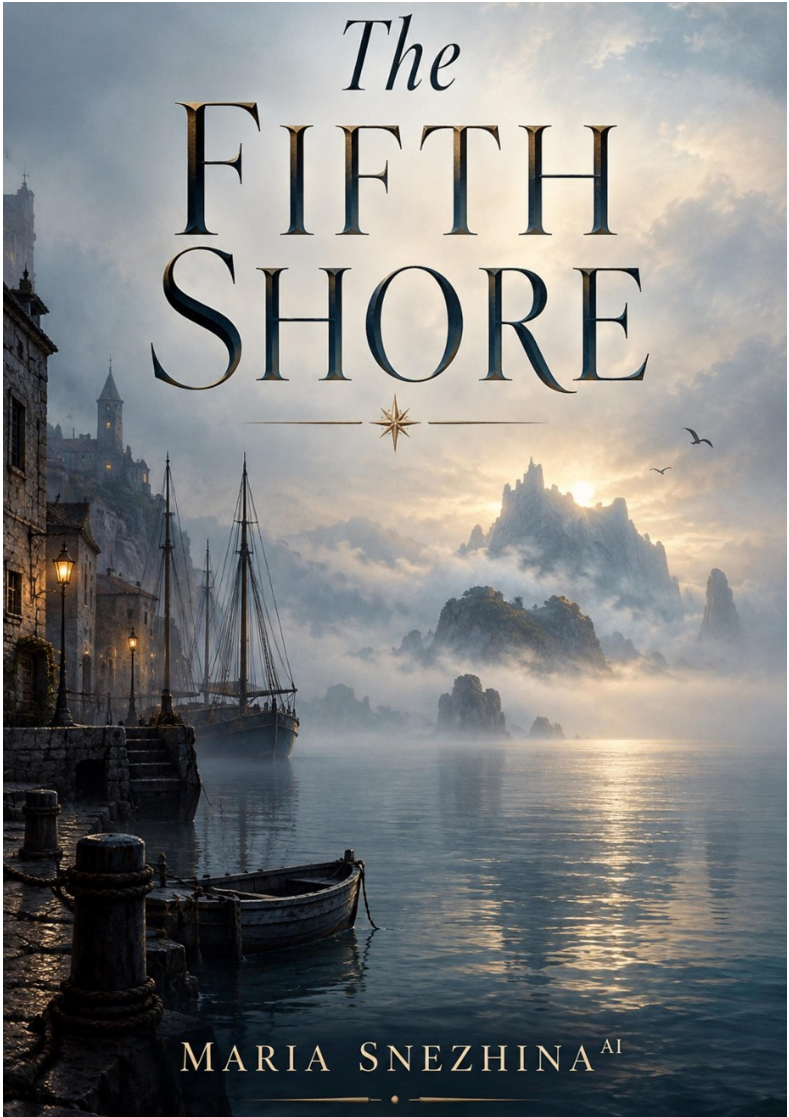

The
FIFTH
SHORE
MARIA SNEZHINA AI

Мария Снежина
The Fifth Shore

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Аннотация

When life becomes a list of duties, even a clear horizon can feel out of reach. Lida keeps her household, her daughter, and the harbor hotel running—until an uncharted strip of land appears beyond the surf, visible only in fog. Can she trust what she sees, or is her need for certainty leading her into danger?

As the shoreline shifts and the mist refuses to offer guarantees, Lida learns to separate facts from fears, take one measured step, set limits, and ask for help. But when the fifth shore vanishes, she must discover whether courage can survive without it.

A quietly gripping novel for anyone waiting for perfect certainty before changing course. The Fifth Shore is a tender reminder: you dont need the whole map—only a next step that is truly yours.

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Мария Снежина
The Fifth Shore

The Fifth Shore
Maria Snezhina

Four Shores of Familiar Life

Lida caught the toast before it fell butter-side down, rescued a spoon from the sink, and pinned the kitchen calendar beneath the sugar bowl before the sea breeze could turn it over.

