

Rip Rap

by Dan Powell

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IT IS STILL DARK WHEN YOU FINALLY ARRIVE. A few streetlights set about the expanse of the cliff-top car park are dead, their bulbs ghostly and pale as blind eyes. All the parking bays are empty. The dim glow of the dashboard clock displays just after four, but like the speedometer, like the fuel gauge, like everything about the Astra, the hands are old and tired and worn and not to be trusted. It's a miracle the car got this far.

You flick on full beam and steer into a bay nearest the edge. In your tiredness you stall the engine. The car lurches forward as if it will throw itself over the edge and you yank the handbrake to bring it to a jolting stop. Through the open driver's side window the sound of the sea blows in with the cold air.

You climb from the car, fasten your fleece against the chill, and cross to the coastal paths. The ground here slopes more gradually than the name Highcliffe might suggest, the flank of coast leading west having been landscaped from a once dramatic drop into its present shallow incline. Across the Solent, the Isle of Wight shines, its coastline marked in dots of light. A ferry chugs through the water, heavy yet

afloat, approaching with the tide. You breathe deeply and wait for the air to spark some memory but your mouth fills only with the taste of the sea, the smell of the salt.

You were last here as a child. The annual family holiday, dragged back to the same place each year. Mum and Dad even went so far as to book the same holiday home. Chalets they were called then. After the long drive, while Mum unpacked, Dad would take you to play crazy golf. The windmill. The loop-the-loop. The pyramids. The house with a face painted on, the mouth its hole. At the end of each game Dad handed over the scorecard. At the end of each holiday you took it home, added it to the tin of holiday mementos in your pyjama draw. Something to remember by.

The wind picks up and you cross back to the car, climb in and turn the key. The engine splutters but refuses to do anything but half-start so you grab the carrier bag from the passenger seat and climb out again. You do not lock the car but leave it open and empty and staring out to sea.

You avoid the direct paths to the beach and instead walk back past the Cliffhanger café, your reflection in the dark empty windows little more than a shadow, then down the graded gravel path to the trees

below. Your memory of the route is clear despite not having been here since those holidays so many years ago. Away from the street-lamps your eyes soon grow accustomed to the dark. The moon is three quarters full and hangs in a clear, cold sky. You remember reading somewhere that the dark of the night sky only exists because the universe is expanding. It is this expansion that degrades the starlight and creates the voids through which the pins of light peek. You have forgotten much already but this you remember reading though you do not remember where. Walking past the dip in the shallow cliffs where Walkford Brook trickles to meet the sea, you wrestle with your memories but admit defeat as you start the climb up the steep path to the holiday camp above. The back gate is unlocked and screeches thinly as you squeeze through to the small curving roads lined with small single-storey holiday homes.

This is the limit of the camp, the furthest point from reception. The chalets huddle along the site fence and the shallow cliffs. Where the slowly eroding cliff-edge encroaches upon the camp, thick grey foundation slabs of demolished holiday homes lie like fallen monuments. It is quiet except for the murmur of the waves somewhere out in the dark. Finding the house does not take long, though the outside

is now white where it was yellow. and new garden furniture sits on decking that you do not recall. Still, you are as sure as you can be that this is the place.

The camp is abandoned this time of year. None of the chalets show signs of occupancy. No lights. No cars parked outside. You collect a stone, bigger than your fist, from the garden rockery and follow the path round to the new backdoor of the old holiday house. The small window above the lock and handle cracks but does not give with the first blow and you thump the stone against it again. Transparent teeth of safety glass explode into the hole you have made, a few bouncing back to hail upon the back of your hand before scattering onto the decking. You slide your hand through, wary of the pieces still gripped in the frame, and flick the lock.

The layout is the same; the room your parents shared down the short hall to the left, your room through the door directly opposite the back door. At the front of the house the large window of the living room looks out to sea. On rainy holidays you curled up on the settee, your book of Greek Myths open on your lap, watched the spume and swell of the waves, imagined floating in it, being washed away, dissolved. You leave the lights off, drop the carrier bag on the coffee table and feel

your way to the armchair nearest the window. You have no book and anyway it is too dark to read so you just sit and wait for dawn to break.

You sleep for a time and miss the sunrise. When you wake a dull mid-morning light fills the window, the sky a solid mass of grey. In the kitchen you find a jar of instant coffee well past its use-by, the granules gummed together in a jagged lump in the base. You chip some free with a teaspoon as the kettle boils, shovel an extra spoonful into a mug to compensate for any loss of flavour, then take the drink outside on to the decking.

