

# Ocean's Echoes

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How can a room be so large, yet feel so suffocating? How can it be so quiet, yet feel like an earthquake is about to occur? How can a room be so calm, yet tremble with the anticipation of a word which could change everyone's lives?

*Guilty.*

As much as I tried to convince myself, I knew it wasn't the room that made me feel this way. It was the feeling of sitting in a chair, watching my brother Caleb being torn apart by the prosecutor's words. He painted him in such an inhumane and cold-hearted way like he didn't have an ounce of compassion in his heart. I clenched my jaw, tasting the metallic taste of blood as I bit down on my cheek. I began nervously twisting my dark brown curls to try to hide how on edge I was. I could've erupted in anger in any moment.

My gaze flickered to Caleb, who was seated at the defendant's table, with a stoic expression on his face. His dark brown hair was all messed up, and he was wearing the suit he wore at his prom. I couldn't bear to think about his 'crime.' My brother loved Natalie. She was the only person he would ever talk about. Things changed when he got into drugs, but he would never hurt her. I know he wouldn't. But I guess the prosecutor didn't understand that. With each piece of evidence he gave, my heart shattered more and more.

"There were drugs found in Caleb's pocket, matching those found in the victim's body. Rohypnol or known as "roofies."

I couldn't bear to watch this anymore. I looked around the courtroom, looking for an exit of some kind. The courtroom was decorated with polished wooden benches everywhere, and a few tall windows

around to filter light into the room, bringing a slight glow to the room. A familiar glow, like you could see through my kitchen window. Suddenly, my mind was transported back to the last joyful memories that I had in my home.

“Cal! Can you grab my DVD of Sleeping Beauty? It's on my dresser!” I shouted from downstairs, hoping he hadn't snuck out like he usually does.

“Get it yourself!” He shouted back. “I'm busy!” I rolled my eyes. *As per usual.*

“With what?” I shouted back, waiting for his reply. After a few moments, I decided it was best not to argue. I went upstairs and grabbed my DVD. I walked out and looked into Caleb's room. He was sitting at his desk, with his headphones on, watching something on his phone. He seemed tired. Burnt out. I wanted to ask if he was okay, but something else interrupted me.

*Ding....Dong....Ding....Dong*

Weird. Did Caleb invite one of his friends over or something? Mom and Dad weren't supposed to come till later in the night.

“Do you know who's at the door?” I asked, starting to become a little suspicious. Caleb was glued to his screen, and clearly couldn't hear me. I went up to him.

“Caleb,” I said, jolting him, to get him to listen to me. He looked up at me and groaned.

“What?” He said, taking off his headphones. “It's probably just a girl scout or something selling cookies.” He sighed and went back to his phone. I didn't know any better so I just assumed Caleb was right. Little did I know, it was quite frankly the opposite.

The doorbell rang again, but this time there was aggressive knocking along with it. My heart skipped a beat, and I nervously rushed down to the foyer. With each step, I could slowly hear faint sounds coming from outside. The closer I got, the louder they became. As I drew closer, I quickly realized what the sound was, and a sinking feeling settled in my stomach. Sirens.

“TASSIA WAIT.” A voice screamed from behind me. But before I could listen, I had already opened the door. A tall police officer was waiting outside, illuminated by a red and blue glow, and he was eyeing my brother who was standing behind me now.

“Caleb O’Hara, you have been arrested for the murder of your girlfriend Natalia De La Cruz. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

“NO I CAN’T.” But before he could continue, he was in his handcuffs, being taken away. I was in complete, utter shock. And that was the last time I heard Caleb’s voice.

Suddenly, the prosecutor’s voice snapped me back into the present, and the memory and echoes of my past faded away. I found myself back in the courtroom, seeing the harsh reality of what was happening.

"Jury, imagine for a moment the terror that Natalia De La Cruz must have felt in her final moments, the fear and the agony as she faced the person who took her life. Picture the devastation felt by her loved ones, robbed of the chance to see her smile, to hear her laughter. Now, turn your attention to Caleb O'Hara. Look into his eyes, as he sits there without a shred of humanity. The evidence presented before you paints a clear picture of guilt, of a man driven by jealousy and rage to commit the ultimate act of violence. The prosecution has shown beyond a shadow of doubt that Caleb O'Hara is responsible for the heinous murder of Natalia De La Cruz."

