

Stingray Jones goes all the way down

By Jaqueline Haskell

Stingray pulls on his whaler's T-shirt, pushes his hair back into its elastic band and throws open the doors of the *Salvamento Maritimo* where he spends his days. Next door, Bradie's easing back the wooden shutters of her beach lock-up, bending over so he can see the outline of her bikini bottoms beneath her thin wrap-around skirt. Every afternoon he watches her swim with the nudists off *Playa de la Tejita* but this glimpse of covered flesh still leaves him breathless. He had hopes of Bradie once. Then he found her crouching in between the Alpaca sweaters and dream-catchers in her store, writing French poetry to another woman, and he knew that was all they were: hopes. He saw her in John Hurley's bar not long after that, arm in arm with someone called May; a sinewy giant of a woman with spiky purple hair and, he soon found out, a penchant for arm wrestling. Stingray rubs his left wrist now, still stiff with the memory of their last encounter.

He fires up the coastguard's buggy and hooks the raking tools over the back using his old snow chains. He'll need them to keep a grip out on the causeway: he's heading straight over to Crab Island, while the tide allows. He's already running late and needs to get there and back before his stint on the *servicio playa*.

Saturdays he mans the Coastguard stand out front of the produce market, handing out advice on the chop and haul of the waters: 'if you don't see any sailboards out, you gotta ask yourself why', he says, gesturing to his pile of leaflets on cross-current safety and beginner's longboard lessons. His tone is severe, his body languorous, but he knows where you can hire the cheapest rigs, ride the best swell.

Stingray's fifty but looks seventy, and he's thin. So thin his skin shines blue, his feet webbed, translucent: hammer toes spread in an embrace.

He's just spent the night out at Gigantes Jake's place and this morning the thrum in his head is every bit a match for the whiz and roar of the buggy's engine as they struggle for possession of the coarse grey volcanic sand. Gigantes Jake's a 7ft Navaho

with slow speech and an illegal still. His tin shack sits in the shadow of Montaña Roja, a triangular volcano rising several hundred metres out of the sea: from his porch you can see the planes swooping and circling the airport down at Tenerife Sur, giant metal gulls on the wing.

Out on the island Stingray checks his watch, snatches a package from inside the buggy and strides up the shore towards the Villa Cascada. He sees Ray Hemingway coming towards him, skirting the swim-up bar of the infinity pool, and raising his hand in welcome, although Stingray's still several hundred feet away.

'Hemingway' said his client when they were first introduced. 'Ray not Ernest,' he'd added, holding out his hand with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

'Good to see you Ray!' Stingray says now. The greeting comes out more formally than he's intended, but then Ray has that effect on people. 'I got you the Ikaros sled, like Jamie wanted ...' He hands over the surf-kite Ray's grandson had asked for. 'Had to have it shipped over in the end though, so there'll be delivery on top.' He produces a small white envelope from the pocket of his cut-offs and shrugs apologetically 'Sorry' he says as he hands over the invoice.

'No problem' says Ray. 'Whatever it takes, you know that... Look, I'd fix us up a drink, but the damned bar shutters have jammed down again!' He gestures at the impenetrable steel wall behind him.

'Thanks anyway, but I'm for getting back' says Stingray. 'If you could stop by with the cash before the end of the week I'd appreciate it.' He hates asking for cash but since the bankruptcy he doesn't have a bank account, not a legal one anyway. 'Oh, and about those shutters yeah?' he says, already turning to go. 'You gotta tap the key code into the remote, then use the manual crank.'

'How'd you know that?' asks Ray.

Stingray hesitates.

'A friend had the same make, once,' he says, remembering the coolness of the marble columns that stood on either side of the shutters to his own poolroom.

On his way back to the buggy he takes a short-cut through the grounds and passes a cluster of pepper trees on the edge of a sprinklered lawn: he smells mown grass. He

smells mown grass and sees his father again, pushing a mower over the front lawn of their Mansfield council house, his shirtsleeves held back by plaited armbands.

This has been happening a lot lately. When he's out on the waves or riding the punch in Cabezo Bay, when all he should have on his mind is making the turn, he sees the row of long-stemmed pipes in their rack above the fireplace and the packets of yellowing pipe-cleaners in the jam jar next to them; he feels the bare threads of the worn tapestry three-piece suite in their living room, the one with the patchwork coach and horses on the arms. When he's breathing in salt spray it's the acid smog from his pit village that reaches his lungs. He shakes his head against the memory.

