

Sand Man

Ray pushed open the coffee shop door, his fingertips following the familiar rippling grain of the worn Michigan pine. He paused in the doorway and looked down Main Street, the hardware and grocery stores worn and brooding behind their awnings, whitewash beginning to fail, betraying the sap and stain of the wood. This was the pine that most of Ansel was built with, a century ago. Now, the pine down at the lumberyard was soft as balsawood, and his neighbors just pushed their old farmhouses and barns into a trench and burned them. He sighed and shook his head.

He stepped into the shop and door boomed shut, the sound bouncing softly across the olive linoleum. Browned men in blue and striped overalls leaned back from the counter. Kansas wheat farmers, weathered faces over denim collars, the soft smell of laundered old cotton and scorched coffee surrounded him. Ray was tall and slender, and tipped his head down when he spoke. He had played center on the high school basketball team, crouching lean and muscular in the yearbook, long legs in grainy black and white pictures.

“Mornin, Ray!” Harvey leaned back and pushed up his snapbrim straw hat. Its green plastic visor cast a sickly pallor onto his forehead. “Nice rain we got. How much your

gauge show?"

"Fifty-four hundredths," Ray said. "Good, for August. You?"

Harvey pulled a smudged spiral notepad from the front pocket of his overalls, and flipped through it with the eraser end of a green and yellow plastic pencil. Its tiny Dekalb Seeds logo bobbed back and forth as he consulted his records. "Last night, I got about three-quarters of an inch up north." He flipped another page. "Thirty hundredths back on the 7th. Need a lot more than that. But, hell, settles the dust." He pulled down a pale porcelain cup from the shelf and poured coffee into it. On it was a blue image of a grain elevator and "Ansel Farmer's Union Cooperative."

"Here." Harvey pushed the cup toward Ray then refilled his own. "Rain's too late to help the milo, but it oughta get the wheat out of the ground."

Ray reached for the coffee. His hands had the delicate texture of glove leather, the soft translucent tone of mahogany oil stain. "I gotta get started on my sandy ground this afternoon before it dries out," he said. "Need to weld that disk up again."

"I don't know how you make a living in that sand," Harvey said.

"You grow up with it. It's not like black ground. You work it when it's wet, so it'll stay

put, like a sand castle. Once it dries out, you touch it, it crumbles like dust and blows away.”

Ray paused for a moment. “We used to dig little hideouts into the sand when we were kids. Under the sandhill plums. We had no sense about it then. Could’ve fallen in on us and nobody would have found us for a long time. Weren’t thinking at all.” He laughed. “My dad used to say, ‘A boy is just a boy, but two boys is half a boy, and three boys is no boy at all.’ ”

Harvey smiled into his coffee cup. “We did that, found places to hide from our folks -- someplace nobody knew about, out of the wind.”

“What’d you do?”

“I’d go walk in the creek bottoms.”

“Creek bottoms?”

“Well, they don’t get that deep in the sand. But up north in the black ground, creeks’ll get six, eight feet deep, like a trench. You could walk for a couple miles in them and no one see you. But, didn’t your Dad come looking for you?” Harvey asked.

“Plum bushes get pretty big, so we hid under them. He probably just decided to let us go instead of looking all over. We’d come back and he’d be welding some piece of equipment, waiting on us like we were off to somewhere important.” Ray smiled slowly. “Guess he was a kid once.”

He drained his cup and stood up, “Better go do something, even if it’s wrong.”

“We always do,” Harvey laughed.

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The sun was already hot as Ray bumped through the dunes in his faded Dodge pickup, pine tree green except for a single shiny spot on the door, where his arm folded out the window. He liked the way his truck blended in with the plum bushes. It made it easier to catch hunters.

