

The Man and His Rocks

The man remembered his piercing blue eyes. He remembered staring into them as a tear escaped its bindings and rested on the crest of his eyelid. He remembered the pain. He remembered being scared, oh so scared.

“It’s okay,” he repeated.

Those eyes had always haunted him.

He would often wake to blistering silence in the dead of night, as he lay alone in a cold sweat. He would slowly count each isolate breath while he lay realizing it had only been a dream. He then accounted for his possessions: a torn brown tarp, a used plastic cup, a blanket, a sheet of cardboard, a dying marker, thirteen tin cans and eight plastic water bottles, his bag of rocks, and his cart.

The darkness was infinite. It was the kind of darkness that lived even after the sun wakes and ascends the heavens; it was the kind of darkness that lingered and lurked. It surrounded him and beckoned him in.

He found himself praying during such times, seeking for a comforting voice, a voice of love, a voice of forgiveness. He would mumble his words of sorrow and holy righteousness but to no avail. In a world without sound, his prayers could be seen as they rose and fell back to the earth in the cold of the winter air.

“I am sorry,” he would whisper aloud in desperation. He paused, but no one was there to listen amidst the nothingness.

Floating droplets of mist were caught in the webbings of his untrimmed beard while others kissed his pursed lips and weathered, rheumatic eyes and face. He would sing to himself

on such nights in order to stay awake, for he feared what he would dream upon his restless slumber. His dreams were seldom dreams, but rather a remembrance of a past yearning to be forgotten--a past so dreaded and tainted, a past so painful and haunting, a past so potent that it overwhelmed the fleeting moments of the present and all thoughts of a future. He sang under his breath and looked to the night sky, searching for the distant stars, but their light remained unseen--trapped behind the ominous clouds in the abyss of black and darkness.

The nights were hot; the days were sweltering.

He slept on the bottom bunk with his boots still on. It was the one hundred and twenty sixth night according to the marked tallies he had scratched onto the bed frame hanging above him. Moving cars and talking men could be heard outside the tent stirring. Noah laid silently on the bed above him. Some slept, but the base was seldom silent.

Noah had grown to become the man's closest friend. The two of them would talk often, especially on the nights they lay awake unable to sleep. Noah would talk about his home and his beloved family, and his beautiful fiancée whom he loved and adored more than any one thing a man could possibly adore in one's lifetime. Noah was the lone soul who knew the man's story, and he knew why the man would listen to Noah while rarely replying with stories of his own. Noah knew why the man never wrote letters home while all the others had.

He knew the man had written a letter home only once. He knew the man received the letter from his mother-in-law a few weeks later regarding the accident. He knew her letter read words of condolence, mourning, and sorrow. She longed for her daughter, and the man longed for his. They were gone before his letter had ever reached home. He couldn't have saved them, and that's what pained the man most.

But on that one hundred and twenty sixth night the two men didn't talk about home.

"Hey," Noah whispered aloud to the man.

"Yes," the man responded.

"Are you scared of it?"

"Scared of what?" the man said.

"Dying."

"I'm not sure. I suppose I am."

"I am. I'm scared to die."

"Why are you scared?"

"Just cause," Noah said in reply, his words lingering in hesitation. "I'm afraid to die like this."

"Like what?"

"Like this. I don't want to die out here. I don't want to die alone out here. I don't want this to be my story; this isn't how I'd choose to go."

"No one wants to die-" the man began to say. "Even those that do, don't. They just want to be living a life different than this one, and they pray that their next life is one they want to live. But people die, Noah. Especially those that don't deserve it--those that when they do die, their souls don't simply lose life, but rather life loses their souls, and longs for them to return to being, because without them, life is as empty as death itself."

"I know. I'm sorry."

The two of them laid silently for a brief moment and listened to nothing but the sound of their breathing.

“How’d you choose?” the man asked.

“Choose what?”

“How’d you choose to die?”

“In the sea. I’d want to die in the sea.”

“Why?”

“I love the sea. As a child, I’d use to visit the sea with my father. When I was with him there, amidst the warm sand and the salty air, time would vanish from existence. The sea holds all my beloved memories.

“My dad told me once that drowning is how we would want to go. He told me that in your final moments, you experience the utmost sense of relief and peace. I guess that’s all I could ever want when leaving this life--to just slip away knowing that those breaths I take are my last, and that I can let go.”

Not a word was said for some time.

“I won’t let you die out here, Noah.”

“I know.”

“I promise.”

“I know.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Noah was killed three weeks later.

His arms were scratched, and his chest remained a chasm torn open. The man knelt, cradling him in his arms. The blood seeped through his shirt, bathing them both. His arms

trembled and his lip quivered as he gazed upon Noah's dirtied face and blue eyes. A tear escaped its bindings and rested on the crest of his eyelid.

"It's okay," the man repeated.

The man woke up. The sun had risen and the darkness subsided. The sand was warm and air smelt of salt. He sat behind his sign made of cardboard, and watched as the families walked on past him, refusing to meet his gaze. They didn't know his story, and he hadn't known theirs. The crowds of walking people melted into a vague blur of unfamiliar faces. All the faces except for one. The boy was perhaps eight. He had stopped and stared at the man. His eyes were a piercing blue, and they seemed to dance as they glistened.

"What's in your bag, mister?" the boy asked.

"My rocks," the man responded gently.

"Why do you have 'em?"

"They're for a friend."

"Oh, okay."

The boy's father shouted to the boy from a distance, asking for him to return.

"I have to go. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," the man said.

"Don't worry, I'll see you again," the boy said.

"I know."

The boy grinned; his sea blue eyes twinkled in the light of the sun.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The boy turned round and ran back to his father.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

In that passing instant, the man had decided, for he knew he was ready.

He sat in the sand with his knees bent as the night absorbed and absolved the day. The beach was quiet, and clean of any souls aside from his own. He tilted his head to the night sky. The light of the stars could be seen as they escaped the trammel of the surrounding darkness.

The man smiled.

He walked towards the sea, its current calm. He looked back to his abandoned torn brown tarp, used plastic cup, blanket, sheet of cardboard, dying marker, thirteen tin cans, eight plastic water bottles, and his cart. His rocks filled his pants pockets to the brim. He waded through the water--creeping ever closer to the edge--as the water rose to his chin. He stood still, counting his breaths in that transient moment. His head submerged, the water engulfing his being, caressing his soul.

Baptized.

It was a night premeditated and destined. His body began to warm as he loosed his grip. He saw their faces. They smiled, and he smiled back. He rose as his body sank, deeper into the darkness, and into the light.