

The Sands of Time

By Sarah Tehuiotoa

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The heat was the first thing he knew. Harsh, dry heat on his head, burning his skin and sending rivulets of sweat down the back of his neck. He gasped a little as he awoke and opened his eyes very slowly. The bright light threatened to make him blind, but he blinked away the fog and let his eyes adjust. The brown, gray and green blobs gained shapes. He found himself staring at the dry, dead limbs of a desert bush. Its feeble branches shook slightly in a small breeze as if waving in greeting.

Groaning, he slid his hands underneath himself and got to his knees. As he stared at the ground, a small, dark red dot formed in the dust. He blinked in surprise. The dot was joined by two...three...five more. Cautiously, he reached up to touch his forehead, wincing as his fingers brushed across a raw spot. When he pulled them away, his fingers were bloody.

A sharp pain flared up in his head. He groaned and dropped to sit with his head in his hands. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here. He didn't even know where here was. All around him, for miles it seemed, there was only rock and desert wildflowers. There was something about the desert, however, that seemed threatening in some way. A haze lay over everything as if nothing here was quite alive.

He tried to remember what it was that had brought him out there in the middle of nowhere. For a moment, a bright light filled his mind's eye. Headlights. Then, a violent clash of metal on metal and suddenly he was back. That was right. He had been in a car crash. But that didn't explain what he was doing here in the desert. How did he get here? He had a nagging feeling in the back of his head that he was missing something, but a far more pressing matter called his attention. He was very thirsty. His tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth, and it was very dry. He attempted to call liquid to his mouth, but to no avail. He needed water.

He stood and immediately realized his overeager mistake. His vision swam, his head spun, and he felt as if he were headed for the ground again. But before he fell, his vision righted itself. It took a moment for him to realize that the scene before him had changed. Sitting a few yards in front of him was a desert hare. Its gray fur was sleek and out of place in the rugged terrain of the desert. It stared back at him with dark, intelligent, and oddly familiar eyes. As his gaze fell across the hare, it froze. They stared at each other for a long while before the hare turned and hopped away. It didn't go very far, however, turning back after a few steps to stare at him once more. Did it want him to follow?

All at once, a voice penetrated his thoughts. It came so suddenly and swiftly that he felt as if he were being attacked by a force he couldn't see. He ducked instinctively as the words reverberated through his mind.

Follow her, it said.

He looked at the hare.

FOLLOW HER.

He took a step forward and then another, and another. He couldn't stop. Whatever force had spoken to him was propelling him forward.

I have something to show you.

One foot in front of the other. One step after another. It wouldn't let him stop. He had no choice but to follow. They walked like that for a long time, the hare leading and him following like a lamb to the slaughter. He thought the analogy was quite appropriate. Here he was being led

deeper into the desert by a hare, following the prompting of a mysterious voice. If that wasn't frightening, he didn't know what was.

As they walked, he noticed that the desert was becoming more and more barren. The wildflowers gave way to dry leafless bushes, and the dry leafless bushes gave way to tall, pale green cacti. The dirt soon gave way to sand. Behind him, a long line of footprints told him where he had been. Soon, there were no plants at all. Only him, the hare, and the sand.

So, it was a little surprising a few minutes later when he noticed the purple. It was just a light of a sort, a sheen with a strange purple hue to it. It shimmered in the sun and wavered slightly, casting its light in his eyes. He winced a little but continued. The force had gone by now. He was walking of his own free will, but he knew that as soon as he tried to stop, it would come back. He hadn't tried it yet. It was just a feeling, but it was a strong one. He felt inclined to believe in it. He was surprised to see the hare heading straight for the shimmering light. Was this what the mysterious voice had wanted him to see? Well, whatever it was, he was eager to see it if only to escape whatever this force might be. He picked up his pace and so did the hare.

When he reached the source of it, he was a little disappointed to find what he did. A small, circular lens made of wavy, purple glass hung from the limb of a dead bush by a tiny white string. He knelt and stared at it in consternation, then glanced at the hare.

Pick it up, the voice told him.

He hesitated. The hare blinked twice.

Go on, love. Pick it up.

Without really knowing what he was doing, he reached out and pulled gently on the lens. There was a roaring in his ears and suddenly, the world began to spin.

-He was sitting in a car. His car. He could feel the nylon beneath his hands and smell that awful pong that used to fill up that poor, beat up Camaro from the 70s. He thought it looked so cool back then, with the rusty, scratched orange paint and white stripes down the front and back. Of course, it was already ten years old, if not older. He couldn't afford a new car on his salary.

Ahead of him in the front seat, two figures sat curled up together, one a young boy and the other a pretty, young girl. They were facing the front windshield, giggling quietly as they talked. A feeling of longing filled him, and he heaved a shuddering sigh. Then he held his breath for fear that the two in front of him would hear him. However, they were too preoccupied, and besides, they couldn't have possibly heard him. He recognized this moment. It was part of the dark hole that was his memory. This was the night, or really day, after prom where he and his girlfriend stayed out all night just to catch the sunrise. The boy was him.

Do you remember this? *the voice asked him.* This is the beginning of it all. Watch there, the sunrise.

