

(Award winning short story, 'Time and Tide' placed first, at the 'Write By The Sea Literary Festival,' Short Fiction category, at Kilmore Quay, Co. Wexford, 2019.)

Time and Tide

By Steve Wade

He left their home in Ballsbridge, Dublin, before the kids awoke. Before their hungry cries clawed and slashed at the inside of his head. Before Jeannette began her wailing, her accusations and her threats.

He stepped out the front door and into the day. He tried to avoid looking at his car, but couldn't. The steel-grey Lexus jeep sat under the wooden pergola to the side of the house. Nearly three weeks since he'd driven it, they were coming to repossess it in the coming week.

From within the tall pine trees a dove coo-cooed its lamenting call. Its mate responded from the rooftop, and flapped lightly into the band of trees. He could hear the hungry squabs squealing as the cock bird fed them. A sharp pain jabbed at his temples. He squinted, and massaged his head with his fingertips as he crunched over the gravel driveway.

A raucous cackling made by a mob of magpies returned his attention to the pine trees. Three or four of the black and white birds were flying in and out. He watched one emerge with something in its beak. It landed on the rooftop, with what he could now see was obviously a dove chick. Its fellow magpies pursued it, chasing the bird onto the lawn, where it hopped about like a vulture. It then threw back its head and swallowed the hatchling whole. The magpie mob flew off to another band of trees in a neighbour's garden. Their un-bird-like cackling as indifferent to their murderous attack as was the grass.

He walked through the high steel gates and out into the tree-lined street.

A light rain graduated quickly to a summer down pour, flattening his thinning hair. The water ran in rivulets from his head down his cheeks. And his beige summer sports-coat turned a tramp-like grey. He plodded on until he came to a petrol station.

The appetizing hum of hot coffee hit him when the shop doors whooshed open. It smelled the way a Sunday should smell.

While standing over the newspapers stacked knee-high on the floor, he went through his pockets for coins.

“Can I help you, sir?” the Asian attendant asked from behind the counter.

The door whooshed open again. He was standing too close to the entrance. “Coffee,” he said. “How much is it?”

“What type of coffee are you liking, sir?”

He returned the few coins to his pocket. “It’s okay,” he said, and mumbled something about leaving his wallet at home. The doors obligingly opened. He stepped through them.

There were a surprising number of cars on the road so early. He half wondered where they might be going, but then spoke aloud.

“Who gives a fuck anyway? Fuck ‘em.” He kicked a stone into the road. But it wasn’t a stone. Luckily, the dog shit he’d kicked was old, and mostly solid. He used a wall to scrape away the small amount of soft shit from the top of his shoe.

Sunday morning walkers, some with dogs, passed him. A few said ‘morning’. He responded, making no effort to put a smile into his voice. One of the walkers, a stiff-looking man in his sixties, with a moustache whose edges were moulded into points away from his face, stared intently at him on his approach.

“Morning,” he said to the moustached man.

The man made a point of looking through him. He then looked away.

He suppressed his immediate impulse to shout after the man what a prick he was. He had more important issues to contend with.

At Booterstown Bird Sanctuary, a heron flapped from the reeds. A pair of hooded crows took after it, pursuing the fisher-bird onto one of the two manmade islands. The crows worried the heron until it regurgitated its breakfast in order to escape their badgering. The cloaked pirates fell over the half-digested food, devouring it.

Terns screeched and crashed headfirst through the water's shimmering surface, while swallows and sand martins shot through the air like twisted arrows, dipping, turning, diving and rising. All these birds were working full out to snap and spear food for their young.

Into Dun Laoghaire, and the sun had replaced the rain clouds. There were more walkers on the East pier than he'd anticipated – but, still not too many. His vision snaked along the great granite arm, bent at the elbow and stretching out to sea.

Down the pier, opposite the refurbished bandstand, he climbed over the wall. Sitting on the far side of the wall, a short chunky man with a huge fishing rod. The fisherman sprung up with surprising nimbleness. In one hand the rod, in the other a can of beer. Not yet seven in the morning, and this man was drinking beer.

The fisherman's embarrassed face, he saw, waited for him to say 'good morning' first. He ignored him and continued on down the sloped surface towards the end of the pier. The incline, which obliged his body to walk with his right leg lower than his left, reawakened a twinge in his lower back. The echo of a slipped disc he'd suffered more than a year ago.

To ease the discomfort, he stepped through the last opening in the thick wall, about forty paces before the pier's end. There were now a good handful of walkers behind him - the nearest about ten minutes away.

A curious seal, its head bobbing in the calm sea next to the lighthouse building, diverted his attention. The animal appeared to be interested in something at the water's edge. Where the pier's incline was the steepest.