As he approaches the west beach he spots May, gathering speed down the steep incline of the slip. With one roaring, glorious leap she launches herself into the sea, board strapped to her right foot, sails spread out behind her like gossamer wings. He pulls up next to a convoy of orange camper-vans, home to a season of visiting surfers sheltering from the beating arcs of the neighbouring wind farms. The bay is already full of an explosion of kites and limbs: it's going to be a long day.

That night Stingray takes his seat at John Hurley's Bar just in time to hear a voice from the stool next to him proclaiming: 'I'm gonna live in a stoosh place! It get build now, mon!' to anyone who cares to listen. Stingray knows from experience that Issy's referring to the new beach hut at the end of the east jetty, and he also knows, from even longer experience, that it won't *get build*. Isenbauhm came for the cure of the Black Madonna in Candelaria, back in '68, but found a different kind of miracle from the one he'd been expecting: now he plays the fiddle in a *mojo* band, withered leg tucked up behind his empty trouser sleeve, gold-tipped dreadlocks gleaming. Most nights he and Stingray shoot the *briza* or play pool together, when he hasn't got a gig that is.

Stingray's just flicking the top off his second Grolsch when Hurley steps through the bead curtain from the back room with the bar's cordless phone pressed to his ear.

'Anyone here called Vivien Jones?' Hurley shouts across at a crowd of teenage girls in the corner. Stingray's head snaps up and he has to catch his beer from going over. 'Someone called Audrey on the phone from England – says it's urgent!' There's a missed

beat in the chatter, a shaking of blonde hair and ponytails; then someone starts up the jukebox and Hurley's lips are moving but there's no sound coming out.

'Coo-yah!' grins Issy at his elbow, 'Stingray Jones got himself a wife!' he says, thumping him so hard on the shoulder that Stingray spills more beer. Someone lets out a wolf whistle and a cheer goes up at the other end of the bar. Stingray shrugs him off, pushes his way out through the stable doors, slamming his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket as he leans into the wind, leaving his spilt beer to form a greasy puddle on the bar behind him.

Vivian.

It's been years since he's heard that name. No one's called him that in a long, long time. Not since his last trip home.

He hadn't wanted to be there, he remembers that – which he now thinks is probably worse than not having gone at all.

He gets a quick snapshot of his Dad, feet up on the smoked glass coffee table, watching Mick McManus on Saturday afternoon, and of himself, next to him, breathing in Old Holburn and thinking about the windsurfing championships that he was missing at El Medano, out in the bay.

He'd hidden his weekly social security cheque and tried to give his Dad money – as he always did – but his father had a nose for poverty and wouldn't take it. He never asked for an explanation though, and Stingray was grateful for that. It wasn't the bankruptcy itself that embarrassed him so much as his own stupidity in making the investment that caused it.

Stingray reaches the harbour wall and turns his back on the dark pool of the sea. Even today, he knows how hard it is to pull yourself up, but back then, slumped on the sofa of his childhood home, he saw only how easy it was to take a wrong turn somewhere, then another, and before you knew it, you were all the way down.

The next time he thinks to stop by his mail drop at Callao Salvaje there's several brown envelopes from HM Revenue & Customs and an airmail letter. It's his day off and he's in the habit of lunching at Hurley's, sheltering from the high North African sun. He takes a seat on the covered deck; orders the chilli tacos; sets himself up with a beer and attends to

his mail. He writes 'Not known at this address' across the front of the tax demands and then opens the handwritten envelope.

Inside there's a black-edged card with a date from the past and a request for no flowers. He turns it over: there's a note on the back. *I tried to call you at that bar - I found the number on a matchbox you left at Dad's - but they said they'd never heard of you. He was asking for you, Vivian. At least come to the funeral?*

Audrey had signed off with a splash of her usual loops and curls.

Stingray replaces the card inside the envelope, smoothing it down to avoid bending any of the corners. He looks round for Hurley and sees him at the far end of the bar serving a biker whose nipple rings are jutting through the crocheted material of his vest. He leans forward to catch his eye, tapping his empty bottle on the Formica surface: a sign that he wants another beer.

