

The necklace stretched from one end of the kitchen table to the other, around the sugar bowl at the far end and back again, stopping only a few inches short of the toaster. The discovery on the beach of a length of abandoned fishing line draped with seaweed had first suggested the idea to Cherry; and every day of the holiday since then had been spent in



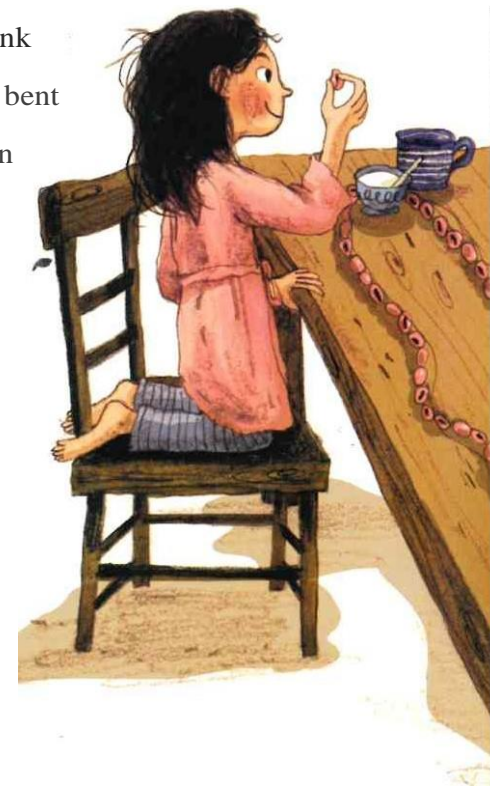
one single-minded pursuit, the creation of a necklace of glistening pink cowrie shells. She had sworn to herself and to everyone else that the necklace would not be complete until it reached the toaster; and when Cherry vowed she would do something, she invariably did it.

Cherry was the youngest in a family of older brothers, four of them, who had teased her relentlessly since the day she was born, eleven years before. She referred to them as "the four mistakes", for it was a family joke that each son had been an attempt to produce a daughter. To their huge delight Cherry reacted passionately to any slight or insult whether intended or not. Their particular targets were her size, which was diminutive compared with theirs, her dark flashing eyes that could wither with one scornful look, but above all her ever increasing femininity. Although the teasing was interminable it was

rarely hurtful, nor was it intended to be, for her brothers adored her; and she knew it.

Cherry was poring over her necklace, still in her dressing gown. Breakfast had just been cleared away and she was alone with her mother. She fingered the shells lightly, turning them gently until the entire necklace lay flat with the rounded pink of the shells all uppermost. Then she bent down and breathed on each of them in turn, polishing them carefully with a napkin.

"There's still the sea in them," she said to no one in particular. "You can still smell it, and I washed them and washed them, you know."





"You've only got today, Cherry," said her mother, coming over to the table and putting an arm around her. "Just today, that's all. We're off back home tomorrow morning first thing. Why don't you call it a day dear? You've been at it every day - you must be tired of it by now. There's no need to go on, you know. We all think it's a fine necklace and quite long enough. It's long enough surely?"

Cherry shook her head slowly. "Nope," she said. "Only that little bit left to do and then it's finished."

"But they'll take hours to collect, dear," her mother said weakly, recognizing and at the same time respecting her daughter's persistence.

"Only a few hours," said Cherry, bending over, her brows furrowing critically as she inspected a flaw in one of her shells, "that's all it'll take. D'you know, there are five thousand, three hundred and twenty-five shells in my necklace already? I counted them, so I know."

"Isn't that enough?" her mother said desperately.

"Nope," said Cherry. "I said I'd reach the toaster, and I'm going to reach the toaster."

Her mother turned away to continue the drying up. "Well, I can't spend all day on the beach today, Cherry,"

she said. "If you haven't finished by the time we come away I'll have to leave you there. We've got to pack up and tidy the house - there'll be no time in the morning."

