



The Search for Shelby

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*Everyone searches for the
“Town of Shelby”
in his or her life*

Everyone

*From the big bad gang member
to
the most timid person*

*Everyone searches for the
“Town of Shelby.”*

Some find it with little effort.

Others with much searching.

Still others never find it at all.

*In spite of the effort
or
the person looking*

*know that the search will end
when you discover where to look.*

THE SEARCH FOR SHELBY



by

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2014

The back of the school bus was Casey's favorite place to sit. Not just the back, but the last seat, next to the window. That was Casey's seat and everybody knew it.

It wasn't that this particular seat was any safer or more comfortable than the others. In fact, "comfortable" would be the last word Casey would use to describe it.

It was just that the corner seat was a place for Casey to get away from everyone.
It was a place for her to hide.

Casey was a loner, an outsider. She kept pretty much to herself. She bothered no one, and no one really paid much attention to her. Usually she would rest her head against the window of the bus and fall asleep until she got to school.

Casey's parents had divorced about two years ago and it weighed heavy on her mind. She did what many teenagers do, blame herself for the divorce. She didn't exactly know why, but she figured she must of had something to do with it.

This caused Casey to be depressed and to turn within herself shutting everyone else out of her life.

As much as she wanted friends; as much as she wanted people to like her, she had lost all confidence in who she was and in her ability to have any friends.

“Dad left the family so he must not care about me,” she figured.
“I’m sure no one else does either.
Why even try to make friends.”

Those were hard times for Casey.
If it wasn’t for Pop being there when she needed him,
no telling what would’ve happened.

“Pop” drove the bus Casey took to school every morning.
Nobody really knew what his real name was.
In fact, every once in a while Casey would try to get him to tell her but he never would.

“Come on Pop,” she would say.
“I’m your friend. I won’t tell no one, I promise.”

Pop would always respond the same way;

“When I’m ready to tell someone, you’ll be the first to know.”

As much as Casey wondered about Pops' real name, Pop wondered why Casey was always alone.

It just didn't make any sense to him.

This was a great kid with a great personality, yet the only person who didn't seem to believe it was Casey herself.

From time to time Pop would talk to her about this, but nothing ever seemed to come of it.

In fact, their conversation became routine, boring, almost predictable. Casey would always talk about how insecure she was around other people, how everybody just seemed better than she was and how trying to make friends was just a waste of time.

Pop, on the other hand, was no less predictable in his response.

He would patiently listen to Casey and then would always tell her the same thing;

it was always the same thing;

*“Oftentimes
the things we search for most for in life,
are things that have been with us all along.”*

When Pop would say this, Casey would roll her eyes and flash an impatient look on her face.

“What the heck is he talking about,”
she would always ask herself.

In fact she had Pop’s words memorized so much that
she would lip-sync the words as Pop was saying them.

*“Oftentimes Casey,
the things we search for most in life,
are things that have been with us all along.”*

~

Morning after chilly morning, Casey would
trudge back to her seat, drop her backpack next to her and
plop down into her place. Eventually she would fall asleep,
resting her head against the frosty window.

It all became routine for her.
Something she never had to think about doing.

But as Casey was about to find out,
routines sometimes have a way of changing.

And this routine was about to change and
change in a most unusual way.

It all happened on a boring Monday in November.

Casey left the house early that day and headed for the bus stop at the corner.

Snow had fallen the night before and the air seemed colder than usual. This made waiting for the bus even more uncomfortable.

When the bus finally arrived, Casey got on and headed for her seat. She dropped her backpack next to her, plopped into her place, rested her head against the window, and immediately dozed off.

When the old bus arrived at her school,
the squeaking of brakes woke her up as it did every morning.

She gradually sat up from her seat, stretched a bit and then
glanced past the window as she rubbed her eyes
and reached for her backpack.

When she turned again to look out the window,
she saw something peculiar.

The sun was out and all the snow was gone. It looked like a day
you'd see in mid summer, not the beginning of winter.

