

The Valley of Yet-Stills

Book 2 of the Elsebeneath series

by Juno Threadborne

For my son, Sam.

Chapter One: The Trick That Wouldn't Land

Sam stood in the driveway again.

Same spot. Same shoes. Same yo-yo.

It wasn't tangled anymore. It wasn't broken.

He'd been practicing. Every day.

He could do "Walk the Dog" now. "Rock the Baby," too.

He could make the yo-yo sleep, loop, even climb the string like it was a mountain goat.

But the trick he wanted—the one Jamie always nailed without thinking—just wouldn't land.

Sam stared at the yo-yo in his palm.

He'd thrown it. Caught it. Reset it. Over and over.

He knew the motion by heart.

He'd watched tutorials. He'd slowed it down.

He'd even practiced in front of a mirror.

But every time, just before the moment that mattered...

...it wobbled.

And flopped.

And failed.

Again.

He didn't yell. He didn't cry. He just sat down on the curb, elbows on his knees, chin in his hands.

This time, it wasn't frustration that curled in his chest.

It was something quieter.
Something heavier.

“I’m doing everything right,” he whispered.

The breeze didn’t answer.

But it *shifted*.

Gently. Like the whole world had tilted, just a little.

The clouds turned lavender. The sunlight softened into something stranger. Sam blinked, and the curb was already fading.

No island this time.

Just grass. Soft and tall.

Just sky. Wide and listening.

He stood slowly, yo-yo in hand, and looked around.

All he could see was a valley—open and slow.

The wind moved like it had nowhere to be.

The trees stretched lazily.

The mountains in the distance looked like they’d been waiting forever.

And then—

From the edge of the valley came a slow, steady ticking.

Not loud.

Not hurried.

Just enough to say:

“Things are still moving. Even now.”

Sam took a breath.

And walked toward the sound.

Chapter Two: The Path with No Guide

The grass swayed as he moved. Not like it was pushing him forward—more like it was letting him pass. Soft green blades brushing against his legs, whispering: *Okay. You're ready.*

After a few minutes—or maybe a hundred heartbeats—Sam paused.

He looked around.

It didn't feel like the island. Not exactly. But it felt like something that remembered it.

There was no Practicio. No smiling turtle with moss on his back. No kind voice pointing the way or explaining what came next.

Just hills and sky and quiet.

Sam frowned.

"Guess I'm the one doing the walking this time," he said aloud.

His voice didn't echo.

It didn't need to.

The valley heard him anyway.

Somewhere up ahead, the ticking sound continued—soft and steady, like the beat of a patient drum.

Sam adjusted the yo-yo string on his finger.

Not because he was about to use it.

Just because it helped.

He thought of Thimble's song fragment, still folded in his desk drawer.

He thought of Zoomie's muddy track, Inky's vanished oceans, and Kip's helmet full of dust.

He wasn't sure what he was walking toward.
But he knew what he was walking *with*.

"Okay," he whispered. "Let's see what this place has to teach."

And with that, he took the next step.

The breeze sighed in approval.

And the ticking grew closer.

Chapter Three: The Clockmaker and the Time That Wasn't

The ticking grew louder—like a metronome keeping time with his feet.

Step... tick.

Step... tick.

The path curved gently, leading Sam toward a small rise. At the top was a crooked little shed, shaped like a teapot left out in the rain. Its roof slouched to one side. Smoke puffed from a crooked chimney, drifting upward in slow, spiral loops.

The door was open.

And inside—

Gears.

Dozens of them. Big ones, little ones, stacked and scattered like puzzle pieces that hadn't met yet. Some glowed faintly. Others were scratched, or bent, or made of things that didn't look like metal at all.

In the middle of the mess stood a woman in overalls, her hair tied back with a measuring tape. She was holding three gears in one hand and trying to sketch with the other, pencil tucked behind her ear, mouth full of muttered math.

She didn't look up right away.

"Oh good," she said. "You brought hands."

Sam blinked. "I—what?"

She waved him in with a distracted gesture. "I've been trying to build something that measures *progress*. Not time. Not clocks. Clocks are liars. All they do is count. I want something that *knows* when you're moving forward."

Sam stepped inside, careful not to bump anything.

“It’s... a little messy in here.”

She grinned. “Progress usually is.”

She handed him a gear with a notch shaped like a lightning bolt.

“This one turns when you try again after failing. Hold it.”

He did.

It was warm.

She picked up another piece—this one shaped like a snail’s shell. “And this one only fits if you’ve been patient.”

“What are you building?” Sam asked, quietly.

