



The Beach Scene

by Albert Berg

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The Beach Scene

April 1, 2006

Walter died today. Found out this morning over breakfast. Suicide. Walter. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it. Suicide. Walter *wasn't* suicidal. I know that, know it for a fact.

But he *is* dead. Why? I am not foolish enough to suspect "foul play" as they say in the mystery stories. No one cares enough about a community college art teacher to murder him. But suicide?

Something is wrong here. Very wrong.

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April 2, 2006

I didn't realize until this morning that yesterday was April Fools day. Some kind of sick joke? But that's not like Walter either. He was a little crazy, but not that kind of crazy. Still I keep half expecting to pick up my voice and hear his voice yell, "Gotcha!" But it is no joke. I know he is dead.

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(Later)

Got a package today. From Walter. Scary considering what I wrote about expecting him to call. I can't express the chill I got when I saw his name on the label. A message from the dead. Surely it's not a good Omen.

It's a painting. Or at least I think it is. The package is the right shape, and knowing Walter it seems likely, but...I haven't yet worked up the courage to open it yet. I'm afraid of what I might find.

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April 3, 2006

Went to the funeral today. Walter's wife, Martha, was in hysterics. Can't say I blame her. It was awkward being there seeing someone in the most vulnerable possible condition. I didn't know her that well. Walter and I rarely interacted outside of work, so I have very little knowledge of his personal life. Sylvia went up to her and hugged her even though she'd never met her before in her life. It must be something with women to be able to make that kind of spontaneous connection. I just shook her hand, and told her I was sorry. I don't make a habit of crying in public, but seeing her so shaken up brought tears to the edges of my eyes, and I did nothing to wipe them away. After five years of friendship it's the least Walter deserves of me.

One other thing. The package. It's still sitting there in my study. Mocking me. That's how it feels anyway. Should I open it?

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(Later)

Finally worked up the courage to pop open the end of the tube and slide out the painting Walter sent before he died. I feel silly now, thinking how I feared to look at it. The painting shows two wooden chairs on a beach facing the surf with a murky sun hanging in the sky. Something in the perspective seems off, but it's hard to put my finger on. At least I can tell what the painting's supposed to be. Some of the modern art Walter used to love so much always seemed like random scribbling to me. Perhaps this is evidence of my complete lack of culture.

Still, as benign as painting is, there's something I don't like about it. Something creepy. Maybe, it's the simple fact that it was last touched by the hand of a man who took his own life, but I think it is something more. I found the words "The Beach Scene" written on the back of the canvas. I assume this is the title.

Ominous. That's the feeling I get from it. The whole thing. Maybe I should just get rid of it.

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April 4, 2006

Mowed the yard today, first time since winter. Had some trouble starting the mower, but problem solved with new spark plug. Felt good to get out in the fresh air after sitting under the fluorescent all day at work. I haven't felt this good since the funeral.

The only fly in the ointment is the painting. It's still sitting in my study spread out on my desk. I haven't gone in there since I opened it. It's not that I'm afraid...but then maybe I am.

Why?

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April 5

Horrible day at work today. I keep thinking I'll look across the hall and see Walter sitting at his desk in between classes. No one has come to clear his stuff out of there yet. I wish they would.

I sat and ate my lunch on one of the benches outside, but it just made the rest of the day seem that much longer. I may call in sick tomorrow. Unethical I know, but I haven't had a real sick day in over a year.

(Later)

When I got home Sylvia had hung the painting in the living room, told me she went out and bought a frame for it today.

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April 6 (Early)

Had a dream, a nightmare. Some of it I remember, but the rest... I shouldn't write it down. Words give things power somehow. I believe that. Silly really but...that dream so frightening, like fingers of fear reaching into my soul (I do wax too poetic, but that is how I feel). But the feeling is fading now. Try to get some sleep.

(Lunch)

Read over my account of the dream last night. If I did not recognize my own handwriting I might have doubted its authenticity. But thinking on it I do seem to remember some sort of troubling dream. Certainly not on the scale I wrote about in the early hours of the morning though. What was it I was unwilling to write? That troubles me most of all. Why do we forget our dreams? So many things science cannot answer.

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April 7

Got our tax refund check in the mail today. Sylvia says we would have had it two weeks ago if I would let them do direct deposit. Maybe I'm getting set in my ways at the ripe old age of 42. Sylvia has seemed morose of late, though the arrival of the check did put her in a better mood. We went out to a nice restaurant in town to celebrate.

