

Susan sat, her eyes closed, and listened. The heavy wind through the trees took her back to her childhood, to the crashing of waves on a sandy beach: its ebbs and flows, a convincing imitation of breakers followed by the southing of water reclaimed by the sea.

Opening her eyes, the ocean analogy remained with her. Branches of willow and oak swayed in the same direction as each other, yet in different ways: one like slender tendrils of spume reaching across the sand, the other rolling breakers before landfall.

Why did so much about her home, here in the land-locked Vale of York, remind her of the sea? She supposed it was the forces of nature. The movements of the trees were as uncontrollable as the waves, and beyond her garden, on the horizon, the edge of the Wolds rose in a frozen chalk tsunami mid-roll.

Susan looked at the empty page and tutted silently at herself for letting daydreams interfere. She tried to block out the trees and concentrate on the report she was supposed to be compiling. The questions she had to address stared boldly back at her from the notepad: Why is the school failing to reach Outstanding when inspected? What can we do to best prepare for Outstanding when inspectors arrive?

Susan yawned and wondered what had possessed her to take on such a task. Wasn't she meant to be retired from this? Didn't she give it up to escape from the dreaded inspections and the stress that goes with them? But the head teacher had pleaded with her - and the reward was eye-watering. She sighed and stared once more into the molten greenery of the trees. Perhaps what the school required was a lesson from nature. What made the trees grow so big and healthy? How did the different trees co-exist happily? And how did they support the rest of the garden community? Answers blossomed, spumy and haphazard. By giving birds and bats somewhere to live. By providing shelter to the insects upon which the birds and bats fed. By adding beauty.

Spurred on by the cleverness of her idea, Susan scribbled notes on to the page. Trees were senior management, birds and bats were the teachers and their assistants, and insects were the pupils.... She laughed at the ridiculousness of her thoughts. What, were the teachers

Time to Stand and Stare by Anne Woodward

supposed to eat the pupils? But the notion of getting inspiration from nature stayed with her. It explained why the school wasn't Outstanding: they had forgotten it was a living thing, made alive by the people within it.

She sat with her elbows on the desk, the tip of the pen in her hand resting on her bottom lip. Her first day as deputy head at the school, she'd walked through the reception area into a leafy courtyard teeming with teenagers. Anyone unaccustomed to young people could have been forgiven for backing away, for they were tall, intimidating, in their black blazers. To Susan, it felt as though she'd happened upon a jackdaw colony in which glossy youngsters jostled, craving to be noticed. They cawed across the yard to each other, teasing and flirting, in a dialect that initially had flummoxed her southern brain with its flat vowels and strange phrases. Nowadays, she sometimes caught herself uttering words that would have nailed her as a Yorkshire woman to other southerners who'd not lived in the county as many years as she had. Of course, she never fooled genuine locals.

Gathering her thoughts, she brought them to order and started again. Susan kept the analogy, but refined it, editing out her most whimsical notions. She wrote, read, adapted, and rewrote her ideas. Finally, she leant back in her chair, stretched her legs, and put her pen down with a satisfying clunk. She had answered the questions as well as she was able, but admitted to herself the management of the school would probably ignore her recommendations. Her ideas were too avant-garde, too unconventional, but she'd submit them anyway. And, no doubt, kiss goodbye to any future work as a consultant. Worry niggled at the edges of her consciousness, but she refused to pay it attention. She'd done the maths - she could, almost certainly, survive without it.

The wind had not abated while she wrote and now, as she relaxed, she let the sounds wash over her. She watched the branches and the leaves as they swayed, rippled and undulated. What was that poem? She tried to remember the words: 'What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare? No time to stand beneath the boughs.....' How did it go after this? Susan trawled through her memory to no avail, but there was no denying the rightness of the poem's message.

Hadn't she retired so she could stand and stare?

Time to Stand and Stare by Anne Woodward

Later, once she'd typed and edited the hand-written scrawl, she printed off her magnum opus and slipped the pages into a large envelope, wishful thinking somehow mixing with resignation. She took the envelope and headed out to the village to post it.

'Nice day. No rain, anyroad!' quipped her elderly neighbour, tipping his hat as he ambled into his greenhouse.

'Lovely, isn't it?' Susan grinned, her earlier thoughts about sounding like a southerner resurfacing. She marched onwards.

From her house, the village centre was a fifteen-minute walk, one Susan took daily. She observed how the seasons changed the landscape along the way. Spring fashioned the gardens in gaudy splashes of yellow as daffodils bobbed their trumpets in the breeze. Black birds, thrushes, robins and wrens filled the air with their song. Summer dressed the village in rainbows, the parish council hanging baskets overflowing with begonias, fuchsias, petunias and verbenas. And the air filled with heady scents and the buzz of bees. Come autumn, trees lost their vibrancy and low mists softened harsh boundaries between roof tops and sky. Hedgerows, once alive with the chatter of sparrows, fell silent. In winter, the village folded in on itself as the air cooled and the ground hardened.

At the corner of the cul-de-sac, a voice called, 'Hello, love. You got that report done?' Margaret, who'd been the first villager to befriend her, leant on the spade she'd pitched into the soil. 'It's a right t'do int it, working for a living?'

Susan laughed. 'You're right. I don't recommend it.' She waved the envelope. 'Just off to post this. Then I'm done with paid employment.'

'Don't blame you.'

She didn't confide in Margaret her doubts concerning her financial prospects but strode away towards the main road.

The variety over the garden fences, the different approaches their owners had to creating beauty, never failed to fascinate. One arranged as a miniature Capability Brown garden sat

Time to Stand and Stare by Anne Woodward

next to another blanketed with meadow flowers and unkempt corners crowded with nettles, dusty spiders webs strung between the stems.

Susan lingered to gaze into a vegetable patch that would have done any market-gardener proud. It tickled her still, after all this time, to see a smart bungalow surrounded on three sides by beans, cabbages, courgettes and lettuces, with a sprinkling of roses between the serried rows of vegetables.

‘Ey up, those yellow flowers you asked about...I’ve identified ‘em,’ came a voice from behind a blush of roses further along the fence. A gnarled hand grabbed a fencepost and a flat cap atop a hint of grey hair emerged, its owner grunting with the effort of standing. ‘Yellow loosestrife. I looked it up!’

‘Brilliant. Thanks.’ Susan nodded to a distant part of the garden. ‘You’ve got some, too.’

‘Aye, but I never planted ‘em.’

‘D’you mind? Interlopers?’

‘Nah. They’re not doing any harm.’

She bade him goodbye and continued on her way. The walk to the post office took her twice the time it should have as she chatted to everyone she passed. After a matter of weeks of her arrival in this curious village, she’d become familiar with many of the residents. Unlike the Suffolk seaside town in which she’d grown up, where it took a lifetime it seemed, to gain acceptance, the folk here had soon taken her in. Now, gratitude settled within her for their quirky ways and their welcoming hearts.

Once the letter was posted, she dawdled home along the back road. Swallows and martins swooped low over the tarmac. They zoomed straight towards her, only to flash inches over her head. A bullfinch sang, its ruby chest a dot of brightness within the green. A few drowsy sheep raised their heads to gaze at her as she walked by.

‘And stare as long as sheep and cows.’ That was it! Susan smiled. No matter what her bank statements told her, no matter how rough the seas ahead, she’d enjoy this life of leisure.

