

## SUNSET REFLECTIONS

I was standing on the beach, Zuma Beach to be precise, when it hit me. While I wasn't struck physically, the epiphany might just as well have been Thor's Hammer between my eyes.

I was middle-aged.

I needed this revelation like I needed another hole in my head, but it wasn't like I asked for it, you know?

To tell you the truth, I'd actually come here to reflect on the painful decision I was facing, when this revelation blind-sided me.

As the tangerine daystar slowly slipped into the azure Pacific, the questions ricocheted through my mind, my middle-aged mind.

When did this happen? Why don't I feel old? Hadn't I just made out with Shelley Markham behind the bleachers a couple years ago?

The questions kept coming in staccato full-auto, but the selective fire on my middle-aged mind was stuck on semi.

After a few mentally frantic moments, I managed to refocus my thoughts on the serene beauty of the setting sun.

It was one of those rare quiet evenings on the beach, and as I gazed at the rapidly sinking star, I could almost hear the soft gentle hiss of the sea dousing the great orb's flames.

Maybe the sunsets held the key to putting the past forty-some years into perspective.

I hit the rewind button on the VCR player of my mind (note to self: upgrade VCR to DVD) and pushed "play" when the tape made it to the scene when I first watched, really watched, a sunset.

I must have been eight or nine years old, and it couldn't have been too far from this very place. My Dad had brought my brother and me to the beach for a day of body surfing and sand castle building. The gnarly surf caught me off guard more than once that day; but any threat I posed to the world's ecosystem by swallowing copious quantities of seawater, was more than mitigated by my subsequent, and painful, regurgitations of same.

By late afternoon, my brother and I were ready to throw in the towel and call it a day. Our Dad, God rest his soul, had other plans.

He lit the charcoal in our rusted hibachi grill, and started a bonfire in the concrete beach ring, just as the sun started its slow decent. The hunger in my empty, salt-water purged stomach, had reached the ferocity of a ravenous pack of wolves, but Dad wouldn't let us eat until after sunset.

"Just look at that boys. See how the sun seemed to pause for a moment before it realized it had no choice but to surrender its fate to the blue waters of the Pacific? If you listen close, you can hear the water put out the sun's flames."

My younger brother bought into Dad's fantasy, but I was much too old for such foolishness.

"That's just the sound of the surf, Dad," I said, in youthful and hungry exasperation.

I didn't know that this sunset marked one of the last times my brother and I would be together with our father.

The next sunset I remember came almost ten years later. I was standing in formation outside the mess hall at Camp Pendleton. I couldn't see the beach, or hear the

waves roll onto shore, but I could see the flat blue ocean, and watch the sun drown itself in her tranquil beauty.

This time I watched spellbound, but once again, I missed the significance of the moment.

The Marine Corps had forged and formed the raw ore of my youth into the hardened steel of manhood.

I had no way of knowing it at the time, but the Corps forever changed me, and I like to think the changes were for the better.

I was in my mid-twenties, and five years into my first marriage when I again watched a Pacific sunset, this time while holding the cold hand of a woman I no longer loved. The vivid colors in the sky stood in such stark contrast to the monochrome life with my wife.

I knew then, in that secret part of my heart, my marriage was over; but I wouldn't find the courage to end it until several years and two daughters later.

When my bare feet next touched this sand, the winds of change had again swept my life clean.

After thirty-four years, I'd finally found my soul mate, and we held each other close as we started our life together, some twelve hundred miles from where we'd first met and wed.

As the sun slowly sank, she put her soft hands on my face, then gently closed my eyes with a brush of her luscious lips.

"Shush baby. Can you hear that?" she whispered wetly into my now crimson ear.

"What?" I breathlessly rasped.

"The ocean is swallowing the sun. Can't you hear the soft hiss as the flames are going out?"

My mind raced, as I realized I'd never told her the story of that long ago day on the beach, the day when I first watched, unwillingly, the sun slowly slip into the Pacific. In fact, until that moment, I'd long ago forgotten my Dad's words on that day.

Afraid that I would miss a rare second chance at some cosmic revelation, I tried to still the pounding in my chest, and then I heard it.

Ever so soft, ever so gentle, the sound of the sun surrendering its fire to the beauty of the sea, and then so much more. As I gave myself over to the flood of things unseen, and before this second, unrealized and unfelt, I recognized this moment from long ago, not once, but many times.

I looked into the eternally deep emerald eyes of my soul mate, and silently gave thanks to my Creator for at long last reuniting me with this woman, and fervently prayed that He would never separate us again.

But today, or perhaps I should now say tonight, I find myself back on this lonely stretch of sand.

My soul mate, now my wife of almost seven years, patiently waits for me in the great desert that lies beyond the mountains behind me. But once again, the fateful winds of change are howling, and I find myself on this same shore.

Now middle-aged, and like my father before me, I am facing one of the most difficult decisions in my life. It's time to walk away.

Despite my best efforts, my ex-wife has managed to turn the love of my daughters into hate.

So now, with heavy heart, I cry out to my Creator, and reluctantly, regretfully, and yes, bitterly, concede defeat.

I watch as the brilliance of the sun is extinguished by the cool darkness of the sea, and seek comfort in the knowledge that tomorrow is a new day.

I know that if I have the strength to look to the east, towards where my wife waits for my return, the sun will rise again, middle-aged or not.

When I turn away from the churning white foam, now almost glowing in the early moonlight, I have to wonder what life has in store for me, before I next have the chance to watch the sunset from this shore.

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