

Delaware Shores Losers Club

By Karen S. Elliott

Appearing to walk upright out of the water, it flopped with a wet smack upon the hardened sand. It slithered over tiny pebbles and shells. It slid over a struggling horseshoe crab and left bits of slime and shards of shell behind. Like a snake, it side-winded its way along the shoreline. Shluh shluh, back and forth.

The creature opened a cavernous mouth, sinking teeny-tiny needle teeth into the pylon of the darkened house. It wrapped itself around the pylon. Vapors were released and wafted up, through the concrete, through the wood, settling invisible malicious fingers. It did not disturb the sleeping man, not yet. It rested.

Van Whitehill's house was all second story held up by substantial pylons. It was built on stilts to protect homeowners from coastal storms and surges. Panoramic views in the bedroom and living area were a real estate agent's dream. Inside heavy, distressed wood panels and beams created rustic charm.

Whitehill did his mid-morning lurching zombie walk to the bathroom sink. The scratch on the bottom of his foot (from a protruding nail on his deck) itched. Note to self – bang shit out of bloody nail on deck. His hair had become rather shaggy – like his old college self. The dark growth on his face and dark circles under bloodshot eyes gave him a haunting look. He turned the knobs on the faucet and bent over.

Face dripping, he walked out into a sunlit kitchen, picking up empty bottles as he went. The automatic coffee maker finished brewing with a satisfying aahhh. He plucked his well-used Phillies mug out of the drainer. He thought perhaps he should make his own mugs – Delaware Shores Losers Club, President - Van Whitehill.

Full mug in hand, Van considered the Delaware surf. The sun promised another clear and sparkling day. Just a week before Memorial Day – yee-fucking-haw. The northern tourists, silly college co-eds, and fraternity whack-a-do's would soon infest the beaches. Rehoboth, Lewes, Fenwick, and Dewey would be overrun from Memorial Day weekend until the Back to School posters were taped up in glass store fronts on the boardwalk. Summer's influx of people meant congestion and lines in every store, along every road and highway.

His soon-to-be-ex talked him into this beach-front property in January when it was cold and windy. And void of tourists. He loved it then. And in five years he hammered out five literary romances. His Stormy series - Stormy's Bay, Stormy's Coast, Stormy's Shore, Stormy's Cherish, and his favorite, Stormy's Legacy. Best-seller lists, radio and TV interviews, critical acclaim, stellar sales. Numerous big bank accounts.

Whitehill's success dug in its heels and pulled him to a screeching halt when his wife walked out. His writing was an amusement to her, as long as he continued to practice alongside Daddy at Griffin, Hoy & Tobin.

When Van suggested to her that he wanted to write full-time, she'd done the debutante two-step. Quit? To be a writer? Are you kidding? He packed a suitcase (leaving all the tailored suits to hang over the \$300 leather shoes) and headed straight to the beach property. So started his decline and crippling writer's block - or rather, his writer's depression and a bit of writer's alcoholism.

Through the dreary winter and early spring he sat at his desk, looking through rain and sleet-buffed windows. He managed only several sentences a day, most of which were in emails to his agent. If someone at the local market or gas pumps asked what he was writing, he had to tamp down a desire to say, "diddley-shit."

The Jack Daniels sat on the corner next to a cup full of give-away pens. Grabbing the neck of the bottle, he poured a double shot into his mug. Now batting, Jack Daniels. He allowed himself the drink, thinking all the great writers drank. Yeah, and like Hemingway and Woolf, a lot of them committed suicide, too.

He pushed the blinking button on the answering machine. "Van, dear, Mrs. Sharply." Evie Sharply, buttinsky neighbor. Quick to criticize his parking prowess or the mess of beer bottles or the occasional scantily-clad female left lounging on his deck. "Van, sweetie, there's some seaweed or something icky wrapped around up under your porch there, and I thought you might like to take a little look-see at that." He pressed delete.

