

Continental Drift

By
Joseph Devon

Randy stood on the sand just where the small ripple like waves could reach up and wash over his feet. His sneakers were in his hand, one sock balled up in each of them. It was dark, the moon was only a sliver at his back. The stars in front of him and the lights of Cannes behind him canceled each other out leaving a dull yellow aura in the nighttime sky.

The Mediterranean was calm, more like a vast lake than the nautical crossroads of three continents. The town behind him was quiet. It was late. He was lost.

He tested the sand with his hand to see how wet it was, then sat down, setting his shoes beside him. He had heard many stories about Cannes, had read about it in all the travel books he and his wife had read to study up before their trip, but none of that made any sense to him. Also she wasn't his wife anymore.

He had drifted into town on the last arriving train. He would have kept going if that had been possible, but he had made the mistake of switching to the slower local trains somewhere outside of Italy and instead of being able to ride through the night he had been forced to stop in Cannes. After a few attempts to find a hotel to sleep in for the night he had given up and had started following the roads downhill until he found himself at the beach.

He dug a small trench in the sand with his heels, then dipped the front of his feet in and pushed, burying them as much as possible. The sand felt fine. There was a time not more than a week earlier when his brain would automatically have examined the sand, considered its texture and density and composition. That part of him wasn't working tonight. He wasn't even sure he could have starting thinking about rocks if he forced himself. His twelve years spent teaching geology at a small college in northern Colorado didn't seem to be a part of him. Igneous, volcanic, sedimentary. Stars, water, night.

He wondered where his backpack was. He must have left it on one of the four or five trains he had ridden on that day. That seemed most logical. But finding it was out of the question. It was too much for him to even remember when he had first noticed it missing. He was amazed at how that wasn't affecting him. Normally he was uptight. Normally small changes in plans upset him and something like lost luggage could cause him to fixate and worry for hours straight, as if giving himself indigestion could conjure up lost items. Granted, he had his passport and travelers checks and ATM card still, so it wasn't like he was in danger of starving to death in the south of France, but everything else was in his backpack. And yet, he didn't seem to be caring. It was curious.

He was a gangly man with a pointed Adam's apple. Occasionally he tried to grow a mustache only to see it come in decidedly wispy. His life had been shockingly average and plain. His mother was a battleship of a woman who had taken to life's difficulties by refusing to let them in and waged a war of protection over her children that included not letting anything enter their lives that wasn't bland and preposterously mid-western circa the early-to-mid-nineteen-hundreds. It was comical, looking back, what his mother had gotten away with. His sister's wedding reception had taken place in their living room and the refreshments had consisted of cold cuts on a white paper tablecloth and two six packs of beer in a tub. It had taken him awhile, years even, after leaving home for college, to get a grasp on what was authentically his mid-western heritage (he adored a good cold can of domestic beer), what was a necessary part of his lower income upbringing (many of his friends had found ways to cut costs for their weddings), and what was part of his mother's

fantasy life (the beer at his sister's reception was actually a more expensive brand that his mother had insisted on because it had been around at her own wedding).

His wife, Joyce, had been a big help in this process. She wasn't his wife anymore. She had allowed him perspective that even friends and high-school and college hadn't provided, and he had learned with dull plodding wonder that even after getting out of his mother's world it was possible to go even further and leave behind the mid-west. People didn't always sit down for formal dinner and it was okay to wear shoes without socks and saying a woman's name during sex could result in that woman making all sorts of new and interesting noises. None of these things would have ever occurred to him if he hadn't met Joyce, who was now his ex-wife. He was pretty sure.

It hadn't happened at all like it was supposed to. Separation and divorce were supposed to be tumultuous, painful, dramatic, or at least it was supposed to be somehow grippable. It hadn't been.

Randy didn't read much fiction, his recreational reading tended to consist of magazines that catered to his geologic interests. But somewhere he had picked up the idea that love was supposed to slink away quietly in the night. Or something equally poetic. But it hadn't. It had ended with an awkward conversation while he had been eating a grape salad out of a plastic container on his lap in his office. And not the kind of awkward he now found himself craving, not awkward because of the strength of the emotion involved but awkward because he had had a hard time hearing his wife, she was mumbling a lot and kept asking if he understood what she was saying. But he hadn't understood emotionally and barely understood, at times, literally. Even if love didn't always slink away in the night it certainly shouldn't go away via mumbling while on speaker phone.

