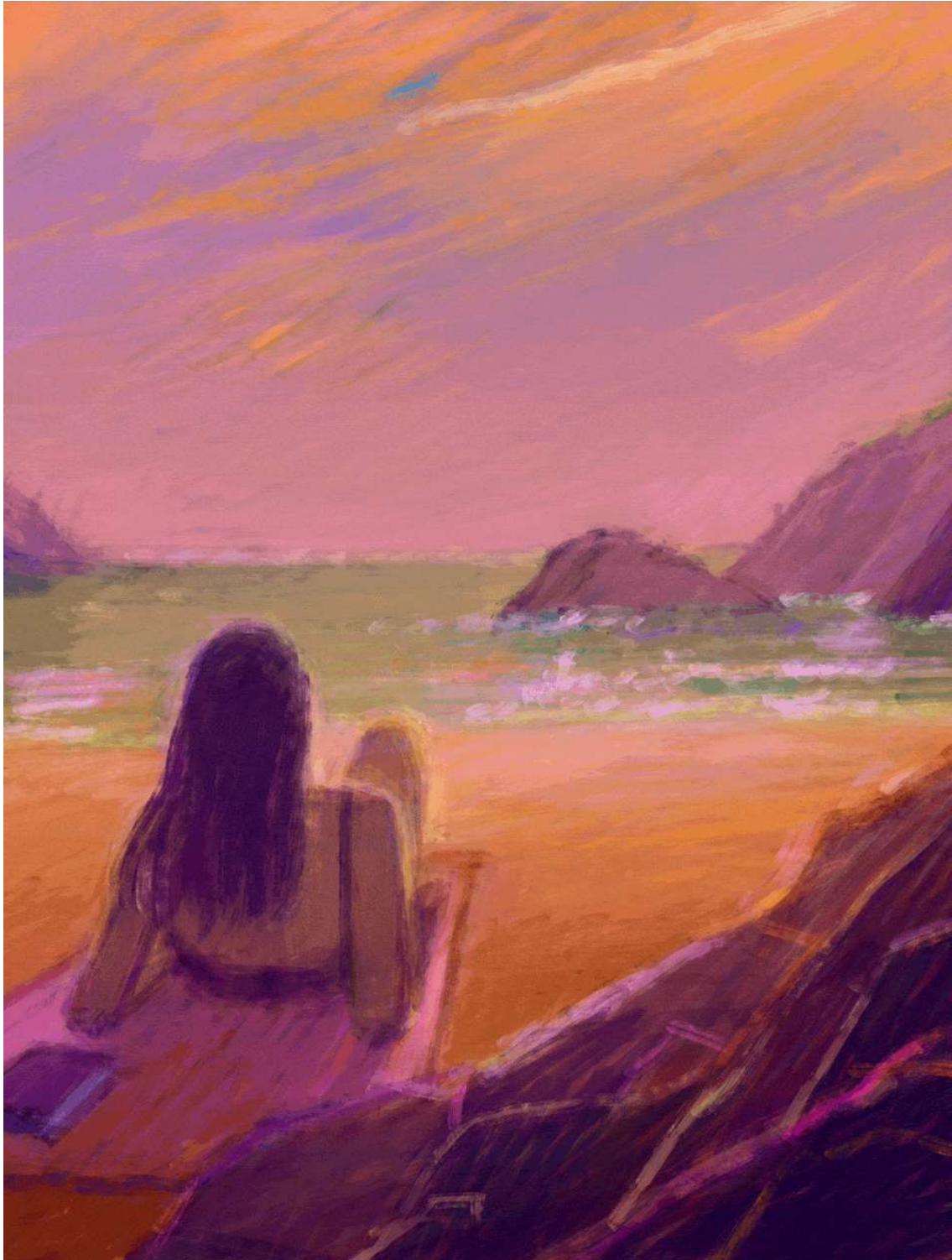


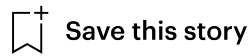
FLASH FICTION

# CERTAIN EUROPEAN MOVIES

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*This is the eighth story in this summer's online Flash Fiction series. You can read the entire series, and our Flash Fiction stories from previous years, [here](#).*

They were trying to find the beach from the guidebook.

He'd bought the guidebook at the train station, some dutiful gesture on his way to the residency, but hadn't even opened it.

She hadn't known him then—when he bought the guidebook. Not that she really knew him now.

He insisted on using the guidebook to pick this beach, their last beach, like he could still make the purchase worthwhile.

The G.P.S. was on the car's screen, the route marked in green.

He missed the turn on the roundabout. She didn't say anything.

Another go-around. He made a quick, nervous veer for an exit, her water bottle rolling off the dashboard.

Am I going the right way, he said, his voice on the edge of a snap.

I know as much as you, she said. She must have sounded annoyed.

So this is what it would be like, he said. If this went on.

We'd hate each other?

They were going the right way. Or some version of the right way.

They drove past the beach they'd gone to before. Only twice in the past ten days, but enough that she thought of it as their usual beach, in the way that even the smallest temporary world takes on its own signposts and traditions.

He had been mostly quiet on those beach days. Reading printed-out articles, taking notes with a pen. His absorption was real. She imagined this is what his

family might experience: his young child, his young wife. She nudged closer, took his shirtsleeve between her teeth then let it drop. He smiled in a far-off way. For long stretches he swam in the ocean, leaving her on her towel.

Did you see me jump off the rock?

No, she hadn't.

Did he notice she had gone in the water, too, that her hair was dripping?

No, he hadn't.

Maybe she wanted it to be something other than what it was.

