

Sea Wall by Simon Stephens (2008)

This short play is a one act monologue told by Alex, a thirty-one year old father of two children about a family holiday that goes awry. We've reproduced the whole monologue here. This monologue should be performed as far as possible on a bare stage, as far as possible in natural light and as far as possible without sound effects. Alex addresses the audience directly.

Alex: She had us, both of us, absolutely round her finger. Fundamentally she achieved this through the way she looked at us. It shouldn't have been a surprise that the way she moved her head to one side should leave me basically on my knees or more akin, I should say, to a slightly tepid pool of just water, but what was more surprising was the effect it had on him.

Anything she wanted he gave to her. Anything she demanded he agreed to. And he agreed to everything with this same little smile on his face. The smile of a man who in actual fact was little more than four years old. I'm not saying I wouldn't have agreed to the same and more in his position, but it just seemed in some way more, what? Downright surprising? Coming from him.

He wasn't that kind of man. He was a soldier. When I say 'was', I mean was. I mean he used to be. Between 1968 and 1984 he was a soldier in the British infantry. He reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He did five tours of Northern Ireland. And this was when, you know, doing a tour of Northern Ireland was more than just a few games of pool and a chat with some kids outside a fish and chip shop. Some of the photographs he took.

He used to have a Polaroid camera and some of the things that, after he'd had a few drinks, he'd get out of his box to show me. You wouldn't have thought they were of Northern Ireland. There was something about them that I found in some way, you know, surprising.

He always refused to talk about South Georgia. Never mentioned it. I asked him about it one time and his face turned, within the matter of a few seconds, literally grey. Slate grey.

And even when he eventually retired from the army he retrained as a maths teacher for Christ's sake! I would have liked to have seen him teach. I can imagine the kind of teacher he was. I don't think he would have worn many cords. I don't think he would have shared too many coffees with the sixth-formers.

Come and play with me. Read me a story. Can I sit on your lap? Where's Grandpops? Oh! There he is. Not his kind of, scene, you know? But he did it with her.

The first thing I learned about photography I learned when I was a kid. If you're taking a portrait photograph, if you possibly can, then take it from below the subject. It renders the subject actually oddly, what it does is it renders them not more heroic, not more godlike, oddly it renders them more human. And if you can take it in natural light, if you can capture the way the light falls, at the start of or at the end of a day especially, then it can be – He used to try to convince me that the existence of, the discovery of and the understanding of the relevance and possible uses of the irrational number which is commonly and internationally and historically known as Pi, that is, to five decimal places, the number 3.14159, is irrevocable proof of the existence of God. It's just so illogical, he told us, that it could ever work, that it must just prove that there's something more than us. And it's so incredible that we can discover it. That proves something. I think he's wrong. I told him. I think you're wrong. I told him, for somebody so palpably intelligent, Arthur, sometimes you think like your head's full of wool.

He liked me. He never got too cross. We'd talk about beer together. He never bothered about me coming from – He watched an unusual amount of tennis. Everything was tennis with him. His conversation was peppered with tennis metaphors. Sometimes I'd watch tennis with him. I never liked it much.

Is it a terrible thing to say that sometimes the company of men is kind of, in some way, comforting? I don't mean it to sound. You know? I don't mean anything other than –He had a house in the eastern suburbs of Toulon in a town called Carquerraine. In the south of sodding France for God's sake.

When I go there with Helen for the first time we drive in her car. She's a kind of mix between being a bit embarrassed because, ostensibly at least, at the time we're kind of, what? Socialists? And just being really proud because her dad has a house in the South of France and she's taking me there and she's paying for the ferry because I'm skint. She keeps going on about how odd he is but how she has a feeling that she thinks I'll like him.

And I do. She says that's one of the things she likes about me. I like people. People like me. They think I'm gentle. I had absolutely no idea that people thought I was gentle. And she says she really likes this bit.

He shows the area at the top of his arm.

This bit is one of the best bits of a man, she says. Which is a phrase that just about sends me completely insane with love for her and her nose and her smile and everything.

Lucy was a Caesarean. And when Helen was in labour there was a moment when I thought she could have died. And I am a little bit embarrassed now because I had to go into the toilets to change into my, what are they called? Scrubs is it? When I had to change into my scrubs I did have a bit of a cry. And when I did, I did ask God, who I don't think is even there in the first place, to make sure that Helen was all right. I said we can survive if we lose the baby but I don't think I could make it if she went and died on me. It's like talking to a photograph or the mirror. It has the same effect. Which isn't to discount it completely, but it's not God.

