

AFTER THE FLOOD



L. S. Matthews

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**To all the horses who have taught me so much,
especially Bree, who explained to me about the
blinkers, and to Pinky, the Ardennes cross,
who introduced me to this wonderful breed.**

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It's the Sea

When did I first realise that something was wrong?

I was watching my dad putting on his coat. It was late evening and there had been yet another flood warning. These were very boring. Like a lot of other people in the village of Ingwick, we had actually packed up all our stuff three times and left our house. We had gathered at the school or at the village's only hotel and, three times, nothing had happened.

Dad was working on flood defences, and had said every time that they would hold, and he should know. And he was right, of course, they had held.

All these warnings caused the problem that night. Outside, in the dark, winter's night, a bitterly cold January wind was gripping our world with its teeth. It shook and worried at the trees till they groaned along with its howling. No one would

want to go out into that. I'd never heard anything like it. Maybe that was it, thinking back – the first sign I'd had that something was wrong, different, from all the times we'd been warned before. Mum had phoned around and found out that some people weren't keen to evacuate this time. She'd persuaded most, but not the old couple, Mr and Mrs Downes, who lived a few doors away, despite begging and pleading.

'This is crazy,' Dad was saying to Mum. 'We should have gone by now. We can't stay around wasting time. Everyone else will have to make their own decisions. I'll go and help the Downes, you get packed up here. I'll be right back.'

'But what if they won't change their minds?' asked Mum.

My dad sighed.

'Val, they're very old, very tiny, and very frail. If need be, I will pick them up and carry them out by force, one under each arm.'

Mum laughed and smacked at him as he headed to the front door. 'They'd never speak to you again if you did that! Can you imagine?'

He pecked her on the cheek as he went through the door, the wind screeching into the hall.

‘Somehow I’d live with that,’ he said, disappearing into the night. The Downes were very sweet but could keep you talking for hours if they caught you as you passed their garden. That’s how Mum and Dad had got to know them.

Me and Mum and Dad had lived in Ingwick for about a year. Before that, we’d lived in other towns and villages on the east coast, always near the sea. My dad, you see, was a special engineer, working on sea and flood defences, so we went where his job took him. Mum was OK about moving – she taught violin at schools and gave private lessons too, so she could carry on with that pretty much wherever we went. I had got used to leaving friends, which was sad, but you could look forward to making new ones. I didn’t like school much, so never minded leaving.

Dad and Mum had explained to me that Ingwick had been flooded years ago in some big storm, along with loads of other places, and because they weren’t good at warning people back then, lots of

people had died. Despite the great work on the sea defences, this was why the people in charge of such things were now a little hasty with warnings.

I was slightly on the side of the Downes, it has to be said. I didn't want to pack things up and then go out into that freezing night to the hotel or wherever; but no one was asking me what I thought. I don't know why, but tonight I went to the lounge window to watch Dad go down the path.

I could just about see him in the light from the porch steps, buffeted by the wind, his gloved hand gripping the scarf at his throat to keep it there. His feet splashed in a puddle when he got to the front gate, and then he did something strange.

He took off one of his gloves, bent down, dipped his finger in the puddle and put it to his mouth.

Then he straightened up and looked back towards the house, and his eyes found me, watching from the window. Then he seemed to look beyond me, and I was aware of Mum at my shoulder. I turned to her.

But she had gone, and I heard her open the

front door. The shrieking of the wind instantly filled the house.

I looked back out at Dad.

He was cupping his mouth, calling against the wind to Mum at the front door.

Then he turned and was through the gate, away and lost into the dark night.

I heard Mum close the door and instantly the roar of the storm was quieter.

‘What was he doing?’ I called, running to her.
‘What did he say?’

‘It’s the sea. Her voice faltered. ‘He said it’s come.’

The Roar

I hardly had time to think what this meant, or what it would mean. Mum was telling me to grab things and take them upstairs to put on the beds. She filled a flask of water and pushed it into my hands. This seemed the strangest thing at the time, but I did not question anything. I just did as I was told.

As we came back downstairs from putting a load of coats and boxes of photos on my bed, we both saw the trickle of water feeling its way, like a tentacle, under the front door. We paused for a moment, then Mum bustled me into the kitchen, where she made me pull on my wellingtons while she grabbed things in a calm but hurried way and loaded me with them as if I were a pack mule.

'That's enough now,' said Mum, pushing the mobile phone into my hand, along with two woolly

hats, her violin in its case, and a little painting her mother had given her.

At that moment, the mobile trilled and lit up in my hand.

We froze – we weren't used to using it very often as it was expensive. Despite the stuff in my arms, I managed to press the button and put it to my ear.

'It's First Alert here,' shouted a man's voice. 'Is that James Crosby?'

'No, it's his son,' I answered, and was about to ask if whoever it was wanted to speak to Mum, but the voice just carried on as if I hadn't spoken.

'Catastrophic failure of the sea wall at Chich. That village is drowned. Now it's heading your way across the marshes.'

'Thank you, I'll tell him, but I think he knows . . .' The line was dead.

I looked at Mum.

'What?' she asked fearfully.

'It was the warning team for Dad. Chich has gone.' I couldn't use the word 'drowned', though I knew people just used it to mean 'flooded'. Thank goodness it wasn't us, I thought. Chich was

over three miles away. I'd walked three miles so I knew it was a long way.

'Then your dad was right. *Our* sea defences *have* held. But it's broken through there and is coming across the land for us anyway,' said Mum. I heard a note of defeat in her voice.

She gave herself a little shake.

