

## Sizewell Gap

An original short story by Anj Medhurst

While she swims, I sit on the pebble beach letting stones run through my fingers, listening to the sound as they rattle down the shingle bank, feeling their smooth warmth, turning the occasional interesting-looking one over in my fingers. Despite her vocal, forthright views, she is swimming in the sea next to a nuclear power station. The redundant outfall rigs rise out of the water behind her, like derelict Victorian oil rigs, now inhabited by a noisy colony of Kittiwakes, like some kind of steampunk aviary.

I call out, that water must be freezing!

No, she's grinning. It's really not. Her voice sing-songs, It's positively balmy.

I can tell that she thinks swimming in the sea is good for her. Invigorating, life-enhancing even. I watch her treading water briefly before she strikes out along the shoreline, her strokes strong, purposeful. It's what first struck me about her, as we stood together, arms linked, at the power station gates. She'd hooked her arm firmly through mine with no hesitation, looked briefly up at me, smiled, and then joined in with the rallying calls, her voice strong, clear. She's hauling herself out of the breaking waves now, pushing her tangled hair back off her forehead, yelping as she stumbles on the shifting shingle.

Wow! That was amazing, she grins, picking up a towel and wrapping it around her torso.

I can see goosebumps on her arms as she stretches them up above her head, performing some sort of yoga manoeuvre that makes my shoulders creak and groan just watching her.

Next time you must come in too. Honestly, it's the best feeling, you'd love it. Really, you would.

I'm not so sure. Aside from an occasional paddle along the foreshore in the height of summer - and this isn't the height of summer - I haven't been in the North Sea in years.

Next time. We are on the beach at Sizewell, on a sunny Thursday afternoon in April and even though the sun is shining I am wearing a thick wool sweater and the breeze is chilly. It's one of my favourite stretches of Suffolk coast. There are fishing boats pulled high up on the beach, waiting for the next amenable tide, and a row of slightly scruffy Victorian villas sit snugly behind the dunes. The gentrification that has transformed resorts either side hasn't touched Sizewell – unless you count the addition of some weathered crochet bunting to a creosoted fisherman's hut.

The original coastguard station is still there, an artist's studio now I think but a reminder of the fearsome reputation Sizewell had as a smugglers' den. A sliver of land, an accessible inlet, between the cliffs of Dunwich and Thorpeness, perfect for landing illicit cargo from ships anchored just offshore. I've read the diaries of William Godwin, a local resident in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, his tales of the renowned Hadleigh Gang, bringing crates of tea and gin ashore at Sizewell Gap,

'15 Carts, 40 Horses and 600 Tubs of Spirits were seiz'd this day at Sizewell by a party of Dragoons together with some Tea and bale goods, notwithstanding which ye Smuglers work'd another Cutter at ye same place the ensuing night.'

I imagine the thundering hooves of horses, in the pitch of night, nostrils flaring with the effort of the load, the Suffolk vernacular ringing through the air as the gang fails to evade the local constabulary. Someone told me that when the coastguard station was sold it still had its musket rack intact.

The gin smugglers are long gone, albeit replaced by the occasional small boat carrying refugees desperate to reach our hallowed shores, cut-off by the coastguard long before they reach the beach because of the most obvious addition to the nineteenth century landscape. The nuclear power station looms over us, its white dome visible from several miles further up the coast.

For the locals though, it sits unnoticed much of the time, just beyond their peripheral vision. The last remaining fisherman lands his catch several times a week and sells it from the hut in his yard. Mugs of tea and cheese toasties are served from the cafe in the beach car park. For years people have walked their dogs, dug their allotments, gone about their daily business while barely giving the power station a second thought.

I've been the same; just another not-quite-local who loves the beach for dog-walking in the winter and avoiding the overflowing car parks of the more popular resorts either side in high summer. The grandkids are always happy to while away an afternoon here with Nana, knowing there's a freezer full of Cornettos, Calippos, and Magnum ice-creams in the little café, set just behind the beach, with no sea view from its wooden picnic benches, and untouched by the gelato-fication of Southwold and Aldeburgh.

Hey, look!

She's sitting next to me, towel wrapped around her legs, hair slowly drying to a pale straw blonde as she too rummages through the pebbles. She's holding up a stone, a piece of

flint, with a perfectly round hole bored through the middle of it. She squints through it, small creases appearing at the corner of her eye, the soft pale down on her cheek glowing in the sunlight. Her face has an exquisite energy.

It's a hag stone. You should keep it, thread a string through it and hang it up above your front door, it'll ward off evil spirits, hags, and witches. We should be stringing them from the gates up there. I tip my head back towards the power station.

I'd gone to the demonstration completely on a whim, and alone after phoning around a few friends (all *incredibly* busy; gardening, doctors' appointments, coffee with a neighbour, a lunchtime recital at the arts centre). If not now then when, I'd thought, as I'd laced up my sturdy walking boots and driven down to Sizewell. There were a few familiar faces – the local green party counsellor you'd expect obviously – but mostly the people milling around, chatting, nodding, and shaking their heads as they shared views and news, were strangers. I'd lurked on the edge of the throng of people collecting placards from the back of a van in the car park, and then wandered along behind the pack as they made their way up to the gates of the power station. The mood was energetic, jubilant almost, a real mix of old and young – but there were lots more women than men it occurred to me – and while some of the younger demonstrators had Extinction Rebellion flags, tattoos, and neon hair, others – it has to be said mostly the older ones – looked like a Ramblers Association meet-up that had found themselves caught up in something unexpected. As we approached the gates someone at the front started a rallying cry,

Sizewell C, not for me! Sizewell C, not for me.

