



*Photos For  
The Sea*

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# Photos For The Sea

by  
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1978.

It was on the baking sands of an exclusive beach during a long hot summers day, that strange and unsettling imaginings that should not have been emerged from dark depths and into the light. As for the nearby seaside town of Whispering Sands, it was a day that would awaken the elusive sorrow that slumbered deep in the rise and fall of the tides.

If indeed it ever did sleep.

You see this particular beach, it was whispered by folks who had grown up in the town, whilst stunningly beautiful, was best to have never been open to the public in the first place. Ask anyone old enough to have known one of the elders, they'd dare you, and it would quickly become apparent the golden, almost crystal infused sands had been feared long before even the first ships had arrived. But the elders were long gone now, and with them the true reasons for the simmering suspicions that lingered in the shadows of the town.

Of course, young Jake couldn't have known any of that though. Sure, he was only ten years old, and it was true he'd already learned more about fear than just about anyone his age, but for him the idea of a holiday by the water was as close to magic as he could hope for. *His* special fear would still follow him of course, sure as too much sun could burn his fair skin, but maybe this time things would be a little different. Maybe this time his bruises will have time to heal.

They arrived on an early Friday afternoon beneath a scorching sky. The beach itself was actually a tiny bay. Nestled at the base of dauntingly steep hills, it was only accessible by a scratchy dirt road so steep that it threatened to burn through brakes and turned driving into momentary, bone shaking surgery. Once you made it to the bottom, the road continued along the back of four small shacks that fronted golden sands before coming to a dead end. And that was it. Four shacks and a dirt road. Nothing else but hot winds, crashing waves and the distant squawks of gulls.

It was the first holiday Jake had been on since the day that had taken so much from him. For a brief moment earlier that morning he thought he was going to be left behind, perhaps locked in the house with some stale snacks and warm bottles of water to tide him over, but when the threat turned out to be hollow he'd wedged himself between his cousins Casey and Sam, six and thirteen, and made sure not to say a word for the entire journey. He had only been to the beach a few times, but every second of every sand dusted memory was a treasure that he often clung to in dark, early hours of the morning when sleep wouldn't come.

Now he could smell the seaweed and salt, and the dark suddenly seemed so very far away.

As soon as the car crunched to a halt his Uncle Erik peered back at them through the rear view mirror with a smile that Jake thought might actually be real. His short beard was the kind that always looked a little messy, and he wore thick rimmed glasses that magnified his bloodshot eyes.

“You kids can jump out and play on the beach for now, but I don’t want any of you in the water you understand me?” He turned the engine off and in an instant the sound of crashing waves swept in through the open windows. His smile began to fade, while beside him Aunty Jasmine remained silent. “And I don’t want any noise around the adults while we’re here. No misbehaving. I’m in a good mood right now, and I want it to stay that way.”

Jake and the girls slid along the hot seat and dashed their way between the shacks onto the golden sands. A hot northerly wind whipped at their ears while their bare feet began to burn. In front of them the bay was a spectacular blue, with enormous waves rising up to glisten and sparkle with the reflection of the sun before exploding white froth and mist on the shoreline.

“Can we make sandcastles?” Casey asked as she dropped to her knees and ran her fingers through the sand.

“Maybe we should explore a little first,” Jake replied. “I mean, look how amazing this place is!”

“Dad will be pissed if we wander off too far,” Sam sighed with not a small hint of spite.

Jake shielded his eyes and watched as she stared back towards the car. Her long, blond hair was tied back into a ponytail, and ever since they had got into the car she had been using her fingers to twist and nervously pull at it. She was still doing it now.

He’d heard what had happened in the middle of the night. He knew *she* knew he’d heard, but neither of them said anything. It was better that way.

“We won’t go far,” he tried to assure her as he pointed at the granite rocks at the end of the bay. “We might be able to find some crabs or something, and I bet we can still hear him call.”

Sam turned and reached for her little sister’s hand before gently tugging her to her feet.

“Okay I guess,” she sighed. “I supposed it does look pretty cool over there.”

“Maybe we’ll see a mermaid!” Casey said, her soft blue eyes growing wide with excitement.

“Maybe...”

