

## [Bete Noir Mason Jar]

I was walking down a bright and lively street through my sun soaked hometown when I decided enlightenment was on the agenda. I walked past the shops selling sundries and the bars selling drinks to noontime alcoholics while cosmic rays brightened my hair and warmed my skin. Alcoholism seemed like a fun afternoon activity but alas, this is not why I made my way down to the beach today. I'm a seeker, you see.

I had somehow gotten the idea in my head that the ocean could provide me with the answers I sought. Such a powerful and evocative force for many, I believed its frothy lips would speak to me on a personal level. I lacked incentive to gain my own wisdom and wanted a greater force to give it to me. And since the Lord Jesus wasn't making any cameos in my dreams, I decided Poseidon was a next best alternative. So I shuffled my feet through the sand and arrived at the water's edge. The beach was crowded as per usual, but still I focused my gaze into the gaping mouth of each wave in an attempt to read the braille of water droplets as they fell.

But I saw nothing and so began walking into the water itself. Perhaps the ocean spoke in tactile verses rather than visual cues, I thought. I allowed the waves to knock me down and tow me underneath the current. I had grown up swimming in the ocean and as such had learned how to let waves take you without ever brushing the rock bed beneath. I trusted the waves to keep me safe and they trusted me to respect their art.

I held my breath for as long as I could and when I could once again feel the warmth of the water's surface against my back I emerged to see how far from land I drifted. The swiftness of a rip tide towed me farther than expected, but rip tides didn't scare me anymore. The quiet wind and paltry view of humans ashore calmed me.

I meditated upon the dense oscillations occurring beneath me and tried to understand how I could become conscious of the deep oscillations occurring within myself. A shadow swept across the bright orange expanse that was my view from closed eyelids and I opened them to see clouds heading toward shore. I sighed and closed my eyes again, preparing for a change in water temperature.

But I did not prep enough.

Icy water rose up from the bottom and touched my toes and then my knees. I curled into a ball to stay as close to the surface as I could, but it was rising too fast. I looked back toward shore and contemplated going in. But I had not found what I was looking for, and as a general rule, I never backtrack. So instead, I swam forward.

I didn't care much to return to land. If I could I would detach from my hands and feet and let the currents take me to a place I could not control. This was not a suicide however, this was a vocation.

After swimming for some time, I sank beneath the surface once again. I held my arms and legs close to my body and suspended myself in the water column to incubate in the womb of the ocean. The silence and lack of breath cleared my thoughts and centered my focus to the pit of my stomach.

My stomach grumbled, not enjoying bearing the weight of my psyche or my lunch. I felt the first thump that reminded me of oxygen, but I ignored it. Corners of darkness encircled the peripherals of my closed vision and I felt excitement and panic at the same time. Relief and the reaction to survive canceled each other out so all I did was reach out into the water in front of me. My hands sank through gravel.

I pushed myself up and gasped for air, choking on the salt and sand in my lungs. I coughed up salty black tar from years of smoking and regretted the taste of resin in my mouth more than the taste of

the sea. I crawled up the embankment and stared at the gravel in front of me, considering its color composition. It seemed off, but I wasn't sure why.

I began to raise my head to see where I was but before I could see where the beach ended and the land began I saw a pair of polished black leather shoes standing right in front of me. Startled, I shuffled back a bit and tried to dart my gaze immediately upward but a strong hand down held my head.

"Don't look up," he whispered sternly. "Trust me."

Now I never trust a man that won't let me look into his eyes but for some reason I felt I wasn't in a position to make the rules. He kept his hand gripped tightly on my head until he was sure I would obey. I had no plan to rebel. Wherever I was, he was my only guide.

"Now I want you to do two things for me," he said. His voice was smooth as cornbread batter and oozed from him through a funnel. It soothed me.

"First, you must never look at my face. It's for your own protection."

This did not soothe me. The only reason to not look at another's face is to prevent future recognition. He felt my uneasiness.

