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Under the Sand

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Under the Sand

Ben Davis

"I thought it was gonna rain till tomorrow," I said as Bill nodded his head in agreement.

The forecast had called for rain all day, but it had surprisingly cleared around 3pm and the sky looked clear as ever as we walked out of the dining hall.

"I guess we can go through with it." He turned to me with a slight grin as we walked up the steps and around our seal. The seal meant everything to our fraternity. It had our letters, Zeta Beta Tau, and our fraternity slogan in Latin or some shit. It meant *together always*. As we walked into the chapter room, the pledges stood up. They always did when Bill, the Pledge Master, entered a room.

"Where the fuck is everyone? I said be here by 6:30."

"Dan and John are in lab and will be here at 7:00. Curran should be here any minute. He was at Kate's apartment," Ted, the pledge class president, said.

"Curran likes hanging out with Kate more than me, doesn't he?"

"I guess so, sir."

"Interesting. I'll be down at 7:00. I hope everyone is here."

I followed Bill up the stairs. Ted walked toward the pay phone on the first floor and called Kate's apartment to make sure Curran got to the house on time. Bill and I were roommates and had been since freshman year. Now, seniors, it was our last year to have fun, but we also had to worry about jobs after college. We were both economics majors and didn't exactly know where we wanted to go from there, but our parents definitely did: make money.

Bill and I walked into our room. My eyes immediately focused on our hermit crab tank. "Haven't switched Herb's water today," I said as I reached through the top of the tank for the mini water bowl sitting on the three inches of sand that covered the bottom of the tank. Herb liked to dig through it. As I brought the water bowl up to the top of the tank, it nicked the side and sloshed out of the bowl—five or six ounces of water, dripping toward the sand. The water soaked in, making its way toward the toy ball that Herb had buried under the sand. It started at the top layer, each spec of sand seamlessly transferring the water to the next, as it surrounded the

ball, almost suffocating it in wet sand.

“So, do we have five guys to drive them?” I asked, wanting to make sure Bill had everything figured out.

“Yea. Nick, Tony, Kyle, and us two. That’s five.”

“Alright. And you’re gonna blindfold them up here?”

“Yea,” Bill turned to me, “should be fun.” We waited till 7:00 and went downstairs. All twenty were accounted for, and we sent them up to our room.

“Who’s gonna be the lucky one?” I asked Bill, already feeling bad for the pledge of his choosing.

“Well, I think Curran had enough fun with his girlfriend earlier, so I’d say he’s the winner.” We walked back upstairs and Nick had already gotten them in their blindfolds. “Everyone grab your pledge brother’s hand and get the fuck downstairs.” I led the first pledge down the back stairwell to the parking lot. Tony and Kyle were already waiting with their cars on. I got four pledges in Tony’s car.

“Alright, you’re good to go. I’ll see you over there.” The sun was starting to go down, and the breeze was picking up. The temperature was high 60’s, and the clouds seemed to have faded into the sky. Not bad for a fall night.

“Last group. Get them in your car, and I’ll meet you over there.” Bill looked at me; the serious look in his face made me confident that he was ready to go through with it.

“You got the shovels?”

“All nineteen of them. Five in each car and four in yours.” And with that I got the last four pledges into my car and hit the gas. I drove slow; no hurry to get there.

“Keep your heads down,” I shouted back at them, making sure they were invisible from the view of a cop that may be sitting on the side of the road.

The beach was no more than a ten-minute drive from the campus. That’s part of the reason I chose Monmouth. I didn’t mind if it was a little chilly in September and October. I could sit on the beach any day as long as I had a joint in my hand. As we pulled up to the beach, Bill pointed to a parking spot. I turned off my lights to make sure we didn’t draw too much attention to ourselves. There were a few oceanfront houses that could see us, but it was doubtful anyone was there in the middle of the week in late October.

“Everyone gets one. Let’s go. Pass ‘em back.” Bill had already gotten the first four cars unloaded and, with mine being the last car, he was anxious to get everyone on the beach with the others. Curran was in front.

“You don’t get one. Just walk.”

I led them, once again, down the narrow path. The dunes on either side of us halted the breeze for a moment until we reached the wide-open beach. At this point, they probably knew where they were despite the blindfolds, as they were barefoot and could feel the sand between their toes. As I gripped Curran’s hand in the front of the line, I looked up and saw Nick waving us toward him. He was about halfway between the dunes and the ocean and all I could hear were the waves crashing down behind him.

As we approached, Bill had the other fifteen kids with their blindfolds off. “Curran, you keep yours on. Everyone else take your blindfolds off.”