There was a sudden burst of light and the horizon which had been a faint blue gray burst with color. Orange and yellow light, with a faint red hue. Delighted, the girl gasped happily and held up a sun catcher. It was unique. He remembered because he had it made specially for her. A friend had given him a discount. Good thing, too. Otherwise he would never have been able to afford it. It was simple looking. A countless number of tiny colored lenses like the one he had found in the desert hung from two hoops of white wood connected by an inch of string on either side. It caught the light and sent it dancing around the inside of the car.

Her laughter was infectious. She was so happy and, he remembered, he felt pleased that she liked it so much. Purple was her favorite color, which was why there were so many purple colored lenses on the sun catcher, but she loved rainbows too.

She turned to him - to the boy him - and kissed him. It wasn't a peck on the cheek as a thank you. It was a real one, and he felt himself blushing all over again.

She loved you. You loved her. It was inevitable that fate place you together. Trust that it was real, because love is the only thing that is real.

He felt tears spring to his eyes at the sight of the kiss. For some reason, it felt...painful, but he didn't know why. There was a roaring in his ears. -

He sat back hard in the sand, breathing heavily. He choked a little. He felt sick. What on earth had that been? There was a gentle pressure in his hand. He looked down at it. The purple lens sat quietly in the palm of his hand. There were indents in his skin where he had held onto it so hard it made marks.

The memories after that day came flooding back to him. He remembered the wedding, four years after that moment in the car after prom. They had both graduated from high school and were working through their third year of college when they decided they couldn't wait any more. They wanted to get married, and so they did. The wedding had been spectacular. Purple was her favorite color. Soft lavender, bright lilac, and deep plum along with snow white to set off the colors. All their friends and family had come, those that could make it. It was a very small wedding. They couldn't afford much, and what they couldn't pay for, their parents did as a wedding gift. In the end, everything had been perfect. They left for a three-day honeymoon deep in the mountains in a little cabin where they spent the entire time huddled close to each other by the fire, sometimes even sleeping there because it was so cold. He remembered those days with fondness and a sense of loss that he still didn't understand.

A noise startled him from his reverie. He started and then looked up to see the hare nosing her way under the bush. For the first time, he realized that the scenery had changed again. Instead of open desert and lots of sand, he was at the mouth of a canyon. The walls towered high above him. As far as he could see, there was no way up them. Their surface with smooth like granite, but with the same red hue as the desert sands. He stared upwards in amazement. The hare hopped forward again and then paused at the entrance.

Go. There is still much to show you, the voice commanded.

Absentmindedly, he slipped the purple lens into his pocket. Once again, he felt himself being propelled forward, but this time it was his own steps that had walked on. Despite his fear of this mysterious voice, he was curious. He wanted to know why his memory seemed to be failing him and why they only came when that voice wanted him to know something. Did it have to do with her? His wife? A sick feeling came over him, and he hesitated slightly. The hare froze as well, but soon the feeling dissipated, and they continued. That couldn't be right. She was safe and well. She had to be. He loved her too much.

Another colored light penetrated the haze of the desert, this time a bright green. He wouldn't have noticed it but that there was nothing growing in this canyon just like there was nothing growing in the desert. He walked along in tandem with the hare, keeping pace until they reached the source of this light. There were two lenses this time, he realized. A yellow one and a

blue one pressed firmly together hanging from a cleft in the rock from another piece of white string.

He hesitated again.

Go on, love. Take it.

He did.

-The Camaro was dead. It had been an old car when he bought it and it was an ancient one by the time they got to their third anniversary. As a gift, and perhaps as a slight push in the right direction, she took him to a dealership where a plethora of shiny new cars awaited their exploration.

He had just gotten a new job in a business firm. It was a good job with good pay. A little boring, perhaps, but he had always been good with paperwork. Four months in and already he was getting praise from his department head. With a little more time and a lot more effort, he might get a promotion. For now, they worked with what they got from his office job and the odd painting she sold, whenever she would sell them. It was enough to buy a new car.

He was looking at a small, red Ferrari F355. He could see his face in the beautiful, sleek surface. It was very fast, very awesome, and very, very expensive.

Still, you were seriously considering the purchase, even though it was impractical and impossible to swing, even on your new salary, *the voice reminded him.*

It was right. He was good at his job, but so were many others. The business world was always changing. There was no telling if he would have his job next week. Not that she was any better. His beautiful wife was an artist, recognized and respected in a few small circles. She was doing well in her business, but she was only just starting out. She was teaching for now, although the job seemed to bring her more joy than the painting did. She always did love kids. A pity that they couldn't seem to have children.

She looked doubtfully on his pick and pointed to a more practical looking, gray minivan. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. They argued a little, him pointing out the coolness points he might get at the office with his new Ferrari, and her pointing out the fatal flaws in his plan. Eventually, they settled on a small red sedan, still practical, but much less embarrassing than a minivan. -

He came out of it, taken aback. This time, he didn't fall back, although the wave of dizziness that flowed through his mind threatened to change that. She had always been bossy, he remembered that, but he did so lovingly. The car hadn't won him any bonus points at the office, but it ended up lasting a lot longer than the Ferrari would have. They still had it.