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April 8, 2006

Sylvia moved the painting into our bedroom for some reason. I meant to ask her about it, but she seems to be asleep now. It can wait till morning. I don't like it though. It seems ominous somehow. The sky seems too gray, though the light on the beach itself is full and strong. Some of the light seems to be coming *beneath* the waves as they crash on the beach. Also, the perspective is slightly wrong (mentioned this before). What is it about perspective? If the perspective is wrong the picture doesn't look real. But it's more than that. This picture isn't just poorly done. Its unsettling. Uncanny (now *there's* a word for it). As if it has embedded itself in my thoughts like a mind worm (what's a mind worm?).

I'm making less and less sense even to myself. Must be past my bed time.

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April 9, 2006

(Early)

Another nightmare. Sylvia! She is still here, still breathing. I am slightly calmer in knowing this, but my heart still pounds in my chest. The horror of that moment when I wake and everything seems so real. Real, yes, but still some things escape me. They hover on the edge of my consciousness like a fly buzzing just beyond my range of sight, and yet, no matter how I try I cannot recall. I am not sure I want to.

(Lunch)

Planned to finally make good on my promise to call in today, but contrary to every forecast it's pouring down buckets outside. Asked Sylvia about the painting, but she says she didn't move it. Thought I did. I didn't press the subject. She must have forgotten. But I wonder...

We're having Tom And Mary Selwick over for dinner tonight. Friends of Sylvia's. Don't know them that well, but Tom is a pleasant enough fellow if I recall correctly.

(Before bed)

Dinner went well. Sylvia made lasagna with garlic bread. She is, I think, especially proud of her home made lasagna, and I must admit it tastes ever so much better than the store bought stuff.

After dinner we sat in the living room and talked for a while. Mary commented on the painting of the beach scene, and I asked Sylvia when she had moved it back. She gave me the strangest look and said that she hadn't moved it, that it had been in the living room the whole time. I didn't argue with her since there were guests present, but it gave me a funny feeling the way she said it.

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April 13, 2006

Today finally seemed like the right day to call in sick. Gave a big test in my Calculus II class yesterday, and nothing else coming down the pike for a while yet. Looking forward to a beautiful three day weekend.

(Later)

Sylvia's gone out shopping and left me home alone. I got a gentle scolding from her for lying about being sick, but I can tell she's not really angry. I had planned to catch up on some reading in the study, but then I saw that Sylvia moved that ghastly painting in there on the wall over my desk. I wonder why. I mentioned my dislike of the thing to her yesterday. She asked me why I was so bothered by it, but I couldn't answer her because I don't know. I only know that every time I look at it seems more and more repulsive. And yet the painting does not change. It remains now as it always has been a picture of two wooden beach chairs sitting on the sand and facing an ocean with mild surf frozen in the act of breaking on the shore.

The chairs are empty. Why are they empty? Where are the denizens of the beach, the bikini clad teenage girls, the children with their sandcastles, the middle aged men with their beer bellies hanging over the elastic of their swim trunks? Is there no one left in the world to rest their back against the wooden slats of those chairs and bask in the weak glow of the cloud shrouded sun?

I almost move the painting myself, but something stops me. I must speak with Sylvia about it. I don't care so much what she does in the rest of the house, but she should know better than to mess with my study.

(Before bed)

The talk with Sylvia about the painting turned into a nasty fight. Again she insists she did not move it. I opened the study door and showed her where it hung on my wall, but she said I must have put it there. The very idea is absurd. And yet, now that I have had time to cool down, to reflect on things, I cannot believe she is lying. If she *did* move the painting, she does not remember. If she did not move the painting...I am not prepared to consider the ramifications of this possibility.

April 15, 2006

Hard day at work today. Three times I made simple mistakes on equations I must have taught a hundred times by now, twice in the same class. I must be slipping.

I have not felt like myself lately. Something is eating at me, keeping me from concentrating. It's difficult to describe the sensation. Almost as if I am trying to remember something important, but the harder I think about it the harder it is to pin down. Also I have had a headache for most of the day. I know it sounds strange, but I cannot shake the feeling that the painting is somehow responsible.

