

In The Dune Fields
Henry Latourette Miller

At the very edge of the salt crusted wooden bar my dad finished his whiskey. He got up and thanked the big man on the other side with a five-dollar handshake and turned around to see me sitting on the floor. I was covered with broken peanut shells and my hair was greased up and hanging down my face. I bit the thin wisps in between the gaps of my teeth and blew them out, a spray of sticky spit going with them. He looked down at me, his shoulders deadly and belly hanging on to the top of his belt. He stood solid as the earth.

“Alright kid, home it is.”

He held out his right hand for me to grab, and I got a good look at it. Warm and rough, weathered out to a pink and black shade, his hand looked like all the other hands of the men at the bar, except for one of his fingers. The index finger, all green and dead, stuck out at me like an accusation. It smelt just as strong as always, like sea vomit and a tar burned rat, wafting around his body in a cloud. I could see the dark purple vein that wound its way down to his fingertip, carrying dead blood underneath a yellow fingernail. I held out my wimpy little hand and he lifted me to my feet.

We left the bar together and I looked up at the stars and half moon in the sky. As we started walking down the street every once in awhile I would catch my fathers great big furry head in between the night sky and me. I tried to lumber with him down the sidewalk. He said a few things to me about my size. I wasn't big enough. I was supposed to be as great as he was, the man with the heavy fists, when I grew up. I wasn't looking the part. He told me to look straight ahead like he did, to put my hands in my jacket pockets and walk on my heels so that I could make a real noise with my steps. I felt

stupid when I tried, my feet were still too light to do anything but make gravel crackle when I came across it. He laughed at me.

The sidewalk ended at the crest of the dune field, fiercely populated with thick beachgrass. The dunes sat in between the street with the bar and the little neighborhood we lived in. It had a thin little cut of a river running through it to the ocean, which was hidden on the other side of the dunes. We started our crossing. My dad let me hold his hand for this part of the walk at night, so long as I promised to let go when we got to the other side. I hated the dunes, which rose and fell heavily and could hide you from the sight of the buildings on either side. They always changed with the wind and the tide of the river. It was impossible to take the same path across more than once, but my dad knew his way. He guided us straight across and never got lost. Sometimes he would hum to make me feel better.

We moved side by side through the beachgrass, little bits of wind changing the color of the stalks as it ran in waves under the moonlight. I held my dad's hand tightly, his dead finger rubbing against the bottom of my little wrist. I wished he would carry me like he used to. His steps made heavy thumps whenever he landed on the bits of plywood that littered the dunes, and he would pull me up by one arm every time I slide into a sinkhole. I could hear the sea. It was foamy, I could tell, and I imagined the little curls that ran themselves against the beach. There was so much darkness beyond the dunes, a deep and wet mass, blue to the core.

I pictured summertime waves and my dad taking me to the ocean to swim. I pictured myself floating in the saltwater, and staying in longer than him for the first time. He would cheer for me on the shore as I rode a wave in on my stomach. We started

walking down a slope of a dune, and I felt the street with the bar drifting out of sight behind me. My eyes fixed on the one streetlamp ahead that stood at the edge of our neighborhood, dividing the dunes from my home.

I heard something change in the beachgrass, like a whip lashing out downwind. I looked in the direction I heard it and saw some of the grass swaying in wrong way. I tightened my grip on my dad's hand and felt the warm sticky puss that comes out of his dead finger whenever I squeezed too hard.

My dad stopped walking. I looked up at him and saw his eyes scanning the dunes. I followed his gaze and watched as thin spiny creatures crawled through the grass around us. I saw a few gleaming white backs covered with red scratches. The animals circled themselves around us, closing in within moments. Making not a sound at all, they stood up in the tall beachgrass. They revealed themselves.

There were fistfuls of them, appearing from the shadows to face my father. They were boys several years older than me, but they were much thinner. Some of them were naked. Their skin shined in the moonlight as they rushed around us. My dad stuck me behind his leg, which I grabbed onto as he twisted around to face them down. He took off his heavy jacket and dropped it on the beachgrass. He then stretched out his claws, his big bear arms covered with fur and his fist large enough to crush a small boy's skull.

They laughed at him. They had a disgusting high-pitched cackle. It swarmed around us and then got lost in the wind and the beachgrass. I closed my eyes. I could imagine shining teeth ready to rip into my throat; thin little arms swinging as they scratched my dad's face clean off.

I felt them rushing around us, then I heard a loud solid thump, followed by a sound that reminded me of my dad pulling a leg off of a roasted chicken for dinner. A wail erupted in front of us, short and filled with blood. I opened my eyes and looked past my father's tree trunk leg. One of the boys lay in front of us, his jaw gaping and flexing as he grasped his neck with both hands. My bear father had ripped his throat open with his claws. I shut my eyes again.

