

Shells

by Rasmenia Massoud

On the other side of my bedroom door, a daytime talk show's studio audience—Oprah or Donahue or whatever—chattered and whooped. I swung the door open and immediately my nostrils burned from the cosmetic cloud of baby powder, hairspray, and perfume.

Perfume. Musk had been her favorite. A lovely thing until I ruined it.

I took eggshell steps across the hallway to the bathroom, too eager to share my newly acquired seashell collection to resist interrupting her while she got ready for work. Smooth, shimmering bottles in clear and tinted glass collected dust on the bathroom counter. Fuzzy hot pink covers decorated the toilet tank and lid, while matching miniature shag rugs surrounded the toilet and sink. Various creams and liquids in shades of rose and amber gleamed and glinted next to her as she sat at her makeshift vanity: the closed toilet lid. Her makeup tray was carefully arranged on the toilet tank, and a light-up magnifying mirror rested on the edge of the sink. Not quite the glamorous setup she'd imagined back when she'd attended modelling school, but she hadn't imagined my existence then, either. The future sneaks up on everyone, I guess.

"Mom," I said, knowing the risk of speaking while she applied mascara with the patience and precision of a surgeon.

She leaned back, inspecting her artistry. Then she set to work smoothing her dark eyebrows with a tiny brush.

"Hey, Mom."

"What?" She flung the little brush into the sink. "You can see I'm busy."

"I wanted to show you my shells."

Mom pushed her fine black hair from her face, the curls still bouncing from a fresh spiral perm and the color glossy from a recent dye touch-up. She sighed. "What shells? What the hell are you talking about?"

"My seashells that I got in Florida." I held up the plastic baggie that contained my precious assortment of beach souvenirs. "Look at all the different kinds I found."

She glanced at my bag of treasures. "Oh yeah, that's really something else. Now get out of here. I'm busy. And I told you to stop wearing that terrible perfume. It smells horrid."

"It's Malibu Musk."

"It's awful. I can't believe they sent that crap back home with you. Besides, you're only twelve. You don't need perfume."

I returned to my room and sat cross-legged on the green shag carpet, examining the shells zipped up in their plastic bag. I wondered how many were. Like that game where you guess how many jellybeans are in the jar. Because I'd grown up landlocked at the foot of a rocky mountain, that rainbow of ocean fragments in blues, purples, grays, and maroons was a miracle of nature.

Mollusks, my father had called them that day on the beach. My younger stepbrother, the ten-year-old amateur marine biologist in the family, pushed his plastic scuba mask up on his head. He squinted at the tiny clamshells in my hand and said, "Coquinas." He pointed at each of the others. Whelk. Sand dollar. Scallop. Cockle. Staring down at the wonders in my hand, I repeated these astounding new words. Then I scampered off to collect more unknown things.

The entire summer had been day after day of different: a strange city with odd street names that led to who knows where, new flavors and textures like brisket and grits, a nonstop stream of sweet tea, a new house that smelled like flea shampoo and displayed photos of strangers on the walls, a new family and a bizarro father who had stepped into the skin of the old one. My old dad was a single dude quick to laugh and always in need of a haircut. An oversized velvet painting of Willie Nelson had place of pride in a one-bedroom apartment where he smoked weed while playing long games of Risk. My old dad revered iconoclasts like George Carlin and Bob Dylan.

This new summer guy was a body snatcher. He read Clancy and Grisham instead of Tolkien and Asimov. He didn't watch *Star Trek* or *Cheech and Chong*. He obeyed his wife in silence. He communicated in grunts and nods, chain-smoked, and kept his smiles to himself. He knotted ties around his neck, which he wrestled with each evening as he stomped through the front door in shiny shoes that clacked on the parquet floor toward his bedroom until the door slammed behind him, his only audible responses to the confinements of this new life.

This body snatcher drove a big green Plymouth Volare during family trips and vacations, his eyes concealed behind cigarette smoke and mirrored sunglasses. Humidity and sweat made the backs of our legs stick to the vinyl seats. My arms and thighs were glued to the clammy limbs of my two new siblings, who pushed and nudged, insisting I stop touching them. It was my lot to forever be consigned to the middle seat. That's the way it goes when you're the summer sibling.

Temporary children learn to live with the uncomfortable seat.

The beach made the sticky, smoky voyage worth it. The ocean crashed and concealed dangers of deadly creatures and undertows. I trekked across the crowded expanse of shattered and scorching bits of shells and crabs and dead jellyfish in search of a place to spread a beach towel as a homebase for adventure. Each wave a dare. A gamble. Every inch farther from the shore a step into outer space. An outer space with gigantic, toothy fish and stinging things. The salty water left my hair and skin parched and gritty. But it wasn't home, and it was littered with new sights and textures. Different.

Like seashells.

