

I was Prince of the Apple Towns

along the riverrun and downwards still through the trees and sheep and streets and into old Aber Mill, falling now from time. Opposite the Mill, built on the corner of Thomas and Windsor street, is Liliwen the Dress' small shop; her naked and faceless mannequins stacked tall on top of one another against the front window and the only light is the slight orange glow shining down to the street through the lace curtains of the upstairs window where she sits bent over her sewing machine, her fingers coiled in pain. The sleeping village almost silent, the hills black and the moon overhead is ghostly white in the star-threaded sky. Liliwen is silent and sombre as she sews, trying her most to ignore Molly Edwards, loud and lumbering in the adjoining kitchen as she makes tea, and Myfanwy Pritchard, sat opposite, watching every move her old hands make, occasionally breaking the silence with a blank query or a thoughtless rumour, which she always made point of ignoring. Urbane in her fury, Liliwen throws aside the long, black dress that she'd nearly finished seaming – it falls open, covering the dark-wood table between them and she buries her face in her palms, leaning her elbows against the satin-dusted dress upon table.

“You okay, dear?” Myfanwy asks moving her chair noisily next to Liliwen’s, scratching the hand-polished floor beneath her. Liliwen ignores her. “Whose dress is this one then?” Myfanwy asked, standing up from her chair and lifting high into the air the thick dress that Liliwen had laid flat beneath her folded arms. The dress hovered like a dusted petal made of linen and hanging around it half a dozen others, identical, coal-black, hanging lifeless on the walls and the doors.

“That one’s Eilwen’s,” Liliwen murmured without looking up.

“Oooh – I was talking with her yesterday, the poor thing!” Myfanwy interrupted, inspecting closely Eilwen’s dress in her hands. “She looked tired – and thin, too thin. Dai’s looking fat mind –”

“That one’s Bronwyn’s,” Liliwen interrupted quietly, pointing to one of the dresses hanging on the back of the door. The room is small and the smell of dust is strong, as if it covers the thrown-piles of faded fabrics and tapestries that Liliwen has stacked on top of one another about the room.

“It’s a good thing you’re not making him a dress! You’d run out of sodding wool if you did!” Myfanwy laughs loudly as she looks around the room. “Probably wouldn’t, actually... if you managed Bronwyn fine.” Molly enters from the kitchen carrying a tray of empty, china teacups. Myfanwy quickly turns to face her, dropping the dress in mid-air.

“What are you two talking about?” Molly asks as she places the tray of cups down on the small coffee table beside them, as are all the tables and cabinets in the room, made of the same hazel-brown, old oak and a short and low-green, felt sofa sits against the back wall. A lone shelf hangs on one wall opposite adorned by two crystal rams on either end and filled with framed photographs, sepia-brown, of faces long forgotten.

“Just about how Dai’s drinking ‘imself fat down the Pant’ every night. He’s gone off the deep end he has – he’s no good for her, she shoulda’ married that Dai Milk –”

“Morgan,” Liliwen said without looking. “Call him Morgan; you can’t go round callin’ a grown man Milk all his life.” Molly laughs and sits down opposite them on the low sofa, struggling to cross her legs.

“Even he would been a better ‘usband!” Myfanwy continued. “No money but that don’t matter. He’d love her; he wouldn’t drink – or hit her –”

“Myfanwy!” Molly shouts and they look at Liliwen, sat distraught. Her hair is straight and so long it nearly reaches her elbows; her arms are frail and fingers so thin that her silver rings almost fall from her as she walks, her face is sullen and her skin is perfect white.

“She’s old aye, but that just means that she’s seen it all, ‘avent you, Lil’?” Myfanwy smiled and tapped her long fingernails on the wooden table.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Liliwen replied, cross-legged, facing outwards away from her sewing machine, her tired hands in her lap. Her voice was older and softer but even now she sounded more tired, less patient.

“She’s not as slow as she seems, Molly. Believe you me, nothing will shock her – not even your little fling,” Myfanwy smirks down at Molly, sat beneath her.

“What fling?” Liliwen asked, interested.

“Not a fling, a *thing* – I ‘av a thing – a skin rash, round my thigh, all red and covered in blisters and sores – I’m in agony, I am!” She throws a scornful look to Myfanwy.

“A heat rash is it?”

“I doubt it’s a sodding heat rash, Lil – Not in this cold! I went Mrs Jones’ for some cream but she hasn’t got any; I’ve only had it the last few days mind, it’ll be nothing.”

“Well I might have something,” Liliwen started, “some cream, somewhere. I’ll go find it for you, Love.” She stood up from her chair, her head almost below her old shoulders, and started to walk out of the room.

“Aw, Lil, Love – are you sure?” Molly asked. “I did try to get some from Mrs Jones in the week but she’d run out!”

“Of course, I’ll just be a minute,” She slowly leaves.

“Thanks, dear,” Myfanwy calls out. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Stop talking about Eilwen for God’s sake. You know it upsets her – she’s already stressed enough as it is making all these dresses day in day out!” Molly shouted, standing now beside Myfanwy, still sat at the table.

“At least she’s getting paid for it! Probably charging a fortune an’ all. And I wasn’t saying nothing about Eilwen, only that I saw her. I didn’t even mention Bronwyn – and I know that’s her one there,” Myfanwy points at one of the hanging dresses, the largest, widest dress, and laughs.

“Myfanwy,” Molly started with sunken eyes, “don’t mention Lloyd again... ever.”

“What you mean ever?” Myfanwy asked in a cold tone. She stands up next to Molly, the low-dim ceiling light just above their heads. “I’m supposed to just pretend he never existed

am I? Or just as if he never died? You're not gunna tell Gareth even, are you? You think just because Lloyd's dead now he doesn't have to know?"

"Stop talking about him! Liliwen will hear you," Molly said through gritted teeth, her short, curly hair shaking when she shouts.

"You think she's never heard of an affair before? Get over yourself, Moll – I bet she wouldn't tell anyone anyway..."

"Aye, and you said you wouldn't neither. She's from a different time, Myfanwy. She won't like it."

"Well I'm not telling her!"

"Good – then stop."

Liliwen walks back through the tiny hallway leading from the bathroom, passed the only bedroom and back into the sitting room. She holds in her hand a white, plastic tube of cream, un-labelled. She stands still in the dim shadow-light and listens to Molly and Myfanwy speaking to one another in the next room.

"And I mean it about Eilwen and Bronwyn as well. She's making these sodding dresses all day every day - she doesn't need any more remindin' – especially now Bronwyn is coming round every other morning asking for money for the widows. It's all too much for her."

"Stop talking about her as if she's so fragile. She didn't lose anybody and neither did you, Molly – so why are we talking like this?"

Biting the breath between her teeth, Molly hadn't the sense to reply.

"I couldn't find what I was looking for, Molly," Liliwen said walking back into the room empty-handed and sitting beside them at the table. Myfanwy joins her and Molly stands, looking down at Myfanwy. Suddenly, there is a loud, low knocking from below. Molly, standing closest to the tiny, open window, leant out, her knees pressed against the wall and her arms stretched downwards, resting on the window-ledge below.

"It's Eilwen," She said confused. "She's knocking on the front bloody window."

"What the hell's wrong with her?!" Myfanwy shouted, rushing over to look out the window, failing to push aside Molly, her arms stretched out long beside her. Myfanwy squeezes her head underneath Molly's arm, stretching her own out in front of her, trying her hardest to glimpse at Eilwen still knocking below. Molly looks down at her, her arm around her neck, and she laughs at her.

"What are you doing?"

Suddenly then the street was lit by the harsh, white light from the shop floor beneath them as Liliwen appeared at the front door below; she had left the room so silently that neither Molly or Mwfanwy even noticed.

"Lil, Love! I've come to pay you..." Eilwen said, shouting to Liliwen through the glass of the opening door, their two shadows projected onto the stone fronts of the houses opposite. "Thought I'd stop off on my way to the post-office, pay you what I owe," she repeated.

"What you mean on your way to the post-office?" Liliwen asked. "It's 7 o'clock, Eilwen – its shut! Everywhere's shut!"

“What are they saying?” Myfanwy asked, still trying to poke her head into view, Molly’s arm covering her ears.

“I don’t know – I can’t hear them when you talk! I think she said she was payin’ her. Probably just for the dress,” Molly said, struggling to step back from the cramped window, having to climb over one of the chairs taken from the table, left in the middle of the room. Myfanwy, now with the window all to herself, leant both her shoulders out and shouted down to them:

“Eilwen! Where to’s all your money gone?”

“Why would you ask her something like that?” Molly asked irritated.

“She’s giving something to Eilwen – not money though, and not from her purse –”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see proper.”

Eilwen reaches gently into her coat pocket and holds in her shaking hand a small, brown, boy’s sock, tied into a knot at the end. She placed the sock in Liliwen’s palm and held her hand in hers a moment. Liliwen stood silent and confused, looking deeply at Eilwen, trembling underneath her large coat.

“It’s all I have at the moment, but it’s enough – they were Morgan’s, they were... they’re diamonds...” Eilwen’s distant eyes briefly filled with life and she gave a wide smile showing the red lipstick that she had smudged onto her pearl-white teeth. “Beautiful they are, and valuable, worth a lot of money.” It was then that Eilwen finally noticed Myfanwy, still shouting at her from above. “Ooh, hello, Myfanwy!” She called out excitedly. “I didn’t see you all the way up there! What did you say? I can’t yeur you.”

“Where’s all your money to?” Myfanwy repeated, shouting even louder.

“Dai keeps all the money now,” Eilwen whispered to Liliwen, then added in a high and happy voice: “but I managed to hide the diamonds before he could find them,” then she winked at her and walked away, alone along the street at night.

Liliwen returned upstairs, the street returned to darkness, but Myfanwy stayed in the window, watching Eilwen from above the houses. Liliwen sat down, a sullen look on her face, as she held the still un-opened sock in her lap.

“Close that window, for God’s sake – it’s freezing in here!” Molly said.

“What’s that then?” Myfanwy asked, closing the small but heavy window behind her. Liliwen did not answer; she looked at the sock for a moment and was sure that even the sock had belonged to him, it was worn and unclean. She opened the messy knot and out poured two-dozen or so crystal-clear, glass marbles.



Overthinking, overdressed, Morgan Phillips stood alone outside Mrs Jones’ corner shop adjusting his shoe-polished hair in his reflection and palming a single penny in his pocket. He

was tall for his age and thin with wide, blue eyes. It was early morning and he was waiting for Mrs Jones to open, hoping to be gone before the streets soon filled with happy, nose-itching schoolchildren. An eternity passed before the glass door opened and a sleepy Mrs Jones silently let Morgan in from the cold, the sun had scarcely risen yet and Morgan felt the warmth in the smell of the fresh fruit stacked at the front of the store. He walked to the other side where a small selection of flowers lay. Trying to avoid her wandering eyes he nervously walked past them, and back; sideward, forward and back, until finally he found the courage to lift a single rose from the table, feeling its thorns against his soft, pink fingers, watching his shoes as he went and placed the flower on the counter between he and her.

- Just the one? She not worth a bunch? Mrs Jones asked.
- Only one penny, Morgan replied in a whisper.
- Poor little sweet. Come back tomorrow, I'll have something special for her. She smiled, sliding across the counter a plastic-wrapped breath mint. Just in case.

Before Morgan could thank her the eager door opened and in strode Molly Edwards perfuming the air. Morgan quickly snatched his lonely rose and concealed it in his coat so that the golden bud of the flower lay against his beating breast and the stem points down his buttonshirt. Aimlessly ambling he wandered past the bramble bushes turning left onto Thomas Street, pausing to wait on the corner where Caitlin walks. Raining droplets fell onto his nose as he saw Dylan Jenkins approaching, perfectly aligned with a single cloud overhead, walking along its passing shadow. He was wearing his grey school trousers, oversized like Morgan's, but instead of the school's blue blazer he wore a thick, black, crewneck jumper over his shirt.

- What the fuck you done now to your 'air!?! Dylan shouted, approaching Morgan, solemnly stood. He charged towards him and grabbed his face in both hands, violently and closely inspecting his hair. Smells like shit an all. What is it, boot polish? You used too much. Is it boot polish?
- No, Morgan answered, pulling free.
- Mn. Why are you standing here? You waiting for me?
- No, someone else, Morgan said, feeling the prickly stem through his coat pocket, checking it was still concealed.
- Oh, God. Not her. Not again.
- I don't know what you're -
- Shut up right now! Dylan laughed. Are you even going to speak to her this time or just get too scared again and embarrass her like the last? Stood there staring at her with your face blank and nothing to say.
- I'll ask her now, if she's alone - and if you're not here laughing at me, Morgan replied.
- I'm not staying - calm down.
- You going school early?

