

MIKE WATSON

The Scent Of The Ocean

Every morning at 7.30 she walked down the slipway and across the beach to the small stone jetty always stopping about midway to raise her head and gaze, for a few minutes, at the horizon.

As I watched her from my window over looking the bay, I wondered who she was. Why did she come each day at exactly the same time? Always alone. Walking across the beach. Pausing. Staring out to sea. It all seemed so scripted and choreographed....a performance.

My curiosity got the better of me and so the following morning I was waiting on the beach ten minutes before she normally arrived. The sea was calm, hardly breathing, and limp waves collapsed on the shore with a tired cry. Selecting a handful of smooth flat stones I began skimming them across the surface of the water. As I crouched to collect more stones I noticed her approaching down the slipway.

She was wearing her usual blue jeans and green pullover. She began her walk across the beach but she stopped a few metres before she reached me. There was a puzzled look on her face....apprehensive and confused. She tilted her head to one side as if somebody was whispering to her.

I was the only other person on the beach. Perhaps she saw me as a threat or even as an intruder to her privacy.

“Good morning, “ I called cheerfully, “beautiful day.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she continued with her walk keeping her attention firmly fixed on the sand. Skimming another stone, I declared,

“I think four is my record this morning. As a child I could do at least ten every single time.” She continued walking. I lowered my voice,

“Mind you, I was never very good at maths. Maybe it wasn’t ten after all.”

Just before she reached the small stone jetty on the other side of the bay she turned to face the ocean and raised her head and became statue still gazing at the horizon.

What an idiot, I thought, all that rubbish about skimming stones. Skimming stones! I bet she thinks you’re the local idiot. Some weirdo with arrested development playing kid’s games. Maybe she didn’t hear me. Perhaps she’s foreign.

She was returning along the beach. Self consciously, I skimmed stones.

“When I was a child,” she said as she passed behind me, “my record was fifteen. Mind you, I always did have a vivid imagination.”

And before I could think of anything to say, she had walked up the slipway and disappeared.

I smiled feeling pleased with myself. I had met this “mysterious” lady....even had a conversation with her....well, of sorts. I crouched down and flung the last stone....twelve skims....yeah!

There was a storm that night. Dramatic. Theatrical. Thunder, lightning and a howling wind. My cottage rattled and trembled and just after midnight the high tide unleashed a charge of explosive waves that kept me awake for hours.

By dawn the storm had rumbled off into the next county and left behind blue skies, warm air and an atmosphere of calm and quiet as if somebody noisy had just left the room.

The evidence of the storm was obvious. The ocean had emptied its cupboard onto the beach. Bundles of seaweed, damp and dark. Drift wood, crates, cans, plastic bottles, polystyrene, rope, fish heads, feathers and dead crabs.

I was so busy exploring the debris; I didn't notice her come down the slipway or even standing behind me until she spoke.

“Quite a storm last night but at least the air's fresher.” She breathed in deeply. “It's cleaner and newer. All the heat and staleness of the past few days has been swept away.”

She was right. There was a shine to the morning. A brand new day. All polished and sparkling. I gestured to the heaps of rubbish left behind on the beach by the tide.

“It always makes me wonder,” I said, “where....” But she had walked off towards the stone jetty and then, as always, turned to face the ocean

I followed her gaze. Gannets were diving for sprats in the blue swell and from the harbour beyond the jetty came a small yacht. I could hear the rigging singing as the boat glided across the bay and the triangular white sails snapped and flapped like reluctant applause.

I knew she noticed neither birds nor boat. She was so still, almost in a trance-like state. Her gaze so fixed she could have been a figure standing on the rim of the world. And then, as usual, she seemed to remember where she was and began her return journey across the beach.

“I love the smell of fresh seaweed,” she said as she walked by, “salty, damp, rooty.... It's like a harvest from the sea.” She made her way up the slipway and disappeared.

The rest of the day I spent, in my office at home, reorganising files on the computer and preparing reports for business meetings. It took a great deal of effort to focus because my thoughts kept straying back to the girl on the beach. Girl on the beach? Lady on the sand?

I didn't know her name or where she came from. I still hadn't figured out the reason for her regular walks along the small bay. Why did she follow the same routine? Taking the same track across the sand....at the same pace. The same steady but unhurried pace. And then stopping....facing the sea....never any variation or deviation. It was almost like she had to do it. A commitment? A promise? A promise to whom? A commitment to herself?