She pissed by his parked rental car, squatting in the dry grass, a man walking past with a dog off leash.

They'd brought beers and an opener and towels from the residency to that first beach—the house manager had been angry.

Those were bath towels, not to leave the house. There were other towels, specific towels, that residents were allowed to take to the beach.

The house manager didn't pretend not to be exasperated with them. The house manager knew everything, knew exactly who was and who was not sleeping in their own bed. The towels were the least of it. People must have acted dumb all the time.

At night, the house manager sat in the hammock by the abandoned tennis court and called her family in Bolivia.

They parked in the lot. There weren't many cars.

He wanted to bring the guidebook to the beach.

Right?

If you want, she said.

She didn't say—why would you need the guidebook, exactly?

They started to walk along a paved road. It seemed clear, after a while, that it wasn't the way.

There was a botanic garden back near the parking lot. The woman at the desk gave them directions in English.

This way, he said with certainty. She followed him. They hit a dead end.

I think she meant that first left.

He clomped along in his basketball shoes. The Europeans at the residency had made fun of them. Not unkindly. They shared their cigarettes. You smile a lot, they told him at dinner.

The dirt path grew steep and narrow. She picked her way down: she hadn't realized how high up they were, how far the water was, until the cove appeared. He took a photo with his phone. She took a photo of him taking a photo. Then her own photo of the cove. Later, they would both show the cove photos to the people waiting for them at home, the wife and the husband. Or that's what she imagined.

The cove had an apron of concrete instead of a sandbank. The sun lit it up.

It wasn't the beach from the guidebook—not even close.

Would either of them mention this was the wrong beach?

There was a couple in sunglasses sharing a blanket. Farther out, on the rocks, was a group of young people—they had beers, food, the pretty women going bare-breasted.

She would have paid them anything for a beer. If she had cash. If—

He went swimming. Wearing his long swim trunks. The Europeans said American men dressed like children.

The water rolled in with the barest energy, never quite becoming a wave.

He swam far across the cove. All the way to the other side.

She took her time getting in. Halting steps. The water was cold and clear. She stood up to her shoulders.

Come here, he called out to her.

She knew she wouldn't swim to him. She dunked her head, anyway, doggy-paddled a bit.

She was a bad swimmer.

He was happy there, on the other side of the cove. On a rock in the full sun. He didn't need her to join him. He called to her again. Whatever he said, she couldn't make it out.

Already the sun was drifting toward the ridge—it was later than she thought. She moved her towel to stay in the sun.

The group on the rocks was having a good time. She didn't understand their Spanish, but she understood that part. They took turns jumping into the water, climbed out dripping. They didn't bother with towels.

She almost asked them for a beer. Maybe if she were alone.

When she looked across the cove, she couldn't see him. He'd swum out past the point, she guessed. She had her sunglasses and a book she didn't read. She had barely read anything the past ten days. She had not worked. It seemed like no one else had, either, even the German.

She decided to take off her swimsuit top. Her breasts were pale, puckered from the cold water. She spread the top on a rock to dry and waited.

She heard him getting out of the water but didn't open her eyes until he was right there.

Oh hi, he said.

Her nakedness embarrassed him in an appealing way. He was almost a decade younger than she was. She could see that he had always been a handsome man and that it had probably made his life worse. It made people want things from him.

He took a photo of her lying there, an arm covering her breasts. He'd delete it from his phone before he went home—she would remind him.

I miss you, he'd write to her later, back in the States, though the nights she went to his room he was nervous and spoke to the ceiling and they mostly just talked and he seemed relieved when she crept back to her own room.

Some mornings, the wind knocked over the wicker furniture on the patio and blew tree branches onto the cracked tennis court and everyone stayed indoors, waiting silently for their turn at the Nespresso, and that's when she looked around and thought, Who are these people?

Their trains left the next morning. Different trains.

He would give her a ride to the station.

They would miss their trains, nearly.

He would run a red light, would act nonchalant.

The woman at the rental-car drop-off would snap at him. Her anger seemed outsized. Leave the keys in the car, she was saying. Leave the keys—it took them a while to understand.

His train would leave first. Already they would be shy with each other. He would walk down the train-station corridor, and she would watch him leave, become a body among other bodies that she did not know.

That was the next day, though.

Now, they drove back from the beach with the windows down. Her hair was almost dry. She could play music from her phone, as long as the cell service held out.

The old singers. Some country.

Some folks' lives roll easy, please let me go round again.

Do I still figure in your life.

He didn't know a lot of the songs. Did she have that album, he wanted to know, where Bob's voice sounds so sweet?

Of course she did.

That one song, he said. The song—

Yeah.

—when Johnny Cash sings, too.

They drove along the fields. There were signs for other towns. The town with the museum, the town with the ceramics—she had seen none of it.

A line from an old story she'd read came to her.

The ending was sudden, as in certain European movies—that was the line. She couldn't remember anything else about the story. Who had written it. What it had been about.

As in certain European movies.

As in certain—

And that poem someone had written for her once: she'd been twenty, he'd been—what? Much older. Probably her age now, funny to think.

Girl from the North Country, because she loved listening to that song.

She's only twenty, only twenty, only twenty—that part of the poem had made her laugh. It wasn't supposed to. But he'd probably written it in five minutes, who cared.

She'd liked the last line: This is the part where Johnny Cash comes in.

There was service till they got to the mountains. The road winding up into the green trees—that's when the music stopped.

This is the part where Johnny Cash comes in, she thought. She looked out the window.

This is the part where— ♦

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