

THE BEACHCOMBER

Written by

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1 EXT. MEDITERRANEAN BEACH - NIGHT (2018) 1

A boat is moored to a lone buoy bobbing on the dark waves. In the background a blur of lights lie strung along a shoreline.

ALAN MCNAVAN, a well-built man in his early 50s swims strongly up to the buoy and grabs it like a lifeline. Looking around in all directions, he's frantic.

ALAN
Laurel! Laurel!

Just the lapping of waves to answer him.

2 EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY (2019) 2

A car travels along a country road. Through the open window, JOHN MCNAVAN, a well-dressed forty-something can be seen driving. He looks exhausted.

On the passenger seat, amidst papers and maps - a photo of a younger version of himself, a pretty young woman smiling (LAUREL), Alan and another young man with a beard.

All are smiling, happy together, except the bearded man, who is evidently uncomfortable on camera.

3 EXT. BRAEWOOD GARDEN - DAY (2019) 3

John pulls up at a ramshackle but large old house surrounded on three sides by trees. Behind the trees there are dunes leading to a sandy beach and the sea.

John parks the car in the shade of some trees.

He disturbs a sleeping cat which scampers away. The front door is open.

John rings the bell and calls but there's no answer.

He peers into the hallway and sees that it's littered with unopened junk mail.

Around the back of the house, he sees that an upstairs window is open. Still no sign of anyone. A few old deck-chairs and a picnic table lie scattered in a semicircle.

On the picnic table there's a half-empty glass of iced tea. Ice cubes clink as he picks it up.

John sits down in one of the chairs. He closes his eyes and soon drifts off into sleep.

INT. JAZZ CLUB - NIGHT (1990)

A loud, dingy jazz club, small enough for a crowd of a hundred to make the place seem full.

John, ELLEN (a rather quiet black girl) plus Alan and Laurel are there.

Alan and Ellen aren't into the music as much as the others. It's fairly raucous hard bop. John points to the front.

JOHN

We should be up there. For the full effect.

ELLEN

I'm not sure I want the full effect. You go. I'm fine here.

JOHN

Alan?

ALAN

I'm going to the bar. Want a beer?

JOHN

No. It's okay. Laurel?

LAUREL

I want to be where the action is. I'll come.

John looks at Alan but he's already heading for the bar.

John looks hesitant, but Laurel grabs his hand and begins leading him to the front.

When they get a few rows from the front of the stage, John stops to speak to her.

JOHN

I didn't think you were into this sort of thing.

LAUREL

Neither did I.

She kisses him on the cheek suddenly. He's very surprised.

JOHN

What was that for?

LAUREL

For showing me something new. Hey, we can get closer. Come on.

She takes his hand again and they manage to force their way to the very front. A few people are dancing to the music, which is loud but rhythmic.

John looks back to where Ellen was standing but he can't see her at all.

Laurel is swaying in time to the music as the sax player launches into a wild solo.

She looks directly at John with a predatory look and everything slows almost to a standstill, except the music which erupts in a cascade of notes.

The sax player arches his body, eyes tightly shut and reaches the climax of his solo.

5 EXT. BRAEWOOD GARDEN - DAY (2019) 5

Jazz segues into the sound of birds, wind and distant waves.

John dozes peacefully.

WOMAN'S VOICE

Hello there!

John wakes and searches for the source of the voice.

WOMAN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

Hello! ... Up here.

John looks up at the open window. A woman, LOUISE, with unruly red hair looks out. She's dressed in a man's worn plaid shirt and holds a couple of paintbrushes.

The vivid red hair has been tied back but much of it has escaped and been inadvertently painted too.

The woman looks like she's in her early forties but it's hard to tell.

LOUISE

Were you knocking?

JOHN

I'm John McNavan. A friend of your husband.

LOUISE

Louise Callaghan. Wait a minute. I'll come and let you in.

She disappears from the window as John is about to reply.

INT. DOWNSTAIRS HALL - DAY

Louise opens the door to John. He steps in, avoiding the perils of slippery junk mail on half-polished floorboards.

Beyond, it's equally untidy. Wooden packing crates, a side table crammed with more mail, magazines and papers, several old bicycles and piles of cable and circuitry.

The packing cases are all marked "Parallax House".

LOUISE

I'd shake your hand but I'm covered in Yellow Ochre. Oh, mind the mess there. Ian's a bit untidy.

JOHN

That's okay. Is he about?

