

North Sea Goose Chase – Colm McDermott

Before he died, the old man wanted one last swim in the North Sea, and since he was too sick to travel, his sons, Philip and Henry, agreed to bring it to him. It was the last Sunday in August. At eight o'clock the boys loaded ten jerry cans into the Bentley's deep trunk and made for Brancaster Straithe.

"Why do you reckon he loves the North Sea so much?" Philip asked, as they waited for the gates to open.

"He doesn't," Henry said, reclining his seat. "He's full of shit."

It was seventy miles to Brancaster Staithe. They'd never been. Philip drove with both hands pinned to the wheel, staying below the speed limits. Normally he was a confident driver but the Bentley put him on edge: the gleam of silver paint on the flanks, the shoebox smell of fresh leather. It was too new, he thought. Too valuable. As they headed down the A148 the Garmin lost signal; the screen went blank. Philip tried to remember if it was the Sculthorpe or Syderstone exit they needed, but the names jumbled in his head.

"Shag," he said. "Henry. See if there's a map in the glovebox."

Henry was doodling on the passenger window.

"Why?" he said.

Philip's leather driving gloves creaked on the wheel. He was two years older than Henry, though sometimes it felt like more. Once, when he was fifteen, Henry had crammed a handful of roman candles through their neighbour's postbox. For five minutes, fireworks bloomed in the lower windows of the house, periwinkle blue and pig pink, the coloured light cascading in sheets onto the front lawn. Philip took the blame, and for the next month, for a crime he did not commit, was made get up every morning at dawn to muck out stables. He still thought of that, sometimes.

"Because he specifically asked us for Brancaster Staithe."

Henry blew fog on the glass, sketched a sun in it, along with two smaller ones, then daubed the whole lot clean with his fist.

A few miles later the Garmin found a signal. They took the exit for Little Snoring and continued driving. At Great Snoring they turned for Barsham, crossing the Stiffkey River, where a cloud of dotted chestnut moths hovered over the bridge. Henry leaned over and beeped the horn, scattering them.

After that it was back roads to the B1355: acres of shorn wheatfields; hay ricks. They came to Burnham Market. The town was bustling, the Sunday Market in full tilt. Some of the stalls were open and, inside, slabs of grey meat bled from hooks.

"Looks like the old man's leg," Henry said, pointing at one.

They passed through Burnham Deepdale. Beside the road the ground was flat yet they couldn't see the land's edge. A kilometer on they pulled into the carpark at Brancaster Staithe and unloaded the cans. They'd washed them with soap the previous evening, and then again that morning, but the smell of petrol still lingered in their plastic gobs. At the edge of the carpark a dune rose from the gravel. Two metres high, it sported a thin stubble of marram. Henry, whose enthusiasm had grown now they were out of the car, was the first up.

"You'd better get up here Phil and take a look at this."

Philip climbed the dune and stood alongside his brother. The beach was a mile wide, at least. In the distance, panels of water reflected the sky; he could just about make out the pencil-line of the surf.

"Is that the shore?" he asked, confused.

"Who knows," Henry replied. "But he can shag off if he thinks I'm going all the way out there to check for him."

Wind dashed through the marram then. Philip looked at his feet where a clutch of salt-edged beachgrasses stood straight, their old blades splitting the sea breeze to a whistle. Among them, younger grasses bowed their heads in the sand.

Philip edged the Bentley to the base of the dune.

"You sure about this Henry?"

Henry stood outside the car; his hand planted on the roof.

"Of course," he said. "Think of all the time we'll save."

Philip toed the throttle. Slowly, the Bentley mounted the dune. Half-way up the tyres bored into the sand, slithering back.

"She's slipping!" Henry shouted.

Philip revved the engine. The Bentley inched upwards, scrabbling against the landslip. Nearing the summit, he glimpsed the water puddled on the foreshore, like melted glass, and a few seconds later he pulled out onto the white, hard flat on the opposite side, the salt crust crackling under the tyres.

"Fucking hell," Henry shouted excitedly, running after him. When he got to the bottom he pulled open the driver's door. "You've got to let me drive!"

Philip sighed. He got out, switched sides. Henry jumped behind the wheel.

"Just take it easy," Philip said, buckling his belt. "We don't want to end up in the water."

But Henry wasn't listening. The hand-sewn leather of the wheel; the glide of the clutch; the easy handling of the gears; it was too much. He gunned the engine, dropped the handbrake, and they shot down the beach.

"All right Henry," said Philip. "Easy."

The Bentley sashayed left and right, scribbling broad loops in the flat. Sand sprayed up and slapped back on itself in sodden sheets. Henry swerved, hard, coming back across the face of the water.

"YOU THERE. IN THE CAR. STOP."

A man on horseback was galloping after them, shouting on loudspeaker.

"Jesus Henry," Philip said. "It's the coastguard. Pull over."

"Are you crazy?" Henry laughed. "I'm not stopping this car for a flipping horse."

