

Written for Reedsy Prompts Contest #238 in response to: Write a story in which a conversation takes place where the true subject is only implied....

**Content Disclaimer: This work features the narrator living with suicidal ideation and depression.**

## **Return To Shore**

We rode your motorcycle along the coast as the wind whipped salt into our cheeks. My hair stung where it struck which only made the taste of the ocean sweeter. I would have asked where we were going if I didn't know the answer.

We weren't.

Do you remember how tight I held you through your jacket? Even now I'm gripping the pillow like I'll fall off the bed without it. If I opened my mouth, the damp patch against my cheek would taste almost like those rides.

There was always a part of me that believed that, if I hung on just tight enough, I would simply phase through that leather and become more than me.

Today I manage to get out of the house and face the overcast Jersey "spring." I take myself on a walk to breakfast, pass a handful of boarded up townhouses, nod a good morning to the elderly woman on the corner who smiles toothlessly from her green plastic deck chair. I can't help but smile back.

It even reaches my eyes.

Keeping on I almost miss the crocus peeking from under a decaying Shoprite coupon newspaper. On a whim, I crouch and lift the musty crusted thing off the flowers and drop it a few inches to the side. I don't have a bag. Maybe I should.

"Thunkathunk," says a jeep of some kind as it passes me through a rougher patch of potholes.

"Thunkathunk," I mutter back, "Thunkathunk."

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Nancy looks up from refilling the coffee as I shuffle into “Mom’s Bagels”. She raises an eyebrow, head slightly cocked.

“Western omelette and pumpernickel bagel—toasted—with chive cream cheese?”

She doesn’t know how much I love her for this.

I give a thumbs up and continue my shuffle to the coffee. Today is a to-go cup day.

“Lucky lucky hot hot coffee,” murmured to the pot itself as I watch my rippling reflection form in the shimmering black.

A packet of sugar. Another packet of sugar. Stir. Try to hold it, nearly drop it, grab a handful of napkins to wrap around the cup.

See the cardboard cupholders fully stocked. Where they always are. I grumble as I struggle to get the lid on.

“Porkroll egg and cheese on rye,” Nancy calls out as she sets someone’s tray on the counter, “cash or card today babygirl?”

I pull out... fifteen dollars. I’ll get some change, but not much. I should just get a breakfast sandwich, but this comes with home fries. If I eat half now, I have dinner. That means it’s only maybe six dollars a meal—less if you take the coffee out.

Nancy gives me a to-go box on the tray with my plated meal.

We never came here together. I’m grateful for that, taking my seat by the window. Gulls coast over the used car lot across the street. I count each one perched on lot lights, wind rustling the down of their sides. One shuffles its wings and pulls a loose feather from under a wing.

We used to fly alongside them. I never did try raising my arms to the wind.

You told me I bruised your ribs.

I thought I’d heard affection in your tone.

I consider walking to the beach. Off season beach strolling sounds nice. I can picture it with my eyes closed and my mouth open.

I can also picture climbing out to the point of the jetty and letting my body fall to the waves. Some sort of plaid Ophelia quickly dashed to pieces.

The bell jangles me out of my brain. Some couple and their kid getting a very loud lunch suddenly take up the space that I’d let get stale.

I cut my hair when you left, but it's gotten long again.

When I get home, I start to take a shower then change my mind. Instead, I walk back out the door and sit on the steps. Did I remember to put my leftovers in the fridge?

You didn't grow up eating out. I let you do all the cooking. I thought you liked to. You put Bowie or someone on every time you did.

I didn't like your taste in music, but I loved watching you love it.

The last time I threw up was in the parking lot of a dollar general when Under Pressure came on.

I find my leftovers resting on a stack of bills on the counter.

"Still good, still good."

The incantation makes it true. There's room in the fridge. If I crush down the other takeout containers, there's room.

Once, on the pier, I pointed a riptide out for you. I started to talk about them, how you can tell where they form because of the stillness, the stagnation of the water compared to the waves on either side. "Calm" water that just keeps pulling you further toward the horizon.

"I know," you'd said before I finished 'see there? That's a rip current,' "you told me last time."

