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THE BBC NATIONAL SHORT STORY AWARD



Tea at the Midland

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THE WIND BLEW steadily hard with frequent surges of greater ferocity that shook the vast plate glass behind which a woman and a man were having tea. The waters of the bay, quite shallow, came in slant at great speed from the south-west. They were breaking white on a turbid ground far out, tide and wind driving them, line after line, nothing opposing or impeding them so they came on and on until they were expended. The afternoon winter sky was torn and holed by the wind and a troubled golden light flung down at all angles, abiding nowhere, flashing out and vanishing. And under that ceaselessly riven sky, riding the furrows and ridges of the sea, were a score or more of surfers towed on boards by kites. You might have said they were showing off but in truth it was a self-delighting among others doing likewise. The woman behind plate glass could not have been in their thoughts, they were not performing to impress and entertain her. Far out, they rode on the waves or sheer or at

an angle through them and always only to try what they could do. In the din of waves and wind under that ripped-open sky they were enjoying themselves, they felt the life in them to be entirely theirs, to deploy how they liked best. To the woman watching they looked like grace itself, the heart and soul of which is freedom. It pleased her particularly that they were attached by invisible strings to colourful curves of rapidly moving air. How clean and clever that was! You throw up something like a handkerchief, you tether it and by its headlong wish to fly away, you are towed along. And not in the straight line of *its* choosing, no: you tack and swerve as you please and swing out wide around at least a hemisphere of centrifugence. Beautiful, she thought. Such versatile autonomy among the strict determinants and all that co-ordination of mind and body, fitness, practice, confidence, skill and execution, all for fun!

The man had scarcely noticed the surf-riders. He was aware of the crazed light and the shocks of wind chiefly as irritations. All he saw was the woman, and that he had no presence in her thoughts. So he said again, A paedophile is a paedophile. That's all there is to it.

She suffered a jolt, hearing him. And that itself, her being startled, annoyed him more. She had been so intact and absent. Her eyes seemed to have to adjust to his different world. – That still, she said. I'm sorry. But can't you let it be? – He

couldn't, he was thwarted and angered, knowing that he had not been able to force an adjustment in her thinking. – I thought you'd like the place, she said. I read up about it. I even thought we might come here one night, if you could manage it, and we'd have a room with a big curved window and in the morning look out over the bay. – He heard this as recrimination. She had left the particular argument and moved aside to his more general capacity for disappointing her. He however clung to the argument, but she knew, even if he didn't know or wouldn't admit it, that all he wanted was something which the antagonisms that swarmed in him could batten on for a while. Feeling very sure of that, she asked, malevolently, as though it were indeed only a question that any two rational people might debate, Would you have liked it if you hadn't known it was by Eric Gill? Or if you hadn't known Eric Gill was a paedophile? – That's not the point, he said. I know both those things so I can't like it. He had sex with his own daughters, for Christ's sake. – She answered, And with his sisters. And with the dog. Don't forget the dog. And quite possibly he thought it was for Christ's sake. Now suppose he'd done all that but also he made peace in the Middle East. Would you want them to start the killing again when they found out about his private life? – That's not the same, he said. Making peace is useful at least. – I agree, she said. And making beauty isn't. 'Odysseus

welcomed from the Sea' isn't at all useful, though it is worth quite a lot of money, I believe. – Frankly, he said, I don't even think it's beautiful. Knowing what I know, the thought of him carving naked men and women makes me queasy. – And if there was a dog or a little girl in there, you'd vomit?

She turned away, looking at the waves, the light and the surfers again, but not watching them keenly, for which loss she hated him. He sat in a rage. Whenever she turned away and sat in silence he desired very violently to force her to attend and continue further and further in the thing that was harming them. But they were sitting at a table over afternoon tea in a place that had pretensions to style and decorum. So he was baffled and thwarted, he could do nothing, only knot himself tighter in his anger and hate her more.

