

Boat Cove just below Zennor Head was the beach they had found and occupied. Every year for as long as Cherry could remember they had rented the same granite cottage, set back in the fields below the Eagle's Nest, and every year they came to the same beach because no one else did. In two weeks not another soul had ventured down the winding track through the bracken from the coastal path. It was a long climb down and a very

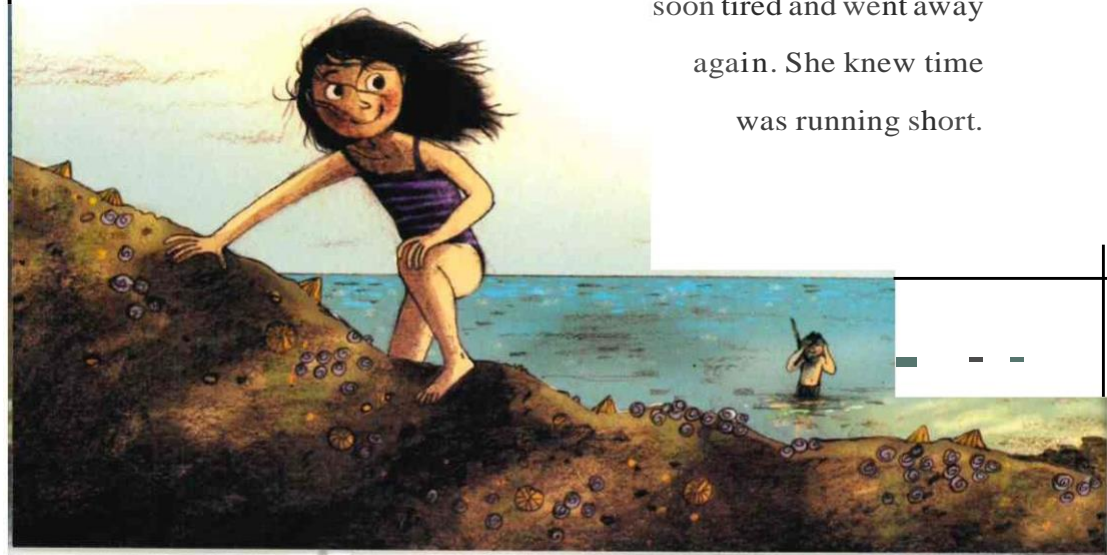
much longer one up. The beach itself was almost hidden from the path that ran along the cliff top a hundred feet above. It was private and perfect and theirs. The boys swam in amongst the rocks, diving and snorkelling for hours on end. Her mother and father would sit side by side on stripy deckchairs. She would read endlessly and he would close his eyes against the sun and dream for hours on end.





Cherry moved away from her family and clambered over the rocks to a narrow strip of sand in the cove beyond the rocks, and here it was that she mined for the cowrie shells. In the gritty sand under the cliff face she had found a particularly rich deposit, so they were not hard to find; but she was looking for pink cowrie shells of a uniform length, colour and shape - and that was what took the time. Occasionally the boys would swim around the rocks and in to her little beach, emerging from the sea all goggled and flipped to mock her. But as she paid

them little attention they soon tired and went away again. She knew time was running short.



This was her very last chance to find enough shells to complete the giant's necklace, and it had to be done.

