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The Quiet Lies

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Introduction

The morning the town felt kind, I woke to the sound of gulls gnawing at the sky. They made a thin, tearing noise that always reminded me of tape being pulled from a roll. The breeze pushed salt through the screen and into the kitchen, clinging to the coffee steam, to the fruit bowl, to the corners of our little rental where sand collected like secrets. Daniel's mug sat where I'd left it the night before—lip print, a coffee ring, a crescent of dried milk. He had work early, he'd said, and I believed him because the bell from the high school carried over the water like a promise you could set your watch to.

By then I had a ritual. I took the camera off the hook by the back door, the one with the strap that cut into my collarbone just enough to remind me of weight, and I walked as far as the dunes before the sand went soft and swallowed my steps. I photographed ordinary things because ordinary things didn't argue with me: a line of laundry twisting in the wind; a boy's red shovel half-buried near the jetty; the church flyer stapled crooked to a telephone pole, its edges softened by fog. I told myself I was cataloging peace. Some mornings I believed it.

The town had rules no one wrote down. You waved at cars even if you didn't know whose they were. You said "fine" when anyone asked how you were. You bought scones on Thursdays because Mrs. Pritchard said they were freshest then, and you understood that the pastor's hand on your shoulder meant both comfort and inventory. Online, everything looked like a postcard—muted blues, driftwood, lattice shadows on white porches, the pastor's Sunday quote lettered in a font that made you feel safe. It amazed me how easy it was to make a place behave inside a frame.

Daniel said this place was good for us, for me. He said the city had ground me down and spit me out, that I needed a softer edge to rest against. He didn't say trauma; he didn't have to. He used words like "quiet," like "fresh start," and I nodded because I was tired of arguing with people who loved me. Love is a lens too; it sharpens what it wants and blurs what it can't use. We tried to be careful with each other. We left notes on the counter. We pressed our knees together under the table as if proximity could keep us from drifting.

Sometimes—on the walk back along the boardwalk, the planks creaking like ribs—I felt a hollow space open behind my sternum, an ache without a story attached. My therapist would have asked me to name it. Fear? Grief? Anticipation? I didn't know. I only knew that I had learned to trust the warnings my body sent, the prickle before a storm you couldn't see yet, the way color falls out of the world right before a shutter clicks. It's a trick of light, I used to tell interns. Everything is a trick of light.

I made friends in the way one does here, in layers. A barista who remembered I liked my latte extra hot and my foam thin. A bartender who poured my club soda into a whiskey glass when the place swelled with summer people. Pastor Elaine, who learned my name quickly and said it in a way that felt like it belonged to her. And neighbors who waved over hedges and posted beach sunsets every night as if perpetuity could be achieved through repetition. We were all curators. We were all complicit.

At night, when the house went still, I lay awake listening to the hum—the refrigerator’s quiet engine, the faint highway sigh beyond the bluffs, the distant bell buoy clanging like a metronome for someone else’s prayers. Sometimes I dreamed in frames: a man’s hand caught mid-gesture, a girl’s hair lifting in wind, the moment before and after but not the moment itself. Memory is most dangerous where it’s neatest. I learned that overseas and paid for it in ways my body remembered even when my mind did not.

I didn’t know, then, how much of this town was a surface. I didn’t know which smiles were rehearsed and which were real. I only knew that when I lifted the camera and looked through the viewfinder, everything stilled. The world arranged itself politely and waited for me to decide. Click. A version of truth. Click. Another. I told myself that if I could collect enough moments, if I could pin them in neat rows, the noise inside me would quiet.

On the morning the gulls sounded like tearing tape, I framed the dunes and the path that cut through them like a thin white scar. Later, people would ask me if I remembered who walked that path first, if I remembered the time, the smell, the faces. I would say yes. I would say no. I would say it depends on the light. But in that moment, I only felt the salt on my tongue and the camera’s familiar weight, and I believed, for one suspended breath, that the town was exactly what it looked like.

