



FATED TO SAMSARA

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In the year 1842, in a small sea-side cottage in the port-town of Yerba Buena, a family was eating breakfast:

"Dear, your eggs are getting cold," Samuel's father called into the bedroom. His wife sat staring into an ornate mirror, drawing gossamer curls slowly through a silver-handled boar's-hair brush, gazing at her reflection in the mirror, each stroke a meditation, a comfort, softly humming a melancholy, haunting song. The mirror was rimmed with roses carved in rosewood, inlaid with silver thorny vines.

Samuel stared at the oats before him and slowly spooned some into his mouth while his father held wide a newspaper and absorbed himself in it. Now out of view, Samuel surreptitiously spooned heaps of oats into a glass of milk.

"Samuel," said his father without lowering the paper. Samuel straightened and resumed pushing the gray glop past his lips.

"Make sure he doesn't mess his Sunday best," called his mother from

the bedroom. Samuel's father grunted his assent. Laying aside his paper, he cut up a helping of pork then buttered some bread and began eating with one hand and holding up the paper with the other.

Samuel decided to butter some bread of his own. He took the knife his father had left on the butter tray, severed for himself an overlarge pat of butter and began spreading it on a slice.

"Aiiieeeeeee!"

An awful scream pierced them, his mother's voice, and in the next moment came the clanging crash of breaking glass. It so startled Samuel's father that he jumped up from his chair, his thighs slamming into the table thrusting it up and towards Samuel. Samuel was knocked back by the table, his chair tipping and tossing him sprawling to the floor, flinging the knife and bread out of his hands. He struck the floor and felt strangeness in his hand. Sitting up, he brought his hand into sight and saw a deep slice across his palm; it was spitting blood. Then the pain of it hit him. He stiffened, staring at the blood streaming down his upheld arm in stark rivulets, squeezing his wounded hand at the wrist, too astonished to cry out or move.

His father froze a moment, looking confused, shocked, his brow furled, his eyes wide and wild, taking shallow, sporadic breaths. He looked around the room seeming bewildered and locked eyes with Samuel lying bleeding on the floor, a look of wide-eyed panic on his face. He shoved aside the newspaper on the table, pulling along with it the tablecloth and dishes which crashed and shattered to the floor. Samuel could not understand what his father was doing and was afraid. His father turned suddenly to the source of the scream and staggered toward the bedroom, stopping at the doorway.

"Oh, no. No, no..." his father said. "This can't be! I am...! This... this is...?!" He covered his eyes with his palms, rubbing them, and then stared into the bedroom again. He pounded himself in the head as he said, "This is not real! Not real! Wake up! Wake up!" He disappeared into the bedroom.

Samuel heard a great cacophony of things breaking, glass shattering, and his father angrily screaming things he could not understand. Samuel slowly rose to his feet and backed up against the wall as things continued to fracture and snap in the room beyond, flinching, cringing with each crash and splinter. He had never seen his father so angry, and he was greatly afraid. Something flew out of the bedroom and crashed beside him. He ran out the front door

towards his grandmother's house, just a few minutes' walk up the road, holding his lacerated hand against his chest, tears streaming down his face mixing with the blood upon his Sunday best.

The door burst open behind Samuel, who was not yet far from the house. He spun around. His father stood in the doorway,

Sometimes the ships were hauled out of the water, flipped upside down and turned into houses.

his face warped in anger and anguish and he screamed, "Fine, go to her! Go! Get out of here!" Samuel ran, running away from confusion, away from pain, from fear.

He found his grandmother, her door always open, and she caught him in her arms with tenderness as he ran into the house. "What's this now, Sam? What's the matter? You're hurt!" Samuel did not speak, only cried and stared.

His Grandmother quickly washed and bound Samuel's hand, and made him sit while she left to check on his house. When she returned some time later her face was drained white as the morning fog and just as passive. She sat in the rocking chair, staring into space for a

long time.

