

THE MONEY SANDS
DEVIL'S HIDE

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Mary Margaret Park

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Ray jolted awake from his power nap, with stabbing pains in his eyes, as if someone evil--(his ex?)--had pushed the 'fuck-you' button, and now his pain circuits were overloading. Moments before, he'd been dreaming about hedge-funds, in a state of familiar bliss, his neurons firing smooth with the art of the deal. He blinked, and the pain raged, the bliss station had closed. He thought *my eyes, I have needles in my eyes*. When he rubbed them, his fingers left behind something gritty, which made it worse. *What the fuck?* he thought, as he pulled up on his elbows. He blinked, and his eyes widened.

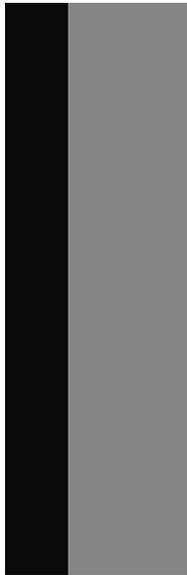
Sand--it was everywhere--and more of it, as far as the eye could see.

What?

An hour ago, when he fell asleep, he'd been on the 47th floor of his Manhattan apartment building—and--there sure as hell hadn't been any sand.

????

Maybe he'd slept away an entire day and thrown his time clock off, but even if he had, there was no explaining the sand, no explaining his location, he blinked, maybe he was dreaming, his friend Dave swore he'd gone to bed in Jersey and awakened in Australia, said it wasn't a dream because he had total recall of where he'd been, knew all the details, which wouldn't have meant much except that six months later, Dave had gone to Australia for the first time to find those places, said he had to know if he'd been right, and when he returned he said that not only were the places real, he'd verified the street names, knew his way around, but what really blew Ray's mind was that Dave had tracked down a bistro in the remote out- back, said that when he arrived he'd recognized the owner, knew his name was Eduardo, and had addressed him as so. *How could he have known?* He figured Dave had been fucking with him, but now he wasn't so sure.



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He returned his gaze to the sand; it went on for miles. He blinked and peered into the desert, a figure was up ahead, its silhouette distorted by the haze and heat, perhaps it was a mirage, but

it was moving, so he figured it was real. He staggered to his feet, swept the sand from his clothes then set out to catch up with whoever it was.

Despite the burning in his eyes, he moved at a fair clip, confident that he'd be able to catch up in no time, but judging distance in a land of glaring reflections isn't easy, and he was wrong

Despite his garbled thoughts, he kept his eyes focused on the figure he was pursuing, he had to keep his eyes on the prize or he might lose sight of it altogether, both literally and figuratively.

He trudged along, back bent, trying to keep the sand from his eyes. His thoughts circled and dived like birds of prey, willing him to take his eyes off the prize.

The intrusion solidified his resolve. He was a man of method, always taking the necessary steps to minimize risk and maximize profit, for his brokerage firm, of course, there were the occasional wild cards, it couldn't be helped, but you could fix that if you were savvy.....

Which made him think of Old lady Devereaux, one of his New York clients, she was a French-Cajan transplant with an attitude, and he hated her, but she had an endless supply of money, and she liked playing the market. He'd tolerated her over the years and had gotten rich in the process, but he'd had to make it a point to keep his distance.

She was a phony, a superstitious fool, and as far as he was concerned, all of her voodoo horseshit proved that the French-Cajan people were no more than the bastard children of their European counterparts.

He'd always gone by the book when he made trades for her, until recently, when she told him she didn't care how much money she was going to lose, he was to cash out all of her investments, every single one, regardless.

When he'd asked her what was so urgent, she'd slapped him down, told him it was none of his business, and that was when he'd made the decision to do the sale his way.

He was breaking the rules by ignoring her wishes, but he only needed an extra day or two for his plan to work, to put a million or so from the sale directly into his pocket, payback for all the crap he'd taken from her over the years, and best of all, she wouldn't be any wiser.

That was six months ago, and it had been as easy as taking candy from a baby.

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He was a man of method, but his methods had changed. He smiled, his portfolio had grown exponentially, he was no longer just rich, he was filthy rich, and it had been as easy as taking candy from a little kid.

He was wearing penny loafers, sans socks, a poor choice for desert walking because with each step, they took on more sand.

He'd closed enough distance on the figure to tell that it was human, not a four-legged animal, *thank the gods*.

He stopped to pour the sand from his shoes, why in fuck sakes had he chosen today of all days not to wear socks? Walking in sand-filled shoes was giving him a hellish pedicure; his feet were abraded and had started to bleed. *No help for it now*, but when he put his shoes back on, it was like jamming his feet into dwarf shoes twenty sizes too small, it hurt like a *son of a bitch*.

The desert didn't take prisoners, *it cooked them* he thought then chuckled, the sand grains were tiny particle accelerators for the Sun's energy, he thought of microwaves and laser beams, zap, zap, was he an entree or a Klingon? Didn't matter, soon he'd be crispy.

