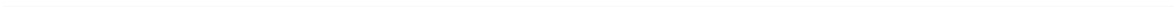


Surge

by

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999 words



She'd been standing in her kitchen in Shore Road, Blackness. It was still labelled that on maps, even though every year there was less shore. Doing the dishes, hearing birdsong.

Roaring, grating. Stone striking water, stone crunching stone.

Not a tidal wave crashing down that she had seen happen elsewhere on tv.

It only took the time for her to reach the front window for the road along the water, the road she'd walked to school on, the road visitors once drove with windows down to smell the fresh air, to be transformed into a grey shadow under murky water.

The sea wall had collapsed.

That was 2032. The breach became the benchmark against which she measured her life.

In 2046, Catherine walked the new path behind the waterfront houses. The local authority had designated it "Residents Only.". Where the road used to be there was sea.

She passed the backs of the old shorefront cottages. Their front doors opening onto a new sea wall holding back tidal water. In West Terrace where there had never been a sea wall, houses were uninhabited, windows boarded.

Two houses had been lifted onto concrete and steel stilts.

The Quigley's house lay empty. They'd moved inland after the second winter flood, rehoused in a new estate on higher ground near Bo'ness. Catherine sometimes pictured Mrs Quigley hanging out washing.

“Morning, Catherine!” called Tam from his garden gate, though the garden was a shadow of its former self. Half of it had become overrun with shingle.

“Morning,” she said, pausing. He held his mobile, studying the screen.

“No reception again.”

She smiled compassionately. “You can use my satellite phone.”

The electricity and fibre optic cables had been raised after the breach. The mobile phone signal still fluctuated with the weather. The satellite dish on her roof, something once only remote communities needed was the new normal.

“Pub open tonight?” she asked.

“Half six ‘til nine. If the van makes it to the car park.”

The car park. The farmer’s field up the hill, cleared, levelled and tarmacked after much of the village became inaccessible. Cars, buses, delivery vans and lorries stopped there now. Supplies came down to the village in robust four-wheel drive vehicles. People were transported between the car park and the edge of the village in them also. The villagers had accepted that this was the only option. Groceries, kegs of beer, containers of gas and kerosene transported through what used to be farmland.

Catherine carried on, the path rising slightly. From here she could see the Forth and flood barriers. Intrusive memories of the debates and arguments: cost, environmental impact. After the surges started, the government had no choice. Dunmore had vanished. Leith

needed a barrier. Grangemouth needed one too. A barrier between North and South Queensferry hadn't been viable. Blackness had to make do with a strengthened sea wall.

She worked three days a week, remotely, processing coastal erosion and tide data for an Edinburgh University research project. Twenty years ago, she'd commuted into the city by car through heavy traffic. Today she logged on from her home office, the sea visible through the side window at high tide. She was fortunate. He still had her job. The monitoring of climate change was critical.

The sense of loss lingered within her. She didn't suffer from anxiety, depression and trauma the way others had. Writing helped her manage her feelings and experiences.

Blackness Castle at the end of Shore Road had closed in 2038 after the rising Forth had made its foundations unsafe. Scaffolding supported its walls for years. The last time she'd walked up there before the gates shut, she touched the ancient stone and hoped it would endure. Now it stood empty, a ruin the few tourists that came photographed from the high-level car park.

The John Muir Way had been rerouted inland on the Blackness to Bo'ness section. The castle shop that sold

tickets, coffees and souvenirs closed. The former barracks and custodian's house became storage for sandbags, but had to close.

The pub in the village square survived, the people who were left eager to meet for social interaction. Her book group in Edinburgh and writers circle in Falkirk had moved online. She still wrote every day. She missed the in-person meetings.

That evening Catherine went to the pub, as she did most Fridays. The solar path lamps came to life at dusk. Inside, the pub smelled damp. Half the tables were stacked, the blackboard listing just three drinks: Lager; Whisky; Irn Bru.

“Good to see you,” said Rosie behind the bar, passing her a pint.

“Delivery arrived, then?”

“Two kegs and a box of crisps. You're in luck.”

They laughed. if you didn't laugh, you'd cry. She cried at random moments. The time she found an old bus ticket to Linlithgow in a coat pocket, printed with a route number that changed years ago.

At the corner table, a couple she didn't recognise studied a map.

“Walkers,” Rosie whispered. “Doing the entire route.”

“Good luck with that.” Catherine thought.

Later, walking home in the moonlight, she went to the end of the old road. At low tide it was still visible under the water. She stood, hands in gloves, listening.

The Forth sounded familiar, comforting. Waves lapping. The same sound that had lulled her to sleep as a child, that had serenaded her teenage romances, that had carried into her kitchen the morning everything changed.

She still grieved for absent neighbours, for locked castle gates, for a world that had changed irrevocably. But there

was something stronger. A comforting sense of being at home.

It remained the place she loved. Smaller. Besieged by water. Quieter. But when Tam waved, when Rosie served her a pint, when the path lights blinked on one by one across a field that used to raise cows and sheep, she felt it: a community damaged but not washed away.

The sea had taken the road.

It hadn't taken them.