

Black Sea Glass on the Shores of Time

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Samuel can no longer remember how long they've been looking for the ocean.

In the early days, he had attempted to keep track by counting steps, methodically recording each slap of his leather soles against the snowmelt sogginess of the road. Every footfall had been a sound as much as a sensation, syncopated staccato beneath the rattle of kicked-up bits of gravel falling together in his boots.

Unfortunately, he had only known so many numbers, and his shoes had only been able to hold so much gravel before Annie had noticed and forced him to shake them out. So, after trying and failing to instead measure time by using the pebble calluses on his feet as tally marks, he had finally turned to the pocket watch.

It had already broken by that point in their journey; not long after he'd first swiped it off a stranger in the street, the face had snapped free from its pendant and tumbled down one of the thawing gulleys beside the road. For a single, stunned second, he'd watched it pirouette midair, its elegant dance knocked off-kilter as it bounced from rock to rock, spider leg cracks exploding into crystalline splinters destined to lose themselves on the ice.

The ache in his chest, the aborted, feeble attempt to lift his hand and catch nothing—it hadn't been a reaction born from sadness, not really—the chain had never even properly wrapped around his wrist, perhaps out of loyalty to its previous owner,

perhaps out of disgust for the grubby skin he'd sat it upon. But clambering down between jagged edges and trying to fit broken parts together before his fingers could freeze over, Samuel had wondered why he'd even stolen it in the first place. And that, if nothing else, had been a feeling adjacent to melancholy; not guilt or regret, but the bitter sort of disappointment that had come with growing up and realizing how easily beauty could shatter into memory.

Then, noticing the glacial wetness seeping into his boots, he had gathered the nearest of the scattered parts into one clenched fist, broken slivers of glass and all, and made the scramble up to the cobbled road without another word. As Annie's outstretched hand had pulled him out of his mind and back into the realm of movement and sound, he'd quietly resented the fact that time had refused to stop. Not for one of its most loyal preachers, its final, ticked breaths evaporating into sighs of vapor beneath the warming winter suns, and certainly not for the philosophical grieving of a miserable, eleven-year-old boy with boots too large for walking in the snow.

After a few miles spent enduring her silent, curious gaze, Samuel had told Annie that the watch had been his father's, just to see what it would feel like to say it. The device had fit well enough within her palm, her own hands more capable of protecting and pretending as if the things they held were precious, as if the ornamental gears along the rim

of the face, broken as they were and immobile as they had always been, could still somehow rotate in time with the stippling stars overhead. Her eyes had traced their celestial edges, then risen back to his expression, and for a moment, he had rather regretted saying anything at all.

“What a lovely watch,” she had replied. She hadn’t reprimanded him because she never did. The look was always enough. “How about we make it a new strap together?”

So the pocket watch had become in death what it never could in life, a relic on a patchy woolen leash loved not for its beauty, but for its ugliness. Samuel still likes to tug it out from the depths of his knapsack and stare at the haphazardly pinned cover like a wayfarer seeking the stars on his compass. He’ll smile to himself from behind his scarf, the cool metal soaking in the warmth of his skin, until he inevitably catches a glimpse of his reflection and spoils his good mood for the foreseeable future.

Of course, even if it did work, the watch would be no help in answering the question of the exact date. Or for how many days they’ve been walking, surviving on foraged goods and Annie’s dwindling purse. Yet Samuel finds himself comforted by the idea of time recording itself more subtly, more unmeasurably, in the disrepair of pocket watches, in the yellow creeping over the edges of old newspaper kindling, in the dust beneath sagging beams in abandoned homes along the road, in the rings of fallen trunks, the number of cranberries left on the vine, the flakes of frost like a thousand moons being shed and subsequently reborn from the sky each night.

Nevertheless, if he were to ask, Annie might know how long it’s been. She seems to keep track somehow. She’s always keeping track of things, always patting her skirt pockets to reassure herself that they haven’t been blown away in the wind,

nimble fingers finding little coins and spools and salt taffies that she’ll have in his palm the instant his feet start to lag when it’s his turn to walk beside the horse.

He wonders what she had lost to make her like that.

But he never asks either question.

In truth, Samuel doesn’t think it should be taking this long to find the ocean unless it doesn’t exist at all. Maybe it existed once, sure, but not anymore, not when all that’s left is melting snow, the distant, dry sand, and rumors of saltwater like a looming avalanche on the horizon, just waiting for the opportunity to crash over the earth and finally make it clean again. To ask the first question would be to bring that possibility into existence, and he could never do that to Annie.

As for the second, well, he could never ask that of Annie either, never risk shattering the fragile, but growing, trust between them. Because Samuel’s life, though he’s lost track of exact days, can still be split into two halves: the time before Annie and the time after Annie. And Annie, in all her confident tenderness, is the kind of woman that Samuel wishes could have been his birth mother.

