
Down the Path of the Sun

by Nicola Griffith

I dreamed again: my sister Diggy and I were on the beach. Although we were the same age as we are now, it was before the plague: my father and three other sisters were there, too, shadowy and indistinct. Like ghosts. We sat facing each other on the sand, surrounded by a bubble of quiet, digging.

Something got tossed ashore on a breaker: a shell, the colour of caramel and milk, big as my fist and smooth as ivory. I wanted it, even though it was forbidden.

Diggy breathed at my shoulder. I reached out and took the shell.

The air rolled and the sea heaved, sluggish as soup; Diggy's eyes widened in fear. I should have uncurled my fingers, let the shell drop onto the sand; given in. Instead, I gripped it tighter; I had found some infinitely precious thing to enrich my life always.

The seagod came roaring out of the waves. The air trembled with his anger but only Diggy and I could see him. We began to run. Everyone began to run: the sea was gaining. We were not going to make it. Still, I refused to drop the shell.

A huge wave crashed down and I leapt for the railings topping the sea wall. I caught them, held them. I had won. Then, with sickening inevitability, I realized that I did not see Diggy anywhere.

She was clinging, half-submerged, to my right ankle. Above the crash and hiss of the spray I could hear her screaming: Karo! Help me!

The tidal wave fell on us.

There was nothing I could do. I lay against the wall, holding on with the strength of desolation while one hand, then the other, was torn from my ankles. I still had my shell, my infinitely precious shell, but Diggy was gone. The seagod had devoured her.



I woke on my back, heart thumping hard enough to break bones. I lay still, listening to the lap of water against stone down below.

Next to me, Fin twitched in her sleep, trying to pull back the blankets I must have dragged from us while I dreamed. Carefully, I slid off the opened-up sleeping bag and tucked her up. I kissed her but resisted the urge to stroke the hair straggling from her braid. Fin's hair is like Fin, wiry and black, always pulling free of restraint. She pulled me along, too; knowing Fin, I knew that grief was not everything, that Evelyn, my mother, was wrong.

I pulled on a shirt and loose trouser before I pushed past the curtain that partially divided the soaring height of the warehouse's fourth floor. Old Will lifted his head and banged his tail on the floorboards as I crossed to where he lay next to my little sister in the corner. With one hand I scrubbed at his head behind his ears, the other I held by Diggy's face. She breathed, warm and soft against my palm. My relief was immediate, as always. I squatted back on my heels and contented myself with watching her eyelids flutter as she lived through some dream of her own. The pre-dawn light gleamed on the hair framing her girl-plump face: silver blond around lightly toasted gold. Since the plague, Diggy had become more and more my responsibility. I glanced over to where my

mother slept and felt the familiar confusing mix of helplessness, love and anger.

By the window, away from the warmth of sleeping bodies, the cold of an April dawn pushed easily through the thin cotton to my skin.

I rested my elbows on the sill and stared eastward to where other warehouses gaped open to the lightening sky; beyond them lay the sea. Eight years it had been like this: families like mine, like Fin's, finding and comforting each other in the quiet, in the emptiness that we would never fill. Since the plague, I had crossed paths with less than forty women and only a handful of men; all of us sterile.



It had rained in the night and the air was fresh with damp early summer greenness. Here and there tiny puddles winked in the sun. The sky was dotted with cloud but the sun streamed from a wide patch of blue and my sweater lay warm across my shoulders. Fin could tell I did not want to talk and moved just ahead of me gliding smooth and sure over the weed-patched cobbles. Now and then she disappeared, blending into shadow as she slipped, dart-slim, through a doorway or peered through a window cluttered with nature's rubbish.

Sometimes, when we walked like this along the dockfront, I tried to remember what it had all been like before, when there were thousands of well-fatted and loud-voiced people with Norfolk accents filling and emptying these warehouses all year round; when for every one who grew old and died, there was another new life to take their place. No one was well-fatted now, not the people like me and Evelyn, or Fin and her grandmother Jess. Not the gangs either, though they were loud voiced. Those gangwomen and men had the

same strut and cruelty as Jess's little bantam rooster. Except the rooster made me laugh with his piercing eye and puffed-up chest. I had not seen a gang for three or four years. Luckily, they had not seen me. Jess reckoned they had probably all died--killed each other off and good riddance she said. But we still slept on the fourth floor and Fin still checked doorways and windows. We all carried knives, even Diggy, and Fin carried a garrotte as well. Old habits died hard.



