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The Sound of Bells

By Saveria Steinkamp

It's been two days since we arrived at Bald Head Island, North Carolina, and the family has already fallen into the dazed lull of summer sun and the exhaustion of sand and waves. We all needed the break from the city, but Alice, my little sister, has been disappointed since we got here. We've been out to all the beaches around the island, and there are no "specimens" to be found. Alice isn't satisfied unless we have some strange creature to examine: sea beans; washed up jellyfish like odd tangles of rubber; sad little dogfish, eyes sunken into arrowhead skulls. And of course, if Alice isn't happy, neither am I.

For the first time in at least thirty minutes I turn away from the window—a perfect frame for waves of sand and saffron grasses, crystal blue and foaming white crests that glisten past a snaking boardwalk from the house. The long stretch of heated wood has become a symbol of anxiety—a long trudge full of trepidation, dallying two steps behind Alice's inexhaustible expectations. My eyes readjust to the relative gloom after gazing out into summer as I stare across the room I share with my sleeping sister. She's curled in white sheets, long hair wild against the pillow. In sleep her face is blank and lacks the customary lines of dissatisfaction. Since I left for college, Alice's mental stability has declined. She spends most of her time depressed, these days—abnormally so, even for a fifteen-year-old. A vacation together is supposed to strengthen our sisterly bond; according to mom, it'll help her get better. So far she only seems to get worse by the day.

The book I've been trying to read all morning falls to the floor with a bang when I shift in my window seat, and summons the scabble of claws on hardwood of the hallway. The creature cometh. Then she appears: Liquid brown eyes, curly perked ears, muddy paws on my sweatpants.

"Hey, girl." My greeting is less than enthusiastic. Warm dog breath and the smell of wet fur over-power flowery shampoo, but Millie doesn't seem to notice my aversion to her perfume.

The floor creaks with the familiar footsteps of my mother as she enters the room.

"Good morning, girls!" she coos and sits on my sister's bed to coax Alice into the waking world. She's always been a heavy sleeper, and I'm a little jealous. I can't even sleep past nine in the morning. Mom says she's lethargic, that it's a sign of depression, but I know if I could, I'd sleep till noon, too.

Alice grunts acknowledgement and inspires Millie to abandon my lap and scramble over to Alice's white sheets. I almost feel sorry for the dog—it will have to face Alice's wrath. She's at her most vicious after waking up. My mother attempts to improve Alice's mood through bribery with pancakes and strawberries. The warm, sweet fragrance drifts down the halls, and we follow it like zombies. I join my father and my grandparents on the porch and eat with the plate on my lap. All through breakfast, Alice becomes increasingly—unusually--chipper. She glowers at her plate for a while, but the customary expression slowly melts into mere indifference. She comments that today we'll find something spectacular. I try to keep up with her near-enthusiasm, but I fear the beaches will be just as empty today as they were yesterday, and I find my mouthful of strawberries resembling cardboard as I picture yet another evening of tension, the family gathered in silence in the living room as, disappointed, Alice plucks at

Millie's curly head. I push the food around my plate and hope the beach is more fruitful than I anticipate.

When at last we venture out over the scorched dunes the sun watches from overhead with a near painful intensity, but the breeze is fresh, and carries the thick, tropical smell of fruit and ocean brine. In my soccer shorts and blue t-shirt, I stand on the beach, hair whipping in the wind, and try to keep the sand out of my eyes as salt lines my lips and stiffens my hair. There's nothing much on the beach today—clumps of seaweed, a few pieces of loamy driftwood and a scattering of shell debris—but I'm pleased to notice that Alice's mild optimism from this morning has managed to persist, and she even laughs as we're buffeted by the wind. She's the one who decides to build a fort, and we prepare for battle mode. We'll fight wind with sand. Alice designs an elaborate chamber, with walls to surround and protect our beach towel beds. A sand castle, human scale. I pull my hair away from my mouth, feel the satisfying tingle of sand under my fingernails as we begin digging. Alice works with the obsessive focus of the neurotic, and as we work I compulsively glance at her from the corner of my eye. I've seen that look before—eyes a bit too wide, jaw set and the slight twitch of a smile—but for once I'm almost glad to see it. It's a step up from the alternating fury and apathy that have plagued her for the past few weeks.

