

DIANNE BOWN-WILSON

Degrees of Exposure

“In order for the light to shine so brightly, darkness must be present.”—Sir Francis Bacon

I chose the house because of the light. The vast picture window that makes up its entire end wall must have been added specifically, as the architects say, to ‘bring the outside in’ and from what I could tell from the Rightmove picture taken from the main room, that ‘outside’ was seriously good. Open sea and open skies stretching into infinity, the frameless glass no more than an invisible barrier against the elements. Coastal Cornwall, the last house at the far end of the bay, huddled like a plump seabird on a stony outcrop overlooking the beach. More than good—outstanding.

Despite the estate agent’s best attempts at capturing its plus points, the rest of the place looked tired, a bit tatty and unloved. But something about it hinted that with paint, new furniture and a serious amount of elbow grease, it could be brought up to a standard more in keeping with the view.

Straightaway I looked up the property’s proximity to other houses on Google—good news, it stood alone—and researched all the relevant details I could online. Nothing in the search results rang any alarm bells or even caused a momentary prickle of concern, so within the hour I phoned the agent.

“The cottage has been a holiday let for years but it’s been empty for a while and the owner’s keen to sell,” he said. “The setting’s superb, though maybe a bit remote for some but it does need work...”

“Sounds okay. I’ll send someone to check it out. When would suit?”

Three days later my mother reported back that she thought this one ticked all my boxes.

Trapped in the honeypot of my mother’s home, yet facing the fact that continuing to live there would eventually destroy us both, I knew I had to make a decision. I’d looked at dozens of properties online, sent Mum out to look round at least ten and none of them had been a patch on this.

“Think about it Gemma,” Mum said. “Making the leap to independence is more important than the actual property—you can always move if it really doesn’t suit.”

I nodded; gritted my teeth. “Yeah, you’re right—I’ll go for it, then.”

I first saw the house itself some ten weeks later on the day I moved in. The idea of moving into a place you’ve never seen in a location you’ve never been to may seem strange but much about my life is strange though it never used to be. Four years ago, I was a normal person, leading an ordinary life, never thinking for a moment that apart from someday meeting The One, followed by marriage and kids, things would ever be much different. But once you’re completely unhinged, ex-boyfriend follows you home, sloshes petrol all over you, then flicks in a lighted match, nothing is ever the same.

Karl, that’s his name, is in prison now and won’t be out for a very long time. Perhaps surprisingly, I don’t spend much time thinking about him and never did in the three months we were together, which was one of the reasons I decided he had to go. Certainly it’s not the threat of him, or any other maniac, that bothers me these days, though people assume that it must be. No, there’s plenty more in my own personal mental prison that disturbs me more.

After ‘the incident’ I was in hospital more or less constantly for about eighteen months while they treated the burns and repeatedly grafted skin. After that, there were periods at home—my mother’s house—where she tiptoed around me as if I was still likely to die and where, despite the very best care and precautions, I picked up infections and endured further spells in hospital and more

operations and drugs.

Fortunately, and I do still try to tell myself that things could have been worse, mad Karl managed to miss most of my face with the petrol and although one whole side of my body was barbecued like a chicken, the bits that generally are visible don't seem too obviously damaged if you don't look too hard for too long. Well, that's if I cover up with long sleeves and trousers and wear my hair in curtains to cover my neck and the underside of my chin where the scars lap up like tidemarks on the shore.

So I know, logically, that I can go out in public and not frighten the horses or make small children scream. But logic left me a long time ago, sucked out with the pus and blood and replaced, so it seems, by fear and panic. Judging by the mental state I'm in now, they must have pumped them in intravenously over a very long time or how did I get to be so bad?

To set the scene then, at the time of buying the house—Seagull Cottage—I was officially diagnosed as agoraphobic, somewhat claustrophobic and suffering from a type of Seasonal Affective Disorder which meant I was constantly depressed despite taking anti-depressants and sitting for hours in front of a light-box. And I was driving my mother towards a nervous breakdown.

“You need to get out, Gemma,” she'd say on a daily basis. “Or if not, at least invite some people round. Your old friends are all really concerned about you, they'd love to come and see you. You'll never get better if you don't make the effort to put this behind you.”

‘Get better’ was a ludicrous phrase—but I knew it wasn't her fault. “Let's not keep going over this Mum. I don't *want* to see anyone from my old life. Yes, I do want to move on, you know I do but that means new people, a new life, a new me. Not the past.”

