

By the Sea

Early morning, the sun begins its climb upward from the sea casting red rays over the still deep blue-black waters. Gray terns hover noiselessly above the water. Occasionally one drops to the water then gracefully rises with his catch drooping from its bill.

“This is what I love about Port Hastings. The serenity of the sea and the beach in the fall before the town wakes up clamoring for coffee and attention,” Martin comments.

“Me, too. Not many mornings peaceful as today. Perfect day for clam scratching,” Tom answers as the two men amble along the water’s edge, picking their way through the detritus and seaweed left behind by the receding tide.

“Hey, not so fast, these new waders are slowing me down. They must be too big or something.”

“They are just “stiff new” will take some adjusting as you learn to walk in them.”

“Oh, what is that mucky mound ahead of us? That is more than a clump of seaweed.”

Moving closer, Tom stabs his clam rake at the perimeter of the seaweed.

“OMG, a body,” Martin exclaims, stumbling as he backs away into the sea.

Ever the philosopher thinker, Martin recovers, regains his footing and strokes his day-old bearded chin thoughtfully. “Don’t touch it. Tom get away. Don’t poke it. You are a reporter, not a coroner or a policeman. How do you think this got here?”

“We probably should report this? Who to, ace reporter?”

“Not sure. Police Chief Donaldson, first?”

“Is Donaldson even on the Cape these days? Seems he takes off as soon as Labor Day ends, midnight and he is out of here to the New Hampshire mountains. His annual climb of Mount Washington.”

“And now, a dead body on the beach. Someone has to deal with it. We don’t do dead bodies. Has rigor mortis taken hold? Even when your customers are dead drunk, you just call the taxi service to come and get them. We can’t call the Portuguese taxi to remove this body. Seems like a job for Donaldson or an EMT or a Medical Examiner.”

Tom circles the body, lightly poking his rake around the seaweed.

“Don’t touch it. We know it’s dead. The tide’s going out, so the incoming tide must have left it early this morning.”

“Is it male or female? Can’t tell from that matted hair. Those fancy jeans could be either sex. Yuk.”

“Do you really believe the body was washed in with the tide? A body washed in with the tide would be bloated, at least. And if it had been in the ocean for any length of time, surely fish or crabs or something would have begun pecking it for food.”

I think someone brought it here and dropped it near the tide line so that whoever found it would think it washed in from the sea.

“All its fingers and toes are there from what I can see.”

“The hair is matted but there is no seaweed in it. There is seaweed all along this beach from the tide. Shouldn’t the body have some seaweed attached to it?”

“This body seems to be intact. Stop poking at it with your rake.”

“I just wanted to dig clams this morning and now we have a corpse to deal with.”

“Call 9 1 1. Let’s see who answers.”

“This is Martin Grove. Oh, hello Brenda. Still working the graveyard shift? Tom and I are here at the Cove Beach in Port Hastings. There is a dead body in the sand.

“I don’t know. We came down about an hour ago. It was still pretty dark. Wanted to scratch for clams.”

“Well, could be either, hard to tell. Hair is medium length, sort of brown, but that could just be color from the sand. Maybe average height. Age? How would we know or even guess. Just send whoever needs to be called so they can take the body away.

“Yes, we will wait. But tell them to hurry, we don’t have all day you know!”

“Says the Sheriff’s Office gets notified first and they send a deputy to assess the situation.”

“What situation? It is a dead body and some official needs to recover it. Can you believe this?”

“We won’t be scratching clams today. What else did you plan to do?”

“Just a couple meetings this afternoon. Then off for a dinner date with Dianne. We were planning steamers, but the menu will now change. It’s my night to cook.

“Do you hear a siren? Something is coming and it sure is making a racket.”

“ Oh, damn. Of course it is. It is the Deputy Sheriff in his rickety jeep. That know-it-all braggadocio Deputy Vernon Taylor. A Sherman tank makes less noise. He could never do undercover work, that’s for sure. Why Taylor? He must be the only one on duty this morning.”

“He seems to always be the only one on duty.”

