

A Hollow Pearly Heart – Lara, Year 12, QLD

There was a girl whom Grief named his target. He shrieked at her, disguised as a familiar voice released from a calcium carbonate cage. But before Grief, it was Aggravation that was a thorn lodged in the girl's side. He came in the form of a younger brother.

The girl and the boy had been squabbling long before they had reached the coast. In fact, they had been squabbling as long as the girl could remember.

In authentic sibling fashion, a mere glare or eye roll was enough to trigger insults and elbow jabs until the whole ordeal escalated into a flurry of gangly limbs, teary eyes and pleas for parental justice.

The last of these was where the problem, for the girl at least, lied. Their mother remained the laid-back type and was unlikely to interfere with the affair. This led to a perpetual cycle of the girl (who was three years older and a whole head taller than her opponent) teaching her little brother a lesson, and then immediately relinquishing her victory in exchange for babysitting what could only be described as an ungrateful brat.

Recently, however, the dynamic had shifted. Their father, who busied himself running the rat race in some far away land for the better half of the year, had returned home in time for the Christmas holidays, and, in true festive spirits, had planned a family road-trip to make up for lost quality time.

The destination was, as the girl described, the most beautiful and magical place in all the world! Most others called it the Giant's Causeway.

The girl's fascination had started in school. She had been shown the photographs of the perfectly tessellated hexagons, like concrete honeycomb, and knew instantly that this was no coincidental feat of igneous rocks—it was undoubtedly the work of giants!

She had read the tale many times. Two giants of extraordinary powers battled it out across the Sruth na Maoile, crafting meticulously chiselled causeways so that they could fight face-to-face. But, much like her brother, the Irish giant Finn McCool, realised too late in the game that he was an unfit match for his larger opponent and deceived Benadonner by disguising himself as a baby.

It didn't matter to the girl that this story was in the past, for the basalt columns still stood, like soldiers dutifully holding their ground against unrelenting verdigris waves.

What did matter was that her arrival at the causeway was being delayed—and it was all her brother's fault!

It hadn't taken long for the siblings' father to grow tired of their bickering. Just one swift jab from the boy was enough to crack the girl's cool and all hell broke loose in the back seat of the Lancer. The father had pulled over just in time to avoid an unfortunate swerve down the magnificently jagged cliffside.

Now the family stood on the shoreline, "taking a breather," but far from relaxed. The mother busied herself on her phone, adjusting camera settings to best capture her beautiful family in the soft winter sun. The boy was itching to move after being trapped in the car all morning and the father's eyes were surveying the sand to find something engaging enough to keep him nearby. Finally his eyes locked onto a whelk shell—it would have to do.

"The ocean!" the children exclaimed, wriggling with delight.

Their father nodded and a smirk pulled at his mouth as if he were letting them in on a fantastical secret.

"Can you really hear it?" the girl asked full of wonder.

By now their mother had joined them and was eager to play along. Her husband passed her the shell and she dramatically let its aperture engulf her ear.

"Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum," the mother chanted, relaying the crucial intel back to her awe-struck children.

"A heart!" blurted the boy.

"Don't be ridiculous," chimed his sister. "How could something hollow and pearly sound like a heart?"

The mother held the shell out to the children, beckoning them to investigate for themselves. She may as well have waved a crimson flag in front of two bulls.

Within a second the siblings were at each other's throats, biting and scratching and kicking and tugging and doing whatever else it took to ensure they had the first listen.

Their father could no longer stand it. He tore the shell away from the children-turned-demons and swiftly hurled it into the aquamarine abyss. With frightening authority, he then promptly banned the siblings from standing within three feet of each other.

The boy, still buzzing from the thrill of the fight, turned his back on the ocean and marched towards the looming, craggy cliff. The chilling gusts that whistled through the crevices taunted that its confronter was too young, too small, too cowardly.

He didn't listen.

The girl had accepted a different challenge. Being on her own meant that she had the stealth and laser-focus necessary to finally spot a merrow.

But as she waded through the shallows, the frigid ebb and flow gnawing at her ankles, fortune brought the girl something far more precious than any mythological creature.

She picked up the whelk shell mesmerised. After examining it with a meticulous eye, the girl took a deep breath, held it up to her ear, and listened.

At first there was nothing. A silence so disappointing that she wanted to crush the shell in her hand. She strained her ears desperate to hear something, anything when-

The cacophonous shriek that hit the girl made her shudder. It was the most horrific noise she had ever heard, full of anguish and terror.

"A banshee!" the girl cried. "I can hear a banshee!"

She turned in a hurry to locate her brother and share with him her ground-breaking discovery. That was when she realised she could still hear the scream even though the shell had been lowered from her ear.

Her mother's wail melted into a sorrowful sob as the sand greedily soaked up her tears. The girl's view of the rocks was blocked by her father's quivering frame but she pieced it all together.

So that was how something hollow and pearly could sound like a heart.