And standing on the sidewalk was small group of kids her age
who were waving at her and motioning her to come off the bus.

Casey rubbed her eyes again to get a better look.

“What’s going on?” she whispered. “Who are those people?
Why are they waving at me?”

Casey quickly turned away in shyness,
but then quickly sneaked another look. Maybe they'd be gone.
Maybe they were waving at somebody else.

But they weren't.

Casey then pointed to herself as if to say, “Me? You want me?”
The group nodded in response.

Casey grabbed her backpack, slowly got up from her seat and
reluctantly walked to the front of the empty bus.

“Why do they want me?
I don’t know any of those kids.”

When she came to the bus steps, she stopped and turned toward the driver’s seat. There was Pop.

“Who are those people, Pop?” Casey asked. Pop smiled, but said nothing. Casey turned back towards the kids outside the open bus door.

“You want me?” she asked.

The kids again motioned for her to come with them.

“Come on, Casey,” one called. “Come with us.”

Casey cautiously started down the steps.

A boy with red hair and a nice smile did most of the talking. “Hi, Casey! How ya doing?” he said.

“Good to see you again.”

Everyone in the group agreed.

“Good to see me again?” Casey asked with a confused look on her face. “Who are you? Where am I? How do you know my name? I don’t know any of you.”

“Don’t you know?” the red-haired boy asked.

“You’re in Shelby. You know where Shelby is.

You’ve been in Shelby all your life.”

What’s wrong with you? What a dumb question. We’re your friends. Don’t you remember anything?”

Casey still looked confused.

“Shelby?”

What’s going on here? Shelby?
I never heard of a town called Shelby or whatever you call it. I don’t know you. I don’t know any of you.”

“Come on,” a girl from the group said. “We’re going to get something to eat and we want you to come with us Casey. Come on.”

Again, everyone in the group agreed.

Casey slowly shook her head back and forth. “No,” she said, “I...I can’t go with you. I don’t know who you are. You’ve got the wrong person. You don’t know me, so you can’t like me. Nobody likes me.”

Now it was the group’s turn to look confused.

“I’m getting back on the bus,” Casey said. “I...I gotta go.”

“Wait!” said the red-haired boy. “You know us. You must not remember. Come with us, Casey. You won’t be late for school or anything. We really want you to come.”

“No,” Casey said as she backed up the steps. “You don’t know me. Nobody knows me. I...I’ve got to go.”

Casey turned and quickly walked down the bus aisle and headed to the back of the bus, huddled into her usual seat and rested her head on the glass.

“Nobody knows me,” she whispered to herself.

Shortly after, a deep voice interrupted Casey's sleep. This time it wasn't the people at the bottom of the steps. It was Pop.

"Come on," he said. "Come on Casey, wake up. You're going to be late for school if you don't get going."

Casey slowly opened her eyes, looked at Pop, then quickly turned to look out the window.

"Pop!" she said. "Where....where did those kids go?"

"You all right, Casey?" he asked.

"Come on, you better get going. It's 8:15."

Casey paused a moment. She sat back in her seat as reality slowly set in. "It was all a dream," she thought to herself.

"It was only just a dream."

"Casey, it's 8:15," Pop repeated.

"8:15? Did you say 8:15? I'm gonna be late!" Casey quickly grabbed her backpack, paused one more time to look out the window then stood up and ran off the bus.

~

All day long at school, Casey thought about the morning and how real it all seemed to be.

She could hardly think of anything else.

On the one hand, she knew it must have been a some silly dream. But on the other, her feeling of having been wanted and accepted by those people was so strong; so real. She had never felt like that before.

However, by day's end, a sad, lonely feeling had crept deep into Casey's soul. She knew she could never have friends who liked her that much. How she wished the people from Shelby had been more than just a dream.

How she wished she had friends who cared that much.

~

The next morning, Casey hurried to her usual seat on the bus. "I wonder if I could," she thought as she sat down. "I wonder if I could go back to that town."

Before she knew it, she was asleep, her head resting against the cold window.

