

## The Sound of the Ocean

*Trans-loos-sents.* It's a big word that means you can kind of see through something. Like the sun behind thin clouds, or behind thin curtains, like the ones blowing around me now. They dance around my head as I play with a bucket of seashells under the window.

*What if it isn't the sound of the ocean? What if it's something else?*

"Let's go, Jack."

Mommy wants to leave. It has gone badly, somewhere out beyond my reach. Grandpa has stopped talking altogether. Grandma keeps saying words, but they're not really connected to anything else. She keeps starting sentences that don't seem to end, then starts new ones. I try to focus on the shells.

*What if it's something else?*

The day before, a boy, an older boy, crouched over me, instructed me on the ins and outs of the world. "If you put it to your ear, you can hear the ocean," he said. I nodded without looking up and he ran off to find someone more interesting to pass his wisdom to. After he was gone, I walked the beach alone, every now and again putting a shell to my ear only to quickly pull it away.

Mommy is stomping around the condo, looking for her keys. I stick my hand into the bucket, pull out a shell. I run my hand along its edge. Somewhere deep in my brain, in the place near where dreams are made, I know this is important work. It's not the right one, and soon I have shells laid out all across the cold floor for inspection.

"Don't make a mess, Jack. Put all that away." I've got to get the right one, though. It's in here, I know it, somewhere under all the other noises.

"Jack! Right now!" The switch has flipped; I don't have much time. My hand reaches out, grabs something small, chalky-gray. *Spy-rul.*

*What if it isn't the sound of the ocean?*

I hold it up to my ear as I'm yanked out the door. Out of my one naked ear, I hear Grandpa finally speak. He says something about background noise, hard lines, echoes. It's only after the condo's door has slammed shut that I think to turn around.

It's July. It's hot. It's bright as hell. There's a slight incline to the sidewalk; I trudge up the hill, more winded than I should be. Tiny rocks in the concrete catch the sun, glisten in front of me, and I have the momentary sensation that I am walking a beach next to the rumbling, honking ocean of the street.

I lick the brine from my upper lip, feel the spreading wetness across my back, inside my thighs, and the accompanying shame, as if being human were a fetish in itself. My hair, thin on top, retreating in deference to the unstoppable surge of my forehead, offers little shade from the ball of inferno light years above; neither do the downtown buildings, for the sun's hard, unforgiving angle at noon.

Equally miserable bodies pass by me, and there is nowhere for any of us to hide. A kid smoking a cigarette stands on the corner, the scent enticing and repulsive. It's been years.

I wait for the light to change, then cross with the kid. He continues down E Street; I stop to cross again, to the right, where the drugstore is. I watch him bouncing off into the distance, still young, grooving to a song I can't hear. I can't tell if his indifference is real or practiced; I imagine it doesn't matter.

I go into the store, ask for a pack of Marlboro Lights; the dark woman behind the counter looks at me quizzically. "Marlboro Gold?" she asks. I squint at the pack she holds up—I guess they've changed the name in the years since I quit. It looks the closest to what I used to smoke. "Is that the same as Lights?" I ask.

“You can’t say ‘Lights,’ she says thickly, the scanner beeping. “It makes people think they are not so bad for them.”

“Whatever,” I say, swiping my credit card, and then force a smile to take the edge off the word. Without raising her eyes, the small woman slides a pack of matches across the counter, hands me the cigarettes. I feel bad and thank her too loudly.

Outside, my heart pounds off the rails as I unwrap the plastic, pull the little piece of foil from the box. My hands shake slightly, both in anticipation and with the regret of a battle lost. More than lost: rendered pointless, unnecessary, in context. Nobody yet knows all the locks I’m crashing through, all the canals opened; nobody cares. I’m just a fat guy on the sidewalk, lighting a cigarette.

I try to hold back a cough. The nicotine immediately enters my bloodstream, fires synapses to the brain, creates a purgatory of delight and nausea. I struggle to look normal, take another drag. My shoulders hunch. I walk, the city sidewalk now sloping down, the National Gallery strangely ominous before me.

I take an empty bench facing the domed building, take in the sun. My mouth is dry, craves what is not good for it, something sugary. I suck on the cigarette, watch the few straggling clouds cross the sky. Silently, I assert that I will never set foot in my office again. I light another cigarette with the embers of the last. It’s like riding a bicycle.

