

Getting Away From Stuff

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Sophie strode out, enjoying the splintering noise of the shells underfoot and the welcome warmth in the late winter sun. Satisfied she had this vast, north Norfolk beach to herself, she headed towards her favourite creek, where she could watch the wading birds and let the lapping of the water soothe her.

But it wasn't long before she stopped, regretting her refills of coffee at breakfast, and cursing that she was now too far from the public loos back in the village. She could still see no-one, so she veered away from the water to find a suitably sheltered place in the dunes. She gritted her teeth, thinking she could never have done this as a younger woman. Now, in her early sixties, she had fewer inhibitions. Even so, relief took its time, as she tensed in the chill of the shaded hollow.

The deed done, she had just pulled her walking trousers back up when she heard someone call out, 'Now wash your hands!' The voice came from a man, lying propped up on one elbow, peering at her around the edge of a nearby, much larger dune. He jumped up and took a few steps towards her. Everything about him looked rumpled and weathered, including his smile. 'And I happen to live here, so next time you're caught short, would you mind not using my back yard.'

Sophie felt the roots of her hair burning. A withering remark was on the tip of her tongue, but she stalled, telling herself that facing up to a complete stranger, in this isolated place, wasn't the smartest move. She muttered, 'I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone else was around.' She started to move off. Why did she spend her life

apologising? Angry with herself, she turned back. 'What do you mean, you live here?'

'Exactly that. Come round and have a look.'

Her head told her to make excuses, and leave, right now. Yet something about this man intrigued her. Initially, she'd thought him young, but most people seemed young to her now. Looking at him more closely, she guessed he might be in his fifties. He was solidly built, with a tangle of light brown, curly hair, salt and peppery round the edges, and the cheekiest smile she'd seen since her days in classrooms. She craned her neck and ventured forward just enough to peek into the dune.

A sleeping bag was spread out over a groundsheet. She could see a camping-gas burner, a cooking pot, a big water bottle, and a mug. A large backpack, with a book poking out of the top, was standing to one side. She glanced back at him.

'What do you think?' he said, seeming to want her approval.

'It looks cosy, but what do you do when it rains?'

He pointed to his backpack. 'There are bits and pieces in there I can rig up. Wind's more of a problem. It blows sand everywhere.'

'How long have you been living like this?'

'Nearly a year. Not for much longer, though. The nights have been really cold recently.' He screwed up his face, 'It's beginning to get to me.' Thinking of sleeping out in the open made Sophie zip her fleece jacket higher around her neck. 'Sit down if you like. It's more sheltered here.' He moved back to the sleeping bag to smooth out a place for her. He spread out his arms in an exaggerated, sweeping gesture, as if he were showing her into the most expensive suite of rooms in a top-notch hotel.

She stepped back. 'No thanks. I came here to walk.'

‘It’s OK. I’m harmless. A chat would be nice. And you owe me for defiling my garden.’

Sophie’s laughter burst out of her. She ignored the invitation to sit down, but couldn’t resist saying, ‘I love this beach. I think of it as *my* beach. I come here as often as I can.’

‘It’s a life-saver, isn’t it? Good for getting away from stuff.’

Unsettled, she looked out to sea.

‘But it’s my beach too, you know,’ he said, pursing his lips, ‘No need to get possessive about it. It’s big enough for two.’

She avoided his eye. ‘I like looking at the wildlife and all the different plants.’ She glanced around at this place that had caught hold of her, given her a shaking, and set her along a path towards healing. ‘I once saw a Chinese water deer in those reeds, just over there.’ She got out her camera to show him photos she’d taken over many weeks, amazed that he could pinpoint most of the locations.

Lured by the thud of the waves, she headed down to the water’s edge and stood for a while watching and listening to the hypnotic repetition of churning sand, pebbles and shells. The man had followed her and stood, staring out to sea. ‘It’s wonderful waking up to this sound each morning,’ he said. He turned to her. She nodded, without taking her eye away from the water.

She wandered back up the beach, the man a few steps behind. She continued towards the salt marshes. He lingered, looking at bones, shells and body parts, abandoned by the tide. He picked up the skull of a gull, calling out. ‘Look at this. It’s amazing how the water, the salt and the sun wash and bleach everything, so there’s no trace left of anything but bone.’ He gave a little grunt. ‘I wouldn’t mind ending my days here.’

Sophie froze. She swallowed hard, then started to run, to get away, get anywhere, to escape the thoughts now rushing at her.