There, a recent memory. He remembered that they still had the car. It was parked in front of the large house they bought after a promotion of his. Or, at least it had been. With a growing sense of unease, he realized that the scene had changed before him yet again. In front of him was a twisted shape of metal that he recognized by the bright red paint. Only, it wasn't so bright red anymore. The paint was chipped and scraped, as if another car had decided to play bumper cars and slid along the side. It was up against the wall of the canyon looking the worse for wear. He slipped the yellow and blue lenses in his pocket with the purple one and approached it carefully.

A thought came to him as he did. Was she in there? His wife? This car had undergone some terrible accident. Perhaps even the one that he had been in before appearing here in the desert. If she had been in the car with him...well, from what he remembered of that crash, it was a miracle that he had walked away when he did. Panicked now at the thought of her being in danger, he reached forward and yanked the door open. It was empty. He looked in back. Empty as well. He sighed in relief and sat down hard on the driver's seat. At least she wasn't here. If she had been, well, he wouldn't have known what to do with himself.

He took a moment to relax, then decided to look around the car. He turned and noticed a string of lenses like the ones that had given him the memories before. Thinking that this memory recall had a pattern, he reached out to touch it, but a shuffling noise to his right called his attention away. Somehow, the hare had gotten into the car. He realized that the back door on the other side was ajar. It half hopped, half slid along the leather seat to come to rest in the soft grip of a pretty pink blanket. Tiny yellow flowers were scattered across the surface. The hare nosed it and then looked up at him with a searching gaze. Taking the hint, he reached out and took hold of the blanket.

-He was standing in a dark room. Shapes of animals were dancing on the ceiling, tiny lights beaming through a rotating lamp shade on the table beside the crib. The crib. His eyes widened as he realized that he was not watching himself anymore. This time, he was himself. But he couldn't move. He was too fixated on the crib and the tiny, shrill cry that cut through the air. Moving slowly towards the crib, he peered over the top to gaze at the tiny infant lying on a soft, pink blanket with flowers on it. She let out another cry.

He couldn't bring himself to touch her. This little girl that had only hours before entered their world. He was stunned speechless by the implication. Him, a father. The thought both exhilarated and frightened him.

His wife crossed the room in an instant and wrapped her hands around their daughter. Cooing softly to her, she smiled up at him.

"Go on, love. Don't you want to hold her?"

He did want to hold her. Very much so. She laughed and held out her arms. Gently, as if she were made of glass, he took her in his arms. She murmured some but settled down as he shifted to make her more comfortable. For a moment, he just stared down at her. Then carefully, he rocked her back and forth, making soothing noises.

"Hush now, little one," he said. "I've got you now. You won't fall. I promise. I won't let you. I won't let you fall ever. I'm your dad, and I love you."

Remember that promise? -

He came to with a gasp of pain as the voice boomed in his head once more. Jerking away, he barely had time to think before another memory caused him to be flung through space once more.

-He saw himself sitting at his desk. It was really just a table with an attitude. Still, he worked at it, if only to please his wife. She had made it with her own two hands. She was good at stuff like that. It was small but sturdy with a cubby for his pens and papers. Secretly, he wished

that he had a proper desk, preferably made of solid dark oak wood. Yes, that was very professional sounding.

A patter of small feet caught his attention. Inwardly he sighed. Couldn't he have just one moment of peace? But he smiled wide as his little girl came into view. She ran straight into his outstretched arms and buried her face in his chest.

"How's my bunny rabbit today?" he laughed, poking at her back.

She didn't answer. He frowned in concern.

"Hey?" he asked her. "What's the matter?"

She sniffed a little and mumbled into his shirt.

"I can't hear you," he told her, poking her again.

She said it again. It was barely a whisper, but he caught it just so.

"I'm sorry."

He almost laughed except for the look on his daughter's face. Sighing, he mentally set aside his work and hooked his finger under her chin.

"What for, honey?"

"I did something bad."

"Can you tell me?"

She bit her lip nervously before sliding off his lap and taking his hand. She led him over to a corner where he and his wife had set up a table for her drawings. The girl took after her mother in so many ways, not just looks. But as his eyes settled on the table, he frowned deeply. It was the sun catcher. The white frame was broken in two and there was a scattering of glass lenses that had broken free of their strings. It lay in a sad heap amid colorful drawings.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, burying her face in his pant leg. "Are you mad?"

He wasn't mad. Not really. At least that was what he told her. Inside, however, he was furious. How could she do this to so precious a gift? But one single glance down at the tear-stained face told him all. She was only six after all.

"No, honey," he said.

"Will mommy be mad?"

"Well," he said, kneeling in front of her. "This was something very special for mommy. She might be a little disappointed that you touched this without her permission. But how about we do something to cheer her up?"

"Like what?"

He was not artistic minded, but even as his eyes fell across the scattered lenses, an idea was forming in his mind.

"How about we do this?"-

He came back to himself. His beautiful, beautiful daughter. Such a lovely smile. She took after her mother, that was for certain.

She did, the voice told him. *More than you realize.*

He looked down at his hand and saw that when he had leaned back, he had touched the necklace made of the glass lenses. Of course. The project. He had helped his daughter make a necklace out of the remaining pieces for her mother. When she returned from her studio, she was a bit surprised, but after he told her the story, she understood perfectly well.

What a family they were. Why hadn't he remembered them before? The implications of such a memory loss were startling and unforgiving. He wanted nothing more than to get home to them right now, to hold them in his arms. This whole situation was frightening and unnatural. Yet even as he wished it, a certain feeling of foreboding rose in his mind. He was being warned away from...something. Just what it was he couldn't quite place that.

