The Little Old Man in the Bottle Cap Shell

There was so much crystal and so much light in the huge room that as the guests entered they were momentarily blinded. The women in their long gowns and beautiful jewelry cooed at the finery of the event. The men drank scotch and grumbled about the economy. Each table had a full place setting of china and none of the glasses had as much as a fingerprint to be seen on their sparkling surfaces. The wait staff were dressed in sharp black suits and nimbly wove through the crowd filling up champaign glasses and distributing little nibblies. This fundraiser to save the endangered giant pink whale was only for top society guests and everyone in attendance knew it.

One of the guests was deep in a conversation with her husband's business associate discussing his remodeling plans for his flat when her shawl slipped from her shoulders onto the ground. Bending over to pick it up, she stumbled away with a shriek. “What's all this fuss about” a very distinguished man with a small mustache leaned closer to see what had upset the woman. “Why it's a small hermit crab! Silly woman, it can’t hurt you” he said. Other guests drew close to see what all the commotion was about and the woman, whose face had turned quite red, said “it has a face!”. The guests chuckled at the woman's absurdity and her husband started looking through her purse to see if there was anything there that would explain his wife's bizarre behavior.

One man with a very expensive suit and a deep commanding voice spoke out and said "This crab does not belong here, I will carry it outside and we can continue with our evening”. He bent down to pick up the crab but paused. He stood up very fast and then bent down again tilting his head this way and that examining the crab. The hermit
crab did, in fact, have the face of a very old wrinkly man with a bald head and long white whiskers. “She is right,” the man said, “this crab has a human face”.

A murmur spread through the crowd and they all leaned forward to catch sight of the crab with a human face. They all gathered around the crab and for a moment all was silent and then one woman stepped forward and said: “this crab must be a bad omen, it must have come to warn us that something terrible is coming”. Others nodded their agreement and many became suddenly afraid of the awful things that were to come. “Maybe we should put it outside where it came from” someone offered up. “But look at how beautiful its shell is”, a very tall woman said, “there is no way that a creature with such a beautiful shell could be a bad omen”. Upon closer inspection, the crab did have the most amazing shell. It had a slightly pearly glow and shone in the light of the chandeliers as if there was a small star inside. One man declared that a creature that beautiful shouldn’t be put on the street for the birds to eat and many others agreed with him.

While some still believed that he was a bad omen, others began to whisper that maybe he was a messenger from deep in the sea. The whispers grew and some started to discuss the validity of cloistering themselves on a beach somewhere to dedicate their lives to the ocean. Maybe he was there to congratulate them on all the hard work they had done to save the great pink wales. Maybe he was there to read a list of all the single-use plastics each of them had ever used and thrown away. Maybe he was some sort of deep-sea god who was there to express his thanks for their mighty efforts towards conservation. “His voice must be so small that we can’t hear it without a
microphone,” one man said. Others agreed and they decided to pick him up and move
him to the stage at the front of their venue so they could all hear his voice.

One member of the crowd bent to pick him up but as soon as the shell was
between his fingers the crab made a squeak of fear and a very small wrinkly man about
the size of a thumb ran from under the shell. The little old man ran naked through the
guests dodging stiletto heels and becoming disoriented by his reflection in the shiny
leather of men's dress shoes. The crowd jumped from foot to foot, balanced on tables,
and leaped upon chairs in an attempt to not squish the fleeing old man. The crab man
searched desperately for somewhere to hide and spying a bottle cap under a table in
one corner he dove for it, folding himself up into a ball inside.

For a few moments, the crowd searched for him wondering where he could have
gone in the huge ballroom. The waitstaff also looked but no one found the crab man in
the bottle cap. After some time someone remembered the extraordinary shell and the
discussion of what to do with it began. The woman who first discovered the crab lobbied
that it should be hers as she saw it first. Others argued that it should be sent to a
museum of natural history and exhibited for the public to see. In the end, they decided
that it should be auctioned off at the end of their event to increase the funds going to
save the great pink whales.

The shell sold for an outrageous price and all the guests went home
congratulating themselves on the success of the event. The bottle cap with the small
man in it was later swept up by the cleaning staff and thrown into the dumpster behind
the grand conference hall. The little old man held the bottle cap tight to his hunched
back and started his long journey back to the sea. He hitched a ride on a garbage truck
but soon jumped off and continued on foot. His feet ached as they slapped down on the rough concrete roads and, when the wind picked up, he was forced to dodge plastic cups, newspapers, and tin cans. Eventually, the little old crab man found his way back to the ocean and plonked himself down to rest his tired feet in the cool water of a tide pool. A small smile spread over his face as he eased into the water and let the weight of the bottle cap pull him to the bottom.