falling right through the roof. I'll have to climb up tomorrow.

Anyway, I was saying . . . the two reasons I don't date.

First, I live in Southern California and I'm an artist. It's a decent gig, pays most of the bills, and no boss. Wonderful in that respect, but chicks only dig two types of artists - the kind with ten-million-dollar mansions or dead artists. I'm neither, of course. I won't get all arty other

than to say my works are mere stick-figure-drawings and watercolors that blend in unique ways and smear ass all over the page. Any half-dick critic would say it's trash and that I color outside the lines. They'd be correct, and I wouldn't argue anymore than I'd leave my prosthetic leg out in the rain, but it turned into a hit. That's all you really need to know – oh yeah, my gosh, Californians are a rare, dumb breed. They'll buy anything.

Secondly, I don't date because I live near the ocean, and any girl I *could* date would invariably want to go to the beach. Why else would they pay four grand a month for a studio? You see my point? To them, the beach is life. I hate the beach.

I'll say it again. I hate the beach.

Think of all the annoyances. It's too hot, at least the times any rational person would go. The sun bakes your shoulders, the sand scalds your feet, and the ocean reflects ultraviolet rays in deadly horizontal angles. Who needs all that sun?

And the wind? Is there a calm day at the beach? Hardly. I read somewhere that it has to do with uneven heating of the land and sea, but I'll leave that to the pros. The wind is agonizing. It scoops up sand and blasts grains against your bare skin like small-arms fire. Then you have umbrellas toppling, chairs tumbling, paper plates and napkins fluttering away, taunting you with skittering agility. You need sixteen arms; it's horrendous. And some asshole always stands upwind of you, snapping his towel into the air as if he's beating out a fire.

Eating on the beach is dismal at best, unless you like the crunch of sand between your molars and like I already mentioned, the brisk wind.

Then there are the seagulls. Conditioned. Fearless. Years of acclimation to humans. They'll dive-bomb your picnic and shit in your hair. If you're lucky, you won't get nipped in ear or finger and have to worry about those germs.

Those are valid reasons not to go; they're various excuses I use now and then, but they aren't what really keep me away from the beach. I haven't had the guts to tell anyone *that* yet. In fact, over the last two years, I've spent effort forgetting all those things, and for the most part it's worked; I only suffer an occasional spell or long night tossing sleeplessly in bed, afraid to dream but equally afraid of the sounds I sometimes hear.

But I can never fully forget. Not on days like today when I'm stuck on my recliner, unable to paint because my hands ache too much, and the Pacific crashes in heavy, thunderous beats against the beach that isn't far enough away. Days like today I can do little but pop aspirins and count the hours between doses and think. It's the thinking that hurts the most. The past, the present, whatever. There are too many memories, too much fear.

All that thinking has brought me to this. The peculiar things happening in the last few weeks are likely connected to what happened two years ago. I don't *want* that to be right, but I'm afraid it might be.

I suppose it's time to start talking. I hope you'll bear with me. I'll try to take this one step at a time. Forgive me if I jump around or ramble on occasion. It's simply the way my shell-shocked brain functions these days.

Back then, I saw dozens of accidents and a handful of deaths on the beach. It's not that I couldn't handle it or that it turned my stomach. I was in Johnson's war, after all. Saw thousands die there. Exchanged my right leg for a purple heart that now hides in my bedroom desk. I'll look at it sometimes, but mostly it collects dust and gives me Viet Cong nightmares. At night, I put my prosthetic leg on top of the desk. How's that for irony?

See, there we go already.

What bothered me was the way the accidents happened. Nobody speaks of it, and it's possible a few others know about it, but they're either unwilling or unable to tell anyone. If I had to put a label on those accidents, I'd call them *highly unnatural*. That's not right, though. By definition, *no* accident is natural, so maybe the word I'm looking for is *abnormal*. *Highly abnormal* is the accurate way to say it.

These things are hard to believe and sometimes I wonder how *I* believe them. I'm a man driven by fact, a man who survived the jungles because we gathered intelligence on the enemy. I could un-jam a muddy M16 in the pitch-black because I knew the gun better than my own nut-sack.

But two years ago was something else. Something fact and reason can't explain, yet I lived it. Look the accidents up. Call them *freak accidents* if you want to. I know the media does, but it's not the truth.

Saturday Morning. Date(?)

I'm a bonehead. Remember, I was going to climb up on the roof? Yeah, well, here I am. I'm stuck. Good thing it's still early. And I brought the notebook. At least I can write.

I climbed up the ladder. It was more of a limp if you can imagine that. Prosthetics don't bend like real legs. I spent twenty minutes army-crawling up the hot incline of shingles, looking for holes or cracks or ways sand could be coming into the condo.

I found nothing. It's solid. I began to slither down.

I went feet-first toward the gutter, same place I crawled up. When I got to the edge, I used my real leg, the one wearing the size twelve boot without extra padding, to reach over the lip for the ladder. But my leg just batted sweltering air. I propped up on my only knee to look. The ladder was gone. I chuckled a little to myself thinking it must be a prank. My younger sister, Rosie, had played the same prank one Christmas on Dad and I when we were cleaning out the gutters. It was funny then, to me. Dad gave Rosie a good lashing for it though.

But my chuckling stopped quickly. I maneuvered sideways, and strained my head over the gutter to see. I felt a jolt of anger when I saw the ladder lying on the ground.

Strange though, I hadn't heard it fall.

Then I noticed something. Made my heart kind of jump, though I wasn't scared so much, I don't scare easily. Just a funny kind of hiccup. An uneasiness.

On the cement walkway below was short mound of sand with a pair of deep holes in it like puncture wounds. I looked at the ladder lying beside it. The size of the holes matched the size and shape of the ladder's legs. My heart was beating faster. I looked away, biting hard on my lip. I wouldn't have done that. Wouldn't have gone anywhere near a mound of sand, not as much as I've come to hate it. But I had. I could see the rusting legs of the ladder, coated with the wet chunky sand that looked like fistfuls of brown sugar.

It's one o'clock now. I only have two neighbors. They work full time and sometimes don't come home until long after dark. There is no one else. I live on a tiny jut of street. My condominium faces a steep hill on the back, that's where I am now, and the front looks towards the ocean a few hundred yards away. From the condo to the beach there is a wide drainage ditch, and following that, a row of exquisitely expensive homes, set up on stilts and nearly touching the water. Millionaire's homes. Those people wouldn't help me and even if one would, they couldn't hear me above the crashing of waves and blustery pacific winds.

Saturday Evening.

I'm still up here. I could take my prosthetic off and jump, but a one-legged man with a broken leg is no good for anything.

I'll wait for help, and I'll tell you the whole story.

I used to love the beach. I grew up there as a kid. Collected sand dollars and traded them for real ones. After high school, I practically *lived* on the beach. Smoked a lot reefer there, too, at least until my dad opened the draft letter from the Army. In a strange way, it was probably best that mom passed away when I was fifteen. She wouldn't have handled the war thing very well.

I was lucky enough to come back from the Vietnam intact. Well, sort of. My right leg was blown off from the knee down, but it was better than coming home in a wooden box.

When I returned home to Southern California, everything hit me in a sort of welcome-home-blast. No pun intended, right? My father had passed six months prior of heart failure, and my sister, Rosie, ran off with some tree hugging pansy who wrote for the Times. I've come to believe those two incidents were related.

For a while I was constrained to a wheelchair. I had a home-nurse, Juanita, who helped me get accustomed to my new and wonderful life as the most non-eligible bachelor in Hermosa Beach. That first year back was one of the most lonely and confusing times of my life. I felt less like hero each day, and more like the pathetic loser I was before they sent me over.

