

Crashing

It didn't matter where we were driving, he had asked, so I said yes. It had been a while since I could remember going outside and breathing. I don't breathe enough.

His convertible pulled up with a screech, left it running, but slammed on the parking brake. With a lurch Maddy popped out of the seat and yelled, "How's it goin'!? Where are you off to?"

He had caught me, as he usually does, on the cusp of my front door, standing on my welcome home mat. "Hey stranger. I'm doin' good. I was just about to go do some laundry down the block. What are you up to?"

"Let's go for a ride," he replied without giving an answer.

Maddy always had great timing like that, stopping people from doing something they needed to do, had planned on doing, but knew hanging with him would be so much better. It's cost me a college grade a few times, but usually it was worth it. The type of guy who could leave your life for weeks on end, and just as you begin to think he had moved to Singapore, or started a solo backpacking trip across country, whatever his crazy world led him to do, there he'd be, at your door step, as if he'd never left, as if you had hung out every day for

years.

“Alright,” I grinned, shaking my head, “Hang on.” I tossed my duffel bag behind the front door and gave it a slam. I fumbled with the lock and keys.

“Oh c'mon now.” The engine was still running. “No one is going to come in and steal your dirty clothes.”

“Hey you never know.” He was right, but that didn't stop the habit from happening.

I closed my eyes for a time, listening to the sounds of the world rush by in a heap of wind, moving with the turns as the car gained speed until I opened them and there we were moving down the scenic highway, escaping the dull foggy town, driving down the coast.

It was a drive south I had taken by myself plenty of times, but rarely could I sit back and enjoy the passing view of the rough ocean on shore, the bluffs and cliffs jutting into a smoother blue. This is where the world made sense, when I couldn't tell whether I was moving, or the world underneath me.

As I sat there, curled in the passenger seat, Maddy put his hand out the window and I watched as he made a playful sharks fin cutting through the wind, a dolphin jumping and diving, then a kite that caught and took his hand away. I smiled at this.

He brought his left hand back in the car, slack on the wheel, and exchanged it with the right, now resting on the shifter. The one that had just been outside the car, out in the world, had

two words scribbled on the palm before the steering wheel blocked it. He was always writing things on his hand, notes, thoughts, words, stuff to remember, lists of books.

This time I wasn't too sure what was meant by the words, *Death*, and *Suicide* under it. I wasn't scared by these words. I knew how much he loved himself. I just wondered how, or why they had gotten there.

I looked out the car now closer to shore, driving along a manmade rocky edge meant to protect the highway. This thin stretch of rocks, kept the rough and choppy sea at bay. But every so often an irritated wave or white foam would crest and explode into the wind, as if trying to reach the car and swallow us whole. I turned the words over in my mouth, *Death, Suicide, Death, Suicide*.

“What's on your hand this time,” I coolly and casually asked, cocking my head in the direction, but not making eye contact with the inky blurred letters, peeping between palm and steering wheel.

He turned to me, his whole upper torso, taking his eyes off the road. I wasn't alarmed, but his attention to the topic at hand proved to be more important than the road. He was acting cooler than me, acknowledging what he's doing, almost smiling. With an arrogance and recklessness he raised the wrong hand and said, “What, this hand?” before turning his attention back to the curved drive ahead.

We both hid our true thoughts behind smiles, an unspoken game. The hand now rested in

his lap, palm up, almost tempting me, as if to warn me, *This could just be a nice drive. Do you want to have this conversation? Do you really want to talk about this?*

I wasn't worried. I didn't hesitate. "Oh c'mon man, don't play dumb. You know what I mean."

He checked his hand, reading the words to himself, then said aloud, "Death or Suicide?"

"Both of them."

Of course he knew what I wanted to hear and instead started with the less threatening idea of death. How comforting of him.

"Well," he started slowly, methodically, "The other night I couldn't get to sleep. It wasn't the regular tossing and turning in bed, something else. It was like I had too much coffee, energetic, I felt almost sick so wide awake. It was strange. I shifted in bed, turned on music, tried to read a little, but by the time I read 4 AM I thought it was time to give up. So you know what I did?"

I softly shook my head no.

"I took a walk," he said, looking at the stretch of coastal highway with a sweet smile. I don't know why I had expected some brilliant answer, excited, enamored, with the thought of some unpredictable solution. But a walk seemed like the only answer.

"Ha, ok yeah," I coaxed him on.

"Well I went down to the beach and there was this eerie feel to the night. It was so foggy

out. There was this orange glow that hovered in the sky. All the lights in town were picked up and smeared throughout the haze. You expect the night to be dark, but I looked up and if it weren't so wet in the air I could have sworn the world was on fire.

“So I'm on the beach, going from the north side to the south and – oh,” he cut himself off, a mental lapse he seemed embarrassed to admit. “I forgot to mention this, now don't get mad.” His childish grin made the words seem harmless, but I expected a bigger reveal. “I brought a little thing of whisky with me on my walk.”

I laughed at him, “Why would I be mad at you? Nothing too wrong with that I guess.”

