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The Night of Daniel

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The Night of Daniel

Daniel was slouched down in his Lay-Z-Boy, midmorning, when he got the idea. He'd dreamed about it for weeks, months even, but deep down he knew he was too old, and he'd been afraid he would die before he could ever do it again. He pulled himself up and called the taxi, then gathered his things: money, extra handkerchief, sunglasses, chapstick in case the wind was up. And his walking stick. It was August, didn't need a jacket or a sweater. Then the taxi was there, honking in the driveway. Daniel yanked his door shut, tottered across the yard and slid into the front seat. "Bus station," he said. "Greyhound."

Aw! this was fine. The trees and the houses fled by, and he gawked at every one, like a kid in from the country. Didn't get out much now, once every three months to the doctor, now and then to Betty's or one of the grandkids. Aw, they'd shit in their pants if they knew about this, wouldn't they? Daniel laughed out loud. Oh, this town was fine, he thought, and it had never looked finer than today. The white clapboard houses and the clipped green lawns and hedges, the oaks and beeches stretching over the street and then the bright glitter of storefronts blurring by as they drove into downtown. A bus trip!

It had been four years since his last bus trip. Four years. Betty drove him to the station then, all the way with her "Dad are you sure you can manage?" "Dad are you sure you'll be warm enough?" "Dad can you find your way when you get there?" Then once they were at the station it was "Dad do you know which bus it is? Let's check at the desk."

No! Hell no he wouldn't check. Taken the bus for years, didn't need to check. He headed straight for the gate, Betty yapping at his heels every step. At the gate he finally turned on her. "Goddamnit I'm not a six year old kid. I can damn well take care of myself, so go to hell home and leave me alone." All the heads turning to stare and he could see the hurt in Betty's face but he couldn't stop. He turned again at the bus door and shouted back at her "And I can goddamned well find the right bus!" and then stepped up and found a seat.

It was the wrong bus. Didn't realize it till they were halfway to Natchez and the lady next to him said something about the Antebellum Pilgrimage and River Drive. He managed to hide his surprise but when they got there he caught the first bus back and took a taxi home. Didn't call Betty. Later, he apologized for the way he'd talked to her at the station, and she said that it was all right, she understood. He never told her about it being the wrong bus, but somehow, he thought she knew. She'd checked the board or asked at the desk — somehow she'd found out. She knew, but she never said anything.

This time, he did not take the wrong bus. He asked at the desk and asked the bus driver too. "Coast Express." Daniel took a seat, halfway back on the right.

The bus rattled out of the city and onto the highway. Asphalt everywhere. He could remember cotton fields, almost up to downtown, little snatches of pine forest all along the river. Near the highway interchange there had once been a dairy farm with a red windmill and a pond surrounded by willows, where Holsteins lounged through the summer. Gone now, all of it gone, nothing but used car lots, gas stations and shopping malls. Signboards screaming This Bud's For You, Step Up To Salem, Fly First Class With Wild Turkey. The land spread out, flat and hot, a dusty tired green. Daniel squinted down at the cars and the pickups as they sped by, a bright blur of headachy colors.

He was already tired. The frummeling in and out of the taxi, the prowling around the station, the crowds and the noise and the lights. The little white fire of excitement he'd felt in leaving, like a coal that burns hot but fast, was gone. He dozed, blinking his eyes open now and then. They were in forest soon, the squatly gnarled oaks and the pines. Years of hiking here, Sundays as a kid, and later with Margaret and Betty. Betty had brought her kitten once, he remembered, and the damned thing ran up a pin-oak and wouldn't come down. Took him, Daniel, half an hour to climb up and fetch him — Waffles, that was his name! — Betty bawling and all the people stopping to gawk or laugh. He gazed out at the trees again, miles of them still, restful and dark, at least that hadn't changed. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes again. There was just the soft whoosh of traffic and the steady rhythm of the bus rolling over the long concrete slabs. Slab, joint, slab, joint. A rhythm like a sailboat maybe, the hull sweeping up and slapping down again on the waves — whoooooomp Ah! whoooooomp Ah! — over and over. He was eighty-two years old and that was one more thing that he'd never do before he died — cross the sea on a sailboat. He held his eyes closed and drifted. Whoooooomp Ah!

He woke up as they were coming into Gulfport. Godalmighty, he was doing it! Yes! He felt strong again, and straightened up to look out the glass, waiting for that first glimpse of the Gulf. The bus rattled over potholes, around a curve, a corner, one more, and there it was, straight ahead. That great flat stretch of colors: gray, almost green, growing to blue, spreading up to the sky — he could see it a million times and never get enough.

