**A night at the beach**

Michelle was a pretty, popular graduate student in Chemistry at the University of Southern California. After four years, she was graduating, so she and her parents decided to throw a party for her fellow graduate students. The party was scheduled at her parent’s house in Imperial Beach (just south of San Diego) for a Sunday afternoon in July. We decided to drive down on Saturday to see the sights along the way. We stopped at the Oceanside pier for lunch, and continued on to Mission Beach in San Diego, where we rode the “Giant Dipper” roller coaster and wandered through the midway at Belmont Park. We saw several motels on the way with vacancy signs, but we decided to get closer to the destination. We had a great time, but it was getting late, so we decided to stop for the night.

There are a lot of motels in Mission Beach, but the “no vacancy” sign seemed to have appeared on all the places. Oh well, we continued on through San Diego looking for a place. There sure were a lot of places to stay, but they were all full. There should be some places in Imperial Beach, after all, that is further out from the downtown area. We could not find any rooms anywhere. Finally, around 11 PM, we go to the beach near Michelle’s parents house, looked out at the sand, and I thought: Why not sleep on the beach? We had sleeping bags with us, the weather was warm. I said the parking lot is vacant; there is nobody on the beach; why don’t we just haul out the sleeping bags and go to sleep on the beach with the sound of the waves. I fell asleep under the stars and clear sky.

rrrrrrRRRRRR. Awaken. What is that? It sounds like a motorboat. Gee, it is very close to the shore; what is it doing out there. What is that light beam coming along the beach? DUCK. We dive into the sleeping bags. The light passes by. Is it illegal to sleep on the beach? Why would they have a motorboat to enforce that regulation? Oh well, we are in trouble now; …but after an hour nothing happens so I went back to sleep. Zzzzzz.

Chop. Chop. CHOP. CHOP. What now? A helicopter? No wonder they call it a chopper. It is getting closer and closer, at least it is still dark. What is that huge sun in the sky? That is a really giant light on that helicopter and it is aimed right at us. It is like daylight out there. DUCK. Into the sleeping bags we go with no body parts showing. The huge light wanders up the beach. They are going to get us for sure now. Wide awake…

PutPut. PUTPUT. Silence. Is that a bus I just heard coming by into that dark parking lot. I think I hear footsteps; we are in BIG trouble now. WHAT? There are ten people in brown uniforms running right at us. OH NO. DUCK. Back and hide in the sleeping bags. We are not criminals; they do not need to send ten people after us. Are they armed? We don’t know, we are hiding in the sleeping bags as if hiding in a sleeping bag on a deserted beach is hiding. The ten running men go right on by us as if we are not there. Hey, maybe these sleeping bags are a good invisibility cloak. They go over to some large rocks that are maybe 30 meters away from us.

Ten minutes pass. Many quiet footsteps in the sand. Now there is an army of FORTY people walking up the beach right at us. AARGH. What now? We look. The ten men in brown uniforms are herding a group of thirty people dressed rather raggedly up the beach. They all walk right by us as if we did not exist and proceed up to the parking lot. A few minutes later, the PutPut bus leaves. Silence. Further sleep is impossible. Well, it looks like this nice quiet, vacant beach was not QUIET, and not VACANT. Dawn comes finally, we stagger up from the sand and head over to Michelle’s parents house. They offer food, sympathy, and suggest we could have sacked out on their living room floor.

NOW, they tell us. So, what just happened here? What it was, is not exactly clear. Explain: Imperial Beach is a few kilometers north of the Mexican border. At low tide, illegal immigrants walk up the beach into the United States, hide, and wait until morning to disperse. The boat, helicopter, and people in brown are the Immigration Service trying to stop them. Illegal immigrants do not use sleeping bags; hence we were ignored by all of them, even though they never saw who we were.

MORAL: Make reservations early for a motel in San Diego on a summer Saturday night.