

A chronicle of love, loss and survival in the American Southwest and tropical Yucatan, leavened by magical realism. Raw and laugh-out-loud evocation of the universal yet highly personal journey of grief. Hope and humor reclaim fear and despair.

## **Sand & Water**

by Michael Hoerning

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The background of the cover is a photograph of a beach. The sky is filled with large, dark, dramatic clouds. The ocean is a deep blue, with white-capped waves breaking onto the shore. The water near the beach is a lighter, turquoise color. The sand is a light tan color, and the overall scene is captured in a wide-angle shot.

# *Sand & Water*

**MICHAEL HOERNING**

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## *Marc*

April 2, 1993

*You can go through it crawling on your hands and knees. Or you can go through it walking tall, head high, eyes clear. One way or another you'll have to get through it.*

The words marched into Marc's mind as if uttered by an invisible coach. He shook his head, struggled for balance against shifting blasts of subterranean wind. Eyes clear? His eyes were squeezed shut, prickling with sand and ash.

His hand gripped the cold, slippery rail, felt the rough texture of chipped paint. He took another step down, and another, making tentative contact with each wet stair.

The wind grew fiercer.

A metallic whine bore into his ears from the deep distance, and under the concrete and metal of the stairs, thunder rattled the illusion of solid earth. Nothing was solid. Everything vibrated and the vibrations jarred his bones, drummed his skull. Down and down into liquefied, shaking earth.

*Walk tall.* He tried to straighten his back, hunched under a burden that grew with each step. His knees crackled and threatened to fail, threatened to shoot him into a never ending and shattering fall.

At long last, he arrived at a dimly lit, low-ceilinged subway platform. But to his left, where the train tunnel and rails should have been, a pool of emerald water lapped a few inches below the platform's edge.

The wind gusted erratically, causing him to stumble as he attempted to clear the grit from his eyes and take in the unexpected scene. Amid the filth and neglect of the subway station, the pool looked clean and inviting, its surface barely rippling, as if the wind couldn't touch it. Marc sank to his burning knees, staring.

A woman's head and bare shoulders emerged from the water, another unexpected vision of loveliness in this grimy pit. She raised a hand, fingers curled in a little wave—welcoming or wistful, he couldn't tell.

He felt overwhelmed by a desire to follow her into the water, but his body was now frozen or turned to stone, bowed by the crushing weight upon his back. Couldn't move his feet, couldn't even open his lips to speak as he watched her disappear. Blood pounded in his ears. His hands splayed uselessly on the cold concrete.

*You can go through it crawling on your hands and knees. Or you can go through it walking tall, head high, eyes clear. One way or another you'll have to get through it.*

Marc Hochstaff was bargaining his way through. Staggering, not walking tall. The body he dragged through his dream was his own. This morning he was sleeping off one more big night before the kids came home—the sleep of the shitfaced.

Across his bedroom, the shadow of a hawk slipped through floor-to-ceiling glass, drifted over an expanse of hand-troweled plaster wall and the empty Stoli bottle standing upon the dresser. There, it paused above a jumble of desiccated lemon quarters before reaching Marc's thoroughly thrashed king-size bed. It hovered upon his exposed thigh and vanished over the bed's edge.

“Marc, hey, I'm leaving.” A woman's voice, level, no-nonsense.

Squinting through coppery lashes, Marc swam to consciousness, losing the dream, struggling to hold on to its words. His sluggish senses pulled him in both directions, back into dream darkness to replay its message, up into daylight and someone speaking aloud. He recognized a blur of color and movement, the rustle of fabric, soft footsteps, the brisk scent of his shampoo.

A feminine hand alighted on his leg, tugged at a sheet to cover it. Touched by the sweetness of the gesture, he strove to remember her name. She moved in and out of sight gathering whatever she'd been wearing the night before, her slim figure draped in a florid caftan that once belonged to his ex. He'd never liked that thing. With any luck, it would walk out the door this time.

The bed creaked as she sat. She pulled the caftan over her head, fastened her bra, and slipped into a blouse. Wet black hair hung past her shoulders. Her head disappeared again for a moment when she

bent to scoop two martini glasses from the floor; she set them on a nightstand.

He watched her fish a twist of lemon peel from one of the glasses, pop it into her mouth and chew, the fine muscles in her jaw moving in unconscious rhythm. Maybe she felt his attention. She turned, pinned him with green almond eyes, throat bobbing as she swallowed the peel.

“Hi, um... Clara. Good morning.” Marc’s tongue felt like a thick foreign object in his mouth, and entirely too much light flooded the room, but there was no way to turn it off—the skylight and solar windows just doing their jobs. He rubbed his eyes and pulled distractedly at the elastic holding his ponytail, loosening tangled hair. The headache didn’t budge. “Shit, I’m a jerk. Sorry.”