She'd shrug. I could tell that inside she probably wanted to weep. Hence the need to move on, to find myself a place, to show her that I didn't intentionally want to cause her yet more pain.

On the day she accompanied me to my new home, the two of us in my car following my Uncle Derek in his van, Mum was especially edgy. For one thing she must have been tired, having spent several days at the place in recent weeks, clearing and attacking years of dirt, making regular round trips from her own place in Bristol. I hadn't

meant to leave her to do it all but luck being what it is, I'd been struck down with some sort of virus two weeks previously and had only just recuperated enough to get out of bed.

She stayed with me, drinking tea and telling me all I'd need to know about where things were and how they worked while Uncle Derek unloaded my stuff. There wasn't much as the furniture was already in place—bought from the previous owner—so in no time at all it was time for them to go. Parting was difficult for both of us but it had to happen. If I was ever to have any sort of life I had to start regaining control.

“Take care, darling,” she said as she kissed me goodbye. “Call me if you need me—you know I'll always come. But be strong too—you know you can do it.”

I nodded. Theoretically, she was right but practically, now I was going to be coping on my own, I wasn't as certain as I felt I needed to be.

I stood in the doorway watching them leave, Uncle Derek tooting the horn and Mum waving heroically. And then, finally, I was alone.

Back in the house there was little for me to do except unpack boxes—mainly books and clothes. Mum had organised everything else—furniture, groceries, paint and brushes for the remaining redecorating. She was an angel; eventually I hoped I'd be able to repay her. But it wasn't about money, or even time, we both knew that for her, the best payback would be if I could get a grip, conquer my demons and get back to being the sort of normal, fully-functioning 32-year-old that at one time she'd naturally expected I'd be.

Just before dusk I went outside for the first time, 'outside' being just beyond the door. From here, at the side of the house, you could still see the sea and the skies but you could also look back towards the village and the distant lights of the other houses, the nearest being several hundred metres away. I felt completely alone. Being June and a reasonable day, dusk was only just falling at around 10 p.m. and a stillness had descended to replace the persistent breeze that throughout the day had whipped up sea foam and flattened the bank of seagrasses. It was tranquil, only the comforting sound of the sea—as regular as breathing—punctuating the silence. In the near darkness, I felt safer than I had all day, though not safe enough to

venture further—over the tarmac for instance and on to the beach. It was too open there, too exposed; for now, a challenge too far.

In terms of challenges I had no doubts I still had a long way to go. I'd spent the afternoon looking out at the view through a small gap in the heavy full-length curtains that Mum had hung to completely cover the huge, 'let the outside in' window knowing that without curtains there would be no way I would be able—for now—to live in such an exposed space. In all the hours that I sat there watching no one passed by, not one person, yet still I couldn't bring myself to open the curtains further.

That first evening, I made myself stay outside for five minutes, I timed it on my watch. I was proud of that but that pride wasn't enough to overcome the tsunami of fear that threatened to swamp me if I let down my guard for a moment. *Try to do too much and you'll die*, my brain kept telling me. *Yes, I know*, my heart replied.

So that was last year and now, in March 2017, I wish I could say that the wonderful property had brought about a miracle cure, that my exposure to the light and the elements and the inspirational surroundings worked wonders and banished my demons. But only a fool would believe that.

The remainder of summer last year and into the autumn was kind of okay. My days fell quickly into a routine. Up no later than 5 a.m., a quick coffee while I washed and dressed and then the first of my forays into the outside world. At first, I could go no further than a metre or two from the house but at the end of my first three weeks there, I finally managed to dart across the tarmac to stand on the beach itself. That first time, I only managed a minute or so but after that, every day I became braver until by September, I was able to stand at the water's edge, waves lapping at my ankles, watching the sun's rays dissolve the dark in the sky. But, like Cinderella, there was a cut-off point—6.30—by which time I had to be back. Some voice told me that after that, the day would be starting and people might reasonably be expected to be about, the light would be bright and I couldn't risk the chance of anyone seeing me. I had to go back inside.

As winter approached, the days shortened and my prison started to close in. The only real living space in the house was the room with the big window and as I still wasn't able to be in it with the

curtains open, I lived my life in the dark. Added to this, as fast as my paranoia faded in one area, so it seemed it grew in another; I'd become obsessed about people outside being able to see whether the lights were on in the house—a sign that I was there. So I kept the curtains on every window tightly closed; it was difficult to believe that progress was being made.

