

A Cream Tea

It's still marked on my parents' calendar, a quarter of a century on: August 11th 1999.

The journey down to Cornwall was one we'd made several times before. Dad (as usual) was complaining about the traffic, going *on* and *on* about how it was different when he was a boy, 'fewer flaming tourists!', and the like; Mum was wittering on about something else – probably her lumbago; Toby was doing what Toby did best, which was to show everybody *just* how clever he was; and I was sitting, dolly on my lap, watching the world go by.

I think we were crawling past Stonehenge. There were throngs of hippie-types wending their way towards the monument, most of them on foot, but others on bikes or on the backs of old station wagons. Dad said something like, 'Oh, I see the Beverly Hillbillies are back in town!' Mum and Toby laughed, but I didn't understand the joke, and nobody bothered to explain.

'Did you know that Cornwall has an area of 1375 square miles and a population of 568,210 - except in summer, when it rises to almost 850,000?'

'No, I didn't Tobes! By Jove you're a clever boy!' Dad said, turning around briefly.

'And, tomorrow's eclipse is because of something called 'syzygy'. Anaxorgas, a Greek philosopher, was the first to explain eclipses, scientifically, and the word eclipse comes from 'eklieipsis' meaning 'the downfall of a heavenly body'.

'Toby!' Mum squealed with glee, 'you really are a genius!'

'I know, Mum. One day, I'll be a professor...and Masie can bring me my coffee!'

Everyone laughed – well, nearly everyone.

'Can we have a cream tea tomorrow?' I asked – really, the first thing I had said since leaving.

'Oh! you and your stupid old cream tea!' Toby said, sneering; and Mum backed him up with 'Yes, Masie, why don't you play with your dolly? We'll soon be there.'

So play with my dolly I did, knotting her hair, and twisting her limbs till her stitching popped and my knuckles hurt. I didn't speak again until St. Ives.

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Next day, the crowds were huge and we found ourselves standing only feet from the cliff edge. 'We'll get the best view from here, but watch your footing,' Dad said, and issued us all with special goggles, 'to protect our retinas from the damaging effects of solar radiation' added Toby, unhelpfully. Mum tousled his hair.

It was getting closer to the moment that everybody had been waiting for and the crowds had become even larger. I could easily see the waves crashing against the cliff face far below us.

'Here we go! Goggles on!' Dad said, and the countdown began.

'Ten...nine...eight...'

I edged towards Toby.

seven...six...five...'

My shoulder rubbed against his side.

...four...three...two...one...'

Nobody heard his screams, drowned out by a thousand 'Zeros'.

And, of course, nobody saw him go.

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The next afternoon, we had a cream tea.

Not Toby, of course.

He was gone.

Eclipsed.

491 words