



Seawall
By: Roman Colangelo

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The Charleston harbor sat below a wounded sky poorly mended with scraggy clouds. The true port rested several feet below sea level, its name inherited by sinuous walls of weathered concrete. Micah perched atop one of these guards, pointing his feet at the muted waters below. He did not come to South of Broad very often, and the people here eyed him as though he were some kind of interloper. He had every right to be here. The wall was technically public property, even though he knew it belonged only to a very specific part of the city. The timer on his watch went off and directed his attention to the present. It was time to begin his walk to the Wade Hampton III Center. There was to be a meeting today.

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“Lyla, I want to tell you a secret, but you can’t tell anyone.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Micah leaned in very closely. “Your uncle still wet the bed when he was your age!”

His daughter let out a soft gasp. “Really?!”

“Yes! And you can’t tell anyone, or else he’ll be really embarrassed!”

“Okay, Dad!”

Lyla ran off, giggling. Micah’s smile was wide and bright. He felt that the secret would soon be out. He went to start dinner when he heard the doorknob twist in its collar. His elder brother entered with the requisite stiffness of a visitor. Plastic grocery bags stretched in his grip. Micah took the treats, set them on a coffee table, and wrapped him up in his arms. “Johnny! I was just about to get dinner going. How’ve you been, man?”

“Good, I’ve been good. I see you’re still skin and bones.”

“I blame a certain fatass for always stealing my food as a kid.”

“No excuses now, though!”

Lyla scampered out from behind the door and latched onto Johnny’s leg. “Uncle Johnny!”

“Hey, bug. Got some treats for you.”

She didn’t seem to care about the bag, so Johnny picked her up and slung her over his shoulders, laughing all the while.

“Do you wanna fly, bug?”

“Yes! Yes!”


He lifted Lyla as high as he could and leaned over to Micah. “We should talk after Lyla goes to bed.”

“Sure thing, man.”

He planted Lyla on the ground. Micah gestured to the kitchen. Micah led the march to prepare dinner, himself and Johnny sandwiching Lyla in their little parade to mealtime. Johnny stopped to look through the windows of the main room, taking in the empty driveways that lined the neighborhood.

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The interior of the Hampton Center was saturated with the warmth of thousands of stray breaths. The 2054 Patriot Climate Defense Conference was a hot-button topic for the high-income White communities of Charleston. It had been two decades since the city had lost state and federal support, and, in a desperate measure to maintain some form of climate mitigation, delegated seawall construction and management to the private sector. Concerned citizens and certain members of the urban planning committee expressed some trepidation, but the wall kept the rising Atlantic back, and the common concern dwindled.



The Hampton, tucked away in the enclaves of wealth, was filled with people who saw that the wall did its job and nothing more, and for that they exalted the company. None were aware of the presence of a man who lived beyond the PCD's wall. He knew that the wall ended four miles before his neighborhood began, and the reason for this hung in wordless ubiquity. There was a halcyon energy buzzing in the crowd. They knew it wasn't the end of the world. Not theirs, anyway.

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“You're one of the last families on this street, dude. The basement floods every time there's a rain storm, and the school is debating whether to keep sending a bus here. What if Lyla gets sick during a flood? You think the ambulance is gonna make it here? I have friends in Raleigh who'd be happy to take you guys until we find something better. Please. She can't grow up here.”

Micah's cadence weakened as he struggled to look his brother in the eyes. He could not help but see their father's concern beneath them. “This was her house.” He choked out the words.

Micah had been driving on his last route of the night when a woman boarded his bus in Calhoun. She seated herself in the opposite row a seat back from his. She spoke to him with the assuredness of a longtime friend. She told him

about her childhood home nested a half-mile downwind from the Hartland Oil & Gas plant.

These pieces of her life floated in Micah's head as he listened to Johnny. They took a keen interest in each other, and she had tipped him with a five-dollar bill that had her number written on it when she stepped off. They went on five dates in the following two weeks and then decided that they just could not leave each other alone.

The life of Alice Campbell had led her through many places. She had remembered her first visit to Niagara Falls, watching millions of gallons of hydrological rage throw themselves onto the granite incisors below. She remembered climbing into the passenger's seat of a moving truck, her father throwing a million silly distractions at her during the drive to Charleston. She remembered his jovial demeanor shattering into fits of hacking up blood. A lifetime of poisoned water, of fine particulates that rode on their very breaths, had come to bare itself to the world.

Of all the words which can be ascribed to the human condition, *deteriorating* bothered her the most. The word bubbled up in her mind with each visit to the hospital. She would be at work, or on the bus, or in bed, and within her mind would manifest the image of her father in a hospital bed, every second gnawing on his vitality.

Her father's death had come to her in pieces. The outburst of grief had been supplicated by a quiet dread that ebbed and flowed beneath her façade. She felt as though she was hovering slightly above the world, trapped in a peculiar limbo in which her ears never ceased to ring, and her body never dispelled the sensation of burning. Micah had been the one to ground her with his embrace. Lyla was her gift to the world, her refutation of death's reign. When she began to cough up blood at work, she sought her family for comfort. When the doctor spoke of lung carcinoma, she cried in Micah's arms.

