

TIDEPOOL

"Exposure"

Episode 105

Written by

[First Draft]

COLD OPEN

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - MORNING

Lena and Marco at adjacent desks. Between them, the paper -- printed out, spread across the gap between their workspaces, covered in Marco's handwritten notes in blue pen and Lena's corrections in red. It looks like a conversation made visible. It looks like collaboration.

They're arguing. Not fighting -- the productive kind of arguing, where two people who see the same data differently are trying to find the sentence that contains both views.

MARCO

All I'm saying is the framing should lead with the temporal scale. That's what makes it unique. Nine years. Nobody else has that.

LENA

But the temporal scale isn't the finding. The finding is the site-specific variation in recovery. The time series is the method, not the result.

MARCO

It's both. The reason you can see the site-specific variation is because you stayed long enough. The method is inseparable from the result. That's the whole point of your opening paragraph. He taps the first page -- the paragraph that starts with "What do you see if you don't leave?" Lena looks at it.

LENA

That paragraph is too personal for a journal submission.

MARCO

It's the best thing in the paper.

LENA

That's not the same as it being appropriate.

MARCO

Send it to Rosen. Let her decide. She edits for Ecology -- she'll know if it works.

Lena is quiet. The idea of someone else reading that paragraph -- someone who matters professionally -- tightens something in her chest. Marco sees it.

MARCO

(gentler)

It's a good paper, Dr. Yoon. It's a really good paper.

He's called her Dr. Yoon since the first day. He still does. But the way he says it now is different -- not deference, just respect. Earned, not assumed.

LINDA

(appearing in the doorway)

Marco, do you have a minute?

Marco looks at Lena -- a quick glance, something uncertain in it -- and follows Linda into her office.

Lena watches them go. Through the glass partition, she can see Linda talking, Marco's posture changing. His hands go to the back of his neck -- the gesture of someone receiving news they half-expected and fully didn't want.

TITLE CARD: TIDEPOOL

END COLD OPEN

ACT ONE

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - CONTINUOUS

Marco comes back to his desk. Sits down. Doesn't say anything for a moment. Lena waits.

MARCO

Rosen's discretionary funding got cut. My field support ends in ten days instead of six weeks.

LENA

What?

MARCO

Budget thing. Across the board -- not just me. Three of her grad students lost summer support. Linda found out this morning.

LENA

Ten days.

MARCO

Yeah. I could try to stretch it -- stay with Becca, maybe, and just come in to finish up -- but I need to be back in Corvallis. I've got TAs for fall and my own thesis to write.

Lena nods. She is processing this the way she processes wave damage: assess, document, continue. But something underneath the professional response is moving -- something she would have to look directly at to identify and she is not looking directly at it.

LENA

We should prioritize the joint sites. Get your thesis data squared away before you go.

MARCO

Yeah. And the paper -- I can keep working on the discussion remotely. Email. It's not like we need to be in the same room.

LENA

Of course. That's fine.

She turns to her screen. Opens the spreadsheet. The familiar columns, the familiar numbers. Her hands on the keyboard, still.

Through the window, the sky is overcast. Standard Oregon coast. Nothing dramatic. Everything the same except the thing that isn't.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - VARIOUS SITES - OVER SEVERAL DAYS

MONTAGE -- but not a montage in the usual sense. No music swelling. Just time passing at the pace this show has taught us to expect: tides in, tides out, dawn light, afternoon light.

Lena and Marco working the sites. Day one of ten: they work in their usual configuration, leapfrogging, calling out IDs. Day three: Marco photographs his thesis sites with extra care, shooting backup angles. Day five: he labels sample bags with Lena's system, making sure his records will be legible to her after he's gone.

Each day, a small moment:

Day two -- Marco brings two Wayfarer coffees again. Becca drew a tiny starfish on Lena's cup this time. Lena notices. Doesn't mention it. Keeps the cup on her desk longer than it takes to finish the coffee.

Day four -- Lena shows Marco a technique for estimating percent cover using a grid overlay. She's patient, precise, a good teacher. It's the most sustained instruction she's given him. She's transferring knowledge, making sure the method survives his departure. It's professional. It also looks like someone making sure a piece of themselves continues in another person.

Day six -- at Site 7, they check Steve together. Thirty-four millimeters. Marco takes the measurement. Lena records it. A small handoff of a ritual they built without meaning to.

Day eight -- Marco is packing up his desk at the station. Books into boxes. He uncovers something stuck to the desk with tape: a printout of the first barnacle cyprid photograph from Site 4's recovery -- the image Lena took the morning after the storm cleared. He put it there weeks ago. He peels it off carefully and puts it in Lena's inbox tray with a Post-it note: "First settler. For your wall."