So I did the only thing I knew. I returned to the beach, did what some might call, soul searching, but that's putting it too grandly. I loitered as if I was part of the homeless population, drinking low-grade whiskey, smoking cigarettes, smoking reefer because it soothed the hurt and time and my emotions. Mostly I just looked pathetic. I grew out my beard and rolled up and down the beach's running paths until I got my wheelchair stuck in drifts of sand. Someone always helped and I hated that; I never asked for help.

I watched sunsets and young surfers, guys only a few years behind me, riding shallow sets on their long boards. Guys that should feel blessed that their mothers remained abstinent just long enough that they missed the draft.

Oh and how it depressed me to watch them surf. A slow bitterness seeped into me, slow like how those goddamned field medics hooked up morphine into a soldier with half his lower body shredded. I watched those surfers enjoying their freedom while I scratched my stump of leg, knowing the trade *I'd* made for mine. After a while, in my wheelchair, I'd sight-them-in using my hands as an imaginary sniper riffle. I'd gauge their distance and the wind and estimate how much to lead them by, like we did to the gooks who ran from us.

A year later, I got my first prosthetic leg. I learned to walk with it, even do a modified sort of jogging. Would you believe I bought my first surfboard later that summer? Surfing was hard as hell. Difficult to learn with *two* legs, and with one, I must have looked like Elvis Presley on ice skates.

I surfed myself right into what I now call the Samantha years. She was a surfer, too. A girl high on life with light sandy hair that flicked easily in the wind and brushed gently between her freckled, tanned shoulder blades as she paddled out into the summer waves.

Samantha was ten years younger than me but we fell hard for each other. We surfed every day together. My life was blissful. I was in shape, the best of my life. I'd stopped drinking; better than that, I stopped suffering from the past, stopped living in it.

We got married later that fall. We said our *I do's* atop a rock ledge that looked out over the San Francisco bay. We surfed and made road trips up the Pacific Northwest. Thought about buying our first real house together but had no idea how such grand ideas could happen given our lack of financial prowess, or savings.

We woke up when we pleased, made decisions based on the sun and the winds. Our plans never extended past noon, but I found that was a better way to live. We *did* talk about kids once, but the talk was more of slaphappy, sarcastic rant at four in the morning after we'd made love on the beach.

But Samantha *did* have dreams. She wanted her own surfing shop and a surf school attached. She could bring out kids from the inner city, kids that had never seen the ocean and have them riding down the backs of waves by the same afternoon. I would help her, not with the lessons, but getting the business started. Raising the funds might even be easy, I'd thought, if I played it right. *Wounded War Vet Helping Impoverished Children Enjoy a Better Quality of Life in Southern California*. People's heart strings might strum to the sound of that.

We waited tables, bartended, did anything we could to keep our lifestyle and our surfing alive. I know what you're thinking with regard to my prosthetic leg. Well, let me tell you. Rusted out three of them from the saltwater before my doctor wrote me a script for a composite job. Fuck those insurance people, right?

Anyway, I was average. Samantha was superb. She grew up on the long board. She gave surfing lessons for a while. She competed and won often, but she was careful too, not one of these weekend warrior types, the high school dropouts who spent more time on their tanning and muscles and beer than the art of the sport. She analyzed everything - the weather, the tide, the rip currents. Christ, she could've brought hoards of the elderly from Palm Gardens Retirement Home to surf with her and kept *them* safe. She was a pro.

We were out on Hermosa one Saturday. It was sunny, and very calm. Samantha was out riding the low surf and I was farther up the beach, buying us some hamburgers and soda from the little pavilion. As I paid for the food, I heard lifeguard whistles and commotion but nothing abnormal for a hot day on Hermosa Beach. When I turned, an ambulance was hurrying over the sand. It looked matchbox sized from where I stood. It parked close to the water where a mob of people huddled. Four paramedics emerged rather slowly. The ambulance lights flickered across the sand with blinding, somber electricity.

As I hobbled toward our towel, holding the cardboard box with our lunch, something hit me, a sixth sense if you will, a slimy sickness that crept under my skin. I squinted into the surf, looking for Samantha. I didn't see her. I swallowed then walked faster still scanning the beachfront, then towards our towel. Something twisted further inside me, some dreadful feeling and I began a sort of limping gallop that hurt my stump, but as I got closer, I didn't think about that or anything because my whole body was crawling with some awful premonition.

A flashback arose which I tried to force away. Walking with my platoon for three days through the heavy rain with our boots sticking into the thick mud. We were looking for trenches and tunnels and the nearly invisible trip-lines that would send shrapnel tearing through your lower intestines if you so much as breathed on it. There was so little intelligence. I pushed the next image away, knowing what it was; my stomach couldn't handle seeing that.

I was fifty yards from the ambulance with its flickering strobes. The paramedics were kneeling around a pale body laid just beyond the reach of the water. One of them leaned over and reached into his bag withdrawing a pair of red paddles. When he shifted sideways, I saw.

My breath stopped. I froze, and my leg felt too weak to hold me up. The surf and murmur of people suddenly muted and all I could hear was the gulp of saliva going down and the way the tiny bones near my ears cracked when I swallowed. The beach had turned into a tunnel and reality became nothing more than a grey washout. Then everything skewed; it was as if I stood somewhere else, somewhere away from my body, somewhere further back like maybe I was atop one of the lifeguard stands or standing in the bed of a truck parked up the slope of beach behind the hip-high sand dunes.

Samantha.

It couldn't be . . . my mind . . .

Samantha's hair was drenched with seawater. It was matted and pasted against her whitening shoulders. She looked like a mermaid washed ashore in some cheap, made-for-TV movie. I dropped the box and sprinted, not considering the impossibility of that. I stumbled; my mouth scooped in a glob of hot sand. I got up and hobbled the remaining thirty yards just as the paramedics sent the first charge through her. Her body didn't jolt as you see on TV; it was more of a twitch.

The other paramedic, an enormously round man with a seemingly tiny head, bent over her. He placed his pudgy fingers gently on Samantha's quiet face, put his lips to hers and breathed for her. When her chest rose and fell, I tried to pretend none of it was real, or that they'd made a mistake, that somehow she was fine, just woozy from too hot of a day on the beach. He breathed into her several more times. I stood behind him, staring at Samantha's

closed eyes and her eyelids that were white but slowly becoming purple. Her chest rose abnormally high with each breath while his cheeks blossomed into the same candy-apple-red color of his fat-man EMT shirt. Between his breaths, the other paramedic glanced hopefully from her face to some piece of equipment lying on the sand. As the moments passed, his face darkened, the light of hope seemed to drain out and his serious expression faded to something that looked unconcerned with time anymore. It was the face of an athlete, a boxer perhaps, who knows the end is near, and who is only waiting for the bell.

The round paramedic with the tiny head looked at his watch and called it at 3:17. He pulled a pen from his rear pocket using his rubber-gloved hand with a sudden practiced grace, then scribbled something on a clipboard.

Samantha was gone. Dead. My wife was dead!

I couldn't even cry. Not then. There was too much shock. I couldn't fall down in the sand on my one knee and beat the earth the way you might see a mother cry, finding her child dead. I sat. I stared into nothing and looked down at my ceramic leg pushed into the beach. I sat as calm and still as a piece of driftwood sits high up on the beach.

Police came later. They took statements. I had little to give them, but a young surfer with punk-style hair and one gold earring, stood face to face with a cop and gave the whole story. The officer listened with an expression that said *all* surfers were trouble; delinquents with drinking problems, or family problems, or just rich kids *without* problems.