A chill breeze pushes across to the cliff-edge and down to the waves below. Scanning the other houses lining the road you fear for a moment that you have picked the wrong one. The shape of the road seems somehow wrong. The perspective is off. The Isle of Wight hangs off to the left, indistinct in the grey light, but the sea mist offers no other point of reference.

Your parents would wake early while on holiday, unable to shake the habit and routine of their working weeks. You would wake to an empty house and fetch your own breakfast of toast and cornflakes and fresh juice which you would take outside to eat. Their voices and the crunch of their boots on the gravel path announced their return from the

morning ritual walk beside the sea, the sound of them slowly rising in volume, emerging from within the hush and wash of the waves below. Sometimes they would be laughing as they stepped from the shifting gravel of the cliff path to the stable tarmac of the camp streets. Always they would smile when they saw you at the table.

The buzz and tick of an engine interrupts these memories. You grab your empty mug and retreat inside the house. An old van, the same shade of green as the camp signs, the camp logo spread across its flanks, chugs past the house. The driver, a fat man in green overalls, sits hunched over the steering wheel and stares straight ahead. You crouch at the window and wait for the van to disappear round the bend and the sound of the engine to fade before you head out.

You pass back out the gate and retrace your steps down from the camp to the coastline below. The sky remains an impassive, concrete grey. The trees lining the path shudder with ghostly, frore gusts that wash in with the tide. The branches twist and rattle and something snap, snap, snaps but nothing falls. At the base of the cliff slope the gravel path spreads wide and thin and fades into the grass and sand that lead onto the pebbled shore.

You stop where the path ends and look out to sea. The waves too

are grey and thick with shadows. The weight of cloud looming above the horizon is almost tangible but there is no rain yet, only the threat of it. The decades-long dramatic collapse of the eastern coastline has reshaped the cliffside into an almost lunar terrain. Where the earth has slumped irrevocably into the sea it is as if the ground has been scooped out like ice-cream, leaving behind ridges and haphazard lumps of colluvium to be climbed over. The distant figure of a fossil hunter scours the slopes of marine sediment for souvenirs of an exposed geological past.

Your father brought you fossil hunting here each year, the pair of you putting on wellies and warm jumpers and leaving before the summer sun rose in the sky in order to make the most of the low tide, a packed lunch in your backpack, a rock etcher and hand lens tucked into the pocket of your parka jacket. Together you'd scour the fossiliferous clay for evidence of life before time. You spoke little except to ask the name of each find, your father replying with words mysterious and ancient: Dentalium, Pterynotus, Volutospina, Bathytoma, Trachelochetus. Haustator, Nipteraxis, Crassatella, Nemocardium, Pycnodonte. Bivalves. Gastropods. Scaphopods. You clutched the names tight, forced them into memory, recited them back at the chalet

as you carefully cleaned and dried the day's findings.

The moss green of the fossilist's all-weather jacket marks him out clearly against the ridges of exposed earth. He crouches and digs at some discovery, his attention fixed on freeing whatever it is from the clutches of the Barton clay. You watch until he stumbles back and stands, admiring something small and delicate and ancient in his palm, then leave the man to his find and turn to follow the coastline west.

Here extensive coastal defence work has slowed the sea's progress. Rock groynes jut into the waves at regular intervals and shingle lines the beaches, protecting the network of paths that slope along the shoreline and stretch in shallow gradients to the cliff above. Further down the coast, on the wide gravel path nearest the sea, twin diggers chug stones from place to place, busy with the Sisyphean task of beach replenishment. The wash of the low tide, hanging back from the coast as if wary to come closer, can still be heard despite the rumble of engines. To avoid the dust and exhaust fumes, you start along the central path which slopes and winds to the car park above.

A shout stops you and you turn in time to see the fossilist fall from a steep ledge of collapsed shoreline. He lands heavily, rolls to a stop on the dark, ancient clay and is still. From this distance, had you not seen

the man fall, the green of his jacket stark against the brown-grey of exposed earth might have been mistaken for a bush or small stretch of grass or weed. But you did see him fall and know you should do something. You scan the restructured coast ahead and the collapsed shore behind, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone else coming to the man's aid, but there is no one. You sigh and follow the sloping path back. Your first few steps, as you descend back to where the brook meets the sea, generate momentum only for it to vanish on the steep climb up the ridged and pitted earth to where the man lies.

