

Mark McLaughlin

Since I Saw the Sea

I watched through the windscreen. A rainy Hogmanay¹, the slap and sluice of the windscreen wipers. The Clyde² Tunnel approached. My brother and I readied ourselves to hold our breath as we always did, as every Glasgow kid did going under the tunnel. It usually took a minute or so to get to the other side. I breathed in deep and felt the tightness start to build against my lungs. A
5 closeness, a pressure, moving with each second from chest to neck to head. We were almost through when the traffic slowed. Daylight just beyond us, but I could hold no more and breathed out with a sigh. My brother held still, cheating I'm sure.

The traffic eventually moved, and we headed towards the A77³. On towards Girvan⁴, on to Aunt Anne and Uncle Emir's. Anne was my mother's sister and we always spent New Year there.
10 Christmas at ours, New Year at Anne's. I loved it there, even the journey. Looking beyond my dad at the wheel, straining for that first sight, first sound, first smell of the sea.

Preparations were already in full flow when we got there. Anne met us at the gate, drying her hands on her apron. We hurried upstairs to leave our bags. I stopped briefly at the bedroom window, knowing that if I looked between two of the houses opposite, I could just make out the
15 grey rock of Ailsa Craig⁵ in the Firth of Clyde⁶. I knew that just a few minutes beyond the house lay the beach. A crescent of grey sand made into a small bay by a low promontory⁷ of rocks. Andy's Bay, Emir called it. "Same name as you." He was Turkish Cypriot⁸ and had told me the bay he swam in as a child was called St Andrew's. Even in the coldness of December it felt so exciting to be so near the sea.

We ran downstairs to the living room. Emir was busy rearranging furniture so everyone could dance later. He met us open-armed as always, pulled us close. We helped him and my cousin Marie pull the chairs against the wall, move the dining table. Some banners were put up beside the Christmas decorations. Happy New Year! and 1985 in big tinsel letters. Soon the room was ready.

Marie and I then played some Monopoly upstairs in her bedroom for a while before we got bored. I started to head back downstairs but passed the bathroom where the door was open. Emir stood there in his vest⁹, getting ready for the party. I watched him wipe the steam from the bathroom mirror. His arms taut¹⁰ and brown as harbour rope¹¹. He saw me, caught me eyeing his watch on the edge of the sink and passed it over to me. I hurried to fix the strap, to feel it
30 weighing heavy and hanging loose around my wrist. My dad never let me touch his watch. Sure,

¹ nytår (skotsk)

² flod

³ hovedvej

⁴ mindre skotsk havneby

⁵ *Ailsa Craig*: navn på en ø

⁶ *Firth of Clyde*: bugt

⁷ landtange

⁸ fra Cypern

⁹ undertrøje

¹⁰ spændstige

¹¹ *harbour rope*: kraftigt tov

you'll break it. As he shaved, Emir gurned¹² towards me in the mirror, me laughing away. He towelled his face, winced slightly as he splashed on Tabac¹³. He turned then to the hair; his black comb and Murray's pomade. He was a huge Elvis¹⁴ fan and his elbows would angle high above his head as he worked the pomade through his hair until it resembled a high D.A.¹⁵ His lips curled in an uh-huh. Aunt Anne shouted for him.

"Emir are you still in that bathroom?" she called. "I need your help down here."

"Coming now, Precious!" he said. I started to giggle as he rolled his eyes and then hammed it up¹⁶ as The King, his comb as a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the bathroom."

I followed him downstairs, the tangle of curls from the back of his head already moving free from the pomade.

By early evening the door seemed to be going constantly as friends, family and neighbours arrived, the smell of winter on their coats. Marie and I took our place beneath the buffet table, sitting with plates of sausage rolls and crisps, polystyrene cups fizzing with Irn Bru¹⁷. The conversation grew louder through the night. My brother stood talking to one of the neighbour's daughters. We watched him blush as Marie and I blew kisses towards him. Soon the music grew louder than the chatter; Abba, Neil Diamond, Wham¹⁸. Elvis whenever they let Emir near the stereo¹⁹. Marie and I watched the shuffling of feet for a few minutes as everyone started to dance, but soon we took our place on the hallway stairs. She picked up her parents' wedding photograph from the hallway table and stared at it. [...]

"See this photo," she said. "I pure love it, so I do."

She was always so full of the romance of her parents' wedding. She'd tell me again and again the stories of how they'd met in London when Aunt Anne was doing nursing training. The parties they threw, the songs he sung her. How they were so broke that they had their wedding reception in their tiny Whitechapel²⁰ apartment. They placed their hi-fi speakers on the windowsill, and everyone climbed through to dance on the flat roof of the grocery store below them. Dancing while an East End sunset gave way to the flicker of tealight candles and starlight. Dancing like that was all there was. [...]

We went back into the living room just as the countdown to midnight took place. 5-4-3-2-1! Then there were party poppers²¹ and kisses, hugs and handshakes. Women I didn't know kissed my cheeks, the smell of perfume and cigarettes. Men ruffled my hair. I found my brother to say Happy New Year, but he was kissing the neighbour's daughter in the kitchen, their heads twisting in small, awkward circles. Marie and I just giggled and ran off.