'Put these on our bed, then find all the warm clothes you can and put them on. All of them. Jumpers, socks, your waterproof coat, the lot.' As she spoke, she was dragging on her coat and struggling with her boots. I couldn't help but notice she seemed to be hurrying. 'Wait for me up there. Don't come back downstairs.'

'But where are you going?' I asked as she followed me to the hall, giving me a gentle shove towards the stairs. Already there were a couple of centimetres of water spreading slowly along the floor.

'I'm just going to tie the boat up so it doesn't float off,' she said.

'Oh,' I said. 'Good idea.'

I headed up the stairs, trying not to drop things,

pleased and a little surprised Mum had thought to save the boat. It was only a small wooden one for rowing, with a mast for sailing in the right weather, but we'd had some fun in it. I had a fleeting worry about my skateboard, out in the garden. Oh well, it would probably dry out OK.

'Jack?' she called after me, when I was half way up the stairs.

'Yes?'

'When you get up there, open our bedroom window, would you?'

'OK,' I answered cheerfully.

I dumped all the stuff Mum had piled into my arms on their bed, went into my room and got all my warmest gear and brought it back there, and then remembered what she'd said about the window.

Open the window? Still, I pushed back the curtains, just as a squall of sleet slammed into the pane of glass with such a whack I thought it would shatter. Outside, it was now pitch black, and I couldn't see a thing. I grabbed hold of the handle of the window, but trying to open it was a battle. An

invisible and powerful shoulder seemed to do its best to shut it in my face, or else fling it back and off its hinges.

Finally I had it hooked open, and now the screaming and roaring of the wind was incredibly loud, filling the room. As I dragged on layer after layer of warm clothes, I could hear another note, low and droning like an old-fashioned freight train or a plane, and knew, somehow, that it wasn't the wind.

Dressed so I could hardly bend my elbows or knees, I waddled to the window again – where was Mum?

I leaned out as far as I dared; instantly the wind screeched around me, gripped my head, sucked the breath from my body. I couldn't tell if it was me swaying, or the house. I felt as if I were on a ship. Sleet slapped me like the spray of breaking waves. I gripped the window-sill tightly. Above the roar of the storm, Mum's voice floated up: 'Jack!' and then something else I couldn't quite hear.

I looked down. My eyes streamed, but I just managed to make out her pale, upturned face in

the dark garden below – then *thwonk*, something heavy and soggy hit me in the face. I jerked away, but saw a coil of wet rope disappearing over the window ledge; just in time, I grabbed it. What on earth was she doing?

I held on to the rope and reached for one of the towels we'd piled on the bed. I wiped my face and noticed the torch which had been half-hidden by the towel. I snatched it up and went to the window again and shone it down into the garden.

The rope stretched away and there, at the end of it, I could make out our rowing boat. I realised it was bobbing about – floating on water where the garden had been. I looked around for somewhere to tie the rope, but could only think of the leg of the bed, so I lashed it to that. Then I shone the torch around everywhere, looking for Mum. But there was no sign of her. And all the time, the screaming of the storm filled the room.

'Mum!' I shrieked, but the wind grabbed the sound and tore it away. To my surprise, though, I heard an answering shout from downstairs, in the hall.

‘It’s all right, Jack! I’m coming!’

I ran out to the landing and gasped. Mum was already half way up the stairs, dripping wet; below her the hall was already swimming with water which seemed to be rising as I watched.

‘Look at the water!’ I shrieked.

Mum pushed wet strands of hair from her face and smiled at me. ‘I *have* seen it, you know – I’ve just been *in* it!’

She stopped on the landing and slowly pulled off her boots, pouring water from them over the handrail to splash into the hall below. Then she peeled off her long, wet socks. Slapping wet footprints on the bare floorboards, she went into the bedroom with me following, every movement accompanied by the rustle of our waterproofs.

With the window open, a deafening roar filled the room. In a moment, Mum was across the room and managed to wrestle the window as closed as it could be, with a rope in the way.

‘Pass me something – oh, one of Dad’s belts, there, on the back of the chair,’ she said, holding on to the window for dear life.

I grabbed a thin leather belt, and helped her tie it round the catches of the window. At last she could let go and now the window was only slightly ajar; and though it strained at the belt, the roaring of the storm was a lot more bearable. Mum dragged the curtains back across, and they billowed and fluttered like sails.

‘Why did you tie the boat up – up here?’ I asked, but she didn’t answer. She was choosing things from the pile on the bed – fresh socks, the flask of water, biscuits, a fruit cake someone had given us at Christmas. From outside, I heard the strange, deep, thundering sound which was like the wind but wasn’t the wind.

‘What *is* that sound?’ I asked.

‘It’s the sea,’ said Mum, as Dad had said earlier, and now I understood what that meant. ‘It has come, and it’s still coming. Let’s get into your room where the window is closed. It’ll be warmer in there.’

A thought struck me.

‘What about Dad? And . . . Mr and Mrs Downes?’

Through all this, Mum had been as calm as if

she had dealt with this situation many times, though, of course, she hadn't.

Now she looked at me and couldn't hide the worry behind her eyes.

'I'm sure they're all right,' she said bravely. 'And he'll probably see them safe and then come back for us. In the meantime, we just have to wait.'

I followed her into my bedroom and she dried her feet with towels and dragged on dry socks.

And then, all of a sudden, the lights went out. We clutched each other, plunged into pitchy darkness. The deep roaring grew louder, and the whole house seemed to shudder with us. The next moment, there came a crash of breaking glass downstairs, and the roaring was in the house, and inside us, shaking every cell in our bodies. I put my hands over my ears, but could not block it out. Now I had a memory of walking on the beach in rough weather, and realised that I recognised the sound – it was the thunder of huge waves, rumbling in and smashing on the shore, but much, much louder than I'd ever heard before.