Shortly after the bus stopped, Casey woke up and quickly looked out the window. Once again the sun was shining and all the snow was gone. And sure enough, there were all her "friends" motioning to her to get off the bus.

This time she didn't hesitate. Casey raced to the front of the empty bus and stopped only long enough to glance at the driver's seat. There was Pop.

Once again, he just smiled.

Casey turned back toward the door and slowly walked down the steps to greet her “friends.”

“Come on, Casey! Come with us today,” the boy with the red hair said.

“Yeah, Casey, come with us. We want you to be with us,” another said.

“Where are we going?” Casey asked.

“We’re gonna get something to eat, then walk around Shelby. We’re just gonna hang out and have some fun.”

Though she didn’t understand, Casey wasn’t about to resist this time. “Let’s do it,” she said, and all were off to Shelby.

Everyone Casey met as she and her friends walked down the quiet, shady, tree-lined streets of Shelby seemed to know her.

Everyone.

It was the most incredible, most gratifying, most beautiful experience she had ever had in her life. If she didn’t know better, she would have thought she was in heaven.

No matter where she went, whether it was to a “friend’s” house, or to the mall, or just hanging out at the corner store, Casey was overwhelmed by the way everyone treated her and by the respect and warmth they showed her.

It was so easy to be in Shelby,
to just be herself and to laugh again.

It had been a long time since she felt like this. It reminded her of those Christmas days when her dad was home and her family was all together and happy.

It was exactly what she had been searching for ever since her mom and dad divorced.

Casey had only one regret: that she had to wake up and leave the town of Shelby at the end of the day.

~

Each school day now, Casey hurried to her usual seat on the bus in anticipation of spending time with her friends in Shelby.

Each day the cold, dreary, dark days of winter gave way to the warm sunshine of summer.

And each day her friends would be there to greet her.

When Casey saw them, she'd rush to the front of the bus, glance at Pop, then join her friends.

Today, however, when she glanced at Pop, she paused at the top of the steps. She just had to ask.

“Pop, I... I don't understand what's going on here. The warm weather, the people – why do they like me so much? I didn't do anything to get them to like me.”

Pop smiled his usual “Pop” smile, then answered Casey:

“Oftentimes the things we search for most in life...”

Before Pop could finish, Casey jumped in,

“Yeah, yeah I know,

‘are things that have been with us all along.’

Casey smiled and then turned to step off the bus,
glancing back at Pop one more time.

“This is crazy,” she thought, slowly shaking her head,

“This is crazy.”

There was no doubt Casey enjoyed her friends’
company, and they enjoyed hers. She had never
received this kind of attention and affection from
anyone in her life.

But the same questions kept nagging her,
“What’s going on here? Why do these people like me?”

Casey was determined to get some answers.

If Pop couldn’t give them to her,
maybe her friends could.

One day, while having lunch at the mall
she decided to give it a try. Sitting across from her
in the booth was the red-haired boy.
Both were waiting for the rest of the group to get their food.

Casey spoke up. “Hey, umm, maybe you can help me out,” she said to the red-haired boy as she nervously moved things around on her tray. “I, ahhh, I just can’t understand something. I don’t understand what’s going on here.”

“What am I doing here? Why does everybody like me? I don’t understand. I’m no athlete or nothing. I’m certainly not the best-looking person in the world, that’s for sure. What’s going on here?”

The red-haired boy unwrapped his burger, smoothed out the paper, then looked up at Casey to answer her.

“Why do you think you have to do something for us to like you? You don’t have to do nothing for us. We just like you for who you are, that’s all. We just like you.

There was a pause while the boy took a small bite out of his burger. Shortly after, he spoke up again. This time he stared straight into Casey’s eyes.

“Don’t you get it, Casey?” he told her.
“All these things happening to you— they are all things Shelby’s been trying to tell you. They are all things Shelby has been trying to tell you for a long time. This is what Shelby is really all about.”

Casey flashed a confused look on her face then slowly leaned back in the booth.

