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Day 8

THE MAN AND BOY stood hand in hand on the top concrete step and stared, like they always did, towards the line where the sky melted into the sea. In the evening light it took a while for the air and water to fuse just as it took a few minutes for the two of them to feel at ease with each other. Then familiarity flooded back. With small nods the boy counted down to the amber-stained sand below. Seven. He took a breath, glanced up and waited.

‘Ready?’ Always the same word. The same starting gun. He liked that.

‘Yup.’

‘The sun’s red,’ the boy said.

‘A blood orange.’

‘A ball of fire.’

The effect was temporary Disneyland splashed on the

tired colours of the English coastal town. Normally on this shore, at this hour, there was only grey. Then a dimmer switch turned the shade in increments too small for the human eye to observe. Later, darkness would sweep in and the lights of bobbing, tethered boats would flicker on one by one to announce the night.

With the gentlest pressure from his hand to the smaller one, the man led the way, leaving behind the merry-go-round and whelk stalls and skittering sweet wrappers of the promenade. On the beach, tourists were folding their towels and rolling up their mats before heading for a pizza place that displayed plastic-coated photos of food, or a forlorn unlicensed cafe that served tea with a pre-heated meal. Afterwards those same people moved on to a themed bar or a disco that shrieked neon light and beamed ugly noise. None of that mattered. The backcloth of the town was not important to them.

‘Why are we starting here instead of at your hut?’ the boy asked, disturbed by the change in the routine. ‘We always start at your hut. Same as yesterday and the day before. I like that.’

‘I know you do. I’m sorry. I did tell you though. I don’t want us to set off from the hut today.’

‘Why?’

Although he had expected the question, the man took a while to reply. He wouldn’t insult the boy with an easy

verbal exit. As always, the boy waited patiently, trustingly, using the empty time to scan the watery landscape.

‘I’m expecting visitors later this evening and I want to be there to meet them by myself.’

‘Without me.’

‘Well... yes. They don’t know you.’

What I should be saying is that I’ll be on my way very soon, but I’m not sure how to tell you that. I don’t want to hurt you.

‘So I can’t come?’

Another long pause while he worked out an answer that was neither a lie nor the truth.

‘It’s a business meeting for grown-ups.’

‘No kids?’

‘Nope.’

‘Can we start from your hut tomorrow?’

‘Maybe.’

Damn.

He hated lying.

‘I’d like to start from the hut. Same as always.’ The boy glanced up, trying to catch and hold the man’s gaze.

He’s different today. Not just starting our walk from the promenade steps instead of his hut. He’s quieter. Sadder. Not really paying attention to me. Like he’s not really here. Like he’s thinking about something else. I do that too sometimes.

It was the first time in their short week together that Abbott had been anything but open and direct and

truthful with the boy. He'd made very sure he'd never taken advantage of him, never patronised him, never skidded away from the truth. Their relationship was built on honesty and the boy had responded day by day with a growing trust and ease.

'How about we walk barefoot today?' It was a ploy – to change the subject and to distract the child. But the boy was canny.

'Why?'

'Because... the sand is soft and powdery today after the rain and then the wind.'

'But we walk very close to the sea. The sand's damp there,' the boy said, puzzled and needing accuracy.

'That's true. Well... powdery until we reach the sea and then we can walk in the water and not worry about getting our shoes wet. That's good, isn't it?'

And I'm not going to get another chance for a long time to walk to the cove barefoot pretending to be a beach bum. There's no meeting for grown-ups or men from Mars. I'm leaving our beach very, very soon. I'm going away but I don't know how to tell you that. But if we leave our shoes here we have to come back here, so there's no possible excuse to stop at the hut where you'll see my bag ready and packed. All part of a cruelly necessary plan.

'OK.' Keen to please but also puzzled. Had he known the word, the boy would have said the vibes were different this evening. Jagged instead of calm. Edgy instead of reassuring.

‘We can leave our shoes here. Hide them under the steps.’

‘What if someone takes them?’

The man glanced down. Almost managed a smile. ‘They won’t,’ he said. ‘No danger of that.’

Without bending down to undo the laces, he trod out of his cheap, grubby trainers and kicked them out of sight under the last step. The boy sat down to undo the buckles of his flesh-coloured jelly sandals. He leant over to nudge them carefully into place, side by side but not quite touching, one inch away from the trainers. That done, he stood up and slipped his hand back into the man’s and for a few moments gazed up with affection. The man smiled back, and felt like a complete heel.

You bastard.