The sun was a full armspan above the horizon now, the only sound birdsong and the wavelets slapping up onto the waterway's silted banks. We lay hip to hip and rib to rib in the middle of the wild wheat. The green ears flicked and rustled in the breeze.

We smiled, lazy after love. I ran my hand gently over the curve of Fin's hip, into the dip and over the upsweep of ribs and breast. Fillets of muscle slid beneath my hand. My skin, tanned though it was, looked pale as sap wood against the loamy darkness of hers. We rested like that a while.

The old waterway ran directly east where, with other waterways, it joined with the river mouth and the sea. The times that we had got here in time to watch the dawn, we noticed there was a slight tide which pulled eastward, to where the sun came up. The light seemed to suck the water towards it; I had seen twigs, even ducks, floating gently eastward to the sea. Fin called it the path of the sun.

We were too late for the sunrise today and, anyway, we were there for the eggs. We left our boots and trousers by the waterside and waded in opposite directions along the bank searching for egg-filled nests. Sometimes we would find none, sometimes so many that if we collected them all we would need to make two journeys with the basket. As I waded thigh deep, I knew this was going to be

one of those unlucky days.

All around me the wheat clicked and rattled; the few clouds I had seen earlier now covered half the sky. The breeze was rising, sending cloud shadow racing over mile after mile of swaying gold and green. A long time ago, all this had been fen, wild and full of water creatures, until the farmers had dug their irrigation channels and planted their crops, draining the land of variety and vitality. Further inland, waterways were silting up leaving standing pools where weeds and rushes thrived, choking the wheat. The water birds and river creatures were coming back.

A cloud covered the sun and I shivered. I had found nothing and it was getting chilly. Time to go back.

Fin was already rubbing herself dry with her bandanna. Only two eggs, she said, not worth carrying back to Evelyn and Diggy. We cracked them and sucked, threw the empty shells away.



Fin's family had taken over a barn for the summer, half for them, half for their animals; above us, where we sat around the huge scarred table eating and talking, the roof looked to be more gap than tile. It was early evening. The sun poured through the chinks and the open door like old wine.

As Jess jabbed her fork in the air to emphasize a point, or stretched across the table to help herself to more salad, her knobby wrists flickered through hanging beams of light and shadow. Lean, with hair the gray of charcoal ash, she was the only one of the family who looked like Fin. Leoni and Sara, her daughters, looked to be just a little younger than Evelyn, and both were powerfully built women with pads of firm fat at hip and breast. Sara could look grim sometimes; she had a way of narrowing her eyes and pausing before she spoke. Leoni had a bad leg from a fall through a rotten floor two

years ago. Between them they had three daughters: Fin, Rachael and Else.

Evelyn called them a tribe, though they were not that many really; they had had their deaths just like anyone else. Maybe it was because they always talked and argued, made their decisions between them. In our family, the older you were, the more right you were. Inevitably, Evelyn was right all the time.

The muscles in my neck and shoulder tightened at the reminder that my mother always had to be right, like that time when I had come home with my hand in Fin's. She had known what it meant; Diggy had grinned.

"Diggy, leave the room."

"Let her stay, mother. We're a family."

She looked at Fin. "This isn't a family."

"It could be."

"This family died eight years ago."

"We can start again."

"No."

"Listen. Please. We could all live together, Fin's family and ours, sharing everything. We'd be safer, happier."

"Happier? You've never had children, Karo, you don't know what it's like to lose them and to know there'll never be any more."

"Do you want to lose me too?" I had asked, but quietly, so she would not hear.



Fin reached over and squeezed my hand. Tears dripped onto the scarred wood in front of me and someone handed me a strip of cloth to use as a handkerchief. No one spoke, but they understood: I had no real choices. I could not abandon Evelyn and Diggy and I could not change Evelyn's mind; she refused to understand.

