

The little stretch of the seaside where the old man's hut stood was altogether quite strange. There was neither beach nor cliff there, for one thing, just a glade running smoothly into the ocean. That alone was enough to attract one or two biologists a year, each of them spending a month or two in the neighbouring town of Lleynybyd. They took measurements, photos and samples, then they sat for days on end, their noses buried in notes, and then they left in resignation, still lacking the answers they came to look for. Geologists also came and went in a similar fashion. They were there to analyse another local curiosity - the two hundred eighty two stone pillars sticking out of the sea near the glade. Each of the rocks was perfectly clean, no moss nor lichen nor even algae sticking to it. They just stood there, each reaching just under two metres over the water level, like a crowd of beachgoers that forgot how to move. Citizens didn't particularly mind the visitors, as they provided a constant, if rather shallow, stream of money and didn't bother the locals much, sometimes only asking questions, each of them without fail answered "Don't know, really. Guess that's just the way it is"

The old man, for his part, never complained about the scientists prowling through his backyard either. He didn't complain about anything, really, and wasn't keen on talking in general, truth be told. He used to be a reverend, until townspeople decided that he must have reached the retirement age of God's kingdom, and brought themselves a brand new one all the way from Cardiff. Back then, people said, he spoke a lot and had such a passion in his voice that many would prefer bathing in hellfire to scorning him. These days, however, he seemed to have exhausted all the words our Good Lord afforded to him. He spent his remaining time on this earth sitting on a chair by his window and looking out at the world with a constant grimace of displeasure.

He was never particularly pleasant in character or demeanour, and has only gotten worse with age. Still, he was a man of Lleynybyd, so it would be rude not to make sure his final days - numerous as they seemed - were spent in comfort. Because he had no wife or children, taking care of him was up to the community, and every day someone from the village would come to bring the man food and keep him company, though he seemed unenthusiastic about both. Recently, this duty fell to Neb, because her older sister who did it before went to university. The girl was only sixteen, but she was used to helping around the house, so she took on the responsibility without much problems. Truth be told, she came to enjoy it. Every morning she took a basket her mother prepared and walked down the long dirt road to the glade. The man watched from the window as she made her way to the run down hut, half built from stone, half buried into a gentle hillside. She even managed to feed the man quite easily, though whether it was because of his liking her or simple resignation, she did not know. After that, she just sat beside him in the window, looking out with awe as he did with distaste.

That morning was different, somehow. Shells cracked under her sandals like they always did, the sea gently swayed between stone pillars like it always did, but she felt something was missing. She knocked out of politeness, but she did not await the response. The old man never bothered locking the door anymore, neither did he ever rush to open them for her. She opened the door and walked in. The place looked about the same as the day before, when it looked the same as the day before that, and so on into a time nobody in the village remembered anymore.

"Hello!" she shouted while closing the door, and, as per usual, no one answered

She set down the basket, took off her jacket and moved to hang it on the coat rack. That's when she noticed what was different. The rack was empty. In the place where the man's dusty trench coat used to be, there was nothing. The old fashioned hat also

disappeared, and on the floor the lack of the worn-down shoes revealed two foot-shaped areas much lighter than the panels around them.

"Hello?" she said again, hoping, for the first time in her life, to hear the old man's voice "Mister..." she paused, realising that she did not know his name "Mister, are you there?" she tried, but the hut, irritatingly, was as silent as always.

The girl peered around the corner into the kitchen, where the man would always sit. That day, however, she found his chair empty, only a subtle depression in the wood showing the man's former dedication to remaining there. The rest of the kitchen was, again, unchanged. Teacups stood exactly where she set them down the day before, the plates were still on the drier, the newspaper she left on the window lay there, untouched. Even air felt like it didn't move. Neb looked at the door opposite the window. She never opened it, but she presumed it led to the old man's bedroom. If he was home at all, he must have been there, she reasoned, as this was the only room in the house aside from the tiny bathroom, and a quick glance through the keyhole confirmed he certainly wasn't in the shower. She approached, nervously looking around her as if the man was about to jump out of one of the closets, yelling "boooo!" and cackling maniacally. No such thing happened. Instead, she reached the door, put her trembling hand on the handle, took a deep breath and pushed it open with a quick, but very uncertain, movement.

There was indeed a bed in the room, standing in the corner. It was neatly made and most definitely empty. The only other thing in a room was a desk, standing right next to the bed, underneath a candle holder attached to the wall. There was a stack on notebooks on the one side of the desk, and an inkwell with a quill sticking out of it. Inbetween them lay a piece of paper. Something must have been written on it once, but wax from the now-extinguished candle spilled onto it, making it impossible to make out the words. She glanced around the room again, making sure the man was not hiding in one of the corners, and picked up one of the notebooks. In it, page after page was written with letters so small and dense she had to concentrate to make out the words. She couldn't quite make sense of the writing, but it still pulled her in. It had a sort of rhythm, a natural music that gripped her mind and wouldn't let go. She kept reading, word after word, sentence after sentence, page after page, until she was staring at the back cover of the notebook, not quite sure how long she was standing there.

Thunder roared outside. She turned around and, looking through the window, realised that, while she was entranced by the writing, storm clouds had gathered outside and it started raining. She swore under her breath. If the man wasn't here, he must have been outside, wandering in the rain, no doubt lost somewhere. She ran out of the house.

"Mister!" she was shouting, as she noticed, beneath her, footprints pressed into the grass of the exact same size as the old man's boots.

She cursed at herself for not seeing them earlier and ran along their trail, afraid that wind will ruffle the grass and the only lead she has will be lost. She didn't notice where she was going until cold waves hit her ankles. She shuddered and took a step back. She looked down, hoping she was wrong, but the footprints did indeed lead straight into the sea, disappearing beneath the waves.

"Mister!" she shouted "Where are you, mister! I'm afraid for you, please come back!"

Howling of the wind was the only answer she got. She raised her hand, sheltering her eyes from the rain that was now pouring in amounts not seen since Noah left his arc at mount Ararat, and she scanned the horizon, looking for any sign of the man. There, in the distance, she saw, just for a second, something that looked like a figure with a coat waving behind it in the wind

"Mister!" she shouted, running into the sea without a second thought

The water was cold as ice, and waves jerked her to and fro. It didn't take long before she started struggling to keep herself from falling, but she still ran as fast as she could. The water reached above her knees, then above her waist, it was almost up to her arms when she lost her footing and roaring waves pulled her under the surface.

It was dark there, but quiet. The roaring of the storm above was dulled by the water. She watched, fascinated, as air bubbles escaped her mouth and floated up along one of the stone columns. Grass swayed gently at the seafloor. As she became dizzy and the world started spinning around her, she wondered whether she could just stop here and take a little nap...

A sudden current jerked her upwards and she broke the surface. She inhaled, deeply, greedily, suddenly hungry for a gasp of air, and flailed her arms around, desperate not to be pulled under again. Her hands met something hard and cold, and she clung to it. She wasn't sure how long she was there, struggling for her life. When the storm died down and the sun came out again, she dared to let go and look at what saved her. It was one of the rocks sticking out of the sea, except the edges of this one were harsher than any of the others, as if it didn't have time to erode. She could see tattered remains of the coat stuck to it, but there was no other sign of the man's presence anywhere.

Neb made her way to the hut, hoping that he managed to return on his own, but it was as empty as when she left. Exhausted, she fell into the chair. She didn't feel ready to come home, not yet, anyway, so she stayed, looking at the two hundred eighty three long shadows cast by the standing stones in the setting sun.