



**Take a seat and watch the sun rise,**  
on a landscape that is both beautiful, and  
deadly.

## BETWEEN FULL NIGHT AND SUNRISE

Joe stares into the thin light of a dawn sky. It reveals the edge of the cliff, about 30 meters in front of him, and beyond that, the faint outline of waves far below. He opens the flask of coffee that is on the bench beside him and pours himself a cup. Like clockwork, Yasamin appears from behind the ridge of gorse to his left.

‘Perfect timing.’ He calls out. ‘Do you want a cup?’

‘Ah yes please Joe.’ Cradling Amaya, as ever, in the baby sling against her chest, she sits down beside him with a sigh.

‘Beautiful morning again.’

She adjusts the colourful headscarf that frames her face and smiles at him. ‘Yes, it is. And sunrise soon.’

Joe nods his head at Amaya. ‘Asleep, is she?’

Yasamin pushes back the edge of the sling and looks at her daughter tenderly. ‘Oh yes. She always sleeps when I walk. Ever since the night of the storm, this is the only way I can calm her.’

‘My two were the same. Sometimes I would take them out for a walk in the middle of the night, just so Maggie could get some rest.’ He thinks back through the years, so many now. He sees himself pushing the pram through dark streets. He sees the twins’ peaceful faces glow up at him like the buds of pale flowers.

‘How long have you been coming here, Joe?’

‘So long, I forget,’ he pats the seat beside him, its wood worn smooth by the bottoms of countless visitors, ‘long enough for this to be *my* bench now.’

A lone seagull flies with a cry over their heads towards the sea, bridging the terrifying drop of the cliff edge with a single beat of its wings.

Yasamin takes a tentative sip of her coffee then closes her eyes and sighs happily. ‘Ah, so sweet. Thank you, Joe.’

‘I know how you like it. What do you call coffee in Iran again?’

‘*Gahveh*’

‘Ah yes, that’s right. *Gahveh*.’ He drains the last bitter dregs and starts to replace the lid of his flask, but Yasamin stops him.

‘Joe, remember your *niyat*, your fortune.’

‘Sorry, of course.’ He upends the lid on the bench beside him.

Yasamin empties her cup then does the same, before picking up his and staring into it, her expression grave. ‘It is hard to read it today...’

‘In England we do the same, with tea leaves you know.’

She looks up at him questioningly.

'We'd read the tea leaves that were left in people's cups. Look for shapes that gave clues to their futures.'

She nods then returns to his empty cup. 'I do not know what I see,' she frowns, 'I see the Seven Sisters, the ocean, and the sky, I see your heart open like a flower. But I do not see your future.'

He reaches for her cup and peers into it. 'You are going on a journey,' he says quickly. 'A long journey -'

Yasamin stubbornly shakes her head. 'No more journeys. I do not like them.'

He reaches out and touches her hand. 'Just one more,' he says softly. 'And it will not be hard.'

She looks over his shoulder and her expression changes suddenly. 'Who is that?'

Joe follows her gaze and sees a young man, dressed in tight fitting, sporty clothes, jogging towards them. When he reaches the bench, he stops, and bends over, as if catching his breath.

'I...think...I...may...have...got...lost.' He says, panting. 'Which...way...is...Seaford head?'

Joe pats the bench between him and Yasamin. 'Sit down for a bit and rest.'

'Are you sure?'

'It's a free country.'

The man sits down and wipes his face with the hem of his running top. 'I've run 10k today. It's going to be such a beautiful morning I thought I'd get out early.'

'It is.'

'Do you come here a lot?' The man asks, retrieving a slim water bottle from a belt around his waist and drinking from it deeply.

'Every morning, come rain wind or shine.' Joe says, smiling. 'I live very near here.'

The man looks at Yasamin.

'I've been coming for a while.' She replies, shyly. 'It helps my baby sleep.'

The man leans over and looks at Amaya. 'I didn't see her. Is it a *her*?'

'Yes.'

'How old?'

'Three months.'

Joe holds out his hand to the man. 'I'm Joe, and this is Yasamin.'

The man hesitates for a moment then shakes Joe's hand. 'Mike.'

'Nice to meet you Mike.'

'As I was saying, I think I may be lost.'

Joe smiles, 'hard to get lost, with the sea on one side and the South Downs on the other.'

Mike frowns. 'I know, it's odd. I must have run here a thousand times. There's a turn off to the car park, I think I've missed it.'

'Stay a bit longer. Once the sun's risen, things will be clearer.'

'Yes, good idea.'

Mike looks at his watch, then leans back against the bench.

'I'd give you a coffee,' Joe says, 'but I'm afraid we've finished it.'

'Don't worry, I can't drink coffee straight after a run, makes me dizzy.'

They are silent for a while. A rabbit dashes through the twilight in front of them, and down into the dark depths of a hole that is partly obscured by a patch of cowslips.