Together they trekked across the sand along the water’s edge. Ocean spray from the crashing waves cooled Jake’s skin and slowly stripped away the anxiety that had been with him since dawn. If there was a Heaven, he thought, then this must be it. The sand between his toes was magic, the sound of the crashing waves was the best sound he had ever heard, and the feeling that he could jump in the water at any moment and dive down into a whole new world, a world where he could be totally alone, if only just for a few minutes, was pure bliss. The only problem was, he couldn’t swim. His mum was going to give him lessons, but...

He quickly pushed the thought away and focused on everything that was beautiful around him. He imagined himself an explorer on another planet, his spaceship hidden beneath the waters of the bay. Casey must have thought something similar too for she broke her sister’s grasp and began running towards the granite boulders, her laughter echoing across the winds.

And so for a short time a sense of joy fell upon the trio. Together they kicked sand in the air and scrambled across the rocks and boulders, the scorching heat of the day insignificant as they squinted and peered into small crevices in the hope of finding small sea creatures.

And then a deep bellow shook along the hot winds of the bay.

“I want you all back right now!” Jake heard Uncle Erik yell, then watched as Sam gently stood and stared up into the sun.

“If he’s pissed off when we get back just blame me for going too far,” she offered.

“But we all wanted to explore the rocks!” Jake said with an uncertain defiance.

“Just do it okay?”

“I wish we didn’t have to go back already,” Casey moaned as her little feet began to carry her back over the rocks and on to the hot sand.

Flies buzzed along the sweat of their backs as they marched towards the four small shacks. Jake lifted a hand to shade his squinting eyes when he saw that another car had arrived. It wasn’t one he’d seen before, not that he knew much about cars anyway, but the fact that it was parked right beside Uncle Erik’s meant more adults to spoil the magic of the secret bay.

When they reached the cars they made sure to stand straight with arms by their sides. It was hard to read Uncle Erik or Aunty Jasmine’s expression behind the thick sun glasses they were now wearing, but for the moment that wasn’t really Jake’s

concern because his attention was instead drawn to a freckled, red headed girl who he had to guess was close to his age. A floppy, over sized hat drew shade across half of her face, and her small frame was draped in a raggedy dress decorated with grinning sunflowers. For a brief second her eyes met his, and in that tiny moment the beach became even more wonderful than he could've imagined.

“Okay kids,” Uncle Erik declared before tearing open a can of beer, “this here is Gail and Rob, and the little mouse hiding underneath the hat is Felicity. I want you to help Felicity empty the cars and set up the bedrooms and kitchen, then you can play a little longer before tea. But like I said before, I don't want to hear any noise and I don't want any of you annoying the adults if you know what's good for you.”

Slightly overweight and with a perm that ignored the wind, Gail stood firm with arms crossed against her chest as though her journey to the beach should have been celebrated. In stark contrast Rob, with his shoulder length greasy hair and choice of shorts and singlet that did little to hide his skeletal frame, was skinny enough that the wind just might take him. Jake wasn't sure what to make of them, but knew well enough to keep his gaze at his feet and his lips silent.

And so they did what they were told, dragging sleeping bags and canned foods into the shack at the end of the dirt road. Casey hummed a little, and Felicity stole glances at Jake when she could, but otherwise they executed the tasks with absolute silence.

The hot winds continued to blow.

Once the cars were emptied they stepped onto the beach where the adults were leaning back in canvass chairs with drinks in hand. The heat of the day was still stifling even though the sun was ever so slowly beginning to float down towards the horizon.

“There was some sort of family murder bullshit down here in the 60's,” Jake heard Uncle Erik slur, “and the town shut down development ever since. Like I've been saying, if you can get the figures to work me and the department can sort out the locals.”

“Can't say I envy you mate,” Rob laughed. “Numbers are easy to shift around, but prime real estate like this? Shit, there's gotta be a reason nobody's tried it before.”

“Yeah there's a reason, and that reason is a lack of bloody ambition and no guts at all!”

They bumped their bottle of beers together and laughed at a joke only they understood before drawing their attention to the children stood before them.

“Honey,” Rob said, “let's get a photo before the sun goes down.”

Gail adjusted her sunglasses and reached into the bag nestled beside her seat.

“Show me your smiles,” she said while balancing a Polaroid camera.

Jake felt the sand grow cold beneath his feet. Without thinking he turned to his left and saw that Felicity’s hands were shaking so bad they might shatter her knees. He quickly returned his attention to the adults as the flash of the bulb dissolved into the sunlight then looked over his shoulder into the blue of the water.

