

GRACE

by Michael Downing

The sand felt warm, the way it usually was on Saturday afternoons in Seaside Heights; face down on the beach under a hot July sun that burned my back and shoulders while Jenny was getting cheese fries and Cokes from the boardwalk concession stand. Later we would jump the waves, venturing farther from shore until the life guards motioned us back, their shrill whistles straining above the roar of the surf and the cacophony of voices that filled the air - ready to save us if we needed help. As the waves rolled into our bodies she would squeeze her arms around my neck and try to drag me under but I could always kick free, riding the wave to the beach and tumbling out of the water with my stomach red, raw, and bleeding from the shells and pebbles that tore my skin and filled the waistband of my trunks; the water would surge forward over the chairs and towels of people too close to the tide line, sending them in a frantic scramble towards drier ground before pulling back with the empty cans, baggies filled with left-over snacks, and cheap plastic toys that had been left behind. Later Jenny would shiver as she held me close on the blanket, towels wrapped around our shoulders, her lips cold, salty, and wet as they pressed against mine, and the warmth we shared would spread throughout my body and stay with me on the drive home. I could feel that warm sand under my face as I opened my eyes in an unfamiliar expanse of desert, just north of Tikrit - a world away from New Jersey and the cool waves of the ocean; the ground was wet with the blood that poured from the gaping hole in my stomach and the mangled pieces of flesh and bone that had once been my legs. I heard the voices of the soldiers around me, the fear and panic in their screams as they tried to help, and felt the searing wave of heat and pain that swept over me - I closed my eyes and wanted only to be home again.

