

Between Tides by Sharon Marie Hier from Swansea

The sea had arrived at the same shore for longer than anyone could remember. Not the same water, of course. But the same patient insistence, a rhythm older than memory, persistent and unhurried.

Each evening in Porth Celyn, the tide swept in like a final breath released. It slid over the stones and black seaweed, filling the hollows between rocks, erasing footprints without ceremony. And every evening, almost unfailingly, Idris Morgan walked the path above the cliffs to watch.

He was seventy-three. The wind had carved extra years into his face. Villagers said little about him except that he'd been a teacher. Some remembered the way his voice could hush a classroom with a story about the sea, or the map of countries pinned behind his desk, places he'd promised to visit but never had. He'd lived in the same grey cottage for longer than most of had been alive.

Children often saw him standing at the cliff edge, hands in his coat pockets, gazing out as if waiting for something the rest of them couldn't see.

On a wet evening in early October, someone finally asked him what that something was. The girl appeared beside him so quietly he thought for a moment she might have stepped out of the fog. She was about eleven, wearing a bright yellow raincoat that seemed defiant against the grey. 'You're here every day,' she said.

Idris turned slightly, surprised but not irritated. 'Yes,' he replied.

'Why?'

Idris looked back at the sea. 'I suppose,' he said slowly, 'I'm waiting.'

'For what?'

‘That’s the trouble,’ he said. ‘I’m not entirely sure.’

The girl moved closer to the cliff edge, not *too* near. She stared at the tide, which was climbing over rocks. ‘Mam says the sea remembers things,’

‘Oh?’

‘She says all lost things end up there, eventually.’

Idris smiled faintly. ‘That would make the ocean a very crowded place.’

Her name, he would learn, was Elin. She’d moved to the village two months earlier.

Her mother had taken over the post office after the previous owner retired.

Children often wandered the cliffs in Porth Celyn. But Elin arrived each evening as if keeping an appointment. Sometimes she asked questions; sometimes she stood in silence.

It was during one of those silences that Idris noticed something unusual. Children were comfortable with quiet in a way adults were not. Adults filled the silence with explanations, apologies, and opinions. Children simply allowed it to exist. The quiet between waves. The quiet between thoughts. The quiet between lives. The quiet between tides.

One afternoon the sea was so still it looked like painted glass. Idris had brought a small thermos of tea and sat on a flat rock near the path.

Elin appeared shortly afterward. ‘You weren’t here yesterday,’ she said.

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Why not?’

Idris hesitated. ‘Because yesterday was an anniversary.’

Elin waited. He appreciated that about her. Adults rushed to fill pauses with sympathy. Elin simply waited.

‘My wife used to walk here with me,’ he said.

‘Used to?’

‘She died five years ago.’

Elin nodded slowly, absorbing this as if placing a stone carefully onto a pile. ‘My dad died,’ she said after a moment. Her gaze drifted to the churning water. The words hovered between them, fragile as sea glass. Idris wondered what she missed: a story unfinished, a laugh or a touch, details she tried to hold on to as the years pulled further away.

‘I’m sorry.’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t remember him much.’

That sentence landed heavier than grief.

Autumn slipped through quietly. Leaves gathered by the stone walls, and the wind carried the hint of distant rain. The fields above the cliffs faded to dull gold like tired grass, and the sheep drifted slowly along the slopes as if conserving warmth.

One evening Idris found Elin building something among the rocks below the cliff. He climbed down carefully. ‘What are you making?’

‘A tower.’

It was a precarious stack of flat stones balanced on one another.

‘A monument?’ Idris asked.

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘A marker.’

‘For what?’

Elin placed another stone on. ‘For where things end.’

Idris watched the tide inch closer. ‘And when the sea comes?’ he asked.

‘It knocks it down. That’s how you know it worked.’

For several weeks they built towers together. Sometimes the tide erased them within minutes. Sometimes it stood until morning. It became, in Idris’s mind, a kind of ritual. Not a monument, but a conversation gravity pulling each stone down, patience guiding their hands, land and sea, memory and forgetting.

The tower’s changed, not in height, but in intent. Elin chose stones deliberately, thin ones for balance, heavier ones for the base. Idris saw her reject the first few. ‘Why not that one?’ he asked.

‘It’s too certain,’ she said.

‘Too certain?’

‘It sits too easily.’ She demonstrated, placing the stone on the stack. It settled firmly.

‘That means it doesn’t belong.’

Idris laughed softly. ‘Most architects would disagree with you.’

‘But we’re not building a house,’ Elin said. ‘We’re building something that’ll fall.’

One day, as winter approached, Elin asked a question Idris had long suspected was coming.

‘Why do you really come here?’

Idris looked at the horizon. ‘The truth?’

‘Yes.’

‘I used to believe life had a shape,’ he said. ‘Like a story. Beginning, middle, end.’

Elin considered this. ‘Doesn’t it?’

‘Not the way we expect.’ He picked up a stone, turning it in his hand. ‘Megan and I thought we’d a long middle ahead of us. Thirty, forty years.’

‘What happened?’

‘She got ill.’ The sea wind lifted briefly, ruffling his grey hair. ‘Then, suddenly, our story ended.’

Elin looked at the unfinished tower. ‘That’s not fair.’

‘No,’ Idris said gently. ‘Fairness isn’t really part of nature’s design.’

One evening Elin brought a small notebook with her. ‘What’s that?’ Idris asked.

