

STUCK

The sawgrass hissed as it dried out in the early spring wind. The rain had stopped only an hour ago, creating ideal walking weather. Around noon, the temperature had spiked to an abnormally high seventy degrees, and was only now beginning to drop with the sun still a few degrees from the horizon. Above the gradually sloping sands, a half-dozen gulls, wings arched and frozen, rode up and down the invisible strings of an offshore breeze. Ahead lay the confluence of a nameless tributary of the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean. Normally only eight to ten feet wide, the tributary had expanded to nearly twenty feet following the tropical-like downpour; stream water rushed quickly to meet an advancing tide, creating standing waves that complemented the gulls' movements.

In the distance, beyond the pale yellow rug of the receding sawgrass, above the gently swaying birch and ash of the forest, just now blooming, the Southport water tower stood nearly black against departing clouds of a late afternoon sky. The sand was fine-grained and cool to the touch. Truman had put his parka shell back on as the temperature began to drop, but had left his hiking boots off, tied together and hung around his neck. He continued walking barefoot, despite the encroaching chill, and enjoyed the feel of the sand between his toes, shaking the clumps loose every few steps.

The slope of the beach was much less severe as he neared the swiftly flowing water of the river, and the sand in front of him shimmered, indicating high moisture content. As his toes dug in he looked down, and gave in to the familiar childlike urge to wiggle his feet until the sand covered them to his ankles. The higher water content of this sand numbed his feet slightly. He took a series of deep breaths and reflected on how he got here.

Since arriving earlier that afternoon to open the family cottage, less than a mile back, he

and Sarah had argued non-stop: about who had forgotten to pack what, who should have made calls to the neighbors.

Sarah had raised her voice at one point, accusing Truman of a cavalier attitude towards this family tradition—his family tradition—which she now felt obliged to supervise. He did not expect a compromise from her, but pled his case nonetheless: a combination of several restless nights and a stressful period of work ~~that~~ had distracted him from careful planning.

“You forgot the key to the shed!” she said.

Her failure to call the neighbors in advance paled in comparison. The shed held the bikes, kayaks, fishing poles—and the backup generator, which was then desperately needed amid the tumultuous downpour.

“What can I do about it now? Drive back home to get it?” was Truman’s response.

Sarah had paused. Truman thought that she really wanted him to go back. And he considered it, during the long silence.

“No,” she had said finally.

A week without an alternate source of power, during the early spring when it was often needed, was going to keep her on edge. He tried to close the space between them, but she held her arm up like a traffic cop and he got no further than the palm of her right hand.

So he had said, “I don’t deserve this from you,” while Sarah began unpacking the food supplies. “I’m going for a walk. When I get back, we’ll both apologize and talk in normal voices.”

“Why am I the only one who ever yells around here?” she had said as he opened the back door to leave, “You never raise your voice, Truman. It’s like you don’t care about anything!”

He had closed the door quietly. As he descended the stairs past the dinghy, past the small shack containing life vests and assorted beach gear, he had heard the door creak, then slam shut.

The first steps of his walk along the beach were consumed by thoughts of her last remark. It was true he never raised his voice. He could not remember a time in his life when he had raised his voice in anger, or even in enthusiasm. He thought of himself as “unflappable;” she had evolved into thinking of Truman as “disconnected.” Truman had always been emotionally distant, but he felt that “disconnected” seemed rather harsh. He was still the same man she had pursued in college. He thought that during their seven years of marriage, she was the one who had changed, but only in her increased level of frustration with him. Otherwise, she was the same powerful, emotional, beautiful and competent woman he had fallen in love with.

When he looked down at his feet again, the sand appeared to be inching up his lower calves. Pretty loose sand here, he surmised, noting the shape of the spit of sand he found himself standing on. Though he could reach out and touch the stiff two-foot stalks of grass with his right hand if he wanted to, he realized he was in the middle of what amounted to a ten-foot-long by five-foot-wide finger of sand jutting out into the water. On his left, the Atlantic; on his right, beyond his reach and a few feet beyond the grasses, the fast-flowing tributary.

By wiggling his toes slightly, he could tell there was no loss of feeling, just a slight discomfort due to the cold. The walk to this point had achieved its purpose of relaxing him. He pulled his right foot up in an effort to release it from the sand's grip. He got the heel nearly to the surface when his other leg suddenly sank up to the knee, soaking the pants he had rolled up only to the widest part of his calf. Fearful of losing his balance, and twisting his left knee, he tilted right with his upper body, and when he leaned on his right leg to even the distribution of weight, it too sank to the knee.

