

As Long As You Both

Her eyes were not exactly blue or grey. They were the colour of the sea, the sea on a dull morning without sunlight. That was how they were when he looked, but he didn't often look. They had been together too long to take much notice of such details, but now he saw the way the strands of hair fell across her eyes and he asked her to marry him, for no other reason.

‘Don't let's make a big production out of it,’ he said, ‘not at our age. Lets just go away together somewhere quiet.’

That was why they were out here in the west of Ireland, following a quick ceremony on the way, in Liverpool. They enjoyed the secrecy - time enough to tell their grown-up children and their aged parents and the mutual friends who'd feel cheated out of wedding. All the same, she'd insisted on a honeymoon, claiming a bride's privilege whenever she could.

‘Do we have to go to the beach today?’ he complained. ‘Can't we just sit around at the cottage? We've got a whole week.’

‘I want to swim. There might not be another chance.’

It was a perfect day, golden with sunshine, a gift to them come unexpectedly after such terrible weather. The forecast had predicted continued rain well into next month.

‘I'll walk down,’ she said. ‘It's only a couple of miles.’

‘I'll drive you.’

‘I don't mind.’

‘I said *I'll drive.*’

When they got there, the beach was much busier than they expected, busier than the places they remembered from previous summers, and she knew that if they went a bit further out of town they'd find somewhere better. But she didn't say anything because he was in a black mood. He'd driven to Liverpool, and across from Dublin for her sake, and now he just wanted to sit and read his book. They stumbled over the rocks to a quieter part of the strand, parked their folding chairs and thermos and he fetched out his volume of Youngusband's adventures in Tibet.

She changed into her costume – pale and a little flabby, not bad for her age, but better clothed than naked. Mentally, she stripped away the coloured windbreaks, the car park and the beach cafes and the crowds of shrieking children, seeing only the bay nestling amongst the cliffs, the shadowy hills in the distance. She trod carefully over the smoother rocks, indented with little pools, avoiding the clams and the slippery seaweed, until she reached the sand. She looked back at the dark figure, still in the jacket he wore to the registry office. He was too hot. He must be too hot. Or feeling the cold like old people did, was that it? She'd married an old man. She watched him for a while. He didn't move at all, didn't look in her direction. Perched on the rocks like a figure from a surrealist painting. She turned towards the Atlantic.

Later she told him all about it. The ease with which she walked into the sea. It was very shallow. There was no need to brace yourself, no sudden shock. The waves ran in one after another, the surf breaking gently, at first against your knees, then high enough to dampen the ends of your hair. At first she jumped the waves and then she breasted them, riding the swell of each one as it came, judging exactly where to aim

for. She felt light as air, trusting the sea to carry her safely, now and then she testing the bottom. Still only waist deep.

Simple pleasures. The sun on her face. The buoyancy of the water. He must be too hot in that jacket. How could he stand it?

The tide was coming in fast, already covering the rocks. If he wasn't careful, he'd be cut off. If he looked up from his book, he'd see the water coming towards him. But he was immersed. That was his way, he never heard the phone ring or noticed the time - not when he was reading, head in the Himalayas. One more wave and another - caught up in the rhythm, she forgot about him. She lost all track of time, hypnotised by the silvery glaze of the sun.

Again, she tested the bottom. Not there. Not there. She swam further along, still felt nothing. Switching from breast stroke to crawl, she tried to reach the shallows, but the sea wouldn't let go. Now she realised where she was, how far from the shore, some distance away from the cluster of bathers bobbing about in the waves. She could just make him out her husband like a dark bird in the distance. And she knew, with cold certainty, that she'd never reach him. How tragic, to die on your honeymoon. And strangely predictable.

She held her arm up straight, not waving at all, straight as a salute. And then both arms. And then alternating left and right. 'Help,' she cried, 'help, help' - her voice dim even to herself. Did he see? 'Help, help....' She couldn't make out his face, couldn't see if he knew her distress. He was her only hope. There was no one else there. And the swimmers couldn't hear. She loved him so much, and now she was leaving.

She was never in any real danger. Just panicked, that was all. There must have been some kind of undertow. What he couldn't understand was how she'd drifted towards the rocks, and why, when she was so close to the breakwater, she hadn't just grabbed hold. By the time he saw her she was almost ashore. Still, he had a fright, dashing down to save her, seizing her hand as her feet found a rock jutting up from the seabed. The hand which wore his ring. His wife's hand.

'Would you have jumped in?' she asked on the way back.

'Of course I would.'

'I always thought you couldn't swim.'

'I can swim. I'm just not very good.'

'We would've died together.'

'Now there's a happy thought.'

Her face was blotchy, and raw without make-up. She wasn't pretty any more; sometimes her face was ugly, with the stretched, sphincter lines round the mouth that most women get when they reach fifty. If she laughed more often they wouldn't be as bad. But he didn't mind. He was glad to have and to hold. He made love to his wife for the first time that night, and he knew that her eyes were closed with pleasure.

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