

The Reservoir

The last day of October and the leaves are dying, or dead. The blackened earth and roots around the reservoir are now hidden, buried deep, and the trees reduced to skeletons that loom high against the darkening sky. Old Mr Griffiths – Gordon – is on his daily constitutional, Sandy the spaniel sniffing at his heels. As usual, mid-week, he's seen no-one for hours. Exactly how he likes it.

It's been thirty long years since they flooded the valley, and ten since he said his thank yous, pocketed the gold watch, and handed over the keys to Dorothy Thompson, the new custodian of the visitors' centre. Does he miss it, the job? Not really, but he can't resist the pull of the place and the thought that he, as lead engineer, was here at its inception; here, when when the valley, and its score of dilapidated cottages and a pub that few people visited, transformed into the reservoir with its sailing club, cycle routes, picnic areas - and visitors' centre, of course. All this, *and* cheaper, cleaner electricity. Gordon could never see what the fuss was all about, why the residents felt the need to protest, some even refusing to move! New houses with central heating! 4G connections to the web! Bus stop at the bottom of their gardens, and a pub with a pool table! Gordon shakes his head then throws the dog's bright yellow ball towards a gnarled old oak. 'Come on Sandy, fetch! It's almost dark – need to be heading home.' Sandy takes off like a whippet and is back in a moment for more.

The sun is falling rapidly and inexorably towards the horizon; the temperature plummeting at an alarming rate. Gordon shivers, tucks in his scarf, and buttons up his jacket. He's feeling his age. Far in the distance, one by one, he sees the lights of the visitors' centre go out, as the new warden shuts up shop for the night. He checks his watch – five-thirty. There'll be no-one around for the next fifteen hours when she'll be back to open in the morning. A few minutes later, headlights illuminate the murky waters of the lake, then two pin pricks of red (*like the eyes of a wolf*, he thinks) pierce the gloom and tell him that Dorothy is on her way home.

Sandy drops the ball at his feet and looks up, entreating. Gordon flings the ball as far as he can and watches the dog hare off, disappearing into the undergrowth. He waits a minute, then another two. 'Where's the daft bugger gone?' he asks, and shouts into the darkness. His cries echo off the trees, but Sandy fails to reappear. 'Sandy! Come on! There's a good boy, come back to Daddy!' Gordon makes his way towards the thicket, narrowing his eyes, listening for the sound of scampering paws, but all he hears is the wind in the

trees, and the cry of a startled bird – a pheasant, he thinks – as it breaks cover at the sound of his voice. The sun has now disappeared and the only available light that of a full but watery moon. He determines to keep on walking in the direction taken by his dog and makes his way unsteadily, negotiating the hidden roots and hollows of the forest floor, towards the reservoir a few hundred yards away. As he feels his way forward down a steep, muddy slope, he stumbles and cries out, but manages to break his fall, landing, ridiculously, in a deep pile of leaves. He's shaken and feels his ankle – not broken, but not good. For five minutes he remains sitting, blows on his hands and slaps his thighs. 'Sandy! Sandy! Where are you boy?!' he shouts again, desperation creeping into his voice: but there's no answering bark, no sudden re-appearance of his old, faithful companion. Somewhere close-by, an owl hoots, and for the first time in many a year, he is afraid.

With difficulty, he stands and brushes the leaves and mud from his clothes. His knees are wet and the cold seems to find its way through to his legs. He makes a stick from a broken branch and stumbles on, his face twisted into a grimace with each agonising step

Finally, he gets to the dark water's edge. A wind picks up, rippling the reflection of the faraway moon. He stands, confused, drawn to the reservoir, but unsure why. Then, there, at his feet, is Sandy's ball. Suddenly, his throat feels gripped as if by an unseen hand, and he twists, but finds that there's nobody there. His hair is on end and his spine tingles with a fear like he's never known.

'Sandy! Sandy!' He looks around, tears filling his eyes. 'Where have you got to, Sandy?! Come back to Daddy.'

And then he sees it...

It seems to hover, somewhere between the surface of the lake and the lowering clouds. A figure, a wraith, which appears, then fades, then strengthens, to come again, like drifting smoke, or enveloping mist.

'GORDON!!' He tries to cover his ears but his hands are made of lead.

'Gordon!! You must listen!'

'Listen? Listen to whom?'

The figure slowly settles, the silvery wisps and strands finally forming the phantom image of a wizened old man.

'To me, Gordon. To me.' The figure looks down; a hint of a leer.

‘To you?’ Gordon squints hard, trying to sharpen his focus. ‘But I don’t know you! Who, or *what*, are you?!’

‘Mmmm. Who or what? A good question... but one I don’t have time to ponder. Gordon, Gordon Griffiths as I remember you, do you remember *me*?’

‘NO! I’ve never seen you in my life!’ Gordon says in despair, ripping away his scarf, the burgeoning cold no match for the heat assaulting his body from within. ‘Who are you?!’

At that, Gordon hears the tolling of a bell – a church bell – rolling over the surface of the reservoir; but there is no church for twenty miles.

‘Ah! Time to join the congregation, Gordon. Remember? The little church, tucked away, between the pub and the village school? The village *you* allowed to be drowned. For your ‘project’? For *this*: the reservoir?’

Gordon freezes, transfixed, his eyes opening wider and wider. His mouth is dry as stone. ‘And so, you must be...’

‘Yes! Well done, Gordon: the one you called ‘the stubborn old fool!’ The cottager who refused to move and was lost, forever, beneath these waters.’

As the tears run, like rivulets, down Gordon’s cheeks, the figure breaks up, then, in a whirlpool of silvery strands, spirals to a pin-point and disappears into the unforgiving depths of the lake; and Gordon, the cold waters creeping ever higher up his trembling legs, cannot resist, and feels compelled to follow...