“Shelby’s been trying to tell me this for a long time?” she whispered to herself. “What the heck is he talking about? What’s the town of Shelby have to do with it.”

Casey may not have understood what was going on, but she did know she wanted to be in Shelby.

There, the sun was always shining, and every day was as warm as the people she was with. She enjoyed her friends’ company, and—surprisingly, Casey thought—they enjoyed hers.

She had rarely gotten this kind of attention and affection from anyone in her whole life.

Gradually Casey’s thoughts of worthlessness were worn down by her feelings of confidence and happiness.

She wished she could stay in Shelby forever.

But that was not to be.

Casey knew this day would come.
It was the day she feared the most

On this day, Casey rushed to her corner seat as usual, tossed her backpack next to her, and fell asleep as she always did.

When the squeaking of the brakes woke her up, she quickly opened her eyes and looked out the window.

Anticipation made her smile.
Reality made her shudder.

When she looked out the frost covered window she saw snow on the ground and no one there to greet her.

“What happened?” she asked herself as the smile on her face faded. “Where are they? Where are my friends?”

Casey grew extremely anxious.

She tried to go back to sleep closing her eyes again and again, but to no avail. Every time she opened her eyes, the results were the same.

“Casey,” Pop called as he looked into the huge rearview mirror. “It’s time to go. Come on, you’re gonna be late.”

Casey didn’t answer.

“Casey? You all right? You better get going.
You’re gonna be late.”

Still no answer.

Pop got up from his seat and walked to the back of the bus to see what was going on. “Casey, what are you doing?” he asked.

“You all right?”

Casey opened her eyes.

“Pop,” she asked, “where are those kids?”

“What are you talking about, Casey?” Pop said.

“You better get going. I have to get the bus back to the garage, and you have to go to school.”

“Pop,” she insisted, “you know what I’m talking about. The kids I’ve been hanging out with, where are they?”

“Casey, you’re not making any sense. You just had a dream or something. You better get going or you’re gonna be late.”

“But Pop...”

Silence filled the air as Casey slowly lowered her eyes in disappointment. She knew Pop was right.

Maybe, maybe it was all just a dream after all.

There would be no Shelby today. In fact, there was no Shelby the rest of the week.

As hard as she tried to bring it back, she could not.

Every day, Casey rushed to her seat, dropped her backpack next to her, and fell asleep in hopes of being with her Shelby friends.

But every day it was the same thing.

Shelby would be no more and Casey knew it. The love, attention and affection she had felt in those brief moments of time were now gone.

It had all disappeared.

The school bus stopped on the corner as it did every Friday afternoon. Casey got off the bus, but instead of heading for home, she walked to her favorite “getaway” spot which was in a alley behind Buck’s grocery store.

There, alone, she leaned her back against the cement wall, dropped her backpack and slid down the wall to the ground. She pulled her knees up close to her body and rested her arms across them.

“Shelby,” she said to herself as she wiped tears from her eyes, “where are you? Where did you go?”

A half hour went by and
Casey was still deep in thought about Shelby.

Suddenly, she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming toward her. She lifted her head trying to focus her eyes through her tears.

As the figure came closer,
Casey recognized who it was. It was Pop.
“Pop!” Casey said, surprised to see him.
“What are you doing here?”

“This is a shortcut to my house from the store.
What are you doing here?”

Casey slowly rested her chin on her arms. “Just thinking.”

Pop pulled an old wooden crate towards him and
slowly sat down, placing his small bag of groceries on
the ground next to him.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked gently.

Thoughts flew around in Casey’s head like a
whirlwind. “Should I tell him? Should I tell him about
what happened? I really don’t want to tell anyone.
Maybe he’ll think I’m crazy or something.
Heck, I think I’m crazy or something.

“...But if I can’t trust Pop, who can I trust?
I just gotta tell someone.”

Casey sat up and wiggled a bit to get more comfortable.
Then, staring at Pop as if to say, “Are you ready for
this?” she began to speak.

“Well, this is going to sound crazy, Pop, but here goes.”

Casey explained everything that happened to her.

