

CYNTHIA KIM

THE TASTE OF SAND

MY FATHER PLANNED HIS FUNERAL down to the last Allen Ginsberg poem, but he didn't plan on dying in August. April would have been nice; November would have been perfect, gray waves pounding a grayer Race Point shoreline, maybe shrouded in a chilly drizzle. He was into the whole dark artist persona.

The beach is as crowded as any on the Cape at the height of the tourist season. Little kids scramble around us, running back and forth to the water, filling buckets, throwing rocks, building sandcastles to stomp on. Except for the boy who tugged on my skirt and told me my candle wasn't lit, they don't seem to notice us.

A bunch of older kids are hanging out behind us, flirting, showing off, teasing each other. They are the kids in school that everyone loathes and admires and fears. The girls have bouncy blonde hair and perky underwire bikinis, and the boys wear long cutoffs draped low on their hips because they're too cool for bathing suits. There is one boy, too cool for cutoffs even, laying on the edge of the blanket. He's shirtless and barefoot, wearing only a pair of loose dirty jeans that have slid down below his darkly tanned belly. There is a line of black curly hair that disappears into his fly like a double dare. He has his hand on the thigh of one of the interchangeable blonde girls, but she's obviously more interested in a lifeguard two chairs down. He catches me staring at his hand and moves it higher. The girl finally seems to notice him, pushing his hand away with a roll of her eyes. Another boy picks the girl up and half-drag, half-carries her to the water, laughing as he

pushes her under the waves for a dunking. The boy in the jeans laughs as she stomps by us, spraying our little funeral with seawater and epithets. I turn my back to him so I can't see the sneering grin on his face or the way his jeans are sagging ever lower on his hips.

It feels like a sick joke, like someone decided to hold the junior prom at a cemetery. We've staked our funeral plot in the middle of the dance floor and the cheerful young couples have been forced to dance around us. And they do, happily, carelessly, almost militantly.

This wasn't in The Plan.

We used to spend the summer at the Cape when Dad was still working, still someone. Every year, after the sun set on the last day of school, we'd pack our suitcases into the rooftop carrier on the old station wagon and head for P-Town. Dad insisted on driving at night, said it was the only way to beat the traffic on that last long stretch up the coast.

This time Dad rode in a square cardboard box on Mom's lap.

Aunt Susan drove; she doesn't like to drive at night, and she doesn't drive over 55. Mom sat in the passenger seat, the box containing Dad's ashes balanced in her lap. I sat in the back seat, sandwiched between my brother Eddie and our cousin Jim, who was heading off to college in a few weeks. Vlad, the exchange student staying with Jim for the summer, was squeezed between Mom and Aunt Susan up front.

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Vlad looked a lot more comfortable in his middle seat than I felt in mine. Sure he didn't have to sit on the hump, and he didn't have to put up with Eddie and Jim passing a creased Miss January back and forth across his lap, but there was something about the way he slumped toward Aunt Susan as he dozed off that made him look a little too comfortable.

We stopped at a rest area as we neared the lower cape. Mom and Aunt Susan headed for the ladies' room while the rest of us sat on the curb and dug into the sandwiches Mom had made the night before. Eddie nudged me as I filled plastic cups with orangeade. "Show them the little surprise I packed."

"You show them."

He reached into the cooler and pulled out my old plastic Donnie and Marie lunch box. Popping open the clasp, he lifted up a plastic bag full of worms, fishing bait he'd told Mom, to reveal three cans of Michelob stashed beneath them. "There's more in the trunk, under the spare tire."

"Hey man, pop one of those babies open." Like Eddie, Jim never passed up a free beer.

I looked over my shoulder, toward the little brick bathrooms. "Are you guys nuts? They'll be back any minute."

Eddie rolled his eyes at me and dumped out three quarters of his cup of orangeade in the grass, refilling it with beer. Jim did the same, topping off his and Vlad's cups, before reaching for mine.

"No thanks."

"C'mon, there's only a quarter of a can left."

"That's okay, I'm not in the mood."

"Priss." Eddie chugged half of his cup and let out a long "ahhhhh" to rub it in. "Pass it here, Jimbo. Melly never could hold her liquor anyhow. We wouldn't want her puking on us in the back seat."

