

AFTER THE STORM

by

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The wind blows itself out shortly after dawn; the rain lasts a little longer. When I finally talk myself into getting out of bed at half past seven, it is still falling, lightly now, a barely audible patter, no longer the thudding wind-driven sile of the night.

I draw back the curtain. The sky is gray, but the clouds are high above. After fifty years on the island, I can read the harbingers as well as the animals do. The rain will stop soon, in an hour or two, by mid-morning at the latest. The thought cheers me.

It is early October, and last night's storm was the first of the season. Anyone who has been thinking of making a late-season visit to the island should be adequately discouraged now. Yesterday's trickle of day-trippers will be the last until March or April. Winter on the island has begun.

I busy myself: washing, shaving, dressing. These things take time now. What once was the work of little more than a few tens of seconds now occupies tens of minutes. As I finish straightening my clothes in the mirror the long-case clock in the corner of the room chimes the hour. Satisfied with my appearance — but is that really me in the mirror? — I go to the kitchen and switch on the radio while I make myself breakfast: cereal, toast and marmalade. I drink the last of yesterday's milk.

The man on the radio, barely audible over the static, gives his version of what is important: an earthquake in Japan; a derailment in Arizona, ten feared dead; a politician likely to be indicted later in the day. No mention of the storm.

The news ends and the weather forecast, the only possibly interesting item, is covered in a parsimonious ten seconds. "A front will come through bringing with it heavy rain and high winds. Power outages and minor flooding are possible." I sniff. As always, the mainlanders are predicting the weather that has already passed us by. I ease my arm across the table and switch off the radio.

In the kitchen, I put the kettle on to boil and carefully measure coffee into two mugs. At the age of eighty, one does not change one's habits easily, and even though I know that Tim really prefers tea first thing in the morning, I stubbornly make

coffee. He tolerates me, of course; it is just one of the foibles of an old man. Coffee until noon. Tea from noon till six. Various combinations of hot chocolate and alcohol from six until bedtime. It has served well enough for fifty years, and I am not about to change my regimen to please a forty-year-old stripling. Anyway, he has never complained.

The kettle boils. I switch it off and pour the water over the dark grains. My sense of smell doesn't work so well any more, but that first cup of coffee in the morning still retains its odor, although some days I'm not so sure whether it isn't just my imagination. Idly, I stir two heaping teaspoons of sugar into Tim's mug.

Somewhat irritated, I look at the clock. Quarter past. He should be here by now. I feel a momentary annoyance at being taken out of my daily routine before I remember that it has been raining all night. It might have taken longer than usual to milk old Bessie; and the path from the other end of the island is sure to be muddy and treacherous. I should be able to find it in me to forgive Tim his tardiness.

There is a sudden rapping on the kitchen door, and without waiting for an answer Tim opens the door and walks into the kitchen.

"Mornin'. Looks like winter's here," he greets me. Like me, he is not displeased at the change in season.

"Good morning, Tim. Aye. I guess it's just you and me and your missus now until spring."

"And Anna," he reminds me as he carefully removes his galoshes and extricates himself from his waterproofs, putting the boots next to the door and hanging the clothes on the hanger that is there just for this purpose.

"And Anna," I agree. Somehow I am always forgetting that there are three of them now. Perhaps it is because whenever I think of Anna, I soon find myself wondering how long it will be before they call it quits and move away to one of the larger islands, or even to the mainland. I will be alone then. Perhaps that is why they haven't moved already. Perhaps.

"Here's the milk."

I accept the bottle and add the milk to our coffee.

“Come on in then.” I lift my mug, take a few sips, then walk carefully through into the living room.

We don’t say much. There isn’t any need. We don’t really have much in common, Tim and I. He is a young writer who bought the small farm at the other end of the island some fifteen years ago. He writes spy stories that have too much sex and too many long words for my taste. I have the feeling, although we have never discussed the matter, that he has never really been much of a success, otherwise he would have left the island and settled into a more conventional mode of life. Anna came as a shock to Tim and Beatrice. I had always assumed, apparently wrongly, that one or other of them was infertile.

Ostensibly, his daily visit is to provide me with milk. We both know that the real reason is to make sure that I am all right. One day, Tim will walk in and find me cold in bed, or in my chair, or on the stone floor of the kitchen. Mostly I try to be nice to him, banking credits against that day.

But today there doesn’t seem much to say. One season has ended; another, abruptly, is about to begin. Such changes take a day or two to assimilate, and both of us seem happy enough simply to sip our coffee and mull over our own thoughts with only the occasional glance out the window.

