

# *The Green Flash*

— AN ESSAY BY —

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**A** green flash is a phenomenon that occurs when the setting sun appears green for a few seconds. A wobbly, neon green disk sinking into the horizon. Sometimes, a green ray follows and for a moment a light flashes and the entire sky exhales a giant breath of emerald glow. This flash is caused by the refraction of light, the atmosphere bending. Beautiful, strange, and almost supernatural, it is not always easy to see with the human eye.

Some have said that if you are lucky enough to see a green flash you might inherit magical powers, you might find true love, you'll never go wrong in matters of the heart. It is not likely you've seen a green flash, because they are rare, and if you have, you might have missed it if you blinked.

I've seen it once. Sitting on the sand, side by side with my father. I'm still a kid, sweatshirt over my knees. He smells like beer, I love him, and everything is wildly green. He says casually, *Don't blink or you'll miss it*. He means the magic.

My father explains that there must be perfect conditions to see a green flash: an unobstructed horizon, the moon and Venus and Jupiter at the skyline, clean air, and the belief that the earth, that our love, that everything is so much bigger than us. Also, luck. The green flash, the moon, the sky and the sea—this is a religion. Everything about my father is magical.

CALIFORNIA REPORTS the highest number of green flashes spotted. We are Californian. Our mythology is an abyss—my great-grandmother buried under a tree steps from Marilyn Monroe, my grandfather caught stealing cars on Hollywood Boulevard in the 1930s, and my parents growing up in the 1950s suburban sprawl of Orange County citrus groves. We spend Christmas on the beach. We believe in the ocean above all, and despite all of our tragedies, we are guided by the tides and our hearts.

My father lives on the Balboa Peninsula for most of his life. He's a waterman, he loves booze, he's charming, he's unexplainably rare. We spend most of our time watching the sea, he quizzes me on everything lurking below. On three sides we are surrounded by water, which brings happiness but also the sensation of drowning, of being trapped, my father constantly trying to be better, to be sober, and never living up to it. He is lovable and sometimes terrible.

MY FATHER DIES SUDDENLY—a drunken fall, a fatal head injury—and I get the midnight call in New York City. I had fled years before, after college for a job, an excuse to leave it all behind. *The wrong coast*, he always said. *The Atlantic is too salty*. I never want to go back to California. I feel surrounded by water again.

I have so many questions: How can I forgive? How can I ever love? How can I go on without him? What if there is no magic? What if I blink? What if I'm drowning?

As I navigate years of grief, I find myself remembering so much of our drowning and so much of our love too. I begin to piece together memories of our past: my father's notes on the Pacific Ocean, my memories of girlhood with a man who drank, and cussed, and yelled, and loved more than anyone I've ever known. I think of my father loving me so hard, and of his misfortunes, our moving, our having nowhere to go.

There were good years when he was fit, woke us up at sunrise to ride bikes, play catch, swim as far as we could. The rigorous morning runs along the water's edge where we dug our feet so hard into the cold sand that my legs were on fire. Surf fishing at dusk. A tall shadow upon the water, a full head of nearly black hair, a contagious laugh. There were bender years where he'd drink all day, avoid my calls, lie about everything, and hide into the night. He'd miss softball games, graduations, meeting me for lunch. When he was there, he was not always there. And then, mostly, he was everything in between.

I find myself scribbling notes about whales, every sea creature, and Evangeline—a woman who must learn to love again.

I FINISH WRITING *CREATURES* in California. Nearly a decade has passed since I sprinkled my father's ashes into the sea. I have been one hundred people since he left.

I am back at the beach now. My husband and I share a little rent-controlled apartment in Santa Monica. The ocean *right there*. A mural of dolphins at the end of my street. I've adjusted back to two seasons: cool and very hot. Sometimes I visit my great-grandmother at the cemetery. It's impossible not to feel the past here, especially on the crystal clear days when the Channel Islands appear on the horizon and I am reminded of being swallowed by the sea.

Some mornings I spring from my bed before the sun has risen all the way, like I am possessed, like there is some inherited madness, and I say something like, *Today there will be a green flash*. And each day I look, I say, *Don't blink, don't blink*. I beg my husband to drive me up the coast with no real destination.

I keep searching. I marvel at the moving water—my father out there somewhere; I watch for whale spouts, praise the stormy weather, describe the perfect flash conditions. We listen to the Beach Boys to be ironic but then sing along with every word, and my life after grief is a totally different and unexpected kind of happiness: some sadness, but a lot of hope. We don't see a green flash, but I know it's there and that's enough.

My life is full of love again, and my father is not gone. He's in this book. He's everywhere.