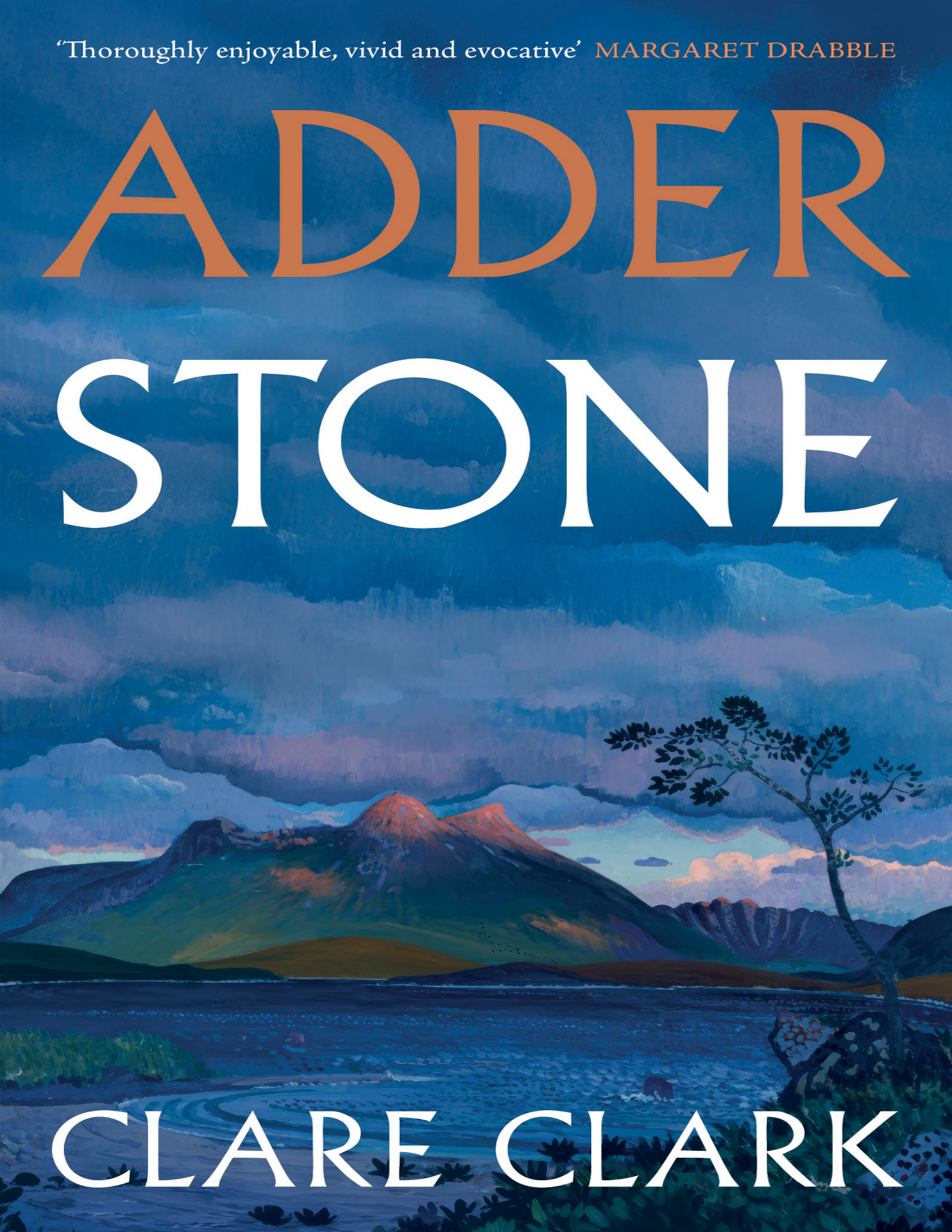
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ADDER STONE



CLARE CLARK

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The Great Stink
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For Nainie, the great Gumpety-Gum

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To live in Wales is to be conscious
At dusk of the spilled blood
That went into the making of the wild sky,
Dyeing the immaculate rivers
In all their courses.

‘Welsh Landscape’, R. S. Thomas

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It was April when they came for us. Three of them, the foreman all business with a clipboard, the other two a pace or two behind, staring at their boots. They had backed their lorry halfway into the yard before they gave it up as a bad job and left it where it was, the gateposts straining with the girth of it. The foreman looked at me, at my apron. His oiled hair lay flat across his bald patch. When the wind blew it lifted like a wing.

‘Ready, Mrs Jones?’ he asked. His Swansea vowels had roughened the way things did up here. I thought of the dirty pot in the kitchen sink, the beds unstripped upstairs. I shrugged.

‘Right,’ he said. He jerked his head towards the house. ‘On you go, boys.’

They were a mismatched pair, the tall one all knobs and angles, the other square and stocky with a neck as thick as his head. I did not know them. The workers kept to themselves, boxed up in a field of shabby caravans at the far end of the valley. Foreigners, people said, Irish mostly, and raking it in. The tall one wore a knitted cap pulled over his ears. He had to duck his head to get through the door.

I thought about going after them, telling them what to shift and to look sharp about it, but that would have meant minding one way or the other so I stayed where I was. It had been raining for days, not the flat-out bucketing kind people round here call tywallt, but glaw mân, a stubborn grey drizzle. The yard was a mess of muddy puddles. The foreman wrote something on his clipboard. He wore a jacket with his company’s name stitched in yellow on the breast pocket. His teeth were yellow too. Of all of them, I thought, he was the one wanted watching. He tapped his yellow teeth with his pen and looked at me. I wondered if it was pity he was feeling or triumph.

‘Mr Jones not about, then?’

A careless enough question but we both knew what he meant by it. Dai had been a thorn in the Corporation’s side ever since the surveyors in their city shoes had come up to the valley and started poking about. Right from the off he was at them, pushing them on the nature of their business, who it

was they were working for. Not that they ever gave him a straight answer. We fetched up finding out the same way as everyone else, from the newspaper. Nearly eight years on and only two families were left. With us gone John Post and Maureen would be the last ones standing and them not much longer. The school would close when term ended in July. After that it would be just the chapel and its rows of graves.

‘He’ll be here,’ I said.

Dai had slipped out early, Teg slinking at his heels. I let him go. The doctor said the chest pains were angina, he ordered him to rest. You make sure he does, he told me sternly, but how could I stop him? It would not ease Dai’s heart to leave without saying goodbye.

I could hear the boys’ boots on the flags, the tall one’s quiet instructions as they managed the table out of the kitchen. Easy on the left. Bit higher. Watch the door. I stepped aside to let them pass. Bob Williams had offered to move us. His boys could bring the trailer, he said, have it done in no time, but Dai turned him down flat. He would not do those thieving twyllwyr the favour of evicting himself. If they wanted us out, they would have to haul us by the necks and the furniture after. The boys put the kitchen table down in the yard among the puddles. It looked smaller outside, less sure of itself. There were crumbs on it still from breakfast and the black ring at the corner where I had scorched it with a pan. Dai’s mother would have died a second time from the shame.

Bit by bit the furniture came out into the yard. The bentwood chairs, the box settle, the chest with the extra winter blankets in, smelling of must and camphor. The rocking chair and its patchwork cushion. The kitchen bench. The fruit crates stacked with dishes and pans, the unwashed pot from breakfast slung on top, its insides scabby with porridge. The framed photographs of Dai’s parents and his parents’ parents, stiff-backed and stiffer-faced. The hulk of a dresser where Dai’s mother had propped her willow pattern plates, the ones she kept for best which meant never. After we buried her, I used them every day and the blithe clatter of them in the sink never failed to cheer me. The dresser was Welsh oak and heavy as a house, but, though his body strained with the weight of it, the tall boy kept

talking in the same calm voice. Down a bit. Steady there. But for the English he might have been Dai talking to the cows at milking.

The dresser left only the beds and the upstairs press to fetch and not enough air over for breathing. As I walked away across the yard, the foreman frowned after me and tapped his pen on his clipboard. I wondered if it was a report on us he had there, if he would mark me down for defiance. I hoped so. Dai always said pig-headedness was our only power, that and silence. You could not fight with these people, the moment you started to win they just changed the rules, but what could they do, he said, if you refused to budge? They could not drown you too.

All talk, of course. They broke him in the end, the same way they broke everyone else. Soon he would come down off the hill, the dog like a shadow behind him, and Emyr up the track from Dan-y-rug with the eggs I had sent him for, and we would put on our good coats and pick up our suitcases and walk away from here forever. Emyr was right, there wasn't a lick of sense in eggs today, but old Mrs Jones would likely give him some bread and jam and Emyr knew enough to know when to keep out of Dai's way. Boys his own age baffled him, he did not have the knack of them, but he could read his father like the weather. He always knew when a storm was blowing in.

In the wall behind the outhouse there was a slab stile where I sometimes came to smoke a cigarette. I wished I had one now. The wind was stronger here, gusting down the valley. Cloud shadows chased each other across the ruin of the gravel pit and up over the battalions of conifers in their ranks on the hill. The Corporation had wanted us out sooner, they had pushed hard, but Dai dug in his heels. When lambing was done, he would go. The sheep would stay. He never spoke about it, he didn't have to. It was the way things were. Farmers upped and offed but the sheep belonged to the hill. Cynefin, they called it round here, the fences in a sheep's mind that kept it from wandering onto another man's land. They were born with it, some said, the borders baked into their little lamb brains. Not that sheep had brains that I had ever seen. Lucky for them most of our grazing land was above the chequered flags that marked the edge of the waterline. Round here habit had a way of trumping reason.

Dai had sold the flock to Wyn Williams at Blaen-ffos. When the new spring lambs came, he cut their ears with Wyn Blaen-ffos's swallowtail mark.

A flash of red caught my eye. The robin perched in the old apple tree, fixing me with its beady black eyes. An omen of death, Mari would have said, and though it was nothing but foolishness I whistled and crossed my fingers, the way she always had when I was a girl. The robin flew away. I wondered what would happen to him when this place was gone. Robins were territorial, fierce about guarding their patch. With any luck it would be that sglyfath of a foreman who caught it. That flap of hair would make a bird a fine nest.

The wind moved low over the hill, flattening the heather. Back when we were first married and Emyr no more than a wriggle in a carrycot, Dai and I used to stand here together sometimes, my back against his chest, his arms around me and his chin on the top of my head, watching the larks soaring up from the tussocky grass and into the sky, their silver songs dropping behind them. There were no larks now and no grass either. No fields or barns or clumps of bright trees, no curved silk ribbon of river. Nothing but a quag of mud, criss-crossed by the tracks of giant wheels.

I closed my eyes but the psalm was a snake and too quick for me, striking before I could stop it. *He turneth rivers into a wilderness and the watersprings into dry ground, a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. He turneth the wilderness into a standing water and dry ground into watersprings.* So Our Father in Heaven, Mister God Almighty Your Honour sir, was this our punishment or our reward? Fruitful land or not, standing water there was going to be, two straight miles from Tydden Bachen to Hafod Fadog, so what were those of us who dwelled therein meant to make of that? Were we the blessed or the damned?

I knew better than to hope for an answer. It was a long time since He and I had been on speaking terms, and besides it wasn't Him who decided things around here, not any more. That was the privilege of the Liverpool Corporation, and those cythreuliaid had made their minds up long ago. At the far end of the valley the foundations of the dam were already in, feet

and feet and feet of clay for those who liked their Bible metaphors ironical, and over the clay a wall of gravel quarried from Bryn-mawr, the hill cut out like a cancer until all that was left was a nothingness slippy with shale. For months lorries had thundered back and forth, moving the valley from one end to the other. Now the wall was slowly rising and along with it a tower like a giant mushroom, prickly with scaffolding. Emyr said that the tower was for drawing off the water. When the dam was finished and the valley drowned, the cap of the mushroom would be the only thing you would see.

I tried to picture it, water right up as far as the New Road, but my mind could not manage it. I could see men walking around at the bottom of the dam, stick figures in hard hats waving their arms. When it was finished the place where they were standing would be a hundred yards under. There would be no daylight down there then, nothing but darkness and the weight of water bearing down. A bulldozer made its way through the Matchbox scatter of cranes and diggers, its funnel belching smoke. Some days it was all you could hear, the roar of the engines. It got inside your head. Not today, though. Today the breeze blew the racket clean away.

I wished I had a cigarette.

The Parrys at Bryn-mawr were the first to crack. A fair compensation, that was the promise given us by the Corporation, but with everyone else dragging their feet Liverpool was happy to show its appreciation. The Parrys swanned off to a farm in the hills beyond Llyn Tegid, thirty-five acres to their twenty, with an indoor bathroom and mains electric for their brand-new television. It made Dai near mad with rage. He called them bradwyr, scabs. He could not understand how Alun Parry could bring himself to do it.

‘Mrs Jones?’

I could not understand it either. The whole world to choose from and they moved five miles. The perversity of it made me want to laugh.

On Dai’s mother’s willow pattern plates three Chinamen with fishing rods walked over a bridge. On the far side a boat bobbed at anchor, ready to take them away. Look at those men, I used to say to Emyr when he was small, off to sail the seven seas. Seeking out the ends of the earth. Until one day he shook his head and said to me very firmly, Mam, they’re just going

fishing. He was his father’s son. In the sky above the Chinamen two birds flew with their wings outstretched, facing one another, their beaks open like two women gossiping. All that sky and they only looked at each other.

‘Mrs Jones!’

After the compulsory purchase order was served I talked to Dai about leaving. A fresh start, away from the bad memories, all the bitterness and rage. A better school for Emyr. Dai listened with his eyes half-closed, the way he always listened, with all his attention and none. A month later he signed the papers on a place by Fron-goch, and not even one of the modern new bungalows near the school but a farm as old and draughty as our own. Compared with us the Parrys had moved halfway round the world. Fron-goch was where the dam workers lived in their caravans. You could still hear the roar of the diggers in Fron-goch.

The lorry’s horn blared, making me jump. I put my hands on the top of the wall, for luck or old time’s sake, the rasp of lichen dry against my palms. In places along the coping there were pieces of white quartz, put there by the men who built it to ward off evil spirits. So much for that, I thought, turning away, and it was not laughter that rose in me then but a kind of desolation.

The furniture was still in the yard, huddled together like mourners at the wrong funeral. Not a stick of it had ever been mine. The foreman glared at me. His irritation raised my spirits. Behind him the tall boy slithered down from the lorry’s cab. He saw me looking and blushed.

‘Mrs Jones,’ the foreman said. ‘I’m as patient as the next man but I have a job to do and I will not be kept from doing it.’

The boys had piled Dai’s Protection League boxes on the table. A great heap of them, stuffed full of papers. I could not see the use of keeping them, what good were they to anyone now, but Dai insisted. The foreman took a deep forbearing breath. He might have been about to deliver the Sunday sermon.

‘Where is Mr Jones?’ he asked.

I shrugged. ‘Like I said, he’ll be here.’

‘He needs to be here now. We can’t load without a signature.’

‘Fine,’ I said, plucking the clipboard from him. ‘Then I’ll sign it.’

I held out my hand for his pen. The form had THE WORSHIPFUL CORPORATION OF LIVERPOOL printed in big black letters across the top. Worshipful, my eye. I wondered what Dai would say when he saw that it was all in English. The foreman tucked his pen into his top pocket and smiled, his lips pressed thin. I knew that smile from chapel too.

‘You do know, Mrs Jones, that it is a crime to resist a legal expropriation? That the courts would look most unfavourably on a defendant who sought in any way to obstruct the due processes to and by which they are legally and contractually bound under the letter of the law?’

It might have been his grasp of the Welsh language failing him or perhaps he thought that he could throw me into such a fit of rustic terror with his law talk that the words hardly mattered at all. I gazed at him serenely.

‘Ach, well, meistr,’ I said, my Meirionnydd accent thick as old paint. ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t be expecting me to understand things like that.’

Emyr was coming back down the track. I could see the top of his head over the slates of the cowshed, the side-to-side dip of it as he sang softly to himself. At the village school that sguthan Margaret Roberts had tried to whack the singing out of him, insolence she called it, but, though she scared the poor boy silly, she never changed him. How could she? The music was no more a choice with him than breathing in and out.

As he rounded the bend I heard a bang. A sharp clean bang like a car backfiring, cracking the air. Dynamite at the gravel quarry or down at the dam. It sounded close but then it always did. The hills wrapped themselves around the sound, holding it in. I saw Emyr turn, then start to run down the track towards the back gate. A chill gripped me. I started to run too, through the puddles, past the sheep pen. I ran, my legs pushing me forward though every other part of me shrank away, willing me to freeze, to shut my eyes and swallow my breath, anything to hold time still, to stop what was to come from coming.

Emyr screamed.

I flung myself at the gate and threw it wide. Under the old apple tree Dai stood silently, staring down at Emyr sprawled at his feet. There was blood on Emyr’s cheek, his hands, the front of his jersey. He was crying, his

breath catching in great sobbing gouts. Teg lay limp in his arms, her eyes glassy, her ears flat against her skull. The white fur on her chest glistened, sticky red.

Dai's jaw was hard, his arms slack at his sides. I had no idea what he might do next. I stood in front of him, a wall between him and our son, and took the gun out of his hand. He let me take it.

'Is it safe?' I asked. Dai said nothing. He looked at the gun. A few of the farmers round here had shotguns for rabbits and to frighten walkers who let their dogs run wild over the hills but this was not that kind of gun. It was a pistol, black with a heavy handle, like something from a film. I had never seen it before.

'Show me,' I said, holding it out to him, and he put his thumb on a lever on the side of the gun and pressed it down. His nails were ringed with black.

'So it's safe now?' I asked and when he nodded I took off my apron and folded the gun inside it and set it very carefully on the grass.

'That's enough,' I said to Dai firmly, like he was the child, and, sinking to my knees, I took Emyr and the dead dog into my arms.

* * *

We buried her by the stream where the spike-rush grew and the rocks were soft with moss. The earth was dark and wet and turned easily under the spade. We wrapped her in an old sack and, when the hole was made, Emyr lifted her down and laid her in the ground. Dai said nothing. Whatever fierceness had possessed him was all burned out. He looked scarcely fit to lift a spoon.

When it was done we walked back down to the house in silence. Grief had knocked the music from Emyr's throat. The yard was empty, the lorry gone. The men had left the gate standing open. The place looked abandoned. We might have been gone a hundred years. Emyr walked away towards the cowshed. I wanted to go after him, to comfort him, but he had always taken comfort on his own. Instead I followed Dai into the kitchen. Where the furniture had stood there was only dirt and droppings. Dai ran

his hand over the blackened beam above the range, gently like it was a living thing. My heart squeezed. For seven years he had fought with all his strength to save this farm, this valley, but he had lost. The truth was he had never stood a chance.

I put the apron-wrapped gun on the draining board. Dai did not look at it. He pushed open the back door, staring out at the familiar folds of the hills towards the dark double peak of Arenig. I stood next to him, my arm warm against his. At the other end of the valley, and hidden behind the slope of Mynydd Nodol, was the house where I had grown up. No one lived there now. After the war, when it was plain Gareth would not come back, Huw Morgan took over the meadow by the stream. The rest of the land was not worth the bother and the house was falling down. The clock of my childhood, the tick-tick of rain dripping into a tin bucket.

‘Mam!’ Emyr called.

I turned my head and heard it, the rumble of an engine, faint at first and then more insistent, tearing the wind-hush in two. John Post had promised to run us to the new house in the van when his rounds were done. We had agreed to meet at the bottom of the lane but perhaps he was early. Perhaps he did not want us to have to do this on our own.

‘It’s time,’ I said quietly to Dai, and I took his hand. It was a long while since I had done that. The tenderness in me felt newborn, kitten-blind. Dai looked at my fingers curled around his, then back at the mountain.

‘She was a working dog,’ he said. ‘She would never have settled off the hill.’

And just like that the tenderness was gone. I pulled my hand away. The man had shot his dog, a snappish, distrustful dog, it was true, but a dog Emyr loved, a dog Dai loved, for God’s sake, loved with a straightforward plainness, and for what? To serve his own delusions, so that he could go on stubbornly believing in the face of all other evidence to the contrary that this valley was all there was, that the world could never be more than this, boxed-in, picked-over, every day end to end already lived ten thousand times before. What manner of plank lodged in his eye that he could not see?

It was not as though he had never left. When the war came farm workers were barred from enlisting, farming was a reserved occupation, but

Dai chose to fight. Duty, he said shortly when I asked him, though to who he didn't say. He told the recruitment officer in Wrexham he was unemployed. The fighting took him all over. He went to North Africa, to Italy. It gave me thrills just to think of it. I had looked at him in his pinstriped demob suit, trailing the great big world behind him, and I thought that my prayers had been answered, that my life was about to begin. Against the brown of his face his eyes were a reckless blue. He would not talk about that time or the places he had been. This is the only place I've ever wanted to be, he said, and he kissed me and I kissed him back and I did not try to stop him when he put his hand up my blouse. What did I know? I was seventeen and stupid as a stick. I thought he meant me.

The engine noise was close now and clumsy, the rough rattle-clank of a tractor. Who would be bringing a tractor up here when there was no work left to be done?

'I mean it,' I said and I hated my sharpness and him too, for whetting it. 'We have to go.'

Our suitcases were lined up in a row by the stairs. I opened mine and, lifting the stack of clothes, I buried the apron-wrapped gun at the bottom. I smoothed my skirt and tied a scarf over my hair. Then, picking up my case and Emyr's, I carried them outside. Emyr was in the yard. He was flapping his hands the way he used to when he was little, snapping them on his wrists. He had not done that for years. Beyond him, rolling into the yard on thick caterpillar treads, was a digger, a metal claw on an arm over its head. The claw swung.

'For the love of peace, Dai, would you come!' I shouted. Emyr's hands flapped harder. I could feel my old helplessness rising to meet them. I handed him the suitcases. The weight settled him, holding him steady.

Dai came out of the house. He had his cap on and his coat, neatly buttoned all the way up. Taking a key from his pocket, he put his suitcase down and locked the door. We never locked the door. He put the key on the boot scraper. Picking up the case, he walked past us and across the yard. His back was very straight. His gaze slid over the yellow digger like a sleepwalker's, like it was not really there.

Emyr followed him. I let them go ahead. They had rounded the corner when I stopped and looked back. The digger had moved closer to the house. I watched its arm begin to lift. There was something hypnotic about the slow, smooth way it uncurled itself, the claw swinging and scraping at the sky. I couldn't look away. Then suddenly, without warning, the claw smashed down into the roof. I felt the shock of the blow through my body, rattling my teeth in my head. The arm rose again. A second time it struck, harder this time so that the broken slates fell away and the timbers poked out like bones, and though I saw the ugliness of it and the violence, though I knew my son's grief and my husband's too, despite all that a sudden joy broke open in me like a river bursting its bounds, a fierce uncontainable rush of furious exultation surging through me, sweeping everything away.

I was free.

* * *

Except of course I wasn't. Free would have meant Cardiff or London or even, whisper it, Liverpool. A city with people streaming along the pavements and not one of them knowing my business. A place with libraries and art galleries and museums and more to learn in every room than a person could know in twenty lifetimes. A job and money of my own, though what kind of job heaven only knew, a married woman with too little education and no English grammar, her whole life lived in one godforsaken valley in Meirionnydd. Two, if you took the stretch from Fron-goch to Bala as different, which I did not, given that the back side of Mynydd Nodol was the same uphill struggle of heather and bog myrtle as the front.

Blink and we might never have moved. It was not just the settle and the willow pattern plates and the tombstone of a dresser. It was the old life too, the worn-out shape of every day: the cows and the hens and the muck and the mud and the vegetables to be tended and the baking and the bottling and the packing up of eggs for sale and the clothes to mend and wash and the meals, the endless meals, Dai and Emyr heads back and beaks wide like two hulking chicks in a nest.

Some things were better. We were on the electric for starters. They had not taken it upstairs but there were sockets in the kitchen and lights that switched on at the wall. It riled Dai from the off. He flat out refused to put an electric stove in, said you might as well burn £1 notes. In the evenings he still trimmed the wicks of the old lamps the way he always had. Emyr and I barely had a light on before he was up out his chair to snap it off.

The other joy came free of charge. Damp and draughty it might be but his mother was not there. For the first time since I was married I could walk into a room in my house and be properly alone. It had never happened in the old place. Five years in her grave and still she hung about the place like washing on a wet day.

Not in the Fron-goch house. In the Fron-goch house there was no shrieking down the chimney when I left the dishes to drain instead of drying them. No crackle of disapproval in the wireless when I turned on the Light Programme on a Sunday afternoon. No face reflected in the dark windows at night, her mouth in the knot that declared without a word spoken that for her I would always be the dirty Pugh girl, the slatternly millstone around her beloved boy's neck, the source of all her disappointment and her shame.

Dead and buried five long years and finally she was gone. I was free of her, we all were. They had smashed her house to rubble and hauled away the stones. The wind and the rain had scoured the spaces where she had concealed herself, scrubbing away the last sour dregs of her spirit. A month after we left I walked up there. A silent rain fell on what was left of the foundations. The nothingness was dizzying. In a matter of weeks they had done what I had never managed in all the years of my marriage. They had frightened her away.

The Liverpool Corporation, wrecker and redeemer.

* * *

I wished they could do the same with my mind. Try as I might, I could not get her out of there. She was like one of those foreign worms that burrow into your brain and lay their eggs inside. There was no thought in my head she had not bored through, no memory she had not chewed to holes. Hold

me up to the light and it would be her face you would see, staring out from inside me like Britannia in a ten-shilling note.

‘We are gathered tonight to take back into our fold this young couple, who have grievously sinned.’

I never turned around that evening, not once, but I remembered the look on her face. I remembered it all. The slanting gold of the evening sun pooling on the floor and the smell of the hymn books and the hot hard ache of milk in my breasts. The polished curve of the Sêd fawr like a cage around us, penning us in. The pinch of my Sunday hat. Dai standing next to me with a savage haircut and his tie pulled tight as a fist, his eyes not meeting mine, and gathered around us the black rustle of the deacons muttering their amens. Reverend Thomas standing at the altar like St Peter, his fingers paddling the prayer book, a smile of patient disgust on his fat flushed face as slowly, so slowly, the chapel bell tolled six. *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart.* He lifted his arms and the congregation rose.

‘Shall we forgive them? Shall we take them back into our prayers and our hearts?’

I never forgave any of them. My heart was shut tight as a stone.

* * *

I went to Liverpool once, back in 1956. A march against the reservoir. Margaret Roberts organised it. She hired buses to take us there. It was Dai, though, who led the charge, the ghost of Owain Glyndŵr clutching his umbrella like a sword. Perhaps the clanking of his imaginary armour drowned out the doubters or perhaps it was a common-or-garden miracle because everyone came, even Eirlys Jones from Ael-y-bryn who for weeks had been whispering to anyone who would listen – only you mind, you’re the only one’ll understand – that it was a fool’s errand, a waste of time and money, why would they care what we thought, a handful of nobodies, and though most had the sense not to say it, Eirlys Jones was not the only one. There were plenty of women glad enough to take Liverpool’s dirty money if it meant the electric and an inside privy.

And yet there we were in our Sunday coats, hats on and faces scrubbed, because the village and its water were ours and everyone knew stealing was wicked and what did it matter what we would have chosen, the handful of families whose homes were to be drowned? The anger was greater than all of us. What had begun with Dai and Margaret Roberts and a few cantankerous old quarrymen from Bala with bad lungs and a bitter taste in their mouths was suddenly Plaid Cymru and the county councils and people writing to the newspapers. It was the Farmers' Union and Morlais Lodge and Welsh Societies in Australia and Canada and Crewe and Éamon de Valera, the Nazi-loving President of Ireland, who could not have put Capel Celyn on a map if we had marked it for him with a cross, but most of all it was Cynghrair Diogelu Capel Celyn, the Capel Celyn Protection League, a man-eating monster with a maw as wide as Menai and a mind of its own. Dai was chairman. Of course we went.

It was November, a raw grey day with an icy wind. Gwynfor Evans of Plaid Cymru came to march with us and other people too, from Aberystwyth and from Cardiff even, but they put us at the front, children first. We walked through the streets holding up our placards with their English slogans: HANDS OFF TRYWERYN VALLEY and YOUR HOMES ARE SAFE – SAVE OURS. Emyr was eight and beside himself. He had never seen so many cars. They gave him a banner to carry with the youngest Morgan girl but he refused to share so he gave his end to Harri Hughes and carried Harri's banner instead, the words thick and black above his knitted cap: CAPEL CELYN MUST LIVE.

It was Margaret Roberts's idea to sing hymns as we marched. How will they drown our valley when they can't drown our voices, she cried, her hands scooping the air to urge us louder, but they drowned our voices all the same, without even trying. Omnibuses rumbled down the roads and cars honked their horns and men on scaffolds hammered and banged and housewives clattered in and out of the shops, setting bells to clanging. In the playgrounds children shouted and sang as they played skipping games. An old woman in a hat like a hornets' nest spat in the gutter and hollered at us to go home but mostly they said nothing. Mostly they did not see us at all.

I saw them, though, them and their city. I think we all did, for better or worse. Liverpool was bomb-scarred and dirty and cold as sin, but it was alive. You could feel the thrum of it in the pavements, seeping out from the cracks in the windows, gusting the leaves and dropped bus tickets in the gutters. And the words! Words everywhere, a plague of them beating themselves into your head, words on the sides of vans and buses, above the doors of shops and cafés, on the white-painted fronts of hotels and the blank brick sides of office buildings and even on the glittering glass dome of the railway station, BRITISH RAILWAYS LIVERPOOL LIME STREET, in letters five feet high. Words on the advertisements too, great windows of colour in the grey: Guinness Goodness and Hartley's Jellies and Osram The Wonderful Lamp. When dusk fell they lit them up. Words everywhere, blazing in the darkness. I could not get over the dazzle of them, the shameless extravagance. I could have stood there a lifetime, just staring at them, letting them fill me up.

'The uprooting and destruction of this precious stronghold of Welsh language and traditions would be devastating to the cultural life of our entire nation,' Gwynfor Evans told the Council Chamber. Dai went in with him. The rest of the precious stronghold waited shivering outside in the cold. I looked around me at those familiar pinched faces with their familiar pinched minds, and I wanted to laugh. Or cry. In my head I had a speech of my own. The nation could keep the lot of it if it meant so much to them, the hymns and the harmonies and the harps and the mashed rhubarb and the mud and the boiled bacon and the shiny black hats with their lace caps under and the dying language that trapped you in the middle of nothing like a rat in a bowl, only, please God, don't make us do it for you. Grant this great honour of yours to some other godforsaken valley, let them stand as the living relic, the last worn-out whimpers of a world begging to be free. This precious stronghold is weary of the honour. If it's all the same to you, we'll take the money.

Amen.

* * *

Dai was not permitted to address the meeting. He spoke only once, when a Liverpool councillor declared that the reservoir would be a wonder of Wales.

‘The wonder of Wales, sir, is that Liverpool pretends to believe it,’ Dai said, icily polite.

The wonder of Wales. They remembered that in the valley. The phrase stuck itself to Dai and he did not unstick it. After the march people from all over sent in clippings from the newspapers. None of them mentioned Dai, though the *Manchester Guardian* carried a photograph of him grim-faced at the head of the procession, the rest of us with our placards scurrying behind. The headline was in English. The man who sent it included a Welsh translation.

DIWRNOD ALLAN IOGEL. A YOKELS’ DAY OUT.

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In September, when the hay was in, the youngest of the Bont-faen boys got married. A family wedding, we were not asked, but Rose and Bob Hughes came back for it. Rose and his mother were cousins. The pair of them stopped by after for a cup of tea, stiff and unfamiliar in their best clothes. Rose brought shortbread in a shiny Tupperware box. We sat awkwardly in the parlour, Rose with a helmet of curled hair and her handbag on her lap and Dai and Bob clearing their throats at each other like strangers. It was a mercy when the pot ran dry and I could escape to the kitchen to refill it. Rose followed me. While the kettle boiled she sat at the table and took off her shoes.

‘That’s better,’ she said, wiggling her toes. ‘They’ve been killing me all day.’

I asked about the wedding. The bride was from Bangor. She wore a sky-blue coat and hat and heels so high it was a wonder she did not break an ankle. The road was all ruts. Mercifully the rain kept off. The photographs had to be taken smack up against the chapel wall. No one wanted rubble in a wedding picture.

I filled the teapot. Bob and Rose had moved to Conwy where Bob’s younger brother had a farm. Rose had never liked the brother’s wife. I wanted to ask how she was managing but there was a stiffness between us, I did not know where to start. Rose rubbed her feet, her thumbs rasping against her nylons. I rinsed out her Tupperware so she could take it home clean but she told me I should keep it. You won’t believe how fresh it keeps things, she said, compared to a tin. Right, I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I picked up the teapot and Rose sighed and put her shoes back on and said Dai looked well, considering, and we went back together into the parlour.

* * *

There were no more weddings after that. Three weeks later the chapel held its final service of dissolution. After that the Bible would be carried away by the deacons for safekeeping and the building would be demolished. I knew about it, of course, but I did not think it had anything to do with us. When Dai told me we were going, I could not believe my ears.

‘I’ve said I’ll read the lesson,’ he said, like that was an explanation.

I dug in my heels. I told him he could do as he pleased but I had made myself a promise sixteen years ago and I had no intention of breaking it now. The Corporation could be firing the chapel into space for all I cared. I would never set a foot in there again.

‘You set foot there five years ago,’ Dai said.

‘For your mother’s funeral. I made an exception.’

‘So make another.’

I would not budge. Nor would Dai. He said a service of this kind had nothing to do with private conscience. It was a public tribute to the thousand-year battle for Wales, for our culture, our language, our very existence. Did he need to remind me that the English valley proposed for the reservoir had been rejected by Parliament because of its population of breeding swans? Drowning it, the politicians said, would destroy their habitat. So instead they chose a Welsh valley that was home to seventy people. What did my ancient grievances count against the cold-blooded sacrifice of our country, he demanded, the callous bigotry that counted Welsh people lower than birds?

Ancient grievances. The words clanked in my head. Our story, his and mine, shrugged off like it was nothing. As for the history lesson, I wanted to shove it down his sanctimonious throat. The seizing of our valley was a scandal, of course it was, the stentorian bass voices of suffering Wales had been sermonising on the subject for years, but I for one was weary of it. Weary of the way the injustice kept on growing bigger, gorging itself on outrage, and weary beyond measure of Dai’s self-righteousness. He had not always been this way. The years of campaigning turned his head, the public admiration or the private terror, not that he admitted to either. Somehow the edge in him that cut through cant and foolishness had thickened into furious self-regard. More and more he saw himself the way the lickspittles of the

campaign saw him, the guardian of Welsh consciences, the simple sheep farmer turned national North Star. Whereas too often what I saw was a stubborn supercilious old git.

* * *

It was a beautiful day, the day Dai and I got married, the sky bright as a licked bowl. His mother was our witness. I looked at my new husband as she signed her name in the chapel register, the shiny gold ring on his finger, and I thought of his hands on me and his mouth. We had not waited. To have and to hold from this day forward. I wanted to have him and hold him right there and then in front of the whole congregation. Perhaps it was Emyr, already started inside me, but I was fat with wanting. That day I was the happiest I had ever been.

I did not see her write the date. It was my wedding day, who cared about the paperwork, and besides what reason was there to do such a thing? There was no column for dates in the register of marriages, not in Capel Celyn, or for baptisms either. We all knew dates were sticky things. In the sight of God and a small congregation it was best not to worry over details. Nothing good came from asking questions. The path to Heaven was paved with approximations and a careful lack of curiosity.

Not for Dai's mother. She could not turn a blind eye. In the Dark Ages where she lived, the earth shook with the wrath of God and no sin passed unseen. If eyes were to be blinded, it was her duty to do the blinding, her duty and her savage desire. An eye for an eye, her eye being Dai who was the apple of it. Perhaps she called on Reverend Thomas. Perhaps the pair of them were connected like telephone exchanges by wires of pious spite. Whatever the cause, once Emyr was born and the choke of our sin had tightened in our souls, Reverend Thomas called on us. He asked Dai and me to come and see him at the chapel.

Afterwards I tried to forget but I could not do it. Scraps kept rising like fat to the surface of my mind. Reverend Thomas kneeling in prayer as we walked in, flesh spilling over his collar, his brusque hand raised for silence. The smell of him, dust and sweat and gravy. His fat finger moving down the

register till it stopped on Dai's mother's name and the date underneath it, squashed into the box. Our iniquity in black and white, a matter of basic arithmetic. Proof of Dai's weakness which was a weakness before God, but proof mostly of my wickedness, my wanton nature, which was both inborn, a corruption in the blood, and brazenly conniving, a trap set for a man too decent to know better. Proof then of what everyone in the valley already knew, that the Pughs of Tyˆ-eithin with their impieties and their poverty and their yard full of broken bits of machinery were scum, that they always had been scum, as long as anyone could remember.

* * *

It was Emyr changed my mind. He sidled into the kitchen while I was stewing over Dai's bad faith and the bacon boiled for supper. School was back and he was wearing his uniform, collar unbuttoned, tie pulled loose around his neck. His trousers needed letting down. He sat at the table, his huge feet hooked around the legs of his chair, and played with the salt pot.

'Haven't you homework to do?' There was salt on the table. That was Emyr, always fiddling and making a mess. I took the pot away. 'Science, is it, on a Thursday?'

Emyr was silent. He trailed a finger in the spilled salt, drawing ragged shapes. I was the one who had pushed for Emyr to sit the School Certificate or whatever it was they called it these days. Dai had never seen the point. Emyr would take over the farm from Dai, as Dai had from his father and his father before him. Everything worth learning he could learn on the hill. It took the Corporation and their compulsory purchase order to spring Emyr from that trap. I would never not be grateful for that.

'Da's right, Mam. We have to go on Saturday. You know, to the service.'

I put the salt pot down. Since the move Emyr had been cool towards Dai, though I had pretended not to notice. Emyr had always looked up to his father. He yearned for his approval. He brought his tempers to me, his messes and mistakes, but he kept his triumphs for his da. A nod from Dai, a scant few words of praise, and the boy would dance like a kite.

I never minded, or not much. I cleaned Emyr's grazes and laughed at his childish jokes. When the agitations came, I calmed him. I wanted to be close to him, or as close as he would let me. I wanted to be needed, not revered. And Dai was a good father. He might set too little store by Emyr's brains but he never tried to change him. For all his mother's efforts, Dai would not be ashamed of his son.

It was different after the Liverpool Corporation appeared over the horizon and the valley turned to Dai to save them. It changed him slowly, the drip-drip of water running down a rock, but it changed him. It was only when his mother died I saw it. Like a castle he had fortified himself against her, a moat dug deep around him to keep her out. I did not expect that to change. He was too old and too Welsh, his careful distance was a part of who he was. What I never saw coming was how quickly the admiration of the valley would fill the space she left behind. How quickly walls built for self-protection could grow thick and stout with self-importance. It grated then, Emyr's boyish awe. The last thing Dai needed was another disciple, even if that disciple was only ten years old and four and a half feet tall.

I knew it could not last. Sooner or later a child grew up, he came to see his parents more clearly. Emyr's puppyish devotion to his father was always going to wane. I should have seen it as a warning. Instead I liked this newly wary Emyr more than I cared to admit. The week before, turning out his trouser pockets for the laundry, I had found the brass tag from Teg's collar. Emyr was a magpie, he was always collecting things, bird skulls and snail shells and squashed bottle tops, pebbles that caught his eye. Usually I left what passed for treasure on his windowsill and threw away the rest, but I weighed the tag in my hand and put it back. I left the dirty trousers where I had found them. I wanted Emyr to keep his secrets. I wanted him to remember.

'Since when have you been a chapelgoer, Mr Non-Believer?' I teased but Emyr did not rise.

'This isn't about chapel,' he said. 'It's history.'

'Oh, history, is it?'

'We've been talking about it in school. The imperial oppression of Wales by the English. Like, you know, Kenya and Nyasaland.'

The thump of love smacked me so hard and unexpectedly that I laughed, a great gulping gasp of a thing that snorted through my nose. Emyr frowned at me.

‘Or the Soviets in Hungary,’ he added sternly.

Still laughing, I kissed the crown of his curly head. I could hardly credit it, this man I had suddenly acquired in place of a son, tall as a weed and every kind of learning growing in his head. I thought of that battle-axe Margaret Roberts declaring him unteachable because he would not answer in class, of Dai shrugging and saying what did school matter, the farm was who Emyr was, who he would always be. And yet here he was in my kitchen, my great big beautiful son, talking about Hungary and history.

At supper I slipped him an extra slice of bacon and told Dai I would go.

* * *

It was a fine day, the clouds high and white in the blue sky. Bob Williams’s eldest fetched us in their rusty Land Rover. The dam site was silent, deserted, the wall like a giant hand across the mouth of the valley. They had taken the stone from all our houses and our barns, the corners and lintels, and put them in that wall. There was a moral in there somewhere, if you cared to look for it, that or a sour kind of joke. The only house not in the dam was Bryn-mawr. The Liverpool Corporation had promised the Parrys to use their stone for a Chapel of Remembrance.

‘Lest we forget,’ Dai said when he heard, and his bitterness could have cut bone.

As we got closer I could see the high fences, the coils of barbed wire. Since we had left there had been a fair bit of trouble at the works. Someone had sabotaged an oil tank, wasting a quantity of oil, and later a bunch of lads took it into their heads to plant a bomb. No one was hurt, thank God, but the damage set the dam back for months. For a while there were discussions on the wireless, mutterings about freedom fighters and a Welsh IRA. Plaid Cymru’s Gwynfor Evans riled a lot of people by declaring that the bombers had his sympathy and support.

Nothing much happened after that. The three bombers were caught. Two went to jail. One of them was a military policeman in the RAF, another a student at the university. After that they stepped up security at the dam. It looked like a prison camp with its barbed wire and its floodlights and its signs in scarlet capital letters: STRICTLY NO ADMISSION and TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. The signs were in English. Dai raged about that too. Everyone in the valley spoke Welsh.

We turned off the New Road and onto the track made by the lorries. Rose was right about the ruts. The car lurched its way down the hill, tossing us about like rats in a sack. Already on both sides of the bridge the verges were packed with parked cars. Crowds of people milled about. The Williams boy slowed to a crawl, nudging the car forward through the crush. It surprised me, how many were strangers. Proud Welshmen, Dai would doubtless say, brought together by grief and anger and a deep love of their country. Rubberneckers, more likely, scouring the crash site for bodies and for blood.

We parked at the bend of the river by the stepping stones. By the chapel a long queue of people were waiting to get in. Emyr's fingers tapped the sides of his legs. I felt a flicker of anxiety. As a child, crowds had lit a kind of panic in him. If I tried to hold him, he lashed out at me like a thing possessed. All I could do was take him somewhere quiet, somewhere he could be on his own.

'If it's too full, Emyr and I can always wait outside,' I said but Dai shot me a look that would have stunned a heifer and Emyr just kept walking, his fingers tap-tapping at his thighs like he was playing a tune on the piano.

John and Maureen Post stood near the door. Though perhaps they were plain John and Maureen Edwards now, with no post office left to run. I hoped the Canadians would not take the news too hard. I had lost count of the number of letters Dai had received from the Canadian branch of the Capel Celyn Protection League lamenting the passing of the traditional Welsh way of life. A life of poetry and song, one letter called it, as though all we did all day was skip over the hills with our harps, spouting limericks.

John Post saw us and waved. He had his eldest daughter Cerys with him and Cerys's two little girls, spotless in matching blue dresses and ribbons in

their hair. They gestured for us to join them but Dai shook his head and led us to the back of the queue. Through the open doorway I could see the wooden sounding board above the pulpit, the tin shades of the lights. More people joined the queue behind us. I could not see how we would ever fit inside. Beside me Emyr's fingers played faster, tap-tapping their jitters into me. I took a deep breath. An hour, that was all. Reverend Thomas would charge us all, miserable sinners, to repent before God, he would sigh and smooth his surplice and drain the last dregs from the Communion cup, and that would be the end of it. He was retiring, Dai said, a bungalow by the sea. On Monday the bulldozers would come.

And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

'Dafydd Jones, what in the name of all things holy do you think you're doing lurking back there?' Margaret Roberts boomed, bearing down on us. Had she been on their side, the Corporation could have used her for a bulldozer. One whack of her reinforced bosom and the chapel would be flattened to rubble. 'We've a place kept for you at the front. For all three of you,' she added quickly. 'Come on, come with me.'

Even Dai knew better than to argue with a bulldozer. He followed Margaret Roberts meekly into the chapel, me and Emyr trailing behind. When the plan to drown the valley first came out, it was Margaret Roberts who appointed herself Secretary of the Capel Celyn Protection League, Margaret Roberts who, in her time off from terrorising her pupils, wrote letters to everyone she could think of, appealing for their support. Dai might have been chairman but it was Margaret Roberts who set up the public meetings and arranged the radio and newspaper interviews and typed the minutes and organised all the things that needed organising. She even appeared on the television once, not that I saw it. A few of them drove to Ffestiniog to watch the programme with Meic Hughes's sister whose husband had the hardware shop and owned a set, but I stayed home. I had no wish to see in black and white a woman I had already had enough of in full colour, and besides the interview was in English, which was why Margaret did it and not Dai. Unlike Dai, Margaret Roberts was a great

admirer of the English language. She knew all the long words and went out of her way to use them. Likely I would not have understood four fifths of what she said.

Our pew was at the front of the chapel. Half of the congregation I did not know from Adam but they all seemed to know Dai. They nodded at him as he passed and murmured grave good afternoons. Some of them shook his hand. Dai took it calmly, as his due. When at last we reached our seats he let me and Emyr go ahead and took his place on the aisle. Margaret Roberts leaned down, her mouth close to his ear like she was telling him a secret.

‘Gwae fi fy myw mewn oes mor ddreng,’ she said. Bitter it is to live in times like these. A school poem, though I could not remember which one. Once I had known it by heart. Dai said nothing. He sat up very straight, his chin raised, eyes fixed ahead. A gold chain round his neck and he could have been the mayor himself. The chapel fell quiet as Reverend Thomas stepped up to the altar. Margaret Roberts sighed, patting the end of the pew, and turned away.

‘We come together in the name of the Lord,’ Reverend Thomas said. ‘Please rise.’

With a clatter of boots and dropped prayer books the congregation stood. Beside me Emyr seemed to have grown taller since yesterday. People said he looked like Dai, though I had never seen it. Only his hands were unmistakably his father’s, the same square palms and thick strong fingers, the same broad fingernails. I looked down at Dai’s, resting on the back of the pew, the skin battered and brown-splodged, the nails split. I knew them as well as my own but looking at them I had a sudden lurching sense of time spooling away. An old man’s hands. In five years he would be fifty.

He would be fifty and Emyr would be gone. Twenty-one years old, older by a stretch than I had been when I had him. It seemed impossible. When I looked at him I saw a child, a lanky lummox of a child with hairy legs and shoes you could set to sea in, but a child all the same, a schoolboy with ink on his fingers and holes in his trousers and the cuffs of his jersey pulled to strings from chewing. Standing there beside him, it struck me that I could summon every stage of him, the babe-in-arms and the toddler and the hand-flapping seven-year-old and the lanky adolescent with his

breaking voice and faint shadow of hair on his upper lip, each boy solid and clear inside the next like those painted wooden dolls, and yet somehow I could not raise a picture of Dai at any time other than the present. What had he looked like on our wedding day, or on that terrible Sunday after Emyr was born? I could not remember.

At the altar Reverend Thomas was working up to a crescendo. ‘Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth!’

He stood before us, head thrown back, as the organ began the first hymn. The congregation drew in their breath and in the emptiness they made I saw him. Not his face but the back of his head, velvet-napped from the clippers. When he bent his head to pray there was a stripe of white skin between his hairline and the brown of his neck, pale as a child’s, and across the years I felt the scorch of my fury, not at Dai’s mother or Reverend Thomas or the black-suited deacons like crows around a carcass or even the families who came to feast on our shame, though God knew I was furious with them too.

No, my rage was all for Dai, this fine upstanding man who knew the glories of the world, who had crossed the sea to Africa and seen with his own eyes camels and date palms and deserts wide as oceans, who had picked sunflowers and swum in green French rivers and gulped dark red wine straight from the bottle, and came back to this shit-scabbed scrape of a valley to grovel to Reverend Thomas. My brave soldier husband, father of my brand-new son, who without his medals and his military sheen was nothing but a cringing boy-man, cowed by his cow of a mother and the tinpot deacon dictators of Nowhere, North Wales. They had summoned us to our humiliation, a medieval ritual of disgrace, and how did he fight back? He bent his knee, his hair cropped short like a penitent, and accepted his punishment in silence while the judgement of the congregation bored its way into our backs and my faith in our future crumbled into dust.

The hymn was into its last verse. *Awn i gwrdd y gelyn, bawb ag arfau glân*. Let us go and meet the enemy, everyone with his holy weapons. Afterwards, when I could not talk to Dai, could not even look at him, he

took me by the shoulders, his grip firm and calm like I was a ewe struggling in a briar. This is our place, he said. We cannot live here if we go against the chapel. I told him he was a coward and he smiled and shook his head. They think they've shamed us, he said, that we're sorry. Let them. It does not make it so.

A vow of a sort. We never talked of it again but I kept it close. It held inside it the two fixed points of our marriage, though for a long time I only saw the first: that shame was a choice and that my husband was bound to this land as the sheep on the hill were bound, by fences that did not exist. He could not unlearn them. The map was in his bones. Beside me Dai rose from his seat and went forward. The Bible was open on the lectern but he did not look at it. He looked out over the hushed congregation, hands gripping the lectern like it was a tractor he would drive right through the crowd.

'I stand before you for the last time in the place I will always call home.'

I glanced sideways at Emyr who sat straighter. People who said he was the spit of his father, those people were wrong. Emyr was himself, through and through. Dai had done all he could to cut the Jones mark into his ears, to teach him the limits of his cynefin, but he had not made a sheep of him. Margaret Roberts and her wooden ruler had not planted sheep thoughts in his head. Emyr would not live out his days on the same few miles of hillside, huddled in the safety of the flock. He would go, he would spread his wings and fly away, because he was clever and bold and he knew what every clever bold boy knew, that out there beyond the horizon there was a great big world where this flyspeck of a village meant nothing at all.

* * *

I lost sight of Emyr before I was halfway out of the chapel. Dai stayed behind to sign the Visitors' Book Margaret Roberts had arranged to mark the day. People crowded around him, shaking his hand. Touching the hem of his garment, I thought sourly. The table for the Visitors' Book was a

wooden coffin raised on trestles. No doubt that was Margaret Roberts's idea too. She had always liked her parables served plain.

Outside I looked about for Emyr but it was too crowded, I could not see him for hats. People were talking and laughing. It felt more like a wedding than a funeral. A photographer in a mackintosh was taking pictures. I watched a woman in red lipstick rub furtively at her front teeth before pushing through the crush towards the camera. By the side door to the chapel Gwenda Lewis was talking to Eileen Barry. Her hat looked like a cushion with its stuffing gone. When she saw me looking, she turned her back, looping her arm through Eileen's, and for a moment we were seven years old again and back in the schoolroom, Gwenda Barry and Eileen Rees, my sworn enemies, the pair of them squealing and holding their noses if I ever came close. *Pugh, Eileen, do you smell that? Pugh, Gwen-Gwen, it stinks!*

They were sisters-in-law now, Eileen married to Gwenda's brother. The child in me wanted to march over and knock Gwenda's stupid hat off. I turned away. I could see Dai on the chapel steps with old Mr Matholwch Pwll-du, and, behind them, Margaret Roberts talking and talking at patient kind John Post. By the square of grass where the telephone box had been, the photographer was smoking a cigarette. A newspaperman, perhaps, or someone from Liverpool sent to keep a watch on things. He tipped back his head, exhaling a long stream towards the sky. I envied him the steadiness, the ripple of nicotine in his joints. I wondered if I had the nerve to ask him for one.

Perhaps I would have done it if I had not at that moment seen Emyr by the graveyard wall. He was talking to a boy with red hair and the skimmed-milk skin to match. Back in the war, the Parrys had a pair of evacuees with that hair, two brothers from Liverpool, thin as sticks and so pale you could see the blue veins under their skin. Mrs Parry shaved their heads, she said they were dirty. At school they spoke only to each other. They had a song they sang, a taunting song in English: Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief. I tried to summon their names but all I could remember was the fiery stubble on their scalps, their fierce scrawny hostility. I squeezed through the crush. Emyr and the boy were bent over looking at something and did not

see me. They only turned round when I was standing right beside them. Emyr slipped whatever it was they were looking at into his pocket.

‘Mam,’ he said without enthusiasm.

‘I was wondering where you’d got to,’ I said, smiling at the red-haired lad. His eyes were startling, white-blue ringed with navy like a merle border collie. ‘I’m Emyr’s mam. If you’d not already worked that out.’

The boy glanced slantwise at Emyr. ‘See you,’ he said.

Emyr nodded. He watched the boy walk away into the crowd.

‘Who was that?’ I asked.

‘Just someone from school.’

‘The poor lad doesn’t have a name?’

‘Tony. He’s called Tony.’

‘I didn’t mean to scare him away.’

Emyr shrugged. ‘He was going anyway.’

Hands in his pockets, he slouched away. Tony had disappeared. I wondered if he was Emyr’s friend or just a boy he knew. Emyr had never been much for making friends. Near the gate to the graveyard a tangle of creamy honeysuckle spilled over the wall. I breathed in its sweet scent and I did not know whether it was a marvel or just plain daft that it took this place for somewhere it could flourish and be beautiful.

Mari’s tablet lay in the corner in a patch of tall grass. I had wanted to bury her with Ifan, under the hazel trees at Tŷ-eithin, but Mrs Parry insisted on a Christian burial. The slate tablet was the cheapest one they had. The upright gravestones looked haughtily away from her, Dai’s mother’s white marble icy in their midst. The Corporation had written to tell us that, when the chapel was knocked down, all the headstones would be taken out and the graveyard covered in cement. Apparently headstones were a hazard. Those who wished could have their loved ones exhumed at the Corporation’s expense and transferred to a new graveyard at Maes-Craig.

Dai would not hear of it. Those cythreuliaid had wreaked enough devastation on the living, he said, without digging up the dead. They could level the mountains and bring down the moon from the sky but his people would stay where they were, together, in the piece of earth where they belonged.

I did not argue. When he talked like that there was no reaching him. Instead I had Emyr write me a letter in English to the Corporation. The letter asked for the body of Mari Pugh to be moved from Capel Celyn to Maes-Craig. I did not tell Dai. I thought of his mother lying for all eternity under sixty-eight million tons of water.

‘Shall we forgive them? Shall we take them back into our prayers and our hearts?’

Not until the waters covered all the earth.

