

“How Close to Savage the Soul” © John Atcheson

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How Close to Savage the Soul

The aromas hit him like a fist, poised there over five decades, waiting until now, triggered by this foolish trip.

Fresh and fertile, seaweedy and salty, they ignited electric jolts from somewhere deep inside his soul, firing off images, conjuring up a thousand snapshots covering his long life. Like coming home again, he thought. But now he noticed another odor, an overlay—fetid and coppery—the smell of death?

"Is this how you remember it, Grandpa?"

What was he supposed to say? As the memories flooded back, he flipped through them like catalogue cards, searching for the right words. No, not catalogue cards you old geezer—Google listings.

"Not exactly." He felt the little hand in his, soft in that way little kid flesh is, against his own, gnarled, age-worn, and arthritic. It reminded him of another little hand from a long time ago. No, don't start ...

In truth, it was far from how he remembered it, and so he let the memories march past while he searched for the right answer. The whole month of August, every year from as early as he could remember. From the time he was younger than little Will here. Corking waves in his father's safe arms, riding up one side of the swells out past where they broke, then down the other, buoyant in the salt water. Now, no one even knew what corking was.

Later, he and his brothers would ride the waves, first body surfing, then with rubber rafts, and finally with surf boards.

Much later, he'd come here with his own child. At least for a while.

So much time, then. Time for life. Time for mistakes. Time for corrections. Time to right wrongs.

But it goes. It goes. Is that what he should say? Tell him how it goes, disappearing more quickly with each year? How it tricks you so at the end; it seems to vanish all at once, like the last suck of water down a drain? How he could feel that last inexorable tug on him even now?

No. We've already given him enough of a bumner. Maybe happy stuff. Like first love.

There had been several dunes over to the left where the boardwalk ended. In a cleft between them, sheltered from the crowds, he'd made love for the first time with a local girl he'd known since they were both kids, kissing and caressing until they both thought they'd explode and then finally, stripping off their clothes, heedless of the gritty sand in that way that only adolescents could be. What year was that? 1996?

He smiled to himself. No. Not exactly fodder for a six year old.

"We used to ride those waves, Will." He let go of the hand, knelt down beside the boy, and pointed out at the breakers rolling in. "Me and your great-uncle Hank."

The boy's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Yup. We were good, too."

"Can we do that?"

Again, what to say? "Maybe later, buddy."

The little boy cast his eyes downward but said nothing. A generation used to disappointment, the old man thought.

He took the little boy's hand. "C'mon. We have to get going."

"Can't we stay a little longer, Grandpa?"

The old man eyed the waves and listened. He loved the sounds. Rushing in, building, like the wind shushing through trees before a storm, ebbing out and poising in silence, before building once again. He hated to disappoint the boy. Maybe a little while longer.

"OK. Let's sit down." He guided the boy over to a bench near the end of the boardwalk, and they sat together, silently, watching the surf build, listening to the sounds intensify. It was a clear day, hot, as usual, and the perspiration beaded up around his eyes, stinging them before dripping down and rolling across his cheeks. He checked the boy. His face was flushed, and he'd stopped sweating. Bad sign. Dammit, gotta watch that. He took a bottle of water out of the small pack he carried and handed it to the boy, who took it greedily and started gulping it down. "Easy. Save some for later."

He checked the surf, then, satisfied, he turned back to the boy. "You OK?"

The boy smiled and nodded. "I bet it would feel good to go into the water."

"Not right now."

"Later, right?"

"We'll see, buddy." Again the downcast eyes, but the disappointment was greater this time. He had to say something. His heart ached, knowing how much more the boy would face by the time he was old enough to have memories. "When I was about your age, we were down here for a month and we couldn't go in the water once."

"Why?"

"Hurricanes. There were three that August, and the waves were ..." He didn't finish. No sense risking raising questions he couldn't answer—or wouldn't. 1985. Five years old, and he'd watched as the surf roiled and broiled, and the skies leadened, and the winds howled, and the air itself shook, taking on colors he hadn't seen until ... well until the last decade or so ago.

Another memory—his son, about this age, here on the Outer Banks, another August. Must have been 2016. A vicious undertow was keeping everyone out of the water, even though it was a typical sunny August afternoon. Red flags snapped in the breeze, and the lifeguard stands were empty, big signs admonishing people to stay out of the water. But kids back then weren't as familiar with disappointment. After more than an hour of whining, Tim had convinced him to let him go into the water. "Just ankle deep, Dad. I promise. You can come with me."

