

Oddities on the Coastal Path

Tehnuka

Revathi had come across several mysteries that morning, including:

a crowded beach where evidence strongly suggested walkers should be accompanied by a dog or two — she was not, and felt rather out of place;

hoofmarks on the tideline that she followed for an age before finding the trotting horse that belonged to them (unfortunately, it had a rider, ending the scenario she'd constructed of a lone horse just wanting to visit the sea);

and giant rusty cylinders half-buried in the sand that she was sure had a good story inside them, albeit that she lacked time to explore.

Earlier, she had paced the platform bleary-eyed as the precious hours of autumn daylight set aside for her walk ticked by on the station clock. There was little mystery to be found in last-minute alterations to railway schedules. But then, from the delayed train, she had seen the countryside roll past golden in the dawn light. She strode eagerly out into Filey, down to the seaside and southwards, keeping her shoes on because the sea breeze was chilly and the sand damp. She would walk faster to make up the time. And if her train had not been late, she would not have been there at just the right moment to pick up a dry leaf and flip over the upturned beetle that was wriggling tiny scuff marks into wet-grain canvas, and watch it scuttle away.

Despite the ebbing tide, the sea cut too close to investigate the black layers in the soft white-and-pink cliffs to her right. Further on, the beach disappeared entirely into boulders and foaming waves. After ten minutes picking her way around the algae-slimed rockpools, sandblasted by a wind that gained strength around the curve of the shoreline, she had to turn back to search for the path up off the beach.

She'd stopped to admire the yellow-green glint of olivine in a rounded basalt cobble, foreign on a beach of chalk boulders, and was just about in tears at the wonder of a tiny crystal frozen out of a volcano travelling through time to be found lying in the sand. She would have

missed the turnoff if the middle-aged man in the khaki sunhat hadn't asked whether she was looking for the coastal trail.

'So, where are you from?'

When she glanced back, he seemed to be questioning whether her eyebrows showed annoyance, or whether they were only thick and close-knit. The rest of his group had dispersed, he explained, as if to assure her that he hadn't intended to follow her. He was glad, he said, of company to offset the tedious slog up the dune in the noon heat.

'Sheffield. How about you?' she said lightly, and jumped over a bony driftwood branch.

'Oh, Cheshire, but where are you really from?' He'd almost caught up, though she set a fair pace even with her battered rucksack. It blocked his view of her, except for her hair, which had come undone again. She left it hanging over a shoulder rather than slow down to fix it.

'Well, originally, New Zealand. Why do you ask?'

He was starting to sweat, keeping pace. 'Oh, I thought I heard an accent. But surely that's not where those exotic good looks are from.'

She gave a small, careful, laugh, and said, 'My parents are from Sri Lanka. What brings you to the seaside from Cheshire?'

'Ah, thought so. I've been to India. Beautiful country, beautiful people. The food was great.' You didn't see many Indians here, certainly not girls hiking on their own, he informed her. He had been to India once.

It was in the seventies, she decided, creating him a story out of reciprocity. He'd got bad food poisoning despite staying in a plush hotel, but he'd seen a couple of temples and the locals were very friendly. The cities were horrifically dirty, if he was honest, although he considered himself far too polite to mention that.

They'd reached the path off the dune, close to the top of the coastal cliff, and she stopped to knot her hair into a bun.

'Your hair's so long. Like Lady Godiva's.'

Now, he was wondering if she'd appreciate his witty compliment, or if she didn't know the legend.

‘Uh...okay.’ She shook a stream of sand out of her trainers with a frown, so that he would assume she didn’t.

By the time they reached the breezy clifftop he had mentioned two other young brown women he’d met on previous hikes, and how he admired their spirit, and moved on to explaining how we were all from Africa, and about continental drift, and the interconnectedness of the universe. She said something about everything being made of stars, and he riffed on that for a few minutes.

Later in her day there would be:

gold-tinged gannets in colonies, squawking and soaring on a precipitous cliff face;
steep climbs down to sheltered inlets and rock arches as the tide splashed ever-higher,
scrubbing clean all traces of horses, beetles, and walkers;

and verdant muddy-underfoot paths through bushes and woods, tracking the invisible sky-highway that the coastal birds seemed to follow, just as the walkers did the cliff trail below, before a sudden arrival into the clamour of a seaside resort with all the glories of amusement grounds and arcade lights and a different sort of holidaymaker, through which the train station must be located.

Revathi didn’t know any of that yet, but she thought there were at least eighteen miles left, and that her map showed an awful lot of intriguing places marked on the way, and that she could still get in a swim somewhere if she ran part of the route.

The man told her how the universe always looked after him, and offered her a lift from North Landing, because Bridlington was very far away.

She politely declined and continued on the trail. She fumed a while, then she admired a tiny mousey creature that scurried across the rustling straw underfoot, and then she curated them both into her mental collection of the day’s curiosities.

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