

From *See You on the Other Side*, Josie Lowe

As she turned the corner into the harbour and saw the movement of the sea, her worries flowed out of her body. She felt light for the first time in weeks. The harbour was quiet and the tide was out, so she walked down onto the sand and took off her shoes, enjoying the cool softness of the damp shore, the sun heating the back of her neck. She felt warm and grubby and in need of a shower, feeling the bacteria multiplying on her skin, but relished moving her feet in the shallow water.

She thought of her favourite snapshot framed in the living room back at home, her children posing here at the harbour aged two and four, holding the railings with boats in the background. Libby smiling in toddler bewilderment with a slight trickle of snot above her mouth, Ellis's eyes almost closed in fullness of grin. They'd brought them to holiday here again in primary school and finally as sullen teenagers she and Rob had to drag around. With all the packing and organising and cooking, for they always went self-catering, it was all Josie could do most holidays to prevent her own existential meltdown. Rob would stride ahead through seaside towns, leaving her to tug along children whose little legs would not take them as fast, and they'd all have to wait patiently outside every charity shop with records while her husband browsed, or sit outside camping shops while he searched for deals on the best waterproofs and walking boots. But seeing her kids' joy at the beach, running towards the waves, patting down sandcastles,

or eating ice cream with faces concentrated as if solving a complex equation made up for the work it took to get them there.

After feeling the sand between her toes and letting the water lap at her feet, Josie dusted off her feet, put her shoes back on and walked along the quay. Gulls swooped over the cliffs and led her eye to Verity – a magnificent seventy-foot bronze statue conceived in the brain of mega-artist Damien Hirst. Josie moved towards Verity as if pulled by an industrial magnet. Naked and heavily pregnant, sword raised in the air, Verity was a symbol of woman, truth and justice. Her imposing structure juxtaposed with the seaside town had the effect of illuminating the felt-covered cliffs opposite. Josie sat on a bench underneath the statue channelling her ancient Briton in worship of a goddess. In Hirst style, Verity was presented in cross-section on one half of the structure. The skull and innards, and the fully-gestated baby in utero frightened her, so she sat on the bench looking up at the side covered in flesh.

Josie sat with Verity and her baby for a while, then got up and walked on to Capstone Hill, a small peninsula that looked out to sea. She stared out at the ocean, tipped white, above which continents of cloud drifted and breathed in the sea air. For the first time away in longer than she could remember, she could take a moment without worrying about someone needing the loo or Rob mithering her to catch up, as she stayed behind with the kids as they whinged about when they were going home.

She strode up the hill, feeling power in her thighs as if charged by the might of Verity. On the other side of the hill, she could see the grass was dead in places and felt sad but on the descent, she looked back and it made

sense. NHS was spelled out in a love heart made from the dried brown blades.

The walk to the car wasn't long but Josie's feet and back had begun to ache and her hangover was still not much closer to abating. She reached into her little backpack and pulled out an energy drink. She walked past the theatre, found her car and climbed in.

Her hand ready to start the engine she was taken by the painted sign of a B&B opposite, Sunnymeade House. She knew it shouldn't be open but thought she may as well try as she was desperate to get cleaned up. She ran her fingers through her greasy hair and rubbed under her mascaraed eyes.

Crossing the road at the lights she gave small smiles to cars that stopped. She walked up the steps and rang the bell. After a minute or two of waiting, no one had answered.

Turning to leave, she bumped into a woman who had a scarf around her nose and mouth.

‘Yes?’ the woman said as she produced a key from her pocket.

‘I was wondering if you had a room for the night.’

‘No, I don’t,’ the woman said crossly. ‘There are no vacancies.’ She pointed to a sign stuck to the inside of the bay window. ‘Right now it’s full of NHS staff like me.’

Josie walked down a couple of steps to keep her distance and noticed the navy scrub trousers and top under the woman’s jacket.

‘It’s no time to holiday,’ said the woman.

