

'Scream, Scream' by Glenda Beagan

This month's Short Story of the Month features in *The Green Bridge: Stories from Wales*, an entertaining anthology of classic stories from twentieth century Wales. From Dylan Thomas to Ifan Pughe, the familiar to the revived, from the rural west of Caradoc Evans to the industrial south of Gwyn Thomas, the politics of Emyr Humphreys to the relationships of Dorothy Edwards, all Wales and all human life is here.

It is quiet on the ward. There are only three bed patients. Nurse Sandra looks at her watch. It is so still. There is the faint hum of a mechanical mower on lawns far away, that is all. No birds are singing. Mrs Jessop is snoring quietly. She's had a bad night. It is on the report.

Linda is about to make her move. Nurse Sandra senses it. She smooths her apron, flicks through a magazine with studied carelessness watching sideways through her hair as Linda shifts her slow carcase off the bed. Even now as those bare arms emerge Nurse Sandra has to steel herself. She looks up, clenched. Sioned, the anorexic girl in the top bed is semaphoring wildly. Linda begins.

"Is my heart still beating?"

"Yes, Linda." Nurse Sandra sighs, tries to smile. How well she knows this never ending litany.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Can you hear it?"

"Not from here I can't, no."

"Come and listen."

"Again, Linda?"

"Yes. I think it's stopped."

"No luv, silly. Course it hasn't stopped. You wouldn't be sitting up talking to me if it had stopped, would you?"

"No."

"There you are then."

Now the familiar pause.

"Is my baby dead?"

This was the bit she dreaded. Day after day, hour after hour, the same question. And still she dreaded it.

"It's a long time ago now, Linda."

"How long?"

"Two years."

"I killed my baby didn't I?"

"No, you didn't kill your baby. You know you didn't."

"Heroin killed my baby."

"Yes."

"Not me."

"No."

"But I did really. I know I did."

Nurse Sandra gulps. Linda never wants platitudes. Sometimes she'll accept them. Mostly she won't.

Nurse Sandra still finds she winces inside at the sight of those arms: the half healed scars she'd cleaned of pus months before are still lurid among the tattoos, the roses, crowns and mermaids, the names JIMMY and MOTHER, the waste, the pointlessness. Linda is dying, her liver, which is all of twenty three years old, is ready to pack up on her. She has respiratory problems. Her legs are hideously ulcerated. She has come here to die because there is nowhere else for her to go.

"Have you got a fag?"

"I don't smoke, Linda."

"Mrs Jessop smokes."

"Mrs Jessop is asleep."

"When she wakes up?"

"You can ask her when she wakes up."

"Will she give me a fag?"

"She usually does, doesn't she?"

"She always does."

A giggle. The ghost of a giggle.

"She always gives me a fag to make me go away."

Linda is not averse to exploiting the unnerving effect she has on people, and Mrs Jessop is easily unnerved. So is Sioned. Linda changes tack. She knows the answer before she asks the question but she wants a reaction. She wants to see those dark eyes close, that pale skull shake its negative.

"You don't smoke, do you Sioned?"

Sioned is pretending not to be here. She does it well. She is now so thin she hardly makes a ripple under the blankets. She is disappearing. Tonic insulin seems not to have had the desired effect. She is seventeen, always tiny, admittedly, but now she weighs just four stone.

Mrs Jessop sputters into consciousness. Stretches, yawns, sits bolt upright.

"Oh."

"Good morning Mrs Jessop. For this relief much thanks."

Nurse Sandra walks up to the bed.

"How are we this morning?"

Mrs Jessop can't remember how she is. Bleary still from night sedation, she blinks, owl-like, registers Linda's looming presence and makes an instinctive move for her handbag, proffering the packet.

Linda beams.

"Ta, Mrs Jessop. You're alright, you are. You'll be going home soon."

She slouches off to the top of the ward again.

"If you're going to smoke you go to the sitting room, Linda."

"Aw, just this once, Sandra."

"Sitting room."

"Can I go in the wheelchair, then?"

"You know I can't push you. I can't leave the ward."

"There's only Mrs Jessop and Sioned, Sandra. Nothing's going to happen while you push me that little way. It's not far."

"If you want to smoke you go to the sitting room and if you want to go to the sitting room you have to walk."

"You're a tight bitch, Sandra."

"Yeah, I'm a real hard case."

"Can I have a light, Mrs Jessop?"

"Not on the ward, Linda."

"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to Mrs Jessop."

There is an edge in Linda's voice but she no longer has the energy to put that edge into action. Nurse Sandra gives her a look. Now it's a battle of wills and Sandra will win because she has the will to win and Linda has not. The girl's efforts have already exhausted her. She wants her cigarette but she does not want to haul herself down the corridor to smoke it. In the end the cigarette wins. It always does. She starts to move down the ward again, painfully slowly for Sandra's benefit, holding on to the beds.