Lena finds it later. Reads the Post-it. Looks at the photo. Doesn't put it on her wall. Puts it in the 2025 field notebook, between pages. Where it will be safe.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN - DAY NINE

The penultimate day. Lena at Site 7, early, alone. She's been coming alone to the morning sessions since the beginning -- Marco was never an every-morning person. But this morning his absence has a different weight. A preview.

She checks Steve. Thirty-five millimeters. Attached. Healthy. She photographs it, notes the measurement, caps her pen.

LENA (V.O.)

At a certain size, a Pisaster becomes functionally permanent. The attachment is strong enough to resist routine wave action. The body mass is sufficient to deter most predators. Barring catastrophic disturbance, an established individual can persist at the same site for twenty years.

She looks at the star in its crevice. A long look -- longer than documentation requires.

LENA (V.O.)

Twenty years in the same spot. Some organisms are built for that.

Diane and Murphy pass on the beach. The wave. Lena waves back. But today Diane stops.

DIANE

(calling up)

Hey -- you doing okay?

LENA

What?

DIANE

You just look a little -- I don't know. Quieter than usual. Which is saying something.

This is the second time someone has seen something in Lena that Lena hasn't identified in herself. Yumi did it on the phone. Diane is doing it from thirty feet away, on the basis of a wave that was slightly different than usual.

LENA

My field assistant is leaving.  
End of the week. Funding got cut.

DIANE

The kid with the new boots?

LENA

(almost a smile)  
His boots aren't new anymore.

DIANE

That's too bad. It was nice seeing two of you out here.

Diane moves on. Murphy pulls her toward the water. Lena stands on the rocks and hears what Diane said, and hears under it the thing Diane actually meant: you were less alone, and it looked good on you.

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - AFTERNOON - DAY NINE

Last full day of work. Marco and Lena at their desks, finalizing his handoff -- data files, sample logs, monitoring protocols for the sites he was covering. It's administrative, practical, the kind of work that fills time so you don't have to think about what's ending.

MARCO

I put the recovery grid protocol in the shared drive. All the quadrat positions, photo angles, everything. If anyone takes over my sites, it should be seamless.

LENA

No one is going to take over your sites.

MARCO

You don't know that.

LENA

I know that the station is under review. I know there's no budget for another field assistant. The sites you were covering will go unmonitored until someone else gets funded, which could be years.

She says this with the even tone she uses for everything. But Marco has learned her register over these weeks. He hears the thing under the even tone.

MARCO

Or you could cover them.

LENA

They're not my sites.

MARCO

They could be.

LENA

I have twelve sites. That's already more than one person should run.

MARCO

(quiet)

Yeah. It is.

The implication sits between them: one person shouldn't run twelve sites. One person shouldn't do a lot of things Lena does alone. They both hear it. Neither says it.

MARCO

Okay. I think that's everything. Files are transferred. The desk is yours again.

He looks at the desk -- his desk for six weeks, bare now except for the monitor and keyboard. A small cleared space

in the lab that will stay cleared.

MARCO

Hey -- do you want to get a beer?  
Tonight? Nothing big. Just a  
thanks-for-the-summer kind of  
thing. Becca's not working -- we  
could go somewhere that isn't the  
Wayfarer.

Lena looks at him. She is being invited to do something social by a person who is leaving. Every instinct she has says no. Not cruelly -- just reflexively. The way a sea anemone contracts when you touch it. The way a tidepool conserves water at low tide.

She is about to say she has work on the paper, or an early tide, or something else that is true and is also a door closing. She opens her mouth.

LENA

Okay.

Marco is surprised enough that he doesn't hide it.

MARCO

Yeah?

LENA

You bought me coffee for six  
weeks. I can buy you a beer.

It's the most human thing she's said in the entire show. Marco grins. Lena picks up her dry bag. They walk out of the lab together.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. BILL'S TAVERN - CANNON BEACH - EVENING

Bill's Tavern. Not the Wayfarer -- somewhere neutral, older, wood-paneled, the kind of place where the menu is on a chalkboard and the bartender has opinions about IPAs. It's half-full. Lena and Marco sit at a booth by the window. Two pints between them.

Lena is out of her element. Not dramatically -- she's not having a panic attack or staring at the walls. But the audience can see the slight stiffness of someone who doesn't do this. Her jacket is still on. Her hands are around the pint glass like it's a field notebook -- something to hold.

MARCO

I'm going to miss the mornings.  
The early light on the rocks.  
It's different than anything in  
Corvallis.