CHAPTER ONE: The Bonfire and the Dunes

The morning the gulls sounded like tearing tape, I was already awake. I'd been lying still long enough to memorize the hairline crack in our bedroom ceiling, a jagged line that started near the window and stopped short of the closet, like a lightning bolt that had lost its nerve. The salt air, thick enough to chew, crept through the screen and settled on my upper lip. I could taste the ocean even here, two blocks inland, as if the tide refused to respect property lines. The bell from the high school rang at seven forty-five, a dull iron heartbeat that Daniel claimed was the town's most reliable clock. He was in the shower by then, humming something tuneless, trying to coax hot water out of a system that coughed and stalled like an old dog.

I made the coffee while the house was still whispering. Our rental had been described in the listing as "coastal charming," which meant it was small and white and smelled faintly of mildew and pine cleaner. The kitchen tiles were uneven enough to make me feel unsteady even when I stood still. I poured Daniel's coffee into his favorite chipped mug and mine into the heavy blue one I'd brought from the city. The city had been a collage of steam vents and exhaust, rain on taxi windows, neon bleeding into puddles. Here, the steam was just steam, rising to meet the pale light that slanted through the window over the sink. It looked gentle. It was not.

I had a routine after Daniel left, one that organized the empty space he left behind. I'd take the camera off the hook by the back door—a vintage Nikon I'd saved from a pawn shop, strap frayed but faithful—and I'd walk the narrow boardwalk that cut between our street and the dunes. The planks were warped in places, giving under my weight in a way that made me conscious of gravity, of my own bones. The seagulls lifted off the roofs as I passed, their cries sharp and efficient. I didn't photograph them. They were too busy surviving to pose.

By the time I reached the path that threaded through the dunes, the sun had burned through the morning fog. The grasses were tall and wind-whipped, their edges sharp as knives. I framed the scene out of habit: the pale strip of sand, the bruise-colored water beyond, the way the light fractured on the shallow ripples near shore. Click. A memory that could be held. Click. Another. I told myself this was healing, that I was documenting peace. On mornings like that, the lie tasted sweet.

I saw Claire Bennett just once that day, from a distance. She was standing near the bonfire pit in the public beach area, the one ringed with driftwood logs blackened by years of reckless flames. She was alone. I didn't know her name yet, not really, only that she was new-ish—a summer person who'd stayed too long and turned into a fixture. She wore a yellow dress, the kind that looked like it belonged on a postcard.

Her hair caught the wind and lifted in a way that made me think of how photographers lit hair on purpose to sell shampoos or perfume. I raised the camera without thinking, zoomed in, and took a single frame. Her back was mostly to me; I caught the line of her shoulder, the dress's bright slash against the pale beach, the way her hand was raised as if to push away something invisible. It was a moment with no obvious story, which is why it stayed with me.

I walked home the long way, along the curve of the street where the houses wore their shutters like tidy expressions. Mrs. Pritchard was already out on her porch, a mug of something steaming in her hand and a pair of binoculars around her neck that she pretended were for birds. She raised a hand. I raised mine. She did not call me over, and I did not ask why she was watching the street as if it might misbehave. The unspoken rules had settled into my bones. You waved. You smiled. You said fine when anyone asked. You bought scones on Thursdays because Mrs. Pritchard claimed that was when the bakery pulled its first tray from the oven, and you didn't ask whether that was actually true. It was enough to participate in the fiction.

Daniel came home late, like he always did on Tuesdays. He taught history at the high school, and on Tuesdays he stayed for department meetings that, according to him, consisted of adults arguing about the budget for photocopiers and whether to keep the quote of the week on the whiteboard by the office. He kissed me in the doorway, held the kiss a second longer than usual, and said, "Long day?" like he was testing the air. He had a way of standing in our home that made it look smaller, as if his shoulders took up a disproportionate amount of the available square footage. He was gentle in the way that large men are often gentle, always aware of their potential to break things.

