

A.A. KOSTAS

The Mouth

12:05 p.m. – 20/11/20--

The top of the Mouth was tough, red saprolite. It was surprisingly flat, like it had been scrubbed with steel wool. From that high up, the ocean is almost visible, nipping at the edges of the horizon.

The sun was hot that day, and it beat down hard on Coor and Aroj as they thudded slowly over the smooth red stone. Their shadows rippled smoothly, like the silhouettes of fish floating at the bottom of a pond.

There were no trees or bushes at the top, just smooth rock and then the empty air. Nothing but rock and air and the hard asphalt of the road far below. Near the edge of the Mouth a round disk was set into the ground, made of something dark grey and porous. The boys approached it carefully. Coor hesitated first, and then they both stopped, a few steps away.

“Bloody hell. There it is.”

“Don’t curse up here,” Aroj snapped, and Coor’s neck tensed.

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

Aroj leaned over and breathed warm air down Coor’s neck. “I can talk to you however I like.”

Coor shoved him away, making Aroj's backpack swing. "How about you just don't talk to me at all, okay?"

Aroj stayed where he was. His face was wary, like Coor was something dangerous.

Coor set the box he was carrying on the ground and quickly opened the lid. The little trinkets had been jumbled around, and he silently picked them up one by one, turning them over with his chapped finger tips. Suddenly a shadow fell over him, and he leaped up wildly.

Aroj had put his backpack down and was grabbing him, trying to get his long arms wrapped around his body. Aroj's face was open and frightening, mouth wide like he was planning on eating Coor whole. They scuffled and hit out at each other like schoolgirls, with shoves and slaps.

Coor felt panic reaching up inside of him, forcing its way out of his chest. Aroj was going to hurt him, Aroj wanted to make him hurt. He felt the big hands grip his neck and pin his arms down, and blindly he bit down on the fingers. Aroj stumbled back, gripping his hand like it was a snake bite.

"What the hell?"

Coor barely heard him. He was furious at Aroj for attacking him, for doing it up here on the Mouth. The only thing he wanted in the whole world was to knock Aroj down and kick him in the side and then it would be over.

Coor's shoulder hit Aroj square in the chest, and there was a rush of air that swirled around Coor for a moment. Then suddenly Aroj was gone.

Coor stood on the edge of the cliff for a long time while his body flashed hot then cold. Hours seemed to pass and his eyes refused to focus.

Then when the sun was about to set, Coor turned away and shuffled back towards the steep path that led back down to the road.

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3:15 p.m. – 19/11/20--

Aroj was waiting for him on the side street, tapping the top of the steering wheel while Coor walked slowly up to him. His school uniform was big and heavy on his slim frame, trapping the humidity so it was a sweaty cloak that wrapped around his body.

“I thought I was walking home today.”

Aroj shrugged. “Change of plans.”

Coor slumped into the passenger seat, letting the smell of stale smoke rub into his shirt and skin.

Aroj gunned the engine, and they lurched off from the tree-lined avenue.

“Have you got your things ready for tomorrow?”

“Not yet.”

Aroj sighed out of his nose with a faint, high-pitched whistling, just like their dad. It made Coor wince, nails on a chalkboard.

“How come you’re not at work?”

Aroj didn’t answer, so Coor settled into the silence, trying to relax away from the uncomfortable tension sitting on the back of his neck.

Coor lit the camping stove while Aroj cleared old clothes and food wrappers off the bed. Coor inhaled the damp, sweet smell that still lingered in the room, Aroj clearly hadn’t been out of bed since he had dropped Coor off at school in the morning.

Aroj threw some dirty t-shirts over into the corner of the room, but they landed on the small wooden table instead.

“Hey, be careful!” Coor lunged over to grab the picture frame Aroj had knocked.

Aroj ignored him, and Coor moved the photo over to the other side of the table.

“You need to get your things ready,” Aroj said darkly. “Some of the guys say if you don’t think about it right, you’re in real trouble.”

“I’m working on it,” Coor said, placing a pot of water over the naked flame. “What are you taking?”

Aroj picked up his dirty blue backpack and pulled out a cheap plastic bong and an old video game handset.