"Can I borrow your lighter, Mrs Jessop?"

"Get a light from someone down there."

"There won't be anyone down there. They've gone to OT."

"Get a light from Sister Annie, then."

"Where?"

"In the office."

"Is that where she is?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Is she on her own?"

"It's not time for the doctors to make their round yet, Linda if that's what you're worried about."

"Is Dr Patel on today?"

"I don't know."

"She's on holiday," says Mrs Jessop.

"Is she? How do you know?"

"She told me."

Linda looks sulky. She likes to think she has a special relationship with Dr Patel, that she is her confidante. To compensate for not having received this piece of information she makes an extravagant balletic swoop towards Mrs Jessop, hands moulded into a parodic impression of an Indian dancer's.

"She's promised me one of her old saris, Dr Patel has. She said I could have one. She likes me."

"You've been pestering her again, haven't you?" Nurse Sandra cuts in, wishing Linda would really get off the ward and go for her smoke. Linda glowers.

"I like Dr Patel. She's alright."

In a moment of rare humour Mrs Jessop chuckles to herself. "She'll be going home soon."

Nurse Sandra smiles. "She's got a long way to go."

Just then the scream.

A vehicle must have drawn up, but they didn't hear it. The front doors have opened and the scream has come in, has forced itself in, breaking through their innocuous recitative. This is the aria, a full blooded aria.

They hear the office door click shut. But they couldn't have heard it above the scream. They must have just sensed it. They are, after all, alive to the relevance of all the building's distinctive vibrations. Nurse Sandra finds herself standing at attention. It's that kind of scream. Joyce the cleaner emerges from the toilets, mop akimbo.

"Christ," she says. "What's this?"

This is Mrs Jenkins. This is Mrs Jenkins' scream. The scream is on a stretcher. Sister Annie is standing by, keys jingling, along with two ambulancemen and a small fair nurse who looks no more than a child.

"Hello, Mrs Jenkins," says Sister Annie. They seem to have met. Curtains are whisked round a bed. The scream seems to fill the world. It changes pitch, it warbles, it fluctuates, it recedes, but it never stops. Sister Annie knows this scream, consequently it holds fewer fears for her. Mrs Jessop is sat bolt upright again, clutching her capacious handbag. Linda hovers, cigarette forgotten. Even Sioned is suddenly transformed into an unusually animated skeleton. She grabs her housecoat from the bed-rail behind her and the emaciated aims disappear into an incongruous protective blur of pink frills. Her mouth falls agape. More arrivals. Dr Merton (nobody likes Dr Merton) and Dr Patel, who is not on holiday after all. They disappear behind the curtain. Blending into the scream are the soft cooing sounds of Sister Annie, Dr Patel's staccato, the young nurse's uncertain burble and Dr Merton's stentorian boom. It is a virtuoso performance. Now the ambulancemen retreat. Now Dr Merton and the young nurse retreat. Only Sister Annie and Dr Patel remain behind the curtain, as the scream breaks the sound barrier and Sioned starts to cry. Nurse Sandra rushes up the ward, reassuring the pink mist until it sinks again beneath the candlewick. Joyce the Cleaner, ever reliable, appears with the tea trolley, basking in virtue since This Is Not Really Her Job but we're so short staffed this morning, what with Nurse Margaret on ECT and Nurse Meira called to take that awful Mrs Prendergast for another EEG last minute. Joyce pours tea copiously, wearing her Very Dependable Face. And still the scream, the scream. Perhaps the ambulancemen have left the doors open, though there seemed to be no wind. Now there's a Force Nine Gale. The curtains around the vexed bed billow, and the curtains at the windows float in a strange leeward drift, the lampshades swing. Very Dependable Joyce proffers tea to all, with the exception of Mrs Jenkins who can't be expected to scream and drink tea at the same time.

It's as if the scream slowly inhabits them all, slowly expresses them all. It's as if the terror slowly seeps out of it, while another nameless quality enters. What does it consist of, this blend of dark voices beyond Mrs Jenkins' own, far beyond, ungovernable, timeless voices without meaning or order, but shot through with a rhythm they recognise, a substance they have felt themselves, all of them, the Hell's Angel and the nursing sister, the anorexic girl who won't grow up and the Indian doctor who has torn up her roots and crossed the world to do just that,

the cleaner who is pompous and kind and commonsensical and the wife of the managing director who is childless and bereft, a loss for which no amount of jewels and furs and foreign holidays can compensate? Perhaps most of all it is Nurse Sandra's scream, since she's been walking on the edge for weeks now, though no one would ever know. She swims with the scream as it ripples and bellows, rises and falls. It is a medley of voices, the cry of aftermath, of battle and birth, of sap and sinew. Mrs Jenkins cannot know that her scream is a benificence, that she takes from all of them their fears, relaying them back, transformed, intensified and finally transcended, that the ward's bland pastels fuse into whirling primary shades, a vortex of richness, of wildness, of courage. It takes courage, this truth, this scream.