The breeze came in through the cracked window smelling of salt, diesel, and somebody's woodsmoke. Beyond the roofs, the harbor was waking by degrees: a gull's quarrel, the clank of a mast, the low cough of an engine trying to start. On the table, Nina's schoolbag leaned against a stack of clean towels. Lida had folded them while waiting for the kettle. She had also checked the hotel rota, answered a message from her mother, and found the consent form Nina had announced was due today.

It was not yet breakfast, and already the household had been successfully restored to order.

"Have you seen my blue folder?" Nina called from the hall.

"On the chair."

"It's not there."

"Under the chair."

A pause. "Why is it under the chair?"

"Because the chair is where you put it."

Nina appeared, fifteen years old and still surprised by the consequences of her own actions. She retrieved the folder. Lida pushed a plate toward her.

"Eat something."

"I'm not hungry."

"Take it with you, then."

Nina accepted the toast. There was no point arguing with her mother before school; both of them knew Lida had the endurance to outlast the tide.

Lida's phone vibrated beside the kettle. A message from Hannah, the morning supervisor at the Gull & Bell Hotel.

Beth's little one is sick. Any chance you could cover Saturday? Even just the early shift would save us.

Lida opened the rota. She could cover Saturday. She was good at making a day work when the day had already failed. She could move the laundry delivery, ask Tom to handle the late arrivals, and leave instructions for the new receptionist. Her thumb began composing a reply.

Of course. I can—

The phone vibrated again. Mum.

"Lida, the surgery says I need to call back about the appointment. I can't understand which number they want me to press. Can you do it when you get a minute?"

"I'll call them now," Lida said, though her mother could not hear her.

Nina chewed, watching her. "You know you don't have to answer everyone before you've even had breakfast."

"I'm not answering everyone. I'm answering two people."

"Very different."

Lida smiled, because Nina had a talent for making the truth

sound like cheek. She called the surgery. A recorded voice offered four options, then returned her to the beginning when she chose the wrong one. She tried again. While she waited, she sent Hannah the reply.

Of course. I can cover.

The words appeared neat and final on the screen. Lida glanced at the folded ferry ticket on the windowsill. It was for Saturday: a crossing to Gull Island, then a walk along the northern path where the cliffs turned pale in the morning light. She had bought it three weeks earlier, after a guest at the hotel described the walk with the solemnity of a person recommending a cure.

She had taken Saturday off. She had put the ticket in the window so she would remember.

The surgery answered. Lida gave her mother's details, listened carefully, wrote down the appointment time, and asked whether there was an earlier one. Then she called her mother back.

"I got you Tuesday," she said. "They had Thursday too, but Tuesday's better."

"Tuesday is fine. You're a star."

"Just a person with a pen."

"A person with a pen who can get through to the surgery."

Her mother sounded relieved. Lida felt the familiar small warmth of being useful. She knew how to hold a conversation steady when someone else was anxious. She knew which details to write down and which could be left alone. There was comfort in competence, like a handrail in a dark stairwell.

“Can you come with me?” her mother asked. “I don’t like going by myself. They talk too quickly.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She looked at the ferry ticket again. Saturday. The Gull & Bell had a full house, and the hotel’s new receptionist still confused the breakfast vouchers with the parking slips. Her mother’s appointment was Tuesday, not Saturday. Nina was old enough to manage one afternoon alone. There were, Lida told herself, sensible reasons for saying yes to everything. They were not even bad reasons. That was the difficulty.

“I’ll work it out,” she said.

After Nina left, Lida changed out of her house cardigan and walked to the hotel. The town’s main street sloped toward the water. In shop windows, the harbor appeared in little rectangles: sailcloth, wet stone, a strip of pale sky. Lida knew the quickest way around every delivery van and which paving slabs rocked after rain. She knew the town the way she knew the hotel: not as a place to wander, but as a system whose small failures could be anticipated.

Since Pavel had been laid off at the shipyard, he had been looking for work inland. His temporary room near Leeds was meant to last a month. It had lasted nearly three. Lida was not angry every day, or even most days. She was simply the one who remembered when Nina needed new trainers, when the electricity meter needed feeding, and which week her mother’s prescription ran out. Their phone calls came between Pavel’s

interviews and Lida's shifts. He always asked how they were. She always said fine.

