

The Mirror in the Ice Cream Parlour

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*To all my friends and relations who read
The Occasional Gardener and encouraged me
to write a sequel.*

*And in memory of
Richard Cocks,
writer of memorable songs and a gentle musical
companion.*

3.15pm 15th November

The sea – the sea is like my breath.

The sea pulls back, gathering its forces – I breathe in, filling my lungs with air. The sea rushes up the beach, slowing to a light film of water as it reaches as far as it can go – I breathe out, my breath slowing to a whisper as it leaves my body. The sea pulls back again – I breathe in again; it rushes up the beach again – I breathe out again. This rhythm lulls me, and makes me realise why I always long for the sea: it is the rhythm of life.

Sitting on the beach in November, sketching the grey clouds coming in above the cold Welsh sea, I'm getting chilly, and the dog's coming back with a stick, asking me to throw it for him. I put my sketch book into my pocket, and ease my stiff limbs off the sand, struggling against gravity. Bloody Newton, I reflect; why did he have to think that up?

The dog is damp. I hope he doesn't start getting arthritis like me. He is quite old now, and Labradors have a tendency to have problems with their hind legs. He wags his tail, shaking his fawn coat and covering my bare feet with salt water and sand.

“One more throw, and then we'll go back.” I chuck it as far as I can, and it disappears over some jagged rocks that tower up out of the sand.

When he brings it back, we'll walk up the long path to the car. I'm looking forward to driving back along the coast road to the warmth of my brother Paul's cottage, and a cup of tea with my girlfriend Peggy. We are staying there while we try to find somewhere to live. Peggy is on leave from the police, while she recovers from a bullet grazing her spine during a drugs raid that I was in charge of. She's doing brilliantly, but she gets tired from all the physio and just simply the business of walking. She'll be at the window, overlooking the harbour, reading something historical, I expect.

Paul will be practising for his gig tonight, which is in a local pub. His partner Andy will be cooking our supper. There might be cake or biscuits as well – warm from the oven. Andy is a great cook. And what am I doing? I'm waiting for a letter with the results of my tests for dementia, that's what I'm doing. The sea is the one thing that calms me down and helps me to stop worrying.

My mind is taken up with all this, so I don't see the dog until he's right at my feet, dropping something on the sand in front of me. It's not the stick I threw, it's small, square and a mottled brown colour – soggy with sea water. I nudge it gingerly with my foot.

“What's this you've found? Where's your stick?”

The dog wags his tail, and barks, expecting me to throw this for him to retrieve again, but I stoop down to have a closer look.

It's a leather wallet.

I pick it up. It's damp to touch, the leather is swollen and discoloured, so it's probably been on the sand for some time. Might even have been washed up by the tide. I walk in the direction of the towering rocks, the dog trotting beside me wagging his tail and hoping I'm going to chuck it for him to fetch again.

The rocks conceal the rest of the beach, and I walk round them to see if anyone's there.

As I expected, not a soul to be seen.

I open the wallet and a business card falls out. I bend down to pick it up and I can see the words 'True Ewe' printed on top of the soft-focus picture of an old-fashioned ice cream parlour. Turning it over, I can just make out something written on the back in pencil. The card is damp and wrinkled, but the name 'Brian O'Connell' is still decipherable, with a number written by it. The last time I encountered a man called Brian O'Connell, he clobbered me over the head and made off with millions of pounds worth of stolen paintings.

Me! Detective Inspector Arnold Rackham!

Painful memories of the last couple of months come rushing back: Peggy being shot by a terrorist; yours truly being nearly murdered by an evil old woman who had buried twenty victims in her garden; discovering that I'd been betrayed by my closest friend; finding out that my wife had been having an affair for decades.

I came here to get away from all this, and part of me says 'throw the wallet back in the sea, Arnold. Let someone else deal with it.'

But I don't – I can't.

My heart begins to thump as I sit down on a rock and look through the rest of the contents of the wallet.

Two cards, one debit and one credit, in the name of MR A M HUNT.

Four soggy £20 notes.

There are quite a lot of business cards stuck together, but I daren't try to peel them apart, in case they disintegrate. The information on them could be very interesting, especially if this is to do with the Brian I know.

A couple of cards come away from the rest, and fall in my lap. I pick them up carefully, and read:

Alan Hunt – Art Dealer
Chancery Lane
Hay-on-Wye
Herefordshire
UK

So Mr Hunt, the owner of this wallet, is an art dealer. Might just be the sort of person Brian would get in contact with, especially if Mr Hunt is a dodgy art dealer.

I turn the card over gently, and the other card stuck to the back reads:

Rigby Rogers – Gunsmith
Bright Street
Camden
NW1

So, an art dealer with an interest in guns? Unusual, I reflect. I breathe long and slow to calm my heart rate down. Have I just discovered a link to Brian and those stolen paintings? The ones that were lost due to my incompetence?

I have got a new job with a company that deals with art fraud, theft and insurance, but I don't start till next month, so I have a bit of time to follow this up – to make good, redeem myself. I should probably hand all this over to Grimwode and his pals in Counter-terrorism, but I don't feel like it – not after the way they treated me. And anyway, I'm still theoretically a policeman myself – at least for a couple of weeks.

What to do? What to do?

I carefully put the wallet and its contents in my coat pocket, ease myself up off the rock that I've been sitting on, and walk up the sand to find my shoes and socks. My

feet are so cold I can hardly feel them as I stand up slowly to take a last look at the sea.

I breathe in as I watch the sea draw back – I breathe out as it comes whispering over the sand towards me. Then I turn and hobble up the path, the sticky feeling of damp grit returning to my feet, the dog leading the way. One damp wallet in my pocket.