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Salt Water, Sugar Dirt



The Opener

There was a distinct and unshakable feeling that the city would slip out from underneath her very feet, crumbling into a thousand pieces of silver, stone, sorrow. So, though she's shaking all over — from the fear in her heart and the cold of the spray — her nimble thumbs push and press relentlessly against the tiny cellphone, and the piece of plastic threatens to bend and crack under her will.

Can you hear me? Will you see me?

Message in a bottle, message from space, the faster she runs the more she feels her heart race — though she knows for certain that she'll have nowhere left to run if this is true. Time travels by, bending, twisting, fretfully, fearfully.

Will you see me in the morning?

Ocean air is good for one's health, even at this hour, but gulpful after gulpful isn't enough to fill her lungs. Sister, don't you dare stop — you type, you write, you run for your life. Warm hands are too far away to console her, to gently pry her away from the phone, to shush her with a finger against her lips, to pat her head and say, *no, don't worry, nothing bad will happen, we'll make sure you'll stay. You're safe and sound, right here by the sound. Yeah? Okay? So don't go throwing yourself into the lake today.*

Please, please, please. I don't want to go.

She swallows thickly, saliva trickling down her throat, letters heckling their way onto the screen. It all



had to be recorded, nobody could forget. I won't go I won't go I won't
There's a silence. Suddenly, the city stops altogether. It seems stable, somehow, the crashing waves no longer threatening to erode its very existence, and hers along with it.

Then came the tremors again.

"You know, you can't afford that."

It was the last time she'd seen him. The last time she'd seen *anyone*, really, or spoken to anyone.

If she'd known — and she'd suspected, of course — that he, of all people, despite everything, would be the last person she'd ever speak to, the last person she'd lock eyes and exchange conversation with, then she might have sweetened her tongue.

"You know," she drawled back instead, putting down whatever purchase she'd been considering. "You can't afford to have your nose broken. It's just about the only thing you've got going for you."

"We *both* know I have more going for me than that," he teased. "But money can pay for surgery. Then again, those tickets were expensive. I ought to mind my budget for a bit."

She shifted, slowly taking in what he'd been saying. "You're going on a flight?"

"No," he shrugged. "You are."

"Well, I know *that*," she frowned.

He smiled. He smiled that rotten, snake-like smile, the kind of smile that looked like it had been carved in his skin with a knife, all bitter white bone and blood-red gums, dripping filthy poison.

"You..." There was blaring in her mind, alarms going off. Something wasn't right.

"Yes, me," he confirmed, nodding. "What, you thought your parents could afford to haul you back home?"

"Don't call it that," her voice rose, wavering, shaking, hyperventilating.

"Don't you *dare* call it that."



A promised journey to no man's land,
No man here to hold your hand.
He took you to the tallest tower in town—
Six hundred floors up, one way down.
Throw yourself out the broken window,
Drown.

Eyes were dark, leaking shadow, pitch, tar,
Black oil. You may not be who you are.
He popped open a fizzy drink to toast—
It's green like poison apple, poison oak.
Be lulled to sleep by the wicked liquid,
Choke.

Took your camera, took your phone,
Made sure you could not contact home.
He buried all that could corroborate—
The grave is hidden, impossible to locate.
Lie there as you're covered with bitter dirt,
Suffocate.

Imitation Lobster

I remember it fondly, the place that I'd go. I remember the harbour, the water, the rivers, the sea.

I remember when there were strawberries for sale, red, sweet, that grew in the water. Yes, there they grew in the water, like the lobsters, like the rivers of syrup and milk and wine — all could be acquired for free, when normally it'd be a mark of the divine. You'd pass a sign: "Strawberries for sale (and lobsters, and syrup)" and that'd go on for some time.

To make syrup you need sugar sand. Sugar sand comes from by the lake, not from by the harbour, where there'd only be salted water, like the pretzels pecked at by the seagulls. But lately the angry lake overflows, floods the city with its tears. It's been looking, through a foggy lens, but what it searches for, it can never find— and so it cries. Don't cry, lake, it's not like you're the only one of your kind.