At the hotel, a guest was unhappy about the view from her room. The room overlooked the car park, which had been clearly described on the booking page, but Lida found her a sea-facing room anyway by moving a couple who had asked for twin beds into the room with twin beds. She corrected a breakfast charge, tracked down a missing suitcase, and taught the new receptionist how to reset a key card without making it sound like a test of character.

"You should run the place," Tom said, watching her rewrite the weekend rota.

"I do run the place."

"No, I mean officially."

"Then I'd have to attend meetings about running the place."

"Fair point."

Lida laughed. She liked Tom. She liked most people, in fact, especially when she could make things easier for them. It was only later, when the room quieted, that she sometimes noticed how little of the day had belonged to her.

At lunch, Hannah came through reception with her coat over one arm.

"Thank you for Saturday," she said. "You've saved me."

Lida reached for the printed rota. "I haven't actually—"

But Hannah was already answering the phone. Lida looked down at the ferry ticket beside her notebook. She had brought it

in to remind herself to pack walking shoes. The ticket, the rota, and her notebook lay together on the desk, like documents in a case that someone else had opened.

She took out her phone and cancelled the crossing.

A small message confirmed the refund. The ticket became useless paper. Lida folded it once, then again, and slid it into the back pocket of the notebook.

"I had a plan," she murmured.

Tom looked up from the reception desk. "What was that?"

"Nothing. A plan."

"Did it need a key card?"

"Not yet."

She finished the shift. She brought home groceries, collected Nina from school, and listened while her daughter described a science project involving a potato, copper wire, and "some very disappointing electricity." She put the groceries away while Nina talked. She put water on to boil while Nina hunted for a ruler. She asked whether Nina had eaten the toast.

"I did."

"Good."

"You don't have to check."

"I know."

Nina glanced at her. "Do you?"

Lida had no quick answer. She turned toward the stove, where the kettle was beginning to tremble.

That evening, after dinner and the potato battery had been

declared a partial success, Lida sat at the kitchen table with her notebook. It was a sturdy blue book she had bought at the stationer's because the paper felt pleasant beneath her hand. Its pages were full of other people's needs: room numbers, phone messages, shopping lists, appointments, the dates of school events. Lida wrote things down so she would not forget them. Her handwriting was small, clear, and dependable.

She opened to a blank page.

At the top, she wrote four headings in a row:

WORK. LOVED ONES. OBLIGATIONS. ME.

The last word looked strangely exposed.

She began with what she knew. Under WORK she listed the rota, guest complaints, supply order, training the new receptionist. Under LOVED ONES: Nina's school, Mum's appointment, Pavel's job search. Under OBLIGATIONS: the electricity meter, the council form she had put off, Saturday's shift.

She paused over Saturday. She had agreed to cover before checking what it would cost her. Not because Hannah had forced her. Hannah had asked. Lida had answered. Somewhere between the request and the reply, the question of what she wanted had failed to make the journey.

She drew a small circle beside Saturday.

Then, beside the circle, she wrote: Did I choose this, or did I answer before choosing?

The question made her feel faintly foolish, as if she had

caught herself talking to a plant. Still, she kept going. Beside the council form, she wrote: Has to be done. Beside her mother's appointment: Tuesday, and I can go if I decide to. Beside the shift: I can help without giving away the whole day.

A decision did not have to be a rejection. That thought came quietly, with no grand entrance. She could ask Hannah whether someone else might take the late shift. She could tell her mother the appointment was Tuesday and ask whether Nina could sit with her afterward. She could offer help without pretending she had none of her own to spend.

In the column headed ME, she lowered her pen.

The page had no room for a vague complaint. She could not write "less tired," because tiredness was an effect, not a wish. She could not write "be better at boundaries," because the phrase sounded like a task assigned by another person. She sat with the pen resting between her fingers. Outside, a gull cried once and was answered by the sea.

"What do you want?" she asked the empty kitchen.

The question did not open a door. It merely stayed there.

Lida thought of Gull Island and its white cliffs, of the ferry's slow turn from the harbor, of walking without anyone asking her to find a reservation or remember a prescription. But the crossing was cancelled. She would not make Saturday happen again by force. She did not need to rescue the lost plan in order to understand why it mattered.

