

My back rests against red stone cliffs worn smooth from water and wind. A picnic lunch lays before me on a red blanket: goat cheese, applewood smoked salami, crackers, olives, and a delicious Malbec.

I sit on a pristine beach in a tourist-y little town outside San Diego, absorbing a brilliantly bright and warm January day. The sun shimmers off of the waves and they caress the glistening sand. Children screech and glide like pelicans while parents walk arm-in-arm behind them. Lovers stroll and smile, holding each other's hands and gazes. Friends chat and joke, their laughs drift like clouds up to the perfect sky.

On this beach, dead whales are not washing up by the dozens, stomachs filled with tons of plastic. But, I can still see them, if I look hard enough.

A lifeguard truck cruises by several times. A serious-looking young-white-male with long, flowing blonde hair and sunglasses glares in my direction. I get *Baywatch* vibes and shudder. Do lifeguards give out tickets, or make arrests? Are they deputized against public drunkenness as one of their life-saving duties? I don't know, but the helicopters flying low over the ocean waves scare the hell out of me, and I resolve to not drink too much on account of paranoia.

The National Geographic magazine, brought from my AirBnB, flaps open, demanding my attention. The "Plastic or Planet?" special issue. About the destruction of Earth and the desperate, seemingly last-minute attempts by some humans to save it. My olives and salami sit in plastic containers. My goat cheese is wrapped in plastic. I use a plastic fork to eat. I read, eat, and digest what a horrible human being I am...at least my glass wine bottle is wrapped in a paper bag.

Winos are onto something. Winos will save us.

I say "fuck it" and drink more, taking large pulls of the delicious wine straight from the bottle after bites of food. The salami, crackers and cheese, and olives all mix well with the wine—and I am euphoric, despite the magazine's pleas. The buzz is coming and I feel sweat form on my brow, feel the pull of the ocean waves retreating out to their plasticized origins. The magazine flips open again to the page I had left off reading. A beach patrol truck lurches by. I hide the wine bottle behind my back and pray no one has ratted me out.

Packing up—out of "the fear"—but careful to leave no trash behind, to leave the spot better than I found it, when a boy darts right up to me, like some starved seagull. Four or five years old. He holds a seashell.

"See! I have creatures in here!" he says, proudly and excitedly displaying his treasures. "This one's a snail. See? I'm gonna take it home."

"Oh, but buddy..." I say, trying to mask my Malbec haze. "Do you think that's a good idea? What if it's happy here?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna take it home and make it my pet and take care of it."

“But what if it doesn’t want to go home with you and be your pet? What if it dies? Wouldn’t it be better to leave it here, in its home, with its family?”

“If it dies we can just come back and get another one,” he says, oblivious to my protests.

“But won’t you feel bad about killing a living creature? It is probably already dying. Like, right now, it’s dying.”

“I’m going to put water in a cup and put the snail in it so it won’t die,” he says, undaunted. Damn this kid’s smarts. Too smart for me. He has a retort for every argument. He believes technology will save the snail, that his generation can be a good steward of the land, when mine and all others, have failed. Too smart for his own good, or maybe he doesn’t know how to read yet. He probably plays *Minecraft*, where the world is a playground, resources are infinite, and death is just words on a screen to be ignored before clicking, “Respawn.”

I think about showing him the *National Geographic*, but decide against it.

By this time the boy’s mother and older brother walk slowly toward us, apparently not wanting to disturb our conversation.

“Okay, buddy. Just be careful, okay? We humans are destroying the planet. Love Earth and all its creatures,” I say, trying one last time. Now the mother and brother creep closer, and the debate is clearly over. But before he goes, the boy looks at me, tears in his eyes, and he says “I really want to show my daddy. He didn’t come today. He’s at home, working. I miss him.”

I smile at him and wave to his family to assure them all is well.

“Okay, little buddy. You take care of that snail and show your daddy. He’ll be real proud of you.”

The boy skips away to his mother and brother and his mother waves to me.

“Thank you,” she says.

For what, I’m not sure.