

The Man Who Mistook His Best Friend for a Footstool

A Story for All Ages by Aaron McEmrys

Once upon a time there lived a man named Sheldrake. He was a pretty boring guy, really. He didn't have any friends or hobbies, and rarely left his house except to go to the office, which was where he spent the great majority of his time. Sheldrake was one of those kind of people who were referred to as, "a Very Important Person."

But it had not always been so.

Sheldrake had grown up in a little coal-mining town in a forgotten part of the country. His father had worked in the mines until his face and hands were permanently black from coal dust and he coughed all the time. Eventually his father started coughing and couldn't stop until death stepped in and said, "Come and take your rest, John."

Sheldrake was only a boy when his father died and he did everything he could to help his family get by. And get by they did although they were very poor. It was during those long nights, listening to the cold wind howling through the many cracks in the walls that Sheldrake, who was always known as Shell in those days – first vowed he and his family would never be poor again.

As he got older, Shell worked harder and harder. He worked so hard that he forgot to go fishing in the Old Mill Pond with his best friend, Tom. He worked so hard that he forgot to pick the flowers his mother loved so much out in the back meadow on Mother's Day. Shell worked

so hard that he didn't even notice that nobody called him Shell anymore, only Mr. Sheldrake, and in fact he forgot that had ever been what people called him. Not that he would have cared what people called him.

Sheldrake didn't have time for people unless they were working for him.

Some years later, Sheldrake owned the coal mines where his father used to work, as well as the gas company, the electricity plant and lots of other important sounding and very valuable things. And every time Sheldrake would take over another company he would order a bigger house built for his family.

The houses were very big indeed and kept getting bigger and bigger until they were the biggest houses for many miles around and by the time Sheldrake looked up from the desk where he spent his life working he was living in a colossal mansion made of dark stone and full of every valuable thing: old paintings, carpets from Persia, massive furniture carved from rare South American woods and silverware made out of real silver. Sheldrake loved things, especially things that got more valuable through time, things he could later sell at a profit. The house was so large that Sheldrake would sometimes get lost on his way back from the bathroom and would spend hours wandering like a lost child through whole wings of rooms he had never been in before.

One night Sheldrake woke up in the middle of the night from a terrible dream. He had dreamed that he was all alone in that great house, all alone except for shadows and squeaking bats. He was covered in sweat and very afraid, so he got up to have a cup of warm milk. For the first

time in years he poked his head into the many bedrooms that lined the corridor to the stairs that led to this kitchen. These were the bedrooms set aside for his wife, his children and his many friends?

At each door Sheldrake knocked, and then opened the door and looked in, and at each door it was the same – nobody was there! The beds were all covered up in plastic and the rooms were cold and dusty. Down the hallways he ran and it was always the same; down the stairs shouting through all the rooms, calling out, crying out – “Is anyone there? Can you hear me? Honey? Kids? Anyone?”

Fearing that he had finally gone mad, Sheldrake ran into the giant and dusty old library and climbed to the very top shelf, where he vaguely remembered photo albums used to be kept. He took the cracked-covered old book down, and blew on it, kicking up a thick cloud of dust and sleeping spiders. It was very cold, and Sheldrake could hear the wind whistling through the hallways.

He hurried into the dining hall, set down the book and went to feed the fire, so small in the gigantic marble fireplace. He put some soothing music by Beethoven on his record player, grabbed an old candlestick and went back and sat down at the head of the largest, longest and most expensive dining table in the county. In the flickering light of the candle, Sheldrake opened the picture album and slowly began to turn the pages.

So many faces! So many faces! Years and years of family photos at picnics and school plays; so many Christmases and baptisms; so many smiles on faces that got older with each turning page. And he

remembered! He remembered all those faces – and he felt a rush of love and yearning in his heart that he had not felt for many years. He felt so good – until he noticed something. He noticed that he was not in any of the pictures. None of them. He must have been working, must have been on a business trip or at an auction, buying another company or another Persian rug. He was not in the book.

He couldn't take it anymore! Sheldrake slammed the book shut and began to weep. "Where are you? Where did you all go? I am so sorry. I forgot, I forgot, I forgot. Please come back, please...." And so he cried, this dry old man all alone at the head of a vast and empty table.

At that moment as if the candle light flickered wildly and then moved all on its own! Sheldrake looked up, terrified, and there, sitting cross-legged on the table, was his wife holding the candlestick in her hand. "What is going on here?" Sheldrake asked.

"What do you mean, Goofith?" she replied, "who do you think has been lighting your way all this time?"

Sheldrake was so scared that he jumped up and ran for the door to escape the fearful apparition on the table, but just before he got there a blast of cold wind hit him square in the face, very cold wind from outside – because the door had completely disappeared! "It's me, father, your son, Dickens. Who do you think has been keeping the cold wind out all these years?"

"Oh yes, and playing the music that helps you go to sleep every night.

I'm very tired of Beethoven, by the way", said his lovely daughter who

was standing where the record player used to be with a violin in one hand and a bow in the other.

Sheldrake was so confused now, such a storm of fear and confusion and happiness filled his heart that he reeled back to the big chair at the head of the table and plopped down heavily. But no sooner did he take a deep breath then the chair collapsed underneath him and he toppled to the floor with a thud!

“Tom, is that you, old friend?”, Sheldrake asked the heavy set old man with the twinkling eyes and receding hairline who he found himself face to face with on the floor.

“Course it’s me, Shell! Who else would have been holding your big butt up for all these years? And may I just add that you’ve been eating a bit too much beef wellington these last few years if you know what I mean!”

Soon they were all sitting around that fine table in the warm light of a big and welcoming fire. They caught Sheldrake, who was back to being called Shell, again, up on everything he had missed when he had forgotten they were people and not things and soon music and laughter filled the hall.

From then on it seemed like more and more of the things in his house started turning back into people again – like the refrigerator who turned into his sister Mildred one day or the collection of rare Amazonian songbirds that turned into his nephew Worth, who was stuck in a gilded bird cage several feet off the ground smiling mischievously and demanding to be let out!

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Before long that old house was so full of people that Shell had to have an enormous yard sale so there would be room for everyone. He realized that although he had forgotten the differences between people and things – his people had not forgotten, and he was deeply grateful.

And he never, ever, mistook his best friend for a footstool again.

THE END