“Guess it’ll be over in an hour or so,” he says when he reaches the end of his mug.

“Reckon,” I agree.

“Will you be going down to the cove? We thought we might take Anna down there later. This is the first time she’s been old enough to appreciate a storm. She might find it interesting to see what the sea has washed up.”

I feel a momentary annoyance, as if Tim and his family are day-trippers thoughtlessly intending to avail themselves of my cove. I do my best to stifle the feeling, and mostly succeed. After all, it isn’t really my cove. Just because you visit a place every day for fifty years doesn’t make it yours.

“I guess I’ll go down there when it stops raining,” I offer the olive branch.

“Well, we probably won’t get down there until after lunch. I’m behind on my latest book and Beatrice had already promised Anna they’d bake bread and cakes this morning. So don’t worry; we won’t disturb you.”

I look at him carefully. I hadn’t realized that he has noticed my daily ritual. I wonder how much he has guessed.

“Well, I’ll be getting along now. See you tomorrow.”

I walk with him into the kitchen and watch while he redons his outerwear; we exchange a final goodbye, and I gaze out through the window as he trudges out into the rain.

I return to the living room. It is a small room, I suppose, although large enough for me. Hugging one wall and in a sense overpowering the room is an old Hammond organ. When we rented the cottage for our honeymoon, the place it now fills was occupied by a spinet piano, but with the sea air it proved impossible to keep the piano in tune once I bought the cottage. Besides which, persuading a tuner to come across from the mainland is difficult in summer and impossible in winter. The organ was a kind of compromise, but I have never felt the same kind of affinity for it that my wife had had with the piano, and for the past decade and a half I don’t think I have sat down to play more than a couple of dozen times. A few carols at Christmas, that about sums it up.

Atop the organ is my one treasured possession, the only material object acquired to which, after eighty years of life, I feel truly attached: a photograph of my wife, taken a couple of days before the wedding. It is the only photograph in the house. Why would I want others?

The rest of the room looks more or less as you might expect: a couple of comfortable chairs; a pair of largish tables; a bookcase filled to overflowing; two standard lamps; the radio. My needs are simple and I am reasonably happy, especially now that summer is over and my peace will be undisturbed for the next half year.

Over in the corner are two large boxes, brought over yesterday from the Post Office on St. Mary’s by Tim: my semi-annual present from Mrs. Tudor at the library on the mainland. They

are still unopened. Inside are the books she has selected for me to read over the winter. Later today, I shall open the boxes. It will be the highlight of the week.

I try to settle, but am unable to. I flirt with the radio, but as usual the reception is poor and in any case there is nothing worth hearing. I try to read another chapter in my book, but the print is too small (I hope Mrs. Tudor has remembered to include more large-print books this time) and really the story is not all that interesting. I abandon the book. I'll start one of the new ones later.

For a while, I sit looking out the window.

The cottage is no more than fifty yards from the cove, although the trees are still in leaf and everything beyond the hedge is hidden. The rain is ending, and eventually I decide that it is time. In the kitchen, I don my waterproof overcoat and remove the stick from its stand. I go outside.

It is raining harder than I had expected; my glasses almost immediately are covered with small droplets, making it difficult to see. Fumbling slightly, I remove them and place them carefully in the pocket of my coat. It wouldn't do to lose them.

The path down to the cove is mostly sand; despite the rain my footing is steady and I need the stick only when I have to open the gate to leave the confines of my own property. I leave the gate open, using the loop of chain put there for that purpose; there will be no need to close it now until March.

The tide was high at six o'clock. (That is how one measures the days on an island: by the times of high tide, drifting an hour later every day.) By now the water has withdrawn halfway down the beach, leaving a thick black line at its highest point, a kind of immense ring-around-the-collar of heaping seaweed deposited on the virgin sand. The seaweed does not yet smell, at least to my nose. Tomorrow, perhaps, especially if the sun comes out this afternoon.

I stand for a while, looking out over the sea, breathing the clean, briny air. The waves are still mountainous, gusts ripping spindrift from their tops only a few yards from the shore. Curl-

ing walls of water, bigger than any man, break thunderously against the sand halfway down the beach.

Even if any of us wanted to, there is no way to leave the island today. No boat would dare approach; not even a helicopter would be able to land in this wind.

I watch the breaking of the waves for several minutes. Eighty years old, and still I am entranced by the sea when it is in this mood.

