

Pirates of Clacton

A Pier Review short story

By Jon Bounds

Danny woke me from a half-forced slumber;

"It's sodding Christmas."

The snow weighing down the canvas made the inside of the tent darker. A timid belt of light across the apex was all that revealed it was morning. I'd woken up for the first time at around four am, as I have always done when we've camped out on our pier reviewing escapades. I'm no Margret Thatcher, I would normally sleep for about seven to eight hours—but camping, odd situations, not being in my own bed essentially, mean I will wake at the slightest provocation.

When traversing the 56 working pleasure piers in the twilight of the summer season I learnt to get up and make the most of the wilderness. I took to rising as I woke, and running along deserted cliff tops; scattering rabbits and taking sly pisses behind static caravans. My desire to run had come as a shock, I've only ever been able to do exercise before as part of sport—give me a semi-competitive game of tennis or football and I'll run for hours, go running and my brain talks me out of it in a matter of yards. But, here, the solitude, the new scenery, the sharp and salty morning air, combined to make it exhilarating. I'd not been able to keep it up when I got back to Birmingham.

My taste for al fresco urination is a constant.

I did get up four, and spent a burning moment proving that the meme that people can write their name in the snow is totally apocryphal. After that, I lay thinking of anything that might make a couple of fitful hours tolerable. The Clacton-on-Sea Christmas morning swim wasn't one of those.

After succeeding in our self-created and vapid quest there were places on the coast that I felt I would return to, some because I really liked them and wanted to share them with someone other than a smelly art-goth from Northfield and a tiny punk, but none really because I had any desire to plunge into the North Sea at the height of winter.

"It certainly is." the noise came from the bundle of cloth over the other side of the tent that somewhere contained Midge Diabolik, Sheldon's most unemployed man. He sounded like he'd finally regretted saying yes to us.

"Lighten up you cunt, it's fucking Christmas."

We'd had to return, Peter from the T-shirt shop had insisted. And there was something about his sage demeanour that compelled up to do so. He'd been the only man to recognise us for who we are. And despite not giving us a discount in any way on our Pier-Vert T-shirts, he held something over us.

"You should come back at Christmas" he said, "the idiots round here go swimming in the sea. It's free, they won't pay for anything but they'll near freeze themselves to death in the name of ritual."

And the word 'ritual' set something off in Danny Smith's mind. So, on Christmas Eve we spent nearly four hours Midge-speed driving to the Essex coast. Chris Rea did not feature, our soundtrack was It's Immaterial. And Fleetwood Mac, obviously. The only thing we all agree on is Fleetwood Mac.

We don't agree on camping, Midge is prepared man and Danny is a scout, they have ear plugs, masks, inflatable mattresses. I have the uncanny ability to find the hardest piece of even the most muddy field to sleep on.

So, after a token exchange of gifts (I got a book from Dan and a Poundland torch from Midge, which I could have done with a few hours ago) and a cold shower (hot water 'tokens' only able to be purchased in a limited and limiting range of time in the off-season) we packed the car. Then on the way to Clacton itself, a stop at a petrol garage for a festive breakfast of machine coffee and non-branded biscuits.

Parking should be easy, no payment on Bank Holidays, but every car park and side street was rammed, Clacton was about to get a very low score on the Kurt Vonnegut rating. In Nelson Road, overlooking the front, car after people carrier skulk beneath the suburban trees. We're old hands and ditch the clio right on the apex of a bend—people who care about their cars will never park where us unmaterialistic bastards will.

We're a little late, as ever. The empty vehicles once contained other people foolish enough to bathe and the beach is fast filling up. From the pier approach we inch out from under the arch, taking a brief respite from the wind that hastened our decent. I estimate there are about three or four hundred people here, they burble and laugh, flowing into smaller and larger, tighter and looser groups. The pier itself is closed, it's one we'd liked, and would have offered a great view of the swimming. But we're going in, we can't just watch.

We bear left past the shuttered food kiosk, and descend into the throng. Above us, the sea wall holds those too sensible to go in, swathed in coats and scarves they call out to the particular knots of people on the sand. The groynes (love that word) are a vantage point too for the more athletic spectator, they're more boisterous and catcall mates.

"Put those legs away, Rich. You're scaring the kids."

"Look at the state of that"

The disorder is comforting, as I'm not sure we want anyone to know just how disorganised we are. We've no fancy dress, no warming flasks of anything, and no wetsuits. As I always will when faced by a situation I can't control, I turned to the internet and tried to find out as much as possible about what I was about to do.

