

SPA FON ON THE BEACH

Peter walked along Rodeo Beach just north of San Francisco, staying slightly above the wet sand. He had driven here early this Thursday morning, and nobody else was around except a few surfers in the water paddling and waiting for waves. Peter had been missing his brother Brent, and he was in a mood in which nothing could really surprise him – as if everything were equally awesome. That mood been one of their bonds – more than simply being stoned, but not much different. They used to meet on this beach every few weeks; neither of them had anyone else they could talk to with more comfort.

He used to meet Brent on this quarter mile of beach. Brent would ride in from the city on his motorcycle, and Peter would drive down from San Rafael. They'd talk, maybe throw a Frisbee, and hike on the cliffs, carving out time and space for just themselves.

For the past few minutes he'd felt an unusual restlessness in the air, like a breeze blowing in all directions at once. The air seemed to sparkle, as if carbonated.

Up ahead was a familiar stump lying on its side, sun-bleached, with big roots flaring toward the sky so that you could sit on the log and lean back against the roots. Someone was already sitting there, someone with a familiar slouch, long legs, long

hair - but this happened a lot. He'd think he was seeing his brother in a store or on the street, but it was always someone else.

He shuffled through the loose sand and waited for the resemblance to fade as he got closer, but the person looked more and more like Brent – which was not possible. From a few steps away Peter could only process what he was seeing by shifting into a detached space, as if watching a movie or being in a dream. He slowed and stopped directly in front of the young man on the log. The white linen shirt and army T-shirt underneath were familiar.

Brent interrupted his long stare out to sea, and looked up at Peter with the perpetually baffled look that he used for both puzzling anomalies and major contradictions. He brushed his hair back and squinted. He was three years younger but had a certainty about him that often made Peter feel like the younger one.

“Hey, bro!” he said. “That you? Really? I was just thinking of you! But . . . how can this be?”

Peter stared, felt his heart pounding. “I don't know. Don't know. This is weird.”

Brent said cautiously, “I thought you were dead, bro!”

“Me? I thought *you* were dead! I went to your funeral four years ago!” Baffled and suspicious, he firmly pronounced one word: “*Spa.*” Brent nodded and said “*Fon.*” This had long been their private password that served as a personal greeting,

terminated arguments, and restored mutual respect. It came from an old comic book from the sixties.

Now Peter sat cautiously on the log and put his hand on Brent's shoulder – or tried to. A force repelled his hand, like two magnets with the same polarity.

“Weird,” Brent said. “I could feel that. Static electricity maybe. But – my funeral? Negative. I think I'd remember something like that. But you, you rich prick world traveler, you died of a lung infection, remember? Came back from Thailand all fevery and coughing from some tropical parasite. I went to *your* funeral. So who's haunting who?”

Peter said slowly, “I did come back from Thailand with a fever, but I got treatment and recovered. But *you*, you cracked your skull open on a boulder! Lucas Valley Road, on your bike -- you took a curve too fast or slid on some gravel. The ER guy said you'd left your helmet unbuckled and he could almost see your brains. Don't you even have a scar?”

“That never happened! I'm still riding the Kawasaki, never dropped it. But -- you really went to my funeral?”

Peter remembered the painful months of grieving and sorting through Brent's things. “It was an open casket thing, pale face with your scar covered with make-up, and hair parted like you were ten years old. You really attended mine?”

“I've got pictures of it! I gave part of your goddamn eulogy! Mom keeps trying to grow flowers over your grave.”

“Same here. ‘No plastic flowers for my Brent,’ Mom said.” They stared at each other, minds spinning.

The tide was coming in and the waves kept coming a little closer to their log. Seagulls flew and squawked, as if waiting for scraps of food. But then one came too close, and its squawk became a terrible cry as it disintegrated a few feet above them. Some feathers fluttered down onto the sand. Brent and Peter stared at the feathers, then at each other.

Brent squinted into the sun, puffed on his cigarette, then flicked it away. Peter watched it arc high and disappear in the air with a slight flash. “Did you see that? Where’d your butt go? It just vanished – like the gull.” He stepped off the log and searched where it should have landed.

Brent pointed: “It’s right there, just past that chunk of Styrofoam. It’s still smoking! You can’t see it?”

Peter shook his head. “I cannot. Okay, let’s try something.” He dug a quarter out of his pocket, said “Watch this,” and flipped it toward the ocean. He saw it drop onto the wet sand. “Did you see it land?”