Opening his laptop, he was met with the scent of lemons, fresh squeezed. He looked over his shoulder, into the kitchen. Hmm, no lemons. Van started to type. When the infected scratch on the bottom of his foot started to tingle, he dismissed it.

He typed for three days, drinking off and on, reveling in his sudden spurt of creativity. He ate when he couldn't hear his thoughts over his grumbling stomach. After three days, he had about 35,000 words. The local newspapers accumulated on his outside stairway along with an odd yellow-green slime.

Van stopped typing abruptly. He started to review - he was amazed by how good it was. This was better than any of his Stormy novels, better than even the literary works he had produced at U of D. Funny how he couldn't remember how he'd come up with any of it. Divine intervention? Hallelujah, Van.

Van plugged into his printer and blew the dust from a stack of white paper. He wanted to send this latest creation along to JoJo Ingram right away - she'd be excited her superstar was writing again. Van could imagine JoJo sitting in her New York loft reading the double-spaced pages - gleaming dollar signs in her greedy green eyes. While the project printed, he pulled out a manuscript box (he had to dig for one of these in the closet). Dropping the manuscript into the box, he felt pleased, and itchy.

For the first time in weeks he wanted to get out and inhale some fresh seaside air. He gathered the manuscript box and his jacket, slipped on the weekend loafers. He be-bopped across the deck and bobbed down the stairs, stepping over the seaweed on the bottom step. He glanced over to the pylons and noticed the one

that Mrs. Sharply had mentioned. And it was icky – the pylon was bound up with some sort of seaweed. The wood was completely obscured. Weird he thought. He'd deal with it later. He decided to walk and did a skip around his car.

Ignored newspapers at the bottom of the outside stairs lay crisping in the sun and salt air. Van missed the article on the front page from the Friday headlines: Local Girl Killed at Lemonade Stand. And how she had been cut nearly in half when the folding table had been pushed into and nearly through her as the force pinned her and the table against her mother's minivan in the driveway. The local man arrested at the scene couldn't even remember the accident. Three times the legal limit. If Van had bothered to read the story, it would have reminded him of his two years in Albuquerque where even the criminal prosecutors drove over the limit.

Van also missed the follow-up story on Saturday, the picture of the little girl with a swirling ponytail. Her grade-school picture appeared on page five, white turtleneck and smock sprinkled with lemons and strawberries.

Once his package was dispatched to the Ingram Agency, NY, NY, he resumed his be-bop over to the outdoor produce market. Standing in front of the plywood tables, the intense smells of the coming summer came to him - the early tomatoes, peaches, apples and berries, all lined up in little biodegradable containers.

"You have any lemons? I feel like lemonade," Van said.

The man pointed. Van picked up a lemon and looked at it closely. He jabbed it with his fingernail, and the lemon sprayed his face. Ah, that's wonderful. He dumped the entire container of lemons into a plastic bag and paid the grocer. He turned and started the trek back to his house.

A long sandy block before the house, he detoured into the Coast Hi-Way Bar & Grill. The conversation at the other end of the bar regarding the tragic accident stopped as Van pushed through the front door. Dark, bleached wood paneling covered the walls. Heavy velvet drapes hung on every window, thick dust covered their tops. Tacky plastic crabs and fishing nets and rusted harpoons covered the paneling.

Van's beer was delivered. He sipped at it and enjoyed the view. In the distance boats bobbed on the bay. Squat weathered structures advertised fuel, in- and out-board motor repair, and aquatic outfitters.

Marching up the steps to his deck, Whitehill realized with a jolt how absolutely dog-tired he was. Walking past the kitchen counter, he dropped the bag of lemons. One rolled out and off the counter and hit the floor with a thud. Van shuffled over to the couch and flopped. Sleeping soundly, he did not hear the thumping under the house, nor did he hear the thumping up the outside stairs.