She’s the kind of woman to speak in “delightful”s and “lovely”s, to punctuate her sentences with little “oh”s, and qualify her adjectives with “so very” as if her lips cannot bear to part such intimate words. She’s the kind of woman to pick crocuses from the frosted grass until her spindly fingers are red with cold, fighting her way through snow squalls in order to lay the blossoms at the feet of any ruined buildings they pass. She’s the kind of woman to wear long skirts and weave longer scarves, to let a kitten stumble with muddy paws all over her fresh lace stockings if doing so would support its quest to explore the wide world, to lean down and gently nudge Samuel’s chin from the folds of his

jacket when he tries to hide his face for too long. No one had ever touched Samuel's face before Annie.

Sometimes, in passing puddles of melting snow or the warped metal of the stirrups hanging off the horse's saddle, he'll spot his dreadful reflection, the wobbly outline of a creature that wears his face, and wonder what kind of person he's meant to be. What do other people see in the gaunt boy with sunken eyes who stalks in Annie's shadow? What do they want to see? What would they have seen back home, if she had never stopped to offer him her hand?

If he makes the mistake of lingering too long on the sight, the woman in question will come to his side and ruffle his hair, once-pretty nails chipped from foraging through brambles. "Oh my," she'll say, the hints of a smile forming on her chapping lips. She'll know, as she always does, what he must be thinking. "What a handsome young man we have here."

It's an effort that succeeds at embarrassing him every time, sending his neck back into the coat and scarf like a turtle as those forgiving hands tighten the cords of his mittens and help him onto Carrot's back. The horse will snort and Annie will pat his mane patiently, lovingly, before taking the reins to walk alongside them.

Samuel likes that about her, the fact that she walks. She doesn't glide or prance, her steps aren't particularly elegant or angelic, she just walks. She walks and her feet will eventually start to hurt in her shoes and she'll have to place something in between the material of the shoe and the skin or she'll get blisters on the backs of her ankles. She bleeds sometimes and has to wrap the wounds, but she never cries. She's an optimist, and being an optimist is painful, he thinks, in a way that being a pessimist isn't, because she always tries to be

hopeful, to see the good in people, and then gets crushed into a tighter and tighter ball each time they fail to meet her expectations. But despite it all, she keeps walking.

Samuel wants to walk with her forever.

Most journeys have endings, he has to remind himself, his field of vision wobbling up and down to the rhythm of Carrot's leisurely pace. It's just too easy to pretend that this one will be forever. That time might really stop, just this once.

"If you don't move forward," Annie likes to say, "you can't get anywhere." But the thought of arriving at a destination is as terrifying as the thought of a vast expanse of rising water crawling over the edge of the earth, clawing its way higher and higher with every passing year. If the ocean, in all its supposed endlessness, will be an end to her walking with him, to her caring for him, then he hopes that they never find it. He hopes that it isn't real.

On the best of days, the days of little wonders, he's able to forget his worries.

Spotting the tiny slices of paradise hidden among the ordinary is Annie's specialty; she'll point one finger into the woods with a delighted hum to show Samuel something he'd never have looked at twice on his own. In her eyes, even the pervasive hoarfrost must look like sugar sprinkled on a tray of pastries, the storm clouds in the sky like a particularly thin layer of lemon glaze melting into speckles across the fluff of a cake.

"Fairy gate," she'll say of a little birch arch, clearly formed by the wind and the weather. When he squints and frowns, she'll only smile even gentler. "Oh, Samuel. You're looking for something that isn't there."

This, of course, always serves to confuse

him further, at which point she'll clarify. "It doesn't have to be there to be real. Isn't it lovely to pretend sometimes?"

He doesn't, won't, ask if she's pretending about the ocean. If it's just a girlhood dream carried on the wind as little seeds swallowed down and replanted by the traveling buskers who fly from corner to corner. If she's looking for something impossible out of fear of whatever follows behind her.

Instead, he'll shrug, nod, and stare harder into their surroundings, searching endlessly for something that he can blurt out, something that will impress her, will reassure her that he does care, he's always cared, he's just never been good at this sort of thing. Strange, for a boy to be so unimaginative, especially when surrounded by so many sources of inspiration. That's what he sometimes imagines that she might think, and then hates himself for it. Funny that his imagination works perfectly fine when it comes to creating monsters.

"There," he'll try. "The rocks by the river."

She'll turn her undivided attention to the unremarkable stones and he'll swallow down his fear.

"They're, well, they're chairs. For the toads and frogs. And the turtles. Sometimes."

Her hands will clasp together and she'll look as if he has produced the sun itself from his bosom. "How wonderful! Oh, how wonderful! They must have quite the time together, don't you think?"

"I dunno," he'll reply, combing a hand through Carrot's mane more for his own sake than the animal's. "I guess."

"They must. I'm sure of it."

