

## **An Old Man and The Sea by Gavin Baird**

The season had finished but still they came. The ponderous rain, the insidious wind, the pernicious cold, none of it apparently enough to protect their little town from the wanderers. The curse of the town - which some saw as its blessing - was not the crashing weather, but it's proximity to the island.

As the wanderers approached, by bus, car, bike and foot they were greeted by a long drawn out car park and a white sand beach pockmarked by vast boulders and slivers of seaweed. Seagulls loitered like bored teenagers. Beyond them a sign which today warned of cancelled ferries, and behind that the small ferry terminal. Inside the terminal were toilets; clean, lemony and 20p to enter, and a small cafe. The cafe is a window, shuttered when closed, the sort found in church halls all over the country. Three staunch tables are set over two levels. It smells of bacon, and has postcards and a smattering of papers for sale. The plastic leaflet holders advertising free maps are empty. At the sole table on the bottom level, sitting in the corner with his back to the window, is a man. His thick hands are tucked up into the arm holes of his body warmer, his thinning thick grey hair swept as if by the wind. He looks as if he's starting a shift he'll never finish.

The first lot in are a bus load, wheeling overnight bags that tells him all he needs to know about them. One of them has a word with Jan behind the counter before they all turn, and he can hear the bus leave again laden with them and their luggage.

Next, an American couple who order coffee ('it's only instant we've got I'm afraid', said Jan) and settle in next to him. They watch past him, two big windows that do all they can to display the sea and all that it is. The waves mean nothing to them, but he hears their coos of awe at the white horses that batter into the future and promise a rough ride. Slowly the cafe fills; a young Scottish couple, armed with thick jackets and a backpack full of supplies, an old Australian wearing a hat that makes him look even older than he must be, and an English family with three children. They all talk to Jan, asking for advice and information, Jan fielding their questions as best she can in the absence of information. A couple of them smile at him politely, perhaps wondering why he doesn't have a tea or a coffee. Jan raises her eyebrows at him when someone asks if they can pay by card.

'He's tucked away round those rocks the now, he'll be back out at 12' she says to one of them as the clock ticks slowly towards 11. Most of them stay, deciding the dead time is worth the possibility.

The familiar rattle of the suspension of the old post van appears above the slow murmur, and Tom walks in. His goatee and wide gold chain made him look like a postman almost as much as the red polo shirt with Royal Mail insignia. He drops the pile of letters next to the cake stand and takes his coffee over to the window.

'Rough out there,' he says.

The man sitting in the corner removes his hands from his body warmer in greeting. 'Boat from Oban busy?'

'Full'.

'Apparently only cattle on the Coruisk ferry'.

'Aye, Shona was saying earlier.'

'You be watching the rally?'

The island's big annual event.

'Canny avoid it. Goes right past the house so I'll no doubt sit in the living room and watch it but I'm no fussed about four hours on a hillside in the dark.' His voice is deep and slow, the opposite of the sharp rattling of the weather on the other side of the window.

'Same here. Some folk though. Out there for hours. It's the smell they're after, petrol heads. Whiff of that is what they get off on.'

'Cousin of mine won it a few years back, Duffy. Allan Duffy. From the mainland, married someone across there and never came back. Except for his moment of glory, mind.'

'Oh aye, remember him.'

They let his face sit quietly between them, as if it needs some mulling over.

Jan comes over, highlights in her short hair and pink stems on her glasses. They're steamed from the kettle, but clearing them doesn't seem to occur to her.

'Hear that?' Tom the postman turns to look out, and they both gaze up at the sky. Wanderers join them.

'The eye in the sky,' Jan says to nobody. The youngest of the English children climbs up beside her and calls back to his parents. 'Mummy, Daddy, a helichopper!'

Everyone smiles at each other, except the man in the corner who gives no indication of having heard it.

The helicopter soars, high above the prohibitive waves, arcing over the island like a seagull and turning back towards safer shores. Tom the postman leaves with it.

