

REBECCA WAIT

The View on the Way Down

PICADOR

And there they were again.

Later, they would recall this scene. Alone, they would study it for its secrets, trying to fit what they knew now with what they knew then. It was coming. Even then it was coming, even on that beach, years ago – only they didn't realize it.

But if they returned to that day, what clues would they find? They might remember that grey clouds were starting to gather in the distance, over at the far end of the beach. That the weather felt like it was about to break; the heat had grown cloying, muggy. Or they might look back at it all and see nothing but the washed-out yellow of the sand and the rhythmic sweep of waves.

The couple were sheltering from the heat in the bay of rocks, with a flask of tea and some sandwiches. Joe had a book open, and Rose held the baby on her lap, occasionally bouncing her up and down.

The boys were further off, down towards the sea, dishevelled and happy in their ragged T-shirts and swimming trunks. They'd decided to dig a hole, and it was proving slow work.

'You need to reinforce the sides,' Kit was saying. 'The walls keep collapsing in on themselves.'

‘Why am I doing all the digging?’ Jamie said.

‘I’m overseeing.’

The hole had been Jamie’s idea in the first place, but now it felt like Kit’s. He had taken over, as he always did.

‘We’ve hit water at the bottom now, which is a good sign,’ Kit said, peering down into the hole.

‘I’m glad you’re such an expert.’ Jamie stuck his plastic spade into the sludge at the bottom, and heaved it to one side. More slid straight in to fill its place. He dragged one foot out of the slushy sand with difficulty.

‘It’s like quicksand down here,’ he said.

‘Don’t be stupid. It’s not quicksand.’

‘I said *like* quicksand.’

‘Keep going,’ Kit said. ‘We need to get a lot deeper than this, or there’s no point.’

‘Are we heading for Australia?’

‘Yup.’

They smiled at the old joke.

‘Hand it over, then,’ Kit said. ‘I’ll have a turn.’

He took the spade from Jamie, and grabbed his arm to haul him out of the hole. Scrambling towards him, Jamie stood on the fragile overhang and part of the wall collapsed.

‘Jamie!’

‘You pulled me up too quickly.’

Kit jumped in and set about repairing the damage.

‘Did you know that sand deaths outnumber shark deaths in America?’ Jamie said whilst Kit worked. ‘I mean, people getting buried in the sand. You’re more likely to get buried in sand and suffocate than to get eaten by a shark.’

‘That’s fascinating, Jamie.’

‘I’m just saying. You’d think sharks would be more of a danger. You wouldn’t think getting buried in sand would kill more people.’

‘Probably all idiots like you, who don’t know how to dig a hole properly.’

‘I’ve done more of it than you!’

‘Quality not quantity,’ said Kit.

‘We should probably make a move soon,’ Joe was saying, further up the beach.

‘I don’t like to drag them away,’ Rose said. She was kneeling now, playing with the baby, who was absorbed in scooping up handfuls of the loose, soft sand and letting it run between her fingers. ‘Look – her first time on the beach, and she loves it. Don’t you, Emma?’

The baby gave her mother a ponderous look, and then returned her attention to the sand.

‘A bit longer?’ Rose said.

‘Alright.’ Joe tried to return to his novel.

‘Aren’t the boys funny?’ Rose said. ‘They’re just like little kids again.’

‘They’ve regressed. Childhood associations of the beach, and all that.’

‘It’s nice to see them playing together.’

‘I’m not sure they’d call it “playing”.’

‘Kit’s being lovely with Jamie, isn’t he? Helping him with his digging. Very patient.’

Joe mulled this over. He didn't think 'patient' was the first word he'd use to describe Kit.

'I've been a bit worried about Jamie,' Rose said. 'The age gap suddenly seems more noticeable, doesn't it? Now they're both teenagers.'

'Jamie will catch up,' Joe said. 'Give him a year or so.'

'Yes, I'm sure you're right.' There was a pause, then she added, 'Lovely to have a holiday all together. Before we know it, it'll just be you, me and Em.'

'Mmm.' He was absorbed again in his book.

Rose turned back to Emma. She helped her fill a little bucket with sand, and then empty it, over and over again.

She said, 'Shall we have fish and chips for supper? As a special treat?'

'Whatever you want,' he said, making it sound almost as though it were a treat for Rose, when in fact she was thinking of the boys.

It was so peaceful, watching Emma play with the sand, and her sons in the distance, serious with their spades. Rose wished they could stay there forever.