I take the subway at mid-day. It’s not packed like rush hour, but still crowded. Doors beep open; doors beep closed. I’m tired and take the first available seat, next to a woman who is almost pretty. We don’t look at each other. I run my hand over my pocket, over the small, gray shell. I leave it there, holstered. The train rattles.

More people get off than get on; the herd thins, becomes paler. We travel together, alone. We all look alike, and perhaps all are, but I feel no connection. The almost-pretty woman gets off at the zoo, her skirt brushes my arm as I let her pass. She smells like cheap soap. I hate myself both for knowing what cheap soap smells like, and for being able to look down on it. I exist in two worlds, belonging to neither.

I continue on to the western, wealthy edge of the city, exit the train, take the escalator back to the surface. The air is different here. The houses begin to separate themselves, grow yards around themselves; they keep the same secrets, only better. I walk the hushed streets, the people who live here either out earning their fortunes or miserably, privately, drinking them away. I turn north for a block, then west, past the park. A Hispanic woman pushes a toddler in an oversized stroller, while another little blond girl trails behind, playing with some sort of mechanical butterfly. For a moment, I consider offering her the shell to listen to, wondering if she might hear the same things I do. The babysitter notices me watching too closely, shepherds the girl, picks up speed. I stifle the urge to apologize, to protest; none of it matters.

I come to the house, unchanged, eternal in my mind: an old Tudor, with dark trellises over the frame, ivy fingers tracing its weathered skin. The long driveway snakes behind the house, to where the stand-alone garage keeps watch like an outpost. The lawn is meticulous, flowers sparse, how she has always preferred it. There are no seasons within the confines of this yard; a lot of money is spent to pretend winter never comes.

I'm in no rush; I know she isn't here, off traveling with some other old widow with money. I lurk outside the house, gaze in the windows, consider breaking in for one last look, think better of it. I realize I'm stalling. "Get on with it," I mutter to myself.

Bird-chest, scrawny arms, flannel pajama pants; my bangs fall down over my eyes. He says he doesn't like it that way, that it makes me look like a sissy. I know he could make me cut it, but he allows me my little victory, our little compromise. I get up from my spot in the corner, cross the hall to the bathroom only I use, rinse out my mouth again. I swish the wash around for a full minute, two, spit it out.

It's not enough. I pour another lid-full, swish again, hide in its burn. I swallow the wash, feel it scratch and scramble down my throat, and immediately begin to gag. I bend over the toilet, try to make myself vomit. Nothing happens. I just crouch over the water, choking, drooling, tears beading around the edges of my eyes. I hear footsteps approaching on the hardwood floor outside; they pause just beyond the door. I hold my breath, waiting for the knock. The footsteps start again, fading away. Hate tastes like peppermint, even in my nostrils.

I wait an extra minute, just to be sure, before I turn out the light, walk quickly across the hall; running would make too much noise. I don't want to make any more noise. I close the door behind me.

The shadows are thick, textured, as if sewn from a cloth heavier than the mere absence of light. It's partly the old wood furniture, partly the faded robin's egg blue of the walls. The doctor had two sons from a previous marriage; this used to be their room.

I wince at the creaking when I crawl into bed, reach underneath the frame. For a moment, my heart stops as my hand runs across the floor, finding nothing but dust, thinking he found it, took it. Frantically, I finally smack against its hard surface. The twinge is sweet relief. I grab the shell from the place under the bed where it hides, recording everything.

The rusted old padlock was easy enough to break, and I knew she'd never dole out the money for an alarm on this old garage; the '55 Bel Air was the doctor's baby, not hers. I fumble about by the light of the doorway, inspect the dusty shelves for a flashlight, find memories instead. I shudder, swallowing a large gulp of dank air, afraid of drowning standing up. I want nothing but to run out of here, though I came with the intent never to leave.