In the sand trail ahead of him was a tire track, deep and sharp, newer tires than his. He let off the gas and crept through the sand, the engine idling. Off to his right, a gaggle of cows emerged from behind a plum bush. They looked up, mildly surprised. Margaret, his lead cow, had a wavy burnished coat that always put him in mind of the grain in a piece of cherry wood. She waggled her ears back and forth, contemplating, dark eyes

set in a creamy, curled blaze face. Then she lowered her head and started following the pickup. Where the truck was, there was always hay. The other cows followed.

He hoped Margaret wouldn't give him away. He didn't so much mind people hunting deer — he kept a deer rifle on his tractor, mostly for coyotes — but those people from Kansas City couldn't tell a deer from a cow. Around the next plum bush he spotted the shiny tailgate of a red Ford pickup. He turned off the truck and waited. No movement around the Ford. In his side mirror he saw Margaret come around the corner of a dune and head toward his truck, fine sand splashing and glittering around her hooves. All the cows would soon be jostling around his truck, swishing tails, stamping flies, coughing.

He opened the pickup door, climbed down softly, and closed it so it just caught with a click. As he walked toward the Ford, his heels sank into the sand. The rest of the pickup came into view. License plate from this county. Probably kids from town, not hunters from Kansas City. Okay. Kids were easy.

But where were they? He heard nothing out of place. The wind rattled through the leaves of the plum bushes. Behind him, the familiar swish and swump of his cows patiently petitioning his pickup. No wisps of voice or stabs of laughter rising against the sweep of the wind. They must have seen him or his cows and hid. Farm kids.

The Ford was too shiny to be a farmer's. Had to be his kids. The old man wouldn't keep it washed like this. He stepped up and looked inside. Clean enough for a date. Maybe he should make a little more noise. He hated surprising a boy and a girl together. Then he had to remember their faces so he could pretend not to notice them when he ran into them with their parents in town. He laid his hand on the hood. Cool. They had been here a while. Could be a ways away.

The wind kicked up. A few wisps of sand began sifting along the ground. Where were they? The tracks led from both sides of the truck, up past the next dune. There were....three? Okay. Not a date. Bunch of boys.

The footprints led around the south side of the dune, glowing umber in the angling western sun. The wind brushed back the tawny wild oats on top. Bits of grit crunched in his teeth. No one. In front of him, a scuffle of footprints mixed with oddly mounded sand. The grass wasn't right, leaning sideways. The leaves drooped. Why would grass wilt after a rain?

Because their roots were dry. Because there was air underneath them. Because the boys had dug into this dune.

He turned and ran to his truck. His cows were busily pulling stringy mouthfuls of hay out of the bed. They looked up, then jumped back as he threw open the door, slammed the seatback down and grabbed the olive green army shovel from behind it. After he disappeared behind the plum bush they started chewing again.

He dropped to his knees and raised the shovel over his head. He paused, then dropped it and dove into the sand with his hands. God forgive me, he said. God forgive me if I cut these boys with the shovel. Fiercely, he forced his fingers deep as they would go, and the sand burned under his fingernails. He pulled back, dove again and felt the blood come under his fingernails this time but he didn't care and pushed, harder, but couldn't feel anything but the damned sand in his hands and pulled back with it and *now* he sobbed and hammered his fists into the sand, cool and wet and hard. He pulled it back around him and grabbed the army shovel again. He pushed it into the sand, trying to feel anything through the handle. Where were they?

His hands had rubbed the pine handle smooth in the years since the war. It was the same smoothness he and his brothers felt when they were young, pitchforking wheat shocks into the threshing machines every July. Some years, great grey buzzing clouds of grasshoppers rattled in, hungry for anything. They would even chew on the pitchfork handles when he and his brothers went in for dinner at noon. The chewing made the handles so rough that his hands would bleed by nightfall. They soon learned to push

their pitchforks into the shock pile handle-first to protect them.

Of course. Handle-first.

He turned the shovel around and pushed the handle into the sand, leaning on the blade. It sank into the wet sand all the way to the blade. He did it again, again, a checkerboard of perfectly round holes in the sand, each time touching nothing.

