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The Last Time We Visited The Beach

We walked to the beach from the ice cream shop for the last time with a silence most of the night had been filled with. I could feel the rocks on the ground shift under my feet and Maddilyn lean against me gently, swinging our hands back and forth as we stepped along the sidewalk, tilting towards the edge, near the road, too still to fall. I could hear the bells of shops ring as the doors opened and the sound of seagulls squawking above us. Normally, Maddilyn would be rambling excitedly about a penguin video she found online or maybe about her marine life class that she had been so eager to begin or just telling me about something she found at a thrift store that made her think of me. When doing so, her eyes would become brighter and her voice would light up. But instead, she was silent, too caught up in her own thoughts to say anything at all. We sat at a bench; the water was too cold for her to swim but the sun was warm enough for the sand to feel pleasant under our toes. In her glasses I could see the lake's horizon and the bright color combinations of the setting sun. The only sound to be heard was the waves crashing against the shore and the shouts of kids as they played a game of volleyball.

"Do you think there's a heaven?" she asked quietly, almost as though she was about to cry.

"I don't think so," I responded, trying to make my tone seem gentle. Heaven was a notion that was made up, to be a comfort, like the tooth fairy. The idea that when you lose a tooth or die, you're rewarded, so long as you did the bare minimum. It was the same for God, but instead of the tooth fairy, he was just Santa Claus and was going to punish all of the people who were 'bad' so that you would be on your best behavior. In the end you'll get to open a bunch of presents, while all the people that hurt you, just get coal. But, I didn't say that part, I'm not entirely sure why. I guess I thought she knew that, just like I thought she knew there wasn't a heaven.

"Then what do you think happens?" she asked. Her head turned to me and her eyebrows wrinkled.

The summer wind blew against our cheeks and brushed back the strands of her hair that had been lying lazily in her face behind her neck. Maddilyn shivered— she had been getting cold a lot easier lately. I let go of her hand and wrapped my arm around her back, gently holding her close to me, trying to keep her warm. She seemed unfazed, too lost in her own thoughts to care.

"Nothing," I said, a bit gentler than the way I spoke before. "Once you die, you're gone, everything about you.

What your voice sounded like, and the way you smiled, whatever you would've created, whatever your interests were." I paused. "The only things left are the memories people had of you and your rotting corpse." It felt more like a realization than an explanation. Maddilyn's eyes were on the ground, refusing to look at me. After another moment of silence, I could feel the sand beneath me shift and I listened closely to the waves crashing against the shore as the sun was beginning to set.

"Is that what will happen to me?" She asked, refusing to still look up. Looking back on it, I probably should've tried to comfort her, but instead I just let the wind blow against my face and listened to the whistle of the water.