Castle and Sand

by Captain Rhino

Crumbling is not an instant's Act
A fundamental pause
Dilapidation's processes
Are organized Decays —
– Emily Dickinson

When NYPD Officer Marvin Cole stepped out of his squad car and saw the Empire Castle building he was reminded of a baseball player who had been great in his prime but was now well into his thirties and his self-image hadn't caught up yet. The grand old apartment building still had the aura of 1920s luxury but the walls were covered in graffiti up to the second storey and at least a third of the windows were smashed or boarded up. A group of teenagers with a Boombox playing some sort of commie-trash 'youth' music were sheltering from the rain in the entrance of the building, doing a bad job of hiding the weed they were smoking.

"What a dump," Marvin said. His partner Steve grunted agreement.

They walked up to the front door of Empire Castle. "Scram," Marvin told the kids, shouting over that awful, pounding, music. "We're not here for you but I want you gone by the time we're finished here."

The teenagers groaned and complained, but Marvin was already pushing past them through the double doors and into the building.

If anything it was worse inside. Bags of garbage lined the walls and the whole place stank like a public toilet. There were four elevators, but each was covered in yellow tape and signs announcing that they were CONDEMNED.

"Ten bucks it's a suicide." Marvin told Steve. "If I lived here I'd want to kill myself too."

Steve simply grunted and took a swig from his canteen of definitely-not-water. He'd been doing that a lot ever since Olivia had woken his kids up in the middle of the night and taken them to live with her mother in Wisconsin. This was not a normal thing for a wife to do and part of Marvin thought he ought to do something about it. The larger part of him knew that Steve Wasik's private life was None Of His God-Damned Business.

The report had come from the tenth floor which meant a lot more stairs than Marvin considered reasonable, with the promise of exactly the same number of stairs on the way back down. After a lot of huffing and puffing they finally reached apartment 1012, by which time the stench of rotting corpse was obvious and unmistakeable. They didn't even bother with a knock and after two big kicks Steve broke the door down.

The wave of stench made both of them gag and they both drew their guns. Marvin didn't suppose any ambusher could lurk in wait here without going insane, but the weight and power of the gun was comforting nonetheless. He flicked the light switch and the bulb flashed briefly before shorting out. Marvin sighed and pulled out his torch as well.

The entrance hall had three doors: left, front and right. The left door led to the bathroom and the right door to a laundry cupboard, both of which were deserted and thoroughly uninteresting. The front door opened up into a large living space with a dining table and a couple of mouldy-looking couches.

Marvin pocketed his torch and grabbed the heavy curtains lining the big window on the opposite wall, but his touch was too heavy and he pulled the whole rail down with a crash. After regaining

his composure he saw that the wooden rail was rotten through and that water was dripping down from the join where the wall met the ceiling.

The view of the city was nice though.

“Over here,” Steve called. He was standing in another doorway, which as Marvin drew closer he could see led to a bedroom. Except the bed was missing and a dead man hung by a rope from a light fitting.

“Told you it was suicide,” Marvin said.

“Where’s the chair?”

Marvin saw that Steve was right. It wasn’t just that the bed was gone. All the furniture was gone. And it wasn’t just that all the furniture was gone. The entire floor of the room was covered in six inches of sand. And it wasn’t just that the entire floor of the room was covered in six inches of sand. The sand had intricate patterns drawn in it. Lines and circles and stars and not a hint of a footprint.

“What the hell?”

Steve bent down and traced his hand through the sand by the door. “It’s nice sand. Real soft.” He scooped some in his hand and stood up. “Here, feel it.”

Marvin didn’t want to, but this was the most animated he’d seen Steve since Olivia left, so he put out his hand and accepted the offered gift. “You’re right Steve. It’s real nice sand.”

It wasn’t. The sand was like all sand: course and rough and heavy and oppressive.

Not many people knew this about NYPD Officer Marvin Cole but the truth was that he hated sand. That hadn’t always been the case. When he was a boy he’d loved sand. His grandparents lived by a beach in Connecticut and he and his brother would visit there all the time for weekends and holidays. Marvin and Harry would spend countless hours in every kind of weather playing on the sandy beach (it wasn’t as if there was anything else to do at their grandparents house).

One February day in particular it had been cold and windy but dry and the two boys had had the whole beach to themselves. Harry had had the idea of burying Marvin up to his neck in the sand, which had sounded fun. Harry was the younger brother so Marvin liked to indulge him occasionally. They’d dug a hole and Marvin had sat cross-legged in it whilst Harry piled sand all around and over him whilst giggling like a crazy person. It had been a good game; by the time they were finished Marvin couldn’t move any part of his body. All he could do was open his mouth and allow Harry to feed him potato chips.

