

Golden Hearts Turned Silver

By Kaylee Nickisch

I watch as the waves wash up against the shore.

There is something magnetic about them, I find; something within the pull they have, the ebb and flow that I can't stop from reeling me in. It's in their color, too— sparkling blues and greens and a mix of something in between; it's so mesmerizing to watch them clash-- against each other, against the rocks and the sand and the legs of the people who walk in them.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?”

I turn in the direction of the person who spoke. The voice is smooth and thin, and it belongs to a woman who, despite her age, stands straight and tall.

Her hair is gray and tucked into a bun, her weekend dress is loose fitting and frayed. There are wrinkles lining her mouth and tucked at the corner of her eyes. I look away, facing the water once more so as to not be impolite.

“Yes,” I agree. The sound of waves crashing, of birds calling, envelopes me entirely, yet I can still hear the raspy, wheezing breaths that the woman beside me is taking. My fingers brush across the starched skirt of my gray weekend dress, tracing patterns into it as I try to focus back into the motion of the waves.

In, and out. In, and out. In, and out. In, and—

“Do you like the ocean?” the woman asks.

There is a pause before I answer. “I do,” I nod. “Do you?”

The woman smiles. It is a soft, sweet thing; her eyes— now hazy with memory— do not leave the sight in front of us. “I love it.” We are quiet for a moment more before the woman adds, “It was much more beautiful in person, I must say.”

This gets my attention. I turn towards her fully, unable to hide the absolute delight in my eyes at the prospect of *seeing* the ocean in real life, of *actually* going to a beach.

“You've seen it? *Really?!?*”

The woman laughs. “Yes, I have. A long time ago...”

“What’s it like? Is it just as pretty as in the videos? Is there just as much sea life? Have you seen a real saltwater fish?”

“It’s gorgeous, dear girl,” she says to me.

Her hand comes up to clutch at a necklace that I hadn’t noticed before— something quite uncommon for citizens. The Commission does not like when those who are not one of their own have such extravagant things. It is a locket; a small, heart shaped thing that is painted in cheap gold. The paint has begun chipping off, revealing the scratched silver underneath.

“It was full of life, once; just as beautiful as it is in these clips. These days…” she shakes her head solemnly. “I am not quite sure that it is the same.”

“Oh.” I settle back down into my place, turning to look at the screen in front of me again. We stay silent; it is only a few moments later that it is announced over the speaker that the museum is to close soon.

“What is your name, girl?” the woman asks me.

“Sofia,” I respond.

“Sofia,” she nods. “A beautiful name indeed.”

I smile, slightly. “And yours?”

I get no response. When I turn my head to the side, I see that the woman is gone.

I come back to the museum later on in the week, after school. The woman is already there— she is sitting on a bench, her back turned towards me, and she is watching clips of a bird swooping through a forest. There is no one else there— there hardly ever is. The museum isn’t something people go to unless they have to for school; once you graduate you aren’t supposed to go there at all, at least not until you reach the final maturity level— Elder. The Commission doesn’t seem too keen on changing that rule.

She doesn’t move when I walk up to her and doesn’t turn her head when I sit next to her. Her voice is clear when she speaks up.

“Do you know what type of trees these are?”

I blink up at the screen. “Sequoia sempervirens,” I respond, “redwoods. I learned all about them in school.”

The woman laughs. “You learned all about the science of them,” she corrects. Her hand, wrinkled and covered in sun-spots, goes up to tap at her locket. “About their scientific name and how tall they grew, about what they looked like and the conditions they needed to survive.

“But you didn’t learn about the voices that sang in them, or the sound that their branches made as they twisted in the wind; you didn’t learn about the feel of their bark or the sweet scent of their sap burning in the heat. Truly, my child, you know nothing.”

I frown; this isn’t true. I know lots of things. I know about the different types of clouds, and about the rules of grammar. I know how to add and subtract and divide and multiply. I say as much to the woman, but she does not seem impressed; she smiles, though, her eyes never leaving the screen in front of her.

“Yes, you know many things, I suppose— but you don’t truly *know* them, do you?”

I think about this for a few moments. “I don’t really see what you’re trying to get at.”

The woman simply sighs. “All in due time, my dear. All in due time.”

We meet again every few days.