His lips will begin to part to reveal wobbly teeth and he'll have to duck behind the scarf once more to hide the smile, thinking about a ridiculous little tea party between amphibians with opposable thumbs as Annie starts to come up with ideas for what the squirrels might be chattering to each other

about. And so time passes, in approximations of moments and minutes, in hours and hands rubbed together to stay warm, and Samuel forgets about endings, about people coming and going.

"Is Annie short for something?" He asks one day as they stop outside one of the few towns that haven't yet been completely abandoned, immediately regretting it when she remains silent for several moments.

"I don't remember," she replies, one hand on her purse.

It's a strange answer. She must remember, he thinks, because how could she not? Unless she would rather pretend to have forgotten. Maybe her real name had been something she'd left behind along with her old life, something she'd gladly abandoned along the road.

"Does it seem like it should be short for something?" Annie continues. "Do I look like an Annabelle? Or an Annette? Maybe Annalise—"

"You look like an Annie," he interrupts. The smile that splits her face reassures him that it's the right answer.

When she leaves him with Carrot and wanders off to attempt a trade, he sits down in the wet grass and thinks about names. He spends so long thinking about names, about gaining them, about leaving them behind, that when Annie returns and tries to show him a map she'd bartered for, he can barely focus on the letters. He's never felt very good at reading, despite Annie's best efforts to teach him. It's too embarrassing when he can't do it, which means he often doesn't want to try at all.

"What is it?"

"The ocean," she replies, and any happiness he may have found in his burst of imagination disappears instantly.

In the face of her unwavering elation, her sunflower smile that has finally managed to completely rotate into the sunbeams, he can manage little more than a croaky, "it's real?"

He hadn't believed, he realizes, not in the slightest, and that alone feels to him as though he'd slapped Annie directly across the face. He'd thought about it, sure, frowned about it, sure, come up with a thousand scenarios in which the sea could be seen and a thousand in which it couldn't, sure, but he had never expected any of them to come true.

How could he not have believed in her?

"We're close." Her answer is possibly the cruelest thing she's ever said to him. A punishment, maybe, for the nonbeliever. "A day or so away."

A day or so. A day or so isn't long enough to say goodbye or thank you or please don't leave me behind. Part of him had really thought it would be easier, that if the world had people like Annie in it, he might be able to like it a little bit more, even without her. And maybe he does. But there are too many things he wants to say first, and the more he wants to say, the less comes out of his mouth.

He's been left behind too many times. He doesn't want to see it happen again.

"Say, Samuel," she says, sitting down beside him before he can dig his nails into his palms, before he can fumble for the pocket watch and cling to it, desperate for an anchor. "Do you know what the doldrums are?"

He shakes his head mechanically, picturing some kind of instrument like the ones he had used to admire on street corners. The buskers had never liked him doing that; children don't tend to carry a lot of money on them. Children with nobody left tend to carry even less.

"They say they're this, this place in the ocean," she begins, taking his hand. "A place where the wind doesn't blow. A sailor can get stuck there for a very long time."

What fate typically meets a fellow in such a circumstance goes unsaid, and Samuel doesn't particularly want to linger on the thought. Without wind, he thinks, alone on the water, a man would have nothing but time, endless time, and the fingers

on his hands. For half of a second, an unreasonable and childish half of a second, he feels jealous. Of the man, maybe. Of the Samuel from a day or two ago, maybe. Of the wind, that gets to blow wherever it wants without a care for the objects in its path, definitely.

"I think the wind is very important," she continues. "It's brought me to exactly where I need to be, after all."

Her eyes don't leave his face when she speaks.

Samuel dreams of a sailboat that night, though he doesn't really know what one looks like. It ends up turning into a little boy in the end anyway.

When he wakes up, much earlier than usual and soaked through with sweat that freezes his shirt to his back, Annie's purse is missing from her side. The draft of cold air that tickles his neck drifts in through the open patch of the tent, the fabric sliced clean with a pocketknife.

He stares. Stares some more at the peaceful rise and fall of Annie's chest, then at his own pack, his body having curled around it even in sleep, the kind of habit that he'd developed as a child when he'd spent every resting moment waiting for someone to wake him up, elbows sharpened into knives for fighting off grabby hands in the night.

For a moment, he can only feel relief that Annie isn't hurt. That Carrot, when he soundlessly shuffles outside of the tent to check, is standing upright, snoozing, unharmed.

But the map had been in that purse.

Standing there, alone, in the frigid darkness, Samuel thinks about going back inside, curling into a ball, and pretending he'd never woken up.

"Have you ever wanted to run away?" Annie had asked the first time they'd met, tucking her cloak around his shoulders as he sat, shivering, against an abandoned storefront. Strange, he'd thought, both the question and the act of her

stopping to talk with him. He'd always been easy for everyone else to pass by. "Find something bigger than yourself? Something you can't explain, but you just know you need to find it, in order to keep going?"