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The moment Emyr came in from school it was plain something was up. He was all starts and stops, his attention distracted, his chores left half done. When he started on the salt I smacked his hand and told him to get on with his homework. He opened a book but he did not read it. He jiggled his legs under the table, his eyes jumpy as a pair of fleas.

I wondered what new lesson had put the fidgets in him. As a child Emyr had not been a talker, he was too busy with the thoughts in his head, but since the start of term something had shifted in him. At supper he was so eager with his stories there was barely space between his sentences to swallow. It was not just Hungary and independence in Kenya. It was war in Vietnam and revolution in the Middle East and civil rights in America. It was Uganda and Nigeria and Sierra Leone. He leaned across the table towards his father, his eyes shining, his coldness quite forgotten. His fervour turned me inside out. All those people with strange names in countries half a world away. The way he talked they might have been Bala.

It made me proud, of course it did. I loved to see the learning in him. I still worried. I wished he would pay the same attention to his school work but when I asked him mildly enough what use Sierra Leone would be in his examinations Emyr rolled his eyes. He said that Mr Wozniak said there was a lot more to education than the inside of a textbook, that as Welshmen it was their duty to look beyond their borders, to draw strength and inspiration from the freedoms being forged around the world. Mr Wozniak was Emyr's teacher, or one of them. I thought Dai would pull him up on that, a man named Wozniak telling Welshmen how to be Welsh, but he let it pass. I was glad. Duty or otherwise, that teacher had kindled a fire in our boy. His whole face blazed with it.

Dai did not always listen. He had his own preoccupations, a well-worn circle of a track into which he would settle given half a chance. At the old farm he had spoken little, like most men I knew he hoarded words like silver, but his silence was not like his mother's, poisoned by the words he

would not say. It was like the silence on the hill, the breeze blew through it. I might find myself wanting better company but I trusted in his peace.

Not in Fron-goch. In Fron-goch an anger smouldered in him, a low black seethe that never quite went out. Nothing suited him. The fields were too boggy. The generator clogged. The roof of the cowshed was rotten. The milking machine kept breaking down. Even the weather was wrong: first too dry and then too wet. The cows would get scald or foot rot or worms. We would not have enough hay for the winter. Some days, it seemed there was not a body on that farm, animal, vegetable or mineral, that was not out to madden or misuse him. I have a dream, Emyr declared one supper over his potatoes, a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed, all men are created equal, and Dai scowled across the table and told him in a voice like a lid coming down that the only rise worth dreaming of was in the price of milk.

Some nights, though, some nights Emyr struck a match on him and watched it catch. Perhaps Emyr would be talking about the Gold Coast in Africa, which was now a country with a new name and a new government, the first in Africa to gain its independence, and suddenly Dai would be the one telling Emyr things he did not know, about the history of the slave trade and the new Prime Minister who held conventions in his capital for all the other countries in Africa because the liberation of his own nation meant nothing if it did not mean liberation for all.

‘The colonial government proposed a dam there too, did you know that?’ Dai said. ‘Back before the war. Not for water but to extract the country’s minerals for their own profit. The new Prime Minister is going ahead with it. Not in the way the English planned it, not to strip the country of its wealth, but to generate free electricity. To turn on the lights for his people.’

‘Lucky for him you’re not there to switch them all off,’ I said, making a face at Emyr, but Emyr was looking at his da.

‘Ghana will use that English dam to power a modern economy of their own,’ Dai said. ‘Water as the foundation of a proud new independent nation.’

‘And here we let them take it from us for nothing,’ Emyr said, and when Dai despondently blew out his lips Emyr blew his lips out too and frowned to hide his delight.

Emyr had his lessons and his Mr Wozniak. Where Dai got his knowledge from I could not guess. His gaze had always been fixed on the ground. The valley, the village, the farm. Even his Protection League with its long octopus tentacles stretching far and wide had never budged from Capel Celyn, its body wedged into a crack under the hills. People sent him things during the campaign, clippings and quotations and stories they had heard, but though the letters came from all over the world everything they wrote about was here, contained within a handful of miles. One man wrote all the way from America. His Welsh father had emigrated there before the Great War and when he died the man found a page torn from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* among his father’s papers. The man sent a photograph. Most of the page was taken up with a church in France. The entry for Wales was tucked into the bottom corner. WALES, see ENGLAND. Three words to sum up a country. Dai kept the photograph for years, he got a furious kick from it, but he could never manage to do it. See England, I mean. Dai could not see anywhere but here.

Emyr was different. Emyr’s curiosity was boundless. He knew about the Frenchman who had invented a special diving saucer to go down to the bottom of the ocean, the race to land a man on the moon. Or woman, he added, because did Dai know that a Russian woman had already made a successful space flight? She had orbited the earth forty-eight times in seventy-one hours, which was more time in space than all the American astronauts put together. Soon, he said, there would be holiday camps in space and hospitals, and flying from London to New York in America would take less than an hour. An hour to travel three thousand miles. I laughed out loud just thinking of it.

Dai did not care for space. It left him cold and Frenchmen too, but politics, politics meant Wales. Politics could rouse him. Not always, and less and less as winter came and the rain and the cold and the diawl of a milking machine soured his temper and his tongue, but once in a while and just often enough to keep Emyr from giving up trying. He put me in mind

of the scrawny barn cat at Tyˆ-eithin who left dead fledglings for Mari on the kitchen step. She hissed at it and chased it off with her broom but it went on bringing them. Mari burned the tiny corpses in the range. You can't blame the animal, she said. It's in his nature. Perhaps it was in Emyr's too, long hidden or fresh made. I wondered if he laid down the things Dai told him at the feet of Mr Wozniak. The thought turned my heart inside-out.

At the kitchen table Emyr chewed his pencil. He did not write a word. The clock nudged six. Quick as a flash, he was on his feet, his books in his satchel and the table laid. Under his father's fork he put a brown envelope, dog-eared and crumpled from his pocket. Dai came in from the milking and washed at the sink. I waited for him to curse about the milking machine running slow, he had been harping on at it for weeks, but he said nothing. I put the plates on the table. Slump-shouldered, like the effort might undo him, Dai took up his knife and fork.

Emyr watched him. I hoped he had the sense he was born with, he knew well enough when to leave his da alone, but his eagerness outfoxed him. Leaning across the table, he took back the envelope and opened it. Inside there were several sheets of paper folded in half and, clipped to one corner, a laminated card. Emyr unclipped the papers and held one out to Dai.

'For you,' he said.

Dai did not take the paper. Wearily, mechanically, he cut his meat.

'It's a membership form,' Emyr pressed. 'I got one for Mam too.'

The card was on the table. I turned it over. Three green triangles for mountains and a red dragon. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party. Emyr's name was printed in capitals at the bottom. AELOD, it said. MEMBER.

'How can you be a member?' I said, bewildered. 'You're not old enough to vote.'

Emyr did not answer. He leaned across the table towards his father. 'Mr Wozniak says Plaid Cymru is the only way we can ever throw off the shackles of English imperialism. He says no democratic community is free that lacks a government directly responsible to its people. That there is no such thing as Wales without a Welsh state. We have to fight for a Welsh state.'

A different day and the spark would have caught. Not today. Dai's face was shut tight as a door.

'Emyr, bach—' I said but Emyr pushed on.

'We've been doing it in history club. How the Normans' castle building programme in Wales remains the most concerted effort at the pacification of an occupied country in European history. How the six steps of English imperialism in Wales – military conquest, settlement, cultural assimilation, political subjugation, economic exploitation and racial discrimination – has become the prototype for a thousand years of colonial oppression around the world.'

The way he had it down he might have been reading from a book. He strained towards his father, willing him to answer. I could not stand to watch it. Scraping back my chair, I picked up the teapot.

'That'll do, Emyr,' I chided gently. 'Can't you see your da's dead on his feet?'

I put the kettle on to boil. Dai said nothing. I wanted to shake him. So he was tired, the new farm made him wretched, but was it really beyond him to give his son an answer? Emyr wanted so little from him and he wanted it so much. A word or two would have done it, a nod. I had a sudden memory of the hill behind the old house, a tiny Emyr stumping along in his yellow rubber boots, swinging the little blackthorn crook Dai had cut for him, Dai slowing his pace to match his. Dai had spent hours that summer teaching Emyr the shrill two-fingered whistle he used for the dog, patiently going over and over it with Emyr blowing nothing but air, until one afternoon he whistled in the kitchen and jumped us both out of our skins. Emyr was proud as a peacock then but Dai was prouder. That's it, he said, and tucked his smile like a pocket handkerchief into the corner of his mouth. What had changed him since that he would carelessly cut Emyr to the quick?

Emyr was silent. I was glad, there was only so much brick wall a head could take, but as I came back to the table he started up again.

'That's why we wrote off for the forms. The Labour Party might bang on about the evils of colonialism but Plaid Cymru were the only ones who fought for Capel Celyn. For the Welsh people. I know you say vote Labour

but Labour don’t get it. They’ll never grant Wales her freedom because they don’t understand she has been denied it, they don’t see her chains. Gwynfor Evans says—’

‘For the love of Christ!’ Dai snapped, slamming down his fork. Emyr flinched.

‘Dai,’ I warned. ‘Watch your tongue.’

‘Tell your son to watch his. No one quotes that conchie in my house.’

‘Don’t listen to him, Emyr. You’re right, Mr Evans did fight for us. He’s a good man.’

‘He’s a conchie and a hwntw,’ Dai said. A South Walian. Dai despised the English but he despised the hwntwyr more. At least Gwynfor Evans had learned Welsh as an adult. Welshmen with no language drew Dai’s bitterest contempt.

‘He battled for years to try and stop them,’ I said. ‘You know that. His hands were tied.’

‘Hands tied nothing. That conchie hwntw lost his blydi nerve.’

‘If he ever had one,’ Emyr blurted.

Dai snorted, not a laugh quite but a bad-tempered snatch of something close.

‘Not many conchies known for their nerve,’ Emyr added, emboldened, and got another snort for his trouble. I blinked at him, astounded. I could not credit the pair of them, Emyr so fast to ditch his principles and Dai still faster to let him.

‘How can you say that?’ I protested. ‘Conchies had the worst of it. Attacked in the street, sacked from their jobs, locked up like criminals. You don’t think that takes nerve?’

Emyr slid Dai a sideways look. Balling up the membership forms, he dropped the pair of them into the range. Dai slumped back in his chair, his eyes shut, a wind-up toy run dead. Emyr’s Plaid Cymru membership card was still on the table. The dragon fixed me with its scarlet eye, its tongue an arrow pointing upwards to the peaks behind. Neither of them saw me sweep it into my apron pocket. Dai would not have that victory, not if I could help it.

* * *

Dog-tired though he was, Dai did not sleep. Often I woke in the night to find the bed cold beside me, the light from downstairs a pale stripe beneath the door. Sometimes I got up. I found him in the kitchen, standing at the window looking out at the dark. That or in the chair beside the range, rocking back and forth like his rocking was the only thing keeping the earth turning round. I made tea and gave it to him, told him to come back to bed. In a minute, he always said, I'll be up in a minute, so I went up alone. If he came back, he was gone again before I woke, the tea untouched where I had left it, a skin like a wrinkled stocking clinging to the top.

I knew he was grieving. I watched him swallow his misery, stamping it down inside himself till it hardened into anger. His rage was a finger in my side, poking and poking. He seemed to have forgotten that this godforsaken farm had been his decision, that I had never wanted to come here in the first place. Suddenly it was all my fault. The boggy fields, the leaking cowshed, the devil's own milking machine, I might have set them there myself to torment him. After a while I stopped listening. The story never changed and besides what could I do? Dai could rant and rave till Doomsday but he had signed the papers. He had chosen his cross. It was up to him to bear it.

* * *

Dr Wynne came, a routine call. Dai unbuttoned his shirt and he pressed the silver chest piece of his stethoscope to Dai's breastbone. I could see the sparse grey scribble of hairs on Dai's chest, the smooth tail of his scar. The first time I saw it, in the grass on the hill behind Tyˆ-eithin, the scar was still angry, a ridged dark red. When I touched it with my fingertip Dai moved my hand. He said we had more important business to attend to. Over the years it had faded to a silvery pink, shiny and puckered like a trail of wax.

The doctor was pleased with himself. The heart, he said, had an astonishing capacity to heal. He wrote a prescription, advised small meals, no salt and no excitement, and took a biscuit with his tea. He did not ask Dai how he was feeling. He talked about rugby, Newport against New Zealand. I watched Dai pretend to listen, his biscuit forgotten on his plate.

Dr Wynne was reliable, I trusted him, but I knew he was wrong. Dai's heart was broken.

* * *

The blizzards blew in with the snowdrops. The days were the colour of sheep's teeth and over before they began. The hens stopped laying. The milk was down. It took Dai twice the time to get half the yield. The world was muffled, suffocated into silence. Farmers lost sheep in the drifts. The lanes were blocked. The bus could not get through. I was afraid Emyr would miss school but he said he could stay with Tony in Bala. He said Tony's mam was pleased to have him.

He had never been away before. Perhaps it was the silence, without him there was so much silence, but I missed him like a limb. The cold crept through the walls and into my bones. No one knew when the weather would change. Some afternoons, when a vest and a jersey and a cardigan and two pairs of socks were not enough to keep the warmth in, I climbed into bed to keep from freezing. I pulled the old quilt over my head and thought of all the nights I had tucked Emyr up in his own bed only to come up later and find him curled up in ours. The bed pig, Dai called him, after the earthenware hot water bottles his mother always used. He would kiss him on his forehead and I would carry him sleeping back to his own bed, his warm head heavy against my neck. Remembering, I wrapped my arms around my shins, holding in the ache of it.

If you had asked me any time in all his sixteen years, I would have said without hesitation and with all the certainty in the world that I loved Emyr with every inch of my heart. That there might be whole chambers to it that I had never known were there was a wonder and a terror to me. It was a week before the plough got through and Emyr came home. By then the missing was so set in me I could not shake it, even when he was standing in the same room. I tried not to show it. I had seen enough to know a mother's need only pushes her children further away. Like a petty thief I filched my comfort from him, a ha'penny at a time. I rested my hand on his shoulder when I reached over to take his empty plate from the table. I brushed

crumbs from the lapels of his school blazer and chivvied him, hands on his back, to the sink to brush his teeth. I picked up his discarded jerseys and slung them around his waist, pulling him towards me like a roped sheep as I tied the arms in a knot. If Dai had noticed, he would have chided me, told me to let the boy be, but Dai did not notice. When I gave Emyr his bus money, I closed his fingers over the coins, his fist in both my hands.

‘Don’t lose it,’ I said and he looked at me pityingly, like I was half-witted.

‘I’m not a child, Mam. When Uncle Ifan was my age he was already working in the quarry.’

My brother, Uncle Ifan, who had a smile like a lamp coming on and hair that would not lie flat however much he wet it, who knew every bird just by listening and could catch a salmon by trailing his hand in the stream. My brother Ifan who went to the quarry at fifteen and died there at twenty-one before he could be an uncle to anyone.

‘Be grateful for change then,’ I said. ‘In all its forms. And don’t lose it.’

Emyr laughed. He was happy, I could see it. Even his father’s moods could not touch him. Closing his fist, he bumped the side of my chin like he was taking a swing at me, only very gently, brushing my jaw with his knuckles. His gentleness was glorious.

‘Bye, Mam,’ he said and I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. The snow fell again that afternoon, a great dump that drifted down the hill, and just like that he was gone again.

* * *

When the thaw came Emyr rode home on a bicycle. A black bicycle with a crossbar and racing handlebars that curved backwards and under like back-to-front Cs. He grinned as he showed it off to me, unable to conceal his pride.

‘It was Tony’s brother’s,’ he said. ‘Grand, isn’t it?’

‘Grand or not, you’re going to have to give it back. We don’t have money for a bicycle.’

‘They don’t want paying. Tony’s mam gave it to me. She said I was welcome to it.’

‘Did she now? And why exactly would Tony’s mam be handing out bicycles free of charge?’

‘Because it was Brian’s and he’s gone to America. Did you know there’s a building in New York that’s a hundred and two floors tall? It’s the tallest building in the world. Brian sent a postcard.’

I frowned. ‘I don’t know. It’s got to be worth a good lot, a bicycle like that.’

‘Stop worrying. Tony’s mam wanted me to have it. She said she couldn’t believe I didn’t already have one.’

‘Is that right.’

‘Don’t be like that. She didn’t mean anything by it.’

The kettle was whistling so we went inside. I took a folded cloth and lifted it off the heat.

‘You should learn to ride it,’ Emyr said. ‘I’ll teach you if you want.’

‘Get on with you,’ I scolded, laughing as I flapped the cloth at him. ‘What would I want with that kind of caper?’

Emyr grinned. ‘The wind in your hair and the world your oyster? I don’t know, Mam. What could you possibly want with all that?’

‘And anyway it’s a man’s bicycle. That crossbar. How would I even get my leg over with a crossbar?’ I asked and Emyr started laughing and went on laughing for so long that in the end there was nothing for it but to laugh too.

* * *

I thought he would forget. Fat chance. Saturday morning he had the bicycle ready and waiting in the yard. He had me wheel it out into the lane. I was so glad to have him home I would have learned to ride a tiger if he had one. I might have preferred it. At least a tiger had four paws on the ground. A bicycle was a different thing altogether. It baffled me how anyone could balance on a contraption like that, with only those thin tyres to keep you upright. As for the crossbar I had to bunch up my skirt to straddle it. Emyr

had put down the seat as far as it would go but still my feet could barely reach the ground. Thank heaven he was holding the handlebars or I would have gone tail over teakettle before I had even begun. I steadied myself on his arm.

‘It’s no good,’ I said. ‘My legs are too short.’

Emyr shook his head at me. ‘You’re fine.’

‘It’s going to tip over.’

‘It’s not. Hold onto the handlebars like this. These here are the brakes. When you want to stop you just squeeze them like this, see? Now put your right foot here.’

He pointed at the pedal. I kept my toes on the ground, or as much of them as I could manage. ‘Don’t be daft. I’m not doing that.’

‘Course you are. How else do you think it moves?’

‘Move, nothing. I’ll fall flat on my face.’

‘You won’t. I’ll hold onto the saddle, you’ll be fine.’

I put my foot on the pedal. The bicycle lurched to the right and my stomach with it. I put my foot back on the ground. ‘I can’t do it.’

‘Yes you can. It’s easy once you get the hang of it. Like riding a bicycle.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘Come on, Mam. What was it you used to say to me? Fortune favours the bold.’

‘That was your boldness we were talking about.’

Emyr grinned. ‘Listen to me. Right foot on the pedal. Push down and when the pedals start going round put your left foot on the other pedal and keep pushing. That’s all there is to it. Easy as breathing.’

‘What if I can’t breathe either?’

‘Listen to you. One excuse after another. Come on.’

‘It doesn’t balance.’

‘It’ll balance just fine when you’re moving. Trust me.’

‘Said the spider to the fly,’ I said but I sat up straighter, stiffening my spine. Cautiously I put my right foot on the pedal. The bicycle started to edge forward, taking the pedal with it.

‘That’s it,’ Emyr said. ‘Now the other one.’

‘I’ll fall.’

‘Stop that. I told you, I’ve got you.’

I’ve got you. I wanted to kiss him. Gripping the handlebars, I lifted my other foot from the ground and suddenly we were moving.

‘Yes!’ Emyr cried. ‘Now pedal.’

I pedalled. I made it maybe twenty feet along the road before I realised Emyr was no longer holding on. The fear jolted in me, setting the bike to wobbling, and I fell, catching my shin on the pedal as I crashed to the ground. Emyr loped up behind me.

‘Are you all right?’

I disentangled myself shakily from the bicycle. My woollen stockings were torn and my hand fizzed from banging my elbow.

‘Did you see that?’ I said, my eyes shining. ‘I did it! I bicycled!’

Emyr laughed. ‘You did. Want to do it again?’

I glanced down at my hand. There was a gash in the side of it, blood all over. I put my other hand over it to cover it but suddenly the thought of getting back on made me feel giddy.

‘That’s all right,’ I said. ‘You don’t want to be late for your friend.’

‘Tony won’t care. He’s always late for everything.’

‘Still, best to get off. Quick, before I come to my senses and set you to work.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Surer than that.’

Emyr did not need telling twice. In a blink he was off and pedalling down the lane.

‘Back by six,’ I called after him and he waved, both hands off the handlebars, the daft twmffat, and was gone. My hand hurt. I thought there might be glass in it but I could not bring myself to look. I had never been good with blood. The last thing I wanted was to pass out in the lane like a lunatic.

I almost walked straight past the stranger standing by the track that led to our neighbour’s yard. From his battered canvas jacket I supposed he was a farmer. His face was strong, almost ugly, the features all too big, and his thick hair fell over his eyes. He reminded me of Ifan’s friend Will

Llewellyn from the quarry, something in the ease of his limbs maybe, the sense of fitting in the world. He saw me looking and smiled, a slow lazy lopsided smile, like smiling was as commonplace as breathing. Not a farmer then, or not the kind I knew. There was copper in his hair, a reddish gloss like a fresh conker. Will Llewellyn had been fair. I wondered how long he had been there watching me. I hoped he had not seen me fall.

A sign was tied to the open gate behind him with baling twine. CAU'R GIÂT, it read in uneven capitals. SHUT THE GATE. The gate leaned drunkenly against the wall, its lowest rung buried in the long grass. Its hinges were long gone.

'Are you all right?' he asked in English. 'That was quite a tumble.'

I did not know the word tumble but it was not hard to guess its meaning. I clasped my bleeding hand against my stomach.

'Siort orau,' I said, I'm tickety-boo, and he shook his head and went on smiling and staring at me like it was quite ordinary to smile and stare.

'It's a graze, that's all,' I muttered in Welsh. 'A scrape. It's nothing.'

His smile broadened. 'Right. And in English?'

I could have done it if I had wanted. I might joke to Emyr about my sorry English but it had been drummed into me at school for long enough. Back then I had thought the English language beautiful, a skyful of stars that would guide me like a sailor to where everything started, and even when I gave up on that there were always those things you had to do in English wherever you were, doctors' appointments and school letters and applications to the Farmers' Union and anything to do with the local council or the law. People complained, they resented it, but nothing ever changed. Sure, my grammar was woeful, I had never liked the verbs, but I could still put an Englishman out of his misery if I had a mind to. Except that I looked at this Englishman with his floppy hair and his shameless staring smile and the mind was not there. This was Wales, as my husband and son were always reminding me. If he was after talking, let him do it in Welsh.

'Nage,' I said. No apology, just no. It felt good. 'Fy ngwlad, fy rheolau.' My country, my rules.

The Englishman shook his head. 'Nope. Not a clue.' He was so sure and easy in his ignorance I could have smacked him.

‘Beth sy’n bod arnoch chi?’ I snapped. What is wrong with you people? ‘How is it you all expect to turn up here and have us talk to you in your own language just to suit yourselves? How long have you lived here anyway? I bet you couldn’t even walk into a shop and ask for a loaf of bread. Of course you couldn’t. If you had a word of Welsh, you’d have told me to put a blydi sock in it by now. You’d be storming down the lane. Hell, you might even be able to read that sign written in blydi great capital letters behind you and shut the blydi gate.’

I never meant to run on like that but once I started it turned out I did not want to stop. I half-expected him to walk away but he stayed where he was, smiling and staring at me till I ran myself dry.

‘Gosh,’ he said. ‘You clearly needed to get that off your chest.’

I glared at him, swallowing a twitch of discomfort. Perhaps it was not true he knew no Welsh. Perhaps he had understood every word I said.

‘Pity it all went over my head.’ He grinned, not in the least put out. ‘If you want to scold me properly, you’ll need to do it in English. You do speak English, don’t you? I thought everyone around here did.’

I opened my mouth to answer, then realised I would only be answering his question for him so I closed it again. The Englishman laughed.

‘Clearly we’re going to have to find another way. How about you blink once for yes and twice for no?’

I did not mean to blink but I did it anyway, I could not help it. Then I blinked a second time and a third. He laughed again.

‘Shall I take that as a maybe?’

I wanted to laugh then too, or a part of me did, the part that was not hot with indignation and an embarrassed kind of shame, and suddenly I saw myself through his eyes, hands clasped to my chest like a swooning damsel in the films. Hurriedly I let them drop.

‘Christ,’ he said in a different voice. He was not smiling any more. I looked down. My blouse was covered in blood.

‘Show me,’ he said, gesturing at my hand, and when I did not move he took it, his fingers firm around my wrist, turning it to look. ‘Ouch.’

I could not bring myself to look at it. I fixed my eyes on his cheekbone, the whorl of his ear.

‘It’s deep,’ he said. ‘You might need a stitch.’

I tried to nod. Welsh or English, the words had all deserted me. My head swam.

‘It needs cleaning with soap,’ he said. ‘Sebon, right? And disinfectant if you have it. TCP. Are those even letters in Welsh? Or honey. Honey, honey, bugger it, I know that one.’

‘Mêl,’ I managed.

‘Mêl. Ie. Diolch.’

Swaying, I closed my eyes against the swirl of silver. So he did speak Welsh, I thought dizzily. Scraps of it, anyway. Diolch: thank you. Ie: yes. Not in the correct form, of course, not the way he had used it, but then yes was a difficult word in Welsh. It all depended on the question.

‘Should you sit down?’

I shook my head. He was still holding my hand. I thought about taking it back but it did not seem like something I could do. I breathed slowly, letting the faintness pass.

‘I’d recommend te. Strong, with siwgr for the shock. Or mêl of course, assuming you’ve any left over by then.’

I opened my eyes. The Englishman was smiling.

‘You don’t have to worry. I know a few groceries but that bollocking you gave me? Not a single word. Except maybe Saes, which I’m reliably informed is an insult around here. And blydi of course. Some swear words work in any language.’ He winked and let go of my hand. Briefly, sharply, I wished he would take it back.

‘Mêl,’ he said again more sternly. Then, hands in his pockets, he turned and walked away down the lane the way Emyr had gone, towards the road to Bala.

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–4–

Mari used to say that spring was like a new dress, it made her want to lift her skirts and twirl. I missed the lambs' tails on the hazels, there were no hazels at the new house, but the fields behind Fron-goch were vivid green, the light scrubbed clean, and along the lane the verges were creamy with primroses.

I thought the longer days would bring Dai back to himself. All winter he had come and gone like the mountains, so that sometimes you could see the angry edges of him clear against the sky and sometimes there was nothing but cloud. The spring would be an end to that, I thought, an end and a beginning. April marked the year. The past was mourned and laid to rest. It was time to stop grieving.

The sun shone, out of the wind it was almost warm, but Dai's clouds did not lift. He still rose at dawn to milk the cows but though he sometimes started on the fencing or the spreading or one of the hundred other jobs that came with spring, he left them all half done. A stretch of the barn roof fell in and he put a tarpaulin over it, weighed down with bricks. He said he would fix it but he never did. Every time I came in from the hens or the vegetables or laden down with shopping from the Co-op the tarpaulin flapped at me, its edges tattered by the wind. As long as I had known him Dai had never stopped indoors when there was work to be done. Now I found him hunched in the chair by the kitchen range, rocking back and forth, back and forth, like he would grind those rockers to dust. I thought it might be the pills he was taking for his heart but he would not see the doctor. Stop plaguing me, he snapped and his hostility stung me like a whip. For the love of God, can you not just let me be.

I might have had more pity for him if he had not also been snappish with Emyr. Emyr was not tough at the edges as I was at his age. He had not had to learn how to endure. When he could not reach Dai with the new stories he fell back on the old ones, stories of the dragons of Dinas Emrys, one red and one white, sleeping in their underground lake, and of Merlin and his prophecy of a new king, descended from the eagles of Eryri, who

would lead Wales to freedom, but Dai who had told him those stories again and again when he was small, had never tired of telling them, only bit his head off.

‘Can a man not eat one meal in peace?’ he barked and Emyr flinched, his face pinched with humiliation and hurt. That night I found him in the cowshed, his arms around Hillman Minx’s neck. He had always taken comfort in those cows. As a small boy he used to press his face against their flanks while they were being milked, an upended bucket for a stool. He liked the smell of them, he said, the noises they made with their insides. He could not abide a dry bath sponge or labels in underclothes or wool against his skin but he liked the rasp of a cow’s tongue on his hand. He said if you kept your eyes shut it held the feeling in.

Emyr did not turn round as I came in. I stood beside him, pulling gently on Hillman Minx’s ears. It was Emyr who had given the cows their names. Dai’s family had always named their calves for trees – Collen, Helygen, Criafol – but when Emyr was five Dai said it was his turn to pick and he chose Vauxhall Cresta. Emyr knew all the car names, even then. Dai’s mother was affronted, she said he needed the sauciness smacking out of him, but Emyr did not budge. He said a cow needed a name she could be proud of.

‘No one is proud to be a tree,’ he said.

Dai nodded gravely and took his side. After that the calves were all cars: Sunbeam Alpine and Vauxhall Cresta and Ford Anglia and Hillman Minx who was not a minx at all but placid as a sloth. When I shortened them – Sunny, Angie, Cress – Emyr scolded me. A cow needed respect, he said, even Morris Six who was so greedy to be fed she yanked the bottle right out of his hand.

Hillman Minx snuffled gently, stamping her feet. Emyr rubbed his nose on the back of his hand.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ he said. ‘Why does he have to be like that?’

I wished I could put my arms around him, the way he had never let me as a boy.

‘It’s hard for him,’ I said. ‘All of that trouble, the valley, it took it out of him.’

‘So what, now he is giving up? Did you know Mr Wozniak was born in eastern Poland?’ He twisted round to face me, his eyes bright in the gloom. ‘When the Soviets invaded they executed his father. The rest of the family were sent to Siberia. Mr Wozniak’s grandmother died on the train, they pushed her body out onto the track. His mother and sisters died in the camp. When Stalin changed sides, Mr Wozniak walked to Persia and joined the British Army. He lost his hand at Monte Cassino and when we won the war we gave his country to Stalin. He can never go back, they would shoot him as a traitor, but he has never given up. Wales isn’t even his homeland, Mam, but he says he will fight tyranny with his dying breath. He says if we stop fighting we disappear.’

I sighed. ‘Your father fought for a long time.’

‘He needs to fight now.’

‘Be patient. Give him time.’

‘Why do you always have to take his side?’

‘Emyr, bach, that’s not—’

But he was already gone.

* * *

On a rainy morning in May Dai came in late from milking. Emyr had already left for school. He did not wash. He marched over to the table in his muddy boots, his wet coat trailing drips across the floor. His hands were filthy. I put his porridge down in front of him and went to fetch the teapot. I did not have the stomach for a fight. When I came back Dai was staring at the wall. Under his coat I could see the blue stripe of his pyjamas.

‘You’ll let it go cold,’ I said. Of all the things to say it seemed the safest. Dai did not answer. I poured his tea, set his pills beside his saucer. The clock ticked. Dai picked up his spoon. Then with a bang he set it down again. He told me that the cows were sold. They would be gone by noon.

I gaped at him. ‘Does Emyr know?’

‘What’s it got to do with him?’

He glared at me, the fury in him thick enough to touch. I thought of Emyr coming home, finding the cows gone. I did not know what to say. I

gaped at him bewildered, the words like missing teeth in my mouth. Dai's jaw was set. He did not look at his breakfast. Scraping back his chair, he pulled his coat around him and went out into the yard.

I watched him from the window. The sky was dark as pencil lead, the rain coming down in rods. I knew I should go after him, make him come back, he had not taken his pills, he was not even dressed, for pity's sake, but I went on standing there. I did not understand what was happening to us. It was not just Emyr. What did he think we would do for money with the cows gone? How were we supposed to scrape by? There were farmers who sold up and went to work on someone else's farm. Farming was a risky and relentless business, there was a lot to be said for a nest egg and a weekly wage, but Dai would never hear of it. He would die on his own hill, he said, before he took another man's shilling, and besides, who would have him? Across the county small farms were going under. Young men with strength to spare could not find work. Who would hire a man with a bad heart, a man too worn out and weary to raise his backside from his chair?

By the time he reached the gate he was drenched, his hair plastered to his head. I could see the pale gleam of his scalp where it had worn thin. The pity I felt for him then only made me angrier. Dai was right. Anger was better than despair. Furiously I scraped his porridge into the hen bucket. Emyr was about to sit his examinations. How could Dai do this to him, now of all times? How could he do it to all of us?

That blydi rocking chair. When I kicked it it jerked backwards, hard the first time and then grudgingly, and fell still.

* * *

The cowshed stank of manure and rotting straw. God only knew the last time Dai had hosed it out. A cow stuck her head through the bars to greet me, her nose glistening in the gloom. Humber Hawk, the boldest and always in the lead. I rubbed her nose, the tufted whorl of hair on her forehead.

'There's my girl,' I murmured, swallowing the ache in my throat. Even after he had nothing left to say to us Dai still talked to the cows. I heard him

sometimes as he brought them in for milking, the croon of his voice somewhere between a secret and a song, and I wanted to pull on it like a rope, to draw him out from under the heavy weight that trapped him.

And just like that, I understood. What were the cows for Emyr but a trap? He might miss them for a week or two, he might resent his father for making the decision alone, but he would get over it. Better than that, he would flourish. With the cows gone, the last traces of Emyr's future in the valley were gone too. Dai was right, though not the way he meant it. The cows had nothing to do with Emyr. When the cows were gone he would be free.

Humber Hawk mooed softly. I smiled at her.

'I know,' I said. 'I'll miss you too.'

I would too, in a way. In all the years Dai and I had been married the cows had started and ended our days. The shapes of them, their broad heads and long straight backs, the rounded crests of their hooks and pins were as familiar to me as the slopes of the valley. I could not imagine Dai without them. The sheep were always lumped together, numbered for the subsidy but rarely singled out. Even the lambs we bottle-fed were swallowed up into the flock, their names forgotten. It was the hill Dai grieved for, not the animals, not individually. You could not grieve for sheep.

The cows were different. The cows were their own selves, each with her own nature. Dai had raised them from calves. He had neglected the fields and the fences, he had left the farm buildings to fall down, but he had gone on tending to the cows. They were the reason he got up in the morning. How would it lift his wretchedness to have them gone? I sighed, crossing my arms over the familiar wrench of pity and exasperation. Where was he anyway? What possessed him, this morning of all mornings, to head off up the hill in his pyjamas, for God's sake, and the rain coming down fit for drowning? The farmer would be here at noon and who was going to deal with that? It would be like the blydi foreman and his clipboard all over again, lorries blocking the yard and me hanging about like a bump on a log waiting for Dai to take it into his head to come back, if he ever troubled to come back, in this rain he'd catch his death—

A single thought cut through me, cold and clean, slicing me in two.

The gun.

I ran across the yard, splashing blindly through puddles. It was all I could see, Dai standing white-faced under the apple tree, the pistol hanging from his hand. If he had it with him – but I could not think of that. I didn't stop to take off my boots, I couldn't, I ran straight upstairs, falling to my knees to yank the suitcase from its place under the bed, but when I opened the lid it was still there in my apron, just as I had left it. I did not unwrap it. I held the rust-streaked bundle on my lap like a baby while my heart slid back down into my chest and the rain ran down my anorak and onto the floor. My face was wet. I closed my eyes, rubbing at them with my sleeve. They were there in the darkness, Teg with her glazed-over eyes and Emyr weeping, his jersey bright with blood.

The front door slammed. Banging down the suitcase lid, I shoved it back under the bed. Later, when things were settled, I would get rid of it.

Dai was standing sodden at the bottom of the stairs. Something in me squeezed tight. He looked so weary, so defeated.

'Look at you,' I said. 'You're wet through.'

He did not answer, just went on standing there.

'Go get yourself dried off. I'll make some tea.'

'I don't want tea.'

'Dai, please, just—'

'I don't want tea!'

'This isn't about tea!'

I glared at Dai. Dai glared at the floor.

'Please,' I said desperately. 'You have to talk to me. To someone. We can't go on like this.'

Dai stiffened. He turned away, his hand on the latch of the front door.

'Don't you dare walk out on me,' I said. I was afraid I might cry.

'The cows need doing.'

'The cows can wait. We need to talk. You need to take your pills. The doctor—'

'Myn diawl, Olwen, that's enough!' he flared and, like a struck flint, I flared too.

‘What is wrong with you? Selling the cows, for God’s sake! Did you not think to talk to me?’

‘It’s what you wanted, isn’t it? What else is there to talk about?’

‘What *I* wanted? Since when have you given two straws about that?’

For a moment he glowered at me, his eyes cold and strange. Then wrenching open the front door, he walked away across the yard. I slammed it behind him. I was shaking, suddenly cold to the bone. In the kitchen I boiled the kettle. The range was hot, stoked high, but though I leaned near enough to scald myself I could not fetch the warmth of it inside me. I could not get the shivering to stop.

I made tea. Strong, with sugar for the shock, I thought as I spooned in two teaspoonfuls, absently touching the scar on my palm. Outside the rain was easing. Beyond the wet slate of the cowshed roof, the shape of the mountain was emerging from the cloud. A faint wash of sunlight gleamed on rock. I could hear the trailer grinding up the lane. It backed slowly, carefully into the yard, brake lights bright beneath a crust of mud. A man jumped down from the cab. I did not know him. Together he and Dai lowered the ramp at the back of the trailer.

In an hour or two, the cows would be gone and Dai would no longer be a farmer. What would we do then? How would we live? I thought of the little books Ifan had made for me when he went to live at the barracks in the quarry, stories to read when he was gone. The stories were all about a girl called Olwen who had marvellous adventures. She tamed wolves and talked to birds and flew to far-off places on the back of a fire-breathing dragon. The stories did not have pictures because Ifan said it was better to imagine than to see. We both knew it was because he could not draw. The Olwen in his stories was not frightened of anything. She could sing a monster from his cave and undo a fairy spell and get a raging giant to put down his giant hatchet and dance. She turned the bad girls at school into beetles and kept them in a matchbox on the windowsill. Where shall we go today, Olwen? the dragon asked her. What shall we do?

I was seven. It was easier to imagine flying and dragons than being thirty-four.

I refilled the kettle and set it back to boiling. I still had those books, tucked away in an old tobacco tin at the back of the press upstairs, though I had not looked at them for a long time. In the yard Dai and the man were setting out the cattle gates, metal ringing against metal. I would make tea and take it out to them. When the tea was drunk and the man and the cows were gone, I would wash the cups and we would not be farmers any more. We would begin whatever it was that was going to happen next. We would try to start again.

Another man came out of the cowshed. An old man with a big belly and a cap pulled low against the rain. I had not seen him go in. He stood in the middle of our yard, bandy legs set wide like he owned the place, and gestured at Dai like he owned him too. I would have known him anywhere. Mervyn Lewis from Pen-y-nant.

The kettle shrieked. I snatched it off the heat. Mervyn Lewis. All the farms in the county who might have bought our cows and Dai had sold them to Mervyn Lewis who had never farmed an acre in his life.

It took an eternity to get those cows into the trailer. I heard them griping and slithering on the slippery cobbles, clattering against the metal fences, their hooves striking the ramp in noisy rhythm as the men whistled at them and shouted instructions. I sat frozen at the kitchen table as the clock ticked away the minutes. Mervyn Lewis. Dai knew what that gwilliad had done to Ifan. Everyone around here knew.

‘Him?’ I burst out when Dai finally came in. ‘You sold the cows to him?’

Dai sat down in his rocking chair.

‘Dirty money’s still money, isn’t it?’ he said flatly. ‘Or have you changed your mind?’

* * *

He came up to Tyˆ-eithin the day after we buried him. Ifan in the earth under the hazels and Mervyn Lewis in our kitchen, his chins piled up on the knot of his tie. Mari made him tea. Mervyn Lewis was the foreman at the quarry. She thought he had come to pay his respects. Instead he folded his

hands over his belly and informed her that the company had completed its investigation. There was always an investigation, he said, after a fatality. The full report of the investigation was confidential, he was not at liberty to share it, but he had put down the main points in a letter. The letter said the quarry was safe, that the company bore no responsibility. At the bottom in capital letters it said DEATH BY SUICIDE. You can challenge the decision if you wish, Mervyn Lewis said, that's your right under the law, so long as you understand that the enquiry will be conducted in public. We can let every single disgusting perverted detail come out, and they will come out, believe me. Or we can settle things here and now. He had a chequebook with the quarry's name on it. He wrote a number on a cheque and signed his name on it and put it on the dresser. Then he straightened his tie and went home.

Four months later Mari was dead. Mervyn Lewis was blessed with a long life and a generous pension. It was not Reverend Thomas who made me an unbeliever. It was not even Dai's mother. I just added them both to the list of people I hoped would burn in Hell.

* * *

Days passed, then weeks. I could barely bring myself to look at Dai. I spoke to him through Emyr or not at all. Dai said nothing. He left the cattle gates set up as they were in the yard.

'Tell your father to put those blydi things away,' I said to Emyr, I said it over and over, but Dai never did. Emyr finished his examinations, the summer holidays started and he was off and away, out wherever it was that he went, and still those gates stood there, a fenced-in path to nowhere. On the rare days he was home Emyr propped his bicycle against them. One night after supper, when I went out to shut up the hens, he came with me.

'How long are you going to be angry with him?' he said.

'I'm not angry,' I protested but we both knew I was. It was not just those gates. It was the silence and the rocking and the money ticking down and Emyr never home because what was there to be home for and did Dai think we could live on heather and fresh air? I was gripped by a terror that

was half vertigo, half blinding rage. I banged pots and stamped and slammed around the house like the noise might somehow rouse him but he did not rouse. He rocked in his chair, his face blank like neither of us was there at all. It was as if the man inside him, the man he had once been, had shrunk so small that he could no longer see to look out. I did not recognise him. I did not recognise myself. I could not think what would become of us.

‘I’ll do them,’ Emyr said. ‘The gates.’

‘It’s a job for your father.’

‘I said I’ll do them.’

I looked up at the black shape of the hill against the sky, the bright gold coin of the setting sun. At the old house, when the evenings grew long, the valley filled with light and the air sang with the cries of weaned lambs calling for their mothers.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

I wanted to say something else, something that would set things right between us, but I did not know what that was. Emyr turned away, looking down towards the house.

‘The water is going to industry,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘The water from the valley. It’s not going to the people of Liverpool. They don’t need it. They never did. They’ve got too much already. The Corporation took our water so they could sell it. To make a profit.’

‘But that’s not true. Remember what that Braddock woman said about the slums, three hundred thousand souls, she said—’

‘It was a lie. It was always a lie. They’ve finally admitted it. They want it for factories. They’ll make a fortune.’

I stared at him. The sun disappeared behind the hill.

‘Was it your da told you that?’ I asked.

Emyr shook his head.

‘But he knows?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘You can’t tell him.’

‘I know.’

I sighed, shaking my head.

‘This blydi place. The sooner you’re gone from here the better,’ I said and I could have bitten out my tongue because he gaped at me, his face twisted with furious disbelief.

‘You don’t get it, do you?’ he said. ‘I belong here. This blydi place is my home.’

* * *

I should have been happy. All those mothers whose sons could not get away fast enough, who came back with their families a day or two at Christmas or never came back at all. Beti Brith-dir had lost her boys as a pair to Australia when the quarry finally closed down. Ten pounds it cost them each to go. Neither was twenty. Beti had photos in her parlour of the weddings she and Bill had not attended, the grandchildren they had never met. After they found the cancer in her, Rose always said it was the grief that put it there. No cure for that, she said, and the fear squeezed her voice so it sounded like a joke.

I could not imagine it, Emyr ten thousand miles away. Breakfast at supper time, midsummer in December, all of it otherwise and upside down. I still knew that, if he asked me, I would tell him to go. It was different for Beti. Her boys were rubblers. They had travelled halfway round the world, swapped day for night, and their lives were just the same, the same scraping by and making do, their work just as dirty and dangerous as it had been across the hill.

Emyr, though, Emyr had to go. It was only by going he would find the full stretch of himself. At the village school he could not kick a football or make a catch. He collected the same cigarette cards they all collected but he never wanted to swap. The other boys laughed at him. Maggot, they called him. They left him out of their games. Emyr said it did not matter, that he did not want to play with them anyway, but it mattered to me. Those boys were bullies and blockheads. Not one of them had a lick of learning. The idea that they might want to improve themselves was beyond their understanding. They were proud of their ignorance. All they wanted was the

brawn to heft heavy machinery and a bottomless belly for drink. Half of them could not count the fingers on their own hands.

My son was not like them. If he stayed, he would always be the misfit, the maggot. But out there, out in the world, it was the boys like him who thrived. Brainy boys with a hunger for books and thoughts too big for their bodies, whose fierce curiosity lit them up like lanterns. Out there Emyr would discover what in a fairer world he would have known all along, that it was cleverness that counted. That being Emyr was not a burden to be borne but something to be proud of. That, out there in the world, the way he was was the way everyone wanted to be.

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The bus put me down at the top of the valley. I crossed the stile and started up the hill towards Tyˆ-eithin but I could not shake them. I kept seeing their faces, their dark stares. Gwynne Owen Evans, one of them was called. A Welshman. He was twenty-one. At eight o'clock tomorrow morning he and his friend would be hanged.

The hill was tussocky, bristled with spike-rush and slabs of grey rock. I would never have known, only someone left a paper on the bus. Their pictures were on the front page. They had killed a man while the other lad's wife and children waited in the car. They were after money but all they got away with was £10 and a watch given to the man by the laundry where he worked. A reward for long service. The senselessness of it only made the horror worse.

At the rise I paused to catch my breath, looking over the wall towards Arenig Fawr. It was a hot day and very still, the white sky smooth as a ceiling. Behind me was the ruined valley, the gravel pit where Bryn-mawr had once been, but I did not look that way. I looked at Arenig, double-peaked against the August sky. As a little boy Emyr had insisted on walking the length of this wall, his arms wide like aeroplane wings. The wobble of the stones delighted him. When we stopped to rest he never wanted to get down. He lay on his stomach on the stones and gazed at the grey-white patterns of the lichen. Like ice, he said, entranced, and he squeezed his eyes shut and put his tongue to it, like he could taste the cold.

We had come up here often when he was small. I wanted him to know it. He could never know Mari or Ifan but he could know the dip and slope of the hill, the hazels and the stream and the grassy mound where Ifan lay. He could know the me I had been when I was his age, running about half-wild with a string of rowan berries round my wrist for good luck. Tyˆ-eithin was scarcely two miles from the old house but it might have been another world. Nobody came here. We played games and paddled in the stream and on wet days we sat together in the hay window of the tumbledown barn and

watched the rain move in veils across the mountain. It was our secret kingdom. Tyˆ-nain, Emyr called it, Grandma's house.

'It's English too,' he said, when he had just started school and he wrote it in the dust with a stick, T9, the tail of the 9 stuck into its circle like a lollipop.

And then Emyr grew up. He did not want to walk with me. I could have gone alone but I never did. It was a different place without a child there to play with. I thought of Ifan sometimes, alone under the hazels, but I let him be. I was busy. The dead did not mind where you remembered them, I told myself, as long as you remembered. I knew that mostly I was afraid of going up there and finding that, without Emyr, there was nothing left of him still there.

* * *

The gate was off its hinges. It lay in mossy pieces among the nettles, its slats frilled with mushrooms. I stepped over it and walked up the overgrown track. Brambles coiled across the field wall like barbed wire, clusters of dark berries glistening in the prickles. I picked one and put it in my mouth but the fruit was hard and sour and I spat it out. At the turn up to the house I stopped. As a girl I had always thought of the house as part of the hill, its stones rooted in the earth like something grown, not made. Now the hill was halfway to reclaiming it. Nettles and spike-rush pushed up against the walls and the roof was mostly moss. Part of the chimney had fallen away. A rowan sapling sprouted from its crumbling lip.

All summer since the cows had gone, I had walked and walked. Not to any place particular, anywhere would do so long as it was somewhere else, but I never came here. So much had already been lost or broken. I wanted to leave Tyˆ-eithin as it was.

And then on the High Street in Bala I bumped into Meic Pen-y-celyn coming out of the Midland Bank. He was wearing a tie. I could not remember ever seeing Meic in a tie.

'Dai's heard, I suppose?' he said. 'About the graveyard?'

'What about it?'

Meic sucked his teeth. He told me the Corporation had removed the bodies for reburial on the date agreed, only not one by one and carefully. They dug them up with a digger. They screened the graveyard off with a plastic sheet and behind the sheet they heaped up the bones like a bonfire. The next day a builders' lorry came and took them away.

He told the story plain, the bulges beaten out, but I heard the relish in him. They could none of them help it, in the end. There was an awful kind of triumph to be had in the Corporation's unswerving callousness and contempt. I thought of Mari, her bones jumbled in with all the other dead. I should never have let her be buried in that place. I should have found a way to have her brought back to Tyˆ-eithin. She would have been happy there, tucked up next to Ifan under the hazels.

'You'll tell Dai?' Meic said and I nodded. I knew I wouldn't. It would not do him any good to hear it. I was on the bus going home before it occurred to me to wonder if he already knew. I was so sure he never spoke to anyone but how would I know? He never spoke to me.

I thought about Meic and the builders' lorry all the way home. By the time the bus set me down in Fron-goch I had made myself a promise. Twenty years too late, I would lay Mari to rest at Tyˆ-eithin, if not her bones then the breath of her. I knew already what to take. At home I took the battered tin from the back of the bedroom press and went through it. I found Ifan's little books and the finger puppets Mari sewed from scraps of cloth and Mabli the peg doll, her roughly painted face half rubbed away, and a string of wizened rowan berries, my shabby store of keepsakes, but the stone was not there. It jolted me. I had thought it was safe. Mari had given it to me when Lowri went away and for years, even after Dai and I were married, I had carried it in my pocket, a creamy brown stone the size of a blackbird's egg and pocked with shallow holes like woodworm. In the middle, like a dark brown thumbmark, there was a dent and in the middle of the dent a round hole that went all the way through. A glain neidr, an adder stone. Only good things passed through the hole of a glain neidr. Bad luck got stuck. A witch could not hide from one, however good her disguise. If you looked at her through the hole, you would see the witch she really was.

I hunted through my drawers and in the dresser. I did not find it. In the end I took the rowan berries, strung on their scarlet thread. Mari had sewn me a new string every autumn for good luck. I wrapped them in one of her old handkerchiefs. I tried not to think about the adder stone. I told myself that a story was just a story, a stone just a stone. That no matter what I had done with it everything that had happened would have happened just the same.

Around the door of the house at Tyˆ-eithin the willowherb was shoulder high. I touched the rowan berries in my pocket, for luck or just safekeeping, and pushed my way through. The front door hung drunkenly from its hinges. I leaned against it and it yielded, scraping against the flags. In all the times we had come up here I had never once brought Emyr inside. The past trapped in that kitchen was too narrow and too sad. Now it just felt abandoned. The walls were peeling, the windows broken or boarded up. Sheep had found their way inside. The muddy flags were strewn with knobbled balls of shit.

No one had lived there since Mari died. No one expected them to. People from round here carried a map of the valley in their heads – the bridge where old Elis Pen-y-celyn was stopped by the bailiff with a hare down each trouser leg, the hayfield Alun Parry's father scythed single-handed in one day, the cherry tree by the Williams's barn that burst into blossom one frozen winter day in 1917, the day Arthyr Williams, missing in action, was found alive – and on that map there was a line around the Pugh place. Stay away, the line said, do not cross. As a little girl I had thought the line was ours, a circle we drew around ourselves to hold us safe. It was only later that I realised it was there to mark us out. Luck like ours was like consumption or cold sores or lice. Get too close and you might catch it too.

I was the youngest, the baby. By the time I was old enough to notice, the others had grown up and gone. Gareth and Ifan boarded up at the quarry and only came home on Sundays, and Lowri lived in with the Parrys at Bryn-mawr. She did the heavy work, the fires and the laundry and the floors. She got an afternoon off a week but she hardly ever came home and when she did she showed no interest in me. She called me Olwen, always Olwen, snapping the syllables like rubber bands. Gareth and Ifan called me

Ol. Short for Ôl-ystyriaeth, Ifan teased, the Afterthought. Mari did not like that. She told me the story of Olwen who was the daughter of the powerful giant Ysbaddaden and so gentle that white clovers sprang up behind her wherever she went. A fine name, Olwen, she said, but she never used it. She called me Wiwer, Squirrel. No one but Mari ever called me that.

I was six when Lowri got married and moved to British Columbia, eleven when the war came. Gareth enlisted but not Ifan. Slate mining was reserved, he and Will were needed at the quarry. They still came home for their dinner on Sundays. At school the boys waved at the planes flying over. It felt like a game until a Flying Fortress crashed on Arenig Fawr. All eight airmen on board were killed. Sometimes when you walked up there you found bits of twisted metal in the heather.

After the air crash everything went wrong. Ifan died. Mari got ill. When she collapsed a police car came and took her to the hospital because the ambulances were needed for the war. Mrs Parry fetched me to Bryn-mawr. I did not want to go but she said that the Lord saw into people's hearts and she took me anyway. The Parrys had three sons at school and the two red-haired evacuees from Liverpool. I slept in the bed that my sister had slept in, in a slope-ceilinged room in the attic. Mrs Parry said it would be a comfort but it was not a comfort, not to me. The bed was hard and lumpy. I missed Mari.

Mrs Parry said to wait till Mari was well. She said a hospital was no place for children but I kept on and on at her till she gave in. We went on the bus. I got off at the hospital and Mrs Parry went to the shops. The hospital was very big and it was the wrong time for visiting but the nurse on Mari's ward was kind. She said I could stay if I was quiet as a mouse. Mari's bed was at the very end. I sat down beside her and put my head against her arm. She smelled strange. Her skin was slack and yellow like the skin on a blister. She had her eyes closed, I thought she was sleeping.

'Hello, Mam,' I said and she laughed. Laughing made her cough.

'I thought I was dreaming,' she said. Talking made her cough too. I helped her drink some water and told her to hush but she would not hush, even when I told her about the nurse and being quiet as a mouse. She said it was time.

The words swam away from me. Mari's bedroom drawer, an envelope with Lowri's name on it, an official certificate, Lowri's name and mine. My brain shut them out but my body understood. A hole opened up in the middle of me that went down and down. I had to stay very still to keep from falling in. Mari held my hand in both of hers. She said it was just a piece of paper. That I was hers and she was mine and always would be. She had to fight to catch her breath. I looked at my arm on the bed, my hand inside hers. It did not feel like it belonged to me.

'Wiwer fach,' Mari rasped. Little squirrel. She tried to say something else but the words stuck in her throat and when I held the cup of water to her lips she coughed so hard she spilled it all over herself. When the kind nurse came back she was angry.

'See what you've gone and done,' she scolded. 'Your mam's wet through.'

I shook my head. I was numb all over, even my mouth was numb. My tongue was hard to move.