He'd relented. Back then, the world seemed safer. They went in gingerly, hand in hand, and at first, they stood there letting the rushing water bury their feet in the sand. Gradually they went in a little deeper, a bit at a time, until the boy was nearly up to his hips and the man felt the pull of the water on the back of his knees. The boy dug his heels in and stood sideways to the rip-current, and it swirled past him, leaving whirlpools around each leg. After a moment, he bent over a bit and scooped water over his head and hair, and the man let go of his hand for just a minute so he could get more. Like some malevolent animate spirit, the water gripped the boy by his ankles, pulled him off his feet, and ripped him away. Panic seized him, as he watched his son rocket out to sea, getting smaller by the second as the water took him to the horizon, tiny arms flailing. He'd jumped in immediately and started swimming, feeling the water close in around him, feeling its pull like the grip of a python, implacable, inescapable, all the while trying to scream "Hold on Tim. Hold on."

As he swam, he lost sight of anything but chops and swells until, rising over the crest of an unbroken wave, he spotted Tim, nearer now, but still foundering in the embrace of the riptide. "Don't fight it," he screamed, but it was lost to the wind and water, and he took a big gulp of seawater for his efforts. He pulled hard and closed the distance, surprised at how quickly the shore was disappearing behind him. When he reached him, Tim was about to go under. "I've got you, son. I've got you." The boy scratched and pulled at him, trying to climb out of the clutches of the sea, and he said again, "I've got you. Relax. We're going to be OK." Tim went limp in his arms after that and looked up with trust.

The man knew better than to fight the undertow, so he swam parallel to the shore—now so far away it looked like a miniature Ptomekin village in the distance—knowing there was a small peninsula a couple of miles down the beach. As he swam, he'd repeated over and over, "We'll be OK, Tim. We're going to make it." He saw the spit after nearly an hour, and they'd maneuvered onto the beach, finally making it, but exhausted.

They'd laid on the sand for a long time in silence, as their breath calmed. Tim was the first to speak, "I'm sorry, Dad. Really." His small voice tinged with panic.

"It's OK. As long as we both learn from it," he'd said. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"What did you learn?"

"To listen to you."

"Good."

They were quiet after that, for a while, each lying in the sand and soaking up the heat as their strength returned. The sea gulls soared and screeched overhead, excited by the stuff the sea was dumping on the shore. After a time, Tim said, "What did you learn, Dad?"

"To pay attention to warning signs."

Yeah. There had been time back then. Time to believe in things that couldn't be. But it goes. It goes. How quickly it goes.

Pay attention to warning signs, the old man thought, and laughed. A brittle laugh, devoid of joy. Had Will heard him, he wondered? He looked down, but no. The boy was staring out at the surf, desire filling his eyes, just like Tim used to. They looked so much alike. Increasingly, the old man would get confused when he looked down at the boy, and think it was 2016 again, and his young son was sitting by his side. But no, it was Will.

Was that a noise? He looked around anxiously, then eyed the encroaching surf.

"C'mon, Will. We really have to get going."

"Just a minute more. Please?"

The old man looked into Will's eyes, his heart breaking. When did he develop this tenderness? He would have thought it weakness in his forties and fifties. Different things mattered then. Money. Wealth. Success. Power. And he'd gotten his share of each, building his own company—small by Wall Street standards—but big enough that it had made him a wealthy man.

The boy's gaze remained riveted on him, silently pleading. Maybe another few minutes would be OK. The electricity was off again, so the damn cottage would be 100 degrees anyway. "OK, sport. A few more minutes. But then we really have to go."

The boy's eyes lit up like high beams, and he said, "Thanks, Grandpa," while he squirmed with joy beside him. Jesus. How little it takes to kindle joy, these days. Poor kid.

Yeah, pay attention to the warning signs ... Time. Time enough back then. Time enough to believe we'd learn. To believe in change. To believe in corrections. But it goes. It goes.

He eyed the water and checked his surroundings. A few more minutes. No more. But then, there was no real refuge, anyway, so maybe staying was no different than going. Back there things were dangerous, too. Different dangers, but dangerous all the same. So maybe the best you could do is pick your threat. He looked over at the boy. He'd gotten up and walked to the edge of the boardwalk, eyeing the sea with naked desire. He was moving in that way kids do, twitching with energy and enthusiasm, so that he seemed all over the place, as if he were dancing to music only he could hear.

