

Sounds of the Sea

It took three attempts to dislodge the door, if you could even call it a door. The hinges were rusty and loose causing the weathered remnants to scrape along the floorboards. Inside the small living room Scott glanced around. Broken glass and debris littered the floor of the remains of his parents' holiday home. A pungent smell of mould mixed with rodent urine assaulted his senses.

Despite the appalling state of the two-bedroom bach, Scott was surprised by the clarity of his childhood memories. Lazy fun-filled days, barbecues on the beach, catching crabs in rock pools, clambering around the shore searching for shells and objects spewed carelessly from the sea.

Every room held memories. The pot belly fire in the living area where the family would roast marshmallows in the late evening. A rusty bin near the bay window held treasures of shells and driftwood. The tiny kitchen where family members enjoyed breakfasts of sausages, bacon and eggs. The bathroom, with its makeshift shower, consisting of a bucket with holes in the base, gave you exactly two minutes and 10 seconds before you were left naked and cold. The bedrooms spoke of people who had stayed.

Out on the small deck Scott gazed out to the Southern Ocean, breathing in the salt air and trying to recalibrate himself to the solitude. He leaned cautiously against the perilous balustrade, listening. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks, the wind reverberating off the cliffs and the occasional screech of sea birds. Sounds that were so familiar. Sounds he missed intensely.

If Scott was sensible he would leave now. Return to the safety of his modern apartment, where he could immerse himself in the busyness of city life and forget. But he wasn't in a sensible state of mind. Life had taken an unexpected change, and to weather those changes he needed to face the storm of emotions that threatened his internal fortitude.

Scott slept in the back of his truck that night. Exhausted from a difficult week he eventually succumbed to sleep, waking to the sound of the sea lapping gently on the shore. Everything felt, sounded, better in the light of a calm cloudless day.

Rising, he prepared himself for a hard day's work. Today's task was to assess what materials and tools he would need to renovate the house into something of its former glory. He wasn't without resources. He had eight years' experience as an architect, some basic tools, a reasonably sized investment and a lot of determination.

Work on the bach progressed quickly. Contact with people was limited, except for occasional trips into Oban, the closest town, to get building supplies and provisions. On the Friday afternoon, nearly a week since his arrival, he was startled by the sound of his mobile phone. Putting down his tools, he fumbled into his grubby overalls to answer it. The caller was his best friend, Brayden.

"Hi Scott," Brayden said. "How you doing?"

"Fine thanks. I'm out at my parents' bach. They haven't used it for years and were thrilled when I said I'd do some work on it. It's worse than I thought it would be." Scott walked out to the deck as he spoke.

"When you coming back?" Brayden enquired with a note of concern.

"Not sure if I want to come back."

"I can understand that. I'd feel the same if I was you. Have you heard anything from her?"

"No." There was a sudden harshness to his tone. "Not sure I want to anyway. Haven't heard anything since she left. You know, it's hard enough her leaving, but did she have to hook up with him?" There was silence for a moment. The pain and anger in Scott's voice was palpable. Brayden knew that "him" was Scott's boss at the firm.

"Thought I'd just see how you are. If you need any company, let me know?" Brayden offered, leaving the invite open.

"Thanks mate, I'm doing okay. The change of scene and fresh air is just what I needed." Turning off the phone, Scott stared out to sea. It was a good decision to come here. He'd resigned from work, packed up and left; an elderly neighbour was looking after his apartment. He didn't want to go back yet. Maybe never. Scott returned to the job at hand, replacing rotten weatherboards.

Later that day Scott reclined in a chair on the deck, a half-drunk beer in his hand. The sun was making its slow exit with a radiant show of colour. He felt satisfied with the day's work. The bach was now waterproof and, with the few pieces of furniture he'd picked up on his trips to town, much more habitable.

Putting his empty beer bottle on the balustrade, he picked up a large shell he had retrieved from the living room. It was a conch shell, white in colour with strange protrusions. Not a pretty looking shell, but eye catching in its own way. Scott remembered the legend. Apparently you can hear the sound of the sea from a conch shell. Placing it to his ear he waited, listening. All he could hear was silence. He yearned to hear something – the sea, a voice, someone to tell him what to do. What to do with his life. He was still young.

"What should I do?" He pleaded, hardly aware that he had spoken out loud. His voice was caught by the breeze, swirling away into the fading light. There was no one to hear his heartfelt cry. With the last streaks of the sun glimmering on the sea he retreated inside, taking the conch shell with him.

EMILY

In Mistletoe Bay, just a few miles away, Emily stepped off the wharf into her 27-foot monohull sailing boat. It was time for tea. The galley wasn't big, but she had redesigned it to maximise the storage space. Often on a Friday evening she would invite a friend to tea or socialise in town, but tonight she wanted some space to herself.