Jim handed over the can and lit up a cigarette as Eddie packed the empties back into the lunch box.

Vlad, who hadn't said more than two words since we left Jim's house, said, "You smoke like chimney."

We all laughed. Eddie slapped Vlad's back and raised his plastic cup in a toast before draining it. Vlad seemed pleased with himself and tried another. Holding up his empty sandwich wrapper, he said, "I eat like pig."

I imagined him sitting at home in Romania or wherever the hell they imported him from, practicing these little phrases to impress his new American friends. We laughed a little less the second time and Vlad bit his bottom lip, maybe hoping to remember something funnier to share with us.

The sound of Mom's laughter echoed across the parking lot as she exited the restroom. Eddie chugged the rest of Vlad's orangeade cocktail, then flicked his bangs out of his eyes the same cocky way he always

did when he knew he'd gotten away with something.

"I drink like fish," he whispered, collecting up the empty cups to throw in the dumpster.

Yes you do, I thought as I watched him cross the parking lot, and if you don't cut it out, you're going to end up in a box on the front seat of a beat-up Buick Regal.

The rest of the drive was quiet. The beer took the edge off Eddie and Jim's interest in Miss January's assets and Vlad fell back asleep almost immediately.

AS WE EDGED THROUGH THE CROWDED streets of Provincetown, my mother took out Dad's handwritten instructions and dabbed at her eyes for effect while she read them over again.

I couldn't imagine she might have forgotten even the smallest detail. Dad had not only written out the ceremony step-by-step, he'd given us an annual lecture on it. Early in the summer, before the real crowds hit, he'd take us out to Race Point "to see the sunset," he'd say. While we watched other kids fish and fly kites, he would detail the path of the funeral procession, remind us of the exact point where he wanted his ashes scattered, recite the poems he'd selected.

He'd chosen Race Point because it was the more rugged of the two beaches, the better spot for fishing and kite flying and surfing, the one more likely to have a stiff wind and a crashing surf. He said it reflected his tortured artist's soul. I only thought that was true when he was drunk, but then he was always drunk when he said it and toward the end he was always drunk anyhow, so I guess it was true.

I never thought of him as particularly tortured or rugged. Sometimes I thought of him as brilliant, but mostly I tried not to think of him as anything except the dad who knew that you could avoid the traffic on that last stretch up the cape if you drove at night.

Aunt Susan circled the parking lot twice before admitting she'd have to park at the far end, near the entrance to the bike trails. That meant she'd have to join the spectacle of the five of us in our Sunday finest hauling everything across the lot: the guitar, the candles, the bound leather book with the poems in Dad's handwriting, the incense. And the ashes.

Mom carried the ashes, like Dad had planned. The boys carried the rest. Aunt Susan trailed behind, looking as if driving us all the way up here had fulfilled her obligation, looking as if she'd known all along it would come to this.

We paused at the entrance to the beach to light our candles. Aunt Susan cradled the ashes against a jutting hipbone while Mom tried to light the thin white tapers. Eddie had purposely taken the guitar so he wouldn't have to carry a candle. Mom wasn't falling for it.

"Give the guitar to Vlad, Eddie, so you can carry your candle."

Eddie held the guitar in front of his chest like a shield. The wind pushed his bangs forward and they fell unevenly across his eyes. "I'm not carrying any stupid candle. You made me come, but you can't make me do all that crap he planned."

"Edward, put down the guitar and carry the candle."

"You can't even get them lit, why the hell should we carry them?"

Eddie may have been bigger, but Mom was faster. She grabbed the guitar case by the handle and ripped it out of his arms, thumping it into Vlad's arms and tearing Eddie's silk shirt in one violent sweep.

"Ow, goddammit, what the hell did you do that for?" He rubbed his chest through the little ragged V in his shirt.

"Don't talk to me like that, young man. This is your father's funeral and you'll show some respect for once."

My little brother drew himself up to his full six feet, a good five inches taller than Mom. "Respect for what? What a total fuck-up he was?"

Eddie raised his hand to flick his bangs but his fingers never reached his forehead. Years of dealing with my father and the dopers he surrounded himself with had left my mother with lightning-quick reflexes and little fear of retaliating twofold. I hadn't seen her hit anyone in years, but when she backhanded my brother across the mouth, it reminded me that she could give as good as she got, even from my father. I'd forgotten how much they'd mellowed after Dad started getting really sick.

