



Dancing on the Edge of the World

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I walked out to the ocean this morning.



Passing 48th and Judah, I glanced at the old Mars Ocean View Motel. Two months ago, I stopped there to buy drugs from a man who was dealing out of one of the rooms. He's dead now—from the very thing he sold. There's a line from the old TV show *Baretta*: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." The guy was right.

Today, though, it's beautiful. Clear. Calm. It's been days since I've thought about my "stupid little discoveries"—those quiet revelations that sneak up on me when I slow down long enough to listen. Lately they've come peacefully, especially about my father and about Stephen. I'm beginning to understand that I wasn't solely responsible for everything that went wrong in our house when I was a kid. Children don't have that kind of power.

As a family, we all carry responsibility for the wounds we share. Healing them requires all of us to clear the air and drain the old blood from the branches of our family tree. Out here by the ocean, those struggles feel smaller. The horizon softens them. The future seems less threatening.

The ocean offers faith. It suggests that things can work out—if I can just get out of my own way. It feels different here than in an office, panicking over a late report while a boss breathes down your neck. Out here, that boss is just a name, not a figure who can dismantle your sense that life is good and you are, too.

They've built a new path along the beach.



At first I went the wrong way, but eventually I found the right one—the one that leads to what feels like the edge of the earth. I climbed a dune and there it was: the Pacific, restless and endless.

Behind me, Highway One hummed. Motorcycles headed south, trucks north. I could hear the Muni trains grinding along their tracks, returning to the city's belly. In front of me, surfers—hopeful or foolish—tested the waves. Northern California isn't famous for gentle waters.



The undertow can be deadly. A few miles north, the Golden Gate funnels currents so fierce they once made escape from Alcatraz nearly impossible.

I had almost come here on New Year's Day, but that morning felt hungover—like the whole city was nursing regret. Truth is, I was the one nursing it. Too many beers the night before.



I was supposed to celebrate with friends, but I didn't want to be around people who liked me. Depression does that. It isolates you even from kindness.

Holidays have always unsettled me. I once heard in an NA meeting, "You can't always save your face and your ass at the same time." I've tested that theory more than once.

A low plane droned overhead, and I looked south. The fog blurred everything into watercolor. People walking along the shore seemed to dissolve into light. I remembered the line from *Poltergeist*: "Go into the light." Standing there, it did feel like the threshold of something holy.

Under my arm was a bottle of Cold Duck—my mother's favorite cheap champagne. Since she died in 1986, I've brought one to the ocean each year and tossed it into the water for her. I had wrapped this bottle in pale blue plastic beads and tied on a few Christmas trinkets—a small ceramic mouse in a stocking. I was her "little Mouser."



That morning at home, while wrapping it, I cried. A grown man making a tribute that was, at heart, something a little boy would do for his mother.



I remembered winters in Wisconsin, waiting for the bus in bitter wind. If it was especially cold, she would open her coat and pull us inside, sheltering us against her body to keep our ears from freezing. That's what good mothers do.

I miss her.

The beach has changed over the years. More trash now. Broken glass, plastic debris, a lone shoe here and there. Still, the ocean remains what it has always been: the end of land. Walk far enough west and you will get wet. That is certain. When I arrived, the tide was out, gifting the beach an extra stretch of sand. Dogs chased birds. Children tested the water with shrieks of delight. A parent scooped up a toddler before a wave knocked her down. Scenes like that make me think we're all here for something—some small participation in a vast, unknowable design.



I didn't feel that way on New Year's Day. That's why I waited. I wanted this moment to be clean.

I came not only for my mother, but for myself. I needed to believe it was acceptable for me to have a life with purpose and happiness. For years I carried a belief that I must suffer so others could thrive, that my own joy was selfish. That thinking fed my drinking and drug use.



When I was sober, my life improved. The people around me improved. I saw it with my own eyes. So why sabotage it? Fear of success? Habit? Addiction? Probably all three.

I want the prize of a stable, sober life. I'm not there yet—but I'm walking toward it.

Years ago, I visited the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the Moscone Center with Stephen.



From the balcony, we looked down at panels stretching wider than a football field. People moved quietly among the names. Volunteers handed out tissues by the handful. One quilt bore a line I've never forgotten: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." It felt true.

