

Neither Sand Nor Sea

by

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The priest was stumbling toward the end of the pier, a small chore before finally passing these dark, desolate hours in a dreamless blackout. Fog blew in off the ocean and swirled everywhere, thick and cold and pleasing to breathe. The pier narrowed and trembled against the current, and the priest thought perhaps it's not just me, eager to be fooled by the uncertainty as each step became a matter of faith—either the pier collapsed, or he did.

Then he was leaning over the railing, the border between the bright shore and moonless oblivion, gazing from a great height at the swells that emerged from the darkness below the pier and split themselves against its pillars. Here the relentless noise of the ocean was deafening but gentle—great bodies of water heaving toward the shore, and waves breaking in rhythms as regular as a beating heart.

He peeled the label off of the empty bottle in his hand, his movements ghostly in the halos of the lampposts glowing on either side of the pier. He took a pen from his pocket and scrawled the date on the blank side of the label, retraced his marks until they were etched into it, then rolled the glossy paper into a tight cylinder and slipped it down the bottle's neck. The label absorbed the dregs, edges quickly becoming transparent, but the date remained as dark as the sky. The priest screwed the cap back on and sent the bottle spinning over the railing and into the darkness, where it was visible for a moment before disappearing without sound or splash.

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The nail was lined up mid-wrist, and as the hammer was raised, he determined not to cry out. But the nail was dull, sheathed in rust and old blood, and when the hammer fell his skin was

not pierced but torn. New blood bubbled up around the nail, and he screamed, for even great men must give utterance to their agony.

He felt the point of another nail against his skin and turned to look just as the first blow drove it halfway through his other wrist. He screamed again but immediately struggled to silence himself lest his torturers revel in his suffering.

Both nails were being driven into him now. The cross shuddered and recoiled against the force of the hammers, and his wrists were pulled wildly about the nails until they were firmly fixed against the wood.

His feet were set on the cross, and he could hear the hammers falling but it felt as though pressure was being applied to a single point in both feet.

He was aware of the pain without experiencing it. He drifted just above consciousness—Father, deliver me from this nightmare—already imaging his death and eventual ascent.

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The priest awoke abruptly in the grey hours of the early morning, hands trembling from the intensity of the dream. There was an empty bottle on the nightstand with a rosary draped around its neck. He reached for neither.

In the bathroom he stared at the mirror, aware of his own reflection without actually recognizing it. He started the shower and waited until steam came billowing over the shower's glass doors then stepped in and let the scalding water scrape him clean. He washed slowly, movements weak and uncertain, then got out and stood motionless under the heat lamp for nearly twenty minutes instead of toweling off. He dressed in jeans and a t-shirt so he wouldn't have to button a dress shirt.

He left the Pier Hotel and ducked into the corner liquor store, where it was cool and clean, and as he made his purchase the clerk smiled at him and said nice to see you again. When he returned to the cottage the bed was made, the towels replaced, the pillows neatly straightened on the couch. He emptied the bags into the fridge and watched people strolling past his kitchen window along the pier, then decided to go down to the beach see if any

bottles had washed up. He poured two water bottles into the sink and refilled them with clear liquor, then left the cottage.

A strange place, this pier, neither sand nor sea yet firmly fixed in both, and when the priest descended the stairs branching off the boardwalk and felt the warm sand beneath his feet, he took pleasure in being solid ground again. He made his way toward the water, moving away from the pier's shadow and into the sun. He found a place to sit in the pale hard sand near the water, and took a long drink from one of the bottles, nearly gagging once but not stopping until he felt that familiar warmth flowing down his throat and into his stomach.

The priest watched the waves for a while but no bottles washed up, so he rose awkwardly and moved into the pier's shadow, where he looked along the sand until he felt dizzy and sat down underneath the pier. The shade and the sound of the waves made him drowsy, but he would surely dream if he fell asleep, so he started on another bottle, enough finally to drink himself back to sobriety.

When the breeze finally penetrated his sun-soaked skin he emerged from under the pier and returned to his cottage. He tried to shave, but the razor trembled against his neck, so he showered and washed off the sand and sea spray.