“You can put your feet in the water but nothing more,” Uncle Erik announced. “And when we say it’s time for bed I don’t want to hear any arguments.”

Sam led the charge and together they dashed towards the crashing waves, squealing with delight as the cool of the bubbling ocean rushed against their knees and stomachs. Jake found himself standing beside Felicity, and couldn’t but help hold her hand as together they tried to stand against the force of the rolling ocean.

“Have you been here before?” she asked against the spraying salt.

“No,” Jake yelled above the crashing waves, “but I think this is the best place ever!”

“Me too!”

The winds began to ease and the sun continued its descent. It might have been days and it might have been minutes but the darkness began to creep across the water. For the first time since they’d arrived Aunty Jasmine raised her voice and called them into the beach shack for a dinner of fish fingers and baked beans, and when they finished the bland plates they were directed to the musty smelling bedrooms in a place they’d never been before. Jake and Casey shared one bunk in one room, while Sam and Felicity shared another. Nobody risked talking once the lights were out, and thanks to the fresh air and adventure sleep came mercifully quick.

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An ever so distant muffled symphony of squealing tires, grinding metal and his mother’s gasp snatched Jake awake, just as it had done so many times before. But when he rubbed at his sun burned shoulder and pushed deeper into his pillow new sounds emerged, and this symphony was definitely not part of any dream.

It took a moment but he soon recognized Felicity’s muffled cries of pain. He also recognized the sharp popping sounds of the polaroid’s flash and instantly wished he could dive deep into the ocean and disappear into another world. Maybe in the dark of the blue he could find some kind of secret power, some kind of magic that could bring an end to the nights when the monsters wanted more photos for their secret album. Or maybe he could finally be strong and jump out the window and run until

nobody could find him, but his legs had already begun to shake and he knew all he could do was lie still, hold his breath and hope.

But like so many times before, hope didn't seem to want to know him.

Felicity's cries began to grow quiet as heavy steps creaked along weather beaten boards. Jake squeezed the skin around his knees. The bedroom door opened, revealing slivers of light from the hallway. He wanted to keep his eyes closed but couldn't, and instead found himself almost hypnotized by the beads of sweat sliding down Rob's flushed cheeks.

"Uncle Erik wants to see you," he whispered. "Seems someone didn't do the dishes like they were supposed to so you better get out there right now."

Jake could barely keep his balance when his feet reached the floor. He winced when Rob grabbed to top of his arm and began marching him down the small hallway towards the kitchen, every step making him want to drop to the ground and start screaming. But what would that do? They were in an old shack on an isolated beach with nobody around. And besides, screaming had never helped before.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the bright lights of the kitchen, but as things began to focus he could see Felicity curled beneath a beach towel on a dirty mattress where the table should have been and, on a nearby chair, a handful of photos with horrible, slowly developing images like ghosts clawing out from two dimensional mist.

Uncle Erik stood by the sink with arms held across his chest wearing only a pair of torn shorts. Beside him, Aunt Jasmine casually loaded another cartridge into the camera with a clicking noise that echoed across the walls. On the other side of the room, sprawled across a chair as though ready for a show, Gail smiled as she looked Jake up and down.

Back at the sink Uncle Erik reached down for his beer, finished what was left and then crushed the can.

"Cut the crying out this time," he said with a distaste of having to speak at all, "and tomorrow you can stay in the water as long as you want."

It was a damn lie and Jake knew it. He also knew that once again darkness and pain would assure him that as far as the universe was concerned, he was forgotten.

Like times before his mind disengaged, the light of the kitchen dissolving away as reality became a soft echo in an eternal nothingness. Sound became nothing more than a distant hum, and while the pain was familiar he sought solace in knowing it couldn't last forever. At some point the world once again grew sharp, prompting his tear soaked eyes to shoot open, and seconds later he instinctively ran for the front door like the frightened animal he had become.

“Don’t worry about it,” he heard Aunt Jasmine hiss as he yanked on the handle, “it’s not like he can go anywhere.”

But there was somewhere he could go, and it wasn’t until he’d bound down the wooden steps, dashed across the cooling sands and could feel the sharp granite beneath his feet that he dared to stop to catch his breath. When the quivering of his bottom lip finally began to ease he turned his eyes up to the sky to see fragments of winking stars around an almost full moon. There was barely a breeze to be felt, and unlike earlier in the day the waves were now small and lapping against the rocks. He did all he could to focus on the new world around him, did all he could to pretend he’d simply been unable to sleep and had sneaked out of the window instead of having fled yet another waking nightmare with monsters.

