

## The Beach

His name was Sean or maybe Shawn. I didn't ask how it was spelled, but he made me smile between the mumbled words that suggested he had more than the one beer that remained in his hand. He was still wearing his hip-waders, held two fishing poles and a bag for the lures, hooks and tools fisherman tend to amass.

It was mid-January. My wife and I had traveled to Seaview, a tiny hamlet adjacent to Long Beach, Washington, famous for its kite festival, insane fireworks free-for-all on July Fourth and the longest continuous beach in the world. At some point, I need do a fact check on that one. The weather, as weather goes on the coast in winter, was unusually spectacular. It was in the mid-fifties, cloudless (mostly) and dry—literally six days of no rain. It was good timing for a short vacation at a friend's beach cottage. We badly needed to get away from our Boise home. The covid pandemic had kept us couped up for way too long. And both of us were on overload, stressed out over the political upheaval and the assault against the Capitol. Our dog, for some inexplicable reason, felt no stress whatever but had never seen the beach, so we brought her too.

It was good to walk on the sand the afternoon we arrived, just the dog and me. I removed her leash and put it in my pocket. There's some therapeutic, almost magical about watching a dog on its first beach experience. She began to wander aimlessly until she spotted a flock of seagulls. They flew off in protest as she barked and attacked at a full tilt run, then returned to me as if to ask: how'd I do? I swept my hand in a broad arc which told her she was free to run wild. She did.

At the end of that really long beach there is a rocky promontory dressed in black basalt with the abrupt mountain covered in thick evergreens. There were three vehicles nearby (this part of the beach allows you to drive on it) and perhaps a dozen people dotting the landscape—six of them not much more than kids, early twenties or less. One of them had his shirt off to which I remarked: *you're not really going in that water are you?* He chuckled nervously and told me he was thinking about it, then pointed to one of his friends, a burly red-haired guy with twenty extra pounds of insulation who was walking out of the ocean toward us. He looked cold. I just laughed and tried to remember back that far to my youth. I walked a little further toward the rocks and saw three people standing at the edge of the tide. I looked hard and noticed that one of three was visibly pregnant, wearing a translucent cover-up of some sort, a white bra and matching panties and nothing else. It was a photo shoot, the photographer more round than tall with three cameras hanging from her shoulders clicked the shutter rapidly, trying to catch that perfect moment. There was someone doing make-up and a couple of others standing high and dry, fifty feet away, looking very serious as they spoke on their phones. As I approached, the pregnant woman was clearly cold, shivering, her pale skin turning pink from the bite of the wind. I told her she looked cold. She shivered and managed several shaky words that sounded like “you can't imagine.”

I met Sean a few minutes later. He was sitting on that black basalt, watching all of it and sipping his beer. He waved at me, and I waved back. The dog was running from one tide pool to another occasionally lapping up the salt water for which she would pay later that night. It was time to return to the cottage when I turned to see Sean standing about ten feet away looking at me, excited for company, I guess. The cool wind gave him a rosy cast, but what caught my eye was that smile. It was broad and genuine. He began our chat with an explanation of giving up on the fish after a few casts and had a beer instead. We chatted idly about nothing important, although he did take time to explain that his friend was in the back of his truck sleeping off a hangover. I don't remember much about the conversation except that he called me dude. Now, I haven't been called that in a decade, but I rather enjoyed it. It's very human. I have no idea where Sean was from or what he did for a living, but it reminded me about why I like the beach so much. It is an escape, a natural spiritual adviser to erase the pressures of life, strange politics and the uncivil ugliness which lies as a dark cloud over our nation. I hesitate to say therapeutic, but the more I think about it, that's exactly what it is. I slept well that night, so thank you Sean. By the way, do have an extra beer?