*HEINOUS? This is such crap!* I felt all kinds of emotions through my body. Anger, frustration, sadness, guilt... and none of it felt good. But I knew, whatever I thought wouldn’t matter. The jury’s thoughts would.

I couldn’t help but stare at each one of their expressions. Some jurors had their brows furrowed, others looked skeptical of the whole situation. But one woman caught my eye. A woman with glowing brown skin and curly hair. Amidst all the uncertainty, she seemed like a sliver of hope.

After a few minutes, the jury had given their verdict and provided it to the judge. I focused on the judge's expression, but I couldn't tell anything. Her expression was solemn and empty. My heart pounded in my ears. She cleared her throat. *Caleb's life was set with her next words.*

“The court finds the defendant Caleb O’Hara... guilty.”

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The ocean stretched out in front of us, like an endless azure expanse, its surface shimmering in the sunlight. The water was smooth and calm, gently lapping against the shore with a rhythmic serenity. The sand beneath our feet was soft and warm, and it always seemed to erase all our worries and troubles. Seagulls would gracefully soar above us, and we would always try to chase them. The salty essence of the air always woke us up in the morning.

The small beach near our home was me and Caleb's Garden of Eden. At least it used to be.

Now it was just the place I would come to reminisce about the memories of our youth. I had been coming back every week to the beach. Amidst all the turmoil of emotions and trauma, it was the only place I could turn to for some tranquility. Feeling the warm golden sand brought me back to one particular summer.

I was 7, he was 11. Mom had bought a volleyball a few months earlier for us to use during the summer. It was definitely worthwhile. It was probably the most fun I ever had with my brother. We would just rally it with each other, and we always ended up fighting somehow. But I remember by the end of it, I would always leave with my stomach hurting from the laughter.

Now, I'm 14 and he's 18. I'm sitting alone on a beach, and he's trapped in a cage. Now my stomach only hurts from the sharp sting of sorrow. I stared out into the ocean, tears beginning to blur my eyesight.

*Why did our lives need to change? Why couldn't I still be that little girl who could look up to her big brother?*

Now the waves were aggressive, waiting to swallow me up at any moment. The sun was now shadowed by clouds, and it didn't feel warm. I guess it wasn't cold, but it was more empty. Everything was quiet. Lifeless. It felt like a part of my heart was ripped out. It didn't kill me, but there was just a big hole.

I put my headphones on and put my head on my knees, closing my eyes. Music used to be my path out of the real world, but now it just seems to teleport me back to the thoughts I wanted to forget.

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"No way we can sit with her anymore." Shayla thought I didn't hear her with my headphones on, but I heard her loud and clear. They were all staring at me from the corner of the cafeteria, and clearly judging me. My friends who all said, "They would be with me through everything," left me as soon as they heard my brother was guilty. I mean I was a 'murderer's' sister. I'm some inhumane psychopath with anger issues who'll hurt all my friends. I gulped.

My face started burning because I knew they were still staring at me. I pushed my hair towards my face to avoid looking at them, and I think they got the message. I could've stood up and gone to the bathroom, but then I knew more people would be staring at me.

I just sat alone at the table, shoving away the leftovers that I had gotten for lunch. I had lost my appetite for the past few weeks, and I had struggled to eat a good meal. Suddenly, I began hearing voices coming from in front of me. Specifically, a girl named Avery.

"No, because I think what happened was that he had drugged her, and then...you know.." She whispered, putting her arms around her neck. I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore her.

"Really? 'Cause I heard that she had.. stab," another friend said in a whisper, "wounds in her chest." All her friends put on a surprised face and began nodding. Thinking, "Oh that's right!" As if they were even there. The worst thing was, they didn't even care, maybe didn't even realize I was right there. My face started burning again, but I couldn't hide my feelings anymore.

I stood up and went towards them. They may have only been a few feet away, but those footsteps felt like weights. *Was this a mistake?*

“Hey, before gossiping about a severe issue, maybe don't you think you should have your facts right? Like do you enjoy talking about something that ruined people's lives?”

