A gentle wave broke over my feet as I picked up the empty scallop shell in the sand. At that moment, I thought of my great-grandfather standing on that very same beach decades before me. It was my first time at Sanibel Island, a little piece of land in the Gulf of Mexico. This island is known for the large numbers of seashells that wash up on its shores. That day, I had been one of many people bending down to pick up a seashell—a position that the locals call the “Sanibel Stoop.”

My great-grandfather wasn’t just a casual collector of seashells. He had collected an amazing number of shells from all over the world. I learned about the collection every summer when I visited my grandparents’ house in Connecticut. When I was a child, my father took me around the house where he had grown up, sharing his memories and telling me stories. My favorite room was the sunroom.

My grandparents had lived in a turn-of-the-century beach house near the Connecticut shore. It once belonged to a Hollywood actor who used it as a summer home. It was full of winding hallways, narrow wings, and unusual rooms that aren’t found in most houses. The sunroom was one of those unusual rooms, and it was devoted to storing my great-grandfather’s shell collection.

The shells were carefully displayed by color and type. My grandfather had kept his collection in sea foam green display cases that nearly covered an entire wall of the sunroom. From giant conch shells to tiny scallops the size of your pinky, the shell collection seemed to have one of everything. There were nautilus shells, seahorses, sea urchins, and sand dollars. There were
sea snails, angel wings, mussels, and spiny clams. There were turkey wings, lightning whelks, cowrie shells, and slipper shells. There were olive shells, coral, cone snails, and starfish. There were shells that looked like colorful pinwheels and shells shaped like the worms that made them. There was even a junonia shell—a shell rarely found on the shores of Sanibel Island. In fact, those who are lucky enough to discover one get their picture in the local paper. Stranger species dwelled inside the drawers of the display cases like hidden treasures. My father loved to show me the tiny jars of octopi, squids, and fish preserved in formaldehyde almost as much as he loved to tell me how one day this whole collection would be mine.

My great-grandfather had passed the collection down to my father, and my father had promised the collection to me someday. When my grandparents’ Connecticut house sold a few years ago, the shells’ stay in the sunroom came to an end. That meant my time as the master of the collection was about to begin. Packed in bubble wrap and tissue paper, the hundreds of shells in the collection traveled across the United States, from Connecticut to California, to be displayed in my home. Miraculously, not a single shell broke during the trip. Unwrapping each shell was like unwrapping a memory—the memories of my grandparents’ house, the sunroom, and my father’s stories of the shells.
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