

From Things I Might Have Been

W'e're at a visitor centre near the first of the great reservoirs. A coach has pulled up and some old folks in see-through plastic macs are milling around. There are things I remember from when we were here before – the big dam wall, of course, the hillsides reaching up high and steep, bright gorse. There's a small stone wall and we sit in sun that comes and goes. Kath tips her head back, eyes closed, to catch the warmth while I fidget, shuffle my feet, rip at the little weeds growing through the paving.

'So what are you doing here, Kath? What are *we* doing here? What are we trying to achieve?'

I'm feeling a bit exasperated, like I'm reaching a crossroads where I shall have to decide something – and deciding things, big things, is not my strength.

It seems we disagree on exactly what happened when either we killed a man or we didn't. Surely we have to clear that one up before we think about what's going to happen next. If we don't, if I go back to Worthing and Kath to London, and if we then meet up occasionally and chat about old times, everything will be a pretence. We'll talk about her son and my guitars and, I don't know, houses and the price of milk and foreign places – and never about the thing that binds us.

And, I have suddenly decided, even if from this day forth we never see each other again there is no way I can simply revert to my strange minstrel life without some resolution to all of this.

I cut her off as she starts to speak. 'No, don't answer that. Answer this instead: what exactly happened when the three of us ended up over there' – I nod towards the centre of the universe – 'on the edge of the water? Describe it to me.'

She lifts her head and looks at me – those eyes that make me do things. Nothing for a moment, then, ‘You two fought. He tried to throttle you. I hit him with a big stone.’ Matter-of-fact tone. Reading the minutes from last month’s finance meeting.

‘And then?’

‘He fell.’

‘Where?’

‘Right there.’

‘Where, exactly?’

‘There, where you were fighting. By the water.’ She’s getting annoyed.

‘In or out of the water?’

‘I don’t know. Half in, half out.’

‘Which half was in?’

‘His bottom half.’

‘And then?’

‘He groaned.’

‘Did you hit him again?’

‘Yes. I think so. Christ, John, what is this? I hit him again, then again. And once more for luck, I can’t remember. Then you hit him.’

‘I hit him?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did we kill him?’

She stands up, faces away. I watch her shoulders rise high then slowly fall again.

‘No. I don’t know.’

‘We filled his pockets with stones and he sank.’ I’m speaking very slowly and clearly, as if to a child. ‘He drowned. That’s if he wasn’t dead already. Which he probably was because we hit his head with rocks. We killed him.’

One of the pensioners from the coach wanders by, beige slacks, pristine white tennis shoes. He looks over at me, smiles. ‘Morning,’ he says. I nod, smile back. He shuffles on.

Kath hasn’t noticed him. ‘No ... ’ she says.

I stand up. Talking quietly to her back. ‘We killed him, Kath. We killed him.’

‘We didn’t.’

I want to explode. ‘Jesus, how can you be so sure?’

She turns towards me. Eyes sweeping across my face.

‘Because I think he came looking for me.’

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Shelley – Percy Bysshe, not Pete – lived round here for a while. I read that somewhere. He rented a house. The house now lies at the bottom of a reservoir, under millions of gallons of water. Drowned. Like Percy. Like Sheldon.

Jackie, my teenage infatuation, loved Shelley. Probably still does. I don’t know – haven’t seen her for years. She used to make me read his poems to her. Sometimes, in the summer we sat our O-levels, we’d take the bus to Findon and then walk up to Cissbury Ring, high on the Downs. We’d lie on the ramparts of the old fort and she would let me kiss her if I read ‘Ozymandias’ or ‘To a Skylark’. Only I felt a bit of a dick, stumbling through lines that seemed to me so difficult and distant. So I would put on a voice – posh colonel or Yorkshire; Cockney sometimes – and she’d get cross at first but if I persisted eventually she’d crack and start to laugh and before long we’d be rolling in the rampion and watching the butterflies rise in clouds of blue and brown.

She went to Oxford, Jackie. Or it might have been Cambridge. Sometimes – this was a long time ago – I’d bump into her parents in town and they would tell me how well she was doing and I would feel my chest tighten and I would jumble my words. I had this sense of a good thing lost.

I wish I’d tried to understand her better. But when you’re sixteen you don’t want to understand. You want to get laid.

He came looking for me.

I think she went into teaching, Jackie. Funny really. Mr Boot who taught us English was hardly a role model. But Jackie would have been good. Inspirational. Kids would have listened. Learned something. Was it teaching? It was something noble. Worthwhile. Social work maybe.

When? Where?

