# The Shell Collector

*The shell collector* was scrubbing limpets at his sink when he heard the water taxi come scraping over the reef. He cringed to hear it—its hull grinding the calices of finger corals and the tiny tubes of pipe organ corals, tearing the flower and fern shapes of soft corals, and damaging shells too: punching holes in olives and murexes and spiny whelks, in *Hydatina physis* and *Turris babylonia*. It was not the first time people tried to seek him out.

He heard their feet splash ashore and the taxi motor off, back to Lamu, and the light singsong pattern of their knock. Tumaini, his German shepherd, let out a low whine from where she was crouched under his sleeping cot. He dropped a limpet into the sink, wiped his hands and went, reluctantly, to greet them.

They were both named Jim, overweight reporters from a New York tabloid. Their handshakes were slick and hot. He poured them chai. They occupied a surprising amount of space in the kitchen. They said they were there to write about him: they would stay only two nights, pay him well. How did $10,000 Amer-

ican sound? He pulled a shell from his shirt pocket—a cerith—and rolled it in his fingers. They asked about his childhood: did he really shoot caribou as a boy? Didn't he need good eyes for that?

He gave them truthful answers. It all held the air of whim, of unreality. These two big Jims could not actually be at his table, asking him these questions, complaining of the stench of dead shellfish. Finally they asked him about cone shells and the strength of cone venom, about how many visitors had come. They asked nothing about his son.

All night it was hot. Lightning marbled the sky beyond the reef. From his cot he heard siafu feasting on the big men and heard them claw themselves in their sleeping bags. Before dawn he told them to shake out their shoes for scorpions and when they did one tumbled out. It made tiny scraping sounds as it skittered under the refrigerator.

He took his collecting bucket and clipped Tumaini into her harness, and she led them down the path to the reef. The air smelled like lightning. The Jims huffed to keep up. They told him they were impressed he moved so quickly.

"Why?"

"Well," they murmured, "you're blind. This path ain't easy. All these thorns."

Far off, he heard the high, amplified voice of the muezzin in Lamu calling prayer. "It's Ramadan," he told the Jims. "The people don't eat when the sun is above the horizon. They drink only chai until sundown. They will be eating now. Tonight we can go out if you like. They grill meat in the streets."

By noon they had waded a kilometer out, onto the great curved spine of the reef, the lagoon slopping quietly behind them, a low sea breaking in front. The tide was coming up. Unharnessed now, Tumaini stood panting, half out of the water on a mushroom-shaped dais of rock. The shell collector was stooped, his fingers middling, quivering, whisking for shells in a sandy trench. He



snatched up a broken spindle shell, ran a fingernail over its incised spirals. "*Fusinus colus,*" he said.

Automatically, as the next wave came, the shell collector raised his collecting bucket so it would not be swamped. As soon as the wave passed he plunged his arms back into sand, his fingers probing an alcove between anemones, pausing to identify a clump of brain coral, running after a snail as it burrowed away.

One of the Jims had a snorkeling mask and was using it to look underwater. "Lookit these blue fish," he gasped. "Lookit that *blue.*"

The shell collector was thinking, just then, of the indifference of nematocysts. Even after death the tiny cells will discharge their poison—a single dried tentacle on the shore, severed eight days, stung a village boy last year and swelled his legs. A weeverfish bite bloated a man's entire right side, blacked his eyes, turned him dark purple. A stone fish sting corroded the skin off the sole of the shell collector's own heel, years ago, left the skin smooth and printless. How many urchin spikes, broken but still spurting venom, had he squeezed from Tumaini's paw? What would happen to these Jims if a banded sea snake came slipping up between their fat legs? If a lion fish was dropped down their collars?

"Here is what you came to see," he announced, and pulled the snail—a cone—from its collapsing tunnel. He spun it and balanced its flat end on two fingers. Even now its poisoned proboscis was nosing forward, searching him out. The Jims waded noisily over.

"This is a geography cone," he said. "It eats fish."

"*That* eats fish?" one of the Jims asked. "But my pinkie's bigger."

"This animal," said the shell collector, dropping it into his bucket, "has twelve kinds of venom in its teeth. It could paralyze you and drown you right here."

This all started when a malarial Seattle-born Buddhist named Nancy was stung by a cone shell in the shell collector's kitchen. It

crawled in from the ocean, slogging a hundred meters under coconut palms, through acacia scrub, bit her and made for the door.

Or maybe it started before Nancy, maybe it grew outward from the shell collector himself, the way a shell grows, spiraling upward from the inside, whorling around its inhabitant, all the while being worn down by the weathers of the sea.

The Jims were right: the shell collector did hunt caribou. Nine years old in Whitehorse, Canada, and his father would send the boy leaning out the bubble canopy of his helicopter in cutting sleet to cull sick caribou with a scoped carbine. But then there was choroideremia and degeneration of the retina; in a year his eyesight was tunneled, spattered with rainbow-colored halos. By twelve, when his father took him four thousand miles south, to Florida to see a specialist, his vision had dwindled into darkness.

The ophthalmologist knew the boy was blind as soon as he walked through the door, one hand clinging to his father's belt, the other arm held straight, palm out, to stiff-arm obstacles. Rather than examine him—what was left to examine?—the doctor ushered him into his office, pulled off the boy's shoes and walked him out the back door down a sandy lane onto a spit of beach. The boy had never seen sea and he struggled to absorb it: the blurs that were waves, the smears that were weeds strung over the tideline, the smudged yolk of sun. The doctor showed him a kelp bulb, let him break it in his hands and scrape its interior with his thumb. There were many such discoveries: a small horseshoe crab mounting a larger one in the wavebreak, a fistful of mussels clinging to the damp underside of rock. But it was wading ankle deep, when his toes came upon a small round shell, no longer than a segment of his thumb, that the boy truly was changed. His fingers dug the shell up, he felt the sleek egg of its body, the toothy gap of its aperture. It was the most elegant thing he'd ever held. "That's a mouse cowry," the doctor said. "A lovely find. It



has brown spots, and darker stripes at its base, like tiger stripes. You can't see it, can you?"

