

NIGHT SURF

After the guy was dead and the smell of his burning flesh was off the air, we all went back down to the beach. Corey had his radio, one of those suitcase-sized transistor jobs that take about forty batteries and also make and play tapes. You couldn't say the sound reproduction was great, but it sure was loud. Corey had been well-to-do before A6, but stuff like that didn't matter any more. Even his big radio/tape-player was hardly more than a nice-looking hunk of junk. There were only two radio stations left on the air that we could get. One was WKDM in Portsmouth -some backwoods deejay who had gone nutty-religious. He'd play a Perry Como record, say a prayer, bawl, play a Johnny Ray record, read from Psalms (complete with each *selah*), just like James Dean in *East of Eden*), then bawl some more. Happy-time stuff like that. One day he sang *Bringing in the Sheaves* in a cracked, mouldy voice that sent Needles and me into hysterics.

The Massachusetts station was better, but we could only get it at night. It was a bunch of kids. I guess they took over the transmitting facilities of WRKO or WBZ after every-body left or died. They only gave gag call letters, like WDOPE or KUNT or WA6 or stuff like that. Really funny, you know - you could die laughing. That was the one we were listening to on the way back to the beach. I was holding hands with Susie; Kelly and Joan were ahead of us, and Needles was already over the brow of the point and out of sight. Corey was bringing up the rear, swinging his radio. The Stones were singing 'Angie'.

'Do you *love* me?' Susie was asking. 'That's all I want to know, do you *love* me?' Susie needed constant reassurance. I was her teddy bear.

'No,' I said. She was getting fat, and if she lived long enough, which wasn't likely, she would get really flabby. She was already mouthy.

'You're rotten,' she said, and put a hand to her face. Her lacquered fingernails twinkled dimly with the half-moon that had risen about an hour ago.

'Are you going to cry again?'

'Shut up!' She sounded like she was going to cry again, all right.

We came over the ridge and I paused. I always have to pause. Before A6, this had been a public beach. Tourists, picnickers, runny-nosed kids and fat baggy grandmothers with sunburned elbows. Candy wrappers and popsicle sticks in the sand, all the beautiful people necking on their beach blankets, intermingled stench of exhaust from the parking lot, seaweed, and Coppertone oil.

But now all the dirt and all the crap was gone. The ocean had eaten it, all of it, as casually as you might eat a handful of Cracker Jacks. There were no people to come back and dirty it again. Just us, and we weren't enough to make much mess. We loved the beach too, I guess - hadn't we just offered it a kind of sacrifice? Even Susie, little bitch Susie with her fat ass and her cranberry bellbottoms.

The sand was white and duned, marked only by the high-tide line - twisted skein of seaweed, kelp, hunks of driftwood. The moonlight stitched inky crescent-shaped shadows and folds across everything. The deserted lifeguard tower stood white and skeletal some fifty yards from the bathhouse towards the sky like a finger bone.

And the surf, the night surf, throwing up great bursts of foam, breaking against the headlands for as far as we could see in endless attacks. Maybe that water had been halfway to England the night before.

'"Angie", by the Stones,' the cracked voice on Corey's radio said. 'I'm sureya dug that one, a blast from the past that's a golden gas, straight from the grooveyard, a platta that mattas. I'm Bobby. This was supposed to be Fred's night, but Fred got the flu. He's all swelled up.' Susie giggled then, with the first tears still on her eyelashes. I started towards the beach a little faster to keep her quiet.

'Wait up!' Corey called. 'Bernie? Hey, Bernie, wait up!' The guy on the radio was reading some dirty limericks, and a girl in the background asked him where did he put the beer. He said something back, but by that time we were on the beach. I looked back to see how Corey was doing. He was coming down on his backside, as usual, and he looked so ludicrous I felt a little sorry for him.

'Run with me,' I said to Susie.

'Why?'

I slapped her on the can and she squealed. 'Just because it feels good to run.'

