

High Tide, Low Time

by Andrew Schofield

The shoreline was further inland than he remembered, a good thirty feet or so since his last visit. He stood in waist deep water — the waves of the emerald green Gulf tumbling upon his pale white torso. He had always been disappointed with the beach as a child. The sand, the salt, the sea's bath water temperature. Even as an adult, David found none of it particularly relaxing. The pool and its adjoining bar suited his needs just fine. But as he fixed his gaze upon a snorkeling tube bobbing about like a twig caught in a current, he couldn't imagine himself anywhere else.

The distant tube darted back underneath the surface as waves rolled by above. Seconds passed until the tube shot back up again — pulling Maddie above the surface with it.

"Found two more sand dollars," she shouted back to the shore. David grinned. He was pleased she was enjoying herself. There had been a bit of contention over where to vacation - with Maddie's mother insistent that they make use of the family's summer home on the Cape (the beaches were, apparently, "to die for" in the warmer months). After Maddie quickly sided with David, he had since become increasingly insecure over his choice. He had imagined Maddie growing tired of the island's slow pace, becoming bored with both him and the place that he had grown to love. His greatest fear was, after all, that their best days were behind them, that their relationship would become nothing more than a convoluted yet perversely necessary social convention. His failure in choosing a place to vacation, he was sure, would be just the first step of her gradual disenchantment — one that was sure to bind itself strangely to a man that David could no longer be (and perhaps never was). So as he admired her joy from afar, relief overcame him

He remembered collecting sand dollars with his brother as kids. Just to keep them busy, mom had been paying them fifty cents a pop until one summer when David and Ralph stumbled upon a breeding ground. They threw close to a hundred of them in a bucket and took

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their bounty back home before their older brother, Carl, clued them in to the fact that the creatures were all still living.

“You two are worse than Stalin,” David remembered Carl telling them. He still liked to bring it up during family events. Called it ‘The Great Sand Dollar Genocide of '93.’

Capping his hand about his eyes, David gazed back out at the pair of goggles hovering above the surface. As she held up a few more, he turned and began towards shore — looking back only to gesture for her return. He settled into the sand. Grains leapt onto the wet skin of his lower back and elbows. The back of his trunks coated like a cinnamon donut.

The ocean's glare blinded him until she stepped into view. The goggles and tube hung delicately from her thin fingers like ornaments from a Christmas tree. Her wet black hair clung to her scalp, her bangs pushed back behind her forehead. Her attentive green eyes carefully examined her growing collection of sand dollars — now at five and a half. She plopped herself beside David — draping her legs over his torso.

David met Maddie during their college years. Both went to different universities but found themselves at the same party over Christmas break of their sophomore year. He found himself almost immediately intoxicated by her presence. Her quiet confidence, her quick wit, the way she played with her hair when she lost herself in thought. David found it all to be incredibly irresistible.

David was well of aware of the much maligned status that “long-distance relationships” were given by most college-aged students. He remembered the breakdown his good friend gave him after revealing he was considering taking things a step further with Maddie.

“You're worrying me here, David,” his friend began, briefly pausing to take a hit from his bong before resuming.

“And as your friend, it is my job — nay, my duty — to intervene on your behalf of you goodwill. So let me break it down for you. Long-distance relationships require more work with little to no benefit. She calls throughout the day — telling you about how big of an

asshole her professor is or how she's pissed at her roommate for leaving the milk out overnight. But at the end of day, you're still the one holding your dick in your hand — jerking off to your own imagination like the rest of us.”

His friend torched the remains of his weed. Exhaling, he said, “You'd turn into a glorified therapist,” pausing before adding, “But hey that's just my two cents. Everybody's got to do what they got to do.”

David always knew he wasn't as nearly carnal as some of his peers. But masculinity always had a funny way of isolating itself from any and all criticism, so in such situations, David often found it best to give a timid, superficial approval during such conversations. To provide anything less would be a declaration of his homosexuality.

David ignored his good friend. He had begun, as his friends sarcastically termed it, “courting” Maddie for a few weeks before they had to return to school. Shortly before break ended, he made his intentions clear. He wanted a long-term relationship with all of its maddening consequences and potential for disaster. For David didn't share the misgivings of his good friend. In fact, he craved what his friend derided as meaningless phone conversations and other forms of conversation that were rendered essential by the distance that would separate the two. He imagined having phone conversations about nothing at all — lasting for hours until they both regained a sense of space and time. For that, David now thought, was his wife's greatest gift: her seemingly effortless ability to make him feel as though they were the only two left on Earth.

