

Crossing the Channel

By Darby Patterson©

It is a sun filled day and heat rises from the sand on the beach. Of course, being Frinton on Sea and facing the English Channel, there is still a nip of crispness in the air. There are few people here with me and the cove seems intensely personal. This sense of solace does not change when a middle-aged couple slowly climbs down the rock stairs from the sea wall above and stand on the sand. They pause there, looking out, and I wonder if they will merely rest a while and leave. They look like tourists to the coast, a little surprised to find themselves here.

They are not dressed for the beach. She wears a pale blue sweater set and navy slacks. Her shoes have low heels. She holds a worn brown purse over her shoulder. He seems dressed for work, in a white shirt and grey pants. Two pens protrude from the pocket of his shirt and he unbuttons the sleeves and rolls them up a bit. They are not far from where I sit, book and camera in hand.

He says something softly to her and she shakes her head. "No, I'll just stay here. You go ahead. I'd ruin my shoes," she tells him.

"Take them off," he suggests, smiling, playful.

She gives him a look of exasperation and waves him off like a mischievous puppy. Her hair is a chestnut color, likely covering a crop of unwanted grey. It has been recently styled and she tries to pat it back into place as the breeze plays with it. After riffling in her purse, she pulls

a thin white scarf out and ties it loosely around her head.

Her husband takes off his shoes, drops them in the sand and strolls to the water's edge. He glances back at her, watching the ritual of saving her hair-do. His eyes are deeply blue like a fisherman's and his face is etched with lines. I know this man is not a fisherman. His countenance hints of a desk job from which he is perhaps retired. Nonetheless, I picture him at ease here, alongside the sea, drawn to it almost without choice. I know he will wade in the water.

He walks beyond the damp line where the waves lap the shore. The man with hair the color of sea foam rolls up the legs of his pants and wanders in. His ankles are white as limestone. They are soon covered by water that laps up to his knees.

He stands and stares out over the Channel, his hands thrust into the pockets of his pants. He looks far southeast and I wonder if he is reaching for memories of a week he'd spent at the beach long ago, when he was young and full. He turns slightly as if to leave, but pauses instead and then inches out further into the tumbling surf.

After many minutes lost in his thoughts, he slowly walks back to his wife who still stands on the stairs by the sea wall clutching her purse to her chest. "Come in with me?" he urges with a faint smile on his lips.

"I don't have a towel in the car," she answers, clearly unwilling to join her husband in his rite with the water. "Go ahead. Don't worry about me."

He takes off his watch and hands it to his wife. He turns his back to her again and walks directly into the water, the forward thrust splashing his trousers, making dark wet spots. The surf is gentle and laps up against legs so thin they look as if they might snap if hit by a strong wave.

Behind him, on the beach, two lovers lay entwined on a red blanket pressed into the sand

like a nest. The young woman with hair the color of honey, quickly sits up and laughs at some words she and her lover have shared. The sound peals like a bell, riding over the sand and out to sea. Her long hair dances in the wind and she runs her fingers through it. The man reaches up and grabs her arm, pulling her down against him again until they are wrapped around each other, touching from toe to head. They are dressed for touching, she wearing a deep backless swimsuit and he in brief trunks that shimmer when he moves.

The older man wrests his gaze from the horizon and turns to look at his wife.

"It's warm," he shouts over the low roar of the surf and the laughter of the young couple.

"It's not at all cold!"

His wife shifts her purse to her hip, raises her chin and answers, "That's nice," still not drawn to join him in his baptism of salt and foam. She will stand patiently, without complaint, and wait until her husband tires of the moment. He is quite wet by now and she waves at him in a gesture of tolerance for his frivolity. She shakes her head slightly, like a mother watching a precocious child.

As the man looks at his wife, and she at him, his gaze falls upon the young couple in the sand. He is of a generation that is loathe to stare, but he watches them nonetheless. I see his chest rise and fall in a great exaggerated sigh. The look on his face is not disapproving, but softly sorrowful. His wife has pinched her mouth up like a closed blossom. She gives no sign she's seen the young couple at all though I know she has glanced, perhaps more than once. She gazes briefly, at me and then up at the sea wall and back out to out to the water.

The young lovers are oblivious of the older couple. Oblivious, in fact, to everything save their mutual bodies and fervor for each other. They roll over so she is now on top, her hair

caressing her lover's face like strands of windblown silk. His arms, flecked with tiny grains of sand, shimmer in the sunlight as he moves his hands over her bare back. I wonder what stops them from coupling there on the beach in front of us, each with our own reflections.

The husband reaches down and scoops up a handful of water. He wipes his face and lets the drops fall to his white shirt. I see him taste the salt on his lips before turning and facing the endless sea. His wife's eyes have drifted fully to the lovers and she watches them with curiosity, her head tilted to one side and lips slightly parted as if preparing to ask a question.

The day has been uncharacteristically bright and warm, but clouds have gathered and now obscure the late afternoon sun. Without the sun's reflection on the sand, the beach loses its warmth. It is a signal for the husband to turn his back on the eastern horizon and allow his legs to dry in the breeze.

He pushes his way through the waves, past the young couple, digging his toes into the sand as he walks to his wife's side. They stand together for a moment looking out at the sea, over the lovers who seem unaware of the change in climate. Where they touch each other there is no room for chill, they are an envelope of warmth, they defy the passage of time, of temperature, perhaps, even, the turning of the earth.

The husband puts his arm around his wife's shoulder. "Cold?" he asks. "Getting there," she answers. "Back to the car then?" She hands him his watch and helps him fasten it around his wrist. He watches her face as she tucks away the loose end of the band. They turn and climb the worn stairs of the seawall to the cliffs above. I follow at a distance and listen. Wanting something for them, from them.

They don't talk as they walk the path along the seawall edge. There are wild flowers here

and there, and benches built of weathered wood overlooking the expansive view of the Channel. They pause at one bearing an inscription etched in brass. It is the woman's voice. "In loving memory of my husband and friend, Len Cherry , whose eyes were as blue as the sea and heart as deep."

"Yes, well," said the man looking out at the half circle of sun peeking from the clouds, and touching the back of the bench with warm light. "He must have been quite a fellow."

His wife, feeling the bite of the wind and looking in his eyes, answers by hooking her arm in his and pulling her husband closer. She looks up into his eyes and smiles. "Come on. Let's get you to the car. You're soaked. "

I rest on Len Cherry's bench and watch the young lovers sit up and gaze out to sea. The clouds have parted. The waning sun hits them and their bodies cast long shadows in the sand.

###