We ran. She fell behind, panting like a horse and calling r me to slow down, but I put her out of my head. The wind rushed past my ears and blew the hair off my forehead. I could smell the salt in the air, sharp and tart. The surf pounded. The waves were like foamed black glass. I kicked off my rubber sandals and pounded across the sand barefoot, not minding the sharp digs of an occasional shell. My blood roared.

And then there was the lean-to with Needles already inside and Kelly and Joan standing beside it, holding hands and looking at the water. I did a forward roll, feeling sand go down the back of my shirt, and fetched up against Kelly's legs. He fell on top of me and rubbed my face in the sand while Joan laughed.

We got up and grinned at each other. Susie had given up running and was plodding towards us. Corey had almost caught up to her.

'Some fire,' Kelly said.

'Do you think he came all the way from New York, like he said?' Joan asked.

'I don't know.' I couldn't see that it mattered anyway. He had been behind the wheel of a big Lincoln when we found him, semi-conscious and raving. His head was bloated to the size of a football and his neck looked like a sausage. He had Captain Trips and n6t far to go, either. So we took him up to the Point that overlooks the beach and burned him. He said his name was Alvin Sackheim. He kept calling for his grandmother. He thought Susie was his grandmother. This struck her funny, God knows why. The strangest things strike Susie funny.

It was Corey's idea to burn him up, but it started off as a joke. He had read all those books about witchcraft and black magic at college, and he kept leering at us in the dark beside Alvin Sackheim's Lincoln and telling us that if we made a sacrifice to the dark gods, maybe the spirits would keep protecting us against A6.

Of course none of us really believed that bullshit, but the talk got more and more serious. It was a new thing to do, and finally we went ahead and did it. We tied him to the observation gadget up there - you put a dime in it and on a clear day you can see all the way to Portland Headlight. We tied him with our belts, and then we went rooting around for dry brush and hunks of driftwood like kids playing a new kind of hide-and-seek. All the time we were doing it Alvin Sackheim just sort of leaned there and mumbled to his grandmother. Susie's eyes got very bright and she was breathing fast. It was really turning her on. When we were down in the ravine on the other side of the outcrop she leaned against me and kissed me. She was wearing too much lipstick and it was like kissing a greasy plate.

I pushed her away and that was when she started pouting. We went back up, all of us, and piled dead branches and twigs up to Alvin Sackheim's waist. Needles lit the pyre with his Zippo, and it went up fast. At the end, just before his hair caught on fire, the guy began to scream. There was a smell just like sweet Chinese pork.

'Got a cigarette, Bernie?' Needles asked.

'There's about fifty cartons right behind you.'

He grinned and slapped a mosquito that was probing his arm. 'Don't want to move.'

I gave him a smoke and sat down. Susie and I met Needles in Portland. He was sitting on the kerb in front of the State Theatre, playing Leadbelly tunes on a big old Gibson guitar he had looted someplace. The sound echoed up and down Congress Street as if he were playing in a concert hall.

Susie stopped in front of us, still out of breath. 'You're rotten, Bernie.'

'Come on, Sue. Turn the record over. That side stinks.'

'Bastard. Stupid, unfeeling son of a bitch. *Creep!*'

'Go away,' I said, 'or I'll black your eye, Susie. See if I don't.'

She started to cry again. She was really good at it. Corey came up and tried to put an arm around her. She elbowed him in the crotch and he spit in her face.

'I'll *kill* you!' She came at him, screaming and weeping, making propellers with her hands. Corey backed off, almost fell, then turned tail and ran. Susie followed him, hurling hysterical obscenities. Needles put back his head and laughed. The sound of Corey's radio came back to us faintly over the surf.

Kelly and Joan had wandered off. I could see them down by the edge of the water, walking with their arms around each other's waist. They looked like an ad in a travel agent's window - *Fly to Beautiful St Lorca*. It was all right. They had a good thing.