- Kind of, aye. I have to go. Tell me what happens when were at Alwyn's, Dylan said, already carrying on along the road.
- I'll tell you at school! I'll see you there? Morgan shouted after him, puzzled. But Dylan had already disappeared and lonely Morgan felt the cold on his nose and the silken petals in his fist.

Wonder how she has her hair today. Can never see her when she's tied it. Looks too much like Polly. She's the taller, mind. Hope she's alone; I can't do it in front of them all, not again. Dylan would never hear the end of it if I don't ask her now; he never shut up about it last time. Wonder where he's going... probably meeting Polly, thinks I don't know. They'll have that jumper off him if he tries wearing it walking in. I'm happy for him! We all would be. Him and her. Me and Cait'. She'll say yes when she sees the rose, when I tell her I've been underground, I know it. She won't care a thing about age then. Have to remember to see Dylan later in school, speak to him before the camping. Probably end up going early to the woods, sneaking off away from Alwyn and Arwyn. Gotta find it though, tonight. Ready for tomorrow.

He saw them before they saw him, but when they did he saw their eyes roll and their mouths open. Caitlin walked in the middle, pretty Polly on one side and the other Ceri-Ann, with dimples in her smile and big bunny eyes. They stopped beside him on the corner, knowing what he'd say before even he, and watched the black oil sweat down his temple.

- I can't wait, I'm sorry, Polly whispered into Caitlin's giggling ear. She walked away along the road after Dylan.
- You look good today, Caitlin, Morgan said, sniffing his wet nose along his coatsleeve.
- Thank you, Caitlin replied, looking at Ceri-Ann. Ceri-Ann was shorter than Caitlin and younger by a year. Her hair was blonde to her shoulders and her eyes, round and bright as stars, were blue. Caitlin Edwards, longing love of his life, was a creature more divine, feminine, not from the same world as he or her; he found himself achingly in love with her, at that morning's first glance of her ribbon-curved hair, her piercing eyes and her flowery smell. Are you cold? She asked him, both hands firmly in his pockets, his arms tucked tight around his waist.
- No, Morgan said.
- Why are you waiting here? Ceri-Ann asked, already knowing Morgan's plan. Were you waiting for Alwyn?
- No, Morgan said again.
- Oh, Dylan then, Ceri-Ann decided. Well he's not coming in today, I already know, so you may as well walk with us. She said smirking back at Caitlin as she started to walk.
- No! We don't need to go now I mean, Morgan stuttered.
- We do! We do! Ceri-Ann protested. Can't be late!

And she pulled the two others, one hand in each, down the road, turning right, back passed the bramble bushes towards Mrs Jones' – Morgan worried now that she knew too much. He held his breath as they passed. The streets were quickly filling with children, all

trying desperately to enjoy the first few, free minutes of their day before the school bell tolls.

- Why're you being so quiet, Morgan? Ceri-Ann asked.
- Just tired, he replied, feigning a yawn.
- Stayed up past your bedtime, did you? She cackled; Caitlin looked at him and smiled.

*Butterflies filled his eyes
and all around and all awhile
the whole world stopped to see her smile.*

Suddenly, stealthily, Ceri-Ann scooped a handful of dust from the dry dirt beneath the grass and blew the brown powder into Morgan's face, and the words of his ditty were lost from his mind.

- Don't sulk, She ordered.

The dust settled from his eyes and Morgan saw that they were approaching the grounds of their small school. It had been built in the centre of the village in a wide square, surrounded on three sides by rows of terraced houses and in the middle of the square was a small, flat paddock, which to the morning-children felt as wild and free as the greatest plains of ancient Wales. He also saw that Caitlin now stood motionless in the centre, staring aimlessly into the rushing crowd of children which had started to flood around them. Passing through the parting crowd Morgan saw the face of his older brother, and saw too that it was he that held Caitlin's saint-like eyes.

- Cait! Ceri-Ann whispered, poking. Look! She ordered, pointing out Gareth from the crowd.
- What, who? Caitlin feigned.
- God alive, look at his trousers! Ceri-Ann cackled. You think he has them like that or does he shrink them in the bath? She asked, looking at Morgan, shrunken beside them.

They're old, not tight, he thought quietly to himself, remembering that his mother had told Gareth to keep the pair kept until Morgan grew big enough to fit them.

- Looks good on him though! Caitlin heard herself say aloud.
- Wait! Ceri-Ann started with a grin. Do you remember... pointing at Morgan, when you asked her to be *your* girlfriend?! She asked with eager eyes.
- Don't, Caitlin interrupted, shamed by his saddened face. Don't make fun of him.

Her soft smile and silken eyes fell on him again but this time he felt none of the warmth or kindness that he did before.

- Let's go talk to Gareth before we go in! Ceri-Ann decided, already running over to stand beside him in the single-file line outside the gates. Caitlin hurried after her without looking back and Morgan watched her slender legs run away, feeling the scratch against his chest of a lover's gift ungiven.



Eilwen felt it when Myfanwy's eyes lost her over the rooftops and she heard the window close shut behind her in the street. She felt the freedom for the first time that day of herself being alone, unwatched; so she lost herself in the dewy meadow where the horses graze and felt the worms buried in the earth between her toes. She smelled the thick pollen in the air and it brought water to her eyes and mouth. It was near seven o'clock, Eilwen remembered, as she watched the stars fade from the sky, as the moon passed through all its phases before settling in full, looking back at her like one great eye.

She walked along awhile as her eyes cleared and felt underneath her feet cold puddles of water on the surface of the mud. She looked down in horror to see the twisted corpse of her son half-buried in the earth and pools of his blood around her. She turned away to retch, her body shaking, and when she looked back his image was gone.

"NO! No! Don't take my boy away, not again!" She screamed and fell to the floor, plunging her hands into the wet dirt and digging down with her fingernails. "Don't take my baby! Let me hold him one last time – Morgan, let me hold you!" Eilwen's face fell to the floor in a flurry of tears; she wailed into the soil until she could no longer breathe and punched the ground until her fingers bled.

After her howls had echoed through the valley and her eyes cleared again of tears a path of poppies grew from the ground and led her up the hill and into the forest where she walked, clenching her rattling teeth, beneath a flurry of falling petals, silken in every colour, from the flowers that grew at the highest branches of the trees, which all died before her feet so that she need not walk on the dirt.

Eilwen walked uphill for a long while along the path of flowers and butterflies wings until she saw between the black trees a small wooden cottage glowing orange with fire. Dazzled by the darkness, Eilwen floated towards the door of the cottage with wide, dilated eyes, gazing lovingly at the cows and sheep that wandered aimlessly in the blackness around her, as if they'd overrun the farmer and his house. Her slender hand was raised to knock on the open door before she heard in the distance the sound of a bull charging wildly against the mud and the faint sound of a woman crying.

From the darkness of the forest she could make out the figure of a tall, thin man darting between the trees towards her; before she could blink the man had crashed into her with such force that they found themselves pushed backwards through the door, standing on the other side, clutched together.

"David?" Eilwen asked the man, who stood with one arm holding the door closed against the angered bull and the other around her waist. "Is it you?"

"I've never seen her this angry, honestly!" David said, ignoring Eilwen's question; but still her eyes filled with life again at the sight of a face she had known.

"Her?"

“The cow! E-velyn,” David stammered. “The fences are down - bloody kids again probably! They’re all out there now, running loose, and she’s in a really bad mood with me for some reason! I dunno what I’ve done to her. She won’t let me touch her.”

“You’re an idiot,” Eilwen said giggling, then she hugged David and he smelled the roses in her hair. “Thank you for saving me, nonetheless. I won’t stay long. I don’t know why I’m here at all, really,” Eilwen confessed. “As soon as it’s clear I’ll make my escape.”

“No! No, you don’t need to leave, Eilwen,” David jumped. “They’re fine, they won’t go anywhere - I can, can stay here, with you. You look cold, are you cold?”

“Yes, actually I am,” Eilwen replied, she was still wearing her old coat but her hair and hands and feet were wet with dew. David threw himself to the other side of the room where an old blanket lay folded over a stool in the corner. He drew it with his arms so wide that it opened fully in the air in front of Eilwen just as he moved to drape it around her shoulders. The old smell of the blanket reminded him of his mother and of the days when he was ill as a child and she would nurse him back to health with herbal teas that she’d made in the garden; then the smell of daffodils brought him back to himself and he saw again the lost love of his life, standing there before his own quivering eyes.

“What’s this?” He asked in a boy’s voice, feeling gently with his fingertips the faded bruise on Eilwen’s purple cheek.

“Nothing for you,” she answered, pushing him away.

“It was him?”

“Not for you, David,” She repeated; she had always called him David. “You’re here all alone?” She asked looking around the small room, empty of all furniture except for a large dining table, chairless, covered with rusted tools and a dirty, old shirt beside which a bucket sat stout on the floor collecting the droplets of water that fell through the ceiling. Then seeing the shyness in David’s eyes she quickly changed the subject: “What happened to the animals to make them so angry?” The two sat beside one another on a low, folding bench which his father used to saw the logs from the trees, and which he himself had made years earlier with only two hinges and two nails.

“They don’t need a reason,” David said with bitterness. “The kids tear down the fences and the stupid animals follow their freedom right over the mountain. I was lucky with these,” he pointed out of the frosted window, “they’re only here because they wandered back down looking for food - must have memorised the way back, all the way from their field!”

“They’re obviously very clever,” Eilwen said, and David felt pride in his very bones. “Except that cow, hitting his head against the wall like that.”

“You’d be surprised; she’s the cleverest of all of my friends,” David laughed nervously at his own joke. “Clever you, though! How did you find yourself here? You’ve never been here before...”

“Honestly, I don’t know - I was brought here by my own two feet and that’s all I know. And all I remember is hearing something calling me from outside your door.”

“Something like a person?”

“Not really, I didn’t hear any words, but I heard all the rest of life... and I felt safe and loved, for a moment,” Eilwen’s eyes had become distant again as she spoke, she ran the edge of the blanket between her fingertips then looked at David: “But it all felt so real. You don’t believe me do you?”

“No, I do. I saw the flowers on the forest floor after you’d come. You’d be surprised the things that happen, up here in the moonlight, away from the village.”

“You’re right,” Eilwen said. “We’re so far from the world up here, I love it. But I should leave. I won’t get home tonight otherwise.”

“No! You can’t leave yet, Eilwen. It’s dangerous,” David said in desperation. “At least eat, I have bread and eggs, are you thirsty? I’m sure you are. I’ll get you milk.”

“No, David, of course I don’t want any milk,” Eilwen said laughing, holding out her hand to stop David from standing. “Just talk with me a while and then I’ll go.”

“What would you like us to talk about?” He asked like a lost child.

“Make me laugh, you always used to make me laugh,” Eilwen answered, distracted.

“If you’d only let me, Eilwen,” he began in a soft tone, “I mean really let me, gave me a chance. I’d live every day to make you smile.”

“Empty words come all too easy to you men,” Eilwen sighed. “I doubt you know even what a woman really wants.”

“I might not know what you want but I see what hurts you. I see him hurt you and I know he can’t be what you want.”

“Remember yourself, David,” Eilwen said sternly.

“I remember you first, Eilwen, always. That same little girl who sold me my first kiss for a penny and who used to walk home with me every day from school; who I thought one day I’d love and she’d love me. I’ll always remember you over me.” David stooped his body into hers and held her hand in his.

“It’s been too long, David. Too much has passed, too much changed and lost. I can’t love you, not again; it wouldn’t be me.”

“What does that mean: ‘it wouldn’t be you?’”

“I’m not anything I was before, David, nothing of the joy we had then.”

“The world hasn’t changed, Eilwen and neither have you, we’re still how we were. And I can be more for you than he is.”

“David! I chose him. Not you. And you - you’re lucky enough that your world hasn’t changed, but my whole life has been destroyed, can’t you see that, can’t any of you see that?” Eilwen spoke frantically. “I can’t stay here any longer,” She said, pushing David’s hand away from her and rising from the bench. “I have to leave.”

“You can’t go back to him, Eilwen. It’s all too much for you. He can’t look after you... tell me how he is with you,” David pleaded, rising to stand beside Eilwen. “I’ve seen him since, I know he isn’t well.”

“He isn’t well,” she stood there aghast, “he hides all the money, or spends it all or whatever he does with it, but I can’t have any to feed my son. That’s why he left... that and the rest of it. Today he did. Dai still won’t hand me a penny. Not even to pay my Morgan’s

mourning dress.” Eilwen fell almost to her knees before David fell before her so that he could catch her first, then they both tumbled to the ground as one.

They lay there for hours silently panting and breathing as one, sitting just as they had landed, wide across the floor.

“I’d kill him for you, Eilwen,” David whispered into her ear. “All you need is ask. And I’ll do it.”