"I was watching her," the young punk started. "She's a legend here, you know. She's just chillin on the easy stuff out there, practicin a move or whatever. Nothing big today, just dinky waves. Then her arms go all funky and she falls sideways. Not a bad fall. Made me even chuckle a second. Sorry," he said, realizing his insensitivity. "It was like watching a football player trip over a lace or something, you know? But she got up and started walking in. She had her board under her arm and then . . ." he paused and looked to the ocean. His lips twisted in a funny way. "I'm not sure," he said shaking his head. "It was like she fell through or . . . sank in. Like she fell into a hole." He paused.

The officer scribbled on his notepad.

The surfer looked down, scratched his straggly hair. He looked up again. "She . . . she went down all the way. Just went right through or something." He swallowed and nodded once. That's my story, the look indicated.

The officer stopped writing. He looked up raising his eyebrows.

“And then . . .” the surfer continued, suddenly remembering more. “. . . then her hands plucked out of the water. She was making them into fists, then straight, then into fists and . . . “He looked away from the officer who’s eyebrows were still up and had the pen to the pad but wasn’t writing anymore. “Well, I guess the hands went under again, but it was real fast. Too fast,” he finished and the officer glared up sharply at that last part.

Samantha was dead.

Two days passed. I was ripping apart, twisting inside out. The sheriff’s office declared it a drowning pending the autopsy that might take months.

I spent a week sobbing violently into the pieces of furniture in my living room, in *our* living room. When I couldn’t cry anymore, I drank. I went back to the beach. I swam the shoreline, face down with snorkel and mask, trekking back and forth, back and forth, hunting for a hole or predator or something there. I needed resolution.

When the autopsy came two weeks later, it was final. Minor abrasions on her legs, and plenty of water in her lungs. A drowning.

Wait. I just heard a noise, a scraping sound. Not from the roof . . . it’s farther, maybe from rear corner of my yard, or the road beyond, but I can’t see through the darkness up here. It could be a crab, I suppose. I’ve seen them dragging their exoskeletons and claws along the cement at night. I wish a car would come and just crush it. I hate the sound it’s making.

I hope the neighbor comes home soon.

Her death paralyzed me. I stopped going to the beach, stopped going everywhere. I wouldn’t let myself enjoy anything again. I didn’t deserve that. Not after Samantha. She’d be alive if she’d never met me. She wouldn’t have been out there that day. None of it seemed fair, or just.

I vowed never to get involved again. The risk of loss and hurt was too great. I’d do what I learned in suffocating wetness of the jungle, as mud and earth and palm leaves exploded around me in machine gun fire. I’d separate myself from everything. Separate my body from feeling and emotion. I would only be a body, a machine. It was the only way. Fight when you can fight and retreat when you can’t. Survive.

Hold on. What’s *that* sound?

There’s a . . .

* * *

Saturday Night

You won't believe this. I don't care. I'm documenting it. They'll want it after I'm admitted to the psyche ward.

The ladder came back. I heard a clanging sound. It vibrated the roof a little. I scooted down to see and. . . . I don't understand. It was sitting right there, right where I'd left it.

It was hard to climb down. I felt sick to my stomach the way I did when Samantha washed ashore. On solid grass, I became angry and the first thing I wanted to do was kick the stupid pile of sand. It was dark, but the streetlight was enough, just enough to reveal there *was* no sand. It was gone, or had never existed.

I got to thinking maybe the ladder was there all along, too, that I was losing it. But I don't believe I am.

I'm in the living room now. The whiskey is refreshing, especially by the gulp-full which I need. I'm shaken. Truly shaken by this.

I'm exhausted too. I need to get drunk so I won't wake up tonight. Don't want to hear the sounds. I'll tell you about them in the morning.

June 6th. Sunday

Great sleep. I feel much better today. Had waffles, an orange, and three cups of coffee. There. That'll rule out a slew of theories later – for the doctors or psychiatric committees - about me being malnourished.

AFTER breakfast, I went to the hall closet again. The pyramid of sand has grown. Up to ~~my knee's~~ my KNEE now. I brought back a flashlight and scanned the ceiling exhaustedly. Found no holes or cracks or anywhere.

Then it hit me. It's the floorboards. They're originals and haven't been redone in ages, not since I've lived here. I'd asked the landlord not to do it. Didn't want them slippery. A one legged man could take a nasty fall. So the condo is probably settling and sand forces its way up through the widening floorboard cracks. That makes me feel better. Maybe this *is* all coincidence then. Maybe the past can remain the past.

An hour later, I found sand in the toilet. Again. I'd forgotten about that. Not a lot of sand, just a spill of it that runs toward the drain at the bottom. Damn. That'll debunk this whole shifting foundation thing then.

Back to the story. Samantha's death left me alone again. I was done being happy, done hoping, done living.

But time passes, as they say, and I *did* move on. I returned to the beach, but not to the sand, because that was sacred ground to me, and I refused to trample over it with my plastic leg.

I hung out on the pier instead and discovered I liked painting. It was nothing at first, just some paper and a set of watercolors I picked up at a yard sale. But for some reason it really got a hook into me. Soon, I was doing it everyday. I brought an old lawn chair and an easel and let my mind unravel.

Being on the pier was difficult. It was where Samantha and I spent our evenings. We'd eat ice cream, watch sunsets, and cringe at those weekend warriors wiping out beneath collapsing tunnels, spun beneath green crests of waves. Sometimes from the height of the pier, we could see schools of sharks prowling the reef, fifty yards from the surfers. We'd make bets on them. So returning was hard, but also healing, and my paintings were cleansing the hurt inside. I was painting people and their auras. I couldn't really see people's auras, but I imagined them by studying the looks in their eyes, the way they held themselves, and I painted that. I painted *feelings* if that makes sense.

People liked watching. They liked the finished product more. I was no idiot. I sold my first one to guy from Sandusky Ohio, just *enjoying his vacation*. He liked the one I was currently finishing in front of him.

"It captures America," he said.

I tilted my head funny at that.

He looked both ways, leaned forward, "*The growing obesity problem?*"

I chuckled, sold him the painting for around twenty bucks. He and his family walked away adoring over it. I never told him I'd painted his wife.

Apparently there was a major local news story happening. I never watched the news. I was busy, okay? My paintings were taking off, and I was finally was able to quit that job the grille, waiting on old ladies who were waiting on their own death.

But I did catch it once Sunday morning. It was raining. I couldn't go to the pier that afternoon, so I grabbed a newspaper and went to one of those cafés. Pretentious as hell that place was, but my eye caught the headline on page three.

Unexplained Deaths on Hermosa Beach.

I scowled at it. Samantha's death hadn't even made the paper. The article covered four recent fatalities on Hermosa. Two of them were drowning accidents according to the article, and authorities were puzzled because the victims were strong swimmers. One was a triathlete; the other swam for her high school's swim team. On the dates of each accident, the surf was low and rip currents were reported.

The other two deaths were more peculiar. Mindy Wallings, a seventeen year old who attended South High, and Jamal Jenkins, who'd be attending the Air Force Academy in the fall, both died within an hour of each other. Neither was in the water. Mindy was sunbathing with her friends and Jamal was playing volleyball further up the beach. Mindy and Jamal were unrelated to each other in any way. The nature of their deaths is pending autopsy results.

The story bothered me a lot. Dealing with Samantha's death was hard enough. I didn't want think there could be something else to it, some relation to these recent deaths. I found it better to just keep my head down, ignore it all. I made sure I kept the TV off, and wouldn't buy another paper.

Time went on. Painting and selling, selling and painting. My life became one of consistency and routine again. It was a *content* existence.

Darlene came along later that fall. I wasn't looking for a woman. No sir. The thought of another woman sickened me. But she'd been watching me from the crowd for quite some time. Made me a little nervous, a tad irritated.

I turned to her one day. She was standing in the half circle of the dozen or so people watching me paint. The picture I was working was going poorly. They sometimes do. So I gave her that look you give your little sister when she's spying on you and your friends.

