





Twenty Feet and Forever Away

It's immaterial now, but it still hurts him to read the words. A physical letter always seems more real than an email. He knows what it is before he opens it.

Land slippage, ground unstable, eviction, three weeks from now to vacate.

'Eviction' had always felt like the wrong word to use. Nobody living at the house had done anything wrong after all, but they're still leaving, or they would risk disaster. Their garden grows shorter every year, chewed away by patient natural forces. Half a mile away at the bottom of the cliff lies the wreckage of that poor family's house, which collapsed from above when a section calved away from under it. After that, the 'powers that be' had a lot more urgency in vacating the remaining households. The last ones to leave.

The houses on the opposite side of the road, closer to the edge, have been empty for a year already. No cars drive the road anymore.

The leaving date has been set for a long time anyway, about two weeks from now, to not cut it fine.

Three weeks from now to vacate.

He had lived here for about ten years, and it never bothered him that doom was crawling closer day by day, in fact he quite liked it. If he had been on the other side of the road maybe he would have liked it a little less.

Boxes on boxes on boxes, piled against the living room wall. Sunlight from their ill-fated view soaks the cardboard. He takes a break from packing and fishes a book from an unsealed box on the carpet. Layers of stale tape trail from the flaps. He turns the spiral-bound book over in his hands, and opens it on an arbitrary page, it cracks slightly as he does. He's looking at two drawings, one on each page. They're similar, but not identical. A vertical stripe going down each page, about an inch wide. Not solid colour. They're full of light, full of activity.

He frowns as something catches in his mind, and glances up at the window. He walks towards the window with the book, moving his head from side to side to get the angle right, and finds it quickly. It's a feature of this house that he's used to. So familiar in fact that he'd forgotten about it. Didn't recognise it on the paper.

He looks out at the window and between the two houses opposite, both now empty and cold of course, is a gap. If these two houses were anywhere inland this gap wouldn't likely be of much interest. But here teetering on the edge of oblivion as they are, it shows him the world. As a family they call it the 'zip'.

Between the two houses is the ocean all the way out to the horizon, under an unbroken sky. There had always been something so strange about that gap – a sliver of infinity, a *ration*. You couldn't see out to sea anywhere else along the road, the view is completely blocked, so it made this little opening special over the years. It's how they all checked the weather, checked the height of the waves before going swimming. It was just a ten-minute walk to the beach, down the road to the bottom of the hill then right and you were there. It used to be even quicker, before the steps that were carved into the cliff face had begun crumbling away and been sealed off permanently. Before that, you'd be at the beach in two minutes.

He doesn't know who the drawings belong to, and doesn't want to ask. Nobody in the house is particularly artistic, nobody that he can recall, so maybe a friend stayed over. He flips through the book and sees dozens of the drawings, so lovingly rendered, day after day. Whoever it was stayed a while, saw the days draw short and then long again, saw the changing seasons. Then he reaches the end, and realises there's blank pages.

He wonders what made this mysterious artist stop drawing. The zip is still there after all, maybe they'd just left the house and forgotten to take the book with them. The thought is a sad twinge in his stomach, but it's squashed by how lucky he feels to have it himself.

Then a ridiculous thought strikes him, ridiculous because he can't really draw, but it feels right. He looks at the blank pages of the sketchbook and decides then and there, that until they leave this house he'll follow in the footsteps of the book's original owner. He checks there's enough space for two more weeks, and there is. Just. Even more fitting.

He carefully plops the book onto a cushioned chair by the window, one of the chairs they're not taking with them. No drawing for today at least, the morning is when he'd do it.

Day 1

His first drawing, the pencil feels odd in his hands. It's a grey day, with a flat light, a featureless sky, green tinged ocean. There's that scramble of zig zagging walls at the bottom with the one tree poking out, grasping with bare branches. *Is that some kind of spire behind it? A weather pole?* He'd never really bothered to wonder about it before now. *Wait - what even is a weather pole? Do they exist or did I just make that up?*

He decides to call it a spire.

He draws two wobbly lines to mark out the zip, then fills the top half in grey for the sky; there's really not much else to say about the sky today. He uses green and blue for the sea, it's a calm day with no waves but some dark shadows still twist in the water.

He draws the tree and the spire at the bottom in as much detail as he can, but it looks crooked. Luckily nobody will see this view ever again, to compare to the drawing.

