

Riptide

Stephanie Boone

“Displaced. That’s how I’d describe it.

“Of course you’re displaced...you, you moved from one place, your origin, to another. Your position changed from where you started. It’s basic physics.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ugh. Again with the physics...you know that’s not what I meant.”

“Well, that’s the definition of displacement, babe,” they snickered.

“Moreso meant it in a ‘forced to leave your actual home’ sort of way.”

A brief pause invaded the space where an awaited response was supposed to be. To quell the worries trying to take advantage of the vacancy in my mind, I peered through the only scenic window I had. The ocean sprawled into the harbor past a few disorganized residences despite the plethora of unused land. Buildings seemed to spill into each other like an unruly thicket of spearmint. In any other community, neighbors would grow tense over the close proximity of their plots. However, the locals of this seaport are particularly nonchalant on such a matter. After all, most of them stem from the same familial roots. Roots that are as unbothered by the extreme entanglement as they are strengthened by it. Roots that unwittingly make prospective seeds from afar all the more difficult to sow, let alone cultivate.

I suppose residential planning wasn’t a priority given the historical eagerness of establishing another fishing port. Just get as close to the water as possible! Anything to make the hardy coastal lifestyle more convenient. What better way to keep one’s nautical vessel in their line of sight than to

coexist within mere steps from it? If the spots closest to the water were already taken, then just build directly behind those homes, why not? At least that is what seems to have happened from the look of things. This layout was undoubtedly useful for the mariners of the area but was inconvenient for those wishing to admire the Atlantic's majestic presence.

From where I stood, I could distract myself with the enthralling view of the Southern Labrador coast, well, as long as I remained on the tips of my toes while craning my neck to one side. There's a gaudy-coloured business directly in front of my most scenic window, after all, a business that doesn't even have a window facing the same harbor view it's currently depriving me of. Yet another barrier that has prevented me from grasping genuine fondness for such a place. I've gone through an ample amount of discomfort to make this work - my strained neck would agree with that sentiment.

I was no different than a lilac shrub being eclipsed by the resolute evergreen. Desperate to bask in the glory of the sun, spreading in every direction to the point where I collapsed under my own weight. Failing to flourish unlike the superior native species that towered before me. How dare they make existing seem so effortless! Generations of evergreens have painted the coast with an unmatched viridity. Witnessing the persistent success from my neighbours left me fraught with indignation, to stand so splendidly in such a barren environment, no less! Why couldn't I, the melancholic lilac, take root like they had?

"-fugees, which last I checked you aren't."

"Huh? Sorry, what did you say?" I snapped back into the conversation a tad too late to interpret anything meaningful. My abrasive thoughts were still relentlessly racing in the back of my mind. It was as if my head was a spherical cage filled with dozens of stuntmen on motorcycles. The ones you witness at carnivals performing extravagant feats for awestruck crowds. Unlike the real life professionals, however, my stuntmen were completely neurotic and reckless. I did my best to quell my revving ruminations as Robin reiterated what they said.

"The type of displacement you're thinking of is for folks who are in duress, y'know like, refugees which you certainly are not."

My partner was right, but I sure wasn't going to admit that they were. That would be too mature for someone as frustrated with their current predicament as I was.

"Certainly feels like it..." I said, begrudgingly, "...besides, I basically HAD to move up here. Away from you no less...it's not fair."

I looked back at the sliver of coastline I could just barely see, trying to distract myself once again. It was a feeble attempt at preventing tears from streaming down my cheeks, tears that would only aid the gaudy obstruction's successful endeavour in blocking the oceanfront. What a pathetic display...I shouldn't be on the verge of breaking down like this. To think I'd be so volatile like a shaken can of soda ready to spill over...over nothing! What Robin sees in this sniveling mistake - this irreparable draft of a person never meant to be released, is beyond me. It must be hard being Robin when you have an Avery in your life. How they've stuck it out for this long is beyond me...

"No, no, I know...I miss you so much, Avery."

"I miss you too, Robin. Just as much..."