The second time I go to his house, after we've been going out now for two years, he takes me diving. He's become a big fan of scuba-diving in the eighteen months that me and Helen have been going out, which is maybe a surprising character development in a man of his age but he's a surprising man. Between St Tropez and the Île de Porquerolles there are, he says, actual shipwrecks that you can actually dive on. Would I like to come?

I've never worn a wetsuit before and it takes me longer to get into than I'd hoped and it makes me feel a bit fat.

He tells me he's going to take me to the Sea Wall. I ask him, 'The what?' He says, 'The Sea Wall.' This makes no sense to me at all. There's a wall in the sea? It drops down. Hundreds of feet. I had no idea that the bed of the sea was built like that. I thought it was a gradual slope. He'd brought us these little bags with bits of bread in and you hold them upside down to swim with so you don't lose the bread because it naturally floats upwards. And he takes us to the wall. And swimming there, with the sun, even bright as it is above us, and it is a bright day. Even then the darkness of the fall that the wall in the sea reveals is as terrifying as anything I've seen.

You get back to the surface of course and the idea that there ever wasn't a sea wall down there in the first place is a bit embarrassing, frankly. I mean, what did I actually think the seabed was made of?

When Helen's giving birth to Lucy the midwife calls to me, 'Daddy, do you want to see your baby born?' They've built a little tent. I look over the edge of the tent and I, you know I'm one of those people who, I

never know where to look when people point things out to me. Like I'm a kid and I'm driving along and Mum says, 'Look! A kestrel!' Or, 'Look! A plane!' and I don't have the faintest idea what to look at. I just smile and nod dumbly and say, 'Oh yeah!' but I'm completely lying. And this is a bit like that. Mainly I see the yellow of the inside of her stomach. Once you've seen the inside of somebody's stomach, I think your relationship with that person probably then moves to what? A new level?

I love her completely. With every bone and bit of skin of me. And it's been very rare the times in our relationship when she's cried and I've comforted her. I'm fucking crying all the fucking time. I can't watch an episode of *ER* without just being a wreck. I cry at *Ground Force* when the person comes back and they've had their garden done up as a surprise.

We go there, to his house, for our holidays every year. We did used to drive. Three years straight we drove all the way down from London without stopping. We took it in turns driving. We kind of promised to share navigating but neither of us needed any help. We did it fine.

When Lucy was born we started flying there though, because the driving's not fair on a baby and he'd buy us the tickets. You can get flights to Carcassonne for dead cheap but he'd pay for us to fly into Nice and he'd hire us a car when we got there.

The first time he sees her he takes her by surprise a bit. He looms over from behind her and he's wearing his glasses, these big old glasses, and he's a very, very tall man, and he takes her by surprise and she screams like living shit, believe me.

It took her about three weeks to recover from that. But she did.

And then she'd start with the shuffling across the floor to reach him and putting her hands up and making these little noises that basically mean, 'put me on your lap and read me a story now, you funny old man,, I don't care if you're meant to be weird, I don't care if you're meant to be scary, I don't care what anybody thinks about you, I want a story and I want it now.' Who could resist that?

She starts wearing cardigans and that's me done for.

One time I say to him, 'If there's a God? Is he a man?' and the question catches him by surprise a bit. But after a while he says that, yes, he thinks in the end God is probably a man. So I say to him, 'What does he look like? Does He have a beard? Does He wear robes? Does He have long white hair?' He says to me that the thing about God is that whatever I think He looks like, well, He will look the absolute opposite to that. And whatever I think He is least likely to look like, then that is what He will look like. So I ask him if he means God looks a bit like Gary Glitter and he tells me not to be so bloody silly. So I say to him, 'If you can't tell me what He looks like, if you don't know what He looks like and He doesn't look like anything, then how do you know He is anything more than just an idea? Just something you made up?'

She's eight. We've been going every year. We've talked for years about having a second child but every time we talk about it we think about Lucy and we just think, you know what? We're very happy. She's just. We just want her.

She's clever. She's funny. She's very, very pretty. She's Helen's sidekick. She's my sweetheart. They make little wisecracks about me. The two of them stand there sizing me up but I know if they push it too far that she'll come running over to me and put her arms around me because the idea of properly making me sad makes her feel a little bit sick.