“I don't know,” Maddy gestured, “Out at night, four in the morning, walking along the beach with a thing of whisky, doesn't exactly project nice thoughts does it? The picture there isn't the prettiest. Romantic, edgy, dark, sure, but not positive.”

“Yeah ok. Whatever.”

“Anyways, I'm sipping on what I have, just enough to keep me warm, listening to the waves crash like dynamite. Louder than I've ever heard before, one after the other, boom all the way down the beach.” He took one arm and raised it in the air, bringing it down with an eery ringing boom. “Another and another. Boom! I followed them, the cracking of the waves all the way down to the jetty and lighthouse.

“I decided to walk out, find a nice spot to nestle in at the rocks and listen. I wanted to watch the waves come in and crash at me. I wanted to tease them, see them come and uselessly

hit against the concrete before dispersing around the lighthouse. So I get to the thin strip of jetty, and I'm nearly to the end, walking along the little path, the lighthouse is just in front of me, when all of a sudden, it became a terrible idea.”

“Why? What happened?” I shifted my body towards his, a large gust of wind streaming into my face until I slouched down into the seat. He only paused, relishing the attention I was giving him, holding it over me.

“Well ...the only reason I hadn't figured it out sooner was because I was walking in between wave sets, so nothing had keyed me in. But the ocean had grown very quiet, and just as I'm near the end, another set hits. Big one.”

I could feel my eyes grow wide. “It was high tide. You idiot!” I wasn't so much angry, as just annoyed to hear him say this with a wide smile on his face. “You know how people can get swept over that jetty. Oh, and you with your stupid whisky!”

Maddy was laughing, “I know, I know. I told you not to get mad. See how bleak it got. In any case, I'm out there on the end, now with an empty bottle of whisky zipped in my jacket, and that dynamite just kept crashing. One hit after the other, two, three, four. I was dazed after the first one, knocked me down to the ground immediately. It was like when you see war movies and a grenade has just gone off. Nothing made sense in that moment right after.

“I was soaked. I mean the wettest thing you ever saw. Shivering, icy cold water running down my body and clothes. But I got up, maybe a little dizzy from the alcohol, definitely from

the waves hitting me, and started briskly walking back to the beach. The path was so slippery, if I took off running I was going to eat it. So there I am, getting pounded, water hitting the rocks, crashing over me, pushing me side to side, a drenched little rag doll, and I finally make it back to the beach. I escaped the concrete strip, and faltered, tripping into the moist sand. Looking back I watched as the last wave swallowed the path up, and then the set ended. That was it. Back to normal.”

It was quiet for a few seconds in the car. I digested this harrowing tale, trying to figure how much Maddy had embellished. For the most part I believed it to be true, my blood pumping, his grin unwavering.

“Jeez Maddy. So that was death then,” I reiterated.

“That was death. Near death anyways. It didn't come to pass.”

I slapped at his arm, “You are so lucky to be alive right now. If you had been swept in, and they found your body, if, if they found your body, with your damn whisky bottle, you'd be chalked up to just another poor idiot from town who drank his life away.”

“I know. I know.” Was all he said back, a contemplative look now on his face, the smile fading. I guess he knew the more serious repercussions of his story after all. “It was my first near death experience, and I can't stop thinking about it. All these things came into play, timing, decision-making, understanding, mood. I could be dead and there could be this big deal made about it, on the news, in the papers, with friends and family, obsessing over my thoughts and

actions, and yet it is one of those wrong time, wrong place scenarios. Except, nothing was wrong about it. It all made sense.”

We sat there in silence again, absorbing what was said, going back through the conversation. I didn't have anything to add. Neither did he. He sat there contemplating it all, satisfied with the thought until he turned and looked at me. There was a reassuring energy in his hazel brown eyes. It was just a story, that's all it was.

The sky was slanted gray in the distance. A dark, hard rain was visibly dumping, and I without a jacket, a duffel bag of dirty laundry in the hallway. Maddy noticed the storm too, gazing further in front of the road. Our eyes met again, and I was satisfied by that reassuring fire. *Don't worry.*

It was the same look I had seen him give on more than one occasion. And I had seen every single person who noticed it, find it comforting too. There was a wildness there yes, but the freedom of the world in those eyes, ready to take on anything, that was something that existed in too few. And with the storm up ahead, that fire burned. Oh did it burn.

If I didn't know better I would have thought Maddy knew about the rain, knew about the storm somewhere out there, and was itching, chasing, to get right in the middle of it. Maybe after his near death experience, he wanted to yell at a storm while cutting right through it. A taunt, a dare, another experience. But he wasn't the type of guy to plan, to look things up. The chance to



yell and scream, charge wild into a storm was one thing, spontaneity and curiosity, that was another. In my mind, that's what he lived for, that's what he wanted most.

It was moments like this, where you could see the excitement churning, that made Maddy the friend we all clung to. Sure, people get caught in storms, but who in their right mind would chase down a storm, in there convertible, with the top down, a friend in the passenger seat? Who would hope for, imagine, dream of driving into a storm simply because it was an experience he had never had? He would. And that's why I loved him, and that's why he loved himself.