"Careful, Will." The boy seemed to fold, and the old man felt like he'd thrown a wet blanket over him. Shit, still not over it.

But kids don't stay down. Presently, he twirled around and said, "Can we go fishing?"

Fishing. It had been years since he'd seen anyone catch anything. Dead seas. Again, what to say?

The old man froze. Beneath the sounds of the sea, from back in the alleys between the main drag and the boardwalk, he heard a now-familiar cacophony—the mindless rumbling of the new apex predator. He reached down into his pack and pulled out his Glock, checking to be sure there was a clip in it. The boy saw it and knew what to do without any words passing between them. He hopped off the boardwalk and got down onto the sand and ducked. The old man crawled down beside him, unwinding his balky joints with as much speed as possible. He eyed the sea licking at their heels now, gauging their time, then waited, listening. The surf was louder down here but he could still hear the

encroaching sounds from above—curses, joyless cackles, occasional shouts and pistol shots—advancing toward them.

He'd thought they'd be safe. Even the gangs stayed off the Outer Banks these days. The place had been picked clean for a decade, now; the tides regularly overran all but the highest areas, and the storms ravaged those. On the way in, he'd stopped at several grocery stores, hoping to find some bottled water, but he knew as soon as he'd arrived he wouldn't find anything. Derelict cars lined the road, their hoods up in silent screams. Store windows were secured with graffiti-covered plywood, and the streets were covered with the detritus of lootings long past.

Funny what he found in the grocery stores. Anything canned was gone. Freezers and refrigerators were smashed in, their shelves empty. Meat cases were empty. The little pharmacies had been looted. But in the sundry aisles, shampoos, rinses and deodorants, and such still lined the shelves in orderly rows. The only thing missing here was hairspray. The gangs used them to fuel crude cannons made of PVC pipes. Potato guns, he'd called them as a kid. Back in the city, the hiss of burning hairspray often preceded the smash of glass late at night. Back there, riot squads still patrolled the streets and a few grocery stores remained open and moderately well-stocked. At least in the wealthy areas. Here? The whole place was a ghost town. A ghost coast.

Time enough, he'd always assumed. Time enough for solutions. But Armageddon had arrived early here. It would come to the rest of the country soon. He could see that. Every spare cent was being spent on trying to defend the coasts, maintain the giant farms in the baking heartland, provide enough water in the spreading deserts, extinguish massive fires in the mountains, and keep the power stations running in the face of decaying infrastructure. That left nothing for the rest of the economy, and so it had crashed, unleashing hordes of the dispossessed and desperate to wander across the country. Men who couldn't feed their children were a dangerous breed. And adolescents without hope were turning the whole country into a real-world Lord of the Flies.

Yeah it goes. It goes. Shit. Above them he heard the thumping of booted feet stomping down the Boardwalk, coming their way. The boy huddled in tight against him and tried to hunker down further into the sand. The old man scrunched down, too, and put his fingers to his lips. But the boy knew. He'd seen things no six-year old should see. Watched as bangers broke into his house, watched as they killed his father—the old man's son. But what happened after that—his mother's screams—still haunted the boy.

"Lookid dis. Fuckin' water is coverin' the whole beach."

He heard the hiss of a potato cannon, the smash of glass, and the hollow laughter of people with no hope. God, how quickly things had dissembled. All that science, all the predictions. The doom and gloom. What they'd missed was how thin a veneer civilization was. How tenuous. How close to savage the soul.

"Told you there wasn't nothin' here. C'mon. Let's head back before we're stuck."

The old man breathed out, unaware that he'd been holding his breath the whole time. He felt the familiar tightness in his chest. Beside him, he could feel the boy trembling. A year's worth of work gone, now. He'd probably retreat into that hollow-eyed catatonic silence again. The cocoon of the hopeless.

Stupid to risk coming out here. They were safe back in his gated community. At least for now. But the kid had begged him to come. Too many stories from his father. And this had been such a healing place when he was a young kid himself. He thought bringing the boy here would help, somehow. Maybe give a sense of normalcy. Stupid.

The boot steps retreated, and he heard their buzz—the sound of a malevolent hoard of bees—ebbing, even as the tide licked at his feet from behind. He had to keep the boy quiet yet a while, keep him from jumping out to avoid the surf. He leaned down until his mouth was right at the boy's ear. "Stay quiet for a while more," he said.