'Fy nain,' I said. My grandmother.

'Right,' the nurse said yanking off the sheets as though it was nothing, as though the difference did not matter in the least.

* * *

I did not go into the house. I pulled the door as shut as it would go and walked up to the copse. The cloud had thickened, swallowing the tops of the mountains, and in the field the rowan tree was scarlet with berries. On the hazels the cobnuts were coming, pale as knuckles in their frilly caps. I knelt down by Ifan's mound and I thought of Gwynne Owen Evans, his dark hair falling in his eyes, his face side by side with the other lad's like pictures from a wedding. Neither of the boys had admitted to the murder. Each of them had blamed the other. Now they were bound together forever. Till death do us part. I had thought my brother a man, infinitely adult. It was only now I understood how little Mari had had of him. Her precious son, dead at twenty-one.

I had a trowel with me. Carefully I cut out a round of turf and, when the hole was deep enough, I laid the string of rowan berries in their handkerchief at the bottom. The wall to the field was fallen in. I set one of the mossy stones as a headstone. I picked some ragwort and some tansy and some wild thyme and tied the posy with a piece of grass. I thought of all the psalms I had by heart, the lines about gladness and eternal life, and I bowed my head.

'Welcome home, Mam,' I said.

It was years before it dawned on me that Mrs Parry had known all along. That Lowri's job at Bryn-mawr had been another of her acts of Christian charity, for all that it bagged her a skivvy at a bargain price. A scandal like that could not be hidden, not in the valley, not without sending Lowri away, and where would she have gone? There was no money. If she knew who the father was, she never told. That box on the birth certificate was blank. Lowri was fifteen years old and a Pugh. Most likely half the village knew. Dai's mother did. After Dai asked me to marry him, she came to see me. She asked me if I had told him about my sister.

'Or do I mean your mother?' she said and when I asked what business it was of hers her mouth pinched. 'It's every mother's business if her son buys soiled goods.'

She had a number written on a piece of paper. She showed it to me.

'Leave him alone,' she said. 'And that's how much I'll help you.'

'And if I don't?'

'Then I'll tell him myself.'

I took a week to answer. I wanted her to stew. I thought about the money. It was not a fortune but it was still a lot more than I had ever thought to have. Enough to start again. I could walk out of Lowri's story and my own, I could be someone else completely. A brand-new Pugh.

I thought about it but I always knew I would not take it. A week later I stood on her doorstep and I told her I was not for sale. She could tell Dai whatever she wanted, it was of no concern to me. I loved Dai and he loved me and no amount of malicious pot-stirring would change that. When the time came for us to leave the valley – and we would leave, she should be in no doubt about that – we would leave it together.

‘What’ll he say, do you think,’ I mused, ‘when he knows you paid me to break his heart?’

I never told him. Not about his mother and not about Lowri either. Perhaps he knew about Lowri already, I never asked. It did not matter. Shame was a choice and we had closed the door on it. But sometimes when I thought about the money and the life it might have bought, I thought of Dai’s mother’s face that day when she understood that the Pugh girl had won, that from now on her son would be scum and her too, and the remembering was worth every penny.

* * *

It was raining when I came down, lightly at first and then in buckets. By the time I reached the bridge above the New Road I was wet to the skin. Rain pocked the river as it rushed and tumbled away over the stones. Not for much longer. The dam was almost finished. In a month or two the floodgates would be shut and the river would be stuck fast between the hills for all eternity, flat as a pancake and staring at the sky.

The bus was late. A few cars sped past in sweeping arcs of spray, rain dancing silver in their headlights. A van stopped. John Post wound down the window.

‘Been swimming?’ he asked, grinning. ‘Better hop in before you’re washed away.’

‘You’re all right. The bus’ll be here soon.’

‘That bus’ll have you waiting till Doomsday,’ he said. ‘Get in, I’ll run you home.’

Dear, kind John Post. I had never said anything to him and he never asked but he saw the bind we were in with the cows gone and Dai no job to go to. It was his idea I buy more hens. After the post office closed he had set himself up in a van selling produce to cafés and bed-and-breakfasts. He said he could sell my eggs twice over. He collected every day, in high season even on Sundays, and he paid well too, better than the Egg Board. Thanks to him, we just about kept our heads above water.

The van smelled of apples, an end-of-summer smell. We drove past the field where the dam workers lived. Two men in plastic windcheaters were packing boxes into the back of a van. The taller one raised a hand to John Post as we passed and John Post raised his hand back and touched his brow in a mock salute.

‘You know them?’ I asked, surprised.

‘How do you think I got started with the van? They’re decent blokes, most of them, whatever people say. It’s not their fault what’s happened here. A man’s got to live.’ He glanced at me sideways. ‘Just don’t tell Dai I said so.’

I stared out at the caravans, my thumb finding the scar on my palm. Somehow I had imagined that the Englishman was one of them but, though I looked out sometimes from the bus at the men smoking cigarettes and drinking beer out of bottles, I never saw him. He was like the goblin in Mari’s story about the princess and the seven silver fish. The mountain had swallowed him whole.

The wipers moved busily over the windscreen, clearing half-moons in the wet. The glass was steamed up on the inside. John Post leaned over his steering wheel, wiping it clear with his sleeve.

‘I suppose they’ll all be leaving now, will they?’ I asked.

‘A lot of them are already gone.’

‘You’ll miss them, I suppose? The business, I mean.’

‘Not a bit of it. With that new café at Bronaber I’m barely keeping up as it is. Talking of which, I’d be grateful if you could give those birds of yours a bit of a rally. Blood, tears and toil and all that. Victory at all costs. We need them laying double speed.’

I nodded vaguely. Bronaber was the camp for the hundreds of men brought in to build the new atomic power station a dozen miles away at Trawsfynydd. Tintown, people round here called it. It had a pub and a cinema, even a Catholic church. No one knew what would happen when the power station was finished, if the town would stay or simply disappear.

John Post stopped outside our gate. I reached for the door handle.

‘Before you go,’ he said.

‘I know. We will lay them on the beaches.’

He laughed. ‘That’s the spirit. But no, this is about a job.’

‘For Dai?’

‘For you. If you’re interested.’

‘What kind of job?’

‘Cleaning, mostly.’

‘Cleaning? Where?’

‘Plas Derwen.’

It was my turn to laugh. I thought he was joking, John Post liked a joke, but I looked at him and the laugh died in my mouth. At least he had the decency to wince.

‘You’re serious,’ I said.

Plas Derwen was the larger of the two English estates in our part of Meirionnydd. The Hawleys who owned it owned half of the valley. People said Mr Hawley had welcomed the Corporation and their plans for drowning, that he wanted the money. Not that they needed it. Mr Hawley worked in London. His children went to boarding school in England. They came to Plas Derwen for the holidays. Once a year Mrs Hawley held a summer tea party at the house for the children of their tenants. The children lined up in the lane for the big iron gates to be opened and afterwards lined up again to wait for the bus. Otherwise the family kept themselves to themselves.

A land agent ran the estate. Once it had all been tenant farmers but these days half the houses were holiday homes. Most visitors came for a week or a fortnight. A few took the houses all summer. A woman was needed to go in between lets, to clean and clear and change the linens. The all-summer people wanted weekly cleans. Sometimes they wanted ironing and meals on top. There were six cottages in total, seven if you counted the dairy. The land agent had asked John to make enquiries. The woman who had done the job for years was finally retiring.

‘I bet she is, poor dear,’ I said. ‘She must be dead on her feet.’

‘So that’s a no, is it?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t have to.’

‘Because it’s Plas Derwen?’

‘That too.’

I looked sideways at John Post. I had known him all my life. Back when I was at Bryn-mawr running errands for Mrs Parry, he was always slipping me a little extra, a square of shortbread or a rattle of sherbets in a paper bag. He even let Mari have things on credit sometimes, though I was not meant to know about that. John Post never gave credit to anyone.

‘Don’t tell me, the pay’s terrible,’ I said.

‘Eight pounds a week. Any cooking and ironing would be extra.’

‘And it doesn’t start till next summer?’

‘They want you end of the month. There’s a plan for Christmas lets, apparently, and even if they’re empty they want someone going in, airing them out, checking for damp, pipes freezing, that sort of thing. Some of the houses are pretty out of the way.’

‘And how does the longsuffering Mrs Williams manage that?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. Her son drives her.’

I had not known my hopes were raised until they crashed back down to earth. ‘So what am I to do? Have Emyr bicycle me there on his handlebars?’

John Post looked at me sideways. ‘Which is why they’re offering a car.’

‘You what?’

‘I say car. It’s a clapped-out US Army jeep, you’ll have seen it around, white star on the bonnet, Jac Bont-faen used to drive it when he managed the shooting up there. About as basic as they come but a step up from handlebars. You can drive a car, can’t you?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never tried.’

John Post laughed. ‘Ah.’

‘I could learn, though,’ I said. ‘You could teach me.’

‘Or Dai could. He has a licence, surely?’

‘I think they gave him one when he was demobbed.’

‘Well then. He can drive you till you pass.’

I stared through John Post’s windscreen at the rain coming down, silver tadpoles streaking down the glass. I tried to imagine driving a car.

‘Maureen passed, did I tell you?’ John Post said. ‘All down to her lucky rabbit’s foot, she says.’

‘Perhaps I should get one.’

‘Perhaps. Or a whole rabbit. Nice to have a bit of company when you’re driving. A furry friend to read the map.’

I smiled. John Post’s wife was a fiend for luck, rabbit’s feet and whistling at magpies and touching wood. Maybe she was onto something. Not everyone ended up with a John Post.

‘In ten years everyone will drive,’ John Post said. ‘We’ll wonder how anyone ever managed without it.’

‘A jeep,’ I said and the word fizzed like sherbet on my tongue.

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I did not tell Dai about Plas Derwen. There would be time enough to argue if it happened. John Post drove me up to meet with Mr Howell, the land agent. Mr Howell talked in English and mostly to John Post. It was only when we were leaving and Mr Howell's secretary said she would need my driver's licence for the insurance that I understood I had the job. She circled a square on a smudgy map of the estate and handed it to me. Mrs Williams would meet me there a week on Monday to show me the ropes. The jeep would need collecting from the farm office.

'It'll be her husband driving till she gets her test,' John Post said and the secretary frowned and made a note on her pad.

'I'll need his licence then. Estate business only, no private use permitted.'

A jeep. I could barely believe it. I practised telling Dai as I planted out the spring cabbage. The way I saw it the job was his decision. It was him who sold the cows. If his principles troubled him, he was welcome to pay for them. There was surely a job for him out there if he could only rouse himself to look. But if he thought we could live off the hens and him slumped in a chair with a three-day-old copy of *Y Cofnod* in his lap then he was mad as a coot. In which case his opinions did not count a bean.

He would still have to drive me, though.

As for Emyr I hoped the jeep was hook enough to catch him. His whole life he had longed for a car the way some boys want a dog, as though the two of them would make a whole. He could reel off the details of every vehicle in the valley, its registration number, its date of manufacture, the specifications of its engine. In a few months he would be seventeen and old enough for a licence of his own. If we had a car, he could practise.

'Not a car, a jeep!' I shouted at the sky and a surge of startled fieldfares exploded cackling from the hedgerow. A jeep from America. The fieldfares were right. It was ridiculous. I laughed out loud, my hoe slicing the sky like a sword.

* * *

I waited till supper but Emyr did not come. Dai and I ate in silence, my speech turning circles in my head. Afterwards I walked up to the top of the track to smoke a cigarette. It was a beautiful evening, the pale sky streaked with ribbons of amber and violet and rose. I sat on the stile for a long time, watching the faint stars pricking out, the swoop and wheel of the swifts. On Emyr's bike I still wobbled, afraid of falling, but in my dreams I bicycled across the sky, the houses like toy houses far beneath me. I raced fearless and the speed shook me out like a tablecloth, showing me a pattern I did not know was there. In my dreams I always wanted to go further and faster. Over the hills and far away.

In the soft pink silence a wood pigeon was calling. You know they're talking to you, Mari used to tell me. Listen, can you hear it? *I'm still here, Olwen.* Down the lane an engine roared briefly and cut out. *I'm still here, Olwen,* the pigeon called again, and my childhood and Tyˆ-eithin might have been a hundred years ago and half a world away, so ancient was the ache in me.

I took the cigarettes from my pocket and lit another. I should be celebrating. Emyr had only gone and passed his examinations, all eight of them. His teacher Mr Wozniak sent him a card with a quotation typed in capital letters on the front: THE MIND IS NOT A VESSEL TO BE FILLED BUT A FIRE TO BE KINDLED and on the back a message saying Mr Jones, I salute you, like Emyr was a private in the army. And just like that he was in the Sixth Form and studying for his A Levels. History and Geography and Mathematics. I was proud as Punch. It still felt like the end of something. I watched him sling his leg over his bicycle, off and pedalling before his backside touched the seat, and every time it was like the swallow in the story about the happy prince, he pecked out another piece of me. When I read that story at school I was the swallow. Now I watched Emyr fly away and wondered how long it would be before I disappeared altogether.

I saw the motorcycle as I came back down the lane, parked up by the old cattle trough. A man sat astride it, the collar of his jacket pushed up like

Jack-the-lad. He swung the bike around, facing it downhill, and a second man stepped out from by the hedge and put his hand on Jack-the-lad's shoulder.

'Emyr?' I said, startled. Emyr turned around. He grinned at me, bold as a butcher's dog.

'Hey, Mam,' he said. 'Nice smoke?'

'For the love of God, Emyr! A motorcycle, are you out of your mind?'

Emyr sighed, shaking his head. 'Smoking and blaspheming. What would the deacons say?'

'They'd say a boy should honour his father and his mother. If your father knew you were gallivanting about on one of those things, risking your life—'

'God, Mam, relax. It's my bike, the brakes, I said I'd be fine but Tony's mam insisted, said I'd be safer on the motorbike. You remember Tony, right?'

The idea of a motorcycle being safer than anything struck me as deranged. I nodded at the boy. 'Hello, Tony.'

'Mrs Jones.' He gunned the bike, ready to leave. I thought of all the suppers Emyr had eaten with Tony's mam, all the nights he had slept under her roof. Tony Bowen had a Dansette record player and his very own portable television in his bedroom. How could we expect Emyr to keep coming home to us when everything that happened to him happened somewhere else?

'You'll come in, surely?' I said. I caught Emyr's warning glare on me but I smiled at Tony and pretended not to see. 'I expect you're hungry. You boys are always hungry.'

'We ate at Tony's,' Emyr said. 'Spaghetti bolognaise.'

I blinked. Spaghetti, was it? Since when did Emyr eat spaghetti? Emyr who would only touch potatoes boiled plain.

'Well, that sounds very exotic,' I said. 'But surely you've room for a slice of cake. Or apple crumble. Do you like apple crumble, Tony?'

Tony shrugged, a grudging half-nod. I felt myself bristle, please and thank you never killed anyone, but I bit my tongue.

‘Come on in then,’ I said. ‘You can park that machine of yours up in the yard.’

* * *

Dai was rocking back and forwards in his chair. He squinted balefully at the three of us as we came in but Tony went right over to him and clasped his hand.

‘Mr Jones,’ he said. ‘Tony Bowen. I’m so glad to finally meet you.’

Dai grunted. He pulled his hand away from Tony’s and tucked it in his lap.

‘You’ve been a hero in our house a long time, Mr Jones,’ Tony said. ‘My brother came on your march to Liverpool way back when. Skipped school and sneaked onto your bus. The Head went beserk, gave Brian the full twelve, no holding back, but Brian didn’t care. He said those stripes were a badge of honour.’

‘Did he now.’

‘He was raging at what happened at Tryweryn. He wrote to the newspapers. A barefaced atrocity, he called it, a criminal assault on Wales in the sight of the whole world.’

‘Well then. And so it was.’

‘He said you lot should have shot anyone from the Corporation who dared set so much as a foot in that valley. That war was the only way to a free Wales.’

‘He wrote that?’

‘He did. He said it was time people told it like it was.’

‘And they published this letter, did they, the papers?’

‘Of course they didn’t. You think they would dare publish a letter like that? Those people, the ones in charge, they’re cowards, every one of them. They’re all in the pocket of the establishment. Well, they are, aren’t they? You know that better than anyone.’

Dai was silent.

‘They had better watch out, though,’ Tony said. ‘Them and the MPs in Westminster and all the other English people with their snouts in the Welsh

trough. Brian says there's a militia out there, an army with columns all over Wales, organising themselves, preparing for their moment to rise up against English oppression. Those bombs at the dam, the transformer, he says that's just the start of it. That there's going to be a war.'

'It's true, Da,' Emyr said, eager despite himself. 'Tony's brother knows people. He wouldn't say it if it wasn't true.'

He strained with the familiar eagerness, only this time the pull was not towards his father but his friend. Out of nowhere a forgotten memory rose up in me: a late summer afternoon at Tyˆ-eithin, the narrow hay loft tucked up under the rafters of the old barn, the air hazed with dust. Ifan and Will springing up from the hay, both talking fast at the same time. A game, they said, and when I asked if I could play too Will gave me a squashed toffee from his pocket and Ifan shook his head at me and told me to get lost. He had hay in his hair.

'If Mam finds out, we'll cop it,' he said. 'She thinks we're chopping wood.'

I didn't know anything then. After he died people said things. The things they said were ugly and shameful. They were also true. Ifan did love Will Llewellyn. He loved him gladly, straightforwardly, the way he did everything. I had seen it. It had never seemed ugly to me.

'Right,' I said, opening the stove. 'Who's for crumble?'

I spooned out a bowl for Tony and another for Emyr. So much for spaghetti. Tony set about his like a starving man.

'Brian knows someone who knows Saunders Lewis,' Emyr said to Dai proudly, like that clinched things. Dai did not answer. He fixed his gaze on Tony who gazed right back at him, his mouth full, chest out and shoulders back like a soldier on parade.

'So,' he said. 'Your brother. Part of this secret army, is he?'

'I mean, no, not right now. Though obviously he would be, if he could.'

'What's stopping him?'

'He's away. Working in America.'

'A Welshman to his bones.'

'A Welshman's a Welshman wherever he is.'

‘And that’s the way a Welshman fights for his country, is it, by leaving?’ With a fierce rock, Dai pitched himself up and out of his chair. Startled, Tony jerked backwards, almost banging heads with Emyr who put his hands on Tony’s shoulders to steady him. Impatiently Tony shook him off.

‘He’s working, that’s all,’ he said weakly to Dai’s back as Dai stamped past him. ‘He’ll come back.’

Dai shook his head. He did not bother to conceal his contempt.

‘Cymru am byth,’ he muttered and slammed the door behind him. Wales forever.

* * *

After Tony was gone, I handed Emyr a dish towel and set about the washing up.

‘Your friend seems nice,’ I lied.

‘Mm.’

‘I hope he didn’t feel I pushed him into coming in.’

‘Why wouldn’t he? You did.’

‘Well. He seemed very pleased to meet your da.’

I rinsed the bowls and set them on the drainer. Emyr dried them.

‘Don’t just pile them,’ I said. ‘Put them away.’

Emyr put them away. I bent over the sink.

‘Sixteen, is he?’ I asked.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. The motorcycle. And he seems older somehow. More – developed.’

Emyr made a face. ‘God, Mam. He’s seventeen, OK? He missed a year.’

‘Did he? Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was he ill or something?’

‘I said I don’t know. I didn’t know him then.’

There was a silence. I scrubbed at the crumble dish, the burned-on bits of black.

‘You will be careful, won’t you?’ I said at last.

‘If you mean the motorcycle, he’s a very good driver.’

‘It’s not just that. It’s – the other things.’

‘What other things?’

I held the dish up to the light to inspect it, then slid it back into the soapy water. I thought about the tilt of Emyr’s body. About spaghetti bolognaise.

‘All that stuff about rising up,’ I said. ‘Bombs and the like.’

‘That’s Tony’s brother. Tony isn’t like that.’

I thought of Tony, all his swagger and showing off.

‘All right,’ I said carefully. ‘But even talk can land you on the wrong side of the law.’

‘The English law.’

‘Which is the Welsh law too. You’re a clever boy, Emyr Jones. The world is your oyster. There’s no shame in having ambitions, whatever your father says.’

‘There’s no shame in being Welsh either.’

‘I know that.’

‘Except you think there is.’

‘No. I think there’s shame in being closed-minded. In clinging to the tiny world you know and pretending it’s all you’ve ever wanted because you’re too frightened to try anywhere else. I think there’s shame in being a bigot and a blydi hypocrite.’

Emyr was silent. I handed him the clean crumble dish and he dried it and put it back in its place on the shelf. I pulled the plug from the sink and watched the water drain away. Then, smiling, I turned around.

‘What would you say if I told you we’re getting a car?’

* * *

Emyr blew his top. The jeep made no difference. He went to school the next day and when he came home he picked up right where he had left off, demanding over and over how I could even think of working for the likes of them.

‘Da, tell her,’ he said. ‘By working for them, she’s giving them her blessing, right? I mean it, Mam. You’re basically saying you’re fine with them coming here and building their bases and planting their forests and turning our country into a holiday camp for English stockbrokers.’

I was pretty sure Emyr did not know what a stockbroker was. ‘Come on. You can’t honestly believe that me cleaning cottages has anything to do with that?’

‘It’s the principle. By doing their dirty work you’re accepting their tyranny. You’re colluding in our suppression.’

‘I’m not their slave. It’s a job, paid work for money. How else do you think the world turns?’

‘So why is it always us who work for them? The Welsh serving the English, letting them be the boss of us, the way we always have. Do you know what Gandhi said about India? “The English have not taken India. We have given it to them.” You think it’s different here? English rule, this whole messed-up system, it relies on us, on our consent. We’ve forgotten what it is like to be in charge, to stand up for our own country. We don’t even think about it any more. We bow and we scrape and we do their bidding and we don’t even notice when they treat us as their inferiors. We think we deserve it.’

‘Deserving’s got nothing to do with it. I wouldn’t mind managing the Midland Bank but they’re not about to ask me. Cleaning I can do.’

‘Except you’d not just be cleaning, would you? You’d be collaborating. Taking their side. Da, tell her.’

Dai said nothing. He might not have heard him. He stared at the fire in the range and rocked.

‘Fine,’ I said to Emyr. ‘So I turn it down. How exactly do you think we will manage? Are you going to support us?’

I wanted the words back the moment they were spoken. Emyr glared at me. ‘I could. It’d be better than wasting my time on pointless lessons.’

‘You’re not wasting your time, though, are you? You’re learning all about India and the evils of imperialism.’

‘Shut up,’ he said. He sounded tired. I put a hand on his arm.

‘Emyr, bach, listen to me. I promise faithfully to thwart the English cythreuliaid at every turn. To sour their milk and spit in their soup and bring all the ancient curses of Wales down on their heads. But I’m taking this job. I’m sorry but there it is. We need the money.’

‘Not theirs! Da, tell her. She can’t possibly work for those people. She mustn’t.’ When Dai still did not answer, Emyr shoved the back of his chair in frustration. ‘Da, please!’

Dai’s head jerked forward. He stared up at Emyr as though he was a stranger.

‘What does it matter?’ he said flatly. ‘What does any of it matter?’

The shock on Emyr’s face went right through me. He stared at Dai like Dai was a stranger to him too, the force of it closing his fists. Blindly he punched at his school bag, sending it flying, and slammed out of the house. Dai did not flinch. He went on rocking and rocking, his gaze fixed on the range. It frightened me to look at him. He was a stranger to me too.

I found Emyr halfway up the lane, looking out over the hill.

‘Emyr, bach—’

He shook his head. He did not look at me. ‘Don’t. Just – don’t.’

‘Listen to me, Emyr. I’ll keep looking, all right? When I find something else I’ll pack it in, I promise, but till then we’ll just have to bring down the system from within. I’m going to ask your father to teach us both to drive. Stuff the estate business only, we can do it in the field, no one will know. How would that be for a seventeenth birthday present?’

Emyr was silent. I bit my tongue and waited. It did no good to rush Emyr. Cornered, he would bolt. He plucked a stem of grass, wound it tightly around his finger.

‘I can drive already,’ he said. ‘I’ve been driving for months.’

‘Emyr, you’re sixteen. You don’t have a licence.’

‘You don’t need a licence on private land.’

‘What private land, what are you talking about?’

He shrugged. ‘A farm. Friends of Tony’s.’

Blydi Tony. I could not credit it. Sitting on that motorcycle like he was cock of the walk, all insolence and swagger with his spaghetti and his fancy

television. I should have known that what I saw of him was not the half of it.

‘I don’t believe you! Do you know how dangerous that is? Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Because I knew you’d be like this about it.’ He scowled at me, his face all angles, the soft roundness of his boyhood almost gone. There was so much I didn’t know about him, the life he led when he was not at home. They grow up and leave, Rose Hughes used to say. Be glad of it. And I was, a part of me was. Another part of me wanted to hurl myself to the ground and weep.

I nodded brightly.

‘Well then,’ I said. ‘You can teach me and save your da the trouble.’

* * *

John Post ran me up to the estate office with Dai’s licence. Afterwards he made some deliveries and I waited in the van. It was raining again. It had been raining for weeks. We drove back to Fron-goch along the New Road. The lines on the slick black tarmac were very white. I watched them slipping steadily away under the van.

‘They put the gravestones in,’ I said. ‘I got a letter.’

‘Have you been?’

I shook my head. John Post said nothing but at the turning to Maes-craig he slowed. Neither of us spoke as we bumped down the track. John Post parked by the wall. The rain fell. The old house was gone, nothing left of it but a shape in the ground. They had yet to start on the Chapel of Remembrance.

‘Perhaps they’ve forgotten,’ I said.

John Post smiled sadly and, leaving me among the gravestones, walked away towards the crest of the hill. Mari’s tablet was under a tree. I squatted down beside it, clearing away the wet leaves. The slate had her name on it and the dates, nothing more. None of those words you saw chiselled into the big headstones: in loving memory, dearly beloved. There was not enough money for that and anyway Mari always knew. I wondered what had

happened to her bones. By the wall Dai's mother's white marble huddled in a half-circle with the others like girls at a dance. Dai had wanted it drowned along with her coffin, he said the two were a pair, but the Corporation flat refused. Gravestones were a hazard.

John Post did not turn as I joined him. We stood side by side, looking out over the valley. The dam had been closed barely two weeks but already it had started to fill. Below us the rocky crag that once marked the boundary of Garnedd Du stared bewildered at its own reflection.

'It's so high,' I said. 'I didn't think it would be so high.'

John Post said nothing. Lifting his cap, he rubbed his forehead roughly with the heel of his hand. He and Maureen had lived in Capel Celyn forty years. They had raised their girls there. I wished there was something I could do to comfort him, this kind man who had done so much to keep my family afloat.

'They said a year,' I said.

John Post sighed and settled his cap.

'Ah, Olwen,' he said softly. 'Life goes on.'

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The jeep was not much of a car. The roof leaked and the gear stick jammed and the windscreen wipers seized up and the steering wheel took all my strength to turn. It was as much like the neat-as-a-pin Anglias the summer people drove as a goat was like a racehorse but I loved it. All that autumn I drove it from cottage to cottage, a learner's plate stuck on the bonnet. Dai sat beside me. When it rained he wore a tarpaulin over his legs to keep the weather off.

He was not right, I knew that. The anger had leaked out of him and in its place a kind of rot had grown. I could smell it on him, the sour fungus reek, but I did not know how to stop it. He would not let me call Dr Wynne. He said it was a waste of time and money and, though God knew he had time enough to spare, I knew better than to push him. He was not about to change his mind and besides, what good would it have done? Dr Wynne was a decent enough doctor, he knew about measles and pneumonia and broken bones, but Dai would no more confess his troubles to Dr Wynne than fly to the moon. It was not how he was, how any of the men were round here. Not even Bob Williams who Dai had known all his life, who had enlisted with him and come back without any brothers when before there had been four. Dai would cut his tongue out before he would admit to Bob Williams he was struggling. He would hate Bob for knowing and Bob him for forcing him to know. Men of their kind kept their counsel. They knew the names of each other's fields and the sizes of their flocks but they never set foot inside their heads. Perhaps if I had been Irish and a Catholic I could have gone to a priest but I had never met a deacon I could trust with a ha'penny. The only person I could think of telling was John Post and I knew what Dai would make of that. He was my husband, his secrets were my secrets too. I kept my mouth shut.

'You could come in,' I said. 'Make yourself useful.'

I thought it might rouse him. There were always things in the cottages that needed fixing, leaking gutters, dripping taps, swollen window frames, loose door catches and floorboards and bolts. I told Dai that if he drew up

an inventory of the problems, I would take it up to the estate office when I went to fetch my wages. Perhaps they would hire Dai as a handyman. It's worth a try, I urged him, think of the money, but I never really believed he would do it and he never did. He sat in the jeep with a tarpaulin on his lap, waiting for me to drive him home.

* * *

The golden rule, Miss Price said, was to be invisible. No one wanted to see the char. I wanted to ask her how a floor got mopped without a body to mop it but I bit my tongue. It was easy enough to be invisible with the houses standing empty and all the summer people gone. There was time to get the measure of the places, to stand at the sink and look out across a different slope of hills. Not that there was much to see that autumn. The clouds swallowed the sky and blotted out the land and the rain never stopped. In the cottages the tins rusted in the cupboards and boxes of left-behind biscuits grew bulgy, soft with damp. I scrubbed the shelves with vinegar and bicarbonate of soda. I lit fires and threw open the windows. Upstairs I shook out the blankets and the feather eiderdowns and hung them from the doors to air them.

The cottages had all been refurbished, each with its own electric oven and refrigerator and a built-on bathroom with a bathtub and a lavatory and an electric heater like something from a spaceship mounted on the wall. They had left in the Welsh dressers and the oak tables and the upright wooden settles with the carvings that poked like knuckles in your back, I supposed the summer people thought them quaint, but there were sofas by the fireplaces and armchairs with soft cushions and long footstools and brightly patterned rugs. None of them were new but they were very comfortable. There were books in every room too, English books and mostly kings and battles but books all the same and even in the bedrooms. The walls were hung with prints of castles and rivers and ships at sea.

Except at Bwythn-gwyn. At Bwythn-gwyn there were paintings. Red cliffs and yellow fields and purple hills and lime green trees and white houses against bright blue skies and a few that did not seem to be of

anything except maybe the thoughts in the artist's head, wild-streaked and lumpy with paint. The unframed canvases hung wonkily from nails bashed into the walls. Each one bore the same three initials: JLR.

The one I liked best hung upstairs in the bigger of the two bedrooms. A double-peaked mountain, lit orange by the setting sun. Above it, a blue and pink burst of streaky cloud, at its foot a roil of green fields like a stormy sea. Arenig Fawr. Its shape was as familiar as my own face and yet, when I looked at that painting, it was like I was seeing it for the first time. Mari had a hoard of ancient stories about Arenig, stories of giants and goblins, of a great white fish who lived in the depths of the lake halfway up, of Dwyfan and Dwyfach who escaped the raging flood caused by the thrashing of the sea monster Afanc by sailing away between the peaks in a boat with no sails. There were newer stories too, stories her grandmother had told her that she swore to Mari were true. A spiteful farmer's wife fool enough to cross her neighbour cursed to eternity on its rocky slopes, a gnarled thorn tree bent double by the wind. A man from a distant land who fell in love with a Welsh girl and, when she threw him over, climbed broken-hearted to the higher peak and buried her letters there in a silver casket.

All fairy tales, of course. The thorn tree was an ordinary thorn tree and Arenig's peaks were solid rock. A spade would wear itself out trying to dig them. And still I saw something in that painting I had never seen before, though I had lived among mountains all my life. That mountains, even ordinary ones, were not part of the human world. They belonged to stories and the gods.

* * *

The jeep marked us out, that blydi great white star on the bonnet. I knew people saw us, that they talked. Dai Jones the great man and his Judas wife, working for those Saesnegs. I paid them no mind. Like John Post said, a job was a job. A car, though. A car changed everything.

Emyr was suddenly at home. For all his principles that old jalopy drew him like a flame. He tried to persuade Dai to come out and take a look at it with him, show him how it worked, and when that failed he brought books

home from the library, manuals with complicated diagrams that he spread out on the kitchen table. At weekends he pleaded and pleaded with me to let him have the key. I told him to put a sock in it, that he had school work to do, that he would have to wait till he was seventeen and had the provisional licence, but I was so glad to have him home I had no heat in me and Emyr knew it. Again and again I came out into the yard to find him with the bonnet up, poking and prodding around, streaks of oil like war paint on his face.

'If you break that thing, it's you who'll pay to get it fixed,' I said, trying to sound stern, but he only laughed and said that by the time he was done it would be a Rolls-Royce. I stroked the car's canvas roof, feeling its rough seams.

'Poor Bessie,' I said. 'What's wrong with being a jeep?'

'Bessie?'

'The cows got car names, didn't they? So the jeep should have a cow name. Bessie suits her, don't you think?'

'You've got to be joking. This jeep was in the war, Mam. It saw action.'

'Star then. For the star on her bonnet.'

'Would you stop? It's not a cow, it's a piece of engineering. It doesn't even belong to us.'

'You're a spoilsport, you know that?'

'I'm doing it for you. Saving you from death by syrup and slush.' He slammed the bonnet. 'Want to go for a drive?'

I knew I should refuse. One word to Plas Derwen that I had let Emyr behind that wheel and I would be out on my ear before you could say dipstick, but I could not find it in me to care. Emyr wanted to go for a drive. With me. Sure, it was the jeep he hankered for, not his mother, but so what? He was not off on his bicycle at sun-up to see Tony. He was here, with me.

'Go on then,' I said, pretending reluctance. 'Only up the back lane, though. The field's too boggy, we'll get stuck.'

Grinning, Emyr swung himself into the driver's seat. I climbed in beside him as he nudged the car neatly into gear. I had no licence yet and little skill, I was no earthly use as a teacher, but then Emyr had no need of lessons. When he drove Bessie – and she was already Bessie to me, no

matter what Emyr said – her engine did not stall the way it did with me. The gears did not grind and hiccup in their sockets. Emyr driving was like one of those fauns in a picture book, two creatures turned by magic into one.

* * *

We practised and practised, the two of us, three-point turns and hill starts and emergency stops, up and down the lane till we knew every rut and rock of it. Or rather I practised and Emyr drove because driving made him happy. We grilled each other on the Highway Code. At supper our talk was all of stopping distances and roundabouts and motorway slip roads that we had never seen. I knew we were breaking the law, the pair of us without a licensed driver, but I folded up the thought and tucked it neatly away at the back of my mind. It was only for a few weeks. No one would ever know. It was years since I had felt so close to Emyr. The joy of it jellied my bones.

The nearest test was Wrexham. I had to get special permission from Miss Price to drive there. When I asked if Emyr could take his test too she frowned and said that it was most irregular and that the extra insurance would need to come out of my wages and that I should not for a moment think that a precedent had been set, but she signed the letter all the same, and on a grey Saturday morning in December we sat our driving tests, one after the other. Emyr had been seventeen a fortnight.

I was nervous, Emyr cocky as the King of Spades. The dismayed examiner goggled at the jeep and clung for dear life to the roof bar. He passed us both. Triumphant, Emyr ripped the learner plate off the bonnet and sent it skimming across the car park. I fetched it back.

‘Right then, Mr Chauffeur, take us home,’ I said and he grinned at me and tugged an imaginary cap before sliding behind the wheel.

‘Where to, sir?’ he asked Dai beside him.

‘Straight home,’ I said sternly from the back seat. ‘Miss Price was very clear about that.’

‘Come on,’ Emyr protested. ‘A victory lap.’

‘A pretty poor victory if it gets me the sack.’

Emyr did not argue. He headed for home, happy enough to be driving. I watched the smooth green fields push themselves up into rounded hills and sharpen into mountains. I thought Dai was sleeping but at the crossroads out of Bala he gripped Emyr's leg.

'That way,' he said.

That way was the New Road and the dam. I frowned.

'Emyr, no, that's not—' I said but Emyr saluted, slicing my objection in two.

'Stand by for action,' he said in English in a crisp BBC accent. 'We are about to launch Stingray.'

* * *

He parked facing the reservoir.

'All yours, Da,' he said gently.

Dai did not get out. He sat quite still, staring out at the water. The water was much higher than when I had come with John Post. The curve of the old railway line was gone and to the west, where the old house had been, tucked into a fold of the hill, there was nothing but flat grey water. Except it wasn't flat, not quite, and not exactly grey either. The breeze blew little waves across its surface and the waves broke the light into pieces, white and black and silver. I thought of the paintings on the wall at Bwythn-gwyn, their fierce swipes and splodges of colour, and I wondered if I had ever looked at anything the way an artist did, seeing it only as it was in that exact moment, and not just the picture of it I already carried in my head.

Dai shifted in his seat. I thought he would want to go home but instead he opened the car door and walked away towards the wall. I went to follow him but Emyr shook his head.

'Leave him, Mam,' he said. 'Let him be.'

Dai stood at the parapet, his back to us, staring out across the water. He had forgotten his hat. He looked thin and grey and old. I thought of the vows we had spoken and the ones we had never said out loud and I wanted to shout at him to turn around, to stop looking at the water and to look at us. The farm was gone and the valley, the drowning was a fact of life, but we

were still here, weren't we? His wife and his son, a family. Not everything that mattered was lost. Life went on.

Dai buried his hands in his pockets. He spat, a white blob that fizzled on the ground, and, shoulders hunched, walked back towards the car.

* * *

And just like that Emyr was gone again.

'It's Sixth Form,' he said, shrugging. 'What did you expect?'

They worked them ragged. Emyr got in early, stayed late after school. On Friday nights he stayed at Tony's and sometimes Saturdays too. I tried not to mind. Emyr was applying himself, that was what mattered. With the Advanced Level examinations under his belt he could go anywhere, do anything he wanted to do. There would be nothing to stop him.

Tony, though. I worried about Emyr and that boy. It was a relief to find out there was a gang of them, four or five boys Mr Wozniak had picked out for special teaching and taken under his wing. They had a study group and a history club and another for debating. At weekends they met up in Bala and went to a café or the cinema. I gave Emyr a bit of money to spend, his share of the eggs. I had a regular wage coming in and Emyr was seventeen, nearly grown up. He had earned some independence. He drove a little, taking the jeep into the field sometimes to do goodness knew what, but with his licence won the car had lost its pull. On weekends we did not see him for dust.

I was happy. Of course I was. His life was beginning. Soon he would be gone for good.

I could not make sense of it.

* * *

I took Emyr's example. I left the house early, came home late. Emyr had his bicycle but I had the jeep. I liked to drive up the rough tracks around Plas Derwen and watch the sun coming over the mountain, the cold red blaze of dawn before the day became a day like any other. Out on the New Road, so smooth and fast, I thought about driving and driving and not looking back.

Once a week, when John Post left the egg money, I took out a few coins for Emyr and a few just in case. I tied the just-in-case coins in a woollen sock and stashed it at the back of my drawer. I liked the ritual, the weight of the sock in my cupped hands. Every week a little heavier, my secret coin cosh.

I did not see John Post much in those days. I was gone before he arrived, the eggs in their trays by the gate. But one morning I came down in the darkness from the coops to find him standing by his van. The light from his headlights spilled out over the cobbles.

‘You’re up with the lark,’ I said.

‘I’m glad I caught you. I’ve a letter for you. From the estate office.’

I gave him the egg trays. He gave me a white envelope. Someone had snitched on us. What else could it be? Someone had seen Emyr driving and had reported it. I would lose my job and it was all my fault. I would lose the jeep.

‘Am I sacked?’ I asked.

‘Don’t be daft. Why would they sack you?’

I had never told John Post about Emyr and the driving. John Post was a demon for the rules. I looked at the envelope, at my name in neat type. I did not open it.

‘How’s Maureen?’ I asked.

‘In the pink. You know she won ten pounds on the Premium Bonds?’

‘No? That rabbit’s foot really is lucky.’

‘Not for the rabbit. Go on then. Open it. Put us out of our misery.’

I wanted to leave the misery where it was, stuck inside the envelope, but John Post went on standing there, smiling expectantly until I had no choice but to open it. The letter was typed like the envelope. Dear Mrs Jones, it said in English. Nothing good ever came from a start like that.

‘So?’ John Post said. ‘Need a lift to the workhouse, do you?’

I made myself read down to the squiggle of a signature, then through again to be sure. I grinned at John Post.

‘Not the workhouse, then?’ he said.

‘Not yet. No, it’s the Bwythn-gwyn tenant, he’s coming for Christmas. They want me up there today to get the place ready.’ I laughed, silly with relief.

‘Ah. The famous Mr Ross.’

‘You know him?’

‘Only that he’s a painter and a pain in Miss Price’s proverbial.’

JLR. R for Ross. ‘Which one is he famous for?’

‘Three guesses.’

I laughed but I felt a shiver of excitement. JLR was coming to Bwythn-gwyn. The air seemed to shift with the thought of it, like someone had opened a door.

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It was a bright breezy morning, the wind clean as a knife. I walked around the cottage and I tried to picture Mr Ross sitting at the table and eating from the plates and sleeping in the beds like Goldilocks in the house of the three bears. The laundry sent the ironed sheets back wrapped in brown paper. I took the package up to the big bedroom and looked at the painting of Arenig. The sun slanted through the window and lit it like stained glass. I looked at it standing up and then I lifted the flowered eiderdown, lay down on the bed and looked at it from there. By the time I got up again the sun had moved and the painting gleamed quietly, soft as wool. The string on the laundry parcel was knotted too tight to undo. I had to use a knife to cut it.

The next week, going back to clean, I found a Morris Minor Traveller parked across the lane. Just as I had taught Emyr flowers and birds, he had taught me cars. This one had seen better days. The porch was a jumble of muddy boots and sticks. The door was locked. I wondered why they bothered, up here in the middle of nowhere. Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief. I knocked. When no one answered I let myself in.

‘Hello?’ I called out cautiously. ‘Mr Ross?’

I hardly recognised the place. Mr Ross had used every scrap of china from the dresser. Unwashed dishes covered the kitchen table, along with unfolded newspapers and piles of books and apple cores and used teabags and a frying pan larded with bacon fat and a record player with its lid open and scattered pencils and pencil shavings too, bright-edged like curls of orange peel. The floor was a wreck of dirty glasses and empty wine bottles and records out of their sleeves and muddy socks twisted inside-out and half-empty packets of biscuits. You could hardly see the chairs for the mounds of jerseys and scarves heaped up on them. It was not the mess that shocked me so much as the brazenness, the extravagant defiance. It felt like a dare.

The fire had burned low. I put a log on it. I folded the clothes and piled the dishes for washing in the sink. The frying pan had been abandoned on the opened pages of a sketchbook. Inside the pan’s brown ring a long-faced

man slouched with his legs crossed, a slipper dangling from one foot. The drawing was rough, only a few strokes, and yet the man was so real he could have got up and walked out of the paper and into the room. I wondered if the man was Mr Ross, if he had drawn it of himself, and for the first time it struck me that this was not my house but his, that now he was back he would take up his place here, not just in the rooms but in the paintings too, in the spaces that they left open, the spaces I had taken to be there for me.

Abruptly all I wanted was to be away from the place before he came back. I hustled through my work, furious at the mess and frantic to be done with it. I was on my knees scrubbing violently at the bathtub when I heard the front door bang open and the sound of voices.

‘Don’t forget kindling!’ someone called. Two people. I had not considered that. One of them whistled in the kitchen. I had a sudden terror that he might barge in to use the lavatory, his flies undone before he saw me there. The thought was mortifying but funny too. I had an awful lurching urge to laugh.

The kitchen tap gushed. I heard the bang of a kettle, the scrape of a chair against the flags. Too late I realised I should have gone out to meet them when they arrived. I would have to go out there evenutally and what would they think then, knowing I had been here all along? I looked at the razor on the shelf above the basin, the toothbrushes with their splayed bristles, the wool dressing gown hanging on the door. Such private personal things. I eyed the window, all ten inches square of it. I wondered how easy it would be to squeeze out.

‘Hello?’ a man called out, his voice muffled. ‘Hello, are you up there?’

The jeep. It was parked on the lane, the star on its bonnet like the cut in a sheep’s ear, marking it out. They knew I was here. They had known it all along. Bracing myself, I wiped my hands on my apron and opened the door. The man was halfway up the stairs. I could see the bottom half of him, a pair of muddy trousers and bright green woollen socks.

‘I – sorry, I’m here,’ I said in English. ‘I was cleaning the bathroom.’

The man padded back down the stairs. I stared at him, his thick coppery-brown hair and the features too big for his face. The disappearing

Englishman from the lane. Mr Ross, JLR, was my Englishman.

‘It’s you,’ I said stupidly.

‘It is. It is definitely me. But then it is my house.’

He shrugged, smiling his lazy smile. He did not remember me. I could not think why I had thought he would remember me. A passing conversation with a stranger months ago. Anyone but me would have forgotten.

‘Nol i’r ystafell. . . ymolchi. Rhaid gorffen,’ I mumbled. I need to finish the bathroom, only in the wrong order and in Welsh. I wanted the floor to swallow me up.

‘Oh my God,’ he said. ‘You’re the bicycle woman. The bicycle woman is our char. Isn’t the world wonderful? So that’s your luxury limousine in the lane, is it? I hope you’re a better driver than you are a bicycler. A better char too, come to that.’

He laughed, shaking his head. I blushed. Thank heaven that the kettle took that moment to shriek to the boil. He turned to lift it and I fled back to the bathroom, bolting the door behind me. I scrubbed the bathtub for the second time and as slowly as I could manage. I heard the other man come back with the firewood, the rattle of the logs into the basket by the hearth, their voices as they clattered cups and spoons. No doubt Mr Ross was laughing at me, the twp in the bathroom, but then again perhaps he had already forgotten I was there. I caught snatches of their conversation, something about a camera and a bird the other man had seen which he claimed was a goshawk though it did not sound much like one to me. Then someone put a record on, a trumpet and a man with a voice like warm honey, and I could not hear them any more.

The door handle turned. When it did not open, they rattled the door in its socket.

‘Hello in there? I hate to rush you but my friend isn’t sure he can wait.’

It was Mr Ross. I could hear the laughter in him straining to get out. Reluctantly I slid back the bolt. He stood in the doorway, his friend hovering behind him. The friend was tall and lanky with a long face and a receding hairline. The man from the drawing.

‘Saved by the bell,’ the friend said, pushing past me into the bathroom. The door banged shut. Mr Ross shook his head and went back to the table. Picking up a sketchbook, he began to draw.

‘If you want tea, Fitz just made a pot,’ he said vaguely, not looking up. ‘There’s milk in the jug. Sugar too somewhere, though exactly where remains one of life’s great mysteries. Do you take sugar when you’re not in shock?’

I knew exactly where the sugar was but I shook my head. ‘Thank you but I have to get off.’

‘Come now, Mrs Jones. Surely even the horrible Howell permits a tea break?’

He knew my name. I stared at him.

‘That bad, eh? Tell you what, if you’re his prisoner, write HELP on that newspaper. Fitz and I can always smuggle you to London. Fitz is the one in the lavatory, in case you were wondering, Thackeray Dante Fitzpatrick. His mother was shamelessly ambitious but them’s the breaks. With great age comes great disappointment.’

As if on cue, the bathroom door opened and Mr Fitzpatrick came out.

‘I left the window open,’ he said. ‘I thought it only decent.’

‘Poor Mrs Jones,’ Mr Ross said. ‘No sooner bleached than besmirched.’

Mr Fitzpatrick laughed. He poured two cups of tea, put milk in both, and handed one to me. I took it. I did not know what else to do. I wanted to fetch the sugar from the cupboard but I was afraid they might think me too familiar. It was their house. Mr Ross went back to his drawing.

‘Sit,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said, pulling out a chair. I sat. I swallowed some sugarless tea. It tasted awful. ‘So, you’re Mrs Jones. I don’t suppose you’re related to Dafydd Jones, are you?’

‘Of course she is,’ Mr Ross said. ‘It’s the law in North Wales. The Dafydd Jones Rule. Every family has to have one.’

‘The Dafydd Jones I’m thinking of led the campaign against the Tryweryn reservoir. Put up a pretty strong fight if I recall. One of yours, is he?’

‘He’s my husband.’

‘There you are!’ Mr Fitzpatrick said triumphantly. ‘Well, good for him. Good for you both. You must have heard about it, Jim, Liverpool City Council sweeping in like the Red Army, kicking families off land they’d farmed for generations. I don’t know how they got away with it.’

Mr Ross squinted at his drawing and did not answer. Mr Fitzpatrick rolled his eyes.

‘See what I have to put up with? I might as well be talking to myself. What happened to the music?’ Leaning over to the record player, he lifted the needle and put it back to the beginning. The song began again. ‘God, that voice. You could eat it with a spoon.’

The music filled the room, the tenor’s voice so pure it raised a lump in my throat. I forced myself to swallow what was left of my tea and got up to wash the cup. Mr Ross frowned at me.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘I’m off now. Thanks for the tea.’

‘You’re not going anywhere, not yet. I’m not done with you. Sit down.’ He waved his pencil, pointing me back towards my chair. I stared at him. All this time had he been drawing me? Perhaps he expected me to be flattered but I thought of my apron, the old scarf knotted over my hair, and all I felt was shame.

‘Sorry but I – sorry. I’ll see you after Christmas.’

‘Ah, Christmas,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘We meant to talk to you about that. You wouldn’t be an angel and rustle us up something for the day? Nothing elaborate, just a nice roast and a pudding we can set on fire. We’d go to a pub but there isn’t a place for thirty miles that’s going to be open. Turns out you’re our only hope.’

I thought about Emyr and not letting the English be the boss of us. What was it the Indian man had said? The English have not taken India. We have given it to them. I shook my head.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Round here Christmas Day is for family.’

‘And we wouldn’t dream of denying you that unadulterated joy. All we ask for is a friendly Christmas Eve delivery and some idiot-proof instructions about the oven. You wouldn’t abandon two helpless hungry men, would you, not at Christmas?’

Mr Ross scribbled on his drawing and, scowling, pushed it away.

‘Is this man bothering you, Mrs Jones?’ he asked.

‘Au contraire,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘Mrs Jones and I are discussing a business proposition.’

‘Bothering of the lowest order. Ignore him. The man’s a menace.’

‘Menace, my hat,’ Mr Fitzpatrick protested. ‘I’m saving us both from starvation. Without me you wouldn’t last a day in this barren wilderness of a country. Ross-on-why, that is the Welsh question.’

Mr Ross rolled his eyes. ‘Says Fitz-for-nothing. Get out, Mrs Jones, while you still can.’

‘Shall we say five pounds and shake on it? Come on, Mrs Jones, have a heart. Think of the baby Jesus.’

The man had stopped singing. The needle crackled as the record went emptily round and round. I hesitated. I wanted to turn Mr Fitzpatrick down flat, for myself and for Emyr and for Mr Ross too who for no obvious reason had taken my side. £5 for a roast lunch, though. If that was the English boot on the Welsh neck, I would put it there myself.

‘Go on then,’ I said. ‘Five pounds.’

‘You hear that, Jim? God bless you, Mrs Jones.’

‘I’ll need two pounds for the shopping. The rest on delivery.’

‘Spoken like a true Christmas angel!’ Seizing my shoulders, he planted a kiss on my cheek.

‘Christ, Fitz,’ Mr Ross said. ‘Hasn’t she suffered enough?’

‘It’s the prospect of a proper Christmas,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘It makes me giddy. Give her the money, Jimmy, there’s a good boy.’

‘Why can’t you give her the money?’

‘You know quite well why not.’ He smiled happily at me as Mr Ross reached for his wallet. ‘I don’t suppose you’d stretch to some mince pies?’

‘Fitz the bill, now that’s irony for you,’ Mr Ross said, holding out two pound notes. As I took the money I glanced down at his sketchbook. An angry zigzag of a line and, crossed out beneath it, my own face, worn out and defeated.

* * *

I made the dinner. I sent Emyr up in the jeep with it on Christmas Eve. I was too busy with our own meal, I told him, I could not spare the time. It was dark when he finally got back with the empty baskets and a fistful of money in crumpled notes and change.

‘They tipped,’ he said. ‘The tall one insisted. Made the other one empty his pockets.’

I picked out a five-shilling note. ‘For you. For fraternising with the enemy.’

‘Thanks, Mam. Although I’m pretty sure the tall one’s actually a Communist.’

‘Mr Fitzpatrick? Don’t be soft.’

‘Honestly. You should have heard the way he talked about Michael Collins. Like the man was a cross between Superman and the Second Coming.’

‘Who’s Michael Collins?’

Emyr gawked at me. ‘Who’s Michael Collins? For God’s sake, Mam. The man’s a legend. Plus he spent the whole of 1916 in the camp here, I mean right here in Fron-goch. You knew there was a camp here, right?’

I did know, though I had forgotten. A defunct whisky distillery, commandeered as a prison camp for German soldiers during the Great War. Ifan had told me about it. The distillery had gone bust years before, not because of the chapel, though the chapel did its best to stop local farmers from supplying it with barley, but because the whisky distilled there was undrinkable.

‘So this Collins was a Hun?’ I asked Emyr.

‘Don’t be daft. He led the Irish rebels interned here after the Easter Rising. You know about the rebels, right?’

‘Not everyone gets the chance to stay on at school.’

‘This isn’t school, Mam. It’s probably the most important thing that’s ever happened here. When the British crushed the Rising, they executed the rebel leaders and rounded up thousands of prisoners, most of them not even rebels. Nearly two thousand of them were sent here to Fron-goch. Half of them didn’t even speak Irish. By the time they got out a year later Collins had them fluent and organised into a proper army. Two years later Sinn Féin

won a landslide in the election. Five years after that they declared the Irish Free State. Thirty members of their first parliament were prisoners right here in Fron-goch, thirty! They called it their University of Revolution.'

'You learned all that over a roasting tin?'

'I didn't need to. Some of us know stuff already. But that Mr Fitz-whatever, he's writing about it, a protest poem, he called it, only with photographs instead of music. He asked if I'd go up there after Christmas, help him with the Welsh.'

'You just said they were Irish.'

'That's what's interesting. Apparently it was everyone speaking Welsh here that made Collins understand how important the Irish language was to Irish identity. After that he insisted that every man in the camp learn Irish. He learned Welsh. He had a local boy smuggle in a Welsh dictionary inside a loaf of bread.'

'Good luck getting that into a poem. Not many words that rhyme with dictionary.'

Emyr ignored me. 'What's most phenomenal is that he did it under impossible conditions. The camp was disgusting. Freezing cold, no drainage, food so rank it was declared unfit for human consumption. And swarming with rats. In Irish the word francach means rat so that's what they called it. Francach. Rat Camp.'

'Sounds about right.'

'At least five of the prisoners had mental breakdowns.'