In the eight years that she's been born I've fucked a lot of things up and somehow by the skin of my teeth managed to largely come out unscathed. And me and Helen. We're doing OK. We have little routines and

stuff, like about the dishwasher or the shopping or cooking, because I really like to cook for her but compared to her I'm shit at it. So when she cooks it's properly a treat. We have all these routines but it's like we fucking love them. Rather than finding them, what? Restricting?

Sometimes when you swim in the sea the force of the waves can crash right against you. It can knock you over. There have been times when just trying to get out of the sea I've been knocked over. Two summers ago this happened and I cracked my coccyx against a stone on the shore's edge and flailed about like some kind of huge seal. I was at that moment the mathematical polar opposite of Daniel Craig.

It doesn't get like this normally where he is. Normally the sea's warm there. Which is quite an unusual feeling for me.

I always swim out as far as I think is safe and then turn and swim another ten strokes and then stop and swim back.

Sometimes you think the tide's caught you. You panic because you think you're not moving. You are. You just need to turn on your back. Collect your breathing. Kick slowly. You're moving.

I ask him, 'Where is He?' He says, 'Who?' I say, 'God. Where is He? Is He in the sky? That's where people used to think He was. Children and medieval people. Is He on the edge of our solar system? Is He on the edge of our galaxy? Because every time we think we've located where He must be then we find out something else and we realise that God can't be there. Is He fifteen billion light years away? On the very edges of the universe? In the parts of the universe that take on the form of the time of the Big Bang? That have that kind of density? Is He there? Is that where He is?'

He says, 'We don't know everything, Alex. There are some things we don't know. There are things we can't explain.' I tell him, 'Now.' He says, 'What?' I say, 'We can't explain them now but that doesn't mean that they have no reason. It just illustrates the gaps in our knowledge. It doesn't mean we won't be able to explain them one day because I really, because I think we will.'

I want to acknowledge something. And it's embarrassing because I know it's something that you will have noticed. There's a hole running through the centre of my stomach. You must have all felt a bit awkward because you can probably see it. Even in this light. Mostly people choose not to talk about it. Some people tell me that they're sorry but that, yes, they can see my hole. 'What's that, Alex?' they say. 'You appear to have a great big hole running right through the middle of you.'

I'd started doing OK. You know? I'd got a, it sounds stupid, but I got a contract with British Home Stores. I took the photographs for their catalogues. And for their websites. The menswear. The womenswear. The back-to-school stuff. The homewear. I made so much money from taking photographs of cushions and saucepans and digital alarm clocks I can barely believe it myself.

Five weeks ago, just before we go. Just before all the packing and the frantic stuff about what are we going to take, Helen's buying some stuff to take with us. She's got Lucy all her new stuff. Her dresses and her cossie and her books and toys for the flight. And she got me some shades which were properly pucker, seriously. Very Poncherello. From Chips. And she asks me to come into the bedroom because there's something she wants to show me. And I get there and she's wearing this dress. It's a blue dress. With this dropped back. She asks me to tell her what I think. I swear for about thirty seconds I couldn't speak. She looked. Oh. And the idea that I was married to her. And that we had our girl. And this was our life.

There's a man in the market in Port Grimaud that we visit on our second day and he sells us a case of claret for the equivalent of about fifteen quid and it is like heaven. We drink two bottles on our second night there.

The next day Helen has to go to the supermarket because we need to get some bread and some shampoo for Lucy and I need some athlete's foot cream, and we love, they have these little yogurts, these little pots of vanilla-flavoured yogurt that you can't get in Britain. And she wants to get some cheese. It's fun getting it from the market, but as it goes it's a proper rip-off so she wants to go to the supermarket, which is where most of the French people go anyway.

So me and Arthur go down with Lucy, down to the sea. There's a bay just near his house. And round the corner from the bay there's a little cove that you can climb on to. And when the bay's busy you can go to this cove, which is actually nearer his house and more secluded, and it's very quiet and it's lovely and we talk about it and we decide to go there.

She can go into this world. Did you ever know any kids like that? When she thinks nobody's looking she can start off just going further and further into her imagination. Playing games all by herself. Actually, what she's really doing is she's talking to herself, which some people might find a bit disconcerting, but I just love to watch her.

