

SHELL-MAN

the house by the cliff

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I



He was born in the sea.

When the storm had calmed down and the ocean had refrained from its fury, he came crawling towards the beach, with his shell tied to his back. It was still night and nobody noticed his approaching, his slow walking, the shape that suddenly projected out of the water. He took slow steps, which, little by little, exposed his body into contact with the wind.

When he had reached the beach, he stopped. The sky was dark and the breeze was cold. He looked around with no demonstration of interest. Or at least with an interest full of doubts and fear, face to face with a world unknown and crowded with shadows. Minutes passed, and his heavy shell forced him to sit down. He looked for a place where he could rest and be safe from the waves, which insisted that he return to the bottom of the sea and which kept throwing themselves furiously onto the sand.

But the shell-man had made his decision. The sea would remain his mother, but was not to be his prison any longer. Resolutely, he broke off a little piece of his shell with trembling hands and handed it to the sea as proof of his love.

Therefore, his shell would be forever scarred because of this separation.

But the shell-man was not sad.

Eventually, he lay on the sand, tired as he was. He retreated into his shell, into his refuge, and awaited dawn, falling soon asleep.

II



He woke up startled. Someone had lain their hands on the shell and struggled to move it. For an instant, the shell-man did not know what to do; the world was something new, he was ignorant of the dry land. He was afraid. He hid inside the shell, tried not to make any noise and not to move. The shell protected him against the disturbance provoked by strangers, of whose existence he had knowledge by means of instinct.

They were just kids, intrigued by the huge round and uncommon object which had appeared after a stormy night on the beach sand. But he did not know what kids were. In his understanding, they were enemies because they frightened him, because they touched him. Maybe he only had the secret notion that children could also be capable of cruelty. Touch was too intimate a form of contact, to which he would never get used entirely and for which he made very few exceptions during his life. In the sea, he felt covered; on the land, he felt lonely and vulnerable.

Then the children left, their curiosity not satisfied. The shell-man weighed the same as an adult plus the shell, and the fun was spoilt.

The shell-man stayed hidden still for a long time after the kids had left, afraid that they would come back. However,

the beach was deserted. Still fearful, he lay his legs out of the shell only at noon. He stood up, but kept his head inside the shell. He walked up to where the waves broke. Feeling a little more secure, he let his head come slowly outside. The sun rays blinded him temporarily — it was the first time his eyes met the irradiation from this star, in such a direct and inescapable way, and its heat, which made one torpid. Soon he got adapted to it, however, and gazed at the sea, face to face.

His eyes were clouded by confusing feelings and pain, which he could not explain to himself. The need of leaving and the want of coming back.

He turned backwards and saw that the beach was narrow, surrounded by high dark stone walls. There were big rocks scattered along the extent of the beach. The sand was coarse, almost gravel, hues of gray dotted with black. Some plants survived in cracks in the rocks and swung in consonance with the wind.

The shell-man observed everything with the patience of a scholar or of a student in his first day at school. But he sought something. Yet he was not prepared for such an oppressing environment. He had been born a little while ago, his burden was too heavy. He could not stand another encounter with strangers, living beings from some reality that still frightened him. In a way, he was shrunk with fear and needed to search for protection in a refuge bigger than that which his shell offered him.

He came across the hide-out by chance, while he was slithering on the sand, scanning every single space in search of it. Between two huge boulders, an empty space had been created, which let the shell-man take shelter there, twice protected against the dangerous encounter with strangers.