David had salivated at the thought of such emotional intimacy. It was the time spent away from her voice that had him worried. He feared his imagination running wild after a missed call or the slightest hint of Maddie pulling away — withdrawing back into a world in which she could no longer be bothered by his incessant insecurities.

David knew the implications, but he proceeded anyway. He could remember the night. They went to their one favorite spots — a

Mexican joint around the corner from Maddie's house. They weren't there more than five minutes before the waiter toppled a glass of water onto David's lap. He remembered looking back up at Maddie. She stared back with a wide smile, stifling laughter as best she could. He remembered thinking that life seemed so established on small, discrete moments. Like a stream, it ebbs and flows — its course molding around such points, never to be the same again.

David had thought this was one of those moments. It had to be. It followed the narrative he so aspired to create for himself. Young couple fall in love. Are separated by the cruel, capricious nature of life. Weather all the difficulties a long-term relationship presents — proving themselves, their friends, and common social perception wrong in the process. All of which gradually builds towards the inevitable unification of the two. He would have his pick of scenes to end with. The steps of their church following their wedding might provide the best note to close on.

But therein lies the issue, David now thought. The narrative never does end. It continues, pushes forward often against our will. The camera never pans out. The credits never roll.

And it never unfolded with such simplicity anyhow. Maddie wasn't nearly the romantic David was. And she was reluctant to enter into such a large commitment. But at the heart of it, David now thought, was that she didn't care for such social formalities, didn't share David's constant need for the defining and labeling of roles. She didn't want to commit to a long-term relationship, especially at long distances. But she wanted to keep in contact — providing a pace to the relationship that David now realized was essential to its development.

“We're gonna be rich,” she whispered with a laugh as she shuffled through the sand dollars — studying them as a housewife studies a carton of eggs. A grin appeared upon David's unshaven face.

He just wished they were a legal tender. Employment opportunities had been scarce since he graduated college. And aside from an internship with *The Economist* shortly after graduation, he

had only been able to land a mid-management position at his uncle's insurance agency. But he was just happy to have a job — even if little of his paycheck remained after paying his college loans and the monthly rent. Family finances weren't exactly a cause for concern though. Maddie had been working with the same company since graduation, and her perseverance had begun to pay off: two promotions within the last eighteen months with a salary coming ever closer to six figures.

David always talked of how proud he was of her. And it was sincere. But he couldn't help but feel the slightest bit of jealousy. He knew it was irrational, but it only grew worse the more he tried to resist.

He had felt it last night at dinner. They were celebrating their third anniversary at Mango's — the more upper scale restaurant of the two that called North Captiva home. They had been enjoying themselves. Drinking wine and eating lobster on the patio. They had even been impersonating other couples that came within view. Poking fun at little superficial details like a woman's choice to trek across a sand parking lot in high heels and an older gentleman's selection of blue jeans in eighty-five degree heat. He kept her laughing all night, or so it seemed to David. They even nearly forgot to exchange gifts. Reminded him of their younger years.

Then the check came. Maddie slid her debit card out of her wallet and laid it gently atop the receipt. David had watched the scene unfold carefully before turning away and releasing a quick sigh. He had immediately regretted the sigh, holding out hope that it would go unheard and drift safely into the silence of night. Maddie stared back with a subdued frustration.

"It's *our* money," she affirmed as her hand sought his.

David paused before flashing a grin and turning back towards her.

"Of course," he replied calmly as if his little sigh could be sidestepped to allow for the evening to proceed along its original course — like a stream rushing around a boulder placed in its path. Maybe they would grab a few drinks at the poolside bar. Catch the sunset on the beach before retiring to the home they rented out for

the week. David even thought it would be a good night to try out the rooftop hot tub.

But he knew that such a thing was impossible. Sighs can't be ignored. And the stream certainly can't be set back along its original course. And so it didn't come as much of a surprise to David when they didn't grab drinks at the bar or enjoy the beach at sunset. She was too tired tonight, she said. So they fell asleep on the couch watching some bad Cameron Diaz movie.

But as he watched her shuffle through her sand dollars once more, David found something strangely reassuring about the previous night - a sort of odd pride that his sigh could have such an impact. That two lives could be so intertwined.

The two awoke abruptly. A small blond boy, no more than four or five years-old, was running about — jumping backwards into the low tide before the Gulf yanked its waters back towards to its center. Unsatisfied with the calm of the shoreline, he raced out to greet the coming waves once again. His mother stationed herself cross-legged atop an orange towel — shifting her weight from side to side as she tried to find an equilibrium that must have eluded her for quite some time. She methodically applied sunscreen to her visible skin before shouting out to the blond boy dancing in the wake.

