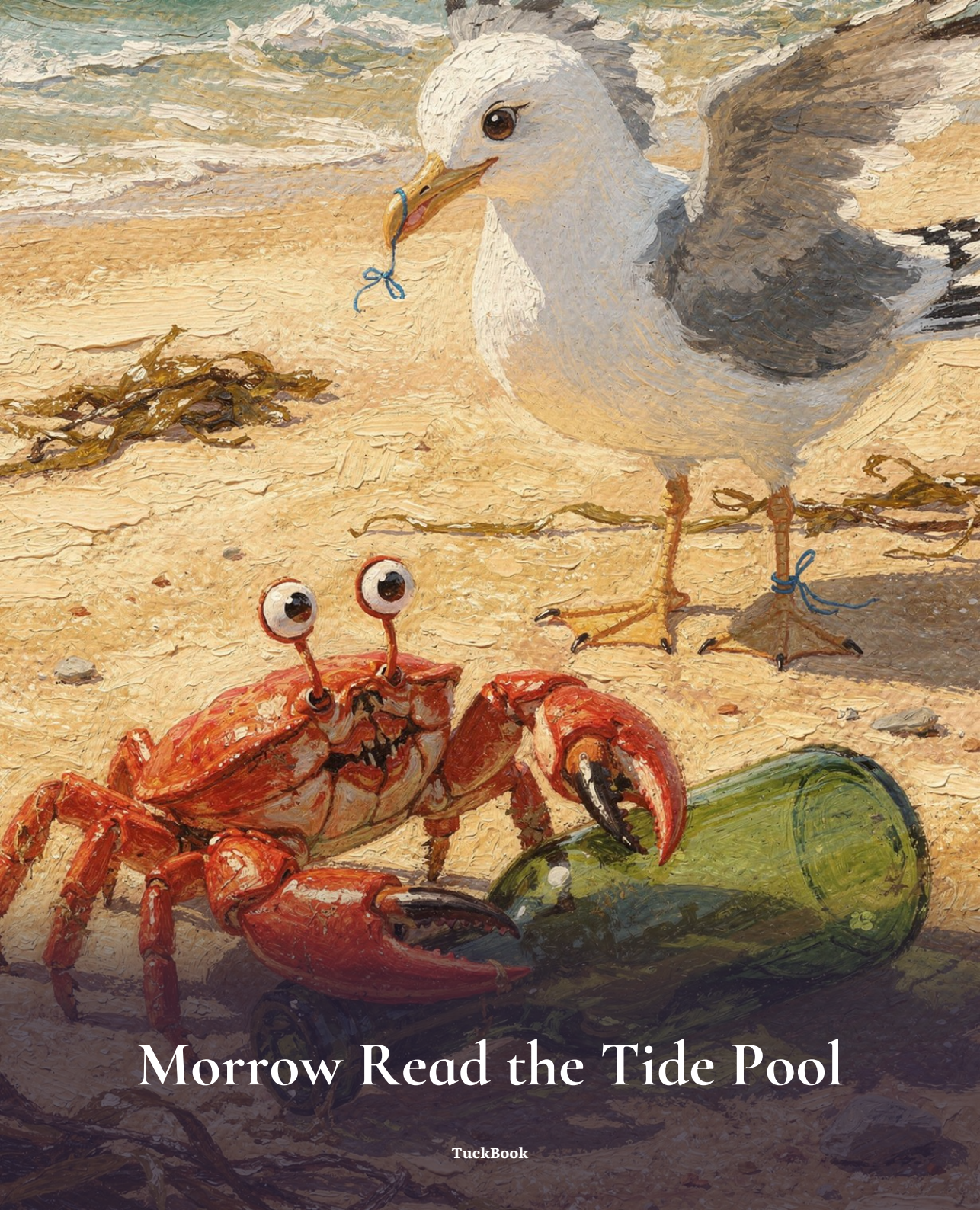




Morrow Read the Tide Pool

“That bottle is winking at me!” cried Morrow, skittering sideways across the dry sand. He was a small red shore crab with a shell as shiny as a tomato after rain, and he had been hunting for a particularly stripey pebble when he saw it. Half-buried near a ribbon of seaweed lay an old green glass bottle. Sunlight flashed through its round bottom, blink-blink-blink, as if it had a secret eye. Inside was something pale and folded. Morrow tapped the bottle with one claw. It gave a deep, bottley clonk. “Gull!” he called toward the shore rocks. “Please bring your excellent beak. I have discovered a suspicious container!”