By the time you arrive, he is sat up, wiping dirt from his face with the end of a wheat-coloured hand-knitted scarf. He laughs as he does this, a smile beaming through his thick brown beard.

–Sorry. Must have given you a bit of a scare.

He drops the end of the scarf and holds out his hand. You take it without thinking and he grips your forearm with his free hand and pulls himself up from the clay. You brace your feet into the dirt to keep from tumbling with the sudden weight of the stranger.

–Thanks so much. He brushes earth from his trousers as he speaks, crouched over slightly, his eyes looking up at you.

–You’re not hurt?

–No, no, well, yes, just my pride I suppose. He laughs a little to himself and rubs hard at the muddy knees of his trousers. –Ah bugger it, I’m just rubbing it in.

You bend and pick up his goggles from the ground, the type you wore in science class at school. A sudden flash of the feel of the hard plastic edges pressing your cheeks, the pull of the elastic on the back of your head, the smell of cheap plastic, the industrial tang of gas as twenty odd children light Bunsen burners.

–These are broken, you say, handing the goggles to the man. The protective lens is cracked and a section has fallen from the frame.

–That’s a shame. Had them a while, he says. –You can buy better these days but my old man bought me these. He brushes the dirt from them. –Oh well, nothing lasts, eh? He seems about to say something else but, eventually, does not. Instead, he wraps the elastic around the broken goggles and tucks them into a pocket of his jacket.

He holds out a hand again and you hesitate this time before taking it.

–Gregory, he says.

A smile bursts from his beard again, his white teeth a bright contrast to the dull earth, the slate sky, the thin sea.

You tell him your name, think you should say something more, but you have nothing else to add.

–Well, you must let me buy you a coffee.

Unable still to find a reply you only nod.

You climb down to the beach in silence. Clouds, grey as putty, hang thick across the horizon, and the sea, some way out still, stretches and strains, moves forward, retreats, moves forward, retreats, each movement accompanied by a weighty susurration, the sound of the water's own disappointment at its failure to truly reach the shore.

Gregory pulls a metal hip flask from inside his jacket, offers you first swig. –To cure what ails you?' he says.

You keep your eyes on the flask and shake your head, knowing that the widening of your eyes will have given away your surprise at the stranger's turn of phrase.

Gregory takes a pull on the flask, gasps at the hit of the alcohol then wipes his lips with his sleeve. –Hits the spot. He waves the flask once more at you. –Sure you won't? Again you shake your head and

Gregory nods. –Best I stop there too. Might have had a drop too much already. He winks and nods back at the collapsed cliffs and laughs a little laugh that pulls a smile to your lips.

Walking the neat gravel path up to the cliff top car park, you listen as Gregory describes his early morning search for fossils amidst the Barton clay.

–The light’s not at its best for a decent search though. He waves a hand at the sky, at the sun reduced to a dour grey circle hidden in the haze.

The Astra squats in the car park where you left it, its headlights seeming to squint out to sea. You do not cross to it, only glance inside for a second or two as you pass by.

–On holiday? Gregory asks.

–I’ve taken some time off work. Decided to visit some places I haven’t seen in a while.

And without really knowing why, you tell this man, this stranger, about how, as a child, you came here, to this stretch of coast, many times.

–Did you enjoy them? The holidays?

The question freezes you in place on the tarmac for a moment and you plunge your hands into the pockets of your fleece as if the answer might be found there, but your pockets are empty except for your scrabbling fingers, fingers that squeeze into fists as you say, your voice cracking, your voice threatening to shatter entirely, –I think so.

The glow of the Cliffhanger café is a beacon in the still leaden light of what must now be early afternoon, the figures inside illuminated in the plate glass like actors on muted television screens. A breeze, thick with the heavy sea smell, sweeps across the flat expanse of the car park.

–Let’s get in the warm, Gregory says.

A waitress leads you to a small table in the window. Gregory does not wait for you to speak or even ask what you want, just orders without looking at the carefully folded card menu with its embossed design.

–Two large black coffees, thank you.

After the waitress has gone, Gregory says, –That’s right isn’t it?

You turn from the window, from where you have been watching the sea and look at Gregory. In the bright light of the café this man, this stranger seems suddenly familiar.

–Have we met?

–Would you not remember if we had? His question to a question comes quick and is followed with a warm grin.

You open your mouth to answer but the waitress returns before you can speak. The coffees sit steaming between you, large cups upon equally large saucers. Gregory slips the hip flask from his pocket and pours a hefty slug into his own drink, then holds the neck of the flask over yours.

–A wee splash to warm you?