So the afternoon went on and they remained on the beach, as the breeze grew cooler and the sun went in, and the clouds in the distance thickened. The soft sand in the bay began to lose its heat, and the sea slunk its way further up the beach, slyly encroaching on them. There was a scattering of other holidaymakers further along the sand, but they were gradually thinning in number, until at last there was nobody left but the five of them.

Finally, Joe said to Rose, 'Tide's coming in.'

Rose got to her feet, scooping Emma up with her. 'I'll call the boys.'

Jamie was saying to Kit, who was still standing in the hole, 'When the sea comes in, we'll have a swimming pool.'

'No,' Kit said. 'It'll be ruined.'

And then the first drops of rain began to fall.

Part One

1

The rain should have disturbed him like it disturbed everyone else. It was wild, it was insistent. It hammered against the windows for attention. The customers had taken on a conspiratorial air, exchanging glances and huddling inside their coats, but he ignored them. He went round closing any open windows so the books didn't get wet, then returned to the Jewish History section where he was putting the new stock on the shelves.

Inside his head, he insisted on silence. It had been difficult, teaching himself to think of nothing. But he was patient and through hard practice it had become habit. Occasionally, when he was struggling – like now – he'd manage to withdraw. Sometimes he'd picture himself on an island, or alone in the desert. Now, though, he chose the woods. They were still and quiet, waiting to absorb him into their great silence. He stood still among the history books, staring up at the sunlight coming through the leaves.

He was wrenched away by someone touching his arm. Reluctantly, he left the shelter of the trees and turned to find an elderly man behind him.

Jamie was blank for a moment, then put on his work voice. 'Can I help you, sir?'

‘I have a complaint about your Jewish History section,’ the man said in precise, careful diction, as though he had rehearsed the sentence. ‘I can’t find any of the books I’m looking for. All your books are on the Holocaust.’

‘Yes,’ Jamie said hesitantly. ‘I suppose most of them are.’

‘It’s absurd,’ the man said. He seemed to gather courage as he spoke. ‘Where are your books on Jewish culture, and music, and literature? You make it look as though the Holocaust is the only significant event that’s happened to the Jewish people in their entire history. As if they don’t have a rich and varied past regardless of that particular atrocity.’

Jamie said carefully, ‘We tend to stock what sells, otherwise we lose money. Books on the Holocaust are always in demand.’

‘Because people are fascinated by horror.’

Jamie didn’t know what to say to this, so he kept quiet.

‘I don’t like it,’ the man said. ‘I don’t like the way your shop defines the Jewish people by one awful thing that was done to them, and not by anything they’ve ever done for themselves. Do you see what I’m saying?’

Jamie nodded.

‘To define us by what they did to us is to let them win. History should give equal weight to everything.’

‘How can it?’ said Jamie before he could help himself. ‘Some things loom up and dominate.’

‘Why should we only study what’s considered interesting by people who don’t care about the – the *big picture*, and only want the gruesome details?’

Was this really his main complaint, Jamie thought, that their History department lacked coherence? He was quickly losing interest in the discussion, but could see the man was still fired up.

Jamie put up a wall between them. 'We always appreciate customer feedback, sir. Do you have any suggestions of books we could order in to broaden the range of the section?'

He thought the man would be irritated, but he eagerly made Jamie an extensive list. Then he struggled back into his coat, his swollen fingers fumbling with the buttons, and went out into the rain. Jamie stuck the list up behind his desk with his other reminders. He knew he would never order any of the books. There wasn't enough room on the shelves. Besides, people wanted the horror.

The rain was still driving down in his lunch hour and he couldn't face going out for a sandwich. He got some crisps and a Mars bar from the vending machine and sat in the staff room reading an Alistair MacLean novel. He always kept an eye out for Alistair MacLeans, and he had a large collection now.

He'd chosen his usual chair in the far corner of the room, a position that usually didn't invite interruption. But just as he was biting into his Mars bar, a shadow loomed over him.

'What are we on now?'

Jamie groaned inwardly. Brian from General Fiction thought he'd found a kindred spirit in Jamie, whose passion for old thrillers he had noted early on. Brian himself was a Science Fiction and Fantasy man, but he'd observed

the zeal of the aficionado in Jamie and seemed to think he'd soon enough be able to divert his energies towards a more deserving genre.

'*South by Java Head*,' Jamie said, without looking up from the page. He was aiming for damage control. Occasionally you could head Brian off by refusing to engage with him, like playing dead when faced with a grizzly bear.

'Any good?'

'Don't know yet. Chapter One.'

