

A View from the Shore

by Ben Short

At the north end of town, a narrow path diverged from the main road. The path crusted mud against our car's underside like barnacles that latched themselves onto sea rocks, and it led to a shoreline that only people like my family knew about. It was an expansive shoreline, too remote for the town to send lifeguards. The shore opened to the ocean so that waves were the most unpredictable of any shoreline around. Some days the water was serene, other days the rip currents were so violent that danger emerged from simply wading in the water. I suppose the dangerous thrill gave someone reason enough for coming here, but when it was a good day, it was more beautiful than any body of water I'd ever seen.

Before my brother left for his first year of college, we frequently drove out to that beach. The afternoon before he left, we drove there and ate sandwich's in the back of Oliver's car. The mayonnaise made the bread soggy by the time we ate them, and food on the beach always tasted slightly too salty. I drank grape soda, and Oliver drank beer. After we ate, I took a camera from my backpack. It was a mirrorless camera that my parents gave me three years ago when I turned eleven—yes, I was young to have such expensive equipment, but I treated it well. Dad gave me a talk about using the camera with caution and professionalism, and I complied with everything he said, bringing it with me nearly everywhere.

The waves were especially rough, with an offshore wind skimming off the surface. Oliver stripped to his bathing suit and took a towel from the car. He was gangly for his age, and goosebumps illuminated his skin against the wind.

"Are you coming?" he asked, throwing the towel over his shoulder.

"I'll follow right after you," I replied. "I'm going to take a few pictures first."

"The tide is going out. You better hurry up."

"Don't rush me, Oliver."

"It's really not worth it."

"Why not?"

"Because you're going to miss high tide. You should enjoy it, while we're still here. Now come on!"

I took a few pictures of Oliver running through the sand, then tucked the camera into my bag and followed his path to the shore. The water was cool when I dunked my head under, and I listened to the waves wash onto the sand from beneath the surface. Oliver and I wrestled in the surf, careful to avoid going too deep, and Oliver even let me win on occasion. When we finished, we laid our towels on the sand. The salt residue from the water dried, causing it to harden my skin and thicken my hair. I looked at Oliver lying next to me and smiled. I would've done

anything to take a picture of us both and preserve that moment forever, maybe even live inside it. That can't happen, though, can it?

Once Oliver left for school, settling into a routine was challenging. Oliver had always been a part of my life, even with a four-year age difference between us, which was practically a lifetime when you were fourteen. I expected him to be present at breakfast, available for an adventure when I returned from school in the afternoon, yet school inevitably locked a dry routine, and I slowly adjusted to Oliver's absence. A few weeks into September, Oliver's college phoned Dad, who spoke to Mom in their bedroom. There were several more calls that week. When I asked Mom about them, she smiled and said it was nothing to worry about. At the start of the last week in September, I woke up to the buttery smell of pancakes. When I came into the kitchen, my parents prepared a space for me, and let me eat all the pancakes I wanted. After I finished, I warily looked at each one of them.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We're eating breakfast," Dad replied.

"You only make pancakes on weekends," I said. "It's Monday. And you never let me have as much as I want. It's usually only three."

"It's something special for you," said Mom. "We know it's been difficult with your brother away."

"But you also made my lunch, Mom. You never did that again after I turned eight because you said, 'I don't want to raise lazy children.'"

My parents looked at each other. "What's going on?" I repeated. "It's about Oliver, isn't it?"

After a long silence, Dad spoke. "Robert, your brother is coming back home,"

"We didn't want you to worry," Mom said.

"But some things are different about him," continued Dad. "He might not act the same when you first see him. But he's *still* Oliver."

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"He's fine, honey," Mom said. "He's just a little sick. And he's coming home so we can help him."

"Is it serious? They don't usually send kids home from college when they're sick."

"I know. But everyone thought it would be best for Oliver," said Mom.

"I don't understand. Who's everyone?"

"Me and your father. The school administration and the doctors."

"Oh."