I told him about my walk, about the light. I did not tell him about the girl in yellow. I had not learned her name yet. There was no reason to put her inside our small house. We ate pasta from plates that didn't match, and he told me about a student who had argued that the Boston Tea Party was actually a shipping dispute and not political theater. He had the kind of patience with teenagers that I admired and sometimes resented. It seemed easier to care about the past than the present.

That night, I dreamed in frames again. A man's hand reaching, a girl's hair lifting, the moment before and after but not the moment itself. I woke at three with my heart climbing my throat. I went to the kitchen, poured a glass of water, and stood in the dark. From the bluff, I heard the distant laughter of drunk people and the low thud of music carried by wind. Someone was burning wood. Someone was burning something. I went back to bed and told myself it was none of my business. The ocean breathed outside, slow and endless. I counted my breaths until it passed.

By morning, the town had shifted. It was subtle, a tremor under the floorboards. The bakery window had a handwritten sign that read "Open," but behind it, the barista's

eyes were red-rimmed. The bell at the high school sounded the same, but I caught a cluster of teachers standing near the flagpole, heads bent, speaking with their hands covering their mouths as if the air had ears. I did not yet know the word for what had happened, only that something had tilted. I took my camera and walked anyway because the alternative was to sit at the kitchen table and stare at the crack in the ceiling until it felt like a wound.

The path through the dunes looked different in the flat light. The bonfire pit was empty, ringed by half-burned logs and a scatter of bottle caps that winked like coins. I took a photograph of the sand near the pit, close up, the way the prints were arranged. Two sets of footprints going in, one coming out. A shallow drag mark where someone had pulled a log farther from the fire. I am not a detective, I told myself. I am only a witness who knows how to look. I walked the path back toward the boardwalk, scanning the grasses the way you scan a room when you've forgotten what you came for. And that was when I saw it.

A strap, black leather, twisted around a stalk of dune grass. A wallet poking out of the sand like the corner of a book. I stopped. The camera hung heavy against my ribs. I didn't touch anything. I took a photograph of the purse where it lay, half-hidden, as if the dunes were trying to swallow it whole. Then I reached into my pocket for my phone, hands shaking in a way that irritated me. I called the police. The voice on the other end asked what the emergency was. I said, "I think I found someone's purse," and then I said, "I think it belongs to the girl in the yellow dress," and then I realized I didn't know if that was true or just a story I had built from one photograph and a pair of footprints.

By the time the officer arrived, a circle had formed. The town was good at circling. Mrs. Pritchard had binoculars again, and she wasn't pretending they were for birds. Pastor Elaine stood near the path, hands clasped, face composed into an expression that suggested she had been expecting this, that she had been praying for this exact outcome in advance. The officer asked me to step back, asked what I had touched. I said nothing, but my prints were on the sand because how could they not be. He put a glove on and lifted the purse. I saw a flash of yellow plastic inside, and my stomach clenched. He opened it. I did not look. I did not need to.

They asked me to come to the station later, to give a statement. I nodded. I walked home in a kind of fog, the camera strap cutting into my neck like a penance. I should have called Daniel. I should have called someone. Instead, I went into the back room where I kept my laptop and a pile of SD cards. I opened the folder labeled Morning Walks. I scrolled through the past week. There she was, in the yellow dress, arms at her sides, hair catching light like spun gold. I zoomed in. I looked at the background, at the dunes, the path, the sliver of a figure near the boardwalk that I had dismissed as a trick of the lens. I thought: I might have been the last person to photograph her.

The police station smelled like coffee and rain-soaked coats. Detective Aaron Cole introduced himself with a firm handshake and eyes that didn't linger. He was older than me by a decade, with the kind of face that had learned to hold neutral and stay there. He asked me to walk him through my morning, and I did, piece by piece. I told him about the camera, the light, the girl standing alone. I told him about the purse without describing the contents, because that felt like gossip I hadn't earned. He took notes on a yellow pad and did not look at his phone once, which made me trust him and distrust myself.

