

There ain't no ocean in Big Sky Country; otherwise known as Montana. A large, sparsely populated, and completely landlocked state -- it all sounded quite unappealing to the eight-year-old girl slumped in the backseat of the rented white Hummer, sandwiched between her mother and her aunt. What did sound appealing to her was the idea of seeing the ocean again. The last time she had truly seen the ocean had been a few years ago, back when her parents had still had the time to show her the world. She felt angry at the fact that for the one time of the year when her parents had the time to spare, they were going to a state in the middle of nowhere, to a city called Bozeman somewhere near the southern border of Montana. It did not matter to her in the least that the reason was to visit her aunt and uncle, both of whom she and her family had not seen in a long time. All she cared about was that she would not be able to see the ocean. Ignoring the excited chatter of the adults around her, the little girl leaned her head back against her seat and clenched her eyes shut, as feelings of resentment reverberated through her slender frame. Even when she felt the powerful hum of the car engine slowing and heard her father's voice call out: "We're here!", the girl kept her eyes tightly closed, well aware of the fact that if she didn't, her last shred of hope of seeing a sparkling ocean when she opened her eyes would be dashed.

However, she was forced to open them as her mother and aunt simultaneously poked her playfully in the sides as they climbed out of the car. "Ahhh! No! Stop it!"

Too late. The scene revealed to her through her bitter eyes was just as disappointing as she expected it would be.

"That's nothing but a dumb lake," she thought dejectedly. "I knew it."

She was so consumed by her own desires that she saw nothing of the beauty of the "dumb" lake--she did not see the water that stretched out towards the horizon for as far as the eye could see; she did not see the majestic mountains covered with the equally majestic pine trees that towered all around; she did not see how the sun beamed down upon the little waves in such a way that seemed to make them glitter and dance.

Reluctantly, not wanting to be left behind in the car, the girl followed her mother out of the car and down the dirt path to the lake. Once they reached the edge, she walked down the shore a little further away from the adults rather than joining them and stood

silently by herself, wanting to be alone. She looked down at her feet where the waves were lapping gently over her toes. But all that managed to accomplish was to further remind her of the fact that she was not where she wanted to be.

"This is dumb. I wish there could be an ocean," she sighed to herself. Of course, she did not expect a reply. But a strong, clear voice suddenly rang out:

"There ain't no ocean in Montana, stupid."

She looked up, and that's the first time she saw him.

Standing in front of her, dripping wet, with one hand clutching a pile of muddy stones and one foot planted firmly upon a rock protruding from the water, was the prettiest boy she had ever seen. The gleam of his golden hair blinded her; the flash of his snow-white teeth dazzled her; the glow of his tan skin dazed her. He was looking directly at her, his twinkling eyes taunting, almost daring her to talk back to an older boy like himself. However, she refused to let any of these factors faze her.

"I'm not stupid!" She scowled at the boy. "I never said there was."

The boy's lips twisted into an arrogant smirk. "Then there ain't no point in wishing it." With a fluid toss of his hand, he tossed the stones back into the water in an arc much too smooth for a child. He paused as if contemplating a serious issue, and continued: "But I can show you something better!" He trotted off looking back over his right shoulder, his smirk morphing into a real grin. "C'mon!"

Grudgingly, the girl found herself following the strange, beautiful boy. He led her further and further away from the lake, to the point where she began to feel a little nervous. But soon, he stopped and pointed at something in the distance, hidden beneath the cover of two bushes. "Look there."

She looked, and saw something that amazed even her. "Ohhh," She breathed. "Oh!" Someone had built a miniature town out of little twigs and stones, perfectly concealed under the vegetation. It was just the sort of town that she had always wanted for her little dolls! "Look, there is a church. There, that must be the school! And what's that building, that one over there? A store, maybe?" She could hardly contain her excitement. "Did you make this?"

"Nawww, I found it." His arrogant smile was back. "See, being here isn't dumb. You can find good things anywhere if you look. You don't need an ocean, even though

that would be so cool to have one!" He hopped away from her, singing "*Here comes the sun, doo doo doo doo...*"

She thought he had a nice voice for a boy. "Who made this? It's great!"

"*It's all right...*" the boy sang. "Oh, I don't know," he replied absently, gazing off into the distance. "That's what makes it fun." Suddenly, his beautiful turquoise eyes sharpened, as if he had been struck with a brilliant idea. "I know! Now it's your turn."

"What?"

