

The Sand at Night

In the near distance the lights from the rescue vehicles came down to spoil the black of the sky and the stars, so many.

Within the surf, sound stopped suddenly, pulled into the rise of every wave, the wave growing impossibly high, drawing all the night sound into its curl and then letting it out when it broke and fell. The biggest waves pushed the surf almost to our knees, as we carried on with our usual talk. A practiced talk, shouted quietly over the waves, touching you here, a touch there on the cool salt damp of each other's skin, vacation week excusing the cliché of a starlight walk on the sand and of our trite romance.

A breeze came from the water and pushed the worst of the mosquitoes back inland. Enough of a breeze not to hear the engines ahead. We saw the lights long before we could hear, concentrated red flashes and a smaller, brighter pulse of white, then the dim outline of the rescue truck and the dark green or brown of the jeeps.

Thinking about it now, I seem to remember that we never had to say "oh" or "oh look," but we probably glanced at each other and kept on – the same pace probably. What good to hurry? But then, there.

In uniforms the sheriff's men had their guns holstered, and one with a clipboard squatted on a knee beside the girl, the wet short blonde of her hair under the stars, the blanket the same green or brown of the jeeps now pulled together at her neck as she tried to answer questions she really couldn't, while the deputy shone his light on the clipboard and, looking up, into her face, the light straight into her eyes before she put a hand up.

The surf made its way around the beached boat. Its hull up, the nose had been pounded into the sand, and the centerboard fin shot upward. The inverted boat shone like a dead shark or some other big fish just washed up. It lifted and floated side to side as the waves came upon it. There must have been a mast somewhere, a wood or metal mast, broken, sunk or floating. Rescue women in shorts and white shirts were in the surf, trying to pull or push the stern into the shallower surf. Then they stopped.

The arm as it came out under the gunwale never struggled but floated with a kind of grace, catching and then freeing itself in a bit of torn sail, which luffed in the water and the wind. The black band of the man's watch set off the paleness of the hand, as it swooped and waved on the water, obscured moment to moment by the foam of the surf. Finally the two women called the deputies over as they bent at the boat and struggled to right it enough to see inside, beyond the gentle fall and rise of the white arm. One of the men took off his shoes and socks, tried to roll his pants up over his thick legs, decided better of it, and just crashed on into the water.

The deputy with the clipboard and the girl slowly rose and put his hands to his gunbelt, flashing his light weakly toward the boat. Then he paused and stooped down again to his questions. He put the light back in the girl's face, and she pulled up her hand again.

You and I, you and I hardly even stopped - couldn't have helped, we must have decided. Neither one of us pulled the other alongside to pause and ask what we could do, and neither of us headed into the cold, steaming water to help with the boat. There was no point, I remember, the arm floating there like it was. A kind of jellyfish, bobbing there in the cold light.

Like my arm next to you. Like yours close to me.