She was sealed away in a cedar chest. She whispered to him in the latest hours, when night crawled in through the windows to blight him with inky silence. He felt as if she was peering over his shoulder each time his eyes ran down the document. Lyla had caught him staining the document with his tears one night; she did not know what he was reading, but she shared his grief because her father was weeping, and that was enough for her. In his arms, between bands of shadow and crepuscular beams, he saw the world entire. She slept upstairs now. The fingernails on his right hand were painted a gentle blue, with the words BY LYLA written on them in glitter. B and Y shared a thumb and were smushed together into near-unintelligibility, but he knew what the words were, and that was enough for him.

"I can't—I can't sell the house. No one would buy it. Insurance is backing out from coverage. The city won't help us find a place to stay. I can't get money for this place. If we moved in with your friend, we would never be able to move out."

“What are you planning to do, then?”

“I’ll reinforce the house. Sandbags, water-proofing, better drainage systems. I’m also gonna keep petitioning the PCD for an extension to the wall—”

“They won’t extend the fucking wall!” Johnny stood up, a mix of anger and worry emulsifying and spilling over. “They didn’t do it when all the people who still lived here begged for it, and they certainly won’t do it for you!”

“They’re supposed to look out for their community.”

“They are.”

Micah stood to meet his brother.

Johnny’s countenance looked as though it had aged during his outburst. So many lost years between them. He could not afford to lose a moment more. John was always the one whose eyes pierced his own veneer. It is impossible to hide from such deep love. That same affection was given to the girl upstairs, and Micah saw this.

“You’re right. I’ll call the FEMA office. Ask if they can set up an emergency account for Lyla and me.”

Johnny embraced him. “Thank you, thank you. Let me know when they get back to you so I can help you guys pack up. You two can stay with me for a few months while we get a new home sorted out.”

“I love you, buddy. Are you spending the night? You can have my bed.”

“No, Heidi has a volleyball tournament early tomorrow. Gotta drop her off.”

“Alright, man. You take care.”

Johnny slipped out the front door with a smile on his face. Micah turned to face the chest. For once, he did not hear it calling out to him.

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The Hampton's walls were awash in the requisite reds and blues of American patriotism. White stars ran amok on the ceiling while indiscernible stock country flowed from the speakers. A voice boomed.

"Please direct your attention to the stage for our beloved company president, Branson Lynch!"

A storm of applause. A tall man in a power suit with dark, slicked hair walked to center stage. He was allegedly fifty-eight, but he looked much younger.

"How are you, Charleston?"

The crowd hollered.

"I want to thank you all for being so welcoming tonight. Every year I make a point to come back here, and every year you guys are so warm. You all deserve nothing but the best, and that's what PCD works so hard to bring you!"

Transactional applause.

"Thank you, everyone. Now, a point of business. I understand that there's been some worry about the government stepping away, but I can assure you that we are working at this very moment to keep you all informed of and protected from flooding. I've been in contact with the White House and President Scalmer, and they've given me their word that PCD will be allowed to use former government stations to monitor the local weather. My friends, you are all safe!"

There was a frenzy of cheering. There was no need to worry. Salvation had revealed itself on the stage.

"Now, I'm gonna stick around for some questions at the end, but I would like to hand the mic to our regional manager, Caitlyn Simard, for a few words."

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Micah paced the kitchen, flip-phone to his ear, panicking.

Johnny was on the other end attempting to douse the breakdown with calming words.

“Her bus would’ve left the school fifteen minutes before the flooding started. I don’t know where she is, and she doesn’t have a phone.”

The Olajide Primary Education Center, two miles beyond the wall’s protection, had been caught in a flash flood. Half of the bus fleet had already left when the water came rolling in.

“Mic, where are you now?”

“I’m at home. I gotta go get her.”

“You can’t drive out there, not when it’s this bad. Sam texted me and said he’s going out with a couple of rescue boats to look for anyone caught in the storm. They’ll find her, I promise.”

Two hours passed, and Micah sat half-dead in front of the television, eyelids heavy and sticky. The news feed was a helicopter’s eye of an overturned bus. It showed impotent rescue squads closing in on the scene. He could make out a child, face-down in the water, dark-skinned, long-haired, and wearing a bright pink back pack adorned with an amethyst butterfly. He threw his remote at the screen, walked into the restroom, and vomited. The last house on Marrs Avenue was filled with sobbing.

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Branson Lynch reclined in his seat and stared into the warm lamp that illuminated the performer's room. He extended a hand to pluck at the assemblage of light snacks by his seat when the door clicked and opened.

“Mr. Lynch, you're on for Q&A.”

He groaned. At least these 'meetings' gave him some respite from those slack-jawed soulless fucks on the shareholders' board. It was nice to be appreciated for his engineering, though it was more social than civil. The aide led him through a carpeted hallway to a roped-off chair that was level with the audience. The Hampton's jovial milieu made it easy to put on a smile. He took umbrage with being this low, but the questions were easy, and easy questions made him look smart.