'Bernie?'

'What?' I sat and smoked and thought about Needles flipping back the top of his Zippo, spinning the wheel, making fire with flint and steel like a caveman.

'I've got it,' Needles said.

'Yeah?' I looked at him. 'Are you sure?'

'Sure I am. My head aches. My stomach aches. Hurts to piss.'

'Maybe it's just Hong Kong flu. Susie had Hong Kong flu. She wanted a Bible.' I laughed. That had been while we were still at the University, about a week before they closed it down for good, a month before they started carrying bodies away in dump trucks and burying them in mass graves with payloaders.

'Look.' He lit a match and held it under the angle of his jaw. I could see the first triangular smudges, the first swelling. It was A6, all right.

'Okay,' I said.

'I don't feel so bad,' he said. 'In my mind, I mean. You, though. You think about it a lot. I can tell.'

'No I don't.' A lie.

'Sure you do. Like that guy tonight. You're thinking about that, too. We probably did him a favour, when you get right down to it. I don't think he even knew it was happening.'

'He knew.'

He shrugged and turned on his side. 'It doesn't matter.'

We smoked and I watched the surf come in and go out. Needles and Captain Trips. That made everything real all over again. It was late August already, and in a couple of weeks the first chill of fall would be creeping in. Time to move inside someplace. Winter. Dead by Christmas, maybe, all of us. In somebody's front room with Corey's expensive radio/tape-player on top of a book-case full of Reader's Digest Condensed Books and the weak winter sun lying on the rug in meaningless windowpane patterns.

The vision was clear enough to make me shudder. Nobody should think about winter in August. It's like a goose walking over your grave.

Needles laughed. 'See? You *do* think about it.'

What could I say? I stood up. 'Going to look for Susie.'

'Maybe we're the last people on earth, Bernie. Did you ever think of that?' In the faint moonlight he already looked half dead, with circles under his eyes and pallid, unmoving fingers like pencils.

I walked down to the water and looked out across it. There was nothing to see but the restless, moving humps of the waves, topped by delicate curls of foam. The thunder of the breakers was tremendous down here, bigger than the world. Like standing inside a thunderstorm. I closed my eyes and rocked on my bare feet. The sand was cold and damp and packed. And if we were the last people on earth, so what? This would go on as long as there was a moon to pull the water.

Susie and Corey were up the beach. Susie was riding him as if he were a bucking bronc, pounding his head into the running boil of the water. Corey was flailing and splashing. They were both soaked. I walked down and pushed her off with my foot. Corey splashed away on all fours, spluttering and whoofing.

'*I hate you!*' Susie screamed at me. Her mouth was a dark grinning crescent. It looked like the entrance to a fun house. When I was a kid my mother used to take us kids to Harrison State Park and there was a fun house with a big clown face on the front, and you walked in through the mouth.

'Come on, Susie. Up, Fido.' I held out my hand. She took it doubtfully and stood up. There was damp sand clotted on her blouse and skin.

'You didn't have to push me, Bernie. You don't ever -' 'Come on.' She wasn't like a jukebox; you never had to put in a dime and she never came unplugged.

We walked up the beach towards the main concession. The man who ran the place had had a small overhead apartment. There was a bed. She didn't really deserve a bed, but Needles was right about that. It didn't matter. No one was really scoring the game any more.

The stairs went up the side of the building, but I paused

for just a minute to look in the broken window at the dusty wares inside that no one had cared enough about to loot - stacks of sweatshirts ('Anson Beach' and a picture of sky and waves printed on the front), glittering bracelets that would green the wrist on the second day, bright junk earrings, beachballs, dirty greeting cards, badly painted ceramic madonnas, plastic vomit (*So realistic! Try it on your wife!*), Fourth of July sparklers for a Fourth that never was, beach towels with a voluptuous girl in a bikini standing amid the names of a hundred famous resort areas, pennants (*Souvenir of Anson Beach and Park*), balloons, bathing suits. There was a snack bar up front with a big sign saying

TRY OUR CLAM CAKE SPECIAL.

