

Waterlogged

Neil peered over the side of the boat into the still water of the bay. His silhouette stared back at him, only the darkness hiding the discomfort on his face.

“You’re even making *me* feel sick,” Paul cried as he watched his friend. “All this anticipation! Just get it up and over with.”

Neil knew he shouldn’t have been browbeaten into taking the boat out. He knew also that he shouldn’t have drunk so much down at the Castle, and he knew, above all, that he should never have agreed to come out with Paul when his friend rang him to let him know he was back in the village.

“It must be something you drank,” Paul was saying. “It can’t be sea-sickness, surely? Not on this pond. Put your drink into the drink,” he heard Paul laughingly suggest as he fought for control of his digestive system.

He heaved and the contents of his stomach made a spreading stain on the water. Paul retched and turned away, anxiously attempting to appease his own rebellious innards.

“You ought to get out more often,” Paul said. “You could hold more, then. this sort of thing wouldn’t happen.”

Neil thought he detected disapproval in his friend’s voice: not only of his own inability to hold his drink but of the staid and rural life which was what Paul considered his existence to be. He knew Paul resented anything associated with the village and its traditions and couldn’t understand anyone wishing to be ‘waterlogged’ in this ‘forgotten little outpost’.

No matter how content Paul had seemed tonight on his return.

“I think we’d best be gettin’ back.” Neil’s voice was dry and his face white. He slumped in the bottom of the boat like a discarded smuggler’s sack.

“Nonsense!” replied Paul. “Now you’ve got that lot off your chest – or your stomach – you should be fit for another half a dozen pints.”

“I told Becky I wouldn’t be late back.”

Becky, Becky, Becky! It had been because of Becky that Neil had changed his mind. He had said that he couldn’t bear to leave her behind, but Paul had always suspected that Becky had talked him out of leaving with his ‘less than desirable’ friend. After Paul had made all the arrangements: the travel, the flat, the jobs, Neil had succumbed to Becky’s desires and decided not to go.

And she would never have left. Her roots went deeper than those of the Cranwell House oaks. Her family had lived in the same manor, in the same manner, as it were, since the Civil War. Paul had never understood why the Holcombes so wholeheartedly approved of Neil; after all, he wasn’t the sharpest knife in the cutlery drawer. Perhaps their expectations were determined by the limited selection of the local specimens.

“I’m goin’ back,” Neil decided with finality. He made to rise to his feet as if he planned to walk the two hundred metres to the shore and the boat rocked as if it had had enough of them both.

“Steady on, man!” screamed Paul as he gripped the gunwales. “You’ll have us turned over!” His eyes were fear-blown and his heart pummelled his ribs in protest. “Look...look, just sit down and relax. We...we’ll go back shortly. Just relax for a moment.”

Neil lowered himself to the seat and looked longingly towards the shoreline.

Paul had a momentary flash of *déjà vu*, as if he had said those very words before, and to Neil; maybe a younger Neil, who had sat down reluctantly then, just as now.

“Do you never get the urge to leave this place?” he said.

Neil dragged his gaze back to his friend.

“Sometimes I do,” he answered and paused in thought. “Not very often, though.” His face eased into a simple smile. “Where would I go? Becky’s ‘ere, the kids are ‘ere. Everythin’ I want’s ‘ere. I don’t need to go nowhere else.”

“Does Becky never mention leaving?” Paul asked, already knowing the answer.

Neil shook his head vigorously. “Becky’d never leave Cranwell. She’s part o’ the buildin’. She loves the place; the kids love it. There was only you ever wanted to leave ‘ere.”

Too true, too true. Paul smiled but it didn’t light up his expression.

The feint breeze tickled their faces but did nothing to the surface of the water. It was clear and still and only the distant shush of the waves lazily brushing the shingle interrupted the silence.

“What brought you back ‘ere, anyway?” Now it was Neil’s turn to fire some questions. “It’s twelve years since you went.”

Paul nodded. Twelve years! He had been eighteen and about to embark on the adventure of life. After his parents had been killed in the crash he had lost all his motivation as far as school was concerned. He had turned his back on a university place and decided that London was the place to make his money.

He had felt let down when Neil had dropped out of his plan and it was only recently, with what he supposed was the belated onset of maturity, that he could bring himself to forgive his old friend.

That, and his sudden need to find somewhere to hide.

“I don’t know,” Paul replied. “I got an urge to see the old place. It’s not so bad

if you know you don't have to stay.”