Not long into our work, we're side-tracked by mole crabs that squirm and scuttle to evade our excavation. Alice is so thrilled to see the prospective specimen that she abandons our original project in favor of constructing elaborate holding ponds for her new subjects. Her transformation is startling, and she prances about the beach collecting hermit crabs—another species that deigned to emerge in seeming collusion with Alice's high humor—to plant in our mini castle. Perhaps mother was right, and three days are the magic charm, though at times her excitement feels as frightening as her fury.

While I play crab-sitter, Alice wanders off in search of fine shells to provide the finishing touches to our masterpiece. The mole crabs are rapidly disappearing, abandoning their slower, hermit brethren. I don't want to face Alice's horror should she return to discover her precious lab-crabs vanished, and I'm absorbed in conducting a new count when I hear a sound not unlike a chime, but harsher and sharper. Excited cries from Alice draw me to where she disappeared over a dune. I stop in my tracks when I see my sister kneeling in the shadow of a tall, dark figure. The silhouette rises from saffron sand, sinister with wild hair, one arm raised above his head as if to strike, and enough brawn in his shoulders to incapacitate a young girl the size of my sister.

"Alice!" I scream and run toward her, feet infuriatingly unsteady in the mercurial sand. I don't think about facing the attacker myself: the only thing on my mind is that creeps really can show up anywhere, and my sister is a pretty, if unstable, young girl.

As I run toward her, space seems to stretch and time to slow down. My progress is slow. As the figure remains frozen, my sister begins to rise. No, Alice! I think. Stay down! Are self-destructive tendencies another latent symptom of her manic nature? But now I can see she's holding something in her hands—something thick and club-like—that she struggles to raise above the stranger. Still, the figure doesn't move. What is happening over there? Is it Alice who's attacking? Suddenly, Alice strikes, bringing the club down with all her might.

"No!" I yell, almost upon her. What is she doing?! "Alice!" I yell as though she has ever once responded favorably to being yelled for. A spark of fury lights the back of my

throat when she doesn't respond. Could you not be ornery for at least five minutes?! The blow seems to miss, and strikes just at the feet of the mysterious stranger. Then I hear it again, that clanging chime—and with its ring, everything becomes clear. I stop just short of Alice, whose face is slack with something between humor and relief, and stare at the shaded form of a large-as-life, wooden cut-out of a clown.

"What?!" Alice demands and gives me a side-long glance with one eyebrow raised. I'm wild-eyed—relieved but still confused—and she misreads my alarm. "You're supposed to hit it, idiot," she explains, rolling her eyes. "Sometimes I wonder if your brain works at all." She chuckles to herself, and her annoyance brings things back into perspective. My distress seems to cancel out any reaction to the barb, and I turn my attention to the curious silhouette.

The object of Alice's violence is vibrantly colored and oddly lifelike—a smiling, creepy circus clown, complete with over-sized shoes, red lips and unreadable, wide blue eyes. The clown stands poised over an orange lever protruding from its enormous yellow shoes, one hand down at his side and the other raised in an exaggerated gesture that must have been intended as a friendly hello. In the harsh light, it looks more like he might clock someone. A rusty bell is mounted over its head like an idea. The "club" in Alice's hands is actually a piece of driftwood acting as a hammer that Alice again brings down upon the lever to force a piece of metal up the track in hopes of ringing the bell. She tries again but, this time, the piece of metal doesn't quite make it. I don't understand the look of despair in her face—she seems close to tears.

"So I lack the brains and you lack the brawn, huh?" I can't resist teasing her—it's so rare that Alice does anything but excel. Well, in every area but stability and social skills. She glowers at me.

"Well fine, meat head, why don't you give it a go?" Her gaze dares me to back down, and so, slightly cowed, I step up to the hideous thing.

Spreading my feet to get a better power stance, I pick up the piece of wood. The damp bark feels like a sponge used too often, with a crusty, almost squishy texture. I give the lever a whack so hard the shock vibrates up my arms. Nothing happens when the metal strikes the bell, and I realize that I had expected something. I shake my head, sure that the clown is just getting to me—I've always hated clowns. I take another whack, and the bell rings out. Alice shifts, crosses her arms over her chest and scowls at me. The third time, my strength fails and I miss. My arms are weak from exhaustion—with that noodley feeling like you can't move anymore—and I'm unaccountably frustrated, though Alice seems oddly pleased. Her apparent satisfaction somehow worsens my mood. "Come on," I mutter, "it's just a dumb game. At least we hit it a couple of times—let's get outta here." I toss one last distrustful look at the beached Bozo and struggle back to our original camp. Gathering up our towels, we turn our backs to the sea and to the little ponds we scooped out so carefully and happily earlier that day. The ponds are empty now, all the little crabs having burrowed down into the safety of the ground while we were transfixed by the clown.

