

They stopped in their play to watch his coming, striding like a tall, grey bird, a white plume atop his head and another thin leg of polished oak that he relied upon more heavily than his two natural limbs. He lifted a long-fingered, slightly shaking hand in greeting as he came within shouting distance, close enough to hear his irregular swish as he limped through the heavy sand.

“Fine morning for it,” he cheerfully croaked, coming on as if he couldn’t stop, as if he was moving at much higher speed and would need to hit something to find rest.

Ruthie stood her ground, Isaac going to cower behind her. Ruthie held a smooth, wave-polished rock in her tight grip, but she wouldn’t need to use it against such a brittle menace. She lifted her chin to the heron-esque man, while Isaac attempted a shy wave as he peaked out from just below her shoulder.

“This your beach?” the man asked, stuttering to a halt to lean on his cane and regard them with narrow, amused eyes that were surprisingly sharp. His hands curled confidently around the curve of his cane, and Ruthie rethought her earlier assumption that she could defend herself against him.

“It’s big enough to share,” she said loftily. “Who’re you?”

“You know, I never had children, but I suspect that sort of impudence is not supposed to be tolerated.” He leant in and Ruthie straightened up taller, but all he did was grin, slow and like he was letting them in on a secret joke. “Good thing I never had any, eh?”

Ruthie’s hand relaxed around her rock. “What’s your name?”

The old man sucked his teeth, thinking. “You’ll call me Bob, I reckon. Heaven knows you won’t be interested in using my full Christian name.”

The warm, salty wind began to whip Ruthie’s coarse red hair into her eyes, but she remained perfectly still. “My name’s Ruthie. *Not* Ruth. This here is Isaac.”

Bob offered a papery white hand, which Ruthie refused, but which Isaac stepped forward to take in his own small, dark brown one. Bob smiled at the boy, his shake firm and appreciative as he appraised him as if he were a fellow full-grown man.

“Good to know at least one of us has a Biblical name and wants to use it.”

Isaac stepped back silently, looking to Ruthie, but she was not budging. “I hate my name,” she spat.

Bob’s downy eyebrows shot up, and then he was laughing, weak and wheezy. “Child, you don’t hate a name until you’ve had to write it a thousand times. If you really hated it, you wouldn’t have made it longer.”

“I like mine,” Isaac piped up.

Ruthie would have wheeled on him if she had been willing to turn her back. Her arm did twitch, ready to shoot out and hold the boy back, but her body uncoiled slightly when she saw Bob smile fondly, straightening from his cane to set off again. He made a wide, halting circle around them, pausing when he was only a few feet away.

“Will you not be joining me?”

Isaac looked to her, an eager puppy asking to be let out the door. She agreed with a curt nod, her shoulders slumping in defeat while Isaac skipped along, and they both fell in step behind the old man like dutiful ducklings.

He led them up and down the empty beach, and they let him speak. His voice was lightly accented, well-to-do, though fallen a long way from its earlier haughty position. Many of his sentences ended on a soft rasp, as if he was running out of air and didn’t want to let on. Ruthie wondered if he could have made his air last longer had he not the habit of gesturing grandly, but he had tremendous stamina for all his frailty, and was eager to use it all. Isaac and Ruthie still had to slow themselves to keep pace with him, but at no point did he indicate he was ready to turn back for home, seeming content to follow the beach into the south until he was somewhere warmer, somewhere he could roost.

He was a painter, or so he claimed. He had been out West, even going past the Mississippi a time or two, out into Kansas and the Wyoming Territory. He had seen the buffalo, painted them and ate them, and had sailed the prairie seas. Land, he said, was dull, all out in the open as it was. He had grown tired of all its brazenness, and had returned to New England, to the ocean. For the ocean kept its secrets, was a challenging subject to capture, like a stoic old woman sitting stock-still in a chair, hands folded primly upon her black skirts.

He had never whaled, citing all its blood and brutality. That made Ruthie stop so fast sand flung into the eyelets of her boots. Whaling was all she had ever known; it had never occurred to her that it was brutal at all.

“Don’t they *need* to kill them? To take their oil?”

