

The Beach.

“Whatever you do, never set foot on that beach.”

By the time he had remembered the words of his grandmother, it was too late.

As soon as he laid his eyes upon it, he knew he had to get a closer look. Nested on a hill of sand was a beautiful conch shell. Double the size of a regular conch shell, it was decorated with an ethereal magenta coloring, and unlike any shell the Boy had ever seen. It was slightly buried, jutting out of the sand like an obelisk left behind by a forgotten empire. Tilted at an angle, the light reflected off of it made it look like a crystal jutting out of the mouth of a great cave. The Boy had no idea what such a strange shell was doing on this beach, and couldn't think of any species of animal that he knew of that lived in one quite like this. What he knew was that he had to take it back with him.

With a twist, the Boy popped it out of the ground. There were no signs of life within, so he assumed that whatever animal had lived in it—a sea snail probably—had either abandoned it or died. It was too big to be put in his book bag, which was already filled to the brim with an assortment of other shells from this beach, so he opted to carry it in his arms. Cradling it like a newborn baby, he made his way back home.

It was getting dark, and his parents would worry if he wasn't back by sundown, especially his father. A shame, since he felt he could spend the whole day at this beach searching for more shells. Spend the night, even. But, there was something about the idea of spending the night here made the Boy uneasy.

There was nothing overtly dangerous about the Beach, except for maybe where it was located. The Beach was secluded, far from the town where the Boy lived. The Boy had to walk for miles, and then traverse atop a jagged trail of rocks just to get there. One wrong move, and he could have easily slipped and hit his head on one of the rocks, but the Boy was nimble and had good balance, and so he made a game out of it. Smiling, he carefully hopped along the jagged rocks one by one.

That smile had faded once he had caught sight of the Beach. It was unlike any other beach that the Boy had ever seen, certainly much stranger than the other ones closer to town. He had read about black sand beaches in the library, but this particular black sand beach seemed different. For one, it was quiet. The waves were calm and gentle, and there wasn't an animal in sight. No seagulls, no turtles, nothing. It was so quiet that the only thing the Boy could hear was his own heartbeat. He froze, and for a while, he considered going back. After all, he had proven to himself that the Beach actually existed, that the book had been right. But, this wasn't enough for him. A part of him wanted to do more than just see the beach. It wanted him to feel it, to experience it —to bring a part of it back with him. When the urge became too great, he set foot on the Beach.

The Beach was more pleasant than he had expected. The Boy usually enjoyed beaches, and would spend most of his time there collecting shells and listening to the drone of the ocean waves. But this time there was no drone of the waves, so he decided to occupy himself with collecting shells. The Beach was smaller than other beaches around town, yet it seemed harder to explore. He felt his shoes sinking into the sand with each step he took, and for once the Boy was happy he didn't wear sandals.

He squatted down, careful not to kneel since he was wearing shorts, and began to dig with a rock he had found on the walk getting to the Beach. In the process of trying to dig up something he hoped he could find some semblance of life on the Beach. It was filled with shells, a broad blanket of them that lined the shore close to the water, but there was no sign of any animal that could have left them. He had tried digging in the sand with his hands to find some roly polies, which he loved to collect. But the sand was too smooth, and after putting his hand in up to the wrist, it felt that his hand was floating in a void, so he took it out as fast as he could. He wasn't afraid that something would bite his hand off, like his sister always feared everytime his family went to a beach, but he seemed to be afraid that it didn't feel like there was anything at all. His hand trembling ever so slightly, he turned to leave. That was when he saw it.

Still carefully clutching the shell in his arms, he made his way onto the main road. Holding onto all the shells he collected while walking across the jagged rocks was challenging, but it had to be done if he was to take everything home with him. He had to take it back with him. Plus, it added another challenge to the 'game' he made up. On the way back he spent most

of his time thinking about what to do with the shells when he got home. He thought about where exactly in his room he could put them, and specifically where to put the conch shell he found. He knew exactly what to do with the smaller shells weighing down his backpack, but the conch shell was *his*. It was too precious, too unique. Unlike anything he had ever seen before. He couldn't and wouldn't gift it to anyone.