"I know it's confusing right now," said Dad. "I'm taking off work to pick him up, so Oliver will be here when you get home this afternoon."

I nodded without understanding and left the table to clean my dishes.

The previous summer, Dad taught me how to surf. He drove me and Oliver to the secluded beach one day when Mom was out of town. He demonstrated how to handle my board, how to stand up, how to follow the natural movements of the water. I did well for the first hour, but I soon grew too confident. When a particularly large wave swelled and approached me, I misjudged the water's speed, and the wave overtook me. I fell off the board and the water churned me so violently that I didn't know which direction the surface was. Unlike other pain I had experienced, the sensation of drowning grew worse as time progressed. While Dad rescued me from the water, I remembered feeling foreign to the water I knew so well, the water I had swam in so frequently.

So when I came home that afternoon, and Dad was sitting on the bed carefully watching Oliver, and he gave me a curious expression, a combination of worry and sympathy, I remembered the foreignness of the water that day I learned to surf. Oliver didn't acknowledge me when I came in. He was pacing across the room with a newspaper in his hand. Oliver didn't normally have many wall decorations, so I barely recognized the room when it was covered in pictures and maps and drawings. Paintings he made from kindergarten, formerly tucked away in his closet, were hung on the walls. A king of spades and jack of diamonds were taped onto road maps. When Oliver put the newspaper down, I saw marks of red ink covering the page, arrows and circles drawn around different words and images. He began speaking.

"If I could only find the kingdom, everything will make sense," he said quickly, pacing with greater focus, picking up the newspaper and red pen again. "There has to be some connection between the two points." He looked at Dad. "Can't you see the points here?" he said, pointing at a picture of downtown from the newspaper. He walked up to the wall and pointed to the map of the town. "I can find it right here. I just know it. Isn't the connection here?"

"What are you talking about?" I croaked. I barely realized I spoke until Oliver turned and focused on me for the first time. His eyes were unrecognizable. "The treasure. It's buried at these points, if I can only find the connection. It all makes sense. I'm going to be the one to find the treasure, and my name will be printed in the newspaper here." He tapped his pen against the paper. "It'll happen soon. You'll see."

He began walking more rapidly and grew upset. "You all need to leave now. I'll figure this out by myself."

Dad and I stayed still. Oliver stopped pacing and looked to both of us. "I mean it!" he yelled, throwing the newspaper and pen down. "You can't get the credit when I figure this out!"

I left Oliver and ran downstairs. I needed to get outside, but Mom heard me from the kitchen and met me by the front door.

"What's going on?" she asked, holding my shoulder.

"It's nothing," I said. "I just need some—"

My sniffles turned into heavy sobs. Mom embraced me for a hug, and we stood by the door while I cried into her shoulder for several minutes. Once I finished, we went into the kitchen and sat at the table.

"I don't understand what's happening," I said. "He's not even the same person."

Mom nodded and thought for a long time. "Do you know when you have a stomach bug, your body does strange things?" she asked. "You throw up, you might have cold sweats, your head might throb?" I nodded. "A similar thing is happening inside Oliver's mind."

I was silent. Mom continued. "The sickness is making him do things that aren't like him."

"How did it happen?"

"It's genetic," she said, "She died before you were born, but my mother had it too. Something probably happened when Oliver was at college that triggered it."

"If it's genetic, does that mean I'll get it one day?"

Mom took a deep breath. "I'm not going to lie, Robbie, it's a possibility. But I don't think it'll happen."

The prospect of me acting the same way was too difficult to process. Mom continued. "Oliver is starting medication. He will get better and return to the person you recognize."

"Why isn't it working yet?"

"The doctor is trying to get the medicine dose right. And it's takes a little while for that to happen. We just need to be patient with the change."

Later that night, the three of us met in the kitchen while Oliver stayed upstairs. Upon the suggestion of the doctor, we hid the alcohol in the foyer closet and the car keys in Mom's purse. Dad had already collected Oliver's phone and credit cards.

