



The Sea Never Keeps Its Dead

The Final Acts That Transcend Knowing - The Deaths of Strangers, and How They Follow

The clothes were the first sign that something had changed. The first indication of a new absence.

They were found crumpled, as if discarded rapidly. A neat lump born of frenetic desperation to be rid of them.

Prior to their discovery, people had started to notice that their owner hadn't returned home. The wallet without an owner contained ID to confirm the concerns.

Missing.

Even when a person disappears completely, it's interesting how somehow they leave behind everything that proves they once existed. That they were once *here*.

Material possessions marking a life that may just have come to a conclusion...

They declared the owner of the clothes missing. A young man no longer someone with geography to those who cared and loved him - he was simply gone. But where?

The missing persons report rippled through the community, as do-gooders joined police search parties to go out scouring for him.

Coastguards monitored the shoreline.

No trace was found.

Obscurity demanded that it was time to call off the search. Ending with the conclusion that the only likely scenario, was that he must have deliberately swum out to sea late at night, after ridding himself of his worldly trinkets.

Before swimming out to sea, with speculation now coming forth, with every intention to die...

Many protested it, but sadly, many more corroborated the theory.

Statements came that he was seeming low of late. A shell and shadow of his former self.

The protestations against this latter point, failed to get the searches reinstated. The case was closed. The search was over - with many left with an unsatisfying ending, as they were left to face the meaninglessness that comes with the mystery of a vanishing. A feeling in the soul that was now mirrored by the light fog that now engulfed the beach.

Days passed. People started to come to terms with all kinds of possible pasts and futures.

Then, his body washed ashore.

A quiet act of the waves that now rejected him and had brought him home. A coldness that would shatter the hearts once again of those who loved him.

Those that were still holding onto a sliver of hope that he might just still be with us, were now faced with a brutal reality.

This all seems like strange fiction, but alas, it's all true.

The facts of the scenario, however, I cannot share any further than what has already been scribed before you. The man in question is only known to me second-hand, in a story passed down from a relative to me when I was a young man.

He was their best friend.

I never had the pleasure of meeting him, never knew his name and he had no chance to meet me either, as his life and tragic passing, were years before I would even arrive.

Every time I sit by the sea, my mind tends to wander to meet him. Especially considering that I come to the sea for all manner of occasions, but recently it's when I am at my lowest, my most lost and in the depths of another wave of depression.

Generally, I think of him when I am alone, sat on a camping chair atop the cliffs I love so dearly. "This is my favourite spot in all the world," I affectionately tell those I care about of whom I like to share the spot with. Recently sharing an evening beneath a clear night's sky with a brother of mine, to take in the majesty of the meteor shower.

Sea waves lashing the beach, their song soothing us into forming a symbiosis with nature as we sank a few beers - before tucking into a thermos of hot chocolate.

Even on a night like that, the man who swam out to sea to die popped into my mind, and as he too often does he found his way to my tongue as I spoke of him...

This man that I never knew.

I can't help but stare at the sea with such intent. Almost matching its cold indifference. My mind flowing through what that final moment must have been like for him.

Ice cold water, frigid and gripping. Seizing and freezing the soul until it shattered into icy shards.

Muscles tensing and locking tight against aching bones. The water creeping further up until it engulfed his whole body, disappearing into the murk, with just a dot visible in the surf from the shore.

A slow swim. Tears streaming down his cheeks, as salt water kissed salt water.

The last motion of a journey, nearing its final deliberate destination.

Stroke after stroke.

Energy draining, draining.

The waves push back, as the currents beneath pull and beckon.

The warmth in the tendons leaving now, as the cold takes more of a hold. The end in sight.

All motion ceases as blackened depths receive a new, but temporary visitor.

A final breath. A slide under.

Sinking, as one final bubble of air escapes, and rushes to the surface popping delicately.

The final footnote at the end of the last chapter of their story.

At times, I suppose I may have romanticised it. Even dreamed of it myself. It sounds as peaceful as it does horrific. Most of us imagine drowning as struggling for air desperately, with no energy or oxygen left to get back to it. For this man, if life felt like that anyway, it must have made no odds to go out in the way he lived, but at least this drowning was chosen.

