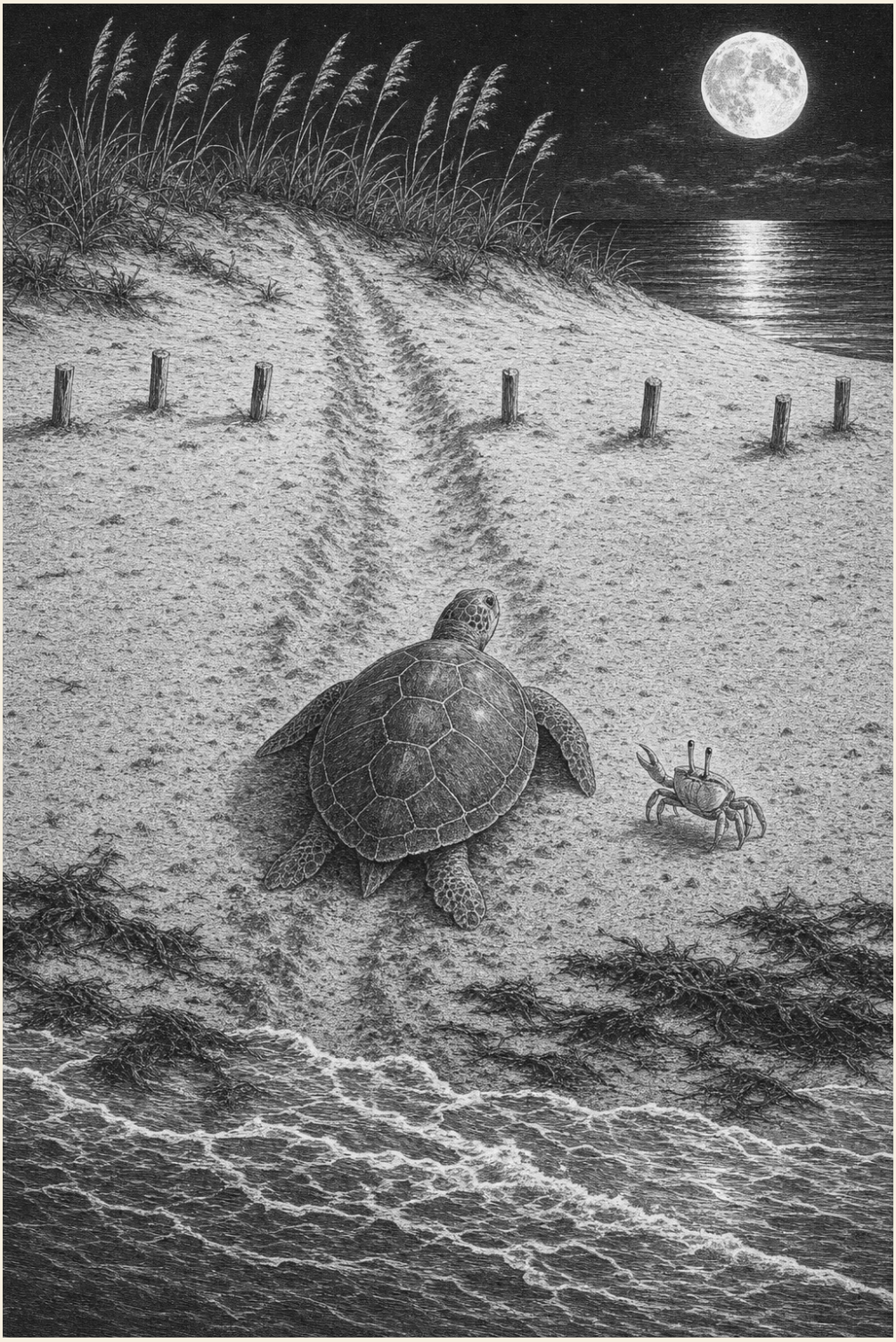

Plate — The Turtle Who Climbed Too Far

The Turtle Who Climbed Too Far

A fable from the Golden Shore · Juno Beach, Florida

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Late in the season, when most of the mothers had gone back to sea for good and the beach was already counting itself, a Green Turtle came ashore at Juno Beach to lay her last nest of the year.

She was a heavy, slow, serious animal, and she had been doing this for thirty years, and she had a rule. The rule was simple and nobody liked it. When she came up out of the water she did not stop at the first dry sand. She did not stop at the wrack line, where the seaweed and the sea beans marked how far the water had come last night. She did not even stop where the other mothers stopped. She kept going. She hauled herself up the beach, breathing like a bellows, over the tire tracks and past the turtle stakes, all the way to where the sand turned soft and cool and tilted up toward the sea oats, and only there, with the dune at her back, did she begin to dig.

A Ghost Crab who kept the books on that stretch of beach came out to watch, as ghost crabs do.

"You have gone too far," he told her. "Everyone says so. The others nest down there, where the sand is easy. You have climbed twice the beach you needed to. You will be exhausted. The eggs will be cold up here. There is no sense in it."

The Green Turtle did not stop digging. Her rear flippers went scoop and lift, scoop and lift, making the round room in the dark.

"How far did the water come last night?" she asked.

"To the wrack line. It always comes to the wrack line."

"And the night before I was hatched?"

The crab did not know that. Nobody did.

"Neither do I," said the turtle. "But I was hatched. So the nest was higher than that night's water, whatever it was. My mother went too far, and here I am. I go too far, and we will see who is here in November."

She laid her eggs, a hundred and some, white and round and warm, and she covered them and packed them and threw sand over the place with her front flippers until it looked like nothing, and then she went back down the whole long beach she had climbed, and the sea took her, and that was the last anyone saw of her that year.

The season went on. The other late nests, the easy ones down by the wrack line, hatched or did not, and the nights got longer, and the crab kept his books.

Then the Hunter's Moon rose out of the sea, big and orange and close enough to touch, and the water stood up.

There was no hurricane. The crab wrote that down, because nobody would believe it later. There was only a wind out of the northeast that blew for five days and would not quit, and a moon leaning in close, and the water simply came, higher than it had come in his lifetime, higher than the wrack line, higher than the stakes, higher than every easy nest on the beach, and it took the sand out from under them and carried it away into the dark. In the morning the beach was a different beach. There was a cliff of sand where there had been a slope. The stakes were gone. The easy nests were gone, or opened, or filled with salt, and the crab had to write that in his book too, in the column where he did not like to write things.

He climbed the new cliff.

At the top, with the dune at its back, where the soft cool sand tilted up toward the sea oats, the Green Turtle's nest was exactly where she had left it, dry, untouched, warm underneath, with the sand over it still looking like nothing.

The crab sat down beside it for a while. He had a great many things to say and found, for once, that he did not need to say any of them.

Nine nights later the sand over the nest began to move.

Moral: The ones who climb farther than they need to are the ones still here in November. Go past the line the last tide drew.

John M. Henry · Juno Beach, Florida

Thank you for coming down to meet the tide.