Eilwen broke from his arms with the same foul look on her face that she held when she saw her child dragged dead from the earth. She slapped him hard across his face, digging her nails into his cheek.

“Not so little now, Ellie,” David said with remorse.

“Don’t ever speak to me again.”

And she left the glowing cottage and walked back into the darkness, along the path of trodden petals and crushed caterpillars and back through the meadow where the horses graze.



Sleeping sweetly in the black of night, the full-white moon watches over our small town from the starless sky above. The long, black cobblestreets are silent now as the people lie sleeping, dreaming of times of happiness and sadness and those awake lie wondering in their cosy beds in rows of tiny, stone houses cut high into the grassy mountain, motionless beneath the velvet-black night-sky. The water’s flow slows softly in the streams through their sleeping moments and waking dreams. So quiet you can hear the mice squeak as they hide from owls in the bushes, whispering to one another beside the wild hares. The sheep sleep in the green fields, the dogs and cats curled beside the dying fire or long across the foot of the beds of their owners.

- And what did you say to him? A woman’s voice asks in the darkness.
- Yes, I said, yes, Molly Edwards answered.
- You can’t, Molly! She called out.
- Well it doesn’t matter now, does it? Molly said in a flat voice. It’s not happening now, so we can forget it.
- Well, I suppose. A man’s voice appeared. But what about Gareth?! What you gunna do with ‘im now?! Don’t you love ‘im anymore?
- Who’s that? Where’s Sian? Molly asks.
- She’s gone, the man answers.
- Where to?
- I don’t know where.
- Who are you? Molly asks.
- It’s me, Molly, Aubrey Jenkins.

- Oh, Aubrey, Molly cries. My poor dead dear! I can't see you, where are you? Tell me you're safe. Who's with you?
- I'm alone, Molly, dear.
- Where?
- Dead.
- What happened, Aubrey? On that night, to you... to Lloyd? Tell me please.
- I'm forgetting, Molly, Love. Something to do with the methane, they say; it happened so quickly we didn't even know, all over and done in the blink of an eye.
- Aubrey –
- My Glenda... his voice rose, remembering. Oh, my Glenda. Molly, you have to tell her, you have to, for me. She's all I have left in this world, she needs me still.
- I will, Aubrey, Love.
- Her hair... he whispers, what colour was her hair, Molly?
- Whose?
- I remember the smell, not the colour.

She woke in the middle of that sleeping night, our Molly Edwards; Gareth Edwards still asleep beside her, his hairy, heavy body naked in the dark, his blackened boots beside the bed-foot in a pile of dust. She felt the cold on her face through the unopened window and as she rose her grey, cotton nightdress drifted in the slight bedroom-breeze. She moved silently, slipper-footed, through the small and narrow landing of the house, into the bedroom of her bouncing baby, asleep in her white wooden crib.

My beautiful Eryn, my baby-bach. My baby... you were still inside mummy's tummy notsolongago. Don't grow. Don't be like me, my Love. Follow your sister, make her proud. I'm just a fool.

Aye, Child, just another foolish old woman in a world full of foolish women made fools by the stubborn men; don't they know it's us women that make the world go round? It's us women that have beautiful little babies like you! Oh, Eryn! Don't cough, Love – you'll wake yourself – there's better, now breathe, breathe, be calm and still and sleep, my sweet – Caitlin, my stubborn little woman – three steps away, through the landing again, across the faded lime carpet and passed the open window which Dewi Thomas spies into every night from his unlit bedroom with his duvet round his head – only fifteen years old and look at you now, prettier than a painting. Smarter than I was too, says she'll teach herself French. You'll never know how proud I am of you. Look after your sister; I won't always be here now... you need to – No, I know you will. Two proud, young women, beautiful and proud, young women. I know you will. Nobody can say I did nothing with my life; I am not just another foolish woman who threw it all away and had nothing else left to live; no, no, I am my daughters' mother, that's more than I could ever ask and more than most people get, more than those women who grow old and die alone, with no family, no love – No, that isn't me.

Ah, Gareth, who sleeps through a storm with his bare belly out.

In this country, with this nature, oh God, there's nothing like our nature; our hills and

mountains under the blue sky, when it *is* blue; in its beauty and its age, with miles and miles of ancient, green grass and bright white clouds dancing together above us, bathing in the sunlight and our cows who moo together behind the wire-fences so that the children can walk right up to them and grin and laugh and point and the sheep that run through our streets like stray cats and eat from Bryn's rose-garden. With such joy and laughter in our world why do we care so much about the pain? Why so much fuss over the little things that just don't matter?

Suppose it's not ever that simple... What was it first made me think of Lloyd anyway? The dream? That stone outline on Mynydd Meio, from my bed-window... built into the ground where the black hospital used to be – those poor little children, all so scared, couldn't even *say* Tuberculosis if you asked them. And all the villages so afraid of the sudden outbreak that they sent every last infected person into the hills to die and be buried there, deep, far away from the rest of us. They'll send me away now an' all; absolutely terrified of any little old rash or flu, anything going around that makes a person human.

I remember the first time, it wasn't the first time I had seen him but it was the first time that he had seen me, and it felt as if I had never been seen before then, I saw it in his eyes and I felt the love and the warmth, and it felt good to be looked at like that and to be loved, why is that so bad? It isn't, it shouldn't be, I know I was wrong, but I was weak, and aren't we all weak sometimes? Why should it be so wrong to be loved, and to want to be loved when nobody else will love you? It wasn't long after the second time he looked over at me, or even the third time, that he and I were chest-to-chest with one another in naked heat, his mouth over my breasts and his hands – oh, his hands were magic – and his eyes looked over every inch of me, and he saw me in my all – I would have married him there in that very moment, before I even knew his name. I knew that I had loved him then, but now there's no need to wonder; Gareth doesn't need to know after all's said and done, it'll only hurt him to know the truth; the men would all laugh at him, and laugh at me, especially as I know he'd stay with me; besides, a dead lover is less threatening than a live one, what good would it really do?

Oh, Lord and church tomorrow – how will I face them, what if they already know – Dai probably already told Eilwen, I'm sure he saw us that time in the rain, and he'd tell Eilwen in a heartbeat if he thought it meant she'd notice him. Oh, how will I face it all, what will I wear? I am old, I know, but I don't look it. Why can't he look at me, why can't he touch me? Doesn't he love me? Doesn't he feel lonely as I do? He promised me such beautiful love and passion and now he breathes so heavily, and he snores and kicks in the night.



Prim, perfumed and purple, Molly Edward strolled down Windsor Street towards Mrs Jones' shop that same early morning wearing a plum hat over her short hair and a long black

coat to her knees. She walked with a weary grace and it was clear in her eyes that she hadn't slept. Her heels clicked along the cobblestones until she kicked open the door of Mrs Jones' store and entered.

She saw her with scouring eyes and beneath her chin, standing at the height of the counter, stood little Morgan Phillips with his hidden secret. He hurried out the door holding his coat tightly closed and Mrs Jones lost her smile as she saw Molly approaching the counter with her ashen face.

- Looking well, Molly, Mrs Jones greeted her.
- Yes, well I'm not feeling it, she replied in a strained voice.
- Yes, well that's just life isn't it. How can I help you? Wine?
- Don't be daft, woman. It's a small skin rash; Caitlin must have picked it up from one of the girls at school. I don't want her to give it to Eryn, see. What creams or ointments do you do for rashes or infections? Molly asked in a high tone and Mrs Jones looked down her long face at her and struggled to hide her grin.
- Not much I'm afraid. Most people just go to the pharmacy - or rather, I hear Dr Lewis is especially patient with young children. I'm sure he'd take a look at your Caitlin.
- She won't see a doctor, Molly answered. She's embarrassed of it.
- Oh yes and so she should be, perhaps, Mrs Jones said through her thick grin. It is genital then, is it?

Just as Mrs Jones finished speaking, in walked Dewi Thomas shuffling from the door to the first aisle he saw, passed Molly, stood there still in shock. Dewi listened in, hidden by the shelves of sweets and breads:

- How dare you! You bitch! Molly quickly turned to check for Dewi, still hidden behind her. I don't know what you're trying to insinuate, but I'll make sure I never set foot in this shithole of a shop ever again, and anyone and everyone I know!

As Molly finished shouting she turned to walk away, pushing onto the floor an elaborate display of tobacco that Mrs Jones had stood on the counter before she walked out of the store, leaving the door behind her open to the cold morning air.

Mrs Jones stood behind the counter in shock looking at the mess, and then silently Dewi reappeared from the aisle and walked over the fallen display, holding her bold eyes as he walked empty-handed passed the counter and out of the store onto the street outside.

Quickly Dewi scurried around the first corner he could find and hid in the small alley behind the houses, pulling out of his pockets a plastic, yellow tube and a packet of cigarettes, the same that had fallen onto the floor. He laughed to himself as he opened both and blew giant bubbles full of thick, grey smoke which would every time fall to the ground then burst and disappear into the wind.



“O tell me now and tell me all bout Anna Banana an her slippery fall,” Anna began in a low tone, climbing out of bed and starting towards her dressing table, holding both palms against her bulging stomach. “Is that what she said? Something like that?”

“No, of course not. I doubt she even knows, Ann,” Thomas said, lying naked in the bed.

“She knows. I know she knows, she said she does.”

“You said you haven’t spoken,” Thomas answered, closing his tired eyes.

“Not to me, to Lili. Asked for her to make her dress,” Anna said, looking at Thomas through the reflection of the glass.

“How can she know when even we don’t?” Thomas feigned an interest.

“Myfanwy told me so. She always likes to.”

“Myfanwy likes to lie,” he opened one eye and Anna looked down and pulled the dead hair from her brush, dropping it onto the floor beneath the table. “What is it now? Say.” She ignored him. “Alright, aye. Let’s just go back to you ignoring me again.”

“It’s not about you,” Anna whispered.

“Well, it usually is.”

There was a long and mutual silence as Anna brushed her hair in the rising sunlight until she finally asked: “Why is it you two always meet up behind my back?” and she met his eyes with a half-smile.

“She worries about you, Anna. She asked about the baby, I didn’t even know what to tell her.”

“Well, when you next see her you can tell her it’s all just fine. And she’ll know how it is when it’s born, like the rest of us.”

“She said she wants to come with you - ”

“Why do you always defend her over me?” Anna asked flatly.

“Don’t talk stupid, Anna,” Thomas rose to his feet and the stained bedsheet fell from his shoulder, exposing his naked self. Anna looked away from the mirror and sat motionless until he left the room. Pensive thoughts then filled her silence.

Disgusting really, she thought to herself. Should buy a new set. Can’t stand to look at that mess. Can’t even tell if it’s me.

The sun had risen and her hair brushed, but Anna suddenly realised she had nowhere she needed to be. She had made the silent decision a week earlier that she was no longer welcome at the church. The other women would give her cold looks from across the pews and their whispers echoed with malice through the painted walls.

The doctor would be sick to see me again, she said aloud to herself. It happened before and will happen now. No use bothering him again.

She took out from the drawer an elegant, oversized bracelet that Thomas had given her when they first met. Struggling to clasp it herself she left it strewn across the messy bed and opened the wardrobe to get dressed.

The ring loses its emerald stone and the crimson felt fades to dust. The strong smell of her clothes made her sneeze and Thomas returned, fully dressed.

“I’m leaving,” he said, silently inspecting the curve of Anna’s spine and the round of her stomach. “You look thin,” he added. “Try to eat something today.”

“If I’m hungry I’ll eat,” she replied without looking. “That or I’ll starve.” Thomas ignored her threat. “Where to you going this time then?” Again he ignored her question.

“What will I tell your mother?” Thomas asked without listening for an answer.

“Tell her whatever you will. But she is not my mother,” Anna had quickly covered herself with a thin robe as she spoke. “She is the worst of all those women. Whatever you tell her it will get back to me, and then to everyone else.”

Thomas was silent for a moment, cautious of what to say next. “What have you heard?” He asked, holding out one hand empty and the other with a watch between his fingers. Silently, Anna fastened his watch around his wrist. “Say,” he sighed.

“They say everything,” Anna began to cry. “They say that I’m sick, and cursed. They say I’m a whore and that it isn’t yours,” pointing through the tears to her chest. “They say it’s already dead - that it’s my fault again that it’s happened.”

“That’s not true, Anna,” Thomas said, as if repeated or rehearsed. “It’s not dead. It will all be fine this time,” He added, moving towards the door. “Ignore the old women and their gossip; they’re just jealous that their time is over and we are young.”

“Do you listen to what they say? Do you believe it as well?”

“I believe that I am our child’s father. That is enough.”

“No,” she interrupted from the foot of the bed. “Is it really my fault?” She asked, overcome with grief.

“Why would you say that?” He asked, half-turning towards her.