But he could. He'd never seen anything so clearly in his life. His fingers caressed the shell, flipped and rotated it. He had never felt anything so smooth—had never imagined something could possess such deep polish. He asked, nearly whispering: "Who *made* this?" The shell was still in his hand, a week later, when his father pried it out, complaining of the stink.

Overnight his world became shells, conchology, the phylum *Mollusca.* In Whitehorse, during the sunless winter, he learned Braille, mail-ordered shell books, turned up logs after thaws to root for wood snails. At sixteen, burning for the reefs he had discovered in books like *The Wonders of Great Barrier,* he left Whitehorse for good and crewed sailboats through the tropics: Sanibel Island, St. Lucia, the Batan Islands, Colombo, Bora Bora, Cairns, Mombassa, Moorea. All this blind. His skin went brown, his hair white. His fingers, his senses, his mind—all of him—obsessed over the geometry of exoskeletons, the sculpture of calcium, the evolutionary rationale for ramps, spines, beads, whorls, folds. He learned to identify a shell by flipping it up in his hand; the shell spun, his fingers assessed its form, classified it: *Ancilla, Ficus, Terebra.* He returned to Florida, earned a bachelor's in biology, a Ph.D. in malacology. He circled the equator; got terribly lost in the streets of Fiji; got robbed in Guam and again in the Seychelles; discovered new species of bivalves, a new family of tusk shells, a new *Nassarius,* a new *Fragum.*

Four books, three Seeing Eye shepherds, and a son named Josh later, he retired early from his professorship and moved to a thatch-roofed kibanda just north of Lamu, Kenya, one hundred kilometers south of the equator in a small marine park in the remotest elbow of the Lamu Archipelago. He was fifty-eight years old. He had realized, finally, that he would only understand so much, that malacology only led him downward, to more questions. He had never comprehended the endless variations of

design: Why this lattice ornament? Why these fluted scales, these lumpy nodes? Ignorance was, in the end, and in so many ways, a privilege: to find a shell, to feel it, to understand only on some unspeakable level why it bothered to be so lovely. What joy he found in that, what utter mystery.

Every six hours the tides plowed shelves of beauty onto the beaches of the world, and here he was, able to walk out into it, thrust his hands into it, spin a piece of it between his fingers. To gather up seashells—each one an amazement—to know their names, to drop them into a bucket: this was what filled his life, what overfilled it.

Some mornings, moving through the lagoon, Tumaini splashing comfortably ahead, he felt a nearly irresistible urge to bow down.

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But then, two years ago, there was this twist in his life, this spiral that was at once inevitable and unpredictable, like the aperture in a horn shell. (Imagine running a thumb down one, tracing its helix, fingering its flat spiral ribs, encountering its sudden, twisting opening.) He was sixty-three, moving out across the shadeless beach behind his kibanda, poking a beached sea cucumber with his toe, when Tumaini yelped and skittered and dashed away, galloping downshore, her collar jangling. When the shell collector caught up, he caught up with Nancy, sunstroked, incoherent, wandering the beach in a khaki travel suit as if she had dropped from the clouds, fallen from a 747. He took her inside and laid her on his cot and poured warm chai down her throat. She shivered awfully; he radioed Dr. Kabiru, who boated in from Lamu.

"A fever has her," Dr. Kabiru pronounced, and poured sea water over her chest, swamping her blouse and the shell collector's floor. Eventually her fever fell, the doctor left, and she slept and did not wake for two days. To the shell collector's surprise no



one came looking for her—no one called; no water taxis came speeding into the lagoon ferrying frantic American search parties.

As soon as she recovered enough to talk she talked tirelessly, a torrent of personal problems, a flood of divulged privacies. She'd been coherent for a half hour when she explained she'd left a husband and kids. She'd been naked in her pool, floating on her back, when she realized that her life—two kids, a three-story Tudor, an Audi wagon—was not what she wanted. She'd left that day. At some point, traveling through Cairo, she ran across a neo-Buddhist who turned her onto words like inner peace and equilibrium. She was on her way to live with him in Tanzania when she contracted malaria. "But look!" she exclaimed, tossing up her hands. "I wound up here!" As if it were all settled.

The shell collector nursed and listened and made her toast. Every three days she faded into shivering delirium. He knelt by her and trickled seawater over her chest, as Dr. Kabiru had prescribed.

Most days she seemed fine, babbling her secrets. He fell for her, in his own unspoken way. In the lagoon she would call to him and he would swim to her, show her the even stroke he could muster with his sixty-three-year-old arms. In the kitchen he tried making her pancakes and she assured him, giggling, that they were delicious.

And then one midnight she climbed onto him. Before he was fully awake, they had made love. Afterward he heard her crying. Was sex something to cry about? "You miss your kids," he said.

"No." Her face was in the pillow and her words were muffled. "I don't need them anymore. I just need balance. Equilibrium."

"Maybe you miss your family. It's only natural."

She turned to him. "Natural? You don't seem to miss *your* kid. I've seen those letters he sends. I don't see you sending any back."

"Well he's thirty . . ." he said. "And I didn't run off."

"Didn't run off? You're three trillion miles from home! Some retirement. No fresh water, no friends. Bugs crawling in the bathtub."

He didn't know what to say: What did she want anyhow? He went out collecting.

Tumaini seemed grateful for it, to be in the sea, under the moon, perhaps just to be away from her master's garrulous guest. He unclipped her harness; she nuzzled his calves as he waded. It was a lovely night, a cooling breeze flowing around their bodies, the warmer tidal current running against it, threading between their legs. Tumaini paddled to a rock perch, and he began to roam, stooped, his fingers probing the sand. A marlinspike, a crowned nassa, a broken murex, a lined bullia, small voyagers navigating the current-packed ridges of sand. He admired them, and put them back where he found them. Just before dawn he found two cone shells he couldn't identify, three inches long and audacious, attempting to devour a damselfish they had paralyzed.

