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A Song for Issy Bradley

Written by Carys Bray

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A SONG FOR ISSY BRADLEY

CARYS BRAY



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FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

November

Claire dreams she is walking along a beach with the Lord. She cannot humble herself and speak nicely so they progress in silence. The sand is hard and damp, puddled in places; its ripples bump her bare feet. They walk until He stops and presses a gentle hand to her arm.

'Please come back. I love you.'

The words whisper along the tiny hairs of Claire's inner ear. Did someone sneak into the bedroom, touch her arm and murmur, *I love you*? She lies as still as she can, in case someone is there, hoping to talk to her. If they think she is asleep they will go away and leave her alone.

She continues to feign sleep as she listens to the morning noises. The radiators pop and clank, a kitchen cupboard slams shut and she hears the unintelligible rumble of voices downstairs. The room feels empty, the air undisturbed. When the children breathe they puff air out of their noses like little steam engines. She holds her breath until her stomach is tight and her ears are thrumming. Nothing. No one. She tries to relax, to unfasten the tension in her muscles and soak back into the mattress. Why did she have to wake up just as the Lord started to speak? She attempts to switch her ears off, breathes deeply, slowly, and imagines herself back on the beach. It doesn't work. Eventually she gives up and occupies herself with a thought that flutters through her

mind like a little biplane, trailing a banner of scripture in its wake: *Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or in other words, I have seen a vision.*

The front door closes and Claire hides under the covers for a little longer in case anyone returns for an overlooked lunch box or a forgotten PE kit. Once she is certain no one is coming back, she unwraps her bedcover cocoon. The room tilts as she stands and she holds onto the top rail of the bunk for a moment, eyes squeezed shut. Once the ground steadies she tiptoes along the landing to her own room, drags an old pair of trackie bottoms off the floor and balances against the wall as she pulls them on. Then she heads back along the landing and down the stairs, tucking her nightie into the elastic waistband as she goes. Her coat is hanging on the bottom stair post; she takes it and retrieves her pink wellies from the shoe tidy.

She opens the door. The fresh air is cool and smells of composting leaves, mud and damp wood.

She walks down the empty drive, and when she reaches the gatepost, she looks back. She doesn't have her key; perhaps it doesn't matter.

The house is tall, narrow and slightly hunched. It's the mid-terrace in a squeeze of three 1920s mock-Tudor properties. There are two windows on each of the three storeys, every one criss-crossed with lead squares, making the house seem short-sighted and elderly. The front door is chunky and panelled. Its black paint is peeling away in plastic-sharp shards. Ian's new slate sign hangs next to it, inscribed in white enamel: *The Place*. He ordered it before – in the summer. And when it arrived everyone stood outside and watched him drill holes into the brick while

he sang a hymn: *We'll find the place which God for us prepared, Far away in the west. Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid, There the saints will be blessed!* The sign is a half-serious joke. 'This is the place,' Ian says as he reverses the car onto the drive; the same words the prophet Brigham Young is supposed to have uttered on entering the Salt Lake Valley with the Mormon pioneers. The sign makes Ian happy; he grins as he passes it. Claire used to think stripping the front door and painting it red would make her happy.

She heads in the direction of the beach. It feels strange to be outside and expose her waxy skin to the weather for the first time in weeks. She keeps going and eventually reaches the undulating road that divides the marsh. The road was built on rubbish, purportedly hardcore, but contractors fly-tipped uncompacted household waste into the open cavity during its construction. As the waste settled, the road sank and crested, and it waves through the marsh like a tarmac sea. Claire has always called it the Bumpy Road. Even on a beautiful day like today when sharp blue sky and autumn sunshine distract from the creep of winter, it's windy here.

At the top of the Bumpy Road there's a birdwatching viewpoint that isn't much more than a section of green fencing with peepholes. She peers through one of the holes. There's a board attached to the fence showing images of birds. She looks at the water and thinks she can see black-and-white avocets like the one pictured. It seems right to be surrounded by birds at a time like this. After all, birds have always been messengers and comforters; a dove helped Noah determine the end of the flood and a raven took care of Elijah in the desert. She thinks about

the selfless swallow in *The Happy Prince* and the nightingale that sacrificed itself in order to create a red rose. Several seagulls fly towards the beach and she remembers another story about birds, the miracle of the gulls. It happened in Utah not long after the first pioneers settled. Crops were being eaten by locusts or crickets, something like that, and the pioneers prayed and prayed until flocks of seagulls descended and ate all the pests. People believe the Lord made the seagulls intervene and, as seagulls don't seem to be naturally helpful birds, perhaps He did. She follows the seagulls and crosses the coastal road to the car park at the edge of the beach.