“It’s what they say,” she answered, her hands tightly pressed against her lap, remembering the frantic pain from the night before. “She blames me too. I know she does.”

“Anna! Everything is fine. This isn’t like last time; there’ve been no signs,” he said, unaware that Anna had woken late last night beside him and screamed in silent pain as her stomach twisted so that she couldn’t breathe; unaware that she had felt with her own hands and her own being that horrible, spastic fright of her poor child unborn. “That’s the last of it, Ann,” he ordered and left her, finally, alone.



The train station was wide and flat and stood in the centre of the village just behind the tiny houses of Graigwen Road. The iron tracks twisted all through the valley and once or twice a day heavy trains hauled hundreds of tons of black coal to the surface. Glenda Jenkins lives alone now, in her small home only a few hundred yards from the train station. And on this Sunday morning, as on every Sunday morning, Mwfawwy Pritchard and Molly Edwards stand outside her gate in their Sunday-dresses waiting to walk to church. As Glenda opened

her front door her yappy Yorkshire terrier rushed to her feet and shouted up the garden to the women waiting. The dog was still a puppy but his black fur had already begun to grey.

“Din! Get down!” Glenda shouted at the dog, pushing him aside with her foot.

“Her and that sodding dog,” Mwfany said under her voice.

“At least he keeps her busy,” Molly replied.

“God, imagine waking up every morning and that being the first thing you see...”

Myfanwy sneered, looking at the field opposite that had been torn apart to make way for the new railway extension.

Molly ignored her and watched Glenda closely as she locked the front door of her house using three separate keys. Glenda was wearing a faded yellow dress, purple, pink and red flowers were tastefully embroidered on the chest and upper sleeves, handmade by Liliwen as a wedding present to her and Aubrey years ago. She wore it with a matching hat and it made her look happy for a moment, until Molly and Myfanwy, draped in mourning, greeted her at the gate, then she felt foolish.

“Hello ladies!” Glenda sang, approaching the gate. “How are we all?”

“How are we? How are you?!” Mwfany said. “We haven’t seen you all week, Glenda! Where’ve ew been?”

“I’m sorry; I’ve been busy. I had to go see my sister, she’s been poorly,” Glenda replied.

“Ah, there’s a shame,” Molly said. “I remember you saying about that, I hope she’s getting better.”

“Well, she’s –”

“But you missed church last Sunday, Glenda!” Mwfany said interrupting.

“She was away, Mwfany! Her sister was ill!” Molly protested. “Family is important.”

“Well is she feeling any better now?” Myfanwy asked in mock-belief.

“Yes, she’s slowly getting better –”

“I mean, to miss church, after all that’s happened, just to think of it,”

“But she hasn’t left the house in days,” Glenda finished.

“Who now; you or your sister?” Mwfany asked and Glenda looked at her with stony eyes.

The women walked through the town towards the church, passing Tom the Cobbler’s, who last winter cut and shaped the tops of old boots to make new soles for the children’s shoes so that they could still get to school in the snow – and in his window still hung the hand-painted slogan *you bring the laces and we’ll make boots to fit*, and passed Mrs Jones’ watching-window, where Molly held her tongue between her teeth. A tall, pale boy stood outside the closed door with his wet nose against the glass, his hair was oily and his skinny knees trembled in the cold. As they crossed over the small river they saw three other young boys huddled together, bent on their knees, elbows to the ground, flicking marbles across the floor at the foot of the bridge.

“They ought to be ashamed of themselves,” Mwfany growled.

“Who now?” Molly asked exaggerating.

"Their mothers! Boys shouldn't be sitting around up to no good, on a Sunday, they should be in church."

"They're only playing marbles," Molly argued.

"They're only sitting there, tearing holes in the knees of their trousers and blacking up their hands and clothes with all that dirt from the floor! It's not the proper thing to do, they should be in church!"

"The proper thing to do?" Molly scoffed. "They're only young!" She said without looking at the boys or at Myfanwy.

"Yes, but their mothers should know better, they obviously don't care."

"Who are they?" Glenda asked.

"It's Dewi Thomas, and the twins, Alwyn and Arwyn," Molly replied, and the boys watched the women pass by them with wide, silent eyes.

"Little sods, they are," Mwfany continued after they'd passed.

"Isn't Dewi the same age as your Polly?" Molly asked.

"They're in the same class in school," Mwfany answered.

"Maybe they're friends," Molly smirked. "And where is little Polly today? Is she at church, waiting for us already?"

"No," Mwfany snapped. "He's a little hell raiser that one, always fighting other boys and teasing girls; last week Polly said he was caught stealing fags from the shop, he's hardly ever in school, he mitches most days. Rhian's got her work cut out for her with that one. And to think, to let your children run around on a Sunday, instead of being in church, well."

"Well where is Polly?" Molly repeated. "*She's* not here."

"If you must know, Molly, her father has her. He's taken her to visit his father, he's dying."

"Why on Earth aren't you there with them?" Glenda exclaimed.

"I couldn't bare the sight of another body," Myfanwy sighed. "That doesn't mean Polly won't be right here by my side next week, mind. As she is every week, and will be."

"None of the children go to church really," Molly said. "Not since what happened."

"I suppose they've stopped seeing the need for it now," Glenda said with sympathy.

"But now is when they need it most!" Mwfany asserted.

"You can't exactly force them to go to church, can you?" Glenda countered. "If they don't want to go, you can't make them. They're only children."

"When I was their age I used to go regular – I'm telling you, ever since... this town has just lost its sense of what's right, and it's wrong of these parents to just give up on what's important for their children. Actually. No. It's not just the parents; this whole town has lost its morals, that Mary Mattress –"

"Morgan."

"Who?" Molly asked.

"Mary *Morgan* is running around the town giving herself to whichever man she finds!"

"How do you know that?" Molly asked.

“My Dai told me – he came home last night from the pub, “Oh,” he said: “Duw,” he said: “She’s been tommin’ ‘round that one –” Mwfany’s voice went deeper when she copied her husband.

“Oh that poor Huw! He loves that girl, god knows why, and she’s just tormenting him!” Glenda cried.

“Well, it’s none of our business; every story has two sides,” Molly said. “They shouldn’t be talking like that in the pub, anyway, gossiping like little girls. It’s nobody’s business but their own what they get up to in their lives.”

“Oh really?” Mwfany asked. “What about Thomas Llywelyn, he shacked up with that girl, Anna Morris, and now the poor young thing is pregnant! Probably terrified! And he’s just as bad as that Mary Mattress; he’s with a new woman every night! He’s got no responsibility, no loyalty. And I bet he’s just going to run off somewhere, or drink himself dead, just like every other man in this town. There’s no two sides, just the same story repeating itself.”

“You keep talkin’ like that and you’ll end up just like lonely Liliwen Dress,” Glenda said under her voice. As she looked up from her shoes she felt her eyes drawn down the road ahead of them, as far as she could see.

“She’s not lonely,” Molly interrupted. “She told me she has a man who writes letters to her every day, he says he loves her and he’s dying, but before he does he wants to marry her –” As Molly spoke Glenda’s eyes became more and more fixed to the empty road ahead.

“At her age!” Mwfany exclaimed.

“I think it’s romantic,” Molly said. “They’ve been writing to each other for years, she knows him from her childhood.”

“When did she tell you this?” Myfanwy asked sourly.

“She fitted me for a dress.”

“What dress? When?” Glenda asked in a daze, her feet almost unable to carry her.

“Not last night, was it?” Myfanwy asked. “What do you need now with a black dress?”

“A couple of weeks ago she did it, before it all,” Molly answered.

“I suppose then if you won’t be needing it, maybe you could lend it to Glenda? Looks as though she’s in need of one.” She opened her eyes as if resurrected, her pale lips tried to move but for a moment she could not breathe.

“I see Aubrey,” she broke, almost weeping, “there along the road.” And she pointed with one finger ahead. Following her finger the women saw up, along the long road, and all of the terraced houses with their curtains drawn. Dawdling down the pavementside, draped solely in mourning-black, two women shuffled from door to door of each house collecting whatever loose change from their neighbours in a black, plastic bucket.

“Who’s that?” Myfanwy asked through her teeth.

“Rhian,” Molly answered, “and Bronwyn.”

“Oh, God.”



The half-muffled bell tolled half in time with her passing footsteps down Windsor Street, so loud that every house in the village could hear, so low that it was felt between every wall in every room. Anna felt it in her heartbeat, she felt it prolonged, loud for a moment, then silent, still, then loud again. The church of Eglwysilan lay just off Windsor Street, over the Marble Bridge, passed Ilan Road and the haunted horse fields, over the pastures, surrounded by the trees. But the mourning toll rose high above the branches and the slate-tiled roofs, resonating throughout the valley.

The town was silent, the stores were empty. Some of the churchgoers stayed after the service to hear Father Edmund's ringing of the leathered bell but many left, overcome, overgrieved. Anna Morris wandered along the silent streets, stopping to look into the empty windows of Mrs Evans' shop, smelling no bread baking in Dai's bakery, until she reached Dai Butcher's shop and paused to smell the blood fresh in the air. No shame in a man like that, she heard herself say aloud. On a day like today. Enough death for a lifetime. She saw a lonely boy ahead of her at the other end of the street, his wet nose pressed against the glass of Mrs Jones' shop. She felt cold at the sight of him; her hands dropped to cradle her stomach as she saw three women approaching from the bridge and she gasped as she saw them walk right through the boy as if he wasn't there. One woman dressed in yellow, the other two in mourning-black, and the boy disappeared behind them. Her's met Molly's eyes along the way, she saw her faint smile as she quickly turned into the butcher's out of sight.

Dai Butcher's shop was an old, terraced building, bare, white brick with a wide glass front. An aged sign hung above the window reading 'Butchery' and two small blackboards lay against the brick below the glass with 'Welsh Beef', 'Welsh Lamb' scrawled white in messy chalk. Legs of lamb and pig and calves hang from hooks in the front; packets of liver, kidneys and bacon sit on the shelf at eye-level along the street-window all with brown price-tags dangling from pins pierced into the meat. Anna held her breath as she passed through the door. Inside it was small and cramped. A long, white counter stretched along one side covered by a dusty sheet of glass. Dai stood behind the counter between the register and the large, brass scales, stained with blood; he wore a long, grey moustache and a white apron around his waist, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows with remnants of meat still pressed beneath his fingernails. He looked up at her and smiled as she stopped to inspect the meat behind the counter. A half-carcass, she knew not what, hung from the feet by a sharp hook in one corner; bowls of meat, minced, beneath the glass; bowls of bowels, tripe and heart beside it. She felt her child, lifeless and cold, inside her and suppressed her urge to cry.



Warming in the midsummer-morning the school year is nearly finished and the wild flowers begin to flood the fields in great rivers of pastel colours. The school bell rang loudly and the last of the children half-hurried, half-asleep, through the streets in their grey shorts and skirts, carrying their bags over one small shoulder, running hastily across the roads without looking both ways. Dylan Jenkins and Polly Pritchard met secretly behind a low stone wall and hand-in-hand ran quickly and unseen amongst the trees off the street, away from the other children and onwards into the open, green field beside the river. As Dylan ran, his hand gently holding onto Polly's small, pink fingers, he kicked his feet through the fallen leaves, those which were once green were now dry-brown, a fading echo. He and Polly giggled and as he turned to face her, the very moment their eyes met, he stopped running, wrapped his arms around her waist and fell to the ground pulling her down with him as they rolled over one another – another one over rolled - and onto the grass beside the water.

- The sky is so bright today. What does that cloud look like to you? Polly asked, pointing to the sky.
- It looks like you, Dylan said laughing, looking not at the clouds.
- Is it pretty? Polly asked with blushing freckles.
- It's beautiful.
- How long will you love me? Polly asked.
- 'Til the moon turns to crystal and the oceans dry and die.
- What if you forget me? Polly asked looking down, plucking grass from the ground with her fingers.
- I never will.
- What if I forget you? Polly asked seriously.

Dylan held out onto Polly's hand and kissed her softly on her lips, holding onto that brief moment before Polly pushed him away and laughed.

- You idiot, that was my first kiss, Dylan Jenkins.
- Will you ever forgive me?
- I'm not quite sure yet, you'll have to wait and see, Polly laughed, then rose to her feet and ran swiftly towards the water.
- Where are you going? Dylan asked.
- To swim in the ocean, before it dies. Polly walked over to the river and sat beside it resting her naked feet in the flowing stream, she sings sweetly and softly:

*But little Willy Wee who took me on his knee
Little Willy Weazel is the man for me.*

- That's nice.
- It's sad! Polly objected. *Little Willy* died. And now she's all alone, Polly said in an exaggerated tone.

- You make it sound nice, Dylan answered in an unsteady voice, moving to sit beside her. What else can you sing?
- Nothing happy.
- It doesn't have to be happy.