Van woke and was starving beyond the stomach-growling stage – he ached. The bag of lemons, left on the counter a day ago, sat quietly waiting to be sliced and squeezed. Ignoring them, he opened the refrigerator and

found a package of sliced lunchmeat (roasted turkey, his favorite), some sliced cheese, and a tomato that was starting an intimate relationship with some green fuzz. In a hurry, he grabbed two hoagie rolls out of a package in the freezer and popped them in the microwave. The green-fuzzy half of the tomato went into the garbage, the other part he sliced into half-inch slices. He found a jar of sweet gherkins and with scissoring fingers pulled out a few and planted them on a paper plate. Sandwich construction complete, he ripped open the corn chips and ate nearly the whole bag before remembering the two sandwiches waiting for him on the counter. This would be his last meal.

He wanted to write again. He swirled some water in the Phillies mug and filled it nearly to the brim with Jack, more than half full. He laced his fingers together, then stretched them out and backwards, knuckles cracking.

He pulled open the laptop, and his senses were assaulted by a sickening sweet smell – strawberries. He waved it away and started typing. And he typed, obsessed, for three days. His cell phone jangled several times, but he ignored it.

He failed to notice morning papers thumping against the stairs outside. He also missed the headline: Second Freak Accident Kills Tourist. The story went on to explain how Adam Kirkpatrick, 22, of Nyack, NY, was killed in a boardwalk café, Mama’s Sweet Treats, when a plate glass window fell out of its sash and nearly decapitated Kirkpatrick while he was finishing a strawberry shortcake. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

When Van finally glanced up and saw sparkling waves and the colorful dots of Memorial Day revelers, it did not register. He just typed. He felt relief, as if he was purging himself. 42,000 words this time. JoJo would be ecstatic.

Van pushed back in his chair and casually picked at a blister on his space bar thumb. He stood, creaking and sore, and walked into the bathroom. The face staring back at him from the mirror was a haggard stranger. He smiled at the stranger with the purple bags under his eyes, flaking skin, hollow cheeks. The stranger smiled back. How nice to have company, Van thought. He scratched at several places on his face, and flakes of skins fluttered down into the sink.

“Care for a drink?” Van asked the stranger. Don’t mind if I do, the stranger responded.

He looked over at the bottle of bourbon on his desk – this bottle was nearly empty. Instead of pulling out another bottle from his stash, he decided to take a walk up to the Coast Hi-Way Bar & Grill. He grabbed his denim jacket from a hook at the door, slipped his feet into his dime store flip-flops, and took off. Through the door, down the steps, stepping over the slime and the papers at the bottom.

Mitch would be on duty up at the Hi-Way Bar during the day, and he was a cordial sort who was

comfortable to chat with. The Hi-Way was a sleazy sort of place that didn't attract tourists, just local drunks and bums and fishermen. The place smelled like yesterday's beer and yesterday's fish.

Van picked his usual perch near the entrance as Mitch approached him.

"Same?" Mitch asked. Van nodded. He missed the bartender's nervous glance. Mitch pulled on the Sam Adams tap; golden brown brew filled a pilsner glass. He flicked a cardboard coaster into place in front of Van and put the beer on top of it.

"Van, you okay?" Van looked up, unblinking. He did not remember going to the bar, or for a moment, where he was. Mitch raised his eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

"Fine. I'm fine," Van said.

Mitch thought, If the guy knew what was good for him, he'd go home and sleep for a few days. He'd been serving Van for years, but had never seen him look this bad, this washed up. And Van's monotone response had freaked him out just a wee bit.

Walking away from Van, Mitch gathered up the pieces of the newspaper that a previous customer had left and shuffled them into a neat pile. He arranged his own stool opposite Louis Kemp and settled in to read the morning's headlines. Across the bar from him Louis sat, nursing a bourbon rocks, looking up at the nearest TV screen.

"You hear about that guy at Mama's?" Louis said.

"Weird shit," Mitch said. The front page section had the story above the fold. He pointed at the dead man's picture, showing it to Louis.

"Yep, weird shit," Louis said. He tossed back the dregs of his drink and slapped a hand on the bar. "See ya tomorrow." As Louis stood, the glare of the day stretched across the bar. Mitch and Louis looked up to watch Van walk out the front door. Mitch looked at the other end of the bar – Van's glass was full. There was a bill tucked under the edge of the coaster.