"Look for something good!" He narrowed his eyes teasingly at her, making it clear that it was a challenge. "It'll never be as cool as the things I can find!"

And so she willingly accepted his challenge. It became a game: who could find the most "good" things? Before she knew it, she was laughing and smiling, and competing over something she had never tried to look for in her life until then. She did not think once about the ocean while she was with him. Later, she understood what the boy had unintentionally taught her -- that she had enough right where she was.

Finally, when it was time for the girl to go home, there were no goodbyes; the boy only gazed at her and simply promised: "I'll always be here."

There ain't no ocean in Big Sky Country. She knew that. But it no longer mattered.

And that is the story of how you and I met and became friends. That was not the only time you helped me figure out something crucial in my life--because we met again. Again and then again, for years. Quite frankly, I'm not even sure why you remembered me at all; but I'm glad you did. Every time my family and I visited Montana, we went to the lake. Every time we went to the lake, you kept your promise; you were always there.

That summer when I was fourteen, I jumped out of the Hummer as fast as I could. I couldn't wait to see you again. I knew you would be there, because by that time, I knew that you had meant it when you said you'd always be. So, I didn't worry when I didn't see you at first. Instead, I looked around and out at the beautiful scenery that lay before me, and wondered how in the world I could have possibly once thought that a mere ocean would be a better view.

"*Here comes the sun...*" you still sang that time. "*It's all right.*" Hearing you sing was how I found you. It always impressed me, the way you could sing like that, the way you never cared about what other people might think of you. You always did whatever you felt was right for yourself.

As soon as I heard your voice, I looked up, and there you were, sitting on top of the giant boulder that you and I climbed that one time when I was ten, and threw stones out into the water (I remember you wouldn't let me pretend they were grenades. You said that that was mean, because "Would you want to get blown up?! Huh? No? See, well neither do other people!" But then, you let me pretend they were grenades after I explained that I wasn't pretending to blow up people; just maybe mountains or something. Silly boy.).

I swear, I almost couldn't believe my eyes. You were sitting there reading, and absently singing at the same time, which meant it was most definitely you. But you didn't look like you anymore, not like the skinny little pretty boy who could pass for a girl anytime. You looked like one of those tan, muscular models straight out from those magazines. You would have laughed if I had ever told you exactly how long I stood there with my mouth open like an idiot -- but I never did tell you, did I? I felt a little worried that you weren't the same boy I knew before; that your physical self was not all that had changed. But I didn't let that faze me.

"Well hellooo there," I said, climbing up the boulder and sitting down next to you. "I think you're hot. Let's be friends!"

I didn't have to look at you to know that you were smiling.

"Damn, not gonna lie. You the finest thing I've seen all day, Graham Bell," I continued. Remember how I always called you Graham Bell? You know, since your name's Alexander Graham. Remember how I always made fun of you?

"Ha, awww please." You grinned at me, and hey, I swear I was still breathing even though it may not have seemed like it. "What's up, Kitty? I missed you, baby. How's it going?" Remember how you insisted on calling me Kitty instead of Catherine? You know, because you thought I needed a nickname so I could stop being so serious all the time?

It felt like the last time we had talked was only yesterday, it was that natural. We told each other everything we had missed out on for the past year. Yes, we probably stayed there for hours, just talking and laughing. However, when I told you about wanting to dye my hair because I had noticed that a lot of my friends were doing it, you called me out on it.

"Bitch please," you scoffed, pushing your tangled, sun-bleached hair out of your face. "Why don't you for yourself for a change? Girl, you always follow the crowd. You do fucking everything they do to try to fit in!"

"Shut up you ass, I don't!" I protested, feeling hurt. "I really do want to dye my hair."

"Sure you do," you sneered, and leaned closer, close enough that I could see the freckles sprinkled on your annoyingly perfect nose. "Listen. I'm always hearing you talk about how you want to do this shit and that shit because he, she, or they like it or are doing it. Never said nothing about it till now. But anyway. You're a follower. Ain't no use crying about it. Deal with it."

Ouch. That was some brutal honesty right there. But thank god for it.

"Fuck you! I'm not a follower!" I snapped.

"Oh you're not? You're lying, and you're in fucking denial and you know it. You people who can't deal with the fucking truth annoy the shit outta me." You glared at me, but then your tone changed and your gaze softened. "But it don't gotta be a lie. You can make it the truth. And don't ever look back, hear?"