"Can I help you?" I asked, though it must have sounded like, *what the fuck are you looking at*, because she stepped back one pace.

But then she smirked and walked ahead of the crowd. "You're pretty lucky, aren't you?" she asked.

In that moment, I might've stabbed her with my paintbrush if I hadn't seen the insane humor in it. "Yes, funny," I said with sarcasm. A one-legged geriatric painting with watercolors on the beach. Very lucky."

Her smile remained. She stared at me a few more moments. "No, I meant about *that*." she said pointing.

I turned to where she was pointing and noticed it. My tip jar had two fifty-dollar bills folded neatly in half. I tried to hide my excitement and shrugged to her. "I'm concentrating here," and I snapped my paintbrush in the air. I tried to look away, but my eyes wouldn't leave hers. They were a deep, translucent green, the way the sun pokes through a cresting wave in the early morning. Hotness crept from my neck over my face. My hands felt tingly.

"Paint me," she said. She crossed her arms low against her narrow stomach. Firm breasts tensed against the white t-shirt that I saw was slightly wet, slightly transparent. They weren't huge breasts, but perfectly round.

I swallowed tried to keep my eyes at her chin level and higher. Brunette hair hung loosely from a faded white ball cap. She was smiling. My eyes darted downwards; they couldn't help it. They found the frayed bottoms of her tight jean shorts, the soft unblemished skin of her thighs, thighs a little pale for a Southern California girl, but that added to their smooth sexuality. Her hips swayed methodically in the sea breeze, back and forth, back and forth like some hypnotist's golden token. I swallowed again then clenched my eyes fiercely then rotated to my painting again.

Stop it, I told myself. What about Samantha?

I was betraying her, a slip of mind. I tried to concentrate on the painting, the aura I was visualizing. "Listen," I said without looking at her. "It's a busy day. I'll see what I can do if there's still time."

Later, I did paint her. Right at sunset, while below us, surfers paddled clumsily over grinder waves and disappeared under the rolling white foam of the Pacific.

Darlene wasn't your typical Southern California girl, that was obvious from the start, but there was something in her confidence I found stunning.

We went out later that week though it wasn't a date or I tried to tell myself it wasn't a date. I found something pleasing in her. There was a deep patience and calmness buried beneath her vibrant face and sparkling eyes that I found enchanting. It was a quality I had, or once had had. Something I only came to know in the *fog-of-war* that I was thrust into, a secret trait of myself that couldn't be taught. I knew that because so many men, so many brave men in my platoon lacked it, they freaked out under the heavy fire, they froze. Darlene had the calmness and it took me.

I found out by our second date, (still not a date, I insisted) and this was pure ego boosting, that she adored my work. It's *fascinating*, she said. She was equally fascinated with me, a loner on the pier, scraggly, grey hairs rustling in the wind, faded jean-shorts and a

sleeveless shirt revealing an armful tattoos. She recognized some of them for their military significance. Her brother had many, though she only saw them twice; once, from in the grainy pictures he'd sent back home, then again, as his cold waited pointlessly, in a padded box, for his loved ones to drop flowers and sentimental things into.

Darlene became a stay-over at my condo, and for a while, I enjoyed a perfect blend of delicious cuisine - she was a cook - and tremendous sex.

We strolled the boardwalk dozens of evenings but never went down on the sand. Samantha was still there, for me. There was a part of her there I couldn't let go of, maybe I never would. But Darlene suggested we ought to. She said it a lot, in fact. It wore into me. She knew I was a widower, the how's and why's of it, but I never could tell her how I felt about the beach.

I gave in one evening. We'd finished dinner at a fancy Italian place. The night was gorgeously calm and clear. We strolled along the boardwalk listening to the ocean, enjoying its gentle murmur, its baby-talk. It was so calm it didn't look like an ocean at all, more like a small lake with ripples caressing the shore. A full moon peered through its own halo as it rode behind long, silver clouds, casting the sky in a bluish haze. The moon's reflection floated on the black water like a phosphorescent oil spill in the night.

"Look at it," she said. "We have it all to ourselves."

She was right. The beach was deserted.

Darlene paused where the sidewalk met the sand and pulled off her sandals in two quick movements. Watching that, ignited a fire inside me, the way she did it, kicking each heel against her firm butt and slipping the sandals off with her hands. She flicked her hair away from her eyes and I found something youthful, carefree, and sexual in that. My mind slipped into another realm. Her white jean skirt molded tightly against petite bottom. Her smooth thighs were shining in the moonlight, thighs that seemed impossible to touch because they were the kind of thighs you saw in dreams that ran on and on ahead of you like you might never catch them. But you did, in the dream. You did catch them and for a breathless moment, the legs let you in, and you felt all that energy and heat and the sharp pinpoint of sexual bliss.

I touched her legs that night; ran my hands up their perfect contours, and they felt like velvet in the place where the moonlight streaked down them in long, glistening runners. Her eyes were like a tiger's eyes caught in the glint of a fire, diamonds of light, the energy of sexual youth I'd almost forgotten before the war, before Samantha, and before the time I understood the world was a place where you lost things. Lost your loved ones, lost your body, lost your mind.

I was certainly loosing my mind in that moment, and after a bit, they weren't moments, just one long string of ecstasy and sensations: my clothes pulled off, our bodies slithering on the cool, clean sand, the heat of her breath as it went down my neck and side and then the unbelievable warmth inside of her.

When we were done, we sat on the sand watching the waves lap the shore gently, like a dog's tongue lapping a wound.

I got up and told her to wait, I'd fetch us a blanket from the car. She smiled up at me. Moonlight twinkled in her eye, and I felt something. A warmth filling-in some empty pit inside I hadn't even realized was waiting. It was like dirt filling a grave, I suddenly thought with frightening clarity. But maybe I was coming to terms with loss. Maybe it was time.

* * *

I walked back from the car with my shoulders back, my head up, and I observed a zillion stars stretched over the sea. It stirred a memory, ignorant in retrospect, but its power resonated. Ship-off day to Vietnam. A brilliantly powerful day. I was going to fight for my country, make a difference in the world. They'd molded our minds to believe that. They'd made us feel invincible before sending us out to that living hell.

Darlene wasn't sitting when I returned. Darlene was . . . she was gone. I froze with the blanket bunched in my arms and scanned the nearby beach. I called her name curiously through the still air. My eyes scanned all the way down the beach, until I saw the orange lights of Redondo Pier, where tourists ate slices of pizza and listened to music of the Beach Boy's piping out of bars.

My heart began thumping. It was strange for her to be gone. The moon was bright; I could see easily down the long finger of sand, but Darlene wasn't there. I turned in fright adjusting my eyes to the darkness under North Pier, twenty yards from me. The water moved faster under there, humped up against the wooden pillars that looked like the legs of a dinosaur wading in the surf. She wasn't there, wasn't anywhere.

I dropped the blanket and called out to her again, shouted her name repeatedly as my pulse rose, and my stump of leg ached from the icy blood pumped to it. My breath was hard to catch and I could feel the toes of my left foot tingling, then the right one, the missing one, as panic pulled over me like a giant steel blanket in the night. The world faded for a moment and I stood there breathless, half shocked, half confused as gentle surf continued lapping the shore. I started up the slope of beach for a moment then . . .

Could've she....

I didn't want to think that. Didn't want to imagine her going out there at this hour into the water. Darlene, who was more of a beach amateur than anyone. Darlene who'd spent her whole life here, but cooked in fancy steakhouses, sold real estate part time, drove by the ocean everyday but knew so little about the environment and its dangers. Her, unknowing of the invisible rip currents that came and went with the tide, with the moon. She'd be clueless that the rip could be even stronger tonight, not just because of the full moon but also because this part of the beach was the calm part, the separation between breaking waves, making this the outflow zone where water rushed outward to the black sea. She wouldn't know how strong it . .