Thereafter, Samuel absorbed what had happened from those around him as he grew, from family and adults in town who knew the story, through snippets of overheard conversation and gossip: his mother had disappeared, vanished into the breeze, probably dead, and his father had hanged himself in the bedroom that very day but not before demolishing their bedroom and every mirror in the house. Some thought his father had gone insane, killed his mother and tried to kill Samuel, citing the scar on his hand as proof. But this was a lie. They had been happy. And no one ever found his mother's body. Some said the sea took her. And Samuel found he had a new name in town: orphan-boy.

Twelve years later, Samuel was seventeen and sick of his life. Yerba Buena went from being a small, sleepy port-town of a thousand souls to being renamed 'San Francisco' with fifty thousand residents. Everyone was sick with thoughts of wealth, the Gold Rush on everyone's mind and tongue, and with it came the gold-eyed throngs traveling through the port to go inland to the waiting mines.

It was nearly sundown. Samuel wrapped up some belongings in a small bag and snuck out of his grandmother's house through the window of his bedroom. He left a note telling her not to worry, hoping to sneak off without hearing another lecture. But

the kitchen window flung open as he passed, and she leaned out to him, eyeing his sack of belongings.

"...Where will you go?" she said, no hint of anger in her voice. She was drying a dish with a towel as she spoke.

"There're trade ships looking for crewmen," Samuel said.

"Everyone's trying to get here, but not you," she said, smiling. "Everyone wants gold, but you look to the sea."

"I hate it here, too many people, too many memories. I want to see the world, not dig it up."

She looked around for a moment, shoos a moth away with her hand, and then looked at him straight. "Well, I can't stop you. I know that. Just don't get into any more trouble... worry my ol' soul. Promise me."

"...I promise."

She leaned back into the window and Samuel strode away.

In port were dozens and dozens of vessels, yet not a sail in sight. Their masts swayed gently in the port swells, black masts silhouetted against the dimming orange horizon, looking like the upheld spears of a marching army. Many of them were trade-vessels whose crews had abandoned them to look for gold the minute they made port. Sometimes the ships were hauled out of the water, flipped upside down and turned into houses or taken apart and used for lumber. The southern dock held the active trade ships, the

ones stocked with sailors with no interest in digging. Sam headed there.

He found one that looked promising, a schooner named the Abergavenny rolling in the surf with lamps lit, a sure sign it was an active ship. He quietly made his way up the gang plank to the deck and looked around. Seeing no one he snuck into the cargo hold and hid amongst the freight boxes and ties, figuring he would emerge once they were underway and they would have to take him on. He fell asleep.

"Ahhh!" Cold water awoke him the next morning, first one bucket then a second. "Okay, okay!" he yelled, thrusting his hands out in protest. Two men looked down at him from the deck above. He had done a horrible job of hiding it seemed. One was swarthy, with a few days of beard, the other clean-shaven and wearing a skipper's hat.

"Get on up, blubberhead," said the swarthy one.

Samuel climbed up out of the hold. They had not even left port yet, he could not believe it.

"Cap'n wants ta know whye've stowed away on us." The captain was not even watching, just looking out over the sea, waiting. "Runnin' from trouble, eh? Aw, he's jus' a boy."

"No, sir," Samuel said, "I want to sail. I'm old enough now."

The captain turned and looked him straight in the eye. Samuel felt he was being seen through completely and looked away. The captain continued to

regard him for a few moments, finally asking, "How old are you, son?"

"Seventeen, sir."

"Cap'n, no! He's an abrahamer if I e'er saw one." The swarthy sailor's voice was gruff. He was older, perhaps in his forties, and tanned as leather, with deep-set wrinkles. "He'll ave us in banyan-days in no time, Cap'."

The captain looked to the swarthy man and said, "It's fine, I'll have the chandler load some more food. We need another man. Teach him the marling-spike. Young man, I hope you like knots." He looked to Samuel directly. "You'll address me as Captain Mobius, and this is Bosun Poole. He'll take you around. Do what he says." He walked off.

