

## When the Sun Sets

‘Jamie, look: any minute now we’ll be able to see the sea. Are you ready?’ June is on the back seat of the car with him. Phil is driving. ‘Look at how flat everything is,’ she says, ‘it makes the sky look so big. I’ve never seen unbroken sky like this anywhere else. I love Norfolk.’

‘I know,’ says Phil, ‘you say that every time we come here. Every year for the past seventeen.’ He laughs.

‘I know,’ June says, ‘but it’s beautiful. Especially in weather like this. It makes you feel so small doesn’t it: lost in a sea of sky.’

‘You’re such a romantic,’ says Phil.

It’s a hot day and the windows of the car are rolled down. There are wisps of white cloud and fields of rape glow yellow as far as they can see. The world shimmers in the heat.

‘I’m seventeen,’ says Jamie.

‘I know,’ says June. She holds his hand and it’s damp. ‘We come here every year. The first time was the year you were born.’ Jamie looks out of the car window. June tries to follow the line of his eye, to see what he is seeing.

‘You remember this scenery don’t you,’ she says. But Jamie doesn’t answer and they listen to the songs on the radio instead.

Soon they pass the sign for Docking. It’s a small village with a chip shop and a pub. Wisteria grows around front doors. The post office doesn’t have a queue.

‘I remember,’ says Jamie.

‘What do you remember?’ asks June.

‘Dog,’ says Jamie.

‘No, there’s no dog. But we had lunch at that pub last year. We sat outside in the sun.’ There are people outside now: a group of four, all quite young. The women wear sunglasses, look cool, light cigarettes and lift their pint glasses to say cheers.

‘I think he does remember,’ says Phil, ‘there was a dog there last time with that family we got talking to. It was a black Labrador.’

‘Blue,’ says Jamie.

‘Yes,’ says Phil, ‘it was wearing a blue collar.’

‘Wow,’ says June, ‘what a good memory.’

The campsite is set back from the road, hidden by surrounding trees. There’s a walk to the beach through the woodland behind them and if they are quiet they can hear the sea. Phil takes the tent from the boot of the car. The material is faded orange and heavy. Jamie sits on the grass looking at the trees and how they move in the breeze.

‘That’s home sorted for the next week,’ says June, ‘now time for a cup of tea, don’t you think?’ Nobody answers, of course, it’s not a question. She takes the small cooker from the tent and lights the ring. Purple flames spit from the metal. She places a silver kettle on the fire.

Later, there’s wine. The camp fire glows and crackles in the darkness, the rest of the campsite quiet and navy blue. June holds Phil’s hand. It’s warm and soft in her palm. The flames of the fire shrink and grow.

‘Shall we go to bed?’ asks Phil.

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘yes.’ And she thinks of his solid body and how he will hold her.

He can see her white skin through the darkness, feel her ribs splayed and the skin stretched and taut across the bones. He tries to be quiet but his breathing is heavy now. He runs his hands across her stomach, feels the smoothness of her skin and then the scar that’s now seventeen years and three months old.

It had started as they’d been told it would. They stayed calm, got to hospital in plenty of time. Had the bag June had carefully packed weeks before.

She’d pushed for hours, done her best, done what she was told. But things were taking too long: there was a problem.

‘The cord is wrapped around the baby’s neck and his heartbeat has dropped,’ said a consultant. ‘We need to carry out an emergency caesarean and you have to be sedated for this.’ The consultant looked dark under the eyes and her forehead wrinkled when she looked at June.

‘Of course,’ said June, ‘do whatever you need to do.’

It didn’t take them long to make the uneven cut and pull the baby boy from her stomach. He was born quickly in the end but he was already blue. They put him in an incubator and the consultant told them that it was probably bad news.

Phil is asleep now, the rhythm of his breath changed. Slowly June unzips the compartment of their bedroom. She stands and tiptoes across the ground sheet, feels the flattened grass, the uneven earth beneath her feet. She opens the zip, pulls back the material of the tent that makes Jamie’s bedroom. Inside

she sees the lines of him through the darkness. His duvet is twisted. Half his body uncovered, his long limbs soft with sleep.

She watches him now, just for a few minutes. She's done this since he was born. In the beginning she would listen for his breath, but now this watching him is just the routine of her life. She kneels, reaches across and pulls the duvet to cover his body. He's so big now: taller than her and lately she has started to worry. It was easy to keep him safe when he was small, when she could put him into a pram and push him around the park.