Then it stopped moving, halfway in.

He flipped the shovel around and nestled the blade into the sand with little wiggling motions and drug the sand straight back behind him. Maybe it hadn't been too long. Another careful scoop and the sand seemed a little darker. He could feel the pull in his back and chest, that familiar strain that came from scooping wheat. He pushed in again, a little harder, trying to see how fast he could dig, searching with the steel point. It pushed back crookedly in his hands. He tried to move it sideways. Something was there. He pulled back with the shovel and then tossed it behind him. He dug with both hands, paddling the sand out. In the deep soft grit there was something flat and firm. He grabbed at it with both hands, clenched his eyes and pulled back, hard. It barely shifted. He punched at it. Maybe they could feel it, could push, kick.

No movement. He re-positioned his knees, took hold of more of the cloth and threw his weight backward. This kid probably weighed more than he did, and now he was encased in wet sand. He scrabbled sand away, digging until he felt a ridge. A collar? He forced his hands into the sand and dug around the head, toward the face. There was the nose, now, and he pulled the sand back and back and back. He worked the head loose and pulled it free, roughly. The head lolled, the eyes partly open. He started raking sand from the mouth. The tongue followed his finger out of the mouth.

He tried to feel a pulse at the neck, but he could only feel his own heart pounding. He shook the boy's head. Nothing. He pounded on the back again. The boy's head bounced. He pulled the head back, put his mouth over the boy's mouth and tried to force air in, but it puffed out around his lips.

With a growl he started digging furiously down around the boy's torso. This boy was dead but there were more footprints, more boys. When he could get his arms around the boy's waist, he bear-hugged him and jerked backward. He could feel his chest knotting up. He pulled again. The boy's body moved, just a bit, then more. Ray jerked back again and the boy popped up with him, flopping Ray backwards onto the sand.

He lay for a moment, dazed and hollow. High above, white powdery traces slowly crossed themselves, chalk pulled across a hard blue sky. Jetliners flying to Kansas City.

Wichita. Denver.

He pushed up on his elbows and a dull spear in his chest pushed him back down. He lay still for a moment then raised up again, testing. Strained muscle. He straightened up but the pain knocked him back to his knees. He crawled toward the hole in the sand, grasping the short shovel. There was no time now. He stabbed the shovel at the sand. Something soft cushioned the stroke. Another boy. He fell forward into the soft sand, pulling. With each armful of sand came a sharp little scoop cutting pieces out of his chest.

Still he raised himself back up and floundered at the sand, and this boy flopped lifeless onto the first one. He was the midwife of death, birthing lifeless boys from sand dunes. Maybe this was hell.

He dug--how long? He pushed into the sand and pulled back. Pushed and pulled back. He was digging, or dreaming of digging. Another boy. More dead weight to haul out of the dune. Three boys sprawled across the dirty sand, caked, gritty, the dark wet sand drying to a tawny sugar on their faces, their shirts, the faded sky-blue of their jeans. He might have watched that boy over there play basketball last winter. Maybe.

Three sets of boot prints. Three boys. There was no one left.

He crawled toward his truck. Wisps of hay surrounded it, ground into the sand. He braced himself on the running board and reached up for the door handle of his pickup. It fell open and he clambered into the cab.

He hung on the steering wheel as the truck bounced out of the pasture, leaning his weight left and right to steer. He arced into his yard and slid to a stop near the house.

Doris caught him as he staggered through the door. "They're dead, Doris. Three boys. Dug a cave in the sand. Red truck. Out in the pasture."

Her eyes widened. He was coated with wet sand and the sour smell of sweat and fear. She half-dragged him into the house and eased him into his recliner. His chest rose and fell while she dialed the volunteer fire department. "Yes, Brian, in our pasture. Ray's here. He's pretty bad. Look for a red truck... I don't know. He's been gone several hours. I was starting to wonder. No, look after the boys."