You look back to the sea before giving the smallest of nods.

–The cure for what ails, you say as if to the waves.

By the time you leave the Cliffhanger the clouds have thickened, the dense brumes curdled into great cauliflowers that hang above the horizon. A drizzle squeezes out and down over the coast line, thin and cold and jabbing as it falls. Lightheaded from the whisky, you walk unsteadily toward the Astra and pull the keys from your pocket. Gregory places a hand on your arm.

–Probably not a good idea for either of us to be driving, not for a bit. Is there somewhere we can go to get out of this rain?

At the edge of the car park a weather-beaten wooden shelter looks

out across the sea. You put the keys back in your pocket and cross to stand under it. Below the twin JCBs rotate and stretch and grab at sand and earth, scooping up bucketfuls, flurries of the stuff falling from the edges in wet, dusty streams as the machine whirls back and forth. As if the movement below unearths something inside, you turn to Gregory and say,

–I know where we can go.

On the steep incline back to the gate and the camp beyond, Gregory moves past you without a word, and continues up the cliffside as if knowing exactly where he is going. His large frame powers the final stretch of path, shoulders swinging back and forth in time with his striding feet, the soles of his boots hammering the gravel, spitting up spurts of stone as they push back and lift. You watch this and for a flash recall your father walking this slope, you riding his shoulders, swaying back and forth with the roll of them. There is the sound of laughter. Words burst too quick across your thoughts to pluck them up, to truly hear them. Then the memory is gone.

The rain swells and slants, swept in on a driving wind that pummels you both as you reach the brow. Without a word you stop and watch the roil of the sea below. In the distance, stretching out from the

Isle of Wight, the Needles are just visible against a stone sky, the ashen flanks of chalk protruding from the waves like the sails of some half-sunk vessel.

–Strange to think the same process that produced those also made so many mountains, Gregory says.

You remember knowing this once. You recall knowing the name of the process, the names of the many mountains. You try to pick them out from somewhere inside but they are squatting in the darker parts of your brain, down where the lights are out and the shadows are spreading.

–The Atlas. The Rif. The Baetic Cordillera. The Cantabrian Mountains. The Pyrenees. The Alps. The Apennine Mountains. The Dinaric Alps. The Hellenides. The Balkan Mountains. The Taurus. The Caucasus. The Alborz. The Zagros. The Hindu Kush. The Pamir. The Karakoram. Even the Himalayas. All of them made when the same four tectonic plates collided.

As Gregory recites the list something flares and the words are on your lips before the thought of them has truly formed. –You missed the Carpathians.

Gregory takes a step back as if he is moving amongst the words he has just spoken, stepping through them to find a space.

–You’re quite right. The Carpathians. Indeed.

The thought of the mountains dredges up a shade of you reading Dracula as a boy, your mother slipping into your room late one night to find you wide-eyed under the quilt cover, torch in hand, breathless. Your vision fills with your mother’s face, her expression a perfect mix of pride and irritation at your flouting the lights out rule to finish your reading. Or perhaps it is the other way round, this memory pulling up thoughts of the Carpathians. You have no way of knowing.

–There’s something missing there too, right?

Gregory points to the gap in the Needle’s remaining teeth and you recall something, spoken in the voice of your mother, her telling a story while the pair of you lay on the beach eating sandwiches, a weak summer sun fuzzing overhead.

–Lot’s Wife. The column that fell into the sea in 1764. The crash of it was felt as far away as Southampton they say.

Gregory speaks the words now but it is your mother’s voice you hear.

–No one really knows how tall the pillar was. Sketches of it are different depending on when they were drafted. It is far outside the reach of any living memory.

As the words unfold, your mother’s voice spirals back into the faded edges of your brain, the final sentence spoken in Gregory’s voice once more.

–Who are you? you ask, but Gregory has stepped closer to the cliff edge. The wind carries the question off and over and out to sea.

Off the end of the Needles formation, under the juddering waves, the Shingles, that three mile shifting shoal of pebbles, sways with the motion of the water. Without you recalling it exists. Without Gregory speaking of it.

The day moves toward evening and the house is cold when you reach it. Rain spatters through the hole in the door, the chinks of glass like broken islands of ice upon the cold ocean of the small puddle forming on the wood flooring.

–I’ll find something to block that, Gregory says and disappears into the kitchen. You nod and step through to the living room. You do not look at the carrier bag still slumped on the coffee table, do not even

think of hiding it, just collapse into the chair and stare once more at the sea. The day still shows no sign of brightening and you grasp about for a word to describe the greyness of the seascape and sky framed in the window.

