

In early 2009 I was invited to give a reading at a friend's party. When I quizzed the hostess on what kind of reading she would like, she asked if I'd ever written any horror fiction.

I hadn't. But in voicing that question, she'd done a very dangerous thing – she'd given me an idea.

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I also want to thank and congratulate some of my favourite writers: Dean Koontz, Stephen King, Mary Shelley, Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis, and Christopher Pike. If I ever write words as scary as theirs, I'll die happy – and hopefully stay dead.

- Jack Heath

The Beach

by Jack Heath

‘You ready to tell me where we’re going?’

He could hear the smile in her voice. Her footsteps were soft against the dirt behind him, and the earrings he’d bought her jingled as she walked.

‘Almost there, now,’ he said.

He left the torch tucked into his belt. The moonlight was just good enough to see by, outlining the rocks and shrubs in his path but leaving the distant ocean a pitiless expanse of black.

Someday, he thought, there’ll be nowhere like this left. Calm water, impenetrable forest. No sound except the leaves scraping against one another in the wind. No phone reception, no boats on the horizon – the chances of seeing another human being were millions to one. Eventually it’d all be bulldozed to make way for a highway or a fishing town or an army base, but for now, they might as well be the last two people on earth, or the first.

He’d known she was patient, but hadn’t appreciated the tenacity of her enthusiasm. More than an hour of walking through dark bushland, after almost two hours in the car on a narrow dirt road, and she was still chirpy as anything. He held out his hand as he walked, and, as always, felt her reach out to squeeze it.

This was the same place he’d taken his wife, almost a year ago. On a night as cold and dark as tonight, he led her down the winding path to the beach. He asked her to close her eyes, and wait. Then he hiked back to the car, and drove away. She was left stranded, with no food, no water, and a hundred kilometres of jungle in every direction.

It had been almost sunrise when he arrived home – to the house that was now his alone. He grinned as he parked *his* car in *his* garage. He washed his clothes, dried them, put them back in the drawers, neatly folded. He phoned all his wife’s friends, saying she hadn’t come home, asking if she was with them. Then he called the police to report her missing.

The cops had investigated, but there was no trail to follow. No body, no weapon, no witnesses. No suspicious prints or fibres or blood spatter or powder residue or anything at all. His wife, as far as anyone else knew, had simply disappeared.

As he strolled through the darkness with his new girlfriend’s hand in his, he wondered how long his wife had waited there. Fifteen minutes? An hour? How long before she panicked, started to run back towards the labyrinth of trees, searching in vain for the car? Had she ever worked out that he had left her to die, or did she think he must have gotten lost in the woods, twisted his ankle in a wombat hole, or been bitten by a snake?

He didn’t need to have witnessed her fear to be excited by it. He’d killed her for the financial gain, but the thrill of getting away with it was unexpectedly addictive. Even now, he could imagine his wife calling out to him, so vividly he could almost hear her voice. ‘Henry? Henry! Where are you?’

What was it that had finally killed her? Was it the cold, as she stumbled through the darkness? Was it a ditch, hidden in

the gloom, deep enough to break her neck? Or did she live to see the sunrise, only to die of dehydration?

‘Henry! Come back! Henry?’

He frowned. For a second he’d thought he heard an actual voice on the wind. No. It must be his imagination – there was no-one out here. The night was still and empty.

The sand squeaked under his feet as they broke through the last of the shrubbery. The sea was so quiet you could forget it was there – a giant shadow clinging to the shore.

‘Henry! Wait for me! Where have you gone?’

A rash of goosebumps swarmed up the back of his neck. That *wasn't* his imagination. It was his girlfriend’s voice, cracking with worry, echoing from somewhere in the forest. He’d left her behind.

Only now did Henry realise that the hand he was holding wore a wedding ring.

‘I knew you’d come back for me,’ his wife said. The moonlight caught her teeth as she smiled.

For a crazy moment, he thought she’d survived somehow – lurking in the jungle for a whole year, drinking from a muddy creek, killing animals with a sharp stick and chewing their raw flesh. But her lacy dress was undamaged. The flower he’d tucked behind her ear was still there, petals lush and ripe. And her eyes were still closed.

Heart thundering in his chest, Henry tried to pull his fingers free. Her grip was as cold and tight as a vice, yet her feet disturbed not a single grain of sand as she started to walk, pulling him towards the ocean.

He shrieked in terror, twisting and flailing, flogging the air with his free arm. His undead wife appeared not to notice, her face turned to the sea as she dragged him inexorably towards it.

He swung his fist at her head, but the air surrounding her felt thicker, heavier, as though she were wrapped in cotton wool. The blow barely touched her icy skin.

‘I missed you, sweetie,’ she said, like the whole year never happened. Like he’d travelled back in time. ‘Can I open my eyes yet?’

Henry’s feet kicked up explosions of wet sand as he struggled to free himself. He fell backwards, then was pulled onto his knees as his wife glided through the gloom. Her hand squeezed his tighter as she approached the gentle waves, and he thought he heard the metacarpal bones crack.

Splash! Freezing water was leaking into his shoes. He screamed out to his girlfriend, ‘Sarah! Help me!’ as he was dragged in up to his thighs, then to his chest. He heard no reply, and for a second he wondered if he was already dead, if he had been in hell since his wife first appeared.

‘I’m sorry,’ he babbled. ‘I’m sorry!’

His wife kept pulling.

Seawater bubbled and sprayed from Henry’s lips as he sucked a last gasp of air through his nostrils. He couldn’t see his captor any more – only feel her grip on his wrist.

‘Almost there, now,’ he heard her whisper. And then the black, unforgiving ocean swallowed him up.

Sarah stumbled onto the beach just in time to see the last of the ripples die. She only watched the water for a moment before turning to scan the beach.

‘Can you hear me, Henry?’ she shouted.

There was no reply.

She fingered the car keys nervously. She didn't want to abandon her boyfriend – she was sure she'd heard him yell for help. But she'd never find him alone in the darkness. The sooner she left, the sooner she could come back with a search party.

'Henry,' she called. 'I'm going to go get the police, okay?'

Silence.

'Wherever you are, stay there,' she said. Then she started to run back up the winding path towards the car.