

Out of My SHELL

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Sea turtles are reptiles and must rise to the surface to breathe. However, a sea turtle can hold its breath and remain underwater for several hours at a time.

My little sister, Lanie, was hogging the armrests. She was in the middle seat, between Mom and me. Lifting herself with her hands, she tucked her knees to her chest and swung back and forth in the small space between rows. She was practically performing gymnastics on the airplane. She was excited for our trip—genuinely and wholeheartedly excited. As badly as I wanted to be, too, I couldn't bring myself to feel even a shimmer of anticipation.

When the flight attendant took my drink order a few minutes later, I could hear myself saying, “apple juice,” and “thank you.” But what I was thinking was, *You've got to keep it together, Liv.*

Our family was minus one, and even though Lanie was

oblivious—bouncing in her seat and bursting with giggles—I was on the verge of falling apart. I couldn't stop glancing at the open seat across the aisle. The place where Dad should've been sitting.

Mom was in rough shape, too. Her fingers drummed the armrest almost the entire flight. She got even more frazzled after the plane landed in Tampa and she had to rent a car. Her legs moved restlessly as she stood in line, creating little ripples in her long, flowery skirt. I wished I could help, but I also knew the rental car company would never turn keys over to me.

Dad had always been the one to step up to the counter. Mom usually corralled our luggage and squeezed droplets of hand sanitizer into Lanie's and my hands, even though we'd already washed them in the airport bathroom.

This time, Mom skipped the hand sanitizer and shot me a pleading look as the woman behind the counter took her credit card. I followed Mom's line of sight to where my sister was standing, hovering really, over a stranger's wheeled bag. Lanie gave the luggage a slight shove, testing its unrestricted movement.

"Lanie," I cautioned, and lunged for her arm. I wasn't quick enough. My fingers snatched empty air as she belly flopped onto the bag. "Wheeeee," she cried, rolling past the Enterprise Rent-A-Car sign and bowling right into a group of tourists.

There were a few yelps, some groans. Two pairs of sunglasses and a beach hat went flying.

Thankfully, Mom was too distracted by the woman at the counter to notice. Unable to look any of Lanie's victims in the eye, I retrieved my sister and rolled the luggage back to its rightful owner. Then I held her hand until Mom was finished.

I couldn't blame Lanie entirely. Even though it rubbed me the wrong way, I understood how she could act so carefree. Lanie was half my age. The sleight-of-hand trick Mom was pulling might've worked on me, too, when I was six.

Look away from our family's ruin and focus on the trip to Florida! It's the Sunshine State—sadness is an impossibility! Forget that our lives are in pieces—we're going to the beach!

Right.

Getting from Tampa to Anna Maria Island required a trip over the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. As Mom drove up the steeply rising arch, Lanie sucked in her breath, then let out a noise that was halfway between a song and a sigh. The road appeared as though it paved the way to blue sky and cotton-ball clouds. The bright-yellow stabilizing cables dazzled like rays of light outside the car windows.

The dreamy expression on Lanie's face told me that she'd already ridden the bridge through the clouds and that her thoughts were somewhere high above the earth's atmosphere.

Even Mom's face brightened for a breezy second at the view. I'll admit, there was a tug at the corners of my lips, too. But it wasn't strong enough to counter the weight in my stomach. It might've been from fear—the bridge was super high. Mostly, though, I think it came from missing Dad already.

I missed the history lesson he always gave as we drove over the bridge. He called them “Forrester Family Fabulous Facts,” although I might've been the only other Forrester in the family to enjoy them. As we reached the highest point, I could practically hear his annual lecture playing in my head:

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge is the longest cable-stayed concrete bridge in the world, girls. Not the first bridge to span the Tampa Bay, though. The first bridge met Disaster. Disaster with a capital D! In 1980, a freighter plowed into it during a thunderstorm. More than one thousand feet of the bridge plummeted into the bay, killing thirty-five motorists and passengers.

Disaster. That was exactly what this vacation would be without Dad. Nothing close to the magnitude of a bridge collapsing, of course, but disaster nonetheless.

Dad made everything more interesting. At his office at the university, he had an Albert Einstein quote hanging above his desk: ONCE YOU STOP LEARNING, YOU START DYING. He said he wanted to make sure that never happened to Lanie and me.