“...and when I woke up, the sun was out and I was in this beautiful town with all these really nice people. Everybody in town knew me, Pop, and they were real nice to me—especially the kids. It was like they had known me forever. I never felt so good in all my life. I felt like I was somebody important, somebody special. I felt respected. I didn’t even have to try to belong. It just happened.”

“I wish I really had friends like that. I really do.”

Casey paused as she eased back into her original sitting position.

“Then one day I woke up and nothing. No town, no sun, no warm weather, no people, no friends, no nothing. Just like it is today—just like it’s been forever.”

“This may sound silly to you, Pop, but I miss that town. I miss those people. I missed being treated like I was somebody. I wish I could go back.”

There was a pause as Pop fiddled with his groceries.

“What was the name of town,” he asked.

“What?” Casey said starring at the ground.

“The town you’re talking about. What was the name of the town?”

Casey raised her eyes.

“Shelby. The name of the town was Shelby.”

“Shelby,” Pop said staring at Casey.

“Shelby. interesting name?”

“Pop, didn’t you hear anything I said?”

Silence hung in the air.

Pop said nothing. Instead he grabbed his bag of groceries and stood up. Before he walked away, he hung his head a bit, adjusted the bag of groceries, turned to Casey and spoke.

“By Casey. You’re a good kid.

You take care now.”

Pop started to walk away, but before he got too far,

Casey spoke up.

“Hey Pop, you alright?”

Pop said nothing.

“See you Monday, Pop”

Pop turned, smiled, nodded his head and then continued to walk away.

As Pop was leaving the alley, an eerie, cold, depressing feeling flashed through Casey’s body.

She didn't know it at the time, but this depressing chill would soon have merit.

~

Monday morning came too quickly for Casey. She spent much of the weekend thinking about Shelby and all that had happened.

It was tough to get going, but eventually she was ready for school. Grabbing her backpack, she said goodbye to her mom and headed for the bus.

The bus was unusually late this morning. This was strange because Pop was never late.

When it finally did arrive, it stopped at the curb as the doors swung open.

“Hey, Pop! Where've you been?” Casey said as she started up the steps. “Wait a minute—you're not Pop.”

“No,” the new bus driver said sadly. “I'm Donna.”

“Where's Pop?” Casey asked.

Donna paused and lowered her head a bit before answering.

“He passed away in his sleep this weekend,” she said in a soft voice. “I'm sorry.”

Casey stood motionless. “Pop? Dead?” she asked in disbelief.
“That can’t be. I was just talking to him a few days ago. He was fine.”

The driver slowly raised her head and said nothing more about it.

Casey’s body was numb. Pop’s death cut deeply into her very soul. Ever since she could remember, Pop had always been there for her.

Casey slowly turned and started to trudge to her seat. As she did, the bus driver spoke up.

“Uh, excuse me. You wouldn’t happen to be Casey, would you?” she asked.

Casey slowly turned and nodded as she quickly wiped a tear from her cheek.

“My boss asked me to give you this envelope.”

Still in shock, Casey took the envelope and stuck it in her back pocket before heading to the back of the bus. If there had been a seat on the back bumper, she would’ve gladly taken it. More than ever, she wanted to be alone.

Casey stared out the window as tears streamed down her face. As fast as the tears came, she’d wipe them away, not wanting anyone to see her cry. She couldn’t believe Pop was gone.

Seems like everyone she ever loved—her father, her friends in Shelby, and now Pop—had disappeared from her life.

This was going to be a long day for Casey and indeed it was. The bus ride home was no different.

As Casey stepped off the bus, she again decided to head for her favorite spot in the alley.

This time she ran, wiping tears from her cheek as she did. When she got there, she threw her backpack on the ground and immediately slid down the wall to sit. She pulled her knees up close to her body, wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested her forehead on her knees.

Tears streamed from her eyes as she began to cry uncontrollably.

“Why did you have to go, Pop?” she thought.

“Why did you have to go?”