But the man pursued her, yelling, 'Hey! Hold on. What's wrong?' He grabbed at her arm and pulled her to a stop.

'Leave me alone. I'm fine.'

'You don't look fine. You're shaking and you've gone all white. Come back and sit down for a while, until you feel better.'

She felt him cup his hand under her elbow to guide her back to the dune. He kicked out a hollow in a mound of sand, and placed the sleeping bag against the slope. 'Sit here,' he said, 'It's not so far to get down.' She eased herself into the makeshift seat and closed her eyes.

Images crowded back to her of a day she thought she'd put behind her, a day when she'd thought the only solution was to let her beloved sea take her away. She'd launched herself into the water, intent on letting it suck her under, away from the pain of being alone and no longer wanted. But it was more difficult than she'd imagined, to reach deep water. She struggled against the turning tide, but the sea scolded her and sent her packing, dumping her back on the shore. Exhausted, she'd listened to the slapping of the waves, urging her to get up and get on with the life she could still have. A couple, walking with their dog, had come to her aid, but she believed it was the sea that had rescued her.

'Here. Have something to drink,' he said, fishing her flask out of her bag.

She opened her eyes. 'Thank you. I'm OK now.' She avoided his concerned gaze. Not wanting to be drawn into explanations, she asked about his book.

He hesitated a moment before accepting her ploy to distract him. 'It's a collection of poems by John Clare,' he said, passing it to her. 'His bond with wildlife was

amazing.’ He eased himself down beside her. ‘Poor man, he suffered from deep depression.’ He recited to her one of his favourite poems. As she leafed through several pages, she came across a poem on a loose sheet of paper. It was handwritten, with many crossings out. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I’d forgotten about that. I tried a few times to get my own thoughts into shape.’ He pulled it away from her and stuffed it in his backpack.

She considered getting up to go: getting on with her usual routine of walking alone. Instead, she asked, ‘So why do you live like this?’

He frowned. He brushed a hand over the sand, making wild squiggles on the surface. Then he looked up again. ‘Because I choose to.’ In a burst of anger, he rubbed out the marks he’d just made, as if wanting to remove every trace of them.

Chastened, Sophie considered how she might react, if a complete stranger challenged her with the same question. ‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘I’m out of order.’

His face softened. ‘I can breathe here. My blackness falls away, as soon as I see this huge openness all around me, and rarely any people.’

‘I’m sorry I disturbed you.’

He smiled. ‘It’s OK. Today’s turning out better than usual.’

‘Don’t people harass you or try to move you on?’

‘The few I’ve seen weren’t very observant. They were glued to a phone. They could have been anywhere. Even you didn’t see me, did you? I’ve noticed you, down at the water’s edge, on several mornings. I spotted you from way back today, so I kept my head down.’ A smile started in his eyes and spread across his entire face. ‘I wasn’t expecting early-morning entertainment. I thought you would just walk past as usual.’

Sophie felt herself blush at the thought that this morning wasn't the first time he'd observed her. Trying to keep a straight face, she said, 'You could have coughed or something, to warn me.'

'Yes, I know. I'm sorry.'

'How do you spend your days?' she said, keen now to change the subject.

He fiddled with the straps on his backpack. 'I go for a swim first thing. Later on, I head off up through the dunes and into the woods. Back in the autumn there were good mushrooms and fruits to forage. I avoid going right into the village. There are too many people around. In the summer, it was a nightmare. But there's a nice little baker's shop, in one of the side streets, so I sometimes go and get something there, then on to a greengrocer. Now and then I pick up a newspaper. When I read what's going on in the world, I often think I'm better off here.' He looked up and shrugged, as he saw her thoughtful expression. 'But I sometimes dream of all the things I love to eat, that I can't rustle up on a camping gas!'

Sophie laughed. 'Chips?'

'No, not really, more something cooked in an oven. There are times when I'd kill for lasagne or shepherd's pie.'

She swallowed hard, trying not to imagine living mostly on boiled vegetables and bread.

'The rest of the time, I walk on all these beaches. I never tire of watching the wildlife. I always sleep here. It's fantastic after dark, especially under a clear sky.'

They sat in easy silence. Sneaking glances at him, Sophie noticed his clothes were worn but not particularly dirty. He smelt similar to the shells and seaweed: not unpleasant. She wondered how he managed.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he muttered at last. Hoping he didn’t, she raised her eyebrows but said nothing. ‘It doesn’t solve anything, does it?’

‘I wasn’t thinking that, as a matter of fact. I’m sure it helps.’