He switched into fifth and they raced along the waterline. The coastguard gradually receded from view and had almost disappeared when the Bentley struck something solid in the sand. They few into the air. Then came the clean sound of wheels spinning, a landless whistle. Seconds later they crashed.

"What in Christ's name was that?" Philip asked, when he had recovered his composure.

Henry, who was holding his nose, and wincing, said nothing.

They heard the dry clop of hooves outside the car.

"Morning gentlemen." The coastguard rode up alongside them. His voice was smug, and he spoke with a lazy drawl. All Philip could see of him was his boots. "Bit of a rush I see?"

"We're terribly sorry officer," Philip said. "My brother, Henry, he's learning to drive. We came out here because it was quiet and, well, you know how it is..."

He turned to Henry, urging him to say something, but Henry looked away.

The coastguard dismounted his piebald. He was older than Philip expected. His hair, like that of his horse, was clipped; salt-grey and black in places. Underneath, his

scalp shone a gummy pink and dandruff plaqued at the temples. Leaning through the window he eyed the pair.

"You're in a right jam," he said. His breath was warm. It smelled of liquorice.

"I know," Philip said. "Listen. Can you help us? Our old man is sick and there's no one at home."

The coastguard considered this for a moment. He looked through the windscreen at the steaming bonnet.

"There's a man in Burnham Market owns a Massey," he said. "Maybe you could give him a ring."

He pulled a green notebook from his jacket pocket and recited a string of digits.

Philip thanked him and rang the number. A man by the name Saleem answered.

Yes, he could help them, he said, but it'd be at least another hour until he could get there.

"Two-year old Limousine," he said. "Broke through a blooming byre wall this morning."

Philip got out then to stretch his legs. A few metres behind the car he saw a wardrobe half-buried in the sand. Six foot tall, dark mahogany, its edges had been chewed by salt.

"Shipwreck," the coastguard said, appearing at his side. He opened the door and a putrid stench lifted out. He stood back. "Cargo ship ran aground a few weeks back. Off Scratby. Been wardrobes and bookcases washing up here since."

Philip stepped forward and looked inside. He covered his mouth and nose against the smell. Sea-water lay trapped in its belly, and scraps of rotten fish floated in the trapped water.

Three hours later Saleem arrived with the Massey. He was Indian but had the face of a carrot cruncher: a nose gnarled by rosacea; beetling eyebrows, and hair that sprouted from the sides of his head. He towed the Bentley out of the sand, along the beach, to the boat launch, then trundled off in his tractor. Overhead, herring gulls shrieked and circled.

"They're protecting their eggs," the coastguard shouted over the din. Pointing to his feet then. "Their nests are right underneath this boat launch. Shower of bastards if you get wrong side of them."

There was the question of how to get back. Philip asked the coastguard if he knew any buses going to Sleaford.

"Don't think so. But there's a train station in Kings Lynn. Reckon you could make Sleaford that way. There's a bus goes from here to Kings every hour."

Philip thanked him. The coastguard mounted his piebald and cantered off. When he was gone, Philip went to the trunk to fetch the jerry cans. Sand and salt etched both flanks of the car. The bonnet was utterly caved in. He looked inside and saw Henry, who had not spoken since the crash, turning the key over and over in the dead engine. He rapped on the driver's window with his knuckles.

"Come on," Philip said. "It's a mile to the bus stop. We can make the next one but only if we go now."

Nothing.

"Henry. It's only a car."

Henry turned sharply to his brother, his face twisted with panic.

"What about the North Sea? You heard him."

The gulls resumed their shriek, louder now. One plummeted into the sand near where Philip was standing.

"You said it yourself Henry. He's full of shit. He doesn't care about any of that. This is all just one long goose chase."

Henry shifted in his seat, uneasy, his jaw clenching. He was about to say something when a huge bird smashed into the windscreen. It lay twitching on its back on the launch for a full minute, then stiffened and went still.

"Do you reckon he knows?" Henry whispered.

They were in the kitchen. Philip hefted a jerry can from the sink. Water splashed out.

"How could he?" he said.

Henry funneled another container into the can.

"You know him," Henry said. "Bastard can probably smell the difference."

It had been a long day. After taking the bus to Kings Lynn, the train to Ely, to Grantham, and then to Sleaford, Philip and Henry had hired a taxi to their house.

They'd only been able to carry two jerry cans apiece, which meant they'd had to fill the tub in increments. They ran the tap into the cans, and, when they were full, added half a container of salt to each.

"Time for a top-up?" Henry asked, brightly. He picked up two full cans and lugged them down the hall. Philip heard the splashing of salt-water; the tub filling. When he returned, Henry leaned against the doorway, pouring sweat.

"I'll say one thing for him. There isn't many his age could handle a swim the North Sea."

Philip nodded. "Always a hard man our father."

He waited for Henry to reply. No reply came. And when he looked up his brother was very far away.