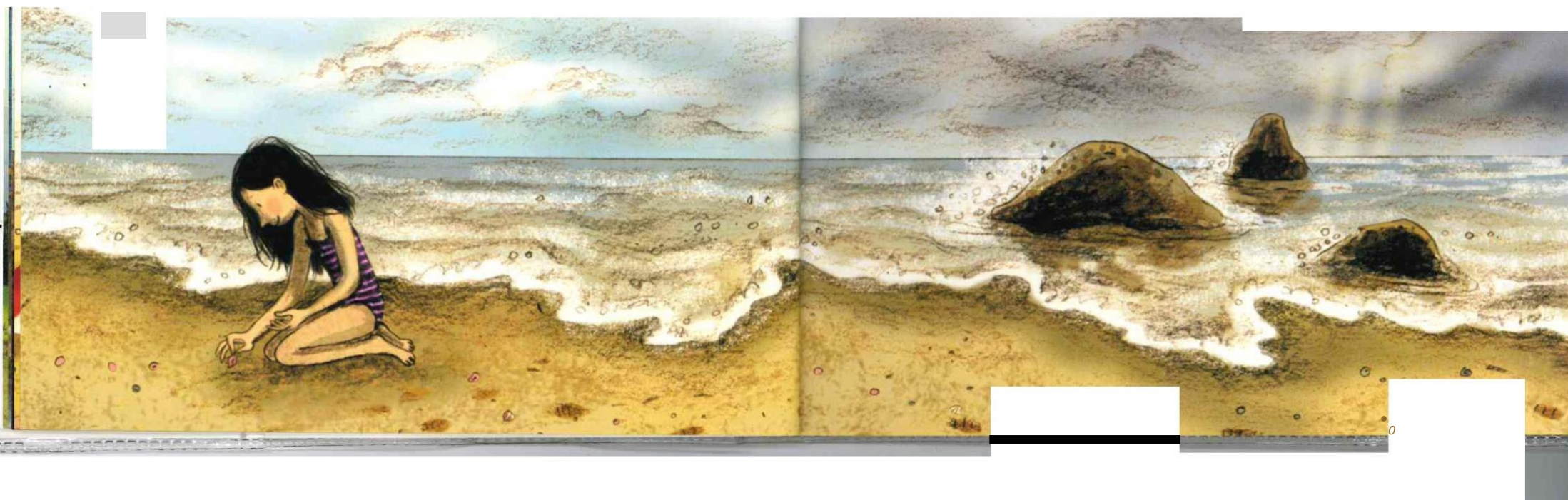
The sea was calmer that day than she had ever seen it. The heat beat down from a windless, cloudless sky; even the gulls and kittiwakes seemed to be silenced by the sun. Cherry searched on, stopping only for a picnic lunch of pasties and tomatoes with the family before returning at once to her shells.



In the end the heat proved too much for her mother and father, who left the beach earlier than usual in mid-afternoon to begin to tidy up the cottage. The boys soon followed because they had tired of finding miniature crabs and seaweed instead of the sunken wrecks and treasure they had been seeking, so by teatime Cherry was left on her own on the beach with strict instructions not to bathe alone and to be back well before dark. She had calculated she needed one hundred and fifty more cowrie shells, and so far she had found only eighty. She would be back, she

insisted, when she had finished collecting enough shells and not before.

