Stones

Watching the endless and endlessly varied march of waves, I remember what is coming to us, and spirit rebels, denies. It seems that you sense my denial and, unwilling to support me in it, you move away, bending low to search among the piles of sea-washed stones for one that suits your purpose. Rising, you fling your chosen stone far out over the breakers. I watch it disappear, the sound of its impact swallowed up by the hollow roar of the waves.
“Take a stone.” Your words are a command, inexorable, irresistible, I shake my head, stubborn. “When one is to journey on the sea, one must give it a gift. You know that. You cannot visit the sea without giving something to it.” My cold fingers fumble among the icy stones; my choice is blind and impulsive. I cast, and the stone falls laughably short of the waves. An expression on unwillingness to give the sea anything of mine, including you. You shake your head and nod at me to try again. This time I put anger behind my arm, and the stone flies far, though not as far as yours, and lands with a musical plop in the water near the shore. Enough, I think. I have given her what I can; it will have to be enough.
At home I stand before the sink, washing dishes, seeking distraction. My eye catches the gleam of blue and green, mahogany and amber in the tumbler of stones where we have placed in water our summer horde of tumbled glass, agate and jade to deepen their gleaming, jewel-like appearance. The sea and stones pervade my life with you.
Pulling me from my fruitless task, your warm fingers entwine in mine and I follow their tugging through the house, up the stairs, to our bed. Sulfurous light from the streetlamps slashes through the partially open blinds, laying stripes of luminosity across the bed that has been the arena for our passion these long months.
Throughout the night we crest and subside like the sea tides that have formed the background of our lives. Dawn is not even a glimmer of promise when we rise at last, replacing the civilized barriers of clothing like reluctant armor. In numb acceptance, I walk down the stairs with you, imagining my dreadful calm to be what someone approaching a death sentence might feel. When we face each other in farewell, I feel you sliding away form me, as though you were slipping into the sea’s embrace. I gave you a stone for him, I tell her, silently. I gave you a stone and your promise is to return him to me in token of my sacrifice. I will this from her, fiercely demanding it even as my lips take from his that last, bittersweet kiss. I do not watch him go when he releases me at last and walks away as light pushes vaguely at the blackness of night. I close the door against the sea-washed air and like an old, old woman whose body has been sucked dry of youth and love, I climb the stairs to begin my waiting, my heart for this space of time as hard and cold as an ocean stone.

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