

Perfect Water

Something tells you this two-pump station isn't a contactless kind of place. Google Maps has given up the ghost several miles ago. You go inside and pay in cash. *Diolch*, you add, your one word of Welsh; the cashier replies with something you don't follow.

Then it's back inside the Polo, Classic FM switched off for now; you need to follow the signs for Port Amlych. You nearly laughed at Lisa last night when she printed a map and traced your route in red ballpoint. It seemed impossibly old-school, like something your dad would have done.

Now, as the roads grow narrower and proper signposts scarcer, you're glad of the map. More than once you pull up on the verge and consult Lisa's printout to be sure you're on the right track. You'd hoped to be at Meiron House by mid-afternoon, but twice you get stuck behind rumbling tractors; now it's past four and the light is dimming. Another tractor pulls out in front of you, hauling a load of haybales in black plastic.

You crawl in its wake and drum your fingers on the wheel, still guilty about leaving Lisa to look after Theo alone. He's your first child and neither of you wanted to miss anything. But more than that, you know it isn't fair on Lisa, no matter how much she's told you it's the best thing for all of you.

Six weeks in Meiron House, and then you can apply for the climate science job you've wanted all along: not this piddling little Natural Resources posting in the back-end of nowhere, monitoring phosphates and acid levels and the sewage content of cold grey water.

The tractor veers into another farmyard and you turn a corner, finding yourself all at once in a real street, with people and shops and neon lights. There are three pubs (Y Ddraig Goch, The Anchor, The Inn) and two takeouts with flickering signs.

Then, Port Amlych is behind you, as though it's considered you and spat you out: you're on the coast road to Meiron House. You don't need Lisa's printout: you can see the lighthouse in the

distance, painted in bumblebee stripes of black and yellow. The Polo begins to bump and judder. Gravel crunches under your tyres.

Meiron House is an austere-looking grey block: two storeys, two chimneys, and a slate roof that's beginning to darken as the rain comes on. You park up, take the keys from the glove box, and unpack.

When you open the door, a snowdrift of letters sweeps the floor. Bending, you scoop up the TV Licence Final Warnings, the leaflets for Sultan Kebab and Muriel's Chippy.

You unpack your things in an upstairs bedroom. There are watercolours of yachts on the walls: sleek boats with titles like *Greyhound: King's Cup, 1908*. You recognise Meiron Cove in one; in another you see the lighthouse. It's a storm scene, at night; a Victorian three-master is fighting with the waves. There's no moon, only pinpricks of stars, and a tiny peck of light in the cupola of the lighthouse. The painting's called *A Gift For The Water*.

From your wallet you take a Polaroid of you, Lisa, and Theo, from a photo booth at a friends' wedding last month. You prop it against the alarm clock on the bedside table; the room feels a little more welcoming.

You make a quick tour of your new home. Everything is tidy, but bare and slightly stale. You wonder how Natural Resources came to own the house. It's big; in this era of cuts you're surprised it hasn't been sold as an Airbnb.

The carpeted stairs creak underfoot as you head down to the kitchen at the back of the house. The long window over the sink looks out towards the lighthouse; the striped tower is a stone's throw away. Nettles and buddleia have grown up round its base.

Natural Resources have given you a portable testing station; it looks like a heavy-duty grey suitcase. You open it on the kitchen table, and see two dozen pyrex test tubes with caps. There's a portable centrifuge, and a digital tester with a slim silver probe. For the next six weeks, you'll wander up and down the coast, checking ammonia levels, phosphates, dissolved oxygen in the babbling stream that runs down to Meiron Cove.

You fire up your laptop and load the new software, making sure everything runs as it should. The light is fading; you take off your glasses and rub your eyes, and glance out towards the lighthouse.

You see the little girl at once.

She is standing in the shadow at the foot of the lighthouse, wearing a faded green nightie with a print of Scooby-Doo and Shaggy; Scooby has leapt into Shaggy's arms. She is looking down at the earth as the rain falls; you have the impression of a thin face and tangled hair.

The girl looks up.

A second, a sliver of eye contact is enough: the chair clatters as you stand. Already you've looked away, heart beating hard, determined not to look at the window. Already you find it hard to recall her face, although there was something about it- something in the slackness, the colour- but that's not what made you stand. It was the sense of absolute bitterness and resentment, aimed at you. Your palm's damp with sweat on the back of the chair.

Your new-minted parenting instincts kick in. It was a trick of the light. Lisa works with children; words like *safeguarding* and *duty of care* pass through your mind. You move to the back door, with its two big panels of frosted glass. The wood is swollen and stiff in the frame.

By the time you haul the door open, there is no one at the foot of the lighthouse. You call out, wishing you knew more than one word of Welsh.

You wait, half expecting to hear footsteps, or to see that face again, but there is nothing.
You are alone.

You can pick up supplies in Port Amlych tomorrow; tonight, you take a chance on Sultan Kebab. By the time your food arrives you've forgotten all about the girl. The moment has lost its power after the fact, like a dream. You message Lisa for a bit; she sends you a WhatsApp of Theo gumming a tiny toothbrush shaped like a carrot.

In the living room is a laminated printout that reads *Welcome To Meiron House! We hope you enjoy your stay.* You realise the place must have been a guesthouse after all. You bring the printout up to bed.

There are two columns, in Welsh and then in English. You learn that Meiron House was built at the same time as the lighthouse, at the tail-end of the nineteenth century, and that a lighthouse keeper lived here until 1953, when the paraffin lighthouse went out of commission. Since then, the house has had several private owners. You flip over the printout. There's a list of attractions nearby, a map, and phone numbers for takeaways, taxis, and the coastguard.

