

A Strange Encounter



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Some places belong in your heart and we felt a special connection to Pembrokeshire, especially St David's. We always thought of that short walk from St David's to St Non's as ours, even though the path was well-trodden, and we met other walkers on the way. On our hikes along the coastal path we'd stand together and gaze far out to the horizon, where the line between sea and sky was often blurred. We liked to suck in deep breaths of clean sea air then sigh with contentment. Until, one day, it all changed.

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The coastal slopes were decorated with the colours of royalty, purple and gold flowers and the pink thrift making the whole place look like an enchanted land. We were, like many others, visitors to that sacred place. We holidayed there every year, with my grandparents, drawn by the stories of Saint David as well as the magic that touches so much of Wales. Land of myth and legend and imbued with tranquillity. The perfect place.

Taid and I had a unique bond. It's often the way with grandparents, isn't it? Dadi, Taid and I would sneak off along the path while Nain and Mam clattered away in the kitchen, preparing food and chattering like magpies.

'Nothing like a bit of fresh air, eh Davey boy?' Taid would wink at me. I knew the fresh air would be followed by a pint in the pub on the way back. I'd be sent on ahead to our rented cottage to warn the women that two hungry men were on the way. They'd roll in twenty minutes after me with cheery smiles and beery breath.

When Dadi left Mam, and then Nain died, things altered. Our family holidays at St David's didn't stop but they became a different affair. Mam lost her sparkle and Taid shrank in stature it seemed to me. As I grew older I wasn't so keen on going on holiday with them but there was no choice. Once I got there, the magic of the place wove itself around and inside me, like warm Welsh cakes with jam. Taid's affectionate smile, and the crinkle at the side of his eyes, filled me with a cheery glow. No excuse for teenage tantrums with such unconditional love surrounding me.

'Come on Davey boy, our usual?' Taid would wink and we'd head off along that familiar path, the wind slapping our cheeks and the sea drowning out the sound of our footsteps.

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‘Let’s look for a Dartford warbler,’ Taid would say as we set off each day. It was part of the ritual. Once or twice we thought we’d spotted one, but they were shy, elusive. We sometimes heard their song and the flutter of wings, but they were clever at staying out of sight.

As I grew older I found, instead of trotting to keep up, I had to slow my pace as Taid wearied easily, wheezing a little at times. We’d stop more often to look at the wild flowers and spot butterflies. We both knew it was an excuse, the chance to rest, gather strength for the rest of the journey.

On one occasion, the little chapel of Our Lady and St Non was open. We entered, admired the stained-glass windows and rested there for a few minutes. A woman was inside, dusting and arranging flowers. She chatted while we sat in that tiny space, listening to the story we already knew about the history of the place.

Seagulls and ravens soared in the sky. Taid pointed out the silver wings of the gulls, swooping and screeching above us.

‘They’re free, Davey boy. Not stuck on the ground like us. Imagine being able to fly high in the air like that. How wonderful that would be.’

‘But we can, Taid. We can fly in an aeroplane.’

‘Not the same, is it now? You can’t feel the wind in your feathers and know just when to turn to catch the current of the air. It must be bliss, sheer bliss.’

That day, when we got back to the cottage, Taid looked grey and tired. Mam was cross with us both.

‘You’ve overdone it again, Dadi. You’re not fit for that walk. I told Davey not to let you go too far.’

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In a rare flash of temper his reply was swift. 'If I can't do the walk I might as well give up now.' He coughed then, that chesty cough that had plagued him all winter and lingered, despite the summer heat.

That was our final walk along the path. The next day was the end of our holiday. Mam tidied and cleaned, and we set off for our walk as usual. We didn't get very far before Taid was coughing so much that he decided to go back and wait in the pub for me.

I trotted off with purpose, keeping up a fast pace and nodding at others on the path instead of stopping and chatting, as was the norm. At St Non's well, I bent over and cupped some water to splash on my face. When I glanced up I was surprised to see a little bird sitting on the stone arch above the water. I expected it to fly off as soon as I moved but he sat there watching me. He sang his warbling song and then hopped up and down. I recognised it from the bird-watching books in the cottage. A Dartford warbler. I was amazed. 'Just wait until I tell Taid,' I thought. Afraid to move further, I gazed right into his eyes. He stared back before rising in the air in a swift and confident manner.

It was strange how that bird followed me all the way back along the path. Every now and again it stopped a few feet from me, sang a few notes and then flew up and around my head. Realisation dawned at last. With lead in my gut and dread in my heart, I ran all the way back to St David's knowing what awaited me.

Mam and I never went back to St David's after that summer. The following year we had a week in Spain; all sunshine and noisy hotels. It wasn't the same.

Now I've got grandchildren of my own and we spend a week at St David's every summer holiday. My grandson, Rhodri, and I love to walk along the coastal path to St Non's. It's a beautiful stretch of the coastline. A magical place.