

Seashells

By

Sarah Mclean

There are some stories that need to be told.

I was on the train home from uni as usual, around six-thirty on a Tuesday evening. The carriage was quiet, unusually so for that time, or at least, it was in the sense that there weren't many people.

It started with some kids running up and down between the seats, shouting to each other from either end, music pumping from phones. There was nothing particularly interesting about them. I'd seen versions of them before, many times. So I blocked them out and went on reading my book.

"Excuse me." One of the boys was beside me. "What's that? Is it a piano?"

I looked up, told him that it wasn't a piano but my braille keyboard which was connected to my phone via Bluetooth, so that I could read what was on the screen in braille.

"Actual?" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, see?"

I showed him how you could scroll along the phone screen by using the buttons on the Brailliant.

"That's cool!"

His mates had approached by this time, and were all gazing, awe-struck, at the machine.

"Why do you need that, though?" one of the girls asked.

"It's because I use braille, because I can't see."

"Oh, are you blind? That's so cool--I mean--no that you canny see, but that you've got that."

I smiled and told them it was only two grand if they wanted one.

"Two grand? Serious?"

"Serious."

It was their stop, and they said goodbye and got off, still shouting. I sat back in the restored quiet of the carriage, feeling slightly chastised. I thought, loud, yes. Chavvy, yes. But also polite, and curious. I felt I had misjudged them and was glad they had proved me wrong.

Still, I doubt this episode would have stuck with me particularly, had it not been for what came next.

We had pulled out of Falkirk Grahamston and were chugging our way towards Polmont. I was back on my phone, engrossed in a text message. I smelt the alcohol before he spoke.

"Is that a pianae, hen?"

My first thought was, is this a joke? But he hadn't been on the train when the kids got off, so it had to be genuine. Just one of those times when the coincidences people love to talk about actually

happen. The lightning strikes twice moment. I turned to him, explained about my braille keyboard, Bluetooth, etc.

"Braille." The word rolled around his mouth. "Did you learn that at school, aye?"

"Yes."

"Did they come in to teach you that, aye?"

I told him that they did.

"See, I thought you were playing a keyboard, a pianae. See, I'm listening to ma music, with ma headphones." He was standing beside me, the tinny sound of guitars audible. "But fuck, my phone's about to die." And so it did. "Have you never been able to see, hen?"

"No. I was born blind." I started to tell him that I thought this was better, as people who have lost their sight face adjustments that none of us could imagine, but he was already with me.

"Aye, that's probably better, 'cause you've never kent any different. See, I think I'd rather be blind than deaf."

I told him I agreed, quoting Helen Keller's "Blindness cuts you off from things; deafness cuts you off from people," a quote which I think is flawed, but it served the immediate purpose.

"Aye, you're absolutely stunning. Really beautiful. And I'm telling you that,"--dramatic pause, or was it thoughtful?--"because I can see." I smiled-part-amusement-and thanked him. "Have you got a boyfriend?"

I said I did.

"Well, you tell him fae Davie, he's a lucky man."

"I'll tell him. Thank you."

"Are you texting your boyfriend the now?"

"I am, actually."

"Well, I'll leave you alone. What's your name?"

"Sarah."

"Nice to meet you, Sarah. I'm Davie. God bless."

We shook hands, and he left grains of dirt on my fingertips. Or so I thought.

He sat down in the seat across the aisle. I'd barely typed three words when, "Aye, Sarah, you look offy happy, and so lovely, absolutely beautiful! Have you got a guide dug?"

"No, I've never really wanted one. I don't think it would suit my lifestyle, really. You have to want a pet as well, can't just fold it away into a bag when you're finished with it."

"Nae guide dug. Aye, well, I'll get you three, if you marry me."

I laughed, halfway between genuine amusement and incredulity.

"Well, thank you. If I wasn't already with someone—"

Some people have said since that this was a strange response for me to give, an opinion which I can understand, although it felt very natural at the time and for me still does. If I were to analyse it, I suppose I was trying to avoid a direct rebuff whilst simultaneously being honest. Or, to put it simply, I was joking, using humour as both a bond and a veil between us, half caught up in the moment of banter, but at the same time knowing that this was not an every-day conversation, but one in which boundaries had to be observed, which could sour in a single sentence. At no point was I frightened, but that doesn't mean I wasn't aware of risks.

"Aye, I'd take you hame to meet ma Ma any day. Do you like seashells?"

"Yes! And I actually do."