'Welcome to Meirionnydd.'

Immediately Emyr's face slammed shut. 'Why do you always have to do that?'

'What?'

'You know exactly what. Twist my words, make them into some anti-Welsh thing.'

'That's not what I did.'

'It's exactly what you did.'

'Come on,' I protested. 'It was a joke.'

'Not to me. Not to Da.'

'Don't make this about your father.'

‘You know what that Mr Fitzpatrick called Da? A local hero. A father to live up to. A Saes without a word of Welsh and he gets it. Why can’t you?’

* * *

It unsettled me, the idea of Emyr working for Mr Fitzpatrick. Not because of what Mr Fitzpatrick said about Dai, though I did not see how Dai was any of his business, but because I was afraid it would change things for the pair of us. How could it not? Emyr was all set for the A Levels, he would never have to scrub a stranger’s lavatory, and although I thanked God for it I could already see the line it drew between us, him on their side and me on mine. In my mind I saw the drawing Mr Ross had made of me, the weary deference his scribbles could not hide. I never wanted Emyr to look at me that way.

Turned out I was worrying for nothing. On the last day of the old year I went up to Bwyth-gwyn and found the car gone and the porch empty, dried clods of mud scattered over the flags like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. I thought perhaps the pair of them were gone for a walk until I went inside. The mess was the same as before, discarded cups and plates and boxes strewn about, the sink piled high with dirty pots, but the walls were bare, the paintings all gone. On the kitchen table, beside a clutch of empty bottles, my unwashed Christmas tins and pans were heaped in a greasy tower.

Upstairs in the big bedroom the wardrobe gaped open, empty hangers jangling on the rail. They had taken Arenig. I put my hand on the wall, in the space where it had been. In my mind I saw the blue and pink sky, the swirling field. Whoever had banged in the nail had knocked out a chunk of plaster. I touched it lightly, the scar. Mr Ross had every right to take his painting, my feelings were neither here nor there. Its absence still felt like a theft.

I stripped the bed. I thought of the photographs on the wall at home, the damp-speckled print of Caernarfon Castle. It had never occurred to me that a painting could work its way inside you and change your shape like music did. Bundling up the dirty sheets, I dumped them at the top of the stairs. A

pale stripe of light lay like a ribbon across the landing. I stared at it, puzzled. Since I had started at Bwythn-gwyn the door at the top of the stairs had always been kept locked. Mrs Williams said it was a boxroom. She did not have a key. Now the door stood ajar. Curious, I pushed it open.

The room was small and plain and startlingly bright. Tarnished drawing pins speckled the white walls, scraps of paper caught on them like leaves. A packing case, splattered with paint, was pushed into a corner. An easel stood beside it. Apart from that the room was empty except for a single large canvas propped against the wall, its back facing the room. I hesitated, listening to the silence. Then I turned it round.

My disappointment was sudden and sharp. It startled me. I could not understand it. Mr Ross the famous artist, Mr Ross who had painted Arenig as though the whole landscape was alive, how could he have painted this? But it was his, his initials in the bottom corner, white on black. JLR. Arenig was in this painting too, its double peak umistakable, but a black dead Arenig, not a place or a feeling, just a shape and roughly painted so that in some parts the canvas showed through and in others the paint was so thick you could see the marks left in it by the brush. In front of the mountain a woman dressed in white stood in a lake. The woman's arms hung at strange angles and her head was too big for her body. Triangles of black rock stuck out of the water around her. A white cow stood on the shore. The cow stared at me, its eyes two blobs of black, but the woman looked down into the water. Against the dead black mountain both the woman and the cow looked like ghosts.

* * *

It was after Easter when they finally came back. Mr Ross first and then Mr Fitzpatrick two weeks later. I did not know if Mr Ross had asked him or if he had invited himself but every week when I went up there he was always on his own. I never saw Mr Ross. He was out painting on the hills, Mr Fitzpatrick said, trailing after me as I swept. A waste of time, in Mr Fitzpatrick's opinion, wandering about like Moses waiting for the right kind of sunlight to strike from the Heavens. Everyone knew painting was

finished, dead as a doornail, and landscape the deadest of them all. The new art was about class and sex and money, it was about music and fashion and television and advertising and graphic design, about experimentation and technology and hope. It was about creating happenings and breaking taboos. Photography, he said, waving his camera about. That was the future. No one needed another wretched painting of a view.

I thought of my Arenig painting and I knew he was wrong but I kept my mouth shut. Mr Fitzpatrick never waited for me to answer him. Sometimes he sat at the kitchen table, raising his voice so I could hear him in the next room, and sometimes he followed me about but all the time he talked and talked. Half his English words I did not know. He ran on and on, nodding and laughing at his own jokes. Sometimes he argued with himself, replying to his own questions impatiently like it was about time he was asked. It was like listening to the wireless. Often I came up from my own thoughts to find him off on a new tangent and me at a loss as to what he was on about and unable to recall a single word.

One morning before I even had my coat off he handed me a photograph. A dilapidated cottage, the words COFIWCH DRYWERYN daubed on the wall. REMEMBER TRYWERYN. Tryweryn was the name of the valley and the river that ran through it. The Corporation had planned to call the reservoir Llyn Tryweryn Mawr, Great Tryweryn Lake, until Dai and Margaret Roberts protested. They wanted Llyn Celyn, in honour of the village, and they got it too, one of their few victories. On the back of the photograph someone had written *Llanrhystud April 1965*. I did not know where Llanrhystud was. I tried to give it back but Mr Fitzpatrick waved me away.

‘For your husband,’ he said. ‘Proof his efforts weren’t entirely in vain.’

I sucked in my cheeks and said nothing. I wondered if Mr Fitzpatrick had bothered to visit the reservoir, how much he would rate Dai’s efforts then. The Corporation had said it would be a year at least before the water reached its checkerboard limits but the Welsh winter in its eagerness had already filled it to the brim.

‘They’re calling it vandalism but I thought it rather fine,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘Simple and striking, like all the most powerful political slogans. The

work of a young poet from Aberystwyth, apparently. A poet, a painter and a patriot. It could be the first line of a poem, couldn't it? Or perhaps the p-p-penultimate.' He chuckled to himself and poured a slug of brandy into his coffee. 'I've always adored alliterative verse. Remember Sir Gawain, those marvellous caesurae, though these days it's as good as disappeared. Auden uses it sometimes, of course, but Auden uses everything. A magpie to his nicotine-stained fingertips. "Deep in the dark my dream shines." Glorious. So much more supple and muscular than rhyme.'

I put the photograph in my apron pocket. Remember Tryweryn. The slogan made me want to weep. What was it about Wales, its relentless mournful yearning for the past? It was not just Dai or the valley. It was the poems and the stories and the songs and the language itself, a hymn to an imaginary history, when dragons flew over the mountains and the Welsh people were free and proud.

'Your very own Dylan Thomas too, of course,' Mr Fitzpatrick went on, adopting a singsong accent he must have thought was Welsh. '"Do not go gentle into that good night." A bitter blow for Wales, culturally speaking, that your finest poets have always worked in English. Denying the treasure trove of the Welsh language to the very people most in need of its riches. Driving your mother tongue deeper and deeper into the far reaches of folksy irrelevance.'

Was that what afflicted Dai, a doomed hankering after a Wales that had never existed, for the idea of a place that he had dreamed of and never known? I wanted to believe he was getting better but what cure was there for that? Most afternoons when I got home I found him where I left him, sitting in the rocker by the range. I had given up asking after his day. He never answered and I did not have the strength to push him. A different person might have seen him more clearly but we never saw anyone. The families from the valley had scattered and our only neighbour in Fron-goch was the widower farmer from across the field who called by once a week for eggs and barely spoke a word.

'"And I rose in rainy autumn,"' Mr Fitzpatrick said, '"and walked abroad in a shower of all my days." People ask how a man whose mother cut the tops off his boiled eggs for him could possibly write like that but

surely that's the point. After Thomas married, his wife did it for him instead.'

I clattered the metal bucket into the sink and turned on the taps. The water thundered into it, drowning out Mr Fitzpatrick and his boiled eggs. I dumped a handful of soap flakes into the hot water and stared out at the rain. I had never asked Dai what he thought about when he sat in his rocker staring into space. It did not seem like any of my business. Foam rose in the bucket like a pie crust. Would I tell him if he asked me?

I turned off the taps, hoisting the heavy bucket from the sink. Mr Fitzpatrick was still talking. Above me I could hear footsteps pacing back and forth. Mr Ross was in the boxroom. Of course he was. It was much too wet to be out on the hill.

'It's fascinating how powerful it has always been, the urge to appropriate public spaces for our private thoughts,' Mr Fitzpatrick said. 'The ancients were fiends for graffiti, especially the coarser lavatory stuff. Show us your hairy privates and Narcissus is the greatest cocksucker, that sort of thing.'

He smiled blandly at me over the rim of his cup. He might have been remarking on the weather. Upending the bucket, I sent a gush of soapy water across the kitchen floor. Mr Fitzpatrick snatched his feet out of the way but it was too late, his socks were soaked.

'Sorry,' I tutted. 'Did I wet you?'

'I knew you were listening,' he said amiably. Gathering up his coffee cup and the bottle of brandy, he squelched out of the kitchen. 'Mortification becomes you, by the way. Puts colour in your cheeks. If you need me, I'll be wringing myself out next door.'

In the parlour he put a record on and turned it up loud. I wondered if Mr Ross minded the noise. He was working towards an exhibition, Mr Fitzpatrick told me, or was supposed to be. So far he had only one painting, the picture from the boxroom that now hung in the parlour. I did not like it any better than I had before. Mr Fitzpatrick did not like it either. He told me it mistook imprecision for profundity and ended up not only false but ugly. He did not ask me what I thought. The way he said things, there was only one answer. No one in their right mind could possibly disagree.

A door banged upstairs. I looked up from my mop to see Mr Ross padding down the stairs. I had not seen him since before Christmas. He looked thinner, his face brown from the weak Welsh sun. His clothes were spattered with paint. He went into the parlour and turned off the record player.

‘I was listening to that,’ Mr Fitpatrick objected but Mr Ross ignored him. He crossed the kitchen, his socked feet printing the wet flags, and took my arm. A smear of green smudged his cheek.

‘Come with me,’ he said.

‘And yes, he does say that to all the girls,’ Mr Fitzpatrick drawled. He was leaning in the doorway, his camera slung around his neck. Mr Ross did not turn round.

‘An hour, that’s all,’ he said to me. ‘Please.’

Mr Fitzpatrick laughed. Raising the camera, he clicked the shutter.

‘Don’t look so panic-stricken, Mrs Jones,’ he said. ‘The man seeks to make art, not love. Or so he’s always telling me.’

‘Go fuck yourself, Fitz,’ Mr Ross said but Mr Fitzpatrick only laughed some more.

‘If he asks you to take your clothes off, just kick him in the balls and tell him he’s a filthy pervert. You wouldn’t be wrong. He’d be filthier still if he wasn’t so desperately repressed.’

Mr Ross’s face darkened. He held out his hands to me.

‘Please,’ he said quietly and I thought not of Moses in the wilderness but Isaac from the plate in the Children’s Bible, hands reaching in desperation for the father who would burn him alive. Gwenda and Eileen used to giggle and moon over that picture, kissing their fingers and pressing them to his face like Isaac was Errol Flynn.

‘I need you,’ he added and though I could not account for it something in me turned over.

‘Don’t do it, Mrs Jones,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘He’ll steal your soul.’

‘The bathroom,’ I said helplessly.

‘Bugger the bathroom,’ Mr Ross said, taking my hand. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It matters to me,’ Mr Fitzpatrick shouted after us but we were already halfway up the stairs.

* * *

In the boxroom I stood where he showed me. He adjusted the angle of my chin, the turn of my shoulder. His touch was casual, familiar, like I was something that belonged to him. He told me to take my scarf off, to undo my hair. I did as I was told. Perhaps I would have taken off my clothes too if he had asked me but he did not ask. He stood very still, his gaze moving over me and through me, peeling me open, and the nerves in me rose up to meet it.

There was a canvas on the easel, its raw back angled towards me, but Mr Ross did not use it. He took up a pad of rough-edged paper and a pencil and he drew. From time to time he told me to move, to clasp my hands or turn my head or lean against the wall, but his attention never shifted from the page. His whole being was in the loop between his looking and the marks he was making, there was nothing else. When he was done with a drawing he tore it from the pad and let it fall, then began straight away on another. The curve of my forehead, my shoulder, the whorl of my ear. Some were shaded and cross-hatched, others no more than a handful of lines. I looked at him looking at me and the pencil moving over the paper, his hand moving with it like it was the instrument and the pencil was the living thing.

I thought I understood what it meant to be looked at. Men look at girls when they are young, they cannot keep their eyes from moving like hands over your body, but when they looked at me it was not just my body they saw. It was my story, spooling out like an old film at the cinema, all the things they thought they knew, the shame and the secrets that were never really secrets at all. Even Dai, who saw it all and married me anyway, Dai perhaps most of all. I was the Pugh girl. I was always the Pugh girl, everywhere but here. In a boxroom in a cottage set high up on a hill I was not anyone. I had no story. I was a forehead. A cheek. A mouth. I was the dip at the base of a throat between two collarbones. He drew, his eyes moving over me, and in my mind I felt the soft press of his pencil against

my skin, tracing the shape of my parted lips, my throat, following the line of my breastbone to nudge the buttons of my blouse, and a plunge of pure heat surged through me. I thought dizzily of Miss Price and her golden rule. I was not invisible now. I was the opposite of invisible. I was the only thing in the room.

‘Don’t move,’ he said and he put a finger under my chin and lifted it so that I looked straight into his eyes, the pale streaks in the brown of his irises like the belly of a mushroom, and my breath was shallow in my mouth. His gaze held me. It moved over me and in me and through me, a fever burning under my skin. He drew me and I held myself still, my face quite blank, but inside I was blazing, liquid as a candle.

And then abruptly he stopped. Closing his eyes, he stretched slowly, luxuriously, tilting his head from side to side. It was like watching someone wake up. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair, pressing his fingers into his scalp, and, sighing, he reached across me and threw open the window. The breeze rushed in. I looked down to see Mr Fitzpatrick taking a box from the boot of the Morris Minor and just like that the world was ordinary. I was ordinary. The ordinary wanton Pugh girl I had always been. I clasped my arms tight, fingers digging into the muscle. I felt stiff and cold and crushingly, sickeningly stupid. I had another cottage to do before I could go home.

Mr Ross glanced at me. ‘You’re cold.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re shivering.’ A mothy blue jersey hung from a hook on the back of the door. He settled it around my shoulders, tying the sleeves in a loose knot. ‘There. That’s better. That blue becomes you. Actually—’ He fumbled for pencil and paper. ‘Stay like that. I mean exactly like that, don’t move.’

I did not move. I stared numbly out of the window and I thought of Olwen in Ifan’s stories, flying away on her dragon. Without looking up from his drawing, Mr Ross caught hold of the knotted jersey sleeves, pulling me closer as his pencil danced across the page.

‘Yes,’ he said softly and he laughed, a low astonished gasp. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, yes.’

He looked up at me, his face so close to mine I could see the grain of his skin. His lips were parted, his breath fast and warm against my mouth. I was sure then that he meant to kiss me and I felt a trapped slither of panic, the jersey tight as a net around me, holding me in, and I angled my head away from him, only a little but it shifted something in him. A change came over his face, its edges hardening. Letting the sleeves of the jersey drop, he turned away.

'The artist and his muse,' he said. 'What fiendish spells you cast over us!'

He spoke softly but I had been the Pugh girl too long to mistake his message. Whatever he had done it was my fault. Taking a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he lit one. He did not offer one to me. My hair hung loose around my shoulders. I wrenched it up, jamming the hairpins in. I wanted to run. Mr Ross exhaled, eyes narrow against the smoke, and opened the door.

'Next week then,' he said.

Downstairs Mr Fitzpatrick was drinking at the kitchen table.

'Eurydice back from the underworld,' he said to me, raising his glass. 'Iechyd sodding da.'

I hardly heard him. It was his words from before that echoed in my head. Don't do it, Mrs Jones. He'll steal your soul.

* * *

I sat for him again the next week. Mr Ross was the tenant, what choice did I have? If he complained to Mr Howell it would be my word against his and I knew how that would go. I told myself that it was better than scrubbing his lavatory, that if he ever tried to kiss me I would leave, but he never did. He held himself apart, his edges sharp and unambiguous. He did not touch me. His hands moved carefully around the lines of me, shaping the air.

I waited for him to tire of me, to put me back to work, but the weeks passed and he went on calling me upstairs. He had me kneeling and leaning on the windowsill and sitting on a chair and on the floor with my knees against my chest, with my eyes closed and my eyes open, my arms crossed or behind my head or just hanging. His drawings of me covered the walls,

me and me and me, overlapping like fish scales. I sat and stood and kneeled as he asked me. I looked where he instructed me to look. Sometimes, staring past him, I recalled the fierce heat that had possessed me, the hunger, and I felt a lurch of queasy shame, but mostly I felt nothing. After a while I forgot to think of him. Whatever he was outside this room, in here he was only his looking, his marks on the paper. I gave myself up to it. His gaze scoured me thin.

I knew he did not see into my soul. I was surfaces to him, planes and angles, light and shadow, patterns of hair and cloth and skin, but, though he did not see it, I grew under his gaze. In time I longed for it. I found myself thinking again of the story of the swallow and the happy prince. Mr Ross was the swallow, peeling me away piece by piece with his looking, only it was not gold and jewels he took from me but the parts of me that I had thought were worth nothing, and his looking turned them into something precious, something true. When he drew me I passed through his body and out of his fingers, reimagined and remade. I wondered if this was how nuns felt, when they gave themselves to God.

* * *

I never said anything to Mr Fitzpatrick. He would have choked on his brandy. Whatever he thought we were doing in that boxroom it had nothing at all to do with art. I could not get out the door of Bwythn-gwyn without some gibe about crossing my legs, about catching my death, about lying back and thinking of Wales.

‘We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos. Would you say you dance with rapture, Mrs Jones?’

One time when I was putting my coat on to leave he asked me if I had remembered my knickers.

I ignored him, swallowing the shame he stirred in me. I wished he would stop. His snideness was breezy but there was anger in it, he could not keep it out. The anger baffled me. Whatever he thought was going on between me and Mr Ross, why on earth would he care? A different man

might have stewed over my morals but Mr Fitzpatrick? Mr Fitzpatrick did not have two morals to rub together.

It was a fine morning in June when I came downstairs to find him sitting at the table, an empty bottle in front of him. A record was playing, music and sunlight streaming through the room. I had taken my apron off for Mr Ross, he wanted me wearing his blue jersey, and I was tying the strings behind my back when Mr Fitzpatrick leaned over the record player and snatched the needle up. He was drunk, his movements clumsy. The needle scratched the record with a rasp. In the sudden silence the tick of the clock sounded very loud. Mr Fitzpatrick staggered a little and took a bowl from the wreckage of dirty crockery on the table. He turned it over in his hands, considering it. Then he let it fall.

‘Oops,’ he said as it smashed.

I fetched the broom. I swept up the pieces. Mr Fitzpatrick watched me. We both knew it was my job. I emptied the pan into the bin and when I was done he picked up a smeared wine glass and dropped it. Bright shards exploded across the flags.

‘This place is a fucking pigsty,’ he said. He might have been talking about the weather.

‘Mr Ross said—’

‘I don’t give two fucks what Mr Ross said. You’re the char, aren’t you?’

I understood then, or I thought I did. Mr Fitzpatrick did not give two straws for my morals. The rules I broke went much deeper than that. In the wild and in the farmyard brute instinct kept animals apart. The bitch and the ewe mated with their own kind. They did not rut with cockerels or with bulls. It violated all the laws of nature.

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The invitation was thick as a slate with gold edges and a scarlet crest you could feel under your thumb. *The Corporation of Liverpool requests the pleasure of the company of* written in copperplate under the crest and then, under that in curly ink, *Mr and Mrs Dafydd Jones*. A ceremony at the dam followed by a luncheon to mark the official opening of the Llyn Celyn reservoir.

‘Those bastardiaid buried us alive,’ Emyr said bitterly. ‘Now they’re asking us to dance on our own graves?’

Even after all this time it startled me that Emyr could speak like that and Dai say nothing. Old habits die hard, or mine did, and Dai had never borne bad language. I knew I should scold him myself but what would be the purpose? Emyr was right. They were bastardiaid. Sighing, I took the card from Dai and tried to tear it in half but it was too thick, it only bent. Emyr snatched it from me and dropped it in the range. The gold caught first, the flame bright green like a magpie feather.

‘No one will go,’ I said. ‘Not from the valley. They’d not dream of it.’

Emyr scowled. ‘You think those pen cociau give two shits what we do?’

Dai’s head jerked up. I thought Emyr was for it then. So did Emyr. He stiffened as Dai leaned forward in his chair, fists clenched, glaring up at his son.

‘But they will,’ he said. ‘By the time we’re done with them, they will.’

* * *

It was not a miracle. Dai was not instantly returned to himself. He still struggled some days with the tiredness, still coughed fit to turn himself inside out. I still found him sometimes in the rocker staring blankly into space, the invisible weight on him hunching his back.

But he was better. There was no denying he was better. Once again he and Margaret Roberts took up residence at our kitchen table. The old Protection League files and folders reappeared, the lists of names and

addresses, and with them flickers of the old Dai I had not seen since the campaign, the Dai who knew best, who expected other people to sit up and listen. Mostly I was glad to see him, though I was not sure I liked him any more the second time. Margaret Roberts brought over her typewriter and set it up in the parlour. The house echoed to the rapid clack-clack of it, an iron heart belting out sixty beats a minute.

An information war, Dai called it. They would not rest, he said, until every last soul in Wales understood the scale of the swindle. They wrote to every Welshman in Wales who had ever supported them, and to all the faraway Welshmen with their Welsh Societies in Canada and Australia and wherever else in the great wide world that they were. They wrote to councillors and businessmen and landowners, to Members of Parliament and trades union leaders, to bishops and deacons. They wrote to the writer Saunders Lewis who had burned down the RAF bombing school in Llyˆn before the war and gone to jail for his trouble. They wrote to all the Welsh newspapers and some English ones besides. I licked stamps until my mouth glued shut and tried not to think about why, if he had it in him to fight so hard for a cause already lost, Dai had not thought to fight for his family, for Emyr and me. It was not long before letters started coming back. Sometimes when I brought him a cup of tea Dai read me one. He had done that often the first time around. I half-expected to look round and see Emyr in short trousers, hunched over his Matchbox cars on the floor.

A reporter came from the *Herald Cymraeg*. The piece he wrote was short and hidden in the middle of the paper but someone must have seen it because they asked Dai to Bangor to speak on the wireless. They gave him three minutes at the end of the midday news. Emyr stayed home from school that day so we could listen together.

‘The Liverpool Corporation took our land, our lives,’ Dai said over the crackle of static. ‘Would they have us dance on our own graves?’

Emyr’s words, neatened up for the wireless but his all the same. I saw Emyr drawing them into himself, holding them in, and I felt a scorch of gratitude to Dai for giving them back to him. A handing down from father to son, not of the land that was lost but of the deep love they shared for it. An honouring. Dai’s voice was low and steady. He sounded almost like

himself. Then he coughed and the interviewer thanked him and cut to the weather.

After that the letters poured in, so many some days that Dai had me and Emyr helping with the pile. Most supported the cause. A handful complained they were stirring up trouble. One envelope contained a postcard and a small newpaper clipping. On one side of the postcard there was a picture, a white symbol against a dark background. The symbol was shaped like an X with hooked upper arms and a vertical line running through the middle of it. On the other a message was printed in Welsh in leaky biro. Whoever had written it had not paid attention to their Welsh lessons. TO DAFYDD JONES, TRUE SON OF WALES, PAST IS THE TIMES FOR WARNING. HEED THE PROPHECY OF MYRDDIN. WE WILL TO RAISE AGAIN.

Myrddin was the Merlin of Dai's stories who foretold the birth of a Welsh king, descended from the eagles of Eryri, who would defeat the English and drive them from Wales forever. The newspaper clipping was in English and dated the previous Tuesday. It reported the anonymous tip-off to police of a bomb planted at the National Eisteddfod in Newtown. Thousands of people had been evacuated from the Pavilion but no device had been found. Dai put the cutting in the file. He threw the postcard on the fire. There were always crackpots, he said sharply to Emyr, wasting police time with their empty threats, perhaps National Service was not such a stupid idea after all, and he went back to his letters. It bothered him, though. I could see it in the way he stopped his writing to glance at the file, as if the crackpots might be lurking there, waiting to pounce.

* * *

I thought it was my fault. All those Thursday mornings in the boxroom with my outside self dropped like a coat and my mind a nothingness, a space for Mr Ross to move through however he wished, and all of a sudden I was present and restless and entirely in the way. I held his poses just the same, arranged as he wanted me arranged, I did not say a word, but I could hear myself. My mind hissed and rattled like a milking machine, echoing with

the clack of the typewriter and the busyness of pens and drawers, Emyr's eager questions, the calm pleasure in Dai's voice as he read aloud. I looked out of the window and the piles of envelopes for stamping made a wide white path over the hill. I did not know where the path would lead, what would be at the end of it. The not-knowing hummed in me, low-pitched and insistent.

It was a kind of game at first. I watched as Mr Ross balled up the failed drawings, juggling with them or throwing them up in the air and whacking them like he was playing tennis. But as the weeks passed the game wore thin. He bowled the crushed pages like cricket balls, viciously, and then he gave up pretending he was playing and just hurled them at the wall or the window or at me. By then you could smell the anger on him. That and the drink. Nothing he did satisfied him. Sometimes he clouted the wall with the side of his fist and sometimes he closed his eyes, neck stretched, and I knew he was screaming in his head. Crumpled wads of paper littered the floor.

He abandoned the drawing. He mixed oil paints and made up a palette. He set a new canvas on the easel. He kept a bottle at his feet, swigging from it he stared at the canvas, a brush dangling slackly from his hand. He did not paint. I stood where he put me. I tried to stay still, to make myself empty, but his agitation was catching, it burned in my limbs. He was angry with himself but he was angrier with me. His idle brush was a finger in my ribs, in my face, in my eye. He looked at me, his eyes narrow, and everything he saw was wrong.

He jabbed at his palette and made a mark. A long pause. With a howl of frustration he threw down his brush, kicking out at the canvas. It lurched off its easel. Mr Ross sent it flying against the wall. I waited. I was afraid he might hit me. Instead he picked up his bottle and held it up to the window to see how much was left. He took a gulp and then another. The chair he sometimes posed me in was pushed into a corner. He dragged it into the middle of the room and sat on it the wrong way, legs straddling its bentwood back.

'Tell me a story,' he demanded. He had not said a word to me for weeks. 'A Welsh story. One your mother told you.'

I shook my head. 'My mother never told me stories.'

‘I don’t believe you. A place like this must be drowning in stories.’

I thought of Mari, the curl of her brown hands around mine as I sat in her lap, my head against her shoulder. The warm bread-and-biscuit smell of her. I had told her stories to Emyr but he had not loved them as I had. He liked the ones Dai told, the ones about battles and swords.

Mr Ross took another swallow from his bottle. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Once upon a time.’

He was frightened, I realised suddenly. He was like a child and a mannerless child at that with his foot-stamping demands, but like a child he was afraid to be alone with his nightmares, fearful of the monster under the bed. Children wanted stories to beat back the dark.

‘All right then,’ I said. ‘Once upon a time there was an enchantress called Ceridwen.’

I spun out the story, how Ceridwen, eager to bestow upon her ugly son the gift of wisdom, cooked up a potion in her cauldron, only for the servant boy to drink it by mistake. Knowing Ceridwen would be angry, the boy fled but Ceridwen chased him. When he could not outrun her he used his new powers to transform himself into a hare but Ceridwen made herself a greyhound. He became a fish and jumped into a river but she turned into an otter and dived in after. He magicked himself into a bird. She became a hawk. Finally, the boy shrank himself into a single grain of corn and Ceridwen changed herself into a hen and ate him and he grew inside her as a child. Ceridwen promised herself she would kill him but when he was born he was so beautiful she could not bring herself to do it.

I had never thought much of Ceridwen, a heartless killer who prized beauty over wisdom and abandoned her son, but Mr Ross hung on every word. I could not help feeling gratified. There was an art to telling stories, the same way there was an art to drawing, making something out of nothing, so when he asked for another I obliged. I told him the story of Culhwch, son of Goleuddydd, Light of Day, a prince abandoned in a pigsty who is cursed by his stepmother to marry the daughter of the fearsome giant Ysbaddaden. Knowing if his daughter marries he will die, Ysbaddaden sets Culhwch forty impossible tasks that he must complete to win his daughter’s hand. Any ordinary prince would fail such a test but Culhwch is a cousin of

King Arthur’s and with his knights, through sorcery, skill and swordplay, the tasks are completed and Culhwch carried back to Ysbaddaden’s castle on the back of a vast salmon to claim his bride. The only part of the story I changed was the daughter’s name. In Mari’s story she was Olwen. In mine she was Penarddan, most fair, a girl so kind and gentle that white clovers sprung up behind her as she walked.

‘That night the giant’s head was set on a stake above the citadel and the enchanted harp of Teirtu played music by itself and the great food basket of Gwyddno Garanhir replenished itself again and again until all the guests had had their fill and Culhwch and Penarddan were married and lived happily ever after.’

Happily ever after. The words were ashy in my mouth. It was June. In September the reservoir would open and the last of Dai’s work would be done. What would become of us then?

‘One more,’ Mr Ross wheedled, slurring his words, but I shook my head.

‘Time’s up,’ I said and I walked out and down the stairs without looking back.

* * *

I told Emyr about Mr Ross and the stories.

‘I’m taking my revenge on the Saes by boring them to death,’ I joked but Emyr only frowned. He was wearing his new coat, a heavy double-breasted greatcoat he had bought at a jumble sale. The coat was long and shabby and smelled of mothballs. The young were all wearing them, John Post told me, it was the fashion these days. I did not like it. Emyr looked like a stranger in it, like he was already someone else.

‘Forget Culhwch,’ he said. ‘What about Owain Glyndŵr? You should be raising their consciousness, not telling them fairy tales.’

‘They’re Saes, Emyr. They’ve got no time for consciousness.’

‘Not true. The tall one was a poet.’

‘Mr Fitzpatrick’s not a poet. He does nothing but lounge around drinking.’

Emyr laughed. ‘In that case he’s a poet for sure.’

If drinking made a man a poet then Mr Ross was well on his way to being one too. He was working less and less, drinking more and more. On my last visit I had found the pair of them sprawled in the parlour and near incoherent. Empty bottles littered the room. Mr Ross tried to stand up when he saw me but the drink got the better of him and he fell sideways onto Mr Fitzpatrick and Mr Fitzpatrick pushed at him and tried to sit him up like a doll but they were laughing too hard and Mr Ross slid off the couch onto the floor. Reaching over for the bottle, Mr Fitzpatrick refilled their glasses. He handed one to Mr Ross, his arm heavy around Mr Ross’s neck, and held his own glass aloft.

‘Ross-on-why the hell not?’ he said, slopping red wine. ‘I’ll drink to that.’

Did he think Ross-on-Wye was in Wales or was it the only joke he had? Mr Ross looked up at me blurrily, rolling his eyes.

‘Fitzpatrick’s distracting me, sir,’ he said and they both laughed some more. They were not laughing at me, they were laughing as if I was not even there. Mr Ross’s shirt was buttoned wrong. I tried to back out of the room but he lurched forward, grabbing my hand, pulling me towards him.

‘Story time,’ he slurred.

‘I’ve work to do,’ I said, trying to escape him, but his grip was too tight and suddenly Mr Fitzpatrick had my other hand and Mr Ross was squirming back up onto the sofa and before I could stop it I was trapped between them, their arms twined around my shoulders, their bodies heavy against mine. Mr Ross put his head on my shoulder. His breath was shocking. Pushing him away, I sat up straighter. Briskly, impatiently, I told them the story of Mererid, the daughter of the king of Cantre’r Gwaelod, who plied Seithennin the night watchman with ale so that he forgot to close the gates to the city when a wild storm was blowing in, and the kingdom was drowned forever beneath the sea. I told it baldly, no frills, skipping the bit about Mererid seducing Seithennin which I knew would only lead to trouble. I might have been a radio announcer reading the news.

‘Drinking and drowning,’ Mr Fitzpatrick hissed loudly to Mr Ross. ‘You don’t get any Welsher than that.’

‘Drinking and drowning and shagging sheep,’ Mr Ross sang in a deep bass and the two of them fell about laughing. Wriggling free of the mess of them I stood up.

‘Wait,’ Mr Ross cried, reaching a plaintive hand after me, but I was already gone. Sliding sideways into the gap I had left, he let his arm fall across Mr Fitzpatrick who smiled down on him woozily and closed his eyes.

The house was filthy. I mopped the kitchen floor till the water turned black. I was unsettled, annoyed with myself. I should never have told them our stories. In their careless hands they became jokes or if not jokes at best exhibits in a museum, peculiar and primitive. I did not bother with the parlour. When I let myself out the two men were still sleeping, Mr Ross’s face squashed up against Mr Fitzpatrick’s chest, Mr Fitzpatrick with his head tipped back and his mouth fallen open like a fish, snoring fit to burst.

Poets, the pair of them. No wonder books of poems were so thin.

* * *

It was slow going but in the end there was no mistaking it. Dai was on the mend. Not quite well, not yet, he ate little and at night his cough had him hawking like a cat with a hairball, but every day a little better, a bit more like himself. Some days you could almost watch it happen, the quick gleam of brightness coming back to him. I had forgotten what that Dai was like. One morning coming in from the hens I heard him and Emyr talking and then suddenly he laughed his low reluctant laugh, a squeak in the back of it like a rusty hinge. I had forgotten that too. I could feel the anger still in me, too hard and deep to shift, but I looked at him sometimes and my heart ached the way my chilblained feet ached coming back indoors on frozen winter days, the feeling in them slowly and painfully starting to come back.

And then he collapsed. Out of the blue, coming down the stairs. I heard him falling, the smack of his head on the floor. I ran to him. His lips were blue. There was blood in his hair. When I crouched down beside him he was sick on my shoes. Cardiac arrest, the men from the ambulance said when they came. A heart attack. At the hospital they bandaged his head and

assigned him to a ward. The ward was big and noisy with a window at one end. Dai's bed was the furthest from the door. Someone had drawn the curtains round him. He lay propped up against his pillows, eyes closed, the loose hospital gown falling open to expose his pale chest, the scar puckered like a pulled seam. I tried not to cry. Later a doctor came, a nurse clucking after him. He gave Dai something for the pain.

'What happens now?' I asked.

The doctor had a brisk manner and downy white hair like a dandelion clock.

'There is no magic pill for a heart attack, Mrs Jones. What your husband needs is rest.'

I thought of Dai slumped in the rocking chair.

'You don't understand,' I said and I heard the shrillness in me. 'He was getting better.'

'We'll keep him in for now, keep an eye on him. The medication will make him more comfortable.'

'He had a cough, that's all.'

'And no excitement. Sleep really is the best medicine.'

'How could this happen when he was getting better?'

The doctor sighed. 'We get older, Mrs Jones. Like cars we wear out. Unlike cars, if we're lucky, we mend. We just have to hope that your husband is one of the lucky ones.'

He clicked away down the ward, the nurse bustling after. Dai's mouth hung open, white gunk gathering at the corners. His lips were mauve, his eyelids too but a darker shade, like old bruises. I made a face at him or I tried to. My face was stiff as a board.

'Well, Dafydd Jones,' I said. 'There you have it. It's not a doctor you need, you old rattletrap. It's a mechanic.'

* * *

They kept him in three weeks. I visited on Sundays. Wrexham was thirty miles and two buses away, it took two hours to get there. Dai was usually asleep. I sat beside him, watching his chest go up and down. When I got

tired of the other men staring I pulled the curtains closed around his bed. The curtains were blue, they turned the light blue too. It was like being underwater. When the sun struck the window it lit the curtain in a rippling strip. I sat in the blueness and listened to the racket of the ward, the chatter and the clatter of crockery and the constant shouting for the nurse. They all sounded quite cheerful, I could not think what they were doing there. Some of them had radios with them. They listened to music and football matches and comedy programmes bristly with canned laughter. It was never quiet, not for a minute. Dai slept on.

I brought clean pyjamas, a newspaper, grapes. John and Maureen Post sent a card. I put it on the shelf beside his bed. I ate the grapes. Sometimes Dai snored or he jerked in his sleep the way Teg used to. Dreaming about rabbits, Emyr always said. I did not know what Dai dreamed of. He had no patience with dreams. I thought about Teg panting on the hillside, showing her yellow teeth, the black rims of her gums. She always looked like she was laughing her head off but she never took her eyes off Dai. When he pulled her ears she shivered in a kind of ecstasy.

I told Emyr not to visit. Wrexham was a long way and likely his father would sleep through it, he would have time enough with Dai when he came home, but one afternoon when visiting time was nearly over the curtain opened and there he was. He knelt down by the side of Dai's bed, his school bag still humped on his back. The soles of his shoes were going to holes.

'Hello, Da,' Emyr said softly and he took Dai's hand and kissed the knuckles. I thought of Dai standing behind me in the yard with his arms around me and his chin on the top of my head, me leaning against him, his hands in mine and lifted to my lips, the two of us one person looking down into the valley, the valley that was not a valley any more, and I wanted to kneel down behind Emyr, my arms wrapped tight around him, and weep into his hair.

Then the bell rang for the end of visiting time and the nurse swept back the curtains and shooed us away. The corridors were bleached with light. It might have been morning or the middle of the night. Somewhere a loudspeaker bleeped a code. We pushed through the heavy swing doors into

the reception area and there was Tony sitting on a plastic chair, his motorcycle jacket cradled in his lap. He stood up when he saw us.

‘How is he?’ he said to Emyr.

Emyr shrugged, twisting his mouth.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Jones,’ Tony said. ‘Liverpool has blood on its hands.’

‘He’s not dead,’ I snapped and Emyr put a hand on my arm.

‘My bike’s at Tony’s,’ he said gently. ‘You’ll be all right getting home?’

I nodded. There was a badge on the lapel of Tony’s jacket, black with a white symbol on it. The symbol was shaped like an X with hooked upper arms and a vertical line running through the middle of it. I stared at it blankly. The shape was familiar but my brain was full of fog. I could not think where I had seen it before.

‘The white eagle of Eryri,’ Tony said. ‘For good luck.’

It came to me then. The postcard sent to Dai, the one written with a bad pen and worse grammar. WE WILL TO RAISE AGAIN. The symbol did not look like an eagle. It looked like the Nazi swastika.

‘It’s for Da,’ Emyr said. ‘Didn’t he always say the white eagle would come down from Yr Wyddfa to help Welshmen in their hour of need? There’s no one Welsher than Da.’

He smiled at me, a fragile frightened flicker of a thing, and for a breath nothing was broken and the world held steady.

‘I’ll walk you to the bus,’ he said and just like that time rushed back in.

* * *

The bus was slow, sluggish with summer heat. I stared out of the window at the whitewashed houses of Llandrillo, the church spire pressing against the sky like a sharpened pencil. It was nearly supper time but the sun was still high, the sky a fierce burning blue. A gaggle of boys were playing football by the bridge. I watched the water move in twisting swirls and runs over the rocks, its unsettledness eddying inside me. That story about the eagle coming down, surely Emyr knew it was not Dai’s, that Dai would have no patience for a story like that? Dai loved all the old tales, he loved them the same way he loved the valley and the hill, they added up together to

something essential in him, but he would never take one for the other. He found wonder in the ordinary world, how often had he knelt to show Emyr a chunk of rose pink manganese, or a rainbow beetle with its iridescent bronze, blue and red stripes, or the sticky insect-trap tentacles of a sundew, but magic and wizards, they belonged by the fireside, in poems and myths. Ill or not, Dai would have no time for an eagle coming down to save us. Emyr knew that. He knew his father. Or had he already started to forget?

* * *

The day before Dai was discharged I tidied away all the papers. Dai would be on bed rest, no excitement, doctor's orders. I gathered up the files of letters and newspaper clippings and put them with Margaret Roberts's typewriter on the front step. She could have fetched them away without knocking but she knocked all the same. She brought roses from her garden and a jar of gooseberry jam.

'Dai's favourite,' she said. 'Send him my best, won't you?'

'I will.'

'Perhaps I'll pop back in a day or two. Let him know what we're doing.'

'I'm not sure.'

'The Rural District Council are boycotting the ceremony, did you hear? He'll want to know that.'

'He nearly died, Margaret. What he'll want is some peace.'

Margaret Roberts opened her mouth to say something. Then she closed it again. She picked up the typewriter. It was heavy. It bent her over. She turned away, then turned back.

'I'll keep on. Will you tell him that at least? I won't stop.'

'You don't think it's time?'

Margaret Roberts's face crumpled.

'I'll keep on,' she said helplessly. Margaret Roberts whose voice used to roll like a boulder down the valley.

* * *

The doctor came as I was lacing up Dai's shoes. He was short and round and harassed-looking. He asked me to step into the corridor. Melancholia, he called it. It happened sometimes after cardiac arrest. He had started Dai on some pills.

'He was ill before,' I said. I could hear the loudspeaker bleeping, the same code over and over. The doctor sighed. He said if there was no improvement after three months Dai could have shock therapy. He said if I was worried I could make an appointment.

'I have to go, I'm sorry,' he said.

The heart doctor left a letter. In the letter he said to make sure Dai walked every day. He said fresh air was a tonic and a body quick to waste. He said that recovery started in the mind.

Neither of them said anything about caring for a husband who would not eat or wash or lift a glass of water to his lips. I did what I could but I had to go to work. I brought him tea in the morning and food to see him through the day. I counted out the pills the doctor had given him and stood over him while he swallowed them. I stacked his pillows, sitting him up so he could see out of the window. I brought jam jars of flowers up and put them on the chest, willowherb and meadowsweet, trails of honeysuckle. I left a pot under the bed for his doings. When I came home I emptied it and opened the window as far as it would go but the smell of it still clung. I felt a furious thwarted kind of pity for him but mostly I felt tired. I woke every day with a great weariness in me, like I was climbing a hill that kept on unfolding ahead of me, crest after relentless crest, its peak always too far out of reach.

One day, running late, I left Dai's pills in his saucer for him to take. When I came home I found the tea undrunk and the pills still rattling in the saucer. He had not taken one. A wave of exhaustion and despair crashed over me.

'For the love of peace, Dai,' I said, close to tears. 'You have to take your medicine.'

Picking the pills up, I held them out to him. He did not take them.

'Come on,' I urged him and when he did not move I seized his wrist and, wrenching open his fingers, I crammed the pills into his palm. 'Take

them now! I mean it, take them!’

Dai turned his face away and closed his eyes. He let his hand fall. The pills spilled over the blankets and onto the floor. I dropped to my knees, blindly scrabbling after them as the tears closed my throat and the rage crashed through me like a fall of rocks.

‘Do you want to rot here in this bed? Is that what you want?’

Dai coughed, a keening wheezing choke, and lay back against the pillows. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I scrambled up and, clamping his jaw with my fingers like he was a sheep to be drenched, I forced his mouth open and pushed the pills inside.

‘You have to help me,’ I wept and beside me Dai coughed again and spat the mess of pills out onto his chest.

* * *

I told Emyr it was normal to sleep after a heart attack. I told him Dai was taking pills to make him better. I did not lie but I did not want him worrying. He sat with Dai sometimes, telling him things or reading aloud from a book, but it was the summer holiday and outside the sun was shining, he could not be fixed for long. I watched him off down the lane on his bicycle, freewheeling feet out down the hill, and I thanked God he was happy and well. The loneliness bent me double.

At night Dai coughed and stared blankly into the darkness. I could not lie next to him, both of us awake. I sat in the parlour and waited for dawn. One night I looked out of the window and saw a light burning in the cowshed. I thought someone must be bunking in there. It was not uncommon round here, men thrown out of their homes or their jobs and nowhere to go. They made a mess sometimes, most of them drank too much, but there was no harm in them. I had almost decided to let him alone, the cows had no need of the place any more, but then I thought about fire and strong drink and the power of a little kindness to change things and I fetched a lump of cheese from the pantry and what was left of the loaf and I put my coat on over my nightdress and went out.

Emyr stood by the back wall, his back to me, stirring something in the old zinc bath we used to wash the lambs in. He looked round guiltily as I came in. A fire burned under it, banked inside a makeshift grate of walling stones and chicken wire. Propped up on the hayrack his torch sent a roll of dusty light into the rafters. The whole place reeked of chemicals.

‘What’s going on?’ I said. Emyr shrugged. He was wearing rubber gloves. Dark trickles ran down the creases in the rubber and dripped on the cobbled floor.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Nothing doesn’t smell like that.’

‘It’s just dye.’

‘Dye? What do you want with dye?’ I tried to get a better look but he stood four-square in front of me, his gloves dripping, blocking my way.

‘To dye stuff, obviously. You don’t have to make that face. Everyone does it.’

‘In the middle of the night?’

‘It’s not the middle of the night. It’s not even late.’

‘It’s nearly midnight.’

‘Exactly!’

I was silent, the chemicals stinging my nose. At seventeen Ifan used to come back from the quarry on Sundays and polish off dinner enough for three. I had thought him as grown as any man there was.

‘I’m going to make some tea,’ I said in a different voice. ‘You want some?’

‘I’m all right.’

‘You’ll put the fire out properly, won’t you, when you’re done?’

‘Obviously.’

‘And be careful with that stuff. Get rid of it somewhere it won’t make a mess.’

‘Mam. Go to bed.’

He poked the soupy mixture, stirring it with an old fence post. I peered at it. Under the chemical stink there was a strong smell of wet dog.

‘Black, is it?’ I asked. He shook his head. ‘What, then?’

‘I don’t know. Sort of green?’

‘Sort of Green. That’s what they called it in the catalogue, is it?’

Emyr frowned, jabbing the soup with his post. I knew I should not tease him, that it only shut him off from me. When he was small my teasing made him laugh but then when he was small he looked at me like I was his whole world.

‘How long before your greens are done?’ I asked.

‘A while.’

Why had I not understood that being a mother was like being young or beautiful, that time passed and suddenly the power you assumed was yours by rights was gone?

‘Green will be nice,’ I said. ‘Nicer than black.’

‘What’s wrong with black?’

‘Deacons. And undertakers.’

He left early the next day, a camping trip. In the cowshed the fire was out but the lamb bath stood unemptied on its grate of bricks, half filled with inky dye. It had been my job to take care of the weaklings, the ones come too early or found abandoned and half-dead from exposure. The first lamb Dai ever gave me was a limp rag of a thing in a purple slither of afterbirth. I was sure it was done for, but I wrapped it in a towel and massaged its chest the way he showed me. I had no interest in sheep, I was fool enough to think I would not need one, but when that lamb wriggled in my arms I laughed out loud at the joy of it.

Emyr had slung his clothes to dry over the byres. I took them out to the line. Two shirts with breast pockets, one much bigger than the other, a pair of trousers and that smelly old greatcoat he had got from the jumble, all the same slightly blotchy brownish-green. The breeze was strong. The trousers kicked their legs up and the coat smacked the air with its cuffs.

* * *

I saw what they looked like. Poorly dyed and blotchy as they were, I did not mistake the intent. John Post was right, all the youngsters were wearing them. In Wrexham the streets were full of youths in greatcoats and leather flying jackets. It jolted me to see them, like somehow time had slipped and

I was a child again. It was only looking closer that you saw the T-shirts and the gym shoes, the cigarettes dangling from their mouths like the past was nothing and the clothes just ordinary clothes. By the bus stop for the hospital there was an army surplus store with battledress displayed in the window. When I saw Emyr's blotchy versions it was the smallness of his world I thought of. I wished he did not have to dye his own.

I did not ask him where he went in his greatcoat or when he would be back. He was sliding away from me, everything was changing, and suddenly I did not know how to be. All his life I had raised that boy with a firm grip. Dai had always fathered him the way he trained a sheepdog, he expected him to work hard and follow commands, but I was the one who told him what he needed telling. It was the way Mari had been a mother to me and I found that it came easy. Children were easy. They might push against rules and boundaries but they needed to know that they were there. You couldn't lose them because there was nowhere else for them to go or nowhere where they wouldn't be sent straight back to you, primed for a clip on the ear. Like it or not, they were stuck with you.

And then in a blink they were seventeen and grown. Six feet tall with a driver's licence and a five o'clock shadow and eyes on the horizon. I might tell myself he could go at any time but the truth was he was already halfway gone. As a boy the few friends he made were children of other families in the valley, Harri Hughes and Harri's cousin Trefor and the youngest of Bob Williams' boys, whose fathers were farmers too. It wasn't just that they went to the same tiny village school. Every part of those boys' lives, their houses, their meals, the ordinary rhythm and the shape of their days, was precisely the same as ours. Nothing Emyr did or saw when he was playing with those boys was any different from what he would have done or seen at home. Playing with those boys made the valley seem like the whole world.

Tony Bowen was the start of it. I could not bring myself to like him, to my mind he lacked both humility and humour, but it was not hard to see what drew Emyr. Tony Bowen with his motorcycle and his spaghetti bolognaise was a door to another world, a world where money and travel and a television were more doors leading to yet more, opening and opening like a hall of mirrors at a fair. So many places and none of them out of

reach. No wonder Emyr could not get enough. I tried sometimes to picture him at Tony's house, eating his supper in Tony's kitchen with Tony's divorced mother, but I could not do it. It was not just the house I could not summon. It was Emyr in it. He would be someone different, I knew that. I wanted it for him. He needed to outgrow us, to spread his wings and fly. What I did not know was if I would recognise the person he became. Or how to make sure he came back.

Mari had expected me to leave. I always understood that, even when I was small and she was still my mother. She was quite unlike the other mothers in that way. They wanted their daughters close, their sons too for that matter, married to their friends' children in the houses in which they had grown up, living the same lives that they themselves had lived. Mari sat me down with my schoolbooks and told me that each sum I got right, each word I spelled correctly, was a feather. When I had enough of them, she said, I would have wings. That was the way to deal with mwydod like Gwenda Barry and Eileen Rees, she told me firmly, to fly higher and higher till they were nothing but specks on the earth. She pushed me to try harder, to come top of my form, and I did, until suddenly she was dying and not my mother any more and the world tilted so suddenly that all I could do was to try and keep my balance. When she died I fell. The only life I could imagine was one that belonged to someone else. I let Dai save me because I no longer had the faith or the courage to save myself.

What would it have been like, to have been seventeen with Mari at Tyˆ-eithin? Would she have kept silent, afraid that her tongue would cut the ties that bound us? When I was seventeen Germany finally surrendered, the war was over, but what peace would Mari have found, her husband and her second son dead and her daughter on the other side of the world and tall silent Gareth, who had always been her favourite, a twitching drunk who never slept and came back to Tyˆ-eithin only long enough to collect his things? I was all she had left. Would she have lain awake as I lay awake in the darkest hours of the night, hollowed out with fear that I would leave and never come back? Or worse, that I would come back as someone else, someone she did not know with a life she could not begin to imagine,

someone who was ashamed of her and her narrow little life, the life the two of us had shared?

She would have made me go. I was certain of that. Mari was strong, much stronger than me. She must have known that I loved her with all my heart, that she was everything steady in the world to me. She must have known too that when the time came I would fly away without a backward glance, that I would neglect to write, fail to visit, forget the promises I had made to her. That was growing up. Children left. You urged them to leave because the world was waiting and it would not wait forever. I knew that as well as she had. And yet the pain persisted like the pain from an amputated limb, senseless and unbearable.

* * *

When my day came round for Bwythn-gwyn I half-expected to find Mr Ross and Mr Fitzpatrick still sprawled together in the parlour. Instead Mr Ross was at his easel in the kitchen. The table was strewn with tubes of paint and palette knives and paint-streaked jam jars crammed with brushes like bunches of dark flowers, a stack of blank canvases propped against the wall. The flags were dotted with splashes of bright paint like fallen petals.

As for Mr Fitzpatrick, he was gone. Every last trace of him, like he had been wiped from the face of the earth. All of the books and the half-eaten boxes of biscuits, the dirty jerseys and muddy socks abandoned inside out upon the rug. In his bedroom the drawers gaped open-mouthed and empty from the chest. He had taken the record player and all the records in their brightly coloured covers. There were still dirty dishes scattered everywhere, the fireplace spilled over with dead ashes, but the place felt different. Without Mr Fitzpatrick slouching about the place playing his records and drinking his wine and generally making a nuisance of himself, the mess was stripped of its exuberance. All that remained was the squalor.

Mr Ross pushed his easel aside. He looked dreadful, his eyes smudged and sunken. I wondered if he was still drunk. ‘You lied to me,’ he said.

I frowned, puzzled. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘The girl in that story. You called her Penardden but she wasn’t Penardden, was she? Was she?’

I wanted to laugh, it was such a small senseless thing, but he was not laughing. His hand closed around my arm. I tried to pull away but he only gripped tighter, his fingers pressing hard into the flesh. I felt a frisson of fear. There was something almost mad about him, something compressed and glittering. It was like standing under the pylons on the ridge, the sizzle of power sharpening the air. It made the hairs on my arms stand up.

‘She was you,’ he said.

‘It’s just a story,’ I protested but he did not seem to hear. He dragged me into the middle of the kitchen, pushing roughly at my waist, my neck, my shoulder. I wanted to resist him but I was afraid of what he might do. I stood in the shape he had made me as he snatched up his brush and, though I could not see what he was painting, I saw the swiftness of it, its certainty, the steady fierce rhythm of his brush, and the fear ran out of me like sand. It was like I was the paint, like he was dipping his brush in me, and setting me, stroke by stroke, down on the canvas. My mind grew empty and yet I did not disappear. I stayed quite still and yet I had never felt more violently alive. I could feel my hair growing and my nails, the blood moving in my veins. I let myself soften, opening myself to his feverish exhilaration, and it surged through me. My whole being sang with it.

And then suddenly he stopped. He wiped his brush and laid it down like something holy. I did not move. I did not want to break the spell. The air crackled with the charge of him. If I could only hold myself still enough, it might ground itself through me. It might shock me into a different version of myself.

‘Olwen,’ Mr Ross said and into my name he put all his hardness and his glittering, he turned it into something new. I laughed, I could not help myself, I laughed with the astonishing power of it, of art, and suddenly he was on me, against me, hands gripping my head, knee jammed between my legs, tongue forcing itself into my mouth. I tried to pull away but my legs were numb. I stumbled and he held me upright, fingers clamped under my skull, and he ground himself against me, his thigh forcing my legs wider,

his tongue hard and deep inside my mouth like he would close my throat with it. Not a kiss but damnation. A final judgement.

