

Devil's Claw Bay

Monday 10th January 2022 – 1.50 am.

Voices drummed through the darkness, a mash of both male and female. The fine hairs on the back of my neck prickled and my heart went from idle to overload in an instant.

I shook Henry's shoulder. 'Listen.'

My husband snorted awake. 'What the...?' He reached for the bedside lamp but I clamped my hand on his arm before he could turn it on. His face was a lighter blur in the darkness and I imagined his green eyes narrowing.

I left the warmth of the bed, tip toeing towards the window. Through a gap in the drapes, I peered out. The moon was veiled but the glow of a yellowy street lamp lit the cobbles below. A group of cloaked people had gathered. Indistinguishable in the darkness, the hooded figures stood in a cluster to my right.

They continued to repeat words in a monotonous thud but the double glazing blunted their speech, preventing me from picking out the meaning. There were maybe twenty people down there, all turned towards someone or something at the centre of their group. The chill January air sent a shiver through me. *Why weren't our neighbours out on the street complaining? Why weren't there lights on in the surrounding terraces?*

Henry got out of bed. His size twelves made the boards creak as he crossed the plush carpet and came to stand behind me. 'I know we're in the depths of the North but this is ... weird. It looks Pagan, like a winter version of Wicker Man.'

I thought of the film and the hapless main character – a policeman lured to a remote Scottish isle to become a sacrifice to some heathen god. Had we been enticed to this village

by an unknown hand and was a dark fate awaiting us too? Anxiety ballooned in my chest, although, there had to be a simple explanation for what was going on. *Maybe a film crew had taken over the streets?* But no cameras or bright lights were visible. Inhaling deeply, my slow exhale fogged the glass in the cold, inhospitable air. I glanced at the alarm clock – two am.

‘I’ll check Mum.’ I left Henry at the window, still staring down at the chanting mob, and hurried to the room next door. My mother’s covers were thrown back and the bed was empty. ‘She’s gone,’ I shouted. Leaving the room, I flung open the other two bedroom doors and that of the bathroom – all empty.

Henry joined me, looking bemused.

‘She’s gone,’ I said again. I hurtled down the stairs and Henry thudded after me. In the kitchen, I turned the downlighters from low to high but Mum wasn’t in the room. The bolt was still drawn on the back door. I turned the brass knob to what had once been a second reception room and flooded it with light. The area had been converted into a bedroom, complete with ensuite. Empty. Finally, I pushed open the living room door. A chill breeze lifted my tangled, dark hair. The front door was wide open.

‘Holy crap, Henry. You said you’d locked up.’

‘I did. I bolted the front and back.’

Not bothering to respond, I stuck my feet into my trainers and threw my raincoat over my pyjamas before darting outside. My pulse throbbed in my throat as the wind slung a vicious blast of salt air at me. The ocean roared but the mob was louder. Their words no longer muffled.

‘First-born killer,’ they repeated, and a chill colder than the elements cut into me.

My mother was somewhere in the freezing night and these strange folks might have seen her. I moved toward the gathering, though my gut warned caution. Cobbles glinted with

frost as my feet iced perilously over them. My heart thundered as I came to a halt behind several cloaked forms.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, in a high-pitched tone designed to cut above the moronic chanting.

‘First-born killer,’ they chorused, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

Adrenaline kicked in, and I muscled my way into the throng. A short, slight woman glared up at me. I caught a savageness in her dark irises, and my breath stuttered. She returned her attention to the centre of the collective and I did the same. I blinked several times as my mind took in the scene. At the core of this strange group was a shrunken figure dressed only in a white nightgown. The woman’s confused eyes darted among the surrounding people before locking onto my own stunned gaze.

‘Ruth,’ she shouted, though that wasn’t my name.

‘Mum,’ I said, pushing through the crowd and reaching out, grabbing her frail hand. Her fingers were freezing and her bare feet must have been like ice blocks. I pulled her to me. The chanting stopped and the eyes of the sinister crowd were on us.

Henry’s voice. ‘What’s going on? Why are you terrifying a poor old lady?’ He rested a protective hand on my shoulder.

A tall, stooped man motioned for the group to disperse and they receded like a black tide, disappearing into the darkness. The figure stepped towards the three of us and my spine stiffened. His face was concealed by both his hood and shadow but the moon-shaped, smooth edge of his pale jaw was exposed. He appeared old as his lanky frame bent forward.

‘Agnes Blythe isn’t welcome here. Her kind are damned. You have until dark falls on the Sabbath to leave this village,’ he said in a croaky whisper.

‘We’ll do no such thing,’ Henry said.

‘You shouldn’t have brought her back. She’s evil and we don’t forget those that sin.’

‘What are you talking about, man? She’s just a sick old lady.’ Henry’s chest puffed out and the heat of his anger was palpable. My husband wasn’t easily riled but this situation was enough to infuriate a Quaker.