She paused.

Then looked up at him with gentle eyes.

“I don’t know. Not yet. But I’ll know it when it clicks.”

Sam swallowed.

“That’s kind of... scary.”

The clockmaker nodded. “Yep. That’s the point.”

She walked over to a table full of odd-shaped parts and held one up. It looked like a pocketwatch, but with no hands—just a single open space in the middle.

“Sometimes progress doesn’t tick. It hums. Or waits. Or sits real still until something inside you catches up.”

Sam looked at the piece in his hand again.

“So... what if it never clicks?”

She smiled, and gently placed the empty watch-body in his palm.

“Then you keep building anyway. Because one day, you’ll look up—and realize it’s been working all along.”

He stared at it. It wasn’t shiny. It wasn’t loud.
But it felt like it was already remembering something.

“Take it,” she said. “For when you forget that forward isn’t always fast.”

The ticking faded behind him—
Still irregular.
Still messy.
Like... progress.

Chapter Four: The Gardener and the Seeds That Wait

The path from the clockmaker's shed wound downhill, past tufts of wild lavender and stones arranged in quiet spirals. The ticking in Sam's pocket had faded, but not vanished. Now it felt more like... a pulse. A reminder.

He followed the trail until the landscape began to change.

The grass grew taller. The wind gentler.
And the trees? They didn't loom. They listened.

Ahead, a low fence made of mismatched sticks framed a garden—not the kind from storybooks, all carrots and cheerful tomatoes. This one was full of **dirt**. Just dirt. Row after row of dark, waiting soil.

In the middle, kneeling beside a patch, was a man in overalls—worn but clean. His sleeves were rolled up. His fingernails were full of earth. He was humming something tuneless and slow, like he'd forgotten the melody long ago but liked the shape of it anyway.

He didn't look up when Sam arrived.

"They're not sprouting yet," the man said softly.

Sam peered over the fence.
The garden looked empty.
But somehow, it didn't *feel* empty.

"Are you sure there's anything in there?" he asked.

The man smiled. "Oh yes. I planted them myself. Some yesterday. Some weeks ago. A few... years, maybe."

Sam blinked. "And you're still waiting?"

The gardener nodded.

“You don’t rush a seed. You make space for it. And you stay kind to it. Even when nothing happens.”

He reached into a small pouch and pulled out a **single, pale-blue seed**—small, oval, faintly glowing like a memory of starlight.

“This one’s a long-term sort. Won’t bloom until you’ve forgotten you planted it.”

He held it out.

Sam hesitated. “What if I lose it?”

“You won’t. Not really.”

Sam took it gently and cupped it in both hands.

It was warm, but quiet. Like a hope still learning how to speak.

He looked at the rows of earth again.

Still nothing growing. Still no green.

“Don’t you get discouraged?” he asked.

The gardener leaned back on his heels, wiped his hands, and looked up at the sky like it was answering him in its own time.

“Sometimes. But the thing about tending something is... it changes you, too. You think you’re waiting on it. But really? It’s waiting on you.”

Sam tucked the seed into his pocket—beside the watch.

He wasn’t sure what it would become. But he wanted to wait for it.

As he turned to go, the gardener added one last thought:

“Water it with patience. Trust it with silence. And when it blooms...”

He smiled. “You’ll know what it’s for.”

Sam walked on, down a path lined with small, quiet signs of growth.

Not obvious. Not loud. But there, if you looked closely.

The kind of things that wait for you to catch up.

Chapter Five: The Shadow and the Mirror That Listens

The air grew cooler as Sam walked.

Not cold—just still. Like a library you didn't know you'd stepped into.

The trees here leaned a little closer. The light came in thin, quiet slices through their branches. The grass felt soft beneath his shoes, but heavier somehow, like it was remembering something.

Sam didn't hear a sound.

Not at first.

But then—

A whisper.

Not words.

Not quite.

More like thoughts that hadn't decided to become words yet.

He turned a corner in the path, and there it was.

A clearing, ringed with tall, dark pines.

And in the center: **a mirror.**

It stood upright, without a frame. Its surface was dim and dappled—like moonlight through water. And crouched before it, barely visible, was a figure made of... nothing.

Shadow.

It shifted when he looked at it.
Not like it moved.
Like it had always been in a different shape until now.

Sam stepped forward.

The figure whispered.

“Why try again? You’ll only mess it up.”

Sam flinched.

It hadn’t said it out loud.
But he’d heard it.
In his chest.

The figure grew taller.