After we left school, I only saw her once more. It was in Worthing, shortly before we all left to go our separate ways – university, travelling, jobs in London. Some of us who played in bands had got together to organise a sort of goodbye gig in a pub in the centre of town. It was a rundown old place just off the seafront but lots of us from school went in there because they were never fussy about who they served. The gig had gone well – chaotic but fun. Covers mostly, of songs we all knew. I was buzzing. At the end of the night, everyone was hugging, saying goodbye, see you at Christmas. It was sad but exciting, like we were all heading somewhere. I didn't know Jackie was there till everything died down and we were packing up – I hadn't seen her for a while. She suddenly emerged from the shadows. She looked lovely and my heart flipped, just like it used to. We chatted and I said I would buy her a drink if she could hang on ten minutes. She said, 'Actually, we're just leaving.' She was there with her new boyfriend. She introduced us. I wondered if he read poetry to her. It hurt, seeing her. With him. But I was on a high from the gig and the adrenalin inoculated me against the worst of it.

He came looking for me.

'Wait, John. Chrissake. Slow down, will you?'

She's struggling to keep up. I didn't consciously walk away. It just happened. We were there by the visitor centre, with the old people in their macs. And now we're not. We're half a mile away, climbing a hill, the reservoir falling away behind us. I've been making myself think of other things.

I stop. She's a hundred yards behind. Fuck her.

Samantha Teal. Looks like a seal. Lets you cop a feel if you promise her a meal.

God, I haven't thought of that for ages. Just popped into my head. We used to sing it in Boot's English class, even the girls. We'd do rounds, a bit like 'London's Burning', on and on forever. God, we were cruel. But so was she – Samantha Teal. What happened to her? Prison officer? Vivisectionist? One of her nasty friends – Melanie something: Carey? Clancy? – got hit by a bus. She was okay but the bus had to be put down. Who said that? Oh yeah. Titty Thompson. He was hilarious. He had man-boobs before they were fashionable. He brought a slow worm into school in his sandwich box.

'John. Will you just wait?'

I can hear her but don't look round.

Mr Wilkes. Headmaster. Dew-drop nose and a hairy mole. Scottish. Very fierce. But Mum knew him from church. Said it was all a front and he was actually a very kind man. His wife died from cancer and I saw him crying once, sitting in his car by the school.

I've reached the top of the hill. Sweat's pouring off me. There's a small stream over to my left and I decide to investigate. The ground is marshy and I splash through the soggy tufts. It starts to rain, light at first but quickly coming in great gobs that make the stream boil. Something sweeps over me. It feels like the wing of a giant bird or the cloak of a god and as it passes, ruffling my hair, it takes with it all the binds and ties, the rules and rituals that make me, and I'm weak in the face of a sudden urge to lie down.

So I do. There in the marsh, by the stream.

He came looking for me.

She comes over the brow of the hill. She hasn't seen me yet.

The rain eases. Still steady but okay. Warmish. I tilt my face to catch it full on. It feels redemptive. Baptismal.

Here she comes. She's pulled a floppy old sunhat out of the little backpack she's carrying. Desert camouflage colours. She stands over me, tugging the hat down over her ears.

'John ...'

I cut her off. 'There was this girl at school, Samantha Teal. We used to sing a song about her.'

And I start singing it. I'm lying there on my back, in a bog, singing. *Samantha Teal. Looks like a seal ...*

I sing it through three or four times, then I say, 'Join in if you want,' and I carry on.

But she doesn't want. She looks both angry and frightened – eyes wide, brow furrowed, mouth open. The rain is tumbling over the brim of her hat. She's got her hands on her hips.

'Get up, John.'

I'm still singing.

'Get up.'

Lets you cop a feel ...

She nudges me with her foot. 'Please, John ...'

Still singing.

More of a kick this time. ‘John, enough.’

... promise her a meal.

Another kick, harder. But I grab her ankle, tug it.

‘Come and join me, Kath. Lie down.’

‘Stop it ...’

She’s unbalanced, falls forward onto her knees.

‘That’s better, Katherine. Lie down next to me. I’ll sing to you.’

My hand is wrapped round her wrist. I’m pulling – quite hard.

‘Come on, lie down.’

She yanks her hand free and then slaps me hard across the face. She’s shouting at me. ‘John, stop it. What the fuck are you doing?’

I grab her arm again. ‘Lie down with me, Kath. I know all the words to “Ozymandias”.’

She punches me in the chest with her free hand, pulls away her other arm.

She’s crying now, I think, but it’s hard to tell because everything is dripping.

‘What is wrong with you? Stop it, please. Just stop it.’

She’s beating both fists on my chest. I’m trying to sing but it sounds funny because she’s hitting me and I start laughing.

Then she slumps forward on top of me and I stop laughing. The rain stops too, suddenly as if a switch has been thrown. And Kath is sobbing. She passes her arms under my neck and pulls me to her. Clutches me, holds me so tight I can barely breathe. I can’t laugh. Or sing. I’m crying though. We’re both crying.

He came looking for me.

He’s alive.

I have wasted my life.