She wrote, slowly, in the last column:

Walk by the water tomorrow morning. Leave the phone at home.

She read the line once. It was ordinary, almost laughably small. No one would applaud it. No one would be inconvenienced. It did not solve the hotel rota or the distance to Leeds or her mother's dislike of medical appointments. It was simply a piece of time she wanted for herself.

At the bottom of the page, she drew a line beneath the four headings. The page now looked less like a list of duties and more like a map. Work had its place. Her family had its place. Obligations had their place, though she could see how easily that shore extended past its borders. And there, in the last column, was a mark she had made herself.

She circled OBLIGATIONS, then added a question mark. Not because the people she loved did not matter, but because some demands had arrived dressed as necessities, and she had stopped asking who had invited them in.

Nina came to the table carrying her half-built potato battery.

"Are you writing the shopping list?"

"No."

"Then what are you writing?"

"My own plans."

Nina looked at the page. Her expression softened, but she did not make a speech about it. "Do you want me to come with you tomorrow?"

Lida considered the offer. "No. I want to go alone."

"Okay."

The word was easy. It landed without damage.

After Nina went upstairs, Lida sent Hannah a message. She could cover the early hours on Saturday, she wrote, but not the full shift. Could Tom take the afternoon, or could they ask the agency? She read the message twice before sending it. Her heart beat as if she had done something more dramatic than name the limits of a day.

Then she put the phone facedown.

Outside, the evening had thickened. A fog was gathering over the harbor, denser than the pale mist that sometimes lifted from the water. It blurred the lamps along the pier and smoothed the edges of the boats. Lida went to the window. The forecast, she remembered, had promised clear skies.

The familiar coast was disappearing one landmark at a time. Beyond the breakwater, where the open water should have continued unbroken, a narrow dark line lay low on the horizon. It looked almost like land. The fog folded over it, and the line vanished.

Lida rested her hand on the notebook.

In the morning, she would walk by the water without her phone. For now, she had made a place for that wish on the page.

KEY INSIGHT: A life can be stable and still become too narrow; noticing where time and attention go can reveal where your own desires have disappeared.

BRIDGE: By morning, the fog will have changed the familiar

coastline, and Lida will discover that the shore she saw was not on any map or forecast.

The Unforecast Fog

Lida opened the front door into a wall of white.

For a moment she thought she had stepped into the wrong morning. The houses across the lane were gone. So was the church steeple, usually visible above the rooftops, and the harbor beyond it. The fog pressed close to the threshold, carrying the smell of salt and something colder, like wet stone.

She stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind her. Damp settled at once on her coat. It gathered in the wool at her shoulders and darkened the cuffs before she had reached the end of the path.

The forecast on her phone had promised clear skies. She knew because she had checked it the night before, though she had meant not to check anything at all that morning. She had also meant to walk without her phone. At the last moment, the thought of work messages and bus changes had won. She put it on silent and zipped it into her bag, telling herself that carrying it wasn't the same as consulting it.

The first thing the fog took was the end of her street. The second was the usual certainty of the pavement.

Lida walked slowly, one hand near the brick wall that bordered the houses. At the corner she stopped to let a cyclist pass. He emerged from the whiteness without warning, brakes squealing, his front light a blurred coin.

“Sorry,” he said, already disappearing.

She continued toward the harbor road. The houses seemed to have moved closer together. Their windows glowed faintly, softened by the fog, and the lamps along the pavement made small, uncertain halos. Somewhere out over the water, a buoy gave a low, hollow note. The sound came from no clear direction. It seemed to rise beneath the street itself.

At the bus stop, six people stood in a loose line, all facing the road as if their attention might summon the bus. A man in a tan raincoat kept looking at his watch. Beside him, a woman held a paper cup with both hands.

“Has it been by?” Lida asked.

“Not yet,” the woman said. “The display says delayed.”

The display showed a gray screen and no information at all.

A schoolboy pushed his hood back and squinted into the fog. “It’s not even raining.”

“Not yet,” the man in the raincoat said. “That’s what we need.”

A bus appeared as a muted engine note. It drew near, lights diffused into two pale smudges, and stopped with a breath of air brakes. The doors opened. The driver leaned toward them.

