

TIDEPOOL

"Disturbance"

Episode 103

Written by

[First Draft]

COLD OPEN

EXT. CANNON BEACH - ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN

The routine. Lena at Site 7 in the gray pre-dawn. Headlamp. Quadrat. Notebook. She checks the juvenile star -- Steve, though she would never say that out loud. Twenty-six millimeters now. Growing.

But the ocean is different today. The swell is bigger than usual -- not dangerous, but assertive. Sets rolling in that make the rocks shudder slightly underfoot. Lena notices. She always notices the water. She checks her watch, checks the horizon. Works a little faster than normal.

LENA (V.O.)

Wave energy is the primary structuring force in the rocky intertidal. Everything else -- predation, competition, temperature -- operates within the envelope that wave exposure defines. A sheltered site and an exposed site ten meters apart can have completely different communities. Same rock. Same water. Different force.

A larger set rolls in. Water surges up farther than expected, washing over the lower quadrat positions. Lena steps back, unhurried but alert. She's been caught by waves before. She finishes the upper quadrats and decides to skip the lower zone today.

As she packs up, she looks south along the coast toward Site 4. The swell is hitting the rock bench there hard -- white water erupting over the ledge where she normally crouches to work. She watches for a moment.

LENA (V.O.)

The forecast calls for eight to ten feet through Thursday. Southwest swell. That's a lot of energy for the outer sites.

She walks up to the parking lot. The runner with the golden retriever is there -- but today the runner has stopped at the trailhead and is looking at the surf. The dog pulls toward the beach. The runner holds the leash.

RUNNER

(first words she's ever spoken  
in the show)

Getting big out there.

LENA

Yeah. Supposed to build through  
the week.

RUNNER

You're out here every morning,  
aren't you?

LENA

Most mornings. Depends on the  
tide.

RUNNER

I'm Diane.

A beat. This is the first time in the show someone has introduced themselves to Lena outside of a professional context. Lena handles it the way she handles an unfamiliar species in a quadrat -- she identifies it and records it.

LENA

Lena.

DIANE

Nice to finally put a name to the  
wave. See you tomorrow.

Diane and the retriever head down the beach path. Lena stands at her car. A conversation happened. A name was exchanged. She is not sure what to do with this data.

TITLE CARD: TIDEPOOL

END COLD OPEN

ACT ONE

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - MORNING

Lena arrives to find Marco already at the lab. This is unusual -- she's always first. He's at his desk, but not working. He's on his phone, grinning at the screen. There's a to-go coffee next to him that didn't come from the lab's machine -- it has a sleeve and a handwritten name on the cup. "Marco" with a small drawing of a wave next to it.

LENA

You're early.

MARCO

(looking up, slightly startled)  
Oh -- hey. Yeah, Becca dropped me off. My rental has a flat. She's getting it fixed for me, actually, she knows a guy at the tire place.

LENA

Becca.

MARCO

From the Wayfarer? The bartender?  
I told you about --

LENA

Right. Yes.

Lena sets her dry bag down. Starts transferring field notes to the spreadsheet. The normal rhythm. But Marco is buzzing with an energy that doesn't fit the room -- the particular electricity of a new relationship, where everything is funny and important and worth reporting.

MARCO

She surfs Oswald West in the winter. Like, proper winter swells. She showed me pictures. Completely insane.

LENA

(entering data)

Mm.

MARCO

She's lived on the coast her whole life. Grew up in Tillamook. She knows every beach from Astoria to Gold Beach.

LENA

That's a lot of beach.

MARCO

Right? And she -- sorry, I'm talking about her a lot. I know. It's just -- it's been a while since I, you know.

LENA

Since what?

MARCO

Since I liked somebody this much. He says it without self-consciousness. The uncomplicated honesty of someone who hasn't yet learned to hide the things that matter. Lena stops typing. She looks at him for a moment -- really looks, the way she looks at a tidepool. Taking inventory.

The camera holds on her face. What's there isn't jealousy. It's closer to the expression of someone who just heard a piece of music they used to know and can't quite place.

