

The Dying Days of Winter – a short story

My legs were tired, flailing at the pedals. The gears on my bike had been broken for as long as I could remember and to cycle up a stiff and stiffer and stiffening climb in rigid top gear was all too exhausting. I dismounted, a knight leading his horse to the heights of Camelot. Clacton was not so far from view after our struggling to the top of the hill – a straggle of outskirts houses in plainest view. I rushed and gushed down the descent, fresh as a stream, and while the pedals circuited on their own, furiously, I rested my legs, arms flung wide to the air, and opened my mouth to taste the breeze, and wished that the whole world (not just my mum) could see me.

It wasn't the most brilliant day for visiting Clacton despite the golden suns that beamed and gleamed from the holiday posters. But I had little else to occupy me, my ma wanted me out from under her feet, and the whole weekend was, as always and ever, my own to do as I pleased. I took notice of the notice informing that the children were freed from school this week and next. I took notice of the bungalows and gardens that displayed themselves along Suburbia's streets, all ready for inspection, sir! I took notice of the whitewash that despaired on the dirty walls of the public convenience (for men). I took notice of the girl who smiled.

I instantly dismounted, ready to assist any maiden, though she seemed in no distress.

"Hello," we both helloed.

"I haven't seen you in many a long year. Would you care, young maiden mine, to accompany me to the shingled shore?"

"I haven't seen you in my life before, but I am going to the beach."

"That's what I thought," I thought.

It wasn't long before we were walking hand in hand, my bicycle beside us. I explained that he was called Micycle – Mike for short – and that I took him everywhere, like a good-luck charm, only he was too heavy to hang round my neck.

We arrived at the beach and I asked her what her name was. Shirley. I liked her – in fact I liked her a lot – but I didn't think much of her name. I called her Karen, instead. She didn't seem to mind. They almost never did.

I praised my good luck – the beaches were empty despite the thrilling, chilling December air. There, at my side, my damsel and my charger, free-wheeling, and she told me she was a schoolgirl.

"I'm a schoolboy," I confessed.

We were both schoolchildren, alone with a bicycle, and dusk was dimly soon in coming. It was not long before the bogeymen, long-fingered shadows of darkness, of deepest night, swooped down.

"Like Batman!"

"Just like Batman," I agreed.

It was four o'clock. And there was the pier with its redundant arcades; Beeching had closed down the ghost train; and the roller-coaster hosted its swarming seagulls, not the screams and shouts of bustling business. And there were the speckled sands, clogged with barefoot-biting pebbles and clotted with sliding, slithery, saliva-like jellyfish, dying in silent agony, drowning in air. And there, under the pier, were the lovers, lying on the sand, each engulfed in an other. We were engulfed in each other, Mike striving to keep clear of the rusting

waters that roller-coasted and boomed to the shore. Two hours, and Karen and I had nearly, so nearly, fallen in lust.

We lay there, frozen, all night, whispering to each other and to the stars that glittered beside the moon: the moon of radiant light; the man-conquered moon; the candle-at-twenty-paces moon. And we whispered to the sea: the fish-clad sea; Neptune's sea; the sea that calls out to all lovers. We heard the sea calling out to us, echoing in Mike's handlebars. And again we whispered to each other, mouth against mouth so we could hear more easily. We fell asleep in each other's arms, whispering, whispering. When we awoke the sea was gone – that, or it was the lowest of low tides. Gone were the moon and stars. In their place were the saturated, spongy sand and the dismal sun lying low in the sulky sky. I didn't think they were so very romantic; neither did she; nor Mike. We went to a café - for the warmth. I was given a face of two eggs and a sausage, which fed my own smile of a face. She chose to survive on a cup of coffee. Mike was already well-oiled.

The night had gone quickly, and so did the day. We watched two films flick round and round and round and scarcely saw a frame. Outside, surprised by the dark, my moon reappeared. We - she and I - clambered onto the pier, my Karen and I. Oh, desolate, lonely, deserted pier; perhaps poetic but, oh, desolate. And how I wished everything would come to life instead of playing dead. We broke into the ghost tunnel and discovered, with matches, that the ghosts were merely models, and they moved no more, and couldn't scare me all that very much. We climbed up onto the roller-coaster, the skeletal scaffolding that holds your breath in summer, the windy, winding roller-coaster. Now dead and empty. We banged loud on the locked doors of the arcades, of the helter-skelter, of the miniature railway, of the mirror-maze, wondering what dead bodies lay behind. Oh, I was glad to leave the pier, to return to my bicycle on the beach.

She wanted to sleep under the pier again but dark clouds came strolling over, like bowver boys, and started to spit between the planks. We rumbled along, in rhythm to the thunder, to the bus-park, and spent the night there, sheltered, whispering, this time selfishly to ourselves, our motherly moon invisible.

When morning came I left her sleeping, my coat her coverlet, my address pinned to her laddered tights. Mike rode me away to further, shivering adventures, and facing mum, to wind down the weekend in bustle-town, exciting, old king Colchester. God, life is dying in these days of winter.