LOUISE

My husband has outdone himself in untidiness this time. He's misplaced himself.

JOHN

Sorry?

LAUREL

Left home a couple of days ago to pick up a piece of equipment. We haven't seen him since.

JOHN

Have you contacted the police?

LOUISE

I'm sure he'll come stumbling back in a day or so. He usually does. Follow me. I'll wash this off.

They go into a kitchen at the end of the hall. Louise begins to wash her hands with turpentine in a deeply unhygienic, paint-splattered sink.

LOUISE (CONT'D)

Don't worry. We don't eat in here. Oh, if you look in the cupboard above your head you'll find some gin. Tonic and ice in the fridge.

Louise tosses him a fresh lime from a nearby fruit bowl.

LOUISE (CONT'D)

You'll probably have to wash that. Make yourself a drink and pour me one whilst you're at it. Glasses are on the rack there.

John doesn't quite know how to respond. But he does as he's told and pours the drinks.

LOUISE (CONT'D)
You probably want to see Ian's den, don't you? He told me you used to play there for hours as kids.

JOHN
I was just thinking...

LOUISE
Come on then.

7 INT. IAN'S DEN - DAY 7

The study is a potential death-trap of papers. One spark and it's gone. A chair has been knocked over as if its occupant left in a hurry.

The walls are covered with strange charts and diagrams, blackboards scrawled with complex equations.

Somewhere under a pile of papers lurks a small, rather sad single bed.

LOUISE
Ian's little monastic cell. He hasn't allowed me in here for months. As you can see, he took to sleeping here recently.

On the desk there's a photo of Ian, Louise and two kids, a girl aged about ten and a boy of around five.

LOUISE (CONT'D)
That's Remy and Tom. A few years ago now. They're both at boarding school. Ian's mood swings made it seem the most sensible option.

John is a little embarrassed by her frankness. He walks over to a blackboard, upon which is scrawled a diagram like a tree.

The many upper branches of the tree are labelled with roman numerals.

LOUISE (CONT'D)
I have no idea what that is.

JOHN
Ian and I used to doodle things like that in our notebooks all the time. Drove the teachers mad. Crazy theories and games...

Louise looks keen to leave. John takes one final look.

Two small boys, resembling John and Ian are briefly seen playing in the corner of the room with Lego and Action Men.

Then the image fades out and the room is empty again.

LOUISE

Now I'll show you my den. We all
need a place to escape to.

JOHN

I wholeheartedly concur.

Louise raises an eyebrow.

JOHN (CONT'D)

It was a phrase Ian and I used to
use. We heard it in an old movie
or something. Part of our private
language.

LOUISE

A right odd pair of birds, you two.

John laughs as she leads him out.

8

INT. ATTIC STUDIO - DAY

8

Large colourful abstract canvases dominate this room which, being set under the roof, is a strange conical space.

One large painting stands on an easel in the middle. It's six feet square and looks like it might topple over at any moment.

A battered stereo and a few loose CDs stand by a grimy kettle in one corner. The machine is still playing angular "difficult" modern music.

LOUISE

Those paintings are mine. Don't
tell me what you think of them yet.
Let me get to know you better so I
can tell if you're lying or just
being polite.

They are very violent abstracts, each with a predominant colour; vortices whose epicentre is also the centre of the canvas.

Her latest and largest is the one on the easel. It's mostly red and orange.

9 INT. UPSTAIRS LOUNGE - DAY 9

Yet another room: a large, square lounge with French windows on one side, through which evening light streams.

The centre of the room is another jumble of boxes and furniture covered in sheets. A ladder and paint pots are piled in a corner. Nothing has been painted yet.

Louise and John sit with cups of coffee on chairs in the centre of the chaos, talking.

LOUISE

I cleared this room two weeks ago, in preparation for redecorating. I'll get around to it eventually.

JOHN

The last time I was in this room must have been... 1988? One of Ian's parents' parties. They were fairly wild affairs.

LOUISE

A seething undercurrent of debauchery held only in check by a veneer of middle class respectability. And that was just Ian's mum and dad. Did you go to school with Ian?

JOHN

Yes. We were best friends although it's been years since I heard from him. Wonder what made him look me up now.

LOUISE

Before he - disappeared - he said he was on the verge of something. A great discovery of some sort. He wouldn't talk about it with me. Ian made secrecy an artform.

