Undercurrents

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This was his second day on the beach, and it was intolerable. A heavy sun lashed upon his pale skin, in waves unbearable, in waves warming what had not been warmed for years. He hated it all, walking in sandals, wearing short-sleeved t-shirts, pretending to be happily absorbed with the beach life. Yet what was here for him, or was supposed to be here for him, maintained the energy of a morbid determination. It promised freedom through desert passage. It was not only the heat, the open air that bothered him. Life was here. People were smiling, swimming, laughing, shouting, playing volleyball. Their loudness rang in his ears, the sun beat upon his back, and the sand scratched his feet like gravel. People living normal lives with normal pastimes were nothing but passers-by. There was no communication between them; even when he saw someone he remembered knowing. Silence worked for him. Words were used only when necessary to accomplish his goal. And there was absolutely no way he could have made this trip without a bit to prop up his skeleton. He had taken just a little to make the run bearable. Just a little from what was kept away, from what was saved, from what was pushing the creeping sickness back. Yet what was left would soon be gone, and fear drove him from the familiar coping ground.

It was no longer about getting high. That had lost its novelty long ago, years ago, and so had the ghetto. There was no adventure to this game any longer, only necessity. Mike used to be intrigued by the circus of the ghetto, the colors of their clothes against the drab buildings. It had been thrilling to be a part of that war, because it was then nothing like war to him. There was a language to learn, tools to master, war–torn neighborhoods to navigate. It was adventure and fear, the draw of the illegal and illicit that enticed him. Like many young men in war, he had fallen to illusion, and learned the truth too late. Mike had been arrested four times for possession of heroin and crack; a fifth time surely meant prison for more years than he presumed he had left. Prison meant confronting the sickness alone, in an environment more hostile than he had ever exposed himself to. This was why he could no longer risk arrest. He remembered fondly the blind days when arrest was something that happened to friends, and never him.

The beach, they said, was safe. The service was always there, always holding, always reliable. It meant he didn’t have to drive back into that war zone of the ghetto, where opposing sides clashed constantly, retreating, reforming, attacking again. A spot with better stuff, at a better location, would militate against a new home, a new corner, or new project. It would be safe at first;
or at least relatively so. Eventually the police would be lured to the spot by its sheer popularity; it would crash as the SWAT sank the fortune, and the Gods on High would reposition their pieces. Rarely did anyone but those expendables fall. It was often a losing game for the low dealer; the more successful the spot, the more likely it would be to fall. It was always a winning game for those above who took no falls. Four times Mike had been arrested, caught in the game; until now it had only been catch and release. That was over; the court now saw him as an unsalvageable human wreck that threatened their society. Certainly, they thought, he was a career criminal, a hopeless addict; there was no place for him in this society beyond prison. They didn't realize the desperation that kept him in the game. It was his turn to relocate.

Establishing a connection in the ghetto had been simple. He had trained his eye to select dealers from afar. He could see them, through their skin, into their pockets, smell their breath. He had developed an extra sense, a strange Pavlovian reflex. When he saw someone he knew without knowing, to be a dealer, there was a quickening of his gut, a rise in his throat, and a taste in his mouth, as real as when he shot or snorted. Sometimes when he passed a dealer on the street, brushed against his shoulders in a thick pedestrian stream, it felt as if someone had jumped him with a car battery. It was electric; it was sensual and real. He had a deep knowledge of a world few knew, yet knew so little of the life the normal lived.

It was this feeling, this extra sense, which led Mike to believe that he would be able to find what he needed on this Chicago beach. Two days had passed, and he had not felt the battery-jump. Today he decided to draw the dealer to him, to become more approachable. He wore sandals, which he hated for their revealing qualities; his bare feet bore track marks scars like liver spots. His arms scarred in light brown, a contour map marking where veins once rose. His veins had retreated far beneath the skin on his underarms; for this he shot into his legs, his hands, and his feet, and occasionally into the neck. He feared but refused to think of the day when there would be no place to shoot. Mike felt catastrophe approaching sometimes, dreamed of the day. In his dreams, he would fearfully dig for hours with that needle and find that there was now nothing but warm soup beneath his skin. And as the months passed, he failed to see, like the anorexic, how thin he had truly become. Today he wore sandals. Today he wore a short-sleeved shirt. Only his legs were covered; he could not bear to reveal them. He was running low, and would run out tonight, be sick before morning. Today he visibly screamed.