Throughout that day, with my concentration wandering all over the place, I frequently found myself staring at the blank wall above my computer. What age was she? Younger than me certainly but only by a few years....late thirties....early forties. Was she married? Did she wear a wedding ring? What colour were her eyes? I didn't know because I'd never been close enough but I guess they were blue to match her fair hair.

The next morning I stood at the window and looked out at the small bay. A calm flat sea. Seagulls. Red marker buoys warning of hidden rocks. A distant freighter edging along the horizon.

Tractor cleaners must have already been on the beach because rubbish from yesterday's storms had been shoved into piles ready to be removed. I admit I felt quite excited. In a few minutes I would be on the beach. No need for excuses like skimming stones or beach combing because I felt my presence there was becoming part of this early morning routine. I felt at ease at the prospect of greeting "the mysterious lady" and eager to discover more about her.

Just as I was going to leave, the telephone rang. An early morning call was unusual and, thinking it could be urgent, I picked up the phone. As it turned out, it was nothing more serious than a friend arranging a sea fishing trip and wanting to know when I'd be available.

Glancing at the clock I noticed that it was already 7.30 so I took my diary and phone to a chair near the window and began to sort out a few dates but all the time keeping an eye on the beach.

She appeared on the slipway dressed as usual in jeans and pullover....her hair aflame in the morning light. Listening on the phone to my friend checking dates, I watched her begin her walk. Her pace slow and steady....following the route she always took just above the tide line....the same area that now had various piles of rubbish dumped there by the tractor cleaners. The piles were obvious by their size yet she suddenly stumbled against one, tripped and collapsed onto the sand.

Hastily saying goodbye to my friend, I dropped the phone and ran from my cottage to the beach and, by the time I'd reached her, she'd regained her self-composure and was dusting the sand from her clothes.

"Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?"

She gave a gasp, startled to discover somebody next to her. Turning her back to me, she continued patting off the sand.

“It’s the man who skims stones isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, pleased she’d remembered me.

“And the same man who was picking through the driftwood yesterday?”

There was a slight hint of accusation in her voice and I was starting to feel a bit like a stalker.

“Yes, me again. Still, now they’ve piled it all together there’s not much....”

“Oh. Is that what they’ve done. No wonder I tripped.” She gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Didn’t see them.”

She continued with her walk with that slow measured pace. I called after her.

“Do you mind if I walk along with you?”

“That would be nice,” she replied.

I caught up with her just as turned and faced the ocean. I stood next to her. She raised her head and stared at the horizon. I could hear her breath being taken in so deeply and then exhaled in an almost sensual sigh.

“Not many yachts out today,” I said attempting to initiate a conversation. There was no reply. “Perhaps not enough breeze,” I continued, “ might pick up later this afternoon though.”

Her pose was so serene I felt inane babbling on about sailing conditions. I kept quiet.

The shushing spill of the gentle tide. Mewling cries of seabirds. Her steady deep breathing.

“Can you feel it?” she whispered. “The being here. Softness beneath your feet. The breeze on your skin and that scent....the scent of the ocean....it’s perfect....and constant.”

“It’s a lovely place,” I said quietly not wishing to disturb the atmosphere of peace.

“It hasn’t changed,” she said. “It will always be like this. I played here as a child. Running on the beach, flying kites, laughing, sand castles and moats, and....skimming stones.”

She folded her arms and turned to face me. Her eyes were not blue like I’d imagined but a pale freckled brown just like the sand beneath our feet.

“I know this place so well. It’s perfect and constant. I know the distance from the slipway to the stone jetty. 317 paces one way. 317 paces back. They wait for me on top of the slipway. They can park the car there and keep an eye on

me....just in case. They worry you know. They shouldn't. I have the scent of the ocean on one side of me and the noise of traffic from the road on the other side. It's safe to walk here....except....”

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed,

“except when piles of rubbish appear overnight. And today you were here to help me.”

She tilted her head to one side and focused beyond my shoulders.

“I wonder,” she said smiling. “Do you look as kind as you sound?” Slowly, she reached up and touched my face.

***Mike Watson** from Darlington, is retired from teaching and spends his time reading, writing and playing classical guitar. He writes articles for magazines and has won several short story competitions. His first book, written for children, entitled *Earth Strider*, will be published in October 2013.*