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The Mollusk Transaction

In the winter of 2010, I decided to become rich.

In my old neighborhood, there was a lake that looked and smelled and sounded like the gaping mouth of a giant sea creature. It had shrubs and brambles for gums, spiky grass for teeth, and pillowy heaps of sand for a tongue. The beast liked to hiss its steamy breath across the lush golf course early in the morning before people could even hear the *clink clink* of the sun's spoon as it stirred its first cup of coffee and stretched its arms with an exaggerated yawn. By the afternoon, the beast's breath would melt all the dew from the green icing surrounding the freshly-turned sand pits, and muscular red ants would poke their beady faces up from under the ground and begin scaling their tiny mountains.

The fusion of scents and sounds heightened my awareness of the natural world and its ability to take care of itself. I often marveled at how an atmosphere teeming with calamity could simultaneously maintain such tranquility as time bled from second to minute to hour to a day to a week to a year to a lifetime.

This was where I decided to become rich.

One Saturday morning, on a car ride to Blockbusters, I rested my head against the window and gazed at the palm trees that guarded our neighborhood like nutcracker soldiers. They were imprisoned in chains of blinking colorful lights that sparkled in the glassy surface of the neighborhood lake.

Aunt Tina drove the car under the canopy of glittering palm trees out into the street, flicking her turning signal and gently gliding between lanes.

She had a habit of adorning her fingers and wrists with so much gold jewelry, one could hear her approaching from five blocks away, and when she drummed the steering wheel with her thumbs, they made a faint *ping ping* sound against the leather.

"I want you to pick something you like, alright?" she commanded in that Long Island tenor that makes every statement seem aggressive.

"Only from the red sticker zone?" I inquired into my palm.

"The what?" she asked, tilting her head towards the passenger seat.

"You mean I can pick something from the *red sticker* area?" I repeated, fixing my eyes on a homeless man passing our car in a Santa Claus outfit. A cardboard sign that read "Why Lie? It's for beer" hung limply at his side and I pieced each scribbled letter together in my mind. W-h-y- L-i-e? I-t-s-f-o-r-b-ear. Bee-air. *No*, b-e-e-r. Aunt Tina locked the doors of her Lexus and looked straight ahead, her facial features rigid as if the man pointed a gun to her temple.

"No, Maddy," she sighed. "It doesn't *only* have to be from the red-sticker area." Then, with a dry laugh, she added, "Does mom make you do that? Only pick from the discount section?" The light turned green and she jerked the car forward so rapidly, my seatbelt dug its fingers into my neck.

"Will that be all?" the woman asked. Her name tag displayed little movie reels spiraling around to form the word "Beatrice."

With a credit card in her hand, Aunt Tina turned to face me and questioned, "Are you sure you want this?" She dragged the Shrek movie off the counter and held it up to her face as if it was a framed photograph of someone famous and she was asking whether or not she looked like the celebrity.

"You said I could pick anything," I continued, my words tumbling weakly to the ground like a spool of thread. In her manicured hand, the Shrek movie looked significantly less impressive than it had on the display. I was only interested in the pen attached to the movie-- a clunky piece of plastic with Shrek's head on it that screamed *Donkayy!* whenever someone squished his rubber head.

"Are you sure you don't want the necklace instead?" She scanned the rack and removed a Barbie Mermaid film

from the collection, then raised an eyebrow and continued, "It's a locket, so you can hide a little note or something inside if you want to." There was nothing I wanted less than a rusty necklace with Barbie's face on it.

"Actually," I lied, swapping the movies. "I like that one better anyway."

"Whose face is on it?" dad asked. He squatted and peered into the ground, one hand on his thigh and the other balancing on his golf club. A bead of sweat traveled down his temple and dripped into the dirt.

"It's Barbie," I sighed. I patted the top of an ant pile with my sneaker and watched the bugs scramble out before adding, "She's wearing a crown or something."

Just before the sun shrugged into its bathrobe, brushed its teeth, and snuggled into its bed, the orchestra of frogs on the golf course began tuning their throats. Swarms of gnats wildly darted in between trees and into my eyes. Patches of dead grass reached up and scratched my ankles with their hairy fingers. Smoky remnants of our Canadian neighbor's barbecue still lingered in the air and created a fog that hovered like artificial smoke at a Halloween-themed party.

"It doesn't really matter," I told Dad after three nights of scanning the patches of sand and dirt for any glimpse of glimmer or shine. "I don't remember where I dropped it."

"Okay," Dad agreed, slowly rising to a standing position. "Sorry, Mad. It's getting late anyway. I'll buy you another one." I beamed at the thought of returning to Blockbuster with Dad and purchasing the Shrek pen, knowing fully well that *he* wouldn't oppose it as Aunt Tina had.

When dad and I rounded the gaping mouth of the lake, a loud crunch issued out from under my shoe. Shattered, purple-streaked shards of triangles formed the shape of a spiral conch shell, and a slimy creature withered underneath like raspberry jelly from a squashed powdered donut.