As Mike paced the beach aimlessly, the calm of his high nearly gone, someone heard the scream he did not shout. Someone saw what casual passers-by saw not. The man knew as soon as he saw the tightly drawn grays of Mike's face. The man angled his walk, to intersect with the man he recognized as a junkie. He saw Mike look skyward, watch the seagulls bounce and hover in the rising winds. They met, appearing quite natural, and the man stopped Mike with an open hand. The stranger asked, casually smiling: "Hey man, you got any OJ?" The stranger removed his sunglasses, his wet eyes clear blue and alive. Mike remembered what to say instantaneously, right as the battery charged him, as the taste teased him. Mike looked up slowly from the sand, and said, "No, ah, I don't, but I could use some."

"How much, then?" the stranger inquired.

"Four," Mike replied, mouth wet with want.

"Set your self down, I'll be back in a minute," the stranger said. He re-positioned his sunglasses, and walked away. Mike watched the stranger leave with curiosity. The stranger had looked nothing like the dealers Mike had grown used to. This man was white, plainly
dressed, and spoke to him in a calm, casual voice. Mike walked closer to the beach, a few feet from the water, and a dozen feet from anyone else. Throwing down a blanket, he sat upright, legs crossed, arms supporting his back. Water washed up, slid down. Breath lazily filled his lungs, and sluggishly pushed out of his mouth. He lit a cigarette and drew in hard; he held it long, searching for the euphoria that once came from smoking cigarettes high. It was not there. He was never high anymore; only comfortably avoiding the sickness. He wondered bitterly whether what he had purchased was even worth his time and effort. Perhaps he should have gone to his old spot, found someone who could meet him outside the hot spots or outside the ghetto entirely. They could be found, he knew.

The stranger was back in five minutes. He sat softly into the sand next to Mike. "Your money," the stranger said. Mike handed over two crisp twenties folded in half. The stranger flicked four bags toward Mike, into the shadow his body created. He smiled, said he'd be around all day. "Name's Johnny. I'll be around." Mike told him he'd be back sometime, said he'd look for him. The stranger got up, and left Mike by himself, how he liked it, with what maintained him.

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Mike knew that he would already be uncomfortable by the time he was on the highway heading home. His legs would start their intolerable twitching; he would become uneasy and fearful. There was one simple way to prolong his comfort. Squeezing the baggie, Mike could tell that there was more in it than usual. He smiled; a warm relaxation filled his gut. Tearing apart the baggie, Mike pulled out the tinfoil and unfolded it. A brownish powder was inside, in small powdered chunks. He used the edge of his license to chop the chunks into a finely ground dust. Rolling a dollar bill into a tube, he readied himself, the excitement building. Trying new stuff was a passion of his. Shooting on the beach was too hard to conceal; he was forced to snort it. He lied down on the towel, and laid the tinfoil in front of his face. One snort, quick and forceful, drew the entire bag of heroin into his right nostril. An intense burn, of the kind he had not felt for years, tore a vein of pleasure through his nose and into his forehead. He squeezed closed his eyelids, relaxed his jaws.

He rolled over onto his side, pushing the baggie into the sand, burying it. The waves rolled close enough to wet his fingers when he reached to dip them in. He snorted the bit of lake water, which, he thought, improved his high. It was an old trick he learned when he used to toot, before he learned how to use the needle. The water receded, Mike sighed. Rolling onto his back, he opened his eyes and squinted at the bright white clouds. Sea gulls were everywhere; some bounced or floated in the wind; others dived to the water in pursuit of bread. He smiled, and closed his eyes entirely, red and yellow sunlight bleeding through his eyelids. There was time to rest, time to think and relax before riding home. Tonight would not be so bad after all. The ride would be easy; he could listen to music and smoke cigarettes. At home he could do another bag or two; maybe smoke some weed to accentuate his high. The beach goers paid no attention to Mike. They were wrapped entirely in themselves, and never considered how differently another might live their life. The sun was shining. It was not a day for such thoughts. They no longer worried Mike. With his Comfort he could tune them out without trying.