I saw something in the water. It pulsed on the seam of ocean and wet sand. When I approached it, my heart almost exploded.

It was her jean shorts. The ones I'd slid down her porcelain smooth legs before we made love, and the same ones she put on afterwards. Now they were just oscillating in the motion of the ocean but without Darlene attached.

I screamed her name with terror-stricken eyes and found myself trashing out into the water. I stopped when I was stump-deep and hunted frantically with my arms trying to use the moonlight as a search beam. Then I swam out further and felt the pull of rip, so I got on my belly and swam perpendicular to it, looping above and below the surface like a dolphin following a speedboat.

I felt underneath the water with my good leg and my arms sometimes hitting bottom but remained calm and attentive for the tiniest of sounds. I must have crisscrossed the area for fifteen minutes feeling the dread rise up in me. Then I was slowing. Swimming against a powerful rip with only one good leg was something you couldn't do without adrenaline flooding your veins and mine was running out. I was fatigued. I swam back to the shore but not without making every splash and every kick a deliberate attempt to feel for her body in the water, or to listen for a desperate scream.

When I emerged from the black sea with its phosphorescent oil spill, I collapsed on the wet beach. My body was spent, but I wanted to go back in; I wanted to let the rip take *me* out. I wanted it to let it all be over.

And that's when I saw it. Five feet from where I lay, it sprouted from the narrow flat bed of wet sand like a weed. But it was not a weed. It was hair. Seven or eight inches of brunette hair plucked out and arched out of unbroken sand like the thin leaves of a growing vegetable.

I felt my eyes squinting and my heart pounding in another stampede as I got up and went over to it. The mix of confusion and dread and twisted shock was too much. A queasy lump bulged from my esophagus but somehow I swallowed it without throwing up.

I stood above the thing in the sand. A single strand of it glittered and fluttered in the gentle night breeze and it almost looked humorous poking out of the sand like that. I knelt down expecting the illusion to vanish; praying it would vanish. Once I saw the trick, I'd be angered, sickened to death to think that what I saw was . . .

But it didn't vanish. A gentle wave sloshed over my toes, almost washed over the hair, then retreated. I let my fingers brush against the hair. It was soft and bouncy, and sprung back into place. It was just like . . .

I didn't pull on it because . . .

I took a breath. I can't say much about how I felt, but what I *did* was begin to dig carefully but also frantically. I clawed a circle around the hair chucking the wet sand behind me. When I did apply some pressure, I felt the resistance; the hair went deep and tight like healthy roots of a bush. I kept slinging sand, and in a few minutes, nearly a foot and a half of the hair was out, a huge lock of it. A lock of brunette that reflected the moonlight's white steely tint. The same tint as . . .

It couldn't be real. My mind wouldn't let that be. It felt more like going through the old Halloween bin in our attic when I was a kid; all those rubber masks, and plastic goblins, and wigs. Those wigs. Some with fiery red bristles of hair, others in double French braids on the side. My mind wanted think it was like that, only . . .

And then it happened.

It vanished. I'd been holding the hair like Mom held Rosie's ponytail in her hand before wrapping a hair-band around it, and then it vanished. It vanished. But that's not quite right. The hair didn't just vanish; it pulled right through my hand and disappeared into the hole it sprouted from. The ponytail just sucked away, and when it went down it made a little twist, a little good-bye salute. *See you on the dark side*, and then it was gone.

Darlene was gone. She was never found. Nothing was. I didn't tell the officer who questioned me the real story but he grilled me plenty. Wanted to know why I'd dug out half the beach. Wanted to know why I'd returned with shovels and dug down almost five feet into the sand. I'd kept to my original story; she went for a swim, and the rip took her. By the time I got in the water, I couldn't find her body. The rips move fast here. I would know, I'm a surfer, I told him. He looked doubtfully at my prosthetic leg.

Of course, they put in divers, flew choppers, and dug into sand themselves with heavy equipment. They ran sensing devices over the beach, used dogs, but there was nothing.

* * *

For weeks afterward, I didn't avoid the beach; I threatened it. I made war against it. I spent every day and a few nights on it. I wanted to wear it down, let it know I would kill it when the time was right. I forgot about painting entirely. I was too angry, too scared, too confused.

I'd go to the beach with a twelve pack and a carton of smokes. No suntan lotion, no towel. Fuck it. The beer I disguised in Vernon's Ginger Ale Bottles. Those lifeguards can be pricks.

On one of the days, I went to the place they'd laid out Samantha's body three years prior. I counted off one hundred and twenty paces south and sat down close to the water. One hundred and twenty paces was halfway between where Samantha gulped her last breath and where the beach sucked Darlene down into its cold darkness.

I drank and watched the ocean; I watched the sand more. I studied my enemy. It was what we did in Nam. We crept up in the night. We watched them. The sand moves if you watch it close enough. Almost like a giant snake moving in ultra-slow motion. The tiny divots grow into humps; the humps sag down divide into pairs and trios of ripples, then go flat. It creeps in undetectable, perfect motion; better than any sniper could dream of, better than the tide advancing stealthily over the sand.

As I sat on the halfway point that day, a family from St. Louis spread out towels, poked in an umbrella, and plopped their pale flabby bodies down next to me while I drank greedily from the Vernon's bottles. The father watched me drink and smoke rather un-approvingly while he bored his wife with sales numbers, and ways to 'Lift the team spirit' at work.

Their son, about seven or eight, made runs to and from the water with wet sand for the fortress he was constructing – *milk runs* we used to call them in battle.

I watched the boy feeling great envy of him for his youth, for his innocence. I felt sad for him, too. He knew nothing about *real* pain or loss though one day he would. He knew nothing about the sand either, only how to dig in it, or build with it. But then, neither did I.

It was around four-thirty when a lifeguard dragged him ashore, and flopped his lifeless, white body beneath the shocked faces of those Midwesterners.

Cramps, a bystander offered. Looked like he cramped up, then went under.

I was up on my foot watching, trying to look concerned, but kept my mouth shut and kept sipping from the Vernon's bottles. I was wasted by that time.

The father made eye contact with me while the paramedic blew air between his boy's purple lips, causing his chest to rise and fall in unnatural rhythm. The father looked rather convinced the paramedic would save him and had that expression that this was all some stupid annoyance, some game.

At five o'clock, they pronounced the boy dead.

I went home. At first, I felt nothing. I slept. Later, I got up and puked and then I cried for the next three hours until I passed out.

I spent the week trying to pretend that nothing happened. I drank often. I told myself it was coincidence. But I was hurting. By then all the pent grief and stress was close to rupturing. I needed more distraction, so I cooked for myself. I tried to recreate recipes Samantha used to make. It took all my focus. I drank straight out of the Jamison bottle until I couldn't feel or remember the world.

The food looked like hell. It tasted worse.

I bought newspapers and scanned the headlines with caution, ready to flinch. My eyes knew the key words they were looking for. *Unknown tragedy, freak accident.*

There was nothing. Just stories about tax hikes and overcrowded California prisons and John W. Hinckley found innocent for shooting Regan *by reason of insanity.*

But the idea snapped me out of sleep one morning like sneaking footsteps awoke us in our makeshift jungle-camps. I couldn't handle the idea, but I couldn't push it away either. It's me. The beach is killing people, but it's me. I've been there for every mysterious death.

I didn't want to believe that. It was crazy. You couldn't believe it. It was like believing in ghosts or fortunetellers or that God might save you once they started torturing you within the depths of some black, jungle tunnel.

I refused to insult myself, yet something was there. Some part deep inside me felt it, maybe the part that knew my old fears, the ones bottled inside me. Wicked fears when I crept through black of night, waiting, watching, listening for Charlie; careful of every step so as not to crunch leaf or a bug or anything that might give away my location. And I wasn't scared of dying. I was never scared of that. Rather the opposite. I was scared of living, and them *making* me live and what they would do for that.