Then just as abruptly he pushed me away, dragging his fist across his mouth like he would rip it from his face. I staggered backwards, trapped against the wall. Snatching up a broad flat brush, he stabbed it against his palette and swept it in a thick swoop across my face, from my temple to the corner of my mouth. The paint was cold. Dazed, I put my hand to my cheek. My fingertips came away crimson. He laughed, a strange high cackle more bird than human.

‘Is that how I should paint you, Mrs Jones?’ he said. ‘The scarlet woman?’

Dirty little Pugh girl. I clenched my fists, overcome with shame and disgust, though whether for Mr Ross or myself I could not have said. The paint was in my mouth.

‘Dwi’n dy gasau di,’ I said fiercely. I hate you.

Mr Ross stopped cackling and stared at me. The gargoyle grin slipped from his face. He is going to hit me, I thought, and a clear high part of me tried to guess how badly it would hurt, but he did not hit me. He stared at the brush in his hand like he did not know how it had got there and let it fall. It skittered redly across the floor. Mr Ross closed his eyes. His legs buckling beneath him, he slid down the wall.

The paint was drying on my cheek. My skin felt stiff, fixed in place. I looked at Mr Ross, hunched on the floor, his head buried in his arms.

‘Dwi’n dy gasau di,’ I said again and, stepping over him, I left.

A week later he was gone too.

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I heard them before I saw them. Hundreds and hundreds of protesters blocking the turning to the dam, singing and shouting out slogans. Their placards could have been the placards we had carried to Liverpool all those years ago: LIVERPOOL HANDS OFF WALES and STOP ROBBING WALES and LIVERPOOL'S UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL. Every sort was there, lads with long hair and denims, and girls with short hair and shorter skirts, and men in Sunday hats, and women with set hair and handbags in the crooks of their elbows, but no one from the village that I could see, no one I knew. A pair of elderly ladies in matching anoraks dragged a reluctant dog behind them on a lead. Overexcited little children ran in circles. Gwynfor Evans from Plaid Cymru was there with some other men, standing apart from the crowd, and a few photographers with long lenses slung around their necks and a man with a television camera on a tripod. A young man in a zip-up jacket and trousers rolled up past his ankles was waving a billowing Welsh flag. The flag was as big as he was. Above his shiny slip-ons his socks were snowy white.

It was John Post who told me about the demonstration. In a newspaper interview the chairman of the Liverpool Water Committee had dismissed the decision by the people of Capel Celyn to boycott the opening ceremony as petty. It was all down to Plaid Cymru, he said, stirring up trouble. The dam had brought jobs to Bala and besides was it not the flood of Welshmen pouring into the city of Liverpool that had driven up demand for water in the first place? Welshmen across Wales had not taken kindly to that, John Post said. The police feared the protests might turn ugly. They were taking no chances. Scores of uniformed officers milled about. They had closed off the road across the dam. Behind the barriers, a kind of temporary grandstand had been erected, a metal scaffold with a covered platform and a stand of raked seats for the audience, and, by the edge of the reservoir, a low marquee with long tables set with cups. A breeze was blowing. It slapped at the marquee's canvas flaps, jerking them on their ropes.

I assumed Emyr had heard about the demonstration but he said nothing about it. On the morning of the opening he was up before me. An essay to finish, he said. By the time I got in from the hens he was gone, his dirty breakfast things piled in the sink. I thought uneasily about Tony, all his fiery talk in our kitchen. Not that he was Tony any more. These days, Emyr told me, he went by the name Anhun. And not just Anhun Bowen but Anhun ap Iwan, the full patronymic if you don't mind, last used in Wales in the times of fire-breathing dragons and knights in clanking armour. Anthony, son of John.

I said nothing when Emyr told me, I had the sense to bite my tongue. It was the boy's poor mother I felt for. From what I gleaned from Emyr, John Bowen had never been much of a father even before he upped and offed. Mrs Bowen had raised that child alone. Anhun ap Iwan, for the love of God. If I was her, I would be steaming. I wondered if Tony expected her to change the name tapes in his uniform. Never mind the sewing, those things cost an arm and a leg.

It never crossed my mind to join the demonstration. We had turned their invitation down flat, that was our protest right there. And yet when I found myself at the top of the New Road and past the turning to Plas Derwen, I could not pretend I did not know where I was headed. I parked the jeep up the Forestry Commission track behind the woods. No one would see it there. The land was private, trespassing was strictly forbidden, but it had always been a place for courting couples. Beyond the track the grass was criss-crossed with muddy tyre marks.

The dignitaries were late. Down by the barriers the protesters were growing impatient. Some of them spilled onto the New Road, looking up towards the rise. I scanned the crowd for Emyr's curly head, Tony's foxy red one. It was a school day, the pair of them should be in lessons, but I knew my son. If there was any day to make an exception, this was the one.

Suddenly a roar went up and like a wave the crowd surged forward, placards high. A cavalcade of shiny black cars was making its way down towards the dam. The demonstrators ran alongside them, shouting and thumping the windows with their fists. Three or four sat down on the tarmac, blocking the way. The lead car slowed. I saw a frightened face

peering out as a group of young men grabbed the roof, rocking it so roughly I was sure it would tip. In an instant there were people around every car. A woman smashed her placard across a bonnet.

By the time the police dragged them off the cars were a shambles, their panels dented, their windscreens cracked. Aerials and broken wing mirrors lay scattered in the road. Pushing back the crowd, the police officers linked arms, clearing a path so that the cars could drive on. Gwynfor Evans brandished an envelope at the last car in the cavalcade but the car did not stop. It passed through the barriers and on across the dam. The policemen pulled the metal gates back across the road and ranked themselves in front of them, a solid black wall. The crowd eyed them restively, uncertain what to do. Men gathered in little groups. Women bent down to wipe children's noses and button their coats. A boy in shorts ran in wild zigzags, waving a plastic gun.

'Bang bang, you're dead,' he cried at the line of policemen until his mother grabbed his arm and told him sharply to hush.

It was the uniforms that struck me first. Battledress with ties and epaulettes and forage caps like the ones the GIs wore during the war. The man leading them was tall and slender with dark curly hair. The other two were shorter, stockier, carrying banners of the Welsh dragon. One of them wore a patch over one eye. They walked towards the crowd on the top of the dam and the crowd turned around and watched them. For a moment there was a strange empty kind of silence. Then someone cheered and another man put his fingers in his mouth and whistled, and suddenly lots of people in the crowd were shaking the men's hands and slapping their shoulders. A photographer was taking pictures and the tall man turned to salute him. The brass badge on his cap glinted.

'That's him, that's Terence,' a girl in cat's-eye spectacles said excitedly in English, tugging at her friend's arm. 'The one from the telly. The Welsh Freedom Army.'

I did not hear her friend's reply. Her words were swallowed by a furious howl from the crowd. On the old road on the other side of the reservoir, behind the temporary grandstand, buses were disgorging passengers. Somehow the visitors had sneaked around the back. The tall man in uniform

shouted something, gesturing at the grandstand. I could see some of the men in mackintoshes calling for calm but the crowd had its dander up, they would not be stopped. Streaming down the escarpment, they surged over the shoulder of the reservoir and into the area where the platform stood. The police tried to block them and some of the bystanders too but there were too many of them. Fights broke out. There was a splutter of bright bangs as someone set off fireworks. Some of the crowd scrambled up onto the stand of seats, shouting and booing and throwing stones. One man had a loudhailer.

‘Drown your own valleys!’ he shouted and as the crowd took up the chant I saw him. Emyr standing on a seat, chanting and punching the air. There was no sign of Tony. Only Emyr, silhouetted against the sky, his blotchy green greatcoat flapping in the breeze.

The Lord Mayor came out onto the platform, his heavy gold chain glinting round his neck. A row of men took their seats behind him. They waited for silence but the crowd went on chanting. Emyr went on chanting. The police stood at their barrier, their faces blank. They did not try to stop the shouting. The Lord Mayor tried to speak but there was something wrong with the microphone, he could not make himself heard.

The man with the loudhailer started singing ‘Land of My Fathers’. The crowd joined in. Emyr was singing his heart out, Emyr who only liked humming to himself. The Lord Mayor mouthed some more words into the microphone. Still nothing. He looked helplessly at the row of men behind him. Abruptly, like a giant skirt being dropped, the marquee by the reservoir sank to the ground. A stone struck the scaffold of the platform with a pure clean ring. The crowd sang louder. One of the officials sitting on the platform got up and whispered something to the Lord Mayor. Hurriedly the Lord Mayor pulled a lever at the side of the platform. A colossal jet of water thundered from the dam wall into the river below, drowning out their voices. Welsh water, on its way to Liverpool. By then all the men on the platform were on their feet. They clustered around the Lord Mayor before hustling him away. The whole performance had lasted scarcely three minutes.

The crowd was triumphant. They yelled and whistled and stamped their feet, not that you could hear them over the racket of the water. The tall man in uniform climbed to the top of the grandstand. He clapped Emyr on the shoulder and Emyr gave him a clumsy salute and climbed down. I could not see him after that. The crowd swallowed him up.

The tall man in uniform stepped up onto the seat where Emyr had been standing and held up the Union Jack. It was muddy and torn. The crowd whooped. It was only as a flame licked the corner of the flag that I realised he was trying to set it on fire. I could see the police scrambling up the grandstand, pushing their way through the protesters. The flag burned for a moment and went out. The tall man tried again to light it but it was too late, the police had him surrounded. Two helmeted officers seized him by the arms. Another grabbed the flag. Together they manhandled him off the stand and out of sight.

* * *

The buses were gone and the battered cavalcade of limousines, off to the grand luncheon in Bala. The three uniformed men had been bundled into a police van and driven away. The crowd was breaking up. Policemen watched expressionless from behind the barrier as the reporters packed away their gear. No one seemed to know if they had arrested anyone else. The young man with the rolled-up trousers stood on his own, staring out over the water. He had lost his Welsh flag. There was mud on his slip-ons, on his snowy white socks. The dark lake shivered, tipped with little waves.

Where was Emyr? I scoured the crowd but I could not see him. I thought of him on the scaffolding in his blotchily dyed uniform, shouting and singing and saluting the man with the Union Jack, and I did not know whether I was sick with fear or just furious. The Welsh Freedom Army. What was he thinking, turning up in that ridiculous homemade uniform of his, making out like he was one of theirs? Did he want to get himself arrested? Did he want to flush his future down the drain? Behind the knots of people the water stretched black as a road all the way to the foot of Arenig Fawr. Emyr could shout and jeer and throw punches at policemen

until the end of the earth, he could bring down a raft of troubles on his head, and what would it do? The blydi thing was right there.

‘Well, well,’ a man said in English. ‘If it isn’t Mrs Jones.’

I turned around. A man in a tweed overcoat raised his hat. He had a scarf knotted around his neck and, underneath it, in a leather case, a camera. Mr Fitzpatrick. I stiffened. I could not think what he was doing there.

‘Pity about the Union Jack,’ he said and he might have been continuing a conversation started in another room. ‘The *Daily Mail* would have wet their knickers over that. Still, at least they managed the marquee. And cutting the microphone was a masterstroke. Nothing like a dumbstruck dignitary to warm the cockles.’

I glanced past Mr Fitzpatrick. If he was back, did that mean Mr Ross was back too? No one had said anything to me about getting the cottage ready and I would need to, I had neglected it all summer. I thought with a shudder of Mr Ross hunched on the floor of the boxroom, his paintbrush bleeding red across the floor. I had expected to have longer. Mr Fitzpatrick fished a flat silver flask from his pocket. He took a swig and held it out to me.

‘Thirsty?’

I took it. If he was going to goad me, I might as well take my reward. It was brandy, or whisky maybe. Whatever it was it burned on the way down. My eyes watered.

‘That’ll put hairs on your chest,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said cheerfully. ‘One way to make it through a Welsh winter.’

I looked at him steadily and took a second swig. The warmth in my chest felt like courage. Bugger Mr Ross and Mr Fitzpatrick with him. What mattered was finding Emyr. When I handed back the flask Mr Fitzpatrick shook it and raised an eyebrow.

‘Welsh temperance in action,’ he said. ‘Mr Jones not here?’

‘He’s busy.’

‘Pity. You’d think after everything this lot have put him through he might have relished the chance to knock a policeman’s helmet off.’

‘Dai doesn’t believe in violent protest.’

‘Ah. Just your son then.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I saw him in the stands. Jumping up and down and hurling rocks for Wales. Not a bad shot either. Any closer and he would have had one of those Liverpool bigwigs flat on his back. Nothing they didn’t deserve either. David and Goliath for the ages.’

I could hear it in his voice, the pleasure he took in making trouble. I shook my head.

‘You’re mistaken,’ I said sharply. ‘My son’s at school.’

‘No mistake.’ Mr Fitzpatrick smiled at me, bland as cream. ‘I remember Emyr very well. He delivered our Christmas lunch and we talked of revolution. A fine boy, you must be very proud of him, of all of them. The Welsh rebels raising their flags, throwing off the shackles of their oppressors. However ramshackle their armies, there’s something very ancient and glorious about that.’

‘My boy’s not a fighter.’

‘Everyone’s a fighter when they’re pushed far enough.’

A battered van drew up to the side of the road. A pack of protesters scrambled in. Mr Fitzpatrick raised his camera and a girl in a plaid skirt held her fingers up in a V for victory as he snapped her picture. I thought of the tall man with the Union Jack being dragged off the stand. Where was Emyr? Mr Fitzpatrick moved the eye of his camera towards the reservoir, turning it this way and that. He did not take a shot.

‘I’d hoped to talk to him,’ he said. ‘But he left before I had the chance.’

‘You saw him leave?’

‘A bunch of them in a clapped-out old Anglia. Four eager-looking schoolboys and a poor man’s George Orwell. Homage to Snowdonia.’

He looked at me expectantly, like he wanted applause, but I was not listening. Emyr was gone. He was safe. The relief was like emptiness, pure and clear. Mr Fitzpatrick lowered the camera, fiddling with the lens.

‘But luckily you’re here, Mrs Jones,’ he said. ‘Ask him to telephone me, would you? I’m up here for a week. Research for a book I’m writing. I’d like to talk to him about it.’

I frowned at him, discomfited. ‘Why?’

‘The Welsh nation is stirring, Mrs J. It’s on the brink. This isn’t chip paper fodder for the brutes at the red tops. This is a thousand years of history. It’s King Arthur with automatic weapons, it’s Hemingway and Robert Capa, it’s Bergman and *The Seventh Seal*, only this time they’re playing for the soul of a nation, its heart, and the pawns are farmers in surplus army uniforms—’

Emyr was safe. The police, thank God, had let him go. Already I could feel the relief curdling, anger seeping in. Mr Fitzpatrick’s nonsense was one thing but what if a picture of him in that stupid homemade uniform found its way into the newspapers? He could be suspended from school, perhaps even expelled. How would he take his A Levels if he was expelled? What would his future be then?

‘I have to go,’ I said.

‘Just one second.’ He fumbled a slim notebook from inside his coat and scribbled in it. Tearing out the page, he held it out to me. ‘That’s the number. He can call anytime.’

The paper was blue and thin as onion skin. I did not take it.

‘We’re not on the telephone,’ I said.

‘Even North Wales has telephone boxes. Tell him to reverse the charges.’ He flapped the paper at me impatiently. ‘He’s at the school in Bala, isn’t he, the one that used to be a grammar? I can meet him there one afternoon.’

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ I spat furiously. ‘You’ll leave my son alone!’

Perhaps it was the brandy or perhaps he was right about everyone being a fighter. Perhaps far enough was not really very far at all. Mr Fitzpatrick raised an eyebrow. ‘You do understand, Mrs Jones, I’m on your side?’

‘I don’t care whose side you’re on. Emyr’s not in any army, he’s got nothing to do with those people. That coat he was wearing, he dyed it himself. He’s showing off, that’s all. He’s not a soldier. He’s not even a protester. He’s a boy. He’s still at school.’

‘So were half the reds in the Spanish Civil War.’

Raising the camera, he pointed it at me. I turned away, shielding my face. The shutter clicked.

‘Come now, Mrs Jones, why so shy? You were happy enough to sit for Jim. Although perhaps sit is rather too vertical a verb.’ Leaning close, he slipped the piece of paper with his number on it into my pocket and patted it flat.

‘Say cheese,’ he said and took another.

* * *

The jeep needed petrol. I went to Plas Derwen to fill it but no one there knew anything about Mr Ross coming back. At Bwythn-gwyn there was no mistaking my neglect. The cottage was dusty. It smelled of damp. In the bathroom there was a puddle on the floor. I mopped it up but water kept on seeping out from underneath the bath. Sighing, I drove back to the estate office. Miss Price told me to fetch Pedr Beddoe from the stableyard and take him up there. Pedr Beddoe was the handyman at Plas Derwen. His van was in the garage for repairs. I wanted to ask what kind of a handyman could not fix his own van but I was not in the mood for talking.

I had plenty of cleaning to be getting on with. Instead I made tea and watched while Pedr lifted out a panel and wriggled himself halfway under the bathtub, his legs stuck out like a corpse. I thought about Mr Fitzpatrick talking and talking at Emyr the way he used to talk at me, drowning him in words. What was it about the Saes that made them think they could always please themselves? Mr Fitzpatrick would say anything to amuse himself. He could make up any manner of lies and it would not occur to Emyr not to believe him.

Under the bath Pedr banged the pipes. His corpse legs twitched. Rummaging in my coat pocket, I pulled out the blue paper with Mr Fitzpatrick’s telephone number on it and twisted it into a spill. The matches were in the kitchen log basket. I struck one. The lit paper flared, burning fast. I dropped it in the sink, shaking the singe from my fingers, and rinsed the charred fragments down the drain. The kitchen window was grimy, dead flies scattered on the sill. I wondered where Emyr was, if he had gone back to school. I tried not to think of Mr Fitzpatrick waiting for him at the gate.

Pedr clattered his tools back in his bag and took the tea I gave him. When I asked if the leak was fixed he shrugged.

‘If it holds,’ he said like it was the weather and nothing to do with him at all.

* * *

When I finally got home the kitchen lights were on and Emyr’s bicycle was propped up in the yard. I took a deep breath, my hands gripping the steering wheel. It was my fault. All summer I had let Emyr run loose and these were the consequences. I needed to sit him down, make him listen to sense. The war was over. The last battle had been lost. The valley was Liverpool’s and all the water in it and no amount of throwing stones would make it different. It was time Emyr took responsibility for his future. He had to knuckle down. He had A Levels to pass.

The kitchen was deserted. Emyr had left the milk out on the draining board. A scatter of sugar glinted on the kitchen table. What was it with that boy? Why was he incapable of clearing up after himself?

‘Emyr!’ I shouted up the stairs. ‘Emyr, get down here now.’

He did not answer. I stomped upstairs. Emyr was sitting hunched on the top step in that stupid green coat of his, his arms clasped around his shins. His head was bowed. I thought of Mr Ross weeping on the boxroom floor. The thought made me shudder.

‘Get up,’ I said sharply but Emyr did not get up. There were two untouched cups of tea on the stairs beside him. I stared at them. It was asking for trouble to leave cups on the stairs. Someone was sure to kick them over. Slowly, very slowly, Emyr raised his head. His face was stricken. A hole opened in me, all the way down.

‘What is it?’ I said but I already knew. Blindly I stumbled into the bedroom. Dai lay curled on his side under the blankets, his eyes closed, his mouth a little open. He looked peaceful.

‘He’s sleeping, he’s just sleeping,’ I said. My voice was shaking and my legs. I could not stop the shaking.

‘He’s sleeping,’ I whispered, my voice breaking into pieces. Sinking to my knees beside the bed, I touched Dai’s cheek. It was cold. Emyr knelt beside me. He was crying.

‘They killed him,’ he said.

I shook my head. I shook my head and my whole body shook with it, my breath ragged as I rocked.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No.’

‘They killed him,’ Emyr said again very quietly and I put my arms around him and he sobbed in great heaving gasps against my chest.

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Margaret Roberts arranged things. She asked me if she could and I let her. Lots of people came. Men in overcoats shook my hand and murmured their condolences.

‘A good man,’ they kept saying. ‘A very good man.’

He was forty-seven years old.

Emyr carried the coffin, front right. He wore a suit he had borrowed from Tony and a thin black tie. He looked tall and pale and pinched, the corners of him tightly tucked inside. When he sat down next to me he touched my arm with one finger like it was wood he was touching for good luck.

We buried him across the hill at Llanycil. It rained. Afterwards there were sandwiches. People stood about. Someone brought me a cup of tea. Rose Hughes had driven down with Bob from Conwy. She had permed her hair. She kept patting it like she needed to be sure it was still there. The hall was stuffy. It smelled of wet coats. I thought of Dai alone in the earth in his plain pine coffin. It would be a year before the grave was settled enough to put up a headstone. Until then he would lie there unmarked in the cold black ground. The funeral director had asked me if he wanted anything burying with him and I had shaken my head, bewildered by the question. Now I wished I had given him a blanket.

Spoons clinked against saucers. Voices rose. A child wailed in long swoops. I thought of the old farm, the foundations marking out the shape of the rooms under the black water of the reservoir. When the presbyter had asked me where Dai wanted to be laid to rest I shook my head. There was nowhere left that he belonged to. When Gwynfor Evans stood up in Liverpool in front of the officials of the Corporation and declared that they were drowning Welsh culture, they laughed at him. We’re moving them a few miles down the road, they said. As if there was no such thing as belonging to somewhere. As if one hill was the same as another and not as particular and beloved to a man as his child’s face.

‘Olwen?’ John Post took the untouched cup of tea gently from my hands and handed me his handkerchief. ‘Let’s get you and Emyr home.’

* * *

When they took him away they gave me a certificate. A bill of sale. The certificate was in English and filled out by hand, the letters twisted all together like a tangle of wool.

1. Coronary thrombosis
2. Coronary arteriosclerosis
3. Congestion of lungs

I looked at the words. They made no sense to me. It didn’t matter. I had a list of my own.

1. The Liverpool Corporation
2. Bloody-mindedness
3. Me

* * *

The day after the funeral Emyr went back to school. He wanted to go. I understood. At school the days came divided in neat parts, like the segments of an orange. All he had to do was peel them off, one after the other.

Plas Derwen gave me two weeks’ leave. John Post arranged it. Alone in the house time stretched and looped and twisted back on itself. Emyr was there sometimes and then he was gone. I stood in the kitchen in the pale light of dawn and suddenly it was dark and the fire was out and the water in the kitchen sink was greasy and grey. At night I walked in circles, up and down the stairs and through the rooms, round and round like the long hand of a clock, pushing the night onwards, forcing the seconds to pass.

I could not face our bed. When I could not walk any more I sat in his rocking chair in front of the kitchen range. I did not think I slept but perhaps I did. I could not hold anything inside. I was a sluice through which

dreams passed or memories, the same vivid scraps again and again patched together back to front and wrong way up, and frilled around their edges with feverish nonsense I could not shake free of or explain.

Sometimes Dai was there. He was always young. He wore his light grey demob suit with its chalk stripes and its pointed lapels and when I looked at him I squinted like I was looking at the sun. Sometimes I was pregnant with Emyr and sometimes I was a girl and sometimes, often, I was myself as I was now, the youth of him catching my breath, but always I loved him with a frantic love that turned me inside out, a love that was half exultation and half sheer panic, so that when he turned to me as he always did, dream after dream, and said very calmly that he was sorry but he was leaving me and nothing I could say would change his mind, I set upon him in a frenzy, pleading and screaming and pounding him with my fists until my howling jolted me upright and I woke, my heart hammering, aching with emptiness and shame. Had I loved him like that once, like a she-wolf, all teeth and fury? I tried to think back but the past was out of reach, buried too deep inside what had come after. I could not remember.

He was still there. I heard him. His footsteps on the floorboards upstairs, the yelp of the springs as he shifted in bed. From the corner of my eye I glimpsed him in the darkness of a window, the tilt of his face so familiar it made my heart jump. I learned not to turn and look. If I looked he was gone. At night I walked around the house and I willed him to walk with me too, the slow hand of the clock, making his own circles, marking out the hours. He never came but I went on walking, afraid to stop, not ready to let go, walking and walking, running down the clock. One day the pendulum would stop. Perhaps then we could both rest in peace.

One night very late the front door slammed shut, the shock of it ringing in me like a bell. I stopped walking and closed my eyes, my hands outstretched.

‘Mam?’

Emyr was standing in front of me. He wore his green army coat, Tony’s white eagle badge pinned to the lapel. I knew he meant it kindly, perhaps even as an honouring, but it pained me to see it. I thought of Dai’s face as

he threw the postcard on the fire. Crackpots, he had called them. He would not have wanted Emyr wearing it for him.

‘What are you doing up?’ Emyr chided. ‘You should be in bed.’

He took my elbow and led me upstairs. He smelled of outside, of earth and rain and rusty metal. I wanted to put my arms around him and hold him forever.

‘Night, Mam,’ he said and he went into his room and closed the door.

I went back downstairs. I walked. Dai did not come. The room echoed with emptiness. He came to Emyr, I was sure of that. Emyr would not talk about Dai, he would not talk about anything, he kept everything tightly locked inside, but I knew. I saw it in his silence, the steady throb of his grief. Emyr had loved Dai and Dai had loved him back. He had praised Emyr too little and bruised him too much but he loved his son in the same deep stubborn way that he had loved the valley, because he belonged to it and always would.

It was different with marriage. You could weld a pipe from two parts and it would last a lifetime but there would always be a weakness at the seam. When Mari died it was like a hole torn in the sky but she did not leave me. She was in the catkins on the hazels and the bees in the heather and the shadows of the clouds passing over the valley. I saw Emyr stop in the yard, gazing out towards the hill, and I knew Dai was with him. He never came for me. I walked through the house and I listened to the silence and I knew I was alone. He was my husband and made before I met him. His bones were not my bones.

And yet. And yet. I had thought myself complete without him, a stool with all three legs. The legs were there still, I was whole, and yet I could not keep myself steady. The floor tipped. I had spent so much of our life together wanting to be somewhere else. It was too late to realise that he was the place where I belonged.

* * *

John Post took the eggs from me.

‘You managing all right?’ he said. ‘You look worn out.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘And Emyr, how’s he?’

‘You know. He misses his da.’

‘Of course he does.’

John Post settled the trays of eggs in the back of the van. He took a long time over it. When he was done he cleared his throat.

‘He’s a birthday coming, doesn’t he?’ he said.

An ordinary enough question but it knocked the legs from under me. Eighteen, I wanted to say, my boy is going to be eighteen, but a lump closed my throat. John Post nodded.

‘I’ve something for him,’ he said. ‘If you’ll let me.’

He tugged the chicken wire off the top of a cardboard box and lifted out a blanket. Inside the blanket was a puppy. Its face was half black, half white, the line between quite straight like it was drawn with a ruler, and its muzzle too, black on one side and the other side mottled, black and cream. It wriggled inside its blanket nest, its ears pricked, the tops of them falling forward like they were just too much to manage. I shook my head. Nothing brought a person to their senses faster than a puppy.

‘John, no.’

‘She’s one of Mal Ddôl-y-uchel’s. Turns out the summer people’s spaniel worried more than just his sheep.’

‘He can’t. Not now.’

The puppy whimpered. I stroked her ears and she twisted her head to chew my fingers, her teeth sharp against my skin.

‘It might do him good,’ John Post said. ‘Something else to think about.’

‘He needs to think about his examinations.’

The puppy thumped her little stump of a tail against John Post’s arm. I wanted to take her from him, to hold her squirming little body against mine. John Post hesitated, his kind face sombre.

‘He needs to watch himself, Olwen.’ He saw me stiffen and his frown deepened. ‘I know it’s a dreadful time for him, for both of you, but it won’t help Emyr to get caught up with bad people.’

‘He’s not caught up with anyone.’

‘These chaps from Ceredigion, the ones who set fire to the Union Jack, they’re going after boys his age, it’s been in the paper. After-school clubs, outings, lads as young as fourteen being indoctrinated, brainwashed about English oppression. They’re not messing around, Olwen. They have bombs, the Irish are sending them guns. If they’ve got their teeth into Emyr—’

I shook my head angrily, shaking off the words. I could not listen, would not. Mr Fitzpatrick and his provocations were one thing but John Post had known Emyr all his life.

‘You’ve got it all wrong,’ I said. ‘That demonstration, the badge, it’s got nothing to do with this army. It’s for his father.’

The puppy wriggled in John Post’s arms and tried to lick his chin. He stroked her ears and put her gently back into her cardboard box. She whined, pushing her head against the chicken wire so that her fur stood up in pieces like a quilt.

‘I saw him,’ he said. ‘Emyr. In Pwllheli. A group of them in uniform, that eagle of theirs stuck all over. An older man was with them, he seemed to be in charge. I wasn’t going to tell you, I didn’t think it was any of my concern, but after all that upset at the opening, when we saw in the newspapers about them recruiting—’

I shook my head. ‘A thin tall man with glasses? For heaven’s sake, John, that’s his teacher! He’s set up an after-school club for some of the bright boys, history and politics and whatnot. He takes them places.’

I did not know if that last part was true, Emyr had never said anything about outings, but what else could it be? It was the only explanation that made sense. John Post frowned unhappily. ‘I don’t know. It didn’t feel like that. The way they carried themselves, blocked the pavement. It was intimidating.’

‘Intimidating? A few schoolboys in army surplus?’

‘Except they, I’m not explaining it, it was like they meant business.’ He hesitated, the certainty gone out of him. ‘Maureen said – we thought it best that you know.’

Maureen. Of course it was Maureen. I thought of the two Polish refugees who after the war had settled on an abandoned farm out beyond Foel Gogh. Two war-hollowed men scraping by on next to nothing, it was

pitiful to see, but Maureen Post said they were Communists and spies and would not serve them. They had to go into Bala to buy stamps.

‘So now I know,’ I said.

John Post nodded slowly.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said and, though his face was troubled, his eyes were very kind. ‘I should never have – I’m sorry. I worry about him, that’s all. Emyr. I worry about both of you.’

‘I know.’

‘He’s a good lad, I know that.’

‘Takes after his da.’

‘Takes after both of you.’

He touched my shoulder briefly, a fleeting squeeze. How had he managed to stay married to Maureen, John Post who always saw the best in everyone? In her box the puppy whimpered. I put my hand on the wire, felt the push of her head against my palm.

‘Bonneville,’ I said. ‘Bonny for short.’

John Post looked bemused.

‘The puppy needs a name, doesn’t she, if we’re going to keep her?’

‘Bonny. I like it.’

‘It’ll be up to Emyr, of course. His pup, his pick.’

‘Unless it’s Princess Griselda Ham Sandwich.’

I had forgotten Princess Griselda Ham Sandwich. ‘Cerys was five.’

‘They don’t stop being blydi idiots just because they grow up.’ He smiled at me ruefully. I smiled back.

‘Go on then,’ I said. ‘Give her here.’

‘You’re sure?’

I nodded and he put the box in my arms.

‘You take good care of them, you hear?’ he said sternly to the puppy. ‘I’m counting on you.’

* * *

Emyr had no time for Bonny. A lapdog name, he called it. She was Nel, he declared, and that was that. Nel had been Dai’s dog when he was hardly

older than Emyr. Dai won prizes with her. By the time the war came she was old and half-blind. She died while he was in Italy. When Dai came home he got another dog, Fly, and he got me. He had still missed Nel. A one-man girl, he called her, like Fly and me had men in every port.

The new Nel was a foolish, flighty creature but Emyr trained her hard. He took her out on dark mornings before school. He came home in the darkening afternoons and took her out again. He stuck to it too, regular as clockwork. He taught her to walk on the lead, to come at his whistle, to sit and lie down and to stay. I watched them from the window, the shapes of them in the field as the darkness thinned and the first pale wash of morning stained the sky. Emyr's whistle had a twist at its end, an upward tilt like a question mark. Dai's whistle. I thought of Dai with Teg, the other dogs we had had, the notion when you watched them together that the dog was a part of him, that they were connected by a single thought, and it was not Nel and Emyr that I saw in my mind's eye but Emyr and Dai. Dai might be gone, the farm drowned, but the ties were not broken. Dai was the making of Emyr and Emyr was his father's keeping on. Dai's voice was still the voice Emyr carried in his head, the dance he danced the same old dance Dai had taught him, separate and silent, maybe, but always a dance for two.

As for Nel, I knew what Dai would make of her. He always claimed you could tell a champion from the off. Training was the easy part, you could make any dog obedient, but instinct, that was something else. The best dogs knew what was wanted before they were told. Emyr's Nel was a bundle of energy, she flung herself about like a grasshopper, but a grasshopper had a bigger brain. She was the clumsiest dog I had ever seen and she chewed everything. I had Emyr build a run in the back so she would not gnaw the place to shreds while we were out.

John Post was right. That gump of a puppy was good for Emyr. She lit up like a firework when she saw him and the truth was, so did he. He was serious with me and silent, but she leaped up at him and he caught her in his arms, the pair of them laughing fit to bust. For all the training and the commands, he was a child again with her, she let him be a child. I wondered what that meddlesome hellion Maureen Post would say if she could see

them. Soldier, my eye. The pair of them hared about together like a pair of loons.

At night I often found them curled up together in Emyr's bed, Emyr's face buried in her fur. I did not hold with dogs indoors, Dai's had always slept outside, but I thanked God for Nel then, and for John Post who had brought her. Emyr and I were knotted with a thousand cords but half those knots were snarled too tight. Emyr was always pulling to get free. It was different with Nel. Nel fell over her feet and barked at her own reflection in the window, she scared herself silly clattering her food bowl across the floor, but lying like a rug across Emyr's lap her understanding was infinite. She licked his face and saw straight into his heart. I watched them and I wished I knew for certain where Dai was, that he was at peace.

Emyr turned eighteen. I went back to work. The earth shifted and settled on Dai's grave. Life went on.

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–12–

John Post brought a letter from Plas Derwen.

‘Sacked?’ he said as usual, he said it every time, but there was no smile in it. Perhaps the joke was growing stale.

I opened the envelope. Mr Ross was coming back. He would be at the cottage till Christmas at least, very likely longer. No one had expected him, apparently he had told Miss Price in the estate office that he would be busy in London all winter, but I found myself curiously calm. My position was clear. I was the cleaner so I would clean, I would do the work that I was paid to do, but that was it. I would never sit for him again.

The letter said he planned to arrive at the weekend but, when I went up there the next day to do the beds, his car was already there. I parked the jeep behind it and went in. I knew he would probably be angry, that a man like him would expect everything to be ready for him whether it was reasonable or not, but I did not feel nervous or afraid. I did not feel anything at all.

He could not have been back long. The kitchen looked almost respectable. I took off my coat and put on my apron and stacked the dirty dishes for washing. I was at the sink when I heard footsteps on the stairs. I did not turn round.

‘Mrs Jones.’

I turned, startled. Mr Fitzpatrick. I had not expected him. He looked awful. A scab crusted the side of his mouth and his eye was a fading smear of purple and green. Everyone’s a fighter when they’re pushed far enough. I said nothing. I turned back to the washing up.

‘I heard about your husband,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘I’m sorry.’

I did not answer. I watched my hands moving in the water in their rubber gloves, my yellow fingers bright as fish. Mr Fitzpatrick came up behind me and put a bottle on the draining board.

‘For you,’ he said. ‘I wanted flowers but there didn’t seem to be any. Perhaps there’s a rule about it round here, is there, like oysters? No lilies when there is an R in the month.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. I did not look at him or at the bottle. I rinsed the dishes and piled them beside it on the draining board. I thought he would go away but he did not. He watched in silence as I wiped down the sink and the windowsill behind the taps. Mr Fitzpatrick lost for words. It was a kind of miracle. I fetched the broom and set about the floor.

‘You should go home,’ he said.

I swept harder, bristles biting at the flags.

‘I mean, what’s it been, four weeks, five? I’d understand if you weren’t ready. I wouldn’t welsh on you.’

Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief. I waited for the word to strike him, for him to hear it as I did, but nothing happened. The penny did not drop.

‘It’s Mr Ross I work for,’ I said.

‘But I’m the one who’s here.’

‘When Mr Ross arrives tomorrow—’

‘Mr Ross isn’t arriving tomorrow or any other day. Mr Ross is holed up in a grotty studio in the arse end of nowhere attempting to transform a single not very good painting into twelve masterworks. He may, like Titus Oates, be gone some time. Till then it’s just me and I’m telling you to go home. I’ll be fine. I’ll probably starve and die in my own filth but I’ll be fine.’

Mr Ross was not coming. It should have felt like a reprieve but it did not. I still had to endure Mr Fitzpatrick who knew exactly what was best for me and would tell me whether I wanted to hear it or not.

‘If you could let me do my job,’ I said tightly.

‘You shouldn’t have to, don’t you see? Your husband is dead.’

I stared at him, the words knocked out of me. What was it about these Englishmen that made them think they could explain us to ourselves? To my rage I felt tears starting in my eyes. I ran the taps hard, filling the bucket, and hauled it onto the floor. There were still splatters of paint on the flagstones. They caught the light.

‘You need to move,’ I said. Mr Fitzpatrick said nothing. He had a stricken look on his face, like he was the one needing comforting. I pushed water across the floor towards him. He stared at the mop, the tongues of

water. When the water was almost at his feet he got up and went upstairs. I stopped in the middle of the kitchen, hands over my face, and cried. Then, wiping my eyes, I finished mopping. I put the bottle in my bag. Dirty brandy was still brandy, after all.

Upstairs Mr Fitzpatrick was lying on Mr Ross's bed, the flowered counterpane wrapped around him like a shawl. The Arenig painting was back on the wall. I felt the rush of it in my chest but I turned my head away. It would keep until I had it to myself.

'You're sleeping in here?' I asked.

'What?'

'Only I'm not making up both beds.'

'Right. OK.'

'So you're in here, are you?'

He rubbed his forehead, blinking at the painting like the colours hurt his eyes. He looked bewildered as a child.

'Well?' I demanded.

'Yes. I'll sleep in here.'

'Get up then. I can't put the sheets on with you lying there.'

I thought he would lose his temper. I wanted him to, to shout at me so I could shout back, but he only got up off the bed and walked out of the room. I slammed the door behind him. My hands were shaking. I sat on the bed and I looked at the painting of Arenig. Music started downstairs, softly at first and then very loud. It ached with all the grief in the world. I wanted to take the painting and run. I wanted to climb into the bed and sleep for a thousand years. I wanted to weep and rent my garments, to throw my head back and howl like a wolf at the moon. Mr Fitzpatrick was right. I was not ready to be back. I was not ready to be anywhere. The painting of Arenig was like a window on the wall. I wanted to climb through it, to a place where there were ogres and wizards and it was my life that was made up, a fairy tale.

The music stopped and started up again. I could feel the shiver of it in the floorboards. I made myself get up. I unwrapped the sheets and made the bed. I was a pillowcase short so I went out to the press by the boxroom where the spare ones were kept. The boxroom door was shut. The key was

in the lock. I thought of all the hours and hours I had spent in that room. I could barely remember it.

I turned the handle. The door was unlocked. Before I even had it open I could smell vinegar and something harsher, more caustic. The room faced north, it had always been filled with light, but the light was gone, the window blacked out with cardboard and black cloth, the edges taped down to keep out any splinter of light. I had not seen that since the war. The daylight from the landing spilled in through the doorway. I saw a trestle table pushed against the wall and above it, pegged out like wet laundry, lines and lines of black-and-white photographs. Many had been taken at the dam. The man in the forage cap being dragged by police into a van. A girl in a miniskirt and cat's-eye glasses sitting in the road, a car nosing her back. A lad in denims careering down the escarpment. The boy with the turned-up trousers and the giant Welsh flag, the reservoir rolled out behind him like a bolt of black cloth. A woman frowning, her head turned, a hand raised against the camera. I looked like Mari. Somehow without noticing I had grown old.

Most of the pictures, though, were of the tall man in the uniform. Again and again, from every angle, walking through the crowd, talking, shaking hands, embracing a man in a tweed coat. Posing on a street corner, an Alsatian in a bandana on a lead at his side. Saluting beneath a Welsh flag. Standing outside a public house, his arms around two other men. One of the men had a patch over one eye. I thought of the drawings Mr Ross had made of me, reams and reams of them covering the walls, of Mr Fitzpatrick downstairs, telling me my husband was dead. What was it about these men, that they could help themselves to us like this? What gave them the right?

On the trestle table two photographs had been blown up very large. In one the tall man stood in his uniform against the sky. He held up the Union Jack in one hand and his silver lighter in the other. The flame of the lighter reflected in his eyes. On his cap there was a shiny brass badge. The badge was shaped like a swastika.

The other photograph was of Emyr. He stood by the water, the collar of his coat turned up, his fist punching the air. His mouth was open in a roar. He looked like a film star, a poster for a film. He looked like Dai. People

had always told me he was the spit of his father, a chip off the old block, but I had never seen it. Not until now. He wore the same symbol on his coat, the white eagle of Eryri, and for the first time I saw it, my son as a soldier. The black-and-white photograph smoothed out the blotches in his mothy coat so that it looked just like the real thing. As for that badge, what had possessed him to wear it to the protest? Had it really not occured to him how people might take it? Could he not see how it looked?

Mr Fitzpatrick's music was very loud. He had me by the arm before I knew he was there.

'What the hell are you doing, snooping in here?'

'It was open,' I stammered. 'I thought it wanted cleaning.'

He looked at the door, the key in the lock. 'Fuck's sake,' he said, dropping my arm, and his laugh sounded like weeping.

'Should I leave it then?' I asked. 'The cleaning?'

Mr Fitzpatrick laughed the same laugh. 'Sure. Whatever.' He looked around him. 'Good, though, aren't they?'

I did not know how to answer. 'Are they for your book?' I asked instead.

'My book? Yes. That's right, they're for my book. Or maybe just for me. I haven't decided. Perhaps I'll exhibit them. Jim Ross would say it isn't art but then as we both know Jim Ross doesn't know his art from his elbow.'

I looked at Emyr in his greatcoat with its eagle badge. I thought of John Post, his talk of training camps and after-school clubs. The smell of the chemicals was making me feel sick.

'You can't put my son in a book,' I said.

'What?'

'You can't. Don't you see, he's not one of them. I mean, yes, he was there, he joined in and who can blame him after what happened, but he's not in that army. He's got nothing to do with them.'

'I know that.'

I blinked. 'You do?'

'This isn't about Emyr, Mrs Jones. It's not about any of those hangers-on. It's about this man.' He tapped the photograph of the tall man. 'Terence

Penro Ellis. The Che Guevara of Tregaran, coming to a *Sunday Courier* near you.'

I stared at him. 'You're a reporter?'

'Come now, Mrs Jones. Do I look like a hack to you? But the editor's a friend and I'm very cheap. Editors love cheap. Especially when it gets the British public spluttering over their toast and marmalade.'

'You mean because of what he did at the opening, burning the flag and all that?'

'I mean because he has declared war on the agents of colonial oppression. Plucky little Wales against the English imperial machine.'

'War? But that's absurd. Isn't it?'

Mr Fitzpatrick shrugged. 'I suppose it rather depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether Mr Penro Ellis is Michael Collins or the Wizard of Oz.'

* * *

Edwards in Bala did not carry the *Courier*, only the *Western Herald* and then only a copy or two for their regulars. I had to order it specially and take the bus into town to pick it up. I was relieved when the girl at the till was a stranger. She picked at her nails as I paid, yawning so widely I could see the blob of pink bubble gum squashed on her back teeth.

The article and photograph together took up nearly the whole page. VIOLENCE THE ONLY WAY, CLAIMS WELSH FREEDOM ARMY, the headline said while Mr Penro Ellis gazed beatifically into the distance, the twin flames of his lighter shining in his eyes. The reporter had his name in capitals at the top of the article, Frank Cromarty, but not Mr Fitzpatrick. Under his photograph it said London Press Agency in very small type. Mr Fitzpatrick would be narked about that, I thought, and I took some pleasure thinking it. He was not the kind of man to hide his light under a bushel.

Mr Penro Ellis told Mr Cromarty that the Welsh were done with waiting. He said the time had come for his country to throw off her chains. Wales had suffered under English tyranny for a thousand years, she was the second richest country in Europe, and yet she was crushed as brutally

beneath the imperial boot as the poorest countries of Africa. While not at liberty to divulge the identity of the Welsh Freedom Army's commander-in-chief, he told Mr Cromarty that columns of men across Wales were mobilising, ready to rise up against their oppressors. Years of peaceful protest had changed nothing. Violence was the only way. They drew strength and inspiration from their friends in the Irish Republican Army. What Irish patriots had achieved for Ireland, the WFA would achieve for Wales.

'Make no mistake,' Mr Penro Ellis said. 'Our country will be free.'

Violence was the only way. I tried not to think of Mr Fitzpatrick's photograph of Emyr, the roar breaking him open as he punched the sky. I tried not to think about the republicans in Ireland who burned courthouses and bombed barracks and killed their own people along with the Protestants and were packed off to prison in their hundreds without any possibility of parole. Ordinary Irish boys, mothers' sons. I looked at the picture of Mr Penro Ellis, the flames burning like the Holy Spirit in his eyes. Was it true, what he said, could any of it be true? Was Wales truly the second richest country in Europe?

Emyr was off playing football. Football on a Sunday. If Dai's mother had still had a grave, she would have been turning in it. I left the paper open on the kitchen table. Emyr was late and covered in mud. He glanced at the paper as he hauled the strap of his kitbag over his head. Then, dumping the bag on Mr Penro Ellis, he opened the back door and went out. I followed him. Nel was hurling herself against the wire of her run.

'Emyr,' I said but he and Nel were already off up the field. He was teaching her new tricks. He made jumps out of the old water trough and heaped-up piles of logs and had her leap over them, over and over. She learned quickly. He set traps of brambles over the jumps, loops of rope, different obstacles for her to master. She was good at it. It was the springer in her, they were known for their agility, but I was glad as I watched her haring off after rabbits that he would never have to make a sheepdog of her. Teg would drop to the ground at Dai's word, a single call and she would forget everything but him, all her concentration focused to a single point. Nel would never be like that. I thought of telling Emyr to leave off a little,

even Dai let a puppy be a pup, but I kept my mouth shut. Training Nel kept Emyr close to home, which was better for Nel and better for Emyr. Better for me.

I went to do the hens. When I came back the newspaper was gone. I left it to Emyr to mention it at supper but he did not say a word. We had been so careful around each other since Dai died. With all the things we had not said the silence had grown thick as leather. I took the dirty plates to the sink.

'You saw the newspaper, then?' I said. It was easier with my back turned. When Emyr did not answer I tried again. 'That Penro Ellis sounds like a troublemaker.'

'I dunno. He's not wrong.'

I wanted to stop talking. I made myself go on.

'War, though. Violence. It can't be right.'

'It's none of it right, Mam.' He brought over the teapot, the dirty cups, and went back for the pans. A minute or two and he would be gone.

'You wouldn't – I mean, you'd never—' I swallowed and made myself say it. 'I saw you. At the dam. The two of you, together.'

'Jesus, Mam.'

'I know you talked to him.'

'You're wrong. I didn't.'

'But—'

'The hwntw doesn't speak Welsh.'

'You speak English.'

'That's not the point, Mam. What kind of Welshman doesn't speak Welsh?'

The same old argument but not mine, not this time. The warmth burned through me like a swallow of brandy.

'I'll finish these,' I said, taking the pans from him, and he nodded and galumphed away upstairs.

* * *

Mr Penro Ellis had no Welsh. I thought of Michael Collins teaching his men Irish in the Fron-goch camp. Surely a man could not be Michael Collins just

in English. I wondered if Mr Fitzpatrick knew, what he would say when I told him, but when my day came for the cottage he was not there. He was not there the next week either, or the week after that. He never said a word about going or when he would be back. He took Mr Ross's car and his toothbrush from the bathroom but he left most of his belongings at the house, his record player and his clothes in the drawers and the big trunk with the leather bindings he kept under the bed. He came back, he must have. Every time I went up there the place was a pigsty.

I had never believed Emyr had anything to with that army, not really, but it eased me to know it for certain. Emyr had swallowed his father's derision for English-speaking South Walians with his first bottles of milk and, besides, he had always been a terrible liar. Whatever John Post had thought he had seen in Pwllheli it was not Mr Penro Ellis's latest recruits. I still fretted over the photograph, though. Mr Fitzpatrick might be right, the papers might care only for Penro Ellis, but what if that changed? Mr Fitzpatrick knew people at the *Sunday Courier*. What if he gave them the picture of Emyr in his army greatcoat with his arm above his head? In his school uniform Emyr was still a boy, just, but in that photograph he was a rabblerouser and a grown man. I kept thinking about the badge. A reporter could latch onto a badge like that, join it up with all Penro Ellis's loose talk about men and violence and friends in the IRA. He could bring down a life before it had begun.

I needed to destroy that photograph. The next week and every week after that up at Bwythn-gwyn I tried the boxroom door. It was always locked. I tried to find the key. I went through Mr Fitzpatrick's drawers and his pockets and the trunk under his bed. In a narrow pocket in the trunk I found a matchbook with a telephone number written on it and a worn-down red lipstick in a gold case and a dog-eared snap of Mr Ross in sunglasses smoking on a beach, but no key. I supposed he had taken it with him.

I watched the newspapers too, browsing furtively through them when I went into town. I never found anything but I worried all the same. There were papers in England that made a business of provoking their readers into fear and indignation, everyone knew that. The coloureds and the Irish overrunning the country, savages with spears slaughtering white settlers in

their beds, the Communists threatening nuclear war. Bogeymen lurking in every corner, ready to pounce. Just because the Welsh newspapers did not bother with Mr Penro Ellis did not mean that the matter was closed. Not by a long chalk.

Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief.

* * *

I saw the car first. Inside I could hear him moving around above me in the boxroom, doing whatever it was he did in there. I was sweeping the floor when he came downstairs.

‘Mrs Jones, as I live and breathe,’ he said. He had his camera round his neck and a sly beseeching face on him like a child hoping for a biscuit. I noticed his jersey only because it did not fit him. The jersey was blue with moth holes and frays at the cuffs. An artist and his muse. I swept harder.

Mr Fitzpatrick crossed over to the sink and ran himself a glass of water. I swept around his feet and wondered if he was going out, if there was a chance he might have forgotten to lock the boxroom door. Putting his empty glass in the sink, he leaned close to me and took a picture. He smelled like chemicals.

‘Stop it,’ I said sharply, turning away but he only moved around me, clicking and clicking, one picture after another. I thought of Emyr on the raked seats of the grandstand, of the girl sitting on the tarmac and the lad running down the escarpment and the boy with the white socks and me with my hand up, all of us snatched away from ourselves to be traded and sold, and I wanted to bang the camera out of his hands with my broom.

‘I said stop it,’ I hissed. ‘Go away.’

‘You know, don’t you, that the easier you make this, the sooner it’ll be done?’

‘I need you out of here. I’ve work to do.’

‘You and me both, Mrs Jones, but the cookie crumbles as it will.’ He grimaced at his camera. ‘You need to come outside. The light in here is abysmal.’

He opened the back door, gesturing at me to go through. I went into the bathroom. Mr Fitzpatrick sighed.

‘Don’t be difficult,’ he said, following me. ‘We both know we have better things to do but Jim wants pictures and right now what Jim wants Jim is going to get. I mean, yes, he’s a bastard and I’d willingly strangle him with my bare hands, but I’m a guest in his house and besides he’s utterly desperate. Come outside. Please? Just for a minute. It’ll be fun.’

He smiled at me hopefully. I scrubbed the bathtub.

‘Come on. Who knows, perhaps you’ll inspire a masterwork, Lizzie Siddal and Victorine Meurent rolled into one. True, the odds are against you but what the heck? You have nothing to lose but your anonymity.’

I scrubbed harder. ‘I said no. I am not a doll for you to play with, you or Mr Ross.’

Mr Fitzpatrick bent down, leaning on the basin, and took another photograph. ‘Bugger this bloody light.’

Muttering to himself, he went away. I scoured the lavatory. I thought of Mr Ross picking over my pictures, helping himself to whichever parts of me he chose, and I wanted to scour the pair of them from the face of the earth.

‘Look at me,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said suddenly, very close behind me, and like a fool I looked. There was a sudden explosion of white, so bright it left vivid blue stains on my eyes. A silver contraption was fitted to the top of Mr Fitzpatrick’s camera. He touched it and yelped.

‘Fuck, that’s hot,’ he said, sucking his fingers.

He went out into the kitchen. I went to close the bathroom door but he was too quick for me. He jammed his foot in the gap. Another blinding flash. Turning my back on him, I knelt beside the lavatory, my arm in the pan. Let Mr Ross make a painting out of that. Mr Fitzpatrick put a new flash into his camera. He squatted down beside me.

‘Come on,’ he coaxed. ‘I’ll pay you.’

The camera hid his face. I put my hand over it.

‘I don’t want your money,’ I said. ‘I want those photographs. The ones of my son. And not just the prints. Whatever it is you print it from. The negatives. All of it.’

‘You’re not serious?’

‘Give me all of that and I’ll do it. Not outside, though. In here. You can take them while I work.’

‘But I told you, those pictures are for me. Don’t you trust me, Mrs Jones?’

‘No.’

He gawped at me and laughed, his mouth stretched with disbelief. I shrugged.

‘All right,’ he said and he shrugged too. ‘It’s a deal.’

He went upstairs. He brought down the photograph of Emyr punching the air and two more of him standing in the crowd. I had not known there were others. Mr Fitzpatrick put the photographs and the negatives on the table.

‘That’s it?’ I said. ‘That’s everything?’

‘Yup.’

‘You swear?’

‘What is this, the bloody Girl Guides? Yes, that’s everything. I swear.’

I hesitated. I wished I could be sure he was telling me the truth. I looked at the picture of Emyr in his greatcoat, his beautiful furious face, and it kicked something loose in me, a tumbling skitter of stones. Fumbling everything into a pile, I shoved it all into my apron pocket.

‘All right,’ I said and I looked straight into his lens. ‘Go on then.’

Mr Fitzpatrick clicked and clicked. He clicked until the blue splodges on my eyes merged, till I saw only in pieces. After each click he unscrewed the used-up bulb from the flash contraption, effing and blinding at the heat of it, and dropped it on the floor. He expected me to pick them up after him. Of course he did. They clicked together in my apron pocket, their glassy guts brown and blistered from the burn.

When he was finished I lit the parlour fire. The kindling was damp. I blew on it. A flame licked upwards and retreated. The wood smoked. Mr Fitzpatrick slumped in the armchair, his feet up on the fender stool, the camera like a medal round his neck. Steepling his hands against his forehead like he was praying, he pressed his thumbs against his closed eyes.

