

## Sugar Sand

(short story excerpt)

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The drive to the bay had been a spur of the moment thing, a last crabbing run before Terry left, “for good this time.” JR raised his eyebrows in doubt at his friend’s worn-out declaration of escape; he’d heard it before. Still, he was up for any excuse to ditch work, the coast and sea air an easy lure.

With only a thermos of coffee and three stale doughnuts, they arrived at the marina before dawn and were gliding across the water in a green wooden skiff as the sun rose. They worked the baited lines in near silence for hours. Tiny waves lapped against the side of the boat, gently rocking it between the occasional lift of a swell. By nine they had a large cooler full of crab.

At the dock, Terry sat on the open tailgate of JR’s rusty ’67 Ford pickup. He watched as JR crouched on the pier systematically pulling each leggy creature from the cooler, prying off the top shell and picking out the entrails into the water. Gulls hung in the late-August air and landed on moss-streaked pilings, begging.

“You’re gutting them alive,” Terry said.

“Nah,” JR reasoned. A cigarette dangled from his lips and bobbed as he spoke. “You say that every time but, look.” He held up a crab. “See? They’re all droopy from being in the ice. They don’t know what hit ‘em.” He squinted at the smoke curling around his eyes and chuckled. “Pussy.”

Terry leaned against the sideboard and threw a scrap of leftover bait to a gull. He and JR had joined forces in junior high Spanish class seven years

earlier, bonded over a shared admiration for Mrs. Greene's heart-shaped ass and the fact that Terry let JR copy his homework. The girls liked JR, his swagger, his half-smile. They liked the way he owned each step of the hallway at school. It was the same long stride he used at home through the fields, heel and toe dug firmly into the dirt, waffled imprints of his work boots left behind.

They also seemed to like his guilt-free coarseness, a trait Terry sometimes found unsettling but, despite himself, tried hard to emulate. He kept pace but barely, often falling short of the indifference required when JR took him hunting for a day or hiking along the creek to check traps, some of which still held a live muskrat or raccoon that had to be clubbed to death instead. When they worked together on the farm, Terry never quite equaled JR's skill at lifting wooden crates of fruit or driving the Massey Ferguson with a pyramid of baskets teetering behind or bending over endless rows in the pounding sun. And he didn't know how to take a beating like JR.

Instead, Terry grew up under the gaze of a portrait that hung like a shrine on his dining room wall. The nine-year-old tow-headed boy depicted in gauzy brush strokes was lost when Terry was five and the painting, along with his mother's curtness, were constant reminders that Terry was not his dead brother.

After the crabs were cleaned, they ate lunch at a local diner, gorging on cheeseburgers and French fries, coleslaw and battered onion rings and peach pie topped with ice cream. In the heat of an already sweltering day, they settled in the truck for a quick nap before the drive home.

They woke up in the early evening. Dinner at the marina grill turned into a carouse at the bar and it was well after closing when they finally headed back.

With Terry at the wheel and JR hunched against the passenger-side door sleeping off the customary two or three or five too many, they made their way along an empty county byway, the moon setting behind a dark silhouette of pinewoods. Spindly trunks on either side were lit like ghosts in the spill of the headlights, sinking back into the gloom as the truck passed. Terry leaned over and punched JR's arm.

"Wake up," he said.

JR opened a bleary eye. "What happened?"

"You could at least keep me company."

JR mumbled. "I thought something was wrong with the truck."

"No. Miraculously, it's still running."

"She's mighty in the land." JR rubbed the back of his neck. "What time is it?"

"After three, I guess."

"And I wouldn't talk too loud about wheels if I were you," JR said. "With that clunker you got."

"Didn't I tell you? I sold it."

"Oh really? It's about time." JR coughed. "No, you didn't tell me."

"I bought a Harley," Terry said. "A few days ago. Used."

"A Harley. When did you learn to ride a bike?" JR tried to sit up.

"I've been. I got my license already. For the trip."

JR yawned and slumped back down. “Man, you’re just full of surprises.” He tucked his chin to his chest. “Let me sleep, Easy Rider. The old man’s been two guys short for a whole day. You know all hell’s going to break loose when we get back.”

“How bad will you catch it?”

“Oh, I’ll have to listen to his mouth until my ears bleed but he won’t touch me. He knows better,” JR said, with the bravado he had long since perfected, even as a kid, playing off the occasional black eye and the chip in his front tooth.

Terry cranked the window down and let the velvet night air blow in through the cab. He wondered at what point blood and bruise morphed into callous, when it was necessary, simple survival, to become casual about the brutality. He shifted into fourth gear and accelerated down a straightaway. He snickered.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just picturing your dad and how mad he probably is.” Terry said.

“Tossing in his sleep.”

“Yeah,” JR reluctantly caught the humor. “I can’t wait to see how red in the face he gets.” They looked at each other and laughed, a long howl of mockery and defiance, their heads tilted upwards like baying coyotes.