LENA

The swell is up. I couldn't get to the lower quadrats at Seven this morning. We should check the forecast for the afternoon window.

Redirect. Back to work. Marco accepts it without registering the deflection. He pulls up the NOAA buoy data. Lena goes back to her spreadsheet. The coffee cup with the little wave drawing sits on his desk, visible in the background of her shots for the rest of the scene.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - VARIOUS SITES - AFTERNOON

Afternoon tide window. The swell has dropped slightly -- enough to work, but the water is restless. Lena and Marco

move through their sites. He's competent now -- his IDs are solid, his pace almost matches hers. His boots are properly scuffed. He belongs on these rocks in a way he didn't three weeks ago.

But he's distracted. His phone buzzes twice during the session. He checks it, smiles, puts it away. The third time it buzzes, Lena is close enough to hear it.

LENA

Do you need to get that?

MARCO

No, it's just -- no. Sorry.

He pockets the phone. Focuses. But five minutes later:

MARCO

Hey, would it be okay if I cut out a little early today? Becca gets off at five and we were going to drive down to Lincoln City.

LENA

We still have Sites Two and Three.

MARCO

I know. I can come back and do them first thing tomorrow if the tide works.

LENA

The tide doesn't work tomorrow morning. The window is 3 AM.

MARCO

Oh. Right.

Beat.

MARCO

I can do them now. Fast. I'll do both.

LENA

I'll do them.

MARCO

Are you sure? I feel bad.

LENA

I've been doing them alone for  
nine years. Go.

She doesn't say it with anger. She says it with the particular flatness of someone stating a fact that is also, underneath, the whole problem. Marco misses it. The audience doesn't.

MARCO

Thanks, Dr. Yoon. Really. I'll  
make it up tomorrow.

He packs up his gear and picks his way up the rocks -- faster than he would have three weeks ago, more sure-footed. Lena watches him go. Then she turns back to Site 2 and works it alone.

She is very good at working alone. The camera reminds us of this by letting the scene run. No music. No voiceover. Just Lena, the water, the rocks, the notebook. The sound of the ocean and the scratch of her pen.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. LENA'S COTTAGE - KITCHEN - EVENING

Lena at the kitchen table. The laptop is open to the paper -- it's growing. Six pages now. She's into the methods section, which is easy, mechanical. She types steadily.

Her phone buzzes. A photo from Yumi -- the kids have drawn pictures of tidepools based on the photos Lena sent. Crayon on construction paper. One is labeled "Steve" with a large orange blob and approximately forty legs. The other is labeled "ANENOME" (misspelled) eating a hot dog (the mussel, interpreted).

Lena looks at the drawings for a long time. She photographs them with her phone -- taking a picture of a picture -- and saves them. Then she types back: "These are

scientifically accurate."

Yumi: "Hana says you should come teach her class. She told everyone her aunt studies the ocean."

Lena reads this twice. She starts to type something. Stops. Types: "Maybe sometime."

She looks at the drawings again. The orange blob with forty legs. She props her phone against the salt shaker so the drawing is visible while she works on the paper. It stays there for the rest of the scene, a small rectangle of crayon color in a kitchen of muted grays and whites.

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - NEXT DAY

Morning. Lena is at her desk reviewing data. Linda comes in with her reading glasses pushed up on her head -- the posture of someone who has been reading things she doesn't want to read.

LINDA

Do you have a minute?

LENA

Of course.

Linda sits in the chair across from Lena's desk. She pulls her glasses down, then pushes them back up. A nervous habit.

LINDA

I got a call from the regional office yesterday. They're doing site reviews for all the deferred renewals. Someone is coming out in August.

LENA

A site review.

LINDA

Basically, they want to assess whether the station's research output justifies the operational footprint. It's not just us -- they're reviewing six stations on

the West Coast.

LENA

But they're reviewing us.

LINDA

They are. And I want to be honest with you, Lena. The intertidal program is the part of our portfolio they're going to look hardest at. It's the largest time investment, it's the most site-intensive, and it has the fewest publications.