He looked down and carefully traversed the rocks, his eyes widening as he discovered small pools that glistened beneath the light of the moon. In one of them he spotted a tiny crab and in another a pulsating starfish. In yet another he watched a school of small fish circle their temporary oasis that would be disappear with the rise of the tide. For him they were little magical worlds, and as he continued to explore he wished with all his heart those worlds could become his too.

Then something caught his eye.

He turned to his left, and lodged in a small crevice by the edge of the water was a large shell that glowed with a soft, electric green tinge. Careful to keep his balance he reached down and prised it loose. It was surprisingly warm to the touch and felt light as a feather as he rolled the strange discovery between his fingers. The shape reminded him of Saturday morning cartoons, and he could picture a smiling character in a grass skirt blowing into a shell just like his to make beautiful sounds that made animals and birds begin to sing and dance. Jake couldn’t help but wonder, had he discovered something just as magical?

Sitting down on one of the smoother rocks he dropped his feet into the water and once again looked up to the night sky. He still couldn’t understand how something so beautiful could care so little for him, but the new treasure in his hands made him feel there could be hope yet. And so he brought the glowing green shell to his lips like he’d seen in the cartoons. It was tangy and salty as he breathed in through his nose. Then, with his heart beating a little faster he blew into it as hard as he could, but there were no beautiful sounds like the cartoons. There was only a slight whistle, and even that was pitiful.

He tried one more time then rested the shell in his lap and looked out across the ocean, gently swinging his feet back and forth. *Of course nothing happened*, he thought, *nothing magical ever does*.

Something tickled the bottom of his left foot. He yanked it out of the water and glanced down with a start, at first finding only the reflection of the moon. Seconds later the surface of the ocean began to change. His eyes widened as long, electric



green tentacles rose up from the dark waters like snakes, and before Jake could utter a sound he was pulled from the rocks and into the abyss.

He could hear a tremendous rush of bubbles against his ears as he kicked and thrashed in an attempt to breathe but it didn't matter. Something slippery and warm was holding him tight, and down he went, further and further until the bubbles grew quiet and his body still. Suddenly suspended so deep even the moon couldn't reach, he wondered how long he could hold his breath, and how long it would be before the panic would tear him apart.

The tentacles wrapped around his neck and then scraped along the top of his head as though searching for something. In an instant it felt as though a million thoughts were happening at once, and then the panic began to drift away, his thoughts began to quieten, and a soft woman's voice whispered deep into his soul.

*Oh little Jakey, down here you don't have to be scared anymore. The tentacles gently caressed his temples. Down here is only for the brave. You're brave aren't you?*

Jake nodded as best he could.

*Then together let's ride the light of the moon and weave our own blanket of stars, because you're wrong little Jakey don't you know? The universe hasn't forgotten about you. It never will...*

The tentacles shifted to his chest and like a shooting bullet he was carried up through the dark and burst into the warm air and silver moonlight. Jake suddenly felt safer than he ever had, safer than he ever *could* have, and cried out with joy while he was guided across the water this way and that as though he had magically grown a powerful tail. The night was filled with dazzling jewels as all around him schools of iridescent fish followed in his wake. He was on the greatest ride in the greatest show on Earth and he never wanted it to end. Eventually though, it did.

Light from the interior of the beach shack came into view. Pressure eased around his chest as he was slowly brought to the shallows, and once the water was only waist deep the tentacles dropped away completely. Jake turned towards the glowing green shape as it floated away and saw that its main body was the shape of an egg and almost as big as a car, and that the tentacles weren't just tentacles but appeared to be strange fingers connected to four long, shimmering arms. He called for it to come back, but within seconds it was gone, and with it the magic of the night.

Silently, cautiously, he crept his way through the back door. The kitchen was empty but he could hear drunken laughter echoing from the lounge room, and so he edged his way to the bedroom and hid beneath the musty blanket, thankful for not having raised their attention.

"Jake," Casey whispered from the top bunk.

“Yeah?” he whispered back, heart pounding at the thought of the bedroom door flying open.

“Promise to take me with you next time, then we can stay away forever...”

