

Véronique Olmi

An extract from "Beside the Sea"

It was still raining outside, the same icy monotonous rain, this town had no imagination, it could only do rain. Stan said he knew the way back to the hotel, I think he was lying because we went past the post office three times, but I didn't say anything because I was too tired, more wrung out than after a sleepless night and, by going round in circles, we eventually found our hotel, our brown hotel.

It felt welcoming to me, it did, a bolthole, a burrow in this strange place, but on the way up the stairs Kevin said he wanted the seashell to give to Marie-Hélène, as if we could dig one up now from the lino, as if we could go back to that angry beach. He said he wanted it, he cried for it like he would have cried for Marie-Hélène, and Stan let go of his hand sharply. The littl'un was surprised and he gave him a kick on the shin before running off crying. Be quiet! Just shut up! I said, do you want to draw attention to us? Why was I so frightened? Apart from the person in the bathroom, you couldn't tell there was anyone in the hotel and, anyway, I didn't give a stuff about invisible neighbours, what frightened me wasn't someone hearing my two kids laying into each other, no, what frightened me was this violence they'd kept in check and couldn't hold back any more. They settled it by pulling faces at each other, I could tell they really wanted to fight, to yell at each other, incredible how you can go from love to hate, there's never any warning, there's like an irritation, a fury that builds up and you don't really know who or what it's aimed at, sometimes I wish I could scream, to find who it is I've got it in for, but there are no limits and every-thing's against me.

I was shattered, I hurt all over and I wanted to go to bed, I'd seen too much already. I was shattered but I was actually happy we had to climb all that way, right to the sixth floor, we were getting away from the mud, the sea, the cafés, the roads without pavements. I could have climbed even higher and even faster.

When we reached our room my hand shook with impatience as I opened the door, that bed was a miracle on earth, I took off my jacket and my muddy shoes and threw myself onto it. I got under the sheets and told the kids, I don't want to hear another word, and I closed my eyes, I wanted to get right inside myself, where nothing more could reach me. The kids are used to it. I often sleep all day on a Sunday. They sort themselves out. They poke about in the fridge, watch TV, and when it's fine they go out to play. But in that room there was

nothing to do, nowhere to put yourself, so they played with the coins. I could hear them and then, pretty soon, it worked, at last, at last, I went.

I left everything, left that town and myself along with it: my body was weightless, painless, I sank into something soft and I shed my fear and anger, and my shame too. I went to a world where there's a place kept for me. Not asleep and not awake, I'm a feather. Not asleep and not awake, but I come undone, I sprawl out like a cotton reel unwinding. Why did I topple over the edge then? Why did I start to dream?

I dreamt of the sea, I remember, of Stan running towards the sea, into the sea, but not drowning, and me with no words left to call him back... Where was Kevin? I don't know, I could feel him but not see him, it was like the sea was only there for Stan and the two of them understood each other so well that it couldn't hurt him. When we understand them, things are good to us, they're on our side, as soon as there's any confusion, I've noticed, as soon as we don't understand them, things hurt us. I kept looking out for Stan, trying to spot him way out to sea, wanting him so badly but unable to speak, and sleep was no longer a refuge, just a place. A place where anything can happen, anything can pounce on you, and you go down, you go down somewhere deep, no one to catch you, you just keep falling. I went there. Crushed. Punished. Worn down.

When I woke up it was almost dark in the room, the sky was full of black clouds, the weather had taken a turn for the worse. I had four boys: the ones in my sleep and the ones in the room, beside me. The four of them didn't know each other, I was the only one who got them confused, who knew about getting from one world to the other, and the pain that always lurked in between.

The boys had stopped playing and were lying on the bed: Kevin sucking his make-do noonoo and winding a lock of hair round his finger, and Stan watching me, I think. He smiled at me, he never resents me for sleeping, he knows I'm better after, when I've had a chance to "recharge the batteries", as I call it. I didn't tell him a nightmare had just cut me right to the quick, I'd rather believe I was fine, too, I'd had a good nap, we agreed on that. Maybe it's the tiredness that's made me lose touch with everyone else. I couldn't spend a full day on my feet, doing this and that, being friendly, polite and happy, no, I wouldn't make it through a whole day with my eyes open. Shame sleep has two sides to it: it's a way of forgetting but also a threat. No way of knowing in advance which side you're going to fall on. I believe in it every time, I always hope it's not going to be such a struggle as being awake, I'm often wrong.

