

Coastal Surprise by Leonie Jordan, Driffield

It was always fairly quiet at this end of the beach, away from the colourful collection of beach huts and the car park. An odd dog walker or parents and children taking advantage of the late afternoon rays of the summer sun. I relished this time of day. A chance to be alone with my thoughts. It has been like this since Jim announced he was off on another climbing expedition and had decided it was over between us.

I'd been watching a shaggy, scrawny dog chase the ebbing tide encouraged by his owner. She was continually throwing a ball and he was relentlessly returning it for her to do the whole again. Reminded me a bit of my relationship with Jim. After three years, I had become optimistic he would want to settle down at some point. He did, just not with me. I didn't much go for mountaineering though I realised now after reflecting being with Jim had been like climbing a mountain. I just never reached the summit. The signs were there as my friend Joanie had warned me.

'He's not a stayer, Betsy. One day you'll wake up and whoosh.'

Joanie was very straight forward in her speech. A Yorkshire lass through and through she never minced her words.

Well, whoosh had happened and I was finally picking up the pieces. My regular late afternoon sojourn on the beach helped to clear my mind. All his stuff was gone and as the cottage was mine. I still had a home even though my heart was shaken. There were days though when I experienced relief he wasn't around. Coming home to an empty house felt slightly liberating. I was my own boss.

As I scanned the shore, I caught sight of a figure perched on the rocks. It was his hat which held my gaze. Bands of differing shades of green with the most enormous bobble I had ever seen. It must have taken someone ages to make it. For some reason I found myself smiling. Who wore a bobble hat in the middle of summer? He was hunched up his arms wrapped around his knees. Completely absorbed in the vista before him.

The large higgledy- piggdely boulders had been a place of danger when I was a child and it was the one place we were always warned to stay away from. It had been a very tempting, with so many rockpools to explore. You could usually spot some creature or other. I still enjoyed trying to spot some bizarre sea creature as I was bending over, something made me lift my head. It was a movement and I noticed the stranger was holding up his phone as if taking a picture. Or maybe he was searching for a signal. I don't know why I thought he was a man. Except he was wrapped up in a dark green thick woollen coat. It reminded me of the great heavy coat my father wore in winter when he was in the army. I used to love the shiny brass buttons embossed with a crest.

The call of the seagulls swooping over the incoming sea caught my attention momentarily and then still intrigued by the lonesome figure, I turned slightly. There was an aura of sadness about him like he was lost to his surroundings not only in thought but to himself.

He shifted and I turned sharply ducking down to pick up a stone, I threw it into the sea. Lifting another from the sand, I risked another glance and this time I spotted black curls escaping from under the hat. I shivered, as if a ghost had passed me. Stepping nearer the waters' edge, I skimmed another stone and cheered to myself as it skimmed three times. My brother and I were always having competitions to see who had the most skims. It was rare I beat him. My heart felt heavy at the memory, it had been many years ago since we had been free to roam the beach and rock pools unsupervised and staying out till the sun had set.

Growing up had been a wild affair for the pair of us. Our father was forced to leave the army when our mother died and he retired to this rugged Yorkshire coast. His family had lived in these parts for many years. At the time it seemed strange to settle here after living in the sunshine of Cyprus. From lapping blue waters to the unpredictable rage of the North Sea was a complete contrast.

Being older now, I realise he was coming home. The loss of my mum was hard to bear for us all but especially for dad. He took to being an artist and his life revolved around the next big canvas. Not raising two boisterous young children.

Thinking back, my brother missed the father he so sorely needed. An older sister always keeping tabs on you can't have been much fun. Granny was marvellous and such a character. She was always on hand for feeding and comforting. It was the nearest we got to having a mother.

Tears stung my eyes and even now, the passage of time has done little to dampen the ache from the loss and the confusion. When my brother left at seventeen it was like being bereaved all over again. I can still hear my father's voice raised in anguish and bewilderment.

Raff was a wild eyed young man. He loved nature and being a free spirit. He found it hard to concentrate on lessons and Dad was forever speaking to the teachers. They didn't seem to get he was a special person who needed patience and understanding. I suspect this is what dad struggled with most after mum. She had such a gentle way about her. Raff was putty in her hands. I tried to re-create that nurturing but I know I fell short.

Wiping the tears from my eyes, I sensed a shift from the rocks and it made me jump.