“This is going to take awhile with Barney Fife.”

The jeep engine grinds to a stop, its wheels throwing sand into the air.

“Morning Tom, Morning Martin, what’s goin’ on? 9 – 1 – 1 says there’s a body on the beach.”

“Yep, there is,” Tom responds. “ This way.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“Nope, we just planned to scratch for clams this morning, not find dead bodies, but there it is,” Tom continues, slogging along in his new waders.

The skies brighten as the sun moves higher. Cumulus clouds dot the early morning sky. Ocean breezes gently cool the air. The two men relate their story to Taylor as he trudges around the body, bending this way and that, but careful not to disturb the scene.

“Guess it’s my duty to call the Country Coroner. He is the one responsible for dead bodies of unknown origin.”

“Can we go now, I need to be at the office?” Tom inquires.

“Yep, we know where to find you!”

2

Time to dig the potatoes, Martin mumbles to himself as he works his shovel around the green leafy mounds of his vegetable garden. Next clean up the squash and cucumber vines. Maybe even add fresh mulch to the perennial bed.

The sun has broken through the early morning foggy mist, the air chilly, just the right temperature for outdoor yard work in late fall. Martin revels in the joy of solitude. Loving his interactions with patrons at the bar, nevertheless he relishes down time to recoup his energies.

“Hey neighbor, wha’ cha’ doing? I don’t see any pumpkins this year. What happened? Deer get ‘em?”

Here she comes, Mary Know-it-all-Gardener. How can I be so lucky she lives next door? Retired from nursing in the emergency room, her focus now is gardening – hers as well as her neighbors.

“Just pulling out my Yukon Gold crop, Mary. When the Fall Harvest Festival and Parade comes around, I will be busy at the Whale Watch and may not get back to proper garden clean up.”

“Your tomatoes looked really good this year. Planning to make any salsa or sauce? Were those Brandywines? Where did you get them?”

“From Mrs. Cavanaugh over by Cedar Street. She always has good tomato plants in the spring. How’d your garden do this season? Any canning?”

“Way too many tomatoes, I took my extras to the Food Bank. It’s just me and I can’t eat tomatoes all winter. You know, the Food Bank can always use fresh produce. Took some squash down also.”

Mary is making her morning rounds, checking to see what the neighbors are doing, needs to know what is in everyone’s garden.

“Did you see the raspberries that ole Ed across the way had this year? He gave me some. They make great freezer jam. Do you ever grow raspberries? Make freezer jam? It is awesome. And what do you know about the body they found on the beach at Cove Harbor last week?”

Hah ah, Mary has wandered into my garden to catch up on the gossip, “Not too much. The Medical Examiner is still doing his work, so not even sure of the cause of death.”

“Well, Tom must know something. Hasn’t he shared with you?”

“No, Mary, Tom seems to be as much in the dark as the rest of us. Not even sure they have identified the body. Have you heard of anyone missing?”

The sound of a car crunching over Martin’s gravel driveway startles both Martin and Mary. Tom turns off his engine and sprints to the backyard.

“Good morning, Tom, it’s early for you to be up and about. What’s the rush?”

“Just had a strange phone call. Seems the audit by the Commonwealth of the County Housing Coalition is reporting losses of more than \$100,000. Story will be in the next edition of the *Cape Cod Times*.

Pausing to take a breath, Tom continues, “My source tells me it looks like an ‘inside job,’ that someone who works within the Coalition has pilfered or embezzled the money. No arrests yet or even any mention of who it might be.

“Mary, you have not heard any of this. You do understand.” Martin cautions, leaning back on his shovel, as Tom, usually discreet, has blurted out this news ignoring Mary’s presence in the garden.

Mary nods knowingly and waits to learn what other news Tom has to share.

3

The eerie silence in the County Courthouse surprises Tom as he roams the corridors looking for some one to chat with, anyone who may have some insight into the

audit report of the County Coalition. Most afternoons, the courthouse is abuzz with activity. People filing paperwork of one sort or another – applying for marriage licenses, recording death certificates, renewing fishing licenses, recording property deeds, registering boats or cars and so on.