"Trust me," he repeated. "That's the second thing you must do."

He threw down a plastic visor to prevent me from looking at anything above his neckline and I put it on dutifully. I stood up shakily and surveyed him from below the neckline. He was wearing a dry cleaned black business suit with a red silk undershirt and an absurd tie. It had a repeating pattern of large black and white spotted cows with party hats on squeezing blood out of their utters into wine glasses and cheering each other.

He turned briskly on his heel and began walking away. He knew I would follow. The sand turned to concrete and the concrete turned to grass as I followed the backs of his heels. He told me to sit down. I obeyed.

"Now I have something very important to show you," he said. "But you have a choice if you want to see it or not."

I stared at the grass, puzzled. I wanted more information.

"Will you tell me what it is?" I asked.

"It's what you were looking for," he said.

I was alarmed. Even I wasn't entirely sure what I was seeking, so how could he?

"That doesn't enlighten me very much," I said wryly. He forced a breath out of clenched teeth. My attitude was a blatant defense strategy against anyone else knowing something only I should know. Discomfort set in and a heavy silence weighed down on the both of us.

"I am trying to help you," he said with darkness in his voice.

"And I'm trying to help myself," I shot back with similar shades of black.

He slapped me across the face and I felt blood slide out of the corner of my mouth. I tried to look at our surroundings in the peripherals of my spinning head but saw only the tops of sprawling leafless trees. They reached toward a darkening sky that indicated we approached dusk. My face was warm where his hand made contact while the rest of my body stayed cold.

"Don't make this into a waste of my time!" he hissed.

I sighed in surrender. With a temperament as cold as the ocean I let swallow me, I would get nowhere.

"Well, what options of information do I get?" I asked, not totally stepping off my pedestal.

He laughed at my attempt to be in control, but decided it was more cute than threatening and so answered the question. "I am going to show you your soul so that you can see it."

I scrambled to find the right question to ask.

“Now I’m going to be as close to honest as I can,” he began, “It’s a choice you should think about. And the option to *not* see it, well, I would heavily consider it.”

Confusing thoughts swirled but I remained silent. Viewing my soul could possibly give me so many answers I sought. What are they made of? On what axis does it spin? Will it look like the real me? Will it show me who I’m supposed to be? Is it fixed or does it flux? Is it light or is it dark? Maybe it’s transparent.

“All those and more,” he answered timely with what sounded like a smile.

“I want to see.” I answered confidently.

“Well now we’re getting somewhere,” he responded, “so glad you decided to get what you came for.”

I looked up from the ground to see him opening a pair of velvety red curtains suspended in midair. Behind the curtains sat a centered pedestal about waist high with a large mason jar sitting on top. My ego drooped when I discovered my entire soul could be contained in merely a mason jar.

“Everyone’s does,” he said, “don’t feel so high and mighty. Now this whole process will feel rather... interesting.”

When the devil tells you something feels interesting, you can be sure it hurts like hell.

“Don’t open your eyes,” he said sterner and darker than before. I shut them as hard as I could.

He grabbed me by the neck with one hand and lifted me off my feet. I began to choke but then felt my throat open wider than it had ever been before while the roar of jet engines filled my ears. My mouth snapped open, my head cracked back, and my diaphragm rose to compress my lungs. I felt my body purge heavier than a deadhead on ayahuasca as serrated knives entered my heart to cut my soul from my body.

After several moments he dropped me to the ground, a heaving and spineless wreck. I coughed up blood all over my hands and wiped them on the grass. He gave me time to catch my breath and as air reentered my lungs, I felt nothing. No relief that I could breathe once again, no pain from the purge. There existed a hole in my heart where my sentiments once sat, a well where thoughts used to geyser. I looked up and the curtains were closed.

“Are you ready?” he asked with excitement.

