

Concrete Jungle

My last gift to Grandad, a promise.

“You won’t regret it, girl.”

Grandad.

Hands gnarled; face weathered from a life in the Merchant Navy. Voice a breathless rasp, full of fight his lungs could no longer sustain. Body a tenuous shadow beneath hospice sheets.

My eyes red next morning as I grab toast before school. Mum’s eyes glazed pale with something more furtive than my grief.

“Thought you didn’t wanna go.” That whine. “What will I do without you?”

I know exactly what she’ll do. And I don’t want to be here when she does.

Grandad called the city a concrete jungle. Moved here for Gran. She wouldn’t live anywhere else.

“You’ve had your world, off at sea. This is my world and I’m not budging. Take it or leave it.”

He took it. He loved her, after all.

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Sailing didn't impress me much at first. I couldn't imagine wanting to do it again. And France was a total disappointment. Two days of puking to get there, and the food was shocking. But the third night, mid-Channel, I started to understand what Grandad had meant.

A sky so big it went on forever. Velvet-black, clustered with stars, glittering like a leading lady's gown on Oscars' night. I knew stars from books, from Disney films, from songs that tell you to reach for them, but miss out the important bit about how to do it. These were real, bright, infinite stars - so many you couldn't count them if you tried. Stars in every direction, reflected in the deep glittering darkness of the waves. As I lay on my back on the deck, looking up, I felt alive with the motion of the boat; alive, and part of something bigger. Something with more meaning.

There was more to come. Evening four, I shared hot chocolate and sandwiches on deck with another girl, our feet dangling above the waves as we watched a dying sun paint sea and sky in colours so magical they hurt your soul to look at them. I've seen sunsets before; I've glimpsed grubby splinters of them through rain-streaked windows, like shards of stained glass invading the narrow gaps

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between buildings. But this was on a different scale altogether. It reached beyond the horizon; bigger, wider, and more intense, the vastness of its beauty unfettered by concrete blocks. It set my heart and mind alight, freeing me to possibilities I'd never dared to dream of.

Grandad was right; how could anyone regret this?

I don't mind being back in the city for now. This concrete jungle. This world of narrow horizons.

I don't know what I want to do when I finish school. But I know I want a bigger world, a world of stars and sunsets. A world beyond towerblocks and empty bottles.

And I know how to get there.

That's Grandad's last gift to me.