Brian sat down beside him, as ever a little too close. Resigned, Jamie closed his book.

'I think you should reconsider Ursula Le Guin,' Brian said.

'I'm just not sure she's for me, Brian.'

'A majestic writer,' Brian said. 'If you're ready for something a class or two above MacLean, that is.'

'I don't think I can handle anything much above MacLean.'

'What, too exhausted from slogging it out in History?' Brian chuckled. 'All those crowds of customers using up your brain power? They never make it up to the second floor, Jamie. You should try working in General.'

'The truth is, Brian,' Jamie tried as a last resort, 'I can't read very well.'

He shoved his book into his pocket and exited the staff room whilst Brian was still stammering an apology. Being robbed of those precious minutes of his lunch break made him feel childishly furious. He sneaked past the History Enquiries desk and seated himself in the little alcove

between Jewish History and Military History to carry on reading, hoping Brian wouldn't track him down.

He became so engrossed in Chapter Two of *South by Java Head* that at first he didn't notice the young man and woman standing near him. Then the woman made some kind of movement – perhaps pushing her hair back from her face, or shaking the raindrops from her coat, he couldn't afterwards say what – and something familiar about the motion drew his attention. Jamie didn't look up from the page, but now he was acutely aware of the couple standing close by.

After a moment, the woman spoke, murmured something to the man which made him laugh under his breath, and immediately Jamie was frozen, unable to make out the words but recognizing something in the tone, something in the rhythm of that voice which erased the intervening years.

Alice Brown.

He saw her turn out of the corner of his eye, and could see her stop and stare. She was looking right at him as he sat in the alcove, with *South by Java Head* open in his lap.

When she started walking over, he stood up.

'Jamie?'

Her hair was cut into a short, neat bob and was its natural dark brown rather than the bright red it had been back then. But her face still had that fragile, questioning quality; almost childlike, especially now with its tentative expression. She was still beautiful. Of course she was still beautiful.

‘It is you, isn’t it?’ she was saying. ‘I thought it was.’ She seemed nervous. Jamie wondered if he was too, but couldn’t tell.

‘Alice.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

Now he saw again her slow, wide smile. Jamie used to love the confiding quality in that smile, which made him and Alice co-conspirators whenever she caught his eye. Eventually he had realized she smiled like that at everyone.

‘This is so strange,’ Alice was saying. ‘We’ve just been up to visit Mark’s parents in Leeds and stopped here on the way back. And then it was raining, so you see—’ She gestured as if to say, here we are.

There was a pause. Alice only seemed to be talking to fill the dead space between them. Jamie had realized after the initial shock that they didn’t have much to say to one another, and he supposed that Alice knew it too.

She gestured to the man with her, and he came forward. Jamie looked him over. He seemed OK. Kind-ish. Not very good-looking.

‘Jamie, this is my husband, Mark. Mark, this is my old friend Jamie.’

Her husband. Jamie took in the news quietly, then shook the man’s hand. ‘Nice to meet you.’ He could tell from Mark’s appraising look that he knew what Alice meant by ‘old friend’. He wondered how much Mark knew. Probably a fair bit, from the careful way he seemed to be looking at him.

‘We’ve been married four months,’ Alice said, as though Jamie had asked.

‘Congratulations,’ Jamie said. ‘That’s brilliant.’ He thought perhaps he was supposed to hug Alice at this point so he reached for her, but she stiffened and he let his arm drop. To cover the moment of awkwardness, he said, ‘Alice, it’s been forever.’ This, he thought, would pass muster. It was the kind of thing someone else might say in a situation like this.

Alice corrected him. ‘Five years. It’s been five years.’

‘How are you?’

‘I didn’t know where you were, Jamie,’ she said, ignoring his question. ‘Where have you been all this time?’

Jamie tried to meet her gaze. ‘Here and there. You know. I’ve been working here a few years.’

‘In a bookshop?’

‘I’m in charge of the Jewish History section,’ he found himself saying defensively.

‘That sounds interesting,’ Mark intervened. ‘Do you know, I might excuse myself for a moment and go and have a look.’

Jamie pointed it out to him, silently hoping he was interested in the Holocaust. He noticed the protective way Mark touched Alice’s shoulder before he walked away, and the look that passed between them. He thought, she’ll be alright with him.

When they were alone, Alice said, ‘It’s so weird, seeing you again like this.’

‘I know.’

‘I waited for you to get in touch. I waited for ages.’

Jamie knew he should say something, but couldn’t think what.