And the time before that, and the time before that.

"Do you just forget? Or are you that obsessed with sounding smarter than me?"

"I don't think I'm smarter than you. I just..."

When I was a toddler on the beach, I watched my mother save an older child in a moment of raw instinct. She left me with my brother and kicked wet in my face with the force of her sprint. It was no graceful dive into the waves but a hurried, flailing dash into the valley of two waves. Of the things I remember, her head disappearing and reappearing yards away where a kid whose face is sandblasted by time heard what I know by heart.

Don't panic, swim (with me) parallel to the shore. Swim south, or north along the beach, you'll get back into waves and they will return you.

"Right. You only have a handful of facts to repeat."

"Where is this coming from?"

"Seriously? Do you want a fucking list?"

I take a trash bag from under the kitchen sink and gloves from the dwindling box, and I return to the street. It would be easier to go back to bed until I was hungry enough to eat again.

I want to go to the shore again, alone. I want to think about riptides and seagulls and sandcrabs for the sake of something more sacred than nostalgia.

I want to sit on a pier and watch ships.

I want to do it without imagining my bones caught in the rudders. Without grim satisfaction oozing into my skull.

I would have liked a list.

I squat and pick up the first cigarette butt. My neighbor, James. An older man who always has a gentle greeting for me... someone I wish I could explain why I run inside now when I smell his tobacco.

You gave up on quitting when I started cooking for you.

“You’re only doing this because I told you to.”

The bottom of the bag is lined with butts now. My calves ache from squatting. So many microscopic pieces of wrappers and paper and tin appear once I start looking for them. This five by five could be all I clean the whole day. Or three by three even. My legs start to tremble.

Do you remember holding me? Water up past our waists and waves hitting our chests? I couldn’t keep my feet from floating. I used to tread water before I met you. I had a green cap at summer camp every year.

I could have been a lifeguard.

Miraculously, I make it to the curb with my bag. The asphalt blinks back at me under the wheels of vanity trucks. I see the crocuses on the next block and take a step to cross.

“Hey,” I’d doled stir fry to both of our plates, more for yours of course, “are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad?”

“I... Don’t know.”

You’d barely touched the chicken. It was even moist this time. Pride in making something edible flickered and died under your restless fork.

“Not everything is about you.”

“I know.”

“Then why are we having this conversation again?”

“You just seem...”

“I’m not mad at you.”

“Okay.”

I waited for the vent about coworkers or your parents or maybe just a general cloudy fall funk. In the end you gave up on eating to go make a call. I didn’t clean up. I had cooked. Dishes were my job when you cooked. It pissed you off the next morning that you had to wash your wok to pack it.

When you left, I shoved the pyrex with your leftovers to the back of the fridge just in case. There’s no room and no food. I could go home now and fix that, but I’m tired enough for sleep. I could try to take a shower. I could keep going or I could make more room for more leftovers to go bad, if I even manage to do that.

A horn blares, a foot from my face, accompanied by a screech.

“Get out of the goddamn street!”

She’s middle aged, white, driving a black SUV that comes up to my collarbone. Juxtaposed between stretches of cracked and jagged sidewalk, the side street under my feet is well paved and smooth. We make eye contact, the inconvenienced lady and I. That she saw me at all is taken as a sign to sprint forward, my bag whipping behind me with the sudden speed. When I hit the dirt by the crocuses my lungs won’t stop heaving. I scratch at the brown grass wildly until my fingernails rip through the thin vinyl and wearing gloves becomes a joke.

No one asks me if I’m okay...

I’m grateful for that even as tremors overtake my body. Dirt under every fingernail.

“I’m alive,” I tell the crocuses.

They don’t respond, but the newspaper I moved earlier gives me the softest shickashicka against the wind. I pick it up, turn it over and note the water stains. So many layers yellowing and browning.

Food for worms.

I dig deeper with the side of a flat soda can into the grass I’ve ruined. After a few minutes, I hold the newspaper once more.

It shreds poorly, but it shreds. Into the earth and buried.

“Food for worms,” I say.

I shove my body to its feet and finally abandon the dream of your jacket to slide back under my own skin.