

Down by the Grand Hotel by Hannah Fox Fernley

The Grand Hotel, Scarborough, had been designed to represent time. Three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms originally, with fifty-two chimneys symbolising the weeks in a year. There were twelve floors to climb, if one could be bothered, and four towers representing the seasons. Very dramatic; very Victorian. Kate's dad had assigned a season to each tower, the one closest to Kate now, looming over the town below, was winter. The seagulls resident on the roof shrieked to each other. Perhaps, Kate thought, each bird represented a year passed since it's construction. One hundred and fifty-four, with a new one on the way.

If Kate squinted and turned her head from the light, she fancied she could see the wan face of Anne Brontë staring out of one of the upper floor windows at her. Her face was pale, her hair up, tied at the back in a style that was long out of fashion. It was easy with her eyes almost closed for Kate to imagine Anne's fading breath fogging the window now smeared with bird droppings, to see speckles of blood hit the glass as the thin woman coughed. Pure fantasy, of course.

'You alright love?'

Kate opened her eyes, blinking rapidly as she looked around. A slim, jeaned man, holding a cigarette in his fingers like a coin, was staring at her. 'I'm fine thanks. Just looking at the sign.' Kate gestured to the blue circle above.

The smoking man dropped down the steps, turning on the balls of his feet to look at the sign.

ANNE BRONTË

1820-1849

WRITER

died in a house

on this site

on May 28th 1849

'Twenty-nine,' the man said, taking a deep drag on his cigarette, 'no age to go. Who was she?'

‘A writer,’ Kate said. ‘A good one. An underrated one.’

‘What did she write?’

‘Agnes Grey?’ Kate said, turning to look at the man’s young, tanned face. ‘The Tenant of Wildfell Hall?’

‘Never heard of them,’ the man said with a cough and a smile, ‘sorry.’

‘Have you heard of Jane Eyre? Wuthering heights?’

‘Oh, yeah.’

‘She was the sister of the women who wrote those,’ Kate said, batting at a wasp that had taken an interest in her dark hair.

‘Did you know Winston Churchill stayed here once?’

Kate turned to the man. ‘Really?’

‘Oh aye. My Grandad won’t stay anywhere else in Scarborough. *‘If it’s good enough for Churchill it’s good enough for me.’*

Kate smiled, her cheeks aching with the novelty of it. ‘Is he having a good time?’

‘Oh, he’s not here. I’ve come with friends. Stag do.’

‘Ah.’

‘Where you staying? I’m Lewis, by the way.’

‘I’m Kate. I live here. Up near the south bay.’

‘Posh up there,’ Lewis said, dropping his cigarette and crushing it with his trainer.

‘Have you never seen that before, then?’

‘I come to look at it when I’m feeling down,’ said Kate, leaving out how often that was. She looked at the plaque, a blue teardrop on the tawny face of the building. ‘I like to think of her, what the house she stayed in was like. What she would think if she knew I was reading her work, over a hundred years later. What it means to me. I think about what she would eat, what she did.’ Kate hand crept up to her belly, stroking unconsciously.

The man nodded. ‘What did she die of?’

‘Consumption. TB,’ said Kate. ‘Killed her brother and sister too. Not so much the good old days.’

Lewis smiled, waving at a group of men who were walking towards them in the distance, laughing and jostling with each other.

‘Then I like to go down to the Spa, think about the people who built it, the people who came to it, what *their* lives were like. Makes me feel better about my own problems, I suppose. At least I don’t have TB,’ said Kate, the smile coming easier this time.

‘I don’t know, I think I’d rather be alive back then,’ Lewis said, eyes on his friends. ‘Simpler times, know what I mean? Buy a house for a tenner, no social media and that.’

Kate tilted her head. ‘I know what you mean. But I’m a lover of WIFI and antibiotics.’

Lewis laughed. ‘This building,’ he said, ‘is a masterpiece. I’m a brick layer. I don’t know how they did it.’

‘Brick by brick,’ said Kate.

‘That’s it.’ Lewis caught Kate’s eye and they shared a smile.

The men shouted at Lewis, jeering and whistling.

‘I best be off. It was nice chatting to you Kate,’ said Lewis, holding out a hand. ‘We’ll be at the South Bay beach tomorrow if you fancy coming down.’

‘I might just take you up on that,’ Kate said, giving the hand a squeeze.

‘Take care,’ Lewis said, trotting off to his waiting friends.

Kate’s eyes fell back into their squint. There was Anne again, her white face pressed against the window. A white hand waved in acknowledgement and Kate reciprocated, her other hand still on her stomach. Kate sucked the salty, fishy air in through her nostrils, the same air that gave Anne her last dying breath. Her mind wandering back, back to simpler times. Back to the good old days.