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When he returned, hours later, the sun was warm on his head and shoulders and he came smiling into the kibanda to find Nancy catatonic on his cot. Her forehead was cold and damp. He rapped his knuckles on her sternum and she did not reflex. Her pulse measured at twenty, then eighteen. He radioed Dr. Kabiru, who motored his launch over the reef and knelt beside her and spoke in her ear. "Bizarre reaction to malaria," the doctor mumbled. "Her heart hardly beats."

The shell collector paced his kibanda, blundered into chairs and tables that had been unmoved for ten years. Finally he knelt on the kitchen floor, not praying so much as buckling. Tumaini, who was agitated and confused, mistook despair for playfulness, and rushed to him, knocking him over. Lying there, on the tile, Tumaini slobbering on his cheek, he felt the cone shell, the snail inching its way, blindly, purposefully, toward the door.

Under a microscope, the shell collector had been told, the teeth of certain cones look long and sharp, like tiny translucent



bayonets, the razor-edged tusks of a miniature ice-devil. The proboscis slips out the siphonal canal, unrolling, the barbed teeth spring forward. In victims the bite causes a spreading insentience, a rising tide of paralysis. First your palm goes horribly cold, then your forearm, then your shoulder. The chill spreads to your chest. You can't swallow, you can't see. You burn. You freeze to death.

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"There is nothing," Dr. Kabiru said, eyeing the snail, "I can do for this. No antivenom, no fix. I can do nothing." He wrapped Nancy in a blanket and sat by her in a canvas chair and ate a mango with his penknife. The shell collector boiled the cone shell in the chai pot and forked the snail out with a steel needle. He held the shell, fingered its warm pavilion, felt its mineral convolutions.

Ten hours of this vigil, this catatonia, a sunset and bats feeding and the bats gone full-bellied into their caves at dawn and then Nancy came to, suddenly, miraculously, bright-eyed.

"*That,*" she announced, sitting up in front of the dumbfounded doctor, "was the most incredible thing ever." Like she had just finished viewing some hypnotic, twelve-hour cartoon. She claimed the sea had turned to ice and snow blew down around her and all of it—the sea, the snowflakes, the white frozen sky—pulsed. "*Pulsed!*" she shouted. "Sssshhh!" she yelled at the doctor, at the stunned shell collector. "It's still pulsing! *Whump! Whump!*"

She was, she exclaimed, cured of malaria, cured of delirium; she was *balanced.* "Surely," the shell collector said, "you're not entirely recovered," but even as he said this he wasn't so sure. She smelled different, like melt-water, like slush, glaciers softening in spring. She spent the morning swimming in the lagoon, squealing and splashing. She ate a tin of peanut butter, practiced high leg kicks on the beach, cooked a feast, swept the kibanda, sang Neil

Diamond songs in a high, scratchy voice. The doctor motored off, shaking his head; the shell collector sat on the porch and listened to the palms, the sea beyond them.

That night there was another surprise: she begged to be bitten with a cone again. She promised she'd fly directly home to be with her kids, she'd phone her husband in the morning and plead forgiveness, but first he had to sting her with one of those incredible shells one more time. She was on her knees. She pawed up his shorts. "Please," she begged. She smelled so different.

He refused. Exhausted, dazed, he sent her away on a water taxi to Lamu.

The surprises weren't over. The course of his life was diving into its reverse spiral by now, into that dark, whorling aperture. A week after Nancy's recovery, Dr. Kabiru's motor launch again came sputtering over the reef. And behind him were others; the shell collector heard the hulls of four or five dhows come over the coral, heard the splashes as people hopped out to drag the boats ashore. Soon his kibanda was crowded. They stepped on the whelks drying on the front step, trod over a pile of chitons by the bathroom. Tumaini retreated under the shell collector's cot, put her muzzle on her paws.

Dr. Kabiru announced that a mwadhini, the mwadhini of Lamu's oldest and largest mosque, was here to visit the shell collector, and with him were the mwadhini's brothers, and his brothers-in-law. The shell collector shook the men's hands as they greeted him, dhow-builders' hands, fishermen's hands.

The doctor explained that the mwadhini's daughter was terribly ill; she was only eight years old and her already malignant malaria had become something altogether more malignant, something the doctor did not recognize. Her skin had gone mustard-seed yellow, she threw up several times a day, her hair fell



out. For the past three days she had been delirious, wasted. She tore at her own skin. Her wrists had to be bound to the headboard. These men, the doctor said, wanted the shell collector to give her the same treatment he had given the American woman. He would be paid.

The shell collector felt them crowded into the room, these ocean Muslims in their rustling kanzus and squeaking flip-flops, each stinking of his work—gutted perch, fertilizer, hull-tar—each leaning in to hear his reply.

"This is ridiculous," he said. "She will die. What happened to Nancy was some kind of fluke. It was not a treatment."

"We have tried everything," the doctor said.

"What you ask is impossible," the shell collector repeated. "Worse than impossible. Insane."

There was silence. Finally a voice directly before him spoke, a strident, resonant voice, a voice he heard five times a day as it swung out from loudspeakers over the rooftops of Lamu and summoned people to prayer. "The child's mother," the mwadhini began, "and I, and my brothers, and my brothers' wives, and the whole island, we have prayed for this child. We have prayed for many months. It seems sometimes that we have always prayed for her. And then today the doctor tells us of this American who was cured of the same disease by a snail. Such a simple cure. Elegant, would you not say? A snail that accomplishes what laboratory capsules cannot. Allah, we reason, must be involved in something so elegant. So you see. These are signs all around us. We must not ignore them."

The shell collector refused again. "She must be small, if she is only eight. Her body will not withstand the venom of a cone. Nancy could have died—she *should* have died. Your daughter will be killed."

The mwadhini stepped closer, took the shell collector's face in his hands. "Are these," he intoned, "not strange and amazing coincidences? That this American was cured of her afflictions and

that my child has similar afflictions? That you are here and I am here, that animals right now crawling in the sand outside your door harbor the cure?"