I didn't know what to say. Before you, nobody had ever accused me anything. So I just ended up hitting you. Hitting you for trying to help me. I didn't quite realize how wrong that was for me to do until later that year. I realized that you were right, that I really was indeed a follower; I really did do things solely for the reason that others were. It would have taken me a hell of a long time to figure that out by myself if you had not been there to tell me first. So, thank you for that.

The last summer you were able to keep your promise to me was the summer that was replaying in my mind for the majority of the time I was with you in the hospital. I kept replaying this one scene: You and I were walking around Bozeman, and you asked

me what my plans for my future were. I told you that I wasn't sure, but that I sort of wanted to go to medical school and help save some lives, maybe.

"Good," you said. "That's good." I knew you were happy when I said that. You always liked to help people, and little by little, that influenced even me to do the same. If you knew this, I know you would say: "Damn okay, just copy me, why don't you. Told you that you ain't nothing but a follower," and then smile that annoyingly perfect smile of yours with the annoyingly perfect teeth, so I would know you didn't mean it.

"I don't know if I can get in, though," I admitted. "It's hella hard to get into. I heard that only a few people out of the lot's of people that apply can get in."

"Kitty," you said, rolling your eyes. "Shut up."

"But barely--"

"Barely anyone can get in?" You interrupted. "Yeah, okay. I get that. But look here. Even though not that many people get in...." You paused for a bit, clearly frustrated with me. "Look. Why shouldn't one of those people be you? Huh? What makes you think one of them can't be you?"

I never forgot those words.

I also never stopped holding your hand until I had to go. It was hard to believe that it was the same hand: the hand that had dragged me into the river that one time, the hand that had always held either a ball or a book; the hand that I had held the first time I felt like I wanted to be with a boy in a way other than just friends. Even so, I never let go. I don't know if you knew I was there, but I was. I told you that I was sorry for being difficult, sorry for hitting you that time you told me truthfully to get my own mind, sorry that I never helped you the way you helped me, and last of all, sorry that it had to be you and not me. Because looking around your room, at all those colorful cards, all those unopened gifts, and all those little blue flowers you liked, I knew you that you really were one in a million. Irreplaceable. The hospital staff and the kids you helped every week came to visit you while I was there too. The hospital staff did everything they could, arranging and rearranging all the medical tools, opening, closing, and then reopening the blinds; anything to make you more comfortable. The kids drew you all sorts of adorable pictures, and all of us worked together and hung them all up on your wall.

However, from just one look at you, I knew that no matter how many gifts and flowers you may receive, no matter how many pictures may be drawn for you, and no matter how hard the doctors may try, that you were never going to wake up again. I knew that I would never hear your stupid singing again, or see your annoyingly perfect smile. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't because I heard your voice in my mind: *Ain't no use crying about it. Deal with it.*

And so I did. I stood up and looked down at you. All the memories we had were running through my mind. You and I sitting atop that boulder just talking and talking and talking; you and I endlessly insulting each other just because we could; you and I floating lazily around the lake on that bright red raft of yours. I remembered how much you valued being able to determine the appropriate time for everything; and yet how you would always start singing at the most inappropriate of times. I remembered how you would always be reading some new book; and yet at the same time always be kicking around some sort of ball, trying on a new hiking backpack, or running to the lake and leaping into the water. I remembered how blunt, unexpressive and impatient you could be, and how easily your temper would flare; and yet how sweetly you would sing to the children in the hospital, how spontaneously you would pluck some flowers on the way home for your mother (although you sharply insisted that they were only for decoration on the dining table); and how you would sometimes gently take both of my hands in yours, and whisper that you'll always be there and to never forget that there will always good things if I look. And finally, I remembered the day you stood there in the water, calling me stupid for wishing for an ocean -- the first day I ever saw you. I could hardly think. So all I said was "Thank you, Graham Bell." Then I turned, left, and never looked back. *And don't ever look back, hear?* I think you would have been proud of me.

And that was the last time I ever saw you. To this day, I still don't know why it happened to you. But, I can still hear that song of yours: *Here comes the sun...*

*...It's all right.*

I suppose it is, isn't it? And in a way, I suppose you managed to keep your promise to me in a way after all.

If you had heard what I said to you there at the end of our story, you would have laughed and called me lame. *Couldn't come up with nothin' better, huh?* But in my

defense, there is a lot of meaning to me in those words. So I'll say it again: Thank you, Graham Bell. Also, just one more thing: there ain't no ocean in Big Sky Country, and there never will be. I know that. But it doesn't matter, because you've taught me that I don't need one.