The *Cape Cod Times* report was vague, Tom believes there is more to the story, even if it is not yet public. While the weekly *Port Hastings Gazette* will not scoop the newest information, Tom needs an angle for his story. The Executive Director Lacey Saunders has lived in Port Hastings for several years. He first met her when she worked as the Admin for the Port Hastings Housing Authority. She often provided insight into families needing extra help during the winter months. The innuendo that she may be involved in pilfering funds from the County Coalition does not ring true to Tom. He needs the real story.

He recalled when Lacey moved to Port Hastings several years ago. She had walked out of her first marriage after less than two years and like many people, had summered on the Cape and remembered those happy times. Summers, waitressing as a student had been lucrative; she'd find work again. Winter Cape Cod is different from summer Cape Cod. Winter is cold, raw and bleak. Gray fills the days with weeks of total cloud and fog cover when the sun does not shine.

Winter waitressing did not pan out. Spending time in the evenings at the Whale Watch's bar, nursing a single draft beer, she made the connections to get the job at the Town Hall. While she is not what Tom considers a "looker," she was well groomed, her brunette shoulder length hair always neatly tied back. She wore her fitted denim jeans, fashionable brown leather mid-calf boots and an Irish fisherman's sweater with certain

flair. Along with a pleasant smile and being able to answer the telephone, take messages, type and file, she landed a part time job at the Housing Authority. Having lived through tough times in her first winters on the Cape, she was compassionate about helping others in dire straits. Tom needs to dig deeper into this story.

“Hello, Tom, wha’cha’ doin’ here today?” comes a familiar voice from behind him.

“Well, hello Mary, I might ask the same of you. What are you doing here?” surprised to see Martin’s neighbor here at the courthouse. “Getting hitched? Fishing license? Quiet here today, isn’t it?”

“Giving flu shots. You missed the sign at the front door – offices temporarily closed for the afternoon. Everyone is at the annex for their annual shot. I just came over here to see if we missed anyone. Have you had your flu shot this season?”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’ll get mine later. Just looking for news. Oh, Deputy Dog Dave is coming in the door now.

“Hey Dave, how’s it going?”

“Not too bad. Yourself?”

“Just checking in for story data. Can we talk?”

“In your office?” While Tom must abide Mary when he is in Martin’s neighborhood, no reason to include her here in the courthouse lobby. *Soon enough, she will be pumping me for news on the audit.*

“Come on in,” the Deputy closes his door, tosses his baseball-type sheriff’s cap on a nearby wall hook, “Score two points!”

He removes his khaki vest with its badge and wraps it around his office chair, then he plunks down in the seat. He fills the space, his firm chest indicating he could still compete in bench press exercises. Tom recalls Dave as the top athlete during their high school football days, someone Tom wrote about in the school newspaper.

“What do you know about the audit at the County Housing Coalition?”

“Not too much. But it’s rumored that the Director’s marriage was in trouble. Her spouse moved out, has an apartment in Oceanside down by the water.”

“Really, I hadn’t heard that. They seemed to be a well-matched pair. Have a house in Port Hastings, not spacious but pricey. But then, all houses in Port Hastings are pricey.”

“Is their Port Hastings house on the market?”

“Not that I know. Anything else to share?”

“That’s about it for now. Keep in touch, see if anything else pops up.”

4

It’s Wednesday morning, deadlines fast approaching and Tom is still grappling for new information into the County Housing Coalition (CHC) audit. When he telephoned their office late yesterday afternoon, no updates. Nothing to connect the story to Port Hastings even though the Coalition has worked with multiple families and properties here. So far, no local angle to work into the report.

Refreshing his stale coffee, Tom stares at his monitor. His eyes glaze over. *What is missing?* Always able to put a twist on local news, this one has him flummoxed. He

takes pride in his reporting expertise, never just rewording the Cape Cod newspaper or TV reports. Lacey's Port Hastings connection does not add luster to the story.