It's late. We're back at our beach house and, as we clean up after dinner, Alice will not stop talking about the clown: "Wasn't it beautiful?" "Where did it come from?" "Will it still be there tomorrow?" "Why was it there in the first place?" She asks as though not particularly interested one way or the other, but the slight glow behind her eyes betrays

her near feverish transfixion. My mother thinks the clown washed up from a cruise ship. My father says it could have been left there after a beach party.

Cruise ships? Beach parties? I don't buy it. Though I might throw a creepy clown overboard if I were trapped with it at sea, I suspect few others would react with such violence. Besides, with that ridiculous iron bell, it would definitely sink. And this stretch of the beach is too secluded for a beach party—there are rarely even footprints. No, this clown's arrival is a mystery, and with a shiver I hope it will have an equally mysterious departure. I know, inexplicably, that we'll find ourselves out there again in the morning, the organ-grind of curiosity drawing us along, but I have a crazy hope that when we arrive the clown will be gone.

The next morning I'm saved by the rain, and the beach outing is canceled. Yet, I find that more and more my mind strays to the clown. I stare through the window into the rain and can't help but wonder if it's still there, its horrible blue gaze piercing the gloom. My gaze flicks to Alice, who sits slouched in a chair near the fireplace. She's been staring at the same spot for hours, breathing slow and eyebrows knotted in that way that always makes me think she's going to cry. What happened to her mood from yesterday? She was functioning almost like a normal child...

As soon as the thought enters my mind, I glower back out the window, caught between guilt and irritation. I know why she's moody again—it's because she can't go out and see the clown. She always gets moody when she wants something she can't have, and I can't help but wonder if it's really depression, like mom says, or if she's faking. I sigh. One way or another, the house would probably be less shrouded in uncomfortable, thick silences if she were happier.

By the middle of the day, Alice can barely contain her longing to see the clown again. She constantly mentions a return to the beach—and to the clown. Finally, feeling desperate, I agree to take her back to the clown. I don't want to admit that perhaps I feel a twinge of curiosity myself. So, knowing our parents would in no way approve of this ridiculous venture, we creep into the storm.

I lie on my back next to the clown and stare up at his face. There's something...enrapturing in his ruby smile. Raindrops run in sad trails over his cheeks and blur my vision. The brine of the beach is intensified by the heady, thick smell of rainwater tunneling into wet sand. As the grains repeatedly shift and re-stiffen against my skin, slowly piling themselves into a moist, climbing shell, it feels like the beach is swallowing me.

"Soon, yes, soon he'll be freed from his enslavement," Alice mumbles from where she lies beside me. I glance over at her, only mildly alarmed. She's been saying strange things like that for a while, now—since we got here, even. While I lie there with Alice, she whispers his tragic tale, asks me sporadically if I can hear it, too—his melodic voice in my mind. Every once in a while, when the wind whistles against a pier in the distance, I almost think I can. He tells us how his spirit was captured by evil men, how he was forced to entertain demons on the ships of Hell. And how, horribly, a young demon grew tired of him and pushed him away with such force that he fell overboard into a churning sea from which he had dared not hope to return. "We have to break it," Alice suddenly declares and hoists herself to her feet.

"What?" I stare at her. Her dark hair is knotted and tangled by the wind and matted with sand. Her face is flushed, and her eyes light on the clown with a terrifying fury. I wonder, not for the first time this evening, whether to take her home by force. If she's faking this, something's wrong with her, anyway.

"We have to break the bell," she says, breathless. "Then he'll be free! And he can wreak vengeance on the demon who did this to him." I don't bother telling her how insane she sounds, or that the idea sends an odd thrill down my spine.

"The bell's rusted," I say instead. "It should be doable." She doesn't seem to hear me, and that now-familiar irritation is back. As she begins to take great, arching whacks at the clown with a stray chunk of driftwood, I stay on the sand and reflect a moment, eyes narrowed. For years, I have been two steps behind Alice, always making sure her path through life is as cushioned as possible. Mother's always babied her, encouraged her manic behavior with obscene tolerance. I feel my anger building. What is it that makes her attitude of the last dozen years acceptable? With a grunt, and large, angry movements, I push off the sand, stride over and rip the wood from her hands to begin smashing it at the feet of the clown. She doesn't make a sound, merely stares at me with a wild, injured look in her eyes, and I grin against the cold of the wind and the strength of sudden anger.

As I feel myself losing power, Alice begins to nag at me.