Ray stared at the wall, breathing shallowly. Doris drew the curtains in the living room, brought him water, a little soup, and tried not to ask him too much.

That night he stared into the blackness, digging and digging and digging. Empty eyes

rolled up at him. Tongues lolled and slithered through sand. Small green shovels stabbed him in the chest, over and over. The phone rang next to Ray's chair. He opened his eyes and the digging stopped. It seemed too dark for morning. The phone rang again, and in the gloom, he fumbled with the receiver and pulled it to his head.

"Hello?" The effort pinched his throat.

The phone was quiet for a moment, then as Ray licked his lips to speak again, a voice.

"Uh, Ray? It's Albert."

Albert. That's who that third boy was. He looked like Albert. It was Albert's boy, Ron.

"Albert. Albert. Oh, um." He sighed, "Sorry about Ron...How are you?"

"Ray..." Albert said. He started again, "Ray, I want to thank you for everything you did for my boy...out there." Above the crackle of the phone Ray could hear long ragged gulps of air.

"Anybody would have done it. You'd have done it for my kids. I just...couldn't dig any faster, Albert."

"I don't know if I could have...could have taken that...digging somebody... somebody's

kids...out...like that.”

“Don't think about it. It's done now.” Ray paused to catch his breath. “Take care of Alice now. She's going to need you.”

“I know, Ray. I know. But I can't hardly take care of myself right now. I keep seeing Ron, looking up, sand around his mouth, in his eyes....I keep seeing him.”

“Albert.” Ray stared into the shadows for a moment. “When I got to them they were all together, arms together, you know? Like they were holding each other up against the sand.” He stopped for a moment. “I think they had time to say goodbye to each other before they ran out of air. They looked like maybe they had just gone to sleep, you know?” He waited.

“Arms together?” Albert's voice seemed a little higher.

“Like a football huddle.”

The phone was silent.

Finally, “The coroner said you got to them one at a time and they was every which way

under that sand.”

“Well,” Ray tightened his grip on the telephone, “it just seemed that way... I was scrambling around trying to get them out. I'd find a foot, a leg, an arm. I couldn't really tell how they were until I sat down and thought about it last night.” He looked up.

Doris was watching him from the kitchen.

“County coroner said you got to my boy last. Tell me the truth, Ray. What really happened out there? Was the first boy alive? Was Ron alive when you got to him?”

Ray inhaled as deep as he could. His breath kept catching. He spread his left hand on the faded knee of his overalls. They were clean. Doris must have changed his clothes for him last night.

“Ray?”

“I'm not making anything up, Albert. They were all....gone. Ron, all of them.”

“Hell, Ray. My boy's dead. Dead. Maybe you just decided it wasn't worth it, you know? Maybe you just got tired and stopped digging. It wasn't your boy in that sand pile, after all. How do I know, Ray? How do I really know what happened?”

A new spear drove itself into Ray's chest. He closed his eyes against the pain.

"Albert" he breathed into the receiver, "I had no idea who or how many kids were in there. I dug like holy hell."

"Everybody's telling me stories this morning. You, the coroner, everybody. Why don't you keep your damn pasture gates locked? You know kids have been out there before. You were plain damn lucky 'till now. Now we all have to pay."

"I'm sorry this happened, Albert. I really am." He dropped the phone back into the cradle and fell back. Doris was gone from the doorway.

Albert stepped into the coffee shop through the old wooden door. Years ago, Ron had pushed against the door with his two soft fists, above his head. "You've got to turn the knob, son. Can't just push on it. Be here all day." He had reached down, turned the doorknob, and his son burst into the store to the squeaks of seats and the laughs of farmers.

Today the door boomed shut and no one turned around. "Morning," he said as he looked around the room. Harvey looked up, pale. "Morning, Albert."

"Pretty quiet bunch," Albert said. "Junior high boys lose last night?"

Several farmers glanced across at him and said nothing. "What happened?" he asked.

"Who is it?"

Harvey's eyes were red now. "Ray. This morning. Said he never woke up."