My mother, who called frequently but visited only occasionally, (deliberately, we both knew, in order that I was forced to come to grips with being alone), remained optimistic.

"It will be difficult—it *is* difficult," she said. "But don't give up. You will get there. I feel you are improving already and I'm so proud of you."

I didn't bother to argue with her, even though I felt I should. There was nothing for her to be proud about. In some ways, although I was now out from under her feet, I was still leading the same damaged life, just elsewhere. By Christmas I still hadn't met anyone from the village, or ventured up to the pub or village hall. The postman left any mail for me in a box outside, so I'd never met him and as I drove to Truro once a week to buy groceries and pick up prescriptions, I had no need for any personal contact with anyone near. Strange how I could get in my car and drive to a busy town with no problems, yet walking alone on a deserted beach, *my* beach, was harder than diving off the high-board knowing you couldn't swim.

I filled my days with work. Fortunately, I now have the luxury of not having to work, having received a sizeable sum in compensation and soon after, the proceeds of my grandfather's estate. Living as I do, simply and inexpensively, that should be enough to last me my lifetime, disregarding the fact that I will also, as their only child, eventually inherit both my mother's and father's estates.

But work is more than earning money. It's about commitment and discipline and achievement and all those other things that normal people take for granted. Work is kind of who you are, certainly it was in my previous career as a teacher, so alongside my physio in the early days I took it upon myself to learn new skills. First, one-handed typing and then, when I was fairly well recovered physically, I trained as a proofreader. The work's not scintillating but it suits. It works well. As a freelance I get sent stuff in the post or by

email that I can usually do in a timescale that I determine and for a price that makes me undeniably competitive compared to those who need to make a living wage. It fills the hours.

Throughout this period my depression hardly lifted. It should have done and would have done had I gone out more but I needed the security of living like some animal, underground, safe from the daylight world. Not that in reality there was much to hide from. It was very rare that anybody came down to my end of the bay; the few that did, I suspected were holidaymakers, strangers, certainly I never saw anyone who looked as if they would be local. Why would they come my way? The prettier, more active end of the bay was the other side—that's where people lived and worked and accessed the beach and the sea; no need to brave the rocks and the bleakness near me.

So that's how my life has been. Then yesterday, things changed.

At around eleven in the morning—I know the time because I glanced at my watch—there was a brisk knock on my door. I could only think that it must be a delivery driver, lost; who else? Surely by now any villagers must have written me off as a weird recluse, a witch; I don't think even the vicar would come knocking now. I decided to sit still and wait for whoever it was to go away. But the knock was repeated, several times and I realised with horror that whoever it was must have spotted a shaft of light spilling out from my illuminated room, beacon-bright in the gloomy day.

Eventually, heart pounding, I opened the door a crack and peered through. The benign features of a young, smooth-faced, Asian man—most likely Japanese?—gazed back at me. He was swathed in an oversized puffa coat, red scarf and flat black cap, yet still looked cold. Around his neck swung a heavy, long-lensed camera, over his shoulder a large canvas strap bag bulged with unknown things.

“Good morning,” he smiled, evidently unperturbed by his wait. His English was perfect with a slight North American twang. “My name is Haru and as you can see, I'm a photographer.” He lifted his camera towards me by way of confirmation. “I apologise for disturbing you but I wanted to ask if you'd mind if I took some shots from outside your big window at the front. I'm trying to get the widest view of the sea and that's the best possible spot. I'd be very grateful if you'd allow me.”

The way he said ‘if you’d allow me’ hinted at an other-world charm that was difficult to resist. My inclination was to refuse but his open-faced smile was so non-threatening that I couldn’t. “Sure, no problem, help yourself.”

“Thank you.”

I closed the door again, expecting that to be the end of the exchange. Unable to run the risk of going back into the main room and having him see me through the crack in the curtains, I stood by the door, hidden, wondering how much time he’d take. Not long, surely.

After about ten minutes, when I felt he must be long gone, I felt safe enough to go back to my work but within seconds there was once again a rap on the door.

Palms sweating, I opened it, perhaps in hindsight a bit too quickly. He was still smiling, looking as relaxed as a buddy dropping by for tea. I said nothing.