Maybe I'm trying too hard. Time to change story lines, he thinks to himself as he shuts down his computer, gathers his notebook and shuffles out of the office.

Tom heads to the police station to check the police blotter. *There must be something other than traffic incidents.* John, the rookie with front office duties, looks up through the clear Plexiglas screen surrounding the scarred and cluttered ancient-looking desk as Tom comes through the open front door.

"Good morning officer, how's it going?" Tom greets him generically; he doesn't recall names when he can't connect them to a story.

"By any chance, has the Medical Examiner filed his report about cause of death of that body we found on the beach?"

"Wait here. Give me a minute to check with the detective in the back room."

Tom leans back toward the wall, resting alongside a nearby empty bookcase. He has no choice; this is not a waiting room. There are no chairs in this bland hallway entrance.

Momentarily, Detective Jimmy King appears from the back, "Yep, report came in early this morning. Have a look," he shares the folder with Tom. "Very interesting! The body was filled with diphenhydramine."

"And what is diphenhydramine?" Tom asks.

"It is the active ingredient in Benadryl."

"Benadryl, the stuff I take for hay fever? Can cause death?"

"Apparently so. Who knew!?"

“Wonder how much of a dose to be fatal. Any ID on the body?” Tom quizzes.

“It’s a male, Caucasian, probably between fifty and sixty years old. Other than that, still John Doe. No recent reports of anyone missing. It’s a mystery,” King replies shrugging his shoulders.

“What do you think? Murder or suicide? Any chance you guys have anything new on the County Housing Coalition audit report? More details?” Tom prods.

“Nope, nothing new on that front. But you can report John Doe’s death by Benadryl or a similar medication.”

Relieved, Tom has fresh news for this week’s *Gazette*, but the CHC story still puzzles him.

5

Damn those reporters. Sitting on her patio, Lacey’s head is spinning. Her world spiraling out of control. Having state auditors in her office for the past few months had not been pleasant. She knew it would not be long before they discovered the discrepancies. She needed more time to cover the shortfalls and camouflage the loans.

Today, last day of the month, the auditors submitted their findings to their home office. Within hours, the media learned of the shortages and blasted the irregularities through all channels. The big story on television and in the newspaper.

Publically, she’s not connected to the shortages. She did not know if the auditors suspected her. If they did, they were certainly circumspect about it. She could not be sure.

But now, her options changed. *Time to flee. She had secreted enough cash from transactions over the years to live comfortably while relocating to the Middle East. No one would think to look for her in Bahrain or Dubai. How fortunate she had met Dan Arrowsmith at the Whale Watch. Fund raising for the Coalition, she was also looking to enrich herself.*

Over the years, she learned there was hidden wealth among many Cape Codders. Not fooled by their tattered designer label sweaters or threadbare jeans, she flitted among them. If they were alone on weeknights at a bar, they were fair game for dalliances. Regular gym workouts kept her modest figure in check along with her sunshine-streaked hair and mini-skirts. Men liked to chat her up. Weekly visits with Martin at the Whale Watch kept her up-to-date on local happenings.

Dan had lived in Saudi Arabia as a young man when his father was the official portrait artist for the royal family. Now Dan managed a Nantucket gallery of world-renown artists. His Middle Eastern connections were strong; he had introduced her to financial people with multiple places to put her resources. Dan divorced and available, nevertheless she kept him at bay. His curly brown hair, year round tan, youthful physique and ownership of a small yacht failed to charm her. His business partners were of greater interest to her.

She was a quick study on where to put money; she just needed to raise money. Through diligence, she had found the means. The Coalition received substantial sums from the Federal Government to buy foreclosed homes, renovate them and then sell or rent them to people with low or moderate incomes. It was not instant success; it took time for her to rise through the organization from Administrative Assistant to Executive

Director. A trusted employee, she convinced the Board to let her be the general contractor for renovations and handle these accounts, cost saving for the Coalition. Bingo! Now she had a free hand with the Coalition's treasury.

The Sheriff's office remains mystified over the body found at Cove Harbor. No ID for it and no one local reported missing. But it will only be a matter of time until the man's identity is determined.

