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## *Ants*

The last passenger, an old man in a straw hat, was making his way along the reef toward the boat. He stopped and bent down, feet amputated by the water, the canvas bag on his shoulder skimming the ocean. Three times since he had quit the beach, he slipped his hand into the water but only once had Myra seen him find something. He stood up and continued to wade, calf-deep, his face cast down. He didn't seem in a hurry, though the islander manning the boat had waved at him twice and was now standing astride the bow, chewing his beetle nut impatiently and spitting the red juice over the side. By the time the trails floated past Myra, they had bloomed into hibiscus flowers against the turquoise field of water.

A bench down, Myra's mother, Iris, was talking to the Australian couple about the things adults discuss when they meet in a foreign place and are marooned together in a boat. The Australian man wasn't much for pig but he enjoyed last night's hog roast. His wife liked the breakfast buffet for the fresh papaya. Though she thought the spa might not be hygienic, she tried not to think about it because the coconut-milk facials were so nice. She and her husband came to the islands each winter, she told Iris, she to plunk on the beach and he to play golf and tennis. They

had been all over the Pacific and felt that this was the most beautiful country and the natives the friendliest, always smiling as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"Aren't you lucky," she said to Myra. "To go so far at thirteen."

"Dad needs help with his article," she said, but Gray didn't look up. A stretch of orange cushions away, he was writing in the notebook he had opened when they boarded. With his face coated in a chalky layer of sunscreen, he resembled one of the African tribesmen he had written about once, who painted their skin with mud to fend off evil spirits.

The islander dropped off the side to help the old man up the ladder. After sitting down next to Myra, he sandwiched the bag between his ankles.

"We saw you out there this morning," Iris said. "We thought we were the only people up at six."

"The earlier, the better," the old man said. "By noon, the tide starts to stir things up."

The Australian woman raised her voice over the snarl of the boat's motor. "Six a.m. God forbid." She had the kind of face that you might imagine behind the counter of a bakery, and a marbling of varicose veins on her thighs. Her husband's mirrored sunglasses flashed each time he turned his head.

"Gray wanted to write about the sunrise," Iris said. "The sun doesn't ever sleep in."

The boat chopped a path through the water. When the Australian man lit a cigarette, Iris said, "Don't tempt me. I quit last year." She cocked her face to the sun. Her skin glowed around her black bikini top.

"If not here, where?" the Australian man said.

"Don't pretend you're an old hand," his wife said. "He only smokes when we're away," she told Iris.

Myra checked the horizon for the island where they were to snorkel but nothing broke the blue plane of sky and water. She pulled her T-shirt over her knees and down her legs. Her bones pressed into her skin as if trying to escape; her body was all angles with new fleshy places like clumps of clay pressed in as an afterthought. In the bag between the old man's ankles, something was moving. She could hear clicking, under the putter of the motor. A hump rose like a muscle under the canvas, then disappeared.

"You like shells?"

Myra looked at the old man. He squinted, as if studying her through a microscope.

"I guess so. I used to collect them when I was little. We rented a house on Cape Cod in the summers. Mom and I dug for clams."

The old man shook his head. "Then you haven't seen anything. American clams are little bastards. You should go to Mexico. The Venus Mortoni. That's a shell with a soul." He reached down for the bag. "Look what I found this morning."

The shell he gave her was full and heavy as a small cantaloupe, the outside white with calcification, the inside a smooth and glistening pink. He dug a bent finger into the slit where the two sides of the shell came together. "The mollusk's got its operculum closed. It's hiding from us." He wiped his finger on the leg of his shorts.

"It's beautiful," Myra said. Light simmered on the surface of the shell. She felt that her face must be glowing, but when she looked up, Gray was still writing and Iris was showing the Australian woman how the sarong she'd bought in the resort gift shop could be reversed to show palm trees rather than angel fish.

"They don't get much rarer than that," the old man said. "I've been coming to the islands twice as long as you've been alive. This is the first one I've found."

Myra could feel his breath on her face. She had seen him out on the reef that morning as she stood on the cliff that fronted the resort and watched the sun quiver on the horizon. Gray was taking pictures as Iris argued with him about what they were to do that afternoon. He wanted to return to the volcano rather than going on the snorkeling trip that Iris had booked. Myra walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the reef. There was nothing holding her back just as there had been nothing the day before as she stood in a gray snowstorm of ash and stared down the scarlet throat of the volcano. She imagined taking the three or four necessary steps, what her mother's scream would sound like, the feel of her father's fingers in the flesh of her arms.