He decided that from the lesser shells, he would make a nice shell necklace for the flower-vendor's daughter. They exchanged glances and smiles frequently in class, but the Boy had never spoken to her before. He had his eye on her for some time, but never had the courage to ask her out upfront. She always wore a beautiful long dress, a white one that seemed to pop out as much as the most striking white flowers. Yes, a shell necklace would look beautiful on her. The thought of it made him jittery. But the picnic wouldn't be held at the black-sand beach. He couldn't let anyone know he went there. If they asked him where he got the shells from, he would just lie. The Book had said that people in the town were banned from going to the Beach, but the book was written a long time ago. There were warnings in the town about venturing to the area *around* the Beach, but the Boy saw nothing that mentioned the Beach specifically. Maybe people forgot about the ban in time. To be safe, the Boy would still lie.

He decided that the rest of the shells he would put in a half-gallon container would be given to his mother. She would be thrilled with such a thing, and would definitely put it as an ornament in the living room. He stopped and got down on one knee and opened his bag to get a better look at the shells, to get an idea of how they would look in the jar. Though they were beautiful, even the smaller shells on the black sand beach struck the Boy as strange. The shells practically lit up the bag like crystals, and their shapes were oddly geometric, like something from a textbook. Not something that would be apparent right away, but if you looked closer you could see slight differences between each of them. The colors were sharp and monotone as well, and almost blended with the black sand perfectly. They even looked manmade. Maybe he would mail the shells to the nearest museum if his parents didn't want it. Or more likely, sell the shells to his classmates, better to make a buck.

He wondered if his grandmother would ask questions about the shell, so he elected to keep it in his room. He felt slightly guilty about not heeding the warning his grandmother had given him. Clutching the shell tighter, he stopped for a moment. He walked backward five paces. Maybe it was time to put the shell back, he thought, and for a brief moment, he considered it.

His parents had left the house with his siblings to visit their grandmother at her house on the other side of town. She lived up on a hill, far away from the shore. She preferred to drive to and from the main area of the town, but she stopped doing so recently. The Boy remembered his father saying that she was too old to keep driving, so he made the family bring groceries every time they visited. Those visits lasted the whole day, and they would usually be back at night. The Boy figured if he went back to the Beach now, he would return home after his family got back. That was bad, it would lead them to ask questions. Maybe even remind him of the stories that his grandmother seemed to tell over and over. He wanted to make sure he got there before them. He shook his head and began to walk forward.

Those were old stories, he thought to himself, stories made to scare little children. He remembered vividly the first time his grandmother had ever told him about the Beach, the first of her stories. **(new material)**

He was much younger then than he was now. That day he had wandered off away from home. He was only gone for three hours and he wanted to have a little adventure. Wanting to explore the nature around the town, he began to walk down a particular path. He had no way of knowing that he was walking towards the Beach. He didn't even know it existed then. On the road to get there, he encountered a dead deer. He didn't know how it died, but he put some of its teeth that he found on the road in his bag. They had funny shapes. Even then he had a habit of collecting things, his bag then filled with an assortment of things he had picked up on his walk. When he got home, he was smiling, ready to show his parents all the things he had collected on his journey. They were not smiling.

When they first greeted him their eyes were filled with tears. They hugged him, brought him inside, and then yelled at him. He remembered his father had hit him a couple of times. His grandmother was home at that time. The whole time his parents were scolding him in the living room, his grandmother sat in the back, not saying a word. When they were done, his grandmother asked him where he had gone. The Boy had said he had just wandered, but his grandmother asked him to describe the route he had taken. The Boy then spent a couple minutes describing what he had seen on his walk in detail. When he was done, his grandmother got up from her chair, walked over to the sofa where the Boy was sitting and grabbed his wrist. The Boy

jumped back. His grandmother had always been so gentle, so quiet, but now her grip was firm, her glare was piercing. Her voice trembling, she spoke:

“I know where you were. You might not have known, but I do.”

The Boy opened his mouth but nothing came out. He wasn’t trying to go anywhere, he had just gone out for an adventure.

“You must promise me to never go near there again.”

“Go near where grandm—”

“*Promise me.*” his grandmother said firmly.