The tears were stopping already. After a while we cleared the table and settled down to enjoy talk and stories in the last of the patchy sunshine.



Walking back from Fin's we trailed long shadows. The warehouse stood dark against the slow fire of the sky and suddenly, again, I was angry with Evelyn, a dull rage that ground at the base of my skull. Then we were clattering up the steps and my anger settled into its usual background crouch. I sighed, more concerned about Evelyn's disappointment when we came back without any eggs.

Halfway up the third flight, Fin flashed a smile over her shoulder. "Bread."

Then I smelled it too. Despite myself I felt a rare flush of affection for my mother: she knew there was nothing we liked better than fresh-baked bread. We slowed down, taking the steps one at a time, prolonging the anticipation.

The hot smell reminded me of when I was little, years before the plague: Evelyn, standing in a gleaming geometric kitchen, smartly shod feet on polished tile, kneading dough, sometimes letting me punch at it, sometimes disappearing through the door for a moment to make sure Diggy still slept. But always moving. Even when she relaxed, took off her apron and made coffee, her fingers would stray to the nape of her neck where she teased her permed hair back into its curls. That was a habit she still had, even though she often looked surprised when her fingers encountered hair absolutely straight from years away from the hairdresser. There was no apron now, no coffee or gleaming kitchen; while the bread baked in an old iron stove she had no toddler to amuse or baby to check on. Sometimes I had seen her sitting there blankly, almost like she had been turned off. It frightened me that she could look so not there. There was nothing

wrong with daydreaming but with Evelyn it was different. Once, when I was ill and she thought I was asleep, she had sat like that for hours. When she had finally moved, she had looked about her incredulously, then shrugged. Ever since then, I had never been able to shake the feeling that my mother really did not believe that all this was real. The long gone world of families and technology lived in her memories like yesterday. Maybe closer. She went about the business of life with an air of detachment, as though none of it really mattered.



For all its height and space, the fourth floor was hot. The last of the sun had poured directly in, mixing with the heat of bread steam and stove iron. Ignoring Evelyn's disapproval I propped the door open wide and stripped down to my shirt. Fin and I split one of the flat loaves and spent the next few minutes alternately tossing hot bread from hand to hand and burning our mouths.

I looked around, turned to Evelyn. "Where's Diggy?"

"She's not been back."

"Since when? Since she went to the food warehouse?"

Evelyn nodded.

"But she left before midday." I chewed slowly on my bread, refusing to get worried. Nothing could happen. She had a knife and knew how to use it and, besides, no one had seen a gang for years. She was hurt maybe, in a fall like Leoni's? No. Old Will would have come back here on his own. She could not be lost, she knew her way around as well as I did and, again, Will could have found his way home. No. She must be playing one of her child-woman games. I could just imagine her, warm and snug in the warehouse paper stacks, humming happily to herself, Will half asleep across her legs, totally oblivious to the worry she might be causing. She

had done it before, more than once.

Without a word I began pulling sweater and trousers back on.

“I’ll come with you,” Fin said.

“No,” I jerked my knife belt through the buckle. “Stay. Please. One of us may as well enjoy the bread while it’s hot.”

She looked at me steadily, then nodded: she would stay behind in case...in case anything happened that Evelyn would not be able to cope with.

Then I was down the steps and outside. The crunch of boot on stone seemed loud in the gathering dark. I trotted, then ran, trotted then ran, alternating between worry and irritation. The night was soft and warm; soon I was slick with sweat.

The warehouse I was heading for was a small one compared to most. Usually, we went in and out using a ground floor window but we had dragged open the great main doors just enough for Leoni and Evelyn to squeeze through. As soon as I saw those doors gaping wide I stopped; I knew something was wrong. My body would not move a muscle; I was not even sure I was breathing. Was Diggy in there? Was anyone else? Without conscious direction, my body unfroze and lowered itself gently onto the cobbles. I cursed the moon; tonight it was no bigger than a nail clipping and its light only emphasized the shadow thrown by the doors. I lay there for a while, making no more noise than a spider weaving her web. I felt cold. Not the cold of the hard cobbles pushing bruises into my hips but a bleak numbness. Something had happened to stop me feeling anything except a kind of lightness in my long muscles. I listened a while longer then stood up, sheathed my knife and walked in.