A Crossing

By Sarah Royston

Westward (1920)

I am a stranger in this place, though once I knew it well. It is not just the wall of rain that hides remembered hills. A stand of beeches grew here, when last I walked this path. Felled for the War, like so many; hedges torn to speed the plough. Before, there was a blessing in the rain. It brings a cold annihilation now. The track is buried beneath a road, where motor-cars churn up the spray. I lost my compass in No-Man's Land. Without sun-shadow to guide me, I don't know the way. A woman selling baskets points me west, then asks:

“Did you see the pasque-flowers up on Church Hill?”

“No.” My voice is hoarse. “I used to find them every Spring. The rain has crushed them, I suppose.”

“Folk say they grow where Danes fell, when they fought great battles here.”

I think of chalk stained with blood; corpses sprouting blooms. Time beating down, relentless as rain, turning horror to fairy-tale. How can I outpace the days, how fast must I travel, how far?

Beneath her hood, her eyes are like the blue flint of the hills.

“When you pass by Hexton you might seek the holy well.”

She tells me of a shrine, pulled down centuries ago. No trace remains on land, she says, nor on any map. I tell her that I cannot stop, and turn into the rain.

Eastward (1292)

'Tis a hard day for tramping, like no Eastertide I've seen. Hot as Outremer, and not yet noon, for my shadow limps behind me still. A friar offers bread and water. I'm thirsty as the devil but I want no cripple-dole. I show him my badges of Saint Joseph and Saint Alban. As a pilgrim I can take alms, there's no shame in that. He asks,

"Were you at Acre? Did you lose your leg in Holy War?"

I can't bear his pity, nor his talk of holy war. I want to hurry on, but a herd blocks the way. Hoof-dust makes me cough like a raddled old man. I shout at the drove-boy;

"Move your beasts, yaldson, let me pass!"

He swats the fly-buzzed backs, staring at my stump. As I skirt the oxen, my crutch slides in their shit. I catch myself and stumble on. The drover calls after me, some mockery for sure. I don't stop to hear.

Westward

It must be midday, though I cannot tell, trapped as I am in the grey cell of the rain. The ridge is only a deeper grey amid the mist. Unreal country. I dreamed it so often in France that it has become a dream. Any moment I might wake and find it gone. Unless perhaps by walking I may come to somewhere real. Out there we moved in jerking lines; rails, duckboards, drills. Places all look the same where a War has been. If not, it's best to look away. A spire, a headstone, initials in bark. A fine-turned gate without any fence. Landscapes beloved, where people belonged, razed to mud and ruin. I fix my eyes on sodden boots and lengthen my stride.

Eastward

My shadow shortens, then shifts ahead, leading me to Hexton. The shrine is cool and dark. I bathe my brow and kiss the flint set in the statue's toe. Only one foot shows beneath her robe. She looks battle-worn as me. Her stone eyes do not judge, so I tell her my truth. They hacked off my leg to stem the rot, but my heart is poisoned at the root. I am no pilgrim. I seek the road from fear, not faith. I offer my gift: a scimitar, the same that struck my wound. It sinks in the well, a sign of saintly blessing. As I leave, I buy a badge, and pin it on my cap. My pack feels lighter now.

I come to Ickleford, where the track crosses the river. The drover is there with his herd. The oxen splash and guzzle, lowing thirst-sated joy. When I'm halfway 'cross the ford something flit-dazzles past - a rainbird, lapis blue. I turn to look, too fast. My foot slides and with a splash I tumble on my arse. A slim arm reaches down. I look into a smile that is brighter than water. How did I take this drover for a lad? I laugh aloud at what a fool I am, then clasp her hand. She hauls me up, and saves my hat before it skirls away. Clouds mass in the east and lightning darts across the sky.

"Time to shelter," I tell her. "The storm will break soon".

