

TIDEPOOL

"Recovery"

Episode 106

Written by

[First Draft]

COLD OPEN

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 4 - DAWN

Site 4. Six weeks after the storm. We haven't seen this site since Episode 4, when Lena was photographing pioneer barnacle cyprids on bare rock.

The rock isn't bare anymore.

CLOSE ON the substrate. Barnacles -- hundreds of them, tiny, white, crowded together on the upper surfaces. A thin fuzz of green algae colonizing the sheltered crevices. Two small anemones, translucent pink, attached in a depression that holds water at low tide. A hermit crab investigating the new terrain, its borrowed shell too big for its body.

It doesn't look like it used to. The complex community Lena monitored for nine years is not coming back -- that specific arrangement of species in that specific configuration is gone. What's arriving is new. Different organisms in different positions, finding different crevices, making different arrangements with the rock.

Pull back to reveal Lena, crouched over the pool with her camera and quadrat. She photographs methodically, counts, records. The same protocol she uses everywhere. But she takes her time here. She is witnessing something she's been studying for nine years from the outside -- the very first chapter of succession, happening in front of her in real time, on rock she knows by heart.

LENA (V.O.)

Recovery doesn't mean return. The community that was here before the storm is not the community that will be here in five years. The rock is the same. The water is the same. The organisms are new. They'll build something that functions like what was lost, but it won't be a copy. It'll be its own thing.

She finishes the quadrat. Sits back on her heels. Looks at the pool -- really looks, the way the tourist in Episode 3 looked, with something closer to wonder than measurement.

TITLE CARD: TIDEPOOL

END COLD OPEN

ACT ONE

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LAB - DAY

The paper is done. It sits on Lena's desk, printed, thirty-one pages, two authors: Yoon and Reyes. She picks it up and holds it -- not reading, just feeling the weight. Nine years reduced to paper, which is not a reduction at all but a translation.

Patricia is at her desk across the lab. Doug has retired -- his desk is cleared, his microscope donated to the local high school. The lab feels bigger with one fewer person. Not emptier -- just bigger.

PATRICIA

Is that it? The paper?

LENA

Final draft. Marco signed off this morning. I'm going to send it to Ecology today.

PATRICIA

Before the site review?

LENA

Under review is better than nothing. At least it shows the data is being used.

PATRICIA

Can I read the first page?

Lena hands her the paper. Patricia reads the opening paragraph -- the "what do you see if you don't leave" paragraph. She reads it slowly.

PATRICIA
(looking up)

This doesn't sound like a journal
article.

LENA

I know.

PATRICIA

It sounds like a person.

LENA

I know.

Patricia hands it back. She doesn't say "it's good" -- she said that in Episode 2 and it meant less. What she does is nod, once, the way scientists nod when data confirms a hypothesis they were already confident about.

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - LENA'S DESK - LATER

Lena at her computer. The submission portal for Ecology is open. Title, authors, abstract, keywords, manuscript file. She fills in each field. Uploads the PDF.

Her cursor hovers over Submit. She has hovered over Send and Submit and Call several times this season. Each time, the hover was the story -- the moment of deciding whether to stay contained or let something out.

She clicks Submit.

The screen: "Your manuscript has been successfully submitted. You will receive a confirmation email shortly."

She sits with this. Then she picks up her phone and texts Marco: "Submitted." One word.

Twenty seconds later: a string of celebration emojis followed by "STEVE WOULD BE PROUD." Then, from a different number -- Becca, Marco must have told her immediately -- a single emoji: the wave.

Lena looks at the wave emoji. This woman she met once, through a coffee cup, knows about her paper. Lena's work exists in the world now, moving through connections she didn't build and can't control. Like a larva released into

the current.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - TOWN - AFTERNOON

Lena walks through town. Not to the grocery store, not to the station, not to the sites. She's walking without a destination. This is new. In Episode 1, every movement had a purpose. Today she's just walking.

She passes the Wayfarer. Pauses. Looks through the window. Becca is behind the bar, serving the afternoon trickle. A thought crosses Lena's face -- half-formed, unfamiliar. She keeps walking.

She passes the Thai restaurant Marco kept mentioning. Bangkok Bay. She's passed it a thousand times in nine years. She stops and looks at the menu in the window. Reads it. Pad thai, green curry, Tom Kha, drunken noodles. The menu of a restaurant she has never entered.

She goes inside.

INT. BANGKOK BAY - SEASIDE - CONTINUOUS

The restaurant is small, warm, busy enough to have a murmur of conversation but not so full that she has to wait. A HOSTESS (50s, Thai, efficient) approaches.

HOSTESS

Just one?

LENA

Just one.

She's seated at a two-top by the window. Given a menu she's already read from outside. She looks at it again anyway, because she doesn't know what to do with her hands.