Eddie carried the unlit candle. We all did. Even Vlad and Aunt Susan, neither of whom looked particularly surprised by the exchange.

WE FOLLOWED THE DESIGNATED route for the funeral procession and stopped as close to my father's "spot" as we could. He hadn't counted on a family of four from Montreal eating tuna fish sandwiches in his spot. Or, if he had, maybe he assumed they'd move. The farther along we got in my father's plans, the more false assumptions I realized he'd made. For instance, he'd assumed there'd be a crowd of hundreds to accommodate. He hadn't planned on falling into obscurity. Sometimes I don't think he even realized his work, or more accurately *he*, no longer commanded the attention he once had.

He hadn't planned on a stiff wind forcing my mother to wade out to hip-deep water just to keep the ashes from blowing shoreward. He probably hadn't realized that the ashes wouldn't sink right away; that they'd mix with the kelp and brine and just sort of float there in a murky clot. And he hadn't planned on Vlad butchering *Complaint of the Skeleton to Time* the way he was right now. Dad's best friend Terry was supposed to read it, but Terry is in court-ordered rehab out in Arizona.

Maybe if Terry were here to read the poem to a big crowd and the family of four from Montreal had moved and the parents sunning themselves had told their toddlers to find another spot to play and the kids behind us weren't quite so drunk and my brother wasn't so angry at the world, I wouldn't be so worried about the way the boy in the dirty jeans is watching Vlad fumble over the last lines of Ginsberg. He's got a sullen sneer that would be frightening if I didn't recognize it so well.

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As Vlad finishes the last stanza and passes the book back to my mother, a half dozen of the boys behind us stand up and start clapping. A few pretend to sob loudly and one does a dead-on impersonation of Vlad's thickly accented repetition of "but leave my bones alone" which came out more precisely as "leave my buns alone."

Aunt Susan gives them the eye, but that only encourages them. The boy in the jeans isn't clapping or sobbing. He's staring at me and I'm staring back; not at his fly, though I want to, but at his eyes and the way they're saying he knows and I can't look away because now he's moving toward me, breaking away from his pack, sprinting across the

sand dividing our two groups and picking me up in a fireman's carry. He's got one hand on my ass and the other locked around my knees and as I'm bouncing up and down on his shoulder I realize one shoe has fallen off because it's lying upside down in the sand where I was standing.

He gets a little more than halfway to the water's edge when we're tackled from behind, by Eddie I assume, though I'm not sure at first because I'm torn between wanting him to keep on running down the beach all the way to the dunes behind the bike path and punching his kidneys with both fists to get him to put me down before we reach the water's edge. We land in a pile, me on the bottom, lying on my back with the boy's shoulder dug into my stomach, Eddie on top, raining a blizzard of punches on the boy's back. Soon Jim is on top of Eddie and the boy's friends are on top of Jim and I'm still on the bottom, turned over face down now, pressing my forehead into the sand because the taste of the sand is less disgusting than the taste of the spittle and blood and sweat that's spraying off the pile of bodies as the violence escalates.

Eventually a small army of lifeguards and park rangers and onlookers separates us. The boy in the jeans is singled out and led off by two of the rangers. I watch him until they turn the corner toward the parking lot and he disappears from view. The other boys and girls are sent home, but not without a loud and foul-mouthed protest. Aunt Susan takes Vlad to the first aid tent to get the gash above his eye looked at. Jim and Eddie wash off their various bloodied body parts in the ocean and head to the car for the beer. Mom is nowhere to be seen.

I sit next to the family of four from Montreal and pretend they're not staring at me as I scratch the sand out of my hair. Eventually Aunt Susan and Vlad will return, maybe looking a little more flushed and happy than would be considered appropriate by decent people. Jim and Eddie will run out of beer and come looking for Mom, who will, when she finally turns up, insist that we not leave without singing the hymn Dad wrote for the occasion.

Until then, I'll sit here in Dad's spot with the family of four from Montreal and pretend they're not staring at me as I watch a couple of kids bodysurf through his ashes.