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Now

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He walked alone along the shore that night as he had done every night for nearly three decades. He told himself that it was no different now; the lake was still sighing breathlessly as the waves slid quietly onto the sand. The beach itself had changed little; the dunes had shifted but not enough so that anyone who hadn’t grown up with them as he had would notice. But it was different—the watermelon rinds hadn’t been floating in the water before, and he couldn’t remember noticing any bathing cap straps lying on the shore, half buried and twisted around a beer can. Even the waves dashed back from the shore as if the land were cold and frightening.

Maybe it was the summer people, the ones that had bought his lot near the road for their hotel. At the time it seemed that he could be doing little harm. He had had to move his shack closer to the lake, but the shoreline was his favorite of places. The money was useful, too; in fact it was necessary because he had had to pay the taxes that he had been ignoring. He grumbled at just the thought of taxes. Paying someone else for land he owned. He wouldn’t have done it if they hadn’t threatened to take all his land away. Yes, maybe the summer people were responsible for changing his shore. What kind of people were they, destroying the natural beauty of life? The young ones may have done it; only the week before he had been out in the dunes and had found a foot trail. It was against his principles to follow a trail, but this time his curiosity got the best of him. As he walked he had seen the glow of a fire, and then found himself in the midst of a group of teenagers. The scrambled from under blankets and tried to hide beer cans and cases. One of the boys had offered him a beer, saying that a man needed pink elephants for company when he was alone in the desolate dunes. The old man had just murmured and walked away toward the lake.

Much as he hated to blame everything on the youngsters, it couldn’t have been the older summer people that had changed his lake; they didn’t come down to the beach itself more than once a season. A swimming pool had been built behind the resort on the second lot he sold. He had questioned the resort owner about the necessity of a pool so near the lake. Evidently the quarter mile walk through the dunes was too much of an effort for the older folks. Huh, he had already walked over a mile down the shore and hadn’t even noticed the time nor the effort. All he had noticed was the night air; it was strangely warm, almost stifling.
A wave slid against his foot, stealing the sand from beneath it. As he sat down to take off his shoes, he remembered how he and his brother had gone without shoes all summer, how they ran and splashed through the waves and tumbled down the dunes. The thought of his brother brought tears to his eyes; their favorite place as boys had been the hill with the towering white pines at its peak. It was gone now, and so was his brother. The old man had had to sell the lot with the hill for money, money he needed, money for his brother’s funeral. His brother had taken a job with a construction firm and had been working on the roof of a high building when he had fallen, fallen to his death while doing something he didn’t believe in. The old man looked up at the hill. It didn’t seem as high as it had when he was young. The twin pines were gone, replaced by a large modern house and carport; a house with drapes drawn over a picture window facing the lake.

As he sat there the air seemed to get thicker. It must be the smoke from the road builders, but even they must stop sometime; they wouldn’t be working this late at night. The thought of a four-lane highway touching even a corner of his land—what had been his land—made him feel sick inside. He could see the young man from the U. S. Highway Commission as if he were standing in front of him now. He had fired questions at the old man faster and faster until his speech was but a jumble of swear words. The old man knew what the government man was there for; he had heard the summer folk talk of how wonderful it would be to have a U. S. highway come almost to their door, how it would make the trip to town so much faster and easier. He had taken the young man’s first offer; he didn’t need the money nor did he want it. According to the government, he couldn’t have the land, so he blindly signed the deed.

He wept, wept as he sat on the thin strip of land that was left. The air was hot. Hot enough to smother a man.