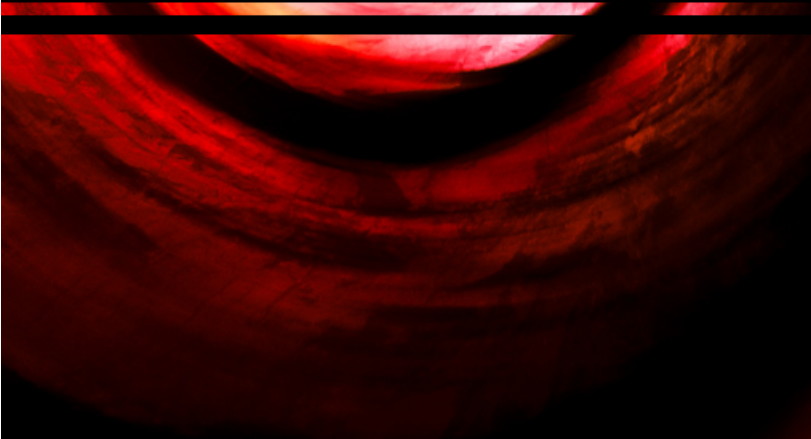


QUICKSAND

— A Short Story —

MATTHEW DI PAOLI



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NEON SINGLES

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Quicksand

I WAS ON MY WAY TO THE BUTCHER'S when I stepped in quicksand. I hadn't really thought about quicksand in years. Maybe *Indiana Jones* or one of those Humphrey Bogart movies where he's a boatsman, and he wears a hat. I imagined the sand's texture to resemble grape jelly. It's actually more like the inside of a rhubarb pie.

I guess it's not that odd to step in quicksand, but the thing that really threw me off was that it was in the middle of ninety-seventh street by the Marshall's. I wasn't on my way to Marshall's though. I was trying to get some tenderloin. The stuff was up to my thighs. They tell you not to struggle, but struggling is my first response to most everything. I'd struggled my way to thirty-five. I struggled myself into a nice desk job where I sold a very expensive type of athletic cup that most people didn't really need. The support was incredible though. I sometimes just wore it around my studio apartment. It was like a squirrel hugging your genitals. Maybe it was indescribable.

In any case, the quicksand was up to my thighs, and I wished I had the athletic cup because, really, who knows what's in Manhattan quicksand? My phone was ruined. I'd say about a hundred people passed me by. A few cars rubbernecked at first, but now they weren't even stopping. A clerk from Marshall's put a traffic cone by me so no one else would get stuck. I guess that was decent of him.

He wore a white shirt and a blue apron. He'd sweated through at the armpits, and he had a haggard look about him that told me something had taken him by surprise many years earlier, and he'd never recovered. I know that feeling.

I tried to wiggle toward him, but it sucked me in a little further. "Is there any way you might call someone for me?" I asked.

He took his flat palm, ran it down his wet face. It sounded like the crush of flesh under tires. He wiped the salty sweat onto the orange cone and set it down in front of me. "Listen, I've got my own problems."

"I understand," I said.

The street lamps flickered on, and the traffic lights glowed. I became tired, though I'd never tried sleeping standing up before. My body sagged forward. The air cooled. I dreamt of a young trapeze artist I'd seen as a boy. How precise her steps were, her taut skin and blue tights. I'd wondered if women like that really existed. Years later I met one, but I was not her trapeze artist. I was a man who'd existed many times and never in the right place. Always falling into quicksand and showing up to parties while the girls were still dressing.

At sunrise, the man who sold cat-skin handbags and cell phone cases laid out a thin rug he kept under his stand and began his morning prayer. It was very moving. Someone tried to come over, waving five dollars at him, but he wouldn't say a word. The sun beat on his dark skin. I envied his sovereignty.

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THE NEXT DAY WAS HOTTER THAN THE LAST. A man and a woman stopped to look at me. They were very blonde. One was blonder than the other, but I wasn't sure which. They were like small sun gods, and I enjoyed looking at them.

“Where are you from?” I asked. It's very boring being in quicksand, after all.