Surprisingly, the kid smiled up at him, pointed at the water circling around their feet and said, in a hushed voice, "Looks like I get to go swimming, after all."

Hope. How the fuck does he still have any? The old man tried to smile back, as he looked down, but his vision was dissolving behind a sheet of tears, and he turned his head and struggled to choke back a sob. When he thought he could manage it, he said, "Looks like it," and rubbed the boy's head tenderly.

He knew why he'd come here, despite his misgivings. His time was nearing, and the boy had no one else. It was here that he'd healed from his father's death and in some naïve way, he thought it might help the boy when the time came.

Time. It goes. It goes so quickly. He could feel it ebb, even as the tide reached his ankles. There'd be an undertow, he knew. There always was these days. He listened for the voices to see if it was safe to get up, but something had stopped the bangers at the far edge of the boardwalk. An argument. Someone wanted to stay. The alpha was being challenged. Just like a wolf-pack. Yeah. A thin veneer.

The water was moving in fast now. It reached his ankles and covered the boy's knees. He remembered his son, disappearing into the undertow decades ago, and he clutched Will's hand.

Now, Will's enthusiasm for swimming was giving way to fear, as he felt the water tugging at him. The old man could see it in his eyes.

Down here, close to the source, that overlay the old man had first detected—the aroma of death and dying—was stronger, permeating everything. It was the pH, he knew. Acid. They'd turned the oceans from a font of life to an acidic crypt.

Jesus. Leave, assholes. Get the fuck out of here.

Across the boardwalk, the argument raged, as people took sides. A voice—deep and guttural—"I say we stay. We wouldn't get back until after dark."

A second voice, "Afraid of the dark, pussy."

A shot rang out, and the boy flinched and let out a scream. The man froze, waiting. Had they heard? The water seemed to be racing in, now. It covered the boy's knees and reached above his own ankles, so they couldn't crawl under the boardwalk. He readied his gun, keeping it dry, and held onto the boy, again feeling him quivering as he tried to melt into his side. There'd been silence since the shot. The

old man realized he'd been holding his breath again, and he let it out, slowly, trying to ease the pressure and pain growing in his chest.

Finally, the alpha's voice reached them. "Anyone else want to second-guess me?" There was a lot of indistinguishable babble—the universal sound of impotent grousing, and the alpha said, "Alright. Let's go. Unless some of you want to stay with Buck." Another shot rang out, and he laughed.

Beside him, the old man had felt the boy flinch at the sound of the pistol. The killer bees ebbed again as they headed away. "A few more minutes yet, OK, Will?"

The boy nodded. The old man studied his eyes and saw that the hollowness had returned. Too much. Too much for a little boy. Not fair. Probably some form of PTSD. The nightmares would be back, now. Brave New World.

By the time they climbed back up to the boardwalk, the water had reached the boy's waist and had covered his own knees. In the heat it felt good. Cooling. But he knew it was likely a toxic brew. Bad juju, algal blooms, and anaerobic stews dominated these days. So he got them out as soon as he thought it was safe.

When they were settled, he put his arms around the boy's shoulders. "Well, you could say we got our swim, huh, bud?"

"Yeah."

One word, no smile. Bad. He had to get him to engage, and quickly. The more time he spent in this state the harder it would be. He thought about the time he'd rescued Tim. Reassurance. That's what he needed.

"It's going to be all right, Will. We're going to be fine."

The boy nodded. The hollowness still inhabited his eyes.

"It will. I promise." But as he said it, he felt the pain and pressure clutch at his chest again, threatening to overwhelm him. It radiated out to his shoulder and arm, and he reached into the pack for his pills. Intense now. Very intense. He had the bottle, but he hurt too much to open it. "Can ... you ... get me one."

The boy took the bottle and shook out one pill. Using his right arm, the old man took it and let it dissolve under his tongue, then waited for the pain to lessen, and his breathing to return to normal. The emptiness of his promise was reflected back at him through Will's eyes. It wasn't going to be OK. Ever. That world was gone, now.

There was one thing he had to do. One thing he had to tell the boy. He had a right to know. And time was slipping away.

Struggling against the pain, he said, "We didn't know." But he knew it was a lie, and it was too late for lies. "We knew. We didn't want to know, but we knew. We thought ... we thought there was time." But that was a lie too, and so as the pain and pressure built he said, "I'm sorry. So Sorry." Pain crushing now. Black spots appearing before his eyes, blending together, mixing with the pain ... He had to say something to