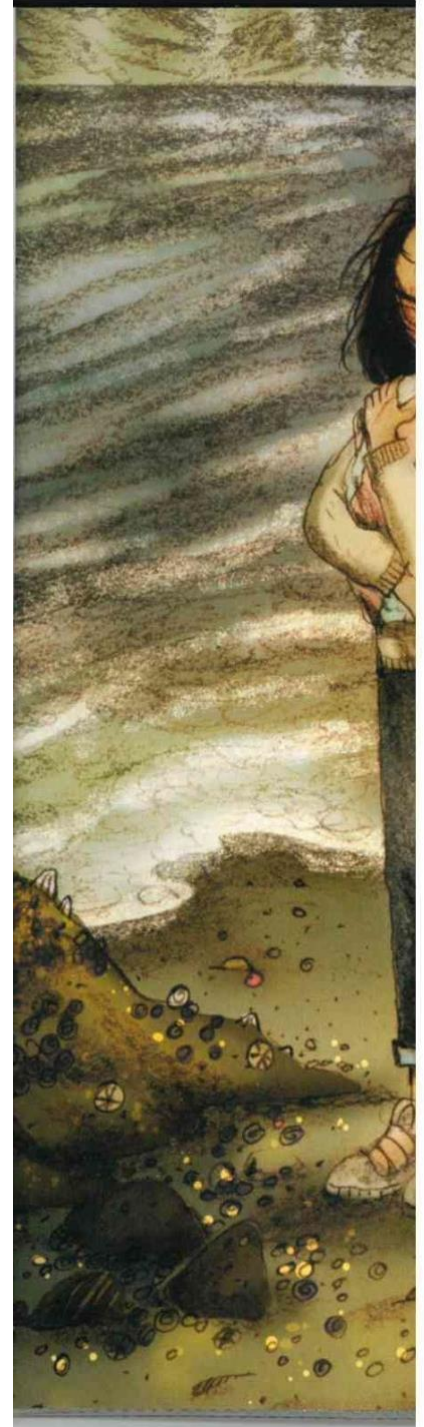
Had she not been so immersed in her search, sifting the shells through her fingers, she would have noticed the dark grey bank of cloud rolling in from the Atlantic. She would have noticed the white horses gathering out at sea and the tide moving remorselessly in to cover the rocks between her and Boat Cove. When the clouds cut off the warmth from the sun as evening came on and the sea turned grey, she shivered with cold and slipped





jersey and jeans. She did look up then and saw that the sea was angry, but she saw no threat in that and did not look back over her shoulder towards Boat Cove. She was aware that time was running short so she went down on her knees again

and dug feverishly in the sand . There were still thirty shells to collect and she was not going home without them. It was the baleful sound of a foghorn somewhere out at sea beyond Gunnards Head that at last forced Cherry to consider her own predicament. Only then did she take some account of the incoming tide. She looked for the rocks she would have to clamber over

