

## *Sunsets & Sand*

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I KNEW WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO SAY LONG before she said it. The declaration of my father's death hung heavy in the air for the silent, twenty minute drive to the beach with the late evening sun chasing us in the side mirrors of my mom's Honda Civic. It was mid-summer and the lake was still crowded with people as we arrived. She took me to a nearby bench where we sat and watched the waves, the hushed rhythm to their lapping nearly as peaceful as the ocean's. My numbness had already set in long before we'd found the bench, so her struggle for words seemed almost awkward to me. When she turned to me with red eyes brimming with tears and took my hand, my head was already hanging, eyes focused so intently on the warm, rocky sand squishing between my toes that it probably seemed like I had never seen sand before.

A couple of weeks before he made the decision to turn the key in the ignition of his car with his garage door closed – a pile of pictures of me in the seat beside him, something my mom had mentioned later on – my father had called me to say goodbye. “I love you, Ashley. I always have. I’m so sorry I haven’t been there for you.” I was ten years old and listening to him from the other side of the country as he pleaded with me to forgive him, and to understand that he loved me. I could hear the grief in his voice, so acutely poignant that even though I couldn’t understand what was going on, I knew that he was crying and it instantly terrified me and brought tears to my eyes. My father never cried. When my mother saw those fearful wet streaks staining my cheeks, she hurriedly took the phone from me and nudged me into the next room. I pressed my ear against the door to hear, the salty-warm tears leaving a smudge against the wood.

“Patrick, don’t do this to her.” She was scolding him. Any other time, I would have found this normal; he was always making her angry, whether from forgetting child support, or canceling my summer visit with one lame excuse or another. This was

different, and I knew it without understanding how I knew. It might have been the tone in her voice, or in his while he had been pleading with me, but something was wrong and I instinctively felt it. I strained harder against the door, wishing I could stretch my hearing like I could my vision when I squinted just right. It was no use, though; I couldn't hear the other side of the conversation no matter how hard I tried.

"Please, Pat. You can't. She needs you, you're her father." Her voice was quieter now, more desperate. I could tell she was crying too, and suddenly I was through the door, having turned the handle and stumbled in without consciously making the decision to do so. The phone was already away from her ear, the silent room reverberating with the flat dial-tone that signaled a hang-up from the person on the other line. For a long moment she sat there staring at it, tear drops standing out as darker splotches in the light grey cotton of her t-shirt. Then she was a flurry of motion, dialing numbers and talking rapidly with police, giving out names, numbers, and addresses that I couldn't have remembered the next day if I were asked.

A knot of worry had been building inside of me during all of it; so much tension that I felt like I might implode as I turned to run from the kitchen, sprinting out the back door and through the cool evening grass. The summer sun was still at least an hour from setting, and it burned my eyes through the haze of tears as I jogged through one back yard

after another on my way to the fence that gated off the military housing. Near the corner was a post with its chain-link fence pulled away from waist-high down; a secret hole for getting on the other side. I squeezed through and made my way to the creek, bare feet navigating the cool stream in just a couple of quick steps to the other side, where I stopped in front of my favorite place in the entire world, a tree with my very own treehouse. Every bit of it was built by my hands, and even though I kept it secret I was proud of it.

Along the trunk I had created a ladder of boards, nailed in but still wobbly. Only because of months of practice was I able to scale it quickly, the boards dipping and creaking under my weight, but caution wasn't one of my concerns at that moment, so I scurried up. It wasn't until I'd reached the main platform, crawled into the cramped cabin, and tucked myself back into the corner that I let the flood of tears come. Every salty orb was laced with fear, knowing that something terrible was happening, but completely in the dark about what it could be. It wasn't until the sun had long set and even the lightning bugs stopped flashing that I climbed down and headed home.

There was no news the next day, or the day after. By the end of the first week, I started to relax. The everyday activities of being a kid on summer break consumed me, until I nearly forgot about that distressing

night and its ominous phone call. But it did hover in the back of my mind, barely there until the day my mother called for a sitter for my baby brother and asked me if I'd like to go to the lake with her for a walk on its beach. There was something disquieting about her voice, a sort of heavy sadness that hinted at the exhaustion of hours spent crying. That knot in my gut returned with a vengeance, and I knew what the trip to the beach was for, just like I knew my life would never be the same again.

The sand felt a little itchy between my toes, and I kept wiggling them in an attempt to get it all out. "I know," I told her, a little too fast; she barely had time to get the words out when I spoke up. My voice cracked a little, the result of over half an hour without speaking at all. I kicked the sand and stood up, walking toward the waves. My mom followed quietly behind, leaving me to my thoughts while I stood knee-deep in the cool water and tried desperately to cry, to feel anything at all. There was just a hollow pit inside of me that had absorbed all of my emotions. I don't know how long I stood there, staring out at the lake and all of the people swimming or boating in it, but eventually my mother took my hand and led me back to the car.

Weeks passed, and I felt like a hollow shell during all of them. I spent most of my time in the treehouse reading; ignoring friends and family completely in favor of solitude and escape into the fantasies of books. I tried

to tell myself it was okay to be sad, or upset, or hurt, but no matter what I did, I couldn't get rid of that empty feeling. It wasn't until his ashes arrived in a package in the mail three weeks after the day at the beach that my emotions were finally restored to me, overwhelming me until I was a heap of sobs on the floor, clutching the death announcement in my hand with my body curled around the triangularly-folded American flag that signified his service in the Navy. Δ