‘What terrible fools we’ve both been,’ he said quietly, like he was talking to himself. My head snapped up, horror spreading like cold paint under my skin.

‘What is it? What’s happened?’ In my mind I saw the police dragging the man in the forage cap, only the man they dragged was Emyr, his roar swallowing me whole. Mr Fitzpatrick smiled bleakly.

‘I loved him against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be.’ He laughed like it was a joke, like it hurt his mouth to tell it, the smile sliding from his face. ‘Ah, Mr Dickens, ain’t that the unqualified truth?’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘I think you do.’

I shook my head, my mouth so dry the sides stuck to my tongue. ‘You said I could trust you. Have you – the photographs – is it too late? Emyr, is he—’

‘Emyr?’ Mr Fitzpatrick frowned at me, genuinely baffled. ‘What does any of this have to do with him?’

I clenched my fists. My hands were shaking. My head swam. I did not understand anything. Leaning closer to the grate, I blew, harder this time, and taking the bundle from my apron, I dropped it in the flames. As the negatives caught the fire opened like a flower. I sat back on my heels, reaching for another log, but suddenly Mr Fitzpatrick was beside me, the camera held to his face. I ducked but he caught my shoulder, holding me still.

This time there was no flash, only the click-click-click of his finger on the button.

‘Who needs Caravaggio?’ he said and he took a few more just for luck.

* * *

I told Emyr to throw away the badge, that it would get him into trouble.

‘They’ll think you’re with that hwntw,’ I said and, though he said nothing, the next time I saw him it was gone. Not that I saw him very much. The autumn term was two thirds over and with the mock A Levels coming

in January he was working every hour, at school or in the library. On his rare days at home he worked with Nel. They were practising a new trick. Emyr had chopped up Dai's old canvas haversack, the one he used to take out with him on the hill, and made a kind of hammock of it. He held it open and whistled and Nel jumped inside. That was the idea, at any rate. Nel would not have a lick of it. Emyr had to wrestle her into it, an unwilling pillow in a case. When she was all strapped up he heaved her on his back, Nel barking and squirming and scrabbling at the canvas with her claws. I thought it was madness, what was he thinking, a dog in a bag, but Emyr said she needed to get used to it. How else could he take her on the bike?

'She had legs last time I looked,' I said but he kept at it. He strapped her into the contraption after supper and wore her on his back while he worked at his books. I grew accustomed to the hump of her between his shoulders, her chin on his shoulder, her head against his. It was a windy Saturday morning when he decided she was ready for the bicycle. He had his blotchy coat on. It flapped around his legs.

'Time to see the world,' he said to Nel and she grinned at me over his shoulder and sniffed at the awful old coat.

'It'll catch in the chain,' I said but he did not listen. Standing up tall on the pedals, he cycled away, Nel's tongue streaming out behind them like a flag.

* * *

Several of the cottages were booked for the holidays. The estate office had advertised, John Post said, some puff about the perfect white Christmas. They wanted the houses decorating. Pedr Beddoe brought up a Land Rover filled with holly and wreaths of fir to hang on the doors. The rain gusted and the clouds were dark over the hills. Apart from the sheep huddled in clots against the wind there was nothing white about it.

I put holly behind the pictures and along the shelves of the dresser. Mari had always done that, though there were always some who did not like it. They said holly brought quarrels into the house. At the village school there was a holly bush in the playground. The girls squabbled over the blind

leaves, the ones with no points. Gwenda Barry said if you put nine of them under your pillow on Christmas Eve you would dream of the man you would marry.

Bwythn-gwyn was our last stop. The house was locked and empty. Pedr unloaded what was left of the holly into the porch. I could hear a robin singing, the tumble of notes getting faster as they fell. I looked about for him, idly at first and then with an urgency I could not quite explain. I finally spotted him perched in the ragged rose bush, his throat feathers fluffed and his tail up like he was king of the hill. It was too far from the old house, no robin would move such a distance, and anyway they only lived a year or two, but as he fixed me with his little black eyes I was certain that I knew him, that he knew me too.

Pedr had to get back to Plas Derwen. He called out a happy Christmas as he bumped off down the lane. The robin flew away. I hung the wreath on the door. I would take the holly home with me, decorate the dresser. Emyr had been working so hard. It would be nice for him for the house to look Christmassy.

I let myself in. The kitchen was a worse shambles even than usual, chairs turned over and glasses and bottles and brimming ashtrays strewn about on the floor. A slither of records spilled over the settle. The dustbin by the back door overflowed. Mr Fitzpatrick must have had guests. I had never known him bother with the dustbin.

The lid of the record player was open, a record on the turntable. On impulse I set it playing. One, two, a man said in a rough-and-smooth voice, and suddenly the room was filled with music. I thought about Emyr bringing Mr Fitzpatrick his £5 Christmas dinner, talking about Rat Camp and the University of Revolution. Only a year ago and it felt like a lifetime. Not so many lifetimes before that, Emyr had leaned across the kitchen table and informed Dai airily that humans would never build a time machine that could go back to the past because time only moved forward and in one direction, from simplicity to complication, from order to chaos. Time’s arrow, he called it. He said he had learned about it in science. It did not sound like science to me. It sounded like one of Mari’s stories.

It’s early in the morning, the man on the record sang, and I ain’t got nothing but the blues. I turned up the volume. The music slid under my skin, wrapping itself in silky ribbons round my bones. It put a swagger in me, a swing in my hips. Each time it finished I lifted the needle and set it back to the beginning. I did not want to stop feeling the way it made me feel.

I tried the door of the boxroom out of habit. As usual it was locked. I thought of all the photographs inside, all the black-and-white faces trapped inside their shiny paper, and with a jolt I wondered if Mr Fitzpatrick had lied to me, if he had only pretended to give me what I asked for so that he could take from me what he thought was his by right. What was it he had said when I had asked him what he meant to do with the pictures? Maybe they’re just for me. As though that made it different, as though that was not the reason for all the things men like him ever did. The boxroom with its blackout curtain and its trays of chemicals had felt to me that day like a completely different room to Mr Ross’s studio but it was not different. It was exactly the same.

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Mr Fitzpatrick had a typewriter. He brought it back after Christmas, along with a narrow-waisted coffee pot he boiled to blackness on the hob. He set the typewriter up in the second bedroom, hauling the gateleg table from the parlour, dragging the chest of drawers out onto the landing to make room. Even with the door shut I could hear him clattering away at the keys. He came out sometimes to boil up more of his treacly coffee and went straight back inside. I supposed he was working on his book but he never said anything about it, not to me. He barely spoke to me at all.

His secrecy unsettled me. He had files of papers but he never left them out. He kept them in the boxroom, unlocking the door when he needed to fetch something, locking it again behind him when he left. Once I came up the stairs as he was coming out and the way he blocked the gap of the door with his body made me think of Gwenda Barry curling her arm around her book of sums, like it mattered what Gwenda Barry had written, like she knew any of the answers anyway.

On the days he was out the study was immaculate. No files on the table, no papers strewn across the floor or even balled up in the wastepaper basket. Just the typewriter and a thick stack of blank paper. There was often a tower of dirty cups on the landing, some habits were past changing, but still. His orderliness unsettled me even more than his secrecy.

I wished I knew what his book was about. I touched the keys of his typewriter sometimes, like the words he had tapped out might run backwards into my fingers. Once, I sat in his chair and rolled a piece of paper into it. The Story of My Life, I typed with one finger, by Olwen Jones. The letter O stuck as I typed it, jumping up from the rest of my name. The books Ifan had made for me were always three bits of paper folded in the middle which made them ten pages long. He kept the front page blank, he said it was my job to write the title, but what if the title was the only part of the story you were sure of? I yanked out the paper and screwed it up into a ball.

* * *

‘How’s that handsome boy of yours?’

Mr Fitzpatrick spooned coffee into his pot, scattering grounds. He had thick woollen socks on and a scarf wrapped several times round his neck. His hair stood up in clumps. He looked like he had not slept in days. I shrugged.

‘Busy,’ I said. It was months since Mr Fitzpatrick had given me the note for Emyr with his telephone number. He had never said anything about Emyr not telephoning. I thought he had forgotten.

‘You should bring him up here sometime,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘I’d like to talk to him.’

‘Like I say, he’s very busy.’

‘But you could ask him. Surely he’s old enough to make his own decisions?’

‘He’s got mock examinations. He needs to study.’

‘He needs to think about his future. Exam results are all well and good but out there in the real world it’s who you know that matters. Think about it. I could help him. A clever boy like him deserves all the help he can get.’

I was silent. Over the holidays I had tried to talk to Emyr about the future, surely with A Levels coming he should be thinking about university, but Emyr refused to be drawn. When I asked what Tony planned on doing, he glared at me.

‘Anhun,’ he said and that was the end of it. He needed to talk to someone who knew about these things, who could get him to listen, but whoever that person was it was not Mr Fitzpatrick. The man tossed words about the way he tossed his dirty clothes, carelessly, for someone else to pick up. Even if he did know people, how could he ever understand what it meant for Emyr to make something of himself? Wherever Mr Fitzpatrick chose to go in life, he was already nine tenths of the way there.

That night Emyr was late home. He was edgy and distracted. I knew he was nervous. I gave him extra potatoes. Brain food, I told him. I said nothing at all about Mr Fitzpatrick or going up to Bwythn-gwyn. Mr

Fitzpatrick was right. A clever boy like Emyr deserved all the help he could get.

* * *

When the examinations were over and the papers marked, the new headmaster held a parents' evening to discuss the results. The man was from Wolverhampton and full of modern ideas. Emyr said not to come, that no one else's parents would bother, but I insisted. I wanted to be proud.

There was no bus in the evening. I had to take the jeep. Emyr and I sat at wobbly tables in the assembly hall as his teachers shook their heads. Emyr's grades were disappointing. He was an intelligent boy, capable of achieving first-rate results, but intelligence alone was not enough. A Levels were a serious business. They required discipline and diligence, a strong grasp of the facts. If he was to do himself justice in June, he needed to knuckle down. I sat there stiff-faced and incredulous, my hands clasped in my lap. I wanted to tell them that they had made a mistake, that they must be thinking of another boy altogether, a boy I did not know. Beside me Emyr glowered in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. His tie was loose, the top button of his shirt open. I looked at him and I did not know him either. All those evenings he had stayed late at school, the weekends he had told me he was studying with Tony. I could not believe I had been such a fool.

I waited until we were crossing the playground before I spoke. It was very cold. My breath made a cloud in the darkness.

'Well?' I demanded and he shrugged, burying his hands in his pockets.

'They're mocks. They don't matter.'

'You said you and Tony were revising.'

'Anhun. We revised.'

'I trusted you.'

'We revised.'

'That's not what your teachers said.'

He shrugged again. 'Maybe I'm not as clever as they think I am.'

'Or maybe they're right and you're not trying hard enough.'

Emyr did not answer. Out on the road a man was getting out of his car. The jeep was parked behind him. He stopped as he passed it, staring at the star. Go on, I thought furiously, report me. I felt a raging fury towards everything, the railings and the streetlights and the lines painted on the playground, fury and a terrible bewilderment.

‘I don’t understand you,’ I said. ‘These exams could change your life.’

The man walked through the gates towards us. He was tall and thin with a high forehead and round wire-framed spectacles. When he saw Emyr he nodded without breaking his stride.

‘Mr Jones,’ he said. His accent was unfamiliar, Welsh mixed in with something rougher, harder-edged. He wore a woollen glove on one hand. The other was an empty space. Emyr’s Mr Wozniak. Emyr stood up straighter.

‘Sir,’ he said.

I meant to confront him, I wanted to, but I was too angry, the words died in my mouth. The man walked past us and into the school. Emyr walked out of the gates. When he turned round he was smiling.

‘Do you think this is funny?’ I erupted. ‘Is that what you think?’

‘It’s mocks, Mam. God. Nobody cares.’

I marched over to the jeep, wrenched open the passenger door. ‘Get in now,’ I said.

‘I’m going to Anhun’s.’

‘You’re not. You’re coming with me.’

‘Can’t. Sorry. Plans.’

‘You get in this car right now, Emyr, or—’

‘Or what?’ Emyr said and he walked away from me out into the night.

* * *

I waited but he did not come home. In the morning his bed was not slept in. The next afternoon he walked through the door like it was an ordinary day, like nothing whatsoever had happened.

‘You need to sit down,’ I said.

Emyr went to the sink and ran himself a glass of water.

‘We need to talk,’ I said. ‘These examinations.’

‘They’ll change my life, I know, you said.’

He put his empty glass in the sink and went outside. I went after him.

‘You listen to me, Emyr,’ I said angrily, desperately, and he frowned at me like someone he knew from a long time ago.

‘You’re so short,’ he said. ‘When did you get so short?’

‘The nights at Tony’s, the weekends, that’s over, you hear me? You go to school and you come home. When you’re here you study. You can’t throw your life away, Emyr. I won’t let you.’

‘All that scrubbing, you’re wearing yourself away,’ he said, and he took Nel and went into the field.

In Ifan’s stories nothing in the world could defeat Olwen. I could not even make my own son do his homework.

* * *

A boy on a bicycle brought the telegram up to Bwythn-gwyn. A scrawny-looking strip of a thing, his Adam’s apple sharp enough to cut his throat. I did not know him. I signed where he showed me and I thought of Dafi Davies who had worked for John Post during the war. Dafi Davies was slow, something had happened to him when he was born that made him simple-minded. He had a wide soft face like kneaded bread dough with two little raisins for eyes. He was always smiling. Mothers with sons away fighting turned their backs when they saw him, sick with dread that the envelope he carried was for them, but Mari told me John Post never gave those telegrams to Dafi to deliver. It was John Post on the doorstep you needed to be afraid of.

I left the telegram propped on the kitchen table where Mr Fitzpatrick would see it when he got back. URGENT, the envelope said in capital letters. I wondered what had happened, if someone had died. It was a strange feeling knowing more than Mr Fitzpatrick, that wherever he was he was still obliviously doing whatever it was he did when he was not here, with no idea that something terrible had happened, that his life was already not the same.

URGENT. Not my business but the word still chafed at me, inflaming my uneasiness. Emyr and I were barely speaking. He left while I was up with the hens in the mornings and came home very late. I waited in the kitchen for the lights of his bicycle in the yard. He did not call out to me when he came in. He went straight upstairs to his room. I kept hearing Dai's voice in my head. He's a good boy, Olwen. Let him be. I was no longer sure if it was true, if Emyr was a good boy. My doubts pulled me in two. If a mother did not trust her son, what hope did he have? Who did she think would protect him then?

I was upstairs when Mr Fitzpatrick came back. The door slammed, I could hear him moving around in the kitchen. I stood where I was, listening. I imagined him opening the envelope, reading the telegram. I did not go downstairs. The jeep was outside, he knew I was here. He could call if there was anything he wanted.

A clatter of feet and then for the second time the front door slammed. I looked out of the landing window. Mr Fitzpatrick was bundling his luggage back into the boot of the car. A sharp wind sliced down the hill, the forecast was for snow, but he did not wear a coat. He hurried round to the driver's door, his face pinched. Gunning the engine, wheels spinning in the mud, he roared back down the lane.

Downstairs Mr Fitzpatrick's coat was abandoned on the table and, underneath it, a copy of *The Times* folded to the crossword. There were circles of letters scrawled in the margin but most of the boxes were blank. Tucked inside the newspaper was a thick brown envelope. The telegram was gone.

The envelope had Mr Fitzpatrick's name typed on it and the address of a post office box in Bala. It made no sense. Why would Mr Fitzpatrick have his post directed to Bala when the postman came daily to Bwythn-gwyn? The flap of the envelope was torn open. I touched the jagged edge and thought about the papers locked away in the boxroom, the photographs pegged on their lines. My fingers itched. What did it mean that Mr Fitzpatrick had taken his bags but not his coat? Was he coming back? I took the envelope to the window, looking out at the gouges left by his tyres in

the grass. I would hear the car in the lane before it got here. I would have plenty of time to put things back.

I slid the papers out. A thick sheaf of articles cut from the newspaper, each one clipped to a label. DURRANT'S PRESS CUTTINGS AGENCY, the labels said. Most of the clippings were in English. The Welsh ones had English translations attached. WE WILL NEVER SURRENDER, one headline said. WFA'S IRA ARSENAL declared another. I stared at them. There were so many. How had I not known there were so many?

I leafed through them, one ear straining for the sound of the car coming up the lane. Almost all of them were about Terence Penro Ellis. He told one reporter that the Welsh Freedom Army was already three thousand men strong, another that it exceeded five thousand. He said that weapons had been smuggled through to them by the IRA, guns and rockets and mortars, that the WFA would march in Dublin with Sinn Féin to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. He talked about oppression and national pride and the need for violent resistance. Welshmen were mustering, he said. The day of reckoning was near.

The article from *Y Cofnod* was very short, barely more than a paragraph. It read like a police report. Since the trouble at the dam, it said, the Welsh Freedom Army had been investigated not only by the police forces of Gwynedd and Sir y Fflint but also by the North-West Regional Crime Squad. While the authorities had no intention of making martyrs of these hooligans, it remained an offence under the Public Order Act to wear political uniforms, military or otherwise. Members of the WFA who flouted this ban at future protests risked fines of up to £500 or a year in prison. A list of known WFA supporters had been shared with police.

I read and re-read the smudgy print. A year in prison for wearing a home-dyed coat. Was Emyr on the list? Anyone at the protest that day would have seen him up on the stands with that Penro Ellis, shouting and throwing stones. Out of nowhere I saw the two hanged boys in the newspaper, the blankness in their eyes that might have been wickedness or despair. In court they had blamed each other. They said they never meant for the murder to happen. It happened all the same. They were hung from the neck. Their dead friend stayed dead.

And then all of a sudden I could not endure them a moment longer, all those words on their ribbons of paper. I tried to push them back inside the envelope but they would not go, something blocked them. I peered inside. A bright yellow postcard was wedged in the corner. JOIN THE WELSH FREEDOM ARMY, the card said in big black letters, COMPANIES ARE NOW BEING FORMED IN YOUR AREA. On the back was a list of recruiting points. Bangor. Porthmadog, Pwllheli. There were others but I did not read them. Jamming the card among the clippings I shoved the stack back inside the envelope. The piece from *Y Cofnod* caught on the flap, sticking out at a crumpled angle. I could not help myself. Tearing it from its translation I stuffed it in my pocket.

I met Mr Fitzpatrick coming back as I drove down the lane. I pulled in to let him pass and he roared past me without slowing, his eyes fixed grimly on the road ahead. I wondered suddenly if the telegram was about Mr Ross. The thought flicked its tail and darted away, leaving behind it only a square of brilliant yellow.

COMPANIES ARE NOW BEING FORMED IN YOUR AREA.

* * *

It was gone eight by the time Emyr finally came in, hauling his great postbag of books. He did not bother switching on the light. He was halfway across the kitchen before he saw me sitting at the table.

‘Bobl bach, Mam, you nearly gave me a heart attack.’ His face fell. ‘That wasn’t— I didn’t mean to—’

I had my speech ready but his dismay knocked the words from my mouth.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I know you didn’t.’

Emyr had outgrown his school blazer. It stretched tight across his shoulders, his wrists jutting from the sleeves. He rubbed his head roughly the way Dai used to. It twisted my heart.

‘I think about him,’ he said. ‘I think about him all the time.’

‘Me too.’

Emyr was silent. I wanted to put my arms around him but I was afraid to move, afraid to break the fragile thread that bound us.

‘I thought I saw him,’ he said, his gaze fixed on the table. ‘I was coming up the hill and I was so sure it was him, something in me – the man, he didn’t even look like him.’

He shrugged, his smile helpless with desolation, and all the fear and anger in me was nothing but a deep aching bruise of love.

‘You miss him,’ I said. ‘It’s OK to miss him. To talk about him.’

Emyr stared at his hands. I waited. I thought he might say something else but he shook himself abruptly, like he was shaking his thoughts free.

‘Where’s Nel?’ he asked in a different voice and the thread snapped.

‘In the run. You want to walk her up the lane with me?’

‘What, now? It’s pitch dark.’

‘It’s a full moon. You’ll see your shadow.’

‘It’s pitch dark and anyway I can’t. I’m not stopping.’

The fear and the anger rose in me like vomit, unstoppable.

‘Oh yes you are! You’re not going anywhere, do you hear me? You will do as I tell you, Emyr, while you are under my roof. You will obey my rules.’

‘We agreed this. It’s Llandudno, remember? Jac’s birthday.’ He smiled at me insolently, triumphantly, hoisting his bag onto his back. I did remember, sort of. Something about an uncle’s caravan, the arcades. I shook my head.

‘Well, that’s too bad,’ I said. ‘You should have thought of that before you botched your exams.’

‘My exams are my business. You don’t get to tell me what to do.’

‘I do and I will.’

Emyr laughed unpleasantly. ‘Yeah? And how’s that going to work? Overpower me, will you, hold me down?’

I stared at him, my boy and Dai’s, Dai who had always let Emyr be exactly who he was, without shame, who would have cut out his tongue before he spoke a word that was not true.

COMPANIES ARE BEING FORMED IN YOUR AREA.

If they’ve got their teeth into him, Olwen—

‘Do you want to go to prison?’ I blurted. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘For God’s sake—’

‘That coat of yours. They could arrest you just for wearing it, did you know that? A political uniform. You could go to prison.’

The cutting from *Y Cofnod* was on the table. I pushed it towards him. He glanced at it and shrugged, his hand tightening around the strap of his bag.

‘The papers talk a lot of rubbish.’

‘It’s the law. The Public Order Act. Five hundred pound fine or a year in prison.’

‘They’d never,’ he said but I saw it, the uncertainty sliding under his skin, and all of a sudden I was drowning in it, boiling over with terror and fury.

‘You’ve joined them, haven’t you?’ I cried. ‘You’re part of that army.’

‘So what if I am?’

He might as well have slapped me in the face. I stared at him, the breath knocked out of me.

‘They’re talking about bombs, Emyr. Blowing up innocent people. How could you be that stupid, that – that evil?’

Emyr stared at me, his eyes burning. Then, without a word, he headed for the door.

‘Don’t you dare walk out of here!’ I cried. ‘You stay right where you are.’

He wheeled round. ‘Why? So you can tell me what you’ve already decided?’

‘I will not let you ruin your life.’

‘What, like you did?’

‘This has nothing to do with me.’

‘Jesus, Mam, it has everything to do with you! So you hate Wales, so what? Leave. Go to London. Fuck it, go to Timbuktu. It’s your life. No one’s stopping you. Just don’t think you can make me do it because you’re too fucking gutless to do it yourself.’

‘You think that’s what this is?’

‘Well, isn’t it?’

‘I want more for you than what we had, your father and me. Is that a crime?’

‘Da was happy. Until those bastards stole it from him, he had everything he wanted.’

‘What are you talking about? We barely scraped by.’

‘I’m not talking about money. He loved this place. So do I.’

‘Why?’

Emyr was silent. He stared at me.

‘This country is being stolen from us, piece by piece,’ he said coldly. ‘It’s not just us. Look at Clywedog, it’s the same all over again, families kicked off their land, valleys drowned for jobs we’ll never see. You think they’ll stop there? You think they’ll ever stop if we don’t force them, if we don’t fight back?’

‘So what, you’d kill innocent people?’

‘You think they don’t? Do you know how many people from the valley have died since those bastards stole it? Well, do you?’

‘That’s not the same.’

‘Nineteen, Mam. Nineteen out of sixty-eight.’

I shook my head. ‘That’s not true.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Dumping his school bag on the kitchen table, Emyr pulled a dog-eared notebook from the pocket. His finger stabbed at the page as he read. ‘Elsie Williams, Bont-faen. Alf Jones, Cerrig-nant. Cadoc Jones, Tŷ-gwyn. Beti Morgan, Brith-dir. Huw Morgan, Brith-dir.’

I put my hands over my ears. Emyr was still reading but I could not listen. I had not known there were so many. Alf Cerrig-nant was older than God and with Beti it was the cancer but Cadoc Jones? Cadoc Jones was tough as old boots. Cadoc Jones was younger than Dai.

‘Stop,’ I whispered but Emyr did not stop. He read out every name on his list. Aled Parry, Bryn-mawr. Dilys Parry, Bryn-mawr. The Parrys who had been the first to grab a slice of Liverpool’s blood money and had fetched up forty-five acres to the good. Mrs Parry, who had never known a tragedy she could not turn to a profit.

‘Dafydd Jones, Ffynnon-ddu,’ he said and closed his book. Dai, the latest on the list. I did not say anything. There did not seem to be anything

to say.

‘They’ve been killing us for years. They don’t care. They don’t even notice. If we don’t fight, they’ll go on doing it. Here and in Clywedog and wherever else they decide they want next. What choice do we have?’

Not them. We. I wanted to weep.

‘You said he didn’t speak Welsh,’ I said helplessly.

‘The Irish didn’t speak Irish till they learned it here. It did not stop them fighting for their country.’

‘So what, you’ll be joining his army, will you, this hwntw who only speaks English? You’ll blow people up for Wales?’

The words were stones, they stuck in my throat. When Emyr said nothing I closed my eyes so that I would not see the answer in his face. My ears were ringing. Somewhere past the noise, I heard him walk out of the room.

‘Leave him,’ Dai murmured. I turned to the rocker before I caught myself. Its cushion was worn flat. I picked it up, holding it against my chest. I could feel the shock easing in me and in its place an emptiness so sudden that I had to grip the edges of myself to keep from falling in. Dai had always believed that the greatest kindness was to leave someone alone.

I leaned my head against the kitchen wall. It was cold. For so many years Dai and I had fought about Emyr staying on at school. I did it for Emyr. He was not farm clever like Dai. His cleverness was all in his head and so dizzying sometimes he could not see straight for the spin of it. Perhaps it was the way with the brainy ones, the world too big for them half the time and the rest of the time not nearly big enough. I thought the Sixth Form would teach him how to make sense of it, that his learning would all come from books. I had never imagined that it would nail his feet more firmly to the tiny patch of earth where he was born. I thought of Mr Wozniak, of Tony who called himself Anhun. It was my fault. If he had left school at sixteen the way Dai wanted, none of this would have happened. A Polish refugee and a spaghetti-eating boy from Swansea would not have made a soldier of our son.

By the front door Emyr’s muddy greatcoat lay bundled in a ball. I picked it up. I would hide it, burn it, tie it up with bricks and throw it into

the reservoir. A flash of white caught my eye. The badge was back, the white eagle of Eryri pinned to its lapel. Furiously I ripped it off. I wanted to crush it under my heel. What else had he lied to me about, what other secrets was he keeping? Frenziedly I turned out his pockets, pulling out a squashed pack of cigarettes and a balled-up handkerchief and a box of England's Glory matches with a phone number scrawled on the lid. England's Glory. The farce of it made me want to weep. I shook out the handkerchief and something fell out, a flash of gold that skittered on the flags.

A cartridge casing, varnished cardboard with a brass base. You saw them in the heather from time to time, the brass tarnished, the faded cardboard soft with rain. This one was new. The cartridge had ELEY GASTIGHT written on the side and ELEY LONDON stamped in a half-circle in the base. Emyr could have picked it up anywhere. Almost a man and still a magpie, greedy for glitter and gleam.

Emyr's bedroom door banged. I scrabbled the badge and the cartridge case into my pocket as he clattered downstairs, a half-empty duffel bag slung over his shoulder. When he saw his cigarettes on the windowsill his face hardened. I saw it clearly then. Not almost a man. A man fully grown, no almost about it. Glaring at me, he yanked the coat out of my hands.

'You can't take that,' I said.

He did not look at me. He put the coat on, snatching up his cigarettes.

'Tell me where you're going,' I demanded. 'I want the truth.'

'Llandudno.'

'I don't believe you.'

'So?'

'So you're not going. I forbid you to go.'

I tried to block the door. Emyr clamped my arm and pulled me out of his way. He was right, I did not have the strength to fight him. Yanking open the door, he went out. I did not go after him. I stood there, my hand closed tight around the badge in my pocket, and it was not my son I thought of but Rose Hughes's Carwyn, dressed in that fringed waistcoat he wore even over his pyjamas, the one with the sheriff's badge shaped like a star. No more than five or six and yet there he stood in the doorway, hand up and

legs braced, barring me from entry. Stop right there, you varmint. The child was a little horror but Rose could never see it. Carwyn was her baby, her pet. Sometimes when the others were distracted Carwyn would turn his hand towards me, two fingers pointing at my head. Hands up, you dirty dog, or I'll shoot.

The fear like a blade of ice cutting through me. Dai's gun.

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I dragged the case from under the bed. My apron was bundled at the bottom, the bloodstains brown and brittle. I fumbled it open. The gun was gone.

Hands clamped, I pressed my knuckles to my mouth. I don't know who I thought I was praying to. Dai, I told myself frantically. Dai had taken it. Dai who was desolate and in despair and who knew he was dying. He had taken it from its hiding place and put it somewhere else, somewhere secret only he would know. A comfort in his darkest hours, a spur to his courage when he had none. I shook the suitcase, my hand groping inside the empty pocket in its lid. Where was the gun?

She was a working dog. She would never have settled off the hill.

Dai stared up at me, his face stricken, and I clenched my eyes shut but it was too late, I could not stop it, Emyr sinking to his knees, keening, his father cradled in his lap, and suddenly I was howling, great wracking sobs that bent me double. I told myself to stop, I needed to think clearly, crying would help nothing, but I could not help myself. My throat was full of broken glass. Half-blind with tears I stumbled to the chest, hauling the drawers from their sockets, upending them on the floor, raking through the tumble of patched shirts and underclothes.

I had to find the gun. I emptied the drawer of the bedside chest, tipping out a scatter of screws, a candle stub, bits of string and rubber bands, some dog-eared old snapshots, an empty matchbox filled with pins. I turned over the chair to check under its seat. I dragged the musty blankets from the blanket box and Dai's suitcase from the top of the press. I ripped Dai's suit from its hanger, scrabbled like an animal among his shoes. The shape of his feet was still in them, the worn press of his heel. I had not remembered they were so shabby. I had not touched a single thing of his since he had died.

It was in the toe of his Sunday brogue. A creamy brown stone the size of a blackbird's egg with a perfectly round hole in it that went all the way through. My glain neidr, my adder stone. I ran my thumb over its bumpy surface, finding the edges of the hole. How long had it been there? You did

not find an adder stone. An adder stone decided when it wanted to be discovered and then it found you. It could never belong to anyone. If you looked through the hole, you would see through curses and enchantments to the truth of what was really there.

I held the stone in both hands. Its familiar shape calmed me. Dai was careful. He always had been, that exasperatingly Welsh way of his of always expecting the worst. In those months when the darkness was thickest he would not have wanted the gun in the house. He knew what damage could be done by despair, by a desperate attempt to control what could not be controlled, and so he had done what I had meant to do that day with the cows. He had got rid of the gun. He had made us all safe.

I closed my eyes and let my legs fold underneath me, sinking to the floor. I could see it in my mind, every detail. The black shape of him in the darkness, the darker ridge of the New Road running away from him, the smooth dark stretch of water at his feet. The pale arc of his hand as he threw. A cough of splash, a shimmer of circles spreading outwards and then nothing. The water cold and dark and silent, sealed over like a skin.

The idea shimmered and held, a cup filled to the brim. I sat on the floor, my hand tight around the adder stone, afraid to move in case I spilled it. I sat there for a long time. Pain spread through my back and into my hips. My legs went numb. When at last I stood up I had to lean against the bedhead to keep from falling. Somehow, without me noticing, my hope had drained away. All that was left was a dazed kind of dread. I wanted to lie down on the floor and pull the clothes and the blankets and the eiderdown over me until they buried me like leaves. I wanted to sleep forever. Instead I stumbled across the landing to Emyr’s room.

This time I was methodical, mechanical. I went through each drawer at a time, setting everything back neatly in its place. I went through his press and his pockets and his pillows. I shook open every book. I did not think about what I would do if I found it. My mind was a blank. I lifted his mattress and looked under his bed. His suitcase was stowed away underneath it, pushed against the wall. I got down on my hands and knees and dragged it out. The suitcase was empty but when I tried to push it back it snagged against the floorboards. I hauled the end of the bed away from

the wall and knelt to look. One of the boards was loose. The board next to it had a dent at its end, a patch of paler wood where the varnish had been scraped off. Someone had prised it up.

I stared at the dent. I felt sick. I touched the corner of the board where the warp had flared it upwards. The board moved a little in its socket but it did not come up so I went downstairs and fetched a chisel from Dai's toolbox. The kitchen was dark and cold. Outside the window I could see the moon. It was full or almost, wreathed in pale cloud like a silver-yolked egg.

The head of the chisel slotted neatly in the dent. The loose board lifted. The space underneath was lined with newspaper. A biscuit tin was wedged inside. I watched my hands as they lifted it out. They did not belong to me. I put the tin on the bed. There was a picture of a clock face on the lid, the fancy antique kind, the hands a minute to four o'clock. TEA TIME, it said in big red letters.

I took the lid off. Inside the tin there was a package wrapped in a piece of greaseproof paper. The package was the length of my hand and maybe four inches thick. Not a gun. It was the wrong shape for that, too solid and dense. It felt more like a parcel from the butcher, bacon or a pound of scrag. I unwrapped the paper to find a layer of newspaper underneath and under that another layer. Pass the parcel, I thought numbly, tearing off the paper. My fingers could not manage the folds.

The last layer was cloth. Inside the cloth were seven brown rolls like fat cigars. Each one maybe eight inches long and an inch in diameter, enclosed in a tube of waxed paper. Three pale red stripes at either end of the roll and in the middle, in a diamond stamped in the same pale red, POLAR and, underneath, A. N. GELIGNITE.

Gelignite. One of the English words everyone around here knew. They used it in the quarries. Rockmen like Ifan bored holes in the rock for the gelignite to go into and then they blew it up. Shot firing, they called it. The gelignite blasted big caverns in the rock so the quarrymen could reach the llygad, the eye, underneath. The eye was the slate. There was no word for gelignite in Welsh.

I had never seen it in real life. It did not look real. I thought of the sweet cigarettes Emyr used to like, white sticks of sugar with painted red tips. A

game of pretend, except no one was pretending now. Seven sticks of gelignite. Were seven sticks enough to make a bomb? Did Emyr mean to make a bomb?

I could not think like that. Fumbling the rolls back into their packaging, I put the lid on the tin and pressed it down. TEA TIME. The clock on the lid had Roman numbers and curly metal hands. Time's arrow, I thought numbly. Simplicity to complication, order to chaos. The small hand pointed to the four, the big one straight upwards or almost, a notch before the twelve. I stared at it, waiting and waiting for it to strike the hour.

* * *

Morning came at last, edging like pale smoke over the hills. The clock on the tin said not quite four o'clock. I took it downstairs. I put it on the kitchen table. I did not know if gelignite was safe, if it could go off on its own. Perhaps it would blow the house sky high. The idea was strangely comforting. Perhaps Emyr had been wrong about the time machine. Perhaps it would blow a hole so big we could climb through it to a time far back enough for us to start all over again.

Nel was barking. I had forgotten about Nel. I let her out. I fed her. I fed the hens. It was what I did when morning came. I washed the eggs and sorted them and put them in their trays. I watched my hands moving and it was like watching a film where nothing happened, a film with no start and no end. When the trays were filled I put them by the gate for John Post. He would think when he saw them that I was not at home. It did not feel like a lie. I was not in my body. I walked the same path round and round my head, following the words that circled it like the stamp on the brass base of a cartridge.

My son believed in an army that wanted to blow things up.

My son belonged to an army that wanted to blow things up.

My son had enough gelignite to make a bomb.

My son was a schoolboy.

My son who was a schoolboy and good and kind and clever and who had never wanted to harm a living creature wanted to blow things up.

My son who was a schoolboy was willing to – I could not finish.

Where was the gun?

* * *

I turned the place upside down. I looked in every place I could think of and then I looked again. As long as I was still looking there was still a chance that I would find it. It had to be somewhere. Nel tired of trailing after me and went to sleep on the landing. It got dark. I did not turn on the lights. I sat in Dai's rocking chair in the kitchen and I rocked and rocked as though the rocking might summon him but he did not come. The house echoed with silence.

Much later I went upstairs. The bedroom, our bedroom, mine and Dai's, was strewn with clothes and shoes. Empty drawers lay on their sides like uprooted trees. The mattress slumped drunkenly against the bed frame, its tangle of bedclothes half-pulled away to reveal the yellowed ticking underneath. Drawerless, the chest grimaced, all mouths.

I kneeled on the ground. I was overcome by weariness. I could not think how I could ever put things back to the way they had been, where I would find the strength. One of Dai's old shirts was bundled by my knee. I could see the stitches like little teeth where I had mended a tear in the sleeve. I put it to my face but it did not smell of him. It did not smell of anything. I did not know what to do with it. It was too worn to give away, not worn enough to throw. An awful helplessness rose up in me, tears pressing at the back of my throat. I had not thought there were any left to cry.

I fumbled in my pocket for the adder stone and held it tight. Dai was dead. He was not coming back. He would never again wear his Sunday suit or his good checked shirt or the shoes that bore the shape of his feet. Whatever possibility I had kept them against, it was gone. I needed to think what to do with them, to hand them down or give them away or cut them up for rags. Emyr might want the suit if there was hem enough to let the trousers down. I was crying again but silently, the tears sliding down my face. Wiping them away, I took the adder stone from my pocket and put it to my eye. Through the hole I could see only a little part of the room, the

sleeve of a jersey, the corner of the smallest drawer. I picked up the jersey. I pushed the drawer back into its slot in the chest.

Bit by bit and very slowly I put our room back to the way it used to be. I returned all the drawers to the chest and then I folded Dai's clothes and I put them in the drawers. I hung up his suit and his overcoat. I set his shoes in a neat line in the press. I gathered up the screws and the rubber bands and the lengths of string and the snapshots. The pictures were very faded. There was one of Dai with Fly, his dog after the war, and one of me holding Emyr when Emyr was a baby. In his photograph Dai was smiling. He looked very young. I tucked it into the frame of our mirror. I put the one of me and Emyr back in the bedside drawer. I looped a length of string through the adder stone and I hung it on the bedpost. Before the war there were farmers in the valley who hung adder stones in their cowsheds to keep witches from souring their milk but what if it was too late? What if the witches had already done their worst?

When everything was in its place I rested. I lay down on Dai's side of the bed in all my clothes, Nel curled up beside me, and, though I had not imagined it was possible, I slept.

* * *

Someone was banging at the door. I staggered downstairs, still in Friday's clothes and thick with sleep, Nel following behind me. John Post was standing on the step, a face on him like an undertaker. John Post did not come on Sundays, not off-season.

'It's Sunday,' I said stupidly. 'Isn't it?'

'There's been a bomb. Up at Clywedog. The dam.'

I stared at him. 'What? When?'

'Last night. It was on the news this morning. I thought you'd want to know.'

'Was anyone—'

'Not this time, thanks be to God. Not that it'll stop here. A campaign of violence, that's what they're threatening, have you seen the English papers? More and more bombs until they get what they want. You think we're safe,

you think any of us are safe? They're terrorists, Olwen. They'll stop at nothing.'

I shook my head. A bomb at Clywedog. I could not take it in. John Post sighed.

'People are talking, Olwen. About Emyr and the others. The army uniform, Pwllheli, fighting with police at the reservoir. They won't stand for it, not after this. They shouldn't have to stand for it.'

Please God let Emyr be in Llandudno. Let him be shivering on the seafront in that horrible coat and losing money in the slot machines. Let him be safe.

'Let me come in, Olwen. Let me talk to him.'

'No,' I said flatly. 'He's sleeping.'

'Then get him up.'

'Don't tell me what to do with my own son.'

'You listen to me, Olwen. They'll kill people, these hooligans, they've good as said so. Is that what he stayed on all those years at school for, to become a killer, to murder his countrymen in cold blood?'

'How dare you—'

'What if he kills someone, Olwen? What then?'

'Get out. I mean it. Get out.'

John Post pinched his mouth. Eyes on the ground, he walked back to his van. Maureen was sitting in the passenger seat. When she saw me looking she looked away. John Post opened the driver's door, glancing up at the house, the curtains unpulled at Emyr's window. Then he got in and drove away.

Lord, in thy mercy, hear our prayer.

I went back into the kitchen. The biscuit tin was still on the table, its clock stuck forever at a minute before four o'clock, and suddenly I could not stand it there a second more. Snatching it up, I marched it across the yard to the cowshed. Nel followed. I shut the cowshed door against her. She whined, scratching at it with her claws, as I bundled the tin in an old feed sack and pushed it into the space behind the stacked-up cattle gates. A thin grey light strained through the grimy window. The gaps between the cobblestones were stained with black.

Back in the house I fumbled with the wireless, the Welsh Home Service. The reception was poor, the announcer's voice crackly with static. The news took forever to come round. A bomb had been detonated at the Clywedog reservoir construction site in the early hours of Sunday morning. A warning was telephoned to Gwynedd Constabulary by a man speaking Welsh. Sixteen minutes later the bomb went off, blowing a hole in the rockface and bringing down part of an aerial cableway used to haul concrete and equipment. No one was hurt. A spokesman from the Clywedog Reservoir Joint Authority said that the attack would cost tens of thousands of pounds and set work at the dam back for months. No organisation had yet claimed responsibility.

At nine the report was repeated. The same words in the same order, nothing new except the shock of it. There would be no more news until midday but I kept the wireless on. They played *The Archers* and a church service broadcast from Llanelli and after that a discussion about seizures of the brain. I listened to it all. If I kept listening without stopping, there would be nothing to be known I did not know. A cold horror squatted in me, waiting to jump.

It was not Emyr. To make a bomb you needed gelignite but his gelignite was here, so whoever had made this one, it was not him. Emyr was in Llandudno with his friend Jac. He was eating chips and wasting money in the arcades. It was not him.

It could not be him. What did Emyr know of making bombs? He had never cared for science. He liked history and geography and nature and cars. His army uniform was a pose, a costume, a kind of grown-up fancy dress. Boys in blotchy home-dyed coats did not set off bombs. The tin of gelignite, it had to be a mistake. Or playing, the way little Carwyn Hughes in his waistcoat had played at being sheriff. Hands up, you dirty dog, or I'll shoot.

Where in God's name had he got gelignite from?

Where was the gun?

The wireless talked on and on. At midday they repeated the news bulletin and again at six: the warning, the explosion, the damage. The Secretary of State for Wales called it a stupid act of destruction. They did

not say anything about who had done it or if they had arrested anyone. I let Nel out and watched her charge around the darkening field. She howled when I put her back in the run. Upstairs I took the adder stone from the bedpost and hung it around my neck. Tomorrow Emyr would come home and time would unstick itself. The clock on the biscuit tin would finally strike four.

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He must have come home while I was sleeping. I came downstairs in my nightdress in the ashy early light and there it was, his greatcoat slung on the back of a chair. Bleakly, mechanically, I searched the pockets. Nothing but grit and crumbs.

On the wireless the announcer read the weather report. Across much of the country today the weather will remain unsettled. Early mist and fog patches in southern England will clear by mid-morning, giving way to occasional sunny intervals. I needed to get him up. Drag him downstairs, show him the gelignite, insist on the truth. Where he had been, what he was doing, how on earth he was in possession of explosives. Tell him that if he refused to stop, if he insisted on going on with this nonsense, if he would not tell me what he had done with the gun, I would go the police. Clear and plain, not letting him interrupt me or contradict me or confuse me with his cleverness, the words that came to him the way they never did with me, before it was too late.

Further north, expect overcast skies with rain or drizzle, particularly in western regions, which may persist throughout the day. The announcer's voice was pleasant, unhurried. Soon the news would start. Tugging on my boots, I ran across the yard to the cowshed. I put the tin on the kitchen table. Let him try and argue with seven sticks of gelignite. Let him find the words that made them go away.

* * *

The chimes went. The announcer started on the news. Something about the Labour government, something else about the Archbishop of Canterbury in Rome to meet the Pope. And then the Chief Constable, speaking from Caernarfon. The bomb at Clywedog was being treated with the utmost seriousness. Regional crime squads had been mobilised across Wales over the weekend and intensive house searches continued to be undertaken. Several suspects had already been brought in for questioning. While

militant nationalist organisations did exist, they were small and closely monitored, their members known to the police. The public should rest assured that perpetrators of this senseless attack would be swiftly brought to justice.

I took the stairs two at a time.

‘Up now,’ I shouted, banging open Emyr’s bedroom door. He roused himself sleepily on one elbow as I marched across the room and threw open his curtains. Emyr’s room faced down the lane towards the main road. A car was making its way up towards the house. A big black car with a domed light on the roof. The light wasn’t lit but for the fright it sparked in me it might as well have been. They took the turn at the cattle grid, crawling up the rutted track. There was nobody up this way but us.

‘Get up,’ I said in a different voice. ‘The police. They’re here.’

I did not look at him. If his fear got into me, I would be finished. I stumbled down the stairs, pulling a jersey over my nightdress. The car was not yet at the farm gate. I had two minutes, maybe more.

‘I was here.’ I turned. Emyr stood at the bottom of the stairs, his face stretched tight with terror. ‘Please, Mam. If they ask you, I was here.’

He was back up the stairs before I could answer. There was not time to go after him. I needed to get out to the hens. It was what I did when morning came. I worked fast, focused on the task, but the thought was a worm, it burrowed into my brain. Emyr had been there. He had not gone to Llandudno. He had been there, at Clywedog. I knew it. I had known it from the moment I heard about the bomb. It was not like he had not said it to my face, openly, unapologetically: You think they’ll ever stop if we don’t force them, if we don’t fight back? John Post had known it too. He had come up here on a Sunday, Maureen beside in the front seat, to get the truth out of him, to make me see. He knew they would stop at nothing, he had told me so. These hooligans, he said, they’re—

‘Mrs Jones?’

I stepped out of the coop. The man was standing at the gate at the bottom of the field. Putting down the eggs, I went to meet him. He was not wearing a police uniform. He had a suit and tie with an overcoat against the

weather and black shoes polished to a military shine. When I opened the gate he flashed a card at me.

‘Mrs Jones? DS Jenkins, No. 1 Regional Crime Squad.’ He spoke English with a strong Liverpool accent. ‘I’d like a word, if I may.’

‘Then you’d better come in,’ I said in Welsh. DS Jenkins frowned.

‘We’ll do this in English if you don’t mind. Follow me.’

He ushered me into my own kitchen. Nel leaped up as we came in and barked at me, dancing and wagging her tail.

‘Sit,’ I said.

Nel did not sit. Emyr was sitting white-faced at the table as a policeman in uniform rummaged through the dresser drawers. He wore his school uniform, his school bag at his feet. I set one hand on his shoulder, the other on the adder stone around my neck. I was sick with fear and fury, I could hardly breathe for the roil of it, but I looked at him sitting there with his future in ashes and the love in me was fierce. I prayed that if the gun was here Emyr had had the sense to leave it where it was. If I had not found it and I had turned the place inside out, then surely the policeman would not find it either. This is all Emyr’s making, I told myself. He has made his bed and now you must leave him to lie in it. Except I could not. I watched as the policeman opened the dresser and emptied it onto the kitchen floor.

‘This is DC Gifford,’ DS Jenkins said. ‘We have a warrant.’

I said nothing.

‘Do you know why we’re here, Mrs Jones?’

‘I’m sure you’re going to tell me.’

‘You’ve not heard then?’

‘Heard what?’

‘About the bomb at the Clywedog dam site,’ DS Jenkins said. ‘It’s been all over the news.’

Thank God I had had the sense to turn off the wireless. ‘What’s a bomb to do with us?’

DS Jenkins looked at Emyr who looked fiercely at the table. Leaning against the range, the detective took a notebook from his pocket.

‘Sit down, Mrs Jones.’

Not a request. A command. I felt a terrible longing for Dai, the old Dai whose politeness could slice a man's tongue. The constable abandoned the dresser and went into the parlour. The settle creaked as he lifted the lid. The gun was not in the settle. I had searched the settle three times. DS Jenkins frowned at his notebook.

'Where were you on Saturday night, Mrs Jones?'

'I was here.'

'Were you alone?'

Emyr stared at the table like he would set it alight. I shook my head.

'Who was with you, Mrs Jones?'

'Emyr.' The lie clotted my throat. 'Emyr was here.'

'Your son, Emyr Jones, was here with you on Saturday night?'

'That's right.'

'He didn't go out at all?'

I shook my head.

'I need you to answer the question, Mrs Jones.'

'He didn't go out. He was here all night.'

'You weren't up watching him all night, though, were you? At some point you must have gone to bed?'

'I suppose.'

'What time would that have been?'

'I – I don't remember.'

'Nine o'clock? Ten?'

'Something like that.'

'So you can't be certain Emyr did not go out while you were sleeping?'

'I told you. He was here.'

'Clywedog is less than sixty miles from here, Mrs Jones, perhaps an hour and a half by car. Emyr has his licence, doesn't he? If he left at half past ten, he could have been there by midnight.'

'Except he doesn't have a car.'

'There's a jeep in your yard.'

'That's not his. It belongs to Plas Derwen. The Hawley estate. I use it for work.'

'Do you work in the middle of the night, Mrs Jones?'

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s a simple question. Do you work at night?’

‘No.’

‘So the car would have been here, would it not, parked outside in the yard? Emyr could easily have driven to Clywedog and back while you were asleep.’

‘But he didn’t.’

‘We’re interviewing witnesses, members of the public who might have noticed something unusual. It’s a very distinctive vehicle.’

‘I’m telling you he didn’t take it. He was here.’

DS Jenkins considered me, his head on one side.

‘What were you doing up in the field when we arrived, Mrs Jones?’

‘Feeding the hens.’

‘In your nightdress?’

‘I wasn’t expecting company.’

DS Jenkins opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again and wrote something down in his notebook. The constable came in from the parlour. When DS Jenkins looked up at him he shook his head. DS Jenkins frowned.

‘Check upstairs,’ he said. He turned to Emyr who clamped his left wrist hard with his right hand. It had been a way to calm himself when he was small. ‘You stay where you are. Don’t move. Mrs Jones, you and I are going to take a look outside.’

‘I need to get dressed,’ I protested but if he heard he did not answer. He went out into the yard. I pulled Emyr’s anorak on over my jersey and followed him.

A fine drizzle was falling. The hem of my nightdress stuck to my wellingtons. DS Jenkins went into the cowshed. He checked the byres and behind the cattle fences. He poked about in the straw. When he found nothing he went back outside and up the field towards the hens. He was out of breath by the time we reached the top of the hill, his shiny shoes claggy with mud.

‘I’m going to need to take a look in there,’ he puffed, pointing at the henhouses.

A city boy, no mistaking it. Scooping some grain from the feed bin, I opened the run. DS Jenkins stepped in gingerly. I scattered some grain at his feet and, as the birds bustled around him, I grabbed the speckled one with the white patch and the filthy temper, and lifted her wing. She squirmed furiously, pecking at me and scratching with her claws. DS Jenkins shrank back. Carrying the hen with me to the nearest henhouse, I unlatched the door and put the hen down in it. She stalked about crossly, her feathers huffed.

DS Jenkins went in. As he squatted to poke through the straw the hen flew at him, pecking and flapping her wings. I unlatched the other henhouses one by one, scattering grain inside. By the time DS Jenkins emerged from the first henhouse the others were full of birds. He searched them hurriedly, sliding his hand into the nesting boxes, scrabbling through the straw and the flurry of hens scratching at his feet. I waited by the wire, my hands clenched in Emyr's pockets, my gaze fixed on the rain-veiled shadows of the hills.

He came out of the coop, wiping his hands on his handkerchief. I shut the door behind him. He said nothing. Slipping on his city soles, he walked back down towards the house. I followed him, dizzy with relief. A step or two from the gate he stopped. Turning around, he walked back up to the coops. He stood by the run, staring down at the galvanised lid of the feed bin. My stomach turned inside out.

'What's in there?' he asked.

I went back up the hill. The crate of unwashed eggs stood beside the feed bin, the top layer wadded with sacking.

'Just eggs,' I said. I hardly recognised my own voice.

'And under the eggs?'

'More eggs.'

'Show me.'

I squatted down, lifting off the layer of sacking. The eggs were muck-streaked and stuck with little feathers and scraps of straw. DS Jenkins crossed his arms.

'Go on.'

The layers of sacking kept the eggs from breaking before they were sorted. DS Jenkins watched as I took out the second layer and the third and the fourth. Eggs rolled off the sacking and into the grass. When the crate was empty he picked it up and peered inside. His jaw hardened. Throwing the crate roughly on the grass, he marched back towards the house. The eggs lay scattered about, pale as mushrooms. Soon John Post would arrive to collect them. He would see the police car, the officers turning our house upside down – but there was no time for thoughts like that. Leaving the eggs where they were, I hurried after DS Jenkins.

Emyr was still hunched at the table. DS Gifford stood over him, Emyr's greatcoat in his arms.

'Hidden under his bed,' the policeman said to DS Jenkins. 'This was in the pocket.'

He handed DS Jenkins a matchbox. It was the one I had found, the one with the telephone number scribbled on it. DS Jenkins studied it, then gave it to the constable to bag. A scruffy khaki shirt was folded over a chair. The shirt had red flashes sewn onto the sleeves.

'That's it?' DS Jenkins said.

The constable nodded.

'What about the outbuildings?'

'Both clear. There is something you should see, though. Upstairs.'

DS Jenkins followed the constable up to Emyr's bedroom. I could hear them moving about above us, the thump of furniture being shifted. Emyr bowed his head, his fingers pressing so hard into his thighs I could almost feel the bruises coming. He did not try to speak. I was glad. He could not give them the slightest reason to doubt him, to think he had something to hide. If they decided to search again—

DS Jenkins came back downstairs, a folded newspaper in his hands. Pulling out the chair next to Emyr's, he sat facing him, knees almost touching, the paper spread out on the table.

'You want to tell me about this?'

VIOLENCE THE ONLY WAY, CLAIMS WELSH FREEDOM ARMY. The newspaper I had bought in Bala, the one I left out for Emyr. Penro Ellis

gazed into the distance, the flame of his cigarette lighter reflected in his eyes.

‘In the habit of hiding things under your floorboards, are you?’ DS Jenkins asked.

Emyr was ashen. I could the horror moving through him like a wave. He thought they had found it, that they knew. Say nothing, I screamed at him silently in my head. They have nothing.

‘Something was hidden in that space, something square. You can see the shape of it on the paper, see? What was it you hid in there, Mr Jones?’

Emyr licked his lips, his breath shallow. I had to stop him from speaking, from blurting something out. He thought they knew. What would he confess to them if he thought they knew?

‘Might this be it?’ I said and, reaching under the sink, I handed DS Jenkins the tin with the clock on its lid. ‘Only Emyr’s father died last year and there were some things of his he wanted to keep. I gave him this to put them in.’