A WAITER (20s) comes by. Lena orders the green curry, medium spice. She has no idea if she likes green curry. She has no data.

She waits. She looks around the restaurant. Couples, a family with kids, two women who look like they come here regularly -- one of them waves at the hostess by name. This is what a restaurant looks like when you're inside it

instead of walking past.

The curry arrives. She eats. It's good -- or at least she thinks it's good. She doesn't have a comparison. She eats slowly, the way she does everything, and when she's finished she realizes she ate the entire bowl, which is not something she does with canned soup.

The check comes. The total is fourteen dollars. She leaves twenty-five. Not because she's generous -- because she genuinely doesn't know what the protocol is and overshoots. The waiter looks at the tip, looks at her, says "Thank you" with a warmth that makes her think she may have overpaid significantly.

She walks out. Stands on the sidewalk. She just ate dinner in a restaurant, alone, for the first time in -- she can't remember how long. Since graduate school, maybe. The experience was neither transformative nor trivial. It was a meal. She had it. The sky didn't open.

She gets in her car and drives home.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. COASTAL RESEARCH STATION - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

The site review. A small conference room that is usually used for storing extra monitors. Today the monitors have been pushed aside and the table is clean and Linda has put out coffee in actual mugs instead of the stained lab cups.

DR. JAMES KEATING (50s) sits across from Linda, Patricia, and Lena. He's the NSF site reviewer -- cordial, methodical, the kind of person who reads every page of a report before the meeting. He has a thick folder open in front of him.

KEATING

The monitoring data is
impressive. Twelve sites, nine
years, no gaps. That's unusual.

Most stations have coverage issues when personnel turn over.

LINDA

Lena has been the primary investigator for the entire period. Continuity of observer is one of the strengths of the data set.

KEATING

(to Lena)

Nine years is a long time for one researcher at one station. Is that by design or circumstance?

The question is neutral -- administrative, even. But Lena hears what's in it: why are you still here? The same question Marco asked on the rocks in Episode 2. The same question the paper tries to answer. The same question she finally answered for herself in a bar three weeks ago.

LENA

Both. I came for a two-year postdoc and I stayed because the data set became more valuable the longer I maintained it. Stopping would have wasted everything that came before.

KEATING

I see you have a paper under review at Ecology. A recovery analysis?

LENA

Co-authored with Marco Reyes, a graduate student from Oregon State who worked here this summer. It uses the nine-year data set to analyze site-specific variation in post-wasting-disease recovery as a function of wave exposure.

KEATING

And you had a major disturbance event this spring? One of your primary sites was restructured?

LENA

Site Four. Catastrophic wave event in late May. The established community was scoured. I've been running a recovery protocol since -- documenting primary succession from bare rock.

KEATING

That's actually quite valuable from a research standpoint. Documenting full succession from a known baseline on a site with nine years of prior data.

LENA

Yes. It's -- that's exactly what it is.

She's surprised to hear Keating describe the loss of Site 4 as an opportunity. She knew this intellectually -- she said it in voiceover in Episode 3. But hearing someone else say it, in a professional context, with administrative weight behind it, makes it real in a different way.

KEATING

Dr. Yoon, can I be direct? The publication record is thin for nine years of work. Two data summary papers and one under review. That's a red flag for the panel.

Lena nods. She knows.

KEATING

But the data itself is exceptional. And I can see from the new paper's abstract that the analysis is substantial. My recommendation is going to be conditional renewal -- continued

funding contingent on a publication plan. I'd want to see two papers in the next eighteen months. The recovery paper and something on the Site Four succession.

LINDA

We can do that.

KEATING

(to Lena)

I'd also encourage you to bring on more collaborators. The data set is strong enough to support multiple analyses. You don't have to do it all yourself.

He means it practically. But Lena hears the echo -- Linda said it, Marco said it, Yumi said it in a different way entirely. You don't have to do it all yourself. The sentence that has been circling her from every direction for six episodes.

LENA

I'm starting to understand that. Keating gathers his folder. Shakes hands. Linda walks him out. Patricia and Lena sit at the table with the good mugs and the pushed-aside monitors.

PATRICIA

Conditional renewal. That's good, right?

LENA

It's not a rejection.

PATRICIA

It's a second chance, is what it is.

Lena looks at her. Patricia, who has been a warm, quiet presence in the background of this entire show -- who gave Lena the first compliment on her voice, who exchanged the knowing look with Doug in Episode 1, who has been here the whole time without Lena ever quite seeing her as a friend.

LENA

Patricia -- do you want to get
lunch?

Patricia looks at her. In five years of working together,
Lena has never suggested lunch.