‘I’m not,’ Josie stuttered wanting to explain.

Then the woman looked Josie up and down and noticed her scuffed trainers and straggled state.

She spoke more warmly. ‘There’s a shelter at Barnstaple if you need it. I’ve heard they’re housing rough sleepers. Here, there’s some money for the bus fare.’ She threw some pound coins down on the ground. ‘And the food bank on Torrs Park might still be open.’

‘I’m not...’ said Josie but if she protested, she was the holiday maker looking for somewhere to stay, and that was worse. ‘Thank you,’ she said as the woman nodded and closed the door.

Josie went back to the car. She picked up her phone and plugged it in the charger. She switched it on for the first time since she’d left Polmennor House.

There were eighteen missed calls, twelve from Rob, some from the kids and a voicemail from Lin. She played it.

‘Josie, love. Give me a call. Rob’s going spare. I’ve never seen him so ... Just let us know you’re all right.’

A text from Ellis:

Missing people who are not found in 24 hours are likely to be lost for good, 1% of missing people never come back.

Mum, please let me know you’re not the one per cent. E x’

And Libby:

Mum did you wash my pink vest top? And for Godssake just give us a ring. You're such an attention seeker. ❤️ 😍 Luv you, Libby xxxx

She couldn't answer them now, she'd do it later when she was settled. Josie got her phone and began to search for places to stay. She couldn't book via the letting sites but sent messages to the owners in the hope something would get there, copying and pasting the same message:

*I urgently need a room in North Devon this evening. Please let me know your availability.*

Landlords sent back their own copied and pasted replies:

*Due to the Covid-19 pandemic you are unable to book accommodation. We will keep our website updated so please check back. Stay Safe.*

One owner said he would report her for asking, and that she should return home. She deleted the message quickly, glad only to have put her first name and no other details. Shit. It was six o'clock now. She'd surely find somewhere.

She went out again and knocked on a couple more hotel doors like Mary, only without a Joseph or virginity, plodding like the Little Donkey back to her Ford Focus where she sat in the back, her phone in one hand and a piece of Battenberg in the other.

She called Lin. It rang twice and she picked up. 'Josie. What's going on?'

'What?'

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m fine. I’ve gone away for a bit.’

‘Rob’s worried to death, and the kids.’

Honestly, she didn’t even think they’d notice.

‘Where are you?’ said Lin.

‘I’m in Devon.’

‘In Heaven? Shit, Josie.’

‘No, Devon.’

‘Devon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank God for that.’ She paused. ‘Why, though? You’re not supposed to leave home.’

‘I know.’

‘What is it Josie? What’s going on.’

‘Oh, Lin. I’ve been so...’

‘Tea?’ said a voice.

‘Thanks,’ whispered Lin. ‘Hi, Josie?’

‘Am I on speaker phone?’

‘Yes, Susan’s been that worried. Go on, you were saying.’

Josie hung up. Susan’s presence really pissed her off. As if it wasn’t enough that she could no longer see her best friend on her own, there was no way she was going to regale them both with the humiliating details while they raised eyebrows and made ‘I told you so’ faces at each other.

She scrolled through her phone list which included all the people she disliked, sucked into her Contacts list from various playdate emails and

failed job interviews over the years. Probably best not to ring the chair of the school PTA to tell her she shagged a man she hadn't seen for twenty years, thinking she was going to live happily ever after with, but hey funny story, turned out he was married.

Josie stopped at Ellis's name. He seemed worried about her. But she felt too foolish. There was nothing to say. Libby was wrapped up in her own stuff and Rob – what would she say to him? She was sure Lin and Susan would now be on the phone to him to give their detailed analysis of the forty-second phone conversation they'd had. At least they would all know she was OK. Of course, she wasn't *OK*, but she was alive.

Josie felt uncomfortable again from lack of shower, twisting in her seat and realised she was going to have to find somewhere to wash. She put the key in the ignition and drove out of the car park.