Another pause. As I waited for my partner to carry on the conversation, I took the opportunity to stifle an oncoming sob. I shot another strained glance at the elusive coastline that I've been so entranced by. My "origin," as physics lover Robin put it, lacked anything related to coasts but it did have Robin. The closest comparable thing to our hometown was Gander Lake, Robin's true origin and my second origin after moving across Canada as a child. Even so, I wasn't used to having a constant example of nature's beauty sitting at my front steps. Well, a beauty lacking an abundance of aspen or birch. Come to think of it, I don't even recall seeing any birch trees once I disembarked from the Qajaq W ferry. Sure, Southern Labrador possessed a unique kind of aesthetic but I still couldn't entirely resonate with it. Almost like photoshopping yourself into a breathtaking picture but it was easy to tell that you didn't belong.

"-but hey, once you're done with that assignment up there you'll be back home in no time and better off because of it. All of this will be worth it then, hey?"

I stared off into the distance, forgetting to acknowledge my partner's

inquiry, “Misfit.”

“...sorry?”

I sighed, wishing to be anywhere else, “That’s what I am...a misfit. I just...I just don’t fit here.”

“Not there, no. Here is where you belong. In any case, you gave it a good shot so th-”

“Did I? Did I really?”

It wasn’t my intention to blurt out my self-doubt so frantically but like a fickle toddler, I couldn’t keep it down. I felt ungrateful and irritated with myself because of it. To be given such an opportunity yet to still feel so ostracised...

“I’m sorry, I...don’t get me wrong, everyone here has been so welcoming and everything-”

“Except for that one piece of work you mentioned, the one who flagged you down at the-”

“At the store? Hah, yeah...serves me right for agreeing to talk about work while off the clock. Not my fault her kid didn’t pass anything in to me despite all the extra chances I gave. Guess it would’ve happened eventually in my career, but I wasn’t expecting that so soon.”

“Welp. There’s always one of those in any community.” Robin concluded, matter-of-factly.

“Yeah,” I nodded as if Robin could see me, I tend to have a hard time holding a conversation unless I’m able to gesture. “The rest of them were really nice though...but I wish the lot of them could understand how hard it is for outsiders to insert themselves into the, well, small town rural lifestyle. So many inconveniences and frustrations to deal with day to day.”

Robin hummed softly, “Hmm, I’m pretty sure that goes both ways, wouldn’t you think?”

I frowned. Somehow, Robin saw this and responded accordingly.

“Don’t be grumpy about that now, I didn’t mean any offense by it but, ugh. I’m just saying, y’know?”

A defeated sigh escaped from my mouth, “Guh...no, no, I get what you’re saying. Still, it’s all of them sharing a similar mindset and then there’s singular

me. My hardships of adjusting to this place are always so easily brushed off like, ‘oh the water has been brown and undrinkable for years, just buy water.’ ‘If you can’t get decent food at our sad convenience store-sized grocery store just drive five or seven hours to Goose Bay or Lab City, we do that every weekend here!’ ‘Want to visit your far away home? Easy! Just shell out an exorbitant amount of money for gas or a plane ticket. If you don’t then we’ll question why you could be so hesitant over such a no brainer!’ ‘It’s normal for us, just do what we dooooo...’, and so on!”

“Why’d you make them sound like some posh old lady given that they live in a place with undrinkable water?”

“Well, these posh old ladies can certainly afford to buy water! You know, the basic thing that we as a first world country shouldn’t need to buy! Not to mention spend all that gas money to go get food that doesn’t arrive rotten like the stuff we get here! They have all the means to do such things, after all! Like they-! They even have family up north to stay with! Unlike! Me! To go get stupidly overpriced, but fresher, food I have to get stupidly overpriced lodging! And that’s after using stupidly overpriced gas! But no! I am the crazy one for not being okay with this! Me!” I retorted.

Robin exhaled on my behalf, “Okay, fair point...”

I followed Robin’s lead and sighed as well. Fingers raked through my hair in a frantic attempt to calm down. My partner assisted with this by offering another quip in response to my ramblings.