Emyr stared at the tin, his eyes stretched with shock. DS Jenkins took the lid off and looked inside. The tin was empty. When he placed it on the paper the mark was a perfect match.

‘Your father protested for years against the Tryweryn dam, right?’ he asked Emyr.

‘My father is none of your business.’

DS Jenkins sucked his teeth, considering Emyr. Then, scraping back his chair, he stood up.

‘Bag that,’ he said to the constable, pointing at the newspaper. The constable took it and put it with Emyr’s clothes. He did not take the tin. DS Jenkins leaned down, his face close to Emyr’s.

‘We’re watching you, Mr Jones,’ he hissed. ‘One toe out of line and we’ll have you. We’ll have all of you. I promise you that.’

Emyr said nothing. There was nothing left to say. We watched the two men walk across the yard and get into their car, DS Jenkins talking, gesturing with his hands. They drove away but I stayed at the window, looking out, my hand on the adder stone around my neck. I was afraid to stop watching, afraid that the moment we let our guard down they would

come back. Emyr put his hands over his face. His shoulders shook. He was crying. I wanted to embrace him, to offer comfort, but I could not. There was not a drop of comfort left in me.

Emyr dropped his hands, snorting through his nose. He wasn't crying. He was laughing, laughing so hard that he rocked with it. I stared at him in disbelief. Then, whipping my hand back, I slapped his face. He stopped laughing then. He gaped at me, his mouth slack with shock, a stripe of scarlet ripening on his cheek.

I could not be in the house with him. Snatching up my coat, I went out. My hand burned but I was not sorry. I walked up the track and over the ridge onto the hill. The wind was brisk and the rain blew thin and hard. It stung my face and my legs. I was still wearing my nightdress. I pulled my coat tighter around me and went on walking. I did not think where I was going. I walked till I was soaked through and my hands blotched purple with the cold.

When I got back to the house he was gone.

* * *

In the middle of the night the wind caught the front door and slammed it, setting Nel to barking on my bed. I opened the door and she darted downstairs, claws skittering on the wooden treads.

Emyr was standing in the dark kitchen, Dai's big old torch in his hands. He swung it round when I came in, blinding me, and turned just as quickly away. Unlatching the back door, he yanked it open, letting in a squally gust of rain.

'Emyr,' I said but he was already gone. I did not follow. I watched him stumbling across the field towards the coops, the beam of the torch picking out tussocks in splashes of green. I put the kettle on, set out the cups. I felt a heaviness in me, as though everything yet to happen was already decided. I sat down at the table. I drank some tea. I waited. Nel put her head on my lap. When Emyr came back in she jumped up at him, tail wagging. There was mud streaked on his face, clumped on his trousers. His hands were filthy.

‘Where is it?’ he demanded.

‘You need to sit down.’

‘Where is it, what have you done with it?’

‘I said, sit down.’

‘You have to tell me!’

‘Sit, Emyr.’ My voice was icy. ‘You’re going to listen to me.’

Emyr shook his head, his hands too, looking wildly around the room as though he might see rolls of explosive tucked behind the pictures like Christmas holly. ‘You don’t understand. You can’t – that stuff in the tin – you have to tell me!’

‘It’s gone.’

‘What do you mean, gone?’

‘I threw it in the reservoir.’

I glared at him, defying him to disbelieve me. Emyr gaped at me. Then, whirling away from me, his hands flapping on his wrists, he threw back his head and screamed. The scream sliced the air, cutting me open. Nel ran out of the room. How many years since he had screamed like that, like an animal?

‘You need to stop that,’ I said but he hardly heard me. He kicked out at one of the kitchen chairs, sending it crashing to the floor. When I gasped he swung round, his face so twisted out of shape I hardly knew him. I raised my arms as he flung himself towards me, shielding my head, but he did not hit me. He picked up my empty teacup and threw it hard against the wall. It smashed with a small high chime, the pieces skittering across the floor. Emyr stared at them, his hands clenched at his sides, his breath ragged.

‘That’s enough,’ I said. I used the voice Dai had used on him when he was little and his temper was too big for him, the voice for frightened animals that was half slowness and half song. ‘You need to sit down. Come on, sit down here.’

I picked up the kitchen chair and set it back on its legs. Emyr slumped into it, his body suddenly limp.

‘I lied for you, Emyr,’ I said. ‘You asked me to lie for you and I did. Now you have to tell me the truth.’

His head lolled forward, his chin almost on his chest. At his feet two blue birds with little round eyes flew face to face, their beaks open like women gossiping.

‘Where were you this weekend?’

He did not answer. Sick with dread, I seized his shoulders, jerking his head up.

‘You have to tell me. Were you there? This – this bomb, was it you? Well, was it?’

He glowered at me, two smudges of pink flaring on his cheeks. ‘I wish it had been.’

‘So you had nothing to do with it?’

He shook his head and the relief was so sharp it was almost pain.

‘Not this time,’ he said. ‘But I would have. I will. One day.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Why not? It’s the truth.’

‘How could you – do you want to go to prison? Because that’s what will happen, that’s where you’ll end up.’

‘Only if I get caught.’

How could a boy so clever with books be so stupid? I wanted to break him open, to reach through his chest and pull the madness from him by its roots. I made myself speak calmly. If I was calm, I might just get through to him. My throat ached with the effort of it.

‘Please, Emyr, listen to me. I know you only want what’s best for Wales, that the only way to stop the English taking and taking is to take back our country, to account for ourselves, I understand that, I think a lot of people do, they know things have to change, but this secret army, the bombs and guns and violence, all these threats in the newspapers? That’s not protest. It’s terrorism.’

Emyr stiffened and turned away, his head lowered. The nape of his neck was pale and knuckled with sharp bones. A child’s neck. It choked me with fury and terror and love. Such terrible furious love.

‘You say you’d set a bomb, that you want to. What if you kill people, Emyr? What if people die? You think a judge and jury will cheer you to the rafters, that they’ll raise a Welsh flag in your honour, the great patriot?

Because I'll tell you exactly what they'll do. They'll lock you up and they'll throw away the key and no one in Wales will say a word against them and you know why? Because they'd be right. They'd be right.'

I was crying. I had never meant to cry. Emyr exhaled sharply through his nose, shaking his head, shaking me off. I felt frightened, dizzy. I did not know how to make him see that he stood on the edge of a precipice, that one wrong step—

My stomach lurched, just thinking of the drop.

'You can't do this, you have to understand. If you were to kill someone, even if you never meant to, even if it was just a terrible accident, how could you ever live with yourself? The torment of that, the anguish of knowing that because of you, because of what you had done, somebody's child, somebody's beloved child – how could you possibly endure it?'

Emyr said nothing. His face was blank, empty. I did not know how to make him see what I could see, to feel what I felt, not just the explosion, the ghastly ripped-apart bodies, but the mourners gathered beside the half-empty coffin, the men in black suits with grim faces, the mother, her head bowed, helpless with grief. Her legs giving way as the coffin was lowered into the ground. Her anguish like a bottomless hole opening in the earth.

'Please, Emyr, you have to listen to me. Killing doesn't make a man a hero. It makes him a murderer.'

'So Da was a murderer, was he, in Normandy? Uncle Gareth was a murderer?'

'That was different. We were at war.'

'We're at war now.'

'We're not at war! No one thinks we are at war but you!'

Emyr glared at me, his eyes fierce with hate. Turning on his heel, he stormed out of the room. I let him go. I sat at the table, my head in my hands, grief twisting the gristle of my throat. He would leave again, I knew that. He would go to Tony's or wherever it was he really went when he said he was there. He would leave and thoughts of bombs would bind themselves around him like ivy, choking off his brain, and the hatred would harden in him so that the next time I saw him he would be lost to me, too far away to reach. Above me he banged about in his room. How many times

had I sat there listening to him, wondering why it was that everything he did made so much noise?

When he came back down he was carrying his school bag. I stood up, barring his way.

‘Give me the gun,’ I said quietly.

He hesitated.

‘I know you’ve got it, Emyr. If you don’t give it to me, I’ll go to the police.’

‘You wouldn’t.’

‘I’ll give them the gelignite.’

‘You threw the gelignite into the reservoir.’

‘No.’

‘But you said—’

‘I lied.’

He stared at me.

‘Give me the gun, Emyr. Give me the gun or I go to the police.’

He shook his head, blank with disbelief, his school bag slack in his hand. I tried to snatch it from him but he was too fast for me. He stumbled to the front door, yanking it open, and ran out across the yard. The night was inky dark and thick with rain. Nel wormed at my legs, trying to follow him. I caught her by the collar, pulling her inside.

‘You think I won’t do it?’ I shouted after him but he did not turn around. As he reached the gate, a car in the lane turned on its headlights, turning the rain to silver. Emyr got in. With a crash of gears the car jolted forward. I shaded my eyes against the dazzle as the car swung round, catching me in its headlights, and roared out of the yard. Its tail-lights were two red eyes in the darkness. Then it was gone.

Shivering, I pulled my dressing gown around me, hugging my arms over my chest. Let him go, Dai said in my head, he’ll be back when he’s hungry, his voice so clear he could have been beside me. I buried my face in my hands, memories crowding into the darkness, one after another. Dai standing behind Emyr at the stream, his hands over Emyr’s, teaching him to fish with a bent pin for a hook. Lifting him up to pick damsons from the lowest branches of the tree, Emyr’s starfish hands black with juice. Giving

him horse rides on his knees in the bentwood chair, galloping him up and down until Emyr was weak with the thrill of it and then abruptly opening his legs so that Emyr tumbled through the gap. Dai's arms sweeping to gather him up, catching him before he fell.

Nel whined, pawing my leg. I pushed her away but she only whined louder.

'He's gone,' I said flatly and, grabbing her collar, I dragged her back into the house.

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A day passed and then another. I went to work and I came home. I sat at the table alone with my supper untouched in front of me, whatever sense I had tumbling through me in a torrent so strong it felt like drowning. Tell me what to do, I said silently to Dai and then out loud, again and again till the words had no shape or sense left in them, but he was not there. Or if he was he never answered. I wore the adder stone around my neck, squeezing it in my hand to hold me steady. Emyr did not come home.

My hands remembered the gun. The long flat-sided barrel, the squared-off blocky body, the round chamber with its snub-nosed indentations, the hard smooth heaviness of it. The handle with its criss-crossed wooden grip and the smooth oval guard encircling the curve of the trigger. The clicking nub of the safety catch. I woke with a start in the night, my heart racing, the crack of it singing in the air, the darkness sticky and metalled with blood. Beside me Nel twitched in her dreams. I buried my fingers in her fur, holding on for dear life.

I did not go to the police.

I listened to the wireless before work and in the evenings. At weekends I kept it on all day. There was never anything about the Clywedog bomber but I went on listening all the same, not just for the news but on through morning matins and the talk shows and the programmes about science and opera and the afternoon plays. It was easier with people talking. It stopped time from slipping sideways or running too slow behind. Sometimes I talked back to the announcers or perhaps the talking was only in my head. Labour was predicted to win the General Election. America announced plans to send astronauts into space. A collie called Pickles found the stolen World Cup trophy under a hedge on a walk in south London. The dog made me think of Emyr. Everything made me think of Emyr.

In my mind he was three and five and nine. We ran down the sloping field at Tyˆ-eithin, racing-car drivers in our imaginary cars. On rainy days we were spacemen spinning around the earth in our spaceship in the hay loft above the old barn. Emyr wanted to know if aliens would speak Welsh

or English. Was that where it began? Back then I had thought the whole world not large enough for him. One summer he learned all the constellations from a book he took out from the library and we lay in the grass on the hill with the damp seeping up into our backs as he pointed them out to me one by one. The stars look like they are by themselves, he said, but most of them are part of their own solar system. Some of the systems have three stars or even four. Imagine it, he said, sunrise in a world with four suns.

My boy with his awkward sideways grin and his awed fascination with the workings of the world, the boy who thought that every slug and moth and frill of fungus was a miracle, who drove me half-mad with the treasures he insisted on bringing home, bones and stones and bits of broken bird's egg. My sweet exasperating boy who never played at soldiers with the other boys or swooped about like a fighter pilot rat-tat-tat-tatting his guns, but squatted on his haunches while they crashed around him and watched a worm inch loop by careful loop across a patch of earth. A boy who rescued ladybirds from the windowpanes and spiders from the sink, and carried them outside in the cup of his hands. How could a boy like that ever be dangerous?

You expect me to picture a world with four suns, I said, when we live in a country without even one? A joke, that was all, a silly throwaway remark. All those sharp little jokes like shoes on the flags of him, wearing him down.

If I had been kinder.

If we had moved away.

If I had only got rid of the gun.

When Emyr was small and a panic came over him I could not touch him, he would not let me touch him, but I stayed where he could see me, watching him, and instead of my arms I set a wall of love around him, a palisade like the ones around the medieval castles he was always drawing, to protect him and keep out his enemies. If I could only stretch myself to encircle him, if I could hold him tight inside my sharpened stakes, the world and all its horrors could not lay siege to him. If I loved him fiercely enough, I could keep him safe.

I should go to the police. Emyr had a gun. I could not trust him with it. He thought what happened to Wales was more important than what happened to ordinary people. He thought the idea of a country was worth dying for. Worth killing for.

My son was a terrorist.

How could a mother think such things? It was monstrous. I was Judas and Herod and Abraham sacrificing Isaac and all the plagues of Egypt except there was no God in me, no higher purpose, just treachery and betrayal and a terrible failure of love, and yet what else could I think? Emyr had admitted it. He had not asked for help. He did not want to change. He was not ashamed. He believed he was fighting for his country, as his father and his uncle had done before him. He was proud of his principles, his courage, a soldier willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. His own or someone else's.

What if it was him who died?

'So Da was a murderer, was he, in Normandy? Uncle Gareth was a murderer?'

I thought of Dai standing over Teg with the pistol in his hand, the scar on his chest. I did not know if he had ever killed a man. I never asked him. He would not have answered if I had. He would not talk about that time. It's over, he said when he came back, and that was the end of it. He hung up his demob suit and he went back out onto the hill. His scar faded.

It left its mark on him, though. How could it not? They enlisted together, him and the four Williams boys and the Jones lads from Cerrig-nant, all of them lying to get around the ban. Only Dai and Bob Williams came back. Dai was not a soldier, he would never have volunteered alone, but once the others had decided what choice did he have? Dai had grown up with them. They had pulled each other's ewes out of snowdrifts, patched each other's roofs, brought in each other's harvests. They depended on each other. That was how it worked in a place like this. If he let them go off to fight alone, he would be responsible for what happened to them when they were gone. When they came back, if they came back, he would not be able to look them in the eye.

Was it the same for Emyr? The gun and the gelignite and the uniform, was it all about loyalty to that Mr Wozniak of his, to Tony and the other lads, boy-men standing heroically shoulder to shoulder in some misplaced spirit of self-sacrifice? They had manipulated him, I saw that now. Anhun ap Iwan, for God's sake. That boy had taken Emyr and twisted him into somebody else, somebody I could not recognise, and I had not stopped it. I had watched it happen. Before Tony Emyr had recoiled from violence. All those boys shooting one another with sticks. Bang bang, you're dead. Not Emyr. Never Emyr. You could see him backing off, drawing himself in. Dai too. Both of them rolling up inside themselves like woodlice, their soft parts safe inside their shells.

And yet.

When my brother Gareth came back from the war he was a drunk. He shook all the time and never slept. I thought it was because of what the Germans had done to him. It never crossed my mind that it might be because of what he had done to them.

On the wireless the local news reported that a caller claiming to be from the Welsh Freedom Army had telephoned a warning to police about a bomb planted in the main Carmarthen Post Office during the Saturday lunchtime rush. The bomb turned out to be a hoax.

I fumbled for the adder stone under my jersey and held it tight. I had the chance to change things, to make it stop. And if I did not and something happened, if people were hurt or worse, it would be me who was to blame. Their blood would be on my hands.

I did not go to the police.

* * *

John Post came every morning for the eggs. He did not drive into the yard. He left the driver's door open and the engine running as he stowed the trays in the boot of the van and then he got back in and reversed down the way he had come. At the end of the week he left an envelope on the wall by the gatepost. He put a slate on top of it to keep it from blowing away. Inside

was my money, the exact amount, down to the last penny. No note or message with it. Not even my name on the envelope.

Along the lane the daffodils were in full bloom.

* * *

It was on the evening news. A twenty-three-year-old sheep farmer from Nebo arrested in connection with the bombing at Clywedog. The farmer had a wife and a small baby. He was a known member of the Welsh Freedom Army. When the police searched his farm they found six detonators in a fridge in an outbuilding and nine pounds of gelignite. The gelignite was buried in his field. The farmer told the police that he had allowed the WFA to use his land for training exercises. The police had charged him with possession of explosives under suspicious circumstances. He was on bail pending trial. The sentence for possession was fourteen years in prison.

It was over. The police had their man and their motive. They had all the makings of a bomb. A search had turned up a forage cap near the site of the explosion. The cap had a brass badge on its crown. The white eagle of Eryri, mark of the WFA. An open and shut case. The farmer would be found guilty and sentenced and that would be the end of it. By the time he got out of prison his baby would be almost grown.

I went to bed. It was raining. I lay in bed listening to the rain. They had one man in custody. It did not mean he had acted alone. Three men had been charged with the bombing at Tryweryn. Two of them had gone to prison.

It was still raining when I got up again and went downstairs. I made tea and sat in the rocker, waiting for the dawn. Nebo was up near Betws-y-Coed, some fifteen miles north of here. If the police were still looking for accomplices, they might come back with a new warrant. They had found nine pounds of gelignite buried in a field in the middle of nowhere. If they had found that, they could find anything. Including seven sticks wrapped up in newspaper and buried in a bin full of chicken feed at the top of our field.

The thought froze my innards to ice.

* * *

I did not sleep that night. When morning came I drove up to Bwythn-gwyn. It was still raining. Streams rushed down the sides of the road. At the T-junction by the telephone box a tractor had broken down. A second tractor blocked the road as two men in dripping waterproofs hitched them together with chains. I waited, legs twitching, hands clamping the steering wheel like I would squeeze it dry. In my head I saw the swirl of blue police lights, heard the scream of the siren, but though I checked the rear-view mirror over and over the road behind me stayed empty. The wipers squawked faintly as they scraped across the windscreen. Beyond the bare hedge a muddy white pony grazed in the field where the dam workers had lived, the field where the Irish had learned to be Irish. There were no caravans now. A steady drip of rain came through the canvas roof.

One of the men got into the second tractor and backed it closer to the first. The other one nodded at me and waved me on through the gap. As I edged forward I noticed a man standing in the telephone box. He had his back to me but there was no mistaking him. Mr Fitzpatrick. He twisted himself about in the narrow space, rummaging in his pocket, and dropped another coin in the slot.

The waving man waved more impatiently, urging me on. As I squeezed past him I knew he was clocking the white star on the bonnet, the steering wheel on the wrong side. I raised a hand to thank him. Perhaps he was one of the Plas Derwen tenants, he might even tell someone he had seen me, but it did not matter because I was doing my job, the job Plas Derwent paid me to do, and it was a working day, the same as any other. In the telephone box Mr Fitzpatrick gesticulated at the receiver, his sleeve rubbing a clear patch in the steamed-up glass, but I was through by then and on the other side. The waving man gave me a thumbs up in the rear-view mirror as I put my foot down. I caught a glimpse of Mr Ross’s blue car parked by the field gate before the sag of clouds swallowed me into the hill.

The cottage was unlocked. I took my parcel from its bag on the back seat and went inside. Ignoring the mess of ashtrays and crushed beer cans, I hurried into the bathroom, bolting the door behind me. The parcel was wrapped in brown paper with Rose Hughes’s address in Conwy printed in

neat capitals on the front. No one would think twice about me posting a friend a present for her birthday.

I tore off the paper, shoving it into my pocket. Inside was Rose's Tupperware box, the lid tightly sealed. I had wrapped the tubes of gelignite in greaseproof paper. They might have been sandwiches or sausage rolls. So much fresher than a tin, I thought, and despite myself I almost laughed.

The fear was quick behind. If I laughed, my luck would never hold. Reaching into the cupboard under the sink, I felt at the side for Pedr Beddoe's panel. It was a simple enough job to lift it out. Lying on my side, I pushed the Tupperware into the space behind the bath. When it was gone as far as I could reach, I squirmed on my belly and peered through the gap. Beyond the splintery boards and the cobwebs and the lengths of metal pipe a curved edge of pale plastic gleamed like a new moon. Wriggling closer, I nudged it out of sight.

I put the panel back and closed the cupboard door. My jersey was furry with dust. I took it off and shook it clean. I wanted to run out of there, to drive as fast as I could back down the hill, but I knew I could not draw attention to myself. It was an ordinary day. I flushed the lavatory. I ran water in the basin and washed my hands. I could not shake the feeling that Mr Fitzpatrick was on the other side of the door, that when I opened it he would be standing there waiting, the way he had waited the very first time I had come here, only this time he would demand that I tell him what I had been doing, what it was I had hidden inside.

Steeling myself, I opened the door. The kitchen was empty, the blue car still not back. Wispy straggles of cloud trailed down the hill, rain blowing through them in swirls. I leaned against the sink and let the lurch in me settle. There was no safer place to leave it. A cottage owned by Saes, leased by Saes, lived in by Saes. No police officer in the world would ever think to look here. In the parlour I swept out the grate and took a folded newspaper from the wood basket to lay a fire. Saturday's *Western Herald*. A thin man in an evening suit stared out from the front page. MORE SHOCKING REVELATIONS! the headline shrieked. I skimmed the words, destruction of our moral fabric, corruption of the young, a cesspool of deviance and vice, and I thought of Ifan, of Emyr leaning towards Tony like a fish on a

hook. The people of this country deserve a law that protects them, the article thundered. I crumpled the page into a ball.

A car engine in the lane. Hurriedly I tucked what was left of the paper into my bag. Saturday's paper was too early for Nebo, they had not made the arrest then, but there might be something about Penro Ellis or the WFA. If there was anything at all to know, I needed to know it. Striking a match, I put it to the fire. The flame crept up the headline, curling it to nothing. The front door banged.

'I've lit the fire,' I called. 'It'll chase out the damp.'

Mr Fitzpatrick came into the parlour. He frowned at me. 'Why are you here?'

'It's my day.'

'Is it? Shit. OK.' He shrugged, his hand going with a grimace to his neck. 'Busy week.'

'So I see.'

'A man's allowed a little farewell bash, isn't he?'

I glanced up at him, surprised. 'You're leaving?'

'Those busybodies in the estate office didn't tell you? Mr Ross has kicked me out. He is returning in a blaze of glory. The past is a foreign country, Mrs Jones. No refugees allowed.'

He was drunk. I had not seen him drunk for a long time.

'He's bringing a journalist, can you believe that? Now that his work is taking the critics by storm, he wants to show them where the magic started, have them capture its primitive charms for posterity. J. L. Ross, the R. S. Thomas of the easel. It doesn't seem to matter that he didn't paint a stroke the whole time he was here. Oh, and the best part? He's getting married. Whoever it was said miracles never happen has plainly never enjoyed the many and diverse pleasures of the Honourable Mr James Lansdowne Ross. Her name's Victoria, like the sponge.'

I let him ramble on, something about a strawberry on the cake. It might have been the old days, Mr Ross out on the hill, Mr Fitzpatrick a bottle down and talking like his life depended on it. I straightened up, watching the fire strengthen in the grate. Mr Fitzpatrick was going. I would not see him again. I was glad. A month ago I would have been gladder. A month

ago, it would have felt like an answer to a prayer. That depends, he had said, when I asked him if there would be a war, on whether Mr Penro Ellis is Michael Collins or the Wizard of Oz, but somehow it was always Mr Fitzpatrick I had thought of as the man behind the curtain, pulling levers for no better reason than he wanted occupation and he could. Mr Fitzpatrick with his photographs and his friends at the newspapers, shaping my son into a character for his book. And now he was leaving and it turned out it did not matter. Emyr had not needed Mr Fitzpatrick to make him into a man I did not know. He had done that all by himself.

I finished the cleaning and let myself out. I did not say goodbye. I left the gelignite hidden behind the bath. It felt like a kind of insurance policy, a bet against Emyr's version of the future, the only lever that was mine to pull. And if the pipes leaked again and Pedr Beddoe happened to find it? A discovery like that could make a great deal of trouble for Mr Fitzpatrick, perhaps for Mr Ross too. Every cloud had a silver lining.

* * *

It was my afternoon for Llaeth-dŷ, the old dairy beside the farm. In the little kitchen I made tea and pored over the *Western Herald*, but though I checked every page I found nothing at all about the WFA. If I wanted an up-to-date newspaper, I would have to drive to Bala and I could not risk that, not in the jeep. I had no reason to be there, not one the estate office would accept, and what if the police were checking up on me? It had only taken that old newspaper under Emyr's floor for DS Jenkins to put one and one together and make five. I needed to follow my ordinary routine, to do exactly what it was I always did. I needed to go home.

It was letting-out time at the school when I drove back down through Fron-goch. The rain had stopped and children were running around in the playground. Their shrieks could have broken glass. Mothers clustered by the gate, waiting for them to be let out, their toddlers in pushchairs or worrying at their skirts.

I had to see my son. The longing overwhelmed me. Ignoring our turning, I accelerated down the road towards Bala. It was madness, I knew

it, and not just because of the jeep. I had no thought of what I would say to Emyr, how to explain why I had come. I could not think that far ahead. All I knew was that I had to see him, to know he was safe. I parked the jeep on a back street and walked the rest of the way. The houses had neat front gardens and net curtains and wavy glass panels in their front doors. Ornaments were lined up on the windowsills, china dogs and dried flowers and glass paperweights, a brass clock with a stained plywood back. One of the bungalows had a windmill in the flowerbed and a sign nailed to the gatepost: FOR SALE. The windmill turned as I passed, glinting silver.

I was afraid I might miss him but I was early. The wide playground was deserted. Primary schools let out earlier, I had known that once. I waited. A woman in a pale blue anorak hurried up the street. She smiled at me. I nodded. We were the only ones waiting. A bell rang, flat and final sounding. There was a pause, the school holding its breath, and then the doors flew open and hordes of black-blazered pupils streamed out into the playground. They clustered at the bus stop or moved off in noisy groups towards the High Street. A handful climbed into waiting cars. I searched for Emyr but I did not see him. Perhaps he was playing football or working late in the library. Perhaps I had missed him in the rush. The woman in the anorak was gone. Everyone was gone.

I went back the next afternoon and the afternoon after that. I learned the rhythm of it, the long pulse of the final bell, the held-in breath before the pupils poured noisily out. Most afternoons the woman in the anorak was there too. I tried not to notice her noticing me as I stood on tiptoes, scouring the crowd for Emyr. He had to be there. The school took a register, gave punishments for lateness. If he was missing school, they would have written me a letter. They were strict like that.

Several times I thought I saw him. A glimpse of a face that made my heart jump, but when I looked again the boy was someone else, someone nothing like Emyr. It baffled me, that my mind could play such tricks, that I could be turned inside out by a stranger. That I could fail to see Tony when he was standing almost in front of me.

‘What are you doing here?’

His jaw was heavier than I remembered, his skin white as lard. A scatter of angry pimples rouged his cheeks. ‘You need to stop coming,’ he said. ‘He doesn’t want to talk to you.’

So Emyr had seen me waiting for him. He was still going to school. He was safe. I smiled despite myself.

‘He can’t tell me that himself?’

Tony shrugged. ‘I’m telling you.’

The last pupils were straggling out of the playground. A boy walked alone, a knot of girls trailing behind. The boy had a football. He bounced it on his knee, flicking it onto his foot and back again. The girls nudged each other. One of them giggled.

‘I suppose he’s staying with you?’ I asked.

Tony shrugged again.

‘And your mother doesn’t mind?’

‘My mother isn’t any of your business.’

His rudeness was shameless, brazen. It emboldened me.

‘She is if she’s harbouring my son,’ I said. ‘I want your address. I need to know where he is.’

‘Are you stupid or something? I told you, he wants you to leave him alone.’

‘He’s my son, Tony. He has to come home.’

‘He’s eighteen, he doesn’t have to do anything. And my name’s Anhun.’

Glowering at me, he hauled his bag higher on his shoulder and stalked away towards the High Street. I leaned against the wire mesh of the fence, staring out across the empty playground. When the caretaker came out to chain up the gates I went back to the car. Outside the bungalow with the windmill a man was taking down the FOR SALE sign. Emyr would never come back. The realisation fell through me like a dropped stone. Even if I managed to talk to him, even if I persuaded him to come home, how long before he left again? In June he would sit his examinations. What would there be to stay for after that? He would get a job. He would stay in Wales, of course he would, but he would move south. He would have to. There were no jobs for a boy with A Levels in Meirionnydd.

And then there would be nothing whatsoever to hold me here. Like Emyr said, I could go to London or to Timbuktu if the fancy took me and I could find out where it was. It shamed me that I did not know. A whole life fixed upon escaping, longing to escape, and where was I? Back where I had always been, waiting for my son at the school gates. At least Dai roamed the hills. Bound about by the cynefin of his own making, he still had all the moors and the mountains and the great empty arc of the sky. I was like Nel caged up in her run, barking and barking and chasing my own tail. Emyr did not need me to stay here. He did not even want me. He had sent his friend to tell me to leave him alone. How much plainer could he make it? All he needed from me was to keep his secrets. The rest was no concern to him. So why was it everything to me?

I had parked the jeep where no one would see it, in the alley behind the Co-op. On the corner the bus was letting people off. I ducked round the back of it and found myself face to face with Maureen Post. She was carrying a string bag of groceries, onions and carrots and mince wrapped in bloody paper. It was too late for either of us just to walk on.

‘Olwen,’ she said stiffly.

‘Maureen.’

There was an awkward pause. I fiddled with the car key and forced a smile. I did not want her telling John Post I had cut her. ‘How’s John?’

I had not realised till I said his name how much I had missed him. Maureen’s face shrivelled.

‘Our country is being held to ransom by violent terrorists who would bomb us all to pieces in our beds and you ask how John is? He’s out of his mind with worry. We both are. I said to him, I said we should have known. Bad blood will out. Your son, those men, they’re monsters. Monsters. They’ve trained dogs to carry their bombs for them now but of course you’d know that, wouldn’t you? They send those poor creatures into places a person can’t go and then they blow them up, it’s terrifying, it’s – it’s inhuman, and what does my husband do? He goes and gives that boy of yours a puppy. A puppy! He might as well have given him a loaded gun.’

I walked away. What else could I do? She was mad, quite mad. If I listened to her any longer, she might make me mad too. She called

something after me, something about not showing my face, but I closed my ears and climbed into the jeep without turning round, my heart pounding in my throat. I thought of Mr Fitzpatrick's photograph of Penro Ellis on a street corner with a dog in a bandana on a lead. I thought with a wrench of John Post. No wonder he was changed. How could he not be with mad poison like that forever drip-drip-dripping in his ear?

I could hear Nel's barking from the lane. When she saw me she hurled herself at the wire, her tail thrashing frantically from side to side. I let her out and she streaked away up the field. Rabbits, maybe, or a pheasant in the top hedge. I whistled for her. She turned round, her ears pricked. The jumps Emyr had made her were still up, a roll of chicken wire pulled between two fenceposts and twisted round with rope, the old trough heaped with logs and brambles. A dog would need to be agile if it was to find its way into a secured place with a bomb on its back, agile and very obedient.

I whistled again and Nel grinned at me, pink tongue lolling, and disappeared into the hedge.

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I dreamed of Tyˆ-eithin that night. I woke early, filled with yearning for a time I did not remember, a place that, awake, I did not recognise. The morning was soft and clear. A leafy haze blurred the branches of the trees and the fields were very green. At Tyˆ-eithin the hazels would be hung with yellow lambs' tails. I thought of Ifan lifting me onto his shoulders to show me the puff of golden pollen when you flicked them, the tiny flower buds with their red tasselled heads that in the autumn would become the cobnuts.

After work I would go back to Emyr's school, I made myself a promise, but till then the past was the only place I could bear to be. I saw to the hens and sorted the eggs, I stoked the range, I made tea and drank it looking out at the yard, and all the time I was at Tyˆ-eithin with Ifan. I thought about the wood anemones and the wild garlic and the merlins that used to come back every spring to nest in the heather above the house. Perhaps they still did. I thought about the story Mari used to tell about the shepherd boy who cut a switch from a gnarled old hazel tree at Craig y Ddinas and walked all the way to London with it but when he got there a wise man told him to go back. If he returned to the hazel, the wise man said, he would find great treasure there. The shepherd boy was footsore but he did as he was bid and walked back to Craig y Ddinas and when he got there he found Arthur and all twelve of his knights asleep under the hazel tree. As a girl I had never liked that story. I had not understood what it meant. Perhaps that was why Mari told it to me, because she knew the time would come when I would, when it would be a comfort.

It was my day for Cae'r-pell. I meant to drive there, I slowed at the turning, but instead I drove on down the hill and through Fron-goch and out onto the New Road past the dam. It was the wrong way but I did not turn around. I looked across the water and I tried to picture the valley as it had been, the grey walls and the grazing sheep and the low clumps of trees, the river looping lazily through the fields, but it was like trying to remember a dream. The sense just slipped away. The lake stretched ahead of me, smooth

and still and bright with sky, Arenig Fach sprawled like a sleeping animal at its head. It might have been there always. It was beautiful.

* * *

The broken-down gate at the end of the track was gone. I drove up through the brambles and into the yard. The spring sun came at me in flashes through the trees. Somewhere on the hill a lamb called to its mother, sweet and plaintive. The ache in me called back.

The door to the house stood wide open, the scrape of it fresh on the stone step. I glanced inside and recoiled. A dead ewe lay by the range. Her head was thrown back, her brown teeth bared, her eyes staring blindly at the wall. She was bloated with death, dark fluid leaking from her mouth and matting the wool around her tail. The air was thick with the stench of her, ammonia and putrid meat, and threaded through the stink a hissing crackle like a badly tuned wireless. I watched her clumped fleece shift and move and then I saw them, thousands of maggots churning underneath her skin.

I turned away, a hand on the wall to steady myself. It was not revulsion I felt as much as savage grief. The limewash was scabby and streaked with dirt. It clung to my palm in tiny shards as I walked out into the yard. Too late I realised I should have checked the sheep's mark, the farmer needed to know, but I did not go back. I knew already I would never go inside the house again. Scrambling over the yard wall, I climbed the hill to the hazels. The lambs' tails glowed yellow. I tapped a cluster lightly with the tip of my finger, hazing the air with gold. The tiny buds were starting to flower, crimson-tipped sea anemones clinging to the branches. When I left Wales, if I left, I would come up here and cut a switch of hazel to take with me. A piece of this place, whatever magic or power it possessed. If you cut off the tentacles of a sea anemone, they would grow new ones. If you cut them in half, both halves would usually survive. Emyr had told me that. Or perhaps it was Ifan.

Primroses were flowering along the wall. I picked some for Mari and Ifan but it was Dai I thought of. I had not been back to his grave, not since we buried him. I could see it in my mind, the mound of turned earth by the

ragged yew, the grass not yet grown over. In his plain pine box Dai would still be Dai, the shape of him solid in the ground. The distance between us no wider than a bed, his deadness cold and absolute, a fresh offence.

A wilted posy lay fanned on Ifan's mound. Wood anemones, their fragile white petals flushed with pink. I stared at them. Someone had picked flowers for Ifan. Who would do that but Emyr? There was no one left to think of it but us. Squatting down, I arranged my primroses beside them, their thickly felted leaves stretching like a coverlet over the anemones' delicate stems. Had Emyr come up here? It was a place he had always felt safe. When he was small he had brought treasures for Ifan, a shiny snail shell, a curlew feather, a stone with a seam of white quartz forking through it like lightning. He likes it, he always said happily as he set his offering down. It's one of his favourite things.

I put the rest of the primroses on Mari's stone. I had been wrong to let them bury Dai in Llanycil, in a strange place among strangers. I should have brought him up here, laid him to rest beside Ifan, under the hazels that always flowered early, their branches in midwinter already bursting with spring. If he could not be laid in his own ground then he should be here with Ifan who was no longer Ifan, not the Ifan I had known, but rather a part of the hill, in the hazels and the heather and the tussocky grass and the spring that ran down between the rocks, sweet smiling Ifan with his kindness and his curiosity, his easy gift for happiness. The lambs' tails fertilised the buds of other hazel trees, their pollen carried on the breeze. It did not seem so impossible that happiness could work the same way. With Ifan beside him Dai might finally rest in peace.

The sky was blue, the clouds snagged wisps of wool. Sunlight dappled the grass. I sat on the mossy wall and looked down towards the yard. I knew I could not stay, that I had to get to work, but the knowledge felt strange and very far away. It did not seem to have anything to do with the me I was here. Beyond the trees I could see the roof of the old barn, the little hay loft window with its dilapidated wooden shutter tucked under the eaves. Anastasia II, Emyr had called our spaceship. You say two, he told me sternly, but you write it like eleven. I never knew where he got that from. He was the captain and I was the rest of the crew. In that cramped hay loft

the pair of us circumnavigated the universe and when we were tired of flying we sat in the window with our sandwiches and watched the rain sweeping in veils across the hills. I smiled, looking over at the anemones, and suddenly I was on my feet and running down the hill, up the stone steps that edged the barn. The mortar crumbled under my feet, chunks skittering down into the yard.

The hay loft was gloomy after the brightness of outside. Hunched over, holding onto the beam like a banister, I picked my way to the window and pushed open the shutter. The day spilled in, filling the air with dancing motes of dust. In the corner by the back wall, I saw a heaped-up pile of belongings. An old sleeping bag, torn and tatty with a broken zip. A brown jersey with its sleeves pulled inside out and the torch from the cowshed and a chipped tin mug. Dai's old canvas haversack with its straps cut off stuffed with clothes. A pile of school books. I opened the cover of the top one. EMYR JONES printed in capitals on the flyleaf. Emyr was not staying with Tony. He was sleeping here.

It made no sense to be glad. He was a runaway. He had no money. A dilapidated barn was no place to live. He would be cold and dirty and hungry, perhaps he was even truanting from school, but the gladness crept in all the same, slanting low and golden. Anastasia II. Our place, his and mine. I gathered the pilled nylon sleeping bag into my arms, hugging it against me. It gave off a musty smell, damp and the faint sour tang of sweat. Through the square of the window I could see the double peak of Arenig Fawr. The shape of it pierced my throat.

I wanted to stay. I wanted to sit myself where he had sat, surrounded by his things. The dust glittered sunlit in the air. I wanted to breathe in the dust of him. More than anything I wanted to talk to him, to start somehow to put things back together, but how? He did not want to talk to me. He had sent his friend to tell me so. If he saw the jeep in the yard, if he knew I knew he was here, he would not stay. He would go somewhere else, somewhere I did not know. I might not find him twice.

I had to leave. I needed to get away before he came back and found me here. Instead I searched the haversack. I had to know if he had the gun. Bundled up in a tangle of dirty clothes I found an alarm clock, a toothbrush,

a half-empty pack of cigarettes, an envelope weighted with coins. The envelope had no stamp on, no address. E. JONES, it said in typed letters on the front. The capital O in JONES jumped away from the line.

I opened it, my fingers clumsy, the clatter of Mr Fitzpatrick's typewriter loud in my head. There was no letter inside, just money, four folded pound notes and some change. I thought of Mr Fitzpatrick locking up his files at Bwythn-gwyn, the explosions of mirth as he and Mr Ross sprawled together downstairs in the parlour, laughing and laughing. Drinking and drowning, Mr Fitzpatrick had said that day as though it was the funniest joke in the world, you don't get Welsher than that, though I had never seen a Welshman drink like he did, like drowning would be a blessing. I had never said a word to Emyr about Mr Fitzpatrick and his offer of help. As far as I knew, after that time with the Christmas dinner, the two of them never met again.

Except Mr Fitzpatrick had known where to find him. That day at the reservoir, the day of the opening, he had said something about meeting Emyr after school. He had made it sound like a threat. Perhaps it was. Perhaps when Emyr did not telephone he went down there, waited at the playground gates with the woman in the blue anorak, but why? Translation work, he had said to Emyr, but he already had someone translating the newspaper clippings and he surely did not need translation for his book. The story was all about Mr Penro Ellis and Mr Penro Ellis did not speak Welsh. And yet he had met with Emyr, that much was plain. Emyr had taken his money. Your son is not the story, he had told me, and though I believed almost none of what he said I believed him then. He had let me destroy the photographs. So what was he paying Emyr for? What did he want from him?

How's that handsome boy of yours? The memory slid like a knife under my skin, Mr Fitzpatrick standing in the kitchen doorway in his thick knitted socks. That handsome boy, like Emyr was the prince from a fairy tale, and I had dismissed it as just another of Mr Fitzpatrick's affectations, that or a prod to my ribs not worth responding to. I had not given it another thought.

He loved Mr Ross. He had tried to tell me, that day by the fire, and I had not understood him, I had not cared enough to understand, but I had known it, even then. I had known for a long time. I had seen it in the way

they were together, seen how Mr Ross was drawn to him too, that he wanted him or needed him or could not rid himself of him, that the two of them were bound together somehow, however much Mr Ross did not want it to be true. And then something had gone wrong that summer and Mr Fitzpatrick had left. Had he hoped Mr Ross would come back with him to Bwythn-gwyn, that there was a chance of making things right? And when Mr Ross did not come, had he looked to ease his loss? There was a host of reasons a man disappointed in love might seize upon another: pride, consolation, anaesthesia, revenge. Was it possible that Mr Fitzpatrick had, that he and Emyr—

Mr Fitzpatrick. It was impossible, unimaginable. Tony was one thing. I thought of him that evening in our kitchen going on at Dai, Emyr leaning towards him like Tony was a magnet and Emyr all iron. I had not liked it, I had not trusted Tony one inch, but I had understood it and not just because of Ifan. It was how Emyr was. He had always been caught up by his passions for things, even when he was a little boy. Like the butterflies or the stamps or the model aeroplanes, Emyr would devote all his attention to Tony, he would learn everything about him, think of nothing else, until abruptly a different passion seized him and the old one stopped. Perhaps it had happened already. Perhaps that was why Emyr was here and not in Bala with Tony and his mother. Perhaps there was someone else, another boy from school, someone, and my heart sank to think of it, from this WFA he was caught up in. Just not Mr Fitzpatrick, though. Please God, not Mr Fitzpatrick.

Beyond the square of the hay window a goshawk soared in deliberate circles, her grey-barred wings spread wide. Grey ghosts, Mari called them. It was not a boy that fixated Emyr this time. It was Wales. That was his thing now, the all-consuming passion that absorbed him. Whatever he was doing with Mr Fitzpatrick it had to do with Wales and that army of his. It had to be. But what? And what was it Mr Fitzpatrick was getting in return?

The goshawk beat its wings, spiralling up into the blue. I watched it disappear. I had to leave. Kneeling down, I fumbled the envelope back into the haversack, spilling the coins. One of them gleamed gold. The brass tag from Teg’s collar. JONES, it said in neat capital letters, and underneath it

the name of the old farm. Teg's name was not on it. Dai said a dog's name was nobody's business but the dog's and besides that way it could be passed down from one dog to another. Teg was the last one to have it.

Swallowing the lump in my throat I bundled the rest of Emyr's things back into the haversack and put the sleeping bag back where I found it. He would never know that I had ever been here. At the hay window, closing the shutter, I paused, listening to the lambs, the bubbling whistle of the curlews. The goshawk was gone. The rowan blazed red and against the bluebell sky the hills glowed golden, soft-edged like crumpled velvet.

Emyr was in every kind of trouble but he had not run away. He had come home.

* * *

I bumped down the track, brambles clawing at the bonnet. Beside the New Road the reservoir was smooth and black as tarmac. The outlet tower bristled from the water and the dam was an ugly wound in the hill. I would drive up to Cae'r-pell. I would scrub the place from top to bottom. At Cae'r-pell, way over on the far side of the hill, I would be able to think clearly. I would decide what to do. There had to be something I could do.

A van was waiting at the junction. I slowed to let it pass and, as it pulled out, I saw that it was John Post's van. Maureen was sitting in the passenger seat. She turned her head to look at me as they passed, her face a pale smear behind the sun-streaked glass. I had not spoken to John Post since that morning after the bomb at Clywedog but if there was anyone who knew about Mr Fitzpatrick and why he had come back, it would be him. John Post always knew everything. Not that he would tell me, not now. Most likely he would never speak to me again. I missed him. I missed having a friend.

* * *

I waited for him the next morning. I knew there was a fair chance he would turn me down flat but I had to try. I stood at the window while I drank my

tea, watching for his van. He did not come. I left the eggs in the usual place. When I came home they were gone.

That night I cooked supper for two. I had an idea that I could drive it up to Tyˆ-eithin and leave it there for Emyr. Before it was made I had come to my senses. I put a plate over his helping and set it aside for another day. I kept thinking all the things he must need, a bar of soap, clean underwear, batteries. I fetched a blanket from the blanket box and hung it on the kitchen rack to air.

I thought about the envelope, E. JONES. The O jumped up and down in my head like a child clamouring for attention. I pushed it away. When I was a girl at Tyˆ-eithin we drew our water from a pump in the yard. I wondered if the pump still worked or if Emyr had to fetch it from the stream. He would need a bucket, a dipper. A tin mug was no way to collect water.

The next morning I was cutting bread when I saw John Post's van in the lane. I dropped the knife and went outside, wiping my hands on my apron. Nel tried to follow but I closed the door. I did not want to talk about Nel.

It was another fine morning. The air shone and the flowering currant was bright with blossom. I thought John Post would get out for the eggs with the engine running but to my surprise he turned into the yard. I waited, a stack of egg trays in my arms, as he opened the door of his van and got out.

'They're laying well,' I said. It was a start, a peace offering of a sort. I hoped he might take it that way. John Post nodded. Taking the trays, he loaded them into the back of his van.

'John, please, I—'

Frowning, John turned to me.

'These are for you,' he said, holding out some letters. The anger still burned in him, I could smell the scorch of it. He did not look at me. I took the letters.

'I'll go on with the eggs,' he said.

'The eggs?'

'I won't stop taking them. It's not you who deserves to suffer. Just don't say anything to Maureen.' He frowned unhappily and climbed back into the van. 'Take care, Olwen.'

‘Wait,’ I said, my hand on his window, but he did not wait. He turned on the engine and he drove away. Without his van in it, the yard felt very big and bare. I looked down at the letters. A white envelope from the estate office and a larger brown one with my name written on a sticker in felt pen.

Nel was barking. I let her out. A soft breeze shivered in the grass. The birds clamoured. I sat on the front step. The white envelope was from the estate office up at Plas Derwen. Mr Ross, I thought, letting my eyes drift down the page, and then I stopped. It had come to Mr Howell’s attention that I had used the Plas Derwen jeep for private purposes in direct contravention of the conditions of my employment. Mr Howell had no choice therefore but to issue me with a formal warning. Any subsequent violation would result in the termination of my employment without notice.

The letter was in English, though his Welsh was as good as mine. It had come to his attention. Someone had reported me. Of course they had. It was my own stupid fault. I had broken the rules too many times. I knew how it worked up there, the estate like its own island in the Welsh hills, a piece of England with its own language and laws. The only surprise was that it had taken so long. Nel ran back across the yard and, panting, pushed her head into my lap. I stroked her ears. It was only a warning. I still had my job. It was less of a comfort than I expected.

The brown envelope was sealed with sticky tape. Drearily I peeled it open. Inside were perhaps half a dozen articles clipped from the *Western Herald*, each one carefully outlined in felt pen.

> *Mr Pritchard, Mr Penro Ellis’s second-in-command, has trained his own dog, a border terrier, to carry sticks of gelignite, transforming the beast into a lethal weapon. ‘Dozens more dogs are being trained at secret camps,’ Mr Pritchard told me. ‘Soon there will be nowhere to hide.’ The Black Mountains of Carmarthenshire are known to be used by the WFA to carry out manoeuvres.*
>
> *‘The Forestry Commission is an occupying force,’ Mr Penro Ellis said. ‘The WFA does not want violence but it is our duty to protect our country from the hostile incursions of the English. We have*

snipers and we mean to use them. If the Commission wants to keep its men safe, it should get them out of Wales.'

Mr Penro Ellis, who claims to have served in the French Foreign Legion, alleges to have received a deluge of donations from supporters across the globe, including £500 from American business magnate and film producer Howard Hughes.

Mr Penro Ellis has always claimed that the purpose of the Severn Bridge, currently scheduled to open in September, is 'to bleed Wales dry'. When I asked for his response to comments by an engineer employed in the bridge's construction that 'only an atom bomb would shift it', Mr Penro Ellis informed me that the WFA are in possession of such a weapon. 'A pilot friend of mine has been instructed to fly over the site and discharge it,' he said. Security measures at the site have recently been ramped up.

The articles were recent, all from the last few weeks. All of them were written by Frank Cromarty. The claims Penro Ellis made to him were surely preposterous – an atom bomb in private hands, it had to be impossible – and yet there they were in black and white, published in a newspaper. Whoever had sent them to me had not included a note. I did not need one. I knew who they were from. Beneath the sticker with my name on it the original address on the envelope had been crossed out with black felt pen. You could still read the words underneath. Mr & Mrs John Edwards, Yr Olchfa.

The longest article was the newest. EXCLUSIVE: INSURRECTION IN THE HILLS, the headline said over a picture of Mr Penro Ellis staring moodily into the distance. According to Mr Penro Ellis, the WFA was planning a surprise assault on the Welsh town of Carmarthen. Carmarthen had been chosen because of its refusal to support home rule for Wales. Other towns would follow. 'We will not rest until the spark of revolution has lit an inferno,' Mr Penro Ellis told Mr Cromarty. Thousands of Welshmen had already answered the call to arms. Men of all ages were currently undergoing intensive military training in secret camps across the

country. The hills, Mr Penro Ellis said, bristled with dragons' teeth. He invited Mr Cromarty to come and see one such camp for himself.

There are those, Mr Cromarty wrote, *who maintain that claims of this kind should go unreported, that the attentions of the press are unmerited and serve only to grant to Mr Penro Ellis and his like the publicity that they plainly seek. But while their threats of imminent military assault might stretch credulity, the fact remains that, in Wales, there are many who believe their country has been grievously misused by the English state. Last week's debate in Parliament over plans by the Severn Water Authority to survey 41 prospective new reservoir sites in Montgomeryshire will only increase tension. If politicians in Westminster continue in their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the depth of Welsh anger, a very bloody chapter in Welsh history may yet unfold.*

Carmarthen. I could not understand it. Mr Penro Ellis was declaring war but not against the English. Against his own. A war between his kind of Welshmen and the rest. I could not see the end of it but I could see the middle. People would die the way people always did in wars. Dai had enlisted with all four of the Williams brothers. Only Bob Williams came home.

As for the forty-one prospective new reservoirs in Montgomeryshire it made me want to weep. Those cretins in Parliament helping themselves to our country, drowning our valleys and our protests, how did they think this would end? Hundreds more families thrown off their land. Hundreds, thousands more Welshmen driven to fight back. The dark tide of hatred rising and rising. *Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.*

Emyr would not stop. He would be the one thrown in jail but to him the crime would always be theirs, the men who had stolen his country for their private profit. They had killed his father. He did not care that he was becoming a man capable of unforgivable things, a man he could not bear to live with, he would not know it until it was too late. He was blinded by his dazzling certainty that his was the side of righteousness. He would think it his duty to dash their little ones against the stones.

And me? I knew in that moment that I would do it for him. I would blow up their dams and their post offices. I would blow them sky high. I would shoot a Forestry Commission ranger through the eye and drop an atom bomb on the Severn Bridge if it meant that Emyr did not. That dirty Pugh girl, what chance had she ever had? Bad blood will out. I would do it all and willingly if Emyr could lay down his burden, if he could know it was well done and walk free.

I would kill for my son if I could save him. How did that make me any better than him?

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A farm truck was stopped outside Bwythn-gwyn, blocking the lane. I parked up behind it. As I got out I saw Pedr Beddoe backing into the porch, his neck straining as he manhandled a sofa through the jamb. There was a young lad on the other end, his son, it had to be. Thickset and mop-headed, the boy was the spit of his father.

They hauled the sofa into the back of the truck. They were taking it back up to Plas Derwen for storage, Pedr told me. The tenant wanted it gone and a lot of other furniture besides. The boy brought the footstool out, the tapestry one from the parlour, and placed it on the sofa, legs in the air like a beetle on its back.

‘So Mr Fitzpatrick’s left?’ I asked and Pedr shrugged.

‘They said so but he’s not gone yet.’

Pedr and his son carried out the rest of the furniture for moving. It was all of the pieces I liked best. When they were finished I made tea. We drank it in the kitchen. The kitchen table was crowded with cardboard boxes, their flaps folded shut, and, on top, a fruit crate filled with records.

‘We’re not taking those,’ Pedr said. ‘That stuff’s all his.’

I looked at the records. I thought about the man with the rough-smooth voice. It’s early in the morning and I ain’t got nothing but the blues. I would have liked to play it, to feel the swagger of it in me a last time, but I did not know which record it was and besides the record player was gone. Pedr’s son fished a folded newspaper out of the pocket of his coat, taking out the coupon that was tucked inside.

‘Cardiff, Leyton Orient,’ he said to his father, tapping his teeth with his pen. ‘Score draw?’

I looked at the newspaper. The *Western Herald*. I wanted to snatch it up, scour it for the latest news. I folded my hands in my lap.

‘Your regular, is it, that paper?’ I asked, my voice casual like I was just making conversation. Pedr’s lad shrugged.

‘I’m not really one for papers,’ he said. ‘Just the footie.’

‘You’ve not seen all this Welsh Freedom Army malarkey, then? I’ve heard there’s a *Herald* reporter never stops giving them the time of day.’

I could not have said what I wanted from the boy exactly. To dismiss Cromarty’s stories as nonsense perhaps, or perhaps to contradict me, to insist that the nationalists were right, that the Welsh had no choice but to rise up, that he was on their side. An ordinary lad like him, I would have found strength in that, a kind of space in all the muddle, but he said nothing. He just went on frowning at his coupon.

‘One of them militants, is he then, the reporter?’ Pedr asked me and gave his son a look. What happened to your manners, the look said. His son chewed his pen, impervious.

I shrugged. ‘Maybe. You’ve got to wonder. Cromarty, his name is. Frank Cromarty.’

‘Not a Welsh name, Cromarty.’

‘You wouldn’t think so.’

‘Sounds more Scottish, if you ask me. Forties Cromarty Forth Tyne Dogger.’

‘Da.’ Pedr’s son looked up, rolling his eyes. ‘He’ll reel off the lot if you let him.’

