

The Barnacle Climber

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Andy loved the wind. He was sitting alone in the gray attic, listening as it shook through the windowpanes. The wet, organic scent of sea salt wormed through the thick raindrops, the edges of the window, and hid in the dark corners of the room behind cracked lawn ornaments and packing boxes.

It was a gale. The words had left his mother's lips.

“You can't go to the beach tomorrow honey. There's a gale coming,” and his heart had starting beating faster in anticipation. A gale was not as good as a hurricane, but then again hurricanes were scary. You couldn't stay in your beach house during hurricanes, his mother explained, the ocean might rise higher and higher and the giant waves would come up over the jetty, edging nearer to the house and...Andy closed his eyes and imagined water smashing through the screen doors. No, a gale was best. He could breathe the salt air and stare out the shivering window at the waves crashing against shore.

Downstairs he heard the faint strands of conversation and spoons clinking in coffee mugs. Even the adults seemed to be quiet in the face of the storm, watching contemplatively through the kitchen windows, grazing, talking nonsense. His aunt had come up the dusty, planked stairs to suggest a game of Scrabble, but when he declined, she didn't protest.

His grandfather also vetoed the idea. Andy could hear his plaintive stomp retreat to the bedroom below the attic. Moments later, a history show rumbled at full volume through the floorboards. His grandfather had bad hearing, Andy knew, but the television below felt like an intrusion. He pressed his face as close to the glass as possible and listened for the rhythm of the crashing waves. He imagined rolling in an open boat, like the one in the painting in the downstairs hallway, wearing a oilskin cap, getting thrown up into the biting foam and feeling gravity leave his stomach.

But the TV noise kept interrupting, singeing his eardrums with artificial sound. Maybe the wind will snap the power lines, he thought. Maybe the power will go out and we'll have to use candles, like in the olden days.

“Andrew!” Startled, Andy spun around. His grandfather was standing right behind him. “What are you hiding up here for, you kid?” His handsome, tanned face was curled in an agitated sneer as he formed the words “you kid.” His thick gray hair—bleached white by the sun—shone in the dim attic. A deep cackle rose from chest and he rubbed his hands together eagerly.

“Ha! Me, I love a good storm.” Andy noticed that his path to the stairs was blocked. He filled with dread. Away from the prying eyes and ears of his parents, his grandfather terrified him.

“A smasher!” He was saying, illustrating with his fists. “Boom! Pow!” He loves making sounds, thought Andy.

“Look at those waves! Look at ‘em smash! Wow!” He looked pointedly at Andy, a malicious grin sliding up the corners of his mouth. His blue eyes twinkled. His tan,

muscular forearms folded over his paunch. He rubbed his belly, contentedly, and then seized Andy's shoulders.

“Come on kid, let's go outside.”

“Outside?”

“Outside! We're going to toughen up a kid. Ever walked on the beach in a storm? A smasher like this? Ha!” A gaping space sagged downwards in Andy's stomach, like a bowling ball rolling on a trampoline.

“Don't you wanna toughen up?” A challenge.

“I think it's cool,” said Andy. “But can I watch inside?” He looked out again to the foamy rocks.

“No! Kids these days always wanting to stay inside. Makes you soft! No we're going outside. Get your raincoat.” This was a command now. Andy noticed his grandfather's eyes take on a dangerous new pallor. Andy left the window and walked down the stairs, feeling the carpet crinkle comfortingly between his toes. He didn't want to leave the house. His grandfather opened the closet and tossed an oversized raincoat at Andy. It was pale olive green. Andy slid it over his head in time to see his grandfather zipping up a large red windbreaker. USS Gainesville, it said, with a submarine silhouetted in black. An American flag shone on one of the sleeves. Andy cast his eyes over to the kitchen where his mother and two of his aunts were still playing Scrabble, hoping they'd take notice, afraid to raise his voice.

His grandfather's hands clasped down on his shoulders again, cruelly pinching him.

“Ready, soldier?” But Andy was not ready. It was warm and cozy inside, well lit. The wind beat with indeterminable fury against the window panes, but Andy was more afraid of the waves. He wanted to stay inside. His heart was accelerating again. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Cool, even. He could tell his friends about it.

They were almost at the door. His mother raised her head from the game.

“Where are you guys going?”

“We’re going to explore outside a little,” said his grandfather, sliding open the door. His mother cast a wary eye at them. Andy pleaded silently, but he knew it was no good. His grandfather had found a weak point. His mother also thought outdoor things were generally character building, even if she didn’t like the way her father treated her son.

“Well, be careful with Andy,” his mother said. She turned back to shuffling her letters.

And then, like that, they were out the door. Needles suddenly stung and tore at his face. It took him a moment to realize they were raindrops. His grandfather was still leading him, by the elbow now. Andy could hear him cackling.

“Hahohoho! Smasher! Come on kid, isn’t it exciting?” And, as his eyes adjusted to the lashing rain, Andy had to admit that it was. The dune-grass spun and ripped in an ecstatic fury. Pebbles and shells cascaded down the beach. Damp sand sunk between his churning toes with a pleasing caress. And the wind. The wind! It nearly knocked him over, numbing every inch of exposed skin. But he could beat it! He leaned forward, running, and something inside of him loosened. He let out a furious yelp, sending his scream above the wind. His grandfather hooted back.

They moved down the beach gesturing wildly, dancing almost. His grandfather seemed to be everywhere with overwhelming confidence. He moved with a young man's levity, dipping his sinewy and weather-beaten calves in and out of the searing foam as they bounded through the waves.

