



Sometimes, at night, the dirt outside turns into a beautiful ocean. As red as the sun and as deep as the sky.

I lie in my bed, Queeny's feet pushing against my cheek, and listen to the waves lapping at the tent. Queeny says I'm stupid, saying that kind of stuff. But it's true. She just doesn't see it, is all. Our maá says there are some people in this world who can see all the hidden bits and pieces of the universe blown in on the north wind and scattered about in the shadows. Queeny, she never tries to look in the shadows. She doesn't even squint.

Maá sees though. She can hear the ocean outside too. "You hear it, *né*?" I whisper, my fingers feeling for her smile in the dark.

In the morning, the ground still wet and foamy from where those waves washed up, I sit and trace the hundreds of animals that have swum all the way up to the tent, their faces pushing against the flaps, trying to get a look at us inside on our beds. Queeny says they aren't real beds, but just old army cots and even older army blankets. Queeny says that a real bed is made

with springs and cushions and feathers, and that real blankets don't itch.

I don't think those animals would know the difference or really care much either.

This morning I found a shell washed up right along with those animals. I breathed in its smell. All hot and salty fish, like the very bottom of the ocean. And even though Queeny doesn't believe, and grunted about when was I ever going to grow up and could I please quit bothering her all the time, she still gave me her last bit of paper and said I could borrow her pen so I could write the words in black at the top of the page. *The Night Sea With Creatures*. I drew a picture as best I could with no colors and paper that curled from the damp. Using her pen and paper only cost me my soap, and I'll steal that back from her later anyway. Sisters shouldn't charge their own brothers for paper.

I snug up with Maá, my legs curled up in hers—but careful not to wake her because today is one of her tired days—and look through all the pictures in my box. I'll need to find a new box soon. The rats have eaten most of one side, and what's left is wet and moldy, even after I left it out in the sun to dry. There are some pictures down at the bottom that are headed with Maá's writing from way back, before I could write on my own. I like Maá's writing more. When she writes, it's like the words seep out on to the page already perfect. I push my fingers over Maá's letters, breathing them in like the smells from my shell.

Tomorrow, when she's better, I'll show Maá my new picture

and the shell, and tell her again about the Night Sea and its treasures. I'll tell her every little bit and listen to her laugh and watch her smile.

When I untangle my legs and whisper that it's just about breakfast time and does she want to come eat, I see her eyes open a bit and the smile start on her lips. "Just little longer, *né*?" she says, in her English that never sounds right. "I not hungry much, Subhi, love."

Maá's never hungry much. The last time she ate a full meal and didn't just peck at her food was when I was only nineteen fence diamonds high. I remember because that was on Queeny's birthday and Maá always measures us on our birthdays. By now I am at least twenty-one or twenty-two, or maybe even twenty-two and a half high. I haven't been measured in a while.

Maá's never hungry much, but I'm always hungry. Eli, he reckons I must be going through a growth spurt. Eli lives in Family Tent Four with some other families because his family isn't here. Eli and I used to be in the same tent, Family Tent Three, but then the Jackets made him move. They do that sometimes. But there are forty-seven people in Family Four, and only forty-two in Family Three, so I don't know why they did. And it doesn't matter that Eli's older than me by more than Queeny is, he's my best friend and we tell each other everything there ever is to tell. Eli says we're more than best friends. We're brothers.

Eli's probably right about that growth spurt because today,

after Eli and I have got our lunch, I'm still hungry even though I was given an extra big scoop in my bowl. "You need to be strong to look after your mother, yes?" the man serving us said. I nodded because I wanted the extra scoop, but I don't know what looking after he was talking about.

Eli leaned over and said, "If you want to be strong, the last thing you should eat is this food." But my mouth was already watering just looking at that bowl. We've had food shortages for the last four days and have only been getting half scoops, so there was no way Eli was going to put me off.

When I finish my lunch, I look down the rest of the long table at the others scrunched over their bowls, and the standing eaters by the wall, but no one looks like they might want to give up their food, not even after someone pulls what looks like a bit of plastic from their mouth. They just spoon through their mush more carefully.

Maá tells me never to look too closely at the food, and whenever I find flies or worms, she says I'm extra lucky because they give me protein. Once I even found a human tooth in my rice. "Hey, Maá, is this lucky too?" I asked, and Maá looked at it and said, "If you needing tooth." She laughed a long time at her own joke. Longer than it was really worth in my opinion.