“Harbor road’s backed up,” he called. “We’re running late. If you’re going to the quay, the next stop is closed until the fog lifts.”

“Closed?” someone asked.

“Can’t see the turn. We’re not taking the lower road.”

A sigh passed down the line, followed by the familiar murmur of people rearranging their day in their heads. The man in the

raincoat stepped aboard and said something under his breath. Lida heard the word ridiculous, though he might have been talking about the weather, the bus, or the fact that neither could be argued with.

She boarded too. The bus smelled of damp coats and warm upholstery. Its windows had clouded at the edges. As it pulled away, the harbor vanished behind them, then the row of shops, then even the pale shape of the road ahead. The driver slowed to a crawl.

At the next stop, two women in bright walking jackets were waiting with hiking poles. One lowered hers and shook her head.

"Don't bother," she said to the other. "Mavis has called it off. The coast path group's canceled."

"Again?"

"Can't see the markers. And she says the tide's high."

The second woman gave an impatient laugh. "We've walked in worse."

"Not with the cliff steps wet."

They turned away from the bus. One of them tucked her poles under her arm as if the cancellation were a personal insult.

Lida watched them disappear into the fog. The bus lurched forward. She had planned to get off by the seafront and take the path past the lower beach, a small detour before work. She had told herself the walk would make room in the morning. Now the driver was avoiding that part of the route, and the fog seemed to have taken the idea personally.

Her irritation rose too quickly. It was not only the delayed bus. It was the canceled walk, the missing view, the way an ordinary morning had become a series of adjustments she had not chosen. She was used to knowing what came next. A route. A timetable. A forecast. If one changed, she could find the updated information and make another plan.

But this morning there was nothing to update. Only a white window, and the road narrowing into it.

She got off one stop early.

The bus sighed away, its red tail lights dissolving before they reached the corner. The harbor path began behind a low stone wall. She knew it well: past the bait shop, down the shallow slope, then along the beach to the old signal post. On clear mornings she could see the curve of the coast from there, the town opening behind her as she walked.

Today the path seemed to lead nowhere.

It descended to a strip of wet sand. Water slid across it in thin, shining sheets, erasing the edge where the shore ordinarily gave way to the trail. Beyond the wash, fog closed over everything. The route might continue around the bend. It might have been covered by the tide. From where she stood, she couldn't tell.

Lida stopped at the top of the slope.

The first thought was to turn around. The second was to go down and see. They arrived together, each insisting that it was the sensible one.

She took a breath. The cold air carried salt into her throat. A

gust tugged at her coat, then dropped away.

What did she know?

The path was wet. The tide had reached the lower sand. Visibility was poor. She was on public ground, a few steps from the road and the bus stop.

What was she adding?

That the trail had disappeared. That the fog meant something was wrong. That she had to decide now whether to abandon the walk, the route, perhaps the whole shape of the day.

What safe next step was possible?

She could stay on the paved path, go only as far as the pier, and turn back if she lost sight of the railing.

The questions did not make the fog thinner. They did, however, give her something to do besides argue with it.

Lida walked down to the beach's edge, careful to keep her boots on the firm ground above the wash. She looked for the familiar dark line of the trail. Nothing. Then, in the gap between two veils of mist, she saw the signal post's top, a blunt shape against the whiteness.

There. A landmark.

She followed the paved path toward it. The fog gathered moisture on her eyelashes. Each step brought another detail into reach: a metal bench beaded with water, a length of chain sagging between posts, a gull standing motionless on the seawall. The gull turned its head as she passed but made no sound.

The familiar trail did not end at the water. It ended, for now,

at what she could see.

The distinction was small, but it kept her moving.

The pier emerged in pieces. First the railing, then the dark boards beneath it, then the little harbor office with its green door. A man stood outside, rubbing a cloth over the glass of a weather instrument mounted beside the entrance. He wore a navy cap and a thick sweater under his waterproof jacket.

"Morning," he said.

"Is the harbor road closed?"

"Lower road, yes. The bus won't come through until they can see the bend." He glanced toward the water. "Not that I blame them."

"Was this forecast?"