Gull swooped down from the smooth landmark rock where she had been polishing a mussel shell on the stone. She was a white-and-grey seagull, broad-winged and bright-eyed, with a small blue string tied around one leg so Morrow could spot her in a crowd of birds. “Suspicious?” she asked, landing beside him. “Is it full of pickles?” “Better,” said Morrow. “It is full of paper.” Gull tilted her head, peered through the green glass, and gave the stopper one neat tug. It did not move. She tried again, bracing one foot on the bottle. Pop! Out flew the cork, then out slid a wet-looking roll of paper, which uncurled across the sand between them.

The paper was a map. Its corners were brown and curly, and someone had painted tiny pictures instead of words: a rock shaped like a sleeping whale, three pools in a row, a line of black pebbles, and at the very bottom, a large red X. Beside the X was a picture of a round pool with five little fingers of water reaching from it. A faded arrow twisted between all the pictures. Morrow's eyes rose on stalks. "Treasure," he whispered. "Definitely treasure." Gull opened her wings halfway. "Possibly a sandwich," she said hopefully. Then she saw a drawing of a chest with shining shells spilling from it. "No. You are right. We have a treasure map."

Morrow hurried to drag the bottle above the high, dry line of sand, where the next wash of water could not reach it. Gull tucked the map carefully beneath one wing, though its damp edges fluttered out like a nervous fish. Beyond them, the sea was sliding back, leaving shallow tide pools between the rocks. But already, farther down the beach, water was beginning to creep into the little channels in the sand. “We must be quick,” said Gull. “The tide is turning.” Morrow looked at the painted landmarks, then at the glittering beach. “We will follow the arrow before the water covers the clues. You can see the whole beach from above. I can search every crack under every rock. Nothing will escape us.”

Their first clue was the sleeping-whale rock. Morrow raced along the packed sand while Gull flew low overhead, calling directions. “A little left! No, your other left! There is a rock with a lumpy nose!” Morrow stopped at three rocks that all had lumpy noses. One looked like a potato, one like a boot, and one like a whale sleeping with its chin in the sand. “This one,” said Morrow, touching the whale rock with his claw. At its base he found a painted blue mark, almost rubbed away by salt and sand: a small arrow pointing toward the pools. “The map is true!” he said. “It is not a pickle map at all.”

The next picture showed three tide pools in a row, each with a different shape. From the sand, Morrow could see puddles everywhere. Some were round, some long, some hidden behind low rocks, all shining and wobbling with tiny fish shadows. He hurried from one to another, but each time the water made the rocks look different. “I have found three!” he called. “Or perhaps seven! They keep pretending!” Gull rose above the beach in two strong flaps and circled once. Her shadow skimmed over the pools. “Stop beside the pool with the purple seaweed,” she called. “From up here, three pools make a crooked paw print. That is the picture!”



Morrow squeezed through a gap between two rocks to reach the middle pool of Gull's paw print. The gap was too narrow for Gull's feet, but just right for a crab who could flatten himself and shuffle sideways. Beneath a frill of seaweed, Morrow found three black pebbles stacked one on another. The map showed black pebbles next, so he did not move them. Instead, he looked closely. Each pebble had a white stripe pointing the same way, toward a low shelf of rock nearer the shore. "There!" he said. "The pebbles are not treasure. They are telling us where the next clue lives." Gull nodded. "A very polite pile of pebbles."