The hare was still sitting on the back seat, dark eyes staring intently at him. It hopped down to the floor and out of the car. In the process, it hit a black case out from under the seat. He looked at it and then reached down to pick it up. It was a violin case with shiny, silver letters carefully printed on the front in children's handwriting. He carefully unzipped it and reached out a hand to stroke the smooth surface, aware that this would be another memory if he did. As much as it frightened him, he didn't want to have lost these memories for good if he didn't recall them on his own. He pressed his hand to the cool surface and a roaring filled his ears.

-He was late. Very late, but he had good excuse. His job had offered him a promotion, and he took it, of course. Now, he and his family could buy a new house, a better, sleeker, faster car and whatever else they could ever want. But first, a drink to celebrate the new promotion. He invited all his coworkers, too, wanting not only to celebrate but also to flaunt his success. What was the point of having it if you couldn't share it with others?

In consequence, it was nearly midnight when he stumbled home, drunk but happy. As soon as he got in the door, however, the mood changed subtly. His wife stood in the front room, nervously chewing her lower lip. As she saw him, her eyes lit up and the worry disappeared, replaced by relief. But that soon changed as she saw his state, and her eyes darkened.

"Where have you been?" she asked him.

"Love, you're never gonna guess what I got today," he said rather stupidly, swaying slightly from the drink.

"Have you been drinking?" she asked, stepping up and recoiling once the smell hit her nose. "You have. How could you with our daughter in the house?"

"Oh, relax. It was just one drink."

"Oh no it was not. You can't fool me."

"Can't you just be happy for me?" he asked her, slightly hurt.

"Happy about you getting drunk and stumbling into the house at quarter to midnight? Sorry if I don't see any reason to be happy," she snapped at him.

"Hey, come on. It was just a bit of fun with the guys at work," he said defensively, getting angry.

"So, you would rather go out and get drunk than come to your own daughter's recital?" she asked him incredulously.

He groaned and closed his eyes to steady himself. He had forgotten in the excitement.

"I'm sorry. Is she upset? I'll just go talk to her."

She held out a hand to stop him. It wasn't that hard. He was barely in any condition to walk let alone push past a firm wall of anger.

"You will do no such thing," she said, glaring at him. "I will not have you walk into her room drunk and smelling like a bar."

"You can't stop me from talking to my own daughter," he yelled at her.

“Yes, I can. In fact, you can sleep out here tonight as well. I don’t want you stumbling into our bed like this either.”

“Oh, great. That’s the thanks I get for working hard to keep a roof over our heads and providing violin lessons and supporting your art ‘career.’ And I can’t just have one night to myself?”

“Of course, you can have a night, but not this night. Not this one. She cried herself to sleep. Think on that while you sleep on the couch.”

She picked up a pillow and threw it at his head. He didn’t have the wherewithal to dodge it and took it full in the face. Only by some miracle did it manage to land in his arms.

“I got a promotion today!” he yelled at her retreating back.

She ignored him. The house reverberated as she slammed their bedroom door closed. He grumbled angrily and then tripped over the coffee table and landed face first on the couch. He didn’t want to get up, so he just lay there for a good long while. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Here he was, working hard to support all of them and she couldn’t have let him have one night? Just one little night of celebration. It was harmless fun and no one was hurt. -

When he came back, he was furious with himself. How could he have justified that moment in any way? How could he have let himself miss his daughter’s first recital? That was a precious moment that would never be gotten again, and he missed it because he was out drinking with coworkers and flaunting his new-found wealth. What a shameful piece of work he was in his youth. What an idiot.

But certainly, he learned his lesson later after he came to his senses? Surely, he apologized?

You did not, boomed the voice. Don’t you remember? Or are you trying to forget again? You woke the next morning with a bad hangover and spent the day in the office trying to work the drink out of your system and the stress from the fight. You still remembered it, and clearly so did your wife, but conveniently, you also brought home roses and a box of cheap chocolates. She never forgot that, and neither did your daughter. But like all moments, it passed and so you along with it.

He cringed at the vindictiveness he heard in the tone. It was right to scold him, but where did this mysterious voice get her information? He did not feel inclined to say anything right now, though, so he let it pass.

For a moment, he had no idea what was going to happen next. The hare didn’t seem inclined to lead him anywhere. Perhaps he had reached their destination, but somehow, he knew that there was still more to this journey than just what he had seen. There was more. A lot more. He could feel it. After that last memory, he wasn’t even sure he wanted to see any of it anymore. He had enjoyed those moments before when he had been in love with his wife and then fell in love with his pretty, little daughter. He didn’t want to remember how things fell apart, if indeed that was what had happened.

Sighing, he swung his legs around and stepped out of the car. He needed to clear his head. He stepped around the side of the car. A bright yellow spot on the red surface caught his attention. A handprint, one small yellow one, was pressed onto the car’s hood. He stared at it a long time, thinking it odd that he would find such a thing, but then again, his wife was an artist

and it seemed that their daughter might be following in her footsteps. He absentmindedly reached out to touch it.