“I just wanted to thank you,” he said. “I got some great shots.”

I nodded.

“I’m surprised you keep your curtains closed, though. If it was me, I wouldn’t be able to ever shut out that view.”

I shrugged. “I have work to do.”

“Oh, of course. And I must have interrupted you. Sorry.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a leaflet. “I don’t know if you’ve seen this but I’m doing a talk here in the village on Thursday: Coastal photography. And I have an exhibition in Truro, opening tomorrow.”

“I didn’t know.”

For a moment he looked wounded. “No problem. Not everyone’s interested in photography.” He started to put the leaflet back in his bag.

In my mind I heard my mother’s voice: *No need to be so rude, Gemma, he’s only trying to be nice.* She was right. I was being a complete arse. “Sorry, really, it’s not that I’m not interested. I just didn’t know about it. But please do leave me the details.”

He handed me the leaflet and then turned to go. I would have let him but in his eyes I saw rejection, something I knew too well.

Without thinking I blurted it out: “Would you like to come in

for a coffee—warm up for a bit? I can feel it's freezing even though I haven't been out."

He smiled. "That would be great—I love this work but you know, I never get used to just how cold some days can be even without ice or snow. The English climate, hey?"

I opened the door wide and ushered him in.

Once inside he stood for a moment, staring ahead, his eyes no doubt adjusting to the lamplight and gloom. "Oh..." he said.

"Please sit down." I indicated the sofa. "If coffee's okay it'll only take a minute."

"Sure."

In the tiny kitchen I filled the percolator and set some mugs and milk on a tray. I made myself breathe deeply; I was afraid, of course but of what? He was actually just a nice, normal guy, quite small, slight—no physical threat. And this was what ordinary people did—invited other people in for a cup of something. I glanced through the door to where he was sitting with his back to me and was relieved to see he'd taken off his coat and scarf and was fiddling with his camera. I'd feared he'd be perched there, frozen, wondering what strange den he'd wandered into.

I took the tray through and poured the coffee before sitting down. I knew I had to acknowledge the elephant in the room.

"You must think it odd that I've got the curtains drawn but I'm afraid I can't open them. It's a psychological problem—various issues; I can't stand the feeling of being so exposed."

"Oh. That's a shame when you have such a great view; it must be very distressing."

"I'm used to it."

He was silent for a moment. Then, "Do you live here alone, then?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?" I almost added, 'Are you an axe-murderer?' but stopped myself, not knowing how he'd take a joke.

"Well, you just seem sort of solitary. And with your 'issues' it must be quite lonely, quite difficult."

"It's okay."

He looked at the floor, chewing his lip and I could tell he'd run out of things to say as I had myself.

Then—"I wonder if you'd be interested in seeing some of the

shots I took earlier? I've just had a quick look and from what I can see they should be interesting. Not as good as the real thing of course but..."

"I'd love to." I felt that yet again I'd somehow been dismissive and wanted to overturn the impression he must have formed of me. "You must be really good to have a show in Truro—is it all landscapes?"

"No, a variety of subjects. I've never specialised in either landscape or portrait, for me they're interchangeable—the subject is king whatever it is. My interest is in how I can capture something—a scene, a person, a piece of architecture—and preserve it at its best and that tends to be about composition and light. Mainly light, because manipulating grades of light creates texture and mood."

I thought back to my school art lessons. "Don't you do that when you print the images or is that something different?"

"Yes, you're right. You can do lots at that stage if you work with film but digital is different. Neither is better than the other and with both it's important to capture the best images to work with. To do that you have to make sure you use the right size of aperture on the camera lens when you're taking the pictures. If you don't let in much light, you can get both far and near objects in focus so it's quite realistic but if you open things right up you can isolate the foreground by making it sharp and keeping the background blurry. That's often the best way, I find, to capture the truth of what's there."

"Oh." When he spoke he came alive and I felt a stab of envy.

"Sorry, I'm being boring. Photographers can be very good at that."

"No, really, it's fine. I was just thinking about what you were saying and how that works." Something in my head was telling me that there was a truth in his words that went further than the business of capturing images but while he was there, I was unable to focus sufficiently to pinpoint what that might be. *Open up...isolate the foreground...background blurry...capture the truth...*

"If you really are interested, I could come back sometime and show you some images from previous exhibitions, where I've created a suite of different moods from the same subject simply by manipulating the light. I find it fascinating still, after all these years, that you can do that—" He stopped and I watched his face fall. "But hey, I know I'm a bit of a photobore, so I don't expect you to share

my enthusiasm, it was just a suggestion...”