“...I mean, you’re completely right. You ARE pretty crazy, Avery.”

A sudden frustrated snort of air expelled from both of my nostrils knowing what was to follow, “Don’t you dare sa-!”

“Heh, heh! Crazy Avie. Craaaazy Avieeee.” Robin chortled.

My cheeks puffed out of sheer annoyance while my brows knitted themselves together. I released an exasperated groan that burst from a previously puffed face. The utterance that escaped was much harsher than intended as evident from Robin’s diminished chuckles. A sullen silence replaced the playful hums of my partner. They were genuinely trying to lift me out of the pit of discontent that I had dug myself into. Leave it to me to snuff out the smoldering embers of warmth Robin had tried to rekindle.

“Robin...I’m sorry. I just- I can’t get by living here like they all do...and with how temporary my assignment is going to be in the long run, well...”

“It’s not much incentive to grow attached.”

“Exactly.” I said bluntly.

After pacing around my small apartment while passionately ranting, I abruptly stopped to glance out the window yet again. Unfortunately, I had successfully soured my own mood to a point where it had finally curdled. I had no interest in facing off against that damned pseudo-grocery store from my window so I decided to take things outside. I promptly snatched up my outerwear to properly defend against the frigid ocean breeze that tickled the mid-April air. The very same breeze managed to intensify enough to flick insignificant specks of grit from the dirt road into my eyes. Blinking furiously behind frames that failed to protect my sight from the onslaught of coarse particles, I trudged on. Never would have thought I’d miss a proper sidewalk so much, but I suppose that’s what I get for becoming too acclimated to an urban setting. Within minutes I was standing at the edge of my country, surrounded by the vast Atlantic which lapped rhythmically at my feet.

“You can still hear me, right?” I inquired to my earbuds as they barely hung on against the wind gusts.

“Yeah, now I can, signal’s back,” said the earbuds that contained a tiny version of Robin, albeit with a poor-quality voice compared to regular Robin.

“Alright.”

“Feel any better now?”

My thoughts were mixed, too mixed to side with one answer so I answered for both.

“Yes and no...”, I scanned the shore for suitable ammunition to puncture through the water’s surface. “Yes because, well, I’ve always loved the sea. It reminds me of home. Original home, I mean, y’know, Sunshine Coast back when I was a kid. Despite all the issues I have with being here...I do like the coastal closeness of it. Oh, and the quiet, it’s a rare sort of quiet, well, at least when the skidoos aren’t revving up around here.”

I picked up a smooth, oval-shaped rock which would have been a prime specimen for skipping across the harbor. If only the waves weren’t so wily

and untamed perhaps it would have fulfilled its destiny of gracefully hopping across the water. Oh, to be a little stone with big dreams of achieving a few seconds of airborne glory before sinking into the depths. However, it would have also helped if the rock was picked up by somebody who was actually proficient at skipping rocks. Nonchalantly, I chucked the rock without much thought as I reminisced about the past. A childhood filled with beachcombing for sea glass, finding perfect pieces of driftwood charitably carved by the sea, watching the tides rise as the sun falls.

I scanned the area for any sparkling glints indicative of elusive beach glass but all I found were the remnants of beer bottles. It was obvious these remnants hadn't even begun their doomed battle with the Atlantic. Hostile edges and jagged points were flaunted by shards that foolishly anticipated a passerby with bare feet. The likelihood of this glass army attacking such a foe was slim, but not impossible. First, the passerby would have to brave the multitude of rocks that surrounded the area with an unwelcoming texture. The title of "nature's pumice stone" would no doubt be an understatement if one were to describe the exfoliating power of this beachfront. Of course, there wouldn't be much reason to go barefoot to begin with as frigid temperatures clung to the region like desperate bed sheets on jostling clotheslines. Soon enough, the brown pieces of the shattered puzzle would see the approaching tide and realize their fleshy encounter was never meant to be. Instead, an unpredictable metamorphosis would occur in the swirling maw of the unforgiving Atlantic. Tumbling, thrashing, and transforming...the result? A rare specimen of Southern Labrador beach glass.