Jake drew the blanket tight against his chin and thought it best to stay silent. He wasn't even sure if there *would* be a next time, and so didn't want to make a promise he couldn't keep. And what of the strange yet magic encounter he had just experienced? Had it even really happened? Sure it had seemed real at the time, but in the musty dark of the beach shack bedroom the dream like memory was quickly fading like a sandcastle in the wind, and trying to explain it to Casey would be all but impossible. No, he wasn't going to tell anybody. It was a secret he would keep for now. And so he closed his eyes tight, waited for the beating of his heart to slow and prayed for the first rays of dawn.

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The heat of the day began early. It blazed in through the shack windows, and Jake could already feel sweat trickling down his back as he dragged himself out of bed. A cautious joy simmered within as the sound of crashing waves and the scent of burned toast helped to wake his senses. The dark of night had ended. He couldn't know what the day had in store of course, nor the mood the monsters would bring, but at least he was on the beach.

Casey suddenly dropped down beside him and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “I don't want breakfast. You think we can go for a swim?”

“Maybe,” Jake replied with a half yawn. “I guess we should see what everyone else is doing.”

With a shared hesitation they opened the bedroom door and crept their way to the kitchen. Already in her bathing suit and leaning against the breakfast counter, Sam offered a half smile before taking a bite of her toast. Felicity stood beside her, a bowl of soggy serial cradled in her hand, and though there was a clear frown upon her face her eyes lit up a little when she saw Jake and Casey.

“They're outside in case you're wondering,” Sam muttered. “Already started drinking too, if they stopped at all.”

“Then maybe they won't care if we go for a swim,” Jake said while pouring himself a glass of water from the tap.

“Yeah, or maybe they get us to clean up the pigsty they left from last night.”

As if sensing they were all now awake, Uncle Erik's slurred voice bellowed from the front porch area like a wild, howling dog.

“Alright kids I want you all out here on the double.”

Jake’s heart began to beat faster. Then, one by one, they stepped out into the burning light of day. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, and within seconds the wood decking was already burning the soft skin of his feet.

Uncle Erik, Aunt Jasmine, Rob and Gail were each stretched out on long, tattered canvass chairs. By their feet rested an esky filled with cans of beer and partially melted ice. They all wore sunglasses beneath tacky straw hats, and Jake could see that their exposed skin had already taken on a rich red hue.

“If it was up to me you’d be giving the cars a good wash but it seems the women here think the chores can wait,” Uncle Erik declared while opening a fresh beer, “so you’ve got the rest of the morning to do what you want. As soon as we’ve had lunch though I’ve got a whole list of things to keep you kids busy so don’t go wasting all your energy.”

“And I don’t want anyone going in past their knees you hear me?” Aunt Jasmine added.

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” Sam replied.

“Now get outta here,” Uncle Erik mumbled.

It was music to Jake’s ears. He was barely able to spit out a “thank you” before sprinting down onto the sand, Felicity and his cousins hot on his heels. Out of nowhere the day had suddenly turned magnificent and full of possibilities. Would he swim first or would he return to the rocks to continue his explorations? And what about the strange sea creature he had met, should he tell the girls or keep it a secret? Or even better, what if together they could find a secret cave and hide so that they would never have to deal with the monsters again?

Mist from the crashing waves cooled his skin as they reached the water’s edge. A glorious chill ran down his spine when his toes became submerged. Behind them the sun was still making its way into the sky but Jake couldn’t imagine the day getting any brighter, and when Felicity grabbed his hand and splashed her feet beside his he couldn’t imagine it getting any better either.

“Do you think there’s dolphins out there?” she asked with excitement.

“Of course there are!” Jake laughed. “I think there’s other cool stuff out there too.”

“Other stuff?”

“You know, magical stuff.”

“What kind of magical stuff?”

“Well,” Jake offered as a wave crashed against their legs, “there’s monsters in the world so why can’t there be magic in the ocean?”

To their right, Casey squealed with delight as a wave sent her crashing down onto her knees. Sam was quick to pull her back up, but it wasn’t long before all four of them were tumbling and laughing in the surging white water. It was definitely deeper than their knees but none of them cared, because for a moment in time it felt like the adults were a world away. Better yet, it felt as if the *monsters* were a world away, and that heaven was exploding around them in magnificent blues and whites beneath a gold tinged sky.

In just mere minutes however, the heaven they shared began to shift and surge.

