

Tumble Me Like a Shell in Shallow Waves

ANYTHING GOOD IN MY LIFE I've had to wait for, but I've been glad to do it. My dad taught me how to use the saw and polisher when I was eight years old, and if you give me any plain rock, I can, in time, find something beautiful buried inside. I am sixteen now, and I have carried a thousand rocks home from the wandering edge of the tide. I am not strong—these are small rocks, eggs, gathered one or two per week. They decorate every windowsill, every shelf, they spill from weary baskets on the floor. My mom, Kimberly, says I have all the good colors but one. It is a Yurok Indian word, and she says it doesn't translate, but she'll know it when she sees it. When she touches it. She is always touching the rocks, pressing them to her lips, setting them down again, and I see the sadness welling in her eyes when the colors are wrong. *Keep looking*, her eyes tell me. They beg me.

I brought home a Yurok dictionary the school librarian was tossing out because no one read it—just scrawled their names, and worse, on the spine. I have memorized a thousand words I hope to use someday. But I have not found the word Kimberly wants.

Another thing I am waiting for: I have not dreamed, not ever. My dreams go into the rock tumbler. Hard solid things: that's as close as I get to dreaming. While the tumbler squats in the garage and churns, I find a window that overlooks the beach, and I wait. I read from the dictionary while Kimberly combs her fingers through my hair because she cannot think of anything else to soften her sadness. What is the word for what I feel? Patience? I read and I wait for the tumbler to reveal the glistening heart of a rock; like the braid Kimberly is putting in my hair, it is a process that takes time.

My dad has three days off from the mill, too long, and he is ready to be angry about something. Anything. He looks up from a fifth mug of coffee, and he sees Kimberly still wearing her nightgown too late in the morning, braiding my hair and whispering words to herself the way she does, the sunlight warming her back, the soft blue silk nightgown from the catalog that costs too much, too blue, her brown skin, her thin hands, which he snatches by their wrists, Kimberly looks so pretty and sad, boys don't braid their hair like that, goddamnit, and I escape through the kitchen door and down the long wooden stairs to the beach. I've never seen what happens next.

A fog bank is dragging in, and the air is so muffled I hear only my feet down the slippery steps. My face is damp. The whiteness surrounds me, so bright that

I close my eyes. I take the steps blindly, and I land on the sand with a thud that jolts my spine.

I walk the wet edge of the tide and search for rocks. Agates, porphyry, jasper if I'm lucky. A Japanese glass float, smashed to bits. The fog is so thick I can barely see my feet, and I have never felt so alone, but that's how I want to be. I suppose I might get toppled by a wave and never see it coming, but I doubt it; the ocean offers weak little waves that slap at my feet and slide up the sand, whispering. The air is so quiet I can hear words in my head, but I don't listen.

I find a black rock in the sand. With my toe, I flip it over: jagged and sharp as glass, swollen on the bottom, as though it had been struck a blow. But the skin of the rock is shiny; it hasn't been in the water long enough to be worn down by the waves. No, this is a single blow from something hard. I shift the other stones I have found, making room in my palm for this sharp and mysterious thing, and I return to the house.

Kimberly likes it out here on the spit, away from town. She likes it because she has a fear of people's eyes, does not like them studying her. She studies me every morning when I brush my hair for school, but that is different, a different look, just watching me, lost in a sadness all her own. She says in high school boys fell in love with her with just a glance, and it was a nuisance to have boys do that, a nuisance because she would fall in love back, and it is better out here on the spit because she is away from that now. Besides, with Nana gone, there's no one out here worrying after her. No one, that is, except for me and my dad, and she knows I won't say anything, and whatever my dad has to say is without care. My dad is probably yelling at her right now, I think, as I climb the steps to the house, but she doesn't listen to his words. She closes her eyes, dreams of me, I know she does.

The fact is that Kimberly does not know who my real dad is. The man I call my dad, he is just the one who stayed. I suppose when you are sixteen and pregnant and your tough old nana wants to know whose ass to kick, and there is this one guy who sticks around, maybe that counts for something. When you are sixteen years old and skinny as a boy except for the bulge in your belly, I guess it means something that someone falls in love with you, and he has a little Yurok in his brown skin, and he says he wants to make it work.

My hands clutch four rocks.

Kimberly is still sitting in the alcove. I can see her slender back as the stairs lead past the window. Her gown has loosened, but she hasn't moved, as though she were waiting for my braid to be placed back in her hands. Kimberly says she used to sit in this window, drumming her belly and whispering Yurok words to me, the few she knew and some she made up, whispering so Nana wouldn't hear, and I think to myself that her life stopped right there and the dreaming began.

I walk into the room, and Kimberly looks at me as if she wished I were someone else, but it is a loving look and I don't mind because really it is herself that she wishes were someone else.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm trying to remember a word."