"Dr. Ellison said he hasn't slept through the night in almost a week," Dad said, making coffee in the kitchen. "He probably won't sleep tonight. We'll take shifts to make sure he doesn't do anything."

"Like what?" I asked. "Run away?"

Dad shrugged. "It's just a precaution."

Mom was sitting next to me at the table. "He's just a kid," said Mom, pulling me into her shoulder. "Robert can't watch Oliver by himself."

I pulled away from her. "I can do it. You and Dad don't have to do all the work."

"He'll be fine," added Dad. "Besides, Oliver might calm down with his brother around."

"I think you could help better in other ways," Mom insisted. "Clean the dishes, take out the trash. Things like that."

We compromised so that me and Dad would pull the first shift together. At the very least, I wanted to show Mom that I had the capability to act on my own. Dad and I played double solitaire for about an hour on the living room coffee table, discussed the latest movies we'd seen, and finally went into the kitchen when Dad wanted coffee.

"Do you want any?" he asked, holding the pot.

"Mom doesn't let me drink coffee."

"It's just one tonight."

I nodded. "You probably shouldn't tell her, though," he added.

"Okay. But not black like you have it. Can I add some milk?"

Dad poured a second cup and smiled. "You can even have some sugar. I can get some syrup too, if you want. Maybe some liqueur?"

"Dad, stop it."

Dad smiled and set the mugs down on the table. We sat and drank the coffee in silence. I watched Dad lift his mug to sip the coffee, and I mirrored his movements. I suddenly felt far older than I was, like I was talking to my parent as a peer rather than as a child. I enjoyed this new feeling, yet it felt forced and premature.

"Dad?" I asked. "What's going to happen with Oliver?" We occasionally heard sounds from his room, and we both knew Oliver was awake.

"He'll get better," Dad replied. "But I won't tell you that everything will be the same. Things will change, even things I can't predict. When the Oliver you know returns, he might not be the same as before. We should all be prepared for that."

"But I want him to be like before."

"These things aren't up to us."

"I wish they were," I mumbled.

Dad set his mug down and watched me closely. "I know you're just a kid, but this is how the world works. Things happen randomly to people all the time. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. Sometimes you're not sure which it is. All of those things will happen to you."

I sat back in my chair and avoided his gaze. Dad lightened his tone. "I understand this is probably overwhelming for you. But in the coming days, you need to figure out how you're going to deal with this. It's a task we all need to work on."

"I'll try, I guess."

Dad smiled. "Good. Now, more coffee?"

Oliver began making noises around three o'clock, so Dad and I went upstairs to stay with him. Dad went into the room immediately, but I stayed back. It didn't matter how frequently I saw Oliver in this state, and still I hoped that he would be the same as before when I entered the room. When I did join Dad, Oliver was asking for pictures from family photo albums.

"Why do you need them?" asked Dad.

"They have the key," he replied. "I'll figure everything out from there."

I retrieved a collection of photos I took from the past several years. They were a collection of holidays, vacations, and random afternoons. Oliver eagerly opened the book and began shifting through the pages to search for what he needed.

"I have to use the bathroom before we wake up your mother," said Dad. "Stay with Oliver for a few minutes."

Dad left the room and I stood beside the bed where Oliver was sitting. He looked up at me. "What are these?" he asked.

"They're pictures of us, when we were younger."

"What are pictures?"

"They're images of things."

"But what are *pictures*?"

I didn't know how to answer him. "A camera takes the picture, because it captures light during a certain moment."

He didn't look up at me the whole time. "But what's a camera?" He didn't wait for my answer. He held the photo album on its side and began violently shaking the book, watching the images flood onto the carpet.

I wanted to stop him, but I just froze in the moment. I didn't know what to say to stop Oliver, and I became fearful that he would grow angry with me if I tried stopping him. I watched Oliver tear through the book and pull out pictures until Dad rushed into the room.