She zipped into a skirt. Sat on the bed again to slide her feet into cowboy boots. Marc’s feet, sticking out from under the sheet, felt iced.

“No, you’re not a jerk. You’re an asshole.” Her tone was warm, and so were her hands as she took one of his feet into her lap and gave it a perfunctory rub. “Look, it’s not like anyone died. It’s a divorce. Get over it.”

Pushing his foot from her lap, she leaned in to kiss his cheek, a hint of resignation and bitter lemon scent on her breath. “Call me sometime. I’ve never gone home with the band, much less the drummer. You’re good. Very good.”

The carpet silenced her descent from the loft, but when she reached the tile-floored living room, an unholy, echoing racket struck Marc’s ears. The front door opened and closed with finality. To sleep longer would be heaven, but he should have been heading out the door already, too. Between half-shuttered eyes he noticed a shadow playing over the undulating wall. A hawk, slow and purposeful, circling in the morning air outside the window.

The kitchen sink, counters, and table were filled with what looked like every dish and glass from the cupboards. Kata would show up any minute to restore a semblance of order, as she had done once a week for the past several months. Marc called the unrelenting mess her job security.

He drained the dregs of yesterday's coffee from the pot into a thermos, added a splash of milk and a handful of ice cubes, and grabbed a freckling banana from the fruit bowl.

Stooping to rescue a stray drumstick from his kit, stashed haphazardly after last night's gig at Evangelo's, he winced at the amplified pounding in his head. He trudged back to the sink to chug a glass of water, then another. The dogs barked from the back porch, but Kata would take care of them also. No time for dog play now.

Marc slid into his gray Mercedes sedan parked in the gravel outside his door and noticed a scrap of paper tucked under one of the windshield wipers—a cocktail napkin with *Clara* and a phone number penned in neat, rounded cursive. He barely glanced at it before shoving it into the console to get lost amid a raft of receipts and restaurant napkins, then he maneuvered his sunglasses over his nose with one hand, steering the car with the other. His tires raised a smoky haze of dust behind him from the unpaved road to the nearby two-lane highway.

Turquoise Trail, Highway 14, was notoriously treacherous, but Marc enjoyed its curves and picturesque views of hilly desert dotted with piñon and juniper trees, and in the fall, the chamisa blooms that sent artists scurrying for cadmium yellow paint—a brilliant, toxic pigment to depict a brilliant, toxically annoying plant. The only good chamisa was in a painting, as far as he was concerned. He'd just learned that the raging allergies he suffered every year now were due to pollen from the charming chamisa bushes and juniper trees. He cursed the damned things every chance he got.

A sneeze-powered expletive burst from his throat. After swerving back into his lane, he glanced into the rearview mirror and accelerated.

Law enforcement was as usual, which was to say, no cops in sight—the good and the bad of living in one of the poorest areas of one of the poorest states in the U.S. Easy to understand why some folks got confused, thinking New Mexico was foreign territory.

*No, you don't need a passport to get here, Grandma, but you can buy New Mexico parody passports at Woolworth's on the Santa Fe Plaza—souvenirs for tourists, and potentially useful documents for New Mexicans traveling out of state. Woolworth's sold Mexican jumping beans alongside candy bars and hot chile chewing gum, apple pie, Frito pie, enormous sombreros, and howling coyote tchotchkes,*

together with the usual toothpaste, T-shirts, snacks, and sundries. Marc had been asked more than once, when visiting friends back in New York, what it was like to live south of the border. Old Mexico, New Mexico—he would find himself giving impromptu lessons in history and geography.

The traffic, including Marc's car, was, snagged by a string of red lights once he hit town. He sneezed and swore again, running ever later. His eyes stung with phantom sand from the unsettling morning dream—what did it mean? Crawling, walking, one way or another—a horn blared behind him. *Drive*. His tires shrieked as he turned left and immediately right.

The Santa Fe Gym sat on a hill across from the National Cemetery, and was accessed by the last signal light before the highway humped north out of Santa Fe. Marc's physical therapy clinic hummed inside, a symbiotic arrangement produced by the fortuitous fall of an icicle. The gym owner, nearly impaled by that errant spike as he exited a grocery store, had been sent to a clinic for therapy on his banged-up shoulder. A business opportunity immediately became obvious when he unfolded his first bill for therapy services—put a PT clinic in the gym, a no-brainer. Marc was happy to oblige, said goodbye to working in a traditional setting and opened Santa Fe Physical Therapy. Business boomed from the first day, bringing in more therapists, assistants, and aides. Marc was ringmaster.

He swung through the gym's double doors, pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head, nodded at the teenage boy manning the front desk, and strode the length of the bustling club toward his clinic in the rear, returning greetings as he went.