The Boy shook his head and said he understood. His grandmother let go of his wrist. She was still staring right at him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Let me tell you a story. Long ago, in this town, there was a—” she looked down at the floor for a second.

“There was a girl. This girl was very curious, and loved to explore. But she was too curious, and went to an area she was not supposed to go to. The townspeople had forbidden it, but she had ignored them. She made her way on the forbidden path, which led to a beach. This Beach is not like the other beaches near town. It has black sand, and strange shells. The girl took the shells home with her.”

The Boy’s grandmother shook her head.

“The next day, the ocean rose to take back what was stolen from it. For what lies on that beach is meant to stay on that beach. The town was flooded, and the girl’s family was swept away.” She grasped his tiny arm tighter, and leaned in.

“Everyone was swept away.”

The Boy shivered.

“When the girl returned the shells to the ocean, the water went back from whence it came.”

The Boy’s grandmother loosened her grip.

“Promise me that you will never set foot on that beach.”

The Boy promised.

The Boy was sent to his room after the story was over. When he snuck out to use the bathroom, he overheard his parents speaking to his grandmother.

"He's a curious boy nana, he had no idea where he was going." It was the voice of his father.

"There are some things one shouldn't be curious about." his grandmother responded.

"That story should keep him from wandering off again. Thanks ma." His mother was speaking.

"That was *no* story—"

"It was a hurricane ma, it just happened naturally—"

"Don't tell me what happened, you weren't there!"

The Boy went back to bed, afraid that his parents would find out he was listening. He had nightmares that night.

The tale had frightened the Boy much as a child, but he was nearly a teenager now. The story was a tall tale to scare children, and nothing more, the boy told himself. The ocean itself, coming to take back a couple of shells? No, the idea was stupid, the Boy told himself. There was no way some shells could be worth that much. The boy glanced at the conch shell. *Except for this one*, he thought. Once again, he considered going back.

No, too much effort, he thought, it was getting late, and he had to get home. So he continued forward, all the while convincing himself that the warnings his grandmother had told him were fake. After several dozen minutes of walking on the main road, the Boy found himself at the mouth of his town, entering the town square. His home was just a fifteen minute walk from the main part of town. The Beach wasn't featured on any maps, and this was as true two hundred years ago during the town's founding as it was today. Only his grandmother and the book seemed to know about it; with his grandmother telling him to never set foot there, while the book told him exactly how to get there. For some reason, it was forbidden to step foot on, and this was true during the time when his grandmother was a little girl, a long, long time ago. But why was his grandmother the only one to know about the Beach? What had happened to everyone else who had known? She might be the only one left, he thought. The only one old enough to remember. The only one still alive.

With that in mind, the Boy began to drag the soles of his shoes onto the grassy soil, to cleanse it of any specs of black sand. He didn't want to arouse suspicion, after all, and he certainly didn't want to upset his Grandmother. After making sure no trace of the beach was left on his shoes, he began to make his way towards his house.

Upon reaching the front door, the Boy took his keys out of his pocket with the hand he wasn't holding the shell in. He was holding the shell tight, it would be an absolute tragedy to drop it right here, he thought. As the keys jangled on their way into the keyhole, the Boy felt a pair of eyes watching him from behind. He craned his neck behind him to see an old man staring at him from several feet away. The man was on his front porch, hands on his hips. He was looking right at the boy, his mouth slightly agape and eyes aimed straight at the shell brimming in his hands. When the Boy looked at the old man's eyes, the old man picked up his gaze to return it to the boy's. The boy clutched the shell tighter. *Did He know?*

The man's gaze seemed to be of disappointment, and it felt as if it were iron-hot. As their eyes met, the Boy froze. For the final time, the Boy considered bringing the shell back. Maybe the man knew that he had taken other shells too, not just the one cradled in his arms he was now trying to hide. Maybe the old man would yell at him, on his own front porch no less. The thought of any kind of public humiliation made the Boy shudder. Pressing the shell tighter to his chest, he tried as best he could to hide it from the man's view, though it was probably too late for that. He closed his eyes in anticipation of the reprimand. But it never came.

What seemed like an eternity only ended up being a couple of seconds long. The old man had stopped looking at him and was making his way back inside his house. the Boy sighed. Maybe he had just misconstrued the old man's disapproving stare, and he was simply trying to squint to get a better view. The Boy hoped he didn't see the shell.

