

Seashell Bones

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Jenni loved gas station money. She loved that it was soft and torn and smelled like metal; holding it felt like she had captured a dozen people's little purchases. Twenty dollars' worth of lotto tickets. A Snickers bar with almonds. An energy drink the color of mouthwash.

She watched Cory through the crack in the windshield and over the BOGO FOUNTAIN DRINK! sticker on the gas station window and marked his progress. They had waited until the station was empty before Cory had pulled his balaclava on and slipped through the automatic doors, and now he was standing in front of the cashier with his gun in his hands while Jenni sat in the driver's seat, anticipating the familiar drawstring Nike bag in her lap and the smell of worn dollar bills.

Money for a box of chocolate milk with a fragile plastic straw taped to the side. Money for a blue Bic lighter with a red thumb pedal. She would use it to build the path away from their sagging apartment and her collection of scraped-together jobs and on to somewhere better. Somewhere on the beach.

When the gun fired, Jenni was startled but not surprised. Sometimes Cory had to shoot to prove he was real. The gun, almost more than anything, was part of the plan. When the automatic doors parted to let him reel out into the parking lot, turning on one heel like a dancer, Jenni wondered why. The day was overcast and the clouds felt close, and Jenni thought it made Cory look blurry and strange as he jerked himself up from the ground and came to the car. He was hopping and stumbling, and Jenni didn't like it. It was not how he had ever left a gas station before, and he looked childish, walking that way. Silly.

When he threw the car door open and pulled the balaclava off he was crying, and Jenni liked that even less. His face was red and pinched. His hair stuck up in the front. He looked small.

"He shot me," Cory gasped. He pushed one arm across his eyes to wipe the tears, and Jenni was repulsed.

“You didn’t get any money?” Jenni asked as she pulled out of the gas station parking lot. She usually liked pulling out fast enough that the speed of it slammed her back into the seat, but now her head hurt.

“No!” Cory said. “He *shot* me.”

Jenni looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. He was hunched over himself like he was about to puke. His face was still red. Jenni was suddenly afraid.

“A hospital?” she said. “We go to a hospital, right?”

“No,” Cory said without opening his eyes or straightening his back.

“The apartment,” she said. She had a vision of them returning to the apartment, up the rough concrete steps, across the linoleum and into the little bathroom with the flickering light and the dripping tap. There might be bandages. There was at least water.

“No!” Now he was shouting at her.

“What then?” she said. No gas station money. No Arctic Blast Extra gum money, no pre packaged ham sandwich in cellophane money. Only Cory curled up in the chair crying like a baby with his pink, shiny face. The car stank like pennies and yesterday’s french fries. “Where am I supposed to go?”

There were only so many places she could go in a car like this, with Cory like this, with no money.

“I don’t know,” he moaned. “We have to hide for a while. Move the car!”

Jenni drove and watched the pattern of the asphalt disappear under the nose of the car. Cory’s voice rose and fell as he talked about what he would do to the man in the gas station, and how badly he hurt, and how they had to return his cousin’s car but they couldn’t go back to the apartment, maybe ever.

“You didn’t get any money,” she whispered out loud. She could feel things slipping away from her. Hot pink bottle openers. Little plastic keychains from places she had never been. Cory. Her stomach roiled.

Jenni’s throat was closing up and her eyes were burning until she forced herself to slip into the quiet, numb spaces in between the yellow dashes on the road. She tried to match her breathing to the rhythm of the road. It was difficult, but it helped. It was hard to know how long she had stayed there, but when she broke the surface again she knew where the car was headed and where they had to go. Some of the horrible,

spinning feeling left her. The realization was almost enough for her to forgive Cory, who was supposed to have been part of the plan, for trembling in the passenger seat.

“The beach house,” she said.

“What?” Cory replied. Now it sounded as though he was angry, and it tamped down the spark Jenni had felt when the beach house returned to her. Jenni drove without speaking.

It was far, and she shouldn't have remembered how to get there. But the beach house was guiding her. They drove for miles, but she knew the dirt road as soon as the wheels touched it. Excitement began stinging against her chest, like pebbles thrown from ten years ago. The dirt road rumbled onwards, building her anticipation for long minutes before it faded away into a patch of brown pebbles and sand. The road was gone. The beach was in front of them. And to the right, a brown shape in the distance, perched on toothpick legs above the sand. From the car, it looked old and battered, but Jenni knew better. She jumped out of the driver's seat with her shoes off and had already abandoned the rough surface of the makeshift parking lot for the rich feel of sand under her toes. Why hadn't she come back before now? What had kept her away? The only culprit she could find was other people's money.

Milk dud money. Wiper fluid money. Barbeque potato chip money. It was all gone now. What was left? A few shriveled dollars from babysitting? Borrowed money, resentful and disappointed in her as soon as it touched her fingers?

Cory was moving slowly, so slowly that it almost made her mad again. She forced herself to return to him. He put an arm around her and leaned on her, too hard, so that her back hurt as they walked towards the house.