The bus stopped for ten minutes at the city station, but Daniel stayed on. Soon they were off again, bumping along the coastal highway, past the motels, the marinas and the baitshops, the lined-up seafood chains: Captian D's, the Red Lobster, Shrimp Shack — All You Can Eat \$9.95. Took thirty minutes just to get out of town, out to some open beach again. Daniel yanked the cord and got out.

He thought he could remember this place. Little stretch of boardwalk, couple of snack shops and souvenir stands, beyond that just open beach. He thought he could remember it but God knows — how many years had it been since the last time he was here? He walked up the path and the steps onto the boardwalk, and leaned on the railing, looking out to sea. Handful of sunbathers on the white sand, kids splashing in the waves, the flat gray water turning over at the shore. How many years?

At least five or six years — he could remember trips down with Betty or the grandkids, but when? Sometime after Margaret died. There'd been plenty of trips down with Margaret, and of course plenty alone too, and plenty with friends, fishing buddies, his brother Walter or his sisters in their old Dodge, bus trips full of rowdy schoolkids, he'd even hitched down sometimes, back in the twenties when he was in school. When was the very first trip? With his parents before the first war, he could remember that open Model-A, he and Walter and the girls in the back, the salt wind buffing 'em all the way. Nothing here then, not a building in sight. Not much building till the mid 20s — twenty-six, twenty-seven.

Nineteen-twenty-seven. One nine two seven — that was a year. Ruth hit sixty, Lindy flew to Paris, and he, Daniel, got married, bought a house, and started teaching. Forty-two years he'd taught — forty-two. Gone straight through the war without a hitch, right up to his sixty-seventh birthday. Could have taught longer of course, but by then Margaret was sick. Nineteen-twenty-seven to Nineteen-seventy. Ho! Not bad. Algebra, geometry, trigonometry, forty-two years of it. Years of Pythagorean theorems and equilateral triangles. Sine, cosine, tangent. The fistfuls of exambooks and the chalkdust spilling down his trousers. The slide rule he wore on his belt, the kids teasing him, calling him Quickdraw.

What a crew he'd taught — kids and kids of kids. Some quiet and some wild as monkeys, always full of shenanigans but he'd outfoxed 'em all, most of the time anyway. Some of 'em turned out pretty well — doctors, lawyers, one a state senator. Some of 'em never amounted to diddley-squat. Most of 'em were just right in the middle, good solid citizens who paid their taxes and kept their grass cut. Generations of 'em, forty-two years.

Daniel straightened up from the railing and stretched his back. Aaaach! It was a hot day, clear except for a few lazy cumulus. Not many people down on this part of the shore, just a few families out for day-trips. He walked a little ways along the boardwalk, right hand on the railing, left on his cane. Jeez it was hot, and what a glare. Already past noon; he was hungry. There were two snack shops, one down at the far end with a neon Budweiser lamp over the door, and one nearby with a sign: Safe Harbor-Hamburger and Fries \$3.95. Daniel went into the Safe Harbor and sat at a table by the window. "Hamburger and fries," he said to the waitress. "And a large beer."

“We don’t serve beer, sir.”

“Got any whiskey?”

“We don’t have a liquor license sir. I can serve you Coke, Sprite, Tab, Seven-Up, Dr. Pepper, Orange Crush . . .”

“Just a glass of plain water then. Got any of that?”

“Yes sir, sure do.”

The waitress went back to the kitchen and Daniel peered out the glass. Couldn’t see much of the water, the boardwalk railing was right in the way. Couples strolled by, then a gang of teenaged girls and three kids playing tag. The kids chased and screamed, giggling at last in that helpless, unstoppable way of small kids, and then he, Daniel, laughed too, infected by them. They scurried on, then a seagull landed on the railing and stared in at him.

The waitress brought his hamburger and fries, on a paper plate. Damn it, nobody used real plates anymore, used to be you could go into a restaurant and get a real meal on real plates. No plates anymore, no sir, and God knows what the hamburger was made of, probably kangaroo or armadillo or some miserable varmint he’d never even heard of. What the hell, nothing to do, you had to eat. The gull flew away and more kids ran by, shouting, the water glistening on them.

He remembered the times they’s brought Betty down here, when she was just a kid. Scuffling around in the sand, moats and castles, one time the little squirt had even buried him in sand, right up to his neck. He’d hold her hand and they’d go running into the surf, her screaming “Daddy! Daddy!” and then he’d scoop her up in his arms as a breaker split past them. The feel of that tiny body, so thin and vulnerable, crushed up against his chest, the salt spray flying.

