

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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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 4<sup>th</sup>.

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 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 6<sup>th</sup>. 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 a 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 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.

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