Looking skyward, he noticed that the gulls had departed; to his left, that the tide had crept up, chewing at bits of a tiny cliff of sand. Around his two legs, the shiny surface seemed more watery than sandy, but when he pressed his knees forward, it seemed to solidify in front of the kneecaps, leaving holes behind the legs which water quickly rushed in to fill. His pants soaked up the water, the cold Atlantic mixing with stream water chilled from the late spring melt-off of snow in higher elevations caused by the heavy rains. The wetness and discomfort wicked up to his thighs. He would have to move slowly, deliberately, in the direction of the sawgrass rooted

in firmer soil.

These spring trips to the cottage were eventful for two reasons. First, the tradition itself, passed on from his father's father, to his father, to himself. Also, he and Sarah had first made love in the cottage, when both their parents were out to dinner and his little brother was at a neighbor's.

Upon entering the cottage each spring, it was the first image that popped into his head. He pictured the two of them in the living room, lying on pillows collected from all the couches and chairs, taking their clothes off; Truman was more nervous about where they were than what they were doing. Later Truman noticed that they had somehow torn open one of the pillows, and he was sure his parents would notice if it was missing. In a gesture that defined their ensuing relationship, Sarah found needle and thread and sewed the pillow back together. After a few weeks, and no remarks from his mother, he finally relaxed.

Up to that point in their relationship, he had not thought of her as having strong emotions. But while the pillow was tearing beneath them, she had begun pounding against his back with both her fists, bruising his back and screaming, "Oh! Oh, God! Truman!" Overly sensitive to his surroundings and the proximity of other cottages, Truman had controlled himself, hoping Sarah might do the same. That she had not, and had not cared about the consequences, while he was convinced the neighbors were calling 911, became the balancing point in their relationship. It symbolized both the love she felt for him, and her willingness to express herself whenever she felt so inclined. In later years, she became less vocal in bed, and more vocal out of it.

With the chilled mixture of salt and freshwater wicking up his pant legs, he tried to imagine a different trajectory for their marriage. Had he been able to relax more that first time, had he not controlled his breathing, had he allowed himself to make the noises he had felt welling up in him as he approached orgasm.

He wanted to, Truman remembered. Oh how he wanted the breaths to rush out of him, to release his passion into the air as powerfully as what he was releasing into Sarah!

He pictured her clearly as she was then. Laying on the pillows, silhouetted against the window, the moonlight, stained pale blue by the tinted glass; her eyes had remained closed for several minutes afterwards. She had smiled, as if she were dreaming, and said nothing. The smile let him know that she was satisfied sexually. That she was so quiet for so long told him she knew he had held something back, and was wondering why. It was a half hour before they had risen and discovered the torn pillow; while Truman fretted, Sarah had matter-of-factly said, "I'll find some thread and a needle. I'll fix it in a jiffy." And that was that.

All this came to him in an instant each April when he first walked through the door. And again now, as he looked down at the sand. He had stopped sinking, but the discomfort from the cold water had caused him to begin shivering. Or was it the memory?

His strategy was this. Lift the left leg slightly, not quickly. Twist to the right and try to get hold of the sawgrass and begin pulling himself out. He wiggled the toes on his left foot to check for feeling, and as he did so, he felt as if water were rushing past the sole of his foot. A split second later he sank abruptly to mid-thigh. It was as if he had slipped into a hollow that the rushing water had carved out beneath his feet. He could feel the tight grip of the sand above his calves; below them, swirling water.

The light grew dimmer, and the tide was up another foot. He could have now reached left and dipped his hand into the ocean. And he was shivering. Above the waist he wore only a T-shirt, and the light parka, which was unzipped and itself soaking up water from the saturated sand. He managed to zip it up and felt warmer. He unhooked the shoes from around his neck and tossed them into the sawgrass just a few feet away, where he pictured himself crawling out of his predicament.

It was now dark enough over the Atlantic to obliterate the horizon line. To the west, the silhouette of the water tower was still visible against a purple and slate gray sky. A few lights shimmered in the forest, across the estuary, indicating those cottages which were likely inhabited. He knew he should call for help, but he did not. Who would hear me, anyway, with this wind? The offshore breeze would carry his voice out to sea. The nearest cottage was his

own, and it lay a mile west. There were practically no waves to speak of, but the ocean seemed oppressively noisy.

He took out a nylon cross-country ski cap from the inside parka pocket and stretched it over his ears. He reached with his right hand and grabbed a tuft of sawgrass and pulled. The sharp blades cut into his palm before he could even squeeze them tightly, and he withdrew his hand.

“Why didn't I bring gloves?” He cursed himself.