She closes the zip, crosses the tent and climbs back into her own bed.

It's only 9am but already the beach is busy.

'Everybody gets up so early when they're camping, don't they?' says June.

'Wow,' says Phil, 'today is going to be a scorcher.' They're walking down the steps onto the beach, the sand is soft beneath their feet and it slows their pace.

'Here?' asks June.

'Here,' says Phil and they put down their bags, shake open the towels and lay them on the ground.

June has a book with her, Phil has newspapers and a crossword. Jamie has a bucket and spade. He digs and moves the sand from one area of the beach to another and then back again. He re-seals the holes perfectly, pats them down so you might not know they ever existed. Except the surface is darker, smoother: disturbed in a different way.

The sea is cold when they paddle.

‘Wow,’ says Phil, ‘it’d take your breath away if you went any deeper than your knees.’

‘I’m going to try it,’ says June. And Phil watches her wade out and then plunge her shoulders beneath the waves. It doesn’t take her long to stand up. ‘You were right!’ she shouts through a deep intake of breath. They laugh and she does it again. ‘Jamie are you coming?’ He’s standing in the water and Phil holds his hand. His skin looks pale against his colourful swimming trunks and June thinks that it won’t be long before he’s taller than Phil. Jamie doesn’t move but a wave laps in and hits them higher on their legs. Jamie laughs, lets go of Phil’s hand and looks further out to sea.

‘You’re getting brave these days aren’t you? Are you having a lovely time?’ shouts June. Jamie doesn’t answer but she’s sure that he is.

It’s early evening now. They finished at the beach a while ago, had fish and chips from the chip shop in Docking.

‘It’s not even school holidays yet but I can’t believe how busy the place is,’ says Phil. ‘Shall we go back to the beach and watch the sun set? In fact the next beach along will be quieter, let’s go there.’

‘Yes,’ says June, ‘that sounds like a lovely idea.’

The car is parked on the quiet road, metres behind them now and they walk along the winding, well-trodden path to the beach. The road turned to sand minutes after they climbed from the car and it feels soft beneath their feet. Phil was right, it is quieter here.

'I bet everyone has gone back to their campsites to get the fires going before it's dark,' says June.

'Or maybe to have dinner,' says Phil, 'but we ate out, didn't we, Jamie? We had fish and chips.' He puts his arm around Jamie's shoulders and squeezes, pulls him tight.

'I can hear the sea now,' says June and as they walk sand banks begin to rise on each side of them. The path is curved and the sea is obscured for the moment. There are hundreds of footprints, maybe thousands, and Jamie bends to touch the shapes in the sand.

'Come on, Jamie,' says June, 'keep up.' They round the corner then and the path opens to a huge, flat beach.

'Wow,' says Phil, 'just look at that. I never get tired of this place.' The beach stretches away to their left and right as far as they can see. In front of them the water doesn't stop until it touches the sky. The sun is beginning to fall now and throws a golden shadow across the water. Phil puts his hands in his pockets, walks down to the water's edge, dips his feet.

'Toilet,' says Jamie.

'Okay,' says June, 'this way.' There's a toilet block back the way they came, a few steps back from the path. She leaves Phil to watch the sun. They'll just be a few minutes and he'll know where they've gone if he turns around.

The toilet block is small. Sand creeps up the steps and the concrete floor: remnants of dried footprints. The *Ladies* sign hangs on the left, *Gentlemen* is signed right.

'This way,' says June leading Jamie left.

‘No,’ says Jamie, ‘man,’ and he points to his chest. June hesitates, begins to follow but then changes her mind.

‘Okay, Jamie, but come back here when you’re done,’ she says. And Jamie looks at her the way he always does.

June is only gone for a few minutes. She doesn’t use the hand drier, doesn’t want to miss the sun. She stands outside the toilet block, shakes the water from her palms, smells the soap again and wipes her hands across her shorts. She hears the waves crashing on the shore and everything else is silent. A minute passes.

‘Jamie?’ she shouts, but there’s no reply. She passes the *Gentlemen* sign, steps inside. There is nobody at the sinks. She turns, checks the cubicles, finds them all empty. ‘Jamie?’ she shouts again.

She is back on the path now, looks left, looks right.

‘Phil,’ she shouts from across the sand. She sees his lone figure, sees the sun lower, closer to the sea. She sees the shadow of evening fall across the ground, sees the empty flat beach and how there is nothing else.