Dr Patel and Sister Annie have decided on their course of action. The curtains are whisked back from the bed. Propped up against pillows lies a wizened face, but you can't really tell it's a wizened face at the moment because all you can see at the moment is the mouth. It is so wide open it seems to have taken over, engulfing all. Sioned, huddled under the covers, still cushions her ears with her hands. Nurse Sandra has turned quite white. Linda stands by the bed, unlit cigarette in hand. Mrs Jessop makes strange popping noises like a frog.

Mrs Jenkins comes from a farm, a farm in the middle of nowhere. A farm so old it's like a great fungus, an excrescence of the land, breeding barns and byres full of rusting threshing machines and ancient harrows and flails. Enough to fill a museum with fascinating glimpses of our agricultural past. But this isn't the past. It's the present. Little has changed at Sgubor Fawr since Owain Glyndŵr rode by, swelling his army with sons of the farm, only one of whom returned, an ancestor of Mrs Jenkins' lawful wedded spouse. She was a Jenkins too, before her marriage, since there were only Jenkinses to be found for miles around. But this is the end of the line. The very end. This is the scream of the last of the Jenkinses of Sgubor Fawr, this is.

It's unforgettable.

There's an hour and ten minutes to go till the others come back from OT. Dr Patel and Sister Annie will let her scream till then. She's screamed solid since half-past-seven last night, according to Mr Jenkins who is usually reliable in these matters. She's screamed in the ambulance for thirty-seven miles by green lane and new road. (Mrs Jenkins never leaves Sgubor Fawr except to come here. It is rumoured she went to Shrewsbury in Coronation Year, but that tale might well be apocryphal.) Who knows, by dinner time it may all be over. She might have done with screaming. Till the next time.

Very Dependable Joyce is handing out a second cup of tea to those that want. All drink. Even Sioned, submerged in her pink haze, drinks, but it's the eating she won't do, isn't it? She's in such a state of shock she almost accepts a Nice biscuit from Joyce's Own Personal Packet. But then she remembers she's anorexic and politely refuses. The scream keeps going, keeps flowing. Dr Merton makes a grim appearance at the ward door, shrugs and disappears. Nurse Sandra stands by. Sister Annie and Dr Patel sit and wait and listen. Is that a diminuendo? Surely ... yes ... no. The scream has risen again but it's definitely less screamy, this scream. It's on the wane. It wobbles, it fades, it flickers, it stops. It finally stops.

Mrs Jenkins does not look sheepish. She is not in the least embarrassed. She has the most ferret-like face you've ever seen. A swarthy ferret with black pebble eyes. In her high bird-like voice she asks Joyce if she can go home now. Very Dependable Joyce explains that as she is the Cleaner it's not really up to her to say. But tea she does have to offer.

"It'll be a bit stewed by now. I'll make you fresh if you like."

"No lovey," says Mrs Jenkins who is invariably easy to please. "I'm sure it will taste fine. I like my tea strong."

I bet you do, thinks Nurse Sandra.

It's still on the ward. Now there's not even the faint hum of a mechanical mower. It's an extraordinary stillness. Not a silence as such, more a resonant absence. How wonderful it is to hear the scream has gone. Never has any silence felt this peaceful, more like velvet, more gentle, more deep. Goodness is singing in the ward. Without making a sound.

Dr Patel winks conspiratorially at Sister Annie. Dr Merton was wrong, wasn't he? He wanted to give her morphine. They said leave her alone.

And they did.

And it worked.

It has happened before, of course. Every three years since 1953, the year of the Coronation, the year Mrs Jenkins went to Shrewsbury. If she did.

She will be going home in a day or two. She'll be chatting away to those two nice ambulancemen who brought her in this morning, sirens blaring. Well, it's all in a day's work.

Linda is now en route to the sitting room. Sioned lies quietly, thinking. Mrs Jessop is rooting anxiously in her handbag. Strange, she seems to have mislaid her lighter. The electrician comes in to change the dud bulb over Mrs Jenkins' bed.

At Sgubor Fawr the sun has filtered briefly through the trees. Mr Jenkins is feeding the hens.