Avery looked at me and scoffed. “I'm sorry, but did Natalia not die from what your brother did? We just feel bad for her.” Great, now I look like the bad guy. I looked down, and almost felt a tear come out. But I knew the truth in my heart.

“Look, Caleb is a good guy, he didn't mean it in his heart. He isn't a cold-hearted killer.” The words ‘killer’ stung my heart, and it seemed to touch a nerve in all of Avery's friends as well. They all uncomfortably looked at each other, then nodded their heads at me.

“Um... but yeah. I know he didn't mean it. I knew him all my life, and I know the kind of person he is.” I bit my lip and gave a slight smile to them. I turned around and quickly grabbed my lunch, without waiting for their reactions. I could now feel sweat dripping from my neck, and my heart burned with helpless rage. I probably just gave them their next piece of gossip.

I should've known better.

*PING.*

My mind suddenly got transported back to the present, and I was back at the beach. It had now gotten a little colder. My phone buzzed and I reached into my pocket to see what it was.

‘Mom: We are picking you up in 2 minutes. Get ready to go RN.’

“Oh!” I said out loud. I knew there was a reason today felt special. Well, I guess not special, but weird. Different. Today was the first time I would be visiting my brother after his sentencing. No wonder I was feeling so emotional today.

As I began to pack up my towel, thoughts began to rush into my mind. The past few weeks I had been imagining what I'd ask him about. Questions like, “How are you?” “How's jail been?” “Do you need anything?” But now that I think about it, they are all such superficial things. I mean, of course, he is

suffering. He's trapped in a jail cell for 35 years. He doesn't deserve that. Now I was at square one though. I needed something to say.

*HONK.*

"Well, I guess I'd need to think of something in the car now," I muttered to myself. I saw my mom waving at me from the car, and I gave her a small wave back. I quickly hopped into the back and opened up my phone to my notes app, where I decided to write down any questions that came to mind. I only had 30 minutes with him, so I couldn't waste a minute.

"So, are you excited to see him?" Mom said in a quiet raspy voice. I looked in the rearview mirror, and I made eye contact with her.

"Yeah, of course!" I exclaimed. Of course, I was excited, or at least I thought I was. Mom looked at me and smiled in the mirror once more. This time, I could see her face much clearer though. Her face looked tired, her eyes red and puffy. There were dried tear marks on her cheeks.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in a waiting room. This was the first time I had ever stepped foot into a jailhouse. I remember my uncle had gone to jail once, and my parents would always visit him. I wasn't ever allowed to go, but now I was old enough.

"Jonathon O'Hara?" A police officer called out.

"Yes, that is me. My entire family would like to see my son, is that okay?" My dad said, with a slight worry in his tone.

"Yes of course," the officer replied. "Follow me," he said, his voice tinged with authority as he gestured for us to proceed. We stepped through a door marked, "Inmates, Officers and Family ONLY." The heavy metal door clanged shut behind us.

As we entered, a vast hallway stretched out before us, illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights that cast long shadows along the grimy walls. The air was thick with the scent of disinfectant, mingling with the faint undertone of despair. Rows of tall metal doors lined both sides of the corridor.

Finally, he led us into the last door in the hallway, which was marked, "Visitors." This felt so surreal all of a sudden. As soon as we went in, it felt straight out of a movie scene.

Inside the visitor's room, the tension was suffocating. But there Caleb was, his presence casting a shadow over the room. He had an orange jumpsuit on, which was faded and worn. He had seemed to have a stubble now, and his hair was messy and unkempt. His eyes, once filled with life and warmth, now bore a cold, steely gaze.

"Mom, Dad, Tassia," he greeted with a tone devoid of any warmth or happiness. His voice carried resentment and a bitter edge.

I felt a lump form in my throat as I struggled to find the words to respond. He was so different now, so distant from the brother I once knew. People say 'Jail changes you,' but I didn't think this much. But I pushed aside my unease, determined to make the most of our time together.

"Hi, Caleb," I managed to choke out, forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace. "How are you holding up?"

Caleb scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. "How do you think I'm holding up, Tassia? I'm stuck in this hellhole while everyone else gets to live their lives like nothing happened."