It was true. I had spent many days in my childhood walking on the beach with my Papa, picking up shells from the sand and examining them. My favourites were always silky smooth, or so spiky that you had to be careful when handling them. Then, when I was a bit older—eleven or twelve—my step dad and I would go after a storm, and bring back a plastic bag bulging with treasure. There were the sharp-edged razor shells, the twirly ones, as flawless as their namesake Belgium chocolates, and those which had once housed sea creatures, now abandoned with their doors open. We collected them all, and my mum raged that the kitchen stank of fish, and that the sink was filled with sand where we'd washed them out. She wasn't appeased by the seaweed that smelt of lemon, or the glass smoothed to harmlessness by the waves. I kept a bag in my room for a while, but it all ended up in the bin. But I remember being so impressed by the way the sea would make everything so perfect. I wanted to be a mermaid, with a necklace of seashells as smooth as the tumblers in our cupboard. I bought one—a necklace, I mean—from Rhodes last year, but it doesn't feel quite the same, somehow. In fact, I've never worn it.

Davie was up again, standing beside me. There was no-one else in the immediate vicinity, but the people halfway down the carriage would be listening, looking, glad it wasn't them.

"I've been at the beach," he said, rummaging in his pockets. "Here you go." He started putting his seashells on the table. "I want you to huv these."

I realised that what I had presumed was dirt was actually sand, grains inhabiting the shells like the tiny creatures. All those times we had washed our loot at the sink. I should have known.

"These are lovely. I love anything to do with the sea. Especially when you can hear the waves through the shell at your ear."

"Aye, I just collected them. You can have them. Although, hing own. I need to keep some. You see, there's a lesbian at ma Ma's hoose, and I think I've got a chance wi' her. So I need to keep some of the seashells." He was chuckling away, and I joined in. And as he spoke, I thought to myself, what a great story this is going to be! I'll tell my mum when I get off the train, my step dad when I get in, my friends tomorrow. "So if I take four, these three, and this wee yellow wan--"

"Yes, you take these back."

"And you keep these three."

"Thank you."

"I tell you, I've nae fuckin' money for this train by the way. I'm getting off at Falkirk."

We had passed Falkirk a few minutes ago. I didn't say this, however. I knew he probably meant that he got on at Falkirk, that he was in fact heading for Polmont. Either that or he didn't know where he

was. And if this was the case, my pointing it out wasn't going to help. He'd missed that stop, that boat. I hoped that the conductor didn't get here in time.

"You know, I've got a tattoo," he went on, "it's a crucifix. And my friend gave me a crucifix to go round my neck, and it fits into the tattoo, right inside. And I had the tattoo months before he got me it, like."

I told him I really liked the stories behind tattoos, especially when they were symbolic.

"Symbolic," he said, testing each syllable. "Aye, symbolic, aye. When they mean something. Symbolic. That's a good word, that. Symbolic. You see, you're an intellectual, like me. I spend most of my time talking to stupid people. But you're an intellectual. Anyway, I'll leave you alone."

"It's okay. I don't mind." I knew that he was in any case getting off sometime in the next half-hour, so I felt safe saying this.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course."

"I tell you, you're absolutely beautiful. Your boyfriend--he must just sit and look at you. You can tell him you met this crazy guy on the train. See, I've got psychosis, OCD, and depression." I wondered fleetingly if the two former can ever exist without the latter creeping its way in. "And I'm up in court on Friday for seven different offences." I was curious as to what they were, but only a fool would ask. "And they're going to cut my dole money, and I'm gonnae go fuckin' mental, 'cause that's 500 quid less a month by the way. But my psychiatrist's gonnae phone them the morn."

"Well, I really hope you get all that sorted out."

"God bless you. You're beautiful, darling. Do you look like your mum?"

"Well, when I'm with her, people say I do, and when I'm with my dad, people say I look like him."

"Are your mum and dad still together, aye?"

"No, they split up when I was little. I have a step dad."

"And does your step dad love you, aye?"

I grinned again.

"Yeah, I'd say he does, yeah."

"Well, how could he no? I've just met you, and I love you! I'd marry you the morn." The train was slowing. "What was your name again?"

"Sarah."

"Well, God bless you, Sarah. Stay safe as Hell."

"Nice to meet you."

He passed me, patted my shoulder. At the doorway to the carriage he turned.

"Last chance, Sarah! Do you want to come and meet ma Ma?"

"Maybe not tonight, Davie."

"You look after yourself, Sarah. Stay safe as Hell."