Also discreetly checking out women, pausing for no one except for his friend Dez, an attractive personal trainer—hispana, as she had corrected him when he was a newcomer, not 'Latina,' not 'Hispanic,' not 'Chicana,' and definitely not 'spic,' unless you fancied a hospital vacation with your jaw wired shut. Northern New Mexican, deep-rooted, proud and badass woman.

Dez read the hangover in his eyes and deftly intercepted him.

"Dude, too much lovin' goin' on," she said in a low, playful tone. "Take it easy."

"Always some left for you, sweetheart." He returned her smile with a wince.



“Thanks, baby, you know you’d be the one if...”

A shapely, athletic woman strolled by, exactly Dez’s taste. Marc’s too.

“Yeah, baby, I know. I’ll shave extra close for you.” His usual plea.

Dez chuckled. “I know you too well. Here.” She opened her hand to offer a couple of ibuprofen capsules and a vitamin C tablet.

Marc hesitated a moment but took them, swallowing the pills with a slug of iced coffee from his thermos.

“Go on. Ruby’s ticked off, so watch your own ass,” Dez said, swatting him smartly on the butt.

“Her bark’s worse than her bite.”

“Not today.”

Marc entered the clinic, greeted his secretary, a middle-aged hispana wearing a fierce expression on her pit bull face. Scarlet nails beat in 4/4 time against arms folded under her jutting bosom. A tiny figure on a cross, suspended by a chain at her throat, sank into her cleavage. Her rolling desk chair squeaked as it rocked.

“Hi, Ruby. Sorry.”

She rose from the chair, which skittered behind her and rebounded from a file cabinet, to hiss, “Mrs. Alvarez is pissed. She’s been waiting a half hour. I told her to start on the bike like you usually do. She won’t listen to me.”

“Sorry, rough night.” He turned toward a plump, older woman in full makeup and an expensive tracksuit sitting behind him across the clinic waiting room.

“Mrs. Alvarez, if you don’t do what Ruby says, *I’m* the one who gets my ass chewed. Please?”

Mrs. Alvarez’s gaze lingered a moment on his rear end before her expression softened. She sighed, but climbed obediently onto the nearby stationary bike and began to pedal, giving him an approval-seeking smile.

“Thanks, doll!” He flashed a grin.

“How are the kids?” Ruby asked, softening as well.

He pulled the appointment book from the desktop in front of her to scan the schedule. Friday, TGIF. “Oh, you know—good. They’re with their mom.”

“I can tell. You’re not late when they’re staying with you. What happened with that nice French girl, Corinne? I liked her.”

“Visa was up. She wanted a wedding.”

“Think of the kids; there are worse things.”

“I *am* thinking of the kids. I let her get too close to them. From now on, separation of church and state. Women and kids, church and state.”

Ruby shook her head.

At that moment, a pretty brunette, her face contorted, limped into the clinic. “Could someone help me? It’s my knee.”

Marc steadied her. “Ruby, is treatment room three open?”

She nodded.

“Okay, let’s take a look.” He helped the woman hobble around the corner; they exchanged introductions, and then he popped back to address Mrs. Alvarez, who was pedaling in extreme slow motion.

“I want fifteen minutes on there, and I want you to sweat! Come on, doll baby, you know you can do it.”

Mrs. Alvarez frowned and glanced at Ruby. The velour-clad knees lifted, drove down, lifted again. *Varoom. Brava, Mrs. Alvarez.*

Marc’s urgent patient was sitting on the padded table when he returned. After examining her, he handed her a tissue and said, “Okay, you have, like, no ACL, and now it’s kind of subluxed out of alignment. There’s a manipulation that will help. Ready?”

Radiating pain, she barely nodded.

“Hold on. This is gonna hurt you more than it hurts”—he quickly manipulated the knee—“me.”

“Aghhh!”

“Sorry, but that actually should help. Keep it iced for fifteen minutes, and again tonight before bed.” He draped the knee with an ice pack.

She gulped, looking cautiously relieved. “Thanks. What do I owe you?”

“Dinner tonight?”

“You’re kidding, right? Aren’t you violating some professional code? Besides, I have a date.”

“Breakfast then.” He smoothed on his no-shame game face.

Before she could respond, the door flew open and Ruby beckoned him into the hallway, her tone terse. “Someone in the gym went down—maybe a heart attack.”

He dashed from the clinic into the gym, where a knot of people stood around a figure lying near the free weights. A man—late forties, reasonably fit, face ashen, lip a gory mess, eyes closed.

Dez pulled Marc close. “They said he dropped like a rock—hit his face on the weight rack.”

Marc knelt to check for a pulse. “Anyone call an ambulance?”

Feet shuffled, throats cleared.

“Call 9-1-1!”

“Got it!” Dez rushed away.