The Scream, Edvard Munch

Something for further thinking: The actual scream, Munch claims, came from the surroundings around the person. The artist printed 'I felt a large scream pass through nature' in German at the bottom of his 1895 piece. Munch's original name for the work was intended to be The Scream of Nature.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/20/edvard-munchs-scream-isnt-screaming-says-british-museum/>

Jenny Brown's Point – by Graham Mort

Col settled his hands on the wheel. They were red from hot water. One wing mirror was broken and the black electrical tape he'd used to mend it fluttered from the shattered glass. The windscreen wipers were smearing spray from a lorry. He switched on the radio. There was a local station up here now. *96.9 FM*. A woman's voice sang it to a corny tune. Jason was strapped into the child seat behind. Col had access every other weekend, but this morning Janine had been a real cow about it. *You've got to make your mind up, Col. We can't plan anything like this.*

Like what? He'd missed a couple of weekends because of work, so things had got a bit out of sync. She'd had another kid – Kaylie – after he left, after shacking up with Simon who'd moved into the house. Simon who still had acne and did fuck-all in the scheme of things. They were supposed to be going to a kids' party together, Jason and Kaylie who was three now. Janine said it wasn't fair, expecting Jason to give that up. Col almost told her to fuck off but he bit his tongue because she'd be on the phone to her solicitor slagging him off if he didn't behave.

So he'd spoken to her quietly and she'd asked Jason and, yes, he wanted to go with his dad. Simon kept out of the way. Just as well. He needed chinning, the soft twat. They'd painted the front door dark blue since last time. You could see the brush marks, like a kid had done it. The kitchen was just as he'd left it when he moved out. Everything fitted tight as a glove, scribed, mitred and joined to perfection, the beech wood surfaces oiled to a deep sheen. He didn't begrudge Janine that; it was a bit of himself, a reminder.

They set off with rain hitting the windscreen. Kaylie cried on the doorstep as Col pulled away. All well and good, except it was November and grim as hell. Saturday, so the traffic in town wasn't bad. Twenty minutes to the motorway. He had the radio on and kept turning round on the M6 to see if Jason was OK. Thumbs up. The music was cool, old soul hits. He'd played bass in a band for a bit when he was a teenager, but they'd never done anything. A few village hall gigs with silly haircuts. But that's why Janine had looked across at him in English. She had shiny brown hair that she hadn't dyed blonde. Her eyes were grey, green, brown. He'd never

figured it out. She wasn't tarty like the other girls. She wore flat-heeled shoes. Sensible. There was something calm and sure about her. Even his mum liked her.

They'd done this trip when he was a kid in their old Fiesta. Col, his mum and dad, his sister Becky. Following behind, his dad's brother Pete and auntie Edith. They had no kids themselves. They had a blue Datsun Estate with loads of room in it, so Col and Becky got to ride in the back. Sometimes it was Southport or Blackpool, but they'd settled on Morecambe as he and Becky got older. They'd tried the east coast once, but that had been a nightmare. *Bloody Siberia in swimming trunks*. His dad and Pete worked together at the Post Office. They spent most of that week in the pub, coming back half-pissed for their tea at the self-catering place they'd hired, farting and laughing like teenagers. His granddad had been a postman, too.

Back then they never had much money, but they had jobs and people stayed together. Stayed together and fought. There in the tight terraced streets, shouting over the noise of the TV, over the screams of the baby, and no way out. For Col's parents, marriage meant just trying to out-manoeuvre each other. Like that game: paper, stone, scissors. A form of attrition. A woman in Col's street had drowned herself in the reservoir one New Year's Eve. He remembered her husband's blotchy eyes, the hearse coming down the street, stretching their faces in its shiny coachwork. He thought of the dark hole they'd bury her in. Col wanted more than that. He wanted life, he wanted whatever love was, whatever it meant.

Col pulled in at Forton services to get a bottle of water and some ciggies. He'd just about got enough petrol. He bought a bottle of pop for Jason, a comic and some crisps. Jason looked as pleased as punch. He was good like that. A great kid. It didn't take much. He looked cute in his blue puffer jacket and trainers that lit up with red LEDs when he stamped his feet. Col was working shifts in a hotel restaurant as a kitchen porter, which wasn't ideal.

He'd trained as a joiner. What he loved was building things. Fitting roofing timbers, architraves, skirting boards so they mitred snugly. He'd been taught to write on wood and gave a poem to Janine written on a length of tongue and groove. She thought it was cute. He'd fitted out the bathroom and kitchen when he and Janine moved into the end terrace.

All that had gone tits-up in the recession. The building trade fell on its arse

and he'd been laid off. He'd got a shit job now and most of the wages went into rent and heating. He got housing benefit, but he wasn't going on the social. He'd still got his carpentry tools. His chisels and power drills and handsaws, the router and folding bench. He knew other blokes who trained with him who'd sold theirs. You were fucked once you did that. You went under and stayed there. He'd seen older guys sitting in the pub over halves of lager staring at the racing on TV. Not him. Fuck that. He got the odd carpentry job, moonlighting between shifts with a cash advance for materials. The rest of the money went on Jason.