PATRICIA

(a beat, then warmly)

I'd love to.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

INT. LENA'S COTTAGE - KITCHEN - EVENING

The kitchen. The same kitchen from Episode 1, but the camera lingers on what's different. The fridge: the graduation photo, the barnacle photograph, and now the crayon drawings -- Lena has moved them from the salt shaker to the fridge, pinned with magnets. Steve with forty legs presides over the kitchen.

On the counter: a to-go container from a restaurant -- not Bangkok Bay, somewhere else. Evidence of a second restaurant meal. On the table: the laptop, open, but also a novel. A paperback, spine cracked, something she picked up somewhere. She wasn't a novel reader in Episode 1. She read journals.

Lena is on the phone. Not sitting at the table -- standing at the window, looking out at the evening, phone to her ear, doing the thing people do when they're in the middle of a real conversation: moving, shifting weight, free hand touching the windowsill.

LENA

I was thinking the week after
Labor Day. If that works. I can
drive down -- it's about ten
hours if I go through Grants
Pass.

YUMI

(on phone)

Lena. You can fly. It's an hour
and a half.

LENA

I'd have to get to Portland. And
then park. And the flights are --

YUMI

You're making excuses because you
want to give yourself ten hours
alone in a car to talk yourself
out of it.

Pause. Lena leans against the window frame. The faintest
exhale that might be a laugh.

LENA

Maybe.

YUMI

Fly. I'll pick you up. The kids
will make signs.

LENA

They don't have to make signs.

YUMI

Lena. They have been planning the
signs since I told them you were
coming. Hana's says AUNT LENA in
glitter glue. There's a sea
urchin on it. There's no stopping
this.

LENA

(quiet)

Okay. I'll fly.

YUMI

I'm going to ask you something
and I want you to think about it
before you answer.

LENA

All right.

YUMI

How are you?
The question. The question from every phone call in every episode. The question Lena deflected with a starfish in Episode 2, half-answered in Episode 5, and is now being asked one final time.

Lena is quiet. She looks around her kitchen -- the fridge, the drawings, the novel, the to-go container. The field notebooks on the shelf, 2016 through 2025, ten spines. Evidence of a decade.

LENA
I'm... not the same. I'm not fixed, or -- it's not like I woke up and everything was different. But I'm not the same.

YUMI
Is that good?

LENA
I think so. Ask me again when I land.

YUMI
(smiling, audible)
Deal. Love you.

LENA
Love you too.
They hang up. Lena sets the phone on the counter. She is smiling. Not the muscles remembering -- an actual smile. Small, private, unperformed. The first one in the show.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN

Morning. The last morning of the show. The same shore, the same light, the same rocks. Lena walks down from the parking lot in her rubber boots and faded Gore-Tex jacket, dry bag over her shoulder. The headlamp is on. It's not quite light yet.

She reaches Site 7. Crouches over the upper quadrat. Takes out the camera, the notebook, the calipers. Begins.

She reaches the northeast crevice.

Steve. Forty-one millimeters. An established juvenile, past every critical threshold, attached in a crevice that has now survived a fourteen-foot swell. The ochre color is deepening -- the first hints of the adult pigmentation that will eventually make this animal visible from ten feet away.

Lena photographs it. Measures it. Writes in her notebook. The same process she has performed thousands of times. The same small, precise handwriting.

She closes the notebook. Looks at the star. It is -- she can admit this now, at least to herself -- beautiful. Not scientifically interesting, which it also is. Beautiful. An animal the color of a sunset holding on to a rock at the edge of the Pacific Ocean because something in its biology said: here. Stay here.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 4 - LATER

Lena walks south to Site 4. The recovering site. She runs the protocol -- photographs, counts, maps the new growth. The barnacles are dense now. Algae is filling in. Two small sea stars have appeared in the lower pool -- new recruits, twenty millimeters each, tucked into crevices created by the barnacle growth. The architecture is rebuilding. Not the same. Something new.

She photographs everything. Then she sits on the rock above the pool and looks at what's growing.

LENA (V.O.)

Recovery isn't dramatic. It's incremental. The first organisms to return aren't the most impressive -- they're the most willing to attach to bare rock. Barnacles. Diatoms. Small things that change the surface just enough for the next thing to hold on.

She pauses. The voiceover -- for five episodes, her voice describing tidepool ecology while the audience heard something else -- shifts. Almost imperceptibly. The science is still accurate. But the voice is different now.

The voice knows what it's saying.

LENA (V.O.)

A recovered community is never a copy of what was lost. It's built from what survived the disturbance and what found the space to settle afterward. New species in old places. Old species in new positions. The pool looks different but it functions. It's alive. It has its own story now, separate from the one that was erased.

She sits with this. The ocean in front of her. The tide coming in, water beginning to fill the lower pools, reconnecting them to each other.

EXT. CANNON BEACH - BEACH - CONTINUOUS

Lena walks back up the beach toward the parking lot. She passes the stretch where Diane usually appears. And there she is -- Diane and Murphy, coming from the other direction.

