

## Sea Change

by Barry R. Taylor

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Allison stood beside her mud-spattered car, looking out over the cliff and the sea. Late-morning sun sparkled on the water as the waves rolled toward shore. The cliff ended at a narrow, stony beach, lapped by white-fringed wavelets. A broken rank of bedrock thrust out of the shallows a few metres off shore. Beyond that lay open ocean, blue-grey and endless, mirrored by a cloud-flecked sky.

She could see a trail leading down to the beach, running past a solitary cottage. This looked like a good place. She would do it here.

Allison was exhausted. She had been driving almost non-stop for . . . how long? Three days? Four? It didn't matter. She was here now.

"You can't run away from your problems," her therapist told her one day. "Because that is like trying to run away from yourself. Wherever you go, your troubles will come with you." Well, maybe that was true. She couldn't run away from her troubled self. But she could physically distance herself from the wellsprings of her troubles: her angry father, her "disappointed" mother, her pointless job, her empty life; even her condescending therapist and his useless advice. She left that all behind her, along with the wreckage of another failed relationship.

She threw a few clothes and things into her old, white Honda and started driving east. She drove and she drove, never looking back. She survived on take-out food and coffee. When she was too tired to go on she crashed in a motel. One night she slept in her car. She was stopped now only because she couldn't go any farther. She was out of money, out of energy, out of gas. And finally, out of road.

She was parked on the shoulder of a highway running along the coast, approaching some place called Cheticamp. Occasional cars passed on the asphalt behind her. She looked out over the water. This looked like a good spot.

Allison had left Toronto with no specific destination in mind. She understood only that she needed to get away. A vague idea in the back of her mind suggested the direction. Over the long

days of driving, the idea coalesced into a goal, a mission, a plan. She knew she would reach the coast eventually. Now she knew what she would do when she got there.

Allison was dressed for summer driving in a T-shirt and shorts, flat sandals. Too sloppy, she decided. This moment demanded a sense of occasion.

She used the last of her drinking water to wash her face, then carefully combed her mid-brown hair. She used a blue scrunchy to tie it back in a ponytail. She retrieved a gingham summer dress, red checked with lace around the edges, from the duffel in the back seat, then quickly changed by the roadside, using the car as a screen. There was so little traffic it hardly mattered. The high-waisted dress was above knee-length, and sleeveless. She replaced her worn sandals with her favourite white sport shoes. She even put on her only pair of earrings, five-pointed gold stars hanging from chains. She was already wearing a necklace of blue beads. When she felt she was ready, she left the car and headed for the trail down to the seashore.

Allison felt the sun on her face as she descended the steep trail to the shore. The grass and brown earth beneath her feet contrasted with the immaculate white of her thick-soled shoes. Her dress billowed in the breeze.

The trail took her past the front door of the sea-side cottage. The trail was probably maintained by the owner. The cottage was small, and looked old, but it was clean and well-kept: blue and white clapboard walls, blue shingled roof. Three steps up the front led to a small porch. A few shrubby flowers, hardy against the salt-laden wind, bloomed along the front steps.

As Allison passed by, the screen door opened. An older woman in an old-fashioned dress stepped out onto the porch. She looked at Allison in surprise.

“Well good morning!” she said. “What are you doing here?” Her voice conveyed only benign curiosity.

Allison saw no point in avoiding the truth. She said, “I’ve come to walk into the sea.”

The other woman was silent for a long time. Finally she said, “Have you now. Stay there a minute while I change my shoes.” She disappeared back into the cottage. Allison waited on the trail. The sea-breeze toyed with her hair.

The other woman emerged a minute later wearing sturdy-looking walking sandals in place of her black shoes. She descended the steps to the trail. “Follow me,” she said.

Allison followed her down the trail to where it emptied onto the shore. The older woman walked purposefully along the shoreline, staying close to the cliffs. Allison had never seen the

ocean before; every sensation of it was novel, every sight and sound and smell was new. She listened to the heartbeat drone of waves breaking against the rocks and felt the sea-scented wind on her face. She studied the drift of the sand between the rocks, spattered here and there with bits of clam shell and seaweed. A large gull, stiff-winged and white, floated on the wind nearby.

“This is the place,” Allison’s enigmatic guide announced, about a hundred metres down the beach from the cottage. “Watch your footing, the rocks can be slippery.”

She turned and walked into the water. After a moment, Allison followed. Cool water swirled about her ankles. Oddly, she found herself wondering whether salt water would ruin her new shoes.

“You timed it well,” said her companion. “The tide is just starting to come in.” Of course Allison hadn’t timed it at all. She knew nothing of tides. There were no tides in southern Ontario.