They were far from the house now, almost at the long jetty. When it was calmer Andy liked to climb over the rocks, sneak up on the cormorants and hunt for crabs. But it was barely visible now, keyed in a rumble of green and pouches of beige seaweed. There were no cormorants now. Their usual perch at the far end of the jetty was lost under the sea.

Andy stopped to look at such scenery and his grandfather pulled up beside him, his chest falling in great, vigorous pants. Andy's high was beginning to wear now, like a pin scraping the edge of a swollen balloon, daring it to pop. The salty storm was starting to make his skin burn. Little bits of sand were gnawing at the tops of his feet. His mother might be getting worried.

"Let's go home!" Yelled Andy. His throat was sore from shouting and came out in a croak.

"No! You fraidy-cat kid! This is nothing." It might have been a joke. Was it a joke?

"We haven't toughened you up yet!" His grandfather continued, almost cackling, his grinning lips struggling to spread against the wind. He was looking at the jetty. Rows of barnacles stood out like ragged little mountains in the cloudy light. In fact, Andy realized, it was almost dusk.

Something grabbed his raincoat. It wasn't a burst of wind. His grandfather's fingers were twisting it into a knot.

"You're a..." the storm caught his words. Then his mouth shoved next to Andy's ear. Leering, biting. "Prove yourself," he rasped. He pushed Andy toward the rocks.

Water spurted over the older man's cheeks, swam through his wrinkles and the stubble on his chin. Andy tried to shake him, but his hands felt heavy, waterlogged. Lightning arced across the sky and he could barely inhale. His grandfather's grip was impervious, his strong legs anchored to the deep sand.

"There and back," his grandfather was saying. "There and back!" He pointed to a rock about halfway up the jetty. There, fifty feet offshore, damp brown rock rose haphazardly above the rest. A minefield of smaller rocks groveled around it, spilling between the waves down to the beach. They were covered in barnacles. Andy felt dizzy.

The hand pushed him forward. He reached the first rocks. These were dimpled, normally untouched by the waves, lifeless and easy to grip. The spray worsened. Dread swung like a cold pendulum in Andy's chest. The rocks were now covered in slippery life, brown organic sludge. His toes skidded. Crash. He crouched low to keep his balance. In front of him, a sharp triangular rock met the waves and blocked his path. Andy knew his grandfather was right behind him, blocking him. He didn't look back. Silently his lips counted the waves, the timing. Crash pause crash.

A final hesitation, a salty gasp, and then he slid his feet into the waves. The chill water surged over his ankles, ramming them toward the beach. He wasn't ready. His center of gravity slipped and Andy threw his spine backwards, wind-milling desperately to get to back to vertical. Next the water sucked him forward, sending the bumpy rocks

cracking through the ocean's skin. He nearly fell again. His heart smacked and churned in agitation. Little veins pulsed behind his ears. But there was a pattern. He could see it now. He leapt forward, chancing it. Then he was on the barnacles.

Andy saw them once in a tide-pool tank at school—their pale membranes casting a claw-like net for zooplankton. Now, he prayed for their claws to grasp him, eat him if only to hold him against the rushing sea. But he was slipping, and there was nowhere to place his hands.

A massive wave sloshed over the rock above him and slapped his face, sending heavy water over his neck and beneath the collar of his jacket. The cold was so intense Andy felt like a pipe cleaner was being shoved through his nostrils and into his brain. He sputtered, violently, and seawater spilled down his throat. His eyes stung. And there was only one place left to put the pressure. Into his feet. Against the barnacles.

Sharp white points stabbed the soles of feet and slashed the bottoms of his toes. But they held him. He closed his eyes, waited for the pain, but felt only numbness. With another gasp he climbed forward. His sense of timing returned to him. Crash pause crash. For a desperate moment he hung empty in the air, but then his fingertips found the leading edge—and he was over the top. The swells engulfed him again—over his knees this time, slopping him with heavy seaweed. But Andy was ready now, and the final rock was just in front of him. Stealing a look back, his grandfather's form looked like a gray marionette flailing excitedly in the wind.

He dove forward again—recklessly clinging to a bed of mussels, gripping and tearing at anything he could on his way to the top. And suddenly he was there. He

crouched, his chest heaving, his eyes burning. The spray bellowed. He looked down at his shivering legs. They were covered in fresh, spurting pink blood.

Andy barely remembered the way back. Only vague sensations. The noise. The dull ache of sand digging into his torn feet. The endless cold. His grandfather's arm, strangely tender this time, guiding him to back to the warmly lit kitchen.

His mother cried out at the way he was shaking and unresponsive, quiet. Andy noticed, dimly, as if from far away, his grandfather saying something about how he'd fallen down. A mistake. He was never in any danger. The boy enjoyed it. His mother didn't believe it, and she reproached him while she examined Andy's cuts. His grandfather retreated to his room, mumbling to himself, and turned on the television.

Hiding in the bathtub, where his mother had poured peroxide, Andy let the warm, maroon lather curl and singe into his scraped skin. Outside, the gale was ending. The wind lowered to a soft hum. His eyelids drooped in semi-consciousness and lost track of color. The hours spent in the attic seemed so far away now. So did the brief, careless feeling of running on the beach. The sounds of his grandfather's television echoed off the tile nearby. I didn't fall, Andy whispered to himself.

I never fell down.