They followed the pebble stripes to the rock shelf, but a lace of returning water was already threading around its edges. The map's arrow seemed to end at a dark crack underneath. Gull landed nearby and poked her beak toward it. "Too tight for me," she said. Morrow scuttled in. The crack smelled of salt, wet stone, and old barnacles. It bent sharply, then opened into a little hollow. Something pale gleamed in the back. Morrow reached with both claws and pulled out a flat shell, smooth as a spoon. On it was scratched another arrow, this one pointing not along the beach but straight toward the sea.

Morrow's claws paused in the air. "Toward the sea?" The shallow water sloshed nearer the hollow. "The treasure cannot be out there. We promised ourselves dry sand, pools, and rocks close to shore." Gull studied the shell, then the map. "No deep water," she agreed. "And look. The arrow stops before the blue paint begins." On the map, just before the painted waves, was the picture of the smooth landmark rock where Gull had been sitting when Morrow called her. But the rock's painted shape was upside down. "Perhaps we must look at it from the other side," said Gull.



They hurried around the smooth landmark rock, keeping to the firm sand while the water whispered behind them. From the front, it was simply a rounded grey boulder. From the shoreward side, its shadow made a dark triangle. Gull flew up and stared down at it. “The triangle matches this!” she cried, pointing with one wingtip at a tiny triangle drawn near the map’s red X. Morrow pressed his face close to the rock. At the bottom, nearly hidden by a wrack of dry seaweed, he found five scratches. One long scratch curved away from the other four, exactly like the five watery fingers in the map’s final picture.

“A tide pool,” said Morrow. “The X marks a tide pool.” He felt so pleased that he did a fast little sideways dance, accidentally kicking sand onto the map. Gull shook the grains away with her beak. “Which tide pool?” she asked. “There are dozens.” Morrow looked again at the final picture. The pool had five fingers, but perhaps every pool near the sea had fingers. The painted X lay beside a squiggle that might have been seaweed, a crab, a cloud, or a very small grumpy octopus. The sea gave a larger swish against the rocks. One of the pools they had crossed earlier filled right to its edge.

For a moment Morrow wanted to dash in every direction at once. He could search under rocks quickly, but he could not see which pools were being swallowed by the rising tide. Gull could see them all, but her beak could not reach beneath their rock ledges. “We have been doing this backward,” Morrow said. “You find the pool from the sky. I find the mark between the rocks.” Gull gave a brisk nod. “And neither of us will race ahead without telling the other.” Morrow tucked the smooth shell clue beneath a curve in his own shell, where it held snugly. Then Gull lifted the map in her beak and climbed into the air.

From above, Gull called the shapes as she saw them. “A round pool beside a long pool. Not it. A pool like a bent boot. Not it. A pool with six fingers, one finger very bossy. Not it.” Morrow ran beneath her voice, weaving around seaweed and hopping over narrow runnels of water. Each time Gull named a possible pool, he ducked between its nearest rocks to search. He found a bright green anemone that shut like a fist, a tiny shrimp wearing no trousers, and a silver spoon-shaped fish who stared at him rudely. But he found no chest, no X, and no five-fingered pool.

Then Gull's call came sharp with excitement. "Morrow! Behind the smooth landmark rock, on the far side of the black pebbles. There is a pool with five fingers, but one is hidden under a stone ledge." Morrow raced there, only to stop short. Water was streaming into the first finger of the pool. The hidden finger lay behind a low arch of rocks, a place Gull could see from above but could not enter. "I can get through," Morrow said. "But the chest may be heavy." "Then I will be ready," said Gull. She set the map safely on a dry slab and stood beside the arch, her wings held out for balance.

Morrow slipped beneath the arch. Inside, the pool was clear enough to show purple shells, waving weeds, and a sandy floor pocked with bubbles. The water was only ankle-deep for a crab, but it was rising grain by grain along the rocks. He searched the left crack. Nothing but sand. He searched the right crack. A snail shell, empty and pearly. He searched under a flat stone and found a crab-sized cave with a single red mark scratched on its roof: X. "I found it!" he shouted. But when he dug beneath the mark, his claws struck something hard, then something harder. A small chest lay wedged beneath the stone.