‘A list of things I don’t want to forget.’ She opened it. The pages were filled with careful handwriting. ‘Mam laughing over burnt toast,’ she read. ‘The way sheep stare, like they know something. The sound the tide makes under the pier.’

Idris felt an unexpected tightness in his chest. ‘That’s a good list,’ he said quietly.

Elin closed the notebook. ‘I don’t know how long it should be.’

‘As long as you need.’

‘What if I forget something before I write it down?’

Idris looked at the sea. ‘That happens to everyone.’

‘Even you?’

‘Especially me.’

Winter arrived, and the sea grew louder. Storms battered the coast like distant engines, rattling windows in the village. Still, they came. Still, they built. The towers grew more delicate each week. Balancing stones required patience, and patience required attention.

Idris noticed something odd: for the first time in years, he didn’t dwell on the past

while standing on the cliffs. He thought about the next stone, the weight, the balance, and when gravity would cooperate.

One afternoon, a storm came without warning. The wind shouted up the coast, driving the tide violently against the rocks. Idris arrived late and found the cliff path empty. For a moment he wondered if Elin would appear.

The tower, carefully built over days, collapsed instantly beneath the first wave. Idris stood watching the stones scatter. Something in him felt strangely calm. The sea hadn't destroyed their work. It had completed it.

The storm passed. The village glistened under a pale winter sun. Idris walked the cliff path, expecting to find the rocks empty. But Elin was already there, gazing at scattered stones. 'Our tower's gone,' she said. 'Should we build another?'

Idris looked at the horizon. For the first time since his wife's death, the question didn't feel heavy. 'Yes,' he said.

'Why?'

He smiled. 'Because the tide will come back.'

Elin nodded. 'That's true.'

They began collecting stones again. As they worked, Elin suddenly asked, 'Do you think the sea forgets?'

Idris paused. 'Forget what?'

'All the things people lose.'

He thought for a long moment. 'I think the sea remembers in a different way,' he said.

'How?'

'It doesn't keep things the way we left them.'

Elin frowned. 'That's not remembering.'

‘Maybe remembering is just letting things change,’ Idris said. ‘Accepting that what was lost still shapes what comes, even if it takes another form.’

Elin placed the first stone of the new tower. ‘That sounds complicated.’

‘Growing up usually is.’ Idris said.

That winter, the sea grew louder than either of them remembered. Storms came rolling in from the Atlantic certain and ancient in their strength. The cliffs shuddered beneath the wind. Sometimes the waves struck the rocks so hard that spray reached halfway up the path.

On those evenings they didn’t build. They simply watched. Elin once asked if the sea was angry. Idris considered the question carefully. ‘No,’ he said at last. ‘Just busy.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Changing things.’

She seemed satisfied with that.

One evening the tide arrived earlier than usual. They’d only just begun their tower when the first wave slid further up the rocks than expected, surrounding the base in cold foam. Elin stepped back. ‘It’s going to fall.’

‘Yes,’ Idris said.

For several seconds the tower remained standing, stones carefully balanced, leaning into one other’s weight. Then the water shifted beneath them. The lowest stone moved almost imperceptibly. The tower folded in on itself with a quiet clatter. Elin laughed with the simple delight of watching something complete the thing was built to do. ‘That was quick.’

‘Yes.’

‘Does that bother you?’

Idris shook his head. 'It used to.'

They sat on the rocks, listening to the tide settle. A faint orange glow coloured the horizon as the sun disappeared behind clouds. Elin opened her notebook. 'You never said what you'd write in here.'

'In your list?'

'Yes.'

Idris thought for a moment. 'I'd write about my wife convincing me to swim in this sea.'

Elin looked horrified. 'You swam in that?'

'Many years ago.'

'Was it freezing?'

'Yes.'

'Why would anyone do that?'

Idris smiled at the memory. 'Because Megan said the water felt like waking up.'

Elin wrote in her notebook.

'What did you write?' he asked.

She read aloud. 'The sea feels like waking up.'

Idris felt a gentle warmth permeate through him, something like gratitude, though he couldn't say for what. Perhaps for the simple fact that a memory he thought belonged only to the past now existed somewhere else as well.

A few days later, Elin arrived carrying a small wooden box. 'What's that?' Idris asked.

'A time capsule for the sea.' She opened the lid. Inside was a smooth piece of green sea glass. A button shaped like a star. And a folded page from her notebook.

'What's on the paper?' Idris asked.

‘A list.’

‘Of what?’

‘Things I don’t want the sea to forget.’ She placed the box at the tower’s base.

‘Won’t the tide take it?’ Idris asked.

‘That’s the idea.’

They finished the tower. When the tide reached it, the water slipped quietly around it.

The stones collapsed one by one. The box disappeared beneath the foam. ‘Do you think it’ll remember?’ Elin asked.

Idris looked across the restless grey water. ‘I think it already has.’

The towers perpetually disappeared with the tides, leaving scattered stones and the faint foam of memory on the rocks. Idris watched the sea stretch to the horizon, endless and patient, and for the first time didn’t feel the weight of what had gone. Beside him, Elin picked up a stone, turning it in her small hands like a secret she wasn’t ready to share. Idris realised then that building wasn’t about holding on, nor was letting go a defeat: it was a quiet act of faith. That brief instant between falling and returning, he thought, was the only time anything truly belonged to anyone at all. The sea swallowed the towers, but in that swallowing, it whispered that everything they’d built, grief, laughter, memory would return again, in some shape, in some moment, somewhere along this shore.