The gap she left in the circle of bystanders was immediately filled by another young woman, this one blond-haired and flushed. Her face had a deer-in-the-headlights look, yet her voice was calm. “I know CPR,” she announced.

Marc locked eyes with her. No time to waste, but the intensity of her blue eyes... He felt himself lingering way too long, an eternal nanosecond—

“He’s not breathing!”

Her words slapped Marc into action. “I’ll take the head. Begin two-man CPR.”

“Ready? Go,” said the woman, already kneeling at the stricken man’s side. She started rhythmic compressions of his chest while Marc gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation without regard for the blood.

“Switch!” she ordered after a couple of minutes.

“No switch,” Marc said. “Blood.”

“I don’t care about the blood. Switch!”

The victim began to breathe on his own before Marc could argue further, and the paramedics arrived a moment later. Marc regained his feet, gave a hand to his CPR partner, and backed out of the way as the crew took over. He felt the woman’s appraising gaze on him and attempted a modest smile.

Instead of smiling back, she looked alarmed and mimed wiping her mouth. “Um.”

Marc copied her movement and grimaced, his fingers sticky, his face heavily smeared by the stranger’s blood. “First time ever... Think I’m gonna be sick. Pardon me.”

He hoped to make it to the men's locker room before spewing. Toilet or sink? Didn't matter—banana, coffee, blood—all churning. When the heaving stopped, he washed his face in cold water until his normal color returned. He rinsed his mouth, cupping his hands repeatedly under the faucet, and patted his face dry. He made himself spend quality time with the drinking fountain, rehydrating.

MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" thumped from the adjacent aerobics class when he left the locker room. He could hear Armando Gallegos, the charismatic instructor, singing along as he led a group that was probably loaded with beautiful women, as usual. Was Armando's hangover the same as, better, or worse than his own? While Marc had played hard onstage at Evangelo's, he'd seen Armando playing hard at the bar. Marc gingerly shook his head. Mrs. Alvarez would be waiting to feel his healing hands on her neck and lower back.

It proved a hectic day without counting the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation: two new evals, an elite athlete training for competition, four princesses—patients of any gender needing an extra measure of personal attention—and three unscheduled drop-ins. Marc was looking forward to getting off his feet later that evening, when Armando hurried in, anxious and excited, his black hair, dark eyes, and white teeth all glittering.

"Man, I need a really big favor."

Marc raised an eyebrow. "Don't have much cash on me."

"Twins!" Armando said in an exaggerated, pleading tone.

"Twins?"

"Two new girls in town. Twins. I was thinking threesome, but they say four for dinner."

Marc felt a twinge of nostalgia. Ten years older than Armando, he'd mentored the kid in developing a professional attitude, but at this moment, Armando represented carefree, youthful energy—something Marc felt in short supply of tonight. "I'm actually bushed."

"Twiins, Marc."

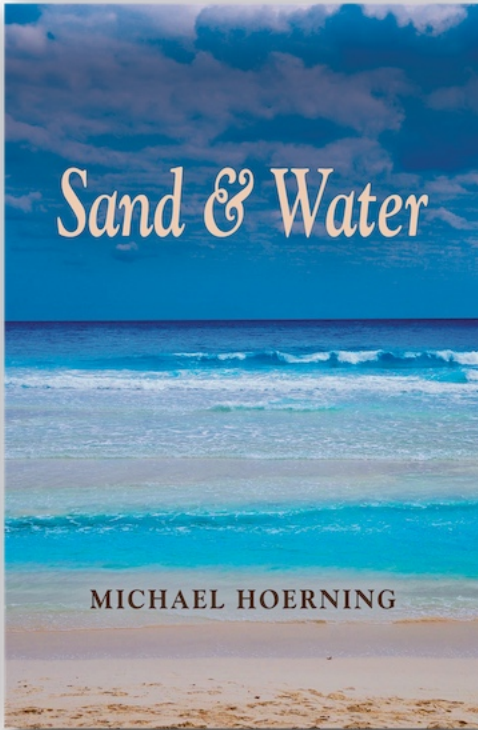
"I got my kiddos back tomorrow, can't do a late one tonight but—*Okaaay*, El Farol. Seven o'clock."

Armando smacked a triumphant high five. "Bro, don't be late. You won't be sorry!"

“Hope not,” Marc said, his palm stinging as Armando flew out the door.

He said a grateful thanks to Ruby, who’d already left for the day, as he poured a cup of lukewarm coffee from the pot she’d made midafternoon. Pulled a gym bag with a change of clothes from one of the desk drawers. Time to rev up with a stint on the stationary bike, do a couple of sets on the bench press, shower and steam, maybe sauna.

Twins, that would be a first. He ran a hand through his hair. Hangover? What hangover? Ancient history. The night was young.



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