This lands. Not with shock -- Lena knows the math. But with the particular sting of hearing someone else say what you've been half-thinking.

LENA

I'm working on the paper. The recovery analysis.

LINDA

How far along are you?

LENA

I have a draft introduction and methods. Results will take time.

LINDA

(carefully)

Could Marco help? With the analysis? He's here for another two months and his own project overlaps with yours.

LENA

I can do it.

LINDA

I know you can. I'm asking if you should. You've been running every monitoring session solo for nine years. Having a co-author on the recovery paper might actually strengthen the submission -- it

shows collaboration.  
Lena is quiet. Collaboration means sharing the data set. Sharing the data set means letting someone into the structure she's built -- the notebook spines on the shelf, the quadrat positions, the nine years of careful, solitary accumulation. It's the scientific equivalent of someone asking to move furniture in her house.

LENA

I'll think about it.

LINDA

(standing)

Think fast. August isn't that far away.

Linda leaves. Lena sits at her desk. After a moment, she opens the NOAA buoy data. The swell forecast for the next three days has been upgraded. Twelve to fifteen feet, southwest. Big.

She looks out the lab window. The sky is darkening in the west, the way it does on the Oregon coast before a real blow.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - TOWN - AFTERNOON

Wind. Real wind. The kind that turns umbrellas inside out and sends gallery sandwich boards skidding across sidewalks. Tourists lean into it. A few surrender and head for their cars.

Lena drives through town on her way to check Site 7 -- not to monitor, just to assess conditions. She passes the Wayfarer, the bar where Becca works. Through the window she can see Marco sitting at the bar, laughing, leaning toward someone on the other side of the taps -- a woman with short dark hair and sunburned shoulders. Becca.

Lena doesn't stop. She doesn't slow down. But the camera catches her eyes in the rearview mirror, and what's there is the look from Episode 2 -- the couple on the beach, the dog with the tennis ball. A frequency she tuned out years ago, coming in faintly, like a signal from a station she thought was off the air.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - LATE AFTERNOON

The coast is angry. Big swells rolling in, detonating against the rock bench. Spray carries thirty feet up the bluff. The tide is nowhere near low enough to reach the pools. Lena stands on the bluff above Site 7 and watches.

The water surges over the exact spot where she crouches every morning. Over the crevice where the juvenile star lives. Over nine years of careful, patient, incremental work.

She can't do anything. She can't protect it. She can't measure it. She can only watch.

LENA (V.O.)

In exposed-coast systems, major wave events are the dominant agent of community restructuring. A single storm can undo years of succession -- clearing organisms, moving substrate, resetting the biological clock to zero. You can't prevent it. You can only document what was there before and what comes back after.

She watches the waves hit. The wind pulls at her jacket. She stays until it's too dark to see.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. LENA'S COTTAGE - NIGHT

Rain hammering the windows. Wind rattling the door. Lena sits at the kitchen table, but she's not working. The laptop is closed. She's listening to the storm.

Her phone is on the table. She opens the NOAA buoy page. Significant wave height: 14.2 feet. Peak period: 17 seconds. That's a lot of energy. The kind that moves boulders.

She puts the phone down. Picks it up again. Opens the photo of the juvenile star from two days ago -- twenty-six millimeters, northeast crevice, Site 7. She looks at it the way you look at a picture of something that might not exist anymore.

She sets the phone face-down on the table. Goes to the shelf and pulls down the earliest notebook -- 2016. Opens it. Her own handwriting, nine years younger, recording the first observations at Sites 1 through 12. The same species names, the same quadrat positions, the same meticulous notation. A version of herself she's been in continuous conversation with without ever noticing.

She reads. The storm batters the house. She turns pages slowly, moving through years of mornings on the rocks, each one recorded in the same small, precise hand.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - ROCKY SHORE - DAWN (TWO DAYS LATER)

The storm has passed. The sky is washed clean -- that particular post-storm coastal blue that looks like someone rinsed the atmosphere. The ocean is still swollen but settling. Debris litters the beach: kelp, driftwood, a shattered crab pot, a sneaker.