The months to follow were difficult for Samuel. He slept before the mast, the most uncomfortable part of the ship, as it lifted and fell among the waves at night. He was sick often. Despite this he was not allowed to slack off. Bosun Poole taught him knots for weeks as they sailed towards China. They began with thin rope and moved up to lines as thick as his arm. He tied and untied knots until his hands bled. He learned to use a marling-spike, a three-foot long bar of iron that looked like a gigantic sewing needle. With it he could undo large knots of thick rope quickly, learning just where to stab each knot and apply leverage to undo it on command. He came to enjoy it and had never imagined there were so many kinds of knots.

The bowline was his favorite. The “king of knots,” they called it, the sailor’s best friend.

Two years passed, and Samuel began to feel like a sailor, even calling himself a sailor. He had seen much of the world and survived it. He forgot his old life.

One night, as the sun dipped into the sea, the top of the mast began to glow with brilliant blue flame dancing like fingers of fire. Samuel cried out, seeing it. The other sailors on deck looked up and gasped. Many fell to their knees, praying and muttering. Bosun Poole appeared and solemnly placed his hand to the mast. “Saint Erasmus’ warnin’, it is.” He walked slowly towards the captain’s cabin, looking up all the way. “Mark my words, a blind roller’s comin’. It’ll be a storm t’night. Time to tap the admiral.” Samuel marveled at it until it faded minutes later, wondering if the bosun was right.

The bosun was right. The storm came, and it came in a flash. Everyone was called up to help. “All hands and the cook!” cried Captain Mobius. “It’ll take more than one blashy night to sink this ol’ girl!” Everyone worked hard to bring in the sails and use the changing wind to keep the ship faced into the waves. Samuel’s mastery of the marling-spike made quick work of the great knots as they all worked. “Battle the watch, men!” But the storm triumphed, the swells began breaking over deck; they began taking on water. “Dump the hold!”

Samuel jumped into the cargo hold

and began cutting the lines holding down the cargo, tossing boxes, sacks and barrels up to the waiting hands, suffering the cold water raining down in great splashes that threatened to knock him down, thrashing against the ship as it continued pitching at steep angles and shuddering with each heavy wave that challenged her bow.

What looked like a giant knot-hole was clearly a window for he could see light inside it.

Sailors above were tying themselves to the mast to avoid being swept over and tossing ballast out to sea between swells.

The hold was finally empty, but they had taken on so much water that the ship had not risen in the water at all. Samuel feared for his life. He made his way out of the sloshing hold back to top deck. They were using a single bow-sail at half-mast to keep themselves righted in the storm, keep themselves facing the waves.

“Land, ho!” someone shouted. Looking to the horizon, the lightning revealed steady, unmoving land behind the rolling waves.

SNAP! A line holding the guide-sail broke and the sail rattled in the wind. The ship began to turn with each battering wave without the sail to orient it, its side now facing the oncoming barrage.

"Secure that line! We're at beam's end, men!" Samuel was tying himself to the mast when a great wave rolled through the deck from behind, taking him with it. The waters stripped the rope from his grasp tossing him into the sea. Feeling the harsh cold all around him, closing in on him, not being able to see or guess which way was up or down, fearing that his last sight would be darkness, he struggled until, at last, even the darkness faded into nothing.

A distant sound, barely heard. The sound of gurgling surf on the shore, of seagulls calling out their staccato cries nearby-yet darkness. His eyes burned as he tried to open them. The air was heavy with the salty scent of the coast, of pungent seaweed and sand. The shore had an aroma unlike the open ocean. It smelled fuller, richer. Light burned his eyes as he forced them open, they teared and blurred. A tiny wave rolled over him and he sat up to escape the next one. His muscles ached. He thought back, back to the great wave that had taken him overboard with it and could not remember the rest. Had he swum for it after all? He was alive, he knew, and that was enough.