-They laughed as they sat in the sun, paintbrushes in one hand and a ceramic bowl in the other. She was making them for a fundraiser. She was always into that sort of thing. This month, it was a children's hospital that desperately needed the money for more research, or something like that. He never could keep them straight. Their daughter loved to help, although she mostly did it because she loved the feeling of a brush in her hands just as much as her mother.

He watched them from afar, doing paperwork at his desk. He shook his head slightly as he watched her. He wouldn't go so far as to call it a foolish activity. His wife loved it too much and they were doing it for a good cause, but it wouldn't put food on the table. He felt a pang as he remembered his business trip the next day. Perhaps just for a moment he could...but no. There was far too much to...

What were they doing now? He leaned forward a little and watched as his daughter stood, her hand painted with wet, yellow paint, and walked over to his new car before placing her hand on the hood nearest the driver's seat. He stood angrily and marched out the door.

"Honey, watch her!" he yelled, gesturing to their daughter.

His wife stood and grabbed the little girl's shoulders, holding her close. He took a good look at the hand print. It was already dry, the heat from the sun taking care of that quicker than anything else. That and his wife never used anything less than industrial strength materials with the projects that did not include canvas. He tried rubbing at it to no avail. It was stuck on there.

"Why did you let her do that?" he fumed.

"It's harmless," she said softly. "Love, let's not do this now."

"When else are we going to do it, then?" he asked. "I need this car for a business trip tomorrow. I can't go to the meeting with my car looking like this."

He rubbed at the paint with his sleeve. Still nothing.

"Please tell me you have something that will get this off."

She shrugged. "I did, but I used it all up last week."

"Well, get some then."

"I can't. The store that sells it isn't open today, and it's not a common solution. Don't worry. We'll get it tomorrow."

"I can't wait until tomorrow. We're having lunch. I've made the reservations."

"You could always not go." She said it quietly, but not quietly enough. He heard it just fine.

He whirled on her and began yelling, "I work hard to provide for this family, to provide for you and keep you happy. You like painting? Well, sorry, honey, but it doesn't exactly pay the bills. But you know what? I don't care what you do with your time, as long as it doesn't involve my things. You've ruined my car!"

"It's just harmless paint," she said.

The argument continued long and hard. -

As he came out of it, he felt tears rolling down his cheeks. He regretted it now, especially since what happened afterward had been all because of that little handprint on his car.

Remember? Your meeting went smoothly because the man you were doing business with saw it on your way to the restaurant, the voice pointed out.

Yes, was his silent reply. *I remember.*

He had gotten the contract because the businessman was a family man himself, raising two girls and a boy. He found it refreshing that not all the young blood flooding the markets were all too ambitious to make time for family. Family meant a lot. Family got you through things. Family made sure that employees were never burned out. Of course, he never told his wife. Pride dictated that he avoided the subject as best he could. He never forgot. He suspected neither did she.

A man's remorse comes not on the day of wrongdoing, but on a day far too late to do anything about it, the voice told him bitterly, and he winced at her words.

"Nothing is ever too late," he said aloud in rebellion.

Somethings are.

He shivered at the words.

Having nothing else to do, he climbed back into the car and sat down, putting his head in his hands. Something shiny caught his attention and he looked back to see a silver watch sitting in the cup holder by the driver's seat. He was certain that nothing had been there before, but after everything that had happened so far, he wasn't surprised. With no other promptings from the voice or from the hare, he sighed and reached over to pick it up.

-She was beautiful. She had blonde hair. That was all that he remembered about her. He didn't even remember her name. But he remembered her smile, the way she laughed when they talked, and the way she made him feel. He hadn't felt that way with anyone for a very long time. It was the Christmas party and they were handing out their gifts for the exchange. She walked up to him, holding out a small box wrapped in red and green striped wrapping paper. She gave him a coy little smile before sauntering off. He watched her go as the men around him hooted in response to the little exchange. He felt his cheeks redden and looked down at the gift.

He didn't open it until later that night. When he did, it was in the privacy of his own car. Ripping the paper away and opening the box, he found the silver watch, gleaming in the light of the parking lot lamp posts. He knew what he was doing. He knew what he was thinking. He also knew that what he was doing and thinking was wrong. But it didn't stop him from slipping the watch on his wrist or wearing it to work the next day. -

It was easier this time, coming out of the memory, but it was also harder. Those feelings were real and vivid. It was hard to shake off the attraction that he had felt towards his beautiful coworker. It made him feel very guilty, even though he knew in his heart of hearts that he had done nothing in response. Still, he had lusted after her, and it was enough that he felt as if he had cheated on his wife. The thought made him sick to his stomach.

He let the watch drop from his nerveless hands, and it fell between the seats and out of sight. He felt a little better after that. All he wanted to do now was get home to his family. Perhaps that was all that the voice wanted him to know. Perhaps that was all he needed to know. Maybe this journey was forcing him to face himself and his past choices before something

terrible happened. It was part of it, at least. Something was still bothering him, however. He couldn't quite place it just yet.

The hare hopped inside the car once more and nosed about until it found the glove compartment. It was slightly open. Worriedly, he moved to stop it. He remembered that he had a gun in there. What if it accidentally went off? The hare scurried away faster than he could blink, but stopped a few feet from the car, looking at him intently. His eyes turned curiously to the glove compartment, and he reached inside. After a moment, he found something that didn't seem to fit in the general clutter of the compartment. He pulled it out and saw to his surprise, he found it was a passport and a ticket to England. As he read the fine print on the ticket, he heard the roar in his ears again, and he was flung back into the past once more.