The Boy shook his head, and entered his home.

The water level at the beach began to rise.

The Boy practically ran back to his room, slamming the door behind him. No one was home yet, thankfully. He put a handful of the shells into a plastic bag and it was from these shells that he would make the necklace. He poured the rest of the lesser shells into a glass jar,

which he then covered and put on his nightstand. Truly, it didn't matter where he would place those shells. What mattered was where he would place *the* shell.

As much as he wanted to proudly display what he had collected, that would arouse suspicion. His parents would ask questions, his sister would want it for herself, and his grandmother... he didn't want to know how she would react. So he elected to hide the shell.. There was some space atop the small drawer that was inside his closet, so he put it in there. He moved all of his jackets and coats out of the way, so he would have a clear view of it. The Boy sat on his bed and stared at it in awe. It was really unlike anything he had ever seen before, shell or otherwise. He had really lucked out.

It looked too plain just sitting there, so he decided to decorate the space around it. He placed some other lesser shells he had found on the beach in a circle around the shell. He then placed two other conch shells at the sides of the shell. The shell was twice the size of the others, and where they were smooth and circular, the shell was straight and rigid. The Boy covered the shell gently with a sheet, careful not to mess up the special arrangement that had made for it.

Taking the plastic bag with the lesser shells, he began to make a necklace from them. After around an hour, the necklace was finally done. Just as he was finished making the necklace he heard the jangling of keys. His parents were home. He quickly closed the closet door, careful not to slam it. No one in the house could know.

Making sure that the closet door was closed, he walked over to greet his parents. He wouldn't show them the shells yet, that came after he gave the necklace to the flower-vendor's daughter. He would greet them and then head out to her house, which was only a couple minutes away. **(new material)**

As he entered the living room to greet them, the smile that he wore faded. His parents and little siblings had come home, and they had brought his grandmother with them. She was dressed in a black overcoat, her face splotched with cheap makeup. She looked thinner since the last time he saw her, he could see it on her face. Her blue eyes looked tired, as if the blue within was beginning to fade. Those blue eyes looked at him when he came into the room.

"Hi Grandma!" The Boy said, quickly stuffing the necklace in his pocket.

"Hi sweetie." His grandmother responded, smiling faintly.

The Boy walked up to his mother and took her aside. She was holding his baby brother in her arms.

“Why is she here, is everything ok?” The Boy asked. He was both concerned and worried. With her being in the house, she could end up finding out about the shells.

“Your grandmother’s not doing so well honey. We thought it would be good if she rests here for now.” The Boy looked down and understood. His grandmother was very old. He didn’t know exactly how old, but old enough to not be able to walk around by herself. As she made her way across the living room, he could see how much slower she had gotten. His little sister seemed to be unaware of this, and was bouncing off the walls with excitement at the fact that their grandma was going to be living with them.

The Boy excused himself and went back to his room. He made sure his closet was shut, and made sure the smaller shells were hidden. He would give the shells to the flower-vendor’s daughter tomorrow at school. After helping his grandmother to the guest room, he went to bed.

The Boy dreamt of the Beach that night.

The Boy spent most of his classes fidgeting. He had left the Shell at home. A part of him wanted to bring the Shell with him to school, since he was afraid that his parents would find it at home. But this idea wouldn’t work, the Boy thought. The kids at school were nosy, and they would see it, maybe even break it. He couldn’t risk it. Just bringing the necklace was enough. He made sure that the Shell was covered and tucked away in his closet. He always made sure to keep his room as spotless as he could, so his mother had no reason to clean it for him. No reason for her to snoop around. All the smallest shells were also hidden in the closet, so the only thing that the Boy had to worry about was his sister.

On top of this to worry about, the Boy worried about talking to the flower-vendor’s daughter. Necklace in his hands, they trembled as he worked up the courage to go up to her. It was lunch time now, and all he wanted to do was to go up to the table where she was sitting and give it to her. But her friends were around her, so he couldn’t. He tried not to look in the general direction for now. His attention was turned skyward, where there was a huge flock of birds flying above his head. The birds had been flocking together since the morning, and seemed to be

going somewhere, but he wasn't sure where. He didn't have a book on birds on him at the moment. He only had the Book, which was tucked safely away in his bag. He wouldn't dare take it out now.

