

A Heart is the Size of a Clenched Fist

by Michael A. Pignatella

Charlie Voss stumbled upon the hand early one midsummer's morning, just as he was about to call it a day. The tide was coming in and he wouldn't have even noticed it if the wind hadn't whipped up, blowing sand and causing him to turn his face to the ocean. It was about two feet out into the surf, at times submerged by the incoming tide. A hand, sticking straight out of the sand, clenched in a fist. Charlie was so shocked that he almost dropped his metal detector.

His first thought was that someone was fooling around. He dismissed that as foolishness. No one could survive long buried like that. No, what he had here was a dead body. Some poor schmuck who had gone out fishing without checking the weather, or had swam too far out and been sucked under by a rip tide, or had cramped up tight like gritted teeth and had sunk to the bottom. Whatever had happened, he was dead. He walked into the surf to take a closer look.

He winced at the chilling water. Despite having lived on Cape Cod his whole life, he hated going into the ocean. He hated the gritty residue left by salt water, hated when a piece of slippery seaweed stuck to his leg like a leech. Hated his mouth filling with sea water, like swallowing the brine from a pickle jar. His face might be weather-beaten and craggy, but in his heart he was a landlubber.

He scratched his short beard as he crouched in front of the hand, running his fingers through the white stubble like blintzes rolling in powdered sugar. It was a hand all right, a man's hand clenched in a tight fist, the fingernails dirty, curly reddish wisps of hair matted on the back. *The poor guy couldn't have died long ago*, thought Charlie, *he hasn't even begun to rot*. No small feat, given how fast things decayed in the ocean. Or were devoured. A wave crashed in, burying the hand

for a moment, spraying Charlie and the metal detector.

"Sonofabitch," Charlie said, wiping the metal detector on his shirt. It was supposed to be waterproof, but it had cost him almost 300 bucks, not a small sum for an old man who had to make do with his crappy Social Security allotment and who paid for his heart medication by cleaning the local pharmacy from top to bottom twice a month. At night, of course, so that the well-heeled tourists from Boston and Connecticut wouldn't have real life intrude on their vacations.

He needed the metal detector. At least until he found what he was looking for. He bent back down to the hand. "I suppose I should get the authorities," he said to it. Without thought, he reached over and touched it.

It was cool, but not cold. Charlie looked at it, scratching his beard again. It was as if it was waiting for something, something other than the tide. Charlie slid his hand down to the wrist, feeling for, of all things, a pulse. There was none.

"Dead," he said, as if saying it out loud made it so. He stood up, his back protesting. He'd need to get the police, putting an end to today's searching. Not that he had found anything worthwhile. Eighty-three cents and a gold earring that he could probably get five bucks for at Eddie's Pawnatorium. But he hadn't found what he was looking for. He fought against the feeling that he never would.

He turned, but then paused and looked back at the hand. It was still clenched, as if holding something. Something small. Charlie's heart thumped. It couldn't be, he knew, but he was filled with the quite certain feeling that it was. It was in there, buried in the palm of the hand like a pearl in the heart of an oyster. Like the King Arthur stories that Charlie had loved as a child, the hand was sticking up from the water to offer him salvation. Like the Lady of the Lake offering Arthur