



The Floating Harbour

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Chapter 4

Cascade Girl In The Mist

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Chapter 4

She is perched upon the place where my elbows rested, on the wood-slat top that acts as table between the bench's seats, using one to support her placed and left-side foot as the other one hangs suspended. Eyes watching the sculpted man gaze across the water whilst I watch the cascade girl gaze across the cobbles, from the corner of the bench in a copied pose.

Once more entranced, the girl is free again, and her wandering might soon rival mine. And once more concernedly curious, I am piqued to wonder over whether this child of ten or of eleven or twelve is with or without guardian – though seeing she is older than it first appeared upon the mist-less moment of the morning's movement, I leave her to her white-dressed wanderings, and to her playful taking of the form she looks at.

Standing, perched, leaning, looking, the café exit frames me for the passing people, becoming entrance to one that walks toward me. As I re-absorb my weight from the wall that would not notice, surely, either way, and begin to step down so as to let the walking woman pass, for a moment at the limit of perceptibility she is swallowed and the harbour with her.

Convulsion – mud, water, stench, and sails – and now she brushes past, expressing with a glance her uncertainty over whether I am inconsiderate, or just out of sorts.

As she disappears into the Arnolfini, the foot of mine that had escaped the doorway for the harbour floor is back with me, and my weight panics sideways until the black of my jacket sleeve is re-contacted with the wall.

A fleeting feeling of pressing and oppressing down upon me; a heart held within a moderate grip, while a brain darts around the body for escape.

The flush of an attack fades in cold, fresh air that drifts to me with peaceful force. Calmed confusion – mud, water, stench, and sails – whilst I step again, this time succeeding, and walk along the path of the breeze to its seeming source, to where it emanates from an empty bench that stands under tree shade and over cobbles.

I step uncertain and my boot is soaked, stinking, sinking within a stagnant pool of rum, but as I look toward the smell and step toward the side I stumble into and on the wooden barrel that lost a portion of its contents to the mud. A seagull screech as I am perched where sat the cascade girl, boots both dry and clutching to the cobbles.

Flight impetus courses in the place of blood, breath shorter than the eyes are wide. My right hand un-grips the bench and comes up blackened, coal dust stripped from my fingers by the wind that carries, thunderous, iron, steel, and stone as sound in and amongst the sudden heat.

Yet as I wipe upon the tree my blackened hand it's clean, and I grasp it in my left and then place both upon the trunk, forehead – battered and fragile wall concealing chaos – falling slowly to the bark.

The fist that's clutched around the heart is softened by the breeze – again, that cold, fresh air. The curtains of my closed eyes pull up and back, pupils coated as the pre-dawn city in the watery mist. My jacket rises out of place as I slump down along the tree, turning front to side to back as weakened legs yield, release, left-centre of my chest still thumping.

Only the muscles of my face and my beating heart are not drained to lifeless on the ground against the tree beside the bench that neighbours nearby Cabot on his piece of wood. Neither he nor I can see, out to the edge and through the mist and to the water, now that it's reformed as thickest fog, white and grey in flux as the gulls in hidden flight. Periodically they screech – they sing – sounding like an echo from the distant gorge, and like a spirit's wail through nested time.

Visible only are ourselves, the four trees, and the two wooden benches, while the jet-black railing and the ground between us all come, slowly, in and out of view.

The voice of calm and query does not fit the man in sculpture, though it seems to emanate from nowhere else:

“Where do we go from here?”

I scramble back to the clutching of the bench and to the planting of my feet below it.

“Though we might get lost in the layers...”

While my eyes stay wide, they are threatened with cover by the heaviness of the brow above them. I see no café and I see no water, no sleeping giants and no harbour strait. Yet I see the dress that’s white – and it suggests of blue – upon the girl who sits, her back against the unmoving leg of the man I sat beside.

“... still, we can’t stay here.”

Each of her words are spoken out as she gazes at the fog. She speaks more and moves, but in amorphous sound and through half-seen motion, staring, as I am, into the ground, feeling strongly that the mist is concrete. My jaw sits heavy with the clamping tension at either side, whilst I hear more words as if a foreign language.

Eyes shut,
words echo,
I open and she stands before me.

“Fuck! God...”

“Fuck god?”

“No, you... you shouldn’t say...”

As I begin to treat her like a normal child, my rushing heart reminds, and my temples fall against my middle-fingers. Joined promptly by the rest, my fingers fall, all, down along my face, matched in lack of speed by my exhalation.

Her eyes dart up and they pull her head and both slowly sink back down.

The mist, the fog, it feels like air again; her hands are on her hips.

Managing, now, to speak without ellipses,

“Why are you following me?”, I say.

In rebuke as she turns and moves:

“I’m not following you. I’m already here.”

My “What?” is amphibious, alive between thought and speech.

Aware, again, of the force with which my back teeth are touching, I use my thumbs upon either side to massage muscle that is acting out a mental state.

She is closing distance between herself and the bars clothed and stripped, intermittently, of mist, and the fog responds to the closeness of her presence, wisping apart and away, though revealing only more behind it.

“Hey, try this!” she calls as she reaches toward it, her right hand causing echoes in the fragile fabric of the mist and fog, weaving slowly ‘til the elbow passes above and beyond the border of the railing.

