

Dear Reader,

Greetings from Dunwich beach.¹ It's early here, and the dawn is cold and damp. But it's going to be a fine day, and I wish you were here. Perhaps some of you are, in fact; there are a thousand others who have cycled overnight from London and are now reclining on the uncomfortable shingle. There's a tang of ozone in the air, and the waft of vinegar on hot chips. The beach cafe is doing its best trade of the year.

This is the first time I've done the ride,² but I've been to Dunwich before. As a child, I came here with my family for summer holidays, staying in a cottage just a short run through the woods from the beach. I knew little about existential dread in those days, but it was still unnerving to stumble across the last few gravestones in those woods, the final remnants of a once-mighty trading port which had long since been washed away by the sea.³ Within a few summers those gravestones were also gone, fallen to the shingled shore below, where my father would sometimes light a fire with gathered driftwood and barbecue a pan of mackerel, or bake potatoes in the fading coals. This makes him sound more rugged and outdoorsy than he actually was; in truth the beach barbecue probably only happened once or twice, although I'm sure he aspired to it happening more. Most of the time he was more of an indoors dad, by default; there were four of us and we kept him busy. He worked from home, and he knew how to cook, clean, put us to bed. There wasn't often time for adventures. But it's impossible for me to stand on Dunwich beach without thinking of that barbecue: the six of us shivering in the stiff North Sea breeze; the food burning our mouths even as it went cold; Dad trying not to look so proud of himself. And it's impossible for me to stand on this beach without thinking of my father, because he was diagnosed with cancer not very long ago.

'Well, here's the good news,' he told us, after speaking to the doctors: 'I'm not going to die this year.'

He was wrong. The thing happened with a wild kind of speed that was hard to comprehend, and it kept accelerating until three weeks later he was dead. It felt something

like the way Timothy Spall, playing the role of Albert Pierrepoint in *The Last Hangman*,⁴ enters the condemned man's cell and marches him briskly but not unkindly to his death. There was no time to look around or protest, only to accept what was happening and fall into the rhythms of it. There were ten days of visiting him in hospital, still imagining we had months to come, and ten days of nursing him at home, saying those things we would all want to say if we had the chance.

Because I have some news for you: death comes for us all in the end. I know it's the summer and the trees are in their full majesty and the swallows are swinging through the fields and you are probably on holiday somewhere with the sun in your eyes and you desperately want life to be like this for ever. But there it is. We all know it. Death comes for us all; and, worse, death comes to those we love, usually when we least expect it. And so what a privilege it was, in those staggering final days, to be able to say the things that matter, to be able to say goodbye. What a gift it was to sit beside his bed all night, holding his hand and listening to him breathe and watching the sun come up once again.

My father was a decent man, and a wonderful parent, and our relationship was so free of complications that in the end the things you might imagine saying beside a deathbed had already been said many times over. *I love you. Thank you. I owe you everything.* But still it was a privilege to say them out loud.

Reader, I don't know who the important people are in your life, or if they are still with you, or how your relationship with them works. But it will only take a moment to write them a note – in a letter, a text, an email – and let them know what they mean to you. You never know. Time isn't always on our side. The ground is crumbling beneath our feet.

I'm hungry. It's time to go and eat chips. I hope you enjoy this issue, and in particular the very fine illustrations Gwen Burns⁵ has done for us. Take care. Write soon. We'd love to hear from you.

Yours,
The Editor.

^{1.} Full disclosure: I'm not actually on Dunwich beach at the time of writing. But I will be there at the point of launching this issue, and the entire narrative construct of the letter works much better if I frame it as being written from the beach, and so I would appreciate it if you would suspend your disbelief.

^{2.} The *Dunwich Dynamo*, which follows a route from London Fields in east London to Dunwich on the Suffolk coast, has been running in some form since 1993. It takes place on the Saturday night closest to the full moon in July.

^{3.} *Men of Dunwich*, by Rowland Parker, is – despite apparently only being concerned with 50% of the population – a good introduction to the history of this lost city. For the full dose of existential dread and mournful humour, however, it would be difficult to better W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, which passes through as it perambulates the back roads of Norfolk and Suffolk.

^{4.} *Pierpoint: The Last Hangman*, 2005, dir. Adrian Shergold.

^{5.} Gwen Burns is an illustrator. More of her work can be found at www.gwenburns.co.uk