He nearly jumped when he felt a hard pat on his back. It was one of his classmates, who was with a friend. They had come up to the Boy's table, who was sitting alone. He normally tried to eat at the school library, but on some days it was occupied by other classes, so he had no choice but to eat in the mess hall.

"Whatcha got there?" the other boy asked.

The Boy squeezed his palms, trying his best to hide the necklace.

"Um— nothing." he responded, not making eye contact. He looked at where his crush was sitting. They were giggling over something.

"Oh come on, you've got something! Show us!" the other boy's friend responded. These boys were not the Boy's friends. For some reason they insisted on bothering him at lunch time or when he was reading. He wasn't sure if they were bullying him or not.

"Even if I did have something, I wouldn't have to show you." The Boy responded.

"Do you plan on giving whatever you've got there to a special someone?"

The Boy froze up and blushed.

"That's a yes."

"That's... that's none of your business."

"Is that what you've been working on all this time? Is that why you're in the library so much? Because you've been secretly making a special gift?"

The Boy froze up. They had known he had been going to the library. They had just been wrong about what he had been doing there. Instead of making necklaces he would be reading. And recently, he had been bringing the Book with him. There was no way they could have known about the book, right?

The Boy stopped looking at his crush and back at the flock of birds flying above them.

"What the hell's up with the birds today? Are they migrating or something?" the other boy asked, who put his arm around the Boy's bag. Uncomfortably close. He still had a few shells in his bag. For a second he was tempted to swat away the other boy, but chose not to.

"That's probably it, they're migrating."

"But didn't they just get here a couple weeks ago?"

“Nah, they’re probably just going back from where they came.”

As the two other boys were talking to each other, the Boy didn’t know where to put his attention: on keeping the necklace hidden, on his bag, on his crush or on his classmates. He began to look down at the necklace, which he clutched closer to himself.

“This isn’t the migration season.” the Boy murmured.

“What?” the other boy asked, barely hearing what was just said.

The school bell rang. Lunch was over, and the Boy watched nervously as the flower-vendor’s daughter got up from her table. He wouldn’t get another chance for the rest of the day.

“Birds don’t migrate away at this time of year. Bye.” The Boy said as he grabbed his bag and quickly made his way to the end of the mess hall. If he would have looked back he would have seen the confused faces of the other boys.

He took a deep breath and walked up to the flower-vendor’s daughter, making sure to do so while her friends were busy throwing out their food.

As soon as he had gotten back home he made straight for his room, closed the door and held the Shell as he lay in his bed. He had enough excitement for one day. Holding the Shell was comforting, and he wanted to hold it all day.

The meeting with the flower-vendor’s daughter had gone better than expected. He asked her if he could see her after school, saying he had something to give her. She smiled at him, and agreed. Such a cute smile too. After school they met near the back of the school. The Boy was practically trembling when he presented her the necklace, but she didn’t seem to mind. He offered her the necklace and asked her if she wanted to go on a date. After giggling, she agreed, which nearly made the boy’s heart stop. Everything had gone perfect. The only thing that had made the boy nervous was the flower-vendor’s daughter’s reaction to the necklace itself. When she laid her eyes upon it, her eyes widened, and she looked at it for a while. She then looked back at the Boy and smiled. For a brief moment, it looked like she was hesitant. For a brief moment, a part of the Boy was afraid. Maybe she recognized where it was from. That part of him wanted to snatch the necklace from her hands and run away as fast as he could. But no, he was the only one who knew.

The flower-vendor's daughter put the necklace on, which complimented her white long dress she always loved to wear. He imagined her wearing the necklace to their first date, and the thought of it made him jittery, and it was all he could think of on the way home. He could picture their first date: a candle-lit picnic by a beach during the sunset. But this beach wouldn't be the Beach. He could be the only one that knew it still existed.

The Boy reluctantly put the Shell back in his closet, in case of the event that he would fall asleep holding it and be discovered by some member of his family. He then closed his eyes and took a nap.