The shell collector paused. Finally he said, "Imagine a snake, a terribly venomous sea snake. The kind of venom that swells a body to bruising. It stops the heart. It causes screaming pain. You're asking this snake to bite your daughter."

"We're sorry to hear this," said a voice behind the mwadhini. "We're very sorry to hear this." The shell collector's face was still in the mwadhini's hands. After long moments of silence, he was pushed aside. He heard men, uncles probably, out at the washing sink, splashing around.

"You won't find a cone out there," he yelled. Tears rose to the corners of his dead sockets. How strange it felt to have his home overrun by unseen men.

The mwadhini's voice continued: "My daughter is my only child. Without her my family will go empty. It will no longer be a family."

His voice bore an astonishing faith, in the slow and beautiful way it trilled sentences, in the way it braided each syllable. The mwadhini was convinced, the shell collector realized, that a snail bite would heal his daughter.

The voice raveled on: "You hear my brothers in your backyard, clattering among your shells. They are desperate men. Their niece is dying. If they must, they will wade out onto the coral, as they have seen you do, and they will heave boulders and tear up corals and stab the sand with shovels until they find what they are looking for. Of course they too, when they find it, may be bitten. They may swell up and die. They will—how did you say it? —have screaming pain. They do not know how to capture such animals, how to hold them."

His voice, the way he held the shell collector's face. All this was a kind of hypnosis.

"You want this to happen?" the mwadhini continued. His



voice hummed, sang, became a murmurous soprano. "You want my brothers to be bitten also?"

"I want only to be left alone."

"Yes," the mwadhini said, "left alone. A stay-at-home, a hermit, a mtawa. Whatever you want. But first, you will find one of these cone shells for my daughter, and you will sting her with it. Then you will be left alone."

At low tide, accompanied by an entourage of the mwadhini's brothers, the shell collector waded with Tumaini out onto the reef and began to upturn rocks and probe into the sand beneath to try to extract a cone. Each time his fingers flurried into loose sand, or into a crab-guarded socket in the coral, a volt of fear would speed down his arm and jangle his fingers. *Conus tessulatus, Conus obscurus, Conus geographus,* who knew what he would find. The waiting proboscis, the poisoned barbs of an expectant switchblade. You spend your life avoiding these things; you end up seeking them out.

He whispered to Tumaini, "We need a small one, the smallest we can," and she seemed to understand, wading with her ribs against his knee, or paddling when it became too deep, but these men leaned in all around him, splashing in their wet kanzus, watching with their dark, redolent attention.

By noon he had one, a tiny tessellated cone he hoped couldn't paralyze a housecat, and he dropped it in a mug with some seawater.

They ferried him to Lamu, to the mwadhini's home, a surfside jumba with marble floors. They led him to the back, up a vermicular staircase, past a tinkling fountain, to the girl's room. He found her hand, her wrist still lashed to the bedpost, and held it. It was small and damp and he could feel the thin fan of her bones through her skin. He poured the mug out into her palm and

folded her fingers, one by one, around the snail. It seemed to pulse there, in the delicate vaulting of her hand, like the small dark heart at the center of a songbird. He was able to imagine, in acute detail, the snail's translucent proboscis as it slipped free of the siphonal canal, the quills of its teeth probing her skin, the venom spilling into her.

"What," he asked into the silence, "is her name?"

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Further amazement: the girl, whose name was Seema, recovered. Completely. For ten hours she was cold, catatonic. The shell collector spent the night standing in a window, listening to Lamu: donkeys clopping up the street, nightbirds squelching from somewhere in the acacia to his right, hammer strokes on metal, far off and the surf, washing into the pylons of the docks. He heard the morning prayer sung in the mosques. He began to wonder if he'd been forgotten, if hours ago the girl had passed gently into death and no one had thought to tell him. Perhaps a mob was silently gathering to drag him off and stone him and wouldn't he have deserved every stone?

But then the cooks began whistling and clucking, and the mwadhini, who had squatted by his daughter nightlong, palms up in supplication, hurried past. "Chapatis," he gushed. "She wants chapatis." The mwadhini brought her them himself, cold chapatis slavered with mango jam.

By the following day everyone knew a miracle had occurred in the mwadhini's house. Word spread, like a drifting cloud of coral eggs, spawning, frenzied; it left the island and lived for a while in the daily gossip of coastal Kenyans. The *Daily Nation* ran a back-page story, and KBC ran a minute-long radio spot featuring sound bites from Dr. Kabiru: "I did not know one hundred percent, that it would work, no. But, having extensively researched, I was confident . . ."



Within days the shell collector's kibanda became a kind of pilgrim's destination. At almost any hour, he heard the buzz of motorized dhows, or the oar-knocking of rowboats, as visitors came over the reef into the lagoon. Everyone, it seemed, had a sickness that required remedy. Lepers came, and children with ear infections, and it was not unusual for the shell collector to blunder into someone as he made his way from the kitchen to the bathroom. His conches were carted off, and his neat mound of scrubbed limpets. His entire collection of Flinder's vase shells disappeared.

Tumaini, thirteen years old and long settled into her routine with her master, did not fare well. Never aggressive, now she became terrified of nearly everything: termites, fire ants, stone crabs. She barked her voice out at the moon's rising. She spent nearly all her hours under the shell collector's cot, wincing at the smells of strangers' sicknesses, and didn't perk up even when she heard her food dish come down upon the kitchen tile.

There were worse problems. People were following the shell collector out into the lagoon, stumbling onto the rocks or the low benches of living coral. A choleric woman brushed up against fire coral and fainted from the pain. Others, thinking she had swooned in rapture, threw themselves on the coral and came away badly welted, weeping. Even at night, when he tried stealing down the path with Tumaini, pilgrims rose from the sand and followed him—unseen feet splashing nearby, unseen hands sifting quietly through his collecting bucket.

It was only a matter of time, the shell collector knew, before something terrible would happen. He had nightmares about finding a corpse bobbing in the wavebreak, bloated with venom. Sometimes it seemed to him that the whole sea had become a tub of poison harboring throngs of villains. Sand eels, stinging corals, sea snakes, crabs, men-of-war, barracuda, mantas, sharks, urchins—who knew what septic tooth would next find skin?

