

The Ocean's Treasure

I've always felt the pull of the water. When I was younger, my family would walk to the beach and we'd look for treasure in the sand. My brother would look for treasure chests and pirate coins with hopeful eyes. When he got tired, he would stare at the dogs roaming the sand, longing to join them.

My mother's gaze would find small bits of sea glass, polished by surf and sand until they shone like jewels in the sunlight. My father would hold her hand, content with the treasures he already had. As for me, I would be with my treasure, down at the water's edge, feeling the tide swirl against my ankles, washing sand off my skin and replacing it with drops of salty water.

I loved the way the water tickled me. I loved the caress of the waves when I was old enough to swim out into the ocean's embrace. I felt safe as the water enveloped me.

Once, we went to a surf beach. Watching from the sand, I was thrilled by the heave of the waves, the playful crash of the ocean as it slapped the shore. I wanted nothing more than to go and play and join the ride of the sea. My father yelled after me as I ran down the shore but I didn't care. I only wanted the ocean.

When I first splashed into the water, I knew something was different. The ocean was more menacing than I had expected, the waves bigger and more forceful than they had looked. Then a wave came in. I tumbled beneath the surface as the wave roared above me, losing all sense of direction as water filled my nose, my ears, my mouth. My leg hit the sand hard and the embrace of the water became an endless shove.

My fear grew as the ocean tumbled me. It didn't listen to my pitiful cries. I was lucky because arms caught me, lifted me above the surface and carried me on to the sand. I coughed up water as my father held me and my mother told me that I had to be very careful in the ocean. She said she knew I

Then a wave came in. I tumbled beneath the surface as the wave roared above me, losing all sense of direction as water filled my nose, my ears, my mouth

loved the water, but the water wasn't my friend — the water was dangerous, a murderous thing. I didn't believe her then. The water was just playing, not realising that I was delicate. Although the ocean had scared me, I still believed that it was my friend.

Back at our beach the next day, the ocean was like a sad dog. It knew it had done something wrong, it knew it had hurt me. I could feel its moping eyes watching my every move, watching with regret that I was staying on the sand. It lapped pitifully at the shore, calling me with a stricken whine.

When I finally gave in and sat down in the shallows, the water washed kelp into my lap. The ocean was saying it was sorry, giving up a small part of itself to me. I took the kelp home, a gift from my friend to treasure.

I forgave the ocean and things returned to normal. I would dive beneath the surface to float on my back and stare at the way the sun danced on the water. It was as if the ocean was putting on a show for me, and the sun was the starring dancer. I could watch for hours — but I always had to go back up into the air to breathe.

Panic started to claw at my heart. My breath started to claw at my throat. Let me go, this isn't a game!

One day, I realised that the ocean had never been my friend. I stared out at the wide expanse of blue before racing in. I dived beneath the surface, drifting down to the sand. I twisted on to my back and watched the ocean direct the sun through its skin, the sparkles of light playing with the water. I lay in the current, moving only when the ocean moved, drifting when the ocean drifted. The world was completely still for me, hanging in time.

I moved lazily, the warmth making me sleepy. Then I felt kelp curl around my leg. The next wave pushed me, twisting it tighter. I had already been below for a while and I needed to breathe. I tugged my leg but another bit of kelp snagged it. Another wave moved me away.

Panic started to claw at my heart. My breath started to claw at my throat. Let me go, this isn't a game! I cried. But the water sparkled, laughing. I thought of the gift of kelp the ocean had given me. Now I was the kelp's gift to the ocean. I struggled, kicking for the surface as teasing light caressed my

skin. In that moment, I knew that I was the treasure that the ocean wanted.

My breath hitched as the water enveloped me, pulling me down into its cool embrace. I was the sea glass, the pirate chest, the treasures born and not found. As the ocean was my treasure, I was the ocean's. With that, the ocean claimed me, sucking me down until my vision darkened. This time, my dad wasn't there to pull me out.

When I woke, I was on the sand, surrounded by people. I heaved water out of my lungs, salt thick on my tongue. The ocean was angry — I could tell in the swell that crashed on to the sand. Its treasure had been stolen from it and it wanted me back. I could hear the lifeguard telling me something, hear the exclamations and concern in people's voices around me, but all I could focus on was the anger of the ocean. My mother was right. The ocean was murderous and dangerous. And it wanted me.

I avoid the ocean now — I never walk on the beach and I turn away from the sight of the water sparkling on the horizon. I never take the scenic route if it's by the seaside. I try my best to evade the sea but it still longs for me. I hear it calling as I lie on my bed in the dark, feeling its heartbeat as it rolls upon the shore. I hear the desperate plea in its voice and smell the sweet ocean salt carried on the breeze. But I ignore it all. I was foolish to believe it was my friend, for the ocean is dangerous. I will never forget that.

Words by Julia Wilkins. age 13
Pictures by Cathy Li. age 13