He'd got Janine pregnant when she was seventeen and she was still at school. He was an apprentice and she was in the sixth form, thinking about Uni. He thought he'd loved her. Told her he loved her when they'd bunked off school and college to sneak back into her house, taking off her clothes, breathless in her bedroom with her Pop Idol posters and CDs everywhere. The teddy-bear pyjamas he found so sexy, making her put them on so he could take them off again, putting his tongue against her small breasts, wetting them, feeling her through the thin cotton of her pants. His mum had gone mad when she found out. They got married and never stopped arguing after that. All through her pregnancy, then when Jason was waking them up all night to feed. Things had got better for a bit, when he settled down, but then they'd slipped back into it again, struggling to make ends meet, blaming each other for things. Scissors and paper. Paper and stone. Whatever. Then the firm let him go and that was the beginning of the end.

Col changed down and pulled out into a pall of spray to overtake a lorry. He jinked in again, spotting the university campus on the left. That meant he'd missed the first turning, hadn't been concentrating. The old mental hospital with its blackened stone came into view. Col had a map on the front seat beside him. Jason was spilling the crisps all over the car. It'd Hoover. Sod it. Never mind Morecambe, he'd go a bit further, head for Carnforth, then Arnside. He hadn't been there for years. Not since he was eleven when the family had decided to go somewhere a bit quieter. His mum was bad with her nerves by then. Even Morecambe's West End had been too much for her.

You'd think it was friggin' Beirut. His dad put on a long-suffering face, winking at him, shrugging on his jacket for a pint.

They were in Arnside by lunchtime and parked up at the seafront. It wasn't seaside exactly, but a wide sandy estuary with the River Kent running

through it, widening towards the sea. The wooded hills came right down to the shore and there were big old houses hidden in the trees, a long railway bridge crossing the estuary on brick columns. The sky was prolapsed, sagging onto the horizon. Col reached back to unclip Jason's safety harness. He picked up his mobile phone and slipped it into his pocket. A light drizzle spattered their faces and streaked the baker's window. A row of gulls sat hunched on iron railings. A goods train went over the viaduct and Col held Jason up to see.

- See the train, Jason? Jason didn't answer but burrowed into Col's shoulder.

- Raining, Daddy. He seemed to find that funny, putting his thumb into his mouth and making a mock sour face. Col laughed. He loved it when he did that.

- Come on then, lunchtime!

Col put Jason down and reached into the car for his jacket.

- Are you hungry?

Jason nodded. He needed a pee first, so they walked to the conveniences, then wandered about a little until they found a café that sold postcards and souvenirs.

The café was called *The Posh Pilchard*. They had sandwiches with bits of salad that Jason pushed to the edge of the plate. The woman running the café had dangly earrings and a plaster cast on her wrist and moved carefully between the tables, making a smiley face at Jason whenever she passed. She must have been a looker when she was younger. Her husband – white slacks and a hand-knitted pullover – hovered in the background, helping out. It didn't look as if he'd ever cut bread before or sliced a tomato. It was expensive, but it was nice. They could have gone to the chip shop and sat in the car with the windows steaming up, but this was better and Janine couldn't say he'd stuffed Jason's face with rubbish. You'd think she was a fucking dietician sometimes.

Col poured out the last of the tea and finished Jason's crusts. The tide tables were posted on a chalkboard. There was a tidal bore at 4. 17, when the incoming sea met the river. Col checked his watch, but the face had misted up. It was stuck at 11. 45. He'd had it for years. It was probably knackered or maybe the battery had died.

The rain had eased off when they left the café. Gulls were stooping over the beach, quarrelling, calling out raucously. You could smell the chip shop. Last time they'd been here the whole family had walked along the beach towards the sea. His uncle Pete had taken his shoes off and gone into the water. He'd stepped on a flounder and pulled it out of the river casually, as if he did that every day. It was a miracle, the flat fish flopping about in his hands like a fumbled catch in the outfield. Now the water flowed brown and steady. There were a couple of fishermen huddled under umbrellas, a tall woman calling to two red setters that were running free, scuffing the sand beside the waterline. She had a blue plastic bag pulled over one hand. There was a line of cars with people inside, eating fish and chips, unwrapping sandwiches, balancing thermos flasks, listening to their radios. 96. 9 FM.