He dressed and got a beer from the fridge, then opened the sliding glass door and went out to sit on the lounge behind his cottage. A few other guests were on their decks, speaking quietly to each other or just gazing off into the distance. The coastline extended parallel to the pier then curved away sharply toward the horizon, forming a crescent in which the pier was nestled. A few tall hotels rose above the skyline, but it was mostly small beach houses and apartment complexes lining the boardwalk. The sun painted every building in the reddish-yellow of ancient adobe, and if he watched patiently enough, the light could be observed sliding down each building's face, retreating with the sun and sliding over the water like bright liquid.

Now the sounds of the city surrendered to the sound of the ocean, and the surf got louder even as it grew calm, and also it seemed to shrink in size as the sun set, bleeding red until it finally fell below the horizon. The priest felt dread creeping into his soul, and as the sky darkened, he went into the cottage to fix himself another drink.

Whitewater surged and frothed about the pier's support beams, a crushing, audible darkness from which it seemed impossible to return. Yet here he was, staring down, remembering something like a ghost going over the railing.

The priest looked at the empty bottle in his hand, the label scribbled on and shoved inside it, and, with a prayer in his head but not in his heart, he tossed the bottle over the railing and watched it fall.

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His head thudded against the cross, the thorns sunk into the base of his skull, and he sank deep within himself. He could hear the crowd raving and cursing and scrambling for rocks to hurl at him.

A shadow fell across his face and caused a moment of panic—he flailed helplessly against the nails before roaring pain forced him to be still. But it was only the Prefect, using a stylus to scrawl something on a piece of paper. Then the Prefect handed the paper to a soldier, who was careful not to get any blood on the Prefect's hands. The soldier moved to the head of the cross, where the paper was nailed in place, and each reverberation drove the thorns deeper into his skin.

He could not comprehend the enormity of the atrocities that had been wrought upon him, nor could he guess at the final insult affixed to the wood above his head.

Then the cross was hoisted into the air and sunk into the ground, a terrifying moment as it rocked back and forth and dimly he thought it might pitch forward. The crowd surged toward him, screaming for yet more innocent blood with which to purify their own, but he could see that some were already horrified by what they had unleashed from within themselves and set loose upon him.

Then each arm buckled at the shoulder, the nails ripping through skin towards his wrists as his body slumped earthward, and suddenly he was hanging by bones alone, the pain consuming him once more, and he found himself screaming, struggling to articulate what he had never suspected until this dreadful moment.

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Knocking at the door woke the priest, strange he should hear it from here, but when he opened his eyes he found himself on the couch in the lounge. He struggled to sit up and saw his rosary splayed on the coffee table amidst a tumbler and an empty ice cube tray. Another knock, and as he decided whether or not to answer it he glanced toward the door and noticed its curtains were open and a face was peering at him through the glass. When he opened it the maid was on the stoop, cleaning cart next to her, saying she could come back another time, but he replied no, now is fine, and retrieved a beer from the fridge then crossed the room to the sliding glass door and exited onto the deck.

The sun was well above the horizon, its reflection scattered across the sea like shards of broken glass. The beach wasn't yet crowded, but already umbrellas were opening along the sand, beach towels were laid out, and the surfers were massed in a jagged line beyond the breakers. A few of his neighbors were enjoying the view from their decks, drinking from steaming cups and engaging in idle chit chat or perusing the local papers.

The beer made him dizzy, and suddenly he knew he might never leave this spot, might simply curl into the lounge and waste the day, until it was time to throw another bottle off the pier. The priest could hear the maid at work in his cottage, washing the sliding glass door and emptying his clinking, bottle-filled wastebasket, when he fell asleep suddenly, the beer bottle rising and falling against his chest, a wet spot growing on his shirt.

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“My God,” he screamed, life running in rivulets down his face and chest and dripping steadily from the wounds in his wrists and feet, “why have you forsaken me?”

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The priest woke late in the afternoon and went down to the beach to search the sand for bottles. After finding none he returned to the cottage to shower and dress in a pair of clean clothes, then he settled onto the couch in the lounge with a full tumbler and a bible from the nightstand.

His nightmares had always been horrific and intense, but the onset of this afternoon's had left him shaken and desperate. It was brief but visceral, Christ's words far more terrifying and violent than the images that filled the priest's mind each night. But what frightened him most also inspired hope—Jesus never spoke in his nightmares.