“It took you long enough to ‘ave your urge. You could ‘ave been dead for all we knew.”

Paul nodded unsmilingly. Neil’s remark was closer to the truth than he could have imagined.

“You stopped answerin’ our letters,” Neil went on. “We thought you’d moved on, changed address, or somethin’.” He put his hand into the water and shook the drops into the distance. “We thought you’d write in your own time.”

“I know, I know,” Paul conceded. “You know how it is. I was busy – no excuse, I know – but, well... I kept meaning to write and kept putting it off and putting it off. The longer I left it the harder it was to do. Time runs away with you, you know.”

The moonlight laid a path to the horizon and Paul looked at it as if it were the road to enlightenment. If only he could follow the moonlight and leave all his problems behind. Follow it to another world where enchantment lay and trouble was only as tangible as a dream.

“Mrs Ford’s always askin’ about you – you remember ‘er? In the shop. Still asks about you, to this day. I’ll be able to tell ‘er, now. *You’ll* be able to tell ‘er. You’ll see ‘er tomorrow; can’t miss ‘er.”

Indeed. Everyone would already know he was back. It was like a cloud going over the village; even before it obscured the sun everyone knew it was there.

“Is she still alive? Good God! She must be a hundred, by now!” Paul shook his head in amazement. Did he recall her having a daughter in Bath? He thought that was probably the farthest she had ever travelled. She’d never seen the Taj Mahal, never seen the Alps or the Eiffel Tower. But then, neither had he, come to that; but

he would, he would.

“She’s certainly knockin’ on,” Neil said. “Perhaps not a hundred, but gettin’ there.”

“Have you ever been abroad, Neil?” Paul asked as his friend looked once more towards the shore as if he expected to see Becky standing there, waving him to come home.

“Oh, yeah! We’ve been all over,” Neil replied. “You name it, we’ve more than likely been there.”

Paul was taken aback. “Really?” was all he could muster.

“Course,” Neil answered, as though it would have been exceptional not to have been everywhere. “We’re goin’ to Iceland this year. We’ve seen enough sun. Want to see some cold.”

So Neil did know what life was like outside the village.

Paul had been to Tenerife six years ago. Still, when he had made his money he’d make up for lost time. It was just that, what with one thing or another, money was in such short supply at the moment.

“Do you think it’s gettin’ a bit nippy?” Neil rubbed his hands together, emphasizing his point.

Paul didn’t think it was and presumed his friend was looking for an excuse to go ashore.

“Come on, then. Let’s get back,” said Paul. “I’ve kept you away from your lovely wife for too long.”

Paul had surprised himself at how easily he had slipped back into rowing mode. After twelve years of being land-locked he was amazed he could still co-ordinate his strokes. He was relieved he hadn’t displayed any ineptitude in front

of Neil.

There was that *déjà vu* feeling again.

His history was all around him: every screech of the gulls, every smell of the sea, the familiar faces that seemed like historical figures from some old book rather than real people whom he had known and had been living lives apart from him. All these things today had made it seem like he had opened a treasure chest full of his past.

“I’d like to see the lovely Becky again,” Paul said. “Would she mind if I called round?”

“No, she won’t mind. Call whenever you want.” Neil seemed to be getting warmer as he neared the shore.

“I didn’t know whether she approved – me being a bad influence, and all that.”

“Oh, she don’t think that,” Neil reassured his friend. “No, you call round. She’ll be pleased to see you.”

The headland, in mysterious shade to the west, protruded into the sea like a Sphinx’s paw. The cliffs encroached on the moonlight as the bow of the boat grunted when it hit the beach.

Paul felt a great and sudden warmth towards Neil as he watched his friend stumble clumsily out of the boat. He felt as though he needed to revive some old friendships, to swallow some of that pie he had always spat out before.

Neil stood on the beach swaying slightly and with his hands in his pockets, waiting.

Paul’s heart felt as heavy as a sodden sponge and his struggle to accept his mistake made it all the more painful.

“Are you comin’, then?” Neil shouted above the shuffling tide.

“Listen,” Paul answered, “I’m just going to row around the headland. I’m quite enjoying myself. I forgot how much fun there was to be had from rowing a boat.” He smiled at Neil. “Give my love to Becky and the kids.”

Neil pushed him off the beach and watched as Paul manoeuvred the boat around. He stood for several minutes with his hands in his pockets as his friend rowed towards the spear of moonlight that pierced the horizon.