There too I feel must have been some consideration in the choice of method to leave this world. Those who decide death by suicide have many paths to explore, and often they are an act that leaves a discovery that for those that they have loved to wrestle with - but sadly in that moment are too broken to consider the aftermath.

When you want out, you want out. And that's okay. Not the death - that's never okay. And not the destruction it leaves behind. I merely mean the fact that sometimes a human being can become so exhausted by their own existence that escape starts to look like relief. And I get it.

Perhaps this way of going out felt, to him, like it might save those who knew him from the encounter of finding him.

Unfortunately, I don't believe he was aware that the sea does not care for our plans.

Nature rarely does.

The tides change with very little ceremony. Returning dead to the shores. With no witnesses, no final words and no drama.

It appears that no matter which method any of us who decide we must get out of this mortal coil, there is no way of doing so without leaving a fissure for others that will always remain open - the discovery and final moment of seeing someone we cared about, as a shell now empty.

In this case, the returned became a horrific memory that interrupted a gentleman's lone dog walk, just a few feet away from where the pile of clothes was found.

This story, despite happening on the distant shores of a distant time, has travelled through to be sat with me again.

Despite not knowing this man, he isn't less human to me. Far from it. He isn't a story like so many to others that happened *over there* somewhere. The lack of knowing doesn't change my empathy or care for his final moment.

Whichever way I think of the story, and at whatever point, he still holds the same significance as the first time my relative shared the story.

Because we don't need to know someone to be connected to their death.

It is that which connects us all to each other.

Death our ultimate equaliser.

I sit alone now on the cliff. The sun has finished setting, as moonlight now skips playfully across the water like pebbles.

A cool air kisses my cheeks, as I hear gulls give their final songs of the day before heading home to roost.

The stars come out to watch me.

Life has been tough recently, and I suppose that's the main catalyst to thoughts of the man I did not know, who disappeared to the sea, and then washed up on the beach. There are times when I feel that same sense of drowning. The pressure becoming too much, and there's a little voice that says, "he has gifted you an option here you know... and the sea is just a short walk down the hill..."

But I shake them off rather quickly.

I suppose, I would if I could.

But I couldn't.

I won't.

I have a beautiful wife and daughter. I've still got plenty of field notes to write, places I want to go, bad decisions I want to make, memories I want to craft, and dare I say it, tough times to get the other side of, so I can laugh at how ridiculous a notion it is that I let a 9-5 job get me to the point of even considering an early exit.

A tomorrow is coming, and I will be choosing it indefinitely.

Observing the grave of many, I can't help but think too that the sea doesn't keep its dead, and neither does time.

We are the keepers.

We keep the stories. We carry the fragments of people who never knew we existed. Despite this, a person can disappear from the world and still occupy somebody else's mind decades later.

The clothes on the beach may have been his last evidence to many that he existed, but now I find myself becoming evidence too. Because every time I think of him, speak of him and now write of him, his story survives.

The stories of our final moments on this earth hold immense power. The kind that transcends knowing and can touch and impact further than we ever anticipated - for good or ill.

I wish to leave as good of a legacy as I can with that last moment - should I be fortunate enough to have much say in the matter. Even with a lack of control of *how* it happens, I can have a say in how I *face* it.

As much as I can't have every final say on how I exit, I can certainly have the final say in making sure it won't be by my hand...

Fuck. What a strange thing to contemplate death while sitting somewhere that is so demonstrably and wonderfully beautiful.

He did the same, perhaps contemplated that same thought, yet saw it right to commit all the same.

Before it happened, it was clear that his mental health was tattered like the sails of a Privateer's Galleon.

Then, he exited quietly with an almost innocent withdrawal.

I hope he found peace, and if he's over my shoulder watching me scribble this note, that he understands I write this not in judgement - but in memoriam.

I feel a chill, the kind that forces me to pull the drawstrings on my hoodie. I open the thermos for a swig of hot chocolate - because even existential moments can at least have a pleasant and sweet beverage.

Before I press it to my lips, I pour out a bit on the grass beside me.

And I say a brief few words of thanks for his cautionary tale, one that empowers me to grip tighter to all I hold dear.

The sea may never keep its dead, but that lesson at least solidifies that for yet another night, I am at the very least going to keep *me*.

Because I've got more walking to do on this proud highway of mine, and the sea isn't claiming this vessel.

And of course, there's plenty more hot chocolate to drink...

Doc

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