As I feel like fleeing from the pressure of the unspoken threat that is solid, once again, behind me, I leave the bench and fight on forward – fighting not to progress, but fighting to keep the progress ordered. I pass through what should be Cabot’s view of his wooden ship, and perhaps he does see through the cloud as freely as his gaze cuts through the layered walls of time.

Her head flirts with turning as I confusedly approach, but instead she adds her left hand to the game.

“I feel a little trapped...”

“Try and grab some.”

“What is it?”

“Mist.”

Knowing not what to say I don't say it; knowing not who she is, I still move.

Both her hands pull back, away, and my right goes up, toward, and the mist recloses, round: the space made by the girl is missing. My arm sighs downward as I look intently at the space that failed to meander away in reaction to my movement.

I feel her curious gaze, and I feel it move from me as she strings her words together.

“Not so easy to wander free and aimless anymore.”

I do not lift and move my gaze, but keep it where it is, as I put my words in order.

“I like wandering free and aimless.”

“Do you?”

Now I lift and move my gaze, but settle it, again, back where it had been.

“You don't think I do?”

“I don't think the wandering is free and aimless.”

The railing has not returned from out the mist for many moments, where before it never went for long. As I turn around to ask her things I see the gaps between the cobbles filling, the fog wisping sparsely around my boots and then back to ground.

I am shaken by containing all I feel within my head. As both my palms press temples in, I shudder through my neck and arms; my rows of teeth try to push beyond each other.

I ask: “What the fuck is this?!” from beneath the clutching of my thumbs and fingers. “And don't give me another fucking obvious answer!”

The breath leaves, and my face rests in my palms, supported from where my elbows press into my midriff. The space behind my eyes is clouded.

As her voice flows soft yet strong – “You can't keep circling the surface of things.” – I raise my head to find bench, cobbles, trees, and Cabot missing. Only a whiteness, cascade girl in the mist.

She smoothly climbs on top of something that I cannot see, perched in air as if on some boulder, or the edge of the bench that used to be here.

“And I don't see what's so bad about obvious answers, so long as they're the answers.”

My mind is desperate to be given no roof or walls but the sky, and my heart beats hard against the lack of control, the uncertainty, the unknown.

“I'm sorry.” As I apologise, my eyes long to make out, clear, what lies beyond the whiteness.

On her unseen perch she has her legs crossed, each elbow upon each knee, and each fist meets her at her jawline, her hair looking like the light I'm missing. Her eyes are deep blue one moment, yet a blue so light at others, but now they are settled, stable, at some point softly in-between.

“What are you? And you can be obvious if you want.”

Her eyes do all the smiling, betraying, clear, an unmoved face.

“You're a... spirit. Or a stroke...”

“Or a girl.”

“Or a Cheshire Cat.”

The left half of her mouth lifts, smiling broadly; the right reaches out, but subtle.

I close my eyes with my inhalation and let it all seep back out, but the space between them receives my focus. Within it, I hope to find not even me.

I find her voice.

“There are layers to it.”

I return as it's time to inhale again, seeing her now standing atop her unseen perch and facing sideways.

“Layers?” I repeat. “To what? You mean to the wandering around? You said it wasn't free and aimless... and that circling the surface was no good.”

She looks at me funny.

“I mean to this mist.”

It does not move for her quite as before. She disappears halfway into it, and calls:

“Or maybe it’s just coming apart...”

As a musical round – phrases following, offset – the shrieking song fades in intensely, while the mist begins to fall apart. Chunks of fog are lifted by a piercing breeze, and as a gull swoops through at my shoulder-height behind me what remains is shredded, torn, and cast away, wisping off in the wake of its wingbeats.

A marsh across the water sings out green amongst the mud, ships of commerce catch the breeze to forge momentum.

Without railing, Cabot, bench, or tree I keep my corner as I stand amidst the masts and men, dogs and barrels, smell and sounds, the sky and river. It laps against the shore of a field of grass, no longer covered by the cranes, the sheds, the train tracks, and I feel a pull upon my back that takes me full toward the ground, as she saves me from the wood that frames the sails, as rope is thrown to tie the boat to Bristol harbour.

I scramble over cobble – not ghosts, but living – and the mist has risen, torn, to hold up the sky, spread about the blue and out around the sun.

What the fuck is this?!

My body speaks, for I cannot, the panicked prey awakes and writhes beneath my skin.

“It’s the harbourside!”

She speaks right through the shouts that see a barrel nearly lost between the vessel and the land. The dark blue of my jeans in places lies beneath wet mud, yet I find my feet, if not my footing. There is no arthouse café but another building in its stead, and that damn girl who keeps me safe and terrified. She beckons and I stumble, but I make it to the wall; here she stands, smiling at the risen.

The church bells keep the time, even as the city fails to keep the year.

There is so much to be said and yet there is nothing I can think to say. The wind is cold and full about me, as I stare out and merely manage:

“Got a name?”

“Iteru.”

Iteru... it is a word on the edge of recall, though I am not sure from whence I know it, nor its meaning. It flows.

“It does.”

“What?”

“Flow.”

“I thought I thought that...”

“I heard you say it...” Self-amused by her mimicry of my tone and raised eyebrow, she lets the imitation fade into a smile as she walks to the edge to look down into the river. Joining her vantage point, I look, instead, across at her.

“What does it mean then?”

“Hmm?”

“Your name?”

“It means me.” Content with this, she remains reading the river’s surface. Not content with this, I smile and do likewise.

“Of course it does.”