

# Sam's Cleaning Station

By Carol Ottley-Mitchell  
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Deep in the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea, in the midst of the glory of a coral reef, Sam, the gobie was scared. He had come upon this reef years ago as a tiny fry, looking for a home after his parents were caught and his old home destroyed. There was hardly anything on the reef at the time, but he had nowhere else to go. He had found a crevice and called it home. As time passed coral grew and more fish came to live on the reef.

Sam built a life and now it was in danger.

Sam decided to share his problem his best friend. Freddie, a sea sponge, was the first creature Sam met when he came to live at the reef and they had been firm friends since. Sam swam over to where he lived and spoke to him.



"Freddie, are you awake?"

"What, what, what's going on?" the sponge awoke out of a deep sleep. "Am I late, is it morning? What's going on, what's going on?"

"You're not late, Freddy" Sam replied, "I haven't opened the station yet. But look at this, we have a new customer."

Sam had been holding a shell carefully in his mouth. He pushed it towards Freddie who replied.

"A new customer? Great news, fantastic job, we can always take on a new ... What? What? oh no! We can't clean her! We'll have to close down, pretend we're on vacation, a hiatus, or hibernation ... do fish hibernate? Oh dear, oh dear, we're ruined!"

Sam nodded his head. "We'll have to think of something. A shark in the cleaning station, even the calmest shark, will not be good for business!"

"Of course we have to do something! Can we just say 'No'? Can you say 'No' to a shark? Has anyone said 'No' to a shark and survived?" Freddie's voice grew louder with each question. "Oh dear, oh dear, we're ruined! It'll take us months to recover."

Sam swam off to prepare for the day's work, leaving Freddie behind to moan. He looked at his list of clients for the day. Apart from the shark, there was nothing unusual just a family of grouper, a few snapper and 25 Jacks. The Jacks seemed to always be getting into some mischief that left them covered in parasites inside and out.

One by one, Sam's employees came trickling in. There were several other gobies who helped with the cleaning and Freddie, who gave the fish a sweep with his grey-green tubes after the gobies had picked them clean of bugs. There were all talking about the shark as they waited for their first customers.

"Well, I'm not cleaning any sharks," one gobie announced. "I'm sure there's something in my contract that says I don't have to do dangerous animals."

The others echoed his sentiment.

Sam came in and heard them talking. "It's my place, I'll clean the shark. Come on guys, customers are coming in, let's get to work."

The grouper family came in first, mother, father and three small fry. They swam in with their heads to the side and their mouths opened. This was their way of letting the gobies know that they were not planning to eat them. Sam divided them up among the workers.



He set to work on the youngest fry. He picked bugs and dead skin off of the fish's body and then swam into the mouth to finish his cleaning.

All of a sudden, Sam found himself in the dark. He turned around frantically and realised that the child had closed his mouth trapping Sam inside. Sam thought quickly.

'Silly fry, I can easily escape through his gills.'

But when he swam to the gills, they were closed. The little fish was holding his water, just as humans hold their breaths, so his gills were closed.

'Just what I needed today,' Sam thought, 'a comedian.'

Cleaner Gobie Cleaning a Mixture Of Reef Fish

Sam swam upwards and brushed his fins back and forth against the roof of the fish's mouth. The fish began to shake with laughter. Swimming inside, Sam felt as if he was caught in a tidal wave. The fish could not hold him in any longer. He let out the water he was holding in through his gills. Sam flew out with the water in a great rush, tumbling and twisting in the surf it created.

When he regained his composure, Sam spoke sternly to the fry's mother.

"Closing your mouth during a cleaning is a breach of Item Number 25.603 in the Cleaning Station agreement. Since he is a child, I will let him off with a warning, but if it happens again, you will no longer be welcome here."

The mother grouper spoke sternly to her son, who apologised sheepishly to Sam.

The rest of the day was uneventful. They had an unexpected visit from a Blue Tang who overslept and had a particularly large number of parasites in his mouth. Sam was busy and did not have much time to think about his last dreaded appointment with the shark.

By the end of the day, Sam was exhausted, but he still had one more customer. He sent home all of his staff. No point in putting them all in danger! Freddie offered to stay.

"It'll be safer if it's two of us," he said.

Sam declined. "If she's going to eat me, she won't care who's there to see. Go on home, I'll be fine."

Sam tried to make the station look as if it was closed so that no other fish would wander in. He sent off all of the Angler fish that provided light in the station in the evening except one. Then Sam sat to wait.

He felt the arrival of the shark before he saw her. A shadow came over the reef and all of the small fish scattered, heading for caves and crevices in the reef. Sam watched as the shark came into view, gliding slowly and majestically, her head turned to the side, mouth open suggesting that she was not a threat.



Sam quickly ushered the large fish into the station.

"Welcome, madam," he said. "Come right in." He hoped that his voice was not shaking as much as he was inside. He tried to appear as business-like as usual.

"I just need you to read over our regulations, since it's your first time."

Sam pointed the shark towards a large open shell in which the regulations were written.

"I'm not reading anything!" the fish roared.

Sam was terrified. Clearly he had made a huge mistake allowing this shark into the station. He nearly collapsed from fright when the shark moved even closer to him. She spoke softly, directly into Sam's ear. Her voice was deep and melodious.

"Sorry that I got upset. Truth is, I can't read. They wouldn't let me into school, said I frightened the other fish."

She moved back away from Sam and Sam realised that he had been holding his gills shut. He forced himself to relax a bit.

"No problem, madam, I'll read the important bits to you." Sam went through the list.

"Let's see ... on no account are you to eat any of the other fish in the station."

The shark nodded.

"You don't eat our employees or other fish here to get cleaned."

She nodded again.

"And no nipping, biting or any other action with the teeth. Oh," Sam continued in a firm voice, "and any fish accidentally ingested must be expelled immediately."

The shark opened her narrow slits of eyes a little wider, probably trying to figure out how she would do that, but she nodded again.

"OK, is there anything special that you need done today?" Sam asked, trying to delay the moment at which he would have to go close enough to start cleaning the shark.

"Well," she moved closer to Sam again, speaking directly into his ear in that beautiful voice. "Truth is, today is my birthday. I've tried every year to treat myself with a trip to a cleaning station. You are the first one that was open on my birthday. It seems to be some sort of cleaning station holiday. Last year, the fish that worked at the station were actually in hibernation!"

She moved back and looked Sam dead in the eyes. "Thank you for staying open for me."

Sam looked into the shark's eyes and saw a lonely creature. He was no longer afraid and he set about to do the first of many annual cleanings of his new large friend.

## About the Author

Carol Ottley-Mitchell is the author of the Caribbean Adventure Series, a series about three children and a monkey who have exciting, magical adventures in the Caribbean. Visit [www.CaribbeanAdventureSeries.com](http://www.CaribbeanAdventureSeries.com) for more information.



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Born in Nevis, Carol has lived in several Caribbean countries. She spent a large part of her formative years in Trinidad, where one of her favorite pastimes was competing with her father to see who could compose the best humorous lyrics to existing songs. This was just the beginning of her interest in creative writing.

Back in St. Kitts, Carol began a more serious side of her writing career in high school when she wrote public service pieces and participated in several debating competitions. After leaving high school to pursue further studies in Barbados and the United States, Carol focused her efforts on developing her information technology and business management skills, while making every effort possible to write and participate in public speaking.

Currently, Carol lives in Ghana with her husband and children.

