

***Beyond the Bay* by Keren Heenan**

When I see the stranger in the distance, coming down the sandy track, I know that everything from now on will be different. All day I have looked to the headland and the pale trail leading down to the beach; afraid that someone may come, terrified that they won't. If I am alone for much longer in this wild place I am not sure what I will do. Yet if I am not alone my purpose in being here is bent, confused. My jaw is sore from clenching and unclenching.

Last night the thunder crashed and rolled around the sky all night long, and lightning flared the tent into daylight. It seemed that even through my eyelids I could see the gnarled fingers of trees above the tent, stark against a violet sky. Before sunrise the rain started, solid drops like boulders falling on the thin sheet. I stared into darkness, imagining the water rising around the tent, loosening the pegs, and floating me away into silvery-blue. I felt as if some other substance was running through my veins, mercury or treacle, but not blood. I tried to find patterns in the dark, some spaces of lesser dark to link together. But it was all darkest dark.

Some time after dawn the rain stopped, and when I peered outside I could see small puddles reflecting a lemony glow. My head felt heavy and I think I'd been dreaming: lots of hills and running and stubble that felt like glass underfoot.

I have been on edge all day, waiting and watching, as if I have known all along that someone will come. I have gathered sticks and pebbles, seed pods and shells, and sat in the clearing sorting through them. I chose a smooth, white pebble with a vein of palest caramel and placed it in the centre, surrounded it with seed pods, eight in all, ran a twig from each pod outward, another pebble at the head of each twig, working around the circle. But today even this pattern hasn't pleased me the way it should. It is jarring and bare. I left it there and returned to the beach. And now the stranger is here.

I watch the small, dark figure becoming taller, larger. There's something odd about him and I can't work out his arms. As he comes closer I see his arms are raised, crucifixion style. I stay tucked in amongst the trees, watching him coming closer, wondering if it's some *Passion Play* being enacted, or perhaps some lunatic carrying his own cross. I slide in behind the tree trunk. I have no time to pack up my camp site. I dare a look out and see now that it is a man with a back-pack, and a stick behind his neck and his arms looped over it at the wrists. He has long curly hair and a hat that covers his eyes. I don't know where to run.

When he reaches the small rise near where I'm standing he pulls the stick from his shoulders and stares at me in surprise. 'Oh,' he says. 'I thought I'd be the only one here.' I nod. 'Ah,' he says and walks past me, sliding his pack off his back. I turn and watch him go

to the far side of the cleared space, pausing only briefly to glance down at my circular design. He pulls things from his pack and shakes tent pegs from a pouch, looking up at me as I stand in the same spot. I look away quickly and move to the beach. I'm worried now about how I must look. It is almost two weeks since I have used a mirror and I haven't washed for days. I go to my tent, my head down to avoid his eyes, and take soap and a towel.

Down by the water I'm all a fluster: should I pack up and move, or stay? Should I ignore him or speak to him? Indecision crashes around me and tears prick my eyelids. For one brief moment I would like Marcus to be here. Just so he could hold me, and then be on his way. But he will never be here. There is nothing to bind us any longer.

It doesn't feel as if I've made a decision but I walk around the pebbly point to the sheltered side where the creek runs into the bay. The water is shallow and warm from the sun. I wash my hair. I even wash the clothes I'm wearing, wrap myself in the towel and return. The stranger is not there. Perhaps he is in his tent, or walking up the mountain to the rear of the clearing. The tent is too hot so I dress and go to the beach to sit and watch the curved patterns of light flicker endlessly.

He is there. Half way around to the headland I can see him twisting his body into strange postures. Yoga, he is doing yoga. I watch for a little while then lie down to doze.

I hear the soft brush of sand and a shadow passes over me, returns, and hovers. 'Seems silly to have two separate fires,' he says. 'Do you mind if we share one?'

When I look up at him I can't see his features, just a fuzzy halo of hair in the blinding light. I squint and shade my eyes. 'Ye-es,' I say, 'I mean, no, okay.'

He nods. 'I'm making a cup of tea.'

I'm not sure if that's an invitation or not, so I nod. He moves away, picking up sticks. I close my eyes again and lie for some time in the sun until I feel my face burning. If the mention of tea was an invitation I have probably missed the opportunity. I stand and stretch, moving off towards the headland to prise mussels off the rocks. I still have rice, I can offer him dinner just in case he has expected me to come and drink his tea.

When I return to the camp I see a second cup by the fire. He has expected me to have tea with him then after all. He looks up from his book and says, 'Tea's cold, sorry.'

I shake my head, splaying the fingers of one hand, and drop the mussels on the ground in my towel.

'Have you taken a vow of silence or something?' he says. 'Sorry,' he adds. 'It's just that you're not very talkative.'

How do I tell a stranger, that in silence there is a blueness that comforts. Even as it blurs into a kind of whispered black. And this is strength until I can haul myself up again. Long ago when my mother died she was wearing a blue dress. The ambulance roared off into the night while my grandmother held me quietly. And together we fell into some kind of blue silence where I thought of nothing but my head resting in those soft folds.

He's still looking at me as if I am a child who has just done something quaint or endearing. I shake my head. 'No. It's just ... I've been here a while by myself.' I rush on, 'I'm cooking. Do you like mussels?' I flip the corner of the towel to show the purple-black shells.

His eyes light up. 'Yes, I do, thanks ... I hope that's not presumptuous, you were inviting me to eat with you?'