'I've often wondered,' says Mike suddenly with a laugh, 'if they ever burrow the wrong way by accident and end up coming out of the side of the cliff.'

'I don't think animals do stuff like that.' Says Joe, thoughtfully, 'I think they have more common sense.'

Yasamin shudders. 'I hope so. How terrible to work so hard, to try to get somewhere, and then find yourself falling into the sea.'

Mike turns to her. 'That's a pretty name, Yasamin. And your accent, where is it from?'

She bends her head and kisses the top of Amaya's head. 'Iran.'

'Oh.' Mike's eyebrows rise. 'You've come a long way then. Your English is so good though, you must have been here a while?'

Yasamin looks startled, but Joe cuts in, 'They all learn English, over there, don't they Yasamin?'

She nods, but doesn't reply.

Just then, a filament of gold light appears on the line of the horizon, flooding their faces with warmth. Joe closes his eyes, Yasamin and Mike stare transfixed at the ocean, watching a path of light roll out across the waves towards them from the rising sun.

'However many times you see it,' says Yasamin, 'it is always so beautiful.' Amaya makes a snuffling noise against her mother's chest. She strokes the baby's downy hair and shushes her gently.

'I wonder if I need to go East or West?' says Mike under his breath. 'I can't seem to get my bearings.'

Joe opens his eyes. 'Yasamin knows the way,' he says quietly, 'don't you Yasamin?'

Yasamin lets out a small wail and shakes her head. 'I cannot leave you, Joe, you would be alone, and you have always been so kind to me.'

Joe smiles at her. 'I'm never alone for long. I've been coming here for years, you know that. There's always so many people to say hello to. Some, like you, even stop and have a chat. That's why I always make a full flask of coffee.'

Mike looks from one to the other. 'I don't understand.' He says in a small voice. 'What's happening here? I was just going for a run, like I always do.'

Joe shifts on the bench to face him. 'Are you sure? Like you always do? Or was this morning different?'

'I.. Mike looks scared. 'I'm not sure.'

'Yasamin.' Joe reaches across Mike and takes hold of her hand. 'You can see he's lost, but you can help him. You know you can.'

A look of anguish flashes across Yasamin's face. 'But I'm not ready, and Amaya, she likes it here. It's peaceful. We look forward to our walk every morning, we look forward to seeing you. Our coffee, and our *fal 'eh gahveh'*

'And it's been lovely meeting you, Yasamin, but Mike needs your help.'

A flock of gulls races below them, the rising sun projecting their fractured shadows onto the distant waves of the English Channel. The sky has started to blush into clear blue. Joe collects his flask and his coffee cups and starts to pack them away.

'Don't leave it too long, Yasamin.' He gets up from the bench, leans down to kiss the top of her head, then holds his hand out to Mike. 'Good luck, it was nice to meet you.'

Mike looks up at him and shakes his hand absently. 'Yes, have a nice day.'

With a groan, Joe straightens up, holding his back then points, 'Look, you can see the path now that the sun is up. Better get going, you don't want to miss it. Goodbye.'

Yasamin watches him navigate a slender chalk path that has been worn through the grass. Eventually his shape disappears into the retreating darkness of the West. She stands up.

'Come on,' she holds out her hand, 'it's this way.'

The two police officers are in a sweat by the time they get to the bench. The younger one takes off her hat and wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. Tentatively she goes as close to the cliff edge as she dares and stares down. She shudders and immediately steps back again.

'It's hard to believe isn't it, that anyone should jump off that.'

The older officer puts his hands on his hips, his expression rueful. 'A third of all the suicides in East Sussex happen here.'

'But it just doesn't make sense, to get in your running gear, to go out, like you've done every day for ages, to take a bottle of water, when all the time you know what you're going to do.'

'I suppose it's impossible to understand, unless you've been there, unless you've been that desperate. Apparently he left a note in his car, that may say more.'

'It's just so sad.'

'Let's sit down for a minute, that climb's done me in.'

They both sit down on the bench, but the younger officer looks upset. 'I mean, it's so beautiful here, but it's also terrible. All those people. Do you think they come here *because* it's so beautiful?'

'Maybe, or maybe it's because they know it will be quick.'

'And it's not just the jumpers is it, it's those refugees, on the boats. Coming over from France. How many of them died in that storm?'

The older policeman reaches into his pocket, takes out a packet of cigarettes and lights one. 'I don't remember. There was a woman, wasn't there, and a baby?'

'Poor things.'

Their radios crackle, and the younger officer fumbles to answer it. '...No, nothing yet, Sir, we're just about to start the search...Yes...Over.'

The older officer stubs out his cigarette and sighs. 'Come on then, we'd better have a look around. They think he must have jumped somewhere near here.'

As he gets off the bench, a small brass coloured plaque is revealed. It has the slightly worn look of having been regularly polished, but a patina of rust has started to obscure the words:

*Joe Merchant, 1925-2005*

*This is his bench. He loved it here.*