He had been eating a fruit salad out of the flimsy plastic container that it was sold in at the supermarket, half a grape was speared on his plastic fork, and he was wondering why he always bought the fruit salad with the cubes of feta cheese included when the inevitable liquid at the bottom of the container, which he had taken to calling "fruit water," always soaked the cheese and made it all taste uniform, then his wife called and left him for no reason, then he ate the grape off of his fork.

He felt empty. He missed home. He missed his life. He missed breakfast. They were supposed to take this trip together during his summer leave and were all set to leave two days after the phone call. Randy had been unable to do anything but take his already economically packed backpack out of the half-empty apartment and use his nonrefundable plane ticket. When he had landed in Rome the only thing he knew was that he didn't want to be in Rome. He got on a train early in the morning, his body telling him it was still last night, and made his way to Verona. When he arrived in Verona he became quite sure that he didn't want to be in Verona. After a wait at the train station he boarded another train, then another, then another, and as the day wore on he constantly found himself where he didn't want to be. More waits, more trains, more of the day passing. Then the waits themselves became too much for him and he had begun hopping on whatever train was leaving soonest, not much thought being applied to anything but departure time and general direction, which was how he had ended up on the local trains, crawling along the south of France little town by little town and, while a larger train would have continued on through the night, his had stopped in Cannes and he had been told that that was as far as it was going. He had left the train and found himself at the beach.

Livinia Colmes was walking through the streets of Cannes during the summer night. The town was quiet, this wasn't a festival weekend, just a sleepy beach village weekend, something that had appealed to her mother while the wedding was being planned.

That wasn't to say there was nobody out. She passed a few bars and hotels while she rustled over the cobblestones, and there were a few late diners heading home. She was getting used to their eyes, to the comments, calls, drunken shouts, and confused gasps. She was even getting used to having to bunch her dress up in both her hands as she walked; her train she wasn't currently thinking about.

She passed, white and hurried, through the incandescent light of street lamps and the buttery yellow light pouring out of hotel lobbies. She walked quickly, her feet naked under the billows of her dress. One of her shoes was back on one of the streets behind her, the other was still in the bathroom of the church where she had used it to break the lock on the window when panic had finally overwhelmed her.

Panic and fear had been churning inside of her for days, bashing up against each other like waves in a storm, sometimes cancelling out, sometimes combining to peak higher than either had a right to on their own. Fear at the ceremony she was supposed to be taking part in at that very moment, panic about what she was contemplating doing, fear at going through with things, panic at how many things pulling out now entailed. Can you return a wedding dress? Who would tell the guests? Who keeps the rings? Should she write a letter, call her groom into the back room to tell him, run like hell? Worrying about what would happen to the cake had been the last coherent thing that went through her head before her shoe was off and she was bashing through the window lock to get outside in the hopes that she would be able to breath once she was out of that bathroom. Only she found as she hustled her way through the streets that panic followed after her somewhere not too far behind her train. She felt physically awful and not at all like Julia Roberts, or Jennifer Aniston, or Kirsten Dunst and Livinia felt a moment of dizzy calm as her mind momentarily became fully occupied with the realization that many famous actresses had played roles in which they had done exactly what she was doing right now. But they had gotten none of it right. They always looked so free and happy or adorably bemused but instead there was this horrible physical sensation of aching in her muscles. That was the biggest surprise, the physical pain. As if she were coming down with something, a disgusting icy sloshing in her stomach that made her dress feel too tight and that she was having no luck walking away from.

Walking, though, she was having plenty of luck with and she felt a very strong desire to continue doing as such. Her feet weren't hers anymore. Their soreness didn't belong to her. All that belonged to her was the mass of people somewhere behind her. She pondered briefly how the people who would be the angriest with her were the ones who she had been trying so hard to make happy when she agreed to this marriage in the first place. It didn't seem possible for her to do anything right. Even finding the train station. She knew that somewhere in the tattered yarns of her thought process the notion of getting to the train station had seemed like the right idea, and so some part of her had been trying to do this on her walk, but she had failed.