*When ev'ning is closing on mountain and dale,
And darkness o'er shadows our home in the vale.
The field flowers drooping, as fast fades the light,
Give warning foreboding, the sadness of night.*

As she sang in the sunlight her voice echoed through dingles to the tallest of the trees and all the hidden birds and squirrels, daintily leavesdropping from their nests above.

- You sound like home, Dylan said slowly. You're really good.
- Thank you. My father sings in the choir with the other miners, and my mother was named after the hymn. They're always singing in my house.
- I know, aye; I always yeur your mother singing when she's putting the washing on the line.
- She tells me to stay away from you, she does. She tells me that you lie.
- Me? No, I never lie.
- Do you really think I'm beautiful then, like the cloud?
- Much more beautiful than the cloud! You're so beautiful I think you come from a coloured city in the sky, high up, higher than all the clouds and higher above where the rain falls, so that you see the water just floating there in the sky.
- I dunno, my mam says you're no good, Polly says, smiling now.
- I am no good, only after one thing I am, just like all the other boys.

Polly kissed him on the cheek. That's all you'll get, she whispered and ran through the river; the water reached half way up her school skirt, leaving a high-water mark on the soft-grey, dark-grey polyester. Her arms stretched upwards over her hair until finally she reached onto the other side where she put back on her small, black doll shoes, then turned and looked over her shoulder to blow a kiss at Dylan before hurrying into the trees. After a moment of hesitation he quickly chased after her, running through the water with his socks and shoes still on; looking only straight ahead, stumbling over his own excitement.

- What are you doing later? Polly asked.
- We're all coming up yeur later, gunna camp and build a big fire.
- Really?
- Yeah, everyone is bringing a blanket each and Alwyn is bringing plums from Mrs Evans' and Mrs Phillips made us all Welsh cakes, she's wrapped them up in newspaper for Morgan to bring with him, Dylan said. He'll probably forget them, mind, he always does. Or keep them for himself.

Polly smiled as he spoke and he saw her, he saw how the cold wind had turned her nose and cheeks red, he saw in her soft face those green eyes, prasine in the sunlight, as if they were

two straight cuts of pure emerald and he wondered how few people in the world had such green eyes – Polly Pritchard was the only girl in the village with green eyes, and he realised in that moment just how perfect and rare she was.

- Does Morgan still fancy Caitlin? Polly asked.
- Oh hell, aye, she’s all he ever talks about! Does my head in.
- Ah, I think it’s sweet! I saw him waiting for her this morning, before I met you.
- She doesn’t like ‘im though, does she?
- No, she’s in love with his brother. She told me yesterday.
- Gareth!
- She says he’s much more handsome. But I don’t think Morgan is ugly.
- Oh, he is! Dylan said. We call him Morfan, he smirked.
- That’s not funny! Polly said laughing.

They walk along the trodden path through the woods which lead to a small plot of open grass in the centre of the village. Dylan stops beside a wild blackberry bush and plucks a handful and eats them, handing some to Polly in his open palm.

- Are they good?
- I prefer the red ones, Dylan said, they’re sweeter.
- I wonder what everyone is doing at school, Polly said in a rising tone, do you think we should have gone in? Will we get in trouble? She asked, eating the blackberries. Dylan looked at her and smiled as they walked away together through their own tiny fairy-tale.



“Polly, Love! Come down a minute,” Mwfany called up the stairs to her hiding daughter. “Yes?” Polly asked sleepily, descending the narrow, carpet stairs.

The coals were reddening softly behind the fire screen; Mwfany was wearing a woollen cardigan, drab and grey, over a floral dress and she laid her legs out on the sofa, faded pink from age and cigarette dust, Polly cross-legged on the rug beside her.

“Your father’s gone down the club again. In fact he’s been there the whole day since I’ve been back from church. And I don’t care when he’s coming back, or even if he is. Instead, I thought we could have a girl’s night,” Mwfany finished, smiling. “We can go down the square and get some chips, I know it’s your favourite,” she quickly added.

“Okay,” Polly replied, one eye covered by her curly hair.

“But first, we need a talk, Love. I haven’t been very open before now and I’m sorry, but I want to try.”

“What do you mean?” Polly asked.

"I want to know how you feel, Love. I know how it is to be a twelve year old girl, I know the feelings," Mwfany began to smile coyly. "And I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything, and if you have any questions you can ask me."

"I know, Mam," Polly muttered through gritted teeth.

When Polly spoke with other children of her age, especially her heart-warming Dylan, she assumed a more mature and imposing voice: only with her mother did she ever feel comfortable in her youth.

"Do you have any questions? About boys?"

"No, Mam. We learned most of it in school, and –"

"And the older girls probably tell you some things, I know, Love," Mwfany laughed.

"Caitlin's kissed four boys already," Polly said and they giggle together, sheltered from the raindrops pattering on the windowpane.

"Caitlin's a good girl, isn't she? Mwfany asked.

"Yeah, she's nice."

"I'm glad you've got nice friends, Dear," Mwfany smiled. "But it's not just about kissing, Love, you're too young for most of that anyway! You know that you should only be with a boy if he makes you happy, don't you? Otherwise you shouldn't waste your time with them! Life's too short. Look what happens. You're the most beautiful girl in the world, Polly, and you never need to let any boy upset you, ever."

"I know, Mam," kneeling still beneath her dotting eyes, Polly avoids her mother's gaze, searching the walls around her she closely inspects the framed, family photos, the wooden love spoons nailed above the fireplace and the thick, sooted drapes drawn not in mourning.

"Are there any boys that do make you happy?" Mwfany asked. "Are there any boys you like?"

"There was," Polly said slowly.

"Oh, really?" Mwfany grinned. "Who's that then? Do I know him; is he a boy from school?" Polly ignores her. "The most important thing is does he make you laugh?"

"Yeah, he used to make me laugh a lot."

"Who is it then?" Mwfany asked.

"Dylan Jenkins," Polly answered, then passed a moment of numbing silence.

"Oh, my Dear!" Mwfany cried softly as she fell to her knees beside her daughter and held her hand tightly in her arms. "Why didn't you tell me, Polly?" She asked and as she noticed a tear in Polly's eye she too began to cry.

"Because you told me to stay away from him," Mam, Polly answered, almost unable to talk now.

"Oh, Love! I didn't mean it; I should never have said that, I'm so sorry," Mwfany said, hugging Polly tightly in her lap. "He was a lovely, lovely, little boy and if he made you happy that's all that would have mattered. I'm so sorry, Polly. We should have spoken about this sooner, you should have told me."

"It's okay, Mam. Me and Caitlin talk about him every day, and Morgan. We all do. I'm okay, honest," Polly said, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Love. I’ve been worrying every day about Dylan’s mother, and Morgan’s, I didn’t even think...”

“It’s okay, Mam.”

“You kids have really been there for each other, haven’t you?” Mwfany asked proudly.

“Yeah; we talk about it every day.”

“I’m so proud of you, Dear. You’re all grown up now, aren’t you?” Mwfany said, holding onto her daughter again as she cries. “Would you like to come see Glenda with me tomorrow? She’s been so upset and so lonely. I think it would mean a lot for her to talk to you. To remember him.”

“Do I have to tell her that I love Dylan?” Polly asked, laughing, sniffing.

“No, you don’t have to, Love. Just tell her the times he made you laugh,” Myfany said warmly. “She really misses him.”

“I do too,” Polly softly looking down.

“I know, Love,” Mwfany said, holding Polly still in her lap. “We all do, it’s just the way life goes sometimes. It’s so sad.”

“I know,” Polly said. “Will you come with me?”

“No, Love,” Myfany answered, flatly. “I’m sorry, I can’t go there...” then she added finally in a tight, happy voice: “I’ll go get us our chips.”



Bawdy and boisterous, beer-bellied and bedraggled, breathing heavily from his plump-purple cheeks Dai Phillips’ head bobbed between the crowd beneath the high, bare ceiling of the Pantaeg Arms until he found the face of Banon the barman then dropped his arse on the barside stool.

“Same beer. Same cup,” he barked over the many voices.

The bar was long and laden with a great pile of empty glasses so that the centre of the wood bowed beneath the weight and the thick ash-smoke about them clung to the dust already piled on the old mirrors. A bronze bell hung above the bar at one corner, beside the tall, brass candelabra and a small, plastic box filled with loose coins sat at the other. The floor was filled with the muddied feet of what seemed to be almost every man of the village; three tall figures stood hunched and huddled in the farthest corner from the crowd, who all moved and mouthed as one, and Dai sat stout, stalking the three men with his one good eye while his other fell downwards into his amberglass, smelling of ambergris.

“They shouldn’t be in here, that lot,” Dai said to Banon his barman, loud so they could hear him. “You should be closed to the public today.”

“It’s tough times, Dai,” He replied. “We can’t afford to turn people away.”

“I bloody know better than anyone it’s tough times! Cheeky sod. That don’t mean they have the right to hear what goes on in here tonight. It’s not for them.”

“Alright, Dai, alright. They’re not here for you lot anyway. They won’t be listening.”

Dai’s shoulders shrugged and he waved him away with his heavy hand. He sat with both feet planted firmly in the ground, his legs were two great trunks of oak and his belly was a barrel of ale; his five meaty fingers wrapped his pint glass and with his other hand he wiped the sweat from his face, scratched deep inside one nostril with his fingernail then smeared it along the underside of his stool, listening behind himself to the faint murmuring coming from the far corner. Nighttime fell slowly over the valley that night; the moon and sun shared the same skyward gaze, high above; and the setting stars and purple clouds passed so close that night that it seemed you could reach out and touch them. The wind soon became cold and wet, but inside the Arms, between its four white walls, the warmth from the burning candles and gathered bodies filled the room with a suffocating heat and Dai Phillips embraced the riot around him as a homely comfort. Silently and solemnly inwards he strolled, Alban Thomas, dressed head-to-foot in bombazine black, and the noise of the bar rose even higher as the miners shouted to him over and across one another:

“Alban!”

“We see you there, Alban,”

“Can’t keep hiding from us,”

“Let us have it now.”

“Spill the truth and let’s be done with it.”

Dodging their calls and lunging arms he passed through the crowd and stopped beside Dai Phillips, eagerly adjusting his papers on the slop-top of the bar, pushing aside the empty glasses in his way.

“Sorry, Alban!” Banon bayed, rushing over to clear away the empty glasses. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Aye, I’ll need one. Bitter,” and Banon obeyed.

“What’s all this then?” Dai asked, reading his papers under the dim light. “*Windsor Colliery: Incident Report*,” his hoarse voice intoned and the noise again rose around them. “Never understand why they named it after that old crow. What does it say?”

“Not good,” Alban sighed. “Who are them there?” He asked, nodding towards the huddled trio in the corner.

“That tall one is Tom Llewellyn, brothers with Lloyd. I don’t know the others. I’d tell them to leave but it doesn’t seem right, being his brother an’ all.”

“Why are they here? They know what today is.”

“I told you, Banon!” Dai bellowed into his beer as he took a swig. “They shouldn’t be here.”

“Why are they here?” Alban asked him, walking back with beer in hand.

“I really shouldn’t say,” began Banon with unease.

“Don’t piss me off now, Banon,” Dai warned, “not today of all days.”

“One of them’s pregnant,” he whispered, leaning in, “they’re trying to figure out which.”

“Even I can help you there, Butt!” Dai cackled. “You never were too sharp, were you?”

“Not *them*, but her. They’ve all had *her*, now she says she’s pregnant. They’re now just trying to map out when.”

“Who?”

“Them three there in the corner,” Banon answered confused.

“Christ,” Dai moaned with exhaustion. “Who her? Her who?”

“Oh! No, I really shouldn’t say.”

“Come on, mun! We need some bit of cheering up on a day like today,” Dai persisted.

“Mary Morgan,” he said under his breath.

“Who’s that now?” Alban asked half-intrigued.

“Mattress it is,” Dai replied over his shoulder, “big brothers with that farmboy lives in a byre.”

“Good God, she really is, that one,” Alban said and watched the three men closely. “Not the first time neither. Left her firstborn on a doorstep, barefoot. She did.”

“I saw her yesterday,” Banon belched, “big as a balloon she was. Already. Big as her brother was; you’re right there, Alban, following in the firstborns footsteps, she certainly is.”

“Enough now. You standing there bloody gossiping all night like a priest,” Dai said sternly. “Go fetch us another drink, else I might wring you for the want of a pint. I reckon he sips from my glass when I’m not looking,” he says to Alban, watching him as he pours another pint. “It’s always empty when I turn my back. Enough with women’s-talk – go now, Alban, tell us what you’ve heard.”