"Which one?" I sit beside her and tumble rocks in her lap, the blue silk of her lap.

"It's nothing. I used to know it. I used to speak it all the time. When I told stories."

"What were your stories like?"

"Like me. Like I was. Like I never was."

"How long did you stay in school, again?"

"I did good in school. I always liked to tell stories." She touches one rough stone and then another. The rocks leave grains of sand in her lap.

Kimberly says a long time ago this was Yurok land, both sides of the bay, redwoods, all of it, and tourists parked their Model T's along the road and bought baskets from the old women who spread out blankets and put their baskets on them. That was way before our time, but Nana told her it was true. Kimberly always tells me this story like it belongs to someone else, and it may as well belong to no one because the redwoods are completely gone. We pretty much ignore the low hills behind the house, a mess of scrubby pines all yellowish green in the sun. The rocks in Kimberly's lap, that's what interests us now. Kimberly's hair covers her face.

"What's this one?" She holds the black rock, glossy and sharp-edged as a chunk from a broken dinner plate. "I've never seen this before."

Kimberly still has a few baskets that Nana wove, and she keeps them full of my polished rocks. Over the years, the baskets have settled around the lumpy forms inside them. Take out the rocks, and what's left is supple as a rag. That's what I used to think a basket was, soft and supple, laden with rocks to give it strength, a loose sack anchored in place and filled with glistening rocks and a little dust you saw in certain angles of sun. Kimberly says Nana was going to teach her how to weave them. Nana always promised she would teach Kimberly to make the empty sacks. But instead Nana made her go to school and do her homework and speak English around the house, and there were no English words for weaving baskets that were quite as good.

I find my dad in the garage, wrestling a dull blade from the saw. He doesn't look up from his work. Give him credit for this much: he knew enough to buy the saw and the polisher. He helped me put them together. But forget talking to him about anything. His words are the names of minerals and semiprecious stones, things you would write on tiny labels if you put rocks in a specimen file.

He knows the vulnerability of a rock in his hands, and that it calls for care, and that too many words only get your hopes up. Sometimes you open the tumbler, thinking you'll have something precious, but it is all shards.

The rock collection is our one thing together. The singing saw. The tenderness in his hands, guiding a piece of jasper into the teeth of the blade: I have seen him touch my mom's face like that. Her eyes closed. But I know she is dreaming of me.

My dad sets down the saw and looks at the black rock I found. The deepest black. "Obsidian," he says. He shows me the page in the rock and gem book. Glassy and brittle, the rock will probably break apart in the polisher. We stand side by side, and I feel the warmth of his arm touching mine.

"Put it in." These days I pick the roughest stones I can find, the kind that chew up blades and tumble for days without softening, but my dad does not complain. He just recites their names. Aventurine. Tiger Eye. The rocks slip and slide apart, wearing each other down as best they can. These rocks are all we have, the words for them, their detached names, and none of those words are "Where did all this go wrong?"

He sorts the rest of my take. "That's porphyry... that's jasper... is that a ruby? Wait." He takes up a dull hard crystal and looks closer. We have never found a ruby. Not this time either.

"Just put it in the tumbler."

When you have so many things you need to say to each other, you just switch on the machine, drown out your voices, make it pointless to try.

At four in the afternoon, my dad drives to the mill. The tumbler rattles in the garage, young tough rocks, and the machine is at its angriest. Kimberly and I leave the noise behind and walk along the beach. Following my old footprints, I show her where I found the black obsidian, but there isn't any more of it. We find three milky shells worth keeping, but we leave them tumbling in the surf.

It was Kimberly who first taught me what to look for, what to stuff in the pockets of my raincoat, what to leave behind. These were lessons without words. It was the way she touched the rocks, her head bent forward, black hair slipping off her shoulders. She would turn the rocks over and over, handling them gingerly as eggs, setting them down again. That was key: set down the best rocks, take home whatever had a roughness to it. You lived life the hard way, but you coaxed tenderness wherever you could.

There are three spots along the beach where Kimberly likes to stop, linger, let the wind whip her hair around her face, and I stand apart from her and wait, hands around my ribs for warmth. When Kimberly was ten years old, a whale washed upon the beach. Kimberly, Nana, and their neighbors cut it up quietly, working through the night, carving it to the bone, hauling off the slippery blubber, divvying the ivory teeth like gold coins after a heist. They wasted nothing,

left only a patch of red sand on the beach that lasted for days. It was a horrible, bloody, smelly job, but they did it. They burned whale oil in their stoves that winter. Kimberly always comes back to that spot, kicks the sand around, trying to uncover something.

