



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

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## The Woman on the Voss

Author: Dee Holmes

This is the best day of the summer holidays. Descending the steep hill to the edge of the River Yealm estuary in Newton Ferrers, and taking the tow path only just wide enough for the car, to the cottage.

On the opposite side of the water is Nos Mayo where the steep ground is dotted with houses hanging on to the cliff side looking as though their hold there was rather tenuous. Ours was the only thatched roof in Newton Ferrers and stood just four feet from the water's edge.

As a 12 year old boy I loved the freedom I was allowed here. Compared to our life in London, this was heaven. I could wander in the woods and walk to the shop and meet up with the other boys that holidayed here regularly too. But the very best thing of all was the kayaking. We had two kayaks. Sometimes my Father came with me, but mostly I went off on my own. The estuary was about two miles long, and we were at the head of it. I had never reached the open sea yet. But I was determined that this holiday would be the time that I would.

At low tide there is a concrete walkway called The Voss that leads across the estuary from the Newton Ferrer's side, all the way over to Nos Mayo. And here is the strangest thing. Ever since I can

remember, I have on occasions seen a woman in a long grey dress standing on the Voss. Sometimes she has a baby in her arms but not always. And she is only ever there when the water is about waist deep. I have never seen her face clearly but I don't feel at all afraid of her.

I don't mention it much now as my parents thought I was either attention seeking or bonkers. But I still see her. And I'm not the only one, I know a few people in the pub at the end of the tow path see her too. I won't say she was well known, but I certainly wasn't the only one to have seen her. However my parents didn't like me to talk about it, particularly in front of my little sister, so I just left the subject alone.

I would have liked to talk to the woman, but as she was only there as the light was fading, and she was waist deep in water, the opportunities were somewhat limited.

The next afternoon was sunny, and I set off in the kayak. With the tide behind me and the water level low, I paddled my way along quite easily for the first half hour. Having left Newton Ferrers behind me the heavily wooded banks rose up to about 40 foot on either side. I kept going like this for another half hour and was soon whooping for joy at seeing the open sea not far in front of me. Just a little bit further and I will have reached my goal in the first day. Amazing. Another few minutes and I can say I've arrived.

Imagine this though. My joy was short lived by the sight of the sky in front of me. Black. With angry looking clouds rolling over the sea in my direction.

I turned the kayak around as fast as I could and paddled like crazy, but of course I wasn't making much headway as the tide was

still going out to sea. I looked behind me, the storm seemed to be advancing faster up the estuary than I was. The banks would be no refuge as they were far too sheer at water level to climb. Surely the tide should turn soon and help me back up the river.

I shivered as I felt the first drops of rain on my back and knew I was in trouble. Soon it was pelting me, sharp stinging needles that must surely be hail stones. I kept paddling as strongly as I could but I was beginning to feel exhausted already, and there was a way to go yet.

The wind was getting stronger and buffeting the kayak around making headway even slower. I wasn't panicking yet, but I might soon.

I was soaked to the skin and very cold and the rain was running down my face making visibility difficult. I kept thinking that someone might come and rescue me, but I hadn't told anyone where I was going. Would they think to look and see if the kayak was missing?

On and on this nightmare journey went and then I felt a slight difference under the kayak, surely the tide was on the turn. Relief flooded through me.

This would make such a difference, and it did for a while. But it was still heavy going with the storm raging fiercely overhead.

Drained, I was becoming weaker and weaker but I was beginning to see as though through fog, dark shapes that could be the first of the houses in Newton Ferrers. Surely I would make it now.

The wind was making the most of its power by whipping up waves bigger than I had seen on the river before. But without warning, the kayak flipped and I was under water.

I struggled to right the boat which is a manoeuvre I had made a few times before, but due to the churning state of the water I was unable to flip it over this time. I tried to wriggle out but I think in my weakened state that wasn't an option either. I was panicking now, I had to breathe, and I just couldn't last more than a few more seconds.

I struggled to free my feet, my face was dragging along the river bed and I realised that I wasn't going to make it out of here. Sheer exhaustion led me to accept this and I became strangely calmer.

I thought of my family and a deep sorrow overcame me. What might I have done with my life? I would never know now? As I was drifting away the fight gone out of me, the kayak jarred as if caught on something. But no matter I was still stuck.

I thought it was imagination or wishful thinking, but I felt two hands under my armpits, and I was being literally pulled out of the kayak. I was limp, a dead weight, but the person on the other end of the arms wasn't giving up. I felt her skirts swirling around me and then my head was out of the water. Although I was albeit unconscious, I knew who was carrying me to the side of the river. She was making comforting sounds, though I couldn't make out what she was saying.

She laid me down on a bit of beach where I would be seen from the pub and then left me. I laid there collapsed, unable to move, but sure enough, though the light was going from the day, I was spotted and recognised.

Due to the ministrations of the landlord of The Dolly, I coughed up a great deal of the River Yealm and apart from a scratched and bleeding face was eventually none the worse for wear.

I would love to have thanked her for saving my life, for there was no doubt that is what she did. Had she not forfeited hers she would not have been there to save me.

I still see her. I am a Father myself now, but only one of my three children see her too. They often want to hear for the hundredth time the story of me being saved by the woman on the Voss.

I often think that children like me gave birth to the Health and Safety notions of today, hackneyed as they have become. That being said, it will be a long time before I will let my own children go kayaking on their own. I have increased the number of kayaks to five and we all go out together now.

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