When you come back to society after the jungle, you're split. I know, because I've kept in touch with Henry and Williams, guys from my platoon. They agree. The war has created two inner selves in each of us. They live simultaneously but internalize everything differently. There

was the *us* before the war, the *us* who drank beer in our parent's basements, stashed Hustler magazines between our mattresses, bet on the races during summer breaks. It's the same *us* now, living pseudo normal lives out in the suburbs or dying in them like my buddy, Harold, because your heart can't cope anymore.

But then there is the *us* who fought in the jungle. The hidden *us* who watched M16 rounds break off children's arms or hands as if they were dead twigs on an old tree and how those kids would just stand there for a few moments in fear, mostly in shock, and they didn't even move when they got hit. Blood spurted from sheared arteries, but they just stood with absent faces until they fell to the ground and died or took more rounds.

That part of *us* doesn't seem real; that part is pushed so far into the cellar of our subconscious it can't come up for air. But sometimes it does anyway. Sometimes a tiny surge comes up like a bit of acid in your throat. Or like hair that suddenly pokes out of the sand on a warm summer night.

So maybe these horrific things happening on the beach was something only the *split* part of me could believe. For the rational part of me, the guy just spending his retirement years in Southern California, this was all horseshit. But how could I deny what I saw, what I experienced?

And now as I sit on my couch in the dark living room, telling you this story, working eagerly through the whiskey bottle, I believe it more. I've had time to think it through, and I'm seeing the correlations to the present; they're coming together now, because only a while ago I was stuck on my roof, and a ladder, a plain old aluminum ladder, played very nasty joke on me. I can't blame it though. It was as unaware as the young boy from St. Louis making sand castles on the beach. The ladder's legs just got stuck in some sand, that's all. But it made me see.

I'd recently hoped the sand inside my condo was meaningless, pestilent sand; blow-off from the beach, trickling through an old roof, making piles in a crippled man's hallways and closets. I prayed it was simply the consequence of inadequate maintenance from an out-of-town-landlord.

That's what I had hoped. But you know what they say about that.

I think it's time to tell you the rest. There were more than piles of sand I found here and there. I couldn't bring myself to write about it before, but now . . .

* * *

I'd spent some horrible days at home after all the deaths. I looked at my Purple Heart. I looked through my *album*, as I like to call it. It's full of war photos from *over there*. I held my Smith & Wesson 9mm one night on my recliner chair, though that gun has nothing to do with the war. Simply a passing curiosity, a glimpse into pain relief therapy, as some might call it.

I had to paint again. I wouldn't return to the beach. Not ever. I would find a new venue. Californians were the same uptown or downtown as they were near the beach. They'd buy my shitty watercolors anywhere. But that didn't even matter. I needed to paint because it was the only thing to take my mind away.

I needed purpose and distraction and self comfort which I only found with a paintbrush and the glorious array of colors to dip it in. Besides, people liked my work. It kept a positive spirit around me. I had no more family or friends except for the few remaining Army pals, but they weren't comfort. Guys like us still carry the weight of our memories, our fears, and our sins on our backs. They wouldn't have capacity to drag me out of this one.

It seemed unimaginable that I could forget all this, but the mind has very deep and dark places where you can hide just about anything.

The painting came back to me. It made me forget everything; my mind focused only on the present, the strokes of the brush, the mixing of greens with reds and swirls of white and black to make dazzling other hues. Putting the memories of Samantha and Darlene and everyone else away became less of an effort and more automatic each day. Fall came and went; Christmas sped through faster than the Brown River Navy cruised down the Mekong on one of their PBR's. And then it was Spring. I was painting; I was living. That was the best I could do.

A little watercolor paint goes a long way if you know how to use it right. I was using it right on the corner of Hermosa Ave and 2nd, my new venue that summer. Made some dough, too. That was okay; I needed the money. But I began thinking a lot as I painted. Deep insights for someone like me. I thought how when you mix just the right amount of blue with the right amount of red, you can get something that looks rather delightful for a sunset background, and how real it could be. You could turn white canvass into a living place full of emotion, full of life, and full of memories. You could really move a person with that. Sometimes my paintings wrung tears from my customers though that was never my intention. My paintings aren't anything sad, or anything happy; they are the links to the past. They bring together so much for one, and tear down for another. But people come back. They cry and they hurt, but they always come back, because it gives them something. I also knew that when using watercolors, if you add enough water you could erase the mistakes you made, erase all the emotions from the scene. You could erase the sunset.

I think that's what I'd been doing. And what a pleasant venue for erasing mistakes. A nice corner location where Mike's coffee shop opens at eight, and behind that, seashells hung on string, jangle in the breeze beneath a souvenir store. An old man, older than me, emerges from it every morning at ten. He walks the sidewalk in front of the shop and picks up the dead palm leaves that fell during the night. It's maybe how he erases *his* past, I suppose.

My life had no plans or goals. I supposed I would just sit out there and paint, and keep adding water to my life until everything just sort of blended to nothing again.

Then the sand returned.

It started last week. I kept finding piles of it inside of closets and sometimes in the back corner of the pantry. Not much different, I'd reasoned, than finding a few mouse droppings lying around. No big deal, I live near the beach.

Sand was getting inside my car. Inside the car and inside my paint supply case which I kept in the car. It's a silver briefcase with two fold-down latches. When you open it up, three trays fold out in a tiered design, perfect for brushes, containers of paint, and sponges.

I brushed out some loose sand one morning then went to work on my first painting. I opened the bottle of red and found it filled with sand. I dropped it in shock. The sand spilled everywhere mixing with the red paint in a grotesque wet pile of sludge. It looked like someone had squashed a small rat or rodent across the brick walkway beneath my easel.

And then last Thursday happened. Don't believe this if you can't, but I know what happened.

Since then, I haven't been able to sleep without heavy meds or alcohol or both. See, I'd been waking during night more than usual. Call it age, call it noises outside. Sometimes I've sworn there was a scratching sound close to my bed. But anything can sound like scratching under the bed or tapping from somewhere within the walls at three-thirty in the morning when the sky is black and there aren't any sounds besides the faraway rumble of the surf. Ask any child about that.

So I'd been getting up to pee. And since I don't wear the prosthetic to bed, I hobble on crutches from my room, down the dark hallway, and into the hall bathroom. I never flick on the lights; I know where everything is. I sit when I pee. Not a proud admission, but on crutches it would be too wild a shot.

So I sit. My one bare foot rests on the furry bathmat in front of the toilet. It's powder-blue and soft. When I'm done, I stand at the sink on a matching mat and rinse my hands. Then back to bed. That's the routine.

And last Thursday, things were no different when I woke. The house was darker than normal. A storm off the Pacific had been driving rains for three days. I heard its light patter on the soaked shingles and a slower, constant, metallic drip from the rear of the condo. A gutter leaking onto the AC unit, perhaps.

I grunted up from the toilet on my crutches. My wrists were aching that night. Probably too much painting and this act of standing up from the toilet. That was something I'd have to solve if this nightly peeing continued.

So I was up; I went to the sink.

I turned the faucet on and stuck my hand under the cold water. I snatched it back immediately when I realized it felt all wrong. A sickness ran through me. The water felt warm like blood and thick like maple syrup my brain suddenly registered. My heart thudded heavily into the darkness. I flicked on the bathroom nightlight and stared wide eyed into the sink. Something brown continued oozing from the drain with the consistency of dark honey. It appeared to be coagulating in the basin, turned yellow under the dim bathroom nightlight.