Up the steps. There were only three of them, and Jenni could feel her excitement increasing with every step as she drew up a little closer to the house. Jenni had been afraid at first that the door would be locked, but she wasn't anymore. It was open. The house wanted her.

The house was warm inside, and smelled of fish and salt. The windows were shut but the curtains still fluttered, and made the orange and pink light they had caught waltz through the room. The wood floor was streaked with sand, and the sand was streaked with glitter. Jenni stopped in the doorway, overwhelmed.

Cory groaned. "It stinks in here," he said. She pushed him away, and he fell onto one knee on the floor. Jenni thought he was crying again. She hated him.

She stood in the center of the room and could see almost everything. The living room spilled into the little kitchen, where she recognized the soft wooden cupboards. Inside them there would be the familiar chipped white mugs and plastic picnic plates. The bathroom was out of sight, but she knew that as soon as she stepped through the door she would be ten again, with lines of white salt on her sun-faded blue swimsuit, trailing sand across the floor. Her parents and Marie's parents would be in the living room, and Marie would be waiting for her outside.

Cory had pulled himself onto the futon in the middle of the living room. Jenni had slept on that futon before. Every night for weeks, sometimes. She wondered exactly how many nights she had slept there, and how many hours of her life she had spent on that futon, waiting for the sun to come up again so she and Marie could run outside and into the sea again. She had never needed a plan in the beach house.

Cory was bleeding. She could see little red snakes of blood slithering out of the wrinkles of his t-shirt and soaking into her futon. It had been the color of orange sherbert, and now it was ruined. Jenni's heart was beating in her mouth.

"Get me something," Cory gasped.

"Like what?"

"A towel. A first-aid kit. Tweezers. Anything."

Jenni had the sudden urge to bring him a seashell from the beach. They could pack his wound with sand, and it would be like the times she and Marie had buried each other's legs only to reveal them in a sparkling shower, smooth and whole again.

She went to the bathroom instead. The same plastic shower curtain with red and blue stars was waiting for her there, hanging bravely on the rod. The rug was the same, but it had been bleached whiter than she remembered. She suddenly imagined Cory dripping blood onto it and it made her move faster. She opened the little cabinet under the sink and found a tiny tube of sunscreen, twisted hard in one direction with dried white lotion crusted around the rim. Jenni thought she might have used that same tube of sunscreen once. She held the tube gently in her hand. She couldn't remember.

Jenni carried the first-aid kit from the bathroom back to Cory. The orange sherbert futon was ruined; there was a dark patch of blood on it that had gone soft

around the edges as it bled into the fabric, so bright and horrible you couldn't see anything else. Jenni thrust the first-aid kit at Cory without a word.

He opened it with dirty fingers and fumbled through the contents. Three little bandaids fluttered to the ground like dead leaves, and Jenni could see in flashes that they were the pink ones with hearts on them. They had been too young for her even when she had last been here.

"This is useless," Cory said. He was sinking back deeper into the sherbert. His words were angry but his voice was tired. He was sagging back against the cushion. He looked as though he could vomit or fall asleep.

It did all feel useless, when Jenni looked around. There was nothing in the first-aid kit but children's band-aids and an ancient bottle of Neosporin. The orange and pink glow inside the house was still warm.

"What do we do now?" she asked Cory.

"I don't know," he said. But he closed his eyes, and that was the real answer. Jenni thought that maybe she should sit on the futon next to him. She could imagine the warmth of his body and the warmth of his blood curling around her if she did. She sat in the rippling orange square on the floor where the light shone through the curtains instead. She was glad to be here, rather than on the sticky linoleum of the apartment they shared. She had played on this floor with Marie. It hadn't been so long ago. The floor had been sandy then, but now it was a mixture of sand and dust, alternately soft and sharp under her palms.

Jenni couldn't remember what Marie was doing now. College, she thought. They didn't speak any more. She didn't know why. Had Marie come back to this beach house? Jenni thought she would have been able to see some sign of it if she had, but the house felt empty. A cocoon that was just a soft, cracked shell now. She thought of gas station money, and everyone else's purchases that she had only been able to touch but not hold. Fruit cup money, and money from strange candy bars that were only found in gas stations. Money for gas to drive far away. That was the money she had liked most of all.

Cory had gone very quiet on the futon. She had never seen him this quiet before. Jenni knew she should do something. They couldn't stay here. But it was hard to move, and their plan was as ruined as the orange sherbert futon where Cory had draped

himself, blanched and bloody and very, very still. She forced herself to her feet and drifted across the floor. She pulled on the handle of the door, but it wouldn't open. She recognized the firm, gentle resistance of it—warped from the sea water, her father had told her—and she knew that she could get it open if she just pulled harder. As a child, she had pulled harder. Jenni went back to the orange square on the floor and lay her cheek against the worn wooden floor. It was warm there, and soft among the dust.