It was the smell I would always remember: blood and shit. The air was thick with it, sweet and metallic. I spat into the dust and mud inside the door, trying to clear the taste from my mouth. I waited

for moment to let unfamiliar shapes of shadow and moonlight come clearer. Several crates and sacks had been burst open, the contents scattered, destroyed. For one whirling moment, feeling threatened to return and overwhelm my false calm. I forced it away.

It was Old Will I saw first. His tail had been cut off and his back legs broken. By the blood trail and scuff marks, he had been able to drag himself quite a way before they had broken his back. Will, who had never known a blow or vicious word in his life. It was easy to imagine him running eagerly, as fast as his rheumatic legs would carry him, towards the gang who forced open the doors. How many had there been? Looking at the destruction, there must have been ten or more.

Methodically, I began to search for Diggy. Row by stacked row: I walked to the end then back again, slowly, checking behind this, on top of that. Then I began to shake. I tried to push it away again but it got worse, my legs would not hold me up. I knew where she was. I must have known from when I first set foot in the place because I had carefully avoided it. She would be in the paper stacks, or near there. Or what was left of her would be. The trembling stopped enough for me to stand up but I had to lean against a half open sack of raw wool. It reeked, but not enough to cover the new smells, the sickening smells. Now that I thought I knew where she was my body seemed unwilling to obey me. For every step forward I had to clench my jaws and fight the urge to run away, to run as far and as fast as I had ever run in my life.

Diggy had always liked to leave her legs bare, hating the restriction of trousers. Now they looked horribly, painfully naked. She was lying bent backwards over a roll of gray paper, her long shirt pulled up over her face and chest. One arm was trapped and tangled in the ripped and stained material, the other hung down, not quite

touching the floor. Gently, I lifted her off the roll. She was heavier than usual and seemed to flop in all the wrong places. Before I laid her down, I straightened her shirt, buttoning it back up where it was not too badly torn. For a while I tried to get her broken leg to lie straight but then I gave up; it was already getting stiff. Teeth marks and bruises covered her body from the neck down, the rips and tears would not hide those. I was crying and the angry red marks and bloody smears kept splintering and merging then jumping back into focus as tears splattered my sweater. The feeling I had now was familiar: like after the dream. Except this was real, I would never again wake up to be reassured by her breathing.

By some chance that somehow made the other visible brutalities worse, Diggy's face was untouched. The tiny, gold-white wisps at her temples looked no different than they had this morning. There was a deep bruise on the back of her neck where they had broken it forcing her to arch over the roll. She stank, of their filth and her own blood and excretia. And there was a lot of blood. I would have to clean her up.

I soaked her shirt in water from outside and wiped at her carefully. I was dazed with hatred for those that had done this; hatred sang hot and light through my veins. I took off my own shirt and dressed her in it, hiding most of the ugliness. I looked for her missing sandal but could not find it. Very well. I took off her remaining one; that looked better. It was when I was combing through her hair with my fingers that I suddenly realized her neck sheath was empty. Where was her knife? My heart thumped like someone had kicked it. Where was Diggy's knife?

Then I was on my feet, feverishly pushing aside crates, plunging my hand into sacks. Where was her knife? I scraped my bare arms, bruised my spine shoving aside a rusted machine. I had to find

the knife. If it was bloody then she had used it. That was important to me; I had to know. Where was that knife? I roared, trying to rattle the walls with the weight of my pain. I ran up and down the stacked aisles, desperate, frantic.

But it was not there. No knife. Tears were running steadily down my face now, splashing warm then turning cold on my bare chest. I knelt by Diggy's head and promised her she would have my knife, that I would put it in her sheath for her, that I would find her knife one day and use it for my own. And I cried until my face was swollen and my nose ran. Then I quieted and felt that strange lethargy you only get when you can not cry any more.

That was how Fin found me, kneeling by Diggy's head, still and calm. She thought I was in shock but once she realized I was not, she knelt next to me in silence. After a little while I stirred and turned to her. We held each other and I wiped at her tears with my hand.

"They even killed the dog." Her voice was thick. "A dog. And poor Diggy."

I just nodded.