‘There’ll be no peace for Agnes Blythe whether she lives or dies. The Devil always finds his own,’ the stranger said.

My mother broke free and raised her fist. ‘Gerald Birk, if I’m to rot in Hell, then you surely will too.’

My hand flew to my mouth. I hadn’t heard my mother utter a coherent sentence in months, yet here she was remonstrating with her tormentor.

The four of us stood for a moment like statues as something akin to shock descended on me at least. Then the cloaked man slapped my mother’s face. Henry lunged at him but her assailant was too quick, retreating at speed down a nearby alley. He was obviously younger and fitter than he appeared. After a few more stunned seconds, Henry gave chase.

‘That’s it, scarper as usual,’ my mother said, as they both vanished.

‘Henry, be careful,’ I called out, wondering what my husband intended to do if he caught the strange fellow – citizen’s arrest? My arm encompassed my mum’s narrow shoulders and tightened around them. Alone in the street, the blackened eyes of the surrounding windows stared at us and I sensed the scrutiny of unseen watchers. I guided Mum across the sloping cobbles, somewhere below the sea continued to crash against the land.

Inside the cottage, I closed the door before sitting Mum beside the pine kitchen table. I slid her sheepskin slippers onto her feet and rubbed some warmth back into her bony hands. Her cheek was red and I feared an almighty bruise would bloom overnight.

First-born killer – at least I knew that wasn't true as I was my mother's firstborn. *But why were they chanting such a thing? And what sort of man slaps an old lady? And how did he know Mum's name?* The questions were whirling in my head when my mother's voice interrupted them.

'You shouldn't have brought me back. I'll burn in their fires or drown in their waters.'

'Mum, you're scaring me.' I glanced in the direction of the front door, hoping Henry would return but the house was empty apart from the two of us.

'The dark moon is rising and the black tide is coming.'

'Mum, you're making no sense.'

She looked into my eyes. 'Ruth, you're not safe here.' Then her face crumpled into confusion. Her mouth opened but nothing came out. She was once again the dementia inflicted woman she'd been since her diagnosis some four years ago. I draped a wool blanket around her shoulders. I had no idea how to turn the heating on and the air inside was almost as cold as its external counterpart. I made sweet tea, holding the cup to her trembling lips. She took a few sips but then shook her head. I gulped the rest down, though I yearned for something much stronger.

After guiding her back upstairs, I settled her in bed. Leaving the night lamp on, I walked softly to the door but she called out before I reached it.

'Ruth, don't leave me!'

I turned around. She was sitting up. The lamp partially lit her skeletal features in an unkind and rather ghoulish way. Her watery, blue eyes were wide but there was no recognition within them. I'd become a stranger, sometimes called Ruth or sometimes called Jenny, my sister's name, but rarely called by my own.

'It's me, Mum – Lydia.'

Her gaze was unwavering but vacant.

'Everything's fine. We're in Helsham, at your old house. The place where you grew up.' I moved slowly towards her again and perched on the side of the bed. She grabbed my hand with a force I was unaware she still possessed and my heart leapt. Her face scrunched as a tear slid down her hollow cheek. Ten years ago, on her seventieth birthday, her midnight blue eyes had sparkled with life and she'd looked at least a decade younger – now she looked a couple of decades older.

My throat constricted and my voice cracked. 'Everything's fine, Mum.' I released myself from her grip and gently pushed her shoulders back until her head once again rested on the pillows. She closed her eyes and gave a little groan – a pitiful sound which made my vision blur. I tried to keep it together and swallow my sorrow. Having to watch your once ferocious mother wither and die, was a sight no child, no matter their age, should have to witness.

'Oh, Mum,' I said, stroking her wrinkled brow and patting down her white hair which was intermingled with a few dark patches – a feeble reminder of her once glossy, black crown. She'd always taken such pride in her appearance, if she could see herself now she'd die of shame. Tomorrow, I would sort the whiskers protruding from her chin and buy some hair dye. The disease was washing away her dignity as well as draining her of colour.

‘It’s okay,’ I said, though I knew it wasn’t. *How long was she going to be trapped in this nightmare? A year maybe. What was I going to do without her?* Although I knew, I’d already lost her years ago when my face became a tangled cacophony of many others.

‘Ruth,’ she whispered. Her eyes brimmed with tears, making her blink. ‘I’m sorry.’

I had no idea who this Ruth person was or why she was sorry but I nodded and smiled. Her lids closed fully and her breathing deepened. I tiptoed out of the room and waited a few minutes. All was quiet.

Downstairs, I turned the lounge light off and went to the window. My warm breath still visible in the cold. Our Vauxhall sat outside, across from it was an Escort and a white van which suggested the facing homes weren’t as deserted as they appeared. My vision strained looking for Henry’s tall, robust frame but the street was deserted. The wind howled and cried in the frozen air.