He says to me one time, he looks at me and he says, 'He's in the feeling of water. Sometimes there's the shape of the roll of land. He's in the way some people move. He's in the light falling over a city at the start of an evening. He's in the space between two numbers.'

You know what the cruellest thing I ever did to anybody was? I'll tell you.

I've started getting into detective fiction. I have a friend who works at St Mary's University and he said to me, 'Alex, all fiction is detective fiction.' He's completely wrong. Jane Austen isn't detective fiction. Franz Kafka isn't detective fiction. *Bridget Jones* isn't detective fiction. Detective fiction is detective fiction. James Ellroy. Arthur goes for a swim. I'm reading *LA Noir*. The bit where the cop and the killer are in the deserted car park meeting at midnight with the lights out, neither knowing whether the other is there. Lucy's kind of being a Power Ranger.

The sun is gorgeous. I've got my shades on it's so bright.

He comes back. 'The water's amazing,' he says. He dries off. I notice his feet. The skin on his feet is unusually battered and cracked. It's one of the moments you kind of rumble that he's a little old. He tells me I can go for a swim.

I do. And the water *is* amazing. I wade past the first bank. I get past all the seaweed and I swim out and out and out. Around the bay. And the light. At that time of day light on the Mediterranean is – and the sea is warm. I turn round.

I'm about twenty yards out. The sky is this huge blue curve. I can see the houses on the top of the road. I can see his house. I can see the swimmers round the corner of the bay. I can see Arthur sitting reading. He's reading some history of China. He's really into it. His towel draped around his legs. Water dripping onto his book. I can see all that from here, with real detail. I can see Lucy playing behind him. Running about a bit. Playing Power Rangers.

I can watch them as she does a little bit of a jump. It's odd because he's so into his book that he doesn't notice that she loses her footing on the sand and the gravel of the rock and she slips and stumbles. And she's quite close to a little edge of one of the rocks there and what she does is she tries to correct her

balance but in trying to correct the balance of her weight she actually puts more weight on her back foot that slips out from underneath her and it's weird to look at because she does fall off the edge of this six-foot-high cliff on the rocks and she falls backwards and cracks her head against some rocks which are jutting out at the bottom of the cliff.

I can see it all clearly but I can't really hear anything and it's weird watching it with no sound. Like if the sound's off on the telly it's always a bit strange. It takes a while to register before I turn and swim back to the shore.

I'm not thinking so I start swimming faster and faster, which is stupid because I'm panicking and when you panic you can't really breathe properly so I have to tell myself, concentrate on your breathing.

I can kind of watch him between strokes and he's thrown down his book and jumped off the cliff and there's one other couple there that I didn't notice before who have stopped their sunbathing and run towards where she is. And I notice him pick her up.

He's torn between running back to the house to call an ambulance and waiting for me.

I get there in enough time for him not to have to worry about this for too long.

I go to her. I take her from him. There is, what there is, which is surprising to me, is there is a handful of blood in her hair. It's thick and matted and her hair is all chewed up by it.

I read that it's a process. That it's never absolutely instantaneous. The injury causes the death of brain cells so signals are no longer sent to the lungs and bit by bit the machine closes down.

Her blood sticks to my hands.

I carry her up the path of the cove and I haven't bothered getting dried and people are looking at me. Stopping still in their tracks and talking to me in French and I'm aware that I'm kind of not crying, I look like, fuck, I don't know. I go back into the house with her and as I'm getting through the sliding glass doors I bang her head against the wall and I'm talking to her, which is stupid, and I tell her I'm sorry for hitting her head but there is part of me that's thinking, well, fuck it now. What does it fucking matter now? I may as well drag her by her fucking ankle. This bit of meat. This bit of meat and air.

I remember I was a bit astonished because one of the ambulance men spoke English. Quite good English. He'd lived in Southampton and I couldn't help thinking, 'Why the hell did you live in Southampton of all places?'

The sound of her closing the door with her bags full of yogurt and shampoo and cheese and bread takes me completely by surprise. She looks at me across his house. She's wearing sunglasses to protect her against the light.

Oh Jesus fuck.

He's sitting on his sofa. He's still wrapped in his towel. He is a man that is completely broken. He is a shattered form. The little noises he makes.