She edged forward a step and saw the old man just as he reached into a hole in the coral and pulled out something large and pale, what, she now realized had been the shell she was holding. She wanted to ask its name, but the shell was being lifted away by a thick hand with hair growing up the wrists, Gray's hand.

"The Mouth of the Ocean," he said, sitting down next to Myra. He had left the notebook on the bench. The pages fluttered with the breeze cast by the boat.

"It does look like a mouth," Iris said.

"With collagen shots to the lips," the Australian man added, and Iris laughed.

"It's one of the oldest legends from these islands," Gray said. The Australian woman asked him to go on and he did, raising his voice when the boat crashed into a wave or when the islander gunned the engine. A fisherman from a nearby island was hunting for eel when a group of young men came upon him and, having stolen his catch, slit his throat then tossed his body into the ocean. That night, and the next, the fisherman's wife waited on the reef for her husband. When his empty canoe appeared, she draped her neck with thirteen shell necklaces, one for each year that she and her husband had lived together. Each morning, she walked to the beach and threw a necklace into the water. The morning of the twelfth day, as she was walking back to the village she saw a beautiful shell washed up on the shore and took it back to her hut. That night, she woke to the sound of her husband's voice, which, from the caverns of the shell, told her how

he had died. The next day, the woman took her husband's club and went in his canoe to the village of his murderers. There, she told the chief that she had finished her time of mourning and needed a husband. The chief gathered the young men of the village and sent them to a hut to see the woman and decide which of them wanted her. When the last man had walked through the doorway, the woman pulled her husband's club from under her skirt. She felled the men one by one, broke their heads open, ground their bones to ash. With each blow of the club, she grew darker and bigger until she towered in the sky, awash in rivers of blood.

"The volcano," the Australian woman said. "How charming."

Gray had passed the shell to Iris as he spoke and it had made its way from one set of hands to another, along the boat. But when the Australian man put it to his mouth and pretended that it was a trumpet, the old man asked for it back.

The island was shaggy with palms and ringed by a flesh-colored beach. Iris said that this was what she had been hoping for, not the "rocky mess" at the foot of the resort. The motor sputtered and died. The islander threw out the anchor and they waded through the knee-deep water.

"There is something you will want to see," the islander said to Gray. A totem pole, not far from where the land curved out of sight, standing near an abandoned village. The totem had kept away sharks and stingrays when the men went out to fish.



"I hope it still works," Iris said. She had dumped the books and towels out of the swimming bag onto the sand. Nearby, the Australian woman was smearing sunscreen on her husband's shoulders. The others had stripped down to their suits, but she had not changed out of the linen tunic that fell to the tops of her knees.

"The totem's too tall to fit in there," the islander said as Gray pulled his camera from his backpack.

Gray started to explain the workings of the lens but the islander smiled. "I know about cameras. One gentleman left me his. I took pictures of the volcano and now it is trapped inside the box waiting to be freed."

"I'm going to quote him in a sidebar," Gray said when the islander had walked away.

"I think he was joking," Myra said.

"They live by their stories," Gray said. "What else do they have? Fifty years ago, they believed they were descended from gods. Now they spend their time mixing rum punches and giving massages." He hung the camera around his neck. "You can stay if you want," he told Myra. "We shouldn't be long."

"I'm not going," Iris said from the sand, where she was stretched out on a towel. A few feet away, the Australian couple was spreading out a blanket, but Myra could tell that they were listening by the slowness of their movements and the concentration on their faces.

"I'll go with you, Dad," she said.

"No you won't," Iris said. "You haven't gone swimming once since we arrived. You're white as

a ghost. You'll go back to school and everyone will think you vacationed in Antarctica."

"I said she could stay," Gray said. "There are plenty of adults."

Iris rolled onto her side. "Go on. We'll come get you if you don't show up. We'll save you from the cannibals."

"Cannibals?" Gray's voiced cracked. "Do you listen to anything I say?"

He stood over Iris, her face in his shadow. When she didn't look up, he turned around, his heels spitting sand. Myra watched him for a moment, then sat down next to Iris.

"We should have gone too."

"He's all right," Iris said. She looked over at the Australian couple. "Gray had a heart attack last year. Before that, he was gone all the time, sleeping in Amazonian tree huts, camping out with the Zulus. But now he can't be alone. We've been here for a week and I haven't even taken my tennis racket out of its case. It's the same thing back home. I go to the grocery store; he goes to the grocery store. I go to the bank. He goes to the bank." She looked out at Gray. "It's like having a child again. You have to shoo them away so they'll learn to walk."