-He was going to England on a business trip. It was far away and he would be gone for a long time. A recent promotion followed by an interest in making the business international earned him a position on the team sent across the sea to secure a deal with a large firm in the UK. He was very excited. But he was also reaching the end of his patience. His wife stood resolutely in front of him, hands clasped behind her back.

"I don't want you to go," she told him.

"And why not?" he asked her, exasperated.

"I-I don't think that this is the right time for this."

"Right time? This is the perfect time."

"But what about me? I have my opening night at the studio. You promised to go. And your daughter? She has another violin concert. You missed the last one. Please, love, don't go. Not now."

There was something she wasn't telling him, but he was too busy now to care.

"I can see your studio anytime you like. And she can play for me when I get back. We'll have our own private concert, just the three of us."

"You know that's not the same--"

He slammed his hand against the wall.

"I'm doing this for us."

"I know you are," she said quietly. "I don't mean to say that you don't care."

"Well, it sure sounds like it. I can't give this up. My bosses just gave me a promotion. If I don't go, it will look very bad."

"I know, love, but...never mind."

"But what?"

"Nothing. I'm happy for you."

"You don't sound happy."

"I'm-I am. I am happy for you. And you're right, there'll always be afterward," but she didn't sound as if she believed it. He was suspicious for just a moment before his daughter ran into the room.

"Daddy!" she cried, flinging herself into his arms.

"There's my little superstar," he said, breaking into a smile.

He lifted her up in the air, and she squealed with laughter. His wife smiled too, although hers looked sad.

"Why don't you get dressed, sweetheart?" she told her.

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"I thought that maybe we could drive you to the airport."

"Really?"

"Why not? We won't see you for weeks. Let us see you off?"

He hesitated just a second. Something didn't seem right to him. They had been getting into arguments more frequently now. To be perfectly honest, he wasn't at all sure that they were going to last that much longer. As the days came and went, they seemed to drift further apart. Perhaps this was a last-ditch effort to keep them together. Perhaps he ought to try too.

"Alright," he said.

In a few minutes, they were all in the car ready to leave. His wife drove the car. She liked to do that. But unlike other times, her conversation was short and awkward. He felt as if she were still hiding something from him, but what, he couldn't say.

"Is something the matter?" he finally asked her when they reached the airport.

"No," she said absentmindedly.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but then they pulled up in front of the terminal. He could see his coworkers waiting for him at the doors, including the pretty blonde he met at the party. He smiled and waved at her. She caught his motion and waved back. His wife's eyes flicked back and forth between him and her, and for a moment, doubt clouded her vision. But she shook her head.

"Stay safe," she said.

"Uh-huh," he replied, opening the door and getting out. He turned and tickled his daughter, who giggled and wriggled.

"Bye, munchkin."

"Bye, Daddy."

He turned to his wife. As their eyes met, he felt suddenly compelled to look away.

"Bye, hon," he said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Wait!"

He turned back. "What is it now?"

She was handing him an envelope.

"Open this before you get on the plane."

"What is it?"

"Not here. Not now. Just promise me you'll open it before you get on that plane."

"Come on, honey," he protested, but she remained adamant.

"Promise me," she said stubbornly.

"Okay, I promise."

She relaxed.

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

He got out, and she drove off. He tucked the envelope into his coat and trotted over to meet his friends. He didn't open the envelope in the airport, not even during the half hour it took to get them seated. Instead, he talked with the pretty blonde coworker. Only when they got on the plane and had been in the air for several hours did he remember his promise. He slipped it out of his coat and ripped it open.

Oh, please, no, *he thought as he watched himself open the envelope.* Please, no, I don't want to know what's inside.

But he couldn't look away. That force was back, compelling him to keep his eyes on the scene.

Watch, *the voice said.* Watch.

He had no choice. As he in the memory opened the envelope, the memories came back to him like a flood, overwhelming him. He remembered the words like a battering ram to his stomach. Bone Cancer. Stage 2. Hospitalization. Further Treatment. They played through his mind like a record on repeat. He couldn't get it to shut up. He couldn't get the words to leave. But it wasn't those words that really frightened him. It was the note that his wife had slipped in with the doctor's diagnosis:

Please, I need you. I need you to be there with me. I can't do this without you. Please, don't go. I'll wait for you. I'll wait until I see your plane leave. Please, or I will take our daughter and go.

I'm sorry, but please.

I love you.

He just sat there, staring at the note in his hands for what seemed like an eternity. The bottom of the world dropped away. The plane was no longer beneath him and he was falling so far. He needed to get home.

At that thought, he bolted from his seat for the pilot's cabin. A stewardess attempted to stop him, but he brushed roughly past her and banged on the door. Eventually, the pilot came out. From there, an argument started. He didn't know what he was saying, just that he needed to get home, he needed to get home. His wife was sick. He needed to get home. He almost got into a fist fight when the pilot told him that they couldn't turn around now. They had passed the point of no return. If they turned now, they wouldn't have enough fuel. Eventually, the crew managed to haul him back to his seat and his coworkers attempted to soothe him. He just kept saying that he needed to get home. It was the only thought that was going through his mind. He didn't want to lose his daughter. He didn't even want to split up with his wife. The thought of never seeing either of them again had forced him into a reality that he had never wanted to face.