Another seal, it looked like at first. Or a black sack with discarded rubbish. A flash of silver beside the sack gave him an instant grasp of the scenario. The silver was the underside of a fish, attracted to whatever the bag had to offer. And the seal, in turn, had been lured to the feeding fish.

But, the fish wasn't moving. Dead maybe. Poisoned by the bag's contents. He moved down the slope sideways, the method he used to use to ease down the ski slopes in Austria on winter breaks.

Atop the sack, a cluster of kelp lifted and swelled with the lapping water. The seal, submerging with a soft slap, took his attention. When he looked back, he saw that the floating kelp was a head of long hair. The black sack a body, and the silvery fish scales a watch.

He twisted about and, in an attempt to dash up the slope, slipped and hurt his ankle. Fighting the dull pain, he worked his way up the bank using his hands in the manner of an ape. The nearest walker was still five minutes away. Limping back down the slope, he wondered if he'd brought his mobile with him, would it have worked without credit the call the emergency services. Something he'd never been sure about.

With the pain in his ankle dissipating, he pulled and tugged at the body until its upper half was free of the water. It lay on the rocky surface. He turned it over. A woman's face, candle-wax grey, bloated, bloodless and gashed.

His stomach tightened. But, without food in his belly, only a small amount of bitter bile pumped into his throat. He bent sideways and let it spill through his parted lips. He spat twice, and then used his sleeve to wipe away a string of spittle.

Who she was, the memories she'd made, the people whose lives she had touched, and who had played a part in moulding hers, was irrelevant. Without knowing the details, he understood her plight. He respected the moment when, in despair, she chose another way - the bravest of choices.

There was something else he understood. It all made sense. As a husband to Jeanette, he had let her down. As a father to their two girls, he had failed. His impulse to get himself to where he now stood, with one step between atonement and failure, was written. The insurance payout would provide for them. Jeanette would have the means and the dignity to raise the girls into adulthood.

That's when he noticed the handbag. Its strap was wrapped a few times around her neck, and knotted in places. As though the sea, determined to take this woman, had strangled her, lest she escape its drowning waters.

His hand, disconnected from his head, opened the woman's bag and fished about in the sogginess. The brown leather wallet it located felt chunky. Full. Without opening it, he stuffed it into his left pocket - the one whose lining wasn't torn.

Just in time. A blonde cocker spaniel, its toenails clacking down the slope, brought him to his feet.

"No," he said to the dog. "Come here." He pulled the animal away from the dead body by its collar.

The dog's owner, a puzzled-looking, heavy-set man in his fifties with glasses and purple cheeks, rounded the corner.

"Quick," he said to the man. "Call the police."

The man's startled eyes, staring through lenses as big as tractor lamps, locked onto the woman's body.

"A phone," he said. "Do you have a mobile?"

The man glanced at him, but jerked his head back towards the body. “Oh no,” he said.

“Jesus, God, no.” He clamped his flabby hands behind his head.

“Hey,” he said. “Can you call the police?”

A clattering sound behind him made him whip his head around so fast he felt something slashing at his neck. The fisherman he’d passed earlier. He’d dropped his rod.

“Here,” the fisherman said, shuffling towards him, his hand extended. In it a mobile phone. “I am is Polish. For you. You call. I no speak good.”

He took it, nodded, and dialled.

The female voice in Emergency Services asked him for his personal details. He repeated the urgency of the situation, and told her again, the location. He closed the call and gave the phone back to its owner.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No is problem,” the fisherman said, his expression crowded with drunken good-fellowship.

By the time he was halfway back up the pier, an ambulance motorcyclist was approaching - the engine a low and unbroken growl of anticipation. A nearing siren on the seafront announced the police or an ambulance. It was both: a white squad car and a yellow ambulance.

He waved the motorcyclist on in an ushering gesture, and pointed as though miming a slow-motion karate chop. The helmeted rider nodded, his concealed face presenting a detached and authoritative air: a man in control of himself and his life.

Ensuring there was no walker too close, either on the upper or lower decks of the pier, he turned his back to the harbour. He pulled out the dead woman’s wallet. Opened it. The notes inside were soggy. Slipping them free, he used the edge of his shirt to sponge up some of

their wetness. Around seven hundred euro made up of fifties. He folded each note and pushed them into his trousers' pockets.

A woman using two walking poles asked him if he knew what all the commotion was about.

He told her.

“Sure, God love her,” she said, and bustled off, as though on her way to base-camp before ascending Everest.

He looked out to sea. Mid-way across the bay were two great white birds. Gannets. He recognised their yellow heads and black wing tips. Careful not to put too much pressure on his ankle, he eased himself up on to a blue bench. An instant lightness made him feel that he, like the birds, had taken to the air and flapped to a great height. There he soared and circled. And through the gannets' eyes, he scoured the blue ocean below, before dive-bombing, at skull-crushing speed, into the salty water teeming with life.