The vertical zip of space is pierced along its length by the fancy ornamentation on the houses either side. He draws them in grey as well. Every house on this road was, originally, a holiday home for a wealthy Victorian family, but now split into four or more flats for some of this town's poorest tenants. Sagging floors, eggshell paint peeling from temporary walls.

The danger that's chasing them from their own home is already evident. Cracks are running up the walls, wallpaper splitting along the shifting fault lines. The house, along with the whole road, is slowly slipping down the cliff.

The first drawing is a simple one, and jagged. But it's unmistakably *today*. *What will tomorrow be like?*

Day 2

The sea is a flat blue stone today, but clearer than yesterday. Some kind of crystal. He picks up a dark blue pencil, labelled *ultramarine*, shades the entire page, and uses a ruler for the lines. It feels like cheating, but it looks better.

There's a black and white vortex of seagulls, a hungry cloud, just above the water. *A fishing boat dumped something, or maybe there's a shoal?* Whatever it is it's gone in a few seconds. The cloud dissipates but it still makes it into his drawing, tiny flecks of black and white pencil. A little heavy handed maybe, and they look more like fish than birds, but it's there.

Then again seagulls are more like reptiles. They're merciless hunters. When he lived in the city the family would visit the beach, the sounds of seagulls outside the car signalling a day of rest, ice cream, sandcastles, peace, but up-close peace was not an option. Any chink in the armour (an open bag of chips, an exposed sandwich) would trigger a violent descent. He knows someone who had their hand ripped open by one as it tore into his bag of donuts.

He can't help but condense these micro-events onto the paper, as if they all happen at once. He feels incapable of letting anything pass by without recording it, like an anxious butterfly catcher holding up a net. A sticky pheromone strip attracting flies. But he won't ever look out this window again after two weeks, nor will anyone, so these moments seem important.

The sky is the same steel grey as yesterday, and he scribbles the tree and spire down in a sort of brown colour, with no real care. But he's happy with the birds, he feels like a fisherman with his first catch.

Day 3

He doesn't draw the sea today, at least doesn't focus on it. Fills it in quickly with a blue then a green. *A bluey green. A sea green?* He hopes so anyway. The grey of the air seeps into everything, makes it the colour of graphite. A great excuse, he reckons, to draw most of it with graphite.

The sky – it's dark but somehow rippling with bright white clouds. There's something coming, or maybe it already passed in the night. Maybe a little more of the cliff melted away in the wind - a few crumbs of sandstone leaving their ancestral home. *I know how they feel*, he thinks, but he doesn't really. This house is as old to him as anything could be, but it's been there for an eye blink compared to what's underneath.

He doesn't bother drawing the spire or the tree at the bottom, not today, it doesn't seem interesting. Flat. Just the green pillar of the sea and the rupturing sky, the clouds that remind him of an ice cream ripple. The houses either side seem dull as well so he leaves them. The view today makes him feel slightly cold, like the grey air has seeped inside him. It reminds him of what he'll be losing.

He's already stopped adding the ornamentation on either side. *It's not really what these drawings are about.*

There's nothing on the water yet, it's just a little too choppy, but sooner or later the new weather system will arrive, from somewhere over the horizon.

And then, who knows.

Day 4

Finally, the sun makes an entrance. And such a dramatic entrance that he squints at the left house. It's lit up like a lamp by the sun, reminds him of the blinding white streets in Portugal. But the right house is grey, and has avoided the sun altogether.

It's dark and stormy all the way out to the horizon though, which makes the blazing light all the more important to capture. It won't last long. Somewhere behind the house, soon, the sun will be slowly swallowed by the dark. Luckily, he can just leave the whole house white to suggest the blinding light. Nice and easy. The walls, tree and spire are all lost in the dagger-like black shadows.

Bright sun and a dark sky, it's his favourite type of light.

The waves are large enough today to be seen breaking, but only at the shore. The kinds of waves that would usually make him think twice about swimming, but still go anyway. And, usually, once he made it down to the beach, they were far bigger than he predicted.

He draws them in but they look static, unmoving. He doesn't know how to draw something that changes so quickly and so constantly, and he fights the urge to check how the artist had drawn them before. He can't look. This needs to come from him. But he doesn't want the recordings to be distorted, lost, just because he's bad at drawing. He'd just have to get better. He stuffs his frustration back down inside himself.

