

Shellycoat

by Susan Rennie

Lori hadna seen the like o yon shell afore. It wisna like the shells she usually fand on the shore—the wee wulks and cockles, and her favourites, the razor spoots. This yin wis special. It wis shaped like a mussel shell, but mair muckle, and wi a bonnie blue sheen tae it like the finest o pearls. Ay, it would look braw in her collection!

The shell wis in a taigle o seaweed, but it widna budge. Lori fand a stick and tried tae howk it oot. Suddenly, there wis a mighty tremor unner her feet and the shore began tae heeze upwart! Forby there wis an awfu clitter-clatter, like hailstanes on a windae pane. She skreighed and ran, feart it wis an earthquake. But then, jist as suddenly, the noise stapped. She turned roond, expectin tae see a muckle hole in the grund. But insteid she saw ... a craitur. A spindly craitur shrooded in a seaweed goon that wis crusted ower wi shells. It wis grippin its shooder in pain. *I've hurt it*, she thocht. *The bonnie blue shell is pairt o this craitur.*

Lori watched the craitur guddle amang the seaweed, pickin up bits o shell and sea-gless. She heard a yelp as it stobbed its tae on a jaggy bit plastic stickin up fae the sand.

'Can I ... help?'

'Lat me be,' came a crabbit voice. 'D'ye no ken a Shellycoat whan ye see yin?'

'A... a *shelly*...?'

The Shellycoat spreid his airms wide and birlid slawly roond. The shells on his goon rattled and a few drapped aff.

'Ay, weel, I dinna blame ye. I'm no whit I yince wis.' He sat doon, pechin.

Lori saw that his goon wis a patchwark o bleached and brukken shards. Even the bonnie blue shell had a pale ooter rim. It minded her o pictures she'd seen o deid coral reefs. But that wis on the tither side o the warld. She hadna thocht o it happenin *here*.

'I wis born in a glacier, thousands o years syne, and cairried doon tae the shore. There wis monie o us lang syne. Ilka river in Scotland had its Shellycoat. But noo we bide oot o sicht – till some thochtless gowk disturbs us.'

Lori felt a pang o guilt, as sherp as the jag she had gien the Shellycoat.

‘I mind whan birds wid drap shells as they passed. Reidshanks, sea-pyots. I wis nivver wantin for shells. But whan did ye last hear the wheep o a sea-pyot?’ He poked a bit seaweed. ‘I use whit I find ... but it’s no the same.’

Lori peered closer. In places his goon wis patched wi plastic straes and bottle-taps.

‘The shells gie me strenth. Whan the last o them fades and braks, I will dwine awa and dee.’

‘But I can help ye!’ cried Lori, lowpin up. ‘I’m guid at this!’

She began tae scour the shore, gangin back and forrit. But efter a while she returned wi jist a few brukken shards and the ring fae a fizzy drink can.

‘I’m sorry. I thocht there’d be shells galore ...’

As she said the words, a thocht hit her like a tsunami. *Shells galore! How did she no think on it afore?*

Lori ran, the sea breeze nippin her cheeks, till she reached her hoose. Quickly, she opened her precious box o shells and took a haundfu o cockles and wulks. *Ay, they’d be braw.* She hauf-closed the lid, then stapped. Whit aboot her bonnie spoots? She wis gey fond o them ... but this wis nae time tae swither! She cowped the hail box – spoots an aw – intae a bag. Then, on a shelf, she saw her prize possession: a cowrie shell, spreckled like the breist o a mavis. *Ay, you and aw,* she sighed, pittin it in her pocket.

Lori walked as fast as she could, grippin her bag in baith airms. But as she reached the shore steps – *wheech!* – she skited on a slippery bit seaweed, her bag burst and a clanjamfrie o cockles, wulks and spoots skailed in aw directions!

‘Naw!’ Lori scrammled efter the precious shells. She could hear the waves gettin closer.

Efter the tide wis in, she’d need tae wait till the morn—and that micht be ower late.

Desperate, she gaithered an airmfu o sand and shells and ran, drappin mair shells ahint her.

He wisna there.

‘Shellycoat, Shellycoat!’

There wis nae answer. Lori threw her shells doon on the weet sand. *If I’d jist been that bit quicker,* she thocht. *If I hadna swithered.* She took the cowrie oot her pocket. Whit use wis a

deid shell compared tae the life o a leevin craitur? Lori flang it awa, greetin. But as it fell and wis lapped by the waves, a byordinar thing happened. At first she thocht it wis the tears in her een. But naw, the sand wis shooglin! Then it swelled intae a mighty wave o sand, seaweed and shells. The force threw Lori backwards and she landed on her dowp wi a dunt.

The Shellycoat looked gey different tae the first time. The shells Lori had thrawn doon had patched his goon wi aw the colours o the seashore. And there, mids them aw, wis her spreckled cowrie, sheenin wi a licht it hadna had afore and makkin saft music as the sea breeze whustled throu it.

There wis anither soond tae. *Wheep, Wheep, Wheep!* First yin, twa, then mair birds flew past, ilka yin drappin a shell. Lori recognised the shells she had skailed whan she fell. Soon, there wis a tooer o shells as lang as the Shellycoat himsel! He turned tae Lori, his voice saft yet clear.

‘I am strang again because o the gifts ye gied me. Tak this. It will mind ye o the Shellycoat.’ He plucked the bonnie blue shell aff his goon and haunded it tae Lori.

‘But ... that’s yer special shell.’

‘Naither the shells not the shore belang tae us, lass. But that’s aw the mair raison tae tak care o them.’

And wi that he sank slawly doon, spreidin his goon wide, till he merged wi the sand and shore aneath him.

Lori took the bonnie blue shell hame. It wis the ainly shell in her collection noo, but she didna mind. She gaithered plastic bottles and straes on her shore walks noo, sae the Shellycoat widna stob his taes. And if she saw a bonnie shell, she’d stap tae admire it—then lee it alane.

‘Mair for you, Shellycoat,’ she’d whusper tae the shell. ‘Aw the mair for you.’