Memories are complicated. Even when relationships sour, certain moments remain sacred. Love survives in them.

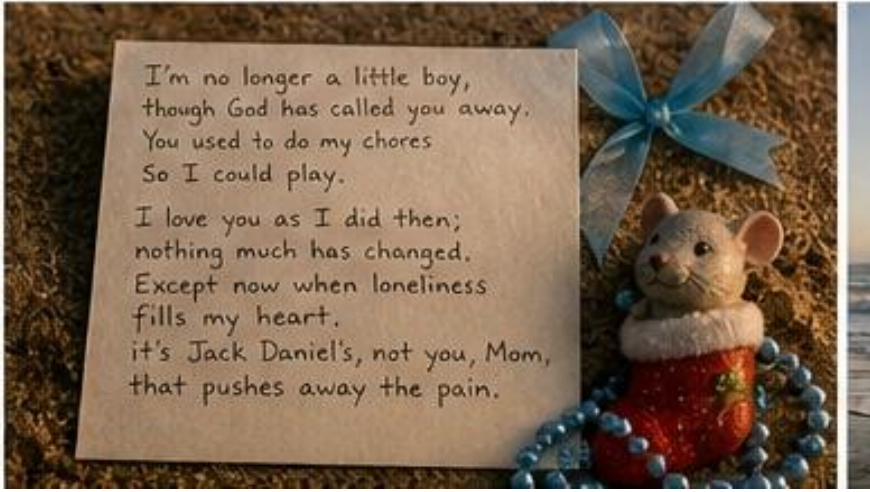
That's why I'm here—because of memory. Because of my mother.

I climbed a dune that looked like an old fortification and sat down in the warm sand. The sun filtered through haze. For a moment, I felt certain that everything would be all right.

I thought about my job, about the uneasy dance with a boss I neither trusted nor respected. Do you confront him and risk everything? Or keep quiet and protect your paycheck? For now, I decided to look for the good in him—even if that decision felt thin. Change has to start somewhere.

I examined the bottle. It was simple and imperfect, but it meant something. I had taken something ordinary and made it sacred with ribbon and memory. Isn't that what love does?

I attached a small card that read:



*I'm no longer a little boy, though God has called you away.
You used to do my chores so I could play.
I love you as I did then; nothing much has changed.
Except now when loneliness fills my heart,
it's Jack Daniel's, not you, Mom,
that pushes away the pain.*

I stood and walked toward the water. With the tide so far out, I had to run to get the bottle past the break without soaking my shoes. Before I did, I asked a couple to take my picture. They smiled and obliged.

I kissed the bottle. "I wish you weren't gone, Mom. I hope you're okay. Please let me know you still love me."



I ran and hurled it as far as I could. It arced into the air, spinning, then disappeared into the surf.

Then panic struck. What if it shattered? What if some surfer cut his foot on my offering? Had my love caused harm? I stood there wrestling with that fear until I finally told myself to breathe. The bottle hadn't broken. No one was hurt. Not every act of love becomes disaster.

Walking back, I noticed windblown calendar pages scattered in the sand. One caught my eye: October 21. My mother died on the twenty-first. For a moment, it felt like a sign—until I saw it was attached to a note about a brake job. Even so, I smiled.



Death has always frightened and fascinated me. After losing friends to AIDS and addiction, it feels less abstract. Those epidemics are wars of their own. But I've come to believe that death is not annihilation. It is continuation in another form.



I see my mother in the moon. I hear her in a child's laughter. I remember the way her eyes squinted when she laughed. Living on memory is like fasting—you survive, but you feel the absence.

As I headed back toward the bus stop, I felt full of love. Then I thought of work and felt slightly less full. Still, I kept walking.

As long as she lives in my thoughts—alive in laughter, in wind, in salt air—she is not gone. The dead love us for loving them.

Crossing Highway One, I saw the N Judah train approaching. I ran, boarded, and took a seat. As we pulled away, I could no longer hear the ocean, but I could still taste salt on my lips.



Proof that I had been there. Proof that it exists, even when out of sight.
“Happy Birthday, Mom,” I whispered, wiping my glasses.



Death pushes us into the unexplored corners of our hearts—the places that ache because they want to grow. Today I felt that growth.

Life is alive. And for a few hours on the edge of the world, so was I.

