

# The Sea Shell, Ray Bradbury

## The Sea Shell

He wanted to get out and run, bounding over hedges, kicking tin cans down the alley, shouting at all the windows for the gang to come and play. The sun was up and the day was bright, and here he was swaddled with bed clothes, sweating and scowling, and not liking it at all.

Johnny Bishop sat up in bed, sniffing. Orange juice, cough medicine and the perfume of his mother, lately gone from the room, hung in a shaft of sunlight that struck down to heat his toes.

The entire lower half of the patch-work quilt was a circus banner of red, green, purple and blue. It practically yelled color into his eyes. Johnny fidgeted.

"I wanna go out," he complained softly. "Darn it. Darn it."

A fly buzzed, bumping again and again at the window pane with a dry staccato of its transparent wings.

Johnny looked at it, understanding how it wanted out, too.

He coughed a few times and decided that it was not the cough of a decrepit old man, but a youngster of eleven years who, next week this time, would be loose again to filch apples from the orchard trees or bean teacher with spit-balls.

He heard the trot of crisp footsteps in the freshly polished hall, the door opened, and mother was there. "Young man," she said, "what are you doing sitting up in bed? Lie down."

"I feel better already. Honest."

"The doctor said two more days."

"Two!" Consternation was the order of the moment. "Do I hafta be sick that long?"

Mom laughed. “Well—not sick. But in bed, anyway.” She spanked his left cheek very lightly. “Want some more orange juice?”  
“With or without medicine?”

“Medicine?”

“I know you. You put medicine in my orange juice so I can’t taste it. but I taste it anyway.”

“This time—no medicine.”

“What’s that in your hand?”

“Oh, this?” Mother held out a round gleaming object. Johnny took it. It was hard and shiny and—pretty. “Doctor Hull dropped by a few minutes ago and left it. He thought you might have fun with it.”

Johnny looked palely dubious. His small hands brushed the slick surface. “How can I have fun with it? I don’t even know what it is!”  
Mother’s smile was better than sunshine. “It’s a shell from the sea, Johnny. Doctor Hull picked it up on the Pacific shore last year when he was out there.”

“Hey, that’s all right. What kind of shell is it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Some form of sea life probably lived in it once, a long time ago.”

Johnny’s brows went up. “Lived in this? Made it a home?”

“Yes.”

“Aw—really?”

She adjusted it in his hand. “If you don’t believe me, listen for yourself, young man. Put this end—here—against your ear.”

“Like this?” He raised the shell to his small pink ear and pressed it tight.

“Now, what do I do?”

Mother smiled. “Now, if you’re very quiet, and listen closely, you’ll hear something very, very familiar.”

Johnny listened. His ear opened imperceptibly like a small flower opening, waiting.

A titanic wave came in on a rocky shore and smashed itself down. "The sea!" cried Johnny Bishop. "Oh, Mom! The ocean! The waves! The sea!"

Wave after wave came in on that distant, craggy shore. Johnny closed his eyes tight black and a smile folded his small face exactly in half. Wave after pounding wave roared in his small pinkly alert ear.

"Yes, Johnny," said mother. "The sea."

It was late afternoon. Johnny lay back on his pillow, cradling the sea shell in his small hands, smiling, and looking out the large window just to the right side of the bed. He had a good view of the vacant lot across the street.

The kids were scuddling around over there like a cluster of indignant beetles, each one complaining, "Aw, I shot you dead first! Now, I got you first! Aw, you don't play fair! I won't play unless I can be Captain!"

Their voices seemed so far away, lazy, drifting on a tide of sun. The sunlight was just like deep yellow, lambent water, lapping at the summer, full tide. Slow, languorous, warm, lazy. The whole world was over its head in that tide and everything was slowed down.

The clock ticked slower. The street car came down the avenue in warm metal slow motion. It was almost like seeing a motion film that is losing speed and noise. Everything was softer. Nothing seemed to count as much.