Bob huffed a laugh and carried on, his cane burying a little deeper in the sand. “That’s right, they do. But it’s the *way* they do it, I suppose.”

“Have you ever painted any whales?”

It was Bob’s turn to stop. He was hunched and trembling with exhaustion, though his chin was lifted strongly and his pale blue eyes were sharply curious. “Has anyone?”

Ruthie shrugged, cowed but unafraid. “I’ve seen drawings and carvings and things. Never seen any paintings. I don’t get to see much paintings at all, though.”

Thoughtfully, Bob nodded. “There are a few. But there are doubts to their accuracy.”

“Well, why?”

“They’re usually of dead whales. Beached, or lifted onto ships. Limp, lifeless, you know. Or done based on their skeletons, which hardly resemble them in full flesh.”

They had resumed walking again, this time headed north. Ruthie’s stomach gave a nervous twist as she noticed the goldening of the waves, now to their right, though the sun remained high enough in the sky. Isaac looked unbothered by the dying day, and not for the first time, Ruthie envied his orphanhood.

“One must needs go a-whaling to see them properly, to appreciate their magnitude, their action, the manner in which they ply their domain, the sea. And that is only for a top-down view.” Bob was swinging his cane in time with his halting stride now, seeming to gain a youthful vim as he spoke. Ruthie, having

begun trailing him to keep an eye on Isaac as the boy lost interest and started combing the beach for pretty stones and shells, now trotted up alongside him, curious.

“Can’t you get in the water with ‘em to get a better look, to see ‘em swimming from the side?”

Bob clucked his tongue and tipped his cane to her. “Good thinking. Tell me, though, where are there waters clear enough for that? Perhaps in the Caribbean, or the South Pacific, but the seas there are shallow. One can see porpoises easily enough, but a greater beast... a rorqual, a sperm whale?” He scoffed, and pulled his cardigan around him as if to protect him from the idea. “It is possible,” he admitted. “But I would not want to be the one to attempt it, even were I younger by a score. In the West, I met enough buffalo to know that a perfectly placid animal can alter course in a heartbeat. Particularly if their young are about.”

Ruthie acquiesced with a hum, but refused to admit defeat completely. “Whales come to the harbor sometimes. If I had a rowboat, I could go out and swim with them, tell you what they’re like. Then you could paint them. Right?”

The old man laughed his dry, sawdust laugh again, until he was wheezing quietly and stopping to cough up phlegm from his throat. “My dear,” he began, bemused, regaining functions like a locomotive leaving the station. “I do *not* envy your poor parents.”

Ruthie pouted. “But you said it would never be done. It probably *has* been done. It *can* be done, I know it!”

He met her eyes with his own, still bright and sharp enough to pin, though his face was lined and splotchy-pink now from exertion, his long, lank, snowy hair fluttering feebly about his neck. He had grown taller and slenderer in time, like he was being stretched from horizon to apex, not enough of him left to go around. Ruthie worried at his height, reminded of the looming, smooth-barked sycamore next to the church, dying but still home to a proud hawk’s nest that she and all the boys in town had long ached to reach and raid.

“I know it can be done, child, and I know it will. That is what I fear.”

He solemnly asked for her hand to hold between his, his cane falling forgotten to the sand. Isaac scampered to retrieve it, holding it up to him proudly, but to no avail, as Ruthie’s careworn hand

remained between his that were terribly soft, terribly light. It wasn't a cane, or a brush, or even an axe, but a watch, given to her to hold and to keep, for him to let go with a soft sigh, like the blowing of a whale in the mouth of the harbor, when the ships have all gone safely to sea, the forest of masts in the docks cut down and depleted.

Ruthie asked for Isaac's hand and he gave it gratefully, going to hide behind her again. The old man remained planted even as they left him with solemn nods and wide eyes, steps heavy with promised vigil. Ruthie's thoughts would be light by contrast, whirring like a summer dragonfly on the hunt until they joined up with the wagon trail into town, and she knew when they stepped onto those deeply graven ruts in the dirt, that they would look back and see a tall white bird, eyes lifted to the sky and away from either land or sea.