It was half-past two according to the clock on the old town hall. Col decided to drive round the headland and find a quiet spot near the nature reserve. Jenny Brown's Point. They'd camped out there once on one of those family holidays. There'd been an old barn with tractors and a cowshed where a herd of Jersey cattle trooped in each evening, their udders swaying. Col remembered the way milk and shit had mixed together on the concrete floor and he and Becky had got a massive telling off from their mum for flicking it at each other with sticks. She'd made them take a cold shower at the campsite and smacked their legs. It was bad enough washing clothes at home she said, without them making work on holiday. She wasn't a bloody skivvy. But she was. She had to be. His dad grinned at them, on his way out for a walk to the village, which meant a pint at the local.

Col drove to Silverdale and then got lost on a wooded lane that wound out of the village. Then there was an old-fashioned sign pointing to the right. *Jenny Brown's Point*. Soft rain tapped against the windscreen. The wipers were on intermittent, which Jason always found funny. The way they suddenly set off across the glass to smear it. He was giggling in the back and pointing. The road dipped and turned under overhanging trees until they were entering the village. A studio and café on the right, an old tower with windows that looked Elizabethan or something, then a left turn down a road through a farmyard with a blue plastic feed tub turned over as a kennel for the chained collie. *No Through Road*. It ended at the sea, or above it. The collie barked at them in the wing mirrors, tugging at its leash. They drove for almost a mile then Col found a layby and pulled in. The rain had stopped. Through the trees they could see the sands gleaming, seamed by gullies. There were seagulls feeding at the shore

and some darker birds far out. The sky was huge. To the south were the square blocks of Heysham power station. They looked like a Lego house. Then skeins of mist blew in to blank them out.

Now they were squeezing past a stone stile onto a path that went through bracken until it reached a broken outcrop of limestone above the beach. A long groin made up of rocks and smaller stones tapered out over the sand. The green timbers of a jetty were rotting away. Black seaweed wrapped over white stones. A gulley ran parallel to the shore, almost empty of water. A thorn tree had been bent back towards the land by the sea wind. Col picked Jason up and splashed through the gully, feeling the sand firm underfoot. Mud and sand glinted, bright and flat and level. It reminded him of sharpening a hand-plane and looking down the blade.

Usually you could see the hills of the Lake District. Not today. A grey pall hung over Grange-over-Sands. He'd been there too. There'd been an arcade with charity shops and a line of mannequins dressed in tartan kilts and berets. His dad turned to them and laughed. *Bloody hell, the gathering of the clans. That's posh. You won't find that in Preston.* Then he got told off for swearing by Col's mum and winked at them when she wasn't looking. Col reached a stream and had to step over swinging Jason across.

- Where's the sea, Daddy?

He hadn't been paying attention. Jason was pulling at his hand.

- It's there, look!

Col pointed to where the sand and sky seemed to meet. Jason giggled. He had a front tooth missing and covered his mouth to hide it.

- Not there! He looked suddenly stricken.

- It's not anywhere!

- Don't fret. We'll find it. Col stooped to ruffle his hair.

- Was it a nice lunch with Daddy? Jason nodded.

- Posh Pilchard! He liked pilchards mashed up in tomato sauce.

- Will you tell Mummy? Jason nodded again, suddenly looking serious, as if he was remembering the tension, the words that arced and sparked between them.

- Good lad!

This would be a good memory. They deserved that. Memories meant a lot. They meant everything in the end. Col hugged him and held him tight for a moment.

- Where's the sea?

Jason seemed doubtful that such a thing had ever existed.

- It's there, look!

The sea. It was a long way out, flat at the horizon. Behind them was Warton Crag with its limestone face. Somewhere behind that was Arnside Knott. They saw a deer there once, on that holiday. A small red deer with short antlers, running stiffly from the trees. Col took Jason's hand and they headed onto the sands ahead of them: ribbed river mud, brown water, the claw prints of scavengers.

When they were kids the sea here had always been a disappointment. Other kids had gone to Majorca or Tenerife where you could swim and lounge about in beachwear. Col hadn't stayed in a resort hotel before he went on honeymoon with Janine. They'd flown to the Costa Brava and Janine had got so badly burnt that she had to stay in her room for two days rubbing cream on her shoulders. She'd done some Spanish at school but was too frightened to use it. The waiters all spoke English, though they weren't used to being waited on. There was a tall one called José who'd worked in Bristol and leered at Janine when he thought Col wasn't watching. Back home he'd have fucking decked him. Janine had morning sickness, too, regular as clockwork. So it hadn't been much fun, holding her head over the toilet bowl, worrying what it was all costing.

They paused as Jason investigated a mussel shell then a dead crab with the toe of his trainer. Then set off again, hand in hand. There was no one else in sight. No fishermen. No dog walkers. Col looked back to where the trees were turning silvery leaves. An elderly couple in blue waterproofs were watching them. The man was waving at something. Silly twat. There was a steady breeze coming off the sea, the sting of salt in it. The silt was damp and firm underfoot. Jason bent down to pick up a handful. He examined it then smeared his hand on his jacket. Col wiped it clean.