Several miles out to sea, there was a mass of murky clouds which would easily cover a national league ball park. Below the clouds, on the surface, a black and glistening turbulence. It churned, like a whirlpool. Oily foam broke through the slick, bubbling up, roiling, sucking up perch, sea bass, flounder and bottom-feeding catfish. Jellyfish were sucked in and squashed. Several people on the beach were pointing and clicking pictures on their cell phones and digital cameras. A fisherman was calling Fisherman's Wharf by the drawbridge in Lewes for any updated bulletins. This particular fisherman had lived here for over 60 years and had never seen a cloud formation like this.

Walking home with his head down, Van saw little except his toes reaching and squeezing with each step.

He took the stairs slowly. Inside, he twitched out of his jacket and hung it up and stepped out of his flip-flops.

He did not remember why he was standing inside the door.

It smelled in the house – a rank composting smell. Van ached down to his bones; he was getting twinges in his back. His head felt like it was held up on a thin string. Walking slowly, he approached the bank of windows on the shore side. Reaching out to crank open a casement window, he glanced at the skin on his forearm. It was flaking and peeling like after a severe sunburn. There were reddish blotches. The veins were purple and bulging like fat juicy fishing worms. It did not occur to him that there could be something wrong here. He simply took note of it and then opened several of the windows. The windows flipped out bottom first, and the ocean breeze drifted in.

Whitehill grabbed a fresh bottle of Jack from the cabinet, twisted and flipped off the cap with his thumb. He gulped from the bottle. With his idle hand, he scratched the back of his head, loosening clumps of hair; his scalp flaking away in bits the size of small coins. He took up residence at his desk chair, trying to find a comfortable settling-in spot, and opened his laptop.

There were only a few times he had smelled this smell, but it was familiar and immediately identifiable. Cordite. He had a vague memory that came and went like ocean whitecaps. He recalled the time he had been to the range with the firearms expert.

And that was Van's last conscious thought for three days.

The laptop screen seemed to come into and go out of focus with each blink. Reaching for his Jack again, he pushed up on the chair arm. Like an old man after a long sit, several joints protested and popped loudly.

Bare feet padding along the gleaming floor, he was bent over like a question mark. Between his scaly toes, he picked up a chunk of hair and scalp. At his bureau, he plunked the liquor bottle down next to the picture of himself and Ashley on their last vacation in St. Thomas. Bronze liquid splashed onto the wooden finish. Opening the second drawer, he pulled out a lumpy sock.

The Taurus snub-nose revolver with a gleaming nickel finish slid out gracefully. He ran a finger along the barrel, along the engravings and the pebbly grip. He held it up to his nose and sniffed.

“That doesn't smell right, does it Van?” He sniffed at it again. The bottle of Jack seemed to sniff and smile back.

He pushed several other rolled pairs of socks out of the way and slid the box of .45 caliber cartridges toward the front of the drawer. He shook the box, and the cardboard sleeve came away from the rows of gleaming shells. He pressed the lever to allow the cylinder to swing out and loaded the five chambers. Slowly, carefully, he pressed the cylinder back into place with a heavy snick. The gun was small and slid easily into his

pants pocket. He grabbed up his buddy Jack and went back out to his desk. He fell into the chair.

None too carefully, he picked a spot for the bottle and dropped it. It fell over, spilling bourbon over the end of the desk and onto the carpet. He ignored the mess and started typing.

Outside, the dark cloud - previously miles out to sea - had moved closer to shore. A shadow on the water following its progression inland. Under the cloud, the water bubbled in a steamy boil.

Whitehill typed for three more days. His breathing was wheezy and thick with phlegm. His flaking skin gave way to crumbling skin. It was coming off in slabs. Purple blotches of skin grew, the purple veins heavy, like ropes. On his arms and legs, the veins had started to break through the skin, pulsing and bubbling. Whitehill's eyelids had started to dry up and were pulling away from his eyeballs.

