

—HIGH TIDE COMING

by Ken Goldman

Long Beach Island, Late Summer 1975

Leah could watch the undulating Atlantic for hours. In the distance the white caps danced, rolling slopes that pressed toward the shore and just kept coming. Throughout the summer the young girl stood hypnotized by the sea's ever-changing motion as if it were some moody living thing. A child with imagination, she would have sworn sometimes the ocean called to her. But she was much too smart to tell anyone.

Tonight Leah could not resist the temptation to answer, although the beach lost its friendliness once the sun descended. She removed her sandals and, looking over her shoulder, crept off the screened patio while her parents entertained their dinner guests.

She ran towards the surf the moment her bare feet touched sand. Its coolness at first startled her because she had been used to sand baked by the sun, but the unfamiliar sensation did not slow her pace.

Small for her nine years, Leah seemed so much smaller compared to the vast Atlantic. She paused to sniff the salty air and watch the ocean swell. Twinkling beneath the beacon of a full moon, each breaking wave offered a new invitation. At the shoreline the surf crashed in a crescendo, then hissed softly as it withdrew from the beach. Leah loved the sea's smells and sounds.

Ordinarily she would never consider going into the surf without her father by her side, but Leah felt emboldened by the cover of night. The water's coldness tickled her toes and she had to suppress giggles, although her parents' summer cottage sat a long way up the beach, appearing as a shadow from where she stood. It seemed unlikely anyone could see or hear her. To Leah this was a good thing.

She didn't want to anger her father by returning to the cottage dripping wet. Slipping out of her shorts and tank top, she tossed clothing behind her as she waded into the ocean's black ink. She didn't care that the water was so cold. Nothing in the whole world could beat this feeling. Leah ventured a few more steps until the water lapped at her waist.

Tickled, she laughed full out now. She couldn't help it. The dark water called to her more loudly than before. With awkward movements that seemed neither wading nor running, she pressed forward with more confidence than she had ever felt, her I-love-summer-vacation smile still in place.

"Oh...!"

The Atlantic aborted the girl's utterance, and she suddenly plunged into a liquid hollow. For a few awful moments Leah panic-thrashed wildly. She managed to reclaim the surface, bobbing amid the waves like some discarded water toy. Salt water filled her mouth and stung her eyes. Gagging, she

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spat out as much as she could. Her toes located a squishy bottom, but just barely because the surf was nose high now. Leah tried to pull her thoughts together and realized she no longer could determine which way led back to shore, nor could she empty her mouth to call for help. She could only cough sea water before the rumbling surf pelted her again.

Walloped almost into insensibility, she clawed her way to the surface in time to see the biggest wave in the history of the world. It grew higher as she stared, beading in on the girl like some murky creature nourished by the darkness. Leah found enough wind to gasp, then gagged as her lungs sloshed with salt water.

The roaring surf sounded like some enraged animal.

["I've got you now, girl... Oh, yes, little Leah, I've got you good."]

The wall of sea water hovered, pausing for a millisecond before it claimed her. It crashed upon her skull, inverting head with toes and flooding the world, spiraling her downdown to the bubbling darkness below.

["Got you, little girl... Got you..."]

Long Beach Island, Summer 2003

The weekly ritual began as it always did.

"Miss Sanders? I have your groceries."

Inside her beach cottage the woman stood motionless, rigid against her front door as she tried to control the runaway speedboat inside her chest. She leaned against the entrance as if blocking some unseen force on the other side. Although Walter's voice was familiar, she could not bring herself to swing the door open for him.

Another few knocks, more insistent.

"Miss Sanders...?"

It took her best effort to return her breathing to normal, or to something close to normal. Without releasing the chain lock she opened the door part way, passing a five dollar bill to the boy. She could see only the kid's knuckles as he accepted her gratuity through the aperture, mumbling something she couldn't hear clearly.

"Thank you, Walter. You can just leave the bags on the patio for me." The kid added no further response, having grown used to the drill. Leah waited until she felt certain the young man had disappeared down the walkway. Crouching with her back against the door gave her the appearance of a woman much older than she really was.

"I can do this," she muttered to no one. "Damn it. There's nothing to it. I can do this." She released the chain and cracked the door wide enough to see the two bags. They were just out of arm's reach; she would have to step onto the patio to retrieve them. A gust of wind tousled her hair, and Leah almost slammed the door shut as if she had been touched by some filthy thing. Her heart's wild race began again, and she felt perspiration bead her forehead.

"Shit... shitshitshit."

In one motion she swooped the grocery bags into her arms and returned inside, snapping the lock shut. It would be all right now, she assured herself. She managed a self-satisfied half grin before unpacking her delivery and preparing a fresh pot of coffee. Although it was shaping up to be a lovely summer's day, this didn't concern