Then Harry had begun to play a game where he ran further and further away, pretending like he was going to leave Marvin there all by himself. Marvin had shouted for him to come back, but the wind had stolen his words away. Then Harry had run into the sea and started splashing around and swimming, occasionally turning around to wave at Marvin. Marvin realised with horror that Harry was drifting further and further out to sea and didn’t seem to realise it. He wriggled and screamed as hard as he could until the wind blew loose sand into his eyes and mouth and he couldn’t do anything about it because he was buried up to his neck and what he was going to do he was the older brother so he was supposed to look after Harry and make sure he didn’t get into trouble and there was sand in his mouth and what if there was another gust of wind and he choked on the sand and then his parents would lose both their children in a single day and it would be all his fault.

The sun had set by the time Marvin’s grandpa found him and three days had passed by the time Harry’s body had washed up forty miles down the coast.

The memory of that day hit Marvin so strongly that he felt like he was right back there on that beach, buried up to his neck in sand whilst his brother was swept out to sea. He writhed and struggled and he realised he was making headway. The sand didn't feel so tight. He writhed and struggled and his shoulders broke through the surface and then he raised his arms up and his hands were free and he pulled himself up and out of the hole and he was running down the beach.

He ran and ran, but he realised he wasn't getting any closer to the sea and to Harry. The sand was moving, the beach stretching out in front of him, further and further apart. And then the sand started rising, rising, rising until it formed a wall. Not a wall of sand like you'd normally see, which was actually just a tall heap, but a proper honest-to-god wall. All straight verticals and crenellations along the top. Directly in front of Marvin a sand gatehouse was forming with a sand gate and sand portcullis (Marvin liked books about knights so he knew all the proper names for bits-of-castle).

The gate opened, about twenty feet in front of Marvin, and a figure like a man strode forth. He was eight feet tall, wearing a crown of sand and carrying a spear of sand and a shield of sand. The man of sand didn't have a face, but he still looked right at Marvin – right into his soul – and Marvin knew then that the man of sand was going to kill him. Marvin took a few steps back in fright then drew his gun from its holster and emptied a full clip into the chest of the advancing man of sand (except he didn't because he wasn't a NYPD Officer yet he was ten years old and ten-year-olds don't take guns with them to the beach) but that didn't stop the man of sand from thrusting his spear into Marvin's chest and killing him.

Marvin jolted awake and found that he was lying on the floor of apartment 1012 of Empire Castle, surrounded by NYPD officers.

"Are you all right Marvin?" one of them asked.

Marvin blinked hard and sat up painfully. It felt like Larry Holmes had punched him in the head and then stomped on his chest as he lay helpless on the floor.

He looked around groggily and found who was speaking to him. "I'm not doing so well Tom," he said.

"What the hell happened to you Marvin?" someone asked. "Who were you shooting at?"

"Shooting?"

"We got 9-1-1 calls about gun shots," Tom said. "The clip in your gun is empty."

Marvin stared blankly at Tom.

"I guess you hit your head. We'll have to get you looked at."

"Where's Steve?" Marvin asked.

Tom glanced at his partner Colin, then looked back at Marvin with an expression of concern. "Who's Steve?"

"My partner, dumbass. Don't mess around, you know Steve. We go bowling together every couple of weeks."

"You don't have a partner Marvin." Colin said, like he was explaining things to a six-year-old.

"What you talking about?" Marvin said. "Of course I've got a partner. Do you think I go around on my own in *this* city?"

"You know," Tom said, looking like he was deep in thought. "It is weird that you don't have a partner. Maybe you should talk to the chief about it and see if you can get one."

Marvin pushed himself to his feet and felt the floor spin under him. "I've had enough of this bull. You're not funny guys." He staggered like a drunk over to the bedroom door and saw that all of the

sand was gone and all of the furniture was back, up to and including the chair the hanged man had kicked away to end his life.

Marvin stared at the hanged man for a several seconds, then turned away and sat down heavily on the mouldy couch.

“What’s up Marvin?” Tom asked.

Marvin sighed and thought about the best of way of phrasing things, before giving up and saying “I think I’m going insane.”

Tom passed him a mug of evil-smelling coffee. “Join the club.”

Marvin took the mug and saw that emblazoned proudly on the white porcelain were the cheerful words “You don’t have to be crazy to work here, but it helps!”

Marvin sighed and leaned back on the couch. What in the big wide world was happening to him?