The train doors beeped, the carriage one slid shut. And he was gone.

I sat for a moment, a little taken aback by it all. My first thought was a reiteration of what a good story it was to tell. And secondly, I thought, I need to write this down, because really--it's the kind of thing you couldn't make up. Then I put my hands on the table, and realised that he'd left four shells, including the little yellow one. I smiled sadly, gathered them up, and put them in my bag.

And I thought, twice in one day I've been asked the same question, and twice there was the opportunity to judge it as stupid or ignorant, when in reality both parties simply didn't know. Some, of course, would argue that not knowing is ignorance, and champion all the word's negative connotations, but those people have normally travelled to different countries--on city breaks, not all-inclusive packages--and can tell you the reasons for the Spanish Civil War. Their parents tend to have gone to university, and their political views are full of stats and lacking in humans, although they can tell you the name of every leader under the sun.

As with the kids, it would have been easy to misjudge Davie, although as it happened, I was less inclined to do so. I have reflected since as to why this might have been. Both he and the kids were loud, both were blasting music, and both interrupted my train journey to chat. Maybe it was simply because before I spoke to them, I only saw the teenagers from the outside, as loud and obnoxious, which they undoubtedly were; however, in having a conversation with them, I once again learnt the lesson that applies to ninety-nine percent of human beings: there is more than meets the eye. In Davie's case, I just learnt this lesson from the start.

Perhaps it was that I knew that any judgement passed on Davie--through either comment or a lack of willingness to engage--may have resulted in a lot more than the middle finger. In his own way, he was nothing but pleasant and respectful, but I am certain that at the flick of a switch, he would be unrecognisable. I suspect that he himself is certain of this. But anyway, I don't think that was the reason. People being potentially dangerous doesn't make you less likely to look down on them. I could have just pretended.

Maybe it was simply that for Davie, I knew that any rebuff might have actually hurt. The teenagers, boisterous, resilient, impenetrable, don't care what anyone says to them. They are people for whom the present is a constant show, people for whom the future begins with tomorrow. Hell isn't safe for them. And it's okay to judge them, because you've been there. You can remember what it's like to think that you understand, and the world doesn't have a clue. The problem for Davie, of course, is that this has actually come true.

As planned, I have told the story about Davie to many people since. Most have been in fits, particularly my family, as the whole thing just encapsulates our type of humour. My Papa was wheezing, even on the third telling, which was to my Nana's friend Mary.

"Oh, darling!" she said between peals of laughter. "I can just see him! That's worthy of a television sketch! Or a fifteen minute BBC radio drama."

Like others, she praised my accent and intonation. I have always loved telling stories, almost as much as writing them. It's as if, for a few minutes, I become a carbon copy of Davie. And I tell it all the more, the better to remember it. It's become one of those stories that is requested: "Have you told them about that guy you met on the train?"

A few people have asked if I was frightened. I find this a little strange, given that I was on a train, there were other people present, and the worst Davie did was get sand everywhere. But then I suppose, if your world is one free of addiction and addicts, it may have seemed a bit alarming. Even so, I have little patience with this reaction, and I sometimes wonder if they were really listening.

Mostly, though, people have had a good laugh, and said that it's an experience to be remembered. My dad's reaction--when his smile had faded--was to say, "Those seashells probably meant a lot to him, though." I was glad he had said this, that he understood.

"Exactly," I replied, "and that's why I'll always keep the shells."

They are still in my bag, although in a separate pocket because of the sand. I still wonder weeks on if Davie gave them to the lesbian at his Ma's, and if they were complicit in winning her heart. Some people think he invented the lesbian, but there's no way.

"Tell them you met a crazy guy on the train."

Well, I've told them, Davie, and they all agree it's a cracker. It almost seems unfair. Here's this story, and here's me getting complements and credit and other people's amusement from it, and it's not even mine. Not really. I didn't do anything, except talk to him, try to be myself, just like he was.

"He would've appreciated that, though," my dad said when I told him this.

I nodded. I suspect this is true, and sure, I tell the story to get laughs, to entertain, but I want to say more than that. Much more. I want to say things about being a child, and believing that seashell necklaces can turn you into a mermaid, things about going to psychiatry appointments so that you'll have money to not spend on train fares, things about filling in the massive picture windows of time between episodes standing in the dock—accused of smashing the glass—by wandering along a cold beach, collecting shells and mentally sleeping with lesbians. I want to say that I kept thinking about Davie's Ma, and what she might have imagined he would be. And I just--I bet it wasn't that.