LENA

Corvallis is an hour from the  
coast.

MARCO

Yeah, but it's not the same.  
Going to the coast for a day trip  
is different from being here.  
Waking up and the ocean is  
just... there. Every day.

LENA

You get used to it.

MARCO

Is that a good thing?  
Lena takes a sip of her beer. She doesn't answer right  
away.

LENA

My graduate advisor -- Margaret  
Chen, at UC Santa Cruz -- she  
once told me I had a talent for  
stillness.

MARCO

What did she mean by that?

LENA

She meant I could sit in the  
field for eight hours without  
getting bored. She meant I could  
do the same measurement protocol

for years without needing  
variety. She meant I was well  
suited for long-term monitoring  
because I didn't need  
stimulation.

MARCO

That's a compliment.

LENA

She meant it as one. I took it as  
one. And then I built a career  
out of it. I found a place where  
stillness was the job  
requirement. Where the whole  
point was to stay in the same  
spot and not need anything to  
change.

She takes another sip. The bar noise around them -- other  
conversations, the clink of glasses, someone laughing at  
the bar. Lena isn't looking at Marco. She's looking at the  
pint glass. At her own hands.

LENA

I thought it was a strength. I  
organized my whole life around  
it. Not needing things. Not  
needing people. Not needing the  
work to be anything other than  
what it was. I ate the same food.  
I walked the same routes. I saw  
the same three people and we  
waved and that was enough. I was  
good at it.

MARCO

Was?

LENA

I organized my whole life around  
being good at not needing things.  
And it worked. That's the  
problem. It worked.

She says this and then stops. She hears what she said. She  
heard it come out of her mouth and she is surprised by it  
the way you're surprised when you open a drawer you

haven't opened in years and find something you forgot you owned.

Marco is quiet. He doesn't rush to fill the silence. He doesn't reframe it or silver-line it or tell her it's not that bad. He sits with what she said the way he sits with a tidepool -- he observes.

MARCO

(after a long beat)

Yeah. That sounds hard.

That's it. Four words. No speech, no intervention, no advice. Just acknowledgment that the thing she described is a real thing and that it sounds hard.

Lena nods. She picks up her beer. Her hands aren't gripping the glass anymore -- they're just holding it. Something released. Not everything. A fraction.

They sit. The bar noise continues. After a while:

MARCO

For what it's worth -- you're a good teacher. I learned more from you in six weeks than in a year of coursework. And I don't just mean the IDs and the protocols. I mean the way you look at things. Like everything is worth counting.

LENA

Everything is worth counting.

MARCO

(smiling)

See? That. Most people wouldn't mean it. You actually mean it.

Lena looks at him. This young man who showed up with clean boots and asked too many questions and named her starfish and brought her coffee from his girlfriend and told her the best sentence she'd ever written should be the first line of the paper. Who is leaving tomorrow.

LENA

You're good at the work, Marco.  
You'll be fine.

MARCO

You'll be fine too.  
He says it simply. Not as reassurance -- as observation.  
The kind of thing you say when you've seen someone closely  
enough to know what they're made of.

They finish their beers. Lena pays. They walk out into the  
Cannon Beach night -- cool, damp, the sound of the ocean  
somewhere in the dark.

EXT. BILL'S TAVERN - PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

The parking lot. Their cars side by side. The moment where  
you say goodbye to someone and the mechanism of it feels  
inadequate -- a handshake, a hug, words.

MARCO

I'll send you the discussion  
draft by the end of the week. And  
I'll keep checking in on Steve.  
Remotely. I expect regular  
updates.

LENA

I don't do regular updates.

MARCO

I know. I'm asking anyway.  
They look at each other. Lena extends her hand. Marco  
takes it -- a handshake, which is exactly the right  
gesture for who Lena is. Not a hug. Not yet. A handshake  
that says: this was professional, and it was also more  
than that, and we both know it.

LENA

Thank you. For the paper. For --  
all of it.

MARCO

Thank you for letting me at your  
data.  
He grins. She almost smiles. The muscles. They remember.

MARCO

Take care of Steve.

LENA

Take care of Becca.

Marco gets in his car. Lena gets in hers. He pulls out first. She watches his taillights on the coast highway, heading south toward wherever he's staying tonight -- Becca's, probably, one last night before the drive to Corvallis.

Lena sits in her car in the parking lot. Engine off. She puts her hands on the steering wheel and holds it. Not driving. Just sitting.

She's alone again. She has been alone for nine years and she's alone again and for the first time she again feels different from the always. She felt it before, probably -- at the edges, in the mornings, in the cold tea and the canned soup. But she didn't have a word for it until tonight.

