

2nd Place, Fiction

Song of the Sea
By Caroline Greene

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Sunlight fell onto Ushio's face, the warmth soaking into her sallow skin. She felt the rough asphalt of the road turn into sand beneath her feet, seagulls cawing at her from above. The sea's salty breeze stung her skin as she walked closer, feeling the slight spray of water crash onto her bare ankles. Her straw hat was tied down to her chin, though she hung onto it just to make sure it didn't fly away.

Just like every other day, Ushio made the small trek from her beach house down to the sandy shoreline. Her steps were exactly the same, one foot in front of the other, the scent of the sea leading her to safety. Every day, she always had the same exact wish: *Maybe the sea will wash me away.* The tide did not scare her, nor did the tumbling waves that yearned to eat her up at any given second. She was independent, raising her chin towards the mysterious depths, craving muse.

Taking a few steps back, far enough that she was away from the tide, she sank the legs of her easel in the deep sand. Her canvas was blank, and she reached out, brushing her fingertips along the bumpy surface. She made out the shape of a seashell, an arrow dwarf triton, the kind her mother used to wear around her neck.

Her mother, Yuzuki, had made necklaces. When she was a child, Ushio would run her fingers down the shells and beads that her mother used, memorizing them by touch. The hemp string felt rough on her small fingers, and the beads all felt the same. Yuzuki would swat at Ushio's chubby fingers carefully, but Ushio wasn't sure if she was being gentle for her sake, or the sake of the beads. However, Yuzuki did allow Ushio to

sit and listen. She heard the soft noise the hemp made as it brushed through the beads, her mother's nimble fingers twisting the rope together to create her tiny masterpieces.

Yuzuki did not stay for long. In fact, she was more of a whisper than anything permanent. She left when Ushio was five, not bothering to say goodbye to her only child. Instead, she left the tiny triton seashell, beaded and bound together by worn rope. Ushio kept the necklace, but only in a box, stored beneath her bed.

Art came naturally to her, and other people noticed her abilities early on. Her paintings sold at a steady, constant pace, much to her surprise. She found nothing special in the old memories that she splattered across the brisk canvas, but could not have ever imagined that others found them so interesting. People travelled across the world just to watch her work, but she enjoyed it the most when they decided to work alongside her. She could reach out, feel the emotion resonating on their own canvas, and allow it to wash over her. Colors collided in her mind's eye, coming together and bounding into each other, almost like the waves against her skin. Everyone who met her always left with a cleaner aura, or at least a softened composure. Their tensions and worries had been washed away, just by painting in the calm solace of the shoreline.

Carefully, Ushio picked up the small box of acrylics that she had placed on the sand and pulled out a few colors. She felt their caps, the small dents and creases in each so unique that she could tell the colors apart. Ivory had a small chip on the side of the lid, whereas navy was chipped at the bottom. She had a small microfiber rag attached to white, so that it would differ from black. She used them both so often that they had the same amount of wear. It made it difficult to tell them apart. Ushio mixed the white with a bit of brown and yellow, creating a soft cream color. Feeling the tips of her

brushes, she chose the most slender, taking it up tenderly in her poised hands. She touched the canvas with her fingers and, after hesitating only a second, she started to paint.

Dancing was a natural part of the process. She found rhythm in the way her arms flittered about the easel, her paintbrush leaving butterfly kisses wherever it decided to land. She lost herself in the motion, all of her senses taking over into the memories that lay about her in the form of color and shape. Her grandmother had taught her to dance two years after Yuzuki left. Her grandmother's name was Maiha, and the way she moved resembled those of the ocean, Ushio thought. The tide crashed and retreated from the shoreline, just as her grandmother twirled and spun. She felt the breeze Maiha would create, and just as the salty breeze of the ocean, it had always led her to safety. In her youth, Maiha had been a geisha, and it was always her silk yukatas that Ushio enjoyed the most. Their silky touch caused her to shiver, running her small hands up and down the rich fabrics. In America, yukatas weren't worn for any special occasion, which only left Ushio yearning for a taste of the Japanese festivals and ceremonies where the women would dress in those beautiful robes.

Maiha had passed away when Ushio was sixteen, leaving behind her robes for her granddaughter to keep as her own.

Usho cleaned her paintbrush, dipped it in an off white, and began to add layer and depth to her painting. This twisted little seashell had dips and crevices that were almost impossible for her to recreate, but she held the shell firmly in her hand, memorizing every inch. With her fingers, she could replicate everything she felt onto the canvas.

Footsteps broke her concentration, but she did not falter. People visited from all over the place, but the air around her seemed much more tense than usual. This was someone special, someone that she hadn't seen in quite some time.

"Ushio," Yuzuki spoke. It was quiet, and Ushio took in the way her mother's voice sounded. It was rough, with years and years of age ripening it at the edges. Ushio did not hesitate, speaking quickly. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes." Ushio responded, nodding softly. Her brushstrokes slowed down. "I do. You are Yuzuki Tsukino."

A slight hum came from her mother's throat. Ushio stopped, letting out a small sigh as she cleaned the end of her brush.

"Have you come to watch me paint?" She asked, turning her head to speak over her shoulder.

"No, I came to say hello. I missed you."

Ushio laid the paintbrush on the small bar the easel provided for resting brushes and cups of dirtied water. It was strange to hear that voice and to feel her mother's presence behind her. Ushio resembled her mother's features in every way, right down to the small skin tag behind her ear that she brushed her finger over every time she was anxious. However, she and her mother held very opposite airs about themselves.

Yuzuki was confident and conceited, while Ushio was more reserved and humbled.

"It took you quite some time to finally miss me."