Shortly after moving in, my landlord had proudly introduced me to her vast collection of beach glass that she had amassed. Displayed in an array of transparent containers and framed on multiple walls, her wealth of these frosted treasures was clearly made evident to guests. Perhaps that was why I failed to find such coastal gems scattered around the waterline; my keen landlord had claimed her catch for the season. Then again, this coastal area was incredibly tiny, at least the walkable portions were. The surrounding area gave way to an impractical incline that only certain breeds of mountain goats would find appealing. Upon reaching the walkable area's end with the

proficient climbers hanging on to my thoughts, I turned around and began another lap of pacing. Last time I saw a mountain goat was when I was still living on the west coast. An adventurous family road trip across the Rockies seemed to feel like a hazy dream. I looked towards the falling star before me; soon colliding with the liquid gold horizon like it did every day. It was impossible not to compare my origin with the present.

“It’s no Pacific but...it’s nice to feel a kind of surrogate connection to it. Really brings me back since I’ve yet to get back for a visit. It’s been, what, 17 years now?”

“We’ll get you there, Ave. I promise.”

“Heh, I know, I already know...but thanks.”

I snagged another rock which was oddly jagged for one so close to the water. I briefly took aim at my colossal target and tossed the rough stone towards the horizon. It would now have no other choice but to be smoothed out as it joined its wet brethren below. My gaze clung onto the impact site of the rugged rock as I noted how abruptly it disappeared. A sudden finale of salt-licked spray flung to the heavens before descending as a series of insignificant plops. Not one trace of the inconsequential event was left behind. Such trivial occurrences meant nothing to the formidable sea with its power to devour far more substantial victims. I could surrender my entire being to the abyssal depths like so many others have. Offering up tortured senses in hopes that the vast waters would bestow a serene numbness. Oh, to venture into the unknown in dreams of drowning out the incessant agonies that afflict my mind. How easy it would be to vanish beneath the waves...

“Avery. You don’t...you’re not the type to do things the easy way. You know that. I mean, you...you’re-”

Robin’s voice faltered. My eyes shamefully sunk to my sneakers as I realized that I voiced my thoughts aloud. Unsure of how to respond, I studied my worn shoelaces and attempted to find the words to match my conflicted feelings. This proved unhelpful when I noticed how the laces weaved together in a close embrace which left me feeling both envious and despondent. I thought back to how often fellow co-workers would voice their woes about not seeing their partners for a single week. My face grimaced out of the bitter taste that

memory left in my mouth. One week? Try six months. Six-month intervals of separation from my community for the past few years of my life. It was a necessary choice for the sake of kick starting my career, for the sake of getting back home. Still, it was a choice that I made. My own choice. By that logic, this heart ache and mental degradation was entirely self-inflicted. I crouched into a partial squat and hugged my knees.

“It’s tempting, I hate to admit. Up here I...I sometimes don’t even feel like a person. I’m trapped here, trapped in my own head. Nowhere to go even! The next town over, over an hour away, has all the same crap! Actually, no! Not even that, they don’t even have a damn gas station! Just, how...? There’s just nothing for me up here! Everyone back home kept saying how great this would be, how much I’d love it like they did, but for some reason I just can’t...!”

My grip tightened in a desperate attempt to self soothe before releasing defeatedly. My burning eyes nearly followed suit as well.

“I want to go home. But there’s also a part of me that won’t stop worrying. I’m so, so worried that this- what I’m feeling- it won’t...”

The waves continued to creep closer, beckoning me to join them before they receded once again. Their hypnotic pull demanded my attention until Robin piped up, closing the silence between us.

“Two months. That’s all you have left, just two months...then you’re done, okay? Okay, Ave?”

“What if it’s just me...?”

“What?”

I inhaled sharply, “What if this- how I feel...what if it never changes no matter where I end up?”