The alley echoed with the sounds of sadness. The street sounds faded and all that could be heard was a young girl's tears.

Soon after, Casey's thoughts were interrupted by an uncomfortable feeling she had, as though she was sitting on something.

She reached back and pulled out the envelope in her back pocket that Donna had given her on the bus.

She stared at it for a moment, then slowly opened it
wondering what it was all about.

Pulling the letter out she began to read it.

The letter was short and to the point:

Casey,

Oftentimes the things we search for most in life are things that have been with us all along.

The boy with the red hair was right. You didn't have to do anything to earn their respect but just be who you are.

I hope you now believe.

God bless my friend.

Shelby

“Shelby,” she whispered to herself. “The boy with the red hair.
How did he.....?”

Then it hit her.

“Shelby! Could....could Pop’s real name be...Shelby?

Casey read the letter again, then slowly lifted her eyes.

“Shelby. Pop’s real name is Shelby.”

A cold chill slowly consumed her body.
It was then she remembered what the red-haired
boy told her while in the mall restaurant,

“All these things happening to you ...
they are all things Shelby’s been trying to tell you.

They are all things Shelby’s been trying
to tell you for a long time.”

Casey eyes stared aimlessly into space.

“Things Shelby’s been trying to tell me,” she whispered.

“Could it be? But how? How could he...?”

What Casey was thinking just didn’t seem possible.

But it was.

Shelby wasn't about any town. It was more than that...much more. You might say Shelby was Pop's farewell gift to Casey before he died,

his way of saying to her,

“You didn't understand me when I tried to tell you, so I thought maybe maybe you'd understand if I showed you.”

And show her he did.

In a strange, eerie turn of events that could have been taken right from the pages of *The Twilight Zone*, Shelby the town was really the words of Shelby the man played out for Casey right in front of her eyes.

It was everything Pop (or Shelby) had been trying to tell Casey for years. And everything he'd been trying to tell her was now beginning to make sense.

That is,

within one's soul truly lies everything needed to be liked and respected by others.

It's been there all the time.

*One needs to do nothing to earn it, and simply enough, all one has to do is to **believe it.***

Casey was now beginning to understand.

What she didn't understand was how. How did Pop, or Shelby,
make this all happen?

How did he make it all come to life for her?
Truth is, she will never understand it.

Still in shock,
Casey slowly worked her way up the wall to stand.

Before she left the alley, she opened the letter and read it
one more time.

“Nobody is ever going to believe this,” she said.
“No way is anyone going to believe this in a million years.”

~

Every once in a while Casey would still sit in the alley behind
Bucks grocery store and think about all that had happened to her
in the past few months and how much of an impact it had made
on her life.

One day while sitting there deep in thought, she was suddenly
interrupted by a friendly voice.

“Everybody thought you'd be here,” a boy said.

Casey looked up. It was a few of the kids she had met at the high school she was attending this year.

“Come on,” the boy said. “We’re going to town. Quit sitting around and come with us.”

Casey stretched out her hand. “Help me up.”

A boy with red hair and a nice smile grabbed Casey’s hand, gave a tug, and pulled her to her feet.

Casey steadied herself,
then paused a moment to give the boy a hard look.

“Whaaat?” the boy asked, staring back at Casey.

“Ya know,” she said, “I...!I still can’t get over how much you look like someone I used to know.”

Casey’s friends looked at one another as if to say, “Aw, man. Here we go again.”

“Yeah, well,” the boy with red hair said with a slight smile as they all started to walk away, “you’ve told me that a million times, and before you ask me again, the answer is

‘No.’”

“I ain’t never been to a place called Shelby or Sleaby or whatever you call it.”