With a sudden sting of panic Jake realised he could no longer feel the sand beneath his toes and so thrashed his arms in an attempt to paddle back towards the shore, but the safety of the beach was quickly becoming further and further away. A soft thunder rumbled behind him, and when he jerked his neck to peer out to sea his heart raced at the sight of giant crashing waves headed straight for them all.

His first instinct was to call out but all he managed to do was to swallow a mouthful of bitter salt water. He thrashed his arms once more, turned to face the shoreline and searched desperately for the others.

Things had turned dangerous in the blink of an eye.

As the thunder of the waves grew closer he could barely make out Sam’s head bobbing in the water, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t see Casey or Felicity. Fear and sudden regret ripped through his body. Heaven had turned upside down, and while he desperately kicked and thrashed he knew that a dark fate was all that was left. They’d broken the rules, they’d gone deeper than they should have, and now the day held only suffering. Any moment now they could all drown, and yet if somehow they could make it back to shore, if somehow they could grab each other’s hands and reach the sand, the monsters would all but certainly be ready to feast upon their mistake.

“Jaaaake....”

He couldn’t be sure but it sounded like Felicity’s scream rushing across the water. In a fit of utter panic he tilted his head up to the sky to yell back but instantly the waves hit, and the world became a symphony of white darkness and exploding bubbles deep in his ears. The thrashing embrace of the ocean was in complete control now. There was no way to tell which way was up or which way was down, and opening his eyes brought only a sharp sting tinged vision of swirling chaos that shot adrenaline to the tips of every finger and every toe. He was out of breath and still the thunder wrapped him tight, squeezing his adolescent flesh and bones as though he were nothing more than a clump of seaweed in the wrong place at the wrong time...

Sunlight punched through his chaotic vision, demanding his eyes to open to the majesty of the sky above. Air rushed deep into his lungs and a hot wind whipped across his cheeks. Around him the sea became calm and, as if in a dream, he suddenly found himself floating upon a beautiful blanket of smooth blue water. He gasped at the sudden change and tilted back to catch his breath. Everything was for a moment calm, and yet screams of the kind he'd never heard before infected the warm winds rushing from the shoreline. Water lapped against his cheeks while the cries of pure pain and terror echoed across the sky.

Thunder returned and a new set of waves drove him deep down, only this time there was something with him. Even as the chaos and turbulence threw him around like a rag doll he could feel the sudden and strangely warm embrace of the tentacles as they wrapped around his waist and slid across his chest. Then something pressed against the back of his neck, and just when he thought he wouldn't be able to hold his breath for a second longer his body crashed up through the surface of the water as though having been fired from a rocket. The return of the light was blinding, the taste of salt bitter against his tongue as he gasped for air. The thunder eased and the waters once again calmed.

And still the sharp screams echoed from the beach.

*It's okay little Jakey, everything's going to be okay.*

Jake couldn't help but squirm a little, but as the tentacles squeezed just a little tighter his body began to relax. A gentle pressure eased his head back so that his blinking eyes filled with the majesty of the endless blue sky. And as the screams began to grow softer in the distance he he watched a lone gull circle above and wondered why the voice had tickled distant memories...

*A little bit of magic can light up the darkest of places and your dark places sure could use some light. So just breathe for me Jakey, okay? Breathe nice and deep and let the magic hug you tight with the love of every star that burns beyond the bright of the blue sky...*

Jake did his best to take a big breath, tried to feel the magic, but a jolting cacophony of exploding metal ushered a deafening moment of confusion. He could still hear the fading screams and the soft cry of the gull, but this sound came from somewhere deep within. There came a shudder along his spine, and then a blur of distant memories reached out for him from places beyond the strange world that now cradled him.

"Mum?" he stammered up to the burning blue.

*Hush now my little angel, you're home now, and that means all the monsters that have ever hurt you are little toys for you to play with over and over again. And if you close your eyes, and listen carefully, you can hear the toys calling out for you...*

"I can hear screaming."

*No little Jakey, the now familiar voice whispered into his ear, it's not screaming you hear but the songs of monsters being transformed by magic! Magic just for you! Now close your eyes for me. Together we're going deep down to look for lots of treasure, and when we find it you'll realize the magic has only just begun. Are you ready?"*

"But what about my cousins, and my friend? Can they come too?"