The insomnia got worse when Stan was born. I started listening out for him: crying, breathing, coughing. I thought I had to stand guard, that if I went to sleep he'd play a nasty trick on me, I know it happens, children dying, all alone, in their cots. It was the same with Kevin, of course, and now that they're both bigger I still keep watch, sometimes I tell myself the whole city needs guarding, that there has to be a light on somewhere. Apparently there are these priests, no, not priests, monks. Apparently there are these monks who pray for the sorrows of the world, day and night, never stopping, taking it in shifts so there's never a break. Me, I don't know how to pray. I'd rather not believe in God, it's too frightening and, anyway, how can I understand God when I don't understand his representative, the Pope, that rich, crumbly old man? God must be like a bunch of popes put together, thousands of popes in one single person, terrifyingly powerful... yes, but knowing there are these monks thinking of me night and day, that's reassuring.

Kevin's hungry, Stan said. I'll go down and buy some biscuits, put the coins back in the tea tin, I told him. Are you going to pay with those little coins? He was worried, you'd have thought I was going to rob a bank. I'm not going to hang on to my savings, Stan, I put them aside for this trip, I've got to spend them. He put the money back in the tin, judging by the noise it made you'd have thought there was a lot of it, but it was dead money, money no one trusted, I'd grasped that.

Kevin was sucking on his noono more and more quickly, his eyes closing, opening, closing again, he was falling asleep, he felt safe. Keep an eye on your brother, Stan, I said... It was so obvious Stan would keep an eye on the litt'un, I don't know why I needed to say it, some sentences are just like that. Be careful when you cross the road, Don't talk to strangers, Keep an eye on your brother, such simple sentences, they belong to everyone and we say them all the time so they never go out of circulation. Our parents used to say them. And our parents' parents. They're sacred, compulsory, make you feel alive.

I put my sodden jacket and muddy shoes back on, and left the two of them on their own.

As I went down the stairs I realized I was leaving them in another world, a bubble about to burst. The further down I went, the closer I got to hell. The hell of other people. Of course, I have to go there every now and then, there are things I need to get. It must be like this in war: breaking cover, risking your life to survive. Kevin was hungry. And Stan, too, I was sure he was. Not me. I was poisoned, full of bile and sour saliva, the sea salt had got into my mouth.

I went down those stairs, and the mist gathered a little closer round me with each floor, I missed steps, thinking they were further down than they were, falling slightly each time, like air pockets in the middle of a dream. With all that missing steps and seeing them too close or too far, my head started spinning, I clung to the banister, I could feel myself lurching to one side, someone must be pushing me from behind, I was sure they were. I stopped on one floor, I don't remember which, they were all the same – brown, lit only by the neon of the fire exit signs, maybe that's what was making me ill, all those endless floors, it drove me mad. My head was throbbing like the blood couldn't wait to get out, I was out of breath. I'm used to that. It's not the tiredness, it's the panic. I've told them about it at the health centre. I'm not the only one, it does happen to people. You've got to reason with yourself. That's what they say. In fact, all their sentences start like that: You've got to. It sounded to me like: You forgot to, you forgot to, you forgot to. Right! I couldn't reason with myself, so the only way to deal with it was to piss off out of there as fast as possible and I hurtled down the stairs, with my fears chasing after me. Of course I tripped and twisted my wrist clinging on to the banister, I was like a ball thrown down from one of the upper floors, I bounced and I bumped but all the same... I reached the bottom.

A feeling of having come a long, long way, my kids were far away from me now, a whole journey lay between us. There was a leatherette armchair in the foyer, and I slumped down into it. I should have felt relieved, proud of myself, proud of winning that round, but I felt worse by the minute. It must have shown. A man came over, probably the hotel manager, I didn't see him coming, he startled me. I couldn't actually make him out very well, I was dazzled, like when the sun's too bright, but the sun had abandoned that town long ago.

My heart felt all heavy and full, sort of thick, every beat hurt, it was full of blood, keeping hold of it and not letting it out any more, my hands and mouth started tingling, the manager seemed to be talking to me, I could hear but it sounded so far away, there were tons of cotton wool between us, it absorbed everything, every word and even the air, I was short of air, I hadn't brought my pills.

