



## *A/stray*

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We were a litter of six. Three of us disappeared, I don't know how or why. We lost them. I was too small, too blind, too deaf to understand that we were born on a shrubby dune at the far end of a resort strip along a beach peninsula. The row of giant towers and dens stretch on forever.





My mother bares her teeth to protect us. I've got one brother and a sister and they stay close to our mother's belly. I stray into the debris. Our mother groans when she finds me sniffing out empty bottles or chewing on a rogue sandal. She lifts me by the scruff and tosses me back onto the warm pile of my pack mates. She sighs a lot. I tell her my compass is strong. I can find my way back. She exhales and looks away, at the knotted pines bent and disfigured by volleys of hurricane.

We watch for the beings. We know some of them are good and some of them are bad and some of them are sick. A neighbour told our mother that sometimes they take us to a metal room to do a cutting so we cannot have litters. We are not the same after the cutting. Our compasses are damaged, our sense for danger and safety blurred. Some of the beings want to lull us to sleep with a potion because we are too plenty. Still others bring us to Obispo Street to sell if they catch us as smalls.

Many beings are sick but they don't know any different. They believe the heaviness in their bones is normal. They believe their shortness of breath and quarantines are normal. They are mostly on guard for the next moment. The next moment. The next moment.

They remedy themselves with tiny capsules, patches, and tinctures. The liquids are contained in shiny tubes that reflect the brightest sun. The smell that comes from their bottles is sour, sometimes sweet—but always makes me sneeze.

I watch the beings from the highest perch of our sandbank at dusk when my pupils dilate and I can see them most clearly. At dark, they howl and yelp in packs gathered around fires on the beach. Smoke drifts to my dune—meat and burning wood—and I yearn to steal closer to the smells. But I stay away. I don't want to go to Obispo Street or have the cutting.











There is a faint cloud of colour around the beings. It is rare to find a being clean of colours and residues. I see fewer colours around their litters. Their smalls. But the bigger smalls already have the colours and smells. They call us dogs. *Mutts. Scruff. Creatures. Get Off. Go. Get Away. You* and occasionally *Look!*

Some beings take the tonics because they have no choice. I know this now. I'm learning to separate the smells. To make a distinction: the shaking disease, the gravity disease, the breathless disease. Fearful aggression disease. They bite and growl too, but the sounds they make are softer—not always—and the cause of their upsets is not clear to me. I study them hungrily, hone in, trying to sniff out the source of their rages.

At sunrise my pupils grow small again. I leave my mates, asleep in a sweet coil, to sleuth the ashen remains of the beings' fire circles near the resort grounds. I scabble down the rocks to the beach where I find the most pungent treasures: spongy globes, flyaway towels, coral and pinecones, branches and bones. My collection is well underway: a stockpile of playthings that I keep hidden between two drift logs near the pines, safe from the waters that roar up the beach, shoved up and down the sands by the moon.

There are burrs in the sand. They pierce the skin of my paws. I lie down to lick the pads of each toe, but sap has made them sticky and the job is tedious. When I lift my gaze, a being walks along the edge of the water. Smells like a *she*. She is many shades of maroon. Stuck voice disease. Carrier of secrets disease. She has strayed from her rambling tower, her pack, to the shrubby end of the beach, and I am quick to follow.

We drift from the places we are supposed to stay.

I pace behind her, camouflaged by my coat. I am what the catchers call an ordinary chi. Tan. Impure tan chis are too plenty, a type nobody wants to buy on Obispo Street. I stalk this being with my head down to get a closer estimate. Her colours are a spectacular chaos of alone disease (blue) and shame disease (yellow). The sun tries to muscle through cloud, but the sky thickens, a hardening dome.

She peers at me and blinks. But she does not appear surprised. She smells of lingering tonics, grief and minerals. I keep my head low, eyes lifted and soft. Safe distance. She looks back to the sea, the way my mother stares out at the pines. I follow her gaze to the water. Take stock.

Metal clangs against metal on the boats, *bang bang bang*. When I stop and look at this being again, she is lowering her haunches to the sand. I wonder if she has littermates and if they sleep together in a warm coil too. Where are they now? Is her pack still asleep?

A low crash moves across the blackening sky and a fat raindrop lands on my muzzle. She lifts a long, hairless paw to the sky. Her nails reflect the iridescence of a shell. Not unlike the husks of my collection. Another drop. More thunder and a bright flash of lightening overhead. We look up simultaneously, then watch the sea again—an enormous bath—an endless pool of wonder.

She turns to face me, pats the sand beside her, says: “Have you lost your way?” I step toward her with caution, mesmerized by the glint of her nails.

*Has she lost her way?* The beings rarely cross to our grittier flank of the silts. *Why has she strayed?* I have never been so close to a being. She extends luminous fingertips and I cower involuntarily. She retreats, but not abruptly. “Don’t worry, *perrito*,” she says.

She cocks her head, a familiar tilt I’ve seen in my mates, and pats the ground beside her once more. I settle near her under the low, grey sky. We both wonder what more is out there on the other side of this channel. Raise our snouts to sniff the horizon. **SW**