But that wasn't the end of it, *the voice told him.*

Nooo, *he moaned.* No....

But the voice was right. As soon as he got to the airport, he made for another terminal to purchase a ticket home. But he was stopped by two police officers who told him that they were here to see him.

No! *He yelled inwardly.* I don't want to know this! I don't want to see this! -

He gasped as he forced himself away from the memory. No! He didn't want to know! He pushed away, dropping the passport and the ticket on the floor. Desperate, he tried to open the glove compartment and push the papers away from him, out of sight and out of mind, but even as he opened it, a shiny golden object fell from the opening. Unthinkingly, he reached out to catch

it. He stared wide-eyed at the object in his hands. His wife's wedding ring. Then, the memories came flooding like punches.

-She sat on the couch all night just staring at the clock and waiting for a phone call, a text message, anything that would let her know that he was alright. She was sick with worry at the thought of what could have happened to him. It wasn't like him to break a promise. Could he be in danger? She fingered the phone cord, wondering if she ought to call the police.

But no. Here he was now. Those were his headlights in the driveway. But why did he park so far away? She waited with anticipation by the door. When he stumbled through, all her worry disappeared and was replaced by anger as she caught a whiff of the alcohol on his breath. All this time and he was out drinking? Never a thought for her. Never a thought that she might be worried sick over his life. She held up the concert ticket in her hands and shoved it at him. -

He doubled over, gasping as if he had been punched in the gut. He leaned back too far and found himself falling over onto the desert floor just as another memory flooded his mind.

-Every day he leaves. Every day he comes home a little different. Where was the man she used to love? Where were his kind words and gestures? These business trips were taking up his time more and more. No longer did he have time to sit by the fire and share a dessert, or read to their daughter, or come see her at the studio, or listen to their daughter play the violin. He was consumed by work. She worried every time he set foot out on these business trips. They were long and dangerous roads. He could be killed or hurt.

And every day, he came back without so much as a "hello" or "how was your day." He wouldn't even talk with her anymore like they used to. Who was this man that her husband was turning into? -

He groaned as he came back to himself and turned over to escape the car and all those memories.

-She found the watch in his drawer. She was just doing a little spring cleaning and it was her husband after all. They had no secrets from each other. Or so she thought. But when she saw the watch, all that confidence disappeared. He could have bought it himself, she reasoned, but the same part of her asked herself why he would feel the need to hide it from her.

From Helen, the writing on the box said. Who on earth was Helen and why was she giving gifts to her husband? She threw the box back in the drawer and took the watch out, fully intending to confront him about it later. But that night, she remembered that it was his birthday. She couldn't get angry at him. Not on his birthday, not even when he deserved it. They celebrated that night, and after they had gone to bed, she put the watch back where she had found it. -

He fumbled in his pocket for the glass lenses and tossed them aside, then continued his slow crawl through the sand.

-It was two months after she had found the watch. She waited a long time for him. She cooked dinner, prepared a lovely table, and sat to wait. And wait. And wait. It was almost eleven by the time that he got home. There wasn't even an apology gift in his hands. He simply kissed her on the cheek as he walked in and asked where dinner was.

What nerve! She started yelling at him about everything she could think of. He started yelling back too, hardly knowing what it was about, which made her even angrier. Finally, she shoved her gift at him and marched away, yelling back at him.

"Happy anniversary!"-

He struggled to his feet and stumbled across the sand. Tears rolled down at his cheeks and blurred his vision. He didn't want to know. Please. He was sorry. He didn't want to know. He just wanted it to be the same. He could make it better, he promised.

-She dropped her paintbrush, her hand shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't make it stop. Her hand wouldn't stop shaking. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, it did, but she was too unnerved to continue for today. She filed it away as just a fluke, but the same thing happened to her a couple of weeks later. Slowly, the weeks became days. Sometimes she couldn't go through one day without having at least three of these attacks. She would wake up in the middle of the night from nightmares. She didn't feel like eating. She stopped painting. She couldn't tell her husband. She didn't feel like he would understand or help her. After all, he hadn't in the past.

-

The further away from the car he got, the more the memories came flashing through his mind. He clutched his head and gasped in pain.

-The doctor's office was cold and sterile. Her daughter was at school. Her husband was at work. This wasn't the first visit. Nor, as it turned out, would it be the last. When the doctor came in and told her the news, she listened in stony silence, then left.

She cried herself to sleep that night, wondering where on earth her husband was and why he was late home. -

"Nooo..." the word came from his mouth like a groan.

-She held the diagnosis behind her back as he told her about his trip to England. A stab of panic raced through her, and she clutched the doctor's diagnosis tighter. Seeing her reaction, he studied her carefully before asking what was wrong.

"I don't want you to go," she said. -

"Please."

-She wrote the note and slipped it into the envelope before driving him to airport. When he said goodbye to their daughter, she smiled, remembering suddenly why she fell in love with the man in the first place. Before he could leave, she shoved the envelope at him and made him

promise to read it before getting on the plane. Then she drove away to park. For half an hour, she waited. She had memorized the plane number. From her spot, she could see the plane taking off. She waited for him a little while longer, soothing the complaints from her young daughter about being bored and promising ice cream. When he didn't show, she stared down at her hands.