Alban turned unsteadily from the bar, his low eyes glazed over the bleak crowd of faces, smoking and drinking, mouthing and moving as one. They were tired faces, worn and worked; white eyes looked back at him, empty hands and tattered clothes, bitter men in whispered voices and he trembled at the sight of them.

Hearing Banon’s heels banging behind the bar behind his back Alban turned to watch him as he handed Dai another beer and then again another.

“How many’s that he’s had now?” He asked the barman coldly.

“I wouldn’t know,” he confessed, “all morning they’ve been in here drinking.”

“Never you bloody mind how many I’ve ‘ad!” Dai mumbled to the back of Alban’s head, turning again to face the crowd, all eagerly awaiting. “You gunna get up there any time soon or what?” Asks Dai.

His feet floated towards the centre of the room as the men slowly surrounded him and their worried faces fell down towards his. The three huddled men remained huddled in the corner, perhaps more worried even, as they tried desperately to count down days on their six shaking hands, as the rest of the men waited and watched with despair for the sound of Alban’s voice, elevated now on an old sugarcrate.

“I’ve been told,” Alban stuttered, “Well, I’ve been to see the manager,” he started again slowly, “The whole mine has been shut down for investigations, all of it. All week they’ve had people in an out and none of them have found anything yet.”

“Aye, newspapers been up there an all I expect,” a miner interrupted.

“Haven’t even had their funerals yet, poor sods,”

"I've got the reports here," Alban raises his papers, "and they all say *On-going Investigation*. They say the official cause of the blast was most likely due to the methane coming out from under the rocks. But till every inch of it has been checked and made safe again the pit won't re-open."

"You can't tell us when it will reopen?"

"I can't even tell you if it *will* reopen," Alban confessed. "All I know is what he's told me and what's been written in these papers."

"You're lying," another miner shouted. "They've filled in the shaft, I heard them do it!"

"What are we supposed to do for money?" Dai Phillips grumbled, until now he'd sat silently drinking away the noise around him.

"They've opened food-banks in the village hall," Alban answered, "But legally they cannot employ us, not till the pit's been declared safe and working again. Which means they cannot pay us."

"Oh give off on that," Dai protested.

"They know it aint safe," Gareth Edwards added, "We know it aint safe, but what else is there for us to do? There's no other jobs."

"Bloody worse than Bryn you are!"

"There's nothing else I can say," Alban submitted, "I know as little as all of you, all I know is he said: we'll check to see it's safe,"

"And we know it aint safe!" Gareth repeated.

"Then expect what we know will happen, what they're too scared to say," Alban countered, "We know the answer. We know how they work, we know it's not safe – once there's a blast that's it, once there's a death that's it, it becomes too much about their money and not about our own. It's not worth their time anymore. It's not worth more people dying."

The crowd fell silent. Alban apologised and stepped down from the crate. The mood fell deeply sombre, the men avoided each other's gaze; some cried, some left, some stomped on their stools but nobody spoke, nobody broke the silence. Until, stumbling and slurring, drunken Dai Milk opened wide the two doors and inwardly marched between the morose and the mourning.

"Who's died in here then?" he asked suppressing a belch. "Well? Why's it so dull?" he shouted, addressing every man in the bar. "Pint, please, Banon," he waved to the barman, moving staggardly towards him.

Dai Phillips noisily stood from his stool, standing between Dai and the bar, lifelessly looking into the smaller man's eyes: "You'd better leave now, Dai, before something happens."

Gareth Edwards quickly hurried between them: "It's a private meeting tonight," he said in a softer tone. The miners stood calmly watching the three men.

"Who are you," Dai started, falling back, "the two of you, to tell me what to do?" Dai drunkenly protested. "You can't tell me what I can and can't do," he turned to face the crowd and grinned, then back at the two men: "you," pointing at Gareth, "whose wife's a

new man wrapped around her waist every time I see her. And you,” pointing at Dai, “If I ever again see that you have touched her, I’ll kill you.”

Dai’s heavy body rose as he lifted his two arms above his head, quickly Gareth pinned them down and Dai Pritchard and Alban rushed to throw Dai Milk through the double doors.

“I’ll fucking kill him!” Dai roared. “I’ll murder that bloody milkman! Bring him here!” He struggled against Gareth until the doors shut closed again. Alban and Pritchard re-entered.

“Stop now, Dai, for fuck sake,” Gareth snapped, unable to hold his temper. Most of the crowd had thinned, some leaving with drunken Dai Milk, but the remaining looked closely at Gareth as he spoke: “What did he mean?” He asked aloud. “Tell me!” addressing anyone and everyone. “What did he mean about my wife?”

Dai sat back on his stool, retreating into his drink, as Gareth now in the middle of the floor, entreating: “Who knew?” Alban silently stood forward. “Tell me his name,” Gareth ordered with wild, fury eyes.

“I can’t,” Alban murmured. At this Gareth threw himself between the bodies of the miners and out through the heavy doors. Alban saw the sad face of Thomas, still huddled in the corner, and wearily shook his head.



“Love, I was worried about you all day today,” Rhian whispered to her tired husband.

“Why were you worried?” He asked, his grey head face down on the pillow.

“I was scared to ever lose you,” She answered and rested her head on his bare back. Such comfort, she thought to herself; lying in our naked bed at night, the cool wind blowing through the window onto our warm bodies, together in the soft sheets and the sweet smell of the lavender candles melting beside us, dim in the dark. Such safety, she thought. Such memories of when she was young, and not so young, but always happy and always in love. The joy of love and the sheer luck: always grateful now, I’ll never take him or him for granted again, not ever. Not now.

“What did you do today, dear?” He asked, turning over to hold her hand.

“I spent all day with Bronwyn again collecting for the widows.”

“Did you raise much money?” Alban’s eyes looked at her, wide like a kitten, waiting for her every word.

“No, not really. But most people have given all they can already, we can’t blame them.”

“How’s Bronwyn? Is she coping?” He stroked her hair.

“I couldn’t ask her,” Rhian said shaking her head. She closed her eyes and her chubby cheeks turned red.

“Well how does she seem?”

“She acts strong, and the boys seem strong, but you can tell she’s lonely, and she’s making herself tired going round all the houses every day but she’s too proud to stop.”

“Well, gives her something to do I suppose,” Alban said, sitting up straight.

“Especially Sundays, she’s stopped going to church now.”

“Really? What about the boys?”

“They’ve stopped too. Bryn never really wanted them to go anyway and she thought that now he’s gone she can’t make them go because it’d be wrong.”

“The poor dear.”

“I feel awful for her, she’s been so strong for the boys and it’s not good for her to pretend everything is okay when it isn’t. She must feel so alone right now; I hate to imagine what it feels like, what if I lost you, Alban? She asked with a quiver in her soft voice. What if you were down there when it fell in?”

“Well I wasn’t. That’s all that matters; you don’t need to think about what could have happened, you’ll just upset yourself over nothing.”

“I’d be so lost without you,” Rhian’s voice was kind; she held onto his hands and pulled his arm around her waist, under the warmth of their bedsheets. Please don’t go down there again, Dear. Don’t leave me again.”

“You’ll never be without me, Love,” he said, and kissed her forehead.

“Do you remember when we were just married and we went to Tenby –” She starts to giggle and with her beautiful and eager smile, she whispered: “when we swam naked in the sea and slept on the sand?”

“The happiest time of my life.”

“Do you remember when we were both thirteen and my mother caught us in the toolshed?”

“And I begged her not to tell your father,” he laughs loudly. “Yes, I do remember.”

“And you told her that you were in love with me and that you’d promised you’d always love me.”

“Aye, I remember.”

“I remember too,” she said. “I remember when Dewi was born and you stayed in the hospital for six days with me because I was ill and even when we got back you still didn’t go back down the pit for another week. You stayed here with me.”

“Of course I did.”

“And all the other wives brought a whole weeks worth of shopping over for us and Molly Edwards said that she’d look after Dewi if I ever needed any rest.”

“They were very kind to us.”

“I saw Molly earlier today; she was walking through town on her way to church.”

“She still goes to church?”

“I don’t know why she bothers. She’s a wonderful woman but she’s no Christian.”

“Why’d you say that? What did she do?”

“Nothing. She’s always kind to me, but she was engaged to another man, Alban! Only a month ago.”

“You can’t be engaged and married at the same time,” he said laughing.

“She was going to leave Gareth, to be with this new guy.”

“Who?” He asked, interested now.

“Lloyd Llywelyn.”

“Oh, no!” He began laughing loudly again. “Who’s told you that, now?”

“Liliwen the Dress – and she has it on good authority; she spoke to Mrs Jones, down at the shop, told her Molly came in one day wanting some antihistamine. Only one reason why.”

“What about Gareth then?”

“I don’t think *he* ever knew about it – I don’t suppose he needs to know now.”

“Hasn’t Molly told him?”

“I don’t think so. Should she?”

“Well if *you* know, I’m sure he’ll find out soon enough.”

“Well it doesn’t matter, and Lloyd’s gone now isn’t he? I just don’t understand it. *And* Dai and Eilwen Phillips! At least Molly’s little tryst happened *before* the explosion, but why would Dai be so cruel to Eilwen after all this horror has happened, now when she needs him most?”

“That’s different, Dai lost his son.”

“And so did Eilwen.”

“I know she did, they’re just dealing with it in their own different ways and thankfully we don’t know –”

“He *drinks* too much, Alban!” Rhian interrupted. “He always has.”

“Rhian, we don’t know what it’s like to lose a child, we can’t judge them.”

“All I know is that every day since that explosion Dai has drank himself sick and pushed Eilwen further away and it’s all just made it that much harder for her to cope. That’s not what a good husband does.”

“You’re right, it’s not.”

“And because of Dai, they’ve lost their Gareth now as well.”

“What do you mean? What’s happened to Gareth?”

“He’s ran away after Morgan died. Dai drank himself stupid, started fights with Eilwen every night and Gareth probably couldn’t take it anymore the poor boy, nobody knows where he is now.”

“Duw!”

“Poor Eilwen.”

“You forget about the kids, don’t you? How do you think Dewi is coping?”

“Probably not well. That’s probably why he’s been acting worse lately, he’s probably so confused, the poor boy.”

“I’m going to go check on him, make sure he’s asleep.”

“Okay, Love.”



The rain taps loudly on the rusted-tin-roof of Dai Milk's farmhouse and runs down his skewing gutters, through his overgrown garden, passed the field where the horses graze and down the steep, stone road into the village. From the cow-stable you can see the whole valley and the next valley over, but now, Dai sits alone at his dining table, still awake in these final hours, whilst the village sleeps in their tranquil night below.

Peppered kidney is no good, don't know why I tried it, knew I wouldn't like it, much too rrough. And this rain is doing my soddin' 'ead in an all, don't know why I can never go on 'olidays. All I want is to go somewhere 'ot, and dry – *meeeeerghh* – sick of this soddin' rain and these soddin' cows – *meeeeerghh* – whats wrong?! Are you 'ungry?! Ah you thirsty?! I'll do these dishes tomorrow, wont 'urt to leave them on the side for one night. Doesn't matter anyway – *meeeeerghh* – 'old on now! Where's the key to that poxy barn. There! Hello, you! What do you want then? Are you 'ungry? Ah, fancy a cwtch is it? Alright, come yeur now. There. A nice cwtch. I've missed you I have. I was just thinking about you, I was. Ah, don't look at me like that, bach. I been busy, that's all – *meeeeerghh* – alright, fine! You've made your point, but you don't have to talk to me like that, what? What's that look on you for, what are you – *meeeeerghh* – oh, that's just typical, that is! You really want – right now? You're being unreasonable and I'm better than this and I'm better than you, you're just wasting your time with Dai, you're just – *meeeeerghh* – oh, don't cry now, you're the one made me say it! No, because I'm *not* sorry. Crying now, are you? what? No, don't go! Eilwen! Wait! Trot, trot, trot. The stupid cow. Nos da, Eilwen!

He dreams now, asleep in the same single-sized bed that his father carved for him by hand when he was a boy, his feet hang slightly off the edge of his cotton mattress, but mostly the bed has not outgrown him.

- Dai.
- Who's that? I can't see.
- It's your mother, Dear.
- Oh, Mam! I miss you every day.
- I know, Sweetheart.
- Where did I go wrong, Mam? I didn't want this.
- I know, Dear, but that's life, there's nothing you can do about it.
- I dunno what to do or where to start.
- Are you happy?
- I'm lonely; but all I ever wanted was to make you happy, and proud. I'm sorry I didn't give you a grandchild.
- That's okay, Dear; I never was good with babies.
- Aye, I know – Dad once said that you'd dropped me down the stairs once and fell asleep watching me on the same day! He misses you too, Mam.
- How is he, your father?
- I don't see him much.

- You should, I know how much you missed me after I went. You'll miss him too.
- I really miss you, Mam.
- It'll be okay, David. Just please talk to him, for me.
- I'll tell him you said hello then shall I?
- Ta ra, Love.