Then she said in a soft and level voice, not placatory, not in the least appealing to him, only sad and without taking her eyes off the sea, If I heeded you I couldn't watch the surfers with any pleasure until I knew for certain none was a rapist or a member of the BNP. And perhaps I should even have to learn to hate the sea because just out there, where that beautiful golden light is, those poor cockle-pickers drowned when the tide came in on them faster than they could run. I should have to keep thinking of them phoning China on their mobile phones and telling their loved ones they were about to drown. – You turn everything

wrongly, he said. – No, she answered, I'm trying to think the way you seem to want me to think, joining everything up, so that I don't concentrate on one thing without bringing in everything else. When we make love and I cry out for the joy and the pleasure of it I have to bear in mind that some woman somewhere at exactly that time is being abominably tortured and she is screaming in unbearable pain. That's what it would be like if all things were joined up.

She turned to him. What did you tell your wife this time, by the way? What lie did you tell her so we could have tea together? You should write it on your forehead so that I won't forget should you ever turn and look at me kindly. – I risk so much for you, he said. – And I risk nothing for you? I often think you think I've got nothing to lose. – I'm going, he said. You stay and look at the clouds. I'll pay on my way out. – Go if you like, she said. But please don't pay. This was my treat, remember. – She looked out to sea again. – Odysseus was a horrible man. He didn't deserve the courtesy he received from Nausikaa and her mother and father. I don't forget that when I see him coming out of hiding with the olive branch. I know what he has done already in the twenty years away. And I know the foul things he will do when he gets home. But at that moment, the one that Gill chose for his frieze, he is naked and helpless and the young woman is courteous to him and she

knows for certain that her mother and father will welcome him at their hearth. Aren't we allowed to contemplate such moments? – I haven't read it, he said. – Well you could, she said. There's nothing to stop you. I even, I am such a fool, I even thought I would read the passages to you if we had one of those rooms with a view of the sea and of the mountains across the bay that would have snow on them.

She had tears in her eyes. He attended more closely. He felt she might be near to appealing to him, helping him out of it, so that they could get back to somewhere earlier and go a different way, leaving this latest stumbling block aside. There's another thing, she said. – What is it? he asked, softening, letting her see that he would be kind again, if she would let him. – On Scheria, she said, it was their custom to look after shipwrecked sailors and to row them home, however far away. That was their law and they were proud of it. – The tears in her eyes overflowed, her cheeks were wet with them. He waited, unsure, becoming suspicious. – So their best rowers, fifty-two young men, rowed Odysseus back to Ithaca over night and lifted him ashore asleep and laid him gently down and piled all the gifts he had been given by Scheria around him on the sand. Isn't that beautiful? He wakes among their gifts and he is home. But on the way back, do you know, in sight of their own island, out of pique, to punish them for

helping Odysseus, whom he hates, Poseidon turns them and their ship to stone. So Alcinous, the king, to placate Poseidon, a swine, a bully, a thug of a god, decrees they will never help shipwrecked sailors home again. Odysseus, who didn't deserve it, was the last.

He stood up. I don't know why you tell me that, he said. – She wiped her tears on the good linen serviette that had come with their tea and scones. – You never cry, he said. I don't think I've ever seen you cry. And here you are crying about this thing and these people in a book. What about me? I never see you crying about me and you. – And you won't, she said. I promise you, you won't.

He left. She turned again to watch the surfers. The sun was near to setting and golden light came through in floods from under the ragged cover of weltering cloud. The wind shook furiously at the glass. And the surfers skied like angels enjoying the feel of the waters of the Earth, they skimmed, at times they lifted off and flew, they landed with a dash of spray. She watched till the light began to fail and one by one the strange black figures paddled ashore with their boards and sails packed small and weighing next to nothing.

She paid. At the frieze a tall man had knelt and, with an arm around her shoulders, was explaining to a little girl what was going on. It's about welcome, he said. Every stranger was sacred to the people of that island. They clothed him and

fed him without even asking his name. It's a very good picture to have on a rough coast. The lady admitted she would have liked to marry him but he already had a wife at home. So they rowed him home.