The second place she stops is where a red boulder washed up during a storm. The boulder was as large as a house. They cut that up too, saws and sledgehammers and sweat, and it mostly came apart under their blows, crumbled into gravel. I don't believe that story, but Kimberly still comes back, looking for pieces, and she claims she has found them, dark blood-clots, tiny as flecks of fingernail.

The third place is where the spit ends and the bay enters the sea. A bridge connects to the mainland. She always walks that far, and I let her go. A tiny figure in a yellow raincoat, trudging down the beach, walking a straight line through waves up to her knees.

The bridge across the mouth of the bay is narrow. One car at a time. I was too young to remember, but Nana was taking her baskets to sell in town. Commerce, that's what she called a load of baskets. Profit. What was the Yurok word for that? Kimberly didn't know. Nana was never a good driver, and her truck went over the side of the bridge into the water. For five days, Kimberly found Nana's baskets washed up on the beach. She took them home, loaded the baskets with rocks, pinned them down, and they have never moved. Since then, Kimberly refuses to leave the spit, she just walks this far and turns around, living the same life over and over again.

From time to time, myrtlewood stumps float downriver and spin off the bridge pilings, bob into the ocean, and wash on the beach, their roots writhing like wild hair. I wander among them and wait for Kimberly to return from the end of the spit. On some of the stumps, the roots still grip rocks, and I climb the stumps, curious to see what was important enough to hold onto. It must be good alluvial soil upriver, and I pick out gabbros, granites, pinks, whites and blacks, salt and pepper, dense enough to polish smooth as marble. Kimberly has a photograph of me, skinny kid in T-shirt and blue jeans, climbing a stump, my long black hair swinging forward, and I am tucking it back from my face. You would probably think it is a girl in the picture, but I don't mind; you have to understand something larger than the picture fits inside. Kimberly keeps it in a drawer with some old government papers with Nana's name on them. She likes that photograph of me the most, and she never talks about it because it means so much to her, but I just know she dreams it again and again. When we walk the beach and I say she is looking for something she has lost, that thing is me. She meets me now beside the stumps, she tucks my hair back from the wind, and I allow her this touch. I am thinking that at some time, later in my life, I will give anything to get that touch back, but I also know this means that at some time in my life I will have walked away from her.

One night I did run away, and my dad let me run. It was raining, and there were elk prints in the mud along the road. I ran through the darkness, the ocean on my right. The gravel of the road—reds and greens and grays imported from who knows where—crunched noisily under my feet with a million voices. I counted the white reflectors along the road until I heard my dad’s truck behind me, and even after climbing into the cab I made him keep going, keep driving, and we counted the reflectors together, numbers piling up, filling a space we were afraid of, because this kind of talking was easier than what we were driving away from. And then we turned around. I know how many reflectors it is to the bridge and back.

Some nights my mom and dad fight, and I find broken china on the kitchen floor, and I polish the pieces into soft, numb, glossy forms that feel warm against your skin and slide manageably on your palm. I always leave these on the kitchen table for my mom and dad as I prepare to leave for school. White and blue. Some afternoons, when I run into the kitchen for a snack, the pieces have rolled off the table and broken on the floor. You can see their sharp and tender hearts again.

When I got my driver’s license, I demanded a set of keys to the truck. I could flee and never look back, fly across that bridge forever, but I have always come back. You see, there are mornings when Kimberly awakens from dreaming, and her heart is sick and sad, but her mind is clear; we both know the feeling won’t last, and she touches my face, and I want that. She picks up one of my polished stones and rolls it in her palm, and when it comes back to me it is warm with her touch. I want that.

I have seen each of them touch my rocks in turn. If you have ever touched a softened smooth rock, you know the pleasure of this, and if you have a thousand rocks to choose from, dazzling white, flecked with blues, pinks, metallic sheens, then you have experienced something even more desired; this warmth on your skin, this one here, this pink one, the one you found because it was warmer than the rest, and it was warmer than the rest because someone you love had found it before you. You hope to find it warm tomorrow.

It is evening, and Kimberly sits with me as I read, while out in the garage the tumbler wears the black rock down. Kimberly asks about school for the coming week, but I do not answer this question because it means nothing to me. Then I hear a change in her voice, a longing and sweetness she uses only for me, and only in Yurok. “Nicky, it’s you and me always... I was only sixteen when I had you... when you were little you were pretty as a girl....” Her sparse words trail into silence. The ocean waves. I don’t say anything, just listen. How long can Kimberly and I keep this silence between us? The pink fog rolling across the water, pelicans spearing the fog, how can I put those into words?

Kimberly’s lips touch my hair, then I feel the cold on my back as she stands. She leads me into the bathroom, faces the mirror, studies her face and mine. We

both have straight, shiny black hair and dark eyes. She stares at the mirror longer than usual before she turns out the light, and when I see our black outlines, I feel a pain that, I believe, should not be mine.