-Your mum'll be cross. Jason went solemn again.

- No she won't, it's OK, only kidding. Come on! Rain began to darken the sand and Jason looked up, afraid that he'd miss the sea, that they'd have to

turn back. He pulled away from Col's hand, ran ahead then screamed. He was sunk in up to his waist, his face gap-toothed, white with terror. For a few seconds he looked almost comical. Col's stomach lurched. He ran forward, his own feet suddenly dragged by suction. He grabbed the collar of Jason's puffer jacket and pulled him free with one jerk, then ran backwards onto firmer sand, almost stumbling. Jason was blubbing now and Col bent to wipe snot and tears from his face, his heart hammering. It had all been so quick. One minute he was laughing like any other kid, the next he could have drowned. Jesus.

Jenny Brown's Point. It was lethal. How could he have forgotten that? People drowning trying to save their dogs. Others just losing their way in the mist. Those obituaries in the *Gazette*.

When Col stood up again he couldn't see Warton Crag or the limestone at the shoreline. The houses and trees on the far side of the estuary had disappeared into a wad of mist. He backed away slowly from the quicksand, picking Jason up and holding him tight.

- Want to go home!

- I know sweetheart, I know. Col kissed him and pinched him on the cheek.

Janine was going to have a field day with all this. He put Jason down and pushed his jacket cuff back out of habit. Jason was stamping his feet but his trainers were caked in sand and mud and they weren't lighting up any more. Fuck! He'd forgotten his watch was broken. He reached into his jacket pocket for his mobile phone. It wasn't there. He checked all his pockets. Lighter, cigarettes, keys, a damp tissue. You couldn't lose it, it was like a fucking brick. He retraced his steps, walking in a wide semi circle. Nothing. He'd put it on the table at The Posh Pilchard and then got up to pay the woman with the broken arm. She'd said something to Jason and given him a sweet from a screw-top jar. They'd thanked her and walked out. Bollocks. It was only a cheap Nokia, but now there was no way of knowing the time. The sky was a uniform grey and mist had settled in around them, nudging away the whispers of rain.

Col kissed Jason again and swung him up onto his shoulders. He watched the sand for darker patches that might be soft. If he could get a view of that shallow river as it ran though, he could get his bearings. They'd walked between the stone groin and the slime-covered timbers. All he had to do was cross the gully, then walk at right angles to it. But all that was easier said than done. There was no river now, just a flat plain of water that bled

out into mist. He made a dozen strides, taking control. When he looked down a small depth of water was streaming around his shoes. He turned and went back over his own steps, except they weren't there any more. He remembered the way the tide turned here. A brown bore surging into the river mouth, choking it with seawater. He bent down and put his finger in to taste it. It was salty alright, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

– What you doing, Daddy?

– Nothing, it's OK. Just checking something.

– Are we going home? No answer.

– Are we?

– For fuck's sake Jason, just can it. The child went quiet, stark with fear. He shouldn't have sworn. If that got back to Janine she'd go nuts. Col tried to think of anything that might lead them back, but the sand was flat, featureless. It had lost even that vague seam of sky.

Col was sure he'd walked at ninety degrees to the channel they'd crossed. His jacket was covered in seeds of drizzle, his shoes soaked to the ankle. Visibility was about twenty yards. Fuck-all. They began to jog towards the shore, shouting as he went. Jason was laughing with tears on his face. This was all a game. Silly Daddy. They went for five minutes before turning back. Something in Col's head was jabbering, telling him not to panic. He walked to the left and thought he saw the distant line of the groin. The sea would have covered the tip, shortening it. He steered to the right, rubbing Jason's legs to put some blood into them. There was a wide section of water and he thought he could see limestone beyond. His feet plunged into a hidden gully and he almost fell forwards. In moments, Col was knee deep in the channel, then thigh deep. He strode through it, dragging his legs against the force of water, hoping to Christ he was going in the right direction.

Jason had gone quiet again. There was a spike of ice in Col's chest. He was a fucking idiot. Janine was right. He'd put everything he loved at risk because he didn't sort things out. He hadn't had his watch mended, hadn't checked his pockets in the café. He thought of the drive home. How sweet that would be, him and Jason in the car with the heater on and music playing, the windows misting up. *96. 9 FM*. That stupid tune. They'd be laughing all the way because they were alive. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, he was rehearsing a story for Janine. He stood with Jason on his shoulders, holding onto his legs, the water streaming past them and deepening. He tried shouting for help, but Jason panicked and started

jigging up and down, throwing Col's balance. The current was coming from his right, which must mean that he was facing the sea, that the shore was behind him. It was walk or drown, right now before it was too late. Right or left? Front, behind? He had to decide, he had to go for it. What a cunt he'd been. He turned 180 degrees until the current was pushing against his left thigh, almost waist deep.