God, I must have done it again, looked really contemptuous or something.

I gave him my very best genuine smile. “I would love to see some of your stuff. Really, truly, please.”

He nodded and we agreed that ten the next day would be a good time for him to return. Within a couple of minutes he finished his coffee, shrugged on his coat and grabbed his camera and bag. As I watched him walk towards the village then closed the door behind him, my thoughts were in a turmoil, not least because, for once, I didn’t feel afraid.

This morning he was here on time. I watched him as he parked his car (a silver Audi) and got out, unaware he was being observed. Turning towards the house he smiled, as if pleased to find himself where he was. Again he was stylishly dressed, quirky but if asked for my overall impression I would have said ‘wholesome’; in fact the faint aroma of him—a lemony, woody fragrance, still lingered in my room. He looked good.

I opened the door before he knocked.

In view of what I planned to do I’d taken particular trouble over my appearance: full make-up, freshly washed, artfully arranged hair, the most flattering of all my highly concealing clothes. I wanted to stand up to scrutiny as best I could.

“Come in. Sit down. Coffee’s ready this time. But first, I’ve been thinking about what you said and have decided you were right. I want to make the background—my background—disappear, so I need to let in the light. Now you’re here I’m going to open the curtains.”

He laughed as if genuinely delighted. “That’s wonderful. But please, only do it if you feel you can. I would hate you to be anxious because of me.”

But I was already at the window, dragging open the heavy drapes, squinting at the impact of the watery sunlight flooding in. I turned back towards him and saw, for the first time, a view of the room that previously had been lost to me. Not a cage, or a cell but a bright airy space. My very own epiphany.

Later, after coffee, he showed me the pictures he'd spoken about. They were stunning.

"All this, it's all about light you know." He gestured at the prints. "Reality is good, it keeps you grounded but to develop things to be as good as they can be, well that requires a bit of manipulation. That's what I do and mostly it works."

And then there was a book, "This came out two years ago alongside another exhibition in New York," he said without a hint of boasting.

I flicked through it, speechless, not wanting to appear sycophantic. He said nothing and after a few minutes I looked up to see he was frowning.

"They don't do anything for you?"

I laughed. "I can't begin to tell you what they do, I'm just blown away."

He laughed. "That's good to hear. Really."

Our eyes met and for a few moments no words were needed. Then he spoke. "You can tell me to mind my own business but it pains me to see you like this. I can see you must have been hurt really badly in all kinds of ways but the healing power of light, you need to think about it. Use it to shape your life into your own perfect vision."

"Yeah." I grabbed my hair back from my neck and turned my scarred neck towards him. "Look at me—perfect vision, huh? And please don't give me any bullshit about the radiance of my lovely soul and how appearances aren't everything. I've heard all that crap."

"It doesn't matter, Gemma, you've got to stop letting it matter. You may think I have no knowledge of the pain you must have suffered but I have had some little insight. My grandmother, my father's mother, was in Nagasaki when they dropped the bomb. She was twenty-three years old. She suffered terrible burns and expected to die. But you know, she lived until she was nearly eighty. After my grandfather died, she lived with us and every day she would offer up a prayer of thanks. 'I was one of the lucky ones,' she always said and she really believed that."

"I've been a bitch. I'm sorry," I whispered. "You're right. Everything's been all about me for so long that I don't know how to let go. And really, it's just tedious and tiring now and I want to

move on.”

He looked at me, serious yet soft. “You know, people out there—in the village—they’re just ordinary people with their own stories and tragedies, I don’t think they want to judge you or do you harm. This is your home now, isn’t it? Wouldn’t you like it to feel like that?”

I nod. There’s no need to reply, he knows my mind.

“Come with me to the exhibition on Monday; it’ll be quiet then. I can take you there, explain the pictures to you, see if you think I’ve managed to capture what I intended—I’d really appreciate your thoughts. And then, maybe...”

“Yes,” I cut him off. I don’t know whether that ‘maybe’ might involve coffee, dinner, a walk round town or something more but I’ll wait to find out. For now, the light is flooding in and I’m starting to feel reborn. “I’d like that.”