April 16, 2006

More of those horrible dreams tonight. I would not have believed it possible, but I think they're actually growing more intense. I took the painting off the wall and threw it in the dumpster on my way to work. I am not a man given to superstition, but I cannot bear its presence any longer. Already I feel as if a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

(Later)

It's back. I know better than to blame Sylvia this time. I cannot fully describe the feeling of fear I felt when I opened the door and saw it there on the wall. I am convinced it is an evil thing, and yet I do not know why. The painting remains unchanged. It shows what it has always shown. There are no dark eyes outlined in the clouds, no eldritch curse scratched in the sand between the beach chairs. Nothing. Am I losing my mind? The headaches are back.

April 17, 2006

Called in sick again today. This time it's for real. Headache is unbearable. Sylvia wanted me to see a doctor,

but I refused. I know what is causing this, and it has to end. I will take care of it today.

(Later)

I am in hell. The painting will not *die*. As soon as Sylvia left for work, I went to my desk and took out a pair of scissors. Intended to cut it up but...this cannot be real. I am having a nightmare. I will wake up soon frightened but normal. But the blood, the blood is everywhere. It bled. I can still barely believe it myself. I sliced it down the middle, right between the two beach chairs, and blood sprayed out, covering my arms, my glasses. I must have screamed, though I have no memory of it. How could I not have? The blood was *warm*. Some of it got *in my mouth*. Before writing this I spent fifteen minutes retching over the toilet and yet I can still taste it on my tongue. I am dreaming, I must be. Oh God let this be a nightmare!

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It is no dream. I cannot explain it away so easily. There is something in the painting. I believe this. There must be a way to fight it, to defeat it. I don't think I can go on living like this. Sylvia got back from her shopping, and asked me if I was okay. At first I thought she was joking. How could she not see the blood soaked floor in the living room, the red stains on my shirt? But they were gone, dried up.

Disappeared. How can they be gone? Told her I had a headache. That much at least is true, but how can I tell her of the thing that hangs in our living room, the thing that has come to haunt me day and night. I cannot. She does not feel its influence. Its power of terror is reserved for me and me alone and I feel it full well. Reading back over the entries of the last few days I realized I sound like a madman. Perhaps I am mad. Some sick part of me hopes that it is so, for if I am mad then none of this, however terrifying, is real. But how can one know if one is mad? Because I have experienced something so far beyond what I had believed possible, does that prove my insanity? The madman says that aliens are sending him messages that only he can hear, that lining his hat with foil will keep them out, but what if it were true? How can one know the difference between what is real, and what is in the mind? Is not all experience in the mind?

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April 18, 2006

More nightmares last night, and the headaches are getting worse. Sylvia again suggested that I see a doctor and again I refused. I know the source of my problem, and I will deal with it in my own way.

(Later)

I went for a walk to get away from the painting, thinking it might be easier to think if the distance between us was greater. The fresh air did seem to calm my nerves a bit, but the headache remains.

I had the idea I should call Martha, Walter's widow. If there is something strange about the painting perhaps she would know about it. I could almost kick myself for not thinking of it sooner.

(Later)

The call did not go well. At first Martha sounded glad to hear from me (once I'd explained who I was of course) but when I brought up the painting she went suddenly silent. At first I thought the line had gone dead but then I could hear her breathing. "Walter didn't like that painting," she said at last. Then I heard what sounded like a sob, and the line really did go dead.

I thought about calling back, but I do not wish to upset her further. Still, the implication of her words is

obvious, at least to me. The painting drove Walter to suicide. The "how" and the "why" are trivial at the moment. The one question that remains is this: Why did he send it to me?

But I think I can answer that one. Yes I know I can. He did not send it. The painting sent itself. It only used Walter as a tool. And when it was done with him...

Dear God I think I am going to be sick.

(Later)

I need answers. I approached the cursed thing with trepidation, looking for the thing I know must be there. It is almost too difficult for me to look at it, but I must. The painter's signature is there in the lower left corner of the painting, the letters following the curve of a leaf of sea grass.

Timothy Lutz. His name is in the phone book. I want to call him but...what would I say? I have half convinced myself that I am crazy, but I do not want anyone else to know it. But the answer is there. It must be.