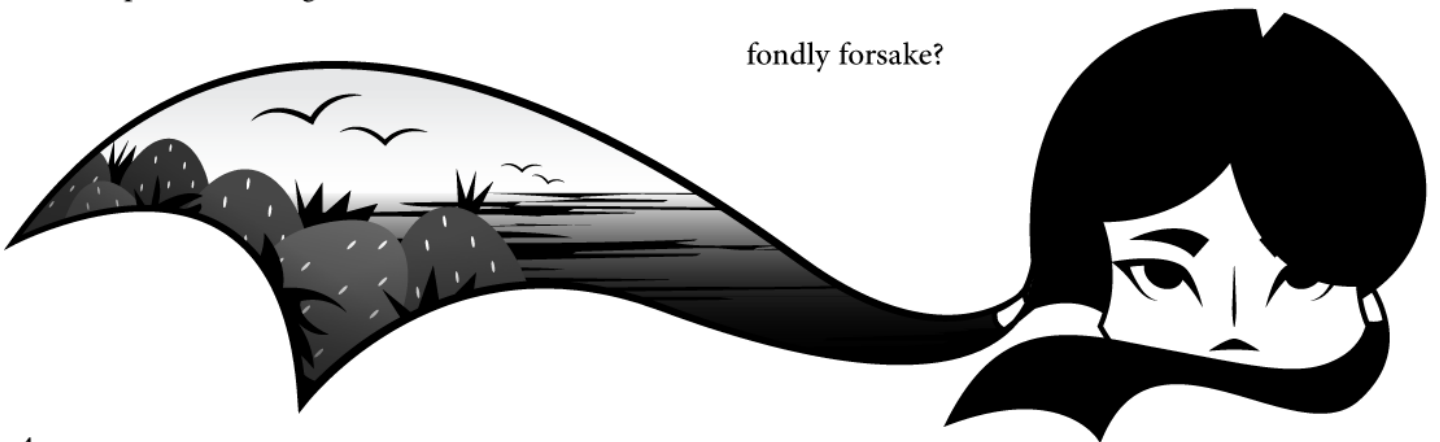
Seagulls don't fly down south much like they used to. These days they've been deathly afraid that if they go away they won't be able to return. I don't know who's been telling them this. I like to think they fly in heart-shapes all around the sky, they circle and they spy and they do better at it than the lake. For them it all goes green bridge blue bridge lighthouse, and a golden lion that guards the graveyard swipes at them.

He's afraid they won't pay respects to my grave. The lion's not from here, either. He understands that sometimes you're from someplace people can't say the name of and that's alright, we'll get on by, we'll pretend that there isn't a force looming just over the edge, threatening to send us both over it. Poor lion paws gingerly at its companion, mangled black metal, proof that this town has a tendency to crumble.

I remember it fondly, the place that I'd go. I remember the lobster, the lion, the seagulls, the lake.

The place that I'd go, does it remember me? Or was it that much easier to

fondly forsake?



Denouement

There was a distinct and unshakable feeling he had made some kind of horrible mistake, and that it'd all leak out and be revealed, slowly, painfully, through droplets of jasmine, jade, jealousy. So, though he's shaking all over — from the cold of his heart and the fear of what they'll say — his calloused fingers smear the ink on the canvas, holding the bamboo brush so tightly it may snap under the pressure.

Can she hear me? Will she see me?

Message left unspoken, message made encoded, the more he thinks the more he feels his mind race — though he knows there's no point in second guesses. It's all been set in stone already, unchanging, unyielding, steadfast, stalwart.

Will she see me in the future?

Ocean air is good for one's health, but since his lungs are full up of cigarette smoke, all air hurts the same. Brother, why don't you stop — you deny, you despise, you'll regret this all your life. Soft eyes are too far away to gaze at him, to gently take his mind off the brushwork, to check on him with a hand against his forehead, to touch his shoulder and say, *no, don't worry, nothing bad happened, thank you for letting me stay. All I need are hugs and holds, right here by the tugboats. Yeah? Okay? I promise I won't throw myself into the lake today.*

Please, please, please. I don't want her gone.

He bites his lip, blood dribbling down his chin, symbols scribbling their way onto the cloth. It all had to be discarded, he had to forget.

I need her I need her I need

There's a silence. Everything stills, for some reason. His hands stop shaking, his heart stops pounding. It's like the whole city took a resigned sign, and the calmness is resounding.

Then came the tremors again.



