



## SHE SELLS SEA SHELLS

by

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Word passed easily along the beach huts,

‘Keep an eye out for Shellie.’

No-one knew her real name, but Shellie seemed to fit, she was always down on the water’s edge looking for shells. She seemed harmless, a slightly batty old lady with as much sand and sea in her hair as on the beach. She was always dressed in a once vividly patterned tunic with large pockets which she would fill with shells. Each time she found a new one she would wash it clean then stand stock still observing it, noting in her mind the miniscule details of the shapes and swirls and patterns which made each shell unique, even the way that time and tides and predators had breached the sea creature’s defences. She would stand motionless until she understood the shell, and then add it to her pocket with the others until it spoke to her.

Shellie stood out.

Shellie wasn’t like others; there was something of the sea about her for sure. Not that Shellie would ever be mistaken for a mermaid, oh no, she had none of the obvious traits of beauty about her. Sure her hair was long, but it was tangled and grey and the beach hut dads would laugh if anyone suggested that she might be alluring. The mums would have dismissed her, except that she had a way with children that meant they could never fully relax if she was around; but the children loved her.

The children who returned to the beach huts each year would cheer when they first saw Shellie. They would run up to her in their new swim suits, a bucket in one hand and a spade in the other,

‘What have you found?’

‘Show us your treasures, please?’

‘Is there a shell for me?’

And Shellie would take from her pocket a specimen and hold it to the light. Each shell had a name, she would tell them. Each shell had a story. Each shell was looking for something, or *someone*. Then she would take the shell and hold it to her ear, and listen. The children too would listen, holding their breath, waiting for her to reveal the secrets she had divined.

‘Not today,’ Shellie would say, putting the shell back into her pocket, ‘maybe tomorrow.’ And with that the children would scatter, going back to their half built sandcastles, or holes dug halfway to Australia. The mums would let go of the breath they hadn’t realised they had been holding, straighten their sunglasses, and finally relax into the deckchairs as Shellie continued to move along the beach.

But the shell had spoken. It always did if you listened carefully enough, she just had to find the child that the shell belonged to, and she hadn’t seen him yet.

This shell belonged to a child who felt abandoned. He wasn’t, of course, he was here with his family on holiday. He had been given a bucket and spade and smothered in lotion and told to go and explore, which he knew was his cue to disappear until the tide came in and it was time to pack up and return. Shellie could feel the shell jostling the others in her pocket as she trudged through the sand away from the waves and towards the dunes. It wasn’t her usual route, but the shell called her on, and the sea breeze at her back pushed her forward, until she spied a flash of red plastic come and go. Placing the shell against her ear once more, Shellie heard sadness, loneliness, and a sense of un-being. It was a sensation she knew well, but this wasn’t her shell, it was George’s.

George was hidden by the tussocks, creating patterns in the sandy mounds with his bright red spade, weaving sea flowers in and out of it to add colour. George hummed to himself, keeping himself company.

Shellie sat down and watched. Something was missing from the pattern and George hadn’t yet noticed, the shell that had brought her here had whispered George’s name. George looked up, still humming, still filling the void and avoiding the unspoken words. His eyes focussed first on Shellie’s, fixing hers with a question he couldn’t formulate sounds for. Shellie smiled and held out her prize.

‘I think this shell belongs to you’, Shellie began.

George, still, the spade no longer moving, held her gaze, waiting for her to say more.

‘It spoke to me, told me your name, asked me to find you, George.’

George simply tilted his head to one side.

‘The shell told me that you didn’t belong by the water. Is that right George?’

George nodded.

‘I think that perhaps you often don’t feel as if you belong. That perhaps you haven’t found your fit yet.’

Again George nodded.

‘This shell doesn’t fit either. I found it down by the sea, but it isn’t a sea shell. It’s a land shell. It belongs to a snail, or it used to. Now it belongs to you, if you want it’.

George nodded, and smiled. He took the shell and turned it in his hands, held it to his nose and smelled it, then lifted it to the light so that he could see its shapes and patterns more clearly. Then George held it to his ear. And nodded once, twice, then smiled, before placing it in the centre of his art.

‘You do belong, George... you just haven’t found where yet.’ And Shellie gathered her skirts as she stood, turned to wave goodbye to George, and headed for home.

George looked at the shell nestled into the patterns he had created earlier as he had struggled to find meaning. George turned to Shellie, the tinkling sound of the treasures of her pockets and the colours of her tunic fading as the sand dunes swallowed her up, hiding her from view.

George looked at the shell and spoke,

‘Me.’