

Other Half

The first thing I experienced in my new life was light. Before that, I lived in constant motion, surrounded by suffocating darkness. Nothing was visible in that murky abyss, and the emergence into this new world with colors and shapes and sunshine terrified me. Now I know I was right to feel this way.

When I was washed ashore, the air stung my body. The salty wind licked and dried my skin until I could no longer move. Immense figures clouded my vision as they walked along the sand. I hoped they would pass me by, and they did again and again. Thankfully, I realized my body was partially covered by a bundle of dried seaweed.

I dreaded the sound of birds. Their shadows circled over me. Once, a seagull's disgusting feet inched towards me. He laughed and strutted across the sand. I struggled to move. It was useless. I lay there staring down the dirty creature. He shrieked to his friends, and suddenly a swarm of them drew near to feast their eyes upon me. I shuddered, waiting for certain death. I would be torn apart by the greedy monsters. They would gobble me up and fly away to cackle and bother the rest of the world.

But, alas, a couple that chose the wrong time for a seaside picnic saved me. The flock of birds caught the smell of bread and chips. Not able to resist the intoxicating aroma, they left me alone in order to attack someone else's feast.

The most agonizing part of this new place, however, was that I could hear the waves, my home calling out to me. I longed to return, but my body was useless—dried and baking in this newfound heat. One afternoon, I realized I had died. My flesh had turned white, and

I was smoother than ever before. I did not pass into that state in which most believe. One moment I was alive and the next I was not.

Weeks passed. The wind blew, but it no longer troubled me. I did not have to fight to stay alive. One morning, as the sun peeked over the waves and the seagulls began their wretched song, I noticed a shadow approaching. It was a man.

He was alone, carrying only a fishing rod. His steps were timid, as if he was unsure of each movement. He was large, though to me everything is large. His body was wrinkled and tired. I remember he did not carry any bait with him. In fact, his fishing rod went unused that day. Later, I wondered why he carried it at all. His shadow became darker and darker until he stood over me, peering down at my lifeless form with piercing gray eyes. A tiny smile flickered across his face. He slowly bent down. I heard the bones in his knees crack. His breath came quick and heavy. I was torn between excitement and sheer terror. What would he do with me? I was almost certain humans wouldn't eat me.

Ever so slowly, his dry, weathered hand extended towards my place in the sand. His fingers came so close, but suddenly, his entire body lay on top of me. I was caught beneath the soft part of his belly, cocooned in the fabric of his shirt. His body pressed me a little deeper into the earth as he struggled to stand. He rolled onto his back, freeing me. He spread his arms above his head. As he failed to sit up again and again, his face became red and damp with sweat. There, as I lay next to him, shining and whole, he began to cry. Thick tears swept down his cheeks, and as he turned onto his side, I could feel that familiar moisture that I had longed for all these weeks. The giant drops slammed against me, but I

relished the feeling. Though my flesh was gone and could no longer enjoy the sensation, I was overtaken with what had once been my life.

The man's body shook with an unspoken grief. People often believe that things that cannot speak do not feel. To them I say this: that day, watching the old man sob near the sea made me realize I could feel despair and loneliness, nostalgia and pain. But as his body ceased trembling, and the tears subsided, he saw me once again. I was the reason he had fallen in the first place. He smiled for the second time, and when his giant hands moved to lift me from the sand, I was not afraid. In fact, for the first time, I knew what hope was.

That morning, he carried me in his hand. His thick fingers curled around me gently, and I was brought to a new place. I heard a gate squeak open, and the sound of the sea was a distant whisper. Through the slits in his fingers I could see many steps leading up to a cottage. The blue walls were faded and worn, and the porch creaked as he walked to the front door. It swung open, and we entered the place that I would learn to call home.

He sat on a whicker chair in the living room and rocked gently back and forth, still cradling me in his palm. His massive legs stretched out, and he slowly opened his hand to gaze at me. Rough fingers stroked my sun-bleached surface. I was glad to be somewhere cool and shaded, and this man was not frightening, as I had imagined all humans to be. Shelves lined the walls, and I noticed dozens of glass jars filled with seashells. They were little deposits of my former companions. I dreaded being placed among them, forgotten and anonymous among the greens and grays and pinks of the ocean. He set me on a table and examined me under the light of a lamp. It was bright, but it felt nice to be admired. For the first time in my existence, I felt beautiful.

Suddenly, he cleared his throat and spoke.

“Clara, come here. I want to show you something.” I heard a noise in another room. Minutes passed in silence. The clock on the wall ticked loudly, and the man tapped his feet along with it. Finally, a woman appeared wearing an apron and a large hat. She was out of breath and her face was red and puffy.

