

The Beach of Disgrace

Robert laid his head back on the cushion. He could hear children in the distance; it must be playtime. He tried to take himself back to a time when he would have given anything to be sitting at home on a Wednesday morning with a strong coffee and the crossword, the stresses of school far away.

He imagined Gina scanning the playground, clutching her non-spill, re-useable cup, anxiously expecting the worst, while tall, athletic Gil strode an effortless path through the sea of children, casual as you like. Robert heard the faint sound of the bell he had rung hundreds of times, and then silence descended broken only by the distant hum of a glinting, silver bird, high up in the sky, the passengers enjoying their high-altitude coffee and snacks.

He studied the sky, tracking wispy clouds through the glass roof of the conservatory. Was he the only person in the world not doing something? The only person serving no useful purpose? Robert knew this wasn't true, but sometimes the feeling of being left behind was overwhelming. Just as the ripple of death rocks those closest to the epicentre and lessens its effect as it spreads until there is hardly any evidence of a departing; the world simply carries on. But Robert wasn't dead, he was living, suspended in a kind of chrysalis while the world went on without him. His 'inner child' as Nicola called it wanted to shout, 'Stop! Wait for me!' But he was trapped and couldn't move.

Suspension had come swiftly and unexpectedly. The chair of governors making an unplanned visit.

'This is a surprise, Donald. What can I do for you?'

Donald had shifted his tall frame in the too-small chair, his knees edging up towards his chin. Robert always liked his visitors to be on lower chairs than his own and suppressed a smile. Donald cleared his throat, the prominent Adam's apple bobbing nervously. 'Well, Robert... The thing is we've had a complaint.'

'Right.' Nothing unusual about that.

'It's just that...well the Blacks have written to Ofsted.'

In an instant, all sorts of alarm bells started ringing at the very mention of the dreaded 'O' word.

Robert leant forward. 'Tell me.'

'Apparently Kayden told them that you hit him with a ruler when you kept him in at playtime yesterday.' Donald was fidgeting with a button on his jacket. 'There was a mark on his arm.'

It was true, he *had* hit Kayden with a ruler. What had he been thinking? He'd been annoyed at having to spend the twenty minutes of break time with the boy. Normally, it wouldn't have bothered him, but yesterday, Robert was behind in preparing for a meeting with the academy management and stress had got the better of him. It hadn't been a hard swipe, just a tap, really. He hadn't thought Kayden was the sort of child to whinge to his parents, who thought nothing of giving him the odd slap themselves. The more Robert thought about it, the more the whole thing made his blood boil; that such a small thing should ruin what had been a solid, successful career since he had been made head teacher three years earlier.

In that moment, as Donald spoke, Robert's world had collapsed, the following Ofsted inspection a blur in which he had played no part. And now, here he was, waiting for the results of an enquiry, washed up with the flotsam and jetsam of scandal regardless of the outcome. Nicola had left, although Robert suspected that this was the excuse she had long been looking for. The house was up for sale and an uncertain future awaited him.

What happened to those marooned on the Beach of Disgrace? Robert imagined that many took to any substance or activity that would blot out the reality. They didn't care what people thought anymore; they had nothing to lose. Others took the short cut to oblivion by taking their own lives. But...maybe there were a few who eventually got the energy from somewhere to crawl up the beach and somehow find a way back.

Robert still had a lot of living to do, hadn't he? And he was blown if he was going to let the likes of Kayden Black ruin his life. There had to be a way forward, on a different path; there had to be a way. He stood up and strode into the no-longer shared study, sat at his desk and pulled the lap-top towards him.

A glance out of the window at the suburban, day-time quiet of Water Lane and Robert was away. Down the lane, along the ring-road, past the industrial estate and onto the motorway...to where?

Flexing his hands and stretching his arms, Robert readied himself for action. A burst of rapid typing revealed a wide selection of campervans.

After a few YouTube tutorials and advice from Derek next door, a seasoned campervanner and cyclist, Robert was ready. Having realised there was very little in the house of any real significance, he was travelling light, an excitement he hadn't felt since childhood bubbling in his stomach. He hadn't ridden a bike for thirty years and admired it, secure in its bike rack on the back of the van. Having given in his notice, there was nothing to hold him back. Was it really possible to start life all over again at forty-five?

There was no plan beyond heading for the motorway.

North or south? South - somewhere unfamiliar.

Robert found chugging aimlessly along the inside lane in the campervan strangely soporific and whole sections of the journey seemed to pass without registering in his memory. When it got to around 5.30, however, he thought it was time to find a camp site. Having tried several he found that campervanning was everybody's new, favourite pastime, as they were all full. Just as the first niggle of worry was starting to worm its way into his thoughts, he found the Windmill Campsite. It had vacancies but no windmill.

Having wisely brought a few provisions to tide himself over the first few days, Robert made beans on toast, and, as the sun was shining, he set his table and chair up outside, under the awning. It was the best beans on toast ever, swilled down with a fairly expensive Chardonnay. Robert sat back and sighed in contentment, closing his eyes and enjoying the unconditional warmth of the sun. The sun didn't always just shine on the righteous, he thought.

'A bit extravagant. A whole bottle of that just for one?'

Robert jumped, his glasses falling onto the table. Once they were back in place, a tall, elderly woman came into focus.

'Sorry?'

'I just said that it seems a bit extravagant - a whole bottle of that for one person.' She gestured at the half-empty bottle.