She knows it is Lance, her sometime arm candy after her second husband had moved on. When she needed an occasional escort to a charity fete or auction, Lance served. Retired early from banking, a scratch golfer, living in the same condominium complex where she resided, he was convenient. Sometimes he stayed over night, sometimes he did not.

Daily she relives the night she found Lance's body. For weeks now, the circumstances haunt her. That evening she had invited a few people for drinks and a light supper after a fundraiser for a local fisherman's accident expenses. The evening had gone well. Dan stayed behind when everyone left. Often he was last to leave, always hoping she would invite him to stay the night.

Lacey continued to put him off, moving around the condo dumping glass contents in the sink, wiping spills from the counter, rearranging chairs. But when she opened the door to her second bedroom, she discovered Lance face down on the floor. She screamed. Dan came running. "What's wrong?"

"OMG!" Call 9 – 1 – 1."

"No, can't do that."

"Why?"

“Just can’t.”

“We can’t leave him here. Are you sure he’s dead? Maybe he just had a heart attack or something.”

“He’s dead. No pulse.” Dan stated as he bent over the body, being careful not to touch him.

“Well, let’s call the police, then.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

In Lacey’s mind, the wheels began to turn again. Dan had seemed too calm under the circumstances. Why?

“Dan, he’s stone cold. He must have been here for a couple hours. I never noticed he was missing from the party.”

“No, remember your position at the Housing Coalition and the audit going on, you don’t want to be associated with the body. We just need to get him out of here while it is still dark.”

We really should have called some one in authority, instead I let Dan talk me out of that suggestion. Weary and scared, she had allowed Dan to guide her actions. She found a blanket to wrap around the body as Dan backed his Toyota pickup truck into her drive way. Together they wrangled the corpse into the truck bed and covered it with the tarpaulin Dan kept there.

Dan then determined to drive to Cove Beach in Port Hastings, confident this out-of-the-way beach was apt to be deserted at night. He was right; no one was there. He

drove his truck as far over the hard packed sand as possible. Then he stopped the truck. Together the two of them hoisted the body onto the beach close to the incoming tide line.

It was nearly dawn when Dan returned her to her condo; he hoped to stay awhile. But as quickly as he pulled into the driveway, she bolted from the truck cab. Keys in hand, she rushed to her front door, unlocked it, entered and slammed the door shut.

6

As Dan collects his coffee “regular” from the Dunkin Donuts counter, his eye catches the headlines of *The Cape Cod Times*: “Dead Body Found on Beach.” Not a good way to start his day. He sits his coffee down, shoves his hand into his pants’ pocket, and grabs two loose coins. He pushes the coins into the newspaper display dispenser, pulls the single remaining copy of the day’s paper, slams close the dispenser window, picks up his coffee and heads to his late model Porsche in the parking lot.

Any other day, Dan would have laid the paper aside to read when he arrived at the gallery. But today, he does not turn on the engine; instead he sits there. Taking a gulp of his hot coffee, he scans the lead story. According to the Medical Examiner, the cause of death was an overdose of diphenhydramine. *Diphenhydramine, the active ingredient in Benadryl, this can cause death? Incredulous, a common allergy medicine caused Lance’s death? Lance must have had a bad heart or something, and the papers are not reporting the whole story.* So far, the police have not ID’d the body or at least, they have not revealed who it is.

When I dropped those pills in Lance’s drink, I only meant to knock him out for a few hours, not kill him, Dan thinks to himself. *Did we leave any evidence with his body*

when we dumped him? When they eventually figure out who he is, I can't be tied to him. I live on Nantucket. He lives on the main land.

He wallows in his thoughts as he nibbles the lid of his foam coffee cup, the beverage now stone cold. Of course, they will question Lacey when they ID Lance. They were neighbors in the condo complex. The coroner will eventually come close to pinpointing the time of death. They always do. But Lacey can deny being with Lance. I am her alibi; we were here on the island the whole evening. I'll get a receipt from Annie's Whole Foods where we bought groceries for dinner that day, stayed in and watched a movie that evening.

