

Chapter Four

The Boy flailed his arms in obvious debate.

“That’s easy for you to say, old Man,” the Boy debated. “You can do anything you want. I can’t.”

Instantly the Boy wondered if he had gone too far, if he had crossed the boundaries of respect. He swept his eyes across the sea before him, the lazy, undulating waves that signaled a calm day and waited.

The Old Man tapped his finger on the weathered cane directly above the archaic, equally weathered reel, as he did sometimes before speaking. After a long while, he broke the silence.

“You see that pond of water gathered over by the spout?” The Old Man gestured with his head. The Boy nodded.

“Go to it and put your hand in it,” the Old Man directed.

The Boy glanced at him as if to question, got off his perch and walked across the rocks. He knelt down and placed his palm below the surface of the tepid water and looked up.

“Now take it out,” the Old Man continued. *“What do you see?”*

“What do I see where?” the Boy asked, unable to contain his annoyance.

“In the water,” the Old Man replied calmly. *“What mark did you leave?”*

“I see nothing,” the Boy retorted. *“I didn’t leave any mark.”*

“Exactly.” The Old Man stopped until the Boy returned. *“Most people leave that same mark with their lives—none at all. They chase idle, self-indulgent pleasures, complain about everything and spend their existences addicted to their own importance. In the end, they leave as big mark as your hand did in the water.”*

The Old Man reflexively tested his line.

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“What does that have to do with me?” the Boy queried.

“Only a few wake up, Boy,” the Old Man said with a steady, forward gaze. “The world is full of people trapped in their own pettiness, people who place another brick on the wall around themselves, a wall of their own making that grows taller and thicker each day with every careless word and deed, until they wake up one day old, tired and resigned to a fate of mediocrity, bitter and full of blame. Let others lead small lives, Boy, not you.”

The Boy sensed more to come and held his tongue.

“It is easy to destroy and much harder to build.”

The Old Man switched hands on his pole. *“Do you remember the great storm of last winter? What took many men years to construct was brought to the ground in a single night. It is the same with affairs of the heart. What might take a decade to create can be dashed into oblivion with one thoughtless comment, one act without consideration of consequence, one selfish moment. We must all consider what we value most and what we will do to protect it.”*

The Old Man turned toward the Boy and then cast his eyes out to sea. *“I heard about the lampposts,”* he said quietly. *“Just because you didn’t get caught, doesn’t mean that people don’t know who did it.”* The Old Man paused. *“I felt great sadness when I found out.”* He paused again. *“I thought you were better than that.”*

The Boy shuddered involuntarily as the Old Man’s words pierced him to the core like a stiletto. His insides flipped upside down, his teeth ground shut and his face turned into an ugly mask that fought back the swelling tears he fought to prevent. Rage and shame vied for center stage, only to mask the deep, numbing pain that churned within and paralyzed him—all except the renegade tears that snuck down his cheeks and tasted of salt.

To disappoint the Old Man, his best friend—in many ways, his only friend—hurt far worse than the sting of his father’s belt. He felt nothing and everything all at the same time, nothing

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inside, everything outside, the light breeze across his temple, the hardness of the rock below his buttocks, the jagged crags beneath the soles of his feet and mostly, the rhythmic breathing of the Old Man he dared not look at.

The Boy heard the solitary cry of a lone sea gull and watched it land in the dark waves that flowed incessantly, each unique and yet every one the same in their rapid, transient passage, as if they echoed the Old Man's thoughts on the impermanence of things.

Side by side they sat, the Boy in a maelstrom of emotion.

The Old Man stood when a fish struck his bait, let the line run before sharply jerking back on his pole. After a moment, the line went slack. Without words, the Old Man calmly stepped back and resumed his post.

The Mediterranean sun brushed its coppery reflection across the vastness of the sea until an afternoon cloud rumbled across the sky and blocked out the rays.

In an instant, the sun's copper painting disappeared.