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Devil's Dyke

by Richard Lewis

After Gabe's wife died, struggling to deal with the loss, he'd thrown himself into work at the software company in the city. He was approaching retirement and didn't need the money but felt he had to keep busy. When not at work he'd find jobs to do at home, anything to avoid getting in touch with the loss. Then came the virus and lockdown and though able to work from home, he had more unwelcome time on his hands without the regular commute, communication with fellow workers and routine.

One morning Gabe was startled by the sound of Alice's voice, as clear as a bell saying, "you need to get out, take yourself off into the countryside like we used to do." For a moment he thought she was actually in the room with him. The words ringing in his head, he decided he would take the advice and head off to Devil's Dyke, a nearby beauty spot on the South Downs. Legend has it that the devil cut the V shaped hanging valley in an attempt to let in the sea and drown the inhabitants of the Weald. In reality it had been formed in the ice age by melting snow fields that gouged out the striking form in the hillside.

Gabe made his way up the steep slope where Victorians had once constructed a cable car to take pleasure seekers to the funfair at the summit; all evidence of which had now disappeared and been replaced with a pub. At much earlier times the vantage point had been the site of an iron age hill fort that commanded the surrounding countryside. Having not visited the area since Alice became ill, his breath was taken away by the panoramic views across the Weald to the north Downs beyond. To east and west, undulating hills rolled out as far as the eye could see. Gabe felt exhilarated and couldn't understand why he'd denied himself the pleasure of doing the thing he and Alice had always loved.

It was a blustery March morning and a yellow model plane was battling with the air currents but was no match for the graceful seagulls. One had been blown impossibly high and was barely visible. At first hiding behind the cloud, next swooping down as if wanting to land but being prevented from doing so by the annoying gusts, as keen as a freshly sharpened knife. The clouds however were little troubled by the stiff blast, taking their time as they ambled across the blue, while pools of sunlight washed over the Weald. Above a mob of crows tumbled toward the sea in the distance, polished like a silver dish.

The sight of crows took him back to the vanished years of childhood and a memory of watching them through his bedroom window, squawking above nearby woodland. It made him realise that inside he'd changed little in the passing years. As a child he'd lived for the outdoors, whether just being in the garden, the woods beyond or out to the winding river that his mother had warned him not to go near. Gabe had been entranced by the mysterious sycamore, beech and oak and the open fields with their tall grass and bracken; where mother nature displayed her wares. Red Admirals, Pink Ladies, bustling bees and insects, all free to observe under the ever changing skies.

The thing was, he'd never understood the ways of town life; the stifling confines of school and church with their teachers, ministers and strange social customs. Gabe wondered if he'd been absent when the lesson on how to be at ease with others was given. Either that or he just hadn't been put together properly. Perhaps the problem stemmed from his parents who were a mismatch and clearly didn't belong with each other; any fool could see, that is anyone except themselves. Home was not a comfortable place, so therefore he couldn't feel comfortable in himself, unless allowed to run free in the great outdoors.

Whether walking, running, riding his bike or climbing trees, it didn't matter. What mattered was that out there he could be himself, away from the demands of others who weakened him and made him question himself.

As Gabe returned home, his head full of memories of Alice and walks they'd had together, he broke down and wept, unable to keep the feelings at bay anymore. Yet as the sadness and grief washed through him he also marvelled at the way he felt young again when out exploring the countryside. As devastating as the pandemic was proving to be for the whole country, for some it would provide new opportunities.

'How wonderful to be alive,' he thought, 'but why does it always hurt?'