

The Faintest Glimmer

By Ella McKhann

I can feel my heartbeat in my ears, thrumming orchestrally with the crash of waves far below. No stalling. It is time. I take a deep breath of salty air, wipe my palms on my jeans, and walk up to the cliff where he stands, looking out over the ocean. He turns as he hears my footsteps crunch gravel on the path behind him. A slight grin pulls at his mouth, peeking out from beneath a Top-Gun-style mustache. “Hi,” I say semi-awkwardly, my lips catching the frisbee of his smile tossed in my direction.

“Hey,” he replies back, grin splitting even wider. It’s mischievous, that look. It beckons a secret promised just between us, one I am not yet privy to.

Are you in? I feel his expression whisper to me across the expanse between us.
Yes, my heart pounds back. *Not yet*, my mind responds.

The idea is to walk the beach at sunset. Peaceful, grounding, dare I say it: romantic. The weather has other plans. Thick fog snakes around the cliffs that wrap the beach, swallowing the trees at the point that sits between us and the invisible sun to the west. A blanket settles low over the ocean, casting everything in a grey haze. Cloudy rocks jut from the waterline behind the veil, the once-familiar turned mysterious and distant. It is impossible to see what is to come. The only choice is to put one foot in front of the other and believe that the way will reveal itself.

“It’s colder than I thought,” he admits as we turn towards the beach.

“You want my sweatshirt?” I tease, and just like that, the awkwardness dissipates. I follow him down the stairs, taking the opportunity at his back to examine him. Out of workout clothes, he looks

different, relaxed and comfortable in loose jeans and a t-shirt. He's taller than the only previous time I've seen him, spinning on a stationary bike when we crossed paths at the gym. He's distractingly cute, lean and tanned with tousled blonde waves, like he walked straight out of an ad for the SoCal life.

There was something disarming about him when we met. Something in the way he carried himself that pulled me in. The way his eyes met mine as he walked in the door. The way I could almost sense how it would unfold. He was so friendly, chatting me up in the gym while everyone else put their heads down and avoided eye contact. Airpods plugging up their senses, and with that, their connection to the external world.

I get that same feeling from him now that I did then. That he's actively immersed in the here and now, instead of checked out in his own little universe. I've been missing that as I walk around campus, trying to smile at strangers. It feels like we're on the same mission. It makes me curious to get to know him better.

As we reach the sand, we immediately shed our flip flops in unspoken agreement. Good. I don't trust people who wear shoes on the beach. If you can survive without the feel of sand between your toes, it is a solid sign we are not meant to be.

A tiny puffball of a snowy plover scuttles over the surfline, spindly legs shrouded in mist. The endangered plovers lay their eggs nestled in depressions in the sand, trusting the world to be kind as they bare it all to the elements. If they sense impending danger, the parents will flee in fright, abandoning their nest. Without proper nurturing, whatever new life is present will be snuffed out.

How do the plovers sense when it is time to flee? It feels like an important skill, knowing when to abandon the nest. Lord knows there are times I've stayed too long. Times I've put others so far before me in the name of love that I forgot myself along the way. Times someone else's happiness has meant much more to me than my own. Times before I knew what the word boundary meant, much less how to place one. I can't help but wonder if the plovers fight with themselves the way I have. Do they struggle to find peace in the choices they make, even in the right ones? Does that deep of a loss change their willingness to rebuild?

We talk as we pick our way through the pebble-strewn sand, conversation flowing easier with each careful step. Over piles of kelp pulled in with the high tide, around rocks revealed with the ebb and flow of the sea. The conversation meanders from the Catalina Classic paddle race (occurring back home for him), to why the Ikon Pass is a scam (a personal war for me). I ask about the kinds of surfboards that fill his quiver at home, surprising him when I can keep up with the lingo. I may be a beginner, but I have a little brother who taught me how to talk the talk. “Your brother knows what’s up,” he commends when I go on to mention the old-rock influence he’s had on my music taste. I think they would like each other.

He’s carefree. Effortless to talk to. Calm yet playful, he has the kind of laid-back energy that puts me instantly at ease.