The boy looked back only to return the wake. She shouted out to him again — now visibly agitated — beckoning him to return for his dose of sunscreen. The blond boy turned, stared back in puzzlement, and with all the seriousness of an United Nations delegate, announced that he was “a big boy” now and couldn't be told when to “put the sunblocker on.”

Noticing the stirring couple, the mother laughed with resignation. She turned her attention to the cover of her celebrity magazine — studying its content as though a prize was to be awarded for the first reader to spot what was missing. She seemed very focused on appearing the she was very focused, David thought.

The sand that had attached itself to his elbows and calves had by now absorbed the moisture and formed a thin crust atop his skin. As he sat up and brushed off the sandy shell, Maddie rustled beside him

— her cheeks already beginning to take on a darker shade. Shaking the sand out of her hair, she smiled as she noticed the boy playing amongst the wake.

David knew she wanted kids. She didn't need to tell him. He could see it in the way she looked at them. He was less sure. The question was easily avoidable before their marriage. But as the days since their wedding rolled on, he sensed a renewed urgency about Maddie. David wondered why women allowed themselves to be consumed by such things. Whatever the case, he found himself annoyed with the little blond boy — offended that he would disturb the comfort of a couple by unknowingly, yet loudly, introducing himself as the third wheel. But as he continued watching the boy, he became embarrassed of his jealousy and dropped the line of thought.

“You feeling up for a stroll?” David asked.

The trail hadn't always been in existence. But it had become a necessity to reach the beach on the other side of the island after Hurricane Charlie ate into the shoreline. David knew of it since childhood. Both his parents considered its passage a Mertens Family Tradition. His mother loved the piles of seashells that accumulated upon the shores, only to remain untouched for weeks. His father loved the excuse to use his machete. He would walk paces ahead — slicing through any tree branches that threatened to grow atop the path's edge. Personally, David loved the flocks of geese that loitered along the water's edge. When he was younger, he would walk up to them slowly before breaking into a sprint — sending the birds flying off every which way.

Tucked behind the beach, the trail was walled off on both sides by large clusters of pine trees — forcing the sunlight to creep through the treetops. The fresh scent of pine tickled their noses. David grabbed Maddie's far hip — pulling her closer until their hips met at the center. Madeline neither yielded nor resisted. They walked hip by hip — breaking their adhesion only to dodge a log in the path or duck below low hanging branches.

David could hardly remember how long it had been since he had last been down this path. At least ten years. Probably more. It was different surely. The advancing shoreline had eaten quite the chunk out of the woods that the path cut through. David even thought he could feel the sea's breeze trickling through — dancing ever so faintly against his cheek. And although he never minded a cool breeze on a humid Florida afternoon, he couldn't help but feel alarmed by its sudden presence. The Gulf was advancing with a cruel inevitability. It gnawed into beaches. Left ruins in place of sandcastles. Even chewed at the roots of trees. In the moments when conversation escaped them, David could hear the waves crashing down — beating monotonously like the war drum of an advancing horde.

But the trail still seemed oddly familiar. He stumbled momentarily against a clump of sand — one of his flip flops sliding off in the process. Placing his bare foot on the ground, he yelped as he felt the hot sand baking underneath a sun that never feels too distant in Florida air. Maddie laughed.

“Should have brought your walker with you, old man,” she said.

“I hope you didn't marry me for my gracefulness, “ he responded.

His foot was still pulsing from the heat. When he was younger, he once made the twenty minute return trip through the trail barefoot. He remembered how disappointed he was when he finally dipped his then-callousing feet into the Gulf's warm waters upon arriving back at the main beach. But he had difficulty remembering why he did not have his flip flops. He certainly didn't make two trips without his sandals. That would have been borderline suicidal. Perhaps he lost them. No, that wasn't it.

They had been on the other side of the beach for a few hours. David and Ralph had been fighting over the wake-board. One dunked the other — completing a few strokes of their escape before the victim returned the favor. David had grown tired and the knobs of his shoulders had begun to take on a darker shade of pink. He had always been a bit of a homebody, but hunger and fatigue brought out the tendency in full force. He scanned the deserted beach for his

mother — knowing full well that she was the ticket out of here. She decided when to arrive, when to leave, and every other logistical decision that may have arose along the way. Mom and Dad were nowhere to be found though.