I nod, 'Yes.' He turns back to his book, his head propped up on a stump padded by his sleeping bag. I want to know what he is reading but if I don't ask I can pretend he's not here.

While we're sitting eating he says, 'How long have you been here?'

I didn't want him to ask questions, but I knew he would. I look into the flames and watch the patterns of orange flare and die. He's stepped over my circular design of sticks and pebbles without disturbing it so I can finish it tomorrow. Yes, I must finish, it will look so much fuller with something chunkier between the twigs, perhaps ...

He's looking across at me still, and one question alone is harmless. 'Nearly two weeks.'

'Oh, is that all. I thought it might've been months,' he says. 'I stayed here for a month once. I only had one visitor. The hike over the mountain stops people. You have to be committed to isolation to come here.' He looks at me quizzically, one brow raised. 'Been here before?'

'Once,' I say. 'For a short time.' I remember turning and looking back along the curved bay as I left, committing the place to memory: the still blue of the bay, the wide silence of the sky. And later, when my mind screamed for refuge, it was this memory that flooded in.

When we finish eating we sit by the fire and stare into the flames. 'You weren't afraid?' he says. 'Camping here alone.'

I shrug. 'No. There's more to be afraid of than camping alone.'

He laughs. 'True. What do you fear most?'

I could tell him that I fear everything. But I think I fear loss the most. I even fear for the loss of those things I don't yet have. 'Those sorts of questions,' I say.

He laughs again. ‘Yes, I can tell. You make conversation hard work, don’t you?’

How could I tell him what I couldn’t even tell Marcus. That when he talked and talked and asked questions about things I could never know the answers to – the burial, what to dress his tiny body in, what to do with the cot, his toys, this grief – it left no silence in which I could fall into blue. I’d said, *Be still, and just hold me*, but he did not understand.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I know you didn’t come all this way for a conversation with a stranger either. And you’ve been very ... considerate.’

I want to ask him what he does, who he loves, or has lost, but instead I ask if he’d like a cup of tea. He says no, he only drinks tea during the day, and I’m glad because there’s no water and I’d have to find my way to the creek. I have a torch but there are always sounds behind me in the dark.

‘Do you know how long you’re staying?’ he says, then adds, ‘or is that an unwanted question too?’ He looks at me then says, ‘Ah, a smile.’

‘I haven’t thought about how long I’ll stay, but I don’t have much food left.’

‘And you’re sharing it with me? That’s no good. Tomorrow I provide the food, okay?’

I nod. ‘Thanks.’

He puts his hands on his knees and stands. ‘Well, time for bed. G’night.’

‘Goodnight.’

Before he goes into his tent he looks across at me and says, ‘You know, the world is bigger than the things you can’t talk about.’

By the light of his torch I see his silhouette moving about in the tent, twisting his body this way and that to remove trousers, shirt, sliding into his sleeping bag. Then the light goes off, and he sighs contentedly. I sit gazing into the dying embers of the fire, then I pour on the dish water and watch the fire splutter and hiss.

Some time through the night the wind shifts. I wake to the change in cadence and lie listening to its rising murmur. If I were home I would hear light furniture moving on the deck outside, voices perhaps, shifting grasses and leaves – a sea of sibilant sound. But I am here, all adrift on a thin mattress, just a flimsy plastic sheet between me and the dark world outside. I wonder what Marcus is doing: is he sleeping, has he too woken to the rising burr of the wind. But he is a long way away. I couldn’t tell him when he asked where I’d be. *Then I can’t tell you where I will be either*, he said. *But I won’t be here*.

I take one hand in the other, spoon-like, hefting it lightly. How much is the weight of one hand? One heart? I’ve seen a sheep’s heart. But I mean a *heart* – the one that breaks. And

then you have to live. An eternity of *living* stretches before me. It will be done because it must be. I turn on my side and hold emptiness in my arms. And I wonder suddenly, what is the stranger's name.

He has gone from the campsite when I wake. He doesn't return till midday. All morning I have waited for him to appear, on the beach, on the path from the creek. But he has disappeared, and if it wasn't for his tent I'd think I had dreamt him up. Suddenly I hear his cheerful humming and whistling. 'I've just been up the mountain,' he points back over his shoulder. 'Amazing view.'

'Yes, I know,' I say, as if I haven't been anxious for his safety – a fall, snake-bite – and wondered where to start searching first.

'Right, my turn for lunch,' he says and rummages in his pack, coming out with packages and tubes of things that he sets up near the fire. 'I'll be out of your way soon,' he says. And I think he means here, now, from the fire-side. But he adds, 'I'm heading back to town today.'

'O-oh. I didn't mean ... I didn't want to drive you away.'

'No, no, I was only ever staying till this afternoon. Have to work tomorrow.'

I'm standing on the sandy rise, leaning against the tree, watching him walk away. He is almost half way around the curve of the bay when I remember. 'Wait!' I call, and he pauses, turns. I run along the sand to catch up to him. Panting, I say, 'I don't know your name.'

He says, 'I have told you, you know, but I don't think you took it in.'

'I'm sorry, I don't remember. I'm Elsa.'

'James.' He laughs and shakes my hand. 'We seem to have done this in reverse order.'

I watch him walk away, his figure becoming smaller again. He reaches the track over the headland, turns and waves. I keep watch till long after he has disappeared from sight. I imagine him turning, seeing me just a speck on the sand, and I wave again though I know he's gone now. Silence thrums painfully for a moment then I turn and face the water. Beyond the bay, the distant horizon is a pale shimmer.