Hurry home, Henry. This place felt like we were at the end of the earth, cut off from civilisation and at the mercy of the elements as well as a violent, intimidatory mob. It was Lancashire, I told myself, a county in England, not some savage land.

I was just about to call the police when the front door flew open. I cried with relief as Henry walked in.

‘Come on now, don’t get yourself all worked up. Just a bunch of idiots.’ He held me while I sobbed. It had been a long time since I’d been in his embrace and the intimacy, although comforting, was somewhat disconcerting. His arms encircled me like a fortress and I longed for our relationship to be back to what it once was.

‘I don’t like it here. We should never have agreed to come.’

‘A little late for regrets,’ he said.

I looked down at the hard polished boards which ran through the ground floor and into the lounge where we stood. It had been me who'd persuaded Henry to leave behind our home in Portsmouth. He was right, we had to make a go of it.

We sat at the kitchen table drinking more tea as Henry described his pursuit. He'd followed the cloaked man through a graveyard and into the countryside beyond. The stranger had been surprisingly swift and Henry had lost him on the cliff tops. He described how the winter sea had lashed at the exposed rock making it hard to hear as well as focus. He imagined the scenery would be spectacular during the day but it was treacherous in the dark.

I'd seen images of the steep cliffs and the horseshoe, sandy beach, beneath them – Devil's Claw Bay. The beauty spot had apparently been given its name because the locals had reneged on a promised sacrifice to the Devil many centuries ago. Satan had sent a huge raven to seek revenge. The bird's claw-shaped talons wrenched a first-born girl from the arms of her mother and the Devil's servant flew over the cliffs, intending to drop the child into the jaws of the hungry ocean. However, the infant clung to life and wouldn't release her grip. Desperate to carry out its master's bidding, the raven circled the sea for hours. Eventually, the bird gnawed off its great claw and the baby fell. It was said she'd hollered louder than a colony of screeching gulls before disappearing but her cry could still be heard on the coastal winds. Following the child's death, the sun was eclipsed and the tide turned black as the water and sky merged. The next day the huge claw supposedly washed up and formed the half-moon shape of the Bay. A sinister reminder to keep your word, to the Devil at least.

The black tide is coming – was my mother referring to the old folklore? Did she think the Devil was coming for us? Nonsense of course but, after tonight's strange episode, it was easy to imagine the locals buying into myths from the past. Maybe Henry was right and tonight's gathering had been part of some ceremony and my mother had wandered into it,

innocently. Though that might be true, it didn't explain the stranger's accusations, his knowledge of my family or why he'd slapped an old lady.

I searched my phone for information on the Bay. A picture came up of the beach at night. The curved shore was filled with cloaked people, holding lanterns. I showed the image to Henry and we read the words beneath. The ceremony was called The Black Tide Gathering and though there was no precise date given, it apparently took place in January. During the ritual, the locals threw offerings in the sea to appease the Devil but they were thankfully just fruit and veg. I thought it strange that I'd imagined such a tide receding as tonight's gathering broke up. Maybe my psyche was more attuned to this place than I realised?

Ridiculous, I told myself. This coastline was as foreign and unknown to me as the folks that inhabited it.

'So I was right,' Henry said. 'Just some weird local ceremony.'

My husband liked nothing more than being right. He was generally always right, or so he thought.

We finished our tea and decided to leave calling the police until morning. It was doubtful they would do anything worthwhile in the middle of the night. Plus, neither of us could make any sense of what had happened and we were both exhausted. It had been a long drive to this remote corner and my mother had spent most of the journey grabbing at the door handle, trying to jump out – thank goodness for central locking. And though my sister had furnished the house, we'd still had to lug all our clothes and personal possessions here. Henry bolted and locked the doors, the keys jingling in his hand as we made our way upstairs.

I once again got into bed and tried to sleep. Henry and I both vigilantly keeping to our own sides of the mattress and lost in our respective worlds. In the darkness, whispers I

couldn't quite hear filled my head and presences I couldn't quite see, flittered across the room. Outside the wind continued to moan and periodically battered the window. I thought of the drowned child, was it her voice the storm carried? I wasn't one for the supernatural but this place had a disquieting energy. It was as if the atmosphere carried a weight that pressed down on me, as if something more than ice ran through the air. Of course I was being silly, fanciful; I was just over-tired. But then I replayed the stooped man's words – *You have until dark falls on the Sabbath to leave this village*. What would happen if we remained? Would some giant raven descend on us and carry us away? Drowning us in the treacherous tides that resided along this picturesque but deadly coastline. The cottage was quiet, refusing to answer my questions, though I could sense its unease as I stared up at its ancient beams.