Eli sees me looking and slides his half-full bowl over. "You crazy, boy. No normal person could want more of this crap." He says it extra loud too, and the Jackets watching take a step

nearer, their hands on their sticks, just in case we didn't know already what happens if we cause a fuss in the Food Tent.

"But we're lucky, Subh, because today's food is only twelve days past its use-by date." Eli points to the empty tubs over by the kitchen, his voice even louder. The food in my stomach starts to churn as I watch those Jackets eye each other, waiting on a signal that Eli's gone too far.

"What's your guess then?" I ask back.

Eli must have heard my voice wobble, just that bit, because he stops staring at the Jackets and turns to me instead. "Dog," he whispers. "Definitely dog."

It's a game Eli taught me. Guess the Food. Mostly the food is brown and mushed and just about impossible to guess. And none of it looks at all like the food in the magazines that sometimes show up in the Rec Room.

I eat the last spoonful from Eli's plate and close my eyes. "Nah. It's chicken covered in chocolate sauce with a drop of honey. Dog doesn't come in tubs with use-by dates."

Eli starts to laugh hard and his hand thumps on the table, making the bowl crash onto the floor, the metal clanging so that everyone else in the room goes quiet. There isn't any questioning what those Jackets will do now, and Eli and I race out of there, jumping over the bench seats and pushing past the line of people waiting outside. We're still laughing, even though the breath is catching in our throats from our puffing, and I reckon if I don't

stop soon, I might spew up my lunch, and then I'll be hungry all over again.

When we've gone far enough that the Jackets won't bother following, I pull out my shell and show it to Eli. Eli, he's the only one I show all my treasures to. "Ba sent me another," I say.

Eli looks at me with one eyebrow raised. I don't think he's at all sure that it is my ba sending me those treasures while everyone else sleeps. But if anyone could work out how to whisper up the Night Sea to send a message to the kid he's never met, it would be my ba.

"Your dad sure needs to work on his messages, because so far not a one of us can make out a word of what he's trying to say," Eli says, and slaps at the mosquito bite on his leg, all red and full of pus. I can tell just from looking the ache it must be giving him.

He has a point. But my Night Sea has been washing up treasures for five seasons now, and the first treasure I found made my maá smile deeper than ever, and her smile stayed all through that whole day. She held the treasure tight and whispered my ba's name, and wouldn't give it back until I told her she'd had long enough with it, and fair was fair. That treasure was a small statue of a knight. There are others too. The little blue car with doors that open, an old green coin with black around its edge, a star fallen all the way from space, a pen that doesn't work but feels heavy and strong in my hand, and a picture, drawn in black, of a thousand birds flying free on the

wind. Every one of those treasures washed up here on a tide that no one but me sees.

I give Eli my shell and he smiles, turning it over and over in his hands. “Nice one.” Then he sits down in the dirt and pushes it up to his ear, so hard and close that I can see the mark on his cheek, turning all red from where he has it pressed.

“Are you listening to the sound of the sea?” I ask.

“I’m listening to the stories of the sea. Do you want me to tell you what I hear?”

Now there are at least ten other kids, all gathered around, listening to Eli tell.

“A long way back, when the world was nothing but sea, there lived a whale. The biggest, hugest whale in the ocean. The whale was as old as the universe and as big as this whole country. Every night, the whale would rise to the surface and sing his song to the moon. One night . . .”

And all of us sit, Eli’s story wriggling its way so deep into our brains that it can’t ever fall out.



Later, I let Queeny have a listen to my shell. “What am I listening to?” she says, the bored all over her face from my telling. “The only thing I can hear is air swishing about.”

“That’s the sound of the sea,” I tell her.

She just looks back at me. “Pft. The sea sounds nothing like

that.”

And when I show Maá, she takes the shell and listens too. She listens for a long time, and that ache in her eyes gets even louder than ever before. She doesn't say anything, but I can tell from her face that she hears something. “Later, *né*?” she says, her voice all low and soft like just thinking is too hard. That's how she talks mostly now.

I hide my shell, along with all the other treasures the Night Sea has washed up, down under Maá's spare shirt and pants, where no one else will look. But just before I do, I put the shell to my ear and listen again, real hard. I'm pretty sure I can hear just the whisper of my ba's voice in there. Calling out to me. Telling me he's on his way. Telling me that it's not much longer now, because it's already been nine whole years and that's a long time to wait for a ba to come on by. Someday, it whispers. And the sound of the whisper is as brilliant as a thousand stars being born.

I don't tell anyone I heard him though. Not even Eli.