Betty, there at his house again every morning, always worrying. Damn it, what all had he said to her this morning? Couldn’t even remember it any more but he knew it was pretty nasty, sometimes he was just pure-D ornery. Daniel twisted in his chair, tugged at a lock of his hair. He finished his lunch and shoved the plate away. Damned armadillo-burger. He paid and hobbled back outside, back to the boardwalk railing.

He ought to apologize to Betty, for grouching at her this morning. Damn it, he’d have to apologize, for this morning and for all the other times too. To Betty and to all the grandkids, they all meant well but all that fussing around just irritated the shit out of him, he wasn’t one for fussing around, no. He knew they meant well though, and he ought to tell ’em he appreciated it, but he wasn’t one for speeches either, sappy soap-opera stuff, no, never had been.

He twisted around at the railing and then Hey! A souvenir! He could buy Betty a souvenir. Give it to her tomorrow. “See, honey, your old man can still take care of himself. Just had a nice day at the beach yesterday, and brought you a little something to say thanks for everything.” God, she’d have a cat, wouldn’t she? Aw, this was fine! He plodded down the boardwalk into the nearest souvenir shop. Captain Kidd’s Treasure Chest — Fine Art, Memorabilia, Souvenirs — Credit Cards Accepted.

It was freezing inside, they had the air-conditioning running full-blast. Place was full of stuff, floor to ceiling. Conch shells mounted on plastic, laminated driftwood, schlocky little paintings of fishing boats and waves breaking over boulders, probably color-by-number sets that'd been painted in Taiwan. Crap! The world was full of crap. Daniel snuffled through it all, the flip-flop sandals, and the keychains and place-mat sets. Had to have something nice, something she would like, and something he could carry around without any trouble. He flipped through the scarves and at last found one. No high fashion, but still, it wasn't bad — a nice deep burgundy with blue marlins swimming around the edge. He paid the cashier and had it gift wrapped, and then he slipped the package into his trouser pocket and trudged back out to the boardwalk.

The salty heat blew up against him, and the high sun caromed off the water, glimmers dancing back and forth, over and under with the waves. Daniel clipped his sunshades onto his glasses, stared out to the sea. What a day! That sharp, pure smell and the wind blasting his face, filling his lungs. Ah, this was healthy, best medicine there was. He shuffled along the boardwalk, hanging on at the railing. When he came to a bench, he sat down. There were kids nearby in the sand, others splashing down in the surf. Kids he might have been teaching, if he'd still been teaching. He'd cram some sense into their heads, wouldn't he? Get 'em straightened out and flyin' right. That was his job, wasn't it? His life. He slid down farther on the bench and watched the waves breaking, one after another. That wrinkle of water building up and up, the lovely thin sheet forming, turquoise and white, so thin you could see through it just for an instant, then collapsing again, all the spray foaming. That constant rushing sound, restful like some music he'd always known. The sun on his cheeks. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he awoke, his mouth was dry and his neck hurt. Didn't know where he was at first, and aaaach! — his neck was stiff as a fencepost. The sun was lower, but still bright — his nose was running to beat sixty and goddamnit what a wind. He wiped his nose and pulled himself up on the bench. Out on the sea, boats were heading in, menhaden and shrimp, thin white wakes and the gulls swarming. A few ragged clouds had come up. Midafternoon, time for a drink. Yeah, that's what he needed, a couple of good stiff ones. He looked around and saw the bar down at the end, with the neon Budweiser sign. What a hike. He stood up, got his wind, started off. Tramping down the boardwalk, the wind whipping up sand now, gulls screaming.

Finally he was at the bar. It was right at the end of the boardwalk, beyond there was just open beach and dunes. He shoved open the door and walked in. Cold again, the air conditioner was blasting. A few scattered tables and he was the only customer, just a girl waiting behind the counter.

“Watcha drinkin’, Pops?”

“Got any whiskey?”

“Got Schlitz, Bud, Miller Lite. Watcha havin’?”

“Bud. Make it two.”

“Allrighty.”

The girl tapped the beer into plastic cups. Nobody used real glasses anymore, it was always plastic or paper, or some chemical shit.

“That’ll be two-eighty.” The girl slapped the cups down on the counter.

“Eh?”

“Two dollars eighty. Buck forty a throw.”