"Yikes!" Dad observed. "Looks like you got that poor conch good." As I wiped my shoe across the grass, it collided with another shell that tumbled down a small slope and settled with a bed of a dozen others in the lake. I stuck my hand into the shallow water and removed a colorful spiral. Murky water dripped down my wrist and the smell of fish wafted up to my nostrils.

"Can they live without their shells?" I asked Dad, holding the creature up against the fading purple sky.

He tilted his head and offered, "I think so, but it probably makes surviving more difficult." I peered into the shell and discovered no animal inside, only a dark cavern of twists and turns that resembled the slotted canyons of Utah. As I gazed into the opening, Aunt Tina's words reverberated in my mind: "*you can hide a little note or something inside if you want to...*"

"Wontons or fried rice? Or both?" Mom hollered from the kitchen. She covered the bottom part of the telephone with her hand and brought it back to her mouth intermittently to continue ordering.

"Fried rice," I yelled back from the dining room. An array of mismatched paintbrushes, easels, glass jars, crayons, pencils, and printed pages of Bible verses lay scattered before me on the table. "And don't forget the fortune cookies!" I added, "That's the most important part." When she didn't respond I removed my paintbrush from the surface of the shell and confirmed, "Mom? Did you hear me?" A muffled "yeah" dribbled out of the kitchen.

She appeared from the kitchen and leaned against the doorway, twirling the phone cord in her fingers.

"What number are you on?" she said. I painted a final flower on the shell before placing it on a drying rack with seventeen others.

"Eighteen," I beamed, rummaging through dad's golf bucket to remove another one. Even though dad bleached and scrubbed the already vacant shells, they still wreaked of lake breath.

"I'm proud of you, you know that?" mom said. The corners of her mouth lifted like a velvet stage curtain when she added, "You little entrepreneur, you."

After affixing 6 fortune cookie messages and 12 inspirational quotes to their own cotton balls and placing each cotton ball in the cave of its respective painted shell, I sat in the passenger seat of dad's car and marveled at my creations as they rattled inside a cardboard box.

Dad parked on the side of the road, removed a tiny plastic table from the trunk, and kicked the legs out into the grass. Then he unfolded a lawn chair and plopped it down next to the table.

"I can hold this for you while you get set up," he suggested. A sign that read "Well Shells: Inspirational Messages 4 All" rested in his hands, and I quickly pieced each scribbled letter together in my mind to verify the spelling. *W-e-l-l- S-h-e-l-l-s.*

My first customer was a police officer. Except he wasn't interested in buying my shells.

“You folks got a permit?” he muttered from inside his car. He rested one hand at the top of the steering wheel and the other hung out the window like a stray thread on a tee shirt.

“I’m sorry?” Dad began. He edged near the car to block my view and asked, “A permit? For what?”

“You can’t be selling things on the road without a permit, sir,” the officer stated. “Whaddya got there anyway? Bracelets? Lemonade?” Each word that filtered through his mustache and reached my ears added to a pool of tears slowly rising in my field of vision. *Drip. Drip. DripDrip.*

I turned away and sank into the crinkly lawn chair. By the time dad appeared at my side again and the police officer drove away, a red truck began whirling down the street in the distance, dragging behind it a bridal train of country music that coughed and scraped with each bump in the pavement. It tore around the corner, whipped past the stop sign, and sputtered to a halt in the grass.

A man in a red flannel shirt waddled out from the driver’s seat and stopped two feet in front of my table, his hands on his hips, legs slightly spread in that perennial dad stance. He scanned the display and plucked a green shell off the counter.

“How much for this one?” he asked. A pair of eyes peeked out from under a faded denim hat.

“Three dollars,” I spoke. “Five for the big ones.” The man focused on some point on the ground and nodded.

“Well, tell you what. I’m in a rush right now, and I don’t have any money on me, so can we do a trade instead?” The last thing I wanted was a trade for my meticulously crafted pieces of artwork.

“That will work,” I lied. “What do you want to trade?” The man raised a finger as if to say *wait a minute*, then proceeded to rummage through his trunk. He removed a rusted metal structure and set it down on the table.

“It’s a battle horse,” he clarified after observing my confusion. “That’s a sword there, and *that’s* a shield. It’s supposed to protect and bring prosperity and whatnot.” He scratched the sandpapery side of his beard and shrugged. “Maybe it’ll do more for you than it did for me.” I lifted the metal structure off the table and ran a finger along the horse’s dusty mane, creating a clean path.

“Thank you,” I managed.

“Alrighty,” he sighed, “This will be for my daughter.” His lips parted to reveal a graveyard of decaying tombstones.

“Today’s her birthday. She’ll love this.”

I nodded without prying my eyes from the horse in my hands. When I looked up, the man was already in his truck, waving and calling “Thanks again!” from his window before peeling away under the canopy of palm trees.

I turned around to face dad. He smiled and gave me two thumbs up.

This was when I realized I was already rich.

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“A little more to the left,” I told mom that night.

“Here?” she asked. She slid the horse along the kitchen wall as if it were a metal detector, about to beep at the discovery of some stockpile of treasure hidden in our home.

“Yeah, there,” I concluded. “That’s perfect.”