

The Beach

The air tasted like chips without the vinegar and made my lips sting. High-flung spray slumped against me, thrown from the rocks below as I walked down the sand-slippery slope onto the beach, hands deep within gloves within pockets, face half-shielded from the peppery ice of the wind by a scarf that I'd knitted myself, inexpertly.

I'd knitted him one too. An empty collection of dropped stitches which he'd wound around his neck, although the sun was laying June-heat along the coast, and swore he'd never take off (removed furtively behind the dunes preceding an expedition which had concluded before either of us was ready, in a sticky list of apologies). The air had tasted of optimism then, of futures as yet untested.

The beach had been a different place that summer of seventeen; a place of far, wide horizons and sand which enclosed our bare feet in a warm enfolding hug. He'd worn the scarf and loose shorts, legs protruding like knotted string, top half shirtless to show the three-haired chest as taut and ribbed as the wet shoreline. The whole bay had loved us back then, circling its four-mile arms around our fun, while the charmed sea tasted our toes and threw playful green lines for us to snatch and drape. I'd tied a strand around his wrist, the other end circling my own. The chilled ribbon hung thick and veined between us, rubbery as the gristle of drowned sailors and I'd felt the dull ache of cold premonition on my skin, even as we'd laughed and run, hair frizzling around shoulders condimented with sand.

Twenty years ago summers lasted forever and contained no other people. Although the beach had been interrupted with sunbathers racked full-stretch like a torturer's shop-window, and reluctant parents with their blockbuster novels lying carefully placed dead-centre on pillows of towels whilst they built competitive edifices for their disinterested children, we were alone. Hip to hip and tongue to tongue we passed among the sliding dunes, diamond-edged grasses etching lines on naked skin as we scribbled our passions in the sand and a relentless sun beat against the gong-bronze sky.

Now the sun was invisible behind the tracing-paper mist. The sea, no longer playful but obsessive, washed the shore, over and over in furious foam as I walked the tide-line, head deep in memory. The dunes in which he and I had rolled and laughed and not-quite loved, were different, new centurions of sand had formed and now marched alongside the old legions ranking the demarcation between wild shore and cultivated land. Far ahead a flock of birds, in dinner-jacket black and white, patrolled the scrubbed sands silvered by distance; their peevish cries thin on the January air. Suddenly they all tumbled skyward indignant with alarm, as a dog slashed across the beach towards them, tearing the resting grains into streams of flying red-gold as he turned and slid and dashed away, leaving the birds to fall back into their broken chequerboard pattern and irritable complaint.

I turned to stare behind at my footprints puncturing the perfect, sea-swept expanse. A single line I'd walked so carefully, not wanting to tread on old memories, passing through the curled brown of the high-tide mark, where giants' toenails of sharply twisted dried

weed pointed through the sand, the steps following me like my own ghost self. I turned back and the dog was there beside me, panting an eager greeting round a Labrador-smile, its liquorice nose pressing into my hand so sure of its welcome.

We would have a dog, he'd said. A big, black bear of a dog, a bundle of exuberant hair. And three children...no, four... , blonde and plump and happy, running hand-in-hand until the last jump from the dunes then sleeping coiled against our legs in ice-cream slaked satisfaction. I wondered now if he shared those dream-children with someone else, if his free spirit had been tamed by a Volvo and the school run, night terrors and nits.

As I fussed over the dog's pleased ears, his owner approached from down the beach. A man, tall, not far off my own age and if this had been a fairy-tale, it would have been him, the boy of my memories; wearing twenty years' wisdom in his eyes and my hand-knitted scarf around his neck. He would recognise me and claim me as his dearest, his lost, best-friend – regale me with stories of the past years and our new future. But this tale holds no magic, the co-incidence must wait another day; the man drew close and passed, calling his dog with no recognition, his hat pulled close around his ears so that his hair fringed below, like a lamp-shade.

I watched until they left the strand, the man a plodding plough-horse through the heavy sand while the Labrador performed a dog-ballet, whirling and leaping, a curlicue of black against the light as they disappeared over the dunes and I was alone with the sky and the waves and the birds. A comma of seagulls dipped overhead with staccato mewing calls, like a sobbing cat. An impertinent Elvis-quiff of foam broke too early and ran over the toes of my boots as the wind tugged at my hair and my coat, urging me to leave the beach for the warmth of my car and the long journey home.

I would heed the wind soon enough. But first, now the far-reaching sand was free of onlookers, there was something I had to do. Taking off my coat, I balled it into a fist of restriction, flung it far from the reach of the water and followed it with the scarf, my hat and gloves. Unencumbered, with the gale combing my hair and fingering indiscreetly inside my clothes, I ran. Ran where the sea was breaking, along a surface neither water nor sand, arms held wide to embrace the air and my freedom. I splashed and kicked, my arms forming spokes as I whirled and spun and the sky became sea, the dunes a stuttering line, the whole a silver-grey streak. My lungs burned. My skin chilled. Overhead the gulls tilted heads to watch, and cried into the downdraught.

I laughed, until I too cried.