He almost laughed, but didn't, this was serious business, he couldn't afford to flake out.

The glaring sun hurt his eyes.

The person up ahead staggered and then fell, and Ray thought,

Good. It won't be as hard to catch up.

Ray stood looking down at the man a short while later, the guy was wearing the remains of a button-down shirt, a silk tie dangled from his neck.

Ray knew it was from Brooks Brothers because he had one just like it, at least the guy had good taste. "Hey, you okay?"

The man moaned then sat up, wavering as if he might fall down again.

Ray's eyeballs mushroomed with pain, and his vision swam like crude oil on water. He didn't want to pass out, so he sat down. He knew this guy, he was a smooth Wall Street operator that closed deals like dominos, and he had a reputation for being merciless.

Ray knew him as Joe G, the G stood for Giovanni, or some Wop name like that.

Joe's eyes focused and Ray saw recognition in them, a moment later they faded back into confusion, and Ray was relieved, because he didn't think this strange desert meeting was an accident.

This guy was bad news, the sort that wouldn't hesitate to cut his wife's throat to get ahead.

Were Joe's eyes clearing? Focusing on him?

Ray had the strange notion that the man had just returned from a land called discord, *or maybe Discordia*, he wasn't sure. Joe's razor-sharp gaze made him uncomfortable, the guy didn't just see him, it was more than that, those eyes saw through him, knew things about him, intimate, personal things, like how much harder he came if he wore girl's underwear when he stroked himself.

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Ray glanced at the silk tie dangling from Joe's neck then giggled.

Joe, the man from Discordia didn't approve, "I'm glad you find this humorous Ray, really, it's all the same to me," he shrugged before continuing, "the NYSE commissioners wanted me to deliver you this message, 'You're a Wall Street Star, have proven *your* staying power, and we'd hate to see that change, but it's high-time you watched your P's and Q's Ray, before it's too late.'" Joe winked.

"Words from the wise to cure Ray's vice. Extra pearls of wis- Dom just in case you need them." Mr. Discord, *Joe*, smiled, but his eyes said something else entirely, captivating Ray with their secret knowledge then shining with amusement at the ease of his seduction, "*Vinci omnia veritas* (truth conquers all), "

It was difficult for Ray to look away from those mesmerizing eyes, but once he'd managed too, he thought *this is madness*, no one could possibly know about his shady dealings, *could they?*

Joe's gaze had softened, and Ray recognized the eyes, knew they belonged to guy in front of him, and that was a relief. Joe didn't seem to care. He swayed, steadied then fell over. Ray knew Joe's return ticket from the land of Discordia had just expired, he thought of checking Joe's pulse, but it was pointless, the guy was dead.

Now he was all alone in the desert, and the sun was setting. It was a beautiful display that he cared nothing for, there was no joy here, only darkness. He laid down not caring about the needles in his eyes or the sand he was sucking into his lungs with each breath.

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He breathed deeper, waiting, sucking up more sand to hasten his suffocation. He didn't exactly fade away; he coughed and gagged on the way. His journey to the land of Discord was a trip he had to take. He wondered if he had a return ticket right before falling into blackness.

Downtown

Ray walked along the sidewalk passing a diner he thought his parents had once taken him to, back when he was 5 or 6 years old, towards the corner of Lexington and 5th, he paused, backtracking a few steps to sit down on a concrete bench with a "Bubba buys houses, Fast Cash" advertisement on it. His shoulders ached, it was the stress, the last eight weeks had been a season in hell, he hadn't paid his bills on time, which never happened, and he couldn't seem to walk from one room to the next without forgetting why he'd done so, to top it all off, he'd even gone to the nuthouse, had been locked away for several days for observation. The doctor on staff had insisted it was for his own good, they had to make sure he wasn't suicidal or homicidal, and the most upsetting thing of all was that no one would take him seriously, no one believed him.

He'd gone from a dependable broker, someone people respected, to an idiot savant in the space of two missed car payments, and if that didn't beat it all to hell, he didn't know what did.

He wasn't sure of anything anymore because his mind had betrayed him. It was that simple and complicated, all at the same time.

The 5th street via swayed up to the bus stop, he'd planned to walk to work, but what the hell he thought, stepping on board.

He had to dig in his pockets for the exact change, and the bus driver's face told him he was taking too long, but what did it matter? It was a new day, and it'd been a long time since he'd ridden the bus, he thought people should try being more forgiving, even if it was only for 5 minutes out of their day.

He thought, *come on, give a guy a break*, surely he'd earned it after everything he'd been through, better days were ahead, *had to be*, because he didn't think he'd last if it happened again, and he was tired, *so very, very, tired...*

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Ray's Deserted Apartment

With each month's passage, the Manhattan apartment grew more unkempt, food wrappers littered the once pristine floors, and there was mold growing in the kitchen sink Ray had once bragged was a real cook's sink, he'd had it custom made to make it easier to clean up the oversized pans he used for preparing his specialty gourmet pasta.

