

## The young man and the sea

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Marcus lifted his heavy eyes from the pavement. The expensive suit was tight on his thighs and across his shoulders, the back of his neck soaked in sweat. They were drinking coffee under a thick shade cloth, but the heat was everywhere, beating at the very air until it gave way, shimmering and vibrating. More coffee was the last thing he needed, but he took a long sip anyway, swirling the lukewarm liquid around his mouth before swallowing.

‘North? The fuck could I do up north?’

The old man’s eyes disappeared behind a spiderweb of wrinkles. ‘It’ll be ab season soon. We could show you the ropes. What are you doing here?’

A constant wave of people was streaming past, and Marcus followed their feet. There is a rhythm to this, he thought, some deeper pattern that lies just beyond my grasp. He felt as though he stood on the edge of a precipice, poised on the brink of falling, transfixed by the inky depths below. Loafers clicked, sneakers scratched, trousers swept the dirt in a long wave of human fatigue, and Marcus realised he had no answer to the question. But before he could find some empty platitude to fill the space, the old man was speaking again.

‘The city don’t need you, kid. You’re a cog in the machine. It’ll eat you up and suck you dry and spit you out tired and lonely in the cold fuckin dirt. This ain’t your place. Come meet the sea.’

So Marcus ran.

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Marcus ran as the city closed in around him. Concrete cracked and shattered as the walls arched inward, threatening to topple and smash his body into dust that would be swept like mud into the overflowing pipes and gutters. The place stank, but worse was the sound that howled up from the depths. It groaned, like some living thing that longed to break its chains and swim towards a half-remembered light. Beneath the layers of shit and decay whole worlds were buried, the light of stars and the wonder of galaxies, but nobody remembered or cared. They waded on through the filth and bought masks to give their lungs a little time, yet as Marcus ran past their huddled forms he saw that they had become ghosts, half people, alive yet not living, rotting but not yet dead. So he ran, and as the dream faded he kept his eyes straight ahead and did not look back.

The steady hum of the engine slowed and Marcus woke. The air smelt different somehow. Cleaner. As his eyes opened, Marcus sat perfectly still, barely drawing breath. Water stretched out before him, further than he could see. All around, the ground shook with an ominous rumble, as if he stood before some god's forge and lives were being smelted in the deep. And there by the shore, the old man stood waiting.

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They bobbed up and down in the midday sun. As the old man busied himself with the moorings, Marcus stood at the bow and looked out over the waves.

'How far does it go?' The blue of the sky and the sea became one, way out there. He wondered which was deeper.

'Who knows?' The old man scratched at his beard with a free hand. 'There's maps back home, but I've never sailed much

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further than this. Who am I to say it ends? Even the sky gives up eventually. Give us a hand with these fuckin ropes, hey kid?’

Beneath the waves, silence rose like an inky shroud, punctuated by little streams of bubbles that fled before his grasping fingers. A few metres away, on a different line, the old man lifted his thumb. You good? Marcus copied. He was good. Better. As they descended he closed his eyes and let the water sweep over him. Minutes felt like years underwater, and soon he lost all sense of direction and imagined himself weightless, suspended in an ocean womb. Maybe if he became salt, he could forget the breathing tube and just float down there. Then his feet met the sand, and before Marcus lay the first beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

They perched on the edge of the highest cliff in the world, looking out over vast forests of weed which swayed with each breath the sea took. Sunlight filtered down from above and formed magnificent pillars of white marble. It’s a city, Marcus thought. Amid the crags and crevices of the cliff face, fluorescent fish swirled and flashed in their multitudes, dancing lights on empty streets. He looked up to the thin black line that gave him life, then back into the depths. Somewhere below, the old man slipped abalone from the rocks with an expert flick, bagging them on his belt, an offering. Marcus saw the whole world stretched before him, and without thought he reached out as if to touch the sky, the stars, the horizon that blurred and twisted into slow blue.

The shadow fell across him as he crouched there, flicking his fifth ab from the rock. The knife dropped from his hand as he turned and faced it. Barnacles encrusted the grey of its skin, the living flesh indiscernible from its rocky surroundings, yet the eye was alive in a way Marcus knew he could never understand. It was the tide, the storms, the currents. It was the

shallows, the reefs, the deep places no man could go. Ancient, colossal, the weight of its being pressed against his chest until there was no air left in his blood. Their surroundings blurred and disappeared into darkness. They were alone, the young man and the sea.

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Marcus ripped off his mask and gasped at the air.

‘Did you see that?’ He was exhilarated, flying; his veins surging with wonder. The old man wrinkled his brow. ‘See what kid?’

And for the first time in years, Marcus burst out laughing.