

North Sea illusions

by *Leona Francombe*

On high summer days at De Haan, the *beignet* man comes down the beach ringing his little bell. He is magnificent in a crisp white jacket, and he carries his tray high, picking his way gingerly through the crowd of sprawled bodies like Lancelot over a battlefield. There is an air of the unreal about him, of myth even, as if he is on his way to greater glory – or at least whiter sands – and the Belgian beach is just a rehearsal.

Never mind that high summer in Belgium is a little lower than elsewhere; or that the sun-seekers, pale and goose-pimpled, might prefer to skip the doughnut and move right on to hot tea and rum. It is the illusion of the seaside that counts: the poignant denial of that stark, blue-lipped reality that is the North Sea. Even in July, the sun must often be conjured from luminous moments.

Indeed, it takes considerable mental prowess to make the Belgian sands hospitable. Beach-goers often perform a curious version of the sun ritual, discreetly, in parked cars vacuum-packed with buckets and spades and long underwear, or in tents pitched among the dunes. It's surprising how often this mysterious mustering of courage works, for during bright intervals people emerge heartened, heading for the water as if impervious to the cold. No doubt the sheer power of the will can warm the air a degree or two, or create a ray of sun out of even the most anaemic glow-worm.

And this is just in summer.

In the deep midwinter

Now that Saint Nicholas is safely home with his donkey and temperatures are hovering near the snow mark, the coast has once again become a lost frontier. No illusion, however fanciful, can create a tourist trap out of this distant edge of Belgium. The North Sea possesses it fully now, with all the force of its chilly personality. Sky and beach have drawn closer together and seem to speak to each other in tongues, so obscure are their motives to the human visitor. Little towns and villages are shuttered and vacant. Even hearty regulars could not fashion a ray of warmth from this frigid miasma.

And that white knight of summer, the *beignet* man, seems never to have existed at all, as though he has been scooped up and taken to some other latitude, where even now he is treading across some tropical paradise, tray held high, ringing his bell.

De Haan is so deserted these days that one suspects a rare sleeping sickness may have gripped the population. Aside from two sullen youths on go-carts, everything is in the



Politics by all means

*Journalist-producers They Eat People lampoons the path
to the 2011 elections in a satirical comedy*



*No illusion, however fanciful, can
create a tourist trap out of this
distant edge of Belgium*



*At this time of year the seaside is
an empty dreamscape, a place of
privacy and gentle reckoning*

singular: one dog, one horseman, a solitary plastic spoon riding the waves. Only the birds exist in the plural, like two or three words in a mournful sentence, or maybe a lonely paragraph etched in the sand. Walkers pass by once an hour or so, then vanish into the mist like vapour, leaving only the initials of their tracks as a clue to their passage. At the water's edge, the wind has the insistent drive of a hill-walker. The gusts carry an invitation to press on up the strand without lingering and join the rhythm of the winter sea.

At this time of year the seaside is an empty dreamscape, a place of privacy and gentle reckoning where unruly thoughts can be put out to air and gathered up again. What a joy it is to watch them rush pell-mell across the sands and come back refreshed, in some discernible order. On a winter beach there is nothing tangible to impede this house-cleaning – not the sand, transforming endlessly beneath the feet, or the steady whisper of wind and surf. Greys melt into browns, then back into greys, all with infinite variety and interest, and one must simply let go and join them. Why chase the illusion of things

more beautiful when they are already at hand, in the soft, star-white suggestion of sun, or beneath the wings of sleepy gulls?

Last night I dreamt about the *beignet* man. He was not the sterling Lancelot of the North Sea that I remembered. Instead, this dream creature had a sultry air about him, the languor of the southern hemisphere. His expression was insolent, his crisp white jacket unbuttoned. He was stepping across a crescent beach around con-men and buxom starlets, and I had the sinking feeling that his noble pursuits might be in jeopardy; that he was spending his afternoons gambling, or worse, serving his *beignets* to some Russian billionaire.

It was a nightmare, really, and I thought: Where is my doughnut? Whither my white knight? Then I heard his bell, that merry little jingle that summons all the ephemeral beauty of a Belgian summer beach. It rang and rang, and I smiled, imagining that Lancelot had returned; that the illusion of a July day would take no effort whatsoever. But it was only the alarm clock, announcing another cold, dark Monday in December.