“Shit no! No! Just like you said. Vanished in the air. Okay, look at that girl there chasing the Frisbee. See her?” Peter looked where Brent pointed and scanned the beach but saw no girl.

“Bro, she’s right there! Red shirt? Picked up the Frisbee? Right there!”

“I see a short lady in a long skirt walking in the waves, is all. Can you see her?”

Brent shook his head no. “Okay, how about that car alarm up in the lot – it just went off. Can you hear it?”

“Not at all. No alarm. Do you see the old guy throwing a ball for his dog? Or that huge tanker out there?”

“No ball, no dog. And there’s no tanker out there.”

Peter’s neck and back prickled. “This is like two worlds overlapping, you know? We’re not crazy, and this doesn’t feel like a dream. In your world I’m gone and in my world you’re gone, but somehow we’re both here. Whatever keeps these worlds separate is not working right now, maybe not for long.”

Brent nodded. “Just before you showed up, I was thinking about you – well, missing you -- and I started noticing something different about the air.”

“Yeah! Me too! I was totally thinking about how we used to meet here. Hey, what’s today’s date? Your date?”

“October 14. Year is 2021. Time is ... he glanced at his watch ... about 10:15. Morning.”

Peter checked his own watch. “So that matches – year, month, day, same time even. And you rode your bike here? The same one I last saw totalled on a flat-bed tow truck? If we walked up to the parking lot, do you think I could see it? And could you see my Subaru?”

Brent shook his head no and held up his hands. “Who knows, Mr. Science. This is too deep for me. Whatever’s happening here, I’m still going home to Paula. We’re

still not married, but we live on Cole and I have a job finishing floors. You're still with Katy?"

"Sure. We've got a kid two years old who looks kinda like you. I work for a loan company, not my best job ever, but it beats selling insurance." They compared other things: they both felt the same about the president, people were dying of Covid, and Dungeness crab season was a few weeks away.

"Damn, you look so real," Brent said softly. "I was so upset about you, dying in that hospital . . . my only brother. Man, it hurt." He made a move to touch Peter on the shoulder but felt the force repelling his hand, and withdrew it.

"What do you think is going on? Why can't we touch each other?"

Peter sighed. "Maybe we shouldn't push it. It could be some anti-matter thing where opposites get cancelled out. Like that bird . . . you might get pulled into my world, where you dumped your bike and cracked your skull."

"Or you'd get pulled into mine, where you don't exist except in the San Rafael cemetery."

Peter looked down at the sand, trying to think, and noticed his shadow on the driftwood stump next to Brent's shadow. Brent's was different, with little flecks of light. He pointed: "Look. Your shadow is leaking light. Only yours."

"Yeah?" Brent studied where Peter pointed. "Hm. Yours is leaking light, not mine! Looks like sunlight through a curtain. Mine's a regular shadow."

Peter looked more closely at his brother. Now he could see, through his face, faint traces of the hills behind him.

“Something’s changing. I think our time is running out. I think we should tell Mom and Dad.”

“Sure -- like they’d believe all this. But will you tell Mom on your end that I said she was right about my skipping college? I should have gone. She was pretty patient with me all along, and I was stubborn. Also, Dad taught me to not be such a glamour boy.”

“And you tell Mom on your end that I should have ended things with Rhoda before I finally did. She was right -- love is blind. She raised me well, they both did. They’ll have a hard time believing we talked, but they’ll think about our messages.”

A wave stretched nearly to Peter’s feet, drawing his attention. He stood. “Let’s try this.” With the toe of his shoe, he drew in the wet sand three large letters: S P A

Brent nodded, extended his foot and traced out the response: F O N

They shared a long look at the sand, then at each other. Peter wanted to say more: apologies, questions, final words, but Brent’s face was fading, as if covered with gauze. The air was churning now.

“Good-bye, bro!” Brent shouted, the sound faint and thin. Peter shouted the same thing, watched his brother dissipate into a hazy shape, and then he was alone.

A small wave splashed onto his shoe and skimmed the sand, starting to obscure the two words. That second word “F O N” was his only proof of what had happened. He pulled out his phone and took a quick shot just before the next wave smoothed the sand still more, The letters softened, filled with seawater, and finally were washed away.

Peter went to the beach often after that, trying to duplicate the circumstances, but the encounter never happened again. He eventually enlarged and framed his photo and never explained it to anyone. It hung on his wall until his death 28 years later.

END