

Light

In a lifelong search for stability and predictability, he had found it in the stony track that led down to the shore. There were changes, but at least they were predictable. He watched the grass grow high in summer and the thistles turn purple. In winter the wind was constant and reassuring, giving him something to lean against as he trudged the same path in the same boots at the same time every day. Day in. Day out. No change.

The skylarks told him when spring was here. They hovered and sang even when the winds blew, determined to fight off any unwelcome visitors, despite their diminutive size. He understood that too. In his own way, he was determined to keep people away. He couldn't sing or fight or intimidate; things would be so different if he could. Instead he perfected the art of looking down, keeping silent and being invisible. People knew what to do and they kept moving, almost as though he wasn't there. People brought change. People were unpredictable. People threatened the stability and the patterns that made him feel safe. Not happy, but safe.

As he made his daily pilgrimage to the coarse sand and the seals on the rocks, he often pondered the thought of time. He was old now. He could probably figure out exactly how old, but he wasn't really interested in that. He'd never have to count candles on a birthday cake or place cards on the mantelpiece. Even so, he reckoned to be at least 80 years old. He measured it by his creaking bones and the pace of his walk. He measured it by his fading senses and constant wheezing. The eyes were always bad, but so much worse now. He painstakingly looked after his thick glasses that magnified his eyes and distorted his appearance. He must have had them for 30 years... long before he started collecting the gifts from the sea. They were cruel about his glasses when he was young, knocking them off and watching him fumble for them on the ground. They stayed in place now, another constant.

The anticipation was always worse than the moment the hand struck his cheek. "I'm talking to you Fish-eye, look at me!" That was their name for him, but he still wouldn't look at them. Instead he would drop to his bare knees on the rough ground, further scuffing his tired school shoes while the other boys kicked his glasses between them. Scuffed school shoes; that was a belt. Grazed knees; another belt. Lost or broken glasses; that was time in the dark. His hands desperately scratched for those glasses, nothing else mattered.

Eyes firmly fixed to the stony ground, he took slow deliberate steps with his hands clasped behind his back. Sometimes he would pass people, especially in the summer. Tourists; brightly coloured coats and swishy waterproofs, binoculars swinging around necks, the scent of perfume and suncream and singing voices chorusing, "Hiya". The greetings weren't returned and his eyes never lifted.

The trips to the beach always started in the morning with the sun in his face, or more often than not, shining milky light from behind the clouds. The light was always spectacular on the island, nothing like the memories of grey skies, grey buildings and grey faces of his youth. Even when the heavens were fully laden and ready to burst, they were quick moving and the light danced around their fringes. Even with his failing sight, he could see the light. Perhaps his only friend in the world. The light meant everything to him.

“Pathetic!” The word was spat rather than shouted. His eyes were fixed in their downward gaze, but now staring at the scarred wooden table rather than the stony ground. He was 8. Just a boy. A small folded figure propped against the hard wooden chair. He didn’t look up, but he knew what he would see if he dared. Mother’s frayed hair and grey skin, eyes fixed in the same downward gaze as his. Father, hunched and round shouldered, surveying them both with contempt. One was a bully, the other was broken. Both were worse than useless to the boy who couldn’t look up. As he grew, the relief from the tension was fleeting and dwindling. He dreamt of an island...

Nature provides without knowing. Or caring. Or expecting.

The smell of salt told him he was getting close to the shore. Only when his feet touched the sand did he look up. Here he would sit for a while and rest, but only if he was alone. If the tide was out he would listen for seals. His eyes weren’t good enough to spot them, but if he listened he could count how many he thought were sunbathing on the rocks. If the tide was in, he would listen for the clacking sound caused by countless pebbles colliding as the waves withdrew. If a gale was blowing he would sit with his back to the wind and watch the wind blow sand from his open hand. Once he was rested, the work would begin.

Nitrogen, potassium, phosphate and magnesium. That’s what he was there to collect, and it came in the form of seaweed. Even with his increasing fragility, he could fill his hessian sack within minutes and be back on his way. The heavy sack only increased his hunch and he plodded back up the hill, eyes back down and breath quickening. Even in the cold, he would often stop to remove his battered old oilskin coat as the weight of the bounty and the ascent of the track took their toll. Despite almost a mile in distance, he only passed one other house before his and he knew they watched in bemusement at the relentless routine.

Once home, the routine continued. First, the seaweed was spread out in neat rows to prepare it for its intended purpose. From years of experience, he knew he couldn’t put it straight onto the garden or salt would wither and burn the plants. Instead, it needed to be cleansed. Nature took care of that too. The showers blowing in from either side of the island were so frequent that it was rarely more than two days before the salt had been washed down the slope. He could watch the squalls blow towards him on an easterly wind over the North Sea. Otherwise, they would blow in from over the hill behind him, straight from the Atlantic. Another benefit of his island existence... although he never called it home.

Belonging is a nonsense word. He didn't belong to anyone, he didn't belong anywhere. Perhaps if anyone bothered to ask he would tell them he liked it that way, but he didn't like it. He didn't hate it either. It's just the way that it was. Belonging, purpose, reason, pride... they were all meaningless as far as he was concerned. He was on this island because he chose it. The Seaweed Man found somewhere out of the way to exist and to drift and to think. Not because he loved it, but because it was the most comfortable he could be.

Collecting, drying, growing; this routine took most of the day and all of his dwindling energy. His time was even more limited in winter when he was provided with barely more than six hours of light. Light that gave way to the dark. Darkness was a place that he could not exist. Inside his tiny home with its two rooms and leaky roof, the light was always on. Always. Darkness was not to be entertained. Darkness was not his friend. Darkness was the past.

It was never the hand on the scruff of his neck, lifting him off his feet. It was never the way he was roughly thrown in the corner like the bag of bones he was. It was never the slam of the half-height door or the snip of the lock on the other side. It was the dark. "You can stay in there and think on what you've done boy!" Except, he couldn't. The darkness was complete and impenetrable. Time became utterly untraceable as he was totally absorbed by fear and confusion. He was lost, cast aside, put away. He genuinely felt like he ceased to exist for whatever period of time father deemed necessary to atone for his wrongdoings. Lost glasses, spilled water, torn trousers... the list seemed endless and he was forever finding new methods of being banished to the dark. To sweat. And cry silently. And wonder why...

There wasn't much in his cupboards now, but spare bulbs were always on hand. The light must stay on.

Seaweed Man. He had first heard that name during one of his treks to the beach last summer. The only other house he passed was home to a family with three young children. He often heard them, though rarely looked up to see them. They would play happily outside and often walk or ride past his own house under the watchful eyes of parents. It was during one of these encounters when he heard a bright young voice say, "Look Daddy, it's Seaweed Man." In hushed tones he could hear the child being gently admonished for being rude and thereafter came an apology directed towards him. The apology went unacknowledged, but not out of anger or upset. Seaweed Man. He let the name roll around in his mind for a few steps. He liked it. At least it was honest and true. And he certainly had been called worse.

Daily he was reminded of time. How much of it was left? How many more harvests would he gather from his garden, fed by the daily offerings from the sea? It was impossible to say. He often thought about what would happen when he was gone. There'd be no-one to grieve for him, and that was comforting. They say you see a bright light when it's your time. He hoped that was true. Anything but the dark. He wondered who would know that Seaweed Man wasn't there anymore? Would people notice his absence on the stony track? Perhaps the shrinking piles of seaweed and the untended garden beds would be the signal. Or would they

wait until the light finally went out in the window and there was no one there to replace the bulb.

Maybe the darkness would let people know that he was gone.