"We're here for you, Caleb," my dad interjected, his voice filled with a mix of sympathy and frustration. "We'll do whatever it takes to get you out of here as soon as you can."

Caleb's laughter rang out again, sharp and bitter. "Save your empty promises, Dad. You've already failed me once. What makes you think you can do anything now?"

As Caleb's callous words echoed in the room, a feeling I never thought I'd have, washed over me. An unexpected surge of sadness... and anger.

How could he be so indifferent, so ignorant about the gravity of his actions? Just then, the realization dawned on me like a storm - Caleb wasn't only denying his guilt but he was actively deflecting blame, refusing to acknowledge the lives shattered by his reckless choices. It was as if he was in a different reality, one where his suffering was worse than what he had inflicted on others.

As the realization began to make its way through me, my heart began to burn with rage, and I felt shame on my face. Shameful for the person I had been in the past few weeks.



Unable to contain my anger any longer, I spoke up, my voice trembling with emotion. "Do you even realize what you've done, Caleb? You took someone's life. You murdered her in cold blood, and now you're sitting here feeling sorry for yourself?"

Caleb's gaze hardened, a flash of anger flickering in his eyes. "You don't know anything, Tassia. You weren't there. You don't know what happened."

"I know enough," I retorted, my voice rising with each word. "I know that a girl is dead because of you. I know that her family is grieving, that they'll never get to see her again. And all you can think about is how unfair it is for you?"

"She deserved it." The words echoed in the stale air of the visiting room, heavy with disbelief and horror. Yet, now I knew the question I needed to ask.

"Caleb, why did you do it?" I said in a small voice. My eyes trembled as I tried to stare straight into his eyes.

"She was annoying me. I wanted to be there for her, and she just didn't want me anymore. She was completely unresponsive to my feelings. So I got angry, and I drugged her, and used my pocket knife too..." The feeling of despair in my chest consumed the inside of me. He was completely deluded, and justifying himself now? I had hoped there was even a shred of humanity in his eyes. All this time, I had been wrong. Now I realized it wasn't my brother I was missing, it was the memories. My face began burning, and angry tears began falling down my face. Words began to spill out of me.

"I defended you." I sniffled. "I told them they were wrong. They didn't know who you were. An innocent, caring brother, who wouldn't even hurt a fly. But you've changed. You've become a different person ever since you started using drugs. I lied to everyone about who you are. No." I stared into his deep cold eyes. "I was lying to myself."

Silence filled the room, thick and heavy with unspoken pain. None of us wanted to speak to Caleb anymore, so the guard had let him away. I looked at my mother who was sitting beside me. Her eyes were bloodshot. I leaned my head on her shoulder, and more tears fell down my face.

The brother I once knew was gone, replaced by a stranger consumed by bitterness and resentment. And as we left the jailhouse behind, I couldn't help but feel a sense of emptiness gnawing at my heart.

On the car ride home, the weight of Caleb's words hung heavy in the air. As tears stung my eyes, I couldn't help but wonder if we would ever find our way back to each other.

“Hey, how about we grab a bite to eat, and have a picnic at the beach? Your dad and I haven't gone yet.” My mom said, in a hopeful voice.

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” I replied with a smile. I just wanted to stop thinking about him. Dad turned the car around and headed towards the beach. I gazed out the window, watching everyone outside. Just moving on with their lives.

Soon, we arrived at the beach with 4 boxes of Chinese takeout and 3 empty stomachs. I grabbed a few light blue picnic mats we had in our car's trunk and placed them down in the perfect spot. Where you could see both the ocean and the sunset.

As we set up for our picnic, something inside me began to shift. The knot in my heart, filled with all the pain and suffering from the past few weeks, seemed to slowly undo itself. All the guilt, sympathy, and rage in my chest began to fade. The truth was Caleb had changed. A bittersweet sense of acceptance began to settle instead.

As we sat down to eat, I took a deep breath, letting the cool evening air fill my lungs. For the first time in weeks, I felt free. I gazed out at the ocean, and the once aggressive waves were now serenely swaying in the twilight. Without any resistance.

Though the pain and loss of my brother would never truly fade away, I now had a quiet acceptance of the truth and all its complexities. Moving on would be a journey, but I was ready to begin.