Col set off into a brown flood. It was seaming past him, into him with its cold weight. He stepped deeper, then deeper again. Fuck! There was a scream building in his chest. He beat it down like a snarling dog. He took a lungful of pure rage, then three shallower steps, almost off balance, then upright again.

- Daddy, Daddy!

- It's OK sweetheart, it's OK, we're almost there. He felt a slight breeze on his face. Two more shallow steps onto firm sand, the drag of water falling below his waist.

- Nearly there, Jason, nearly there!

There was a tear in the mist. Suddenly, the groin was on their right, a long spear of stone. They were a long way from where he'd thought they were. He could see the shore now: white rock, a line of trees. He took another step and sank deeper. If he got swept away they'd be fucked. The current had reversed, that's what had thrown him. The tide was dragging at his waist again. It was only a few yards. He was a shite swimmer. Jason was screaming now, punching at his head. He took another step and another, almost lost his footing and then was across, scrabbling the last yards to the sharp rocks on his hands and knees. Col put Jason down and he was lunging at him, hysterical, punching him, aiming for his balls, screaming.

-You, you! Col stepped back, feeling his trainers pump out water.

-Horrible! Horrible!

-Hey, hey, it's OK. We're safe darling. His heart was thumping like a fist on a church door. He wiped Jason's face with his hand then scrambled over the rocks, lifting him and scrambling up behind until they reached the path and then a green metal gate that led onto the road. A magpie flew off as they went through and found the car. His chest was tight again.

They were both soaked, covered in stinking mud and sand. Col fastened

Jason into the child seat and found him a half a bar of chocolate, kissing his face. He brushed the crisps from the back seat with his hand and sat with the door open. Then he took off his trousers and socks and wrung them out. A middle-aged couple with rucksacks and walking sticks passed and gave him a funny look. He didn't give a fuck. The couple stopped and glanced back. The woman said something, touching the man's arm and they went on again. They looked well-off. Fuck them.

Col was sobbing quietly, feeling a great bubble of relief break from his chest. They could have been dead by now, face down in the water. There would have been an inquest, a few lines in the newspaper. His fingers were numb as he dressed himself, fumbled with his shoelaces. He pulled off his watch and flung it over the wall towards the sea. Fucking thing. He thought of his phone, tucked behind the salt grinder in the café, of the woman with the broken arm fumbling with the sweet jar, Jason's big eyes following her.

He'd explain it all to Janine, somehow. He'd unbuttoned her pyjamas and kissed her, sliding his hand over her belly. She smelled of shampoo, her hair shiny and soft, her mouth wet and yielding. She'd made him feel he existed. There in that hot little bedroom in a nowhere town in the northwest of England, somewhere in the Universe. He'd say he was sorry. What else? It'd all got messed up.

Col checked that Jason was alright. He was asleep in the back seat, his head lolling. There was sand in his hair. Col fished out his lighter and an unopened cigarette packet from his jacket pocket, picking off the cellophane. They were still dry. Janine hated him smoking near Jason. His lighter wouldn't work so he lit the cigarette from the gadget in the car. He remembered when uncle Pete had got one of those. He thought it was the dog's bollocks back then. Col leaned against the hatchback, blowing out smoke, picking specks of tobacco from his lip.

There was a gap in the clouds over the bay and light bore down through it, glittering on the sea. It looked like the scales of a huge serpent. It'd turned on them, but they'd survived. What was he going to say to Janine? What would Jason say when she gave him the third degree? It was a mess alright. But they were alive and that was all that mattered now. Other things would matter later, the usual crap. But this was life, for fuck's sake, life. He flicked the cigarette stub away, watching it hiss and extinguish in a puddle, staining with water, sucking up darkness. He should give up.

When he got in the car and switched on the engine, Bay Radio was playing. 96. 9 *FM*. Col glimpsed a white house though overgrown trees. There was a man in a blue jumper putting the lead on an English sheepdog. Then black and white calves glimpsed in the fields. Jason was still asleep in his harness. Col drove slowly, his hands still gritty with sand. He looked in the wing mirror and the black ribbon of tape flickered from the cracked glass. He changed gear, glancing at Jason as they reached the dead end where he'd turn the car around to head for home.



Warton Crag & Jenny Brown Point - beach walking toward old chimeny

<https://crosbyman66.wordpress.com/2018/06/22/warton-crag-and-jenny-browns-point/>