“Yes, darling. What is it?”

The man stared at his companion with an odd look of sadness and frustration. He gingerly swept me into his hand, stood up on his third try, and brought me to Clara. I was apprehensive of this woman, but the moment she caught sight of me, her eyes danced with excitement.

“Oh, Arthur” she murmured. “It’s beautiful. How did you ever find a whole one?” The man shrugged shyly, beaming at me. I stared at Clara. Her face was dry and craggy, lined like Arthur’s but in a different way. Her features sagged unnaturally, as if she could no longer ward off time.

“Can I wear it?” she asked him. He smiled and brought me to a different room. He placed me on another table, and rummaged through some drawers. Slowly he brought a long, thin piece of wood into view, placed it on me, and slowly tapped it with a hammer to form a small hole. I could not feel any pain but quivered with each blow from the wooden point. Finally, he stepped back, blew away the dust I had shed, and brought me to Clara.

She stood in the kitchen, staring at colorful bubbles in the huge sink. Arthur crept up behind her, kissed her softly on the neck, and murmured something I could not hear. She laughed, a full, hearty laugh that filled the room but was gone as quickly as it came. She disappeared down a hallway and returned moments later with a thin pink ribbon. Arthur looped it through my new puncture and Clara turned her back to him. At first I thought she

was unhappy with me. She had just been admiring my beauty. *What had changed?* I thought.

Then, with reverence, Arthur lifted me high over her head and lowered me to her wrinkly chest. I felt the ribbon tugged tighter as he secured the material around her neck. I lay against the softness of her loose skin. Her heart beat faintly against me. I wondered what it would be like to have so many organs and blood and life flowing through you. I would never know.

She turned and clutched at me with her soft fingertips. Arthur's smile stretched across his entire face.

"I've always wanted a whole sand dollar," Clara whispered.

"Well, my love, now you've got one."

I spent weeks against this woman's body. She slept with me, ate with me, bathed with me, and could not fathom removing me. I came to know all of her habits. She took hour-long baths, submerging me in freshwater and soap. Her white skin shone against the porcelain tub. Folds of skin lay against her bones. She lathered every inch of herself meticulously, washing each wrinkle and dark spot clean.

She and Arthur took walks together, though she was always the one to take his hand and ask to go home. He would sigh, plead with her to keep going, but ultimately we would all turn around and return to the cottage. Once, she fell in their bedroom, landing with a thud against the wood floors. I was afraid she would collapse against me, cracking me into a state of worthlessness, but she remained upright. I could hear Arthur in the next room, but she didn't call out to him. After an hour or so, she used the bed to stand. Each morning,

Arthur pulled the pink sheets away from her body and rested his head against her stomach. He would lie there until she awoke. She would stretch and stroke his balding head, but he could never disguise the despair.

One evening after dinner, she and Arthur sat on the tattered couch. I watched Clara's hand scribble answers to the crossword. Then, suddenly, she stopped and grabbed Arthur's arm. She turned to him, and I could see the worry on his face. She took a deep breath. I rose and fell with her inflating lungs, but she said nothing. She went back to her crossword. I saw Arthur's eyes.

"Please don't leave me here," he begged. I saw her hand reach to touch his face. She said nothing, stood up, and we both left him there waiting for reassurance. I hated Clara for that.

Days later, as we lay in bed, her heartbeat grew fainter and fainter. I listened to the last *lub dub*, and then it was quiet as she went still beneath me.

I was taken from Clara's body and placed in a small box with some spare change. It was dark there, and I longed for the skin I had grown accustomed to and the sights and sounds of the little cottage. I could only hear Arthur's soft sobs from his bed. Sometimes he would doze off but violently awake screaming for Clara. I wished I could make it better, but I think the sight of me would have hurt him more. She was gone, and no one could bring her back. I wondered why I wasn't like her—why I could not simply stop being.

Time passed, but I was unaware of it. My sense of it was gone. One day, I heard other voices. They were new to me, and I was nervous because Arthur was all alone. I

longed to see these new visitors, but I remained in my prison—locked away so he could forget.

As I stared into darkness, the table on which I had been placed began to move. It shook beneath me as somebody fiddled with the drawers and rifled through the objects inside. Suddenly, the top of my box was lifted and light enveloped me. I saw a young woman staring at me with wide brown eyes. Her lips pressed together and her eyebrows drew into a scowl.

“Grandpa, what’s this?” she yelled. Arthur shuffled into the room, looking haggard and frustrated. He saw me. I longed to be in his comforting hands again.