Hell’s bells, a dollar for a beer! He laid two bills on the counter and squeezed out some coins. The girl scooped them up and dropped them into the cash register.

“Allrighty.”

Daniel hung his cane over his forearm, gripped the two cups, and hobbled to the far table by the window. A buck forty beer out of a plastic cup. He stretched out in the chair and twisted his neck, right, and then left, until it was loose again. Better. He started in on the beer. Could have used some cold George Dickel now, never been much of a beer man. He finished the first and started in on the second.

His neck still ached a little, and his back too. What could you expect at eighty-two? Eighty-goddamned — two, nine squared plus one. What a shitty age to be. Eight more years and he’d be a right angle. Maybe Margaret had been lucky, dying at sixty-seven. Maybe it was better that way, instead of flummoxing on like him, an old duffer with a runny nose, stringy hair white as ivory, almost yellow. Aches and pains and forgetting, falling asleep in the middle of the day.

God he was bushed. That salt air and the sun — they could really do you in. Phew! He finished the second beer and shoved the cups away, then put his head down on the table to rest. Just for a moment.

“Hey Pops! You all right?”

“Eh?”

“Wake up, willya?”

“Margaret?”

“C’mon. Time to get going!”

“Where’s Margaret?”

“Whadja say? C’mon, you got to go now — we got to close up.”

The hand on his shoulder. The lights. He pulled himself up, blinking and blinking. The girl pushed a mop toward his feet. He gripped his cane and headed for the door. Outside, it was very dark.

He stepped down the stairs at the end of the boardwalk, carefully, one at a time, onto the sand. Just walk along here for awhile, he thought. Get a clear head.

Margaret. She'd been right there with him for a moment. It was a dream, he knew, but it seemed like something more. Dead thirteen years now, crazy the tricks your mind played, the things that came back to you. Like all that floatsam the sea washed up, the slick shiny things from years ago — while the things that fell in yesterday got buried in the mud.

The way she sat, with her legs crossed, and her back straight as a T-square, hair halfway down to her waist, or up in a bun after Betty was born. Those slender fingers, the supple way they moved. That look in her eye sometimes, she'd kid him, call him Dangerous Dan. Certain parts of her body, the little hollow in her neck, just above her collarbone, the curve of her hipbone at the top of her thighs. Sometimes he thought he could still feel her fingertips on his skin.

Working on that damned house, adding a bedroom and a playroom, klutzing around with wallpaper and linoleum tile, Margaret crouching up on the ladder, painting the ceiling. All those simple, ordinary things that got done every year, raking leaves and cleaning out the gutters, year in, year out, building up the garden together. He could still see her down on her knees clipping away that nut grass at the edge of the oleander beds.

Daniel stopped suddenly, looked around. Son of a bitch, how had he walked so far? Ahead of him was only beach and dunes, and back behind him, a long way back, was the boardwalk. He could see a few lights flickering, a car passing now and then on the highway, way over in the distance. He had to catch a bus, damnit, a bus. He had come the wrong way.

Goddamnit what an old fool he was! He was too tired to walk back, worn himself out walking down here. Just take it easy, he thought. Little bit at a time. Don't panic. He walked a short distance, but it was no good. He was already bushed, and the sight of all that sand between him and the highway just knocked all the stuffing out of him. Better take a rest, he thought. Get some strength. He plodded up the first row of dunes and down the other side, then lay down on the far slope. It was easier getting up and down, he thought, lying on a slope. It was fine here, the wind was down and it was still plenty warm. There was a full moon just coming up, way over to his left. Just rest a moment. He closed his eyes.

The moon was far overhead when he awoke, and he stared at it for a long time. Funny how clear it was, he thought. All those craters, the peaks and the valleys. He could hear the waves spilling onto the shore nearby, the soft wind whispering over the dunes. It occurred to him, as though an afterthought, that he might die here. It was still warm but it would get cooler toward morning. He'd had a long day and he was a worn-out old man anyway, weak as a kitten. He might die here, on this night.

So what? He wasn't afraid of dying, no, no way, he'd convinced himself of that. You had to go sometime, sure, why not tonight? Big deal. Somebody'd come along and find his body, they'd shovel him up, haul him away and bury him. He could see the headlines: EMINENT EDUCATOR PASSES AWAY WHILE VACATIONING, CAREER SPANNED SIX DECADES. This night.