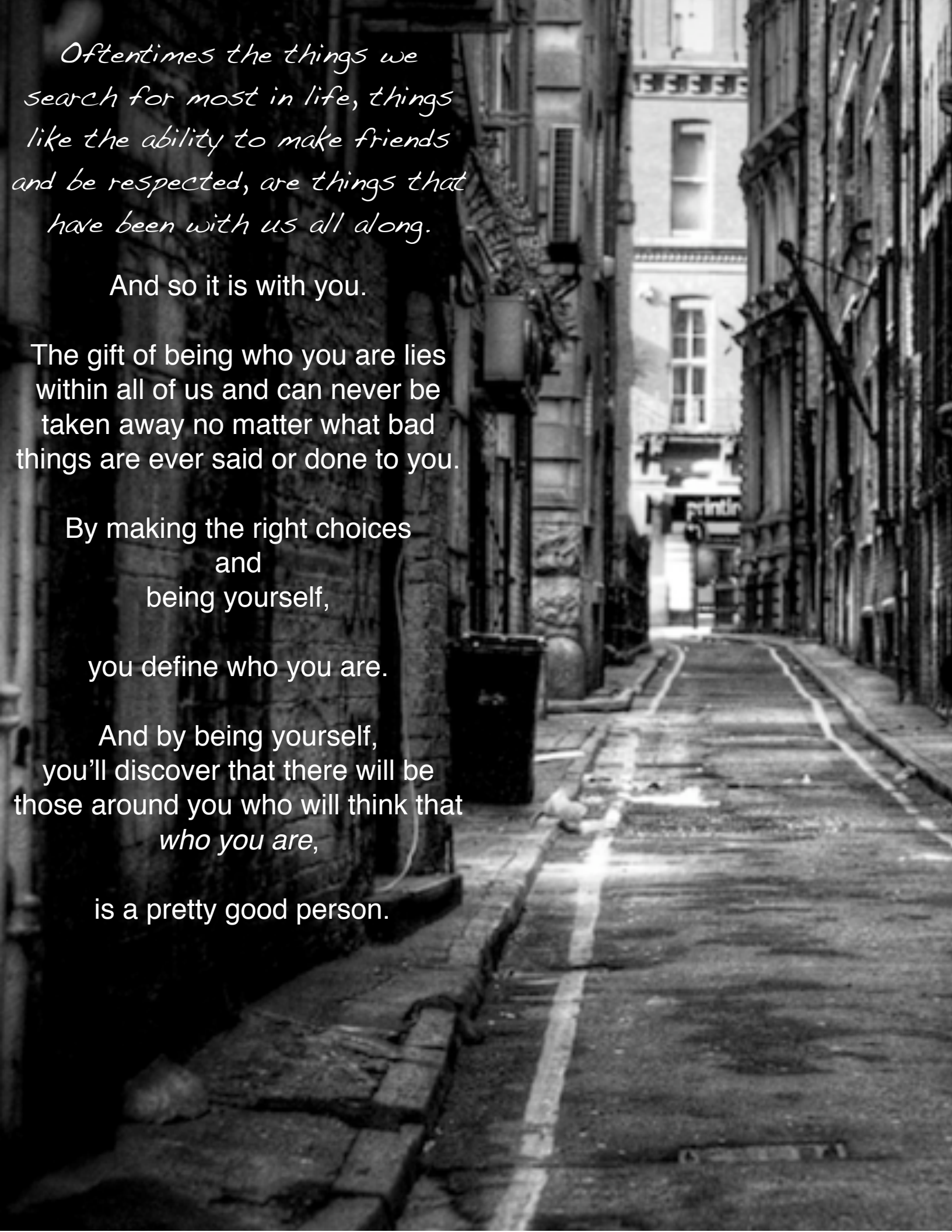
There was a pause before Casey spoke up.

Nice place, Shelby is.”

Casey’s words echoed off the buildings in the empty alley as the group slowly walked away.

“Nice place.”

FINAL THOUGHT



*Oftentimes the things we
search for most in life, things
like the ability to make friends
and be respected, are things that
have been with us all along.*

And so it is with you.

The gift of being who you are lies
within all of us and can never be
taken away no matter what bad
things are ever said or done to you.

By making the right choices
and
being yourself,

you define who you are.

And by being yourself,
you'll discover that there will be
those around you who will think that
who you are,

is a pretty good person.

Questions & Comments

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