He stopped shelling and found other things to do. He was sup-

posed to send shells back to the university—he had permits to send a boxful every two weeks—but he filled the boxes with old specimens, ceriths or cephalopods he had lying in cupboards or wrapped in newspaper.

And there were always visitors. He made them pots of chai, tried politely to explain that he had no cone shells, that they would be seriously injured or killed, if they were bitten. A BBC reporter came, and a wonderful-smelling woman from the *International Tribune*; he begged them to write about the dangers of cones. But they were more interested in miracles than snails; they asked if he had tried pressing cone shells to his eyes and sounded disappointed to hear he had not.

After some months without miracles the number of visits fell off, and Tumaini slunk out from under the cot, but people continued to taxi in, curious tourists or choleric elders without the shillings for a doctor. Still the shell collector did not shell for fear he would be followed. Then, in the mail that came in by boat twice a month, a letter from Josh arrived.

Josh was the shell collector's son, a camp coordinator in Kalamazoo. Like his mother (who had kept the shell collector's freezer stocked with frozen meals for thirty years, despite being divorced from him for twenty-six), Josh was a goody-goody. At age ten he grew zucchini on his mother's back lawn, then distributed them, squash by squash, to soup kitchens in St. Petersburg. He picked up litter wherever he walked, brought his own bags to the supermarket, and airmailed a letter to Lamu every month, letters that filled half a page of exclamation-laden Braille without employing a single substantial sentence: *Hi Pop! Things are just fabulous in Michigan! I bet it's sunny in Kenya! Have a wonderful Labor Day! Love you tons!*

This month's letter, however, was different.



*"Dear Pop!"* it read,

> *. . . I've joined the Peace Corps! I'll be working in Uganda for three years! And guess what else? I'm coming to stay with you first! I've read about the miracles you've been working—it's news even here. You got blurbed in* The Humanitarian*! I'm so proud! See you soon!*

Six mornings later Josh splashed in on a water taxi. Immediately he wanted to know why more wasn't being done for the sick people clumped in the shade behind the kibanda. "Sweet Jesus!" he exclaimed, slathering suntan lotion over his arms. "These people are *suffering*! These poor orphans!" He crouched over three Kikuyu boys. "Their faces are covered with tiny flies!"

How strange it was to have his son under his roof, to hear him unzip his huge duffel bags, to come across his Schick razor on the sink. Hearing him chide ("You feed your dog *prawns*?"), chug papaya juice, scrub pans, wipe down counters—who was this person in his home? Where had he come from?

The shell collector had always suspected that he did not know his son one whit. Josh had been raised by his mother; as a boy he preferred the baseball diamond to the beach, cooking to conchology. And now he was thirty. He seemed so energetic, so good . . . so stupid. He was like a golden retriever, fetching things, sloppy-tongued, panting, falling over himself to please. He used two days of fresh water giving the Kikuyu boys showers. He spent seventy shillings on a sisal basket that should have cost him seven. He insisted on sending visitors off with care packages, plantains or House of Mangi tea biscuits, wrapped in paper and tied off with yarn.

"You're doing fine, Pop," he announced, one evening at the table. He had been there a week. Every night he invited strangers, diseased people, to the dinner table. Tonight it was a paraplegic girl and her mother. Josh spooned chunks of curried potato onto their plates. "You can afford it." The shell collector said nothing.

What could he say? Josh shared his blood; this thirty-year-old do-gooder had somehow grown out of him, out of the spirals of his own DNA.

Because he could only take so much of Josh, and because he could not shell for fear of being followed, he began to slip away with Tumaini to walk the shady groves, the sandy plains, the hot, leafless thickets of the island. It was strange moving away from the shore rather than toward it, climbing thin trails, moving inside the ceaseless cicada hum. His shirt was torn by thorns, his skin chewed by insects; his cane struck unidentifiable objects: Was that a fencepost? A tree? Soon these walks became shorter: he would hear rustles in the thickets, snakes or wild dogs, perhaps—who knew what awful things bustled in the thickets of that island? — and he'd wave his cane in the air and Tumaini would yelp and they would hurry home.

One day he came across a cone shell in his path, toiling through dust half a kilometer from the sea. *Conus textile,* a common enough danger on the reef, but to find it so far from water was impossible. How would a cone get all the way up here? And why? He picked the shell from the path and pitched it into the high grass. On subsequent walks he began coming across cones more frequently: his outstretched hand would come across the trunk of an acacia and on it would be a wandering cone; he'd pick up a hermit crab wandering in the mango grove and find a freeloading cone on its back. Sometimes a stone worked itself into his sandal and he jumped and backpedaled, terrified, thinking it would sting him. He mistook a pine cone for *Conus gloriamaris,* a tree snail for *Conus spectrum.* He began to doubt his previous identifications: maybe the cone he had found in the path was not a cone at all, but a miter shell, or a rounded stone. Maybe it was an empty shell dropped by a villager. Maybe there was no strangely blooming population of cone shells; maybe he had imagined it all. It was terrible not to know.

Everything was changing: the reef, his home, poor frightened



Tumaini. Outside the entire island had become sinister, viperous, paralyzing. Inside his son was giving away everything—the rice, the toilet paper, the Vitamin B capsules. Perhaps it would be safest to just sit, hands folded, in a chair, and move as little as possible.

Josh had been there three weeks before he brought it up.

"Before I left the States I did some reading," he said, "about cone shells." It was dawn. The shell collector was at the table waiting for Josh to make him toast. He said nothing.

"They think the venom may have real medical benefits."

"Who are they?"

"Scientists. They say they're trying to isolate some of the toxins and give them to stroke victims. To combat paralysis."

The shell collector wasn't sure what to say. He felt like saying that injecting cone venom into someone already half paralyzed sounded miraculously stupid.

"Wouldn't that be something, Pop? If what you've done winds up helping thousands of people?"

