

Winter Water

By Ariel Nyvall

“These look like your eyes.”

He held the glittering fragment up to the sky, resting angularly on his free hand. Dying sunset light filtered aquamarine through the prism. Kaitlyn’s cheeks grew warm with the compliment, studying now the translucent blue of the rock.

“What do you suppose it is?” She wondered aloud, looking out to the shore beyond the sand and folded corners of her beach towel. *It* seemed to be glowing, though Kaitlyn was never one to know a glowing rock. Michael set it down, leaving a perfect opportunity for her to roll it between two fingers. Smooth but sharp along some edges, blue like tears of the sky.

“I know what it is.” He stated matter-of-factly, crouching to a stand and offering a palm for the girl to take. Fourteen years old and you would think he knew everything about everything. He did not—which Kaitlyn knew because at the very least he didn’t know that the war, in which his father was off fighting, was rumored to be worsening each day. Michael never seemed to know much about the war, as it was something he took great caution to distance himself from. He drank knowledge like cherry cola, but lingered far from the war like the plague. Kaitlyn knew deep down (and this was because she *was* in fact smarter than him) that he didn’t want to know anything, to avoid the one something that would shatter him. Shatter him into a million pieces as the blue magic in her hand would shatter with the slightest too much pressure.

“Oh? Enlighten me.” They were walking the shore now, her fingers running the jagged edges of the rock, searching for indications of where the divets came from. Her mind was fast at work with assurance that whatever Michael thought this was, was utterly wrong. The air was laced with salt and through the corner of her eye she saw his smirk. She knew that smirk all too

well from years of watching it paint his face, eager to answer every question school threw his way. Correct or not, Michael was able to make an anthill sound like Mount St. Helens.

“See, over in Antarctica, the water completely freezes every year during the winter—” He paused, checking to see that Kaitlyn was still listening. She was listening...listening to his blasphemy. “And then the sun comes out, real sudden...so sudden that the frozen water breaks! You see—real fast temperature changes make Arctic ice break clean away. Then it floats for months, and months...until by the time we’re sweating away the summer these guys have made it down to us.” Satisfied with his ludicrous explanation, in which Kaitlyn could find no short of infinite scientific flaws, Michael bent down to pick up another fragment. This one he threw at an angle, sending it skipping down the water.

The foam of the ocean bubbled over the sand, creating a secret to be revealed with the falling tide. Shells, crabs, and unknown blue particles spilled these whispers that would otherwise have been concealed to the sea. Kaitlyn’s gaze rose from the sand filtering between her toes, to the never ending span of mystery before her. In a way, she thought, the evasiveness of “Arctic winter water” didn’t tell, but further veiled more secrecy.

As the sun set, the two returned to their blankets. Kaitlyn leaned back on her hands, letting the tranquility of the fresh night bathe her. Michael settled next to her, and because she didn’t hear anything accompanying his presence, she didn’t have to guess what he was thinking about. Maybe now was the time to tell him.

“Michael—” She hesitated, studying his tragic face. Hair blowing in the wind, eyes bright on the surface but sullen within, night was the hardest for him. She knew from her acute sense of people, this person specifically. He looked at her, and some unforeseen force, maybe the hand of the wind or the will of the sea—or the rock still in her fingers—pushed the words from her

mouth. “Remember when your dad used to bring an icebox with him to the beach and drink a beer with your mom while we played in the ocean?” As soon as the end of the word “ocean” left her lips she bit down on her tongue. Best to stop anything else stupid from flying out.

A twinge of fleeting sadness streaked across his face—she’d caught him off his guard. Frantically and to absolutely no avail she tried to rationalize her foolishness. So smart and so stupid.

Nevermind. Say. Nevermind.

“I-”

“Yeah.” His voice was low, serious. Taking her cues from the valley between his eyebrows she inhaled. *Do it now.*

“Well, the bottles were always...always blue. And I guess....I mean, I guess what I’m trying to say is that if I had to assign this silly blue rock meaning...I don’t think it would be winter water.”

Michael was staring at his hands. What did she think would happen? Kaitlyn’s chest tightened. Had she really stained ten years of friendship with a simple memory? Was it really her place to open a wound four of those ten years old? The answer was no, and the reason she knew was because beyond that thick blond head of hers was a mind smarter than her other half’s.

Smart but so terribly dumb, because what flew from her mouth next didn’t ask permission first.

“I say it means your dad is out on a beach somewhere, kicking back a cold one, looking over the horizon and straining his eyes to see you...just like you’re doing now.”

The silence rang loud. When Michael’s eyes didn’t leave his hands, veiled in a dark shadow, she wished that time was at her fingers. She would turn back the seconds until there was no time left to turn back.

As she kicked herself she followed his gaze down, slowly until she saw the dying moonlight filtering aquamarine through the prism.

Then: "I like that."