



BEACH

- ROBERTO BOLAÑO

I gave up heroin and went home and began the methadone treatment administered at the outpatient clinic and I didn't have much else to do except get up each morning and watch TV and try to sleep at night, but I couldn't, something made me unable to close my eyes and rest, and that was my routine, until one day I couldn't stand it any more and I bought myself a pair of black swimming trunks at a store in the centre of town and I went to the beach, wearing the trunks and with a towel and a magazine, and I spread my towel not too far from the water and then I lay down and spent a while trying to decide whether to go into the water or not, I could think of lots of reasons to go in but also some not to (the children playing at the water's edge, for example), until at last it was too late and I went home, and the next morning I bought some sunscreen and I went to the beach again, and at around twelve I headed to the clinic and got my dose of methadone and said hello to some familiar faces, not friends, just familiar faces from the methadone line who were surprised to see me in swimming trunks, but I acted as if there was nothing strange about it, and then I walked back to the beach and this time I went for a dip and tried to swim, though I couldn't, and that was enough for me, and the next day I went back to the beach and put on sunscreen all over and then I fell asleep on the sand, and when I woke up I felt very well rested, and I hadn't burned my back or anything, and this went on for a week or maybe two, I can't remember, the only thing I'm sure of is that each day I got more of a tan and though I didn't talk to anyone each day I felt better, or different, which isn't the same thing but in my case it seemed like it, and one day an old couple turned up on the beach, I remember it clearly, it looked like they'd been together for a long time, she was fat, or round, and must have been about seventy, and he was thin, or more than thin, a walking skeleton, I think that was why I noticed him, because usually I didn't take much notice of the people on the beach, but I did notice them, and it was because the

guy was so skinny, I saw him and got scared, fuck, it's death coming for me, I thought, but nothing was coming for me, it was just two old people, the man maybe seventy-five and the woman about seventy, or the other way around, and she seemed to be in good health, but he looked as if he were going to breathe his last breath any time now or as if this were his last summer, and at first, once I was over my initial fright, it was hard for me to look away from the old man's face, from his skull barely covered by a thin layer of skin, but then I got used to watching the two of them surreptitiously, lying on the sand, face down, with my face hidden in my arms, or from the boardwalk, sitting on a bench facing the beach, as I pretended to brush sand off myself, and I remember that the old woman always came to the beach with an umbrella, under which she quickly ducked, and she didn't wear a bathing suit, although sometimes I saw her in a bathing suit, but usually she was in a very loose summer dress that made her look fatter than she was, and under that umbrella the old woman sat reading, she had a very thick book, while the skeleton that was her husband lay on the sand in nothing but a tiny swimsuit, almost a thong, and drank in the sun with a voracity that brought me distant memories of junkies frozen in blissful immobility, of junkies focused on what they were doing, on the only thing they could do, and then my head ached and I left the beach, I had something to eat on the Paseo Marítimo, a little dish of anchovies, and a beer, and then I smoked a cigarette and watched the beach through the window of the bar, and then I went back and the old man and the old woman were still there, she under her umbrella, he exposed to the sun's rays, and then, suddenly, for no reason, I felt like crying and I got in the water and swam and when I was a long way from shore I looked at the sun and it seemed strange to me that it was there, that big thing so unlike us, and then I started to swim toward the shore (twice I almost drowned) and when I got back I dropped down next to my towel and sat there panting for quite a while, but without losing sight of the old couple, and then I may have fallen asleep on the sand, and when I woke up the beach was beginning to clear, but the old man and the

old woman were still there, she with her novel under the umbrella and he on his back in the sun with his eyes closed and a strange expression on his skull-like face, as if he could feel each second passing and he was savouring it, though the sun's rays were weak, though the sun had already dipped behind the buildings along the beach, behind the hills, but that didn't seem to bother him, and then I watched him and I watched the sun, and sometimes my back stung a little, as if that afternoon I'd burned myself, and I looked at them and then I got up, I slung my towel over my shoulders like a cape and went to sit on one of the benches of the Paseo Marítimo, where I pretended to brush non-existent sand off my legs, and from up there I had a different vision of the couple, I said to myself that maybe he wasn't about to die, I said to myself that maybe time didn't exist in the way I thought it existed, I reflected on time as the sun's distance lengthened the shadows of the buildings, and then I went home and took a shower and examined my red back, a back that didn't seem to belong to me but to someone else, someone it would still be years before I got to know, and then I turned on the TV and watched shows that I didn't understand at all, until I fell asleep in my chair, and the next day it was back to the same old thing, the beach, the clinic, the beach again, a routine that was sometimes interrupted by new people on the beach, a woman, for example, who was always standing, who never lay down in the sand, who wore a bikini bottom and a blue T-shirt, and who when she went into the water only got wet up to the knees, and who was reading a book, like the old woman, but this woman read it standing up, and sometimes she knelt down, though in a very odd way, and picked up a big bottle of Pepsi and drank, standing up, of course, and then put the bottle back down on the towel, which I don't know why she'd brought since she never lay down on it or went swimming, and sometimes this woman scared me, she seemed too strange, but most of the time I just felt sorry for her, and I saw other strange things too, all kinds of things happen at the beach, maybe because it's the only place where we're all half naked, though nothing too important ever happened, once as I was walking

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along the shore I thought I saw an ex-junkie like me, sitting on a mound of sand with a baby on his lap, and another time I saw some Russian girls, three Russian girls, who were probably hookers and who were talking on a single cellphone and laughing, all three of them, but what really interested me most was the old couple, partly because I had the feeling that the old man might die at any moment, and when I thought this, or when I realized I was thinking this, crazy ideas would come into my head, like the thought that after the old man's death there would be a tsunami and the town would be destroyed by a giant wave, or that the earth would begin to shake and a massive earthquake would swallow up the whole town in a wave of dust, and when I thought about what I've just described I hid my head in my hands and began to weep, and while I was weeping I dreamed (or imagined) that it was night-time, say three in the morning, and I left my house and went to the beach, and on the beach I found the old man lying on the sand, and in the sky, up near the stars, but closer to earth than the other stars, there shone a black sun, an enormous sun, silent and black, and I went down to the beach and lay on the sand too, the only two people on the beach were the old man and me, and when I opened my eyes again I realized that the Russian hookers and the girl who was always standing and the ex-junkie with the baby were watching me curiously, maybe wondering who that weird guy was, the guy with the sunburned shoulders and back, and even the old woman was gazing at me from under her umbrella, interrupting the reading of her interminable book for a few seconds, maybe wondering who that young man was, that man with silent tears running down his face, a man of thirty-five who had nothing at all but who was recovering his will and his courage and who knew that he would live a while longer. ■

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