‘Anyway,’ Alice said into the silence. ‘You can’t do anything about it now.’

He thought this was probably true. There was another pause, more uncomfortable this time. Jamie decided to say after a moment, ‘I really am sorry, Alice. There’s no excuse.’ He noticed the formality in his own voice, and thought how odd it was that he was talking to her like a stranger.

‘But how are you, Jamie?’ Alice said. ‘Really?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘And your family?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, Jamie.’

He said nothing.

Alice said, ‘You know it doesn’t make it go away, just pretending people don’t exist.’

She would never forgive him, he thought. He didn’t blame her, and it didn’t matter; but he felt sorry for her.

Mark was coming back over. He said, ‘You’ve got a good selection of books on Auschwitz.’

‘Thanks.’

Mark turned to Alice. ‘Darling, we should be getting off.’

Alice was rummaging around in her handbag, and eventually pulled out a business card. ‘Keep in touch, Jamie,’ she said as she handed it to him.

‘You’re an interior designer,’ Jamie said, inspecting it.

‘Not a very successful one,’ Alice said.

‘I thought you wanted to be an artist.’

She’d been looking at him narrowly, but suddenly she

smiled. 'People *are* allowed to change their plans.' Jamie felt her old charm working on him again.

'I mean it about keeping in touch,' she added. 'Don't disappear again.'

'It was nice seeing you, Alice,' he said. 'Good to meet you, Mark.'

'Take care of yourself.' Alice started to walk away, but at the last minute she seemed to change her mind. She murmured something to Mark, and left him waiting a little way away. Then she came quickly back towards Jamie and slipped her arms around him, putting her head against his chest. For a moment, the familiar gesture left him stricken. Alice had always had a special way of tangling herself in his arms. The next moment, she'd turned away and gone back to Mark without a word. Mark took her hand, gave Jamie a quick nod, and they disappeared down the stairs.

Jamie went and stuck Alice's business card behind his desk next to the old man's list of Jewish history books. He took a quick glance at the titles. *Resource and Ritual in the Ancient Near East*, he read. *The Wisdom of Solomon: Israeli Science and Discovery, 400–500 BC*. No use stocking that kind of thing, he thought. Nobody would ever buy it.

2

It was lunchtime, always an ordeal for Emma. She was hiding in the school chapel, or lying low, as she put it to herself. She sat in a pew at the back and stared up at the stained-glass cross in the window above the altar. It was made up of reds and oranges and yellows, with purple at the centre, so it looked like it was on fire. Rejoice in the glory of the Cross, she thought.

She didn't want to go to the canteen because she had no one to sit with, and besides, she shouldn't eat anything because she was fat. And she wasn't fat in the way other girls at her school were fat, which just meant that they were thin but worried about their appearance because it made them seem 'adult'. No – she was fat in the normal, rubbish way, where you have a double chin, and extra rolls of flesh on your tummy. She was genuinely fat, and surrounded by people pretending to be fat. It made her feel like she was losing her mind. Trust her to be fat in the wrong way.

The chaplain came in and smiled hello at her – he was used to her silent presence at the back of the chapel at lunchtimes. He disappeared into the vestry.

Sunlight was glinting through the coloured glass, setting it ablaze once more. Staring at the cross, Emma

thought: Jesus went through life alone. He always had people around him, but really he was alone. Imagine how he must have felt as he was made to carry his cross to Golgotha. It struck her now what a disturbing part of the punishment that was – the condemned men made to carry their own cross-beams, sweating and exhausted, to their place of execution.

If Jesus had suffered all that, surely she could go through life by herself and not mind too much. She didn't need to be surrounded by people to do God's will.

Her stomach rumbled. She thought of fish and chips on the beach, the sand sticking to the grease on her fingers. She thought of the chocolate muffin and strawberry milkshake she had as a treat on Saturdays when she was little. She thought of creamy mounds of mashed potato with her mother's special onion gravy. How unfair that girls who were already thin could quite happily miss lunch and not even notice, whilst she was hungry all the time.

The chaplain reappeared. 'Ready for the Christian Union meeting tomorrow, Emma?'

'Yes.'

'What's your topic?'

'God's purpose for us.'

'Good.'

She sat there a few minutes longer, leafed through the hymn book and memorized the words to 'Be Still for the Presence of the Lord'. Then she thought she'd better go to lunch, even if it meant sitting by herself, because she was too hungry now to think about anything else, and at this

rate she wouldn't be able to concentrate all afternoon. She had double Maths after lunch which was her worst subject; and Mr Lawson would be horrible and sarcastic when she got things wrong, and then everyone would look at her and she'd go bright red with the effort of trying not to cry.