"I had something too," the Australian woman said. "A few years ago. I spent six months thinking I wouldn't be around for the next Christmas."

Her husband put his hand on her back. "She was a real fighter."

"I said if I made it we would come here once a year," she said. She looked over at Myra. "Terrible things can be blessings in disguise. Give your fa-



ther a little more time.”

Myra smiled back, but she felt a shudder of irritation pass through her body. She had seen Gray’s heart stop, and she could not forget, just as she would never forget the fetal pig her class had dissected that fall: its purple blister of a liver, the saddle-like lungs. She understood now why the Australian woman held herself that way, with her knees up to her chest, why she was not wearing a bathing suit like the rest of them. She imagined that she could see, through the thin material of the tunic, two brown scars like those on Frankenstein’s head cutting down the woman’s ribs.

The air sharpened with the smell of the heating coals from the grill that the islander had taken from the boat. The old man was farther down the beach. Behind him, the sky stretched like a sheet of blue rubber pulled tight by the clouds, light on top, dark at the bottom.

“If we’re breathing that, we might as well,” Iris said when the Australian man held up his pack of cigarettes. His wife had fallen asleep on her towel; the cover of her book on her eyes and nose. The Australian man lit a cigarette and gave it to Iris. As he leaned toward her, his foot shifted in the sand, closer to hers.

Myra stood and picked up her snorkeling mask. Gray had given her the mask and a set of fins for her birthday, just after he announced that all three of them would be going to the Pacific that winter. A family vacation, he had called it, pronouncing the words as if they were in a foreign language.

“I’m going in,” she said. She walked out of

the tobacco smell, into the smell of roasting flesh from the barbeque. Iris called her name. Her eyes stung and she blinked hard until the sky and the ocean came back into focus. The old man had opened his bag on the sand, just above the line of the water, and was sorting through the shells. When one of them started to trundle away, he grabbed it and put it on its back in the pile. Inside the dark slit, legs and claws wiggled and churned.

“How long do you have to wait until they leave?” Myra asked. She snapped on a fin.

The old man laughed. He looked up the beach, then back at her. “Come by my hut later. It’s the one next to the tennis courts. I’ll show you.”

“Maybe,” Myra said. She plunged her foot into the ocean, forcing the fins through the thick water until she was immersed to her waist and the warmth was woven through with cold. She pulled the mask over her eyes. Through the cloudy plastic, Iris and the Australian man jolted toward her in their fins and face masks, their snorkeling tubes high on their heads like antennae. She took a deep breath of rubber-flavored air and went under. The ocean floor was studded with black urchins and green bouquets of seaweed. A school of angelfish parted around her outstretched arm, which looked as if it were made of plastic, a grotesque, unnatural thing. As she kicked her way out, she saw Gray sprawled beneath the totem pole, with his mouth open. The way he had looked when he fell off his chair at dinner, his lips pushed forward like a fish mouth seeking air. His eyes, unblinking, frozen, more

white than pupil. She kicked harder against the water that was growing colder and greener, as below, the ocean floor slipped away. A wave crashed over her back, and water poured into the snorkel. She lifted her head and spat white foamy traces onto the glassy surface. Iris and the Australian man were close behind, their bare backs humped toward the sky.

Under the surface again, a cloud of butterfly fish scattered in a fluorescent blur. Myra followed them for a few strokes, before letting her body go slack. She opened her arms as if she were flying, then turned toward the beach. Iris and the Australian man floated over a gray turban of coral. He was pointing at something, a cluster of anemones, Myra saw as she drew closer, flame-orange and pink, their tentacles fluttering as if in a breeze. As the Australian man watched from above, Iris slipped deeper and swirled her index finger along the tentacles. She and the Australian man hung together in the nothingness of water. Myra opened her mouth and pushed out the snorkel with her tongue. The sound of her own screaming came at her through the thud of the waves and the thickness of water. She kicked toward Iris then up to the surface.

"Shark." She spit out the word. Above the jerking waves, Iris grabbed her arm. The Australian man had heard and was heading for the shore. Myra and Iris swam side-by-side.