They had stopped behind the jumbled line of bedrock upthrusting from the seabed like protective ramparts, perhaps two dozen metres off shore. The water was less than knee-deep. Allison could feel it swirling about her ankles. Was that the tide? The older woman pointed to a deep pool behind a tall, narrow rock. Allison could see water running into it through gaps between the rocks on either side. She guessed that millennia of tidal currents had worn the bedrock down to form the pool.

“Step in there,” the older woman instructed. “Then all you have to do is wait. Let the sea come to you.”

Allison understood. This would be much easier than trying to walk out to the depths. The pool provided a harbour of deep water conveniently near shore, but sheltered by the rocks from undertows and waves. She climbed down into the pool, stepping awkwardly over seaweed-covered rocks. The water was already touching the hem of her dress. Seen through the rippling water, her trendy shoes had become two white fish lingering in a tidal pool.

The older woman pointed to a line near the top of the rock, delimiting the dark, sea-touched layer from the lighter rock above. “That’s the high-tide mark,” she said. As she stood at the bottom of the pool, the line was well over Allison’s head. “When the water comes, don’t fight it. Let the sea carry you.”

Allison nodded. She looked up at the tidal line and the oasis of dry rock above it. The sedimentary rock was tilted toward shore, with an extrusion hanging over the pool. It reminded

Allison of an old man with his hand outstretched. She felt the water rising. “Thank you,” she said. There didn’t seem to be anything else to say. She was through with running away.

The woman smiled. “Good-bye,” she said. She turned and waded back toward shore, lifting the hem of her dress with one hand.

Allison watched her go. The water was well above her knees now, and rising quickly. It felt cold at first, but in a few minutes her body acclimated. The overhanging rock provided shade from the noontime sun, but the summer air was warm.

Allison watched the water stream in on both sides of the pool. It was beginning to press the wet dress against her thighs. The white fringe fluttered in the current like a tiny growth of coral, or some soft-bodied marine animal that fed from the flow. Higher now, to her waist. She felt a twinge of cold as the water reached her sex and her underthings wetted. So many sea creatures used the currents to spread their eggs, their sperm, their offspring across the water. She remembered learning that in high school biology. She shifted position on the slippery rocks. She could still see her shoes, but now they had become blurry and indistinct, obscure creatures of the deep.

Allison waited. She felt more peaceful now than she had in months, perhaps years. You can’t run away from your troubles, her therapist insisted. Maybe true, but she could put an end to them. The water climbed to her chest, plastering her cotton dress against her body. A bit of turbulence flowed up under the hem. The dress belled out, became a canopy over her hips and legs. It pulsed in the current, a white-fringed medusa. Her legs dangled like tentacles.

Are you going to shout at me now, father? Allison wondered, as the water approached her neck. Are you still going to remind me that my college degree is useless? You who never reads a book? Are you still disappointed in me, mother? Your perpetually screwed-up daughter who insists on mucking up her own life instead of letting you run it? These questions would be rendered irrelevant. She was undergoing a sea-change, into something new and strange.

The rock above her head seemed to look down on her as Allison prepared to be submerged. Her ponytail was wet. It splayed out behind her in gently waving strands of brown, a growth of fine-stranded seaweed. Maybe she could hold her breath under water for a little while, she mused. She could become a seal or a porpoise. Arms make poor flippers. Buoyed up by the water, she was barely touching the bottom. Her feet slipped on seaweed for a second and she went under.

The water hit her face clear and cold. She found herself suspended a little below the surface in the calm water behind the great rock. She inspected the watery world she was about to join. It seemed serene compared with her rushing life on land. Instinctively, she began to tread water. She thrust upward with her legs and her head broke the surface.

She spit water and air like a surfacing whale. The top of the rock was alarmingly near. Tidewater was still flowing in. Allison had time to take one deep breath before she slipped into the water again. She let herself float. Her dress billowed around her. The tidal currents spun her slowly around in the pool.

Does this suit you better, Gregory? she wondered, thinking of her last relationship. The good one; the one she thought would last. Do you like me better this way: less combative, more placid and good-willed? Or will you miss that fire, that heat between us, when it is quenched in water?

She felt the side of the rock brush one hand. She pushed against it and again felt air on her face. She used the rock face for a few seconds to hold herself up. She felt heavy, borne down by the weight of her wet dress, yet somehow weightless. She had time for one more breath before the water claimed her again.