I was. As I prepared my sight for the spectacle of a lifetime, superficial questions seeped through my skin. Will it be purple like my favorite color? Will it sparkle like my dark green eyes? Will it swirl like a tornado or sift into fog? Or maybe it will be solid as marble and raw like the Earth? The corners of my mouth crept into a greedy smile as I readied myself to lay eyes on my greatest desires.

“Yes!” I said rushed. I quickly grew impatient; he knew what I wanted.

“Feast your eyes!” he shrieked as he snapped back the curtain.

I stared straight ahead at that creature of me but heer sharpened light rays struck me blind. I saw no colors, no mirrored distortions, nor any holy magnificence. My eyes melted together like a teenage dream’s plastic nightmare and my pupils paled to white from the rejection off my retinas. I threw my hands over my eyes to dull the pain but the damage was done. I stumbled backward and tried to reassess what I’d saw and what I could now see. I looked back at the mason jar and once again felt the sting of sharpened wavelengths. I screamed in anger at the treachery I had been dealt.

“You did not say this would happen!” I cried in tears of fire and heaved against the drought in my throat. I collapsed into silence, but then noticed the sound of his laughter ringing in my ears, slowly fading into an echo.

“Did I promise you I would?” he chuckled suggestively. “I did mention it wasn’t the best of ideas.” He radiated.

I rested on all fours as my eyes throbbed in pain. “Well, what now?!” I panted the words out. The devil laughed a laugh of contempt, as if I deserved any compensation for my introspective greed.

“You asked for this, do you not remember?” he asked sarcastically. I seethed with anger, remembering his first words to trust him. “You can keep the jar, of course, but you can never really look at it. There is a space in your chest to latch it onto and that’s probably the safest place to keep it.” I shot him a dirty look with my whitened pupils but to him it meant nothing. He had known all along the order of events and his fun was already over. “There is a boat at the water’s edge ready to take you back to shore.”

He walked away as I staggered to my feet. I was now all alone with impaired vision, achy bones, and a mission to get to the mainland. I shielded my eyes as I took hold of the mason jar, warm and vibrating. I latched it into my chest as I was instructed and began to backtrack. The soft vibration on my ribcage made me more aware of my bone structure and the truth behind cracking your knuckles. In a way, I felt more alive. But it was a physical awareness, not an enlightened one. I felt rather dull inside, like a black and white cartoon in a world of color. I sat exhausted in wet clothes within the small motorboat, but didn’t see any land in sight. Too fried to care, I started the boat and headed straight out from the shoreline.

The sea was calm enough to easily go full speed with only a light mist dotting my face. I daydreamed of where in my house I could put my soul to accent the interior best. I’d have to cover it of course, but it could look nice with the right color cloth.

An erratic wave lifted up the boat to catch some air and landed me with a thud, bringing my focus back to the boat. I was fast approaching my familiar cloudy coastline. Casually, I drove the sputtering motorboat into the harbor on the north side of town, hoping to ditch the boat in an empty stall and walk home. The clouds drove away most beach goers with only a few locals attending the food stands and liquor stores. I couldn’t find an empty spot so I pulled up to one of the fingers of the dock, got out, and left it untied. I didn’t have time for order, I wanted to go home.

Needless to say, housing a large beaming jar in one’s chest attracts attention. It seemed everyone but me could stare straight at it and comment on its radiance. People loved and misunderstood me more than ever. Bible thumpers often came to my door to give warnings of damnation but I always told them there just wasn’t much I could do and they usually understood and left. It was difficult to hold a job as time and time again I got labeled an office distraction. Nobody took me seriously and I couldn’t blame them.

Instead, I plucked myself out of average society and joined a passing circus. The ringleader immediately saw my potential as a sideshow attraction and agreed to house me with his lucrative collection of extraordinary strays. I had my own trailer, an assortment of strange circus friends that all had interesting past lives, and a free ticket to travel all across the county. For many years, this vagabond life suited me and made me happy.

