

*Stranger
on the
Beach*



Stranger on the Beach

A short story

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For Jacqueline, who was my beloved wife and best friend on earth for almost fifty years, and our firstborn daughter Laura who we knew for such a very short time. Though they are with me in spirit always, I miss them terribly each moment of every day.

Stranger on the Beach

The wind was gusting across the beach blowing sand and spray against Sarah's face. She blinked with half-closed eyes trying to hold back her tears, and raised her hand to her face as a shield against the stinging sand. In her right hand she tightly clutched a small, white box close against her body.

Sarah stood just a few yards from the surf, feeling the power of each wave and the constant buffeting of the wind. Being this close to the sea did not bring Sarah joy this day. Her grief and sorrow were simply too great.

Turning her back to the wind and sea, Sarah sank kneeling in the sand while press-

ing the small box gently to her lips. With her reddish-brown hair streaming in the wind, and her body hunched over in protection, she began removing the ribbon that held the lid to the box.

The box and ribbon were the most beautiful she could find among her bedroom treasures. She was glad that she had saved the box and ribbon from her ninth birthday bracelet six weeks earlier. Sarah carefully slid the white, satin ribbon from the box and then over her hand and wrist to secure it against the wind.

She remained motionless for several minutes unable to continue. Then as she started to remove the lid itself, the terrible pain and sorrow came rushing back and her body shook with sobs. Sarah no longer fought to hold back her tears. She couldn't.

"It was my fault. It was all my fault. I should have been more careful," she cried.

Lowering her head, she held the box against her cheek as she rocked from side to side trying desperately to relieve her hurt.

Sarah was startled by a firm hand on her shoulder. She had not seen or heard anyone and was frightened momentarily. Her first instinct was to run.

“Don’t be afraid, Sarah. I am your friend,” said a man with a deep soothing voice.

Something in the man’s voice made her less afraid. She looked up through her tears to see him standing very still directly in front of her, with his hands and arms extended to show her that he meant no harm.

The stranger was standing with the sun at his back so that his face was in deep shadows. Sarah could see that he was tall and slender. He folded one hand over the other in front of him, and looked directly at Sarah with a trace of a smile. The stranger’s long, slender

fingers were quite beautiful for a man. She had felt power in his hands through his firm, yet gentle touch.

“How do you know my name, and who are you?” Sarah asked.

“As I said, Sarah, I am your friend. Your name came to me when I learned that you lost someone you loved very much. When you are ready to accept me as your friend, you will know my name, and I will tell you who I am.”

A single tear fell from Sarah’s eye onto a grain of sand in front of where she was kneeling. Still looking up at the stranger, who was now kneeling in front of her, Sarah thrust the box forward in her hands so the stranger could look inside. As she did, the lid to the box fell to the sand covering her tear.

“He’s dead. I know he’s dead! Can you bring him back to life? Please. He’s my best

friend,” Sarah pleaded.

Moving slowly, the stranger took Sarah’s outstretched hands in his, and lowered them so that they could both look in the box that they now jointly held. “Sarah, may I touch your little friend?”

“I know you can’t hurt him. Nothing can hurt him anymore, but promise me that you will be gentle with him. I tried to make him comfortable, but I couldn’t fix his neck. I know it must have hurt him terribly. I’ll give anything if you can make him live again.”

“I will be careful, Sarah. I promise you,” said the stranger.

As he spoke, he slowly stroked the small neck with the forefinger of his right hand. Sarah began to relax somewhat as she watched the stranger touch her pet with such tenderness. Sarah thought she saw an eyelid flutter, but when she leaned closer for a better look,

both eyes were still wide open in a fixed, terror stricken stare and she voiced a barely audible sigh of regret.

Sarah continued to watch the stranger's gentle, rhythmic strokes when she saw the twisted neck straighten, the eyes close as though in a deep sleep, and the mouse's mouth and face soften into total relaxation. Sarah could not restrain her excitement, "You're bringing him back to life," she exclaimed with tears of joy streaming down her cheeks.

The tall, slender stranger reached out to hold Sarah's face in his hands so that she looked directly into his eyes for the first time. "No, Sarah. Your little one is not alive."

"But I saw him move," Sarah pleaded. "When you touched him he moved, and he is sleeping now. His neck isn't broken anymore. I didn't mean to hurt him. I just picked

him up for our playtime. He jumped right out of my hand and fell to the floor. I didn't mean to kill him! Please make him live again. I know you can do it. You fixed his neck that was broken! I know he's just sleeping."

Sarah's pleading eyes searched the stranger's face for some sign that he would grant her wish. His dark eyes were set deep into his gaunt face. His eyes were kind and understanding, yet so large and penetrating that Sarah felt he knew everything she was thinking or about to think.

His hair was as dark as his eyes in contrast with the fairness of his skin that was taut against his cheekbones. His face was still in shadows with the bright sun behind him. The shadows softened the sharpness of his features. He obviously had never been handsome even in his youth, but his aura of kindness and understanding were reassuring.

Everything about this stranger told Sarah that he could be trusted and that he only spoke the truth. Sarah began softly crying as she lifted her beloved mouse from its bed in the small, white box and kissed his forehead.

