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Living By The Sea

by Debbie Holden

The smell of him is corrupt and putrid, making me gag. An uncontrollable reflex that I try to hide from him. I'm embarrassed by my own body's inability to hide this shameful feeling of revulsion. His clothes like his hair are oily, there are unknown stains covering his jumper and torn trousers. His hands and feet are almost lost, melting into the black clothing. Nails encrusted with muck. I don't want to even wonder what this might be. The smell is like an illness that has grown on him, an incurable disease that he is suffering.

"It's ok, he says, happens all the time". He grins, showing his teeth, unevenly stained yellow, rotting brown broken teeth, jagged and full of gaps. As he speaks another more rancid stink hits my nostrils, and stains my skin with his spittle. The stink is like fermented egg, it blows in, mixed with the salty breeze of the ocean spray.

He turns towards his seafront shelter and I follow. My eyes take in his surroundings, dark in the late winter afternoon, damp from the sea spray, and recent rain. This is where he lives, eats and sleeps. It's like a human compost, rancid, mouldy and festering. I can almost see steam rising from his few filthy possessions in the corner of the space, next to a filthy duvet. He passes me some fresh dry cardboard to sit on, as if he were holding out a velvet backed wing chair for Dinner, ever a Gentleman. The cardboard has been stacked neatly on a pallet, covered over by a black bin bag.

"Gotta keep the bedding dry, if you wanna survive out here," he warns, "I always liked the sea," he says more to himself, "its safe, not like the town, too bloody dangerous down there."

“How long ? I ask, how long have you lived like this?”

“How long?” he repeats, “as long as I’ve been lost. I don’t count, but for many years I think.”

“Being lost I’ve succeeded in being considered totally uninteresting,” he says with pride, “some of us choose to be lost.”

I’m not sure I understand, but I tell him about my research, my writing about what I’ve discovered about being homeless. I tell him how I hope sharing these stories will help raise awareness, encourage more help, more assistance to get people off the streets. He listens quietly, he doesn’t move, doesn’t show any emotion.

I talk of the stories others have shared with me. The lack of human contact from passers by who look away, cross the street, won’t make eye contact. Drag their children off for fear they may catch something. From being spat at, urinated on and having food thrown in their faces. The lack of a warm dry bed. No place to wash, your body or clothing. But of course he knows these stories better than I do.

He leans towards me suddenly, “What’s your perfume?” he asks

“Sorry?”

“That smell, I recognise it.”

His eyes are closed, I watch him, he breathes in through his open mouth, as if capturing the smell, swallowing it down for safe keeping, digesting it slowly, savouring it like a wonderful wine.

“It’s like Tonka beans, vanilla, flowers and herbs, warm, exotic and sultry.”

His eyes still closed, he looks entranced, lost in a memory, as he describes my scent.

“My wife always used to wear that perfume he says quietly, I recognise it.”

“Harold will you help me?” I ask, “help me to gather the stories, help me make a change, help me deliver the tragedy of being homeless. I’ve been told you know these people, that you understand them, have their trust. I want people to know that when you are homeless very small things mean a lot. A dry pair of socks, some shoes without holes, a pocketful

if change. A clean dry bed. A warm friendly smile or greeting. A sweet smell. I want people to know it can make a difference.”