As they slowly lifted them above their eyes, the pledges looked around, trying to get a gauge of exactly where they were on the beach. “Curran, lay down flat.” Curran lay down, chest toward the sky. “That’s how big his grave has to be. Start digging, and fast.”

The nineteen left started digging. I wasn’t there when they did this the year before, but I remembered from when I was pledging that the hole would only take about twenty to thirty minutes to dig. With nineteen kids digging, it went pretty fast.

Bill and I slowly walked toward the ocean, without a care in the world. Nick, Tony, and Kyle went back to stay with the cars, ready to call us if anyone pulled up to the beach, or may have seen some suspicious behavior.

“How you think he’ll do for a night under there?” I asked Bill, knowing Curran was one of the mentally weakest pledges.

Bill looked up at the sky, and then out at the ocean. “He’ll survive.”

I don’t know what Bill was thinking about during those twenty minutes that we were staring into the ocean, but if I had to guess it was similar to what I was thinking. This was our last time doing this. At this point next year, we would be working, hopefully, somewhere.

“I think they’re done.” I tapped Bill on the shoulder.

He flinched, startled, as he came out of his daze. It was almost as if he had seen Poseidon hovering over the sea. He turned around. There were two kids on their knees in the rectangular hole, scooping out the remainder of the sand and smoothing out the bottom. We walked back toward them.

“Curran, lie down in the hole.” Curran looked at me, helplessly, almost hoping that I would save him from Bill’s latest request. I stood there in silence, and Curran slowly crouched into the grave. “Lay the tarp on top of his head.”

Bill had been there when the pledges did this the year before and was the fortunate one in our pledge class to, well, get buried alive, so he

knew the protocol. The tarp would separate the loose sand from Curran's mouth, allowing him to breathe throughout the night. Bill looked down at Curran's face, covered with the tarp, arms resting along his side, and feet pointed up toward the clear sky. Bill took a shovel of sand and dumped it on Curran's face.

"Can you breathe?"

Curran nodded his head, and was able to let out an "uh huh."

"Bury him." Bill looked at the long, tired faces on the other pledges. "Hurry the fuck up." The kids began to burry Curran. "Don't pat it down. Just let it lie on top of him."

Bill wanted to make sure the sand around Curran wasn't too compacted. It only took five or ten minutes for the kids to put the loose sand that was in piles around the hole back on Curran.

"Back in the cars," Bill said. He walked over the sand where Curran was buried probably four or five feet below.

We would be back at 4am. That way, we could get Curran out before the sun came up and before anyone walked along the beach. Bill nailed two horseshoe stakes into the sand on either end of the grave. He nailed them in hard, making sure they could withstand any wind at night. We were straight up from the 23rd Street entrance to the beach, so they wouldn't be hard to find. When Bill and I got back to the parked cars, Nick, Tony, and Kyle had each already taken their four pledges back. Bill and I hopped into our cars. His car had four as well, and mine had the last three, with Curran left in the sand.

We drove back in silence and sent the pledges back to their rooms. "Be back at the house at 4am. Don't be late for Curran's sake." Bill and I walked back up to our room.

I glanced at my clock: 10 pm. I had to go to bed soon so I could wake up with Bill and the other drivers at 4am to go get Curran. Bill was already in bed, setting his alarm. I peeled our curtains apart and looked out the window at the sky.

"Still clear out there. Have you checked the news to get a weather report?" I asked Bill.

"Last one I saw was after dinner, but it said the front had moved through earlier than they expected and looked clear until the weekend." That was all I needed to hear. I brushed my teeth, set my alarm, and fell asleep on the top bunk.

CRACK! "Yo, get the fuck up. Get the fuck up." I had been rooming with Bill long enough to know his panicked tone of voice, but this one was different. This voice was panic and fear. "We have to get Curran the fuck out of there."

CRACK! "Holy shit, is it raining?"

“Yea, let’s go.” I jumped out of bed and threw my shoes on. I glanced at the clock: 2am. It can’t be raining, I thought to myself. The forecast said it was done. Bill and I ran down the back stairwell to the parking lot and got in my car.

I can still remember the drive like a nightmare I just woke up from. It was dead silent. All I could hear was the car cutting through the water-filled streets. Then a CRACK! I slammed on the brakes as we approached the parking spaces on 23rd street. Without a word we hurried out of the car, each grabbing a shovel from the back. We sprinted, our feet gliding over the wet sand, barely hitting the ground.

As we approached the horseshoe stakes that marked the grave, I looked at the rain coming down. It was sinking right into the sand. There were no puddles on the beach. Each drop sank directly into the sand, cutting through the layers, suffocating anything underneath.