He lay there, trying to relax, but suddenly it was no good any more. God, what a fool he was! Why had he walked all the way down here? Fool! Why had he come alone anyway, should have asked Betty to bring him, but she was always such a worry-wart, wanted to do it alone to show her, damnit. Goddamnit Betty, it was all her fault! Goddamnit! ABANDONED MAN FOUND DEAD IN DUNES, DAUGHTER CHARGED WITH NEGLIGENCE.

Daniel scabbled in the loose sand, clawing on all fours like a lunatic crab. He worked his way up to the top of the dune, and then he stopped, wheezing out of breath, heart thumping like a motor.

What was the point of it? He couldn't make it back to the boardwalk tonight and even if he could, so what? There was nobody around this late, no phone, no more buses either. It was his own damned fault, not Betty's, and now he just had to ride it out; what else was there to do? He could get up again in the morning when he was rested, or call out for help when there were other people around. If he made it till the morning. Maybe he really would die, tonight. This night.

He could hear himself breathing, his own breath, in-and-out, in-and-out, and then abruptly, it seemed like he had to breathe harder, to reach out for each breath and suck it in, harder and harder, each one thinner and farther away. He could feel the warm sand all around him, sense it, and then he was sinking in it. Sinking! Quicksand! He thrashed out wildly, tried to yell but his mouth was too dry and his tongue thick. His legs dug in and his arms flailed in a panic, trying to pull himself up from the sand, out. He had to get out! Yes! He lunged and bucked, loose sand flying, and then he was bushed again, shot, and he just lay there, not moving. He gulped for air, and the fear twisted up through his legs and his gut, way out on his fingertips.

It was fear of death. For months now, every night, the fear pressed down like the ceiling and the walls. He could slough it off during the days and the evenings, but that hour always came, the middle of the night. Sometimes he could feel the fear coming, like a train in a tunnel, and then it was the fear itself he was afraid of. Goddamnit, that mindless, numbing fear, he could feel it now, like fingers from the sand, holding him.

Think goddamnit! That's what he had to do, think. Use his noggin. Line it all up in some rational order, he thought, like an algebraic proof. Maybe if he could come to some understanding, like some summing up, or like finally figuring out what the meaning of it all really was, the point. Maybe then he could meet the fear head-on. But no, it was still there. He shivered, his body stiff as a plank, and he wrapped his arms around his chest and squeezed. He squeezed and squeezed, fingers digging into ribs, forearms crushing down into his gut, and then he stopped, and closed his eyes.

His whole body, every part of it cold and tight, lay still on the sand. Legs spread out down the slope, arms folded over his chest, grains of sand blowing in his hair, at his temples, and that hopeless, mindless fear, still there. The wind sighed over the dunes, the spare reeds rustled nearby. He forced himself to listen, to concentrate on listening. Any sound, anything at all to get out of himself, out and beyond the fear. The surf coming in, over and over, a gull every now and then with a crazy shriek. He shifted again in the sand and then he felt Betty's package in his pants' pocket.

He had a sudden intense vision of another summer night, years ago. He was just back from a Little League baseball game — he was assistant coach — and they'd lost again, had a miserable team. Margaret wasn't feeling well, she'd been to the doctor that afternoon and hadn't gone to the game. She was already in bed when he got home, but she was still awake. He slipped in beside her, just under a sheet; it was hot even late at night and the wind barely stirred the curtains. "I have a surprise," she said, and then she was on top of him, pushing him down with her hands at his ear, then whispering, "I'm pregnant."

He'd gotten up and pulled down a jug of apple cider from the pantry. Poured them both a toast. Sipping that cider in the bed, the hot darkness and the crickets whinnying outside in the hedges, and both of them yakking and laughing like teenagers.

He jumped abruptly, startled by the sound of his own laughter. He had laughed out loud! He opened his eyes again to the dunes and the ocean, the white moonlight on the waves. Yes, goddamnit, he had laughed. Those memories, all the crazy ones coming back. It was something to hold onto anyway, a little nugget he could squeeze. The tension drained out of him now, legs relaxing, arms relaxing; his breath came easier.

Goddamnit he'd have one hell of a memory if he ever survived this night, wouldn't he? He stared out over the ridge: the sand, the sea, the light from the moon. The sky — no seams or corners or edges, no ceiling pressing down on him this night, no, just moon and stars. The longer he looked up at them, the deeper they seemed. If he stared, it was almost like he was part of it, like he was falling into the sky.

That one night. Kissing Margaret's belly and spilling apple cider in the bed, both of them laughing. That's all that mattered. Those memories, and that laughter. Yes, he said, staring up at the wide sky, yes.

by Michael Owen