It was quarter to one. Emma steeled herself. If she went to lunch now, she might bump into Kayleigh, who was also in the Christian Union and would probably sit with her.

She was in luck. She spotted Kayleigh by the entrance of the canteen, and ran to catch up, an undignified, huffing little run.

'Kayleigh! Are you going to lunch?'

She saw before Kayleigh could disguise it a slight look of irritation cross her face. Of course, Kayleigh didn't want her tagging along, but she put up with it because she recognized her Christian duty. Emma knew this, and to be honest she didn't particularly want to tag along with Kayleigh either, but she was short of options.

They queued together, and Emma said, 'I've picked some passages for tomorrow's meeting.'

'Cool,' Kayleigh said politely.

'I thought some St Paul.'

'Yeah, sounds good.'

Then Jasmine came up and Kayleigh started to talk to her, ignoring Emma. When they got to the front, Emma chose carefully. She wanted French fries, but it was too embarrassing for a fat person to ask for chips, so she got some roast potatoes instead and then took lots of pasta salad to fill up on, and some lettuce leaves and tomatoes so she looked healthy. She had to wait for ages at the salad

bar because the cool group kept pushing in front of her, not even deliberately, probably, but just because she was so unimportant as to be almost invisible. She waited patiently for a lull, then loaded up her plate.

She went to find Kayleigh and Jasmine, but they'd already sat down with Harriet Jackson and Lucy Wright, and there was no space at their table. Emma hovered with her tray for a few moments hoping someone would ask her to pull up a chair, but nobody did, so in the end she had to go off and find a table in the corner by herself. She ate her lunch as fast as she could and left the canteen to go back to the chapel.

When Emma got home from school, her mother was on her knees in the kitchen scrubbing inside the oven. The surfaces were gleaming, and various cleaning products were arranged in neat rows on the kitchen table. A bad day, then. Emma put some bread in the toaster and poured herself a glass of milk.

'How was school, love?' her mum asked.

'Fine.'

'That's great, darling!'

It struck Emma that this was not exactly what she'd said, but she decided to let it go.

'How was Maths? Was it alright?'

'Fine.' She saw her mother looking at her, anxious for more information, and added, 'We did quadratic equations.'

'And did you have a CU meeting?'

‘Nope. It’s tomorrow.’

‘And what have you got planned?’

‘I think we’ll do some St Paul.’

‘And how are your friends?’

‘They’re fine.’

Emma took the toast and milk up to her room and sat down on her bed. She wondered when her dad would be home. Her mum was in fussing mode – it would be better if he wasn’t around.

She tore the crust carefully off the toast and put it to one side whilst she ate the middle bit, licking the jam off her fingers. She was always, always aware of the danger. They probably thought she couldn’t remember all the awfulness after Kit died. But it was part of her now – her dad’s scary moods, her mum going for days without speaking. There could be no going back to that, so she tried to keep an eye on things.

She finished the crusts, and went to get her CU file from the desk. Looking at it made her feel better. It was a big pink ring-binder filled with plastic pockets where she kept all her notes and Bible passages and pictures. She liked how thick the file had got, and she found it satisfying to turn over the plastic pockets and look at all the successful meetings she’d organized in the past. The better prepared she was for tomorrow, the less likely Kayleigh would be to try and take over.

She got out her pad of paper and felt tips, and wrote the heading in bright blue: ‘God’s purpose for us’. She thought for a moment, then added below in pink, ‘Paul’s own life serves as example. Wicked Saul converts to

Christianity and accepts his mission to spread Christ's Word.' She hesitated, chewing the end of the felt tip. She wasn't happy with the phrase 'accepts his mission'. It made St Paul sound like he was in *Mission Impossible*. She crumpled up the page and started again. She had a rule of no crossings-out in her notes.

This time she wrote, 'undertakes the mission of spreading Christ's Word'. Then she paused again. She was finding it hard to concentrate today. Jamie was in her head. Sometimes she enjoyed imagining where he might be, and what he might be doing now, but today it was just making her sad.

She closed her eyes, and asked Jesus for guidance. He stayed silent. Sometimes it was like that. Emma wondered, suddenly, if Jamie believed in God. When he finally came back, she would ask him. She would remind him that God loved everyone, and He would forgive Jamie. And so would Emma, in the blink of an eye, if he just came home.