

# Time

A young man without name or discernible purpose had asked to join us on our boat, claiming he could see patterns in the stars and messages in the waves. The captain had scoffed at the young man, but allowed him on anyway, because bad luck comes to those who deny clear power.

He walked aboard the boat, his hair, fair as snow, waving in the salty wind. The captain muttered under his breath, words of prayer and safety. But I watched the man disappear below the decks, his spine was straight as a mast, and his feet steady and sure upon the wet floor of the boat. This was no ordinary man.

I sat beside the young man as the boat was leaving the harbour, and he was looking out the small window, with a look of confusion about him.

“Do you have a name?” I asked, unsure of how to address him. He shook his head. What sort of man doesn’t have a name?

“I have wandered among places where no sounds that have been called words have passed through lips. My name is lost among the grains of sand resting at the bottom of the ocean, friend, and I travel over the sea in hopes of regaining it.” The words he used were elaborate, unlike the rough, blunt language of simple fishermen such as myself. But I listened, intrigued by his words.

“I try to remember from before the time of my silence, but nothing- ” the young man sighed frustratedly, averting his gaze from the ocean to his long fingered hands. “I simply must remember my name, you understand? For if I do not have a name, I am nothing, and I will slowly cease to fade, drift away...” He looked back outside.

“The sky is hidden from my view.”

“And that is bad?”

“Not necessarily,” the young man said vaguely. “But without a map, how will you find your destination?” He gave me a tight lipped smile and left the cabin, his feet making little noise on the hard floor of the boat.

As I slipped between the realms of the waking and dreaming that night, the phrase ‘without a map, how will you find your destination?’ kept returning to my thoughts. What a curious set of words it was indeed! Where was my destination? What was my map?

Dreams of blue deserts and golden seas plagued my sleeping mind, and I awoke feeling confused, but oddly at peace. It was dawn, and the sky had cleared into pale gold and turquoise, pink and orange.

The young man was leaning on a railing, facing east to the rising sun. The sun coloured his hair gold. I stroked a strand of it, in awe, as he turned idly to face me.

“They say the rising of the sun makes one’s mind clearer, ready to seek the answers they desire.” He turned back to the sun, his profile outlined by light, his eyes shining.

“You still seek your name?”

“I have a tune, a distinct melody of the way the name rolls of the tongue in the memory of my mind. It is similar to the word... time!” He turned to grin at me, looking like an angel from an Italian painting.

“My name rhymes with Time, friend, so you shall call me that!”

I smiled, as the sun rose above the sea. “It’s nice to meet you, Time.”

Time rested his fingers over mine, and they were cold, so very cold.

The captain called Time’s name through the haze of fog that lay around the boat. I shifted closer without realising, wanting to hear what I could of the conversation.

“I am not a magician, Captain, I cannot speak to the clouds, nor can I guide you when my map is not visible.”

“What is your purpose then, young man?”

“I don’t know,” Time whispered. “That is what I am trying to find.” The captain sent him off, annoyed.

But I heard a soft vulnerability in the tone of his voice, a genuine plea from someone who is lost and confused, and I felt obligated to answer. But for now I went back to working the boat, tying knots with hands that were rough, too rough for someone my age, too hardened for his soft, delicate hands that seemed ageless, that gripped with strength that seemed beyond him.

We lay together on the deck of the boat, hidden from any eyes but our own and the stars, who must surely look down upon us and think it strange that humans feel so much within such short periods of time.

I twined my fingers with his, unsure of his response. But he smiled into the sky, and wrapped his hand around mine, letting me stroke the back of his hand with those rough, rough fingers of mine.

“Sometimes I wonder what goes on in your head,” Time whispered, tilting his head to face me. I turned mine too, so now we were close enough for our breaths to mingle in the cold night air. I looked into those honey eyes of his, ink black in the moonlight, and wondered how I came to be staring into those eyes.

“I want to know if our maps are joined,” I whisper against his cold lips. “If our maps lead to the same destination.” I lean in closer, desperate for some sort of sign, a signal from him that he felt the same.

He did.

I awoke the next morning to a vision of white gold hair, the deep blue of early morning, and the black sea, cold and empty, so, so empty. Time’s lips were still resting at my neck, but no breath hit my skin. I untangled myself from his graceful limbs and prayed that my skin can remember better than my mind. I stood at the railing of the boat for a while, until he had gotten up and stood beside me. He looked like an angel, even this early in the morning. I looked at his lips, recalling both the words that came from behind them and their touch.

“What are you thinking?” Time’s eyes were honey once again, and I craved some of their sweetness.

"I do not think our maps are entwined," Time whispered. My body went cold. So beautiful had the dawn seemed, so timeless, serene and perfect. Now it was just cold.

"Why?" I said quietly. Our hands were not touching on the railing like they usually did.

"I have remembered my name. And the port grows near."

He was right. The next town was visible on the horizon, darkened by the rising sun.

"My path takes me north, to the ice and snow, while yours takes you east, to new beginnings," Time took my hands suddenly, forcing me to face him. "All beautiful things die eventually. You must understand. I cannot stay."

"I'll come with you. I would. I *will*."

Time just smiled sadly and let go of my hands.

"Nothing good comes from those like you who fall in love with those like me."

"But what is different between us?"

"Oh, but I cannot tell you that," Time smiled, tight lipped, and faced the sun, which was shining its golden light, turning him into a perfect statue. "It is better if I simply disappear, and better if you do not remember me."

"One more night?" I whispered, not daring to talk loudly. Time nodded, and now, his fingers rested over mine on the railing of the boat.

As much as I tried, the memory of his lips on mine and the strange sentences he whispered against them faded over time. I tried to burn the memory of his skin and the shape of his body and mind into my fingers, but he didn't burn easily. The memory of him stayed in my mind and my fingertips, and he danced in my dreams and his face stayed in the back of my mind.

And many decades later, after a wife and children, as I stood on the deck of the boat with my fingers on the railing, winds heavy with seawater and charged with lightning swirling around the boat, I knew it was time to leave. But if only... if only he was here, one last time.

The roaring of the sea was loud, louder than ever, but there was a gentle pressure on my hand. His face was golden, lit by dawn light, and his white hair, fairer than snow, was lit by pale fire.

He embraced me like he always had, his touch resurfacing memories I had fought hard not to lose.

"Our paths were not always entwined, but they were destined to cross a few times." And all that existed was him. Not the storm that would be the death of me, nor the life I was leaving behind. Just him, like the way it had always been. My map had found its destination.