¹² skar en grimasse

¹³ aftershave

¹⁴ Elvis Presley (1935-1977) amerikansk rock-legende, også kendt som The King

¹⁵ *Duck's Arse*: anderumpe (frisure)

¹⁶ *hammed it up*: gav den gas

¹⁷ *Irn Bru*: lokal skotsk sodavand

¹⁸ *Abba, Neil Diamond, Wham*: berømte popbands og -kunstnere fra 1970-1980erne

¹⁹ musikanlæg

²⁰ fattig bydel i East End i London

²¹ *party poppers*: trækpropper med konfetti

Soon we were sent to say our goodnights. As I waited to speak, I watched Emir, my dad and some other men talking.

"So, what... you even swim there in winter?" asked Dad.

"A quick dip every day," said Emir. "I've done it my whole life, from growing up in Northern Cyprus, to lidos²² in London and now here."

"But you swim here in the sea?" asked another man.

Emir nodded.

"Even on New Year's morning?" asked Dad.

"Every day."

I approached my dad then. *Night*, son before he turned back to his whisky and the other men. Emir squeezed my shoulders softly.

"Uncle Emir," I said. "Could I come with you to the beach? Just to watch."

"Of course, you can," he said. "But it will be early in the morning."

I lay down on the blow-up mattress on Marie's bedroom floor. I could still hear the throb²³ of music and laughter, dancing footsteps. I thought of the hours until I'd see the sea but soon, I fell asleep.

I woke the next morning to light from the hallway creeping beneath the bedroom door. I could hear someone moving in the kitchen, so dressed and hurried downstairs. Emir was rolling up his trunks in a dark blue towel and gathering his bag.

"Morning, Andy," he said. "You want some tea?"

I nodded. He still took his tea Turkish style. I watched him pour from the double kettle pot²⁴ into small glasses. The tea iron-red, floral steam²⁵ rising. It was bittersweet, so hot it burned my lips. He sat there quietly, smoking the day's first cigarette. I watched him drain the last of his cup. Then I waited for him to turn away and emptied my tea down the sink.

With our coats pulled tight, we quietly made our way down to the beach. The sky sat somewhere between night and morning. [...] Emir laid his duffle coat down on the beach, gestured for me to sit down. My hands rested against the cool, compact sand. Emir started to undress, pulling his jumper, shirt and vest off as one. [...] Then turned away from me as he [...] pulled up his trunks. Just a brief *God, but it's cold* before he hurried across the sand. I watched him move towards the waves, rubbing his palms together. Just the slightest hesitation at the water; as cold sea reached knee, balls and waist, before his shoulders rose and he dived into the cresting surf²⁶. He swam onwards, his long arms clawing and ploughing at the slate-coloured²⁷ water. He looked so small against the great bowl of morning sky [...]. I watched those arms and feet breaking the surface of the sea, his head twisting to the left to gulp in cold air. He seemed to be in the water longer than I'd expected, more than a *quick dip*. [...] By now Emir was so far out that he barely seemed to be moving [...]. I stood up and walked nervously towards the water's edge. The thinning of the sea²⁸ foamed against my trainers as it reached across the sand, so I stood further

²² friluftsbade

²³ dunkende lyd

²⁴ double kettle pot: tyrkisk tebrygger

²⁵ floral steam: (her) blomsterduft

²⁶ cresting surf: hvor bølgerne brydes

²⁷ slate-coloured: (her) skifergrå

²⁸ The thinning of the sea: (her) Vandet fra bølgerne

back. Emir still hadn't turned around. I looked about the beach anxiously, hoping to find someone, anyone, maybe an adult walking their dog. Someone who could tell me what to do. I called out towards him, my voice lost against the sound of the surf and the cawing²⁹ cries of some seagulls. I thought to walk towards town, find a phone box and call the police. But what if he did come back and we lost each other? I waited a moment longer and then started to edge along the thin line of rocks which reached out towards the sea. [...] I stopped a moment to see if I could find Emir. I called again but it was hard to shout and stay steady on my feet. To my side the waves seemed stronger now, the water darker, deeper. I thought to turn back but as I did a wave passed straight across my feet and ankles, filling my trainers with sea water.

I tried to turn around but lost my footing and fell backwards into the water. A muffled³⁰ roar in my ears, the water fizzed, ice-cold around my face. I pushed my head up, my arms and legs frantically splashed to try to keep myself afloat³¹. My head would slip below the surface whenever a wave crossed, but even when I was above the water I struggled to breathe. [...] I looked around, unsure of whether I was facing sea or rock or land. I tried to call for Emir, but the words wouldn't form in my mouth. I felt again a wave crossing cold across my face, pushing me round like I was the smallest piece of driftwood³², but then I felt something else. An arm around my chest pulling me onto my back. Emir.

"It's okay," he said. "It's okay."

I couldn't see him, could just feel his arm around me which I held tightly, the sound of his breathing over the slapping of the surf. After a moment I could breathe easier. He kept moving back towards the shore and I just looked up towards the sky. When we made the beach, it felt even colder when I moved free of the water. We hurried to his towel, quickly dried ourselves. He put my wet clothes in his bag, gave me his jumper and wrapped his duffle coat around me. I moved across the sand, legs bare, the coat almost trailing on the ground, the sleeves hanging low beyond my hands. We climbed onto the sea wall³³ and he stopped me, pulled me onto his back. My arms held tight around his neck as we walked. I stared at the back of his head. His hair, more dishevelled than ever, a silver sprinkling of stubble just visible across his cheeks. He walked on, both of us silent, but then the silence was always okay around Emir.

(2021)

²⁹ hæse

³⁰ dæmpet

³¹ oven vande

³² drivtømmer

³³ sea wall: mole