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Hidden in the Strand

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Hidden in the Strand

Laura Havice

Winner of the Prize for Creative
Fiction in the 2004
Creative Writing Competition
Sponsored by the UNF Writing Program
and the Department of English.

My grandfather lived by the sea, a mile or so from the broken edges of North Carolina. He brought my grandmother there before he had a whisper of my father and carved a stone cottage that served as sentinel to my grandmother's vegetables. I am told the first time I came to Leigh Island, I cast myself into the dunes and proclaimed, "I am home." I must take this on faith; I was only three.

Each year I retraced my steps and found myself cosseted in the salted hammock that hung from my grandparents' porch. I stayed two weeks, my entire spring vacation, before my parents ferried me home. The year I turned seven, the chicken-pox turned by vacation to baking soda baths. As a gift, my parents sent me to the island for the summer. The moment we arrived, my grandfather hurried me from the car and pulled me over the stepping-stones.

"You made it. Just look." His voice a gruff song.

The moon washed the ocean in ribbons of light and turned the sand to alabaster. Each layer of waves pushed glistening stones toward the shore until they rested, quiet. Down the beach a few stones moved. I did not understand these stones skimming the sand. I held them in my sight and walked until my toes grazed the sea oats.

"They've come to nest," said my grandfather.

Another moved closer. The moon left a blanket on its back.

"Where are they from, Gramps?"

"Africa, I suppose."

I giggled at this proposal and he pressed a worn finger to my lips.

"They'll sing if you listen. They swim for months and months just to visit us. Every year it's the same."

Their bodies shifted over the sand until they rested a space away, their eyes dark pearls. We said, hidden in the fan of the oats, and watched them spin a nest. I leaned against my grandfather's shins and listened as he whispered stories as fat and delicate as those eggs lining the cool sand. That first night we stayed until the sky bled, the secrets hidden in the strand.

We did not speak as we walked to the house. My grandmother surprised us with pancakes. I felt delicious sitting there liking syrup from my salty lips.

"You're a fine bunch of nuts, staying in the cold to watch them loggers lyin' in the sand. If you get sick, don't come cryin' to me for a moment." She grumbled on about those damned turtles as she tugged on my knotted hair.

"Gran, you could come out. Come out to see them."

"Now that's a grand idea, wastin' my time to gawk at some turtles. The Heavenly Father didn't make enough minutes for me to toss some away on them."

So the nights were left in our hands, and we watched the turtles weave upon the tides. Gradually their numbers dropped until one night no turtles came. And again the night was just for sleeping.

We missed the first night the hatchlings wound their way to the sea although their story lingered on the

beach. Some broke into my grandmother's garden and died under her tomatoes; others found the road instead of the waters.

"They head into the light even if it's a porch light," whispered my grandfather.

Our midnight watches became crusades and we were knights of the round-table. My grandfather took the north and I the south end of the beach. We galloped through the sea oats searching for stragglers and scooped them into our palms. The unfurling waves became our Camelot. We shouted the locations of the deserters and time after time we danced through the masses on our toes only to open the cocoon of our fingers beneath the Atlantic currents.

My grandfather named them and then told me where they were heading. Kings, pirates, singers, toy-makers, ballerinas, musicians and wanderers sailed free from our fingers. My stories mingled with his, and our favorites became adventures for grandmother over breakfast.

Each year I came with the turtles to nest, my grandfather watched for our arrival from the edge of his porch. On the occasions I could not stay to watch the hatchlings, he would send me letters with their tales. Those letters held the ocean in their folds and I could smell the salt before I opened them. I would sit, curled upon myself and read the damp scrawl, the gulls nipping at my memories, my pillows turning to sand. My lungs missed the gales that pulled my grandfather there so long ago. Sometimes sand fell from the letters, and I could see my grandmother watching from the porch, watching as he ambled over the beach picking shells.

The year I turned 23, my grandfather's heart grew lazy with age. He lost his stories and no longer walked the beach. While the turtles flirted with the surf and my grandfather faded into his rocking chair, I was bound to the city, struggling with rent and jobs. I called each day and, eventually, he stopped walking to the phone.

"He's getting old, and for the longest time his heart just didn't know it. I suppose now it does." Her words were quiet with reflection.

"Gran, I want to be there! I miss you both so much."

"And just what good would that do, eh? He knows you love him, and that ain't going to change. There's no need to lose your job and home just to sit rockin' with him.

And stop those damned tears, what good, I ask you! What good, eh? You come in the fall when you planned; them turtles will just toast in the sun otherwise."

September came, and with it the first thoughts of winter. I did not want to come to see those damned turtles running, their stupid souls leading them to my grandmother's vegetables. Foolish creatures that came back, again and again, to see the cottage where my grandfather once lived, and perhaps trip unto his grave and vanish in the morning sun while they dreamed of cool waters. My grandmother was waiting on the porch when I arrived, watching me pull my bags from the cab, probably wondering what thoughts littered my mind, and if I would leave as I had the night his grave was pressed.

I smiled.

"So she comes to talk to the turtles and see her poor Gran. They keep lookin' back here each night, I think they're waitin' for them stories." She

stepped from the porch and pulled a bag from my hands, "I've missed those breakfasts, you know."

"Oh, Gran... I've missed those too."

We talked, small things, the city, jobs, the new light they were putting in on the island before we finally gave up. Silence filled their home, her home. Bits of moonlight wandered over my grandfather's rocker, and I imagined him biting a toothpick and waiting.

Outside, I walked to the edge of the dunes, my toes touched the oats, and I watched a small devil work its way to the tip of my sandal. It moved over my toes and settled on the swell of my foot. I had no stories in my mind; he would have no place to go, no grand life, no new beginning. He would expire upon my toes and I would not feel his loss. I would not. Turtles did not become gents that roamed the seas and they did not fall in love with some ragged coast in North Carolina. They did not. They did not.

"You know, your Gramps sat out here until the end, every night talkin' to them turtles. He would read them stories when he couldn't remember this own. When the reading got to be too much, he started talkin' about old summers, pancakes, knights and such. I told him he loved them turtles more than anything."

"Not more than anything, Gran."

"No, maybe not more than anything."

The wind stung the salt in my eyes and I could not bring myself to look at her.

"So now, what are we to do with all these turtles? I always supposed they'd make a fine soup, just add some cream and garlic."

My lips curved, and I bent to pick the gent from my toes. He snuggled

in my palm. I walked on tip-toe at times over others, intent on finding distant shores. The night cooled with each step; the wind wrapped around my shoulders and held me close. I leaned into the tides, warm water covered by feed, and I opened my hands.