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The Discovery

The beach smelled of fish today. The sea was a deep navy blue. It was funny how it changed all the time. Bonnie wrinkled her nose. Yes, fish, and salt, and something else, like burnt toast. Maybe someone had lit a fire, only the beach was empty, so that couldn't be it. She jumped from the last bit of dune path down onto the sand. The tide was going out, and the wind from the north. It blew the pale, dry sand over the darker damp sand like streams of smoke. Her ears ached with cold. She turned her coat collar up and tucked her hair inside.

No one else was fool enough to walk on a freezing windy beach on a January morning. Well, everyone was in school, most likely. Which is where she should have

been, only she'd had enough of being bored out of her mind, and shouted at, and teased for being different, and when she'd told Granda she wasn't going, not today and not ever again, he had not said anything at all. He'd carried on with his work as if he hadn't heard her. Maybe he hadn't. But she'd soon had enough of sitting in the dark house, and so she'd run down the lane and over the field to the path through the sand dunes, and here she was. She'd brought the big metal bucket, in case there was stuff to take home, stuff the sea brought in with each new tide. She plonked it down at the top of the beach near the Border Notice and the concrete blocks, big ugly things which had been put there to stop tanks invading from the sea in some old war, years and years ago.

A flock of small brown-and-white birds took off with a whirr of wings as she got closer to the water's edge. She screwed up her eyes to look closely: sanderlings, winter plumage, juveniles—which meant last year's babies, in their first winter feathers. Further out, a bigger bird with a long curved beak searched for food in the pools on the flat rocks newly exposed by the retreating tide. Curlew. It flew off, too, as she stepped carefully over the slippery weed on the rocks.

Further out to sea, a flotilla of small islands was part of the same seam of rock called the Whin Sill. Bonnie loved Granda's stories about the islands, about the people who once lived there and tended special houses of light to warn passing ships of the rocks, and rescued shipwrecked fisherfolk, and about ghosts and strange birds that only came at night. He said there were more than twenty-five islands at low tide, but only one big enough to live on. If the light was right, on the clearest days, you could sometimes glimpse the islands glimmering on the horizon, coming and going as the light shifted so that Bonnie wondered if they were really there at all. It was too far and too dangerous to go there, and in any case they didn't have a boat. Not any more.

The waves raced to the shore, chasing each other, their white crests curling over and spreading out into lacy foam, fine tendrils whipped behind by the wind like hair, like a horse's mane.

Enough daydreaming, Bonnie! Work to be done! Bonnie heard Granda's voice as clear as if he were right at her side.

She retraced her steps back along the ridge of rocks onto the sand and ran along the tideline hunting for useful things washed up. There was always plastic stuff,

but that wasn't good for much. It was usually cracked and smelly and you could get poisoned by the liquids that had once been stored inside. Wood was more rare and precious. Sometimes she found bits of sea coal, and that made Granda happy. Once it had dried out it made the fire blaze hot and bright. Bonnie found a length of fishing net that could be mended. Good. And two old leather shoes, not matching and too big for Bonnie, but they could be dried and traded or turned into something else. There were shells aplenty, which was a good sign. It meant that the sea was recovering, getting back to health after the long time of waste and spoil.

She went back for the bucket, and dumped the net and the old shoes, ready to take back home later. Food harvest, next. She perched on the Whin Sill, peering into pools, careful not to let her shadow fall across the water and scare off everything alive. She pulled up the sticky sea-flowers that were actually creatures even though they looked like plants—never more than one clump from each pool; you must always leave enough behind—and picked green crabs from under pebbles, and put them in the bucket. She found fresh green edible sea-leaves, and the pink seaweed that tasted good in soup. She scooped up small shrimpy things, and put them into the bucket

with enough seawater to keep them fresh. Each time, she said thank you, and sorry, for the life taken.

Her hands were frozen. She put the bucket down on the sand, and shoved her hands deep in her coat pockets to warm them. She straightened up and stretched her spine out, and there—just for a second—a flicker of movement up in the dunes startled her. Was someone there? She waited, but nothing moved. Perhaps it had just been wind blowing the dune grass. Or the shadow of a bird.

The bank of tall dunes at the top of the beach was high and deep just here. Deep rutted paths of sand ran between massive clumps of dune grass. Children played there sometimes—hide-and-seek, and tag—and sometimes on summer evenings couples came to lie together in the sun, out of the wind, out of view. The dune grass was yellow and gold, like hair.

A thin line of sunlight pierced the mass of grey cloud over the land.

Bonnie studied the line of the dunes again.

Was there something there?

She could make out the grey shape of something. Perhaps it was part of a dead tree washed up ages ago and buried in the sand for months, and now the wind

had shifted the sand and unburied it again. It might be big and strong enough to make something new for the house. Shelves for her room. A new bed, even.

Bonnie went closer. Her boots sank in the soft dry sand.

It was not a tree.

Her heart gave a little skip.

It was the upturned hull of a wooden boat.