

The Beachcomber

For forty years Albert had been a thief. Not the kind who wears a black mask and cracks safes but a quiet, patient thief who sported a cagoule and muddy wellies. The Atlantic was his mark and sea glass his loot.

His cottage on the cliffs of the north Devon coast was practically held together by the stuff. Jars of frosty emerald, cobalt blue and rare, sun-purpled lavender glass lined his shelves and window sills catching the light sparkling off the sea. To Albert each piece was a tiny shard of history, a bottle that a carefree holidaymaker had drunk from decades ago, a lantern torn from a sinking ship.

But the sea, as any coastal dweller knows, does not tolerate a one sided bargain forever so one Tuesday afternoon in March Albert decided it was finally time to settle the debt. The sky was the colour of wet slate and the waves were hurling themselves against the black rocks of the cove. He carried a bulging canvas sack down the zig zagging cliff path. With every step it clinked like wind chimes during a storm. He stopped at the high water mark where the spume died into shifting shingle and looked out at the horizon. The swell was particularly massive - a shifting, breathing monster of cold grey-green, utterly indifferent to the old man standing at its edge.

“You’ve been whispering for these back” Albert said, his voice instantly swallowed by the wind.

He reached into the sack and pulled out a handful of glass. He held up a piece of deep ruby red – a fragment of an old ship’s lantern, smoothed by a hundred years of tumbling in the dark deep. It was his absolute favourite. He threw it as hard as he could. It cut a clean arc through the salt spray and vanished into the froth.

One by one, then handful by handful, Albert returned his stolen treasure to the tides. The greens went first, returning to the kelp forests. The blues followed merging back into the water. The rare whites, resembling frosty pebbles, he scattered like confetti.

With every throw Albert felt a strange, light sensation in his chest. He had spent decades trying to pocket the ocean, attempting to bottle its wildness in neat, glass jars. But he knew the sea can’t be owned, you can only borrow its spoils for a while.

When the sack was completely empty Albert shook it out. He stood there for a long time, watching the waves attack the shoreline, already pulling the glass back into their depths. They would be tumbled again, smoothed further, perhaps to be found by another beachcomber fifty years from now.

As he turned to walk back up the cliff, a final wave rushed up the shingle soaking his boots to the ankle. Albert couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t mention it.”