His unsteady hand hovered above the Gospel according to John, in which Jesus seemed a mere man—he thirsted, he assigned his mother a surrogate son, and in the end he simply muttered, "It is finished." But when he flipped to Luke's Gospel he saw the familiar flicker of divinity. Luke's Christ cried, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And after the thief acknowledged the Savior, Christ rewarded the thief with a place by his side in paradise. Then, close to giving up the ghost, he whispered, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." It almost seemed a prayer.

But Matthew and Mark recorded something different, something terrible: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The priest believed this was a moment of soul-searing betrayal and doubt; that the Father had abandoned His Son; that Christ decided to question his life at the moment of his death. The priest even understood these words to mean that Christ could not forgive his Father for the suffering He had ordained. And now the words survived in the priest's nightmares.

Years ago, on this very pier, he too had felt forsaken, and in a moment of despair and doubt he went over the railing and into the water below, where it was dark and cold, where he hoped to drown in perfect stillness, too intoxicated to struggle toward life. Suddenly he was on the shore, staring up at the underside of the pier while the calm early-morning waves lapped against his side, and after comprehending that he was alive he discovered something like faith. Believing himself saved he donned the cloth and commenced the Lord's work, but within a few short years the nightmares began, his salvation seemed to vanish, and he was driven from the pulpit to the bottle, this time hoping he might drink enough to quell those irrepressible dreams.

His meager savings could not sustain this forced leave much longer, but the Pier Hotel seemed the perfect place to halt the steady collapse of his faith. Here he had renounced his Maker, only to be reborn, and, it seemed, forgiven. But as he refilled the tumbler throughout

the night that terrifying new dream bled itself of all initial hope, and dread flooded into his heart once more.

Christ's sins were despair and doubt. How fitting it would be if his final words were repeated nightly in the priest's dreams as a new form of penance; how fitting to suffer such penance in the very place the priest had repeated Christ's sins.

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The priest had been here nearly a week, long enough to throw four bottles off the pier and find none returned to the sand. The waves rolled in like the slow undulations of something massive slithering toward the shore, but some trick of the tides pulled the bottles in the opposite direction, or perhaps drove them into the ocean floor. On the railing next to him stood the fifth bottle, a label with the day's date stuffed inside it.

He'd been here long enough to experience the cycle of nightmares, but instead of reverting to the verdict delivered by Pilate he'd had a new dream, one that implied more suffering before all could be forgiven.

The priest looked at the bottle next to him a moment before nudging it off the railing, then he started back toward the cottage, where he would try to pray—perhaps beg—for at least one dreamless night, something he hadn't done in a very long time.

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But he did dream that night, and it was almost peaceful.

He dreamt of Eden, where the flowers bloomed fragrant and beautiful. Where the trees were heavy with fruit. Where the bushes were lush and colored with berries. Where a large clear river flowed swift and clean. Where the crops rose high above the ground and wavered in the breeze. Where thin clouds spanned the sky in lazy patterns. Where the sun shone on everything, and the moon was nearly as bright.

But it was a lonely paradise, for no man had ever walked there. So God formed Adam

from the earth itself, and seeing him as lonely as the Garden, God felt compelled to populate it with beasts and birds and fish. Still, the man lacked a true companion, so out of Adam God formed his wife, Eve.

God told them to guard the Garden and cultivate it. Their labors were pleasing and simple, their hearts filled with joy for the gifts they had been given, and they praised God morning, noon, and night.

A tree grew in the middle of the Garden, a tree unlike the others, and God told Adam and Eve that it was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He commanded them never to eat of this tree, for its taste brought death.

That was the only rule in Eden.

But man's nature is to transgress, either out of curiosity or a strange desire to suffer the consequences. Adam and Eve needed no serpent's tongue to persuade them to eat of the tree, for there was only one rule to break in Eden. Thus Adam and Eve plucked the fruit and shared it among themselves, and after acquiring the knowledge of Good and Evil, they unwittingly damned mankind.

God walked among his creations in Eden, and when he came upon Adam and Eve struggling to cover their nakedness He knew the sin they had committed.

Instead of death, God placed a curse upon the earth, so that Adam's easy labors would henceforth be grueling and harsh. He cursed Eve's womb to prolong pregnancy and render childbirth painful. Then He expelled them from the Garden forever.