The final bell rang and the children of the village rushed out of the double doors into the street – chasing over the small patch of grass outside the school gates and across the road, squeezing allatonce into Mrs Jones' corner shop to buy penny-sweets. Dylan and Polly hurried amongst the tiny parade, hiding from Mr Williams the whipperine as he stalks through the narrow streets of the village, his weary eyes looking over his heavy, round spectacles.

Running now, Dylan ahead, still holding onto Polly's little paw, (she laughs in her sweet way) away from the school and the other children.

- Where to we going? Polly asked calmly.
- Alwyn and Arwyn's house. We're meeting everybody there now.

Over that small stone wall again, onto Windsor Street and skipping through the heart of the town, running quicker now, passed Mrs Evans' cornershop, who hates Mrs Jones; passed Tom Cobbler, who early every year gave both Dylan and Polly their school shoes on the book; passed Mr Brown's bakery, where the sweet smell of cinnamon and sugar slows the hungry couple; passed Liliwen the Dressmaker's shop, where tall, faceless mannequins stand upright and dressed in the window and scare the schoolchildren; passed Dai Butcher's, who hates to be called Dai, Polly holding her breath as she passes to stop the smell of blood and finally turning left at Mad Mary's house, too scared to look in through her window as they pass, and up the hill through the narrow paths which go behind the backs of all the houses, looking over the brown fences into their gardens; seeing the wooden pegs pinch the clothes and bed sheets to the thin wire-line as they dance in the wind and smelling the leaks and onions and potatoes as the mothers cook their dinner and finally onto Clos Morgan Gruffydd, they see Bryn Mills, shirtless in his garden, digging the earth around his roses and hiding in the bushes of the neighbouring garden are Dewi Thomas and Morgan Phillips. And Bryn sang:

*And all the greens of the valley
Were coloured white with snow,*

- Watch this, now. No! Come yeur, so you can see! Dewi said quickly as Dylan and Polly slowly approached the bush, also crouching down for cover.

Dewi took out from his pocket a small plastic, yellow tube and unscrewed the lid, dipping the pink top into the soapy water.

- Where to did you get those bubbles? Dylan asked.
- Mrs Jones' shop, I pinched them this morning before school, Dewi said laughing, then perched his head above the fence, carefully hiding his pink face in the green branches of the bush.
- When this morning? Morgan asked from below.
- It's clear, Dewi whispered loudly, ignoring Morgan's question. He's looking the other way.

And the children copied Dewi exactly, slowly rising to their feet and perching their heads just over the fence, at eye level, and watching silently as Dewi blew what seemed like hundreds of soapy, round bubbles over the fence into Bryn's garden, floating sweetly in the windless air, still and soft in the sunlight, with tiny rainbows bouncing off every one.

- Bryn! Bronwyn called from the open window. Look behind you, she laughed.
- Ha! What's this now then? Bryn asked as he turned to see that his garden and the sky had been flooded with thousands of bubbles. Bronwyn! Come out yeur, Love. Good God!

Bronwyn saw the heads of the giggling children and laughed as she walked through the open door at the front of the house. She stood beside Bryn and put her arm around his waist.

- Well I hope it doesn't last like this forever, Bryn said loudly. They'll kill all the flowers, mun!

Alwyn and Arwyn appeared at the open door of their house and the rest of the children jumped from the bush, over the fence, and ran after them through the open house laughing.

- Duw, the swine, Bryn said under his breath as he put his arm around Bronwyn and she laughed as he pulled her towards him.

- Hurry up! Alwyn said as he helped to pull Arwyn onto the top of the old wooden tool shed at the end of their garden.
- Quick, before he sees us! Dewi said.
- Who's got the bag? Arwyn asked, reaching his hand down.
- I do, Morgan said and he passed Arwyn a faded, old pillow case.

Alwyn and Arwyn, both balancing on the slanted roof, leaned over the tall wooden fence and plucked the purple plums from Mrs Evans' tree in the adjoining garden.

- What if she sees us? Polly asked.
- Ah, she won't see us; she's so old she's nearly blind! Dylan said and the boys laughed.
- You're taking too long! Dewi said. Morg, help me up! And Dewi struggled on top of Morgan, then onto the roof and then quickly helped to fill the bag.

- Why don't you climb up, Morgan? Polly asked.
- He fell off once and broke his arm, now he's too scared to come up! Alwyn said loudly so that all the boys could hear him.
- Shut up, Alwyn, that's not true! I'm not scared! Morgan argued.
- Why are you taking so many? Polly asked Dylan.
- There's lots of us all going camping later, Morgan answered. And we want to make sure we get enough for all of us. But I doubt there won't be enough food for anyone extra though.
- She's in the window! Dylan shouted.

And the three boys ran and jumped off of the shed, rolling onto the grass and all of them then spilling purple plums out of the pillow case as they rushed through the house again and out through the front garden, passed Bryn and across the road, into the bushes at the foot of the mountain.

As Bryn stands in his garden, still half-watching the children as they run up the mountain, he sees Mrs Evans approaching from the street.

- Your boys were up on the shed again, stealing plums from my tree! Mrs Evans said in a shrill voice.
- Well, I didn't see them, He replied. It must have been the buzzards again.
- Bryn, you need to fix those boys, or else I'm going to call the police.
- Who they hell you think you're talking to, now? Coming over here to my home. They're only boys, mun! Its only one or two plums! Let them enjoy themselves. Nobody's getting hurt.
- One day I'm going to do something about them! Mrs Evans said, walking away from the garden.
- Duw, the swines.



Grey clouds lowly formed and covered the moonlight, but underneath their shadow the night-sky is a glowing blue. A brown owl flies close over the field behind Liliwen's old, quarry-stone house as she sleeps and dreams in darkness.

- Is it warm there, or cold? Asks Liliwen the Dressmaker, the old bones of her hands rattling together.
- It's warm, Love. But it could be warmer, a voice answers in the darkness.
- Are the others there with you? She asks. I would warm your bedsheets if only I were there.
- Oh, aye, sometimes they are, sometimes they're not, he answers.
- I miss you, my love.
- I miss you too. Lovely, little Lily.

- I'm so lonely here now, without you.
- I know, Dear. But you don't need to be.
- What do you mean? She asks.
- You don't need to be sad my Love. Not now. You know I'm here now and that I'm warm. He laughs in the darkness. Now you can be happy. It hurts me to see you so miserable.
- Then I won't be.
- Good. Just pass the time and be happy.
- But I'm so bored and lonely here; I want only to be with you. All I have is you.
- Never be bored, Lilly Dear. Be wild again! Like when we were young. Go see all the wide world. Please, dear... enjoy yourself before you go. Don't be sad for me.
- What do you do to pass the time? She asks and he laughs again. Do you still sing?

*The wind blows hard
On the flowers plight,
But we shall shelter
In the soft bower's light.*

De Dee, de de Dee, Dee de

*I'll wait for you
With kindness my dear
We'll together once more
You've nothing to fear.*

- I miss hearing you sing.
- And I miss you in the nights, he whispered.
- Where do you sleep? She asked.
- At the foot of your bed, my Dear. Every night.

Liliwen woke suddenly, her bedroom walls glowed moon-white and through the open window the grey clouds had gone now. She looked down to the foot of her bed and saw nothing but cried with joy.

During those earliest hours of the new day when the air feels the coldest and the village seems the most silent; in this eerie hour Glenda Jenkins sleeps awake, alone and silently in her empty house, Din also asleep, curled beneath her hollow bedframe. She hears the whispers through the darkness:

- Dylan, is that you? Aubrey? She asks, her slight hands trembling.

- I'm cold, Mam.
- Dylan?
- I'm scared, Mam. It's dark, I want to come home.
- Oh, my dear! Trying desperately not to cry. Please don't be scared child.
- It's cold here; I taste dirt in my mouth. Please let me come home, Mam.
- Oh, Love, I wish I could. I wish I could let you – there's nothing I can do. But I promise you, you're safe, Dylan – don't be scared, please, Love, for me, be brave.
- Okay.
- Is your father there with you?
- Sometimes. But I never see him though; it's always dark here, like now.
- He'll look after you, Love, you're safe with him.
- There's things I can't remember.
- What things, Love?
- What's my puppy's name?
- Din, Love. You named him. You really don't remember? You were so excited when you first saw him and we brought him home.
- Where do the birds above our house fly to? What time was school in the morning... Where are my friends now, Mam?
- Oh, Dylan.
- Where is Polly?
- Polly who, Love?
- Tell me how she looks when she laughs. Does she still laugh?
- Yes, Dear, of course.
- What colour was her hair there? Does she still blush when she sneezes? Does she remember me?
- Of course she does, Sweetheart, we all do.
- You won't forget me, will you, Mam?
- Never, Dear. I miss you every single day. Her heart and soul exhausted, she weeps.
- I hear you, Mam, every morning, every night. I hear you crying, I know you're sad.
- Of course I am, Sweetheart, I miss you, I miss your father.
- Please go see Sian... she misses you.
- How do you know that?
- She told me.
- You spoke to your sister? When?
- Last night, just like I'm speaking to you. She wants to see you and I think it will make you happy again. I haven't seen you happy in ages.
- Okay, Dear, I will. Where is she?
- I don't know. I only hear her voice, but she asked about you. She sounded sad as well.
- I don't know where to find her. Glenda cries.
- Please try.

- I will.
- Promise?
- I promise, Sweetheart.

Four doors down from Glenda, the opposite side of the river, inside the endhouse on Llan Road, Dai Phillips and his wife Eilwen are also awake; she reads alone in her bed as Dai moves heavily from one room to another, loudly dragging their furniture across the floor.

- What are you looking for? Eilwen asked in a tired voice.

After a passing of silence, Dai re-enters the bedroom and violently pushes the dressing table from the foot of the bed, bending down to look at the revealed floor as he does so. He then pushes the wardrobe out from against the wall, leaving it also in the middle of the bedroom as he inspects the floorboards beneath where it stood, his back to her.

- What is it? Eilwen asked again, louder now, getting out from bed. What have you lost now? Hidden another bottle, have you?

As she moved towards him he quickly bowed his wide shoulders and struck her hard across the face with his twisted fist; in raw silence she fell to the ground, hiding from him her weeping face. Then from the silence rose a fury of screams and cries as he continued to beat her; as neighbours continued to listen through the thin walls; until at the peak of that brutal fear a heavy rain started to fall from the sky, harder and louder than any before, so that slowly her screams were drowned by the sound of the water until nobody could hear her cries.



The street is cold-silent outside the Pantaeg Arms but inside it is warm and loud and filled with most of the men of the village as they drink together and sing together loudly:

Dai Phillips: *(singing by himself now) And we were singing hymns and arias*

Land of my fathers,

Huw Williams: *Do The Maid of Llanwellyn, Dai! (Huw shouted drunkenly, sat at the bar beside Lloyd Llowellwyn)*

Dai Phillips: *(standing on a table now, singing)*

I'll've no sheep on the mountains nor boat on the lake –

(Slowly, Dai leans too far backwards and falls off the table, throwing his beer over himself as both of his ankles lift into the air as he falls backwards to the floor. The men cheer and laugh. Dai the Milk and Alban Thomas go over to him, grabbing one heavy arm each, they pull him to his drunken feet in a ball of laughter and they fall back into the small snug in the corner, laying Dai Phillips face down on the leather seat)

Bryn Mills, Aubrey Jenkins and Dai Pritchard sit at a round table in the centre of the pub, surrounded by empty pint glasses.

Bryn Mills: Oh, hell, aye! I couldn't believe it, the cheeky cow!

Aubrey Jenkins: She's always been like that. Remember her in school? She used to run around the playground trying to kiss all the boys and then shout at those that wouldn't; she's always been lonely –

Dai Pritchard: Yeah, and now it's made her bitter! Pure jealous, she is! *Dai Phillips quickly sits up in his lonely seat, rubs his face hard into his hands, stands and walks over to Alban Thomas, now standing at the bar beside Huw Williams and Lloyd Llewellyn.*

Dai Phillips: Thanks for that, Butt. *(He says and slaps Alban on the back)* So, how's my favourite neevew?

Huw Williams: Who's that? Dewi?

Dai Phillips: Yup. *(Dai answers, still looking at Alban)* My Eilwen says he's been in trouble at school again! She says that I shouldn't let Morgan play with him because he's too much trouble – I said, trouble or not, Love, 'e's family, so you let be. If you want me to have a chat with him, Alban – I won't mind.

Alban Thomas: No, Dai. It's alright. He's just young, that's all.

Huw Williams: And, I bet you two got up to worse when you were his age!

Alban Thomas: Oh, hell, aye! *(Alban looks at Dai and laughs)* But don't ever tell *him* that.

