

The Splintering Effect



Time is much longer when you're sober, moments like molecules dragging into pixelated detail with nothing to dull the sharp edges. I sit quietly on the beach this morning melting into day. The river of time passes through me here. I'm new to this island and I've just learned of its ley lines. Some things are beginning to make sense now. It is late summer, the scorching off-season. Too hot for most, but still there is a small flock of sunlovers scattered over the shoreline. Languid in the heat, I am without my habitual bottled accompaniment. I'm learning to just be. Soft moments float by, the salt mist collecting in droplets on my skin, over the slick layer of tropical tanning oil. My heels burrow into the sand, pushing up little hills for my toes to rest. As I let go, the current of thought swirls around me, lazy carefree beach day thoughts. The moods of strangers drift through me as I allow myself to be unshielded.

Near me two women sit on a beach blanket, eating grapes and watching their small children play in the surf. A boy and two girls, they go to the same school. Their mothers chat about

upcoming homework and soccer practices, the new school year to start in a few short weeks. I smile at them and they return it easily. We are warm with sun and the lightness of this moment. *See there, I can do it; I can be with other people.* It's even nice sometimes. Then it happens; involuntarily part of me goes on alert. There is a hitch in the breeze. I feel a nearby lurking, a crawling gaze. Bristling, I scan to find its source.

A man sits in the sand, leaning back against the brick wall of the fort perimeter on the edge of the beach. He is about 15 feet from the moms on the blanket, they are his one o'clock. In one hand he holds a cell phone. His eyes flick back and forth from the people on the beach to his phone screen. He mutters erratically, as though he wants it to appear that he's on a call. His other hand is down his pants, moving.

The old sensation comes to me, the air sucking out of the atmosphere, popping my ears the way it does right before a mortar hits. I'm in the channel again, not really me anymore. My eyes zoom in on the man; I would like my second glance to prove false. I want to be wrong. *Show me that I'm wrong.*

As his lips move, so does his hand in his pants. I dissect his sightline. The moms in bathing suits? No, it is not them he is watching. His eyes are on the children. The little boy is jumping in the surf and his trunks are half a size too big. They slide down slightly whenever a wave hits, exposing the curved bridge of tanned to pale skin. Up down. Up down. The man's hand jerks in time.

Where before my blood would have roiled now it is frigid, coagulated. I am so tired. But this cannot be allowed to pass. Vaguely I sense the splintering of my consciousness. That other part of me will take over now, the part born in sand on the other side of the world. She does what's necessary. Always. My real self recedes, watching but not in control.

Quickly and quietly I walk in front of the man and drop down to his level. I let the everydayness fall away from my face. Behind my eyes the reckoning thrashes, and beyond that a numb abyss devoid of remorse. He flinches and recoils, his hand snaking out of his pants. He tries to squirm away, but he is caught between me and the wall.

All around me are the instruments of an end. Do you see that bit of broken glass at your feet in the sand? It could slip so easily into an artery. This beach will absorb a river of blood, just as the desert did. And I will feel nothing.

Feet finally finding desperate purchase in the sand, he skitters away. I let him go. He flees, but not off the beach, only further down it. I walk back to the blanket and tell the moms, in case he returns. Horrified and irate, they call the police. The beach patrol officers arrive quickly. I provide a detailed description: Male. Age 30-50. Average height and build. *I should have done more.* Olive skin. Short dark hair. Clean shaven, possible 5 o'clock shadow. *Why didn't I do more?* Cutoff shorts, possible khaki or bleached denim. Red sleeveless tank. Flipflops. *There must have been something else I could have done.* The spiked pit of revulsion is a lump I swallow down. It lodges in my stomach where it will stay to leach acid. I have never been able to master that physical reaction.

I watch the officers move down the beach in their uniforms, hunting over sand... Before starting their pursuit they asked me several times if the man had exposed himself. I told them no, but it was very obvious what he was doing. As I say this I watch them look at each other, these two cops. I know the silent language that passes between them. It says they won't be able to do much from a law enforcement standpoint if the man wasn't actually exposing himself on the public beach.

I trudge to my car. There is nothing left for me to do here.

Rage and depression compete for me. Ancient memories slither up from my gut's acid well, burning my throat on their way into my brain. My own and those I was made to see through the eyes of other soldiers on other sands. *Bacha bazi*... My people are tainted by the sins we were made to witness, in their seeing and their telling. Now I can't stop seeing. My radar was long embedded but their stories strengthened its signal reception. I fear the condition is permanent. *I don't want to be the one who must notice these things.* Over There I could shove a shiv into the cretin's neck and dump his body in the Tigris. One predator down, no one the wiser and that village a safer place. No, that is a lie. I could do no such thing there or anywhere else. Still, the vigilante cravings come. Rage says burn them alive in a mass pit. Bleakness reminds me even if I could, there are always more of these unnatural beasts with eyes set forward. They prey on children, our doe-like innocents. And they exist in every country the world over. Why? What is their point of origin? How can their source be eliminated? Will our species ever fix this? If only enough of us could try... *But I cannot be a sin eater anymore.* I keep forgetting to remember that I gave up my uniform.