

## Elliot

It had never occurred to Elliot that he might be a beachcomber. In high school he found people responded best when he told them he was going to be a doctor (or was it a lawyer?) and so put little effort into the discovery of other professions. But it wouldn't have taken much to change his mind, academia had never really been his thing, and eight years (at least) in post-secondary, studying how to perform heart transplants, was not his actual life plan. His life plan wasn't very defined. He always pretended he had some mysterious goal that he just chose not to share with people, but truthfully it was a well-rehearsed act.

For a while he worked in a coffee shop. A girl worked there whose boyfriend he hated passionately for no reason other than that he was her boyfriend. When she moved to California he quit his job at the coffee shop and never heard about her death in a motorcycle accident. Next he worked at Safeway. He liked listening to people talk; sometimes he would be so intent on eavesdropping that he would forget to check their groceries through his till. Eventually, someone complained and he was fired. He didn't regret this very much, feeling that he had gained more than he had lost; after all, he had gotten to hear the mundane dramas of Safeway shoppers. Once, a man with a bushy mustache told the woman standing in line with him that he wished he had been a chemist. She didn't seem to know him and looked uncomfortable. That man then went home and told his daughter he was going to university to study chemistry. Once he enrolled, he realized his true calling had been farming. Elliot didn't know this for certain of course, but he imagined. He heard countless arguments and even more snippets of conversation that made little sense out of context. He made a special world for each one. Here was a banker who didn't like it when people asked him for loans. Here was a florist who once lived in Scandinavia but had moved to escape a life she didn't want. Here was a computer technician who was afraid robots would take over the world. In that time these stories had but one function in life: protection. They helped Elliot avoid an often hostile world whose actual stories were not all cute and ironic. Most of his friends and family had given up on him at that point, but it didn't bother him very much. He had his imaginary worlds and what else did anyone really need?

Later he worked on an advice column in a trashy magazine. Working there wasn't nearly as much fun because everyone just told him their whole story and so there was nothing left to create. He forgot to come to work one day, and, liking it, decided never to go back. He then studied the migration habits of elephants before traveling the entire Silk Road on foot. He cheated at some points and rode a bicycle. He would sometimes send letters to people who had made a profound impression on him. He had never gotten a response, but still wrote them dutifully. Whenever he wondered why no one wrote back, he would be comforted by the thought that a letter reaching him would be a tiny miracle, considering that he was rarely in the same place for more than a year. For a long time (he was never quite sure how long) he worked as a tour guide. Many of the tourists he showed through the dangerous jungles of Brazil were remarkably stupid. Their stories were usually boring and there were times that he couldn't find the redeeming part of their lives that he normally could. Occasionally he would meet

someone whose story was intricate and fascinating. Once a woman with half her head shaved and a long scar plunging down her thigh arrived. He never learned anything concrete about her, but the life stories he crafted for her were glamorous and heroic. Many of his clients were wealthy and, in his mind, some had killed for their money while others inherited it but wished that they had made it themselves. People died on his tours sometimes, but he was told that he shouldn't worry too much, it happened to nearly everyone at some point. One of the people who died was an old woman. She had always wanted to see the jungle, a clairvoyant friend of hers had told her it would change who she was. It certainly did.

One day Elliot decided he no longer wanted to be a tour guide. He was starting to have more trouble making stories for people and whenever that happened it was time to move on. He became a carpenter in Vietnam. Then a dentist in Alaska.

Later, after he got tired of not being able to listen to people because he was filling their cavities, he moved to a small beach town with a coffee shop much like the one he had worked in when he was a teenager. It had the same kind of cups and chalk board with the options on it that was always a little smudgy. He always ordered something different; there were an infinite number of coffee drinks to be had. The town also had a beach. It was wide and grey and wet and perfect. Since it was far away from town it was often deserted, and there he began to find bits of evidence of human existence: a blue bottle that he imagined had once held a note written by a desperate sea captain, a marble lost by a daring child, a fork abandoned by picnickers; everything came from its own world, each was an alien artifact discovered by a hopeful but disbelieving scientist. At last Elliot had found the profession that met all his requirements. Beachcomber was the new doctor.