“No, no, that’s not true. You weren’t like that here, not at all.”

“That was before I started this job. Maybe- maybe I’m just not cut out for this. I mean, if I can’t handle this then how- I mean, how am I supposed to handle anything? Is this just my life now? Feeling like I’m nothing every single day!? Waking up just, just, j-just to say, oh not again! Not this again! I don’t...I don’t, I-”

“Avery, stop. You’re spiraling again, just breathe. Okay? Breathe. You’re

okay. Just- deep, deep breaths. Okay, babe? You're okay... I'm here with y-"
Click.

"...R-robin? Rob-bin...?"

No answer.

My despair spilled over. No matter how forcefully I tried to suck it back in, it kept seeping out. Everything seemed to fall apart in that instant. I drew in a harsh breath in an attempt to regain my composure and buried my wet face into my scarf. My eyes scrunched together out of anguish resulting in hasty tears being wrung out like a dishrag. This dying place couldn't even support a phone call, let alone its withering population. I shoved my phone and earbuds back into my coat after failing to get any service. Service that was non-existent most times. What a feeling that must be. I'd be better off not existing in the first place, really.

What a waste I am! To think that I've been given this opportunity at life only to squander it all with self-loathing and an inability to appreciate anything! The majority of people in this world would go above and beyond just to be in my shoes. Why can't I feel proud of the things that I have? The things I've done? Of who I am? Why can't I feel anything but this incessant itch that makes me want to crawl out of my very own skin? Why can't I go a single day without wanting to be anyone else but me?

But here I am! Stuck! Stuck teetering on the edge of this expanse. Crouching upon the furthest easterly point of my home country looking upon the watery expanse. What some people would give just to stand in my place at this exact moment is unfathomable. Unlike me, many go their entire lives without seeing the Atlantic, let alone any sort of ocean. Yet another thing this past-due mistake has taken for granted. If only...if only this dreadful feeling could stop...

Fwoooooosh!

Peeling away from my drenched sleeves, I squinted at the ocean's rhythmic onslaught which had advanced considerably. The waves continued to inch their way closer to where I sat, reaching for me in a desperate attempt to douse my enflamed soul. In...and out...in...and out... The tidal pull was a tempting force to follow. How easy it would be to give into it. To harness its

power to escape this ceaseless pain. A way out... I smeared my hand across my salt-stained face...

...and surrendered myself to the might of the ocean.

“In...”

A pause.

“...out.”

Repeat.

I continued to breathe deeply while matching the same cadence of the waves rolling in. Slowly but surely, I was able to soothe the searing pain that had engulfed my chest. The usual weight of an anchor pulling my heart down still remained but at least it was no longer set ablaze. I lowered my head to my knees and clasped my hands around the back of my neck. As someone supposedly in the prime of their life, I wasn't expecting to feel this burnt out so soon. Still, when compared to others, I've been allowed to come so far...even if my current displacement isn't exactly where I'd like to be. I sighed dejectedly before turning my head and freeing a hand that gravitated towards the ground. Another rock throw was in order, well, at least that's what I thought until a small gleam suddenly caught my eye. I reached out in disbelief, expecting to be mistaken but no, it was the real deal...

Beach glass.

Rolling it between my thumb and fingers, I appreciated the glossy texture and mossy hue before pocketing it. I couldn't help but think of the journey this little gem took to become such a sought-out marvel. As I pondered the perilous journey of my newfound companion, my legs extended with a subtle crack from maintaining a rigid pose for too long.

“Two months, huh?” I muttered to myself.

It wouldn't be much longer now.

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After working 2 years in Labrador as a fresh out of MUN permanent teacher, writer Stephanie Boone has finally come back to Newfoundland! To cope

RIPTIDE

with the isolation of living in a community far from home, Stephanie would write various works in her spare time to combat the mental hardships of rural living. Her story, “Riptide” is one such work dedicated to her long-distance partner, who helped her through the toughest of times. Stephanie is eager to start her new technology, science, and math teaching position in central NL...as well as writing more in years to come!