

The Secret Beauty of Sand

Dedicated to Barbara Macnish who treasures and polishes each grain's promise and potential - and with thanks to Dr. Gary Greenberg for his microphotography and to David Scott for sharing it with me

"Welcome to Inconsequential-Sands!" said the man in the suit with gesticulating hands. "This is the *perfect* place for what we have planned. I told you, I prepped you, my brief was quite right – I've brought you to a veritable *gold* mine."

He talked with purpose, annunciating each word as if he imagined he'd been born to be heard. But the beach was deserted and silent that day and there was no crowd gathered to hear what he'd say. Just one man standing in mirroring grey, his suited form poised in a proprietorial way.

They had driven out from somewhere consequential, their purpose business and their object raw material. The aim was clear, the stakes were high - to find a beach of sand to supply an enterprise sure to multiply...

And sand would become gold dust... just you see – "So man, come on, don't you agree?"

The second man yawned and scratched at his head, but there was a glint in his eye as he cunningly said "Well I suppose now, perhaps now, this beach would do, and it's far enough from prying eyes too. There's no one influential for miles around it, I've observed it carefully, I'm sure no one has even found it! So how could anyone miss a few tonnes of dust? And even if someone noticed – there's no value to the stuff. Who's going to worry or bother to complain, especially given the respect of our company's name? And meanwhile we can just come and take everything we need to make..."

"GOLD!"

The two men said it in perfect time – it rolled off their tongues like something sublime. How they loved all its expansive one syllable meant – the power and riches that were their intent.

"We'll squeeze it and crush it and melt it all down. It will become so much more than all this dull brown."

"I can send the first truck early next Saturday" said the first man abruptly, for there could be no delay.

The hand shake was firm, the agreement was made. And the light of the day was beginning to fade. The two men walked away, each turning his back - then sped off city-ward in matching metallic black.

And the beach fell empty and the silence had weight as if somehow the sand ached for its inevitable fate.

And the sea seemed to whisper again and again, a lapping and haunting white-noised refrain. "And sand will become gold dust, gold dust, gold dust. And sand will become gold dust – oh but it must."

"Someone's stealing the beach!"

It's an unusual claim – a bold accusation, no wonder the words failed to cause a sensation. Who steals a beach? And how would they try? And anyway, the nearest one wasn't that close by. It didn't affect the things of today, and everyone was busy, there was just no way... that disappearing dust – sand, shells and stuff – could be viewed as mattering to *anyone* really that much.

Jimmy was discouraged, he felt quite defeated – for there was no denying the beach was depleted. Every time he went now more sand was gone, a chasm had opened half a mile long. Where there once had been dunes undulating to beige, now there was a sudden drop which felt quite unsafe. He didn't dare cross it to reach to the shore so he couldn't paddle in the waves anymore.

But everyone he told said the same thing, one hundred and thirty seven versions bouncing back at him:

“Jim, it's just useless sand. I don't see why you can't understand. I can't worry about some beach I hardly know. It's not somewhere I even bother to go. If you want to be helpful and make a contribution, this is what I suggest as a better solution. Just don't go there anymore upsetting yourself and get on with your work like everyone else. If you've still got time to gawp at disappearing sand, then you can step in and lend me a hand. We want to put Inconsequential onto the map and that takes investment so come on good chap... do us a favour and remember to savour what's really of worth to us all. If people have taken the sand to make gold, no matter, we've not been left out in the cold.”

So Jimmy fell silent on the subject of sand – the town thought the subject of the beach was banned. By day he worked hard and was one of them again, soon they reconsidered him a friend. But each dusk as the street lights blinked tired before sleep, Jimmy crept off and climbed the cliff path steep. He had to be high now to look out to sea for the beach was disappearing completely. He'd sit and mourn in silent vigil alone, a good twenty five miles from his cosy home. He'd remember the feel of sand under his feet and the magnificent abiding scale and peace that he'd felt every time in his gut or his heart when he'd walked into this canvas of art.

And out on the rock in the moonshine bright, he'd go through the same routine each night. From his pocket he'd take it and set it down – then untie and unfold with concentrated frown. He'd view and caress, let it run through his fingers... revelling in memory as echoes of fuller sensations lingered. But each night when he handled what had now become treasure, the wind she would mock him and steal a fresh measure. Till eventually the sand was all stolen grain – both on beach and in cloth square nothing remained.

The vigil continued though the sand was history. Jimmy sat on and on, shaping his theory. He couldn't put his finger on why it was such... why the sand should matter so very much. He considered many times conceding defeat – perhaps there had been no value in the beach. Perhaps after all it was just dust – perhaps there was no value to the stuff? But try as he might he couldn't shake the feeling... the beach... well, it had some deeper meaning. It haunted him, taunted him, wouldn't leave him be – there was more to sand than what he could see.

He knew he would never discover the truth if he stayed in this town with the friends of his youth. But somebody somewhere would share all his grieving. He felt certain there were others who abhorred sand-thieving.

So the very next dawn of the very next day, Jimmy shut shop and went far away. He had but one goal, one endeavour, one quest – until he unearthed the mystery of sand, he would not rest!