I heard footsteps rushing through the sand beneath the beachgrass, getting loud as a pulse as they approached us from all directions. Then great smacking sounds like lightning as my father beat the boy creatures down with his mighty fists. I heard cracking eye sockets and curdling cries of painful pleasure. My father roared at them with the voice of the waves of the ocean.

I held his leg, solid as the world, and did not look up. I did not want to see my dad killing these little things. I felt his muscles tighten as he picked several of them up and tossed them into the slicing wind. He was a monster.

More footsteps racing around us, dodging my father's deadly swings, one of them leapt onto his back. His feet dangled and struck my head, but I did not look up. I heard skin break, flesh tear, and a boy's snarl filled with hunger. Blood dripped down the leg and found its way into my eyes. I imagined his finger, dead forever, touching my little wrist.

I was yanked off my dad's leg, and immediately missed the warm protection it provided. Then the ground thundered, pummeled by the weight of my father's knees as I opened my eyes and saw him fall. His body flattened the beachgrass for yards around him. His face was embraced by the cool sand and his blood poured from his neck into his

hair. My dad was dead. The great father with the deadly shoulders and thunder fists would be still forever.

I stared at his great bear body. The wild boy creatures stood still around it, then some pounced. They ripped at his clothes with their thin shiny claws. One of them bit off his ears while two others removed the fingers from his hands, leaving only his dead finger, which none would touch.

I sat still on the flattened beachgrass as I watched my father being dismantled. Then a boy with ragged clothes on jumped in front of me, he howled. He did not sound like my father, whose voice was the tide of the dark ocean and fallen fir trees. His howl was hollow. It reached into the sky at the half moon and stars like the voice of a fingernail running along steel. He was the largest of the boy creatures.

He pulled a stark naked boy up from the corpse of my dad, and dropped him in front of me. I stared at him; I was empty and could not blink. He looked back at me, blood smeared up his nose to the crown of his forehead, and I saw his hunger within him. The big boy grabbed the naked one by the hair with one hand, and with the other he pointed at me, as if I was being accused of something. Then I saw his finger; really I smelt it, dead like my father's. The same scent of sea vomit and tar burned rat hung onto it.

All the other boy creatures gathered around me and I saw their fingers too. Each one had a dead index finger. All except for the naked boy in front of me, with my father's blood on his head, his finger was alive. He stared at me, at my throat and at my body. He crawled towards me and stood up, looking down at me like a caught rabbit. His eyes were

cold and gray, and they reminded me of the ocean, with my dad and me floating in the wisps of sea foam.

My hair was greasy and slid down over my face, I sucked it in through the gaps in my teeth and blew it out, sending a spray of sticky spit with it. The boy jumped a little, trying to avoid getting hit by my saliva. He seemed surprised. He looked around to the biggest boy creature, unsure of what to do. The boy creature pushed him down to me, and pointed to me again, he wanted the naked boy to kill me. The naked boy's hunger returned, and he grabbed my hair and twisted it back, I closed my eyes. I pictured him ripping my throat out as my father had done to one of them.

Then I felt the naked boy grab my hand, his living fingers holding onto my wrist. He pulled my hand up towards his face, and as I opened my eyes I saw him close his teeth around my index finger. My bone cracked as he bit it off. He dropped my hand and shuffled around to the big boy creature, I could see the hunger in his body turn to shame and fear. The big boy creature smacked him with his outstretched claw, tearing skin off of his face, and the naked boy fell down to the flattened beachgrass.

I looked at the stump where my finger used to be, gushing with blood. It hurt, but the pain was too far away in the chill of the wind. Then the half moon and stars lit up my little digit laying on the ground. Life was still in it, even as it was completely still, and I started to cry. My cry turned to a wail and tilted my head back and let my voice carry to the sky. I was emptying my own little howl to the dune field, as loud as I could.

The boy creatures jumped as they heard me, then looked around at each other in worry. A few of the smaller naked ones started backing away into the beachgrass, the biggest one turned away from me and ducked his head from the noise. They started to run

away, shifting themselves back out into the dunes, afraid that my innocent wail would attract attention they did not want. The naked boy who bit off my finger stood up and ran towards the streetlamp at the boarder of my neighborhood.

Soon I was left alone, my father's body laying still underneath the sand that had been kicked up on it. My little stub was dripping blood onto the fallen blades of beachgrass. I saw my dad's massive coat hidden underneath the sand. I pulled it out by one arm, and began to walk towards my neighborhood, humming to make myself feel better.