Sometimes I cannot go— usually because I have schoolwork or because Mother and Father need me to stay with them. Once I couldn’t go because all citizens were ordered to stay in their units by the Commission. I am still unsure as to why.

However, when I do go, the woman is always there.

She never gives me her name; I never ask again. She does not look at me, and she does not speak to me like my teachers or parents do. She teaches me about things I thought I knew, yet I always end up finding out learning something new anyways.

“Things in the past... well, everything is much different now,” she had once said.

We were in a new part of the museum that day. We tended not to stray from the Geology section, where I would learn about simple things such as the feel of the ocean or the call of the mountains or the songs of valleys that dipped into the Earth. That day, however, she led me to a section I had never thought to enter before— Life.

There were less screens in this room— that is the first thing that I had noticed. Less screens for videos and more still art, like paintings and photographs.

I nodded when she said this because this is something I had come to understand. The way the woman talked about the past— so fondly and nostalgically it made my chest feel tight— made me a little confused. I, even still, could not help but wonder what exactly had changed.

“Look here,” she said, and I did. We’d stopped in front of a portrait— a photograph, bigger than the widths of both of our shoulders. It was of two men— one dressed in something resembling a robe, the other dressed in a suit. They were shaking hands; they were smiling.

“These days, everything is so similar. There is a distinctive order, a specific way that we believe things should function. We have the four levels of maturity— Child, Teenager, Adult, Elder— which determine our roles in our communities. We have the Commission, who sends out our rations and chooses our jobs and enforces our laws.

“We are made to wear the same things: our weekend dresses and our weekly dresses and our uniforms for work and school. We do what we’re told and don’t question it. It’s odd, for people like me... people who know about the lives we lived in the Before.”

“The Before?” I asked. The woman nodded.

“Yes. The Before. Before all this... the regulations, the rules.”

“What... what was it like?”

“Different. Different in a way that I cannot, will never be able to, teach you. Things... they’ve changed so much; and I am not sure this change is for the better.”

The woman turned to me, then. From this view I was able to tell that her wrinkles were much more prominent— she was much older than I had assumed before. Her skin was pale as cream and her eyes were a deep green.

Her hands moved up to unlock the clasp of her locket. She stared at the piece of jewelry softly, allowing it to pool into a pile in her palm. Then, she outstretched her hand— taking my own. I could do nothing but watch, astonished, as the necklace fell into my palm. My fingers curled around it instinctively.

“But some change,” she said, “is good.” Her hand wrapped around mine— it was warm and smooth. “Sofia... There is a way to make things better. There is a way to help save the Earth— not just the culture of it, but it’s nature. It’s people.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

The woman smiled at me. Her hand shook as she released my own, as she brought it up to pat at my shoulder. “Because you are like me, and I know myself well. This change-- this change begins with you.”

“Miss...”

“Go home, Sofia,” she said to me then. “Get some rest. You’ll get the answers to all your questions soon enough.”

So, I did. I went home, the locket hidden safely in my pocket. I ate dinner with Mother and Father, I finished my homework and did not leave my unit when the Commission told us not to later that night.

The next time I showed up to the museum, the woman wasn't there.

The museum closed not long after.

It is not until years later that I fully understand what the woman means.

The ocean is different from how I pictured; it is ugly, thick and black like oil. The waters leave a residue when they lap at the shore. It's rancid— smelling like sour rot. The sand is covered in shattered glass and trash that spreads much farther than what my own two eyes can see.

I had already been disappointed by the forests, which were full of tree stumps and dried dead plants, and had been let down by the valleys, which were now nothing more than grey stone that was sharp enough to cut and dry soil which had been bled of all its nutrients. It only seemed fair that the sea would disappoint in such a way too.

The wind blows into my hair, whipping it around wildly; my clothes are thin and ragged, and I am unclean from my journeys. The locket that the woman gave me has turned entirely silver now, scratched and dented from the fights that I have faced. Agents sent by the Commission are sure to find me soon— the Commission is efficient, and I can never travel too far without them catching up.

I bring my hand to my chest, and wrap my fingers around the locket, successfully hiding it in my fist. There are tears blurring my vision, but still I smile.

This change begins with you.

The murky waters call to me, the wind whispers its secrets; it sings, "*You have a lot of work to do.*"