“Oh, just something I found once. It...was your grandmother’s.” His voice shook. He opened his mouth to continue but was interrupted.

“Ooo...vintage. Is it okay if I wear it? It’s so pretty.” She didn’t wait for an answer. She tied me around her neck with confidence and ease. “I’m gonna go show Mom. She’ll love it. Thanks, Grandpa.” And with that, she brushed her lips against his hollow cheek and bounced out of the room.

I now dangled precariously above her ample bosom. She strode to the living room where I had been so many times with Clara and Arthur. Instead, another woman sat on the plaid couch. Her legs were tightly crossed at the knees, and her hair was tucked severely into a bun.

“Mom, look what I found. It was Grandma’s. Doesn’t it look perfect on me?” The girl flipped her hair for good measure. I decided I looked hideous against her skin, but only out of bitterness. This girl might have been Clara’s granddaughter, but I didn’t belong to her. She had stolen me away and didn’t even know where I came from.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. It’s pretty. Be careful, though. It looks fragile.”

Sadie walked to the rusty mirror on the wall, and I was taken aback by her reflection. Brown hair fell over her slim shoulders, and her face was covered in makeup. Black smears coated her eyes, and her lips were unnaturally rosy. She wore different clothes than Clara had. Her fingers touched me again, but this time I was held between two red nails. She flipped me roughly side to side. I would have rather stayed with the coins.

“Vrooooooom. Errrrrk. Neeeeeeooooorrrrr splat!” A toy plane crash-landed in the living room and a small blond boy giggled with excitement. He clapped his hands, and collapsed next to a pile of tiny soldiers. He began organizing them into battalions. His little tongue protruded from his mouth in concentration. Slowly, he raised his head and saw Sadie in front of the mirror.

“That’s a dead *Echinarachnius parma*,” he announced. “In New Zealand, they call them sea cookies. You should put him back where he belongs. He could be a fossil fuel one day.” Sadie’s chest rose and fell beneath me. *Sea cookie*, I thought. *Huh. Maybe that’s why those seagulls were out to get me.*

“I don’t care, Jeffrey. Go play somewhere else. You’re annoying me.”

“You’re not the boss of me. Mom? Tell her she’s not the boss of me,” he squealed. Their mother was reading a magazine, completely unaware of her children’s argument. She hummed loudly to herself, lost in the pages.

“She doesn’t care. Go away,” Sadie snarled.

“I wanna see the sea cookie!” His scream caused the clock on the wall to hum.

“It’s not called a sea cookie, freak. It’s a sand dollar, and you *can* see it. You just can’t have it. Grandpa gave it to *me*. It was Grandma’s,” she taunted. His cheeks filled with blood and his fists clenched at his sides. Sadie laughed at him.

“I hate you! You’re the worst sister in the whole world.” When he gained no reaction but another snicker from Sadie, he added, “I bet you’re the reason Dad left us!”

Angry tears brimmed in the boy’s eyes and spilled onto his round cheeks. He ran at his sister, arms flailing. When he reached her, he began kicking at her legs. His head reared back, and it slammed into her stomach. She fell, clutching at her gut, and I hung just inches from the brown carpet. Sadie gasped for air. Jeffrey fell to his knees, hiccupping from another wave of sobs. Slowly, Sadie raised her head, and I caught sight of the boy. He was wiping his face, and a long stream of snot hung from his nose. He rubbed his chubby fingers over it, transferring it to his grimy little hands. Sadie raised her arm, poised to punish Jeffrey for what he’d done.

“That’s enough.” A shadow appeared over the three of us. Arthur stood, staring at his grandchildren. His breath came quickly. I yearned for him to lift me from these disgusting humans and marvel at my beauty like he had so long ago. Instead, he turned away and shuffled down the hallway. I heard his bedroom door slam, and I was left stuck to Sadie’s sweaty skin.

In a moment, she had untied the knot of the ribbon and I swayed towards her brother. Dangling between them, I saw Jeffrey’s lips twitch into a grin. I spun on the ribbon, and the image of their faces blurred into a single figure. Sadie. Jeffrey. Sadie. Jeffrey. When I could no longer distinguish the difference between their bodies, I felt a hand capture me. It glistened with unknown moisture, no doubt teeming with traces of the

tears and snot Jeffrey's face had just produced. His nails scraped at my surface, and I saw chunks of brown caked under them. His little fingers traced my five grooves, beginning in the middle and extending to my edges. Eventually, he dared to glance at Sadie.

"Don't ever talk about Dad again," she whispered. She snatched me from his hands. I swung back and forth in her grip until I landed on the kitchen table.

