

There was this rock on the beach.

It was round and gray, with a wider bottom than the top. It had grooves right where the shadow of a stubby arm would be. Kind of like Totoro, from the Studio Ghibli movie. From behind the rusting fence, Aidan could only ever see the back of this rock, never the front.

Every time Aidan rode his bike up the hill in his eighteen years of life, he saw this rock. It sat tall in the middle of the sandy beach, untouched by the waves. Oftentimes, seagulls would perch on top of it to give it something akin to a head. An unfitting one, at that.

“Aidan!”

He turned towards Max, who was waving at him.

“We’re gonna be late for dinner!”

“Okay, okay!” Aidan yelled. He hiked up the hill with his bike in tow. Reaching the top, Aidan gazed at the beach again, as he did in his childhood. He wanted to savor the view for as long as he could, like a piece of sweet hard candy.

The moment ended abruptly as Max took Aidan by the arm. “We need to go! C’mon!”

The two of them walked along the edge of the road, cars whizzing by them. Some were stuttering trucks carrying fresh fish to be fried and steamed. Others were fancy BMWs and Teslas, full of boisterous tourists who could not get enough of the colorful buildings.

“I can’t believe you’re graduating,” Max said suddenly.

Aidan glanced at Max and sighed. “I can’t believe it either.”

“And you’re leaving tomorrow.”

Aidan wondered if Max meant to say “leaving them all behind”, but he didn’t want to pursue the topic further. He wondered whether he would have been happier if he had chosen a college closer to home, where he could still taste the salt of the sea.

Aidan knew he should not have had that sip of champagne.

His aunt thought it a brilliant idea to give him a “taste of adulthood” before he went off to college by force-feeding him a glass of champagne. She was drunk. Aidan hoped he wasn’t.

But there he was, putting on a windbreaker to head out at three in the morning to see a stupid rock.

When all the lights of the house dimmed, Aidan found it high time to sneak out. In his head, the sound of champagne bottles opening looped over and over again. The bitter taste of the alcohol lingered on his tongue. He swallowed to try to get rid of the aftertaste.

Holding his breath, Aidan lifted the window as slowly as possible. He pushed himself over the windowsill and landed softly on the grass. The little town on the edge of the ocean had gone to sleep, snoring ignorantly amidst the soft lapping of ocean waves.

He vaulted over the fence once he reached it, hands screaming in pain. With the beach laid out in front of him, Aidan set out for the rock he cherished for eighteen years.

When Aidan saw the rock up close, he realized for the first time how large it was, nearly a head taller than him. But as he circled the rock, Aidan's heart sank. He did not know what he was expecting. It was just a rock.

Filled with a feeling of suffocation, Aidan sat down on the sand. He breathed in the chilly ocean air and tried to remember the last time he came to this beach.

Suddenly, Aidan felt the earth shudder. He turned around and nearly screamed.

The rock had gained a head. A white-feathered bird head. With a bright yellow beak and two bulging crystal-blue eyes. And it was standing. Stubby gray legs supported its big round body, helping it bounce up and down with unearthly glee.

"Aha!" the rock laughed. "It's that time of night again!"

Before Aidan could react, a choir of animal growling sounded from all the rocks on the beach. They all flipped over to reveal pale white bellies and beady black eyes, stone flippers flapping and tails swaying.

"I'm literally going insane," Aidan panted.

"Insane? Far from it." The rock chuckled. "This is closer to reality than you'll ever be."

The rock-seal army yipped and rumbled. Moonlight reflected off their smooth, rotund bodies. They dragged their torsos laboriously towards each other, clinking their shiny bodies together.

The rock hobbled towards Aidan. Aidan stepped back. He was definitely not processing any of this.

"What are you doing here?" the rock asked.

"What?" Aidan gulped. "Did you really just ask me that?"

“I’ve always been here. Yet you have never seen us for what we truly are.”

Aidan paused at that. He remembered his overactive imagination as a kid, daydreaming that the strange rock could come alive. He thought of it as a stalwart guardian of the town, just like Totoro. But this creature, rock-bodied, bird-headed, and accompanied by a legion of seals, was nothing like Aidan imagined as a kid.

The rock bounced around, cawing at the seals who screeched in response. Across the beach, the seals were entering the ocean, frothy bubbles coating their bodies. Aidan stared in awe as each melted into the dark blue waves as if they were made of water, not stone.

“Sorry I can’t keep you company. Gotta go!” The rock leaped into the water to join the seals in a big splash. Aidan could only stand there, watching the magic disappear in his hands like loose sand.

Walking back towards the crammed-together houses and rumbling engines, Aidan wished to open his eyes and find it all a dream. But the sand in his sneakers and the salt on his tongue were too real.

Aidan opened the front door to his family’s small, yellow-fronted house, and sat very still. He sat until the sun rose and reality set in again. The memory of that nightmarish dream dissipated into the humid air, like the fizzling bubbles of champagne. When Aidan opened his eyes the next morning, he assumed the gnawing emptiness inside of him was what a hangover was supposed to feel like.