Some things he just knew, and some facts he looked up on the spot. Like when we saw a pod of dolphins, he pulled up info on his phone about their migration patterns. And when we saw a sea turtle, he pulled up images. “Okay, Olivia Forrester,” he’d say, as if I were a contestant on a game show. “Name that species: loggerhead, green sea turtle, or hawksbill?”

I couldn’t imagine an entire summer without his quizzes and Forrester Family Fabulous Facts. Instead of coming with us this year, he’d be teaching history classes to college students. I never imagined I’d be jealous of anyone going to summer school.

Then there was Dad’s new apartment—one couch, a single chair in the kitchen, and no TV yet. I imagined him coming home to it, all quiet and empty, after a day of teaching. He had to be sad and lonely.

Grandma and Grandpa were waiting outside their beach house as we pulled into the driveway an hour later. Beads of sweat dotted the patch of wrinkled skin above Grandpa’s eyeglasses, and Grandma was fanning herself with a folded piece of paper.

Every June, my mom’s parents greeted us in front of their turquoise-colored home, a soaring three-story barrier between us and the beach. When we exited the car, they enveloped us in hugs and a cloud of Grandma’s overly sweet perfume. They

said what they always say: “Oh my word, how you girls have grown!”

There were slight differences, though—things Lanie didn’t pick up on but I did. My grandparents held Mom a tad tighter and a fraction of a minute longer than usual. For the first time ever, Grandma didn’t comment on how much I resemble my father.

“Grandma! Grandpa!” Lanie said. She tugged our grandmother out of her embrace with Mom by the back of her sleeveless blouse. “Look!” Lanie pointed to the pink hole in her bottom gum, and our grandparents peered in as if they’d uncovered the eighth wonder of the world. Everyone made a huge fuss over the lost tooth while ignoring the fact that Dad wasn’t there.

I turned away from the group, unable to feign interest in my sister’s dental development, and saw Aiden standing on the front lawn of the Beachcomber Inn next door. He was taller than last summer, and his hair was different. Longer. He wore new glasses. As good as it was to see my summer friend, my legs felt wobbly as I walked toward him. He had to have noticed my dad was missing, and I dreaded explaining why. I didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I waved quickly, then shoved them into my pockets.

Aiden’s grandfather was the caretaker at the inn, and Aiden

had been visiting since we were both in diapers. He had always been quiet yet playful. He inserted funny faces into conversations instead of words. He cracked jokes after barely saying anything for hours. A thousand times, he'd snuck up on me just to give me a fright.

I thought our friendship might be the one normal thing left about Florida. I stuck my tongue out, trying to initiate our usual banter, and immediately regretted it. Instead of twisting his features around or mimicking me like I expected, he tipped his head questioningly. He knew me well enough to know something was wrong.

I couldn't escape Dad's absence. It was hovering over me even now, making my reunion with Aiden as uncomfortable as everything else. At least Aiden smiled. When he did, his lop-sided grin revealed smooth, straight white teeth. No more braces. It was then that I realized how much older he looked this summer.

I felt instantly self-conscious about the purple plastic headband I'd borrowed from Lanie and the lacy frills on my sleeves. The one-year age difference between Aiden and me had always seemed meaningless before. In that moment, though, I felt embarrassingly young standing in front of him.

"Hi," I said, then shifted my gaze to the inn behind him. Apparently, this was the summer for drastic changes. "Wow.

The Beachcomber looks so . . . different,” I muttered, thankful it gave me something to talk about other than my absent father.

I could tell Aiden was still wondering what was up with me and my family, but he was too polite to ignore my comment. He rotated, causing the frame of his body to expand while he glanced at the Beachcomber behind him. His broadening shoulders made his torso seem more kite shaped than the bean-pole he’d always been. “I know,” he said. “The grand reopening was last weekend. Grandpa’s new boss”—a dark expression clouded his face—“remodeled the entire property over the winter.”

“Oh” was all I could think to say.

When Aiden squared his shoulders back toward me, his eyes darted to where my mom and grandparents were gathered around Lanie. I knew exactly what he wanted to ask. Before he had the chance, I blurted, “I should get back. I haven’t seen my grandparents since last summer. They probably want to hear all about my year. Catch up later?”

“Sure,” he said.

I could hear the disappointment in his voice, but I averted my gaze again so I wouldn’t have to see it in his eyes.

As I walked away, he called out, “I’m glad you’re here, Olivia.”

I turned my head and smiled weakly at him. “Thanks.”