He sighed. ‘I just need this for a while.’ He looked far out to sea. ‘None of it belongs to me, but I feel at ease here.’ He picked up some shells, shuffling them in his palms. ‘And nobody can take any of it away from me.’ She smiled. His lined face creased as he sensed she might understand. ‘And it will last forever, whereas our pathetic lives will just fizzle out.’

‘Don’t you ever miss being with people?’

‘Of course I do. I often cry from sheer loneliness.’ He scrambled to his feet and paced around. ‘But I feel even more lonely when I’m in a crowd.’ He came to a halt and started grinding at the sand with one foot, as if stubbing out a cigarette. ‘My wife and daughter were killed last spring in a car crash.’

Sophie turned to him, wide-eyed.

I kissed them goodbye after breakfast, went off to work as usual.’ His voice faltered. ‘The first I knew about it was when the police contacted me. They were brilliant. They rushed me to the hospital. I just got there in time to be with my daughter, but I wasn’t in time for my wife.’ He glanced away, his face puckered. ‘A wonderful nurse told me how he had held her hand and eased her out of this world, about twenty minutes before I got there.’ He folded his arms across his chest and clutched at his sleeves. ‘The other driver was still way over the alcohol limit from the night before.’ Crouching down, he grabbed a stone, and hurled it at nothing in particular. ‘All that, just at the time when everything around us was bursting into new life, in what seemed like the most beautiful spring we’ve had for years.’

Sophie got up and walked over to him. She put a hand on his shoulder. He straightened and gave her a slight nod. 'I'll be going back soon though, trying to behave as if I've recovered from my crisis, loss, breakdown, whatever they want to call it.'

'Where will you go back to?'

'I've got a house, about twenty miles inland from here.' He smiled at her surprise. 'I'm not homeless. Or destitute.' He kicked at another stone. 'Far from it, but that house has memories and ghosts that I've got to learn how to live with.' He took a deep breath. 'I've got a job to go back to. My school's desperate for teachers, especially for maths and science. They want me back as soon as I feel I can cope.' He paused and grimaced. 'It's all arranged. I've had some sick leave and a bit of unpaid leave. I'll go back and do what I can, but I'm going back part-time. I'm very grateful for that.'

Sophie tried to beam encouragement, but she remembered how hard she had found it to motivate, let alone inspire children to learn, when so much of her energy had been drained by her own problems.

He rubbed a hand across his brow, letting out a deep breath. 'I can always come back here at weekends to let off steam.' He turned his back to her and wandered several paces away.

Sophie had learnt how being alone on this coast could blow away the emotional refuse human beings let fall on each other. She knew too, that like leaves blasted away in a gale, it would eventually settle again. But it would land further away, letting light in, to give energy and strength to face whatever might come next. As the silence grew, she considered slipping away to leave him in peace.

But he sprang round to face her. 'You hungry?'

She glanced at her watch. She hadn't realised how long she'd been there. 'Yes, a bit.'

'Let's hit the village. Be my guest!'

'What! It'll be as crowded as hell! People will have come out of the woodwork on the first sunny day for weeks, even though it's cold.'

'We can get takeaway and sit down by the harbour. I know some quieter spots. Do you fancy fish and chips?' He wasn't waiting for an answer. She watched, bemused, as he rushed to stuff his belongings into his backpack. In a whirlwind of movement, he hoisted his bag onto his shoulders. 'Come on, today's different,' he said, pressing home the clasp of his bag's waist strap. It made a robust clunk, as if underlining his moment of decision.

Ready now, he looked her full in the eye. 'And at some point,' he said, 'you'll have to decide whether or not to go back to whatever it is you're running away from, won't you?' Sophie felt a catch in her throat. He touched her shoulder. 'I know a short cut. Come on, please, I'm famished.' She smiled at the urgency in his voice. Perhaps encouraged that she hadn't yet refused, he said, 'By the way, what's your name? I'm Joe.'

She hesitated a moment. 'I'm Sophie.' She frowned and fiddled around, putting her flask back into her bag. She glanced up. 'I'm very pleased to meet you, Joe,' she said, as if revealing an unexpected truth to herself.

He gave her a long, thoughtful look. 'Do you live alone too?' She nodded. 'Well then,' he said, 'Let's not be strangers.'

Sophie thought this sounded less of a suggestion, more of a decision. She raised an eyebrow, but as they set off, she didn't hesitate, when he offered his hand to help her over the deep, uneven sand of the dunes.