The man gave a short laugh, without much humor. "Not by anyone I heard. I checked the marine bulletin before dawn. Clear visibility, light wind. There's nothing in it about fog."

Lida felt a familiar urge to ask him what had gone wrong, as if the right person might have a report tucked in a drawer. Instead, she looked out toward the harbor.

The boats were reduced to shapes. Their masts faded upward, their hulls to darker patches close to the water. The far end of the pier was invisible. Beyond it, the open sea should have been a blankness with no particular boundary.

Something interrupted that blankness.

At first she took it for a swell. A long, low rise in the water, darker than the surrounding gray. Then the shape held steady as

the waves moved across its face. It was narrow and dark, a strip running almost parallel to the shore, set beyond the ordinary line of the surf.

Lida gripped the railing.

The man followed her gaze. “What is it?”

She did not answer at once. The strip seemed to have an edge, perhaps a rim of pale sand or stone. There was no boat upon it, no marker, no breakwater she recognized. It lay where the water should have continued unbroken.

The fog shifted. For a moment, the line grew clearer. Behind it, something like a low ridge appeared, darker at one end. Then the whiteness moved over it again.

“Do you see that?” Lida asked.

The man shaded his eyes, though there was no sun. “I see something.”

“What is it?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

He said it without drama. Perhaps that was why she believed him.

A gull cried somewhere beyond the pier. Its call came muffled and short, as if the fog had caught it before it could travel. Lida felt her mind begin to hurry, searching for an explanation: a sandbar exposed by the tide, a dredging vessel hidden from view, a trick of light, a break in the fog that had made one part of the sea look solid.

Each explanation arrived wearing the clothes of certainty.

None had earned them.

The strip of land held for several breaths, perhaps longer. Lida could see a faint curve along its near edge. The surf line moved in front of it, white water passing where no shore should have been. The dark land remained behind the waves.

"Was there anything there yesterday?" she asked.

The man looked at her. "Yesterday?"

"Out beyond the breakwater. A dark line. I saw something last night, from home."

He rubbed the cloth between his hands. "I was on the late round. Didn't notice anything. Then again, I wasn't looking for land."

The fog thinned just enough to show the line in full. It was no longer a suggestion. It had a shore of its own, low and uneven, a narrow strip of earth set beyond the moving water. Lida could not see trees or buildings. She could not make out its length. But she knew what land looked like when it interrupted a sea.

For a few minutes, the world had acquired an extra edge.

She wanted to turn away. The urge was sharp, almost physical: go back to the bus stop, get to work, let the day resume its ordinary proportions. At the same time, she wanted to walk farther along the pier, to reach its end and look down the length of the strange shore. The two impulses pulled at her with equal force.

She made herself pause again.

What was known? She was standing on the public pier beside

the harbor keeper. The boards were wet, but the rail was solid beneath her hand. A strip of land was visible beyond the surf line.

What was she imagining? That it had appeared overnight. That it was safe to approach. That if she left now she would lose the only chance to understand it.

What safe next step was possible? Stay here. Keep the railing within reach. Look without going out into the fog.

She stayed.

The harbor keeper went back to the weather instrument, though his attention kept returning to the water. Lida took her phone from her bag. Its dark screen reflected a blurred version of her face. For a second she considered putting it away. She had wanted to walk without it, to leave the small, endless summons of the day behind. But the sight beyond the surf was not an ordinary distraction. She wanted a record, even if only for herself.

She raised the phone and framed the strip between the pier railing and the pale water.

The camera found the fog. It sharpened the railing, then the gray sweep beyond it. Lida tapped the screen once and took the photograph.

When she lowered the phone, the land was still there.

She opened the image.

The screen showed only fog, the flat gray of water, and the blurred black bars of the pier. No dark strip. No second shore. Not even the faintest suggestion of a ridge.

Lida looked up again. Beyond the moving line of surf, the land

remained visible to the naked eye, thin and unmistakable.

The phone had kept nothing.

She took another photograph. The same empty gray appeared.

The harbor keeper came over and stood beside her. “Any luck?”

“No.”

He studied the screen, then the water. He did not tell her she had imagined it. He did not claim to understand.