It was no bigger than a loaf of bread, made of dark wood with a lid banded in greenish metal. Morrow pulled. The chest scraped forward one claw-width, then stuck. Sand had packed around its bottom, and water poured faster into the little cave. “Gull!” he called. “It is here, but it will not come!” Gull pushed her head through the arch as far as she could. “Can you dig behind it?” “Only if I stop pulling,” said Morrow. He looked at the spreading water and the chest’s shining clasp. Pulling felt urgent. Digging felt slow. But he remembered the black pebbles, the arrows, and every clue that had only worked when they had looked properly.

“Do not pull yet,” Morrow said. “Tell me where the water is coming in.” Gull lifted off, circled above the pool, and landed again. “There is a narrow channel on the left, feeding the cave.” Morrow scuttled to the back of the chest and began to dig there instead. Sand flicked behind him in two busy fountains. “A little more to your right,” Gull called. “The chest is angled toward the arch.” Morrow dug until his claws ached. At last the chest tipped, not toward the water, but onto two smooth stones. “Now!” Gull cried. Morrow shoved with all his strength.

The chest rolled out of the cave just as a little wave rushed through the arch behind it. Gull hooked her beak beneath the metal band and lifted the front. Morrow pushed the back, sideways of course, because that was the direction his legs knew best. Together they bumped it over the dry ridge beside the pool. Another wash of water filled the cave, swirled around the red X, and covered it completely. Morrow sat down hard in the sand, panting. Gull folded her wings. For one breath they only watched the water sparkle where the secret place had been. They had made it out before the tide returned.

“Open it,” whispered Gull. Morrow touched the clasp. It had no keyhole, only a shell-shaped catch. He tried lifting it with one claw. It would not budge. Gull tried nudging it with her beak. Still nothing. Then Morrow noticed five tiny grooves around the catch, like the five fingers of the tide pool. He set the tips of both claws into two opposite grooves and twisted the shell-shaped catch. It turned past all five grooves with a tiny scrape. Gull held the chest steady. Click! The lid sprang open, and a bright scatter of light danced across both their faces.



Inside lay shining shells of every sort: pink scallops striped like sunrise, blue limpet shells polished like buttons, spirals that gleamed cream and gold, and one tiny shell that flashed green when Morrow tilted it. There were no piles of coins, no crowns, and not a single pickle. Yet the chest seemed fuller than any chest Morrow had ever imagined. Gull lifted a silver shell in her beak and turned it toward the sun. Little spots of light skipped over the sand. “This is better than a sandwich,” she said. Morrow chose the green-flashing shell, then looked along the beach at the animals who had watched them hurry past.

A family of sand hoppers bounced beneath seaweed. Two shy hermit crabs peered from borrowed shells near the whale rock. A line of tiny plovers hurried along the wet edge, stopping whenever the water hissed. Morrow shut the chest gently. “A treasure hidden on a beach should not spend all its time in a box,” he said. Gull’s eyes brightened. She flew to the landmark rock and called, “Shell lights! Come and see shell lights!” Morrow carried the chest in careful sideways steps to a broad patch of dry sand. He could not carry it fast, but this time he did not need to. Gull walked beside him, keeping the lid from wobbling open.

Before long, the beach animals gathered around the chest. Morrow passed shells out with his claws, choosing a round blue one for a sand hopper, a sturdy spiral for each hermit crab to admire, and the tiniest silver shell for a plover who could barely lift it. Gull showed everyone how to catch the shell light on a flat rock, so it flashed and leaped like a quiet little star. Morrow kept the green-flashing shell tucked safely under his own shell, not because it was the best treasure, but because it reminded him of a hidden finger of water, a hard choice, and Gull calling from the sky. When the sea reached the place where the X had been, it found only a clear tide pool and two friends watching the lights dance together.

Good night.

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After the story

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Morrow the shore crab and Gull the seagull follow a picture-map across a beach as the tide rises. Their careful teamwork leads them to a shell-filled treasure and a generous celebration of its light.

TALK ABOUT IT AFTER READING

After reading, ask which moment felt the warmest or bravest today.

AND TOMORROW...

The next morning, the empty green bottle gives a mysterious clonk from the dry sand again.

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