I give up on the flashlight, and start looking for the cigar box. It's right where he left it, on the day he died and all the others, second shelf from the top, tucked into the back right corner. I open it and I can smell him. I can feel the sweat instantly bead under my arms, my flabby arms. I can smell myself. I can smell myself in front of him. My hands shake; the box falls. The sound of the keys hitting the concrete floor unleashes a parade of obscenities from my cracked lips, like a plug is pulled from some deep, inky drain. I kick the metal shelves, make a sort of animal whine. Suddenly, the poetic justice seems unimportant, as does the impotent revenge that I know may very well go unnoticed, a mere tremor under a septuagenarian roller coaster of world-traveling and petty social charades. At least I won't be around to see that my loss had already been accounted for long ago.

I remember I have matches. And cigarettes. I light one with the other in a trembling hand, try to calm myself for what comes next.

Afterwards, I get down on the ground, and use a match to find the keys. I open the Bel Air's door; the trapped air hits my face. The doctor's smell is in there, too, but fainter, overpowered by something stronger, more medicinal. He kept this thing impeccable; he could have transplanted a kidney in the back seat, it was so pristine.

I climb behind the wheel, light another cigarette. I pull the shell from my pocket, set it beside me on the bucket seat. I smoke another, and another, until it starts to hurt. My eyes burn. My throat is raw. I put the shell to my ear. Science says the sound you hear is the amplification of the sounds around you, distorted and focused into your ear canal; I know better. It is deadly silent in this abandoned garage and I know better. I listen.

I have no idea how long I've been weeping when I realize that I am. It comes over me in long, rolling waves, starting deep behind my stomach, pushing upward, shaking my chest in monstrous, tidal quakes. Everything expands and contracts: the universe as depicted in the front seat of a dead pedophile's favorite old car.

I get out one last time to shut the swinging garage doors tight. I feel my way back to the seat, close the doors and lock them for some reason I can't fathom, except that it feels more right, like the click you hear when you get on an amusement ride, and the tattooed kid secures your safety harness. I crack both front windows, then crack them a little wider. I stare at the key in the ignition, a sword embedded in a stone, thrust in to the hilt. I turn it, and the engine starts right up, a cough that lands on all fours, becomes a purr.

I know only that it should be painless, that I will just grow increasingly groggy, then fall asleep forever. I put my hand on the shell, wait for something to happen. My mind, whether naturally or not, begins to wander.

It alights on a memory from when I was very young, before Mother and I came to live with the doctor. We were staying with my grandparents, who had retired, somewhat unhappily it seemed to me, to a condo on a California beach; it was as if it had been a dream of theirs for so long that, when it was time for them to live it, they couldn't admit to themselves that their dreams had changed.

We stayed with them for weeks or months; the sense of time becomes unfastened over the horizon of memory. I don't know exactly what set it off, but the fighting was abrupt, and intense, as if the resentment had been building for a long time, just beyond my childish perception. To this day, I have no idea what was the tinder and who was the flame, but, historically, I imagine it had something to do with Mother wanting the world to arrive on her terms, and lashing out when it didn't. She painted herself into some corner or other, lied one lie too many, and she needed an out. Enter the doctor.

Enter the sissy.

I remember a boy telling me at some point that you could hear the ocean if you put one up to your ear, and not completely believing him, almost out of habit. I remember thinking, *What if it isn't the sound of the ocean? What if it's something else?* And that day, right before Mother put me in the car and dragged me across the country, I grabbed a shell. A particular, special shell. It seemed different than the rest. I kept it with me all these years, and, all these years, it picked up everything. Every growl. Every

moan. Every smack. Every thrust. Every choked, humiliated sob. Science, it turned out, was right, if only partially: it amplified every sound in the room.

And I would curl up with the shell every night, falling asleep to the white noise of my own pleas to be left alone. To be normal again. To be given back what had been deflated, used. I didn't want to forget. I knew it would be easier to forget. There were already too many lies being passed around; I didn't want to tell the biggest ones.

*What if it isn't the sound of the ocean? What if it's something else?* I can feel myself starting to give in, the edges of my reverie growing blurred, softer. I feel everything start to loosen inside, like ten thousand fingers inside me letting go of the rope, going slack.