I had to hang on to something, an idea, an image, something to get me out of this, I was a wonky machine, jumping in every direction, little twitches, nerves waking up with a jolt around my eyes, my hands, my lips, they moved on their own, twisting for no reason, turning inwards and biting themselves all on their own, the man shook my shoulder and then it came. In fits and starts. A bit at a time. But it came. I honestly believe that's what saved me. Tears, moaning, more tears, little yelps, I couldn't do anything to stop all that. The manager backed

away quickly and left, maybe he was frightened I'd splatter him. Well, fine. I'd rather be left in peace, unhappiness is never a pretty sight.

I let my rickety machine run its course and, gradually, everything went back in to place. I was spent, I'd been beaten and battered every which way. I stayed in that chair for a while, to recover: my heart, my nerves, my muscles, it all had to start up again gently, without bumping into anything, without going mad, calmly, and back to normal. A huge sigh came out of my chest, one final misfire, and I knew I could set off again. I stood up, pushing off against the chair, my head was still spinning a bit but everything else seemed to be working. The manager came back. A problem? he asked. I knew exactly what I must have looked like, I was used to it: red face, thick nose, dark rings under my eyes and white lips. On top of that, I smelt bad, rain and sweat didn't make a good combination. A problem? he repeated, slightly irritated. Everything's fine, I said, stressing both words to be sure they didn't get away from me, and I added, I'm off to do my shopping, trying to sound casual. Why did he have to look at me like that? Hadn't he ever seen anyone cry? Where do people cry? I often wonder about that, funny you never see people blubbing in the street. They make phone calls much more than they cry, maybe we'd hate each other less if we cried a bit more.

I walked towards the door, as upright as I could manage, the bloke stepped aside, frightened I'd fall on him, poor git! I knew exactly what I was doing. I wouldn't have asked him the way to the nearest shop for anything in the world, I do have my pride. Just as I was about to go out he called, There's a funfair on, you should take your boys! Now, that was a good idea! We'd make up for the grey sea and the scrap in the café, we'd have our bright lights! A funfair? Uh-huh, he said, on the outskirts of town, just before the main road. I was too exhausted to carry on the conversation so I gave him a little wave and went out.

Hard to say whether it was nightfall already or whether it had never actually been day, the light itself seemed so hesitant. It wasn't raining so hard but the sky was darker, it was a fine rain with tiny icy raindrops, poor man's snow, something you couldn't put a name to. It did me good, though. I tipped my head back and looked directly at the sky, it was all fresh, waiting for me.

In fact, the town was very small, everything was either at the end of the road or behind the post office, it was a shrunken town, maybe the sea nibbled into it a bit more each day, edging a bit further into the streets. I walked very slowly through the mud, it was harder on your own than with a nipper on each hand. It's just as well they're not here, I thought, they didn't see me cry, the psychiatrist often says Try to avoid breaking down in front of the

children. Right. There are some things you have to do in secret. You forgot to, forgot to, forgot to.

I didn't have any trouble finding a shop. There were wizened vegetables and black bananas displayed by the door, they didn't seem to be attracting any customers, and the shopkeeper was outside the door watching all those people walking past and not stopping at his shop. Mind you, he didn't look very pleased to see me, he barely budged to let me pass, and then he followed me inside looking at the mud I was leaving on the floor. Terrible weather! he said. I didn't answer. They say it's not getting better. I couldn't give a stuff, he'd never guess how little I cared. I chose some chocolate biscuits and a bottle of water – incredible how much they charge for their water, you'd never know it just falls out the sky.

At the till I pulled the tea tin from my pocket, it wasn't easy and the shopkeeper watched me with a frown, which was a good start... Okay! Stay calm, darlin', I thought, this bloke doesn't exist, he's just a shadow, he can't do anything to you. I took out my ridiculous coins and said, This is all they had at the bank, can you imagine? He opened his eyes so wide! Like he'd never seen money before in his life, This had to happen to me, he muttered, and I knew straight away he couldn't wait for someone else to come into the shop to make fun of me. Tough luck, the place was deserted, and he started counting the money, all disdainful like he didn't really want it, my arse! I was his only customer that month, he could at least have thanked me. I told myself all that to keep going, but I was dying to bugger off out of there. Let him take the money and let me never see him again. People can come into your life like that, from one moment to the next, even if you don't want them to. You should be able to screen them. Why was I alone with this tight-fisted shopkeeper when my kids were waiting for me up there? He put the money in the till, I stuffed everything into a plastic bag and left without saying goodbye.

Still no light outside, same rain, same people, I think it was the ones I'd seen earlier still going round in circles, was it really that dismal where they lived that they had to dawdle like this before going home? What were they after in town that they couldn't find in their own homes? Me, I couldn't wait to get inside, had enough of exposing my face to the air.