–Leadon, you say to yourself.

–What’s that?

Gregory steps into the room and closes the living room door. Two slim spotted mugs hang by their handles from the fingers of his left hand.

–I taped a bin bag over it, should keep the worst out.

He does not sit but steps over to the window, looks out for a moment then turns, perches on the slight seat the window sill provides and places the mugs down beside him.

–Nice chalet. It yours?

–It’s where we used to come on holiday.

The sky had seemed brighter then, even the days it rained. There had been comics and sweets and hot chocolate before bed and stories. Someone to tuck you in. Someone to kiss you goodnight.

–Care for a real drink?

Gregory pours from his hip flask into the two spotted mugs, the rich smell of rum fills the air. You take the offered mug and throw your head back, gulp down a swig. The alcohol flares in your chest, fills it like the striking of a match, sets something burning inside. You watch Gregory take a swig and try again to place what it is about him that seems so familiar.

–What’s in the bag? he asks.

You stare into the mug clasped in your hands. Not at Gregory. Not at the bag.

–The bag?

–The carrier bag. What’s in it?

–Nothing.

–You don’t want to tell me?

–It’s nothing.

–There’s clearly something in the bag, that much I can see. If you don’t want to say, that’s fine, but please, and Gregory puts down his mug, leans forward, his hands on the dirt-smudged knees of his black

combats, –don't lie to me.

It is not the words or even that his voice is raised as he speaks them, rather it is something in the saying of them, the bite of his white teeth within the deep brown of his beard perhaps, or the tightness of his eyes, lines flaring from the corners in a way that would have been comforting if accompanied by a smile, something in the combination of all these things and lack of things that makes those four words hang menacingly in the air as if the sound of them echoes and echoes and echoes.

You remember those words spoken in your father's voice, his standard, unshifting reply to the childish response of –I don't remember, wheeled out whenever you found yourself caught in some mischief or bad behaviour. –Did you do this? –How did this get broken? –Why did you do that? he would ask, and you –I don't remember? and Dad –Don't lie to me, his voice a shout, a bellow to wake the dead it felt sometimes, a shout to shake the land and send it crashing into the sea and, mystified at why your words caused such uproar, such chaos, the tide would burst inside you and you'd cry, your mother running toward the sounds of earthquakes and storms to wrap you in her arms.

–I'd like you to go now. You rise from your chair, scoop up the

carrier bag from the coffee table and clutch it to your chest even as Gregory snatches at the bag, bunching the side of it into his fist. You pull, trying to drag the bag from his grip but he holds firm. The bag stretches taught between the two of you. You feel the plastic tear beneath your fingers, know it will burst, know it but can't let go.

The bag explodes scattering the contents. Boxes of paracetamol clatter onto the coffee table, thump softly onto the carpet, packets and packets and packets. You stood in shop after shop, supermarket after supermarket, buying the allowed two packets over and over, buying more than you would need, more than you could ever swallow. Enough to do the job many times over. Amongst the blue boxes with white writing, the pink lettering of a single box of Escitalopram and the green on white of a single box of Trazodone, your twin meds, peek out.

Photographs spill from a faded Kodak envelope along with the strips of negative, the envelope torn, the images faded, the negatives brittle and pale. In the pictures: a small boy playing in a garden. Kicking a football. Paddling in a small inflatable pool. Riding a tricycle. Then older: riding a bike. Stabilisers on. Stabilisers off. Standing proud in a cub's uniform. Chasing a woman across the grass. Some sort of game. Tig. Follow the leader. In short trousers and Spider-man t-shirt.

Smiling. The sun, the sky, bright in each photo. Your father present only in the point of view. The photos flat but bursting with old Kodak colour.

Once the pictures and pills stop their clatter and flutter, the punctuation of your own breath is the only sound. You should be able to hear your heart, can feel it racing, but it does not make a sound even as you fling yourself at Gregory, fists flailing. You feel teeth bared in your face and the stretch of leg muscles as you chase him down the hall. You fire blows that fail to land or only half land as the man steps back and back and back until he is out of the house, across the road, on the grass, the edges of the flat slabs of concrete foundation causing him to stumble but never quite fall as the momentum of your anger carries you right to the cliff edge, would carry you over, into the tide below, but Gregory shouts above the wash of the waves.

–That’s not the house.

You stop, arms still raised, fists still clenched. You feel like a child posing for a photograph. Show your muscles. Show us how strong you are.