Looking across, I could see he was watching me. Quickly I averted my gaze and went back to gathering stones. I felt oddly vulnerable and yet I was drawn to risking another look. He was now on the beach, his hands in his pockets striding in my direction. I knew I should turn and head for home but something stopped me. There was something oddly familiar about his stride. My heart skipped a beat as he grew closer and suddenly, I was sinking in the sand beneath me.

Shaking, I felt time flow away as his pace quickened. With a fluid movement he pulled his hat from his head and the black curls sprang free, cascading wildly about his face and shoulders.

My hand flew to my mouth as I let out a tiny gasp.

'Raff?' Stiffly, I edged nearer. It couldn't be?

He was in front of me now. Those feral deep green eyes sparkling. Without any hesitation he enfolded me in his arms. He smelt of the sea, tobacco and something more fragrant.

‘Heh, sis, I thought it was you. You’ve been spying on me for ages. I was sure you would guess it was me.’ His voice rasped, was that the reason for the smell of smoke?

He spun me round and round and I laughed giddy with excitement.

‘Stop, put me down, what are doing here?’

Coming to a standing stop, he let go of me and smiled his familiar rakish smile which all my friends had adored.

‘I’ve come home. It was time. Your last letter was very sad Bets.’ He took hold of my trembling hands.

‘Still squelching around in rock pools then?’

‘This is my nirvana. Every afternoon when work finishes, I spend an hour or so out here. It slows my brain. Oh my God, I can’t believe you are here.’

Standing back, I began drinking in the sight that was my beloved brother. Beloved because he was. A kind, gentle, caring soul. He’d finally found his nirvana on a bleak shore off the coast of Ireland. He had returned home to explain his plans to dad and I. They managed to heal the rift but were often uneasy with each other.

He’d done a string of rubbish jobs before finding himself in Ireland and working for an archaeological dig. It led to him meeting a group of people he suddenly fitted with. Being a talented artist himself he set himself up in a remote cottage owned by the head of the dig team and remained there. Earning money from his paintings kept the wolf from the door.

‘Is this anything to do with an exhibition I read about?’ By now we had made our way to the sea wall and had chosen a bench to sit down.

‘Ah, yes, it is. Coming home to Roose Bay was always my intention. It’s happened sooner than I planned. I was up near Flamborough yesterday. The sea doesn’t grow any kinder does it? The warnings of cliff falls seem more prominent.’

‘So much of the coastline is under threat. Tell me about the exhibition?’

Raff turned his body to face me. Fine lines had etched their way through his rosy skin.

‘Later, I need to know about you. About Jim. The fool. His mountains I suppose?’

Letting out a long sigh, I fished out a tissue. Shredding it in my hands, it was hard to talk about.

‘I kept waiting for him to pop the question. Like an idiot. To be fair he had asked me more than once to join him on his expeditions. I couldn’t. He knew that. I hate climbing and I couldn’t leave dad. In

the end the mountains won. I can't have meant that much. Which means I have basically spent the last three years wasting my life.' I blew my nose on the remnant of tissue.

'Strangely though I have quite enjoyed my own space. He could be intense sometimes.'

Raff pulled me close as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. Kissing the top of my head I was struck by how much I had missed him.

'Well kiddo, I'm here now. We'll do what we have always done. Muddle through and look out for one another. How's dad?'

'Tired. He doesn't go far now. Talks a lot about joining mum and how his time is coming. It's draining hearing it.'

'I'm sorry I left you to deal with it all. I rang him yesterday. We spoke. He knows I'm here.'

'What happened with Ruth in the end?' I asked tentatively.

'I couldn't give her what she wanted. She left.'

I squeezed his hand. 'Sorry it didn't work out. Looks like we are not so different after all. Destined to be the odd couple living their days out by the sea.' I laughingly said.

'What is the point of two people being together if one is miserable. I can be philosophical because I guess I wasn't invested in the relationship as she was.'

We sat quietly together lost in our thoughts watching the incoming tide approach. I set out this afternoon expecting the same as I always did. Nodding to other beach walkers. Being amused by owners chasing their pets and eager to find some respite from the ache of losing Jim.

Now here was the very person who could lift any spirit. I could physically feel my body relax. As if settling into a comfy pair of slippers. Life was always so black and white to Raff. It was or it wasn't. I think that was always why he struggled to fit in and yet to me he made perfect sense.

Both our futures lay open before us and my day ended on such a high, I could have danced all the way home.

END