"I sent Evelyn to get Jess and the others."

"You sent her, and she went?"

"Yes."

There were no echoes in the warehouse. Every word hung dead in the air. I was trembling again.

Fin handed me my sweater. "Here, put it on." Of course, I was cold. I hardly noticed the irritation of wool on bare skin.

"Fin, her knife was gone. But I couldn't find it. Will you look? I've searched everywh--"

We froze at the tiny sounds from door and window. With a look of apology, Fin pulled my knife from Diggy's neck sheath and

handed it to me. She slid her own out of leather and motioned for me to stay where I was.

“Fin! Karo! Are you in there?” Else’s voice, strong but cautious.

“Diggy? Diggy? Are you there Diggy?” Evelyn, sounding weak and puzzled. I tried to answer but my throat had closed around my grief again. Rachael and Else padded feline and dangerous around the warehouse. I heard Fin explaining, Jess cursing, Evelyn shouting for Diggy again and again until Sara shut her up. The air was hot with adrenalin, we were all breathing very fast.

Jess stooped to help me up. She stood for a moment with her tree root hands on my shoulders, letting old pain acknowledge new. Then she sighed and stepped aside: there was more.

I looked at Evelyn.

“Karo? Where’s Diggy?” She started towards me. “Who are these people, why are we here?” She looked about. “Where’s your father?”

I took her hand. It was limp and warm. “Don’t worry. I’m here. You don’t have to do anything. Why don’t you go with Sara for now? I’ll join you later.”

She nodded vaguely and allowed Sara to steer her gently towards the door. My mother had finally retreated into her land of yesterdays forever. Rachael and Else followed them out; Jess stayed. She looked down at Diggy.

“Where will you take her?”

“Out to sea.”

She nodded, then looked straight at me. Her eyes were bright. “We’ll take care of Evelyn for now. Tomorrow we’ll talk for a long time.”



We stood waist deep in the water, silent and waiting. In front of us, Diggy's floating bier of woven rushes was already tugging against our hands. The eastern sky was lightly touched with orange. This time yesterday I was feeling Diggy's breath on the back of my hand, laughing at my stupid dreams and noticing that her face was still plump with girl fat. It would never become lean and womanly now. I would never know who Diggy would have become or might have chosen to love. And I would never know what had happened to her knife. So many things I would never know now.

Slowly, the water turned to fire; the tugging grew stronger. By my side, Fin looked serene; young and wise. Her hands were still and steady on the thick green stems. We had laid old Will on the front.

The bier tugged sharply. It was time. Without a word, we let it go and watched as it drifted eastward, down the path of the sun. Then I was humming a tune. Just a silly little thing. Diggy used to sing it to herself when she played. It was a catchy tune, easy to learn. Fin took it up for me when the melody was stifled by my tears, opening her throat to send Diggy on her way with a familiar song. As the bier drifted out of sight over the horizon, she raised both arms in salute. My infinitely precious Fin.

Close, but not touching, we walked back towards the barn and the other women; my family. All the way there we hummed that tune, Diggy's tune. The seagod had her now.

Down the Path of the Sun

When I was twenty-two, I wrote a novel, almost by accident. It sucked but by the time I'd finished I'd decided that, hey, this writing thing is cool. I wrote another. That also sucked. I was still hooked on writing, though, so I decided that I should teach myself how fiction worked by writing short stories. "Down the Path of the Sun" was the first. I was twenty-four.

The story is based on a recurring dream I began having when I was fourteen, just a few months after I understood that I was a dyke, and stopped when I was sixteen, right about the time I found my first girlfriend. My dream was essentially Karo's: my little sister, Helena, and I on a beach; a shell; a wave; my sister being swept away. Every time I woke I was sure Helena was dead.

When I was eighteen, I left home and moved to another city to live with my girlfriend (a different one). I felt as though I was abandoning Helena; I felt like a monster; it felt like a choice between being me and looking out for her. Within a month or two, she started using drugs. By the time she was fifteen, she had discovered heroin. I did everything I could think of to stop her, then to help her, then, finally, to keep her alive as long as possible. It didn't make any difference. In 1988, three years after I finished this story, she died. She was twenty-four.

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