Apart from today’s different starting point, their walk was exactly the same as always. They set off in a straight line down to the sea’s edge, then wheeled left and struck out along the curved shoreline towards the farthest point, where jagged rocks inhabited the sea, holding the fort and blocking the way to the smaller cove beyond.

As they walked, their bare feet left repeated signatures, large and small, in the sludgy tide-wet sand. Five and five, the boy counted silently. Ten and ten. Square heel and round toe marks frothed with toothpaste foam before the water took away the edges of the imprints. Looking back along the beach, he saw that the furthest dents were

already erased, as if part of their walk together was vanishing. The tide was on the turn, sucking the shingle and rattling it backwards, reclaiming it for its own.

Despite the slight chill in the air, the man's hand was warm. He registered the boy's delicate pressure and the staccato squeezes of pleasure. The child's bones felt as fragile as a bird's but the man knew his spirit was strong.

'Yellow, lime green, white,' the boy chanted when they drew level with the row of sweetie-coloured beach huts, a long way back up the beach, lined up as straight as soldiers against the high concrete wall that was topped with a footpath for walkers too faint-hearted to venture this late along the beach.

'I don't like the white one.'

'I know.'

'I don't like the people in the white beach hut.'

'I know. We've talked about that a lot. Let's forget all about them. It's OK... they'll be gone soon. Summer's nearly finished.'

'Good. I don't want them here.'

They walked on.

'But they're there now,' the boy said, twisting his neck. 'They're staring at us. Like they always do.'

'Take no notice.'

'That's hard. I can feel them watching us.'

'They've got nothing better to do.'

'Oh... blue, another white one,' the boy continued, satisfied with the man's answer. 'Yours. Cherry red.'

'Pink. You missed one.' The man said on cue.

'I don't have to say pink. It's empty.'

'They're all empty.'

'Cept the white one,' he sighed. 'I mean all the other huts *had* people in, only they've gone away now but the pink one has had no-one in it all summer. It's empty.'

'OK. I understand.'

'Red *was* empty but not now because you live there. I like the red one best.'

The man allowed himself an ironic smile because this conversation, with a few variations, was as predictable as everything the boy did. Beyond the beach huts, there was only sand.

'OK...I want to know when. You say when.'

The man was expecting this too, would have been surprised if the words had not been spoken here, three-quarters of the way across the bay, where they could almost touch the closeness of night and true dark.

'*Why* can't I see it?' he persisted, despite several previous explanations.

'Because it happens slowly.' The man's voice was calm and patient, a baritone rumble above the rush and scatter of pebbles as the tide continued its task of pulling them back into the sea.

'But we can say *now* it's day and *now* it's night...'

'Only afterwards. There's light and dark but there's grey in between. Twilight. It doesn't matter if we aren't

sure. It's OK sometimes not to know. To be uncertain.'

'I like certain.'

'I know you do.'

'What about me and you? Are we *certain*?' He liked the word.

The man paused before answering. 'We are friends. That's certain. But I'm not here for more than a short stay. I told you that the first day we met. I said I'm here for a week or so. No longer.'

I won't even be here tonight. Nor tomorrow. The hut's tidied and I'm packed and ready to go the minute we part company this evening. While you're walking back to your house, I'll be on my way to the station.

'I wish it could be forever,' the boy said, choosing to ignore the man's nudge into a possibility of a parting he didn't want to acknowledge. 'We'll go for a walk together for a few more days yet though, won't we?'

'Well, I can't promise. I have to go back, you know.'

'Where to?'

'My house. Where I live.'

'You live in the red beach hut.'

'Only at the moment.'

This exchange had become a refrain.

'But you won't go yet.' It was a plea, not a statement.

The man let it lie.

'You *could* stay here even after summer ends,' the boy continued, against hope, but again he got no reply.

What he'd sensed earlier in the man – a nervous restlessness – grew stronger as they continued along the sand, and set off warning bells which made him feel unsure and fidgety. The arm linked to his own didn't swing along with the same pendulum bounce as they paced the beach, and the man sighed often. Instead of his lop-sided grin, his mouth was set in a line. His hand gripped harder. It was their habit to look out to sea, then at each other for an emotional weather check, but tonight the man was lifting his head and gazing round. As if he'd never seen the place before. As if he might be saying Goodbye to it. A tremor of anxiety ran down the boy's spine.

Abbott marched on knowing that his upset and guilt about leaving the place, transformed perhaps into something vague like restlessness, was being picked up by the boy who walked at his side. Like an emotional sniffer dog, he missed nothing. While not party to the plan ahead, nevertheless he was perfectly tuned in to the emotions that accompanied it.