“They were better than you. Jamie. Thimble. Even Zoomie. They *knew*
who they were.”

Sam clenched his fists.

“I don’t believe you.”

The shadow flickered.
Almost spoke.
But let the silence answer instead.

“You do. Sometimes.”

He didn’t answer. Not out loud.

The mirror shimmered. Sam stepped toward it.

He expected to see himself.

He didn’t.

Not at first.

He saw a version of himself with his yo-yo snapped in half. His eyes downcast. His shoulders slumped. The look of *giving up*.

He turned away.

But something tugged at him.

He turned back.

This time, the mirror showed something different:

Him. Trying.

Not winning. Not perfect.

Just *still there*.

And next to him, a familiar shape:

Thimble's song.

Zoomie's poster.

Inky's brush.

The watch. The seed.

Everything he'd gathered.

Proof.

That he hadn't stopped.

The shadow shrank.

Sam stepped toward the mirror and placed his hand against it.

It was cold.

But not cruel.

A quiet voice—his own—echoed back:

“I hear you. But I'm not done yet.”

And then—

The mirror cracked.

Not shattered.

Just a single, perfect line through the center.

A fracture that gleamed like hope.

The shadow faded, curling inward like mist.

Where it had stood, a single shard remained.

Sam picked it up.

And for a moment—just a moment—he felt taller than he was.

Chapter Six: The Cat and the Stars That Haven't Shown

The path opened wider again, curving along the edge of a low ridge where the trees grew thin and the sky grew wide. The air smelled like cool grass and distant rain.

The sun hadn't gone down—but somehow, the stars were already there.

Faint. Wandering. Unfinished.

Sam stopped walking.

Above him, the sky rippled like a pond in reverse—soft indigos and bruised purples blending upward into lavender. But only a few stars had found their places. The rest blinked in and out, like they were still deciding whether to arrive.

Near the edge of the ridge sat a **cat**.

Still. Graceful. Tail curled around her paws.

She was black, but not shadow. More like midnight ink spilled across moonlight. A thin silver chain hung loosely around her neck, from which a tiny telescope charm dangled.

She was looking up.

“What are you looking at?” Sam asked softly.

She didn't look down.

“The ones that haven't arrived yet.”

Sam tilted his head. “How do you know they're coming?”

The cat's eyes flicked toward him.

Green. Bright. Tired in the way only patience can be.

“I don't. Not for sure. But I like being here when they do.”

Sam stepped closer. Sat beside her.

They watched together for a while.

One star blinked into place.

“Is that one new?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Old. Just finally brave enough to shine.”

He looked at her necklace. “What’s that for?”

She raised a paw and tapped the telescope charm.

“To remind me to look farther—especially when I feel like stopping.”

Sam nodded slowly, and sighed.

“I’ve been trying a trick. For weeks. It just... won’t show up.”

The cat didn’t say anything for a long time.

Then:

“Some things don’t show up when you try. They show up when you *listen*.”

She reached behind her with a paw and nudged something toward him—a small, folded **star chart**. Most of it was blank. But one constellation near the top had a single word written beside it:

“Almost.”

“Take it,” she said. “You’ll know how to finish it when the time is right.”

Sam unfolded it. The paper was soft like dried petals.

He looked up again.

One more star had joined the sky.

Not a lot.

But enough.

Chapter Seven: The Trick That Still Doesn't Work

The path curved back toward itself.

Not in a circle, exactly. More like a loop—one you could walk again if you needed to.

He passed the garden. The shed. The cracked mirror now covered in soft moss. He walked through the quiet trees until the path grew faint, then fainter, then gone.

And then—

He blinked.

And the world around him blinked back.

He was back in the driveway.

Same curb. Same sky. Same yo-yo in his hand.

The string was neat. The trick was waiting.

Sam stared at it. His hands didn't shake.

Not because he was certain.

But because he'd learned something more useful than certainty.

He tried the trick.

Swing. Arc. Flip. Miss.

It hit the ground and bounced sideways.

But this time—he didn't wince.

He just reached down, picked it up, and tried again.

Swing. Arc. Twist. Drop.

Still not there.

Still not right.

But something in his chest was *quietly glowing*.

He pulled the yo-yo in.

Checked the string.

And tried again.

And in his pocket, things waited:

A handleless watch.

A pale blue seed.

A mirror shard.

A half-written constellation.

Not trophies.

Not magic.

Just *reminders*.

That he'd been there.

That he'd kept going.

That he still could.

He smiled.

Tried the trick again.

And somewhere—just barely—
the Elsebeneath leaned in.

And waited with him.