Please be aware, says a line of red text, *that the tide in Meiron Cove can be sudden.*

You switch out the light, and go to sleep.

You've slept more lightly since Theo was born. You don't know what time it is when you awake; the Polaroid blocks the red numbers on the alarm clock. It is full dark.

It takes you a moment to remember where the bathroom is. On the landing, the carpet bristles under your feet. As you stagger back to bed, something- several things- press against the

soles of your feet. Still half-asleep, you bend, and scoop them up. Pebbles in your hand. It's that sort of house: there are faint gritty deposits of sand and crushed shell by the skirting boards in each room.

All part and parcel of living by the sea. The pebbles go on the bedside table, next to the Polaroid.

When your alarm goes off the next morning, the bedroom's bright enough to read in. Sunlight glows through the pale creamy curtains. You fumble to silence your phone, half-dreaming. You touch the pebbles; for the first time you see them.

You sit up, fully awake, and scoop the pebbles into your palm. Almost at once, you put them down.

They are not pebbles, but teeth: milk teeth, the kind you remember losing as a child. Smaller than your little fingernail, nearly translucent, and pointed, almost sharp, underneath. Five in all.

Your phone alarm goes off again. You wash and dress, run the Polo into Port Amlych for groceries. Back at the house, you make breakfast. Then you're out, North Face on, path crunching under your hiking boots as you make your way down from the headland to Meiron Cove. You have the digital tester, your pyrex tubes; you walk a mile up and down the coast, testing and making notes on your phone.

The water's pristine. You're surprised. You think of the barns and the tractors you passed; normally, where there are farms, there's fertilizer runoff, and that means pricklingly high levels of nitrates and phosphates in the water. But in Meiron Cove, everything is clean, pure, pH a perfect seven. And it's like that up and down the coast: you almost wish for different readings, in case it looks like you're phoning it in.

When you left the house that morning, you put the milk teeth in your pocket. You have not allowed yourself to think about them. Before you turn back for Meiron House, you let them fall from your hand. They land on the shale, where the tide will draw them into the water.

When you come home that evening, you pause on the threshold of your bedroom, bone-tired from walking the coastline all day. You shrug out of your North Face, trying to puzzle out what feels different about the room. You can't place it.

You clatter about in the kitchen making a stir fry, singing along with a Motown playlist. After you've eaten, you FaceTime Lisa in the front room; Theo waves his chubby arms and crows when he sees that it's you on the screen.

When you break off the chat, you feel anew the emptiness of the house. You toy with cracking open one of the Peroni in the fridge; instead you go upstairs, straight to bed.

Head on your pillow in the darkness, you realise what's amiss. The red numbers on the alarm clock glow unimpeded.

The Polaroid's gone.

You click on the side light and search for it, even get down on your hands and knees to look under the bed and between the floorboards. There's no sign of it, not even when you haul out the bedside table and empty all the drawers the next morning.

You never see the photo again.

The weeks slide by. Soon- far sooner than you would have thought possible- you have ten days left in Meiron House, then a week, and then Lisa and Theo are coming to stay for your final four days

in the house. It's only when Lisa's Nissan crunches to a halt on the gravel that you realise how lonely you've been.

It's so good having them there; it's scary how much Theo has grown. You were worried he might be hesitant with you, but no: as soon as you unstrap him from the car seat he's smiling, burbling, kicking his legs. You all troop into the hallway together; the silence of the house is lifted.

On your final day in Meiron House, you all get up early; the weather is fine, the best day you've had all year so far, and together you're going down to the beach. It's Theo's first time; when you're down on the shingle you take a video to send to your own mum and dad.

You set up a double blanket on a smooth patch of beach, well away from the water. Theo lies on his belly and practices crawling; he's learnt how to turn over, but not how to turn back again. Lisa minds him while you wander up and down the beach, snapping the coast with your SLR. Then, you mind Theo while Lisa takes her turn, eyeing up seabirds to post on her Instagram.

You settle your back against a smooth rock and close your eyes, feeling the heat on your face. Your mind's wandering already to the drive home, how good it'll feel to be back in your own bed. Lisa bends and picks up Theo, quietly enough that you barely open your eyes. You doze, and bask in the warmth of the sun.

'Where is he?'

Lisa's voice, sharp. You snap fully awake. Again, her voice, more urgent:

'Where is he?'

You stand up; Theo is gone from the blanket.

'I thought he was with you.'

'I thought he was with *you*,' says Lisa. Your heart thuds hard as you scan the shingle.

'I thought you picked him up.'

Lisa shakes her head, dumbfounded.

'Then who-'

Something draws your gaze away from the shingle and the empty blanket, towards the long sweep of wet humped sand that glistens under the sun. Towards the sea.

A small, slight figure in a green nightie, its back to you now, carrying something.

'There.'

'Where?'

You realise Lisa cannot see her.

The painting in your bedroom comes to mind. *A Gift For The Water*. And all at once, some part of you understands what is happening here, what has been happening, intermittently, for years. Understands, even, the perverse logic of it. Why the water in Meiron Cove is so clean, so faultless. As though it's been purified.

The girl in the mint-green nightie turns; for the first time, you see in full her grey and bloated face. Your heart lurches when you see the thoughtless way she's carrying Theo, as if he's a sack of potatoes. He hasn't been carried like that once since he was born: not by you, nor by Lisa, by anyone.

The girl takes a step towards the waves, her gait clumsy. The water, you realise, is already at her knees. You run.

They aren't alone, not quite. Further down the sleek sand, as the tide rushes in with astonishing speed, is another small figure, pale under the shining sun, and beyond that another, and another, until you lose sight of them beneath the perfect water.