

Wall at the Tide

Brett Byars

The following is an excerpt from Chapter 1

My short stride took me down the coastal walkway to a rock polished with asses and surrounded by the black stains of spit gum. Concrete columns connected with chains were the only guardians against the vertigo of the cliffside. An hour and ten minutes until my appointment. I stared at the surf-slammed rock formations which looked like crinkled dark tissue paper. I removed my peacoat and rested it on my lap to cool the furnace of my body heat. The numbing of a cold sea can feel like warmth after a time. For the first time today I actually felt calm.

“It seems so inviting down there,” my mind wandered. The rolling waves nearly put me to sleep. “Would be nice to take a swim. A dive, even. To feel those rolling waves over me.” Okay, that’s enough of those thoughts. “Why not? Down there you can be safe from this world.” The thoughts took on a vaguely masculine tone. None of that was me. I nearly dropped my coat at the sight of a figure standing on an outcrop several dozen feet to my left.

A man of indistinct age looked out at the sea. He seemed either unaware or unfazed by my presence. I looked at him with a lurching fear for any signs of sudden movement. His straw hair flickered over his motionless head.

“Today might be the day.” His mouth didn’t move. “Two choices in life. Wear the neural prison or slowly become a haze-headed Slipshod. Trapped. There’s a third. It calls out there, they all know it but what is it?” With my head locking toward him, I leaned forward pressing my chest into my lap. I was barely seated on the rock.

“This seems a good a spot as any. The Haze hospital in the distance. Poetic. Wandered far enough up the Pacific coast. Best years already behind me. Even things I was embarrassed about years ago seem like victories compared to what I have now. Trapped. Breathe a few times, listen to the waves. Make up my mind soon.”

Oh Jesus Christ, my first time at ocean in over month and someone is trying to kill themselves. So much for remaining calm. I wrapped my coat over my shoulders to provide myself the minutest amount of security. My hair blew across my lips as I focused in his direction. I closed my eyes, straining them from how hard I was rolling them back in my head.

“A few steps forward. Life changing and life ending. Everywhere I had ever been resting on a few steps forward.”

“Although,” My shoulders where nearly up to my ears. “Maybe I do have somethings to look forward too.” There was a long pause between the seagull screeches. I was no longer at the beach. I felt like I was in large dark room, with only my inner ear to tell me things were moving around. My stomach felt like a gaping pit, with my meal clanging against the sides as it fell. I had never done this before, hopefully it works.

“Like what though? I just can’t imagine-“ His fists loosened ever so slightly.

“I have been through a lot. The fact I traveled this far shows I am searching for something. Something that’s still out there. Something that can bring me away from these thoughts.”

“Every door behind me is closed. I can’t move back. And here, these tiny steps forward before the edge is my future. How can I change that?”

“By looking at it from a new perspective. By moving on out of pure spite. The world is already against me, I don’t need my own self to be another ally in their corner.” I thought I could feel the tension ease, but it was impossible to know. I waited for his thoughts to gather.

“I don’t want to go through this again.” I felt like his mind was playing a game of chess against me.

“The moment my feet leave this edge, every problem I’ve ever faced is going to seem like nothing compared to the fall. That’s the gravity of the situation.” Whoops, shit. Now is not the time to be making puns, but I couldn’t stop my mind from saying it. I opened my eyes to see any kind of body language to suggest the charade was over. He rose up on his toes and arched his back.

“I want to stay here longer- it’s very peaceful. I’ll watch for a pattern in the sea foam. If everything in life is chance maybe the ocean can decide. It is no longer up to me.”

I closed my eyes once again. I couldn’t exactly see what part he was looking at but I tried to pour on my most buttery memories, the most soothing sensations I could possibly send to another human being. I looked again. “I just need to step away from this cliff. My mind will be clearer soon,” I reinforced.

His foot reached out and for a second I thought this was the end. I gripped my coat sleeves tightly. He turned and swung inland toward the coastal hills. On his face was a wide grin and a completely relaxed composure, not a trace of suicidal demeanor. His arm swung up and waved erratically. He wasn’t looking at me. An auto pulled up alongside him, crunching the gravel on the side of the road and he briskly stepped toward it. A hunched woman emerged and he embraced her lovingly.

I melted back against my rock making my coat fall off my shoulders. But wasn’t he...? He was going to kill himself, right? I heard it so clearly, I felt the tension, his stance- everything said so! I swear to God I was talking to someone that wasn’t me.

He kept his hand on her shoulder and the two faced out toward the water as she snuck a kiss on his cheek, then they nuzzled their heads. Shaking my head, I rebuttoned my coat over

myself and set off for the medical center. My mind swung like a pendulum between thinking that this was all bullshit or that his behavior was an act for her. Before I got too far away I turned to them and shouted into the sea wind, "You're welcome!" I saw the slightest movement of their heads turning toward me and I whipped away to avoid eye contact. I needed to put that encounter behind me.

I turned on some music for the brief remaining walk, something from nearly a hundred years ago that was once described as elevator music. Jazzy analog tunes created the ridiculous theme song for the daunting structure in front of me, the brain-scrambling fortress of the clinic. Its glass and steel dome stood three stories high, and was surrounded by three asymmetrical buildings. It looked like it had no place being in a seaside town this size.

The complex was surrounded by a moat of coastal grass, shrubs and ice plants, distancing itself a fair way from the downtown. In the fields stood sad outlines, ten or so hazeheads dispersed across like scarecrows. Small birds swooped closely as if these people were a part of the environment. I crossed the freshly paved boulevard leading to the massive parking lot. After mistaking which entrance to actually use, I found where I was supposed to be.

"You have arrived to your plotted destination! Forty minutes until your appointment!" I stood near the main door next to a waterless fountain encrusted with dead algae. Just before the automatic doors slid open and I went beyond the point of no return, I thought I heard the tiniest sound: "thank you."