DIANE

Morning.

LENA

Morning.

They stop. This is new -- in every other episode, they waved and kept moving. Today they stop.

DIANE

How's the big pool doing? The one that got hit?

LENA

Coming back. Barnacles everywhere. A couple of small sea stars in the lower pool. It's going to be okay.

DIANE

Good. That's really good.

Murphy noses Lena's hand. She looks down, surprised. Pets him -- awkwardly, the way someone pets a dog when they haven't touched a living thing in a while.

DIANE

He likes you. He doesn't like everyone.

LENA

I'm going away for a few days.
Next week. Visiting my sister.
She doesn't know why she's telling Diane this. Nobody asked. But it came out the way the sentence in the bar came out -- unprompted, from a place that doesn't wait for permission.

DIANE

That's nice. Where does she live?

LENA

San Jose.

DIANE

Warm down there.

LENA

Too warm, probably. She has kids.
They made me drawings.
She catches herself -- she's talking. Volunteering information. Describing her life to a near-stranger on a beach as if it's the most natural thing in the world. It isn't natural. Not for her. She's doing it anyway.

DIANE

(smiling)

Well, have a good trip. The rocks will be here when you get back.

LENA

I know. That's the nice thing about rocks.

Diane laughs. Lena is surprised by the laugh -- by the fact that she said something that produced it. Murphy pulls at the leash. Diane waves and walks on.

Lena watches her go. Then she walks to the parking lot.

INT./EXT. LENA'S SUBARU - PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Lena gets in the car. Sits. The parking lot: her Subaru and Diane's car and one other she doesn't recognize. She puts the key in the ignition.

Her phone buzzes. She checks it. Marco: a photo. The photo is of a whiteboard in a university office -- Marco's thesis outline, scrawled in his handwriting, with a Post-it stuck to the corner that reads "CHANNEL YOUR INNER YOON." He's captioned it: "Writing day. Thinking of Site 7. How's Steve?"

Lena looks at the photo. Opens the camera on her phone. Scrolls to this morning's photograph of the juvenile star. Sends it.

She types: "Forty-one millimeters. He's going to make it."

Not "maybe" this time. Not the scientist's hedge, not the superstition of someone who doesn't want to jinx it. He's going to make it. She knows. The data says so and she believes the data and she also believes something less precise than data, something she doesn't have a variable name for.

She starts the car.

EXT. ROCKY SHORE - SITE 7 - DAWN (ANOTHER DAY)

The last scene. Dawn. The same shore from the cold open of the pilot. The same sound -- the Pacific breathing, water pulling back over stone.

CLOSE ON the tidepool at Site 7. The upper quadrat. Three adult ochre stars, repositioned since the storm but attached. The juvenile -- Steve -- in the northeast crevice, forty-one millimeters, its color deepening toward the vivid orange of maturity. Around it, the community: urchins, anemones, chitons, limpets, coralline algae. A universe in a divot. The same words from Episode 1. The same pool.

Pull back. Lena crouches over the pool. Headlamp, camera, quadrat frame, notebook. The same position, the same tools. She photographs. She counts. She writes.

But the camera pulls back farther than it has before -- wider than any shot in the series. Wide enough to see the whole shore: the rock bench stretching south toward Site 4 and its rebuilding community. The beach where Diane walks Murphy. The parking lot where the Subaru sits. The town beyond, waking up. The ocean, vast and patient and unconcerned.

And Lena. Small in the frame. One person on the rocks at the edge of the water, doing the same work she's done for nine years. Counting. Recording. Staying.

LENA (V.O.)

I used to think monitoring was about the organisms. Counting what's there, tracking what changes, recording what's lost and what arrives. And it is about that. The data matters. The record matters.

She stands. She looks at the ocean. Not studying it. Not measuring it. Just looking.

LENA (V.O.)

But the thing the data can't capture is the observer. The person who stands in the same place, year after year, and watches. The record changes the keeper. You think you're documenting the world and the world is documenting you. Every morning you come out here, you're the one being measured. By the rock. By the water. By the time.

The first voiceover in six episodes that is not about tidepool ecology. The first voiceover where Lena says "I" and means herself. The recognition, arriving not as a revelation but as a thing she's known for a long time and is finally willing to hear.

LENA (V.O.)

I came here to study what survives. I think I'm starting to learn.

She stands on the rocks. The tide is coming in. The pools are filling, connecting, opening to each other and to the ocean. The water rises around her boots and she doesn't move -- not because she's stuck but because she has a few more minutes and she wants them.

She looks at the ocean. She looks at the sky, which is doing something extraordinary -- bands of pink and copper layered above Haystack Rock, the kind of sunrise that makes tourists pull over.

In the pilot, she didn't look up.

She looks up.

END OF SERIES