

Beside the Seaside

Graham exuberantly breathed in the sea air as he tramped along the coast path from the village, his spaniel, Dotty, pulling excitedly on her lead, bursting with enthusiasm to get to the beach. A light breeze ruffled his hair, as he looked down the cliffs to the beach of Mortehoe, and to the ocean beyond. There were a handful of intrepid surfers, their dark grey wetsuits making them visible against the white-trimmed jade sea, tossed around as they sat patiently on their boards, waiting for the right wave to carry them in shoreward. Apart from these brave souls, the beach was deserted, which was just as Graham liked it. Although it was bright and sunny, at seven-thirty in the morning, most holiday-makers would be just shaking off their booze-induced slumbers, waking their over-tired whining kids, so they could gorge down vast quantities of sausages and bacon and eggs and beans and toast at the breakfast table. Graham always greatly preferred to get down to the beach before these loud, rotund families sprawled themselves and their rubbish over one of the most beautiful coastlines in Britain. Graham has come to despise tourists, regarding himself as a local, now that he and Marjory spent around ten weeks a year down here in their holiday home. He had bought it following his voluntary redundancy from a light engineering company, having worked there since leaving school at sixteen. If he could have his way, he would travel down here more often, leaving the noise and traffic of Swindon's roundabouts and housing estates behind. But Marjory insisted that they should be there if the grandchildren needed baby-sitting, and to make sure that they kept in touch with friends. Graham wasn't particularly bothered about socialising, or spending time with his family, but he knew that he had to keep Marjory happy if he wanted a quiet time during their visits here.

One of the main reasons why he relished his stays on the North Devon coast was the ability to escape from the petty family pressures. He was free from the tedious family gossip, free from the persistent demands of the grandchildren and, during these early morning walks with Dotty, he was even free from Marjory's fussing over his health and diet, and her constant worrying over silly inconsequential matters.

Savouring his liberty with each draught of cool sea air, Graham decided to forego the path down to Mortehoe beach and instead followed the path along the road towards Woolacombe, then branched off, to stride down the steep path to Barricane Beach. The beach was little more

than a cove with a spit of sand and pebbles between high jagged rocks, but was Graham's favourite spot. He paused on the concrete path to release Dotty from the lead. She bounded off jubilantly towards the beach, jumping the wall by the beach café, presently closed and shuttered at this early hour. Graham followed more slowly, noting that the tide had not long turned from its high water mark, delineated by a thin line of seaweed, ice lolly sticks and crisp packets. The waves were still quite close, rushing and tumbling in the narrow channel between the vertical slabs of slate, breaking with a crash on the shore, and then sighing as they dragged pebbles back to rear up again. There was nobody to be seen: perfect.

Within an hour or so, the tide will have retreated through the channel, connecting the short strip of Barracane Beach to the flat sandy expanse of Morteheo beach, leaving large pools of sea water in the canyons between the rocks. This would allow the swarms of noisy kids, wielding their newly purchased plastic buckets and spades, to torment the crabs, small fish and other innocent sea creatures stranded in these pools. Presumably, Graham mused, a geologist would find the area fascinating. At some time in their primeval past, the slate cliffs that had been laid in horizontal layers had been subjected to a seismic shift, so that the strata was now vertical. Sea and wind had weathered these rocks into jagged incisors, stretching out to the ocean, collecting the strips of sand and water between them. Although the neighbouring beach of Morteheo was made up of fine, firm yellow sand between the high cliffs, Barracane Beach consisted of small pebbles of quartzite and slate, the latter superb for skimming, plus loose shale near the high water line. For some reason, the rough seas of the Atlantic could drive the shells, pebbles and small rocks up the beach, but didn't have the strength to drag them back again.

Graham eased himself down the three deep steps on to the beach, enjoying the scrunching sound of pebbles underfoot. Dotty was already at the water's edge, barking at each wave, rushing headlong as it receded, and then hastily retreating as a new one came crashing in. Her courage did not extend beyond getting her paws wet. Graham searched the ground for flat, round slate pebbles, superb for skimming, as he ambled towards the surf. Waiting until the surface was relatively flat between waves, he sent one pebble skimming three, four, five times out towards Lundy Island, outlined on the horizon. Dotty started to go after it, before deciding that judgement was the better part of valour, and contented herself with just barking at disappearing stone.

Graham selected another as the ocean breathed in again, rattling the stones as it drew back, then exhaling spray and spume as another wave broke, forcing Graham to skip backwards quickly, to save his hush puppies. He tossed the flat pebble across the surface in retaliation. Dotty just barked at Graham now, having lost interest in the waves, and frustrated at not being able to chase the stones.

"Alright, Dotty, I'm getting it," he grumbled as he dug into his anorak pocket for Dotty's tennis ball.

Suddenly, he had an uneasy realisation that he was not alone.