He wanted to get out and play, badly. He kept watching the kids climbing the fences, playing soft ball, roller skating in the warm languor. His head felt heavy, heavy, heavy. His eyelids were window sashes

pulling down, down. The sea shell lay against his ear. He pressed it close.

Pounding, drumming, waves broke on a shore. A yellow sand shore. And when the waves went back out they left foam, like the suds of beer, on the sand. The suds broke and vanished, like dreams. And more waves came with more foam.

And the sand crabs tumbled, salt-wet, scuttling brown, in the ripples. Cool green water pounding cold on the sand. The very sound of it conjured up visions; the ocean breeze soothed Johnny Bishop's small body.

Suddenly the hot afternoon was no longer hot and depressing. The clock started ticking faster. The street cars clanged metal quickly. The slowness of the summer world was spanked to crisp life by the pound-pound of waves on an unseen and brilliant beach.

This sea shell would be a valuable thing in the days to come. Whenever the afternoons stretched long and tiresome, he would press it around the lobe and rim of his ear and vacation on a wind-blown peninsula far, far off.

Four thirty, said the clock. Time for medicine, said mother's exact trot in the gleaming hall.

She offered the medicine in a silver spoon. It tasted like, unfortunately—medicine. Johnny made a special kind of bitter face. Then when the taste was modified by a drink of refrigerated milk he looked up at the nice soft white face of mom and said, "Can we go to the seashore some day, huh?"

"I think we can. Maybe the Fourth of July, if your father gets his two weeks then. We can drive to the coast in two days, stay a week, and come back."

Johnny settled himself, his eyes funny. “I’ve never really seen the ocean, except in movies. It smells different and looks different than Fox Lake, I bet. It’s bigger, and a heck of a lot better. Gosh, I wish I could go now.”

“It won’t be long. You children are so impatient.”

“I can’t help it.”

Mother sat down on the bed and held his hand. The things she said he couldn’t understand fully, but some of them made sense. “If I had to write a philosophy of children, I guess I’d title it impatience. Impatience with everything in life.

You must have things—right now—or else. Tomorrow’s so far away, and yesterday is nothing. You’re a tribe of potential Omar Khayyam’s, that’s what. When you’re older, you’ll understand that waiting, planning, being patient, are attributes of maturity; that is, of being grown up.”

“I don’t wanna be patient. I don’t like being in bed. I want to go to the sea shore.”

“And last week it was a catcher’s mitt you wanted—right now. Please, pretty please, you said. Oh, gosh, Mom, it’s elegant. It’s the last one at the store.”

Mom was very strange, all right. She talked some more:

“I remember, I saw a doll once when I was a girl. I told my mother about it, said it was the last one for sale. I said I was afraid it would be sold before I could get it. The truth of the matter is there were a dozen others just like it. I couldn’t wait. I was impatient, too.”

Johnny shifted on the bed. His eyes widened and got full of blue light.

“But, Mom, I don’t want to wait. If I wait too long, I’ll be grown up, and then it won’t be any fun.”

That silenced mother. She just sort of sat there, her hands tightened, her eyes got all wet after a while, because she was thinking, maybe, to

herself. She closed her eyes, opened them again, and said,  
“Sometimes—I think children know more about living than we do. Sometimes I think you’re—right. But I don’t dare tell you. It isn’t according to the rules—”

“What rules, Mom?”

“Civilization’s. Enjoy yourself, while you are young. Enjoy yourself, Johnny.” She said it strong, and funnylike.

Johnny put the shell to his ear. “Mom. Know what I’d like to do? I’d like to be at the seashore right now, running toward the water, holding my nose and yelling, ‘Last one in is a double-darned monkey!’” Johnny laughed.

The phone rang downstairs. Mother walked to answer it.

Johnny lay there, quietly, listening.

