

BEACH HUTS

She did what she had always done, every single day. Long before Manny died in the lavender and mothball scented room they had shared for forty years, and in the great creaking oak bed that they had not shared for the past five.

Manny died as he had lived, with a minimum of fuss or complaint. Perhaps, more accurately, he simply stopped living as though it was some nasty, tiresome habit he had managed to give up after a number of failed attempts. This time he got it right.

When she got back from her swim, he was already cold and stiffening, arms at his sides, staring at the ceiling as though deep in thought. There was nothing to do but call Dr Braithwaite and dry her hair while she waited for him to arrive and for the kettle to boil.

Like startlingly bright beads against the skin of an old woman, the string of multi-coloured beach huts were the only relief from the merged greyness of sea and sky. She was staring at that, avoiding the huts when the doctor's car arrived at the gate and she pressed the remote and turned away.

Braithwaite was quietly solicitous and concerned. He spent some time with Manny and made a call, before signing the death certificate and accepting the tea she poured for him. It was almost an hour before he picked up his bag and took his leave with one last shrewd glance at her impassive face. The little plastic bottle of pills he'd left her stood untouched on the dining room table.

Next morning dawned as they do, always have and always will, birdsong muted until the gunmetal horizon turned to blushing peach. It found her at the kitchen window again, teabag neatly consigned to the bin and cup to her lips. A hesitant sunrise reminded her of today's agenda. She reached down and hefted her beach bag - packed the night before - and turned towards the steps downward - to the waiting beach.

She made great issue of her preparations, cap set just so, swim suit equally distributed - just the way Emil had liked it - in the red hut. A tendril of hair snaking down her cheek - just the way Rob had declared it to be enticing - on the small deck outside the blue hut. Behind the green hut, Andre had made her... made her feel young and ageless. So much so that she had regretted those clinical, passionless minutes on the floor of the yellow hut with Peter of the Nordic blonde looks, incomparable tan and self assurance that his own beauty gave him.

There were others; other huts and other days and other lies. And through it all, Manny had smiled his apologetic smile and asked after her enjoyment, the water temperature and the weather outside, thanked her for the small things she did for him that he could not do himself. Everyone agreed that Manny was a wonderful person.

On the sand, out of habit, she spread her towel as though to bask later after her swim. Then she folded it neatly and returned it to the bag. The water was chilly, but not unbearably so as she waded out through the shallows. When it reached her chest, she turned for one last look at the beach huts before slipping into her tireless breaststroke, eyes on the first orange curve of the sunrise.

From long experience, she sensed the deeper water from the cold eddying up from far below and after another few strokes, she stopped, rhythmically treading water. Then she arched onto her back to float, at one with the sea, hands fanning gently at her sides to maintain her position. Out here, enfolded in solitude, she could think. It was going to be a clear day from the look of the sky. Gulls floated across her field of vision, an occasional cry breaking the silence

Carefully, she reached a hand up to the brim of her bathing cap and felt for the slim outline of the razor-blade she had tucked in there against her temple. With very little hesitation, she opened the great vein that ran the length of her left arm, gasping at the sting of the incision. Then she resumed her floating. Watching the sky, floating and waiting for her last lover to come to her.