Sure enough, as he turned to throw the ball back up the beach for Dotty, Graham saw that there was a family of three near the foot of the cliffs, situated so that he could not have seen them during his descent to the beach. The mother was lying on a beach towel, wearing a floral sun hat and sun glasses, with a tee shirt over her swimming costume. Graham assumed that she was enjoying a doze in the pleasantly warm early morning sunshine. The father was laid on his front, digging a hole in the shale. Graham could see that the hole was the depth of his arm, as he scraped more sand and pebbles from the bottom with a scarlet plastic spade. Their little girl aged around four or five, was eating a Kit-kat, chocolate smeared around her mouth like crazy old-lady lipstick. She held a plastic bucket in her other hand as she pottered around, supervising her daddy in the bossy way that little girls do.

The man, about twenty yards from Graham, glanced up at him. Graham gave him a half-hearted smile, but the man gave him a stony glare and determinedly went back to his digging.

Maybe he thought Graham was staring, Graham wondered to himself. You had to be so careful these days, particularly around little girls - you could be accused of all sorts of things. Graham was always careful to be discreet when sneaking a look at young ladies changing on the beach, or when they went behind the rocks for a pee. He particularly liked watching the fit girl surfers as they struggled in and out of wet-suits. But he always kept a reasonable distance, pretending to be busy with the dog, or tying his shoelace, then sneaking an illicit glance when they, and particularly their boyfriends, weren't looking. Graham considered that a flash of a young lady's private places put a spring in a man's step for the rest of the day, but in these politically correct times, some nosey do-gooder was likely to call him a pervert if he wasn't careful.

Dotty bought the ball back and dropped it at his feet in expectation. Graham threw the ball again, keeping a wary eye on the people on his beach.

"Oh, look at the doggy, Daddy," the little girl exclaimed, dropping her bucket, watching Dotty race after the ball. "Can I go and see it?"

"No - it might bite you," her father grunted, still toiling away.

"Dotty won't bite you," Graham tried to reassure them, walking towards them. "She might give you a nasty lick, though."

Graham's attempt at humour was met with another humourless look from the man, now kneeling at the edge of the freshly dug pit. Now that he was closer, Graham could see what a dishevelled state the man was in. Sweat ran down his face and had matted his hair, and he had shards of sea shell and grit stuck on his face, and all over his arms, legs shorts and tee shirt. He must really take beach-games seriously.

The man looked past Graham to his daughter, who had ignored the warning, and was chasing after Dotty. "You just be careful, Rachel," he called to her.

"Dotty, my dog, really is harmless," Graham tried, tentatively. "Wonderful with kids."

"Yeah, well. You can't be too careful, can you?" the man muttered dubiously.

"No. Quite right," Graham agreed.

An awkward silence hung between them. Graham looked into the oval-shaped hole, which was about four feet deep, with sea water was oozing through the pebbles at the bottom. Then he looked beyond to the man's wife, lying on the beach towel nearby. First, he noted her shapely legs - they were very pale, despite the recent sunny weather. Then, he realised that, what he had previously thought was a dark red floral pattern on her sun hat, was a blood stain that had seeped through the fabric of the hat. It dawned on him that he hadn't seen her stir since he first noticed them on the beach.

"Um, is your wife alright? Only-."

"She's just a bit tired," the man replied, a little too quickly, standing to block Graham's view. "Late night, last night. You know, she thought she would sleep it off in the sun."

Graham was far from convinced, but still had a reluctance to interfere. "I don't want to pry, but,"

Graham broke off as the man appeared to be distracted by something behind Graham.

"Can your dog swim?" he asked, concerned. "Only, I think that he's in trouble."

Graham turned to look at the sea. "Oh, I really don't--"

The words were cut short by a blow to the back of the head. Graham felt a searing pain through his skull, and the blood drained from his face as he sank to his knees. The man brought the heavy slab of rock down again on to Graham's head, and he slumped, face-down, on to the shingle.

The man, now sweating even more profusely, quickly scanned the cliff tops to make sure that nobody could have witnessed his violence.

Rachel walked over, followed by Dotty, carrying her ball in her mouth. Rachel looked at Graham's prostrate body with concern. "Oh dear. Man fell down," she said simply. Dotty crouched and tore bits of green fluff from the tennis ball.

"Yes, Rachel. But, I'm afraid, Daddy had to do it," the man told her.

Rachel looked at her dad without comprehension.

"You see that sign" he went on, pointing to a notice board screwed to the wall of the café behind them. "It says that dogs are not allowed off of their leads on this beach between March and September. It's June now, but that man still let his doggy off of the lead."

Rachel thought about this for a moment. "So he was a naughty man."

"A very naughty man."

The man stooped to grab Graham's legs and drag him up the beach towards the prone body of his wife.

"I suppose," he started, pausing to catch his breath. "I suppose that his doggy will need a new home now." He dropped Graham's legs. "Shall we keep it?"

"Oh, can we?" Rachel's face lit up with joy as she ran to wrap herself around her daddy's legs. "I always wanted a doggy."

Dotty had followed her, curious as to the cause of all the excitement. Rachel turned to hug her too. "You can come home with us, Doggy." Dotty didn't mind. She had a new friend, one who made a big fuss of her and smelled of biscuit. Rachel stood up. "I don't feel so bad about mummy, now," she told her father.

"I told you we would be better off, just us two," he said, pleased with himself.

He looked down at the hole, then at the two bloodied corpses, and sighed, shaking his head. "I'll have to make the bloody hole bigger now."

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