She said it out loud in a bar to a 26-year-old she'll probably see twice a year at conferences. And saying it didn't fix anything. It just made the shape of the thing visible. Which is, she knows, exactly how science works. You don't change the phenomenon by measuring it. You just see it clearly for the first time.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - LENA'S COTTAGE - NIGHT

Lena pulls into her driveway. Sits in the car for a moment. Then goes inside.

INT. LENA'S COTTAGE - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The cottage. The tide chart. The notebooks on the shelf. The crayon drawings propped against the salt shaker -- Steve with forty legs, the anemone eating a hot dog. She looks at them.

She puts the kettle on. While it heats, she takes down the 2025 notebook from the shelf and opens it to the page where she tucked Marco's barnacle photograph. She looks at it. The first settler. For your wall.

She takes the photograph out of the notebook. Walks to the fridge. Puts it under a magnet, next to the old graduation photo of her and her mother. Two pictures now on the fridge. The kitchen has twice as much visible life in it as it did in Episode 1.

She makes tea. She sits at the table. She picks up her phone.

She calls Yumi.

It rings three times. Yumi picks up.

YUMI

(on phone)

Hey! Two calls in one month.  
What's the occasion?

LENA

The grad student left today.  
Marco. His funding got cut.

YUMI

Oh no. The Steve guy?

LENA

Yeah.

YUMI

Are you okay?

The question again. The same question Yumi always asks. But tonight Lena heard herself say the truest thing she's said in years, in a bar, to a kid she might have dismissed five episodes ago. And the question lands differently now. Not on the surface, where she can deflect it with a starfish.

LENA

(a real pause)

I think I might be a little  
lonely, Yumi.

Silence on the line. Not shocked silence -- held-breath silence. The silence of someone who has waited a long time to hear her sister say something real.

YUMI

(very gently)

Yeah. I know.

LENA

You know?

YUMI

Lena. I've known for years. I  
just couldn't say it for you.

Lena is quiet. The kitchen. The kettle. The crayon  
drawings. The barnacle photograph on the fridge. The voice  
of her sister on the phone, a thousand miles away, saying:  
I see you. I've always seen you.

LENA

I don't know what to do about it.

YUMI

You don't have to know. You just  
said it. That's a lot.

They breathe on the phone. The rain starts outside --  
light, steady, Oregon rain.

YUMI

Come visit us. Please. Whenever  
you can.

LENA

I have the site review in August.

YUMI

After the review, then. Or  
before. Or whenever. Just come.

LENA

(quietly)

Okay.

YUMI

Okay as in you'll think about it,  
or okay as in okay?

LENA

(a beat)

Okay as in okay.

Yumi lets out a breath. They talk for a few more minutes about nothing -- the kids, the weather, whether Jay finished the garage project. Normal things. The kind of conversation that fills the space between people without needing to mean anything. Lena listens. She talks. Not much, but more than usual.

After they hang up, Lena sits at the table. She drinks her tea while it's hot. All of it.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN

Next morning. The first morning without Marco. Lena at Site 7, alone. The headlamp, the quadrat, the notebook. The same rocks. The same protocol.

She checks Steve. Thirty-five millimeters, same as yesterday. Holding. She photographs it. Writes the measurement.

Then she does something she has never done in the show. She takes a second photograph -- not the scientific documentation shot, square to the quadrat, calibrated for light. A different shot. An angle that catches the color of the star against the wet rock, the morning light in the water of the pool, the green of the algae. A photograph of something beautiful.

She looks at it on the camera's screen. Then she sends it to three people: Yumi. Marco. And after a moment's hesitation, Becca -- whose number Marco left on a Post-it on the coffee machine.

No caption. Just the picture.

Diane and Murphy pass on the beach. The wave. Lena waves back.

DIANE

(calling up)

Just you today?

LENA

Just me.

DIANE

Well. See you tomorrow.

LENA

See you tomorrow.

Lena turns back to the pools. The tide is still out. She has time. She has work. She has twelve sites and a paper to finish and a funding review to survive and bare rock waiting for new life at Site 4.

She is alone on the rocks. This is the same as it was in the first scene of the first episode. And it is completely different.

LENA (V.O.)

Exposure is the time an organism spends uncovered between tides. Too little exposure and the intertidal species get outcompeted by subtidal ones that don't need air. Too much and they desiccate. The organisms that thrive in the intertidal are the ones that can tolerate being uncovered. That can survive the air.

Wide shot. Lena on the rocks, alone, the ocean behind her. She works. The light comes up.

END OF EPISODE