Robert had planned on having the other half the following night, but now it seemed rude not to share it. 'Take a seat and help me finish it,' he said gallantly, and having retrieved a second chair from the campervan and seated himself opposite his tall, elegant visitor.

'Thank you...er'

'Robert. You're welcome...'

'Evelyn.' Evelyn smiled and leant forward to shake his hand.

Formalities over, they sat in silence enjoying the wine. It tasted better when shared, Robert decided.

'Are you here for long?'

'I don't know. To be honest, I'm making this journey up as I go along.'

'Good for you. I hate planned trips. That's the great thing about this.' Evelyn gestured around the campsite.

'Which is yours?' Robert was uncertain about campsite etiquette.

'Oh I don't have one.'

'Oh...?' the unspoken question hovered between them.

Evelyn laughed and replaced her glass on the table. 'That always gets everybody. I'm the owner and I live over there.' She tilted her head towards the entrance building. 'Above the office.'

'Oh.'

'But don't get me wrong, I've done my time in tents, caravans and campervans, but there comes a time when it's best to hang up one's tow bar gracefully.'

'Shall we finish this up?' Robert poured the rest of the wine.

'You're just the kind of person I set this site up for. I never take advance bookings, so all the wanderers end up here.'

Evelyn leant back, cradling the glass in her hands. 'So what are you running away from?'

'Sorry?' Robert, affronted at this personal question from someone he had only just met, put on his headteacher's voice. 'I don't think that's—'

'Oh but it is, Robert, because you are on my campsite, so I get to ask the questions.'

By the time darkness had fallen, Robert had told his story, leaving nothing out, not even the growing indignation he felt about how he had been treated by Kayden, the Blacks, Donald and the board of governors, Ofsted, Nicola... the list was extensive.

'That's a lot of people who seem to have it in for you, Robert,' observed Evelyn, a silhouette in the darkness.

'Absolutely,' he returned, pleased that someone at last understood how badly he'd been treated.

'But... I can't help thinking that maybe those people have a reason to be unhappy with you, too. I don't pretend to know how schools - or marriages - work. I've avoided both. But I do know a lot about people.'

Robert's smug pleasure evaporated in a moment. 'I don't know what you mean,' he said standing abruptly, almost tipping the flimsy table over.

'I've been where you are. I know that feeling of uselessness and being left behind.' Evelyn was standing now, an urgency in her voice. 'And I can tell you that until you revisit that disgrace with an open heart, you won't find the path off the beach.'

Robert froze half-folded table in his hand. 'How do you...?'

‘...Know about the Beach of Disgrace? Everyone who has been there recognises it. Thanks for the wine, Robert.’

Open-mouthed, he watched her outline vanish into the darkness.

A long, restless night of reckoning followed. Not what Robert had expected for his first night in the campervan – the peaceful sleep of the free. Because he wasn’t free, was he? Evelyn was right.

The following morning saw him at the outside table writing several emails. He apologised to the Blacks, Donald and the Board of Governors for letting them down and betraying their trust in him. There was no excuse for his behaviour – he understood that now.

Writing to Nicola took more thought. Where he had gone wrong in their marriage wasn’t as clear cut. In the end, he wished her luck in her new life and told her to keep whatever she needed from the wreckage of their shared life together.

He took the laptop over to the office intending to connect to the wi-fi, expecting to see Evelyn somewhere around. He wanted to thank her for making him see things differently.

Eventually after much ringing of the bell on the counter a surly girl appeared, phone in hand. ‘Yeah?’

‘Can I have the wi-fi code? I need to send some emails.’

The girl nodded her head towards a notice on the wall, where, along with various campsite information was the password, printed in very small type at the bottom of the list. Internet usage was obviously not encouraged among the campers.

‘I wonder if I could speak to Evelyn.’

‘Evelyn who?’ The girl shifted the gum to the other side of her mouth, her eyes still fixed on her phone.

‘Evelyn, the owner of the site.’ Robert was aware of the impatience in his voice – the same impatience that had been there in school when a child or member of staff had not agreed with him or hadn’t understood what was required. He felt ashamed and was just starting to imagine how he had made those in his power feel.

‘There’s no Evelyn here. My dad owns the site.’ She jerked her head towards the door where a large, thickset man was approaching.

‘Excuse me. I need to speak to Evelyn – I know she’s the owner of the site in spite of what this girl says.’

‘You be careful how you talk about my daughter.’ Robert suddenly felt at a disadvantage, not being on his own territory – not being the one who called the shots.

‘Tell her, Dad. There – is – no – Evelyn.’ She enunciated each word with venom.

‘No Evelyn,’ the big man concurred. ‘Are you ready to settle up? Maybe it’s time you moved on.’

Robert’s campervanning took him to Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, even the outer Hebrides. He found that the UK was a place of surprising beauty and variety. On cycle rides he revelled in the summits of hills and even mountains, descended into valleys and followed the paths of rivers, he strode across moorland, and visited many cliffs and beaches along the way. His journey was a thoughtful one, and as he travelled the tumour of self-pity shrank, along with its inevitable companion, anger. In its place appeared small shoots of empathy and kindness. And Robert found that he could cope with not being in charge.

At the end of the year, although there was much journeying still to come, Robert could see a path leading off the Beach of Disgrace. A path that would allow him to lift his head up again, and to grow. And he would always be grateful to his saviour, Evelyn – whoever she was.