JOHN

We had our own secret worlds. Invented whole religions, usually involving absurd ceremonies of craven worship. We were always looking for the Galactic Prism, or something like that.

LOUISE

Maybe that's where Ian's gone. To locate the Galactic Prism. We've had mysterious government types phoning up and asking for him.

JOHN
Really? Why?

LOUISE
Parallax House - the place Ian used to work - have been claiming that around the time Ian resigned some equipment went missing. They build components for CERN. You know, the large.... thingy, collider.

JOHN
Ian was always a clever sod. Totally over my head, all that.

LOUISE
Mine too. Anyhow, then there was something in the Guardian.

Louise rummages amongst some papers and locates what she's looking for. She hands the article to John. It's headed "Parallax Wins Defense Contract"

LOUISE (CONT'D)
Ian wasn't happy. He demanded to know what was going on. They wouldn't tell him. He started to cause trouble, writing anonymous letters and so forth. They cut his funding then relocated him to a shitty wee pre-fab on the outskirts of the compound. He got sick of it all eventually and left.

JOHN
You don't think... With his sudden disappearance... You know...?

LOUISE
I'm certain it's nothing sinister. We'll hear from him soon enough. He just doesn't have a very good sense of time, that's all. He'll be back.

JOHN
And if he doesn't come back?

LOUISE
Then I'll find him. He'll have left little clues. He usually does. Somewhere amongst all this.

JOHN
You still care for him a lot.

LOUISE
 He's still my husband. I love the
 idiot, even if he doesn't know it.

Louise lets this sink in.

LOUISE (CONT'D)
 Maybe you can shed some light on it
 all. Feel free to have a look
 through this stuff. Something here
 might mean something to you.

JOHN
 I'll have a look.

LOUISE
 Forgive me asking, but you never
 married, did you? Ian used to say
 you were even more of a confirmed
 bachelor than he.

JOHN
 You're nothing if not direct.

LOUISE
 I've been called worse. So tell
 me... did you never meet your
 match?

JOHN
 Maybe. Who knows?

10 INT. CREMATORIUM CHAPEL - DAY (2018)

10

A wall of fire erupts around a wooden coffin.

In a small chapel a group of people stand in silent
 contemplation.

We can hear the words of a eulogy being spoken by a Church of
 Scotland MINISTER.

MINISTER
 ... Laurel McNavan was a treasured
 member of our community. In her
 work in the Dean Village Nursery
 she was exemplary, much-loved by
 all her children and by their
 parents. Although not a regular
 church-goer...

His voice fades out as we look at the group of mourners.

John stands shoulder to shoulder with his brother Alan.

Of the two, it is John who looks most obviously distressed.
 Tears roll down his face as he attempts to control himself.

Alan stands stonily rigid.

KATHERINE, the men's staunch mother, stands behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders.

John turns to smile weakly at his mother.

Alan remains as tight as a clenched fist.

11 EXT. EDINBURGH BOTANICAL GARDENS - DAY (2018) 11

Alan and John walk together across the grass, past flowering rhododendron bushes.

ALAN

She loved it here. She was going to apply to do some sort of voluntary work at one point.

JOHN

Is that right?

ALAN

Weed the borders, pick up leaves and suchlike.

JOHN

She should have gone for it. She would have enjoyed that.

ALAN

Said she was too busy. Another example of something she wanted but didn't pursue.

JOHN

What do you mean?

They come to a listless halt in front of the vivid red flowers and in the shadow of a towering fir tree.

ALAN

You really don't know?

JOHN looks blankly at his brother.

ALAN (CONT'D)

You were always a couple of saucers short of a dinner service.

JOHN

What are you talking about?

ALAN

My wife was in love with you.

The news strikes JOHN like a hammer blow.

ALAN (CONT'D)

Bit of a bummer, eh? I mean I do all the work, I have to actually marry the bitch and you're the one she walks through daisy-strewn meadows with in her dreams.

JOHN

Alan, this is crazy. She married you. I would never have dreamed...

ALAN

That's why she knew it was okay to feel that way. You would never put her in a position where she'd have to do something about it.

JOHN

You're fantasising. It's a shock reaction.

ALAN

Oh fuck off with the psychoanalysis. You two were so alike, it was sickening. Don't you remember that time at the party?

JOHN

Which one?

ALAN

You know. Your friend's place... whatsisface... Ian Callaghan.

JOHN

Braewood?

The brothers pass out of sight amongst the tall, dense bushes.