

BLUE

By Alexa Sudarto

CAUTION: HAZARDOUS WASTE

Signs with these three words written on them were plastered on the large, electrified fence that stretched for miles. Neon-coloured posters were strewn carelessly at the foot of the fence, ignored and left neglected after the last environmental rally held a few months ago. No one had bothered to pick them up—but who had the time?

The electric fence was the only thing separating us from the vast ocean beyond. Physically, the closest I have ever gotten to the endless caress of the waves of the sea were the hundred billion grains of sand that dotted the surface of the beach. Further down along the fence, I could see a group of scientists donning Hazmat suits and collecting samples of the ocean water in test tubes. Scientists were the only people allowed to come within five meters of the water and truthfully, no one ever complained about that rule. If you came within even 20 meters of the water, the stench would hit you like a direct slap in the face. It was a smell so awful it would make you tear up. The sight of the ocean was a completely different matter on its own. The water had turned from what was once a pristine deep blue colour into a green, murky, vast nothingness. Pieces of trash and plastic floated atop the stable waters, floating farther and farther towards the horizon and towards the unknown. That is why the fence was erected a long time ago: The toxins in the water had become so uncontrollably dangerous that scientists concluded no human would be able to survive the amount of hazardous chemicals in the sea. For the longest time, I had pitied the creatures living underwater until I realized that the unrelenting ocean must have spared none.

I had heard about the ocean before. I had heard about a beautiful mass of water that nurtured millions of species in its care, whether it was inanimate multi-colored corals or exuberant schools of fish. I had heard of a deep blue ocean that sparkled like diamonds under the bright, hot sun. I had heard of so many things about the ocean but have unfortunately never seen these things for myself.

From where I sit, the view of the ocean is pretty clear. I can see clearly the murky water and the pieces of trash floating atop the water. I wonder whether the water is cold or hot. I wonder if there is still any life under the water. I wonder if the fence will ever be taken down.

Before long, the stench of the ocean becomes too much for me. I begin walking back into town, leaving behind the unruly sight and the hair-singing smell of the ocean. At the entrance of the beach, there is a sign with information about the beach and pictures of what the beach once looked like.

PANTAI NUSA DUA, it read. The beach used to be the cleanest on the island but nearly 100 years after the sign was put up, I think a change might be long overdue.

From where I stood at the entrance of the beach, I could see a run-down store that used to sell surfboards and swimming supplies. It had been boarded up years ago due to a lack of profit to keep the business going. A few stores down was a seafood restaurant that was decorated to look absolutely glamorous. My parents had told me that seafood was once the regular everyday diet of billions of people all over the world but today, seafood has become a luxury that only the richest can afford.

I began my journey home. I lived not too far away from the beach, in a small apartment above the store that my parents ran. They ran a modest souvenir store that sold everything from postcards to educational magazines. The first thing you see when you enter the store is a rack of postcards. They were mostly blue, displaying images of what used to be the ocean. Scrawled on the picture were catchy taglines: “Visit Bali!” “Wish you were here!” Now, it just seemed sad; a reminder of what once was. The postcards on the topmost rack were gathering dust and their colors were fading—the color of the blue sea had slowly faded into a dark, incomprehensible image. It looked more accurate now.

Spread out on one of the tables in the store were educational pamphlets. Vintage, you could say. They’d been around for as long as I could remember. Mom and Dad tried to do their part as much as they could, but no one really cared about the ocean anymore.

“Save our oceans!” read the text on the pamphlet. Just like the postcards, a thin layer of dust rested atop the surface of the pamphlet, clouding the once-bright color. Funnily enough, you could tell a lot just by looking at the pamphlets. No one cared about the ocean, no one cared about preserving it anymore. The ocean was nothing more than an old wives tale. Another story to tell future generations about something humans had been blessed enough to have, but neglected and lost in the long run.

I traced my finger over a line on the pamphlet, scoffing lightly at the words that were written almost ironically, and in vain. *“Preserve our oceans for future generations to come!”* it read.

I do not know what the oceans were like. I just know that they were blue. The most perfect, exquisite shade of blue. It was taken away from me even before I got to know it. The ocean was blue for a moment, and then it was not. And just as choppy ocean currents guided men back home long, long ago, I hope the blue finds its way back too.