The sea is still at least a couple of miles away, but she can feel the motion of its waves in her chest as she crosses the car park, and each undulation brings a small, unexpected surge of happiness. Overhead a swarm of starlings begins a red-arrow swoop. They whip through the sky like feathery fireworks and as she stops to watch, a swell of emotion breaks in her chest and trickles from her eyes.

She walks past a couple of cars that probably belong to the dog walkers on the track ahead and an elderly couple in a camper van, drinking from Thermos flasks. She follows a slight incline to the Sandwinning Track. There's a bright, new warning sign at the gateway. *Caution: Ribble Estuary Cockling*. She knows the tides here are dangerous; the sea sneaks behind people, filling imperceptible dips in the mudflats, rolling in like a lake, and there is quicksand. Just last week the front of the local newspaper carried the story of another rescue.

Her wellies scuff the stony track and she hears cars whoosh behind her as they race along the coastal road. It

was much quieter in her dream. To her left, in the distance, the pier needles its way from the promenade out onto the bare sand. Inland, she can see the tips of buildings and the pyramid of steel suspension cables supporting the Marine Way Bridge. To her right she can see Blackpool. And if she squints she can see the thin curve of a roller coaster. It seems like she could walk there. People have tried and some of them have drowned.

The track is sandier now, damp and sticky; gritty, like cake mix. It's stamped with a network of prints. There are wide tyre marks from cockling vehicles and thinner tracks from bicycles. There are footprints, paw prints and birds' prints, some tiny, others surprisingly large, pronged like windmill blades. As she continues, the texture of the sand changes; it is speckled with a mosaic of broken shell pieces which draw her towards the sea like a trail of breadcrumbs.

She stops walking when she sees a discarded net. It's red like the little bags that hold oranges, and half full of tiny cockles; silver bells and cockle shells – she remembers singing the nursery rhyme to the children. She prises one open with her thumbnails and when it unlocks like a little mouth she thinks of the children again, of trying to insert toothbrushes past pursed lips. Inside the shell is a brown jelly splodge of clam. She lifts it to her nose, smells the sea and then drops it.

As she walks further she can hear birds calling. It's rockier underfoot and the track is strewn with debris that the sea has spat out. The sand grows muddy and it sucks at her feet, slowing her pace. A dog barks and she glances back. In the far distance, she can see the hill summit of Rivington Pike. She remembers stories where people built

towers and climbed mountains in order to talk to God. Rivington must be more than twenty-five miles away and apart from several railway bridges the town is flat. She could have walked to a railway bridge and she has imagined doing so several times in recent weeks, but this morning's dream has made things clear. When she woke she knew where her exchange with God should take place.

The dog starts to run towards her, shaggy hair streaming in its wake like wings. It's only a puppy, an animal that's bursting with mindless affection. It jumps up and wipes sandy paws on her coat.

'I'm so sorry. Down, Bingley, down!' The man squelches through the last patch of marshy track. He tries to grab the dog by its collar while it licks the rubber of his wellies. 'Who's a bad dog? You are, aren't you? Yes, you are! Oh God. He's got mud all over your coat.' He ruffles the dog's floppy ears and attaches a lead to its collar.

'Don't worry.' Claire's voice sounds rough and discordant. Her tongue is thick and the roof of her mouth is sticky.

'You'd better get it in the wash, or it'll stain. You turning back now?'

'I'm heading on.'

'You want to be careful out here. Got a mobile?'

She hasn't, but she nods.

'Keep looking around. Make sure the sea's not snuck in behind you, the tide's a bastard!'

She raises her hand slightly to indicate goodbye and the man does the same. She watches him and the dog walk away for a moment. He seems to sense her gaze and he stops and turns.

'Lovely day for it,' he calls.

She heads on, unbuttoning her coat as she walks. Her nightie has slipped out of one side of her trackies, so she untucks it and lets it fall to her knees. Ian would say the beautiful weather is a Tender Mercy, a manifestation of the Lord's capacity for reassurance and comfort. She hopes so, but it's hard to know. Ian believes the good things are heaven-sent and the bad are arbitrary. She isn't sure what she believes any more. She keeps walking in the direction of the sea and suddenly, in the squinting distance, beyond the endless corrugations of sand, she thinks she can see its shimmer. She increases her pace, forbids herself from looking left, or right, or behind, and it soon begins to feel as if she is all alone in the world.