The shell collector fidgeted, tried to smile.

"I never feel so alive," Josh continued, "as when I'm helping people."

"I can smell the toast burning, Josh."

"There are so many people in the world, Pop, who we can *help.* Do you know how lucky we are? How amazing it is just to be healthy? To be able to reach out?"

"The toast, Son."

"Screw the toast! Jesus! Look at you! People are dying on your doorstep and you care about toast!"

He slammed the door on his way out. The shell collector sat and smelled the toast as it burned.

Josh started reading shell books. He'd learned Braille as a Little Leaguer, sitting in his uniform in his father's lab, waiting for his mother to drive him to a game. Now he took books and magazines from the kibanda's one shelf and hauled them out under the palms where the three Kikuyu orphan boys had made their camp. He read aloud to them, stumbling through articles in journals like *Indo-Pacific Mollusca* or *American Conchologist.* "The blotchy ancilla," he'd read, "is a slender shell with a deep suture. Its columella is mostly straight." The boys stared at him as he read, hummed senseless, joyful songs.

The shell collector heard Josh, one afternoon, reading to them about cones. "The admirable cone is thick and relatively heavy, with a pointed spire. One of the rarest cone shells, it is white, with brown spiral bands."

Gradually, amazingly, after a week of afternoon readings, the boys grew interested. The shell collector would hear them sifting through the banks of shell fragments left by the spring tide. "Bubble shell!" one would shout. "Kafuna found a bubble shell!" They plunged their hands between rocks and squealed and shouted and dragged shirtfuls of clams up to the kibanda, identifying them with made-up names: "Blue Pretty! Mbaba Chicken Shell!"

One evening the three boys were eating with them at the table, and he listened to them as they shifted and bobbed in their chairs and clacked their silverware against the table edge like drummers. "You boys have been shelling," the shell collector said.

"Kafuna swallowed a butterfly shell!" one of the boys yelled.

The shell collector pressed forward: "Do you know that some of the shells are dangerous, that dangerous things—bad things—live in the water?"

"Bad shells!" one squealed.

"Bad sheellllls!" the others chimed.

Then they were eating, quietly. The shell collector sat, and wondered.



He tried again, the next morning. Josh was hacking coconuts on the front step. "What if those boys get bored with the beach and go out to the reef? What if they fall into fire coral? What if they step on an urchin?"

"Are you saying I'm not keeping an eye on them?" Josh said.

"I'm saying that they might be looking to get bitten. Those boys came here because they thought I could find some magic shell that will cure people. They're here to get stung by a cone shell."

"You don't have the slightest idea," Josh said, "why those boys are here."

"But you do? You think you've read enough about shells to teach them how to look for cones. You *want* them to find one. You hope they'll find a big cone, get stung, and be cured. Cured of whatever ailment they have. I don't even see anything wrong with them."

"Pop," Josh groaned, "those boys are mentally handicapped. I do *not* think some sea-snail is going to cure them."

So, feeling very old, and very blind, the shell collector decided to take the boys shelling. He took them out into the lagoon, where the water was flat and warm, wading almost to their chests, and worked alongside them, and did his best to show them which animals were dangerous. "Bad sheellllls!" the boys would scream, and cheered as the shell collector tossed a testy blue crab out, over the reef, into deeper water. Tumaini barked too, and seemed her old self, out there with the boys, in the ocean she loved so dearly.

Finally it was not one of the young boys or some other visitor who was bitten, but Josh. He came dashing along the beach, calling for his father, his face bloodless.

"Josh? Josh is that you?" the shell collector hollered. "I was just showing the boys here this girdled triton. A graceful shell, isn't it, boys?"

In his fist, his fingers already going stiff, the back of his hand reddening, the skin distended, Josh held the cone that had bitten him, a snail he'd plucked from the wet sand, thinking it was pretty.

The shell collector hauled Josh across the beach and into some shade under the palms. He wrapped him in a blanket and sent the boys for the radio. Josh's pulse was already weak and rapid and his breath was short. Within an hour his breathing stopped, then his heart, and he was dead.

The shell collector knelt, dumbfounded, in the sand, and Tumaini lay on her paws in the shade watching him with the boys crouched behind her, their hands on their knees, terrified.

○

The doctor boated in twenty minutes too late, wheezing, and behind him were police, in small canoes with huge motors. The police took the shell collector into his kitchen and quizzed him about his divorce, about Josh, about the boys.

Through the window he heard more boats coming and going. A damp breeze came over the sill. It was going to rain, he wanted to tell these men, these half-aggressive, half-lazy voices in his kitchen. It will rain in five minutes, he wanted to say, but they were asking him to clarify Josh's relationship with the boys. Again (was it the third time? the fifth?) they asked why his wife had divorced him. He could not find the words. He felt as if thick clouds were being shoved between him and the world; his fingers, his senses, the ocean—all this was slipping away. My dog, he wanted to say, my dog doesn't understand this. I need my dog.



"I am blind," he told the police finally, turning up his hands. "I have nothing."

Then the rain came, a monsoon assaulting the thatched roof. Frogs, singing somewhere under the floorboards, hurried their tremolo, screamed into the storm.

○

When the rain let up he heard the water dripping from the roof and a cricket under the refrigerator started singing. There was a new voice in the kitchen, a familiar voice, the mwadhini's. He said, "You will be left alone now. As I promised."

"My son—" the shell collector began.

"This blindness," the mwadhini said, taking an auger shell from the kitchen table and rolling it over the wood, "it is not unlike a shell, is it? The way a shell protects the animal inside? The way an animal can retreat inside it, tucked safely away? Of course the sick came, of course they came to seek out a cure. Well, you will have your peace now. No one will come looking for miracles now."

"The boys—"

"They will be taken away. They require care. Perhaps an orphanage in Nairobi. Malindi, maybe."

