

3rd Place

Glass Bottle Half Full of Sand

R.K. (JH 3)

The holidayers stole sand. Adults took pinches, teenagers fistfuls, toddlers bucketfuls. As a child, I deliberately tripped the toddlers, making them drop their buckets – my family had been fishermen for generations, and the beach was *our* home. Ours to enjoy. My grandfather would chide me gently - “Share, Munchkins” - sit me on his lap, and recount The Great Sanding of 1972.

“Decades ago, the beachers despised those who took pleasure from our beach without experiencing its hardships. We decided to check holidayers for stolen sand at the beach exits. If they had stolen sand, we would make them put it back. A decade on, we had abundant amounts of sand, more than we needed. The sand soaked the water and fish died.

The God at Sea was displeased, Munchkins. He wanted to punish us.

One day I returned from the sea to the beach village. Everything, Munchkins, was Sanded.”

My grandfather would wipe his eyes. “God sanded your grandmother - and I dug her out.”

Grandfather lifted Grandmother out of the sand covering the floor of his house. Her mouth spilt sand when he shook her. Grandfather took half a bottle’s worth of sand that day. He kept it as a reminder that we must not give away all, but not keep all.

“One day,” he said, “you will learn.”

When Grandfather died, my family took him to the swooping rocks and did the tradition of throwing his corpse into the sea. We threw his bottle after him, just as he wished.

I left my town that year. Screw fishing, I wanted an office seat. News of my home beach decaying - a result of its children, myself included leaving their homes for the city - reached me, but I had learnt how to speak the city way, dine the city way. My wife was a city girl.

My wife fell ill. Smoking had blacked darling Jenny’s lungs; the doctor recommended Sea Air as a 21st-century medic should. Jenny’s last two months, he claimed, would be easier in the salty air.

I took leave of my work for a while and carted Jenny back to my hometown.

Muddy brown bit into the once-white beach. We stayed at my uncle’s, who spread his battered finances, begging me to help. I agreed. Every day, I set Jenny out on the deck for air and went out fishing, just as Grandfather did.

And just like Grandfather, I returned from sea one afternoon to see a Sanding.

I had never learned, after all. I found myself wading through the sand in my uncle’s house, searching for Jenny... My hand touched a cold face, and I parted the sand to dig the body out.

Jenny peeked out, her mouth choked with sand.

The sand soaked up my tears in an instant.

After her funeral, I took Jenny out onto the cliff and threw her into the waves. I threw a bottle half full of sand after her, too.