They whispered to one another in a strange language.

The man's face glowed like Mayan sacrifice. The woman's hair drifted to cinder.

I looked up in the sky because I knew that's where they were from. I pointed. “Up there?”

The blonde woman agreed. She nodded. The blond man seemed unsure and smiled with embarrassment. They walked away, the man tugging the woman by her porcelain arms. I regretted speaking to them. How would you like it if the Venus De Milo started asking you questions, I thought. Not that I was the Venus De Milo, but it was the best example I could think of. I hadn't eaten in a very long time. It's like they say, you never realize how much quicksand will take from you until it's gone.

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ON THE THIRD DAY OF QUICKSAND I smelled my body becoming part of the earth. The sand gripped my waist. I rested my hands on its back. The city can be very cruel to those it deems unworthy. The night was so quiet. I only heard wind. The pavement grew sticky and moist like liquorice gum.

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MY PARENTS CAME TO VISIT.

“So are you happy?” asked my mother. She brought a small

basil plant. It smelled like June in Sicily, and I remembered feeling hot and content like a dog in the sun.

“To tell you the truth, Ma, I don’t like it here much.”

“Why don’t you just get out?” asked my father.

I was too embarrassed to tell him I couldn’t. I wanted to prove to him that I could. “It’s actually not so bad here. I have more space than my old apartment.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” he said. “That place was a real dump.”

“We just worry about you,” said my mother. She started blowing gently on the basil leaves.

“What’s that for?”

“I heard they like it. Everything needs caring for.” The purple in her hair deepened in the baking sun. She squeezed my burnt, chafing arm. “We miss you. You ought to stop by.”

I nodded. “I will. It’s just hard to get to Queens from here.”

“Your mother, she worries,” said my father, watching the cat-skin vendor praying with a look of bewilderment on his face. “Does he always do that?”

“A few times a day,” I said.

“Well he ought to get a better rug. That rug is filthy,” said my mother. She often worried about other people’s rugs.

They both kissed me on the cheek. My mother hugged me. It hurt and felt wholesome. I hadn’t felt whole in a while.

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THE QUICKSAND WRESTLED MY BODY. It clung around my chest. It’s amazing how many different types of hubcaps there are. The way women pack their flesh into shoes. How every cigarette stump is warped like childrens’ ear lobes. There is a grimness to the bottom of the world.

I WAS ASLEEP WHEN I SAW HER. Really, I couldn't lift my head, so I only saw her ankles and knees.

"My name is Alice," she said. Her voice sounded like gasoline. There was something combustible in it. Something I wanted to capture and inhale. "Are you a sinker, too?"

"A sinker?" I asked.

She squatted down, and I saw her thighs.

"You know," she said suggestively. She dipped her hand languidly into the quicksand. First her nails, then her knuckles, the curve of her palm. A rush of air blew inside her skirt.

"There's a name for people like us?" I asked.

Her tan legs rubbed together. "Could I join you?"

I tried to nod my head, but the quicksand wrapped around my neck. Alice slipped off her golden sandals and dipped her foot in. She shook with pleasure. Then, without hesitation, she plunged her other foot in and began to sink. The murky sand engulfed her calves and thighs, and her skirt settled around it like a parachute.

"I'll wait for you," I said.

"I hope you do."

I would. I would wait for her to sink into the earth with me, and we would live forever, sinking downward like the roots of ancient and forgotten willows growing hotter and deeper toward the centre of the earth until we fused and became unflinchingly whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Di Paoli received his BA at Boston College where he won the Dever Fellowship and the Cardinal Cushing Award for Creative Writing. He has also been nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize and won the *Prism Review* Short Story Contest. Matthew earned his MFA in Fiction at Columbia University. He has been published in *Neon*, *Litro*, *CURA*, *Squalorly*, *Carte Blanche*, *Black Denim Lit*, *Gigantic*, *Fiction Week*, and *Post Road* literary magazines among others. Currently he's publishing a novel entitled *Killstanbul* with El Balazo Press, shopping a novel entitled *Holliday*, and is teaching Writing and Literature at Monroe College.