When I got back to the hotel the manager was no longer there, the phone was ringing all on its own and there was a smell of sausages, he must have been making a little snack, I wondered what time it could realistically be, was this dinner or tea?

Those stairs were pure torture, I looked at the tips of my toes to stop feeling dizzy, the bottle of water weighed a ton and, when I reached the third floor and realized I was only

halfway up, I was so disheartened I sat down and started singing a song to myself, just to have something else to think about. Brave sailor back from the war, Hushaby, your shoes all worn, your clothes all torn, Brave sailor where have you been, Hushaby. I thought about how tired that sailor was, how tired the whole world was, we were all exhausted, weren't we? Who felt like getting up in the morning? If people weren't paid any more, wouldn't half the world stay in bed? Not necessarily... sailors love the sea, even when it's grey, even when it's nasty, and soldiers love war... even in the snow, even in the mud... I'm the only one who's so exhausted, didn't I use to long to be knocked down by a car and break my leg so I'd finally have a good enough reason to be left in peace? When am I going to be left in peace? I'm just missing a few chemicals, yes, that's what I tell myself when I swallow my pills, I've got fewer chemicals than other people... maybe it's that simple, maybe that's all it is: a few more chemicals... a few less... Brave sailor back from the war, Hushaby... it's the Hushaby that makes it seem tired, that song, when a man's really hushed he's bound to stop. To stop laughing and putting on airs, I mean he can just forget it. There's nothing better than a man who can forget it, and there's nothing so bloody rare, either. You find it mostly in songs, and films, in everything you can't touch. Dear lady, I'm back from the war... Dear lady, I'm back from the war... I stood up and climbed the remaining floors counting the steps, there were thirty-six of them, thirty-six little numbers to count between my kids and me.

Stan had locked the door, I knocked, he opened it very gently, he didn't look welcoming but when he saw it was me his eyes lit up, I knew he was happy. I handed him the plastic bag and I smiled, too, we were making our peace.

Kevin was asleep, dribbling on the pillow, still curled up in a ball, his little fists tight and his wet noonoo by his cheek. Well, there was someone who was happy, it made you feel good just seeing him. And envious. I slid in beside him, his feet were freezing but I could feel the warmth from his breath, it smelt good.

You took ages! Stan said in a sad little voice. I closed my eyes and rolled myself into a ball, too. Shit! always whinging, always questions, after doing the shopping surely I had a right to a bit of rest, my crying fit had worn me out, sleep would sort that out, why did Stan never take a nap? Lie down, I said, you need to gather your strength, I've got a surprise for you two. Really? he said, a bit suspicious, what is it? Lie down! I ordered... I mean, really! I was the mum, I was the one who should say what we did and when we did it, why wouldn't the kid lie down? Are we going home? I heard. I opened my eyes to look at Stan but it was so dark in the room I couldn't see him properly, I couldn't seem to understand why he'd said that. All

these years I'd regretted my kids had never had a holiday and now we were here they could only think of one thing: getting home. They were cats, these kids, mustn't make changes. Never mind. I was glad, I really was, to have slipped my moorings, glad to be somewhere different, hardly any light, we'd got to the edge of the world and that was a good thing.

I sat up in bed and said to Stan, Listen, when I say a surprise I mean a surprise, okay? So eat some biscuits, trust me and let me rest. But what is the surprise? My God, he's made up his mind to drive me mad with his questions, any other kid would have jumped for joy if his mum told him she had a surprise for tonight, any other kid would have gone to bed to make the time pass faster, but mine was a mix of anxiety and suspicions, mine only took shallow little breaths, mine didn't trust anything or anyone! His teeth were chattering, I grabbed him by the shoulder. Lie down, I said, and I was so angry he obeyed me right away.

That's how I should have spent the rest of my days, in bed with my kids, we could have watched the world the way you watch telly: from a distance, without getting dirty, holding on to the remote, we'd have switched the world off as soon as it fucked up.

I rubbed Stan's back through the blankets to stop him shivering, for him to go back to being nine years old and let go of all those fears that don't belong to a child his age. I walked round the town, you know, I told him quietly, I've got the hang of it, we won't get lost any more, the man in the shop was all thankyou's taking the coins, and this evening we're going to spend the rest, all the rest, that's all I'm going to tell you! I'd like to go home, he said very gently, he was begging me. I stopped warming him up, I lost interest in him, turned the other way and closed my eyes.

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