Two more days. Johnny tilted his head against the shell and sighed. Two more whole days. It was dark in his room. Stars were caught in the square glass corrals of the big window. A wind moved the trees. Roller skates rotated, scraping, on the cement sidewalks below.

Johnny closed his eyes. Downstairs, silverware was being clattered at the dinner table. Mom and Pop were eating. He heard Pop laughing his deep laughter.

The waves still came in, over and over, on the shore inside the sea shell. And—something else.

“Down where the waves lift, down where the waves play, down where the gulls swoop low on a summer’s day—”

“Huh?” Johnny listened. His body stiffened. He blinked his eyes. Softly, way off.

“Stark ocean sky, sunlight on waves. Yo ho, heave ho, heave ho, my braves—”

It sounded like a hundred voices singing to the creak of oarlocks.

“Come down to the sea in ships—”

And then another voice, all by itself, soft against the sound of waves and ocean wind. “Come down to the sea, the contortionist sea, where the great tides wrestle and swell. Come down to the salt in the glittering brine, on a trail that you’ll soon know well—”

Johnny pulled the shell from his head, stared at it.

“Do you want to come down to the sea, my lad, do you want to come down to the sea? Well, take me by the hand, my lad, just take me by the hand, my lad, and come along with me!”

Trembling, Johnny clamped the shell to his ear again, sat up in bed, breathing fast. His small heart leaped and hit the wall of his chest. Waves pounded, crashing on a distant shore.

“Have you ever seen a fine conch-shell shaped and shined like a pearl corkscrew? It starts out big and it ends up small, seemingly ending with nothing at all, but aye lad, it ends where the sea-cliffs fall; where the sea-cliffs fall to the blue!”

Johnny’s fingers tightened on the circular marks of the shell. That was right. It went around and around and around until you couldn’t see it going around anymore.

Johnny’s lips tightened. What was it Mother had said? Children. The—the philosophy—what a big word! Of children! Impatience. Impatience! Yes, yes, he was impatient! Why not? His free hand clenched into a tiny hard white fist, pounding against the quilted covers.

“Johnny!”

Johnny yanked the shell from his ear, hid it quickly under the sheets. Father was coming down the hall from the stairs.

“Hi there, son.”

“Hi, Dad!”

Mother and Father were fast asleep. It was long after midnight. Very softly Johnny extracted the precious shell from under the covers and raised it to his ear.

Yes. The waves were still there. And far off, the creening of oarlocks, the snap of wind in the stomach of a mainsail, the singing chant of boatmen faintly drifting on a salt sea wind. He held the shell closer and yet closer.

Mother's footsteps came along the hall. She turned in at Johnny's room. "Good morning, son! Wake yet?"

The bed was empty. There was nothing but sunlight and silence in the room. Sunlight lay abed, like a bright patient with its brilliant head on the pillow. The quilt, a red-blue circus banner, was thrown back. The bed was wrinkled like the face of a pale old man, and it was very empty.

Mother looked at it and scowled and stamped her crisp heel. "Darn that little scamp!" she cried, to nobody. "Gone out to play with those neighbor ruffians, sure as the day I was born! Wait'll I catch him, I'll—" She stopped and smiled. "I'll love the little scamp to death. Children are so—impatient."

Walking to the bedside she began brushing, adjusted the quilt into place when her knuckles rapped against a lump in the sheet. Reaching under the quilt, she brought forth a shining object into the sun.

She smiled. It was the sea shell.

She grasped it, and, just for fun, lifted it to her ear. Her eyes widened. Her jaw dropped.

The room whirled around in a bright swaying merry-go-round of bannered quilts and glassed run.

The sea shell roared in her ear.

Waves thundered on a distant shore. Waves foamed cool on a far off beach.



Then the sound of small feet crunching swiftly in the sand. A high young voice yelling:

“Hi! Come on, you guys! Last one in is a double-darned monkey!”

And the sound of a small body diving, splashing, into those waves . . .

The End