I used to come to Anson Beach a lot when I was still in high school. That was seven years before A6, and I was going with a girl named Maureen. She was a big girl. She had a pink checked bathing suit. I used to tell her it looked like a tablecloth. We had walked along the boardwalk in front of this place, barefoot, the boards hot and sandy beneath our heels. We had never tried the clam cake special.

'What are you looking at?'

'Nothing. Come on.'

I had sweaty, ugly dreams about Alvin Sackheim. He was propped behind the wheel of his shiny yellow Lincoln, talking about his grandmother. He was nothing but a bloated, blackened head and a charred skeleton. He smelled burnt. He talked on and on, and after a while I couldn't make out a single word. I woke up breathing hard.

Susie was sprawled across my thighs, pale and bloated. My watch said 3.50, but it had stopped. It was still dark out. The surf pounded and smashed. High tide. Make it 4.15. Light soon. I got out of bed and went to the doorway. The sea breeze felt fine against my hot body. In spite of it all I didn't want to die.

I went over in the corner and grabbed a beer. There were three or four cases of Bud stacked against the wall. It was warm, because there was no electricity. I don't mind warm beer like some people do, though. It just foams a little more. Beer is beer. I went back out on the landing and sat down and pulled the ring tab and drank up.

So here we were, with the whole human race wiped out, not by atomic weapons or bio-warfare or pollution or anything *grand* like that. Just *the flu*. I'd like to put down a huge plaque somewhere, in the Bonneville Salt Flats, maybe. Bronze Square. Three miles on a side. And in big raised letters it would say, for the benefit of any landing aliens: JUST THE FLU.

I tossed the beer can over the side. It landed with a hollow clank on the cement walk that went around the building. The lean-to was a dark triangle on the sand. I wondered if Needles was awake. I wondered if I would be.

'Bernie?'

She was standing in the doorway wearing one of my shirts. I hate that. She sweats like a pig.

'You don't like me much any more, do you, Bernie?'

I didn't say anything. There were times when I could still feel sorry for everything. She didn't deserve me any more than I deserved her.

'Can I sit down with you?'

'I doubt if it would be wide enough for both of us.'

She made a choked hiccuping noise and started to go back inside.

'Needles has got A6,' I said.

She stopped and looked at me. Her face was very still. 'Don't joke, Bernie.'

I lit a cigarette.

'He can't! He had -, 'Yes, he had A2. Hong Kong flu. Just like you and me and Corey and Kelly and Joan.'

'But that would mean he isn't -'

'Immune.'

'Yes. Then we could get it.'

'Maybe he lied when he said he had A2. So we'd take him along with us that time,' I said.

Relief spilled across her face. 'Sure, that's it. I would have lied if it had been me. Nobody likes to be alone, do they?' She hesitated. 'Coming back to bed?'

'Not just now.'

She went inside. I didn't have to tell her that M was no guarantee against A6. She knew that. She had just blocked it out. I sat and watched the surf. It was really up. Years ago, Anson had been the only halfway decent surfing spot in the state. The Point was a dark, jutting hump against the sky. I thought I could see the upright that was the observation post, but it probably was just imagination. Sometimes Kelly took Joan up to the point. I didn't think they were up there tonight.

I put my face in my hands and clutched it, feeling the skin, its grain and texture. It was all narrowing so swiftly, and it was all so mean - there was no dignity in it.

The surf coming in, coming in, coming in. Limitless. Clean and deep. We had come here in the summer, Maureen and I, the summer after high school, the summer before college and reality and A6 coming out of South-east Asia and covering the world like a pall, July, we had eaten pizza and listened to her radio, I had put oil on her back, she had put oil on mine, the air had been hot, the sand bright, the sun like a burning glass.