I can't get past that moment in a beach condo, though. *What if*, I start to think, and then lose the thought. *What if what? Something about the ocean and the shell, the seashell. Something I can almost hear. What if it isn't the sound of the ocean? What if I'm a little boy in my grandparents' condo that nobody wants to be in and it isn't the fucking sound of the ocean?*

My focus is weak; the shell beside me is throbbing like a telltale heart. My eyes are heavy. I need to get out. Now. I grab the conch, cradle it like a football, try to open the car door. Locked. Pop up the lock, stumble out. I've got ten feet to go. Nine. I won't fall. The garage door comes upon me, and I don't hesitate, lower my shoulder.

I burst out of the garage into the meager half-light of day, screaming into the end of the seashell like a madman, my lungs exploding with air and something like hope.

I hold it up to my ear as I'm yanked out the door. I feel my eyes grow wide. Mommy is pushing me, and Grandpa is yelling something, but I can't really hear; a voice—a man's voice—in the shell is screaming at me, screaming my name, begging me not to go to the doctor. I don't understand most of his

words, but the ones I do understand are like lightning bolts down my back, and I can hear that the man is crying and gasping for air and sounds like he means every word he is saying. He sounds like a guy trying to stop something bad from happening.

I grab the door jam, and Mommy jerks, loses her grip on me. I want to scream something, anything, but no words come out; I am too scared. *Petry-fide*. Mommy's eyes seem to change color right in front of me, and I am so distracted that I don't see the hand slap across my face, knock my head into the doorframe. I drop the shell. My grandparents move toward the door, but she slams it, grabs and pulls me again. Tears build in my eyes, but I don't cry. I pull away again, and run for the shell. As she comes after me, I grab it and stomp ahead of her—she can't pull me if I lead the way. Not sure what else to do, she smacks the back of my head, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to stop me from moving. As we turn the corner, I look back and see Grandma and Grandpa at the door, see the worry in their old faces.

She pushes me into the passenger's seat, then walks around and gets in herself. Maps and cigarette packs and all kinds of knick-knacks flash around as she gets herself settled. She turns to me. "I don't want to hear a goddamn peep out of you, you hear me? Don't move a fucking muscle, either. I could leave you on the side of the road for the vultures if I wanted to, do you hear me?" I hear her.

We screech out of the parking lot. Two quick turns and one longer one and we are on the interstate. She's smoking, muttering to herself, the maps unfolded in her lap as she drives. She says something about finding the first even-numbered interstate and taking it all the way across the country, where so-and-so, some rich doctor she met on the beach, lives. She says he's going to be my new Daddy. I put the shell up to my ear, watching her.

"What are you looking at?" she says, and flicks ash out the window. The voice in the shell is screaming about this doctor. About how he hates sissies, but how I'll be his favorite little sissy, and that it doesn't make any sense, but it doesn't have to because the doctor's the doctor and he does what he wants. The voice says Mommy is supposed to protect me, but she won't. She'll let it happen. Over and over, she'll let it happen. The man in the shell is scared, too, so he tells me where the doctor will touch

me, and where he will make me touch him, and he's so sorry, so very sorry, to say these things but I have to know, and if I don't want to be touched, or touch, and I don't want to be anybody's favorite sissy, the voice tells me what I have to do, screams that it has to be now, *nowgoddammitnow*, and I grab the steering wheel, twist it as far to the left as it will go. Mommy reaches back for it too late; I watch the cigarette fall, burn her leg. She was driving too fast to begin with; the car swerves across the center line, over the guardrail, rolls over twice. Everything floats, like time has stopped, and crashes, like it's started all over again. The car lands on its hood in a ditch.

I hang upside down, strapped into my seat. I was wearing my seatbelt; Mommy was not. Her body is broken over the dashboard, her tan legs up in the air, panties showing. I can kind of see through them, see the hair between her legs. *Trans-loos-sents*. Her head is tilted in a way it shouldn't be. She looks like a doll, with drops of red paint around her mouth. I can't turn away.

Cars around us slam their brakes, their doors. There is shouting; soon there will be sirens, Grandpa holding Grandma, a sad story to tell people. When they eventually pull Mommy's body out, they will find a shattered conch shell beneath her, broken into a hundred pieces. They will have to pull some of them out of her cold back with tweezers.

But for now, there's only me and Mommy staring at each other. And just past us, past the people shouting outside—faint, but I'm sure of it—I can finally hear the sound of the ocean.