But then one day, a day all circus performers eventually experience, a child pointed out something about me that inspired deep distaste for my trade. I was standing behind my usual booth with a colorful sign over my head that read The Girl Who Sold Her Soul for Nothing when a little girl with her mom walked up to me. She had short blonde pigtails and an ugly sugar covered mouth from cotton candy fusing with her spit. I did my usual act of showing off the jar in different positions while portraying the devil’s dominion on my face. She looked me up and down.

“Is this all she does?” the girl asked her mom.

“Well, look honey! She has a beautiful light where her heart should be, not everyone has that, she’s very special,” her mother reassured. She winked at me and the reassurance felt more directed at me than her daughter. I felt worthless. They moved on.

Later that night, I was sitting at the table with Sal the Bearded Lady and Abby the contortionist. Sal was picking crumbs out of her beard and Abby was playing with her food between her toes.

“I hate my act,” I said aloud. They both stopped what they were doing.

“Why? You’re really popular,” Abby said, concerned.

“Yeah, I mean you know how many bearded ladies there are out there?” Sal scoffed. “I’m surprised I even got this job.”

“I don’t know,” I brooded, “this jar just feels heavier than most nights. I know it’s what’s paying the bills, but maybe it’s more of a burden than I really want to admit.” All I got back were confused stares. I was talking to the wrong crowd. These people revered and made a living off their eccentricities and here I was complaining about mine. An awkward silence filled the room so I stood up and walked out of the dining cart. Night had already begun to fall. Our nocturnal show would start soon and I saw Sergey the Strongman doing curls by the fire pit outside his trailer. I sat down next to him and stared into the flames. I wondered what it would feel like to be a cinder.

“Hellou my favoreet leetle shining light, how var you?” His thick Russian accent gave him a paternal sensibility, but I think I was the only one that thought that since my grandfather was Hungarian and also spoke with a thick accent.

“It’s going okay,” I sighed. “I think I’m going to break my jar.”

“Vat!?” he exclaimed and put down his barbell to look at me. I didn’t look back.

“Vhy would you do zat?” he knelt down in front of me so I would look at him like the troubled father figure I projected.

“Because I don’t want this life anymore! No one sees me for who I am. Everyone just stares and assumes my act is all I am. It’s giving off the wrong impression and I’m being held back by it.” I was talking so fast I could see his mind sorting through his broken English vocabulary to understand what I was trying to say. I gave him time to process it and then he smiled.

“But leetle light girl, zat iz vat iz zo vonderful about you!” He gave me a confident look.

“Help me break it,” I pleaded, “use your giant hammer! Maybe it will escape back into my body!”

“No,” he said sternly. “Even I am not ztrong enough to brek a deal vit ze devil.” He picked up his barbell and walked back into his trailer to get ready for the upcoming show.

Stupid superstitious Soviet, I alliterated in my head. He did however unwittingly leave his hammer resting upright by his trailer door. I took a quick three-sixty degree glance around me and then ran over to the hammer. I grabbed the handle and tried to pick it up. The muscles in my arms screeched as the mallet head lifted only an inch off the ground. This wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought.

I looked around for a dolly and found one standing by the pile of firewood a few feet away from the fire pit. I sprinted over to it and rolled it towards the hammer. Crowds of people began to accumulate by the circus tent entrance to buy tickets and popcorn for the next show. The performers’ trailers were behind the main stage tent so I wheeled the hammer to the side opposite the parking lot where there would be less foot traffic. We camped in a pretty isolated part of the forest near the northern Midwest and it got dark fast once I walked away from the closest lamppost. That didn’t really matter though since I had an ever present flashlight protruding from my chest. As I walked, I began to plan exactly how I would go about this. I needed to find a ledge of some sort and push it over onto the thickly plated glass jar since I couldn’t lift the hammer high enough myself to smash it.