"Ray didn't deserve this, dammit," continued Harvey. "Of all the people this could happen to...ever since..." He looked up at Albert and stopped.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's a shame," Albert said finally.

Down the counter, the farmers studied their cups of coffee and the dirt ground into their fingers.

"I hated to see him going downhill like that. First we lost those boys and now..."

Harvey said, "It seemed like the sand just...pulled him down...no matter how careful he was."

"The last couple of years have been rough, all right, on everybody," said Albert.

"We'll be goin' out to start cleaning up his place for the sale," Harvey continued, stirring his coffee slowly. "All they had was that little house and Quonset hut on that quarter of sand."

Along the counter, bald heads nodded over folded hands.

"Doris'll need all the money she can get from his equipment. You be there, Albert?"

"I..um.."

"Just let it go, Albert," Harvey said. "Let Ron go. They're both gone now. Ray couldn't save him. No one could."

"So everyone says."

"C'mon, Albert," Harvey reached up to pour a cup of coffee. "Here."

"Uh, no thanks," said Albert. "I need to check my cattle. Yeah, I'll come help. It wasn't

Doris's fault. Let me know when." He walked carefully out the door and crossed the street. The sun glowed dully off the dusty red Ford. He climbed in. Across the top of the metal dashboard snaked strings of numbers: Albert's running tallies of cattle he had moved with Ron's truck each year. He leaned back for a moment and closed his eyes. Then he started the truck up, and headed toward the old home place.

He stopped in the driveway, flanked by rows of grey-green cedar trees, tall and ragged sentries to the abandoned farmyard. A single strand of electrified barbed wire stretched across the gravel. He reached down and carefully grasped the red plastic handle to unhook the wire, then tossed it back, watching it recoil and bounce across into the ditch. Let it go. Cattle aren't up here right now, anyway.

He climbed back into the truck and rolled past the cedars into the yard. Behind them now, out of the wind, the buffalo grass was cool and the air was still.

In front of him was the old granary. It was a plain grey rectangle, backing into a little hill. It had been his grandfather's first real house, built of the first Michigan pine he could afford, to get his family out of their sod dugout. He had seen the old pictures: a long porch, two front doors, three windows facing the sun. The back side was dug into the hill, the kitchen underneath. His father had been born here.

After a few more wheat crops, when he could afford more lumber, his grandfather had built another, larger house to hold all his sons and daughters. Then this house was made into the granary. The bedrooms where Albert's father had slept were boarded up and made tight for wheat, the floors reinforced with extra posts, ceilings removed and openings cut through the roofs and floors for grain spouts.

When Albert took over the farm, he and young Ron nailed sheets of new galvanized steel over the aging building. Every stroke of the hammer had to be true, the nails held perfectly straight, or the nail would bounce out of the hard wood, and the hammer would carom onto the fingers. After the first day Ron had a finger and thumb so bloody Albert winced. But Ron wore an extra glove the second day, and his hammer strokes slowly became higher, more sure. At the end of the week they admired the old granary in its sleek steel coat. It looked modern, and impervious.

Now the steel was crumpled and rusted on the corner where Ron had accidentally hooked it with the wheat truck. Corners of roof panels curled up, loosened by the wind. The steel was dull grey, blotches of dark rust spreading like age spots. Sparrow nests of brown grass and feathers were tucked under the eaves. Albert walked over and rolled open one of the doors. Inside it smelled of musty grain and mouse droppings. The skeleton of a raccoon curled in the corner, sharp teeth grinning across the wheat-polished floorboards. It had been years since he and Ron had put any grain

in here.

In fact, this old granary needed to go. He couldn't use it for anything any more, and it was just an accident waiting to happen. How long before someone's kid climbed in here and fell through the floor and hurt himself? Ron wasn't going to be needing it, that's for sure. He walked around the granary and into the old basement on the other side. The doors hung open, cattle hair hanging on their edges. Inside, dried manure, pulverized by stamping hooves, was pushed up against the walls, forming a powdery grey-green crater in the center. He turned around slowly, surveying, then strode out to his truck. No wind here. It would go straight up.