○

A month later and these Jims were in his kibanda, pouring bourbon into their evening chai. He had answered their questions, told them about Nancy and Seema and Josh. Nancy, they said, had given them exclusive rights to her story. The shell collector could see how they would write it—midnight sex, a blue lagoon, a dangerous African shell drug, a blind medicine guru with his wolf-dog. There for all the world to peer at: his shell-cluttered kibanda, his pitiful tragedies.

At dusk he rode with them into Lamu. The taxi let them off on a pier and they climbed a hill to town. He heard birds call from the scrub by the road, and from the mango trees that leaned over the path. The air smelled sweet, like cabbage and pineapple. The Jims labored as they walked.

In Lamu the streets were crowded and the street vendors were out, grilling plantains or curried goat over driftwood coals. Pineapples were being sold on sticks, and children moved about yoked with boxes from which they hawked maadazi or chapatis spread with ginger. The Jims and the shell collector bought kebabs and sat in an alley, their backs against a carved wooden door. Before long a passing teenager offered hashish from a water pipe, and the Jims accepted. The shell collector smelled its smoke, sweet and sticky, and heard the water bubble in the pipe.

"Good?" the teenager asked.

"You bet," the Jims coughed. Their speech was slurred.

The shell collector could hear men praying in the mosques, their chants vibrating down the narrow streets. He felt a bit strange, listening to them, as if his head were no longer connected to his body.

"It is Taraweeh," the teenager said. "Tonight Allah determines the course of the world for next year."

"Have some," one of the Jims said, and shoved the pipe in front of the shell collector's face. "More," the other Jim said, and giggled.

The shell collector took the pipe, inhaled.

○

It was well after midnight. A crab fisherman in a motorized mtepe was taking them up the archipelago, past banks of mangroves, toward home. The shell collector sat in the bow on a crab trap made from chicken wire and felt the breeze in his face. The boat slowed. "Tokeni," the fisherman said, and the shell collector did,



the Jims with him, splashing down from the boat into chest-deep water.

The crab boat motored away and the Jims began murmuring about the phosphorescence, admiring the glowing trails blooming behind each other's bodies as they moved through the water. The shell collector took off his sandals and waded barefoot, down off the sharp spines of coral rock, into the deeper lagoon, feeling the hard furrows of intertidal sand and the occasional mats of algal turf, fibrous and ropy. The feeling of disconnectedness had continued, been amplified by the hashish, and it was easy for him to pretend that his legs were unconnected to his body. He was, it seemed suddenly, floating, rising above the sea, feeling down through the water into the turquoise shallows and coral-lined alleys. This small reef: the crabs in their expeditions, the anemones tossing their heads, the tiny blizzards of fish wheeling past, pausing, bursting off . . . he felt it all unfold simply below him. A cowfish, a triggerfish, the harlequin Picasso fish, a drifting sponge—all these lives were being lived out, every day, as they always had been. His senses became supernatural: beyond the breaking combers, the dappled lagoon, he heard terns, and the thrum of insects in the acacias, and the heavy shifting of leaves in avocado trees, the sounding of bats, the dry rasping of bark at the collars of coconut palms, spiky burrs dropping from bushes into hot sand, the smooth seashore roar inside an empty trumpet shell, the rotting smell of conch eggs beached in their black pouches and far down the island, near the horizon—he could walk it down—he knew he would find the finless trunk of a dolphin, rolling in the swash, its flesh already being carted off, piece by piece, by stone crabs.

"What," the Jims asked, their voices far-off and blended, "does it feel like to be bitten by a cone shell?"

What strange visions the shell collector had been having, just now. A dead dolphin? Supernatural hearing? Were they even wading toward his kibanda? Were they anywhere near it?

"I could show you," he said, surprising himself. "I could find

some small cones, tiny ones. You would hardly know you'd been bitten. You could write about it."

He began to search for cone shells. He waded, turned in a circle, became slowly disoriented. He moved out to the reef, stepping carefully between the rocks; he was a shorebird, a hunting crane, his beak poised to stab down at any moment, to impale a snail, a wayward fish.

The reef wasn't where he thought it was; it was behind him, and soon he felt the foam of the waves, long breakers clapping across his back, churning the shell fragments beneath his feet, and he sensed the algal ridge just ahead of him, the steep shelf, the rearing, twisting swells. A whelk, a murex, an olive; shells washed past his feet. Here, this felt like a cone. So easy to find. He spun it, balanced its apex on his palm. An arrhythmic wave sucker-punched him, broke over his chin. He spit saltwater. Another wave drove his shin into the rocks.

He thought: God writes next year's plan for the world on this night. He tried to picture God bent over parchment, dreaming, puzzling through the possibilities. "Jim," he shouted, and imagined he heard the big men splashing toward him. But they were not. "Jim!" he called. No answer. They must be in the kibanda, hunkered at the table, folding up their sleeves. They must be waiting for him to bring this cone he has found. He will press it into the crooks of their arms, let the venom spring into their blood. Then they'd know. Then they'd have their story.

He half-swam, half-clambered back toward the reef and climbed onto a coral rock, and fell, and went under. His sunglasses came loose from his face, pendulummed down. He felt for them with his heels, finally gave up. He'd find them later.

Surely the kibanda was around here somewhere. He moved into the lagoon, half-swimming, his shirt and hair soaked through. Where were his sandals? They had been in his hand. No matter.

The water became more shallow. Nancy had said there was a



pulse, slow and loud. She said she could still hear it, even after she woke. The shell collector imagined it as a titanic pulse, the three-thousand-pound heart of an ice whale. Gallons of blood at a beat. Perhaps that was what he heard now, the drumming that had begun in his ears.

He was moving toward the kibanda now, he knew. He felt the packed ridges of lagoon sand under his soles. He heard the waves collapsing onto the beach, the coconut palms above rustling husk on husk. He was bringing an animal from the reef to paralyze some writers from New York, perhaps kill them. They had done nothing to him, but here he was, planning their deaths. Was this what he wanted? Was this what God's plan for his sixty-some years of life led up to?

His chest was throbbing. Where was Tumaini? He imagined the Jims clearly, their damp bodies prone in their sleeping bags, exhaling booze and hashish, tiny siafu biting their faces. These were men who were only doing their jobs.