A plan in place, Dan heaves a deep sigh, slowly turns on the engine, revels in its quiet purring as he drives to the gallery.

Business slows this time of year. Vacationers have closed their elegant cottages and returned to their year-round residences. Dan smugly congratulates himself for another successful season. Once again, his customer base bought the purchases and consignments he had negotiated the previous winter. His nouveau riche clientele seek original artwork from undiscovered artists. They are true futures and options traders. Subtle when negotiating, Dan knows their game. He plays this game best with island newcomers; long time residents rarely purchase artwork on Nantucket, their homes filled with furniture and artwork from generations past.

Dan checks his watch; Lacey will be in her office by now. He tries to call her anxious to share his scheme with her. He's confident he has a well-designed plan, but she may have suggestions for improvement. One of the things he most enjoys about Lacey is her creative and keen mind. Pushing the buttons on his desktop phone to her private

office line, he waits for her to pickup on the other end. No answer, instead her perky voice on the answering machine asks him to leave a message. *Nope, not leaving a message*, he quickly hangs up. Next he tries her home phone. Again, no answer! “Hey Lacey, it’s Dan, give me a call when you get this message. I’ll be at the gallery most of the day.”

Turning back to his desk, he rips yesterday’s page from his daily calendar and tunes in his desktop radio.

“ ...Breaking News, Lacey Saunders was arraigned early this morning in Barnstable County Courthouse on charges of embezzlement of more than \$100,000 from the County Housing Coalition.

“Being able to post the \$75,000 bond and never having had any other illicit actions, they released her. She is expected back in court next month.”

This explains her whereabouts. Now what? Dan’s mind races. What to do? Where is she now? Guilty or innocent of embezzlement, not important.

7

Passport, bankbooks, what else do I need? Lacey thinks to herself as she races through her condo assembling her nest egg from its hidden chambers. Having planned ahead, in case the inevitable happened, and it has, she pulls her stash of U.S. dollars from her lingerie drawers, home office file folders, winter sweater boxes, empty cereal boxes, tucked with her screwdrivers, hammers and wrenches, Christmas tree ornaments, her party dishes and stemware.

Lastly, she pushes her knock-off Gucci sunglasses back into her hair, wraps her recently acquired Hermes scarf around her cash and makes one last stop in the bathroom. With all that is vital to her wellbeing now stuffed into her roll-aboard luggage or her oversized leather satchel, she carefully zips the suitcase and tosses the handbag over her shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, she exhales slowly as she exits her condo building. Trying to calm her pounding heart, she deliberately measures each step. Seated behind the driver's seat of her late model Buick sedan, before starting the engine, one last time she scans the landscape and the condo complex. Early evening, not yet dark, she is relieved she sees no one else in the area: no one peaking out windows, no workers or landscapers on the grounds. There are lights in very few windows; most of her neighbors have not yet come home from work.

When the police arrived at the office earlier this morning, they did catch her off guard. This was probably their intention. Arrested on suspicion of embezzling more than \$100,000 was only the tip of the iceberg, she feared. She has no intention to repay the money; this is the largesse to her new life. Fortunately, after the booking and fingerprinting ordeal, being able to post bond, she was released on her own recognizance. With no other arrests or even traffic tickets, they did not deem her a flight risk. Of course, she would make her court appearance.

Little do the officials know of her grand plan. Now in the next few hours, she must turn her plan and dream into reality. Since she had been arrested at her desk, no one would expect her to return to work. No one will be looking for her for a few days. Dan might try to call, but their relationship does not require an immediate reply.

Lacey turns her car onto the mid Cape highway and drives toward Providence. She plans to park her car at the Providence Convention Center, check in to a nearby hotel and pay cash for one night. The next day, ride the Amtrak train to Penn Station, New York City, switch trains to get to JFK Airport, board a plane to Switzerland and then to Montenegro. From her research, no one will trace her there and if they do, the country will not return her to the USA. With her small fortune, she can live comfortably for years in Montenegro.