

On the Rocks

by [Sarah Das Gupta](#) (October 2023)



Rocky Cliffs and Waterfall, Gustave Courbet, 1872

The car had been parked only a few meters from the cliff edge that sultry August evening. A grey mist had drifted in from the sea. Brian could just make out the piles of jagged rocks far below and the white surf crashing against them. Jenny was curled up on the front seat, apparently in a deep sleep. The cliff top was bare. Dog walkers and hikers had disappeared for the day. Far out at sea a few local fishing boats bobbed at anchor.

Brian stood, looking down where the chalk cliff had crumbled away as if a giant mouth had bitten a chunk, only to spit it into the waves swirling and foaming over huge pieces of broken chalk. Sea gulls perched on eye-wateringly narrow ledges. Further out at sea, three black cormorants kept sinister guard over the sandy cove beyond the cliff face.

Quietly, Brian opened the door on the driver's side. Leaning across he prodded Jenny's right shoulder and arm. No reaction. Slowly, Brian released the hand brake. Slammed the door shut. Jumped clear. At first the car stayed obstinately still. Then it suddenly began to move. Meter, by meter, it crawled forward over the well-worn turf. A second later and it had gathered speed. It stopped for a moment, as if contemplating the sheer drop. In the slowest of slow motion, it tipped over the cliff edge. Brian looked down at the toy car broken on the rocks below, its metal limbs and innards splattered over the chalk and foam. He thought he saw the flash of his wife's scarlet cardigan before waves swirled over the wreck.

Brian lay on the beach in the spring sunshine. There was something relaxing about Greece. The ancient olive groves, already in new leaf, the whitewashed cottages, clustered round the domed village church. The sound of local fishermen, returning with the night's catch, had changed little since classical times. Should he go into the sea, impossibly blue in the April light, or sit with his new translation of Homer, with a glass of the regional red wine?

"Brian, be a darling and get my swimming cap from the bedroom. I don't want to spoil my new hair style."

"The sea here's like crystal. You can see the shells and sand under your feet."

"Yes, but it's still salty and I've just had my roots done."

As he walked reluctantly up the beach, Brian imagined he heard Jenny's voice in the whispering olive grove, "*Brian, darling just run a bath for me, please darling, only a minute, darling ...*"

That evening, under the trees, a silver slice of the new moon shone through the dark branches. In the distance the hypnotic sound of the waves washed and rinsed the ear. Brian was savouring his third glass of wine and had reached that part in *The Illiad* where Achilles desecrates Hector's body.

"Darling, can you just look at the washing machine. It's not draining and the kitchen's flooded!"

"Leave it for tomorrow. You, can always wash stuff by hand."

"No darling, I wouldn't feel they were really clean. It won't take you a minute. You're only reading all those violent Greek stories. Brian. Darling ... "

He mopped the beautiful, worn tiles in the kitchen and altered the dial on the ancient washing machine. He wondered how this translator would deal with Helen of Troy.

"Oh, thanks dear. Those awful tiles need replacing. I don't know where they got that washing machine. It must have come out of the Ark! I thought we'd go into town tomorrow. I could do with a jar of marmalade and I'd like to look round the shops."

"I want to visit the ancient theatre at Dodon. It's one of the best preserved in this area."

"Oh, Brian darling, it'll be most dreadfully hot. One pile of old stones looks much like another. Once you've seen one lot of old rubble, you've seen them all."

Brian wondered idly how the translation would treat the murder of Iphigenia!

In bed that night, Brian lay awake listening to the cicadas and a night jar in the distance. He looked at Suzy lying snoring quietly beside him. A hairnet hung over one ear, a jar of make-up remover was open on the bedside table. The Greeks knew how to deal with women. Think of Zeus and Danae or Paris and Helen.

Suddenly he heard, faintly at first, then louder, an only too familiar voice, *"Brian darling, come here for a minute ... "* At first, he thought he was dreaming. But he was definitely awake and Suzy was definitely snoring. Brian hadn't heard that voice for over ten years. He thought the flash of scarlet on the rocks, among the mangled car, had been the end of it.

"Brian, Brian come here ... "

He slipped quietly out of bed. Suzy knew only that his first wife had been killed in an accident and that it upset Brian to talk about it. That's how it had to stay!

Brian found himself walking towards the beach. As his eyes became accustomed to the feathered darkness, he could see the waves, the crests, moon-tipped, magical.

'Come here, darling. It will only take a minute ... ' The voice echoed and re-echoed, mingled with the music of the sea and the breeze in the olive grove.

He walked on, as if drawn by the haunting, whispering sound. The ground seemed to be rising. He could feel the sandy soil beneath his feet as he climbed a steep, winding path. A wind had arisen, blowing from the north, he guessed. Clouds were scudding across the sky. The path had flattened out. He could feel grass beneath his feet. The wind was now almost gale force.

'Brian darling, come here, here ... ' the voice now came from the right.

He stepped off, into vacancy. Down, down accelerating faster, ever faster, drawn down, always down!

The rocks below waited.

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Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher from Cambridge, UK who also taught in India and Tanzania. She started writing last October while in hospital, recovering from an accident. Her work has been published in magazines and journals in over 12 countries including, US, UK, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, Croatia and Romania.

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