He took the cone shell and flung it, as far as he could, back into the lagoon. He would not poison them. It felt wonderful to make a decision like this. He wished he had more shells to hurl back into the sea, more poisons to rid himself of. His shoulder seemed terribly stiff.

Then, with a clarity that stunned him, a clarity that washed over him like a wave, he knew he'd been bitten. He was lost in every way: in this lagoon, in the shell of his private darkness, in the depths and convolutions of the venom already crippling his nervous system. Gulls were landing nearby, calling to each other, and he had been poisoned by a cone shell.

The stars rolled up over him in their myriad shiverings. His life had made its final spiral, delving down into its darkest whorl, where shell tapered into shadow. What did he remember, as he faded, poisoned finally, into the tide? His wife, his father, Josh? Did his childhood scroll by first, like a film reel, a boy under the northern lights, clambering into his father's Bell 47 helicopter? What

was there, what was the hot, hard kernel of human experience at his center—a dreamy death in water, poison, disappearing, dissolution, the cold sight of his arctic origins or fifty years of blindness, the thunder of a caribou hunt, lashing bullets into the herd from the landing strut of a helicopter? Did he find faith, regret, a great sad balloon of emptiness in his gut, his unseen, unknown son, just one of Josh's beautiful unanswered letters?

No. There was no time. The venom had spread to his chest. He remembered this: blue. He remembered how that morning one of the Jims had praised the blue body of a reef fish. "That *blue,*" he'd said. The shell collector remembered seeing blue in ice fields, in Whitehorse, as a boy. Even now, fifty-five years later, after all his visual memories had waned, even in dreams—the look of the world and his own face long faded—he remembered how blue looked at the bottom pinch of a crevasse, cobalt and miraculous. He remembered kicking snow over the lip, tiny slivers disappearing into an icy cleft.

Then his body abandoned him. He felt himself dissolve into that most extravagantly vivid of places, into the clouds rising darkly at the horizon, the stars blazing in their lightless tracts, the trees sprouting up from the sand, the ebbing, living waters. What he must have felt, what awful, frigid loneliness.

○

The girl, Seema, the mwadhini's daughter, found him in the morning. She was the one who had come, every week since her recovery, to stock his shelves with rice and dried beef, to bring him toilet paper and bread and what mail he had and Uhu milk in paper cartons. Rowing there from Lamu with her nine-year-old arms, out of sight of the island, of other boats, with only the mangroves to see, sometimes she would unpin her black wraparound and let the sun down on her shoulders, her neck, her hair.

She found him awash, faceup, on a stretch of white sand. He



was a kilometer from his home. Tumaini was with him, curled around his chest, her fur sopped, whining softly.

He was barefoot; his left hand was badly swollen, the fingernails black. She took him up, his body that smelled so much like the sea, of the thousands of boiled gastropods he had tweezered from shells, and heaved him into her little boat. She fitted the oarlocks and rowed him to his kibanda. Tumaini raced alongside, bounding along the shore, pausing to let the boat catch up, yelping, galloping off again.

When they heard the girl and the dog come clattering up to the door, the Jims burst from their sleeping bags, their hair matted, eyes red, and helped in the best ways they knew. They carried the shell collector in and with the girl's help radioed Dr. Kabiru. They wiped the shell collector's face with a washcloth and listened to his heart beating shallowly and slowly. Twice he stopped breathing and twice one of those big writers put his mouth on the shell collector's and blew life into his lungs.

○

He was numb forever. What clockless hours passed, what weeks and months? He didn't know. He dreamed of glass, of miniature glassblowers making cone teeth like tiny snow-needles, like the thinnest bones of fish, vanes on the arms of a snowflake. He dreamed of the ocean glassed over with a thick sheet and him skating out on it, peering down at the reef, its changing, perilous sculpture, its vast, miniature kingdoms. All of it—the limp tentacles of a coral polyp, the chewed floating body of a clownfish—was gray and lonesome, torn down. A freezing wind rushed down his collar, and the clouds, stringy and ragged, poured past in a terrible hurry. He was the only living thing on the whole surface of the earth and there was nothing to meet, nothing to see, no ground to stand on.

Sometimes he woke to chai pouring into his mouth. He felt his body freeze it, ice chunks rattle through his guts.

It was Seema who warmed him, finally. She visited every day, rowing from her father's jumba to the shell collector's kibanda, under the white sun, over the turquoise waters. She nursed him out of bed, shooed the siafu from his face, fed him toast. She began walking him outside and sitting with him in the sun. He shivered endlessly. She asked him about his life, about shells he had found and about the cone shell that saved her life. Eventually she began to hold his wrists and walk him out into the lagoon and he shivered whenever air touched his wet skin.

The shell collector was wading, feeling for shells with his toes. It had been a year since he'd been bitten.

Tumaini perched on a rock and sniffed at the horizon where a line of birds threaded along beneath stacks of cumulus. Seema was on the reef with them, as she had been nearly every day, her shoulders free of her wraparound. Her hair, usually bound back, hung across her neck and reflected the sun. What comfort it was to be with a person who could not see, who did not care anyway.

Seema watched as a school of fish, tiny and spear-shaped, flashed just below the surface of the water. They stared up at her with ten thousand round eyes, then turned lazily. Their shadows glided over the rutted sand, over a fern-shaped colony of coral. Those are needlefish, she thought, and that is Xenia soft coral. I know their names, how they rely on each other.

The shell collector moved a few meters, stopped and bent. He had come across what he thought was a bullia—a blind snail with a grooved, high-spired shell—and he kept his hand on it, two fingers resting lightly on the apex. After a long moment, waiting, tentative, the snail brought its foot from the aperture and



resumed hauling itself over a ridge of sand. The shell collector, using his fingers, followed it for a while, then stood. "Beautiful," he murmured. Beneath his feet the snail kept on, feeling its way forward, dragging the house of its shell, fitting its body to the sand, to the private unlit horizons that whorled all around it.