Westward

I reach the Garden City, with its red bricks and black roads. Its very newness leaves me tired. Even the weather is weary, and wanes to bitter drizzle. Time hurries on. Could I catch up, if I tried? When suburbs end in fields, the rain gives way at last. Rays break the cloud like a blessing from Heaven, and fall on a chalk-pit and the London railway line. Larks sing wild and high; they know the light won't last. I follow the path to Ickleford bridge, beside the ancient crossing-place. I can hardly get wetter, so I step into the river, and pick my way across the stones. A kingfisher flashes in the gold-bright air and snatches away my breath. I stand still. Laughing water ripples round my aching calves. I plant my feet more firmly, so as not to fall.

Something glitters by my boot and I pick it up. A fragment of metal; its stamp is worn but might be a rough-drawn foot. I keep it, for luck. Perhaps tomorrow I'll stop at Hexton and try to find the well. Some trace of the ruin may yet remain.

At the western shore, my shadow follows me from the water. It stretches on the rain-bright grass. I know where I'm going. I walk towards the sun.

A Letter from the Edge

By Mike Corbett

Today you can watch the rain approaching from a distance. It moves along in squalls. Pulsing its way across flat, island fields. It arrives in swirls and hits against the window like needles. It is Saturday. First day of the weekend. The forecast is for storms.

Sitting by the window I remember another day like this. Another weekend. Watching you rush into the sea - oblivious to the wind and rain. Your dark hair picking you out in the waves. And afterwards. Running. Out of a grey and restless sea. Towards an orange towel on the beach.

'You mean you didn't know?'

'That's enough, Peter!'

'For fuck sake, why do you think she left...?'

'Peter!'

Closing time. A sharp exchange between brothers. I thought little of it at the time. But a long time ago makes no difference. Once upon a time cuts no ice.

The sky has grown darker. Charcoal and indigo. The air is icy. Pellets of hail spatter the pavements. Pedestrians hunch over and pull their hood strings tight. To no avail. This world is covered with a thin, white sheet. Chill. Threadbare. Then softly, it begins to snow.

You wore a long, yellow tee-shirt to go out on the quest for water. It was just after dawn. Bright sunlight behind the early mist. (Talk about soft focus!). You were lemon-coloured to your knees. Barefoot. Hair of copper-beech. A silver pot. You crossed the empty campsite in the morning. Towards the dark green water-hut. It was summer. Lazy. Carefree. The world was full of promise.

I passed you once – or at least I thought I did. Maybe a year later. Sheltering in a doorway with a friend. I never turned my head. Your conversation never faltered. Maybe it was you. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, we never met again. But now, after all this time. A letter. For you. Because *over and done with never ceases*. (Remember, it was one of John's favourite lines). And a long time ago makes no difference.

Today is much the same. Rain drives in horizontally from the sea. The wind whips up in wicked gusts. Lifts papers, sticks, cans (look out small animals!) in the updraught and hurls them this way and that. Few pedestrians. Little traffic. It is the Sabbath. A quiet and reverent day on the island.

Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. I remember standing in the aisle of a crowded church those years ago. Then leaving to write it down before I forgot! I put it in a note I wrote for you that afternoon. You liked it. We were young. Innocent in a way. And now? For what it's worth, not cynical. Overburdened. Perhaps. Disillusioned. Maybe. But still somewhat naïve. In spite of it all. A chink for wonder and belief.

'You mean you never knew...?'

Night had fallen. The sea was calm. Silver glinting in the moonlight where the water flipped over onto sand. You lit the stove. We huddled together looking out across the beach. Outside the gas-jet sounds. And through the open flap we see. A lilac flame. With all the night beyond.

No. I didn't know. I do now. I guess. Although not the details. Not what happened next. Big, dizzy snowflakes at the window. Bright eyes wide with wonder. Love frail as a dream. Or a crack in the heart of a stranger. Or pain. Or darkness. Or nothing at all. What might have been. Perhaps a constellation. An alliance of stars whirling across the heavens. Remote. Eternal. Glittering down on the affairs of men. A redemption of sorts. Ancient. Cold.

Today it is a grey sea. Full of loss, it rolls and swells, trying to embrace the edges of the world. The grey-eyed gods who watch over it have themselves withdrawn. Invisible. Unsolicited. They no longer seem to care. I hurl my offering into the sea.

Gulls flutter briefly from the white-tipped spray. For a moment, it is caught in the dark waves of your hair. Then it slips beneath the surface to the undertow. *For you.* Sea-nymphs. Nereids. Hoop-la. A letter from the edge.

END