I hadn't joined in with the chanting, but I'd glanced around to see who was making the most noise and smiled at the people I made eye contact with.

He's due at eleven, yeah? The young woman next to me had called to one of the police officers standing between us and the plant entrance and received a shrug in response.

Running ten minutes late, traffic on the A12.

Then she'd hooked her arm through mine, winked at the stony-faced police officer, and joined back in with the rousing mantra.

Later, when she is dry and warm, we walk along the back of the beach, on the sandy heathland track where the grass is mown close by the rabbits and gorse covered banks slope up to the power station, filling the air with vanilla scent. This stretch of the coast is dotted with the paraphernalia of the fishing industry that once thrived. Although the fleet now comprises just one boat, winches, nets, and ropes are still strewn across the shingle. The straggle of creosoted fisherman's huts has been reclaimed by residents who appreciate their decaying charm and sit, waiting for the kettle to boil, while they watch the sea birds and ponder the changeable weather. This still feels like a working beach.

We reach the point on the path where the fencing separating the power station from the beach ends, and we have the open expanse of RSPB Minsmere nature reserve in front of us. Home to Bitterns, Avocets and Marsh Harriers, it is an important landscape for conservationists and bird watchers. With our backs to the reactor buildings, looking across the unique landscape, the reed beds glisten in the mellow light. We stroll back along the foreshore, where sea kale grows in the shingle, bending occasionally to pick up an interesting piece of flotsam or a stripy pebble, hoping to spot Baltic amber, or glowing orange carnelian. The power station is remarkably quiet. Not even a faint hum is audible as atomic nuclei split endlessly, like cells silently mutating, to heat the water, to produce the

steam, to spin the turbine, to power the generator, that makes electricity flow.

There are gulls swooping and diving around the two 'flush valves'. I've heard that this is where the filters of the cooling system are emptied and it is dead fish, unfortunate enough to find their way into the pumps, that are being belched back into the sea.

Waves ripple out from the power station into the community. The single-track railway line that carries nuclear waste away from the power station demands an armed guard to pass through the nearby town; residents have iodine tablets in their bathroom cabinets, just in case; and armed police in off-road vehicles regularly patrol the beach. I can remember lying on this beach, in the aftermath of 9/11, eyes closed, the sun warming my eyelids, sea birds screeching above, and picturing a hijacked jet flying into the huge white dome behind me. Deciding that I'd rather be a hundred metres from it, gone in a flash if that were to happen, than at home five miles away, outside the iodine zone.

She'd moved quickly when the politician's car was spotted on the approach road. As the police officers had moved forward to clear the access for the vehicles, she'd turned to me,

Are you up for a little bit of civil disobedience?

What? I'd said.

Quick.

Then she'd sort of shimmied sideways, and somehow from the raggle-taggle cluster of demonstrators an organised line of bodies emerged, arms linked, still shouting and before I was aware what was happening, she was looping a thick plastic cable tie through my elbow and then through hers and pulling it tight.

You'll be fine, she gave me a reassuring look, smiled, then looked along the line of

protestors.

I saw now that the tall young man at the end of the line had attached himself to the metal security fencing to the side of the open gate. Looking the other way along the line, I saw the same. We were, in an instant, a human barrier, each protestor cable-tied to the next, all the way across the entrance to the plant. The remaining demonstrators stood in front of us, waving placards and shouting,

Sizewell C, Not for me, Sizewell C, Not for me.

You did what mum?

Later that evening I'd phoned Claire, I thought I'd better let you know, I laughed, you know, just in case you saw me on the news. Claire laughed too.

Honestly mum, what were you thinking?

Well, I wasn't really. It just happened. One minute I was milling around plucking up the courage to join in with the chanting, and the next I was part of a human barricade.

Floss and Ted are going to think it's hilarious, Nana on the local news at an XR demo.

It wasn't an XR demo, it was just a few locals making sure the Business Secretary knows how we feel about the new reactor, that's all.

Well, that's not what it sounds like mum, I think your little group of concerned OAPs might have been infiltrated. Next, you'll be telling me you've been seduced by an undercover police officer. And since when did you have such strong views on nuclear power?

She's chuckling now, and I join her, settling myself in the armchair for a chat and reaching for my wine glass. It's been quite a day.

We'd walked back down to the car park together after the police had liberated us – none too gently, I hasten to add – from the cable ties, and the business secretary had ignored us before turning on the charm for his PR piece to camera, extolling the virtues of the 'clean', 'safe', job-creating future of nuclear power for the local news reporters.

I'm sorry if that took you by surprise, she'd said, her hand on my arm. Are you OK?

Goodness yes, I'm fine. I'd looked her straight in the eye, That was the most fun I've had in ages.

We'd both laughed and she'd offered to buy us both a cup of tea and a cheese toastie.

OK, but it's on me.

We'd sat for an hour or more, on a bench outside the café; she'd told me about her degree in environmental science, the various marches and climate change demos she'd been on recently, her boring childhood, her ex-girlfriend who'd left her for a mutual acquaintance. I'd watched her fiddle with the ratty tangle of friendship bracelets on her wrist, tip her head back and close her eyes against the late afternoon sun, wipe melted cheese from the corner of her mouth. I'd skirted around the banality of my art classes, volunteering at the library, babysitting grandchildren, losing Nicholas all those years ago. She'd touched my hand gently.

I'm going in for a swim, she'd said, Fancy joining me?

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