David headed towards the mouth of the trail — a portion of the island that bottlenecks with a calm bay opposite the beach. David had always enjoyed the cove — its placid, serene waters contrasting against the crashing waves no more than two hundred yards away. As he had neared closer, he was sure that he had guessed right. Voices wafted above the roar of the ocean. He had seen his parents sitting side by side — his mother turned to his father, his father turned towards the sea. He was about to call out to them until the words began to come into focus. He had heard phrases like “how can I ever trust you again” and “how could you be so selfish.” David had wanted to run, but he felt glued to the spot he stood on. The last thing he remembered was the look in his mother's eyes as she glanced back at him. He broke off into a sprint. He left his flip flops on the beach. That's why he burned the soles of his feet.

The rest sort of tumbled out in a series of images, replaying themselves against his own will.

That night in the group therapy session. No couches like the therapists had in the movies. Just five armchairs placed carefully around the office. One for each of them. David's was overstuffed and beige. Nondescript in a very factory-made sort of way. The tall arms growing higher and higher — as David had sunk deeper and deeper into the soft cushion.

The strange pair of eyes settled on him. *So, why do you think your parents will stay together?* David had sat there like a pupil who just forgot his multiplication tables. He couldn't really recall what canned line he had thrown back at her. Something vague about love. But what he did remember was his mother's eyes - exhausted as Captiva's shoreline, eroding with each wave.

After reaching the trail's end, Maddie drifted off — idly poking through the shells that washed upon the shore. He found she often

did so after he lost himself in thought — creating a prolonged silence during which Maddie was left to wonder what was eating at him. He understood her frustration, but couldn't help but becoming frustrated over the petty games they played.

He was beginning to wonder why he even brought Maddie here. She played a large part in the decision no doubt. She wanted to see where David spent his summers as kid, and perhaps, in some form or another, carve herself space in a place so full and vivid in David's memory. But he could have done more to avoid a return to this place. After all, they could have gone to the Cape. David was sure they would have had a great time there.

David usually didn't confront Maddie after such odd patches of distancing. But he found himself increasingly concerned with the web in which he found himself in. He felt like he was being tossed about at sea — frustrated over a steadily deteriorating relationship in which he believed he held no control. For that, if nothing else, is what David wanted: control. Control to stop the painfully gradual alienation that was beginning to plague his marriage. Control to find a career he enjoyed. But most of all, he felt he needed, was control of himself. Control to manage and overcome the insecurities that so often revealed themselves in most ordinary of moments.

He began to bemoan his analytic nature. Much better, he thought, to wake up one day and at once become aware of the certain foreignness that those around you have begun to take on. At least a contented life can be lead up to that point. But his nature could not allow for such a thing. He was destined to watch the process unfold before his eyes — knowing how the story will end even before its written.

David became convinced that such keen awareness necessitated action. He was the lucky one, he began to think. Whereas others were left to replay the same mistakes again and again, David had been imparted with a certain foresight.

He returned to Maddie, wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and returned her smile.

“I want to have a kid,” David calmly said as he embraced Maddie tighter.

Maddie looked away and grinned sarcastically.

“What?,” David added. “I thought you'd be ecstatic.”

“I do want kids, David. I really do. But what I don't want, or need for that matter, is you constantly making this relationship about something its not. Having a kid isn't going to magically change things.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I'm not *trying* to say anything. I just don't think our relationship is strong enough to support the raising of a child.”

“I think we can. I mean, we love each other, right? What more do you really need? What more can you really have?”

“We do, David. I've never doubted that...”

“So what's the issue? I don't see what the big deal is. We both want to have a kid. Let's just do it. We're both ready.”

“The issue is that, at your core, you'll always be that romantic nineteen-year-old trying to swoop me off my feet. Trying to refashion the structure of the universe so you can place yourself at the center and watch us all orbit around you. “

David remained silent, not quite sure of how to respond.

They sat at the ocean's edge, letting the water rush around their legs. He wondered what shape their narrative would take from here. Perhaps a touching reaffirmation of commitment. A few kids to follow. Ending only with old age and strange hobbies.

David stared out to sea — watching wave after wave. Each one rose, stood tall before arching its back only to cascade down upon the shoreline. He thought of how it was such a shame that a process so beautiful could be so destructive. Some day, he was sure, the entire island would be underwater. Never again would the waves crash against these beaches, this sand. He wondered where they might go afterwards. He pictured them rolling on by above — its fallen enemy long forgotten under the surface. For the life of a wave is never complete, never reaches a natural stopping point. It pushes

onward towards some indiscriminate shore not out of desire but because it can do nothing else. It is condemned to be free.