Time seemed now to have less meaning; Mike could not tell for how long he had lain, with his hand propping up his head. The quality of this drug was better than any he had ever experienced in his life. A faint nod was creeping into his body, something he usually only felt if he did more bags than he could afford at one time. He wanted more of that - and
now; it seemed so close, so affordably in range. Perhaps he could have a little more, just another taste, to see how far he could take this quality. Rest perhaps just a little longer, before the ride home. The beach now seemed far less alien, far less threatening. The sounds had died behind him; with the winds picking up and a dark armada of clouds collecting in the distance, some beach goers had abandoned the beach. Some stayed despite the coming clouds, eager to get another game of volleyball, meet one more girl, to let their pores taste fresh water a little longer. Mike stayed; he had no where to go and besides had not noticed the darkness. His eyelids drooped almost noticeably. The corner of his mouth hung open, and breath came slowly, lazily; the water now with wind moved quicker than his breath. Mike switched positions only when his cheek began to go numb, only when his wrist was sore from supporting his head. He rolled onto his belly, felt the kind sun massage his poor skin. Heaven had not been this close in years. He wondered when he last prayed. Perhaps right before he was last arrested? But it was too good a day to think like that.

One more could do it. He could get his nod on again, smoke a cigarette in a half-sleep, if he had one more. Just a little more; maybe not even a full bag. It was worth it. Mike figured he could track Johnny down before he left for some more. He would need more of this; certainly he would be back again tomorrow. He withdrew another baggie from his pocket and carefully unfolded it, looking first around him for any suspicious glances. Of course, no one was watching. He was merely another sun bather to the passers-by. The dollar already rolled, he again snorted an entire bag, surprising himself with how automatically it happened, almost as if on accident. Long fingers massaged his temple and brain, and his extremities tingled with a numbness he had almost forgotten. He blinked slowly, once, and then twice; a burning tear ran down his cheek, his nostrils were so singed by the quality. A short orgasmic laugh popped out of his mouth, and caused him to laugh a little more. This is why I play the game, he thought, this is why I came. He thanked the God he casually called in vain for the friend who had told him of the beach. Mike's eyelids drooped and displayed red-yellow dreams, silhouettes of people and animals, sparkles and splotches. A song he barely remembered played in his head. He hummed, and rolled onto his back. The beach was almost empty, now, and the winds swept sand past him. The water lapped at his feet, more aggressive now, calling more to him now.

The sun still burned, and he thought that perhaps it would burn forever. The gulls however, had retreated, recollected farther inland, away from the winds and darkness. Passing heavily in front of the sun, clouds blocked light, and then revealed it. The darkness and light, the warm and shade alternated, yet Mike barely noticed. He lit a cigarette and it burned more than he smoked. He rested his smoking hand on his chest, and forgot about the cigarette. There's still time, he thought. Just let me lay a little longer, just need to close my eyes for a moment. The thunder did not wake Mike. It was slow, rolling thunder that did not startle; it was thunder that announced the arrival of rain. And the rain fell, in rare but heavy drops, hesitant yet sure to release.

The water now wet his knees each time it was pushed shore-ward, but Mike either did not notice or did not care. It had been a while since he had been swimming. Probably the last time was on his last vacation with the family. They no longer spoke to Mike, but he remembered. There was Mother, Father, Julie, Christina... They swam together that trip, in a lake in Wisconsin. Wisconsin was so beautiful. He imagined trees hissing in the long wind.

The thunder rolled, the clouds now covered the sun and let through no light. He remembered barely a verse of the Bible, something he remembered much of but believed very little of.

The Bible was an artifact of a life he no longer lived. He remembered the pastor saying, "the Lord saith, and the whole land shall be desolate, yet I will not make a full end." Memories
were but pixilated dreams.

The hesitant rain chilled him, and he shivered for what seemed like the first time without sweating. His cigarette burned quickly in the brisk wind, and the filter burned down too; soon it would burn his fingers, but he would not notice. Just let me sleep a moment longer.

The waves slapped against his body, consuming him almost entirely. Louder grew the thunder, ready now to release what swelled in its belly. Thunder could not wake him. He saw in that dream now his tired mother comforting him, standing behind him in the rain, her hands wrapped around him, pulling him tightly into her, and she whispers that thunder is nothing but angels bowing in heaven.

The waves pressed ahead of him, lake water filling his gaping mouth. He was gone by morning.