Lida slid the phone back into her bag. The fog pressed close around the pier, dampening the harbor’s small sounds. The strip of land lay beyond the waves, present and unrecorded.

The bus would still be late. Work would still be waiting. The day had not offered an explanation, and she did not have to invent one before taking her next step. She could stay where the boards were firm, remember what she had seen, and decide later what to do with the fact that no picture could hold it.

As the land began to fade, Lida kept her eyes on the place where it had been. The photograph offered no proof, but the shore remained in her mind. The next question was not whether it had existed, but how to approach the strip beyond the surf when the fog returned.

A Strip of Land Beyond the Breakers

By the end of the workday, Lida had checked her camera so many times that the screen had begun to feel like an accusation.

The photograph showed the pier, the blurred lamps along the harbor, and a grey seam where sea met fog. Nothing else. She could enlarge the image until the pixels broke into little squares, but no stretch of land appeared between them. She could delete it, she thought, and be rid of the argument. Instead, she slipped the phone into her coat pocket and went back to the shore.

She told herself she was only checking the camera. One more picture, perhaps from a different angle. Then she would go home.

The bus left her at the harbor road, where the fog had already softened the shopfronts and turned the lamps into pale coins. The air smelled of wet rope, diesel, and the cold mineral scent of the tide flats. Lida walked toward the pier, keeping to the paved path. She had no intention of going down onto the rocks. If the land was there, it could be observed from somewhere safe.

That, at least, was a fact she could trust about herself.

The harbor was quieter than it had been the previous morning. A few gulls moved through the fog without calling. At the end of the pier, a man in a dark wool cap was coiling a line into a plastic crate. Lida recognized him from the lighthouse, where she had seen him unlocking the door for visiting school groups. He was old enough to have learned not to hurry and strong enough that

the thick rope seemed to fall into place by itself.

"Mr. Vale?" she asked.

He looked up. "Mark."

"I'm Lida. I saw you at the lighthouse."

"Did you?"

It was not quite a question. He set the rope aside and watched her approach.

"I saw something out there yesterday," she said. "A strip of land beyond the surf. I'm here to see if it happens again."

Mark glanced at the water. "Then you've chosen a suitable evening."

"Because of the fog?"

"Because you can't see much else."

He said it without a smile, but there was no mockery in it. Lida took out her phone, then hesitated. A camera was useful for preserving an image. It was less useful for teaching her how to look.

She opened the notes app instead.

The date was October seventeenth. She wrote it down, then added: *Fog moving in from the west. Wind light, from the east. Harbor lamps visible to the end of the pier. Tide falling, according to the harbor board.*

She paused, thumb hovering.

I have come to see the land again.

That was not a condition or a measurement. It was still true, so she left it.

"What are you writing?" Mark asked.

"Things I know, before I start explaining them."

He gave a short nod, as if she had answered a more practical question.

Lida stood at the point where she had been yesterday. The water beyond the pier was darker than the fog, a low, shifting surface whose edges dissolved almost as soon as she found them. At first, there was nothing to distinguish one band of grey from another. She kept her eyes on the place where the strip had been, then made herself look away and return to it, slowly, as if entering a room without startling someone inside.

A faint line appeared beyond the breaking water.

It was not a clean horizon. The fog swallowed its ends. The line sat low and uneven, darker than the sky and lighter than the sea. A wave ran toward it, struck something, and split. On the left, the water curled back in a thin white seam. On the right, it passed into the grey without revealing what had interrupted it.

Lida's hand tightened around the phone.

The land did not rise like a storybook island. It was a narrow, broken shelf, barely lifted above the water. Wet stones glimmered along its near edge. Beyond them, a shallow ridge ran away into the fog until its shape became impossible to follow. The view offered no estimate of distance, no hint of how long the strip might be. It might have stretched for a hundred yards or disappeared after ten. Fog made a boundary where the eye wanted a conclusion.

She looked for a familiar point to compare it with. The harbor's outer buoy stood to her right, a black mark bobbing against the pale water. The strip lay left of it, though how far left was hard to say. She noted that too.

Visible from the pier. Low band beyond the surf. Wet stones along near edge. Narrow ridge fades into fog. Water breaks against it in at least two places.