In the back of his truck was a 5-gallon can of diesel fuel he carried for emergencies. He pulled it out and walked back over to the granary. Inside the bins, he poured the fuel along the walls, all the way around each old bedroom. He could see writing: "first wheat cut june 13 33" on the wooden wall. That was pretty early for harvest back then. It could have been his father, lying in bed that night, penciling it onto the wall in the gloom.

He finished up at the doorway and took the can back to his truck, then got in and backed it away from the granary. He pulled a propane torch out of his toolbox, turned on the gas, lit it with a striker, and walked into the first bedroom, the blue flame hissing

in his hand. He pointed the torch down at the diesel-soaked wood. It smoked almost immediately, and then flickered alight. He backed out, watching the flames through the doorway.

At first the flame seemed unsure of what to do. It danced uneasily and a thin trail of black smoke wafted out of the door. Then it began to spread along the inside wall, still silently licking its way along the wet trail in the wood.

The fire crackled loudly, and it started up one of the walls. Thicker smoke started streaming out of the doorway, filling it. Smoke began pushing out from under the seams and edges of the steel sheets covering the granary, lazily at first, then with more urgency, like steam from a pressure cooker. A large sheet of old steel on the roof began to raise up on edge, then flop back down, still held by nails along one side. Orange flames began pushing out under it, elbowing it open even further until it waved up and down, releasing bursts of flame and smoke. Smoke stopped streaming out of the door, and clear air rushed in, pushing the smoke in front of it. Flames poured up the inside walls.

The metal sheet on top stood straight up, now, and a chute of orange flame blasted past it. A dull low roar, like a wind through a tunnel, began to overlay the crackling sound of burning wood. The steel walls were darkening. Albert raised an arm up in front of

his face and his cheeks felt cool in the shadow of his hand. He had heard this old pine burned hot, but this was more than he expected. He ducked his head to block more of the heat with the bill of his cap. The left side of the granary began to turn to a deep bloody shade. The dull glow poured slowly up the side, brightening to a cherry red. Bits of grass and shrubs nearby smoldered and burst into flame, quickly burning down to ashes.

The entire house glowed a blotchy crimson, roaring and belching orange flame through every gap in the steel sheets. He backed further from the heat and bumped into his pickup. His hand shook in front of his face and he knelt down in the gravel. He should have called the fire department. Shouldn't have lit this fool old building in the first place. Shouldn't even be here.

A tower of cinders and ash rose up from the top of the house, spiraling into the sky. In that tower rose his grandfather's thin bearded face, sternly regarding him from an old photograph, higher and higher, and then Albert's own father in his wedding suit, spinning, his bride flung away from him across the sky by the fierce wind. Then his aunts and uncles, shooting up into the sky like barn swallows, swirling and darting, black and quick and gone sailing across the plains where they were all buried.

At the bottom of the pulsing house wall, a green crackling flash. Then another, and

another, faster, rattling across the steel like popcorn. A bright emerald shower of igniting zinc flared up and across the wall. The front, then the far side, all began to erupt in crystalline electric waves, the house bursting forth its energy. Fluorescent sparks rained down, arcing higher, wider, lighting the noonday farmyard in a cool aquamarine. Acrid white smoke poured up all around the house, wreathing it in a glowing diaphanous column.

Suspended in the column was a shape. A man, slender. Albert squinted against the heat. It was Ray, floating on his back, palms open, mouth gaping. Beside him was Ron, as Albert had seen him every night since the cave-in, on his back, gasping. The two began to turn, slowly, spinning like leaves, shining raiments of light trailing behind them. The burning house howled and smoked and blew, lifting them. Together they arched against the sky, suspended in the flowing, sparkling whiteness spreading around them, softly covering them, deeper, and deeper.