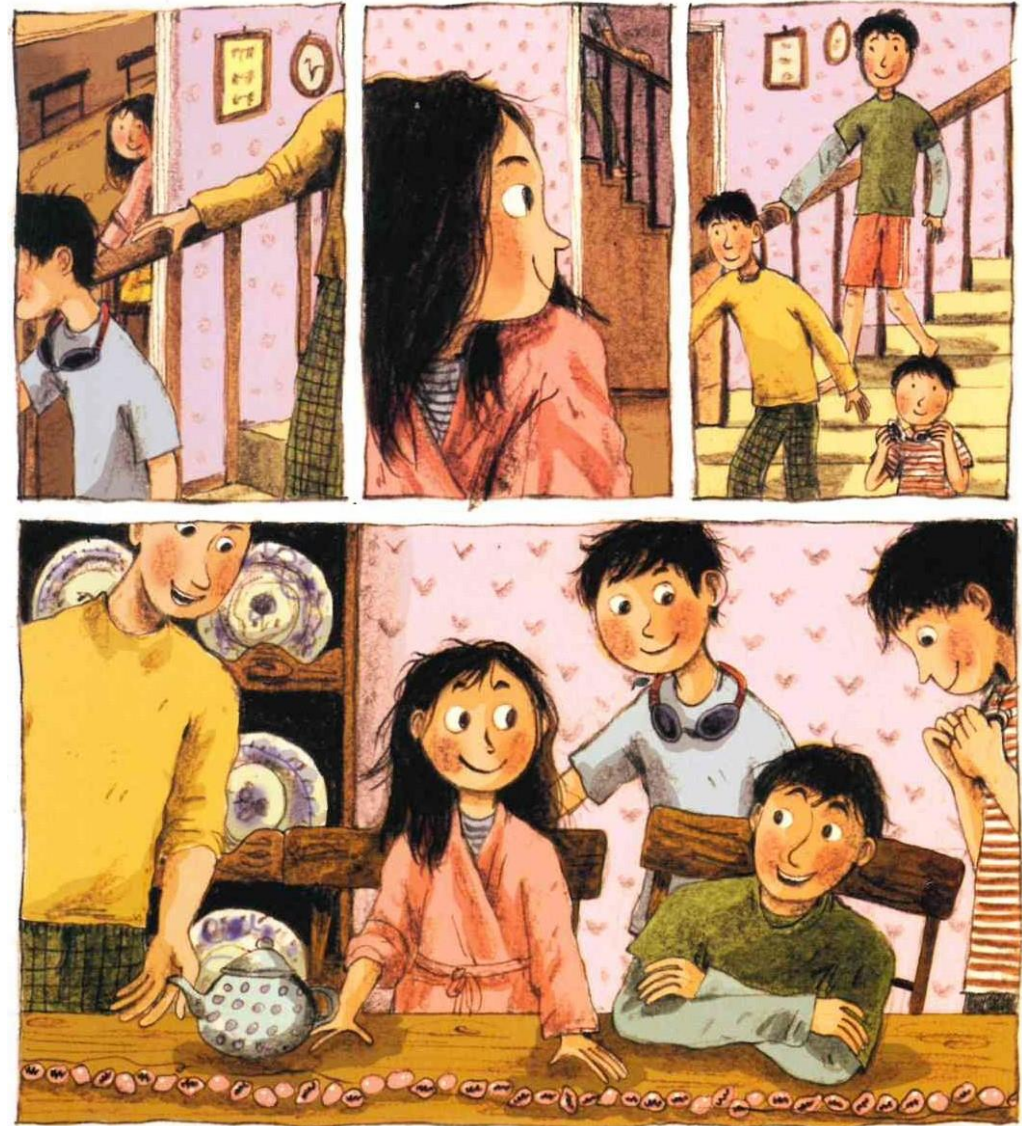
"I'll be all right," said Cherry, cocking her head on one side to view the necklace from a different angle. "There's never been a necklace like this before, not in all the world. I'm sure there hasn't." And then: "You can leave me there, Mum, and I'll walk back. It's only a mile or so along the cliff path and half a mile back across the fields. I've done it before on my own. It's not far."

There was a thundering on the stairs and a sudden rude invasion of the kitchen. Cherry was surrounded by her four brothers, who leant over the table in mock appreciation of her necklace.

"Ooh, pretty."

"Do they come in other colours? I mean, pink's not my colour."

"Bit big though, isn't it?" said one of them - she didn't know which and it didn't matter. He went on: "I mean it's



a bit big for a necklace." War had been declared again, and Cherry responded predictably.

"That depends," she said calmly, shrugging her shoulders because she knew that would irritate them.

"On what does it depend?" said her eldest brother pompously.

"On who's going to wear it of course, ninny," she said swiftly.

"Well, who is going to wear it?" he replied.



"It's for a giant" she said, her voice full of serious innocence. "It's a giant's necklace, and it's still not big enough."

It was the perfect answer, an answer she knew would



send her brothers into fits of hysterical hilarity. She loved to make them laugh at her and could do it at the drop of a hat. Of course she no more believed in giants than they did, but if it tickled them pink to believe she did, then why not pretend?

She turned on them, fists flailing, and chased them back up the stairs, her eyes burning in simulated fury. "Just cos you don't believe in anything 'cept motorbikes and football and all that rubbish, just cos you're great big, fat, ignorant pigs..." She hurled insults up the stairs after them and the worse they became the more they loved it.