I'll miss this place. And the boy.

'When will you take the boat out again?' the boy asked, glancing longingly back at the white dinghy tied up high on the shore close to the huts.

'Well, not today. The sea's rougher. Anyway, we did that yesterday. We can't go rowing every day.'

Excuses. Lies. The truth is that you've had your last trip

in that dinghy.

‘I loved it. It was the best thing I’ve ever done.’ His eyes shone as he remembered his first ever sea journey, made of dreams and magic. Or like being in a movie, the way they’d slid across the bay with the man pulling steadily on the oars and the water lapping like a tune against the hull.

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

‘Maybe.’

In fact, never.

‘Three hundred and ninety-seven,’ the boy said. ‘Seven too many.’ But he was smiling, not anxious. As if admitting *counting is only a joke now.*

‘No. We said ten more or ten less, remember, because sometimes we walk a bit faster or a bit slower so between three hundred and eighty-five and four hundred and five is fine.’ The man continued the game. Playing serious.

‘I know.’ There was a faint hint of relief though the boy’s counting didn’t preoccupy him the way it had before he’d met the man. ‘And two hundred and twenty-eight back to the hut.’

‘Plus or minus five.’

‘Do you remember... it was only two hundred and two the first time. You were walking so fast and I was trying to keep up!’ He looked up and grinned. Gave a tug on the man’s arm.

‘I remember.’

‘You didn’t want me there, going for a walk with you the first time, did you?’

There was no point in lying. ‘Well no, but things change.’

‘Why not?’

‘I wanted to be alone. I didn’t know you. I thought you might be a pest.’

The boy smiled and leant in, ducking his curly head into the man’s armpit, turning so that his free hand caught hold of the lapel of the old wool coat which was rough and scratchy, perhaps like the fur of a fox. It smelt of the sea. The man never teased him about his numbers.

At the farthest end, they stopped at the same exact spot, marked not by a stone or stick in the sand but by a line in the geography of the boy’s mind. He could see the details of the landscape as sharply as if they were drawn in ink on paper: where the half-buried rocks were darker and more heavily indented and closely spaced; where the pools between them ran deeper with scrambling, sideways-scuttling crabs; where the black peaks rose from the sea in clusters of three and four and five with more sword edges and dagger points beneath the surface waiting to tear a swimmer’s leg or tangle a fishing line or score a jagged scratch across a boat’s hull.

Here, before the man came, at low tide he had often scrambled and slipped over the seaweed-slimed rocks to reach a cave that leaned out at the entrance to the next

cove, a place of echoes and damp where he could stay for thirty minutes before the white water frills crept in to take possession and forced him to run back to safety. He could time thirty minutes exactly and get away safe every time.

Someone watching in the fast-fading light might have guessed that a father and son stood at the farthest end of the bay, huddled close, rock still, perhaps on holiday in this small dull coastal town, perhaps saying goodbye on their last night as darkness slowly blotted out even the sharpest of rocks and crags that stood so prominent, so unchangeably present in the clarity of day.

This was their check-point moment, where they acknowledged that they felt the same as the previous day and the day before that. The boy sensed the sea awash in the man's heart just like it occupied his own and that without it, perhaps, they would not have found one another. Turning to face the water, he thanked it for its gift. Then, at a nod from the man, the same as always, they wheeled round, turned their backs on the rock-strewn maelstrom and headed for the lights of the promenade. They would head further up the beach, walk on the softer sand close to the wall, climb back up the concrete steps and buy their cones of chips at the stall where the man gave them generous portions. Holding the vinegary packets against their bodies, they'd retreat the way they'd come and rush back to the intimacy of the red beach hut before the chips got cold.

They were halfway back to the steps when the man stiffened, transferring a warning shudder down his arm to the boy's hand. Neville had his head down, watching the crunch and spray of the drier sand as he placed each new footstep, heel then toes, exactly beside the man's larger ones. The sandpaper rasp made his soles tingle. He was counting when the man stopped, dropped the boy's hand and raised his own to his forehead, making a cap brim as if to shield his eyes from a bright sun, except that it was almost dark. When the boy raised his head and followed where the man stared, he could just make out a dark silhouette on the road above the huts and a bright spot of light that played all along the beach, back and forth, up and down, trying to pick out something or someone. At first the torch's light made wild sweeps all around them, missing their shadowy shapes in its random roving. Then it found them and fixed on them, illuminating their faces and bodies. Again. Again. Back and forth. Abbott ducked and dodged but the light stuck to him. And to the boy.

