

# A Walk By the Beach

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She had said that they should spend a night at a hostel along the coast. She had discovered the place in her endless perusal of travel brochures. She said it was time they stopped thinking of their problems and got out into Nature, if only for a night. They were no longer having sex because he had refused to join the 12-Step Program which now was the center of her life. They would sleep in the same bed, but he had to understand that there would be nothing more than that.

They arrived in late afternoon, under a gray fog. The hostel room was small, clean, bare, and painted a grayish white — a color that only a bicyclist could love, he thought. There were shelves above the closet door for storing blankets and knapsacks. A no-nonsense room for people who believed in activity, health — life. One window, grimy with sea-salt, looked out on rocks at the top of a low cliff. In the distance, part of a sandy beach could be seen. The endless crash of waves intruded on everything the two of them said and everything he thought.

The next morning he woke early. She loved to sleep late. She lay turned away from him, breathing in a way that said, “And don’t you wake me up! I am busy with important things!” He was already bored.

He dressed quietly and stepped outside. A cold blast of morning air almost took his breath away. Fog swept over the low buildings. He could smell the ocean — the stink of the ocean he always wanted to say. The ropes on the flagpole at end of the buildings were clanging against it. Seagulls were squawking, diving. No one else was up. He walked out the little driveway, up a hill, down the other side. Below, the white wave crests were laboring to shore. (Millions of years of never getting it done, he thought.)

Between the driveway and the cliff that dropped down to the beach was thick, juicy, ice plant, with paths snaking through it. He walked along one. Below the waves went on crashing. The ocean washing its hands of everything, never getting done, he thought.

He liked the firm path, which was covered with a fine powder created by thousands of foot-steps. This, at least, was something that got done, he thought. It had been worked on and perfected. At least there’s this.

Who could say, perhaps the meaning of life lay in a turn of this path? The question was which turn, and at which time of day? God, how boring ice plant is, and yet, by God, it too gets things done, spreads itself far and wide, takes in sea air, sunlight, whatever else it needs to live. It grows, lives, dies. Makes people think twice before they step on it.

He thought: what if I jump off the cliff? Just go off the cliff. Is she still sleeping? Why do women take so long to get up in the morning? Cold sea air — the phrase went through his mind. “Cold sea air”: it is a phrase, used a thousand times in stories and novels. Yet the reality is as trite as its description. This cold sea air is owned by the club that owns this hostel. What was he supposed to do with it? Blankets of fog swept past in the wind. The ocean labored below. At least it’s making me hungry for breakfast, he thought. He chose a path that seemed to have been deliberately worked in there to pass as close to the cliff as possible. He walked across the ice plant, which was like walking over clothes that someone hadn’t hung up, to the edge of the cliff. It was, what, a hundred feet to the beach. Suppose you missed all the rocks? Suppose you only broke your back? Then they’d keep you alive for another hundred years.

The sun was now unavoidable in the East. He sensed the sun at his back through the fog. The underwater machinery which had been grinding on all night in the dark cold, now was grinding into the day. Fish ignorant of their fate were struggling on, swimming, darting, eating, avoiding death, the whole meaningless business.

Oh, God, for something that would make it all significant: a tunnel, that would do it! In childhood, the possibility of finding a tunnel had gotten him through many a day. A trap door in the ice

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plant, known only to a few: you would go down a ladder to carved tunnels. *No decorations*. Cut through the rocks by years of chiselling. One of them leading to a window in the cliff side. There, a few bare wooden chairs like office chairs, where you would sit, surrounded by all that stone, and look out at the sea. No sound. The silence of rock. And the chiselling would go on, year after year, the whole cliff like an apartment building. Getting to know rock not in a scientific or a nature club way but by spending thousands of hours chiselling it.

No, it would be as boring as everything else, he thought, stepping through the ice plant back to the path. We need war. If this were World War II, there could be Japanese submarines out there in the gloom.

Someone — who does these things? — had put a cement bench at a wide place in the path, so you could sit and look out at the sea. And so, with the squawk of seagulls overhead, the cold blast softened now by the morning sunlight at his back, he sat down. He listened to the waves. He thought he smelled fried eggs and bacon for a moment. Can we eat ice plant?, he wondered. He thought of the people who had walked on these paths: the lovers arm in arm, parents, kids running and shouting, going too close to the edge, perhaps a white-haired blind man, feeling his way along the path with his stick. He thought of the dogs and cats which had scampered down the paths, and across the ice plant. Maybe one or two had fallen off the cliff. The kids crying, the mother pulling them into herself to take away the view and hence the thought of what poor Missy had experienced during the last few moments of her brief life.

And then, for no reason he could possibly fathom, he thought of a black armadillo. He could see its shiny plates clearly in his mind's eye as it lumbered across the ice plant, could see its heavy, burdensome armor, could see its intent, small eyes. He imagined it to have whiskers. And, suddenly, the burden of the morning's misery was lifted from him. He imagined the armadillo cut in half, its guts not what you would expect, but instead a creamy, marbled goo, like an overripe oyster. And the thought of it having been cut in half, by kids or a frightened old man, didn't take away the lifting of his spirits that had occurred with the thought of the animal. He saw it whole again, saw it scuttering through the ice plant, busy, busy with its life work. Down the paths, lumbering bravely, quickly along like a midget knight under its weight of rubber armor, tail switching back and forth, sniffing, probing, watching out for kids. Where was its home? Did it have a burrow somewhere in these cliffs? Did it have a mate? Would it, in fact, one day be cut in half by some nitwit believing he was doing the right thing, was "protecting people" from this marauder? It didn't matter. The man sat on the concrete bench, head turned half away from the vast ocean, and sat, in temporary peace, watching, in his mind's eye, a non-existent animal running along endless paths through the ice plant.