"Stop that, Oliver," he ordered, pulling the book from his hands. "You can't do that." I began picking up the photos from the floor, the photos broken from their chronology.

"What were you thinking?" Dad asked me. "You can't let him do that."

I heard Mom walk down the hallway. "What's going on in there?" she asked. Mom came in bleary-eyed, and when she saw the pictures on the floor, she drew in a sharp breath. She bent down to help collect the photos, staying completely silent. I could tell she was crying lightly, but I didn't want to look at her and see the pain I had caused.

Almost four years ago, Oliver took me for long walks at night. For a period of several months after our family finished dinner, Oliver led me outside and we walked for hours, circling our neighborhood and going to the docks by our house that overlooked downtown. I sat on the edge of the dock, my feet dangling above the water, and we watched the lights from downtown reflect onto the water like hundreds of faded stars. Every so often, the ferry came into the harbor, unloading passengers from the island about ten miles offshore.

Oliver and I watched the harbor and talked about our neighbor's new car. We talked about girls in our grade and Dad's stories of girls he dated in high school. We talked about our baby cousin who was born recently, and how I missed our Grandfather who had died years before. When we came home, our parents smiled and didn't ask where we had been. I later found out that Mom and Dad were fighting during those months. We were in financial trouble, and the two of them fought over expenses after dinner, which led to deeper, more insulting fights. I didn't know about the fights then. I'm sure Oliver did.

I avoided my family following the night with the pictures. I completed my chores each day but spent my free time outside. Staying at home left me feeling stranded—from myself, most of all. After school, I brought my camera to a variety of places throughout the town, trying to capture the heavy sunlight that appeared in the late afternoon. When my parents asked where I had been, I replied that I was working on a lengthy school project, and they didn't ask for more, though I don't think they believed me. My parents said Oliver's medicine was becoming more effective, but Oliver still wasn't getting much sleep. He was in the kitchen Friday morning with Dad and even tried conversing with me, but he quickly became distracted, and I soon left for school.

When I arrived home Friday night, my parents were talking about Oliver. The doctors were trying to increase his medication dose but were unsure of potential side effects. I left my parents for my room to chart out plans for the weekend. I wanted to be away from home, able to enjoy myself as had been impossible in recent days. I planned a day at the beach. It was one of

the last weekends that the water would be warm enough to swim, and though I felt guilty for deserting my parents, they wouldn't notice my absence if I quietly slipped away.

I woke up early on Saturday to pack my bag. When I came downstairs, my parents were in the kitchen in the middle of a conversation, and although they deliberately kept their voices lowered, I knew they were arguing about something. When they saw me, Mom stepped aside from Dad and poured coffee.

"Good morning, Robbie," said Dad. I tried smiling at both of them.

"Your father is seeing Dr. Ellison today," Mom said. "They're going to discuss a medication change. I need to stay home and watch Oliver, so we need you to do the shopping for the week and collect the clothes from the dry cleaners."

"We'll give you the money, and you can take your bike" said Dad.

"I'll do it tomorrow," I said. "I'm going to the beach today."

"We need these things done today," Mom replied, sternly.

"I was planning this the whole week," I said. "I've been doing things for everyone all week, and I just want a day off."

"We understand your feelings" said Mom. "But we're in special circumstances right now. For everyone."

I grew frustrated and went to the fridge to put a few sodas into my bag. "I'll do it tomorrow. Promise."

"Your mother and I are sacrificing things for the family, and we expect sacrifices from you too," said Dad. "You can't spend your day relaxing at the beach while there's important things to do."

"But this is the last week the weather will be warm enough."

"Frankly, Robert? I don't care. I don't have time to argue with you. I'm leaving for Dr. Ellison's now."

"But it's not fair," I insisted. "I've been doing extra chores all week. I already did the grocery shopping last week, and I made dinner on Tuesday. All I want is a little time off."

"We would all love that," Dad said.

There was a pause between all three of us.

"I'm sorry Robert," Mom said evenly. "You need to help us."