That night, as the four of them sat around me, the silence was only broken by the clatter of utensils and Jeffrey's food being destroyed between his teeth. His jaws gnashed the chicken his mother had made, his mouth flapping open like a seagull's. After what seemed an eternity of this hell, Arthur wiped his creased lips.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. He rose slowly, gripping the table for support. He shoved the chair back under it and disappeared from the room. The scraping of forks ceased, and even Jeffrey's mouth stilled for a moment.

"Mom, how long do we have to stay here?" Sadie whined. Her mother shook her head, taking a gulp from her glass of wine. The young woman sighed and stabbed at her peas.

"Grandpa's so sad. It scares me. I'm never getting married. Girls are icky," Jeffrey said defiantly.

"Trust me, boys are icky too," his mother mumbled as she slammed her glass onto the table. I shook with the impact.

"Yeah, but boys can pee standing up. We're so cool." Sadie's head fell to the table and she groaned at her brother's comment.

"Please stop talking, Jeffrey."

I was left on the table that night. When all the dishes were cleared away, and Jeffrey began terrorizing his sister, no one noticed me. As I lay in the moonlight, I missed Clara. If she were here, I would be resting peacefully against her skin. Her heartbeat would comfort me, and I would rise and fall steadily as she slept beside her husband.

When I could see the stars through the window, I heard a door creak. Footsteps echoed in the hallway, and Arthur stumbled into the kitchen. He pulled out his chair and winced as he lowered himself to sit. The skin around his thin mouth trembled as he stared at nothing. His eyes were unfocused, lost in another time.

Then, his big hand reached across the table. It shook slightly until it found me. I was finally cradled in his palm, just as I had been on that fateful day. His thumb brushed against me. He brought me to his cracked lips and pressed me against them. The air from his nostrils blew against me. His body swayed back and forth in the chair. Then, just as quickly as I had been taken from the table, I was flung down. I saw the anger he had buried deep inside. He left the kitchen, abandoning me once again.

When the sun peeked through the window and the damn seagulls began screeching, Sadie made coffee. The machine gurgled, and she wrestled around with some pots and pans. The blue flame of the stove flickered alive, and eggs began to sizzle. She slid plates onto the table and poured juice into glasses.

Jeffrey raced into the kitchen, surely lured by the smell of food. His mother soon followed. When the eggs were done, the three took their places around the table and stared at the empty chair. Jeffrey could no longer contain himself.

"I'm hungry. Why aren't we eating?"

"We're waiting on Grandpa," his mother declared.

"That's stupid. It's gonna get cold." He reached out to grab the plate of eggs. Sadie grabbed the other side and pulled hard.

"You can't have any until Grandpa gets here," she said. The boy kept his fingers locked on the plate and it hovered over me in the center of the table. Both of their fingers began to slip, and I was helpless to prevent it. The plate dropped. I split into two pieces. I heard them gasp, and then silence fell upon the kitchen. After several moments, the plate was lifted from me. When it cleared my vision, I saw that they weren't looking at me. Following their gaze, I saw Arthur standing next to the table. He clutched the back of his chair. He was so still. His lips were pressed into a hard line, and his eyes were in that distant place again.

I cannot accurately describe being two things. One moment I was whole, and the next I was split. There were two of me, but I was one being. I was not either piece. I would always be both.

The three of them stared at Arthur, attempting to judge his reaction. He breathed steadily, but his silence was suffocating. Sadie spoke first.

"Grandpa, it's okay. We can put it back together." Her voice quivered. "And even if we can't, it's no big deal. I only had it for a day. I wasn't too attached yet." She giggled awkwardly, but it dwindled away into silence again.

Arthur reached out to touch me. He picked up both of my pieces. This time, his hands were firm. I was squeezed tightly into his palm. His voice was ragged and cold.

“Do you honestly think I care about that? You’re so goddamn selfish.” With that, he began walking. The kitchen door slammed shut behind us, and I could hear the waves beating against the shore. Arthur stumbled over some jagged rocks but stayed upright. When he finally reached the edge of the water, he stood motionless. I was torn. I loved the sea. It was my first home. Somehow, though, I didn’t belong there anymore.

Arthur bent over. Against all odds, he knelt down. The waves lapped at his knobby knees, soaking his pants. He plunged his fist into the water, and I was immersed in that salty liquid. One by one, his fingers released me into the sea. I floated for a moment until I was saturated, and then I began sinking. I caught a last glimpse of him. His graying hair blew wildly in the breeze. His chest heaved up and down, and those sad gray eyes blinked against the sun.