

## *Now I Know*

*By Elsie Locke*

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I am standing in my swimsuit in the sunny morning, looking across the harbour and waiting for the others to come down from the camp. Our beach is quite small, and we're the only campers left now the holidays are nearly over. The tide's coming in and the water's flat calm, no white horses anywhere, only little sparkles.

I look over the tide to the long strip of pure white sand that has tantalised me ever since we came here. It's on the same side of the harbour, but we can't get there by walking because of the long muddy inlet cutting in between; and we don't have a boat. My sister Lois has swum across three times. She's in the sixth form and has all her life-saving certificates. She says the sand on McGregor's Beach isn't coarse like ours; it feels silky-soft between your toes. But she never notices the shells.

I'm thinking about this when Lois appears beside me, wearing her yellow bathing cap. That means she's not just fooling round this morning.

'Perfect weather,' she says. 'Warm water, calm sea. How about swimming across to McGregor's with me, Samantha?'

I blink in surprise. She's never asked me before, and of course I want to do it, but.

'Would that be all right?' I ask uncertainly.

'Sure it's all right. I was just waiting for a suitable day to ask you to come with me. You've clocked two kilometres in the school baths and that beach can't be half the distance. You can do it easily.'

'Oh, it's not too far, it's not that - ' I say.

'But it's deep? Don't let that worry you. If you do get tired, I can tow you to shore.'

She has towed me often, practising. I would put my trust in Lois any time. She's strong in every way. If she says she can do something, she can.

'All right!' I say. 'I'll come!'

Our brother Dan comes hurtling down the track. 'What are you two up to?' he asks.

'We're going to swim over to McGregor's Beach,' I say proudly.

'You, Samantha?' he exclaims. 'Have you asked Mum?'

I give him a superior-sister look. I don't want to ask Mum. What if she says no? I can't appeal to Dad because he's not here. He's at work in town. I let Lois do the answering.

'Mum won't mind,' says Lois. 'She knows Samantha can swim further than that. I'll look after her.'

'You're crackers,' says Dan.

'Ha, you're only jealous,' I say. Dan is older than me but he can't beat me at swimming, either speed or distance.

The two Ludlow boys who are camping with us turn up with their fishing rods. 'We've got better things to do,' says Dan. 'Go and drown yourselves if you like.'

'We've no intention,' says Lois.

We run to the water, plunge in and get going. 'Like it steady,' she tells me. 'It's like walking. A good easy stride and you can go on forever. You only get puffed if you sprint.'

Lois stays beside me and sets the rhythm. We use different strokes in turn: freestyle, side stroke, breaststroke, back stroke. We pass the pine plantation, and a slope with tamarillo trees, and a big grass paddock. I haven't seen these before, because they were hidden by the pines.

Now the bank curves away from us and we have to cross the mouth of the inlet. A few minutes more and all the shores look far away. A strange feeling comes over me: it's like being away out at sea. I look around me and there isn't a single boat in sight. If I got tired now, could Lois really tow me so far? I push that niggling doubt aside. She won't have to; I am still swimming smoothly and strongly and so is she. I tell myself not to think about the distance. It's like crossing a rickety swing bridge, you don't look at the turbulent water rushing below, you carry on straight ahead and you don't get scared. You know that the bridge won't give way.

Maybe Lois had that small flash of doubt herself, the first time, because she says: 'We're over half way, Samantha. See how the beach is coming closer?'

So it is! I keep my thoughts on that beach and how silky-soft the sand will feel between my toes. I think of the shells which Lois has never told me about. I want to run along the sand from end to end and then come slowly back looking for shells I've never seen before.

We are now so close that I can see big logs on the shore and a dinghy turned upside down, but no people. I'm wondering how soon we will touch bottom when Lois says,

'You're going beautifully, Samantha. How about we go back again without stopping? That way you don't break the rhythm. I've done it before and there's no reason you can't.' No reason? Only that I want to run on that beach and feel the sand silky-soft between my toes, and walk slowly back looking for shells. But Lois has delivered a challenge and I don't want to disappoint her.