When the neighbors started complaining about Ray's cat mewling and crying 24/7, Billy, the superintendent, had to get involved.

Billy didn't want to stir up the shit, figured he'd end up with a face full if he hassled Ray, and it wasn't necessary, but the whining Jews in 3C wouldn't shut up, so he had no choice.

Billy liked Ray because he fit into his favorite category of apartment owners, low maintenance, and Ray had been good to him, always tipped him big.

Billy knocked on Ray's door, "Yo, Ray, it's the Super, Billy." He knocked again, waited then said, "I'm comin' in, gotta check on something,"

As soon as the door swung open, he knew something was up, place smelled like cat piss and rotten food. When he flipped on the light switch, Ray's cat darted past him, it was pitiful, half-starved, and losing its hair. The place was filthy. Maybe Ray was sick and hadn't told anyone. He checked every room, but there was no sign of Ray, maybe he'd had to leave town in a hurry, had an emergency or something.

Billy locked the place up good and tight and then went to look for the cat.

Ray On the "Bench"

Ray's aching shoulders had robbed him of yet another night's sleep, it wasn't until midmorning that he finally dozed, dreaming strange dreams as he skimmed along the outer edges of the deep sleep he so badly needed. He was somewhere in the deep South, in Cajun Country, and Old lady Devereaux had asked him to follow her into the woods, said she wanted to show him something, and to make sure he followed her close because if he didn't, he might fall and dirty his suit. He'd called out to her, "Wait, maybe I should change," but she had already disappeared into the swamp, "Mrs. D, I'm coming, wait for me Dee."

He always called her Dee, had pretty much refused to address her by her surname because on the rare occasions he'd done so, it seemed to elevate her condescending attitude to another level, he thought of it as her *super bitch a La French* mode, and every time she uttered it, he wanted to kill her, ergo he was doing her a favor by addressing her as Dee, a protective measure if you will, it was his idea of being honorable.

He hurried to catch up, caught a glimpse of her and thought, *how in God's name did she get so far ahead, so fast?* Surely the forty-year age difference should count for something in his favor, but today it hadn't, evidently there was more to her than met the eye.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the wind shook the treetops, a storm was coming, so he'd better hurry. The clouds that were stealing his light were joined by the rain, it was sporadic at first; the rain drops were sparse. *No big deal* really--so he was able to get within a stone's throw of her.

She'd stopped, her head was cocked to the side and he got the impression she was talking to someone, *but who?*

The rain intensified, thousands of water droplets tumbled from the sky, each one, less than temperate, stealing his visibility by degrees, until he could scarcely see the path directly in front of him.

He froze, water boiled up from the swamps floor, he was unsure of his footing. He took a few more steps, and when he had almost reached her he stopped, because the woman in front of him didn't look precisely like Dee. It was Dee, but it wasn't.

When he'd followed her into the woods, she'd been wearing a sleeveless pink blouse that accentuated her sunken shoulders, but her shoulders didn't look sunken now, nope, now they looked supple and strong, and the blouse covering them had a pyramid symbol in its center, its eyes darted from between her shoulder blades.

When he stepped forward, Dee turned towards him, smiling, and he noticed she had something in her hands. He never got the chance to close the gap between them, his last step had missed the path, and he'd plunged waist deep into sinking sand.

He leaned forward and tried to crawl, but the watery sand was heavy, he'd probably be able to inch his way out, but it would take hours. He yelled, "Dee, help me, my legs are stuck."

She was still smiling, but she hadn't acknowledged him.

He fought the sand for a few more seconds, and she smiled wider. She raised her hands into the air, and he saw what she'd been holding, her fists were full of hundred-dollar bills.

One of the bills had gotten loose and was nearby, it had landed with the Benjamin Franklin side facing up, and Ben's impish grin said it all.

A ringing buzz sounded in the distance, he thought of church bells, the tones soothed him, made him feel free. He was floating, was looking down at the tree tops, enjoying the green the way he enjoyed making money, feeling ecstatic until the needles entered his eyes and a searing pain filled his head.

DOWNTOWN NYC

His eyes flew open and he was aware of his aching shoulders and arms. He could hear the smooth glide of traffic passing back and forth on the street, along with the rumble that New York City carried inside its belly, it was a low and steady roar that thrummed in the concrete. It was the city's essence, as difficult to define as an unborn child.

It was raining as it only does in the city, each rain drop stirring up a different smell, of blacktop and soot, of fresh mown grass, brick, and sawdust, and the smell of the air as the heat dissipates.

The cardboard box that Ray called home had gotten wet. If it rained much harder, he'd have to find another one. It was okay though. He wasn't worried, his experience said to keep it simple, so he did.

The church bells rang, triggering his memories, and he thought he might have once worn an expensive silk suit, the next memory was one of cradling a beautiful woman in his arms, he couldn't recall her name, but it didn't matter, for now, knowing that he once had, was enough.

Fear Not, Flesh...

A tale from the ongoing saga.....

THE MONEY SANDS
"SANS CASH"

By Mary Margaret Park

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