I came across a fallen tree about a hundred yards from our encampment with roots stretching out in all directions. It was a very large tree with an established root system the perfect height for me to drop the hammer from the tip of its highest root. Once I reached the base of the wooden beast I positioned the dolly upright so I could remove my jar. I shut my eyes tightly and unlatched it from its residency in my chest; it was warmer and heavier than I remember. I placed it on the grass about two feet away from the base of the roots, just in case the hammer didn't fall straight down. I turned my face so I could open my eyes again and began walking the dolly to the canopy side of the tree trunk. I found a small enough incline to wheel it up onto the tree and carefully pushed it up to the base. As I got closer, I saw the glowing radiance I knew so well peeking out from behind the roots. A commotion of elated feelings filled me as I prepared for my impending freedom. I reached the bottom of the tree and gave one final lurch of both the hammer and the dolly over the edge. If the hammer missed, the crash of the dolly could ensure the jar's destruction. In those final moments when gravity held my fate, I opened my ears to hear the beautiful sound of breaking glass. I listened so hard that for a brief second, I heard the faint and distant echo of the devil's laughter.

I heard a slight shattering of what sounded like the tiniest of glass syringes hitting the floor and then the suction of a firing nerf gun. There was no thump or crash to signify the hammer and dolly had reached their destination and the glowing light behind the roots faded so I could barely make out its aura. I grabbed hold of the tree with my hands and crawled over the top to look down below.

And for once in the entirety of my imprisonment to that damn light I got to see what everyone else paid to see. An effeminate and curvy swirling cloud of soft yellow danced on the grass bed where I had left it. And the answer was yes, it did sparkle like my dark green eyes but no, it showed me nothing of who I am. It started to coil out tentacle-like tendrils to grasp onto each protruded root, large and small alike, and began pulling them back down towards the ground. There was no sign of the dolly or the hammer and as I realized this, the dead weight of the tree suddenly heaved upward. I lost my balance and my hands their grip so my left arm jutted in between two large roots. My soul continued to haul the tree upright and I reckoned she planned to acquire a new owner.

I tried to struggle free but then began to panic as her tendrils gained momentum on the tree. Finally, I broke loose and forced out an accomplished laugh as the force of the tree propelled me forward onto the ground underneath it. Once again I experienced the bite of her penetrating light on my skin as I fell on top of her. Every slice of skin on my body singed with the intensity and irony of a thousand cinders. An instant later, I sensed the approaching blackness of the bottom of the tree as it rejoined with the earth, crushing me in between.

I could see nothing but black and felt the boulder-like weight of the tree on my back. How I was alive was beyond me, but I wasn't in any pain. The burning subsided and was replaced by a tingling sensation that diffused away my body pixel by pixel. It didn't hurt but was a slow and laborious process that dissipated each bit of my body into a solidified and fixed compartment.

Over time a small piece of me was present in every inch of that tree. I could feel the wind rustling my leaves, swaying my branches, and pressing gently past my trunk like gentle waves in the ocean. My feet distributed into roots and I stretched them as vigorously as I would stretch the tendons through my feet to the webbing between my toes. I was strong and stacked, with no fear of knees buckling or legs tiring and so I stood forever while at the same time always being at rest. It was marvelous.

And then a feeling I underestimated overtook me like a typhoon: I experienced an immense thirst. It was a thirst not just for as much water as could reach my canopy, but for all the nutrients I could devour in order to grow as big as possible to expose me to my healthy diet of light. I was suction cupped to the

Earth and relished the way she hummed her seismic vibrations beneath me. I now understood how easily animals could become disconnected from their mother.

I appreciated at that moment that the entire problem began when I was so dead set on seeing what it was I really wanted instead of becoming it. As a tree, I saw nothing but became a part of everything. My sight had been blinding me my whole life.

I came to love the reverberations of footsteps as people approached my wide and welcoming trunk. Sometimes I could even sense the faint impression of handprints touching me. Time slowed down so much for me living on a plant's clock that every moment provided meaning. I no longer felt at a loss for selling my soul for absolutely nothing. It was worth it.