Lena picks her way down to the rocks at Site 7. The intertidal zone is scoured. Bare rock where there was algae. Displaced boulders. Pools rearranged.

She reaches the upper quadrat. Crouches. Looks into the pool.

The three adult ochre stars are there -- knocked around, repositioned, but attached. Holding on.

She moves to the northeast crevice. The juvenile's crevice.

Steve is there. Twenty-six millimeters of *Pisaster ochraceus*, still attached to the wall of a crevice that just took a fourteen-foot swell.

Lena photographs it. Writes in her notebook. Her pen hesitates for a fraction of a second before the notation. Then she writes: "Juvenile *Pisaster* present. Attached. No

visible damage."

She exhales. It's the first audible breath she's taken in the scene.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 4 - CONTINUOUS

Lena walks south along the rock bench toward Site 4. The damage increases as she goes -- more scour, more displaced rock, more bare substrate. She rounds the point to the broad bench where Site 4 sits.

She stops.

Site 4 is gone. Not the rock -- the rock is still there. But the community is gone. The large complex pool that was the richest site in her network -- the one she documented most carefully, the one with the most species, the longest record of succession -- has been scoured clean. Boulders shifted. Organisms stripped. The pool is full of churned sand and gravel where there was coralline algae and anemone beds.

Lena stands at the edge. She photographs it. She takes careful, methodical photographs from every angle. She opens her notebook and documents the damage -- species absent, substrate condition, estimated displacement. Her handwriting is steady.

She does not cry. She does not sit down. She does not stop working. The audience watches her document the destruction of nine years of patient observation with the same precision she used to document the community itself, and understands -- maybe for the first time -- that this is not professionalism. This is the only way she knows how to feel things. By measuring them.

LENA (V.O.)

Catastrophic disturbance isn't always destructive. It creates open substrate. New recruitment becomes possible. Things that couldn't settle before now have space.

She says this in voiceover and means it scientifically. It is accurate marine ecology. It is also, the audience

understands, the only language she has for something she doesn't know how to say.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 4 - LATER

Lena finishes her documentation. Closes the notebook. Stands above the wrecked pool. The sun is fully up now. The ocean is calm, almost apologetic -- the glassy, indifferent blue that follows a big blow.

Footsteps on the rocks behind her. She turns. Marco is picking his way down the beach. His face is serious -- he saw the damage on the way in.

MARCO  
(quietly)

Oh no.  
He reaches her. Looks at the pool. Looks at Lena.

MARCO  
How bad?

LENA  
Complete restructuring. The upper bench is scoured to bare rock. The lower pool lost most of the anemone bed and the urchin aggregation. The coralline mat is gone.

MARCO  
The whole site?

LENA  
Some of the deeper crevice fauna might have survived. I can't get into the lower zone until the swell drops more. But the community I've been monitoring -- the one in the data set -- that's gone.

She says this with the same measured tone she uses for everything. But Marco has been around her long enough now to hear what's underneath.

MARCO

I'm sorry.

LENA

It's not -- it's a natural process. This is what the coast does.

MARCO

Yeah. It still sucks, though. He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't try to fix it or reframe it or find the silver lining. He just stands next to her and looks at the wrecked pool.

They stand there for a while. Two people on a rock, looking at an absence.

LENA

(after a long silence)

Seven is okay. The adults held on. And the juvenile is still there.

MARCO

Steve made it?

Lena looks at him. There is a version of this scene where she corrects him. Where she says "We don't name them." She's said it before. This time she doesn't.

LENA

Steve made it.

Marco nods. They turn and walk back up the rocks together. Not side by side -- Lena slightly ahead, on her path, finding the good footholds. Marco following, finding his own. But walking in the same direction.

Wide shot: the two of them on the rocks, the wrecked bench behind them, the ocean calm and blue and unconcerned. The bare rock of Site 4 visible at the edge of frame -- empty, scoured, open.

Waiting for whatever comes next.

END OF EPISODE