There's no horizon, so he blends the dark blue gradually into the black of the storm. Somewhere in the middle they meet of course, but there's no telling where.

Day 5

He hates the term but can't think of any other word to describe the sea. *It's a mirror.* It reflects the mercurial sun.

A tiny dark silhouette of a dinghy with two, maybe three people cuts through the glimmer as soon as he sits down to draw. It's slow moving, quite far out, a drowsy insect picking over the surface. Slow enough for him to burn the shape of it into his memory before it slips past. Again, he feels lucky to see it. A flare of excitement as he records it.

Everything - the sky, the sea, the houses either side of the zip are blanched orange, and any meagre shadows that are permitted to fall are a faint purple. The edges of everything seem to pulse with light.

The pencil feels more familiar in his hand now. He hasn't got better at drawing, that won't happen in two weeks, but he isn't scared of the paper anymore.

Nothing else passes as he sits there drawing the orange clouds, obsessing over the shape of each one.

Day 6

He opens the curtains to a bright day, tinged yellow. There's a haze on the horizon like there often is, but in the haze something huge is moving. A cargo ship, so far out to sea that it melts almost entirely into the haze. But it's there.

There's a familiar illusion at play as well, one that he still doesn't fully understand, because the boat isn't moving through the sea, it's moving above it. A thin gold line separates it from the ocean like it's hovering, gliding on a cushion of air. He tries to recall someone explaining it to him, he knows they did maybe a few years ago as he looked out the very same window, but he hadn't retained it. It wouldn't have been important then.

He zooms the frame in today, expanding the zip to fill almost the whole paper, more room to eke out the irregularities of the ship. He can't see much, but there's two smokestacks towards the middle, maybe, *or maybe those are something else*. He draws it in yellow and grey, barely darker than the sky behind it. A ghost-ship.

For just a moment as it moves, each end of the ship lines up with the house on either side, bridging the zip perfectly. But it doesn't stop to acknowledge the moment. It's a steel cliff carving through the water at merciless speed, and it slips agonisingly slowly out of his sight. A few tiny yellow clouds like popcorn hang above it. They stay behind when it's gone.

Day 7

He gets up earlier this morning, to get a different view. The colour is yet to seep back into everything. *The world changes so much from day to day; you only realise when you have something small to focus on.*

The sea and sky blend together into a dark purple void, in fact the only thing to mark the horizon for him is a string of faint lights, a pearl necklace at the horizon. *From a boat, obviously*, but beyond that he's just guessing. The zip is a solid monolith that gives nothing away, so this time he focuses on the peripheries too.

Black houses either side, black tree, black spire. A black bird, *not necessarily a blackbird*, zips past too quickly for him to really see it. But that's okay, he knows what a bird looks like. A small aeroplane. He's caught it in his net regardless.

There's something satisfying about catching these elements almost against their will, like a game of Whack-A-Mole. All he has to do is see them, remember them, mark their form on the paper, and they're there forever.

They're imperfect marks, he thinks to himself, *imperfect is an understatement*, but the observer is part of events whether they like it or not. In these drawings he's recording himself looking, not just recording the events themselves. *It's better*, he starts to think, *if they're imperfect. It means he did them.*

Day 8

Today when he opens the curtain to make his observations, he is observed first. A seagull has arrived at dawn, to steal chips and cause some mayhem.

That's their only job. To sew chaos. To make sure seaside living doesn't get too sweet.

This one, which has probably been there for a long time before he'd opened the curtain, perches on the left house high up on the roof.

It's another early morning, the houses are in shadow, but it's just late enough for the first wisps of colour to be seeping back into the air. Today the zip is a clear green test tube, with a few drops of liquid gold at the bottom. As he sits there drawing, the gold rises and a reaction occurs, and the liquid turns to blue and spills out. But he draws it as he first saw it, with the houses, tree and spire, sky all hues of green and blue, and the blazing gold at the horizon.

He does allow some of the gold to crest the seagull's head though. All the while the gull sits motionless facing away. It's thinking about other things, and it's seen enough sunrises.

He makes sure to draw it in as much detail as he can achieve (which isn't much), because it's earned its place in the chronicle, and he can't help but feel thankful for it being there. Besides, nothing else passes by in the water or the sky.

Day 9

The curtains are already open when he opens the sketchbook, and the world is alive with colour. The sea is a field of glittering green and yellow flowers, and huge anvil clouds drift above, glowing orange like logs in a fire. Floating among the flowers is a yacht, against a halo of orange. It's barely moving.