“That’s it?”

“It’s meant to be things you like, right? The guys said this kind of stuff usually works.”

Coor thought about what things he liked. His eyes fell on the photo in the silver frame, but he flicked his eyes away quickly. “I’ll have a look in my box.”

Aroj grunted. “You better.”

Coor and Aroj played video games until it got dark, and then Aroj made eggs on toast while Coor did some of his homework. He felt exhausted, the nervous tension had seeped from his neck all the way down his back, and it made every movement an effort.

Before he fell asleep Coor put some old toys into a shoebox he found under the bed and placed it by the door. Aroj climbed into bed just as he was falling asleep, and Coor felt an almost unstoppable urge to reach over and put his arms around Aroj’s big, long back. But he knew Aroj was pissed off, so Coor curled over onto his side, and kept a firm grip on the blanket so Aroj wouldn’t take it all during the night.

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7:47 a.m. – 20/11/20--

It was a long way to the Mouth, and even though they left early in the morning, it wasn’t long before the summer heat found them sealed away in Aroj’s old car. Both boys began to sweat.

“Can’t you make that noise stop?”

Coor took the shoebox off his lap and placed it on the back seat, but it only made the jangling slightly less annoying.

“Sorry,” he said despondently.

Aroj shook his head. “You’d better have brought the right stuff. It’s a big deal.”

“It’ll be fine.” Coor turned to look out the window.

“I can’t believe you left it so late. Are you trying to be stupid?” Aroj did a fake laugh, trying to sound grown up and smart.

“Shut up.”

Aroj wasn’t done. “You know, I have no idea what you’re thinking most of the time. You just float along like everything’s going to be fine, but the truth is that you just don’t care. Why don’t you grow up?”

“Well if you’re so smart, how come you don’t have a job anymore?”

Aroj leaned over and smacked him on the back of his skull. Coor yelped and shoved Aroj, and the car swerved into the other lane. Luckily the roads were empty, but they kept their hands to themselves after that.

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12:05 p.m. – 20/11/20--

The trail took them up through the layers of heavy ferns and vine-strangled trees that fringed the road. Even in the shade, the air still felt like a weight pushing against them, willing them to stay put and not take another step. But eventually, after a slow ascent up five switch-backs, they made it to the top.

There were no trees or bushes at the top, just smooth rock and then the empty air. Near the edge of the Mouth a round disk was set into the ground, made of something dark grey and porous. The boys approached it carefully. Coor hesitated first, and then they both stopped, a few steps away.

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Coor barely heard him. He was furious at Aroj for attacking him, for doing it up here on the Mouth. The only thing he wanted in the whole world was to knock Aroj down and kick him in the side and then it would be over. His whole body was flooded with energy, and somehow he knew that if he wanted to, he could kill Aroj right there on the Mouth. Aroj was circling around, keeping his eyes on Coor but each step was taking him farther from the edge of the cliff. If Coor was going to strike, this was the time, but he felt an uneasiness rising up inside of him, keeping him rooted to the spot.

As he watched, Aroj's feet inched closer and closer to the grey disk. Coor thought of the meaningless plastic toys he had brought all the way up here and let out the breath he had been holding.

Aroj was still looking at him when his feet made contact with the grey material, and before Coor could yell out, the circle began glowing. Aroj looked down at his feet and the air began to stink with an electric burning.

“Coor!” Aroj yelled out in panic.

Coor instantly sprinted forwards from where he had been crouching, and the only thing in his mind was the picture in the silver frame. He leaped onto the disk, next to Aroj and placed both hands on him, trying to move him. The disk was glowing brighter and brighter, and Coor had to squint to see. He could feel the heat melting his shoes and he realised it was impossible to move. He was stuck too.

The light flared to engulf the entire top of the Mouth, and Coor felt his body being pulled in half, along his sternum and spine. But he refused to let his hands drop from Aroj’s body.

When the light it finally faded, Coor was lying on the ground on the other side of the Mouth, where the trail led back to the road. He slowly lifted his head and saw Aroj lying down next to him, and he reached over to prod Aroj’s large, sweating back. Aroj shifted to face Coor, and slowly opened his eyes.