It hadn't been a great day. The phone didn't stop ringing with clients wanting appointments, there were accounts to be paid, and files to be updated. Maybe it was time to leave her job as a medical receptionist and find something less hectic. At 29, she had lots of options. Emily loved the bay. Whenever she turned her

little Mini down the gravel road the pressures of life seemed to vanish like mist rising from the lush forest. Now, as the evening light dissipated, she couldn't have been more content. A simple scrumptious meal, the gentle swaying of her comfy boat as it rested against its moorings, and the knowledge that work was over for another week were more than enough to lull her to sleep.

Waking late the next morning, she dressed quickly. With no phone coverage Emily had to be organised. She'd already arranged to meet some friends for lunch, at her favourite haunt, the Albatross Café, further along the coast. But before she left she needed to do some chores. Emily hung her wet clothes on a makeshift clothesline between two trees. Returning to the boat, her sandals slipped on a rock cutting the side of her foot. Blast it, she thought, blood oozing from the wound. Hobbling along the wharf, she clambered back onto the boat in search of a plaster.

Lunch with friends was Emily's ideal weekend treat. After a delicious meal and stimulating conversation she diverted into town to look at some clothes shops and pick up groceries. It was late afternoon when she turned off the main road into her bay. Transferring her groceries, new purchases and dried washing into the yacht took a while. By then she was ready for a coffee. Her foot was hurting, too.

SCOTT

Scott spent the morning cleaning up inside the bach. Then he turned his attention to the kitchen. Progress was painfully slow, but by late in the day he had hot water at the sink and pipes that took grey water away from the house instead of under it. Sitting out on the deck, he noticed the clouds beginning to gather.

Scott must have dozed off. The sound of the sea woke him. Yet the noise didn't seem to be coming from the shore below him, but from the living room. Confused, he walked inside, then back out onto the deck. The sound was definitely coming from the living room.

Concentrating hard Scott walked over to the bin, picking up the conch shell. Lifting it to his ear he listened carefully. How bizarre. Yesterday he'd heard nothing, but today he could here clearly. The oscillating soothing rhythm of the sea.

He took the shell out to the deck and placed it by his chair, bemused. Maybe he'd been on his own too long and was hearing things. He stretched out again, watching the clouds dance across the darkening sky. Then he retreated to bed.

EMILY

As the evening progressed Emily began to feel more and more unwell. Despite redressing the cut on her foot it still hurt, and her ankle had begun to swell. She took some painkillers and prepared for bed. I'll be better after a good sleep, she thought.

Later, in the night, she awoke from the pain. Her whole leg was swollen and painful, and she felt thirsty and confused. Through her delirium she realised she was seriously ill. Was it blood poisoning from her cut? Whatever the problem she needed to get help, and soon. Stumbling out of bed she dressed as best she could. Gathering her car keys, a torch and a rain jacket she headed for her car. Emily wouldn't call herself a praying woman. She wasn't sure whether there was anything beyond what she could see. All she knew was she needed help. Instinctively she called out from the depths of her scared soul for help.

SCOTT

Scott woke up with a start. He thought he had heard a woman's voice calling for help. Turning on the light, he dressed, and went into the living room. A light drizzle was falling outside. He opened the door that led out to the deck, looking and listening. He couldn't see far, and he couldn't hear anyone.

The conch shell drew his attention and he picked it up, placing it to his ear. He could clearly hear the sound of the ocean, even the faraway cry of some sea birds. And, strangely, the sound of a woman crying.

Unsure of what to do next Scott grabbed his heavy rain jacket and a torch. Holding the conch shell he headed down the beach searching for any signs of someone in trouble. Back and forth along the beach he searched, listening every so often to the sounds emanating from the shell.

He thought the sounds were stronger when he walked in a westerly direction. Broadening his search he climbed the overgrown track that would lead him down to Mistletoe Bay, an uninhabited part of the coastline.

Reaching a high point he saw what looked like a small vessel moored at the wharf, and a light nearby. Walking quickly now, he went to investigate.

Emily hadn't got far. She'd fainted on the wharf, awaking a few minutes later, the drizzle dampening her long hair, and chilling the raging fever that was draining her very life. She half dragged herself forward, her tears mixing with the rain, before falling into unconsciousness again.

Scott found the source of the light within minutes. It was a torch. And beside the torch was the body of a young woman, seemingly lifeless. In her hand was a set of car keys tangled among her limp fingers. He attempted to wake her but with no success. What responses she gave were incomprehensible and mixed with cries of pain. Extracting the keys from her hand he lifted her light body into his arms and carried her to the car.

Settling her into the back of the Mini he contemplated the mysterious turn of events. The shell was on the passenger seat. It was now silent. Maybe it had achieved its purpose. Starting the engine he headed for town. Maybe his life wasn't over yet. If he listened carefully and followed his heart, new opportunities and adventures might open up. As he left Mistletoe Bay he glanced back towards Emily. Who knows? If he kept believing he might find a new future, and with it, his heart's desires. 

AUTHOR HEATHER CLARK

Currently working as a health protection officer in Invercargill, Clark holds qualifications in science, environmental health, theology and education. She sees writing as a creative escape from everyday pressures and a chance to reflect on life's ideologies. Clark is an avid reader, particularly of fantasy and romance, and also enjoys socialising, biking and walking.



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