I left the house and slammed the screen door behind me. Dad yelled after me, but I heard Mom say something behind him, and neither of them followed me, though a part of me wanted them to. I took my bike and began pedaling for the beach. My parents expected more from me,

and the extra responsibilities were a reason for pride several days ago. Perhaps I just wanted their attention. I would still do the errands, but I wanted them to think I had the capacity to rebel against their wishes, that I was separate from our family unit.

I meandered around the town, not knowing my destination. My friends were probably free, but I didn't want to talk with anyone. I felt too guilty about idly spending time at the beach, so I found myself doing massive loops around the central part of the town, past the shops and the harbor. I pedaled harder, and the concentration of navigating the roads as breathing became more difficult provided a distraction from my thoughts. When I approached the grocery store for the third time, I applied the brakes and pulled up to the storefront. I finished a soda and was ready to go inside when my phone started vibrating in my bag. I pulled it out and saw two missed calls from Mom. She called again, and I answered it.

"Robert," she said. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the grocery store, Mom," I said. "You don't need to lecture me about this morning, I'm doing everything you—"

"It's Oliver, Robbie," she said. "He's gone missing."

"What?" I stumbled to speak. "What happened?"

"We were in the living room, and I was trying to keep him occupied. I left to start boiling water for pasta, and he was gone when I came back. He slipped out the window and took the second bike. All the maps and drawings he had in a notebook are gone as well."

"Did you call Dad? Are people out looking for him?"

"I called your father after I called the police. They're out looking for him. They know he's sick, so they'll treat him well when they find him."

"What if they can't find him?"

There was silence on Mom's end. "Someone will find him. It's not a very big town, and he's on a bike. But I want you to come home. Your father is on his way home right now."

"But I can be out looking for him. I'm not doing anything if I'm at home. Please Mom."

"You need to come home. I won't have both of you wandering outside."

"Mom, I'll find him. Just let me try."

Before she responded, I hung up the phone. It was my responsibility to find him. He left on his bike, so I could cover the same radius he could. I remembered what Mom said, that he had taken his maps and his drawings. I had a sudden thought of where he might be.

I biked up north to the end of town to the secluded beach. When I reached the path, I hid my bike in the seagrass and hiked past the dunes to reach the shore. I ran through the sand, yet

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the harder I ran the more difficult it seemed to progress. My feet dug into the ground with every stride, but my legs felt incapable of supporting themselves underneath the changing consistency. As the water came into view, I didn't see Oliver. It was a calmer day than I had ever seen. Under any other circumstances, today held the perfect conditions. It was low tide, and the waves rhythmically washed onto the sandbars and back into the ocean. I kept breathing heavily. When I hung up with Mom, I was so convinced that I could find Oliver. What if I was wrong? What if I couldn't find him?

I remembered coming to this shore before Oliver left for college, how my only concern was the anticipation from the start of school. And what struck me the most wasn't those previous months, but how I had been absent since Oliver came home. I wanted to believe that nothing had changed, but Dad was right: I couldn't control these changes. And when it was my turn to be there for my brother, I ran from the responsibility, seeking to treat the past as if it were reality. I was too cowardly to confront a new relationship. A bitter glare of shame came upon me, like sunlight reflected onto the water.

And as I reached the final dune to find nothing more than the shoreline, a formerly forgotten memory appeared to me. One weekend when I was very little, when my family was in the process of teaching me to swim, Oliver slipped a pair of floaties through my arms and gently eased me into the water. Mom looked anxious, but she did her best to smile at me, and I recoiled when I felt the water's coolness. When I began treading water with Oliver's guidance and the floaties' support, I ventured further into the water, exploring unknown water as I gradually went further from shore.

And before Mom called me to inform me that she wasn't mad, but that Oliver had been found on the side of the road a few streets over from our house and she wanted me home immediately, I remembered the hot sun against my face that afternoon as I swam with greater confidence, Oliver letting me go as he whispered, "Robbie, you're swimming by yourself! All by yourself!"