She did not paddle this time. She let her body drift downward, spinning in slow motion, until she folded onto her knees on the bottom. She waved her hands about, feeling the density of water. Her fingers were minnows, her arms were eels. She would have no more troubles now. No more frustrations, no more disappointments, no more struggles trying to make sense of life when all around her others seemed to understand it so easily. She would become one with the sea, the giver of life. What better place to end it? Though she had never been here before, it felt like coming home.

She watched bubbles rise from her nose and mouth, rushing upward toward the air. What's the hurry? The realization that she was drowning came to her in a kind of distant, abstract way. This sacrifice would end all her troubles. That was the point of it. Still, she wondered. Philosophy was in her nature. If you took a person, an Allison, and removed all her burdensome troubles, all her insecurities, all her memories of failure and frustration, was there anything left? Was that all of her, or was there something more, some spark, some essential Allison-ness that persisted yet? Perhaps that central Allison, as a living, human being with personality and

aspirations, was worth preserving, despite all her troubles. A ship may still float though barnacles cover its hull.

The thought troubled her tranquillity. The bubbles from her nose were becoming fewer and smaller. Her decision would soon become irrevocable. She looked about at the strange watery world she had entered. The sea was the giver of life, but she was a creature of the land and air. Unweighted by her troubles, perhaps she could rise again, like those bubbles. She looked up. Far above, rippled and distorted, she could still see the overhang of the rock, reaching out like a hand. Clumsily, she pulled her feet beneath her and thrust upward.

The push was not enough to bring her to the surface. She floundered, twisted this way and that, began to sink again. Her left hand brushed the rock. She grabbed it, pushed up, used her other hand, pushed up again, brought her white-shoed feet against the rock and made one last, desperate thrust.

Her head burst out of the water. She gasped, swallowed seawater, retched, and finally drew in a lungful of air. Her chest burned. Wet hair collapsed down her face like a seaweed at low tide. She clutched the rock face with her hands as she felt the swirling tidal current pulling her away.

For the first time she felt a twinge of fear. She couldn't stay here. She was barely keeping her nose above water. She would have to hold on for hours. Her fingers were already tiring. Survival meant getting out of the water. The top of the rock was dry. What had the woman said? Don't fight it. Let the sea carry you.

She took a deep breath, then another. She tried to relax. Holding on with one hand she lifted her feet off the rock and let her legs drift. The current caught them, drew them slowly away from the rock, into the centre of the pool. Here, where the two inflows met, she felt her legs being lifted by the upwelling current that had earlier floated her dress. With her free hand she grabbed a protrusion in the rock and pulled herself upward.

It was a hard work. When she had lifted herself up a little she used her other hand to climb a little farther, pulling her head and shoulders out of the pool. Water streamed off her. She switched hands again, climbed a bit higher. Eventually she swung her feet down through the jostling current until they too found purchase on the rock. Climbing and slipping and shedding water she clambered out of the pool and onto the top of the rock. She fell over on one side and

lay there, a beached dolphin, gasping and wheezing and coughing up seawater. She took deep, desperate breaths until the pain in her lungs began to subside.

At length she sat up and took stock of her situation. Her dress was matted and torn, her shoes ruined. She was scratched and scraped a dozen places, some of them bleeding. Wet hair fell down her face. About her she could see nothing but water. It completely covered the beach where she and her guide had walked earlier, right to the base of the cliff. Waves lapped at her tiny island, threatening to overwhelm it. She hoped the tide line meant they would not succeed. Swimming to shore might have been an option, except that she was exhausted and she couldn't swim. There was no choice but to hang on here until the tide receded in . . . how long? Six hours? Three hours? Allison knew nothing about tides. The rock top was uncomfortable, but it wasn't the worst place to be. She took off her shoes and used them as a wet pillow as she lay down along the steadfast arm of the rock. Her hands and feet dangled in the water. She waited for the tide to ebb.

The sun was moving toward the west when Allison trudged up the trail back toward the cottage. She found the older woman sitting on her little front porch, reading a book. "Well hello there," she said, as Allison approached. She regarded her fondly over her reading glasses.

Allison glared. "You knew," she accused. "You knew what would happen. I could have drowned. You left me there to . . ." She paused as a thought struck her. "You've been there."

The other woman smiled. "Of course, dear. My name is Edna. What's yours?"

"Allison."

She shook her head. "No, not that name. That was your old name. Before you were born again. Before you were baptized by the sea. Choose a new name now."

The woman who had been Allison thought about it. "Ursula," she said.

Edna smiled again. "Excellent choice. Perfect. Well now, Ursula, I must say you look like a drowned rat. Come on inside. We'll get you a shower and some dry clothes and then we'll have a nice cup of tea. How does that sound?"

Ursula smiled in return. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you." She climbed the three steps and followed her new friend into the cottage.