Instead she seemed to have made her way to one of the beaches. The open gap of sky at the other end of the street was a clear sign that the town was ending and the ocean was approaching. She decided this was fine. Her feet were coming back to her and sand and water seemed like a good idea. In a brilliantly oblivious motion she carefully gathered her train up in her arms, maintaining the safety of this already destroyed piece of her dress suddenly becoming the one thing that seemed accomplishable to her. "It might get sandy,"

was all she thought, and despite the fact that she had to drop her dress in order to gather it up, and despite the fact that it was already frayed and blackened with dirt at the ends from being dragged through the street, and despite the fact that her hair was fallen in parched blond curls about her face and her back was soaked through with sweat, she carefully gathered her train up and held it gingerly as she approached the beach entrance. She really hoped she didn't get her train sandy.

Randy's nostrils were flared. He hadn't washed properly since the morning before his flight and he relaxed his nostrils then flared them again, feeling the irritation of a pimple forming. Then in one swift moment the beach turned from a good place to sit and wait for another train into a very uncomfortable place to sit and wait. The sand was sucking the warmth from his body. And it was hard. And his body was getting sore. And it was boring, there was no way he could just sit and stare dumbly like this until dawn. And he wanted to be moving on. He had to get out of there. This was no place for him to be. Somewhere else would be better; more relaxing.

He stood up and turned to walk back towards the street, aware that his body was beginning to act in strange ways, his head wouldn't sit properly on his shoulders, which were slumping, and his torso was willing the rest of him to just lie down.

Then everything stiffened and the sound of air whistling into his mouth over his teeth meshed with the soft slush of the little waves behind him as his heart jumpstarted into a quick thumping rhythm and he stared at the ethereal white form gliding across the sand in his direction.

It drew closer and Randy looked around, thoughts of flight, thoughts of arming himself, thoughts of calling for help pinging inside his head. Yet some consensus seemed to have been reached because he didn't do any of these things and only stood still and watched this thing bear down on him.

The white form drew nearer and there was a peak of otherworldliness when he realized that the form at times resembled a woman in a wedding dress, then his nervousness began to recede and his eyebrows slowly lowered and drew towards a point above his nose as he struggled to make sense out of what he was seeing. It wasn't a white shape that resembled a woman in a wedding dress; it *was* a woman in a wedding dress. And she wasn't walking towards him, as he had first thought, but was walking very determinedly towards the water with no notice of him whatsoever. And she was a mess in a sadly comical way, as if she had put on her wedding dress before cleaning the house or climbing the Stairmaster. And, on top of this all, she was trying, and failing, to cradle a bunch of fabric to her chest. Parts of it were slipping out and falling through her arms and Randy realized that it was her train; she was trying to protect her train.

Randy turned and looked over his shoulder, a movement that was completely instinctual and natural, by the time he looked over his other shoulder this movement had become slightly stylized and Randy realized he was looking around, hopefully, to see if anyone else was nearby and also seeing this. He was looking for company.

The bedraggled bride walked past him, taking no notice, and then began to angle off in order to avoid walking straight into the water, her path arcing away so she could walk down the beach, becoming smaller and smaller, eventually receding into a blur that Randy had to squint his eyes to distinguish until she blended into the city brightened darkness.

Randy's stomach growled. He rubbed his palm against his stomach, then scratched at his side with his middle fingernail. He looked around, then at his watch, then went over to where his shoes were sitting in the sand.

He seemed to remember passing a café or something with bread and pastries in the window when he first walked down here. It might still be open. He bent his knees and squatted next to his shoes, deciding to remain barefoot while still on the sand. As he picked them up and brushed the sand off of them he paused, letting some collect in his hand. He placed his shoes under his arm and took a pinch of sand between his fingers, rubbing it together, letting it grind against the pads of his fingertips and sprinkle back into his palm. He walked as he looked, not really noticing where he was going, eventually getting close enough to the street to have adequate light. Holding up his palm he noticed the deep yellow color and large particle size. Quartz, he decided, with heavy iron impurities.

He looked around and got his bearings, then took one last look back at the beach, his head shaking in disbelief at what he had just seen there, and he marveled at how crazy some people could be before he brushed his palms together, dusting the sand off of them, and walked up onto the street.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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