The priest awoke as Adam and Eve wandered out of Eden into the boundless desolation beyond.

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What link could there possibly be between these new dreams? Original Sin and the words Christ screamed at the sky while dying on the cross.

The priest drank from the bottle on the nightstand without realizing it until he was wiping a few stray drops of liquor from his lips. Then he took a few more sips to steady his

hands.

He showered and dressed and left the cottage, then made his way to the beach, where he found a spot in the sun near the pier. The waves were small, and they seemed to wash up without advancing across the sand. He watched them without study, too confused to look for any bottles.

The dream of Eden shed no light on the dream of Christ's final words. The Crucifixion nightmares were punishment, agonizing penance, or both. The latest in the cycle was proof of that, as was the burden of past psychological torment. The connection between Christ's words and the place he'd had similar, if less intense feelings seemed clear.

But the connection to Original Sin was not. He'd been baptized at birth, thus purified. So why dream of a single sin for which he'd been forgiven long ago? It did not make sense.

The priest left the beach and made his way along the pier back to his cottage. He filled a glass at the tap then went outside and reclined on the lounge. Several umbrellas bloomed along the beach in the afternoon heat and made the priest think of the flowers in his Eden dream. A paradise Adam and Eve had squandered through simple curiosity. God found them ashamed and aware of their nakedness, grasping for anything that could be plucked from the bushes around them and used for cover, and He knew their transgression. Perhaps His wrath was tempered by His desire to forgive. The desire didn't overshadow the enormity of the sin in this case, but instead of death the fruit brought only expulsion, and Adam and Eve and their kin would forever repent, and beg the Lord—

The priest sat up so suddenly he spilled some water on the lounge. That was it. The connection between the dreams. Between all the dreams. Original Sin was not Adam and Eve's decision to eat the fruit; it was God's inability to forgive them for doing so.

The priest's Crucifixion nightmares had driven him to the pier, the place where he'd felt forsaken and tried to commit suicide. It was the only appropriate place to dream about Christ being forsaken. Christ died for our sins, but not even his death could blot Original Sin from the souls of mankind. For it was not a human sin. The doctrine of Original Sin did not appear in the bible—it was invented. So while theologians like Augustine and Aquinas squabbled among themselves, its true meaning was lost. Christ's inability to forgive his Father for the suffering he'd had to endure was a reenactment. God could not forgive Adam and Eve, and Christ could not forgive his Father. So when Christ gave tortured utterance to those words on the cross, the Father's sin passed to the Son. The priest could not have understood that without dreaming in the proper sequence—what better way to reach the Father than

through the Son?

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The priest stood at the end of the pier, holding a full bottle of liquor. He could barely control his shaking hands but he managed to unthread the cap and dump the bottle out over the railing. He peeled off the label, tearing it a few times by accident, and wrote the date on the back of it. Then he stuffed the label into the bottle and rethreaded the cap. If any washed up he could check the date on the label and know exactly when that particular bottle had been thrown off the pier.

He had tried to convince himself that he'd survived by accident because that would at least take some of the sting out of the dreams. Now he knew otherwise, finally, and whether any of the bottles found their way back to the beach was irrelevant. A feeling felt long ago expanded inside him, and he threw the last bottle off the pier as a kind of farewell. Then he returned to his cottage, knelt down in the bedroom, and prayed.

He prayed that he might be forgiven for his original sin, because he did not want to forget it. Then for each subsequent sin he'd since committed. For anyone who felt as he had, or still did. For the strength to pursue his faith. For others to pursue theirs, whatever it may be. To overcome addiction. To confront himself and change. To endure doubt. To suffer, if necessary, but never lose hope again. To live and value his life. To forgive.

And he did. He forgave God.

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The priest awoke early the next morning, cold and sick and withdrawing slightly, but rested. His hands were still too unsteady to shave, so he showered and dressed and packed his things.

Before checking out he strolled down to the end of the pier. Several fishermen were there, lines cast and taut. The priest nodded at those who turned his way and they nodded back. He looked out at the horizon, where the sun was just rising and cutting through the cold.

Then something near the pier caught the priest's eye and he looked down.

There in the water, floating and rolling gently on the swells and occasionally clinking against each other, a cluster of bottles caught and reflected the first rays of the morning.