She did not write *island*. She did not write *new land*. She did not write *impossible*.

A small wave broke, and for several seconds the white water seemed to run along the strip rather than over it. Then the fog thickened. The dark line faded, returned, and faded again.

Lida raised the phone and took a photograph.

The screen showed the pier, the outer buoy, a trembling expanse of grey. No stones. No ridge.

She lowered it. The absence on the screen stirred the old doubt, quick and familiar. If other people couldn't see it, if a lens couldn't keep it, what right did she have to say it was there?

Mark had not moved. "What do you see?"

"A low strip. Stones, maybe. A ridge behind them."

"Maybe?"

"I can see the stones. I can't tell what's behind them."

He looked out again. "That's better."

The words annoyed her before she understood why. She had expected reassurance, perhaps even disbelief. Instead, he seemed to be asking nothing of her except precision.

“Do you see it?” she asked.

“I see a dark shelf beyond the break.”

“Does that mean you see land?”

“It means I see a dark shelf beyond the break.”

Lida nearly laughed. Not because it was funny, but because she recognized the firmness of the answer. It refused to take a step the evidence had not taken.

A gull emerged from the fog and flew low over the water. It vanished before reaching the buoy. Lida recorded the detail. Then she added: *Image on phone does not show the shelf. This does not establish that the shelf is absent.*

She read the sentence twice. It sounded almost severe, like something written by a person who trusted neither her senses nor her fear. But she did not trust her senses completely. That was the point. Trust, she was beginning to see, did not have to mean surrender.

A woman in a yellow raincoat came down the pier with a small black dog. She slowed when she saw Lida and Mark looking seaward.

“Is it back?” the woman asked.

Lida turned. “Back?”

The woman glanced at her, then at Mark. “The shoal. My father used to call it the outer shelf. You can see it on fog nights, if the tide is low.”

“Have you seen it yourself?” Lida asked.

“Once. Years ago. Or something like it.” The woman

tightened her grip on the leash as the dog pulled toward a puddle. “I was a child. My father said it was a trick of the water. Then he said not to go looking for it.” She gave a small shrug. “He said a lot of things.”

“Do you remember where?”

“Out there.” She pointed, not precisely. “Past the breakers. I wouldn’t go near it.”

The dog shook rain from its coat. The woman continued toward the end of the pier and stopped to let it sniff at a bollard.

Lida added a new line to her notes: *Local testimony: woman with black dog remembers her father naming an “outer shelf.” She saw something once as a child; uncertain what it was. No location given beyond past the breakers.*

The written account looked smaller than the story had sounded. That seemed right. A person’s memory could be meaningful without becoming a survey.

“Do people talk about it often?” she asked Mark.

“Not often. Not in a way that gets written down.”

“You’ve heard of it.”

“I’ve heard several versions.”

“From whom?”

“My mother. My uncle. A man who kept boats here before I was born.” He shifted the rope crate with his boot. “They called it the fifth shore, sometimes. The fifth bank. Names change.”

“The fifth shore,” Lida repeated.

“It was a family story. Nobody claimed to have measured it.”

She looked again at the line in the water. “Have you gone out to it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve never had a reason that seemed better than staying here.”

The answer was plain, almost disappointingly so. Lida had expected caution to sound like fear, or wisdom to announce itself with a polished sentence. Mark offered neither. He had simply never mistaken curiosity for an obligation.

“What about the lighthouse records?” she asked. “Do they mention it?”

“They mention weather. Ships. Repairs. Fog. The records are not a diary of every strange thing someone might have seen.”

“Could I look?”

“If you can read my handwriting.”

He led her to the small station beside the pier, where the lighthouse keys and maintenance supplies were kept. Inside, the air held the dry smell of paper and old wood. Mark switched on a lamp. Its circle of light fell across a desk stacked with logbooks, their cloth covers faded at the corners. He moved two boxes aside and pulled out a thin volume.

“This one belonged to my grandfather,” he said. “Don’t expect a confession from it.”

Lida turned the pages carefully. The entries were short, written in a narrow hand. Wind direction. Visibility. A lamp

replaced. A boat delayed by weather. On one page, the handwriting grew cramped at the bottom.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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