*There's special magic waiting for them too Jakey, but this home has been waiting just for you. It's time to go now. The little ones will be just fine, and if there's one thing I can promise you, it's that you'll have eternity to play with the toys. The tentacles wrapped a little tighter. Now close your eyes, I've got something special to show you..."*

The burning bright blue quickly turned into a deep, endless dark azure, but that didn't scare Jake. Magic was all around him and that's all that mattered. Even when the salt water filled his lungs he was calm. There was treasure to be found after all, and what else could treasure be but toys made from monsters and memories rescued from the dark shadows that had reached out for him for so long? Indeed, for Jake the magic was all that mattered. The universe had finally found him.

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Three hours later and the heat was stifling back on the beach as radios crackled and car engines creaked and moaned while struggling to keep the air conditioning running. All four cop cars were parked nose to tail at the rear of the shacks, each with sweating officers seated behind the wheel drained of colour and expression, and each quietly hoping there was no reason to be stepping back out onto the sand. There would be of course, but still there was no harm in pretending there wouldn't be for the moment.

Officer Sandra Leith didn't have the luxury of refrigerated air. Only twenty four and a rookie import from the city, she had to deal with the stench and the flies and the hot winds. There was no point arguing though. Experience had already cemented it would get her nowhere.

She looked up to the sky and contemplated how long she could hold her breath, then chose to face the inevitable and cast her eyes back across the crime scene with an instant knowing regret. The horror, which had so quickly driven the more experienced officers to puke over their boots and hide in the squad cars, was still baking beneath the sun like a demented museum exhibition that promised only utter, existential despair. And still the stink grew, and grew... and grew.

The sound of soft gurgling drew her attention once again to his shredded and bloated face. It wasn't the bleeding eyeballs, the shattered teeth or cheeks opened like over ripe eggplants that once again tested the mettle of her stomach. No, the true trigger for the bile burning the back of her throat was what had been left of the

unknown man before her, for his arms and legs and been ripped from his torso and left in a pile by his groin to be pecked at by several seagulls. The sand beneath him had become a sickening, vivid red mud. That he could still be alive seemed impossible, and yet the horrid gurgling continued to mix with the hot breeze.

Sandra did everything she could to steady the primal panic itching to take over. She was a cop after all, and as far as crime scenes went this would probably be the worst she'd ever encounter. Someone had to be sure of the details though, had to be witness to the absolute horror before forensics arrived to bag and remove the evidence, and the boys hiding in the cars sure as shit weren't putting their hands up for the job. And so, for a moment in time on a beautifully sunny day, the absolute horror was all hers.

Jagged branches of drift wood lay staked in the sand in a haphazard circle around the gurgling torso, thirteen in total she quickly counted. On three of the branches a human head had been perched, each blood soaked and mutilated. Judging by the matted, somewhat long hair on one of them Sandra surmised it had been a woman, but for the other two any attempt at rudimentary identification was pointless. They were nothing more than a crushed balls of flesh, hair and bone. The other branches were equally grotesque but far more abstract, each decorated with shredded body parts that promised no anatomical hint of origin. It was a mad, demented open air butcher display of stinking intestines, flaps of skin, jagged bones and stringy veins that had been stretched and laid across the horrid red sand like discarded string. And yet just a few metres away, as though oblivious to the pocket of hell before her, the gloriously blue ocean lapped upon the shore.

In the distance behind her came the sound of approaching ambulances, and for a split second she had the urge to turn and signal for them to turn around. *Too late*, she could lie over the radio, *the tide's already swept everything away...*

"Sorry Sandy, but you're not going to like what I've got." The husky, slightly broken voice belonged to Jeff Winter, one of the only cops that didn't treat her like a high school student on a work excursion. "It's shit like this that sends good badges to the bottom of bad bottles."

Turning from the glistening nightmare she could see heartache etched in his eyes and the corners of his mustache drawn down tight. Without saying another word he reached out and waited for her to take the handful of polaroid photos clenched between his fingers. They were hot and slimy to the touch. Worse than that, they were in perfect focus.

The back of her neck was burning. Her uniform shirt, so perfectly ironed that morning, was drenched with sweat and glued to her skin. Barely able to keep her composure, Sandra turned and marched towards the lapping waves while high above a squall of gulls cried into the wind. When her boots began to fill with the crisp blue water the tears came, and as she did her best to hide the fact she'd begun to shake she tossed the polaroids into the sea. Seconds later she took a startled step back when what looked like a tentacle snatched them away.