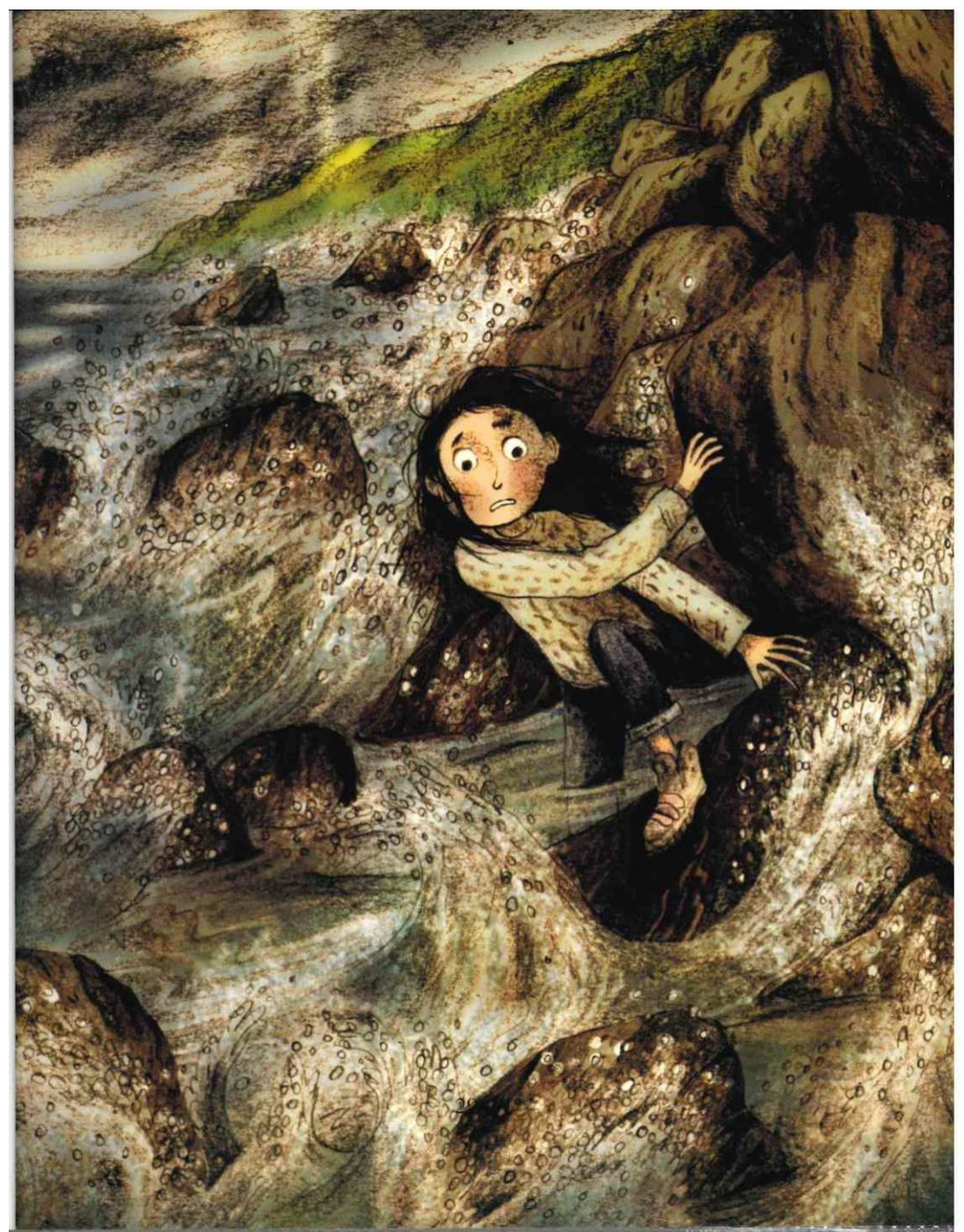


to reach Boat Cove again and the winding track that would take her up to the cliff path and safety, but they were gone. Where they should have been, the sea was already driving in against the cliff face. She was cut off. For many moments Cherry stared in disbelief and wondered if her memory was deceiving her, until the sea, sucked back into the Atlantic for a brief moment,

revealed the rocks that marked her route back to Boat Cove. Then she realized at last that the sea had undergone a grim metamorphosis. In a confusion of wonder and fear she looked out to sea at the heaving ocean that moved in towards her, seeing it now as a writhing grey monster breathing its fury on the rocks with every pounding wave.



Still Cherry did not forget her shells, but wrapping them inside her towel she tucked them into her jersey and waded out through the surf towards the rocks. If she timed it right, she reasoned, she could scramble back over them and into the cove as the surf retreated. And she reached the first of the rocks without too much difficulty; the sea here seemed to be protected from the force of the ocean by the rocks further out. Holding fast to the first rock she came to, and with the sea up around her waist, she waited for the next incoming wave to break and retreat. The wave was unexpectedly impotent and fell limply on the rocks around her. She knew her moment had come and took it. She was not to know that piling up far out at sea was the first of the giant storm waves that had gathered several hundred miles out in the Atlantic, bringing with it all the momentum and violence of the deep ocean.



The rocks were slippery underfoot and more than once Cherry slipped down into seething white rock pools where she had played so often when the tide was out. But she struggled on until finally she had climbed high enough to be able to see the thin strip of sand that was all that was left of Boat Cove. It was only a few yards away, so close. Until now she had been crying in voluntarily; but now, as she recognized the little path up through the bracken, her heart was lifted with hope and anticipation. She knew that the worst was over, that if the sea would only hold back she would reach the sanctuary of the cove. She turned and looked behind her to see how far away the next wave was, just to reassure herself that she had enough time. But the great surge of green water was on her before she could register either disappointment or fear. She was hurled back against the rock below her and covered at once by the sea. She was conscious as she went down that she was drowning, but she still clutched her shells against her chest and was glad she had enough of them at last to finish the giant 's necklace . Those were her last thinking thoughts before the sea took her away.