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I made the call. I almost didn't. The phone trembled in my hand, my fingers shook as they sought the keys, but I forced myself to go on. The voice that answered at the other end did not belong to Timothy Lutz. It was a woman. She sounded young, younger than me at any rate. I asked if I could speak to Mr. Lutz. At first she assumed I was a telemarketer, a reaction that seemed almost humorous given the circumstances. I explained that I had purchased one of his paintings and I had a few questions for him about it. Her voice took a new tone: edgy, evasive. She asked which painting it was.

I described the beach scene.

She flew into a fit. Told me to get rid of it. *Demanded* I get rid of it. "Burn it. Cut it up. Kill it before it can spread." Those were her words. "Kill it."

I suppose her tone should have frightened me, but instead I was relieved to hear that she had some knowledge of the thing I was facing. I asked her to tell me what it was, what force gave The Beach Scene such power.

She said she didn't know. She said that Timothy had said it was a virus. "Like a computer virus, only instead of infecting computers it infects people minds."

I asked her where he might have caught such a virus, but she didn't know. She told me he was studying some strange Mayan frescoes before he started acting strangely, but she couldn't be sure if it was their influence or some other force that had planted the idea in his mind.

At first things had been normal. He had been more absorbed in his work than normal, but nothing to cause any real concern. But gradually, she told me, the painting began to be an obsession, a thing that "demanded to be completed." Her words.

I asked if Tim had any history of mental illness, and she told me no. He was normal. Nothing in his past to indicate such things might be percolating in his mind. No strange behavior leading up to the day that he said he "caught it". Like an infection. Infection of the mind.

I asked her what happened, eager to learn how I might escape his fate. Her voice cracked, and then there was silence, and for a while I wondered if she had dropped off the line. But then she spoke and...her answer...I can't begin to convey how it chilled me.

"He tried to kill me," she said. I expected her to cry, but her voice was suddenly a flat eerie monotone. "He took a kitchen knife and tried to stab me in the back. But I fought back. I...killed him."

She paused for a long moment before continuing, and when she did her voice began to quaver. "He didn't die right away. He lay there on the kitchen floor bleeding, dying in my arms. That's when he told me what it was, made me promise to get rid of it. I tried to burn the thing, but I couldn't. Something stopped me. So I threw it away. But someone must have found it, and now...you have to stop it. There's no telling how many people it could affect. If something like this gets loose in the world..."

I wanted to tell her, wanted to explain that I had tried to kill it and failed.

I couldn't. My lips wouldn't move, refused to form the words I had in my head. Instead I heard myself speaking, thanking her for her time, promising to look into the matter. But it though it was my voice, it wasn't me speaking. A few days ago I used the term "mind worm" to describe this thing that's been happening to me. I didn't understand it then, but I think I might now. Viruses spread through contact. And minds brush against each other in so many ways. I am afraid.

My fingers are tired. Will write more later.

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She wanted me to kill it. But it is not alive. Not really. It is an idea, an aberration, that lives only in my *mind*. Where did it come from? How does it work? Why did it affect me and not Sylvia? I do not know. It doesn't much matter at this point.

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Sylvia is dead. I killed her. *It* killed her. But it is part of me now. The blood is real this time. It will not disappear when the policemen break open the door to the apartment. It doesn't matter. I'll be dead by then. The mind worm has finished with me, but when I am dead it will claim another mind.

The painting is gone. I burned it, just like she said. But it doesn't matter. Only now do I understand, that the painting itself wasn't important. It was just a tool, a medium, a way for the mind worm to spread. And just as it embedded itself in the painting, so now it is weaving itself into the very fabric of the words I write.

Yes, I think I can almost see the understanding dawning on your face, you who will read this journal after my death. You who wish discover my motives, to try to catch a glimpse into my deranged mind, you will soon know more of my story than you bargained for. It is in *you* now, already taking control of your consciousness, only allowing you to see what *it* wants you to see, only allowing you to think what *it* wants you to think. I wish I could feel sympathy for you, but that part of me is dead, consumed by the mind worm. I am resigned to my fate. And to yours.

You may try to destroy these words, to burn the pages of this journal, but it will be too late. *It* won't let you. You'll feel it growing inside you, invading your dreams, filling your mind with an inexplicable horror, and you'll want to escape, but you'll find that you can't.

Because you can never escape from yourself. You too will experience the lapses of memory, the headaches that no pill can cure. You too will share in the path that I have trod. The path that leads through the woods of madness and emerges on the other side onto the plains of an undiscovered country. And in the end...well...you should already know what happens in the end.