The urchins appeared, then the seaweed. A pair of arms lifted her from the water and she saw the islander's legs and chest. He carried her like a baby, out of the foam. He set her down and, as

she caught her breath, undid the seal on her mask with his thumbs. The Australian man kneeled in the sand. His face was flushed, and he had lost a contact lens. One of his eyes squinted. His wife sat next to him, looking in the mask for the lens.

"You're OK," the islander said. "Sharks don't come in that close."

Iris had staggered up to them. "She knows what she saw," she said.

The islander looked at her for a moment. "I'm sure she saw something."

Iris's breathing had calmed and she was adjusting her swimsuit, which had ridden up the curve of her breasts. The mask had left red welts across her forehead and cheeks.

"You're a brave girl," the Australian woman said to Myra. "Good thing you were out there with them." She held up her finger. The lens glinted on the tip. "I told you I would find it," she told her husband.

The old man wasn't back from combing the beach, but the rest of them ate the grilled chicken and breadfruit and wedges of pineapple and mango. Myra sat next to Gray, who had returned to the beach from the totem pole and told Myra and Iris how it stood up to the fronds of the nearest coconut tree, a male figure, nose worn flat by the wind, until Iris interrupted him by saying, "aren't you interested in the fun we had while you were gone?"

As they ate lunch, Gray would reach out now and then and run his hand down the back of Myra's head as Iris and the Australian man told him

about the shark.

"I should have been here," Gray said.

"It's OK," Myra said. "It's not like there's anything you could have done."

"It was probably a leopard shark," he said. "It wouldn't have hurt you."

"Still," Iris said. "My heart almost stopped when I saw the fin behind Myra. Like something out of a movie but you're in it."

"I might not have seen it," the Australian man said. "But I felt it bump against my leg and that thing was not little."

"You come to a place like this," his wife said. "And you think nothing bad can happen."

When they'd finished eating, the Australian man took the folding chairs and followed his wife to the boat as Myra and Gray collected their books and towels. Iris was rinsing the sand off their snorkeling gear at the edge of the water.

"You and your mom had a real scare out there," Gray said. He swung the beach bag over his shoulder. "Why don't you do something fun this afternoon."

"I want to stay with you," Myra said. Gray didn't seem to have heard. As they walked to the boat, he talked about his article, how he was sure the editor would like it, how he might make the cover of the magazine with a photograph of the totem pole. His voice was purged of the note of pleading it had taken on in recent months.

Ahead, Iris was climbing up the boat ladder. The Australian man reached down to help her as his wife looked on. Myra's chest crumpled, then filled with the ocean air. "Mom wants to

play tennis. While you were gone she said that she hadn't even been able to unpack her racket."

"Then why don't you two have a game this afternoon? I'm going back to the volcano but I'll be there for dinner."

"I don't play." Myra pointed at the boat. "But he does. You should ask him."

She listened to the ocean rubbing against the beach, drawing back into itself grains of sand. The shark rose again, this time into the air, made of sand and seaweed, circling her mother and the Australian man. Gray put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a soft squeeze.

The old man's bungalow was easy to find, the front nestled in plumeria and breadfruit trees, just off the path that led to the dining room. Myra walked around the back, where the trees gave way to tight grass that rolled into the tennis courts.

The old man kneeled on the porch. He was laying out shells, pale pink, white, blue, gold and brown, all turned onto their backs. He stood up as Myra climbed the steps. He had taken off his hat.

"You see," he said. "They do the work for me."

Myra bent down to look into a shell. The ants each had bits of meat on their backs. They dropped off the side of the porch into the grass.

The old man wiped his hands on a white towel that hung on the railing and folded it over his shoulder.

"Can I hold it again?" Myra asked. She pointed at the Mouth of the Ocean, which sat alone



at the top of the stairs, ants streaming from each end.

"It's not done yet."

"I don't care."

She held out her hands. The old man gave her the shell. The ants spilled over the sides and onto her arm. The old man had not moved his hand away. Slowly, then faster he ran his pinkie finger along the edge of Myra's thumb. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Over his shoulder, on the lawn that ran between the bungalows, the Australian man was walking toward the tennis courts, carrying a

racket. The ants crept over the shallow of Myra's elbow, up into her armpit. The Australian man stopped by the gate to the courts and leaned his racket against the chain-link fence. He looked over at the porch.

"Let's go inside," the old man said. "I have more I could show you."

Myra smiled at the Australian man. The old man looked over his shoulder. His fingers drew back into a fist. Myra walked to the edge of the porch and raised the shell toward the sky.

"Look," she cried. "Look what he gave me."

