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Sandscape

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The man ambled along the beach, pausing now and then to stoop. He had come from the road which ended at the beach, treading his way carefully through the dry sand. From the small group of picnickers whom he had just left came occasional anxious glances, but he wandered on oblivious of them.

He was barefoot and from beneath his feet came the small squeaks that dry sand makes on a very hot summer day, much like the small squeaks that snow makes on a very cold winter day. It was like little explosions at each step, with the coarse sand melting immediately on touch. He knelt, scooped up a handful and squeezed it between his fingers. The sand ebbed away like some dry liquid, leaving his hand feeling dusty and rough.

He stood again, and the stiff clean breeze from the ocean coursed through his hair, reminding him of the touch of a woman once, a long time ago. The wind rippled against his skin; so cool . . . so different from the sultry dampness of the city behind him.

The texture of the sand changed beneath his feet now, the little explosions were gone. The sand was firm and damp and cool—no—cold. He walked on, following a receding wave until it returned and water raced around him, until it in turn receded, leaving him wet to the knees. The soaked legs of his trousers clung to him, clammy—yet pleasant.

He walked on down the beach, placing his steps carefully so that each wave at its highest point just gently washed his toes. His foot struck something, and he dropped to his knees again, to search around him with his hands. He found it and held it before him. He turned it, touching it tenderly, feeling the smoothness of the ridges and the roughness of the grooves. He traced the spiraling line to its conical point and knew that it was a conch shell, something he had seen a long time ago. Standing up and cradling the shell in the crook of his elbow, caressing it with his other hand; he turned back toward the step that told him he had strayed too far.