An hour later he was dry, but he had seen no signs of life and wondered if he was the lone survivor, or if the crew had gone on without him, left him for dead. Was this an island, or the edge of a land, perhaps Japan? He was very

thirsty and walked inland looking for fresh water.

Beyond the shore lay a lush jungle. He walked into it, searching about, looking and hoping, thirsting for water but finding only plants, insects, and the excited calls and cries of birds. Finally, after an hour of walking, he heard the rush of water and crashed ahead through the brush, his heart overjoyed. Pushing aside a palm frond he saw the crystal blue waters of a small waterfall and the pool it roared into. He rushed to the water's edge and plunged his face into the lagoon. Having drunk his fill he sat down and looked around. What he saw startled him for a moment, and the feeling of hope overtook him: on the opposite edge of the pool from him, a few dozen yards away, was a gigantic tree, but it was not only a tree. What looked like a giant knot-hole was clearly a window for he could see light inside it. He noticed steps cut into one of the roots leading down to the water's edge. "What on earth?"

He swam across the pond, walked up the steps as quietly as possible and peeked in the window. Someone did live here! There was a fireplace, shelves full of herbs and glasses and bowls, a great cooking pot, a chest, a tiny bed of hay, and a table, along with many oddities hanging about all over. But it was strange, somehow.

As he peered in, the inside door swung open and light streamed in followed by a woman dressed in some

sort of gray cloth, her hair long and matted. He ducked away from the window then peeked again. She was standing before a table along the opposite wall. On the table were four glass jars that seemed out of place, larger than the others and a blue color. On each had a different letter: W, S, E, and N. She tapped on the lid of one three times, the lid popped open, grabbed something inside, he could not see what, and walked out the door.

He decided to follow her, and walked around the house towards where she had gone. Peeking around the last great protruding root, he saw her standing on a porch made from woven tree limbs in a seemingly impossible fashion. She was carrying a broom in one hand and her other hand was palm up holding whatever she had taken from the jar. It looked like an egg or large marble from this distance. She began to blow on it and as she blew her breath turned from a puff into a gale! She aimed this wind at the stairs leading to her door and a great throng of dust and leaves whirled into the air and disappeared with the gust a moment after. With that, she walked back into the house and the door closed. Who was she? How did she do that?

Amazed, Samuel walked up the last of the steps and knocked on the door. The door opened and the woman stood still, eyes wide and fixed on his. "Madame, I beg your help. I am shipwrecked."

"Come," she said. He staggered in, suddenly feeling weak. "Sit, sit."

A chair hit him on the back of the knees and he sat reflexively. The woman eyed him suspiciously through clenched eyes. She reached over and closed the lid of the blue jar.

"I suppose you want my help to get you back home." He nodded. "The question is, how can you pay me in return...?"

Samuel began to worry, for he truly had nothing. She studied his face intently. He said, "If I had anything at all, it would be yours."

"Ah, but you do have something I want. Or, you will..." She grinned mischievously.

"Name it."

"I will use my magic to send you home." She began to pace methodically. "And in exchange, you will give me your first-born child. I am alone here and without an heir to my wisdom. That is my only desire in this world."

Samuel shivered. What sort of person asks for such a thing, he could only wonder. But, he decided that if he got home it would be impossible for her to take his child, or would it?

"How is that even possible?"

"Don't worry. My spells make many things possible. Do you agree to the terms?"

Samuel pondered outcomes. He sat, shaking off the last of the damp in his clothes, imagining spending the rest

of his life on this island with a crazy woman versus agreeing to a crazy deal, thinking about being married one day, having children and what it would be like to have a child at all, much less to give it up. He decided he had no choice. He would humor her and deal with it later. "Alright. I beg you, help me get home."