They were worried about price hikes in the face of PCD's new services, but he assured them that corporate pockets were deep enough to eat the cost. That was partially true; federal coffers would last until the decade's end, and he would hopefully be onto greener pastures by then. He lost track of who asked what, but the answers seemed to flow out from somewhere deep within him and ease the nerves of his interlocutors. The line had all but thinned out when a dark-skinned man walked to the microphone. He was twenty years or so younger than Branson, but his face looked worn. The soft blues in his eyes were glassed over as if his soul had been violently ripped from its chassis.

“Mr. Lynch, why does the sea wall end where it does?”

“Well, we manage development of the wall based on the risk assessments our hydrologists and coastal specialists perform. Higher-risk areas receive priority in construction.”

... Marcus DeCastro, Charleston County clerk, hereby certify. . .

“Was the coastline two miles north of Olajide PEC considered high-risk?”

... of Lyla Campbell, born 08/11/2045. . .

“Okay, I see what you’re getting at. Oh-La-Jide was a tragedy, and we’ve spent the last two weeks reassessing how we can better protect vulnerable areas of Charleston.”

“I’ve been to the coast—what you can’t even call a coast, every day since the flood. I haven’t seen anyone laying a foundation. No construction. I haven’t even seen your hydrologists come by.”

“Do you live near the school?”

“I do.”

“I’m sorry, that must’ve been a deeply personal thing to go through. We’re going to do our best to make things better.”

“Of course. Do you know where Marrs Avenue is?” The man’s voice softened but nevertheless carried a strange acidity.

This was a leading question, and Branson figured that it wouldn't lead anywhere nice. Enough was enough. "If you're going to be like this, I have to ask why you even came here. We're here to celebrate the progress being made toward keeping the community safe, and now you're complaining about a neighborhood everyone's moved out of. If they wanted us to protect their neighborhood, then they shouldn't have up and left. Real Americans don't give up! We fight to protect our communities! Our homes, our families, they're our world, and if you can't see that, I have to ask if you know what you're here for. I think it's time someone else asked a question."

...asphyxiation due to drowning.

"You're right. Thank you for the clarification."

Branson found himself fixed on the man's right hand as he moved away from the microphone. There were little fragments of sky-colored blue stuck to his nails. Small patches of glitter caught stray lights from the stage. He was so lost in the man's right hand that he had failed to notice the handgun that the left had produced from its coat pocket.

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There was a brief silence before the world inside the Hampton ended. A half-second of perception in the absence of thought. The realization crashed through the crowd's mind and elicited a scream. Branson was sprawled on the floor. Crimson streams webbed out from the hole in his forehead. A frenzied rush to the exits. Micah tossed the gun and ran behind the curtains, eventually finding the workers-only exit and bursting outside into a gray world of soft winds and gentle rain. He broke into a sprint and made for the harbor.

The oldest quadrant of the sea wall had given way to water and time. The concrete guardrails hung in depressed rows above the water, struggling to hold steady against a capricious storm that was now screaming against the coast. The waters turned over and crashed into the wall in a fit of ambivalence. Micah held fast against the winds, turning his head to see blues and reds flickering off in the distance. His phone felt as though it had been buzzing for an eternity. They would kill him or take him away. There would be questions. There will be no answers.

He crossed over the railing as the sirens began to come into ear. If they want a cromulent explanation, they should trace the wall to its end. They should walk amidst the empty homes and flooded streets that the wall neglected to protect. Maybe then, in all the destitution and death and lost dreams that swim in the waters flowing through their streets, they may finally dredge up the question of why. It was not for him to elucidate, however. This place was not for him. His world was gone, drowned.

In the welter of car doors slamming and officers shouting, Micah Campbell gave himself to the sea.

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The police held a short press conference. A man had brought a gun into the Hampton Center and killed Branson Lynch. He then ran out to the sea wall and committed suicide before police could detain him. Due to inclement weather, the body was unable to be recovered. Motive is unknown. The usual actors said

the usual things: violence is bad, change is only brought about by measured debate and incremental reform, we must all come together, and so forth. PCD appointed a new president and continued to provide their services to Charleston. The naked shores received no new protection, and the poorer communities further inland evacuated to nowhere in particular.

Days after the fact, when John Campbell stepped forward to reveal that his brother Micah had killed the beloved company man, the Charleston Venture put out a report linking the father to the Olajide tragedy. Attached to the article was a racial density map of the city with the sea wall traced on it. This brought a surge of protests and police confrontations throughout the city's urban core. For once, PCD had come under pressure from the impotent carcass of the federal government. In exchange for maintaining federal support, they would attach a three-mile strip of flood guards that stood two feet high. When asked why resources were not delegated to build a proper sea wall along the extension, the company cited cost and time constraints. The extension would be completed six months later, shielding homes that were already abandoned and schools that had been forced to migrate further inland for the year. An internal hydrological report from the PCD predicted that median sea levels along the city's coast were to rise by four feet within the next five years.



Roman Colangelo is an English major at the University of Alabama who has stumbled into writing science fiction. His previous work has been published in *Glass Mountain* and *365 tomorrows*. He resides in Youngstown, New York, where he serves the every whim of his cat, Beau.



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