

## Chapter 7—A Road Trip to the Beach

Darian stood at his sink washing paint off his hands while about ready to start screaming his head off. The combination of relentless working, crushing pressure to succeed as a painter and live up to the family names, oppressive late September humidity, and Jenna's incessant complaints about her substandard childhood was enough to make him want to kill someone...again.

"...And my mother would always support my sister but she would never support me. Like when I wanted dance lessons and she wanted dance lessons but mom let her have them and not me because she said my sister was just more talented than me—can you even believe that?!"

"No, I can't believe it," he said loud enough that she could hear it, then added so quietly she couldn't hear it, "you're still talking!"

"I know! And she of course took my sister's side in everything. I got grounded more often even though we both got into the same amount of fights at school. I once got grounded for a month! Of course that never would have happened on my dad's watch. I wish my dad had been around then but he was in the Navy so he was almost never around and you know I think that's why I've lacked any sense of direction in my life. I mean there's definitely something missing there when your father isn't around."

"Yeah, I know," Darian said with great irritation that Jenna didn't notice.

"You know I've tried to find a real sense of direction—some kind of structure in my life, I think that's why I've visited so many religious centers in my life. Like I went to a Catholic service once but I found it utterly boring. The priest was so slow moving and uninspired that at one point I actually thought he'd died and he just kept saying 'There is one god, there is only one god' and then had us stand up, sit down, kneel, stand up—it was like a game of Simon Says. I visited this Buddhist temple and chanted with them and at first I thought it was boring but then I found it very calming and they were nice but I hated all the rules in their religion—like to join you have to buy an altar and put offerings of rice on it every day and stuff and I'm just not going to do that besides it seems very hypocritical since Buddhists are supposed to be against materialism..."

"Uh, huh, and are you getting to some kind of a point *dear*?"

"Yes, of course. My point is I've been to a lot of different religious services in search of some kind of structure—like this one mixed Jewish-Christian service where we all sang songs about 'Yis-rai-el' and the Aquarian Foundation where we talked about aura cleansing, channeling dead spirits, space aliens, and all sorts of cool things..."

"The point Jenna?! What is your point?!"

"Dare, isn't it obvious?"

"No! How can I discern one minuscule point from your entire minute by minute life Jenna?"

"I didn't just give you my entire life story, I mean I didn't even talk about..."

"*THE POINT JENNA?!*"

*“I HAVE NO SENSE OF DIRECTION.”*

Darian couldn't help but feel sorry for her while simultaneously wanting to strangle her.

“I think if my dad had been around I'd have some sense of direction and I just...”

“Where is your dad?! Do you have any idea where he lives? I mean, I could hire a private eye to find him if you don't know, or...”

“Oh I know. He's in Lincoln City.”

“At the beach?”

“Yeah.”

Darian grabbed Jenna by the arm and rushed her down the stairs, grabbed his car keys as he ran out the door, and left Señora Rafaela to close the door behind them. Within minutes they were on I-84 west, then Pacific Highway west. 92 miles and two and a half hours of driving up and down the winding narrow two-lane highways lined with dense evergreen forests later they were in Lincoln City and Darian was forcing Jenna to remember her dad's address while he looked around for a gas station that sold maps. 25 minutes later they were driving up Jetty Avenue. They stopped in front of a two-story blue and white house across the street from some beachfront properties.

“Is that his address?” Darian said.

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“What if he's not happy to see me?”

“Then you can kick his ass.”

Jenna laughed.

“What? Remember when that guy tried to steal our seats at The Schitz when I took you to see the Oregon Symphony? I thought you were going to knock out his teeth. Your dad probably will be happy to see you, and even if he isn't you'll finally have closure.”

“I don't know, I just...”