"Have you seen her before?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning," I said. "First time. I don't know her name."

He nodded. "Have you seen anyone else on that path? Recently? Last night?"

I thought of the laughter, the low thud of music. "I heard people," I said. "I didn't see them. I was inside."

He looked at the camera I'd set on the table between us. "May I?"

I handed it over. He held it like something fragile and scrolled through the images. He paused on the one I had taken of the purse. "You took this before you touched anything?"

"Yes."

"Good." He handed it back. "We'll need a copy of that image. And any others from the last twenty-four hours."

I nodded. My chest felt tight, as if the strap were still there. Outside, the wind pushed a plastic cup across the asphalt, the sound hollow and ridiculous. I wanted to ask him if he thought she was okay, if he thought she had just lost her purse, if it could be that simple. I didn't. I had spent enough time with the police in other towns, on other jobs, to know they prefer facts to speculation. But I also knew that speculation was a kind of fact when you were trying to find someone.

I went home and made myself toast, though I wasn't hungry. The house felt too quiet, as if even the walls were holding their breath. Daniel would be home soon. I would have to tell him. I thought about the girl's face in the photograph, the way the wind had lifted her hair, the way her hand was raised as if to push away something invisible. I thought about the purse half-swallowed by the dunes. I knew I should leave it to the police. But I also knew that my work had always been about seeing what other people missed, about holding a moment up to the light. And the quiet of the

town, the polite smiles and the curated sunsets, suddenly felt like a lens with a smudge on it I couldn't stop trying to wipe away.

That evening, the town gathered at the pier. It wasn't official; someone had texted someone, and the result was a loose semicircle of neighbors holding candles in paper cups, their faces turned toward the water as if answers might float in on the tide. Pastor Elaine spoke first, her voice smooth and practiced, promising that everyone was doing everything they could, that Claire—someone finally said the name—was in their prayers. The name landed. Claire. It fit the yellow dress and the hair lit by the morning sun, and hearing it out loud made her disappearance feel real in a way the purse had not. I stood near the back, camera in my bag, hands shoved deep in my pockets.

People murmured. They traded theories in soft voices. She had a fight with her boyfriend. She had money problems. She had left town before and come back; maybe she left again. I listened. I didn't participate. I watched faces, the way some eyes slid away when her name came up, the way one woman gripped her husband's wrist too hard. It wasn't proof of anything, but it was texture. I remembered what I had learned overseas, that the story you heard first was rarely the truest, that silence held more information than noise.

When the gathering started to break, I stayed. The wind off the water was colder now. Pastor Elaine approached me, her hand warm on my shoulder. "You're the photographer," she said. It wasn't a question. "I've seen you walking. You have an eye." She smiled the way people smile when they are used to being in charge of a room. "I hope you'll use it responsibly."

"I always do," I said. It came out sharper than I intended.

She didn't flinch. "Claire volunteered at the church," she said. "She helped with the food pantry. She was... spirited." Her eyes searched mine as if looking for a specific response. I didn't give her one.

I walked home alone. The boardwalk creaked under my feet. I thought about the girl who had volunteered at the church and the woman I had seen standing alone with the wind in her hair. I thought about the purse half-eaten by the sand. And when I reached our house, I sat at the kitchen table and opened my laptop. I made a new folder and named it Claire. I copied the photograph from the morning she disappeared, the one with the yellow dress and the hand raised against nothing. I looked at the exif data—the time stamp, the GPS coordinates. I looked at the sliver of a figure near the boardwalk, the shape I had dismissed as a trick of the lens. I cropped it, enhanced it, searched for a face in the blur. The image was not perfect. It was, however, something. And the longer I stared at it, the more the quiet of the town felt less like peace and more like a held breath waiting to scream.

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