A lover of beaches, a seeker of meaning, Jimmy grew closer to the truth he was seeking. He soon reached new coast-lines to walk bare-footed along – every time he found sand now he burst into song! Till one day exhausted in the noon day sun, he thought he was finished... but it had just begun...

No mirage ahead, but a vast rock, hewn door. So he knocked and then waited for he longed to see more.

Stepping inside he felt perhaps he was dehydrated, in some delirious state – all strangely elated. For what he saw in that place was not normal or likely and the light hurt his eyes it was shining so brightly. But when he squinted and adjusted and took it all in, he was all wonder-struck laughter and aching full grin.

The room he was in was of staggering dimensions – it seemed to have almost no limitations. The ceiling looked just exactly like the sky and seemed to be as fully high. But dominating it all, hugely towering, was a man made of rock, with myriad facets all sparkling. From one angle he seemed to be granite grey, all hewn from some tough rock that was all just the same. But beyond even diamonds refracting seven shades rainbow, his every inch was made of multi-coloured stone-glow. With quartzes and gemstones all reflecting so bright, the rock he was made of was sculpted light!

And above Jim's head the rock man was beaming out smile – utterly intent on his working hands meanwhile. Never had Jim seen such intense, immense beauty, even an inch of the rock man could dazzle completely. But combined with his expression, his posture, his evident delight. He was just so...

But then Jim got a fright!

He felt it first as a mighty vibration, an incredibly full, resonant sensation. But then he realised it was sound, a combination of a cave's echo and a harmonic's ringing round. He was singing. The rock man was singing! And when he grew accustomed to such unusual musicality, like the source of the world's tuning forks chiming ecstatically... his wonder was complete...

Or so he thought...

For that was when he saw the truth he'd been seeking. Oh he'd never imagined his beach had THIS MUCH meaning!

For just the other side of the huge rock feet, were several piles – small and neat. And each one contained the very same thing - and at the thought of *this* source, Jimmy could also almost sing. It must be so precious if it this is where it was made, for instinctively he knew now this was from where it all came.

And then as if to confirm it, at the very right time, he looked up and saw... oh my word, there was more...

With careful and dedicated artisan's pace, again and again the rock man turned his face – and then Jim saw double and blinked through teary haze for a mirror each time reflected the rock man's gaze. The gentle eyes closed and his breath misted glass, then he gently tipped it to catch something... lightning fast. Then with left hand on some glass seeming to magnify and right on a chisel appearing to swiftly fly, something was being formed.

Again and again like a dance or refrain, the jewel of a rock man repeated the same. Lovingly lingering on each tiny piece before moving on again simply to repeat. What was his mirroring, breathing, chiselling making? What was the magnificent man intent on creating?

It couldn't be!

But yes as the huge rock hand placed down the glass, Jim caught a magnified glimpse at last. A beautiful green of such depth and such glory in a shape that seemed to evoke unique story. And then as the handle was lifted again, a flash of purple not remotely the same. Jim stood still completely entranced as he watched different colours and shapes almost dance. Such gemstones, such beauty, each a masterpiece, yet familiar because yes, now he could see... they had all been seen before, all in one place, they were all reflections of the rock man's face!

Then the huge man ended a batch and was bending... he placed his work down with look of love un-ending... and one last brushing caress of finger tip, and then he was straightening... to get on with it.

And there it was on the floor next to Jim. A new pile of sand in the image of *Him*.

Jim couldn't quite believe the truth he now knew – sand wasn't yellow or brown, it was azure blue! And Ceylon and cerise and emerald and vermilion. And angular and curved – shape varieties into billions! Each grain was so different

and so perfectly designed, so original and colourful – he was mesmerised. Each one was an echo born of kaleidoscope eyes. Not uniform but derived from the same kind smile.

How would he tell them? How would he make them see? How could you begin to teach, the utter pricelessness of a beach?

Jim's journey home was urgent and that made it forever long, for he knew if he could make them see they would help him right the wrong. Together they would find the beach, bring home the treasure- sand. Everyone would surely drop their work now and lend a hand.

Jim was welcomed back with warmth and with delight – his unexplained leaving had given Inconsequential quite a fright! Still more when he took out the grains he'd brought with him, and the shard of powerful magnifying glass the melodious man had given...

That day the town was focused and united in their vision – they would go and find the men who had stolen without permission the treasure store that had been their shore. Jim was right, he told the truth, the sand was worth so much, they grieved the day they'd ever dared to call it dull brown dust. Sand should never be ground and melted to be turned into gold – it was already worth much more – everyone must be told!

The tale of the quest when they persuaded grey suited men is one of courage and commitment worth sharing with your friends. But that's the sequel – and not the equal – to this one that ends right now. Of the truth and the secret of the beautiful value of sand, and the power of perspective to change the way we understand.

There may be billions of grains in the world today, but none of them is disposable dust to simply throw away. And if even one so very unique is treated as commodity, stand up for the fact that they are utterly extraordinary. What they echo, what they reflect, what they hint at on examination is the source and the epoch of the purest ever beauty. So tread lightly friend, now that you have come to understand. Tread lightly on the secret of the beauty that is sand.