

Dig

by Amy Halloran

“Did you know there was this much sand at the beach?” the girl asks her brother in the purple light of dawn.

Every morning, the children dig holes for their parents. This is both necessary and beneficial: the kids need to dig and the parents have to be buried.

The children go to bed before sunset so they can get up soon enough to loosen the sand. The sand is tamped down tight by the dark, a blanket that tucks the earth into the ocean. The dark sings the sand a lullaby, and grain-by-grain the sand collapses, snuggling tighter than seeds in a flower head.

The kids need special shovels. The work must be done by hand. Parents who have hired machines to bury them have died. Not because the machines ruin them: the bodies remain in tact, and the skin is unmarked. By now, hiring a machine seems suicidal, which invites intervention.

The truly suicidal just kill themselves by overexposure. Usually, they don't have anyone to bury them, although this lack cannot be seen as the reason people want to die. People who have children also want to die. What is known is that the people who want to die hide behind beach grasses so that no one will notice their big bodies burning in the bright sun.

The sun is now too bright. Instead of causing excessive withering and dryness, however, the dangerous brilliance makes a fungus grow on the inside of a person, starting at the tip of the tongue, and migrating down the throat. The fungus eventually covers all epithelial tissues, and a sort of strangulation ensues.

But before the fungus squeezes your last breath, a number of other symptoms occur. The reflection of the sun from the sand makes reading all but impossible, even with sunglasses. This

effectively crowds out optimism, which makes the developments that follow even darker, as day follows night.

The fungus only affects people who have stopped growing. It is incurable. Thus, the digging, and also, the exit for those who choose to hide in the grasses.

The last thoughts that people have are beautiful. Whether they die in the sun, or in their beds in the dark, or in their cars, careering off the road as the fungus strangles them, people remember being at the beach when they were kids. They remember sunshine and sandwiches and beach towels. They remember waves attacking their legs. This isn't much different than the conversations people have as they are buried.

"Remember when we played with pails and shovels and made sand castles?" a husband might say to a wife in the pink gray of dawn.

She will nod, and take a sip from her mug of coffee. She will look out at the beach, the heads sticking up from the sand, the kids digging, digging. The waves touching no one.

"Remember when we ate things called lobsters?" she will say, and the couple locks a gaze inward and backward, and recall a date they had in Maine, at a little shack on the rocky coast, where they dipped chunks of white flesh into plastic cups of melted butter. Where they ate corn on the cob even though it wasn't very good. Where they sat at picnic tables whose wood was gray from the salty mist. Someone took the lovers' picture with their camera, not imagining this future that was not so far away.

"Remember when vacations were not work?" the man will ask the woman as they climb into the holes their children have dug. Tucked in sand up to their necks, the couple will recall what has been, but they will resist regret, because they think that if they miss the past too much they will like life too little. And while they are safe from the harms of the modern beach, from the fungus that will eventually engulf them if they aren't covered in sand, they don't see that nostalgia could actually cure them.

They think that nostalgia is toxic, when in reality, it is medicinal. The medicine of longing saves a few people every year from dying alone in the grasses. If people get wistful and wanty soon enough they can stop the fungus, and at the end of a day of reminiscing, they stand up and brush the sand off and walk back to the rest of their lives. They never, ever tell anyone about how they didn't die, so researchers do not know that nostalgia saved them.

This is a secret the world keeps for an entire generation, until the parents don't remember eating lobsters or building sandcastles or body surfing. By this time, since people don't remember what they think they shouldn't regret, parents cry freely, weeping habitually under their sunhats. Kids remove sunglasses to sop up tears with handkerchiefs. The stuff is precious and the kids squeeze their cloths into medical cups, and drink this liquid at night.

"Don't cry," a boy tells his mother, "don't cry. Everything is going to be all right. You'll see, tomorrow everything will be better."

"But I don't know what is bad," the mother sniffles.

"Something is," the boy says, "but it will be better. It always gets better."

And gradually, even though grief is not understood, the population becomes immune to the effects. And the next generation, or maybe the next, enjoys the beach, and digs in the sand for pleasure. These unburied people dip lobster meat into tubs of yellow butter with abandon, and push their bodies at the water, so that the water will push them back. Back.