“Jenna quite frankly you don't know how lucky you are to have the opportunity to talk to an absent parent or even to yell at them. When someone's dead you can't get any closure—good or bad. My dad died when I was 11—I never had the chance to discuss religion, politics, or philosophy with him or to love or hate him as one adult to another. I'll always wonder what he would have said to me, what he would have thought of me, and what I would have thought of him. And I will never know. But you can know right now.”

Jenna got out of the car.

“Maybe you should wait here,” she said.

“I was intending to. And I'll be here when you're ready to go home, don't worry about me—this is all about you,” he said.

Jenna closed the door.

“As always, it's all about you, Jenna,” he said as he watched Jenna go and knock on the door and saw a tall man with blonde hair answer it. He recognized Jenna immediately, hugged her emphatically, and invited her into his house.

After several minutes had passed Darian decided to lock his car and go for a walk. On the beach he looked to his left and saw the Chinook Winds Casino and Resort on an embankment near the beach and beyond that he saw miles of beach, getting hazy in the unknown distance. To his right he saw the long beach stretching out to some cliffs and large rocks with waves crashing against them. He took off his socks and shoes, rolled up his pants, and ran right, through the hot, sunburned sand and into the cool, foamy salt water. He went in ankle deep and the tides made it knee deep.

In all the gray sand he came across sand that was a glittery black and he wondered why. The cliff and the rocks were farther away than they'd looked and the time to get there annoyed him. The beach along the way was about as interesting as any other beach: water, salt, people walking dogs, sand, seaweed shreds, air, and the occasional miniature crab corpse. When he finally reached the cliffs he rinsed off his feet and put his socks and shoes back on and rolled his pant legs down so he could easily walk across the row of large rocks that lay below the cliff. He climbed over the big black rocks that seemed to explain the source of the black sand. He got lightly dusted with ocean spray as tides crashed in with a pleasant violence.

He came upon a small cave in the cliff side but the tide was too high for him to reach it. He took some photos thinking of how he could paint a picture of the dawning of time and life on planet Earth using this seascape as inspiration. He waited for the tides to come in in order to get the best, splashiest photos then he sat down on a rock and stared into the sea contemplating where those waters had come from and where they were going. A wave hit the rocks and some sea foam splattered onto his left cheek. He raised his hand to wipe it off, thinking that that very sea foam could easily have been to China and Australia. He felt an immense longing to get lost in the green-blue horizon.

"Beautiful isn't it?" an old man with a bucket full of seaweed said.

"Yeah, it is. I feel like...I just wish a wave would come and wash me out into it. I mean, not really, but I would just love to get lost out there."

"Not happy with your life?"

"It's very claustrophobic."

"How so?"

"Well...my parents wanted me to be a painter. Now I paint. I'm trained for nothing else. I couldn't do anything else. I feel like I got no say in my life. And I love painting but it takes so much of my time that I have no life," Darian said, surprising himself when his voice began to crack.

"Oh, I can understand that. I worked as a welder at the same industrial plant for 40 years before I retired. I had to wear overalls over my clothes and now I only wear shorts, even when it's cold out. The only way I got through it was by finding some way to be free, some outlet. For me, it was fishing, boating, and being out here by the sea. I used to drive out here every chance I got and after I retired I moved out here. It may not sound like much to some people but fishing, boating, and the like kept me going. Most of us spend our lives doing jobs we don't really want to, and often

it's whatever our parents did or thought we should do. You can't get down son, you just have to find something that excites you and then you'll have that to think about when you're doing the things that bore and tire you, okay?"

"Okay," Darian said.

He felt better as he scanned the whole ocean view. When he turned his head back to thank the man he was gone. Darian stayed to watch the sunset. He took his camera out to film it because it would make a great picture, then he decided to put the camera away and just enjoy the sunset. Enjoy the sight of something beautiful without turning it into work for the first time in years. He just sat on the rocks, enjoyed the view, and smiled.