She kisses me and says it won't be long until I'm alone. That's what I want isn't it? Be patient, she whispers. My dad works graveyard at the mill, and he zooms across that narrow bridge in the dark, the same bridge the school bus scrapes as it wobbles across in the day. The golden bear statues that guard each side of the bridge are tarnished green, one of them bent when Nana crashed her truck, the other one waiting. The concrete is crumbling away from the rebar like meat from a stew bone. Stumps of myrtlewood pile against the bridge like wrecked cars. It is only a matter of time, some night, too tired, too fast, his truck will fly from the road, crunch in a heap where it lands, the hardness of rock, the softness of water, it doesn't matter, he cannot fly, he was never meant to fly.

"That doesn't make me alone," I say. "What about you?"

I slide in front of her and look at the darkened mirror. Kimberly pulls my hair back from my face. We look identical. Kimberly might not be the only person taking long looks in the mirror at both ends of the day, but she is the only person desperate to find something, and this makes her the only person to fail. She lets go of my hair, and it falls into my eyes.

THE RED NUMBERS on the bathroom clock say one a.m. Curled on the mat on the floor, I am awakened by the low notes of waves pounding the beach, wind shuddering the house. I am alone. The door is open, and the wind and rain are angry in the house. The rock polisher in the garage is raging. I follow Kimberly's steps to the beach and across the sand. I find her in the surf, deeper than I have ever gone, stumbling and rolling. She lets me take her hand. It is hard to guide her; she tries to stand, stumbles to her knees again, and waves wash over us, tumble us around. I try to lift her up, and her hands grip my arms, and she is sobbing. Then I feel a hardness against her: her pockets are full of polished rocks. All the best rocks, the loveliest ones, pulling her down. I dig them from her pockets, set them in the water, more rocks, more rocks, until we can stand. Rocks I had collected and polished, now set free for the tide to tumble around again.

In the bathroom, Kimberly and I strip our clothes, shedding wetness like a layer of skin. It is dark, and we are shivering cold. The house full of rocks creaks in the wind.

"Where is my nightgown? I can't find it."

My foot touches the liquid of her silk nightgown and I reach down to hand it to her. Her hands pause, I feel them in the darkness, and she lifts the nightgown over my head and guides my arms to the sleeves. She runs her hands through my wet hair.

It doesn't matter to me. It only matters what it says about her.

She cups my face in her hands. She smooths my hair. "There's a Yurok word for you. For what you are. I can't remember it, though."

"There's no word for me."

"Pretty."

"There's no word for me." I am hugging my ribs in the thin nightgown, impatient for the word and wishing I could form the word in my mouth, on my lips. But impatience has never gotten me anything.

The moonlight finds a gap in the clouds as I sit in the window in the blue silk gown. Light and fine, it pulls on my skin no more than smoke. Kimberly sleeps beside me, covered with a blanket, dreaming of me, I just know she is, and I curl beside her, something solid and heavy against her belly. Someday I will pay for this. I will carry this memory inside. I won't talk. Don't get me wrong: I have no trouble expressing my feelings, but try to understand: it is wordless what I feel. The pain in my life doesn't play out that way. You have to look deeper and you have to just know, without words, what you've found.

For the first time in my life I dream. I dream about a storm, waves strong enough to flip logs, tossing myrtlewood stumps like plastic floats. In the morning I walk along a low tide, and the sunlight reveals what the waves at night have done. Crabs, tossed far up the beach by the waves, scurry back to the water, but the water's too far, and the crabs dry in the sun. Seagulls, terns, and crows neatly flip the crabs over to peck out their soft bellies.

By sunrise Kimberly and I are still curled together, and I slip loose, pad into the garage, and switch off the machine. The black rock is a perfect, gleaming egg. It rolls in a tight circle in my palm, the way an egg must roll to stay in its nest and keep from breaking. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever made. I grip it tightly in my hand. I do not want to show this one to anybody. Perfect, seamless black.

Kimberly has followed me into the garage. She hugs me. I squirm out of her arms. I have something all my own. The obsidian egg. My black pearl. Worth waiting for. I press it to my cheek as I have seen Kimberly do a thousand times. I bend my head forward, let my hair slide off my shoulders and around my face.

"That is the very color." Kimberly blinks, yawns, rubs her arms.

"What is the word?" I clench the rock so tightly that if it were an egg it would crush.

"I don't remember. I'm sorry."

"I'll wait for you." I rest my head on Kimberly's shoulder, and I set the rock on the counter. As Kimberly holds me tight, I begin to cry, or does she begin to cry, I can't be sure, we are both crying, and we watch the black rock wobble to the edge. Don't fall.