Apart from some goosebumpy shaky-cam footage on YouTube there just wasn't much. While Felixstowe or Southwold raise money for deserving causes, and offer hot chocolate and safety wardens, Clacton just seems to be people turning up and running into the surf. It apparently used to be organised by the Clacton Swimming Club, but they seem to be no longer in existence. An old, rugged, chap in a red swimming cap muttered something

about a disgraced treasurer and wandered off—I had a vision of Arthur from Eastenders vigorously towelling himself off.

"The tepid safety of the indoor pool is not for me" he'd said when I asked why he was here. There are different types of people here: some all year round 'wild swimmers' taught and weather-hardened in trunks and dark swimsuits, the rest are in party mood. Bright swimming shorts, santa hats and, compressed through cheap speakers, a waft of Elton John on the breeze.

People are waiting for 11 o'clock, inching toward the waves in an ever tighter crowd, there isn't a timekeeper. Midge is the only one of us that has a watch, and it's not waterproof, we'll go when they go. I strip down to my swimming shorts, blue, adidas, difficult to keep up—phone in sock in trainer, T-shirt in jacket, with trousers wrapped in my towel. For once I know where my towel is. We hang to the far left of the bunch, nearest the pier which seems natural. As outsiders we also don't feel too comfortable being in the centre of things.

Most here have non-swimmers to look after their clothes, but, still, molehills of cloth and leather punctuate the sand. The sea looks not only fresh but a little rough, I'm not totally sure I want to do this.

A countdown starts, a big man of about forty is leading

"Are we ready? Ten... Nine..."

Pockets of the crowd take it up, some young girls giggle.

"Eight... Seven"

Some are bouncing: warming up?

"Shall I stop and look after the gear?"

There doesn't seem to be a 'one', the jog has started and I go with. The lads at the front are already reaching the water, arms windmilling high, the running motion seeming to attempt to keep them out of the water for as long as possible.

Eventually each topples into the water, a step into Christmas, the brave duck under straight away.

When I go, it hurts. Like a rough smack to the exposed skin, and a cold hand to the covered legs.

Submerged it's okay. After a few seconds you start to shiver into a sort of comfort, fresh like after a long wait for a night bus.

Midge is barely visible when I surface, each piece of current lifts him slightly. Danny is sort of striding into the splashing pack. People are already getting out, a dip more than a swim. The cheers and laughter is sustained from those on the beach, I can hear a Winter's Tale and some at least are joining in.

I decide to at least swim a few meters, maybe to the other side of the pier and back. I've been under them, but never in the water, this might be the only sensible chance. I get a little further out, going to do a sort of circuit, the waves lap hard at the wooden struts, a comforting lick like from a boisterous collie, I struggle a little with each surge, my stroke not confident enough to ensure. Pause. Past one, white spittle breaks up against the sodden roughness, I'm brushed against it, a lonely pup, away from the pack, it scratches, I push off and away to loop around. Not push far enough, a rush back to the structure, against it, a slap to the back, a hug of water pressure.

I go under.

And back out, I can't get a grip on the pitted green. I wash in and out with the swell. The rhythm of the Glitter beat, regular.

I go under.

Just out this time, a gulp of brine, hard to breathe. The decking above like staves, regular, four four beat. Perfect pop.

I go under.

out

under

under longer

out

back under

I can still hear the music from the beach, just. Sleigh bells. I can't focus. Paul McCartney is having a great time.

salt

stinging

wonderful

having

pressure

a child is born

through my lungs

harsh bristles attack my mouth

pressure

roughly turned

cough from the depths of my stomach

I'm battered

freezing

it's hard, the ground I'm lying on moves

I can hear voices, singing yes but also bonhomie

"Are you alright?" It's the hair, the teeth, beard.

"Mmm" I cough. The beard hands me a bottle, I slug, it burns.

"I've got to go change the record. Back in second."

"And that was the new one from Paul and Linda, great mates. Here's everyone's favourite Welsh rock and roller."

"Sea's rough today, needle's slipping everywhere." He hands me a blanket. "Get this round you, I'm going to put a Genesis LP on and get you to shore"

"This is Radio London, I'm the hairy cornflake, here's something for all you rock fans."

I'm falling asleep, much warmer.

"Stay with me buddy, on 1134 medium wave"

wave

splashes

wet

Danny is standing over me.

"You alright mate? Though we'd lost you there."