

“At the Cliff’s Edge”

by Cristina Goulart

The North Coast wind bit through her linen suit as she stood gazing at the Pacific Ocean. It transformed her hair into miniature whips, stinging her face. A group of young tourists dressed for a Southern California beach huddled nearby.

“Why is it so cold?” one asked. “It’s May!”

The youngsters piled back into their car and drove off without a glance her way, leaving her alone on the cliff top. She watched the rhythmic pounding of waves on sand, the sound reaching her ear a fraction of a second after the shore took each blow.

If the cliff were more vertical, if the waves were only a leap away, she would probably already be in them. She pictured herself remaining calm as she was sucked under by the current.

How long would it take for the life to leak out of her body, she wondered. Five minutes? Ten? She imagined coming face to face with a cute harbor seal in her last moments.

“Ma’am?”

She turned her head to see a young man with furrowed brow looking at her. He must have hiked up the beach trail. The black pickup truck at end of the pullout must be his.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Southern, clearly. Military, likely. The posture. The hair. The foresight to have brought a heavy jacket to the Sonoma Coast.

She looked back at the sea mutely, the beautiful sea that gives us life, life we eat, life we pollute.

“Ma’am. Can I help you?”

She turned back to him, seeing the strength and youth aflame in him. How beautiful he was, with the promise of a life ahead of him.

She shook her head.

“I’ve had bad days too,” he said.

“Have you ever had a bad decade?” she asked.

“No, ma’am, but I’ve been at the cliff’s edge, a few times myself. Will probably be there again.”

She was comforted by that, but looked away, embarrassed to be comforted by another’s suffering.

“You’re shivering,” he said.

“Am I?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I don’t feel it.”

A gale hit them, unsteadyng them both.

“That wind could knock you over the cliff,” she said to him. “You should step further away.”

“Take your own advice?”

She stayed put.

He kept his gaze on her for a moment, then edged closer to the cliff and looked down.

“You know, you’re not making it into the water from here. You’re just going to roll and bounce part way down. Break a couple bones maybe.”

She was contemplating suicide. He was talking her down. This boy, talking down a stranger, a woman old enough to be his mother. But no, she thought, he wasn’t a boy. He was young, but he’d lived. There was a set to his jaw, lines come too early to his eyes.

“Alabama?” she asked.

“Good guess. Fifty miles to the west.”

“Mississippi.”

He smiled. “*Someone* out here knows her geography.”

“Stationed at Two Rock?” she asked.

“Coast Guard? Heck no, I’m Army,” he beamed. “I’m driving down the coast from Oregon on leave. Wanted to be alone.”

“They say being alone isn’t always the best thing for those of us who tend to the cliff’s edge.”

He shrugged. “It’s quiet when I’m alone.”

“In *your* head, maybe.”

He laughed with a snort, which made her smile despite herself.

“May I ask, have you seen combat?”

“Two tours.” His eyes hardened, and he looked away, off to the watery horizon.

“You’ve seen worse than I have. I guess you’d think my life is easy.”

He looked back at her. “Oh, I had been at the cliff’s edge before I ever went to those deserts. At least in the Army I’m never alone.” He shuffled. “That sounded stupid.”

“No, it didn’t,” she said.

“If you haven’t been in, you wouldn’t know what I mean. Outside it can be lonely, everyone for himself,” he said. “Or herself,” he added and shot her a glance.

She nodded. “It can feel like running alone on a treadmill, hoping you don’t fall off. Not wanting to find out if anyone would help you back up.”

He extended his hand. “I’m Shane.”

“I’m Nancy,” she said, and shook his hand.

“It’s fixing to be a pretty sunset.”

She smiled at his vernacular.

The sun sank lower, drenching the scattered clouds with pink. The two of them stood together watching the sky, silently grateful, silently taking a step away from the cliff’s edge.