“Your dear little friend is at peace now, Sarah, but I cannot restore his life. You did not deliberately hurt your beloved pet. He died in a tragic accident that was not your fault. It has hurt you enough that your little mouse is no longer alive, but there is no reason for you to remember him as he was after his fall. I want you to remember him as you saw him so many times when he was peacefully sleeping. That is something I can do for you. What you now see are the beautiful memories that will be with you for the rest of your life. Listen carefully, Sarah. No one that you know will live forever on earth; not your beloved pet; not you or anyone else you love and care for. One day many years from

now you will hold and play with your mouse again. When that time comes neither your mouse nor anyone you have ever loved will die again. You will live a second life in heaven that never ends. Do you believe me, Sarah?"

"Yes, I do believe you," said Sarah.

Sarah trusted her new friend whom she no longer thought of as a stranger. She kissed her mouse that she was holding in her cupped hands one last time.

Her new friend held out the small, white box with its cotton bedding inside, and Sarah lovingly laid her mouse on the cotton bedding. She stroked his tiny body three times, and then brushed away another tear.

"Sarah, do you want me to say a prayer for your pet before we bury him in the sand dunes at the back of the beach?"

"Yes, I would like that very much."

“What name did you give your pet mouse?”

“His name is Little Whitey.”

“Dear lord, we ask your blessing for Sarah that she may find peace and comfort knowing that her beloved Little Whitey is with you for his everlasting life, waiting for Sarah’s time to also be in Your Kingdom where she will rejoin all those she has ever loved on earth. Let Sarah know that during the remaining years of her earth life, Little Whitey’s time waiting for her will seem but one brief nap for him. They will never know that they were ever parted.”

After the stranger placed the lid on Sarah’s box, with Little Whitey lying peacefully inside, Sarah laid her hand on the box for a few moments before sliding the ribbon from her wrist. She held the ribbon to her lips in a last kiss goodbye, then placed it over the

box, and carefully straightened it so that it was perfectly centered. As Sarah held the box the stranger rose to his feet, and leaned forward with outstretched hands to help her to her feet.

Sarah brushed sand from her knees before turning to face the ocean and surf that no longer seemed threatening to her. She watched a single gull swoop low over her head, then just over the crest of a wave before soaring upward in a long, ever higher wide spiral.

Its shimmering, white body became increasingly smaller before blending completely within an equally pure white cloud. All during the gull's flight, its wings were held motionless as it was lifted by some unknown power.

The stranger took Sarah by her hand, and led her away from the surf toward the dunes

at the back of the beach. They stopped between two of the largest dunes, where again they kneeled in the sand. With their hands Sarah and the stranger scooped away sand until they had dug a hole several feet deep.

Sarah placed her box holding Little Whitey at the very bottom of the hole. Once again, a single tear fell from Sarah's eye past the mounds of sand and into the hole, until it struck the bow of the ribbon causing it to flutter ever so slightly.

Sarah took a handful of sand and held it over the box as she watched some of the sand trickle from the sides of her hand. When the sand stopped falling on its own, she slowly turned her hand over so that the grains of sand fell in a stream, forming a small cone of sand on top of the box producing a barely audible sound—much like brushes on a tiny drum.

In a few seconds Sarah's hand was fully turned over and empty of sand. She paused for a moment as yet one last tear fell directly on the tip of the cone of sand, producing a small crater and a tiny dark spot where the sand was now wet.

Sarah used both hands to begin filling the hole with sand that she and the stranger had scooped out. The stranger remained kneeling beside Sarah, with his hand on her shoulder. As Sarah covered the last white of the box, only the beautiful white ribbon remained above the sand. She paused momentarily before quickly moving to fill in the rest of the hole.

When Sarah finished smoothing the sand over Little Whitey's grave, the stranger handed her a cross he had fashioned from two slender pieces of driftwood that he had found scattered among the dunes. Sarah pushed the cross into the sand above Little

Whitey's grave, and then traced his name in the sand with her finger. She looked directly at the stranger and asked, "Is Little Whitey in heaven now?"

"Yes, Sarah. Your beloved friend's spirit went to heaven with the gull that you saw soar into the clouds over the sea.

"Are you an angel?" asked Sarah.

"Yes, Sarah. I am your guardian angel. I was sent to comfort and guide you through your grief."

"You said that when I was ready to accept you as my true and trusted friend, I would know your name. May I call you David?"

"That is my name, Sarah and I am glad you accept me as your friend. You will not see me again for many years, until it is your time to be rejoined with Little Whitey and all those whom you have ever loved. You will

not remember seeing me until we meet on that day, but you will recall everything I have said to you. You will remember the great white gull soaring to heaven carrying Little Whitey's spirit. I will always be with you my dear Sarah. I will always be watching over you, and you will feel my presence in time of need. Goodbye for now my dear, Sarah."

David placed his hand on Sarah's shoulder for the last time, silently rose to his feet, turned and walked toward the sea. When he reached the surf's edge, he stopped and half turned to face Sarah as he waved goodbye to her. Sarah was standing watching David when she glanced down at the sand, noticing that David had not left a single footprint.

When she looked up to wave her goodbye, she saw a great, pure white gull shimmering in the early afternoon sun, effortlessly rising from the sand near the edge of the surf. The wind suddenly changed direction

so that the gull soared on motionless wings ever upward toward a pure white cloud. Just before the cloud embraced and enveloped him, a shaft of golden sunlight shone on the magnificent gull.

Sarah had never before seen a bird soar so high without once moving its wings. She turned to face the cross on Little Whitey's grave, and said in a voice choked with emotion. "Whitey, somehow I know that beautiful gull was carrying you to heaven where someday we will never know we were ever parted."

The End