"Give it back!" she shrieks. I ignore her—let's see how she likes it. The panic in her face lights a giggle in my chest.

"I've almost got it," I shout. I feel sudden renewed vigor and raise the club high over my head. Alice puts a hand to her throat and seems to clutch at her windpipe in pain.

"Let me do it," she begs, voice soft against the gale. My gaze is held by the blue of the clown's glowing eyes as I sense, rather than see, my target.

"You get everything, Alice!" I shout over my shoulder, lost in the storm and the adrenaline of, for once, doing what I want, and not what my sister wants. "You're spoiled rotten, and a total faker!"

"I am not!" she's sobbing. "I try to be nice..." the end comes out a whimper, but all I can think is that when we were little, she used to threaten me with the devil and the moon.

"You're not nice, Alice! You're a mean little girl, and when we were little I thought your heart was black!" I hear a little gasp, a hiccup of a sob, but carry on swinging the club. I imagine the clown's pride as I bring the club smashing down with all my might. Alice crumples to the ground. As she falls, my mind goes oddly numb, transported to the day before we left for the beach. *We're going to have to be careful with Alice*, my mother had told me. Apparently, the doctor had confirmed what we all knew: Alice is unstable, with a tendency toward severe manic depression, neuroticism, self-destruction and even suicide. I didn't pay much attention, and as I watch Alice's knees buckle I wonder why that was. I turn in a panic to the clown, snapped from my trance as it tips toward my little sister. I let out a shriek as the clown opens its enormous mouth.

The rest I don't think I will ever remember in detail. It's been almost a year, and I've decided perhaps I don't want to remember past the blur of horrible images. I sit in the windowsill of my bedroom, back home in Philly. *The clown toppled over toward Alice, crushed her into the sand. The clang of its bell was a mind-splitting shriek that filled the air.* For one moment, I see them there, Alice lying stunned, only her eyes visible through the

clown's hair as he forces her into the sand. In one great gulp of the beach, they were both gone.

I shift, an unread book bent backward over my knees. My last clear memory of that night is leaving the house to see the clown with Alice, though remnants of other half-remembered horrors claw at my mind. *I sat up, sank my hands into the soft sand, searching for stability, and looked around. Alice was asleep beside me. My hands clench on the spine of my book. I can hear mom downstairs in the kitchen, and there's still something sad in every clink or creak of her footsteps. She hasn't spoken to me since we got back. I wonder how much she's put together of what happened. I wonder how much of what I remember is even true. I reached over to Alice from where I sat by her bed, back at the beach house the next morning, shook her roughly by the shoulder. It was already noon. She didn't so much as twitch. I repeated the gesture for hours, eyes wide, heart pounding and mind horrifically blank. She was still breathing.*

I wonder again—as I have wondered every day, every moment, since coming home—what possessed me to take her out, into the storm. Was it because the clown made her smile? Or because ringing that bell was the first thing I've done better than my genius, crazy sister? *The sun set slowly behind us as father scooped Alice in his arms and we silently made our way back home. I couldn't guess how long it took him to find us after the storm died down. When I woke up, it was to him tapping my shoulder, sky lit with a clear, fiery dusk, no sign of the furious gale Alice and I had stumbled into. With only a twinge of worried hesitation, I looked at my little sister as father scooped her out of the sand's embrace. She hung limp. I couldn't see a mark on her.*

"We're going to the hospital!" Dad calls up from downstairs. Of course—it's 11:30. Mom and Dad are going to visit Alice in the hospital.

"All right! Bye!" I shout back. There's a pause, and I know what he's going to ask before he asks it.

"You sure you don't want to come? I'm sure she'd love it if you did." No, she wouldn't.

"No thanks, Dad." He doesn't bother asking again, and I hear the door close behind them, the car pull out of the gravel driveway and roar down the road. Alice hasn't woken up since we got back from the beach. Doctors don't seem to know what's wrong with her—they say she probably hit her head in the storm. I wonder if maybe she just doesn't want to wake up. I haven't gone to see her in the hospital once. I can't. Alice isn't awake to tell me it's my fault, but we both know.

My book slides off my lap and clatters to the floor. The sound, for some reason, wakes me from my depressed stupor. I remember again that it's 12:00, and in a panic, leap from my seat and race to my bed, where I curl under my covers and clap my hands over my ears. The church bells ring at noon. The rich, low tones reverberate through the windows, instant transportation to that night on the beach, and bleed through my comforter. I clap my hands vainly over my ears.