She felt her mother flinch, though she did not mean it in any kind of hateful way. It was the truth. Five years old had been quite some time ago. For an entire year afterwards, she spent her free time making necklaces in hopes that her mother would

miraculously return, proud of her independence and creativity. Proud enough to call her a daughter. She had spent the majority of her teenage years trying to understand the reasons her mother left her behind, while her twenties had been spent allowing herself to go through the grieving process. It was when she hit the age of twenty-eight, she moved on. Six years later, thirty-four years old, she was more at peace with herself than she had ever been.

"I'm sorry, Ushio. There were terms that you just wouldn't understand." Yuzuki mumbled, stepping closer. Ushio heard the crunch of seashells. She wondered if there were any tritons among them. "But, you can understand now. Ushio, my little seastar, I never meant to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me." Ushio shook her head, a soft smile growing on her pale lips.
"I was disappointed, but you did not hurt me."

"Maiha made it sound like things were so bad -- "

"She softened the rough edges. You never really hurt me. We weren't close enough. You were never *really* there for me...and you still aren't really here for me, are you?" Yuzuki tried to jump in, to defend her actions, but Ushio shushed her quickly.

"Just listen to the waves. Listen to the crash, mother. I forgave you a long time ago. There's no reason to settle any grudges, simply because there aren't any. You mean just as little to me as a stranger coming to watch me paint. Maiha raised me well and taught me the song of the sea." Ushio turned towards the sound of the waves, a soft look coming over her face. "Maiha taught me forgiveness."

There was a rustle, and Ushio felt Yuzuki sit on the soft sand to her left. An air of uncertainty hung over her mother's head, creating a buzzing tension between them.

"Why did you leave?"

The tide was coming in. Yuzuki let out a long sigh, digging her ankles deeper into the sand.

"Your father was gone. Things were just hard, Ushio. After the accident..." Her mother paused. "After the accident, I lost my mind, just as you lost your sight."

Ushio did not remember the accident, though she had been told that it had taken her father's life. The only thing she truly lost was her sight, and really, it wasn't so much of a loss as everyone had initially expected. It took some time, but she learned to use her other senses. Her life had been quite sheltered, and the people around her were careful and kind. Over time, she forgot the faces of her family, and eventually forgot her own. However, she never forgot color. Even in her dreams, the colors wrapped themselves around her mind, swirling together, creating patterns and abstract shapes. It's up to her to shape these images together, to create these pieces of art based on the colors that appear in her dreams.

Ushio did not remember her father, but he was the love of Yuzuki's life, and Ushio was the love of his. This was what Maiha would tell her when she reminisced about her son. His eyes were like the nighttime stars, she said, and they twinkled every single time he would see Ushio's face. Sometimes, it bothered Ushio that there was so much love that she couldn't even recall, but love is just like a human: it dies with age.

"I never stopped loving you, Ushio, but it was too difficult." Yuzuki sighs, and Ushio realizes that she is close to tears. "I just wanted to tell you why I left. I felt like you deserved that."

"I was a good child. I never gave you any grief, Yuzuki. There has to be more of a reason that you are here. If you had truly missed me, you would have been back a long time ago."

"Ushio... you're right. I needed this for myself. I've been diagnosed with Huntington's disease, and my future is very uncertain. If I am going to die, I wanted to do so with a clearer conscience."

"Ah, Huntington's disease," Ushio felt the sky grow overcast, clouds blocking out the sun. She allowed moments of silence to hang between them. Seagulls spoke to them with their loud squawks, hopping around on their thin legs, battling the loud sea breeze. "Do you have a family back home, Yuzuki?"

"Yes. I'm not going to lie to you." Yuzuki nods, hesitantly. "I started a new family, quite some time ago. I had two boys, and I told them all about you."

"Do they ever want to meet me?"

"Of course they do. Koichi and Koji, they have always been so intrigued by you." Ushio heard a smile in Yuzuki's tone.

"I wouldn't mind meeting them sometime or another. I am always here, in this beach house, living with a simple roommate who is nothing but a blessing. He watches out for me. I'm not helpless, but I'm also not fully able, either." Ushio chuckles at herself, brushing her fingers over the wrinkles in her hands.

"It's very kind of you to take up that offer. I was imagining that you would be more like me. I would have sent my mother away if she dared wait so long to come and talk to me again. Instead, you're more like your father."

"Maiha always told me we had the same personalities. Isn't that another reason you left?"

"Your father chose you over me, Ushio, and I wasn't able to handle that. He gave his life to make sure you did not get hurt in that car accident. He chose to protect you over me. You still lost your eyesight. If he had chosen me, he would have still been alive --"

"But I would be dead."

Death could come at any time. When Maiha died, Ushio found herself at an unbelievable loss for words. Her grandmother went so peacefully in her sleep, without any warning or sign that it was time to go. She helped her grandfather pull together a small shrine in their living room, and each day, she relit the candles that smelled of ocean breeze. Maiha was someone that you never thought would actually die. After her grandfather joined Maiha in their eternal slumber, Ushio had packed everything she owned and moved to the small beach house. She felt closer to her family here.

The sudden drops of rain ushered Ushio back to her house. She stood, brushing loose sand off of her white skirt. She felt something being pushed into her hands, only to realize that Yuzuki was offering her a present.

"Here, please, take this as my final gift. I know I did not give you much, but..."

Ushio shook the box lightly, noticing that, despite the cloth that was wrapped around the inside, there was the small sound of seashells rattling together in harmony.

"These were the remaining shells that I had leftover from our lives in the past. I thought they might make for good subjects."

"Thank you, Yuzuki. You take care. Tell your boys that I will see them one day."

She said, "I will," and left.