The brown substance was stuck to my hand and I could feel it making an awful tingling, bubbling sensation. You don't think that in such a moment, your brain could even process the idea that something could be eating away your skin, but I did anyway. I furiously smeared my hand on my shirt, thought about dunking it in the toilet. A strong nausea washed through me and my fingers began burning and itching at the same time. I gritted my teeth, the toes of my left foot curled in pain and disgust.

That's when things turned upside down, because my toes dug in. They dug into sand.

I felt the granular scraping and pinching in the crease of my curled, big toe, and wet clumps of sand squished up between the surrounding toes. A two-legged man would have easily pulled his foot away in shock and fright. I must have forgotten I only had one. I was lucky to catch myself on the crutches and avoid splitting my head on the vanity counter or cracking it against the porcelain toilet.

Brown gunk continued draining out of the . . . I didn't care to know what it was. I already had begun hobbling towards the hallway, toward my front door, but I never made it that far. The kitchen floor met my face. There was a moment of blackness, but I wasn't knocked out, just stunned, my brain rattled sharply from the fall. I could feel a swelling already beginning below my right eye. Then the blackness brightened to a fuzzy gray. The dark kitchen faded in, the wooden table and the bottle of something high on the counter came into focus.

I continued laying there. I was quiet. I breathed as slowly as I had the control to do. I listened.

I had to swallow hard through nausea and dryness in my mouth. My head pulsed in painful beats, and it felt like there was a Browning .50 cal machine gun resting between my temples, pelting out sporadic rounds into the haze of my kitchen.

No, I whispered. It's a crazy nightmare. Wake up! Wake up!

I tried pinching myself. Tried punching myself – which turned out to be a mistake. I was convinced it was a dream, and I'd sleepwalked to the kitchen. It happens to people all the time. People get their keys and start their cars; they cook full meals and serve them to imaginary guests who are all part of dream world. It happens.

Yes, it was only a dream. Nothing more.

And then I tried to sit up from the kitchen floor. I had to pull my leg into position with my hands to do it. When I pulled on the underside of my foot, I felt grains of sand on it. I released my foot, frozen with fear, knowing that it wasn't a dream, and if something else happened, if something came out of that bathroom, I wouldn't get up from the floor. The fear was too much. I'd look at it for a minute and then close my eyes and hum and hum or cry until it was all over.

But there was more. My brain finally caught up and revealed the details I was unable to perceive while I was panicking and wiping something acidic from my fingers.

Maybe it happened just before my toes curled into the sand, or maybe a split second after. That I cannot say for sure. But what I can attest to is what I felt. A very light tickling sensation on my left calf. On any other night, it would've just been a bug or a cobweb, but then, in the slow motion playback, I realized it was hair tickling me. Hair that sprouted up from the sand like some weed in the night.

The memory became more vivid than the present, almost like I was tripping on acid or LSD. The hair wasn't the slightly coarser texture of brunette hair. It was shiny and soft and blonde and somehow I knew it wasn't very long; Samantha never kept hers that way, no surfing girl would.

But it *wasn't* Samantha's hair, because I felt something sick behind its touch. Something evil and ancient and rotting. It wasn't hair to be dug out as I had on the beach two years ago. I knew if I did that, whatever it was would have reached right out of that sand for me. Something with long fingernails and that slithered out of the bathroom floor like a giant leach turned inside out. Something that might lick the air and hiss with unspeakable madness.

I didn't remember much after that, only waking up with light streaking through the dirty kitchen window, painting me in hot, white square on the floor. I got up. A car door shut. Its engine roared to life then backed out of a driveway. It was Jerry Lawson, my neighbor. Probably headed to the office, maybe even to the car wash first, something that had become a habit for him on Fridays.

I sat up. My head was pounding. I must've passed out for six hours on the floor, but the fright remained. My muscles and ligaments pulled tight in tense fear. The house was quiet. Very quiet. I listened for the running faucet but heard nothing.

A few minutes later, I struggled to my foot with the crutch handles pried into my armpits. I was apprehensive about taking a single step because I knew what I'd feel. It would be ultimate confirmation and probably the tipping point of my own sanity when I felt the grains of sand beneath my bare left foot.

I took a step and I felt nothing. I scanned the linoleum where I'd spent the night but saw nothing there either, no sand.

But that wasn't enough. Only a little boost of confidence I'd need to put this to rest. I needed to see the bathroom again. This wouldn't beat me, this hallucination, or this dream or whatever it was. I wouldn't run from it. This was my house, damn it! This was my life!

The bathroom door was closed halfway. The lights were off, the nightlight included. I leaned against the far wall of the hallway, as far from the bathroom door as possible. Then I used one of my crutches as an extender arm and prodded the bathroom door open. It swung in, into darkness. I didn't know what I expected to see, but my heart felt like it stopped for an instant. Two powder-blue bathmats looked up innocently from the floor where last night they had become sandpits into hell. I squinted through the darkness at the sink. The porcelain rim gleamed from the hall light but was otherwise clean. I saw the toothpaste stain on the side, and maybe a few flecks of grey beard stubble near the drain. All in all, it was status quo.

I felt better but not calm. The daylight helped, and the fact there was no evidence of the nightmare helped more, but I wasn't right in my head.

Isn't this what any insane man must feel, I thought.

And I realized in that moment, I welcomed insanity. I was glad for the coming committal of myself. All of that was better than believing what happened last night could be real. Insanity, at least from what I've read, was somewhat treatable. The world had powerful drugs these days, specialists, psychiatrists, narrow beds with strong clamps that could cure a man like me, protect me, and all I had to do was believe them.

After that incident on Thursday, things calmed down a bit. Just the one pile of sand in the closet, which I've told you about already. I've been rather happy over the last five days or so, too. Admitting you have a problem is half the battle, is it not? I've felt relieved.

But then this thing with the ladder is bothering me. What do I do with that? What do I do with the scratching sounds that persist? They wake me in the night when my drugs wear off. I still have to pee when I wake, but I've worked out a solution that doesn't involve me going into the bathroom anymore.

Oh, boy. This is so hard. I want to put it to rest. I want to be insane. Is that an insane thing to think? Is it? What else *can* I wish? Nobody will believe any of this shit is real, even if I do.

I suppose by writing this, then, I *have* achieved my goals. Forget all the preliminary meetings and paperwork. I've composed my one-way ticket into the asylum. It's perfect. It'd be great if they give me back this journal once I'm in, for memory sake, but I doubt they will.

Well, I'm exhausted tonight. I have to add a few more details in the morning. There's some proof I think in all of my ramblings. I only hope the *proof* won't undermine or delay acceptance into the clinically insane wing of wherever they want to send me.

* * *

Investigator Marty Hedstrom narrowed his eyes at the notebook. It was all the man had written. He, of course, didn't believe a damn word, though something there had sounded vaguely familiar, some incident on the beach maybe. This guy was just another poor vet with *posttraumatic stress syndrome*. He'd probably left this out purposely, and then barricaded himself in a shack near the water, preparing for a standoff with police, or more likely, he'd already ended things himself. Suicide amongst vets had become a growing trend in recent years. The man had at least one gun. A 9mm. Marty had picked up on that. He knew this was something he should run by department heads immediately. But he didn't. Something urged him not to, some sense of compassion, perhaps. He knew what the department would do, the force they'd use. They wouldn't care what the man had done for his country.

The notebook toppled onto the floor when that new trainee, Megan, waltzed by Marty's open office door. His eye's drew to her crisp new uniform that hugged her hips in magical tightness. Then she was gone.

He reached for the notebook, then paused. It had flopped open to a page near the back with more writing on it. He picked it up. It was the same handwriting but not as neat or straight like the rest had been. Marty swallowed. Perhaps it was the way each line went crooked at the end and bended diagonally across the page that pricked up hairs on his neck.

Marty set it on the desk and read the page.