I leant over the desk at the check-in at Nice and we'd been taken to the front of the queue and we had actually been given an upgrade and while the woman there was sorting all this out I looked over her at the sheet she was checking off on her desk and there was a list of the passengers and the crew and the baggage and at the end of the list it read 'human remains'. Which was a bit –We're sitting, the three of us, in the departure lounge. We can't really touch one another. We can't look at each other or at anybody

else. I turn to him, and this is the cruellest thing I ever did to anybody else, and don't forget this is a man I, you know, I've known him for ten years and I, I, I do, I love him. I look at him. I say to him —

You get back to London and the noise of the place and the dirt and the colour and the roar of it. I can't actually. What I can't really do, for now, at least, is work. There's a lie at the heart of photography that I've always cherished. When you take a photograph what you do is you freeze something that's actually alive. To do this properly you need, more than anything, to believe in life.

There's a child outside the window laughing. And in his laugh there is absolutely no joy or humour.

Warning: this vehicle is reversing.

I have a complete and total inability to cry.

You see people when they say to you that they can't imagine not believing in anything because it would be just too depressing. I think there's something sick about that. The level of cowardice in that is just unbearable to me.

I've been home for three weeks.

If this can happen, anything can happen.

He goes to a window. He opens it. Looks out for a short time. Looks back.

Just now there was this couple outside and they were arguing in the street and it looked like they were deliberately trying to copy characters out of soap operas. In the way that they argued. As though the closest they'll ever get to being famous is rowing in the street like they were actually on *EastEnders*. The misery and the emptiness and the vacuous shitiness of their lives is so considerable that the proximity to the behaviour of soap characters acts as some kind of consolation.

Helen moves around the house.

I'm holding my entire head together. The skin and the shell of me. I'm falling absolutely inside myself. But you can see that. You can see the — in my — Just because we don't know doesn't mean we won't know. We just don't know yet. But I think one day we will. I think we will.

Questions:

- When the monologue begins, Stephens doesn't name 'she' or 'him'. Who are they? Why might Stephens hold back this information right at the start?
- What image do we get of Arthur, Alex's father-in-law? Why does Stephens create this image before he talks about Arthur's relationship with Lucy?
- Stephens has Alex self-interrupt, going off on tangents (side stories) throughout the monologue. Why do you think Stephens does this?
 - What does it mimic or reflect in real-life?
 - What might it reflect about how Alex is feeling?
- Why do you think Stephens emphasises the relationship between Alex and his father-in-law Arthur?
- Why do you think Stephens builds the play around the visit to the Sea Wall? What could it reflect about Alex's life?

- Throughout the monologue, Stephens changes tense quite a lot. **What does this do? Why does the use of tense matter, given the story the monologue tells?**
- Alex tells us that Lucy was born by Caesarean section and that he got very worried during the birth. **What could this foreshadow for later in the play?**
- Alex says "And it's been very rare the times in our relationship when she's cried and I've comforted her." **What could this reveal about Alex's relationship with his wife, Helen?**
 - Why does Alex tell us that now he's crying all the time?
 - What might be the significance of Alex's crying "at Ground Force when the person comes back"?
- Stephens also has Alex reflect on several conversations he's had with Arthur about God and faith. **Why do you think Alex keeps coming back to these conversations? Why does it matter that Arthur's opinions are different to Alex's?**
 - How might Arthur's opinions about God seem different by the end of the monologue?
- "We're very happy. She's just. We just want her." This line is incredibly affectionate, but changes meaning entirely by the end of the monologue. **How does this line add to the tragedy of the monologue?**
- Alex tells an anecdote about a prior visit to France where he "cracked [his] coccyx against a stone on the shore's edge," **how does this anecdote foreshadow the rest of the monologue? Why does Stephens include it?**
 - When you don't know the end of the monologue, how could this affect the audience?
- What could the tide be a metaphor for? What could be 'catch'ing Alex? What do you think of the advice he gives: "Collect your breathing. Kick slowly. You're moving."
- Alex acknowledges the audience on the fourth page: "There's a hole running through the centre of my stomach. You must have all felt a bit awkward because you can probably see it." **What does it do to the monologue to have Alex talk to us so directly?**
 - What is the 'hole' in Alex's stomach symbolising?
- How does Stephens foreshadow that something in Alex's life is going to change, and probably for the worse?
- Stephens keeps having Alex mention "the cruellest thing I ever did to anybody". Does he ever tell us what it was?
 - What are the other references?
 - What is it that Alex might have said? Who does he say it to?