He licked the blood from his palm and took his ski cap off, then stuck his hand into it. He tried grabbing another few blades of the razor-like grass and pulled, his left hand grasping his right wrist. Slowly, his body tilted right, the wetness reaching up over his buttocks on that side, sinking, but only slightly as his arm muscles tensed and he pulled with all his might.

When his arms were bent at right angles, he released the tuft and tried to grab another one further away. As he let go, he felt both his feet lose whatever little footing they had, and involuntarily, like a cat trying to claw its way up a smooth vertical surface, his legs began a kind of kicking motion and he sank to his right, at more of an angle, to above his waist. His left side remained free from just below the hip. The chill reached up to his chest. He was soaking wet and shivering again.

He cried out, “Sarah!” as he straightened up. Where did that come from? Some self-preservation instinct. The sand was still below his belt line, but his T-shirt was now wet, and moisture was wicking its way up his broad chest.

He took long, slow breaths and that helped him relax, despite the cold. He shouldn't have remained so quiet that first night. He knew he would not sink any more. He was not afraid of the sand. But the risk of hypothermia was mounting. The sky was now entirely black, and in the absence of moonlight he could barely make out shapes: the sawgrass, even his own hands, were difficult to see.

Over the years, at the climax of arguments, when Sarah's voice reached its loudest arc—no matter where they were, Truman would leave and go for a walk.

He would say to himself, this argument began because of some dirty laundry and has once again evolved into a tirade against his “inability to engage.” He didn’t want to yell at Sarah. What good would it do? He knew there was something wrong in his reasoning, but couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

And because she had not left him the first time, nor the second, or ever, because she had accepted his reticence, perhaps because of his physical ability to please her, his abrupt exits had become a comforting counterpoint to her rage. She always forgave him for walking away. He would say he was sorry too, but he didn’t know what for. For not just standing there? For not yelling back? For whatever she wanted?

They had a good marriage. They made love often. He held back something; she held back nothing. They agreed on movies, books, and politics; they played tennis and skied together; they never went to bed angry. He found another tuft of grass and hung on. Instinct again.

“Sarah!” he cried out, in a voice that was no match for the wind. This is what yelling is good for! When you are desperate, to get help! To survive!

Problem is, he did not have enough practice. If it were Sarah, she would have lights in houses along the shoreline turning on.

“Sarah!” The blades cut into his palm and he grimaced. Breathing was difficult, compounded by the extreme effort it took to pull himself along.

He inhaled deeply, and cried out “Sarah!” each time he exhaled. Anger and fear mixed together. It was difficult to tell if he was making real progress. He was so wet and cold that he wasn’t sure how much of his body was submerged. He felt moisture up to the chest of his T-shirt. He tried to wiggle his toes and couldn’t.

Exhausted, he stopped crying out, waiting for his labored breathing to subside, and listened for voices, any sounds other than the rippling of the river and the gurgling of the ocean. He tried holding his breath. He thought he heard something, and he cried out, “Sarah! Is that you?” then held his breath to listen. No one called back. Why was he so reluctant to let go that first night?

Why couldn't he just cry out with her, the two of them together, joyous, sweating, careless of the neighbors? What kind of man gives into that fear?

Give me another chance Sarah, he thought. One more chance, and he would let the guttural rumblings explode from his mouth. He would cry out in an atmosphere of abandon.

As the moisture crept up towards his neck, he pictured himself back at the cottage an hour ago, hand curled around the inside knob of the back door, releasing his grip on it, and this time raising his voice to match hers.

“Sarah!” Truman cried out, using every muscle in his chest and neck. It was a frightening, throat-searing scream. And as he did so, with all his might, he pulled at the grass until he could feel his head brushing against a few blades. In the one enormous expulsion of air and noise and energy, he pulled his left leg up near the surface. His waist was well free of the sand’s grasp. He smiled and breathed heavily, the way lovers breathe when they are finished from the effort, smiling from the brush with near death, like Sarah, relaxing toward the one deep breath that prepares the body for sleep.

As the tide advanced up the barely visible sand, he was warmed by the thought that soon enough he would be home with a story to tell Sarah. She would throw her arms around him and they would apologize and go to sleep holding one another, as they had from the beginning. In the morning he would spoon her and become aroused. And when they made love, he would be more like her, less “disconnected.”

This image brought with it an additional surge of warmth, almost as if the water had turned warm, which Truman knew was the sign of a serious problem. Hypothermia was settling into his body; the little seizures were coming every few seconds now, even though from the waist down he had lost sensation of the sand itself. He worked to free his right leg, but had little energy left, and progress was slow.

He laid his head against his right shoulder and hoped the tide had peaked. He thought he heard voices in the distance.

He cried out, “Sarah” again, but it was barely a whisper this time.