I take the last few steps down on to the sand. The cove is not very large, no more than a hundred yards across. I always start at this end. Today I proceed slowly, poking at the weed, using my stick as a kind of crane, lifting peculiar, alien objects so I can examine them closely with my uncertain eyes.

It is a disappointing haul from such a promising storm; perhaps it is too early in the year. Apart from the planks and the fishermen's plastic nets and floats — the floats used to be glass, until about thirty years ago, and after most storms there used to be one or two of them intact on the beach. I have a collection back at the house that one day I'll do something with. The plastic ones are ugly; no one would think of collecting them — precious little unusual has been brought in by this storm.

Side by side are two beer cans, one Mexican, one Chinese (I think; it's hard to be sure without my glasses). Several condoms, which I hurry past distastefully. An aerosol can containing who knows what, the writing on the can Japanese or perhaps, in view of the beer, Chinese. A couple of detergent bottles, smeared incongruously with greasy tar. A green plastic bottle whose imprinted writing has been eroded to the point of illegibility; it looks like it might once have held shampoo. And now I am nearly at the far end.

I stop, my eyes on a particular patch of sand, my thoughts fifty years in the past. As I do every day, I tentatively approach the spot, and then kneel bone crackingly and touch the sand. This is where we made love for the first time; this is where our daughter was conceived. This is the place that brought me back to the island after the accident. This is the reason I have lived in the cottage all these years.

“I love you,” I say, the same thing I have said at this place every day for the last fifty years.

Slowly, I get back to my feet. I don’t say any more, there is nothing else to be said.

My love declared, I make my way back along the beach, up the path, and into the house, where I put my glasses back on and make myself a midmorning cup of coffee. My hands are blue and my face numb. It’s not really all that cold, but the wind is biting, and I decide that since winter has started, it is permissible for me to augment the coffee with a splash of brandy.

I drink it in the living room, slowly, savouring every mouthful as it trickles down my throat and into my stomach, warming me from the inside out.

My eyes keep falling on the boxes of books, and I decide there is no time like the present. I get out of the chair, rising a little too quickly. For a few moments, I remain still, gripping the arm of the chair. It’s been happening a lot lately, much more than it used to. Perhaps my time is near.

When I have recovered, I smile across at the picture on the organ. “Not much longer now, darling,” I say.

It takes me a while to undo the strings on the boxes. I cut the string on both boxes before I open the first one. Then, with an expectant air, hoping desperately that Mrs. Tudor hasn’t let me down, I open the first of the boxes. I glance over the titles, and a smile forms on my face. A good selection. I nod approvingly. Tomorrow I’ll go up to Tim’s to use the phone. Mrs. Tudor will appreciate my thanks. For a moment I stop, wondering how old Mrs. Tudor is and what she looks like. It’s odd, but I’ve never wondered that before. She sounds middle-aged on the telephone, but telephones can be so deceptive. Maybe I’ll ask Tim to visit the library clandestinely next time he goes to the mainland. He’d enjoy that, a spy on a secret mission to gather information.

I look at the second box, string hanging down, still closed. I’ll leave that for tomorrow, I decide. Even if it’s a disappointment, I’ll have today’s present to fall back on. I run my hand along the spines of the books, wondering which one to read.

Can that really be my hand, so transparent, so wrinkled, so old? Eighty years is a long time, I remind myself. Yes, but not that long, some other part of me argues. For some reason I look up at the picture on the organ. Her smile is reassuring. "Not long now," she seems to be saying, echoing my own thought of a few minutes before.

I grip a book without looking and lift it out, then look at the jacket to see which book I have chosen.

Dick Francis. All right, good enough for a cozy first day of winter. I get to my feet and again I do so too quickly. There are spots before my eyes and my body seems suddenly weak and fragile. I nearly drop the book, but somehow I manage to keep a hold on it, and strength duly returns. I go back to my chair and ease myself down.

For a while I try to read, but something about the day is unsettling. Rebutting all my experience, the clouds close up and lower, and the rain becomes strong once again; it begins to tap noisily against the glass of the window. The breeze freshens. I am disconcerted; I can't remember the last time I was wrong about the weather.

The book seems suddenly heavy, and I let it fall to my lap. My eyes drift over to the piano, and then back down to the book. From somewhere comes the sound of laughter, over a piano playing softly. Vaguely I recognize the laughter, and for several seconds there is a frantic, urgent feeling as I struggle to remember who it is who laughs like that. *Of course*, I remember now as the panic subsides and a smile creases my face. How could I have forgotten? That's the way she laughs. I look across to the piano again, and she stops playing and turns to me with a smile.

"I think it's time, don't you?"