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Shells

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Shells

Esther Joy Yoder

You cracked the door and peered out at me with red, sleepy eyes.

"Oh, did I wake you?" I asked. And then I regretted my decision to ring your doorbell twice. I know better than that. If you want to be bothered you always come on the first ring. But I needed you, so I decided to chance it.

"Yeah, I must have fallen asleep," you croaked. And then you turned and walked back into your apartment. You didn't catch my side ponytail, the bright blue eye shadow, my shirt opened to the fourth button, or the sea-shell necklace dangling to my chest.

I followed you. After all, you hadn't shut the door, just left it cracked. I told myself to go home, to just turn around and walk back down those stairs. But I couldn't bring myself to go back out in the cold night, the sky dark and starless, to make that lonely walk home. So I told myself you were just sleepy, not coherent enough to realize I wanted you.

I told myself this as I shut your door and made the walk down your black hallway. My hands reached out to touch the walls as I made my way to your room. I have traveled from your door to your bed so many times I could run the distance in the darkness, but I approached your bedroom slowly, as if I was a stranger to the place and afraid of tripping over something.

The soft glow of the lamp on your night-stand was not waiting for me. The one I gave you for your birthday so you wouldn't have to use that flourescent overhead light. "Ta da!" I had said while you ripped the bright blue wrapping paper off the box.

You looked at it for a minute, then glanced up with those green eyes of yours, and smiled. "This is very nice," you said.

And I believed you. But when I poked my head in later that night to find you reading, the obnoxious overhead bulb was blaring while the lamps quiet light shone by your bed.

You looked up from your book for a moment and said, "It really goes great in here."

I started giggling.

"What?" you asked. You had that confused look on your face you so often wear.

I flipped off the light switch and came over to your bed.

"What?" you asked again, now smiling along with me.

I crawled on top of you and ran my hands through your hair, feeling the soft waves between my fingers. "Nothing," I smiled, and then leaned over to turn off the lamp.

"Let's leave it on," you whispered, then rolled me over on my side and placed your hand in the small of my back.

As my hands reached out for the wall of your hallway, I remembered; the way you took off my clothes that night, slowly, as if I were a china doll and you would break me; the feel of your unshaven face against my neck; the rise and fall of my breasts against your chest. It had been the first time I knew a word could be felt, not just spoken or read. Completeness.

The picture of you in my mind, your strong jaw in the lamplight that night, is what kept me walking toward your room. It occurred to me walking down an empty, dark hallway toward a sleeping version of you was madness. But I wanted to feel words again, to quiet my brain from simply thinking.

I opened the door of your room and found your bed, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. I crawled across your still lump and lay beside you, my sea shell necklace jangling as I situated myself under your covers. "Are you really asleep already?" I whispered.

I was answered by your even breathing. So I lay there on my back in my outfit, wishing you would roll over and take it off. It seemed heavy all of a sudden. The half-buttoned shirt twisted around my torso, the necklace suddenly choking me. I fingered the tiny shells on it one at a time as I stared at the dark ceiling. The smooth roundness of the little forms somehow comforting my fingers. I closed my eyes and let my mind wander to any place but your bedroom, and my shell of a body lying next to yours.

I thought of a tiny blue bathroom from my childhood. There was a basket on top of the toilet, filled with seashells I loved to pick up and run my fingers over. So cold, so smooth, those shells. I would sit on the toilet and watch my mother apply pink lipstick to her lips and rouge to her cheeks, while I ran the tops of my fingers over the smooth round form in my hand.

"Here, Esther, hold it to your ear like this," she said once. She crouched down so she was at my level and held the shell to my ear. "Can you hear it?" she smiled, her round blue eyes looking into mine, "It's the sound of the ocean."

I said nothing, just sat on that toilet with big eyes and nodded my head hard enough so my pigtailed bobbed, holding the shell to my ear even when she let go of it.

I have always thought that to be a sad sound. Such a hollow one, the sound of the shells longing to go back to the ocean. I lay there in your bedroom's darkness, listening to your even breathing. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the ocean.

Eleven years after hearing it inside that shell, I was finally able to touch it. The first time I saw it, I was alone on the beach. I had risen early, wanting to see it before it filled with people, noise, and beer. I sat on the sand with my legs crossed and my back straight in the early morning light, watching the sun reflect off the water, hearing the lull of the tide lick the beach and flow back out to sea. I was overwhelmed by the vastness stretching out before me, of how small a speck I was on that beach. I realized I would not be able to describe my experience that morning to my still sleeping girlfriends. The emotions the water washed through me were mine and mine alone to keep. So I sat there, losing myself to the rhythm of the tide.

But it was a different kind of lost, a quietness, a stillness of mind. Not the sort that swelled inside me as I lay next to your still form. You were turned away from me, even as I snuggled next to you and lay my head on your shoulder. Your back was to me, and you were turned away. I realized even if it had been daylight, and I had been naked on top of you, rocking back and forth, you would still be turned away.

You don't see me when I stand at your door in these little outfits, and you no longer laugh when I tickle you. You don't leave the lamp on anymore.

I wanted to leave you. To crawl out of your bed and leave the string of shells on your night-stand, to alone face the darkness of the walk home. But I couldn't leave you, I was still hoping you would roll over and quiet that hollow sound inside me. I knew you wouldn't grasp its significance, my necklace, if I left it by your lamp. I decided to wait until morning to go, so I could watch that perplexed expression of yours cross your face when I tell you, "I need to go back to the ocean."

You didn't give me that opportunity. You left the room right after our "good mornings" and gave me the view of your retreating form headed for the shower instead.