Oh, shit. Shit! I don't know . . . this is happening now. It's June 5th. No, the 4th. It's late. I cant' see what time. So dark outside. But I left the light on.

It's the beach in here. I mean it's like that. Sands everywhere. It's

My crutch is buried up the handle. I tried, can't get it out.

I'm going to be sick. It's that feeling again. That sickness. Oh dear God. Have mercy on me. Have mercy on this place. Dear God, please come down and save me fr

Shhhh. I have to calm my breathing. But I'm crying right now because the power in here is so strong. Oh what am I saying. How. I just pissed myself but that doesn't matter.

There's two crabs on the sand. I can't move. My crutches. My leg is gone. I think it's buried under the sand. They can get up here if they want, those crabs, because it's almost up to the top of my mattress. It'd deep in here. That's what Sgt. Malcomb used to say when his squad tried to B.S him. *It's deep in here boys*. We'd laugh at that. Smoke to it.

The crabs don't have eyes. They're crawling, scratching. One is climbing the wall like a spider.

I just threw up. A crab crawled on the bed. I smacked with a pillow. It flew over on its back. But its up now. Side of the room. When I leaned forward I saw.

No. No. Yes I saw. It's the boy. Thin. Hallway.

He's eating. No. Four crabs. He's licking. Oh no. I didn't see his bald head before. Not when he turns. I can't see. Oh Jesus! The red line around his head. It's a smiling line, it opens. Oh God. Can't look.

First bite. Not bad stinger. Brunin no burning round cut.

The St. Louis crows the crowds in St....?

My fucking toe's off now. Can we. We gO? Weeee! No that's it.

Bullets are like monkeys, he said. WHAT GEORGE?

IS That your ripped hat or the one with the brain vent? Harold liked that one. The St. Louis boy. That's what I been tried to say.

Feels good without the toes. Four gone. Lighter on me feet, eh?

YHes. Ol me Ol. Me. Oh yes. The works getting di

the worlds' get

Damn IT! Can't I get it right. One last thing. Don't come in here. Here here here. Let me try again.

THE WORLD'S GETTING DIMMER. Got it George!

Darlene? Hi!!!! Wha

That afternoon, in the orange glare of the setting sun, Detective Headstom walked cautiously under the North Pier in his black boots, the boots he only wore on the rarest occasions, like visiting an actual homicide scene. He could feel a blister forming on his big toe.

The air was cooler under the pier, and the rushing breeze reminded him of the train tunnels they played in as kids. The sand was ragged and thick. Weeds protruded from its valleys, and viciously sharp rocks threatened to poke the unprotected foot. He exhaled a satisfied breath, thinking of his boots.

Then he saw it.

The withered head of a surfboard protruded from the sand like a tombstone. He flicked on his Mag-lite and walked to it. The board had once been orange with some kind of logo or design, but now it was severely faded.

Marty's heart quickened as he stopped a few feet from it and shined the beam of light around the sand. Behind him, heavy surf rolled under the pier creating the bizarre sensation he was in a cave. It was that sensation which agitated him just a little. Marty didn't like tight spaces, in fact he'd quit his former career as a home inspector, because there were attics and crawl spaces and leaking cinderblock cellars.

His light caught a silver glint in the shadowed sand.

When he bent forward to inspect it, realizing immediately it was only a gum wrapper, something happened. He jumped away in tiptoe kind of two-step. A little gasp escaped his chest, an uncontrollable frightened sound. Marty took a deep breath; he got himself together. He was a cop, after all. He should act it. But that didn't stop what he'd felt. No, not at all.

His boots were not steel toed. They had soft black leather on the part that covered the upper foot area, designed for air circulation and comfort, most likely. He wanted to believe it was a mouse or a crab that had just scurried across that soft part of leather, but he couldn't. It hadn't scurried. Something had looped over it, even massaged his toes for a second. The feeling was much like caressing your hand through leather driving gloves.

Marty found he was unable to move. He flicked the flashlight beam over the sand, determined to find that mouse or piece of litter or something to blame it on, not wanting to admit that what he'd felt were long fingers looped over his boot. Fingers connected to a hand and to a wrist that had reached out of the dark beach for him. His heart beat faster. He was losing control. His cop training told him that. A seagull cried somewhere above the pier. Marty backed up a few steps then whirled around with his flashlight. His other hand instinctively went for his gun.

And then the foolishness hit him at once. He paused where he was and took some deep breaths. It was nothing. He was allowing some crazy old man's diary to scare him as if he was nine years old.

Marty stood where he was and scanned the area more carefully with the flashlight. He found nothing else. No evidence or clues or anything that could . . . that could what? What was he doing out here anyway? Looking for a body? Maybe, probably, but if anything, he should be asking around, finding out who this guy was, visiting his house just to make sure he was okay.

Marty got home around seven. He would go to Hermosa and 2nd tomorrow, a smart starting place.

He went into the pantry and grabbed a mostly empty bottle of vodka from the top shelf, then a rocks glass from his kitchen cupboard. He set them on the counter. When he turned to the freezer, he stopped dead.

The ice he was about to get was suddenly inside him, shooting through his veins. Hairs pricked from his arms and neck. On the fridge door, held with a magnet, was a painting. If Marty had kids, it would be no big deal. Just a watercolor thing. Marty wondered for a terror-stricken moment if they still taught kids how to use watercolors like he'd learned in school. But that thought was only distraction, and diversion to what he couldn't fathom and wouldn't believe.

And this was no work by a child. He could see that. He could see why these things had sold so well out on the pier and then later on the corner of Hermosa and 2nd. If his heart wasn't hammering, and if cold sweat wasn't forming in his armpits, Marty could almost cry at the thing. He understood now, how these paintings affected people the way the man described. Marty thought it reminded him of . . .

A scratching noise came from down the hall. It was loud. It sounded like someone sanding a long piece of wood slowly with heavy grit paper. He swallowed then un-holstered his gun. Marty snuck quietly into the hallway and headed toward the rear of the house, pausing only shortly to notice three, ankle-high pyramids of sand sitting there.

Marty disappeared into the back bedroom. It was his last act, unless you count the two gunshots. If anyone had been there to witness it, they would have only heard his screams echoing through the hallways and other empty rooms.

Later, Marty's older brother, Sam, would find him. He'd call his brother six times from the restaurant, wondering why Marty hadn't shown up for Sam's celebratory engagement dinner. When he found Marty that night, he wouldn't understand the measures his attacker must have taken to do such things to his brother's body.

Hermosa's homicide department would never solve the case either. It would go into one of those cold case files.

Adjacent to the pier, waves continue to slither up the beach and pound the shallower waters as they've done for millions of years. A silver moon watches its own reflection topple over the sea's peaks and slide into blacker valleys. When morning comes, aimless souls return to the shoreline, bake under the sun, and mold Mother Nature's sand into miniature human

creations, like castles or towers or other kinds of things aimless humans like. And just underneath it all, something continues to slither and breath, waiting for the right moment to reach up to the low hanging fruit when feels hungry again.

About the Author

Scott Zavoda is a writer from Cleveland Ohio, working across many genres: horror, science fiction, fantasy, dark fantasy, and thriller. Short stories are his forte. He's a devoted husband and father of two lovely girls. As an airline captain, he spends most his time enjoying the food and culture at nearly every city you can think of in America. Scott say's "Being away from loved ones is the hardest thing, but I make the best of it by using the time to read and write.

His other works include:

[Bobby](#)

[Morning Commute](#)

If you want an automatic email when Scott's next book is released, [sign up here](#). Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

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Say Hi!

You can find Scott easily online in a variety of places. He would love it if you dropped by to say hello.

Check out his short story blog at ShortStoryFan.com

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Dedication

For my wife who always makes the impossible seem possible . . .

