

The Listener

She found him at his small beach hut by the sea.

Alone there on the shingle, listening to the sway of the sea, he felt happy. Her appearance introduced a faint sense of threat, and without acknowledging her, he paused his painting of the small wooden boat. It was a task undertaken with slow, careful strokes, and he reviewed his progress with satisfaction. He'd chosen a cheery light blue colour, an attempt to coax the rickety vessel into an unlikely commercial future.

"Have you come to help with the primer?" he asked as she approached, nodding towards a tin resting precariously on a rock.

"We need to talk," she answered, some unknown inner tension short-circuiting any small talk.

He experienced a pulse of unease, because nothing good ever followed that phrase. As he waited, the paintbrush dripped a bead of blue on the prow of the boat. It would need to be scraped off, but if - *whatever this was* - could be kept brief, there might be time to fix it before it even dried.

She began, faltering with the finality of it.

"I've made up my mind. I've been to see a lawyer. There are papers you need to sign."

He nodded minutely, sensing it would be in his best interests to provide a definitive reaction to this announcement. Studying her expression, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, he guessed she had probably told him what she had seen a lawyer about, and what his signature would achieve.

A seagull glided overhead, its strident cry creating a kind of harmony with the slow throb of the sea. Embedded in the clean smell of open salt water and seaweed, it framed every moment of each day, each day of each year, each year of his life.

"When I'm finished here we can talk about it properly," he said, hoping that was sufficient answer to make her leave. The sea was his, infinite and private, she could not just come here and demand things.

"But we can't," she said, "that's the whole point."

He held up the brush, helplessly indicating that its wet paint held him hostage, that he was by the sea, so whatever she needed from him would have to wait.

“I don’t understand why -” he began, hoping that an appeal to her more accommodating side would conclude this uncomfortable interaction, or at least postpone it until he felt able to withstand the angry reminder he felt certain would soon be hurled at him.

“But I do,” she broke in, “I do, finally, understand.”

His nameless unease intensified. She was calm, speaking words without emotion. Love, commit, exhausted, divorce. Listen.

He stood there, paintbrush aloft, unease spiralling into anxiety. Listen? He listened. He knew every cry of every seabird, he knew when the tide was coming in or going out, he heard every changing mood of the sea.

She left.

The papers, apparently, were on the kitchen table, along with her key.