The wanderers have started talking amongst themselves, frustrated at the lack of information being provided, their disappointment bubbling just below the cusp of social ceremony.

'I wouldn't mind being told it wasn't running. It's the ambiguity,' one of them says.

Jan raises her eyebrows again.

'Looks like it's calming down,' says the American, a man with an academic face.

Jan's eyebrows don't bother lowering themselves.

The clock above the hot water vat ticks relentlessly onwards and the crashing of the waves refuses to subside. 12 o'clock comes and goes, and the wanderers gather en masse at the window, seeking more information from Jan.

The man in the corner watches them without watching them, hearing only Jan's lines, repeated as if she's practicing them.

'He'll be here when he's here. Safety first.' More bacon and more coffee, but neither can disguise the building angst.

The wanderers have gathered themselves around him at the window, his existence a performance for them. But really they're looking over him, beyond him, through him, at their intended destination which hours ago must have seemed so near and now might almost not exist. He feels the warmth of the sun on his neck, and sees their hopeful reaction, and immediately hears the hammering rain and smells their despair. They filter away from his stage, to their tables, to plan Bs, to fresh bacon rolls. Only one of them remains.

The remaining wanderer peers up at him, and the man at the window checks around before smiling down at him. Taking this as encouragement, the visitor clammers up on the bench next to him and draws himself up so their eyes are level.

'What's your name?' the little boy asks.

'Rory,' says the man, more gruffly than he wants to. 'What's your name?' He asks back, almost by way of an apology.

The boy ignores this.

'Are you waiting on the boat too?'

Rory looks round, his eyes ineluctably drawn backwards but they stop before they made it to the view. His arms are now firmly back in his bodywarmer.

'No no, not me.'

'You have a spill on your jumper', the boy says, pointing at one of the many Rory hasn't had time to get rid of over the years. Rory looks down but doesn't say anything.

'When will the ferry leave?' the boy asks.

Rory, for the first time, lets his eyes go. He turns round and looks squarely out the window. His eyes see a different sea to the eyes of the wanderers, capturing at once the force of the waves on the nearby rocks and the swell on the harbour and the resistance of the wind to the water as it rushes across the channel.

'Not long now, son. Reckon you'll see it coming out of that wee cove just about any moment.' He turns further so his pointing finger aligns with the boy's eyeline and, just then, the red, black and white of the ferry emerges.

'Mummy, daddy, the boat!' the boy cries, jumping away from Rory in his excitement. It's infectious, and the solid crowd are up and jackets are being thrown on and bags are gathered and rolls swallowed and within moments all that is left of them is their litter.

The Australian man comes in, fresh from a toilet break, to find them all gone.

'What happened?' he asks Rory.

'Ferry's coming,' he replies with a nod backwards out the big windows. He too leaves.

Rory can hear the ferry putt-putt-putting it's way into the harbour, and knows when the thump against it will come. As the wanderers are boarding the terminal door opens, letting the still fierce wind in. It's Fiona, who runs the pub in the next town down the coast and also runs the post across to the island each day.

'Rory, how you getting on?' She asks as she gathers up the pile left by Tom, haphazardly scattered next to the cake stand. 'Still waiting for news from the insurance?'

'Aye, something like that,' he says. 'You know how much these new fishing boats cost now. I'm no holdin out much hope'.

'Must not get any easier,' she says, standing upright in sympathy.

'Much harder for the boys' parents. They said to me he knew the risks but. Ach. You just expect to come home from your job don't you.'

When she's gone, and on the boat, and its engine starts and revs just enough to get it beyond the harbour wall, he checks for Jan who is nowhere to be seen and turns to watch it pull away, listing across the chopping waves that he'd guided his boat across thousands of times and that he thought he knew and understood, and keeps the ferry carefully centred in his spell until it is harboured safely across the water and the quiet is interrupted by the next bus load arriving with their wheely bags.