He hadn't wanted either of those things. He had wanted a nice place to store his stolen pocket watch, maybe, and someone who would smile at him, definitely. But he hadn't cared about finding a purpose and had never really experienced the luxury of dreaming about his future.

To be honest, he still doesn't care about hope and possibility in the same way that Annie does. But if the idea of the ocean is to her what she has been to him, then he'll find the map, no matter what it takes. He's only ever wanted to see her happy.

Picturing the way her smile had looked when she'd opened the map, he becomes the wind.

His feet are moving and he's running, flying, whirling, his skin bruising from the cold even as he burns. He's out of the tent and in town begging, knocking on doors that are shut in his face, crawling into the kinds of hovels he would have hidden in had it been him, before chasing a boy of thirteen or fourteen into the woods with bare feet and a barer heart.

It hurts, a bit, feeling nails scratch into his skin. The last time he had fought someone had been in the days before Annie. Any tolerance he'd built up for it back then is gone, but he has no choice. No choice.

"Are you an idiot?" The boy roars, nose bleeding from where Samuel has tackled him to the ground. Both of them are covered in wet, frigid dirt, shivering even as they wrestle, teeth bared. He is Samuel, in a way, two or three years older but also two or three years into the past. "They sell these everywhere! It's not even worth anything!"

He is an idiot. He doesn't care. It has to

be that one. He thinks of a brilliant smile and the laughter of fairies and little animals chattering away and a great blue sea and he burns. "I need it," he says, desperate. "Please. Just the map. Please. You can keep the money. I won't tell anyone."

The boy glares up at him for several moments, his eyebrows low and blood still smeared across his upper lip. "Something's wrong with you," he spits finally, shoving himself out from underneath Samuel's trembling arms. "Whatever. You can have it."

Samuel lets him go, barely even hears the words, a great weight lifting from his shoulders upon seeing that the little names are still there, unharmed, on top of each part of the map. He can't read them, but they're still there, and he can almost imagine what they might say. With trembling fingers, he smooths out the creases that the pickpocket had left behind, tenderly, as a mother would to a child. As Annie would to him, her hands massaging out the wrinkles on his forehead when he had lain sick and panting the one autumn he had caught a fever.

He stands up, looks from the map to the sky and from the sky to the map, and then he's running again, hair sticking down to his forehead with something between sweat and icy condensation. He's running, and this time, he knows where he's going. He knows where he wants to end up.

Annie is already awake, her hands wringing together until she notices him and stands with a silent shout, eyes widening at whatever horrible state his face is in. He throws himself forward and feels strong arms circle his back.

It's a strange realization, the thought that she might need him, at least in this moment, in the same way he needs her. It's one that makes him shudder with snot, one that makes his knuckles clench, his eyes squeeze shut, and the bumps of his skin shiver with something akin to hopeful, almost disbelieving longing. His lips part, then close, and he

holds her tighter.

“I want to see the ocean,” he sobs. He can’t remember when he started crying. He can’t even remember the last time he’d cried, if he’d ever cried, but he’s crying. “I really want to see the ocean.”

Warm thumbs rub circles into his shoulder blades and he wails into her dress, staining the fabric with the salty trails of the sea.

“I’ll take you,” she whispers. Her quietness is strong. “Don’t you worry. I’ll take you wherever you want to go. Let’s go see the ocean.”

When the dawn floats up over the horizon, they’ve almost made it.

Frost clings to the tall grass that threatens to swallow the path, tickling Carrot’s legs as he trudges past. Samuel, bandaged fingers clinging to a sturdy waist, doesn’t think browns, grays, and whites have ever looked so lovely. Just yesterday, he might have thought them lonely.

“Does the water really go on forever?” He asks, peering over her shoulder at how much of the hill they have left to climb.

Annie laughs, the sound of a clock tower at noon. “I don’t think so, Sam. If it went on forever, there wouldn’t be any land left for us to live on.”

“Then what’s on the other side?”

“I don’t know,” she replies, teasing. “But I’m sure you can come up with something.”

“I—” he begins, before stopping himself. He had been about to say that he couldn’t. “I could. But I wanna know what you think.”

“I think it’s better not to know.”

Samuel takes a moment to consider this. “So you can pretend?”

“So the possibilities will stay endless forever. So I can hope. And dream. And know that as long as the wind blows, there’ll be somewhere new for it to take me.”

He rests his small head against the back of her shoulder and thinks, breathing in the salt and sweat of the sea as Carrot completes the final, plodding steps over the crest of the hill, leading the charge to the boundless edge of possibility.

There, as the waves crash against the rocky shore, powerful enough to gouge canyons, to kill, to smooth even the most worthless of human trash into prismatic glass, Samuel takes in his first glimpse of the ocean.