What was supposed to be a quick nap ended up being a deep sleep, and during that sleep the Boy dreamt.

He was on the Beach again, but this time there were no shells in sight. Not even his conch shell was present. It was just him, the black sand, and the muted movements of the waves across the shore. The water looked almost black, having a deep-blue hue to it. The sun was setting. In the middle of his line of sight was the flower-vendor's daughter. She was wearing her white dress, and had the necklace on. Her golden hair was eclipsing the setting sun, with the dwindling light making the shells on her neck shine. It was beautiful. The Boy walked closer, but stopped once he saw that she was in the water. Her feet were submerged in the water, and her hands were behind her back. The sun was in his eyes, and he could barely see a smile escaping from the sunset, her gentle eyes looking at him. The water scared him. He moved closer in, to get her onto land, but it seemed for every step he took forward, she seemed to move two steps back.

Something came out from under the water. The Boy began to breathe heavily, because whatever it was looked nothing like he had ever seen before. It was too thin to be a tentacle, but it moved organically, almost like the body of a snake. It wrapped itself around her neck, and began to choke her. Blood began to seep out from under where it was choking her, yet she still looked at the boy. She was still smiling. Her face began to turn a sick shade of blue, and blood began to seep from her eyes. The Boy tried to run, but he couldn't reach her in time.

The Boy woke up sweating. Taking a deep breath, he turned to see his sister opening his closet.

The Boy sprang out of bed and pushed his little sister aside. She had almost grabbed the sheet. His eyes still blurry from his sleep, he slammed the closet door in her face.

“Hey! My teddy was—”

“How many times have I told you not to go in my room without asking?”

“You were sleeping, so I thought—”

“No. You thought wrong. You don’t go in this closet when I’m here.”

He grabbed his sister by the wrist.

“You don’t go in here at all! You understand me?”

“But my teddy might be in there.”

“Why would your bear be in my room?” the boy demanded.

“Because sometimes I put things in your closet, my room is too small—”

The Boy let go and looked at the closet. He thought of the shell. Maybe she thought that he was hiding her teddy bear under the sheet, like some practical joke or something. The Boy punched the closet door.

“Don’t go in my room without asking me? Do you understand me?”

“...Yeah,” his little sister responded. She had begun to cry.

Part of the Boy wanted to hug her, the other part wanted to throw her out of his room.

“Don’t you dare tell Dad about this, ok?” He said, practically shooing her out of the room. He slammed the door and locked it. He opened the closet door and uncovered the shell. He stared at it while he sat on his bed, panting.

It was quiet at the dinner table that night. After dinner, when the Boy was taking out the garbage, he saw his grandmother sitting outside on the front porch. It was a cloudy night, and she was watching the last of the birds. For a second, it looked like her leg was trembling. They exchanged glances, and she smiled at him. The Boy made his way back to his room. No one could know about the Shell. Or the Book. Yet it felt that with each passing day it was harder and harder for the Boy to keep it all a secret.

The Boy did not dream that night.

It was the morning. The Boy had awoken to the sound of screams. He heard crying, which was coming from his baby brother's room. He couldn't tell where the screams were coming from. He tried to take a deep breath but coughed out water instead. His entire room had been submerged. His mother called out his name and helped him to leave his room. She was holding her infant son in one arm, and guiding the other son with her other. The Boy asked his mother where his sister was, and she replied that she was with their father. She didn't know where grandma was.

After getting to higher ground, the Boy had seen what had happened. There had been a flood. The old man's house was completely demolished, and it seemed that the rest of the town was under water. Amidst all the chaos, the boy thought only of the Shell. He had to make sure it was safe. But before he could make his way back inside, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. It was a long white dress.

Despite his parents yelling at him, he swam over to get a closer view. It was the body of a young girl. Her skin was fair, and her skin was very delicate. The Boy put his hand in his mouth and nearly bit his fingers off. He could recognize that dress anywhere. It was the dress that he had seen so often at school, the dress he had sometimes seen on the street, the dress he had seen in his dreams. She had on the same shoes, the same dress, except there were no traces of her auburn hair. The Boy screamed once he laid his eyes upon what was left of the flower-vendor's daughter.

End of Part I.