I have never been one to like small talk. But with the right companion, even the seemingly mundane holds an unfolding. It is a dance of surrender, cautious at first, until you know your partner can hold you through the lifts. Like a dance, it begins with the foundations. *This is scary for me, is it scary for you too?*

At the point where the cliffs sharply turn, the receding water begins to unveil little pools of low-tide secrets that pocket the rock shelf. We walk the rock like a tightrope, careful not to step on any critters who call the Pacific intertidal home. A flash of silver catches my eye and I crouch low to examine it. The tip of a wavy turban snail shell pokes through the sand, a particularly large and flashy find on these beaches. I tuck my fingers beneath the loose sand burying this treasure, catching the edges spanning four or five inches apart. I allow the shell to slowly release through the silt as I tug gently, trusting that will come free if it is meant to. A ribbed, cone-like spiral begins to emerge, flecked with pearl and purple, shimmering with saltwater.

This shell is empty, but the snail often housed within builds this home around its body, meticulously spinning a web of safety. The opening invites the sands deeper within, spiraling towards the very heart. There are walls we create to close ourselves off. And there are boundaries we erect to invite others in.

I hold it up in triumph. “Sick find,” my companion calls in response from his own nearby pool. I replace the shell gently to its spot in the frigid water.

We turn around as the sun dips below the horizon in a far off place, the sky shifting imperceptibly to dark as the mist swirls thicker around us.

“Okay, I really and truly can’t hold it anymore,” he admits with slight misery. I laugh, but he’s completely serious. He walks down towards the waterline, leaving me up on dry sand.
“Tell me if someone is coming.”

I turn away as he faces the ocean, standing awkwardly as I try to scan for people in the mist without looking in his direction. He comes back a minute later, threading his belt back through its loop. I attempt not to stare at his abs.

“Now completely forget that ever happened,” he pleads with a self-deprecating smile.
“Forget what happened?” I reply with an equally self-conscious grin as we continue on.

I spin in a circle, arms thrown wide, feeling the thick air condense to droplets on my fingers. We are inside our own little cloud, a perfect bubble of undisturbed silence. There is no one in sight. The dunes are engulfed, the ocean disappearing beyond the first ripple of foam. There is nothing but the two of us and the footprints we leave in the sand.

I feel him watching me. I pretend not to notice.

“Spooky or cool,” he asks.

“Cool,” I reply easily. Then I pause, peeking at him out of the corner of my eye.

“As long as you don’t try to kill me,” I add casually.

“Oh please,” he scoffs, not skipping a beat. “If anyone is killing anyone, you’re taking me out.”

I laugh as my mind flashes back to the brief I gave my roommate as I ventured out with this unknown boy on this empty beach, sans cell service. How unfortunate that it’s a valid concern.

But I feel safe. With this stranger. Inside this cloud. Each laugh he pulls from me comes easier, melodically weaving me into this forming bond between us. Each smile that splits his lips feels like a burst of golden light the weather app so falsely promised us.

“We’ll have to come back for a real sunset,” I say as we climb back up the stairs, towards the material world and the reality of the sun rising again tomorrow. I say the words tentatively, the ones unsaid hanging in the air like an outstretched hand. *I want to see you again.*

“It’ll be my excuse to come back with you,” he replies easily. I smile with relief at his back.

He shines his phone light so I can unlock my bike in the darkness. We stayed long past the fade of day into night.

The bike back feels like a coming-of-age montage plucked from a favorite comfort movie. His arms spread wide as we pedal down the center of the main road, street lights glowing in the mist, sounds muffled by the haze. The cold air bites at my pink cheeks, sore from smiling so endlessly.

I feel purely, undilutedly *alive*. The headlights on passing cars feel distant. The moment stretches, as if I can just pause the movie and stay suspended in time a little longer. A feeling of freedom takes flight within me, more expansively than I can remember in recent years. We meet eyes for a second as we soar down the street, and the corner of my heart tugs as it pulls back the sheets to make a bed for the tender trust I feel forming.

The paradox of trust is that it is given freely, as a gift, without the guarantee that it will be handled with care. The paradox of life is that it asks us to trust what we cannot see, time and time again. We must trust that the sun still sets in the fog. Trust that the home we wrap ourselves in shines with beauty to those we invite inside. We must strike a balance between wrapping ourselves in the comfort of familiar safety and risking our nest to the world. In the end, all we can do is believe that the faint glimmer of hope we see in the heart of another, once loosened and pulled from long-buried sand, will reveal a kaleidoscope of color.

I watch two tendrils of potential future snake out before me like the fog that wraps us.

I could close off to this. Remain deep in my shell, free of risk. Alone.

Or I can choose to open to this experience. To let him in. To trust my heart in the free air like the precious little plover risks its youth. And to know in my bones that whatever happens, I will be okay.

I can let this in. I can make this choice.

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