

Night Swim

by Alex Austin

“Mother's Beach?”

It was midnight, and behind them Sol Luna, the Marina del Rey restaurant, where they had eaten dinner and afterwards danced to a band called The Ebb Tides, was still packed. Several Silver Margaritas had gotten them pleasantly buzzed. The boats' lights sparkled on the water and reflected off Setsuko's glossy black hair as they passed under the sign and walked toward the darkened beach.

“Yeah, it's just a little bay. Water's shallow. No waves. No riptides. Safe as your bathtub. Mothers come here with their toddlers and can relax. Safe.” Hugh laughed. “It's also known as Stretch Mark Beach.

“I don't understand.”

Setsuko's English was getting better, more advanced than Hugh's Japanese, but she was challenged by idioms and wordplay. Hugh took her hand and puffed out his belly. He held her hand to his skin and separated her fingers. “Marks left when the woman's skin stretches during pregnancy. Stretch marks.”

“Ah, sutoretchimāku.”

They wrapped their arms around each other, shrugged off their shoes and stepped into the still-warm sands. It was August and in Los Angeles it had been in the nineties during the day for the last two weeks. It was mild compared to a Tokyo summer, and perfect beach weather, but Setsuko, wary of the sun, would only go to the beach in late afternoon, and even then hid beneath the umbrella. How relaxed she felt now. In two days, she was to return to Japan, and a week later, he would follow..

At the water's edge they stopped, swaying to the music that slipped from an open door of the restaurant like a bird escaping from a cage. Hugh dug his toes into the moist hard packed sands, surprised at how quickly the water pooled around his foot. He took Setsuko's arm and guided her out into the shallow water. They

walked hand-in-hand in the warm bay toward a shadowy bulkhead. Beyond the bulkhead was a dock which rented kayaks and sailboats. The bulkhead threw a darkness on the water. They sat under the dark pilings, bound against each other. He took off his shirt and lay it on the sand. He unpeeled Setsuko's jeans. She trusted him implicitly. He held his hand against her, staring back across the beach at the dancers in the picture windows of the restaurant. On one of the docks, a boat was tying up.

"Let's go for a swim," said Hugh.

"All right."

Hugh took off his jeans. Setsuko slipped off her T-shirt. They crept across the sands, staying in the bulkhead's shadow. They slipped into the water like amphibious creatures tired of the obstinacy of land. The water was too shallow to swim in at first so they crawled, digging their fingers into the muddy bottom, their bodies still on the water's surface, but finally the water became waist deep and they were free to swim. Setsuko was a strong swimmer. She had swum on her high school team. Hugh had to labor to keep up with her, but it was not long until they reached the rope and buoys that signaled the limits of the bathing area. They clung to the rope. Hugh held his hands up and let himself drop to the bottom. His feet touched in an instant. It was not even seven feet, but deep enough to drown in. With arms resting on the rope, they clung to each other, kissing hungrily, faces sinking into the sea until they remembered their breaths. The water had the faint smell of oil, and he tasted it on Setsuko's lips. A pelican swooped down out of nowhere, skimming the surface, its huge whiteness unexpected. Setsuko stared into his eyes as he slipped off her panties. She wrapped her legs around him. His hand barely held the rope and later he could not have said if it happened above or below the water's surface. The calculations that Setsuko would later make, put the conception of the twins At Mother's Beach.

Hugh never mentioned the odd pulse of the water as they made love and he could not have guessed that its source was a hundred circling sharks.