'Darth Vader!' the boy said.

'Sshhh...'

A second shape appeared on the wall as if in answer to a shout or signal from the first. Two men stood in position, spaced out, stock still like soldiers on a watch tower. A second powerful torch came on and swept the shore until it too stopped on the two of them, blinding them.

Jim had said no reprisals. No witch hunt. What the

fuck's this then?

‘Two Darth Vaders.’

‘I said Be quiet.’ Such harshness. And fear. The man who was always strong and steady sounded scared.

‘Just people watching the boats...’ the boy began, trying to reassure him, but worried because the man held his breath and rocked on the spot.

There was no mistaking they had come for him. The torch lights played up and down their bodies, marking them out as prey. But this was all wrong. It made no sense. Jim had turned up the previous evening to tell him that he was in the clear. There would be no dramatic reprisals. No-one would bother following him here and no-one would arrest him because what he had done was not serious. Stupid, regrettable, a dumb mistake, but not a criminal offence. He was a free man. Jim had said it was time to go back and face the music, but it wouldn't be the full orchestra. So what the hell was this? They *were* shining their torches on him. He wasn't imagining it. Perhaps this was a cock-up and he was caught up in someone else's drama. Or some event in the town that had triggered a search party down here.

No, Abbott. It's you they want.

‘Listen,’ Abbott said to the boy, his voice tight. ‘You're to run home. Leave me here and run.’ His words came in breathless bursts. Like gunfire. ‘Run back towards the

promenade. In this light, they might not see you. They've seen me but I'm big and tall. Perhaps not you.'

Some hope in those flood lights. But there's a small chance he can slip away.

'You want to run?' The boy asked, perhaps deliberately mistaking the words. This wasn't the game they played on their way back to the red beach hut. If anything they slowed down, anticipating the pleasure to come. Yet even as he asked, he knew this wasn't a game.

'For God's sake, Neville, just do as I say. Leave me and run. You're not part of this. I don't want you to be part of this.'

'Part of what?'

Right now, I don't know. I haven't a clue. Unless Jim was lying and they've come for me after all...but he would never lie. He'd tracked me down and travelled all the way here to tell me I was in the clear, for god's sake. You might get a phone call and a knuckle-rapping, he'd said. Not two men in heavy duty with search lights.

He racked his brain. The only mistake he could think of was that he'd taken the boy out in the dinghy. OK, that was a bit daft. Someone might have seen them and put a scary gloss on it. He'd gone for a row with a child in the bay without asking a parent's permission but anyone watching would have seen them arrive safely back at the shore with no harm done. The child had been a bit late home but there was nothing new in that. Abbot had spent

the rest of the evening talking to Jim. They'd parted on good terms with Abbott's promise that he'd come out of hiding and return. Tonight. After he'd gone for one last walk with the boy.

There are a hundred scenarios to explain this but none of them make a damned bit of sense. Why would anyone want to corner me on this dreary wasteland of a beach?

The boy stared through the darkness, drinking in the drama, still too astonished to be frightened. One of the robots broke ranks and ran along the promenade and down the steps to the beach. Still a long way off. The other one jumped down to the roof of one of the huts and was scrambling, clinging then falling to the deck below. Voices carried across the air above the gentle evening shush of the sea. Two dark outlines appeared on the beach like weighty ghosts heading toward them. Hard, heavy running that must have left boot-shaped pits in the wet sand because these people were not bare-foot and were in a terrible hurry.

'Run, for christ's sake!'

'Why?'

'Don't ask. Just run away as fast as you can. OK?'

'Where?'

'I told you.' The man's voice was harsh. 'Go up the beach. Hide between the huts like you did before. Anywhere...but leave me. Go!' The man gave the boy a push.

But the boy leaned harder against the man and held fast to a fist full of his coat, choosing to wait with him. He saw stamping, panting, shouting people draw near enough for him to see not robots but humans with black hoody things with eye-holes pulled down over their faces. The first man was closing in on them fast. Maybe soldiers. Maybe police.

Neville started counting. *Two*, he said to himself. *No...there's another further away. Three.* He shut his mouth, then opened it again. 'There's my mum!' he shouted. 'My mum's running too, but she's a long way behind.'

She'll be so mad at me. She doesn't know about the man or the red beach hut. And I don't know why these men are running hard at us with bright lights. I'll stay close to Abbott. Whatever happens, I want to stay here with him. He's my friend.