As it got dim outside Darian began to walk back. It seemed as if the distance had grown and he was concerned that Jenna would be outside his car wondering where he was. When he got back to his car he was surprised to see that Jenna wasn't there but he didn't really mind. It wasn't humid at the beach and his T-shirt didn't provide any warmth for him against the ocean breeze. Standing there he became suddenly very self-conscious of the fact he was still wearing his painting clothes. He shuddered and retreated into the privacy of his car. He leaned back in the driver's seat and began to doze off.

Darian awoke to a knocking on the passenger's side door. He shot straight up in the driver's seat and in a moment was confused then remembered where he was and leaned over to unlock the door for Jenna. She hopped into the car with a big grin on her face.

"So I take it things went well with your dad?" he said, hoping she felt better and hoping—against all logic and reason—that she wasn't going to talk to him about it.

"Yes. I'm joining the Navy."

Darian was so startled by her announcement that he wound up hitting the steering wheel and sounding off the horn, which further startled him since he almost never used it. He stared at her for a second and immediately assessed a difference in her, a change that was palpable yet indiscernible. He tried to figure it out then shrugged his shoulders and decided that he no longer cared.

"Okay," he said. "So are you staying here or going back to Portland?"

"Back to Portland," she said. Her voice had a hint of clarity and calm he'd never heard before. He drove down to Oregon Coast Highway. "Don't you want to know why I'm joining the Navy?"

"No. Not really. I'm confident you know what you're doing," he said disinterestedly.

Jenna seemed slightly taken aback by his response but it was the truth. The truth like women always said they wanted while never really meaning it, but there it was. He didn't need to know, he didn't want to know, he didn't even care anymore but sure enough she began to tell him.

"...And my salary would be better than what I'm making now considering that I could live on a naval base and pay no rent at all and I'd get some kind of special job training, and I'd have medical and dental coverage for the first time in my life, 30 days paid vacation to *anywhere in the*

*world*, and I'd have educational opportunities—like college and stuff, and a retirement plan and veterans' benefits and..."

Darian had gotten so accustomed to Jenna's omnipresent chattering that it was almost like road noise to him: just another part of the sounds in the background. He was glad to see her so enthused about something and hoped that following in her father's footsteps and joining the Navy would provide for her the sense of purpose that painting always had for him but he still kind of wanted to open the door and kick her out of the car as he rushed down Salmon River Highway and its two lanes of forested monotony.

"...Are you even listening?!"

"Of course I am! You're joining the Navy—good for you, that's great!" he said mechanically, but she didn't even notice.

"I know! It's fantastic! I finally have a plan—some direction in my life. I mean it's just like..."

He realized that in the absence of better childhoods they had become honorary family to each other; she had become like an annoying little sister to him. When he looked at her now he almost couldn't believe he'd ever had sex with her. It just seemed so *wrong* now.

She talked incessantly until they were driving past the tiny town of Grand Ronde then she seemed to have finally worn herself out but after a minute he saw that that wasn't it. He recoiled within himself knowing that she was still looking for some emotional support from him—the exact thing he had never gotten from her. At first he said nothing then decided that if he were supportive he could probably get her out of his life faster.

"You know Jenna I'm really proud of you right now."

"*THANK YOU!*" she said with her very cute grin that no longer appealed to him in any way, shape, or form.

He grinned back then continued to drive along the seemingly unending road back to Portland. 77 miles and an hour and 40 more minutes more of Jenna's talking and Darian was careening across the semi-circle Marquam Bridge on the I-5 freeway over the Willamette River. He dodged a two-trailer truck to get over to the first exit on the other side of the river and rushed up to Water Avenue at Yamhill Street and to her apartment on MLK, above Nearly Honest Bob's Thrift Store.

"Good luck Jenna," he said as she got out of the car.

He sped away before they could exchange any more words. "Oh my god!" he said loudly in the empty car. "I don't want to hear that woman talk ever again!"

Back at his house he settled down into the serenity of solitude. He sat on the back porch with a cup of tea while listening to All Classical 89.9🎵 and just enjoyed the view.

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