Detached and uninterested, Whitehill noticed dark bloody smears on the computer keyboard. His fingertips - now raw and cracked - were dripping blood. His space bar thumb had split open from the tip back to the first knuckle. He could see odd bits of what looked like little green worms in the gash. Under his shirt, his vertebrae starting to poke through his skin. The Taurus snub nose waited patiently in his pocket, against his thigh.

He tried to stand. He was stuck to the chair. Three days of sweat and stink and his body's fluids has created a sticky pool under his ass. He pulled away from his seat, making a sound like a macabre Velcro. He could not stand up straight. Muscles were atrophied, dried out and stiff. He tried to move his feet. They were stuck to the floor. He pulled and skin came away, and he made an ooey-gooley smear on his way to the front door.

With a gnarled and seeping hand, he pressed his red Phillies cap onto his head, a pair of sunglasses to cover his sinking red eyes. He shrugged into his jacket, transferred the gun from his pants pocket into his jacket pocket. He opened the door and started walking, a trail of blood and goo behind him. Bits of him stuck to the doorknob.

The cloud formerly known as out-to-sea was now over Whitehill's house. Dead fish, chewed up crabs, and jellyfish littered the beach. The heat and humidity had ramped up to east coast unbearable. A crowd of teens - out in the sun and away from the cloud - was tossing a Frisbee, oiled bodies glistening. Van walked in the opposite direction. A few of the teens noticed a messy, sweaty old guy leaving his house, and pointed. A couple of them laughed.

At the Hi-Way, Mitch, back to the door, was serving a fresh bourbon, rocks glass. Van stood just inside the door, the vague glow of behind-the-bar light leaving a subtle golden glow on his sunken cheekbones.

Looking at Van, Mitch was horrified; he had a funny feeling down in his groin where he didn't like getting funny feelings. One eye on Whitehill, he filled a glass with Sam Adams, did the coaster toss and set the glass

down. Mitch, himself hung over, mouthed a vague greeting and went back to his stool, glad to walk away. Cripes, Whitehill, take a shower once in a while.

Van started to mumble to himself about lemons and strawberries. Mitch and Louis glanced up. Louis was three sheets and didn't have the sense to feel uneasy. Mitch, however, noticed a bit too much. He started to feel a little bile backing up in his throat.

"Guess what I smelled this morning when I opened my computer?" Van said.

Mitch was silent, staring. Van slipped a hand inside his jacket and wrapped bleeding fingers around the butt of the gun.

"Cordite." His hand twitched inside his jacket.

Mitch was about to open his mouth to ask what the hell is cordite? when the bullet hit him square in his right eyeball. A crack and a squeesh and it was all over.

Louis the bobble head doll stopped in mid-slurp, and somewhere between shit-faced and boiled, considered what that snap-crackle was.

Louis stared at Van and Van stared back. Van smiled at him. Louis started to smile. Then he saw the barrel of the gun. And before he was able to get his pickled head around what the fuck? a bullet ripped through his skull, sending him over backwards. He was still holding the rocks glass.

Van's cell phone, always interrupting, shouted bling bling. He answered it, and wonder of wonders, it's his dear-bitch-wife Ashley. The Ash-hole, the Ash-wipe. Yes, dear, come to the beach. I'll sign. Yes, you can have everything I've got.

When Whitehill pulled open the door to exit, most of what was left of the flesh and substance of his hand pulled away and stuck to the handle.

When the local constabulary found what was left of Van Whitehill and his soon-to-be-ex wife, the junior deputy said something like mmm-bork , leaned over the railing on the deck and deposited his recently consumed Subway sandwich (extra peppers and onions) over the rail.

Next door, Mrs. Sharply sat on her own deck, smirking over a tall glass of lemonade. Blood leaked from her gums. The ice cubes reflected the purple bruises under her watery eyes. She scratched at the flaking skin on her arm and watched it float to the deck. With a thumb and forefinger, she twirled a glob of hair and scalp around and around her finger.