Putting the top up was never an option, I didn't suggest it either. Maddy didn't speed up, nor did he try and change course or direction. He took my silence as acceptance. You trust that fire in his eyes. It wasn't a feeling of right or wrong, simply a feeling you wanted to share.

Still coasting down the highway at 65mph or so, I searched out into the distance along the ocean, looking for an edge, the end to the massive clouds that hovered ominously. I didn't find one. The further out to sea I looked the more I saw the ocean ushering these dark billowing masses.

I interrupted our silence, “And Suicide?” Nervously I shifted, unsure what to expect from this topic. “What made you write that down on your hand? Don't tell me you don't love yourself anymore.”

I tried to smile as if it were a poor attempt at a joke, but the pause and silence between us lasted longer. Was he stuck, trying to formulate the best response to such a touchy topic? I

wanted him to know that it was ok, but I remained patient.

He took a deep breath and began, “You know when you're driving down Highway 17, or even here along the coast, forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour on these windy roads.”

“Yeah,” Not so much a question, but an push to continue.

“Well, there are cars whirring by in both directions, sixty miles an hour, twisting and turning, with headlights growing until they are staring you down almost blind. There is an effect that takes place. I figure most people feel it, but choose to ignore it, or rather, don't want to talk about it. But more and more I find the feeling creep in the back of my head.”

I stared out his side of the car, noticing the blurs that passed by in the opposite direction, before turning back to the raging sea. I'm still listening. He knows.

“Well that same night, it must have been what 5:00, 5:30 in the morning by the time I got home. I was cold, wet, sandy, and I was so awake still, so alive, I didn't want to go back to my room. I wasn't ready to. So I hopped in the convertible, maybe you can see the sand still, and went for a drive.”

I peered down onto the seats and the floor, moving my shoes lightly, hearing the crunch and grumble of sand underneath them. “I guess I just figured you were never one to clean your car.”

“Ha, right you are.” He took his own hand and wiped the dashboard revealing dust.

“Anyways, new light was just beginning to show, but the sun itself was still twenty minutes

away. That orange haze of fog had disappeared, receded back out over the ocean. I came down this same stretch, the wind drying off my top half, the heater on full blast warming up my bottom, and, and, I thought . . . well a car had just driven by me in the other direction. And for some reason I thought, the slightest movement of the wheel, just a touch to the left would calmly take this car into the other lane. One small motion could cause this destructive path. It would all be over. Just like that, in an instant. Dead.”

I didn't know what to say. I looked uncomfortably at the storm, unblinking.

“Don't get me wrong here,” he continued, “I'm not suicidal.”

I didn't think he was. But I guess you have to have that clarifying statement, or at least he felt it necessary.

“This isn't a matter of an unhappy life, looking for a way out. Nothing like that, far from it. You know me, I'm the happiest douche of all. I love myself. But to have that power and then simply use it without a second thought, just a tug at the wheel. The act and power of suicide.

“I'm not trying to harm anyone, I don't want to hurt anyone. If it was something that could only effect me, it would make it all the more tempting. It's the idea that causing so much carnage, pain, worry, distress, hatred, confusion, sadness, all of it. Such an array of powerful emotions, from one little tilt could create such a big reaction. Not even a reaction to death, but simply an unexpected question. I can imagine all the questions that would come up. Why would someone do this? How could this happen? How can we prevent it? Was he drunk? Texting? Was

the car broken? Not paying attention? An accident? So many different excuses. All of them.”

Maddy was breathing a little heavier now. He was a little worked up but I wanted to hear what he had to say. I felt he was close to some break through, some idea of life I hadn't even considered. At least, not properly that is.

“No but it wasn't an accident. I meant for all of it to happen. My intentions would always be misunderstood. I make a decision and in an instant it's over already. What would possess any one to do such a thing so harmful to others? But that's it, that's the thing, it has nothing to do with harm. It's this almost beautiful, and chilling fact that an action can happen whether we understand or agree with it.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” I whispered.

“Exactly!” he shouted, catching me off guard. “Curiosity. That's all it is. The thought, the process, the outcome. Haven't you ever had that little voice pop up in your head that says, sure, why not. Why not try it for once? No pain or pleasure, but possibility. Of course there are many reasons as to why we shouldn't do something, but why does that mean we can't? It's the experience. Where the only things stopping you are all the pain and hurt, the death of the situation. The finality. The ending. Morality and mortality have taken so much away from possibility.

I wasn't scared, and I knew he wasn't either, but I was surprised. His breathing was what had me wonder, was this just a thought, or something more that provoked him? Was he just

testing the waters? Did those ocean waves that crashed upon him knock something loose?

“Mortality and morality,” he repeated in a soft tone. “That's the combination of life, that's what we're living by and for. And I don't think there is an escape from it.”

Maddy sat there and I could tell he was still fuming, processing. I didn't want to look at him, so my eyes burned into his hand, the letters blurred with his sweat from gripping the steering wheel so hard. My eyes were watering, from the wind, from not blinking, from... And then I felt it. Ever so slightly, just a touch, the car drifted a little to the left. I could feel the wheel running over the dividing lines, rumbling over the paint. There was another car fast approaching a few hundred yards away.

I knew it wouldn't happen. He knew it too. Then the rain hit hard.