Maybe she wasn't good enough. Maybe she was the one who failed this marriage. She hadn't been supportive enough or loved him enough. She tried to help him, but maybe...maybe it wasn't enough. A single tear rolled down her cheek before she sniffed and smiled at her daughter in the rearview mirror.

"Are you okay, Mommy?"

"I'm fine dear. Do you want to get that ice cream now?"

"Yay!"

She chuckled and maneuvered through the airport parking lot. The light was green. She surged forward, eager to get out of there as soon as possible. She never saw the truck. The driver wasn't paying attention. All she registered was her daughter's screams before the world faded to black. -

He screamed in despair as the memory tore a hole in his soul.

- "I'm sorry, sir," the police officer said in a thick English accent. "Your wife and daughter were killed in a traffic accident on the way home from the airport."-

It felt as if the last vestiges of life left his body all at once. He fell forward on his knees and flung himself face down in the sand, letting the tears flow. He wailed long and hard, not caring who saw. His hand opened slowly, and he let the ring drop to the sand. He couldn't stop himself. He couldn't stop the tears. They came, and they wouldn't stop until it felt as if every drop had left his body. After a good long while, he settled into a dull whimper, keeping his face buried in the sand.

A shifting sound caught his attention, and he blinked slowly and turned his face to look up at the hare, who was sitting only an arm's length away. They were always his daughter's favorite animal, he thought to himself. He reached out on a whim. The hare stood still this time. Carefully, he caressed her fur, then gasped as another memory flooded his mind.

-It was vacation time. They had a cabin up in the woods where they went every winter for Christmas. It was part of the deal that he made with his business. They got Christmas together, him and his family. It was a deal the company grudgingly but did make.

She was ten now, and nearly full grown, or at least to her mind she was. She was getting good at skating. Maybe, she told her parents, if she got good, she might consider skating lessons instead of violin lessons. They laughed at that and told her they would think about it.

For the first time in months, her parents weren't fighting. They were laughing and holding each other like they used to.

Just for the fun of it, she threw a snowball at her father. He gasped at the cold and then retaliated with his own. Her mother laughed until a well-aimed snowball hit her shoulder. She

gasped and then picked up some snow of her own. They laughed as they played. It was just like it used to be before her father got important. Someone had forgotten the cellphones at home.

She hadn't regretted doing it either.

When it got too dark, they all went inside for hot chocolate. She quickly took the couch and stretched all along the length of it, claiming she need the whole space because she was a growing girl. Awkwardly at first, they sat together at her feet in front of the fire. But then, her mother leaned a little closer and a little more until her head was resting on her husband's shoulder. Slowly, he too rested his head on hers. She fell asleep looking at them, knowing for sure that they still loved each other. -

He came away gently this time. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the smell of her hair and the way she looked in the orange firelight. His chin trembled a little and when he opened his eyes, he saw the hare was still staring up at him with those strange, familiar eyes. His daughter's eyes.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

For a moment, they just stared at each other. Then the hare blinked. He felt an immense weight being lifted from his back. He sighed shakily and whispered it again.

"I'm so, so sorry."

There was a moment's hesitation. The whole desert seemed to wait in anticipation.

I forgive you.

He cried. When he finished again, he took a deep breath. He remembered the rest now. He had tried to kill himself in a boneheaded move. His car was wrapped around a tree now somewhere out in the real world. He had a choice to make now.

He would live. That wasn't the choice. He didn't get to pick if he lived or died. That was the job of a much higher power than him. But he had been given a second chance. He had lived so selfishly, never once thinking about his wife or daughter or their needs. He had been a jerk. Worse than that, he had been an utter failure as both a husband and a father. He had made choices and they had nearly ruined them. What was he talking about? They *had* ruined him.

But he didn't have to continue living that way. He couldn't change the past. That was impossible. But the future was unset, untraveled, unknown. He didn't have to be the same person that he was then. Despite everything, he had still loved them, and as the hare had shown him, they had still loved him. He could choose to remember. He could choose to remember that love or to fall into despair. For their sakes, he would choose love.

As he readied himself for this next leg of the journey, a thought startled him out of his resolution. Would he remember this? He needed to remember. Desperately needed. The desert had made him forget himself once. Would it do the same again?

Only if you choose.

He didn't want to lose this. He held onto it even as he stood and began walking away into the desert and away from it all. Though he was leaving it behind, he knew that it would be a part of him always. He only hesitated once, glancing back at the hare. She stood still. The car was gone. So were the canyons. It was only endless sand now. As she stood there, for the briefest of moments, a figure came to stand beside her. He gasped as he recognized the tall lady. She stood

with her arm around a little girl, who came to stand behind the hare. They both smiled at him as he walked away. He smiled too, for their sake, and turned back, disappearing from the desert.

The hare watched him go and then watched the two figures disappear into the wind. A fitting end to a sad tale, she thought mournfully. To disappear on the wind, like a moment, like a day, like a life. Such sad stories, those who wander the desert. They all have something to lose in the end.

She turned and hopped away, never looking back as the howling sands swallowed her up.