–That house. Gregory nods past your shoulder, at the house behind. –It isn’t the one you stayed in as a child. It can’t be. The closest

chalets to the cliff edge fell into the sea years ago. The slip of '73. It's a process that's still happening. He points at the concrete foundation slabs behind you in the grass. –That's why those have been removed. Torn down before they fall down.

Your arms drop and you turn and look at the exposed foundations and then at the cliff edge. You step closer to the edge. Cloud stretches to the horizon in thick sheets, forms a frozen reflection of the grey sea churning below. The wash and hush and constancy of the waves assailing the slowly collapsing cliff side drowns your silence.

You feel the question before it is asked, the sense of it escaping from Gregory like breath and so you answer before the question can be asked.

You tell him your diagnosis, your eyes fixed on the water below. When he looks at you blankly you say,

–I call it my equal opportunities Alzheimer's. It doesn't discriminate by age or sex or race or social class, though as many as half of those diagnosed have an affected family member.

Gregory doesn't say anything. You drop to your haunches and perch on the edge of the cliff like a bird about to take flight. You put a

hand to the grass at your feet. It is damp. You will remember this, the dampness, the sound of the sea, the feeling that if you could simply stretch yourself wide enough you might catch the wind and fly from the cliff top and out over the waves. This thought you wrap inside you, try to place the moment deep where your condition will not be able to find it, however much it scours the essence of you from the meat of your brain.

–Is there nothing to be done?

You reach into the pocket of your fleece and pull the scrap of paper from it. The breeze flicks and snaps the paper and threatens to carry it off but you keep it scrunched in your fingers until Gregory plucks it from you.

His eyes flicker down the list of questions.

–How old are you?

You think about this.

–39, you say, –No, 36.

You try to remember your date of birth.

–I’m not forty yet, anyway. I think.

It's the best answer you can find in the end.

–What year is it?

You know it's the twenty-first century.

–2008? 2010? 2017? 2003? You list the years looking for a flicker of agreement in Gregory's face but he is impassive. While you have been talking the cloud has cleared to reveal a bright crescent moon. The light illuminates him, makes his pale skin shine, the glow of it emphasised by his thick dark beard.

–Which is it then? you ask but he just shakes his head.

–Does it matter? he says.

You lean forward. Below the water embraces the shore. Below is mud and stone and sand and sea.

Gregory stands. –A fall from here wouldn't kill you, he says and holds out a hand.

And you're laughing, hot and hard and loud, the sound of you battering the sound of the sea into submission.

In the end the pair of you go back to the house. You make tea while Gregory tidies up the living room.

–I’ve put the bag by the backdoor, he says when you hand him his tea. –If you still want it. He pulls the flask from his pocket again. –One for the road, he says, leaning forward with a grin, arm outstretched, the flask angled ready to pour.

You lean to meet him, stretch out your arm, the mug shaking slightly, the milky tea within lapping at the edges, eager to spill. –Is that thing ever empty?

Gregory just grins and pours, winking as he screws the cap back on. –Not if I can help it.

Tea drunk, you watch him watch you fall asleep. When you wake he is gone. The living room shows no sign that anyone was here other than the tiny disturbances of your own presence; squashed cushions on the armchair, dried mud on the coffee table from where you swung your feet up as exhaustion swept you off. His mug is gone. In the kitchen a single set of muddy footprints track a dirty path across the lino. The glass fragments scattered around the back door glint with the first light of the morning. On your way out you lift the carrier bag, hold it open and fish out your Escitalopram and your Trazodone and stuff them in the pockets of your fleece. You leave behind the rest.

By the time you cross the beach and climb the path back to the car park, a finger of reflected sunlight stretches across the waves to you. It is reaching rather than pointing, at least that is how you see it as you sit upon a bench and look out over the man-made coastal defences. The sunlight is warm and you close your eyes and listen to the tide work its unhurried erosive force on the rip rap and the shingle, reshaping everything by increments.



Dan Powell's prize-winning short fiction has appeared in the pages of *Being Dad*, *The Lonely Voice*, *Unthology*, *The London Magazine* and *Best British Short Stories*. His debut collection, *Looking Out of Broken Windows*, was shortlisted for the Scott Prize and longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and the Edge Hill Prize. He is currently working on a second story collection and a debut novel, is a First Story writer-in-residence, and a Doctoral Researcher in Creative Writing at University of Leicester. He procrastinates at danpowellfiction.com and on Twitter as @danpowfiction.