

# **Rock Pools**

## **By Paul O’Kane**

I can't remember clearly anything special that happened, where we went and what we did, but as I remember what we usually did I think I can guess. We probably visited some beaches within a ten-mile radius of the town, maybe that beach with the red, sandy cliffs and beautiful rock pools. This was early summer and during the three years Soo lived down there we always made the most of what the area had to offer. In Winter we'd visit the same places and see them in a different light. The beach with the red, sandy cliffs and beautiful rock pools would be a place to stroll and paddle in the warm months but in winter we'd visit to take-in a desolate, abandoned atmosphere which, on certain days -weekends probably- would be enhanced by lines of parked-up pensioners sitting in cars, eating sandwiches and biscuits, taking tea from flasks and never talking to each other or their next-car neighbours, just staring out through the windscreen, at the horizon and the tide rolling out and in.

The convenience of a car meant that as long as it was bright even on cold days it was possible for these elderly couples to steal one more sense of summer by staying out of the breeze and soaking up rays through the screen. So there they sat, wing mirror to wing mirror, in a row stretching the length of the front, providing a human reflection of the horizon itself, thinking, I suppose, about the past and the future.

Well, I hope you get the picture of the kind of places we'd go, beaches, moorland, little cafés. Sometimes we'd just stroll around town chatting about buildings or window-

shopping, feeling life was to be lived in pleasure, not yet having really felt the harsh whips of time and money that would later shake us into thinking and acting more responsibly. When you first love someone you might hardly notice it. Not that you take it for granted, but you don't really question it, just fall in and you're together, and then it doesn't matter much what you're doing or where life's taking you. That's how I remember those days with Soo. There was fun, and regular flashes of passion, but most of all I recall those OK, easy days. The environment of a small town in a pretty part of the country helps a lot, because you're both surrounded by space and possibility, with a sense of low pressure that you lose if you transfer that love to the city and expect it to run just the same -which is exactly what we did.

The city pushes a close couple too close together, in an environment subject to constant, invisible pressure, which acts on you even in your sleep. It takes a long time, many years in fact, to find the spaces and possibilities of the city, unlike the country town where they're obvious. You need to find the things that don't cost money, the right people to be with, who and where to avoid. When you first arrive in the city it's like someone glued roller blades to your feet and you've got to move fast just to stop yourself falling and getting hurt. Suddenly, your little country love turns into two individuals striving to cut a success through a jungle of competitors, and slowly you notice your paths diverging, you're losing touch, and soon you rarely see, hear or feel each other, only knowing that the other is over there somewhere, last seen headed in that direction.

The next thing is you're all alone with obstacles in every direction, and with half the

skills and energy you knew as a couple. But this is the moment you begin to learn the real language of the city, a whole new tongue, transmitted and received on a wavelength of near panic. Now you realise that the most densely populated, most civilised place is where you're least protected. You sleep under a roof whose Victorian plaster is more threatening than the night sky, and you walk well-lit roads whose sickly amber glow makes the pitch black of country lanes seem welcoming. Little by little the city buys your soul for a bargain price, piece by piece you surrender your sweetness and dreams in return for its forked-tongued promises. Now and then you flee, crying 'this isn't me' but you soon become estranged from any clear notion of self. The city throws down a gauntlet that cannot be ignored and you become committed to its challenge. And so your scurrying feet, restrained by a piece of invisible elastic, slowly turn you around, like Dick Whittington, to take-on the city once more, believing now you'll be stronger, wiser, better-paced. You cuckold yourself, like a bad boxer, into one more bloody bout, beginning with promises of gold and glory but ending in another concussion.

After returning for the umpteenth time like a battered wife to a battering man you begin to realise that secretly, perversely you're in love with the city and that the only thing that will satisfy you both is consummation. You must become the city, allow it to fully envelop you, only then will it allow you to feel any kind of home. You become one, forsaking alternatives, accepting that this is where, for the foreseeable future you belong. You make a pact to donate your life to the city, as so many have done before, and only thus do you turn a corner, beginning to see yourself no-longer as immutable, autonomous, set against the environment, but porous, shifting to match the surroundings

like a certain species of moth which, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, turned itself black to hide within the urban grime.

City love affairs are quite different from those of country towns. Perhaps surprisingly, they are more, not less ritualistic. They are tribal operations within the mechanism of a close-knit, fast-communicating hive that insists you jump through hoops, wear ceremonial dress and submit to rites of passage. Nor do they lack joy or splendour, far from it, these are intensified, but city rituals take place in communion with a diary-driven, media-entangled populace who's lives you interact with in a great, mutual co-dependence. And if the city hasn't spat a couple out or broken them apart then it will hold you together once it's blessing has been given.

To not-only survive but thrive in the city, to thrive enough to be capable of loving there you are next required to be superhuman, heroic figure, never caught napping or off-guard, always armour-plated, virtuous, as stylish and charming as possible, yet watching the games people play like a poker fiend.

Naivety is devalued and long gone, lost along with the horizon, and now you look out only for the next trap and the next way to wriggle out. And now, if you go back to the country, the sea and the small town you're no-longer relieved and redeemed but shocked by its complacency, disoriented by the arbitrariness of its unfilled spaces, dismayed by the dullness of its lives, and bored by the absence of drama.