‘It’s a Scottish name is all I’m saying,’ Pedr said mildly. ‘Cromarty Firth. Ross and Cromarty. Right then.’ Swallowing the last of his tea, he gathered up his son’s cup and his own and deposited them in the sink. ‘Back to work. You’ll lock up when you go?’

* * *

That night I dreamed Emyr came home. In my dream he was holding a cake. The cake had candles on it. I clapped my hands. Emyr lifted the cake to blow out the candles but when he blew his breath was fire. The candles blazed, a dozen fuses flaming down. The cake exploded.

I jolted upright, my heart hammering in my chest. The house was silent. I reached for Nel, sleeping beside me, but she was gone. Pulling on my dressing gown, I went to the window and looked out. Night was melting

into morning. Above the black hill the hem of the sky smouldered, a glow of smoky orange.

I went downstairs. The dream clung to me. I wanted Nel, the eager warmth of her. I called her name but she did not come. Down in the shadow of the valley a car's headlights cruised through the darkness like a spaceship, a blur of white light. I rubbed my face, waiting for the kettle to boil. I could feel the questions gathering themselves up in my head, clamouring to be heard. Should I talk to Emyr? Would he listen? What was it that I wanted for him, from him? What did I want from myself? I unbolted the back door. Perhaps Nel had got out somehow. A pale curve of moon clung to the sky and the air was cool and fresh. I whistled for her and rattled her bowl. Nel always came when it was dinner-time. She did not come.

It was only when I came back in that I saw the note on the table, scribbled on a torn scrap of paper bag. He had put the salt pot on it to keep it from blowing away.

Have car and Nel. Back tomorrow. Sorry.

He had not signed his name. The dread rising in me, I looked out into the yard. Emyr's bicycle stood propped against the barn wall. The jeep was gone. I checked the dresser. The key was gone too. Emyr had taken it. He had sneaked up here while I was sleeping and he had taken the car. The car that belonged to Plas Derwen, the car that I was expressly forbidden to use except for work. I thought of Mr Howell's letter: Any subsequent violation will result in the termination of your employment without notice. There would be no second chances. Emyr was not allowed to drive the jeep at any time. He was not insured. If anyone saw him driving it, if they reported it to the estate office, he would lose his licence. I would lose my job.

I should have been angry. Instead a fizz of bubbles prickled my belly. Fuck them, I thought, and the filthy word burned like brandy in my chest. Fuck them and their £8 a week. Fuck scrubbing the Saesnegs' shitty toilets and sitting for their shitty paintings and swallowing their shitty jokes. Emyr was right, I should never have taken the fucking job in the first place. Fuck the fucking lot of them. They could not sack me if I was already gone.

The bubbles rose into my throat. I laughed. I knew it was madness, all by myself like a crazy person, but I could not help myself. I felt exultant, lit up with certainty and strength. I wondered if this was how it felt to be drunk.

Dawn came, the sun edging over the hill. Little by little the elation in me drained away. In the ordinary light of day I found myself ordinary too. So I would leave the job at Plas Derwen, so what? It hardly mattered. My son was a terrorist. He had stolen my car. He knew what it meant to take it and he had taken it all the same. The jeep with its distinctive American steering and the white star on its bonnet that marked it out as mine. Whatever it was he planned to do, he had made me a part of it.

I felt numb. If something happened today, if he did something, if – I bent double, my guts cramping. Not for me, what happened to me was irrelevant, none of that mattered any more, but for him. Back tomorrow, his note said. What was it he meant to do today?

I closed my eyes. I pressed my arms hard against my stomach. When I was steady I went upstairs. Dai's photo looked at me from the frame of the mirror as I dressed. The steadiness of his gaze made me want to weep. He looked so sure of me. I had to find Emyr, talk to him. Perhaps I could stop him. And if I could not, at least I could keep him from coming back here. If he dumped the car, I could report it as stolen. I could tell the police he had been home all weekend. They might not believe me but what could they do? Unless they caught him red-handed they had no way to prove it was not so.

What mattered was to stay calm. It was important to think clearly, not to make mistakes. I pulled on a jersey, took the sock of coins I had saved from the hens out of my drawer. In the mirror I saw the adder stone hanging from the bedpost. I slipped it around my neck. In the porch I jammed my feet into my boots. Perhaps Emyr had left already for wherever it was he meant to go. Perhaps he was still there. If it was a bomb, if he – they did these things at night. Back tomorrow meant tonight. Perhaps if I talked to him, he had to understand, you could blow up things, there was a justice in that, but people? It could not be borne. If his intention was to do harm to others, to ordinary people, I couldn't. I couldn't. I would not be able to live with it or us.

He had taken Nel. Why had he taken Nel? I thought of Mr Penro Ellis's second-in-command who had trained his border terrier to carry bombs and, though I blocked my ears, Maureen Post's shrill voice echoed in my head. A puppy, it's disgusting, he might as well have handed him a loaded gun.

* * *

The bolt on the bicycle frame was rusted. It took a fight to make it shift. When the seat was at its lowest height I slung my leg across the crossbar and, swallowing my nerves, I pushed off. The bicycle wobbled, skidding a little in the mud. I gripped the handlebars and pedalled harder and just like that I was out through the gate and heading down the hill. The bicycle picked up speed and my heart was in my mouth but my fingers found the brakes and squeezed and the bicycle steadied and Emyr was right, I did have the hang of it, sort of. My legs were jelly but I did not fall off. I carried the sock of coins and a torch in a string bag knotted to my belt. The sock was heavy. It clunked against my leg.

I took the back lanes to Tyˆ-eithin, the old quarry track over the hill. You sometimes met walkers coming that way but it was too early for walkers. Sheep picked their way through the twisted roots of the heather and from shaggy patches of grass larks fired themselves into the sky, their songs streaming behind them. The track was stony. Where it got steep I had to get off and push.

At the old sheep trough I left the bicycle in the heather and scrambled down to the wall that marked the top end of the field. I could hear wheatears, the creak of their song like a metal nut being turned. Near the house two upright slabs sliced off the corner to make a squeeze stile. It was when I turned sideways to go through it that I saw him, a man in a green army uniform urinating into a clump of dead bracken.

It shocked me, how close he was. I could see the split seam in his forage cap, the glittering arc of his pee. Catching my breath, I pressed myself back out of sight. My hand found the adder stone and squeezed it tight. It had not occurred to me there might be other people. The man did not see me. Buttoning his fly, he walked away down the field. He did not turn around.

Keeping low behind the wall, I slipped through the trees to the place behind the outhouse where in summer the bilberries grew. Ifan had put steps there, flat slabs of stone that stuck out from the wall on the diagonal. The steps were cracked and green with moss. Carefully, quietly, I climbed over, slipping around the back of the outhouse. The old pigsty had caved in, lengths of corrugated iron lay rusting in the brambles. I pressed myself against the broken-down wall. From there I could see all the way down the field to the rowan tree.

The jeep was parked on the edge of the gully past the tree. They had taken off the canvas roof and draped the bonnet in camouflage netting like a tip of fallen leaves. The netting hid the white star but not the steering wheel on the American side. A man stood beside it, a white cloth tied over his face. He wore heavy-framed glasses that clamped it to his nose. He would have looked comic, a near-sighted child playing at ghosts, had it not been for the gun he carried. It was big and black, a machine gun. He leaned his elbows on the bonnet of the jeep and lifted the gun to his shoulder, aiming it up the hill. He did not fire. He posed, gun aloft, while a man in a tweed overcoat took his photograph. I could not see the second man's face but I did not need to. I knew him immediately.

Mr Fitzpatrick.

The man with the forage cap joined them at the jeep. The man in glasses lowered his gun. Mr Fitzpatrick lowered his camera. The gun man waved his arm and another man in uniform scrambled up from the gully. He carried a pistol. He put it down on the jeep's front seat and lifted something out. A bomb? I thought perhaps I saw wires but I could not be sure. The three men in uniform conferred. Then, taking whatever it was with them, they walked with Mr Fitzpatrick down the hill towards the woods and out of sight.

My mind was racing. I thought about the newspaper interview, Mr Penro Ellis's invitation to Mr Cromarty to come and see a training camp for himself. Could this be it? Was Mr Fitzpatrick taking photographs for Mr Cromarty? But if that was the case, if this was a camp, where were all the others? Perhaps they were hiding in the scrubby woodland below the house.

No one ever went there, not since the quarry closed. Perhaps snipers were watching me now, squinting at me through the sights of their rifles.

Cautiously, very cautiously, I pressed myself back against the wall. The hills are bristling with dragons' teeth, Penro Ellis had told Mr Cromarty. Forties Cromarty Forth Tyne Dogger. The nonsense danced in my head, finding the cracks in my panic, worming their way in. All those hours listening to the wireless, Pedr Beddoe was not the only one with those words on the brain. Cromarty Firth, Ross and Cromarty, only this time it hit me like a brick. Ross and Cromarty. Ross-on-why. A weak enough joke and an even weaker grasp of geography. It had not stopped Mr Fitzpatrick from making it over and over.

Mr Ross and Mr Cromarty. It could be just a coincidence. In Scotland, in England even, Cromarty might be a perfectly common name. Although did a reporter use his real name when he was reporting on armed revolution? It had to be dangerous getting in with men like that and yet Mr Cromarty did not seem to be afraid. There was a mocking tone to some of his reports, as though he could hardly credit what Mr Penro Ellis was telling him. I thought of the boxroom at Bwythn-gwyn, the pegged-out photographs of Mr Penro Ellis, his face lit up like an angel's, and in my mind Mr Fitzpatrick shrugged at me and smiled his sardonic smile. It depends on whether he's Michael Collins or the Wizard of Oz.

Could Mr Fitzpatrick be Frank Cromarty? It was a very Mr Fitzpatrick kind of joke. I thought of the clattering typewriter, the secret files locked in the boxroom. He had been working on something these past few months. It was impossible to imagine Mr Fitzpatrick a reporter, impossible to imagine him with any kind of job at all, but somehow his photograph of Mr Penro Ellis with his burning Union Jack had found its way into the *Courier*. With Mr Ross in London he would have needed money. He never had any of his own. It was easy enough to imagine him taking what was happening here and turning it to his own profit.

I'm not your enemy, he said to me that day, I am on your side, but I never saw any proof of it. It seemed to me he saved a special kind of scorn for Wales. Drinking and drowning, he said that day to Mr Ross, you don't get much Welsher than that, and they had fallen about, both of them

helpless with laughter. He knew I could hear him. I was standing right there. I had not known if he thought the drowning a joke or if he had simply forgotten, an English goldfish in his English bowl. I wished I knew which one was worse.

Frank Cromarty, though, he was a different matter. He was on the Welsh side or at least open to it. Mr Penro Ellis clearly thought so. He had confided in Cromarty. He would not have done that unless he believed Cromarty could be trusted. If it was true, if Fitzpatrick was Cromarty, could it be that all I saw was the pretence, that the flippancy and snarkiness was his way of covering his tracks, deflecting attention from his underground work as a reporter? Was that what he had wanted with Emyr? Had he given him money in exchange for information? Was he helping him? Had Emyr invited him here?

My head was spinning. I tried to think straight. I needed to get out of here, to leave before they found me. The army was real. The guns were real. It was not just madness to think that somehow I could change Emyr's mind. It was madness to imagine I could make any difference to anything at all. Whatever was happening here, whatever it was they were planning, it was much, much bigger than Emyr. He would not decide what happened, any more than a private in the second battalion of the Welsh Guards decided what happened to him in Normandy. Emyr could desert or he could stay and follow the orders he was given, but the outcome would be the outcome all the same. We're not at war, I had told him, no one thinks we are at war but you, but I was wrong. Across Wales there were men who saw this as their war, not because they wanted to harm people but because it was the only way left to stop the harm. I thought of Mr Fitzpatrick standing beside me as the protesters threw stones at the dignitaries from Liverpool. Everyone is a fighter, he said that day, when they are pushed far enough. It did not make the fight your fault.

A sheet of corrugated iron blocked the gap between the outhouse and the overgrown yard, its furrows rusted to lace. I peered through. A battered transit van was parked slantwise by the house, its back doors open, and, behind it, Mr Ross's blue car, low on its haunches and packed to the roof with luggage. I could hear a blackbird, a lamb plaintively calling for its

mother on the hill. Otherwise everything was silent. I pushed at the corrugated iron, its crumbling edge cutting my palm, and stopped.

There was a man in Mr Ross's car. I could not see his face, only his khaki elbow jutting from the open window, a cigarette burning in his fingers. He dropped the butt, exhaling a long thin stream of smoke through the open window. The smell filled me with homesickness, though for what home I could not say.

I could not leave while he was sitting there. The hillside was plainly visible from the yard, nothing to hide behind but heather and flat grey rocks. On the ground the dropped butt smouldered, sending up a lazy spiral of smoke. I wondered if the man had a gun. I waited. When at last he pushed open the passenger door a dog jumped out ahead of him and bounded across the yard, scrabbling at the corrugated iron. She was wearing a harness, a cobbled-together contraption of buckles and straps. The band around her chest was a boy's elasticated belt, clasped with an S-shaped snake. Nel.

The soldier whistled. I could not see him. I did not need to. His whistle was Dai's whistle, the whistle he had passed down to Emyr. Shoving the corrugated iron aside, I yanked roughly at the S-shaped clasp, pulling off the harness. Nel jumped up at me, licking my face. I wanted to take her in my arms, to bury my face in her soft fur.

Emyr was standing by the car. I hurled the harness at him. It hit him on the shoulder. He flinched and turned, his hand reaching for his waistband, pulling out a gun. Dai's gun. He stared at me, grey-faced. He looked exhausted.

'Go on then,' I said flatly. 'Shoot me.'

He looked down at his hand. Sliding the gun back into his waistband, he let it fall. His army jacket was creased, unbuttoned, exposing his dirty undershirt.

'Shoot Nel too,' I said. 'Better that way. Kinder.'

Emyr's shoulders slumped. He did not ask me what I was doing there. He did not say anything at all.

'How could you do it?' I blurted. 'How could you even think of it?'

He did not answer. He stared at the harness, the burned-out cigarette butt in the mud. I thought of Gareth back from the war, the shakes on him, his terrifying bursts of temper.

‘Listen to me,’ I said. ‘Bring down their power lines, blow up their dams, blow them sky high, I don’t care, I’ll help you, they deserve all that, every bit of it, but Nel? You’re not God, Emyr. You can’t choose what happens to someone else’s life. Your own maybe, perhaps that’s yours to give, I don’t know, but no one else’s, not even a dog’s. Do that and you’re worse than them. You can’t be worse than them.’

Emyr did not look up. I could see the curve of his skull through his hair, the jut of the bones at the back of his neck. He might have been twelve years old, bent over one of his collections.

‘I’m taking her,’ I said. ‘You can’t stop me.’

His head jerked up. I glared at him but he only shook his head.

‘You don’t understand,’ he said bleakly. ‘It’s lies. It’s all lies.’

‘What is?’

‘Two hundred men. That’s what he told me. The best of the best. Training in explosives, military manoeuvres, preparation for a major attack. A special request from the WFA’s northern command after Hughes was arrested, they couldn’t use the Nebo farm, it wasn’t safe. Do you know how many men are here? Nine. Nine men and five guns. Four. The Spanish musket’s a million years old and the spring’s broken. It doesn’t even fire.’ He laughed, distraught, digging his fingers into his scalp. ‘It’s all a fake, all of it. Northern command, the IRA, Carmarthen. Clywedog. It wasn’t Hughes, the bomb. It wasn’t the WFA at all. They planted evidence, they wanted the police to think it was, but it wasn’t. It was someone else. They don’t know who. They don’t even care. All they care about is this. Dressing up as soldiers. Getting their names in the newspaper. All that stuff about a secret army of revolution, columns and columns of men across Wales rising up, taking back our country, it’s all lies.’

‘And the bomb under your bedroom floor, that’s a lie too?’

‘They said it was safer, spreading it around, but I think they wanted us to be caught. The headlines in the newspapers. They don’t have a plan.

They're fantasists. Penro told Cromarty he was an honorary colonel in the IRA. There aren't any colonels in the IRA. The rank doesn't even exist.'

I stared at him, bewildered. 'But all those articles in the *Herald*. If it's all nonsense, why would he write it, why would he even be here?'

'Because Cromarty believes him. Even now, with all of this, he still believes him. Penro spun him some line, something about protecting his men's identities, and Cromarty swallowed it whole. He's going ahead with the piece. A special feature, three pages in the Sunday magazine, colour photographs, the lot. He even told Penro he would make it look like there were loads more people, like a proper camp. He thinks he's helping. He thinks Penro is the real thing.'

A shot rang out, sending the rooks screeching from the trees. I spun around, hands up, but there was no one there. In the distance I could see men in the field, the tops of their heads as they climbed the hill back towards the jeep. Fear coursed through me. Lies or not, they had guns.

'Come with me,' I said.

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I – they know me.'

'Did he take your photograph? Here, I mean, did he take pictures of you here?'

He shook his head. 'I didn't – I couldn't.'

'So come with me. What can they do? If you say you weren't here, you weren't here.'

'They have the jeep.'

I pressed my hand to my forehead, trying to think. Beside me the door of Mr Ross's car was open. I looked inside it. The keys were in the ignition. An eye for an eye.

'OK,' I said. 'Then we'll take this one. Get your bag. Run. You can't leave anything here.'

To my surprise he obeyed me. The men were still in the field. One of them climbed into the jeep. I bent down, scrabbling frantically through Mr Ross's car. I needed paper. The door compartment was crammed with rubbish, the footwell too, empty bottles and crisp packets, greasy paper

bags, but nothing to write on. I yanked open the glove compartment. There was a book of London maps in there and, tucked inside, a letter. Mr F. Cromarty, it said on the envelope, and a post office box for an address. No pen. I pulled the letter from the envelope, shoved it back in the glove compartment. I tore a blank page from the book.

Emyr ran back across the yard, the torn sleeping bag over his shoulder like a sack. I held my hand out.

'Pen, quickly,' I said and he rummaged inside, dug out a pencil. I scribbled a note, shoved it in the envelope. Circling Cromarty's name, I underlined it. PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL, I scrawled across the top. I put the envelope under the windscreen wiper of the transit van.

'Get in the car,' I said to Emyr and, dazed, he got in, the laden sleeping bag bundled on his lap. I pushed Nel after him. The car made a grinding noise as I forced it into first gear. I looked in the rear-view mirror but the car was packed too full, all I could see was boxes. Rocks scraped against the undercarriage as I accelerated down the track. The wheels skidded in the mud. Emyr did not say anything. He stared out of the windscreen, his arms around his sleeping bag, Nel squeezed into the space at his feet.

We drove along the New Road. There was not much traffic. At the lane that once led to Maes-craig I turned. The grass had grown long around the headstones and along the mossy wall someone had planted clumps of daffodils. I stopped the car.

'You need to change,' I said.

Emyr was silent. On the slope above the reservoir a digger with a long crooked arm looked out over the water. A deep gash curved across the rise, foundations for the Chapel of Remembrance. They had already begun to lay the steels along the foundation at the far end. The metal gleamed like water in the black earth. I took the sleeping bag from his lap. It was heavy, lumpy with books. I pulled out a pair of jeans, a jersey.

'Go on,' I said.

Emyr got out of the car. Nel ran after him, following him around the wall. A heaped-up pile of stones was covered with a loosely roped tarpaulin. The remains of Bryn-mawr, the Parrys' house. Emyr disappeared behind it. Nel sniffed at it and squatted to pee.

When Emyr came back I took the uniform from him, bundling it into the footwell.

‘And the gun?’

Emyr hesitated.

‘Give me the gun, Emyr.’

He reached into the back of his waistband. The metal was warm from his body. I could not look at it. I put it on the driver’s seat.

‘There’s a bus stop on the New Road. Go to Bala or better still Blaenau, a café, a pub, somewhere people will remember you. Do you have money?’

He nodded. His jersey was old and shabby, the sleeves too short for his arms. He looked enormous in it and at the same time impossibly young.

‘Take the last bus home. You’re not to stay with Tony, you understand?’ A thought occurred to me. ‘He wasn’t with you, was he, at Tyˆ-eithin? He wasn’t one of them?’

Emyr’s jaw tightened. He shook his head.

‘Still,’ I said, relieved. ‘Best to keep away from him. From each other. Just for now.’

Emyr was silent. Turning away from me, he tugged at the cuffs of his jersey, trying to pull them down over his wrists. Nel was in the graveyard, sniffing at the headstones. I called her. She did not come.

‘He told me not to go.’ Emyr’s voice was flat, matter-of-fact. ‘Anhun. He said it didn’t smell right. He came with me, the first time I went to meet Fitzpatrick, though he was Cromarty by then. He was pissed off at me, Cromarty, he asked me what I was playing at, why I hadn’t come alone, but I said both of us or nothing. Anhun, he’d always taken charge, everything was always his idea, but suddenly it was me, I was the one who knew someone, I was making things happen, it felt good, great actually, only right from the start Anhun and him, they – Anhun couldn’t stand him. He said Cromarty was – he said only a lunatic would trust him, and I thought – I thought it was him, that what he hated was me standing up for myself, having ideas of my own, and so I went, I went on my own, and Fitzpatrick, Cromarty, he said it was the start of something. He said he wanted to help me, that there was something about me, a light, I don’t know, I thought he meant Da, he talked and talked about Da, he said courage like Da’s must

run in the blood, that I was the heir to him and I believed him, I wanted to believe him, he said it was men like me who would save Wales and he would make it happen, he would introduce me to Penro, and he did, he took me to his house in Tregaran, the weekend before mocks, and we stayed there for hours talking and drinking, I couldn't believe I was really there, I kept thinking of the stupid drills we had done with Mr Wozniak, the playing at soldiers, and here I was with one of the senior commanders of the WFA, it felt like a dream, I – only it got later and later, and Cromarty, he'd drunk too much, he couldn't drive, he said we should stay, a pub in town, his shout, he'd booked a room, and I agreed, I mean, it was his car and his money and I never thought – only there was only one bed and in the night I woke up and he was – I tried to push him off me but he was – he kept trying to – he wouldn't stop—'

He broke off. He did not look at me.

'I hit him. With a lamp.' He laughed briefly, bitterly. 'Smashed it over his back and kneed him in the balls. He stopped then. While he was down I took his car keys and I locked myself in his car. I was so angry with myself, I thought I'd messed everything up, blown my one big chance. I sat out there all night, freezing my bollocks off, trying to work out what to do, how to make it right. In the morning he banged on the window and asked what on earth I was thinking of, sleeping in the car. We ate fried eggs.' He laughed the same bitter little laugh. 'I shouldn't have told you. I don't know why I told you.'

'You told Anhun.'

Emyr stared out over the water. 'Yeah.'

A single word, barely that, but curled up tight inside it was all his pain and defeat. A surge of love moved through me, bringing me abruptly, painfully, back into my body. Had he known, Mr Fitzpatrick, was there some signal Emyr transmitted, a silent wavelength that gave him away? Was that why he had not wanted Tony along? If that was true, if he had somehow recognised Emyr, if he had seen the love in him and the longing, then what he had done, what he had tried to do, was worse than criminal. It was the bitterest kind of betrayal.

Fierce tears burned my throat. I put my hand on Emyr's back, fingers spread, my thumb pressed against the winged ridge of his shoulder. He straightened, I thought he was shaking me off, but instead he turned towards me. His face crumpled. Without stopping to think I threw my arms around him, pulling him close. He did not pull away. His body jerked against mine, his breath coming in ragged hiccups. My boy who never cried. I hugged him tighter, my heart a spreading bruise against my ribs.

'Mae'n iawn,' I said. 'Fydd popeth yn iawn.'

It's all right. Everything's going to be all right. A plea or a prayer or just a row of little stitches at the start of a ripped-apart seam. One day, when it was time, I would tell him about Ifan and Will. I would tell him how, one golden summer's evening, I had watched them from the hay loft, flat on their backs in the long grass, how Ifan lit a cigarette and leaned over to put it between Will's lips and Will caught his hand and kissed his fingertips very gently, one after the other. How I had always wanted to be loved like that. How maybe, perhaps, without knowing it, I had.

'Everything's going to be all right,' I murmured, my hands against his back, and all the while another prayer hardened in my gut.

I hope that bastard burns in Hell.

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I drove straight to Bwythn-gwyn. Mr Fitzpatrick would not be there till evening, Emyr said he was staying all day at the camp, but I was afraid of attracting attention, a car full of luggage that was not mine, and besides he might decide to change his plans. Insurance, I had called it in my note, against the risk of damage to the jeep. I was pretty sure that, given his circumstances, he would not risk going to the police but I added as a PS that I knew about the explosives hidden under his bathtub and would consider it my civic duty to pass that information on. Insurance on the insurance, for safety's sake.

Emyr took Nel in the haversack. She climbed in obediently, meek as a lamb. He reached back over his shoulder, finding her ears, and she licked his fingers. I was glad she was with him. They made quite a pair, my tall son and his dog. No one who saw them together would forget.

I wrenched at the gears and set my eyes on the road. What would Mr Fitzpatrick say if I challenged him, if I threatened to go to the police? He would deny it, that or shrug it off. It was just a bit of fun. We'd been drinking, he agreed to share a bed, what was I supposed to think? He led me on. The old lines that every girl knew by heart, that meant only that he wanted it and thought it should be his to take.

What gave them their sense of entitlement, those arrogant Englishmen? I thought of something Dai had said to me years ago, when the surveyors from the Liverpool Corporation were still marching about the valley with their measuring sticks, something that, impatient with his preaching, I had hardly stopped to hear, but it came back to me as I drove up the hill to Bwythn-gwyn, the fields blazing green and every lichened rock and leafing tree sharp-edged in the sunshine. Our country is like our language, he said, chipped and broken, a poor unmatched set of a thing, half-drowned by English and desperately plain, but it holds within it a nobility as old as the hills, a nobility that the English who have never thought to learn our tongue or know our traditions will never understand. They will wipe out our way of being, he said, not because they despise it but because they do not believe

that it exists. I should have listened. Would it have changed things if I had listened?

I parked the car on the verge outside the cottage. I took the gun from the glove compartment. I was not thinking of shooting him, not then. A man like Mr Fitzpatrick would learn nothing from being dead. But to have him weeping, begging, grovelling, wetting himself in abject fear, that was worth having. Not to even the score, an eye for an eye, not that. There was no eye that man could give me that would see him for who he was. No, just for the relief of it, a brief vicious moment of release.

The cottage was unlocked. Mr Fitzpatrick had left Mr Ross's key on the kitchen table and, on the floor beside it, a capsized wreck of a bin bag, loosely knotted at the top. A foul-smelling liquor had leaked out on the flags. I left it there. In the parlour there were no sofas or chairs or bright rugs, nothing but the carved settle with its hinged seat and the Welsh dresser, its shelves arranged with willow pattern plates. It might have been the parlour at Dai's mother's house. Upstairs the boxroom was just a boxroom, slope-ceilinged and bare. I stood at the window, looking out. From the bedrooms on the other side of the cottage you could see the lane and, further off, a scatter of houses. This side there was nothing but hills and sky.

It was the end. I would not come back here. Somehow, without me knowing, the matter had been settled in my mind. I could not go on being a part of it, whatever this was. I needed to get away from here, get Emyr away. We would stay till his examinations were done, and then we would go somewhere else, somewhere we could both start again. Somewhere that, when the time came for him to leave, he would want to come back to. I had thought once that there was nothing about this valley I would ever miss but I would miss the shape of these hills, the wide shaggy-grassed expanses of the high moor, the double peak of Arenig cut like an earmark in the sky. I missed them now, looking out at them.

The front door slammed. I stiffened. The gun was in my coat pocket. I put my hand on it, steadying myself, and went out onto the landing. Footsteps thundered up the stairs.

‘Jesus, Fitz, what part of stay out of my fucking life do you not understand?’ Not Mr Fitzpatrick. Mr Ross. He gaped at me. ‘What the fuck?’

‘Sorry, I didn’t – I’m just waiting for Mr Fitzpatrick.’

‘Who doesn’t live here any more. Who was given clear instructions to be out of here a week ago and whose car is still outside packed full of his stuff. My car, actually. And probably mostly my stuff. So where the hell is he? And why are you here? What do you mean, you’re waiting for him? What the fuck is going on?’

‘He’s taken my jeep.’

‘He’s what? Why?’

I hesitated. ‘Work, I think?’

‘Oh my God. Frank fucking Cromarty. That man couldn’t fly under the fucking radar if his life depended on it.’ Mr Ross laughed sourly, his lip curling. ‘Come on. Don’t tell me you didn’t know? The char always knows everything.’

Char. What was it about that English word, the way they spat it out like they were spitting on my feet? I thought of the slash of cold paint on my face, my son defenceless in the darkness, a man’s hand pressed over his mouth. I put my hand in my pocket, finding the gun’s cross-hatched handle.

‘Strange, isn’t it. You’d think people would be more careful.’ I smiled blandly at Mr Ross who looked uneasy. ‘I mean, Ross and Cromarty. A bit obvious, isn’t it?’

‘Not my idea.’

‘He told me you’re getting married. Congratulations.’

Mr Ross shrugged. ‘Thank you. Now look here, do you know where Fitzpatrick left the car keys? I need to bring the van up to unload so—’

‘Does she know, your fiancée, did you tell her?’

‘About you?’ He laughed, incredulous. ‘I hardly think the char sitting for—’

‘About you and him.’

His face slammed shut. ‘I don’t know what—’

‘Like you said, the char always knows everything.’

‘You listen to me, Mrs Jones. I won’t tolerate your ignorant gossip, do you understand me? It’s hardly my fault that Thack Fitzpatrick is a raging fag.’ The words were venomous but not his face. His face was unreadable. ‘I tolerated his fucked-up campery until he declared his undying love for me and then I threw him out. Nine weeks later they got him for gross indecency in a public convenience. I mean, for Christ’s sake. It’s repugnant.’

I flinched, repelled by his bigotry, his hypocrisy.

‘You let him come back here,’ I said.

‘You think I wanted to? They refused bail, sent him to Pentonville to await trial, we were told it would take months, and then, just like that, he was out again, all charges dropped and nowhere to go. I let him come here because it was better than him hanging around me in London. Only then of course he wouldn’t leave. I had to threaten him with eviction before he admitted what he was really doing here, the dirty little deal he’d done to get himself sprung.’

‘You mean, with the *Herald*?’

Mr Ross laughed. ‘I mean with Special Branch. Surely the all-knowing char didn’t miss that? Your Mr Cromarty is a nark. A police informant. A spy, Mrs Jones. Despatches from the Welsh front line.’

I stared at him. It was not true. It could not be true. He was lying. He had to be. Mr Ross laughed again.

‘Ludicrous, isn’t it? Although perhaps that’s the genius of it. That he’s literally the last man on earth you would trust to keep a secret.’ His grin was horrible, the gloat in it. I pushed past him, clattering down the stairs.

‘I hope I’ve not said anything I shouldn’t?’ he called after me, all innocence. ‘I wouldn’t want to make trouble.’

I slammed the door.

* * *

I shut myself in the car. I locked the doors. Mr Fitzpatrick was a spy. The words ran round and round my head, repeating themselves over and over until they made no sense at all. He was spying for the police. I thought of

the calm-voiced Chief Constable on the news the morning DS Jenkins came to the house, assuring the public that organisations like the WFA were closely monitored, their members known to the police. No one is interested in your son, Mr Fitzpatrick had said to me, but DS Jenkins and the other one had still come, they had still turned the house upside down.

A police informant. A man who depended on other people to keep his own secret for him, whose very nature was against the law, and yet he had knowingly betrayed Penro Ellis and his army who depended on him just the same. It was their secrets that had kept him out of prison. I abhor bullies, he had said to me once. I could help your son. I'm not your enemy, I am on your side. Was there a single word he had ever said to me that was not a lie?

Mr Ross came out of the house. He gestured at me angrily, yanking at the car door. When it did not open he banged on the window. I did not look at him. I turned the key in the ignition and reversed abruptly. Startled, he jumped out of the way.

At the bottom of the hill I parked across the turning. There was only one way up to Bwythn-gwyn. If I blocked the road, Mr Fitzpatrick would have no choice but to stop. What I would say to him then, what I would do, I had no idea.

'How can we win,' Dai said despairingly after the Liverpool march, 'when it's the other side that writes the rules?'

He would come soon, he had to. He would not risk waiting, not once he had read the note.

The note. A sick horror lurched through me. In the note I had threatened Mr Fitzpatrick with the gelignite under his bathtub, I had said that if he made any trouble I would go to the police. Except that he was the police. My note would go to the police. Mr Hughes from Nebo might or might not have set the Clywedog bomb but when they dug up the dynamite in his field they charged him with possession of explosives. His trial was due any day. If they found him guilty, he would go to prison. No one from Special Branch would offer Mr Hughes a deal to get him out.

Wrenching the car around, I accelerated back up the lane. Mr Ross's van was parked outside on the verge, the back doors open. I could see him hunched over inside it, wrestling with a crate tied up with straps. He

shouted after me as I ran across the lane into the house but I did not stop. I ran into the bathroom, bolting the door behind me. On my knees I scrabbled the panel out and groped among the pipes. My fingers found the Tupperware. I hauled it out. It was too large for my pocket and I did not have a bag. Pulling up my shirt, I shoved it under the thick strap at the back of my brassiere.

Mr Ross was standing in the kitchen when I came out, his hands on his hips. He had changed, his city clothes swapped for a threadbare jacket and collarless shirt, both dirty and spattered with paint. A long ragged cotton scarf was knotted around his neck.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Call of nature.'

'I told you not to come back.'

'You wouldn't have wanted an accident. Not in your car.'

I tried to walk past him but he caught my arm. I pulled away, bristlingly aware of the gun in my pocket, the box of explosives strapped against my back. Mr Ross tightened his grip.

'I don't know what you and Fitzpatrick think you're playing at but let me be quite clear—'

'Get your hands off me.'

'If you do anything, anything at all, to screw this up for me, I swear I'll —'

'Let me go.'

Angrily he did as I asked, almost pushing me away. The Tupperware shifted between my shoulder blades. Breathing in to hold it steady, I walked slowly back to the car and got in. Mr Ross watched me. He slammed the back doors of his van. When I started to reverse back down the lane he climbed into the cab. Gunning the engine, he accelerated towards me, so close I was certain he would hit me, then swung the van abruptly slantwise, barring the lane. No one would be able to drive up to the cottage, not with that there.

Once again I reversed back down to the main road. The Tupperware pushed me close to the steering wheel, sitting me up very straight. I made myself think straight too. I had to decide what to do. I could wait for Mr Fitzpatrick. He had the jeep. Or I could drive directly to Llidiadau and the

stile that marked the path up to the lake at Arenig. There were never walkers up there, they liked the bigger mountains, the ones with their photographs in the guidebooks. The lake was small but very deep, the water cold as ice. You could throw anything in there and no one would ever find it. Mari used to tell me the story of the great white fish who lived at the bottom. The fish was a beautiful maiden cursed by a witch to wait for her true love to fish her from the depths and turn her back into a girl. The fish might like a gun. She could practise her shooting while she waited.

I pulled out into the main road. A car blared its horn. I jammed on the brakes. The jeep swerved, squealing round me into the lane, and accelerated up towards the cottage. I had to get the jeep. Once I had the jeep back I could decide what to do. Wrenching the car round, I went after him.

At the top of the hill, where Mr Ross's van blocked the lane, Mr Fitzpatrick stopped the jeep and got out. I pulled up behind him. He did not turn round. Frowning, he peered in to the van, then walked around and out of sight. I got out of the car. I thought about taking the jeep, driving away, but the key was not in the ignition and anyway the lane was too narrow, with Mr Ross's car behind it I would never get it out. Someone had bundled the canvas roof into the space behind the driver's seat. Hurriedly, before anyone could see me, I buried the Tupperware deep in its canvas folds. On the passenger seat a piece of paper was crumpled in a ball. My note, scrawled on the torn-out page of a book of London street maps. Furiously, feverishly, I ripped it into shreds.

Mr Fitzpatrick stood outside the cottage. A large painting in a dust sheet was propped against the porch. He turned as I walked towards him, his mouth pinched in a tight-lipped smile, and it rushed at me so fast it almost knocked me over, the urge to hurt and humiliate him, to cause him unendurable pain.

'Mrs Jones.'

'You – you bastard.'

Mr Fitzpatrick's expression did not change. 'I believe you have my car.'

'You – did you think you could just – he's eighteen, you bastard, he's still at school, and the whole time, the police, how could you – he trusted you—' I broke off, the words trampling each other like a trapped crowd,

crushing themselves against the limits of my skull. My hand was in my pocket, clamped around the handle of the gun.

Mr Fitzpatrick frowned, glancing towards the cottage. ‘Look, I don’t know what Emyr told you but—’

‘He told me you assaulted him.’

‘You know he’s a homosexual?’

‘And what, that makes it better?’

‘We were sharing a bed, I thought he—’

‘He trusted you.’

Mr Fitzpatrick sighed. ‘Look, it was a mistake, all right? A stupid, stupid mistake, I’ve been making a lot of those lately, I was drunk and sad and very stupid, but I never meant – nothing happened, Mrs Jones. I was in no fit state and your son made his objections extremely clear. I have the scars to prove it.’ He smiled wryly. I wanted to smash his head open like an egg.

‘Spying for the police,’ I said. ‘Is that a stupid mistake too?’

His smile vanished.

‘Or perhaps you think it’s worth it, your freedom in exchange for our country.’

‘Look, I don’t know what you think you know but—’

‘I know there are Welshmen willing to die for their country and you’d sell out every one of them to save your own skin.’

‘You tell him, Mrs Jones.’

Mr Ross stood in the porch of the cottage. He didn’t look at me. He looked at Mr Fitzpatrick.

‘You can’t trust the fags,’ he said. ‘They’d sell their own grandmothers.’

‘You’re a fucking hypocrite, Jim.’

‘And you’re unhinged. How many times do I have to say it? I’m not like you.’

‘Au contraire, you’re the queerest queer I know. Stick of rock fucking queer. But it’s not the queerness I’m talking about.’

Mr Ross’s face hardened. ‘You need to leave.’

‘Has Mrs Jones seen the painting?’

‘Fuck you, Fitz.’

‘You don’t think you should show her? Given she’s standing right here.’

‘She’s been here every week since November. Did you show her all those reports you typed up for your handler?’

‘I didn’t need to. She could read them for herself in the *Western Herald*. It’s what those goons want, for me to expose them in all their self-deluding grandiosity. It’s how they think they’ll change the world. Do you think Mrs Jones will feel the same way when she knows?’

‘It’s not important what she feels. What matters is the work.’

‘Then show her,’ Mr Fitzpatrick said. ‘If it’s not important, show her.’

He stepped towards the painting, reaching out for the dust sheet. Mr Ross grabbed his arm. Mr Fitzpatrick wheeled round, pushing him hard in the chest. Mr Ross staggered backwards. Neither of them was looking at me. Grabbing the dust sheet, I tugged it off.

My own face stared mulishly back at me, my mouth set in a resentful line. A colour photograph, perhaps a foot across. A slash of white paint marked my forehead. My hair was tied up in the rag I always used for cleaning, only in the picture the rag was brightly coloured and piled high on my head. I gripped my mop, pressing it against my body. Not my body, a body made to look like mine, that looked for all the world like it belonged to me. A body made of dozens more colour photographs stuck roughly together. A naked body, bare-breasted with a dark triangle of hair between the legs. Around its hips a beaded strip of leather, around its neck a necklace hung with teeth and bones.

Mr Ross cleared his throat.

‘It’s a commentary on Wales,’ he said. ‘On colonial oppression.’

In the painting I stood beside a lake, a mushroom-capped tower pushing up from the water. Beyond it, against the sky, the unmistakable double peak of Arenig. The mop rested in a puddle at my feet. At its other end a glinting spearhead pointed upwards, streaked red with blood. My bare breasts were blood-streaked too. They looked like my breasts. Behind me a trail of white flowers reached back across the hill.

‘That’s not me.’ My mouth was dry, my tongue clumsy. ‘I would never have – that’s not me.’

‘None of it’s you. You’re a symbol, a metaphor. That’s what makes it so powerful.’

I shook my head, horror working its way through me like poison.

‘The journalist I’m meeting called it devastating, a work to upend the union,’ Mr Ross said. He did not try to hide his pride. ‘Quite a claim, but everyone who’s seen it so far seems to agree.’

I gaped at my scowling face, my naked body. My hand was in my pocket. Everyone who saw it would know it was me. Everyone would think it was my body. They would think I had stood naked in front of Mr Ross, that I had let him use my body in whatever way he wanted. Emyr would think that. The poison made it hard to breathe. My fingers were numb. My thumb shook as it slid over the metal, clicking down the safety catch.

‘You can’t – I won’t let you—’

‘It is not a question of letting, Mrs Jones. It’s my work. A model has no rights in law.’

I did not stop to think. I pulled the gun from my pocket and I fired, the gun bucking in my hand. The shot echoed off the mountain. I fired again and again until the trigger failed and the gun fell silent. Five bullets. Emyr had not used a single one.

I lowered the gun. The silence had an echo all its own. Mr Ross stood white-faced in the porch, his body pressed against the wall. The force of the bullets had pushed dents into the canvas, buckling the photographs. Five holes, raw-edged and smudged with black. Two in the chest, one at the side of the mouth, one clipping the headwrap where it touched the sky. The fifth square between the eyes, making a gaping black exclamation of the streak of white that striped the forehead. The scowl was still defiant but the rest of the face was gone. It might have been anyone’s.

* * *

Mr Fitzpatrick told Mr Ross to go inside. He walked down the lane with me. I stopped by the jeep. The gun was heavy in my pocket, the metal still warm.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked him and he frowned at me, confused. ‘Are you taking me to the police?’

He laughed. ‘For what? It wasn’t exactly the *Mona Lisa*.’

‘What about Emyr?’

He shook his head, suddenly serious. ‘I know it doesn’t count for much but I’m so very sorry about what happened. It was a stupid mistake, a terrible mistake. If I could take it back—’

‘I meant the police. The camp. Will you tell them about him?’

‘Nothing to tell. He made his lack of interest pretty clear.’

‘He says it’s a sham, that WFA.’

‘Of course he does. He’s much too serious for them. He actually wants to do something.’

‘Is that what you told your handler in your reports?’

‘My handler isn’t interested in Emyr.’

‘They searched our house, the police, after Clywedog. They turned it upside down. Someone told them about him.’

Mr Fitzpatrick sighed, frowning at the ground.

‘It was you,’ I said flatly. ‘You told them.’

‘He was one of them, Mrs Jones. He made no secret of that. It’s just a list. If he keeps his head down and stays out of trouble, he’ll be fine. It’s not a crime to love your country.’

‘And if he doesn’t?’

‘Then presumably he thinks it’s worth it.’ He frowned again, gazing out over the sloping hill, the white farmhouse on the far rise. ‘I’ve always envied people who know exactly what they’re for. Who have a purpose. It turns out a life without purpose is a bugger’s muddle.’

I was silent. So was Mr Fitzpatrick. He looked down at his hand, the ring of the car key around his finger.

‘I had no idea when I took those photographs of you that he would use them like that,’ he said at last. ‘If I had known, I would never have done it.’

I nodded. I did not know if I believed him or not but then again it did not seem to matter much one way or the other.

‘Get rid of the gun,’ he said. ‘Without the gun or any witnesses—’

‘You’re a witness.’

‘Except I’m not. As confidential police records will confirm, I was undercover with the WFA.’

I looked at him.

‘Mr Ross on the other hand has the makings of a bomb under his bath.’ He smiled wryly. ‘Purpose. Of a kind. One has to start somewhere. Goodbye, Mrs Jones.’

He climbed into the blue car and drove away. I did not know if he looked back. The car was too full of luggage to see. I took the gun out of my pocket and pushed it down with the Tupperware into the folds of the jeep’s canvas roof. As I walked to the driver’s door a flash of red caught my eye. A robin was perched on the field gate, its head on one side. The wind blew a dent in its feathers, pressing them flat. It looked at me for a moment with its beady black eyes like there was nothing in the world it did not know. Then it flew away.

I drove down the lane. I looked in my rear-view mirror but I could not see the cottage. Mr Ross’s van was parked in the way. I meant to turn left up towards Arenig but I thought about the spotted orchids that grew between the rocks and the little waves that crested white on the dark water and the craggy corrie rising behind it that was always pink with scree, and I turned right instead. They had made a reservoir of the Arenig lake too, back when Mari was a little girl, water for Bala and the valley. The water was crisp and very pure. Filtered through dragons, Ifan used to say. Our water, the water we were allowed to keep for ourselves, was too precious to contaminate.

I drove very fast along the New Road, the wind whipping my hair. It was a Saturday and I was on a final warning but what did it matter? On Monday morning I would go up to the estate office at Plas Derwen and I would hand in my notice. Purpose of a kind. Mr Fitzpatrick was a lying bastard diawl but he was right about that. One had to start somewhere.

There was no one at Maes-craig. The digger drowsed on its bent arm and waited for the week to start again. There were celandines growing in the long grass, stars of yellow silk. I picked some and, kneeling, I laid them on Mari’s tablet. I wished I had lambs’ tails to put there too.

At the place in the trench where the criss-cross of steels ended I climbed carefully down. The earth was soft, the black peat speckled with white. Limestone, made from the shells and coral left behind hundreds of millions of years ago when Wales was covered with the sea. Ifan had told me that, or perhaps it was Emyr. I scooped it out in handfuls, half-moons of dirt thickening under my nails. As the hole got deeper I lay on my side, propped on my elbow, and reached down with my other arm. I could not see the reservoir or the digger or Mari's tablet tucked into the crook of the wall. All I could see was sky.

When the hole was nearly as deep as my arm I fetched the gun and the Tupperware of gelignite from the jeep. I put them in the hole and, kneeling, I shovelled the earth back over them. When the Chapel of Remembrance was finished the walls might belong to the Parrys and the sglyfathau at the Liverpool Corporation, but underneath them, in their very underpinnings, the earth would remember the people who loved this land the way it needed to be loved, not because it profited them but because it ran in their blood. Their limits were the limits of cynefin, passed down through the generations so that everyone who knew this land knew exactly where they belonged.

When I climbed out of the trench I lay on my stomach on the grass and reached down with my fingers to sweep away my footprints from the earth. I could feel the adder stone pressing its shape into my breastbone. When no trace of me was left, I turned over and sat up. My hands were filthy. I would carry away a part of this place under my nails, in the creases of my skin. I looked at the jeep, the white star gleaming on its bonnet. It was time to go.

Instead I walked to the rise and looked across the lake. Swans flew over the wind-streaked water, a pair of them, their wings wide and white. John Post and I had stood here together, how long ago, in the rain? The water was much lower then. *Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.* Or as John Post would have it, life goes on. I wished he was here with me now. I wished – but what was the purpose in wishing? If you wanted something to happen, it was up to you to take the first step.

The lake shimmered, brimming with sky. All this time and I still could not get my head around it, the depth of the water and its weight, its vast permanence. A wash of pale sunlight lit the hill on the far side of the reservoir and, on the water, caught in the ripple of reflected clouds, there was a sudden patch of blue. I put the adder stone to my eye and it was all that I could see. Enough to make a sailor a pair of trousers. Mari’s way of looking, as much a part of me as the chapel. I gazed at it, my shining circle of blue, fixing its light in my eye, as above me the swans banked, their wings outstretched, and landed on the water in a sweep of silver.

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Author’s Note

As a child my favourite place in the world was my grandmother’s house near Caernarfon, owned by her mother’s family since her great-grandfather, Owen Roberts, bought it in the 1820s. By the time I was born the house had passed to my great uncle but my grandmother loved it there so much that it was agreed that she and her family (three daughters and eight grandchildren) could use it for as long as she was alive. My mother and her older sister were evacuated there during World War II and afterwards spent all their school holidays there. My mother continued the tradition with us until Nainie (nain is Welsh for grandmother) died in 1985.

I don’t remember who first told us about the Welsh valley that had been drowned to provide water for Liverpool. I know it was 1976 because that summer the fierce drought shrank the lake, exposing the remains of the village beneath. Newspaper photographs showed people posing beside the foundations of long-demolished houses, walking over bridges thought to be lost forever. I never saw it for myself but I could not stop thinking about it. We had been learning about Pompeii at school. I pictured bodies curled in frozen terror in the cracked Welsh mud.

In 2022, another devastatingly dry summer, it happened again. The water receded, the drowned village emerged. It was only then, looking at photos on Google, that I realised what I had failed to grasp as a child, that in its voracious thirst for water Liverpool had drowned not one but two Welsh valleys. Llyn Vyrnwy was officially opened in 1892, Llyn Celyn in 1965. I could not tell which was the one I remembered. They looked so alike.

Their stories were shockingly alike too. Like Capel Celyn, the valley chosen by Liverpool in the 1870s was home to many, with ten farmsteads and a thriving village, Llanwyddn, with a church, two chapels, a school, three inns, and nearly forty houses. The valley’s 433 residents protested but to no avail. The Liverpool Waterworks Act was passed by Parliament in 1880; construction began the following year. The monumental granite dam, topped with thirty-one gothic arches, was considered a triumph of Victorian

engineering. In 1889, when water flowed over its lip for the first time, Llyn Vyrnwy became the largest man-made reservoir in Europe.

Llyn Celyn held only half as much water but it made a far bigger splash. If the dam at Vyrnwy was framed by the Victorian love affair with progress and technology (the Illustrated London News in 1889 declared it ‘one of the grandest works of modern times’ and dismissed the demolition of the ‘dwellings of forty or fifty families’ in less than a sentence), the drowning of Capel Celyn came amid the 1960s reckoning with the British colonial legacy. Across the world, countries were rising up, determined to cast off the chains of imperial rule. In 1960 alone, seventeen nations gained their independence, including Nigeria, Senegal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

No surprise, then, that the idea of an independent Wales gained traction in these years. Nationalists had long argued that Wales was the original colony, the model for Britain’s imperial ambitions: decisively conquered in the thirteenth century by Edward I, it had been occupied and annexed, its princes executed, its language and laws suppressed, its culture denigrated, and its people reduced to second-class citizens. When Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (the National Party of Wales) was founded in 1925, its first president Saunders Lewis maintained that its chief aim was to ‘take away from the Welsh their sense of inferiority… to remove from our beloved country the mark and shame of conquest’.

For decades Plaid was more of a social movement than a political party, its focus on reviving the Welsh language, but anger at the high-handed expropriation of Welsh land by a government based in Westminster continued to intensify. In 1936 Saunders Lewis was imprisoned for nine months after he and two fellow nationalists deliberately set fire to a RAF bombing school on the Llyˆn peninsula, and from 1949 a fierce campaign was waged against Ministry of Agriculture plans to commandeer more than forty Carmarthenshire farms for forestry. And still the march continued. By the end of the Second World War nearly 10 per cent of Wales was owned by the British Armed Forces; by 1951 the Forestry Commission was the single largest landholder in the country. Rigid grids of (non-native) conifers scarred the hillsides, deepening hostility and resentment.

It took Capel Celyn to light the spark of a militant Welsh nationalism. The tiny rural Welsh-speaking village became a symbol of Welsh culture and traditions that were at risk of disappearing altogether. Half the Welsh population had spoken Welsh in 1911; by 1950 that figure had dropped to less than a third. Wales's economic prospects were bleak, young people leaving in their droves, but the reservoir would not bring jobs. Welsh water would power Liverpool's industrial growth and the Welsh people would not be a penny better off.

Most of all, Capel Celyn served as a bitter reminder of Wales's powerlessness and lack of political autonomy. Opposition to the scheme was vigorous and widespread, only one of the thirty-six Welsh MPs in Parliament voted with the government but, as always in a house of 630 seats, their protests went unheard. Little wonder then that, according to Thomas Jones, the local Labour MP, the reservoir 'aroused the nation's feeling to white-hot indignation'. Little wonder, perhaps, that for some it seemed that the democratic process would always fail them, that violence was the only way to force change.

In my version of the Capel Celyn story I have made choices about how closely to stick to the historical record. Most of the broader historical facts that frame this novel – the bomb attacks on the dam construction sites at both Capel Celyn and Clywedog, the march on Liverpool by the villagers in 1956, the chaotic protests at the opening ceremony in 1965 – are true and have been widely documented.

Olwen Jones and her family, however, exist only in my imagination. While the village had a post office, a school and a chapel, John and Maureen Post, Margaret Roberts and the Reverend Thomas are all entirely made up. My Cynghrair Diogelu Capel Celyn (Capel Celyn Protection League) is also an invention. Its real-life counterpart, Pwyllgor Amddiffyn Capel Celyn (Capel Celyn Defence Committee), was chaired by Dafydd Roberts, with the redoubtable Elizabeth Watcyn Jones as secretary. They fought tirelessly for eight years to stop the drowning and died before the reservoir was opened, Elizabeth (aged only fifty-eight) in July 1965, Dafydd Roberts three months later in October, just days before the official opening ceremony. We remember them both with grateful thanks.

In creating the Welsh Freedom Army, I have borrowed heavily from the real-life FWA or Free Wales Army. The FWA was headed up by Julian Cayo Evans, a charismatic horse trainer from Lampeter who regarded propaganda as his most powerful tool in the fight against Wales's Saesneg oppressors. In this he found himself admirably supported by the press, who proved willing to print pretty much anything he told them. All the claims in the press cuttings Maureen sends to Olwen were taken from the record, including the one about the atom bomb and the Severn Bridge. Fitzpatrick's involvement with the FWA 'training camp' at Tyˆ-eithin is loosely based on a multi-page feature that ran in the *Sunday Telegraph* magazine in 1968.

While the FWA never detonated a bomb (the only one they had failed to go off), a second paramilitary group, Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru or MAC, did mastermind a sporadic bombing campaign during this time, blowing up water pipes and municipal buildings, explosions for which the FWA often claimed responsibility. Later, MAC's leader, John Jenkins, would claim that 'we were not into taking life. We wanted to save our soul; the soul of the nation', but bombs are dangerous things. In 1969 MAC set a number of devices to disrupt the Investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales: one exploded prematurely, killing two MAC members. Five days later eleven-year-old Ian Cox was playing on Llandudno Pier when a device intended to target Royal Britannia went off. Ian lost his leg.

Jenkins was imprisoned in 1970. There were no more bombs. While these days Welsh children are taught about the drowning of Capel Celyn in school, the brief and violent flowering of militancy that followed has, until recently, been mostly overlooked by historians. Did it change anything? Jenkins would say so, that after the 1960s the authorities in London could no longer ignore Wales. Martin Luther King would counter that 'an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind'. Either way, as nationalism burgeons, polarisation deepens and the rhetoric grows ever angrier and more frightening, our past exists. How can we learn from it if we don't even know it ever happened?

Cofiwch Dryweryn. Remember Tryweryn.

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