"Excellent. Sit. Don't move even a bit while I build the spell!" She pulled a shade over all the windows and stood over the great cauldron. With a flick of her hand the fire under the cauldron flared tremendously. Sparks flew out and rained down around it, and the fire turned a bright blue. In moments the cauldron was boiling and the room was hot with a heavy, earthy smell. She stood where she could reach the rows of herbs and jars and began pulling them off the shelves in rapid succession, dumping this and that into the pot, each toss issuing forth streams of new colors and smells, all the while singing a haunting song, until a constant steam issued forth that shimmered and glowed like tiny jewels in the sun. She waved her hands rhythmically, and it danced and flowed according to the motions of her hands. She flicked her wrist at the large upright chest, and its double doors flew open with a bang, exposing a floor-length mirror. The shimmering cloud flowed towards it and hovered near it. Her other hand sent part of the sparkling cloud towards Samuel,

and it surrounded him. Suddenly, light shot from the mirror, Samuel could not believe it. A hazy image began to form in the mirror.

"This is your future wife, my boy!"

Samuel shot forward in his chair. The image continued to sharpen until he could see her, see the magic surround her. There she was, brushing her hair, looking back at them, and, my god, she was beautiful—he felt his chest tighten and in that moment decided he could not possibly betray her. "Wait," said the witch, "Who... what's going on?" The witch leaned over the cauldron peering closer into the mirror, and at that moment Samuel leapt out of the chair and pushed her into the wicked cauldron! The magic around him exploded with a sound like a strike of lightning. The mirror shattered. Samuel grabbed the blue jar marked "W" and raced out the door, across the pond, and through the jungle until he reached the shore. He put the jar down and tapped the lid three times; it popped open and inside were clear spheres that looked like they had a tiny cloud roiling inside them. He blew on one and a great wind shot out, just like he had seen the witch do. As he blew the marble got smaller and smaller. He spent the day building a raft, with a sail strong enough to survive the wind, using improvised rope—vines and bamboo—and soon he was ready to leave.

He took one final look back and set

off across the ocean. With the power of the jar he made it to a distant shore in just three days. By the time he arrived he was so exhausted, so thirsty, and hungry that he collapsed within sight of the shore, dropping the jar into the sea, reaching for land even as his vision hazed and he fell.

When he awoke he was in bed, a young girl sitting by his side, smiling down at him.

“Good morning.” She offered him a glass of water; he drank it greedily. He sat up and looked around. “I was collecting seashells when I saw you, you’re very lucky. What were you doing out there?”

“Doing? Where?” Samuel did not know this girl, did not know this room, and did not know why his body hurt, why he was thirsty, even how he got here. And the more he tried the more he realized he just did not remember anything except his name and nothing else.

“Out on the water,” she read his face, “You don’t remember?” He did not. He could not, and he did not know why.

A year passed, then another. Samuel still did not remember his past. In time he grew to accept this and decided to make new memories, to start living his life. He got a job in town as a carpenter building houses and he lived with the girl and her mother. He fell in love with the girl. Her name was Sara. They soon married and had a son they named Sam Jr., and Samuel built them a house

along the water.

One day he was reading the paper at breakfast just as his father used to do—suddenly a wall in his mind, long since eroded, crumbled at last, and his memories were uncovered instantly.

“Aiiieeeeeee!”

A fierce scream rang out from the bedroom, from his wife! He jumped up from his chair in alarm, knocking the table away, knocking it into Sam Jr. who crashed to the floor clutching a bloodied left hand. Samuel raised his own left palm and saw the scar across it, it was faded and meek now, he remembered cutting himself as a child... there on the floor, but no he was standing here, seeing himself through eye and memory in both positions. Dread overtook him as a thousand memories of all the years raced to the fore in this singular moment, blocking out everything else. Yet this moment demanded attention in the now and he came back to himself, worrying for his wife.

Still unbelieving, thinking surely it must be a dream he would yet wake from, a dream he knew he must wake from somehow, some way, he seized the newspaper and there... the date on the corner, in desolate black and white, the terrible truth, printed in all of its awful glory, the year, again: 1842.