'If you like,' I say.

We stand waist deep for a moment to prove we've succeeded; and then we face back the way we have come. I can't see our own small beach at all. It is the same succession of pictures as before, turned inside out. This time, when we come to the mouth of the inlet and all the shores are far away and there's not a boat in sight and we have the whole watery world to ourselves, I don't even have a flutter of doubt; I feel exultant that we have not even slowed our pace. As Lois said, it's like walking, a good easy stride and you can go on forever.

We pass the big grass paddock and the slope with the tamarillo trees, and come to pine plantation. Halfway past it we change to breast stroke and look straight ahead. At last I can see our own stretch of beach, and there's a line of people standing on it.

'Can you see who's there?' I ask. Lois has really long sight, much better than mine.

'All our lot,' says Lois. 'Dan, and Andy and Bill Ludlow, and Mum oh! and a man! I wonder who that is!'

'A welcoming party,' I say. I get to thinking how I'll tell them that we reached the other side and came back without stopping. I'm really pleased with myself and I can imagine their surprised congratulations. That man, who is he? I can't yet see his face and I'm trying to match the way he stands with people I know, when I realise that all five of them are watching us very intently. There is a stir of uneasiness inside me as we touch bottom and stand up, waist deep for the second time.

It is not the man, but our mother's face which holds me now. It is white, as white as the sand on McGregor's Beach. Her skin is pulled tight across her cheek bones. It is taut with fear - and I know at once that the fear is for me.

How long has she been standing there, her mind haunted with pictures of me being carried home, drowned? Such a long way, such deep water, that's how she must have seen our marvellous swim. Oh Mum, I never thought about you, the whole way there and back.

I splash through the shallow water and run to her and fling my arms round her neck and hold her tight, dripping water all over her dress. 'I'm sorry Mum, I'm sorry,' I say. In a shaky voice she tells me, 'We could see Lois's yellow bathing cap away out there. We couldn't see you at all. Not until Dan fetched Mr Hall with his binoculars. And even then we couldn't be sure you'd make it.'

So that's who the man is: Mr Hall, the farmer on the next property, where we never go because people say he doesn't like strangers on his land. It would take a lot for Mum to ask for help from someone we don't even know.

'I'm glad I was handy,' says Mr Hall. 'I'd have got my boat out if we hadn't spotted you. You're a pair of silly girls.'

I am squashed good and proper. It's condemnation, not congratulations. The three boys are looking smug, as if they're the ones who've done well. But Lois doesn't seem to notice any of this. She says stoutly, 'There was nothing to be afraid of. We're both good swimmers and we knew what we were doing.'

'That's not how it looked to your mother,' says Mr Hall. 'If you want a long swim you can do it just as well in line with the shore, and you won't be in trouble if your muscles get cramp. Now if you headed that way,' he adds, pointing over his shoulder, 'you'd come to our jetty, and we've got barrels of apples up at the house. How about that?'

'Could we walk round to the jetty and bring our fishing rods?' asks Andy Ludlow eagerly. 'Can we fish off the jetty?'

Mr Hall gives a cheerful yes. He's being really friendly. I can't think why we've never explored the shore in that direction. We all like the idea - but I've got two regrets inside me. The first is that I've given Mum such a bad time.

The other is that I've missed my once-only chance to explore McGregor's Beach. I'll never know how silky-soft the sand will feel between my toes, or whether the shells are different from the ones I find here. Never.

As it turns out, I'm wrong about that. Next day, when we do swim round in line with the shore to Mr Hall's jetty while the boys scramble around the rocks, we see that his boat is a smart big runabout. And we go to the house for apples, and Lois drops a hint, and on Sunday Mr and Mrs Hall get the runabout going and take us across the water and land us from the dinghy.

Mum comes too, all happiness. She loves boats.

So here I am on McGregor's Beach, and I look back the way we've come and I can't see our own beach at all. I run from end to end on that silky-soft sand, and I walk slowly back, and yes, I find a beautiful shell shaped like a turban that I've never seen before. So now I know.