Maybe there's no wind. Bad time to use a yacht.

In any case it gives him time to draw it at leisure, dark blue with two sails, and he takes so long drawing the cacophony between the houses that he forgets about the houses themselves, along with the tree or the spire. He leaves it all blank today. All except the zip of colour.

He scans the marks on the page and decides that he couldn't have drawn all of this a week ago. The yacht looks like a yacht, and the waves are finally starting to look like liquid.

Day 10

It's the darkest morning yet, stirred with fierce wind. Everything beyond the tree and spire is lost in the maelstrom.

Occasionally a black shadow of a gigantic wave breaks through, the only thing he can see, so he remembers where they are and draws them onto the zip. It's not really how waves work, but there's not much else to work with.

He remembers seeing a group of people (he couldn't make out how many) dancing, jumping, running up and down the jetty in weather like this. The stone walkway was soaked in rain, and 7-foot waves exploded against the end, sending up sheets of white water 20, 30 feet into the air to rain down on them. *One wrong step*, he remembers thinking, *and it would all be over*. He had thought about shouting to them, but his voice would never have reached them.

He's going to miss those bizarre happenings that spring up along the coastline, there's something about the sea that brings out the animal in people.

The only other thing he can see now are birds - black delta shapes ripping through the air in groups just in front of the houses, well suited to this kind of weather. He draws them in too, everywhere where there isn't a wave. The zip is now full of movement.

Nothing could survive on that ocean.

Day 11

The opposite of yesterday. It's so bright that he can't even look. In fact, he had timed it perfectly for the sun to reflect off the sea straight into his eyes. He can feel it on his face. But he's stubborn, and refuses to move the chair. He doesn't want to taint the ritual.

If I can't draw what I see, then I'll draw what I can't.

He looks for just long enough for the light to burn his retina, then closes his eyes and notes the colour of the afterimage on the inside of his eyelids. The houses are blocks of plum purple, the zip is a blood red strike through the middle of them, with a burst of pure yellow halfway down where the horizon would be. That's it.

He draws the damage to his eyes from memory, scribbling in a frantic hurry, because the burn doesn't last. *Luckily*. Eventually the colours decay from red to purple to blue like a bruise, and the image fades.

But what actually happened out there in that moment? He'll never know.

Day 12

1:00am rolls past twice while he's sleeping, the annual glitch in the matrix.

The clocks going back means brighter mornings, and by the time he sits down by the window, feeling indulgent and well rested, the sky is fully charged with sunlight.

But the sky doesn't draw his eye today, the abundance of light picks out the detail of the waves like it never had before. It's a calm day, but still stirred by a gentle wind and he can see every ripple. The sea is like molten silver.

He draws out each twist in the water with a deft flick, tries to record how the waves seem to roll over each other. Sunbeams crackle and burst over the broken surface into glitter. There are other colours in the water too, oranges and pinks that he can just about make out.

He even focuses more on the tree and the spire and, afforded more detail, he notices that the spire actually has three small spheres on the top, not one. He draws it in its entirety for the first time. The tree's branches are still bare and will be for a long time, but he wonders what it will look like from this window when summer comes, and immediately remembers that he'll never see that happen.

Of course, it happened many times while he lived here, but he'd never noticed. He finishes the drawing with a knot in his stomach.

Day 13

His heart breaks when he opens the curtains today. He can't see anything.

His view is shielded by sheets of iron rain.

The zip is a dull grey, a lightbulb without its filament. But he doesn't want to say goodbye to it this way, so before he leaves his home for the last time, he betrays himself.

I won't draw what's there, but what I wish was there.

He draws a dark sky with strong sun on the houses, his favourite type of light.

He draws birds curling, arcing, darting, tumbling through the sky.

Every type of cloud whipping by.

He draws lime green paddleboarders and yachts on the water and draws the spire in gold this time, and draws fresh leaves onto the bare branches of the tree like it's summer.

By the time he's finished the zip is full, with barely a sliver of space left.

It takes just a couple more hours for the rest of his family to gather themselves, and he makes sure to pack the sketchbook into one of his own boxes.

He wonders what will pass by the zip when he's gone.

What will I miss?

He steals a look out the window for one last time as they leave. The rain has calmed only slightly, but it's just enough to see a single bird-shaped shadow, circling behind those empty houses.