My stepmom gave me an empty sandwich bag from lunch to collect my beach loot. Each sandy shell an exotic treasure. Fragments of the Florida coast. I seized my piece of the ocean and returned triumphant to my mountains, altering the American landscape forever in my own small way.

On the drive home from the airport, Mom passed the time by firing off a series of questions. She didn't ask me what I thought of Florida, its humidity, snakes, oversized bugs, and palm trees. She didn't ask about our trip to Busch Gardens or the books I'd read and movies I'd watched over the summer. She didn't ask about the beach.

"How big is their house?" she wanted to know. "Are her kids brats? Do they call him dad? Because he's your dad, not theirs."

I answered each question the best I could, which was usually, "Uh... I dunno. I guess so." Then I tried to change the subject by showing my sweet tan lines or my brand-new Ocean Pacific Velcro wallet.

"Do they get along? Like are they, you know...holding hands and kissing and all that? Do they joke around with each other?"

"Jeez, Mom. I dunno." To deflect, I presented her with my new bottle of Malibu Musk, making her sniff it to fully appreciate its value.

"That doesn't smell good. Did she buy that for you?"

"Yeah. It's musk."

"No. I like musk. That smells like dog shit."

"No, it doesn't," I said, smelling the bottle to be sure I detected no canine feces.

"Is she prettier than me?"

"What? Who?"

"You know. Her. His new wife."

There was only one possible response. That didn't make it any easier to answer. The fact that it had even been asked, that my mother had placed her self-esteem in my twelve-year-old lap, was too much weight. I couldn't hold it. I couldn't move out from underneath it.

The kids who bounce back and forth learn to live with the uncomfortable seat.

"She is, isn't she?"

"What? No. No way. Not at all. Don't be weird, Mom."

"Do you like her better than me?"

"Gawd, Mom. No. You're so much prettier. And you're my mom. Don't be a dork. She's like...totally annoying. And fat. And super religious. It's so weird and creepy," I said, assuming this would be enough to satisfy her. My mouth continued throwing things out there, hoping the right words would reach her and we could end the conversation. I searched for whatever she needed to hear to move on so I could tell her about the plastic charm necklace I'd bought at the mall in Jacksonville with my own money, even though they seemed clunky and childish when I first saw them. I scored a purple toilet charm and an abacus charm and wanted to show them off. But now something burned inside my mother. I'd fanned the flames when I thought I was snuffing them out. A smile began to form in the corners of her mouth. The twinkle reappeared in her hazel eyes.

"Annoying? Annoying how? Does she annoy your dad?"

"I...I don't know?" The thing I didn't know how to articulate, because I hadn't noticed it much in the whirlwind of stepsiblings, southern accents, and palmetto bugs, was that I didn't know anything about him. When I thought of him, he was a necktie, a cloud of cigarette smoke moving among us. Who knew what was inside? I had no idea.

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A few weeks later, summer fell from the trees in golds and browns. The plastic charm necklace that I'd believed was so east coast and unusual turned out to be just one of many in the halls at school. My super-cool corduroy OP wallet turned out to be useless. I never had money to put in it or anywhere to carry it to. I stuffed my bag of Coquinas, sand dollars, and seashells into a box. Sometime before the autumn turned to ice, the rot began to creep out. The stench wafted from my room, out into the hallway, contaminating the rest of our home.

"It's that godawful perfume," my mom said.

As the odor increased, becoming more foul and evil, it seemed like it might drive her mad. "You'd better throw that goddamn musk in the trash." Occasionally, she would poke her head into my room and scream, "How is it still smelling this bad? What did you do? Did something die in here?"

On phone calls to my father, she told him, "Your daughter had a terrible summer out there. She doesn't even like your wife. She's annoying. She's too religious and your own kid finds it weird and creepy."

And the stench grew worse, the smell of something rotting.

As I sat on my bed, doodling in a notebook, I wallowed in the stink. Tossing the notebook aside, I searched the clutter on my dresser for the bottle of Malibu Musk. I gave it a whiff. Still chemical, fruity musk. I ferreted out the shoebox that contained the bag of my beachy bounty. I tiptoed all the way out the front door, careful not to disturb Mom in the bathroom as she performed her precise ritual of painting and sculpting her flawless exterior.

Peering over the edge of the green plastic dumpster in the driveway, I examined my little handful of the Atlantic Ocean. My alteration of the landscape. Some of the shells had cracked open, revealing the dead things inside. Fragile, living things I hadn't been aware of. I'd only just begun to understand the decay of beautiful things.



Rasmenia Massoud is the author of three short story collections and several stories published in places like *The Sunlight Press*, *XRAY Lit*, and *Reflex Press*. Her work has been nominated for The Best of the Net and her novella *Circuits End*, published by Running Wild Press, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2019. A second novella, *Tied Within*, was published by One More Hour Publishing in 2020.