Dai Phillips: They already do the same stupid things we did, but it's all worth it. *(He says to Huw, with a heavy, drunken smile)* I love my two boys, no matter what they do, and his boy like he was my own. *(He looks to Alban and they both laugh awkwardly)*

Alban Thomas: When are you two going to have some kids then, eh? *(He asks Huw and Lloyd)*

Huw Williams: God knows, probably after –

Dai Phillips: At least Lloyd here's single; he knows he's taking his time, but you, Huw! You've got a woman and I tell you now, Butt, that Mary won't wait forever! All women want children and they all want them now! *(Alban laughs loudly)* You don't have long left, Butt, believe me.

Dai Pritchard: Where to your boys now then, Bryn? Hiding from them, are you? Or from Old Evans?

Dai Phillips: Only person anyone's hiding from here tonight is your wife! *And* your daughter.

Bryn Mills: They're up the quarry somewhere, camping with Dai's boys.

Aubrey Jenkins: Aye, my Dylan's up there too.

Alban Thomas: And Dewi is.

Dai Phillips: Aye, that's what's he's told you, is it, Alban? Do you lot remember when we used to go camping up there when we were younger?

Aubrey Jenkins: We used to stay up there for days, mun.

Dai Pritchard: Every night my mother used to go mental when I came back and all my shirts and shorts had tears in them!

Dai Phillips: We should go up there now! It'll be a laugh. We haven't been up there in years. It'll be like we were kids.

Alban Thomas: Aye, alright, I'll go!

Bryn Mills: Yeah, me too!

Dai Phillips: We can take a couple of cans up now, mind.

Dai Pritchard: I've got a tent at mine.

Dai Phillips: Nooo, we don't need a tent, mun!

The men carry a plastic bag each, full of cans of beer as they walk together through the sleeping town upwards into the mountain.

Alban Thomas: The grass is black!

Dai Pritchard: Aye, it's darker than I remember it being.

Bryn Mills: Remember that fence there? (*Bryn says loudly, pointing to a barbed wire fence, stood waist-height in the field*) And you, Dai, you said you could vault it that night when we were walking back from the rugby club and you slipped and collapsed right onto it. Brought the whole thing down!

Alban Thomas: You couldn't walk right for weeks! (*he adds laughing*)

Bryn Mills: You should have seen him down the pit! He used to sit on his arse in the lift as we went down so he could put straw down his trousers.

Dai Phillips: I don't know what you're talking about.

Aubrey Jenkins: And that tree there, we told Alban that a woman hanged herself on that branch, and he got so scared he couldn't find his way home and he wet himself!

Alban Thomas: I was five years old! And I didn't wet myself because of the ghost, Bryn and me were walking back in the dark and we saw Mad Mary in the bushes and I thought she'd killed someone! Bloody terrified me, she did.

Aubrey Jenkins: That's even worse! And you weren't bloody five, you liar!

Bryn Mills: And she was only walking her soddin' dog! I saw her after you did! (*they all laugh*)

Dai Pritchard: (*he sings loudly between sips from his can, swinging his plastic bag as he does so*)

*The land of my fathers is dear unto me
The land of the poets, the land of the free –*

Then a quick shuffling was heard in the bushes to the right of the path, and the men all peered in blatantly, over one another's shoulders, single-file, gazing into the bush. And in the half-darkness they saw a small figure fall from a tree and run quickly away from them through the sharp bushes and trodden leaves.

Alban Thomas: Shall we follow 'im then?

Dai Phillips: Obviously! Go!

And the men gracelessly stumbled through the bushes, under the low hanging branches of the trees and walked through the shadows until they came out into a small open campsite and saw six small boys dotted about the dusty floor around a small fire.

Bryn Mills: Hullo, boys! *(he said happily, as he entered the campsite and sat on the dirt beside his two sons)*

Arwyn: Dad *(he says softly)* Was Mrs Evans mad with us?

Bryn Mills: No, don't you boys worry about her!

And all the men came forward and sat on the dirt beneath their sons too and sat together around the small-burning fire as families.

Dai Phillips: Let's make this fire a bit better, come on, boys. *(And he and his sons Morgan and Gareth stood)* It's shit, let's get it really going.

Gareth: We collected loads of fire wood; it's all hidden over there behind the bush. *(His eyes were like two young leaves.)*

Dai Phillips: Good boy, go get some for us. Morgan, help me break them into small pieces.

Bryn Mills: *(aside)* Your mother wasn't pleased, mind.

Alwyn: Ah, Mam's not mad as well is she?

Arwyn: She's horrible when she's mad. She took our presents last time.

Alwyn: Then we didn't even get any cake. On our birthday! Neither of us!

Arwyn: And she smacked me, in front of all my friends!

Alwyn: And you cried. *(he laughs)*

Arwyn: I didn't cry!

Alwyn: Yes you did.

Bryn Mills: She's not mad, she just wants you to go and say sorry to Mrs Evans.

Both: Okay.

Gareth: *(loudly, from the bushes)* Dad! How much do we need?

Dai Phillips: *(loudly)* Bring it all out! Go help your brother, Morgan, for fuck sake.

Morgan: Alright. *(he rushes into the bushes)*

Aubrey Jenkins: *(aside)* How was school, Dylan?

Dylan: Yeah, it was alright.

Aubrey Jenkins: Did you have any trouble with that boy again?

Gareth and Morgan return, each cradling more wood in their arms than they are able, dropping pieces behind them as they walk back to their father.

Dai Phillips: Noo! This woods no good! It's too wet, it won't burn. Put it around the fire; try to dry it out a bit. *(His sons dropped the wood onto the floor and kicked it piece-by-piece towards the fire with their feet. Dai slaps Gareth hard against the back of his skull)* Do it properly! Don't be so lazy. *(Morgan grinned his small mouth when he saw Gareth's eyes turn red and again when he watched him rub the back of his throbbing head with one hand and collect the scraps of wood with the other)*

Dai Pritchard: Who's that giving you trouble? *(to Dylan)*

Aubrey Jenkins: Some gypo at the school has been hassling Dylan, hasn't he? *(Dylan looks down)*

Dai Pritchard: Hey, it's alright. *(He says, nudging his shoulder into Dylan's)* Your father and me used to get picked on at school too! But they only ever picked on us once, isn't that right. *(Aubrey Laughs)*

Dai Pritchard: You just got to make sure you hit him harder than he hits you, that's all.

Dylan: There's two of them, Uncle Dai.

Dai Pritchard: Then you take a friend with you – it's the only way to deal with it. Aubrey, remember that family at the top of Brynhafod Road? *(All the boys are listening now)* They were giving me hassle every day after school, three of them. And I didn't want to fight them so every day I just ignored them, until one day, they punched me and broke my nose and I was sitting in my living room with Aubrey next to me, my face covered in blood, and my dad came in and saw me and said – That's it, come with me. And he got my brother Mark, and me and Aubrey and we all went up to the top of the road. He knocked on the door and their father came to the door, my father explained what had happened, that they were picking on me and ganging up on me and that it wasn't right so he was sorting it out there and then; and there and then, us three had it out with them three – fair and square. And they never bothered me again.

Dylan: But they're in the year above me.

Dai Pritchard: Don't worry about that either. With these arms, the only thing you'll have to worry about is making sure you don't kill 'em! *(He says, pinching Dylan's tiny arms)*

Alban Thomas: *(aside)* Why don't you keep an eye on 'im tomorrow, Butt? *(he says softly to Dewi)*

Dewi: I'm going to. He only told me about it yesterday, and I know the two boys that did it. I hate them. I would have helped if I knew.

Dylan: What you all doing up here anyway?

Morgan: Are you camping up your too?

Dai Phillips: *(loudly)* Yes we are!

Aubrey Jenkins: No, we just came up to see how you boys were doing.

Dai Phillips: But we've brought all these cans! Bugger it, I'll drink them all my-sodding-self if I have to.

Bryn Mills: *(to his sons)* Do you boys want a beer?

Alwyn: *(excitedly)* Yes!

Arwyn: I've never had one before.

Bryn Mills: Then you're probably going to hate it. *(He laughs, placing a can in each of their small hands)*

Dewi: Can I have one, Dad? *(To Alban)*

Alban Thomas: Alright. But, only one, don't want you getting drunk!

Dai Phillips: *(to Morgan and Gareth)* Do you boys want one, since everyone else is?

Morgan: Yes!

Dai Phillips: *(to Gareth)* What about you, Butt?

Gareth: No, I don't like the taste.

Alban Thomas: You get used to it.

Dai Phillips: *(to Gareth)* Go on, try it. Everyone else is! *(Forcing it into his chest)*

Gareth: No, I don't want to drink, I don't like it.

Dylan: It tastes disgusting! *(He says laughing and stretching his mouth open, sticking out his tiny tongue)*

Bryn Mills: How many of you boys have already had a beer then? *(Alwyn and Dewi raise their hands and everyone laughs)*

Dai Pritchard: Where to did you get them? *(He asks laughing)*

Alban Thomas: I don't think I want to know the answer to that. *(Alwyn laughs)*

Dai Phillips: I think you already do.

Morgan: Do you all have work tomorrow?

Gareth: They don't work Sundays.

Dylan: What's it like down the pit?

Aubrey Jenkins: Very hot. *(He laughs)*

Morgan: Is it scary?

Dai Phillips: No, Son. It's perfectly safe, we're all perfectly safe.

Dylan: Don't people ever get hurt?

Dai Phillips: Aye, sometimes.

Dylan: Doesn't that scare you?

Dai Phillips: Not really. We watch each other's backs.

Dai Pritchard: It's quite fun, really.

Arwyn: Fun?

Dai Pritchard: Oh, aye.

Dai Phillips: Lots of jokes, down the pit.

Morgan: Like what?

Dai Phillips: Well, your Uncle Dai *(nodding to Dai Pritchard)* is the worst! *(he laughs)* As we tunnel along we have to build supports out of wood, right, but sometimes the tunnel above it comes loose and that makes a gap above the support, just a big open gap –

Bryn Mills: A fall.

Dai Phillips: Aye, that's right, it's called a fall. And sometimes gas can get trapped in there, but more importantly, sometimes the rock above it keeps on coming loose and eventually falls down, so the fall gets bigger and bigger, and if it gets too big we have to close off that section of the mine. And one day, we had this fall, and every day it got a little bit bigger, until finally we had to shut it off and get the manager in to inspect it.

Dai Pritchard: A right arsehole, that manager is.

Dai Phillips: He is! And he came underground to inspect it, but just before he did Dai rushed over to beneath the fall, where it had all fallen down, and just on top of the rubble, he spread around a load of soil, and turf!

Bryn Mills: He'd brought it down from the surface in his pockets!

Dai Phillips: And this manager was so thick, he saw the grass and nearly wet himself! *That must be nearly five hundred meters deep!* He said. *Everybody out the mine!*

Morgan: And did he make every get out?

Dai Phillips: Noo, course not, he saw everyone laughing behind him and then he realised.

Dylan: Did he find out who did it?

Dai Phillips: Noo, we all said we didn't know.

The fire had grown larger now that the wind had stopped; behind the sound of spitting fire they could hear the small fish bubbling beside them in the quarrywater.

Arwyn: Did you used to camp up year when you were younger?

Aubrey Jenkins: Of course we did! We could walk around and show you every part of the valley; we'd stay up here for days! In fact, you probably can't see it now, because it's so dark, but that hill up by there, it has a crater in it where the soil grew over the edge, so that it hangs over and you can sit inside it, like a pocket, and it would shelter you from the rain. But back when we used to come up year, there was a long stone wall along the top, Griffith's Farm, it was, and we used to steal hundreds of rocks from it, that's probably why its gone now, and we'd make someone sit in the crater, and when they did we'd roll those rocks down the hill, right over the top of them!

Dylan: Did they not get hit by the rocks?

Alban Thomas: No, the rocks would go right over their heads, they were safe in the hole, but if they came out and got hit, that would be it!

Arwyn: Really?!

Aubrey Jenkins: Oh, aye. And your father was always the one at the top of the hill rolling the rocks down and I was always in the hole; one I kept on shouting for him to stop so I could get out but he kept me in there for forty sodding minutes!

Dylan: What else did you do?

Alban Thomas: Well, because we used to come up year for so long, we'd bring blankets and cans of beans for when we got hungry, and every now and then other groups of boys would come and try to steal all of our stuff –

Bryn Mills: Raiders, we called 'em.

Alban Thomas: Aye, and these soddin' raiders used to steal all of our stuff! So, Bryn started to bring his air rifle with him, so we could shoot at them before they even got close to us! *(they all laugh)* And then, we'd go up to Griff's farm, and one of us would climb onto the back of a cow, and another one of us would shoot it in the arse with the air rifle! You'd just see their head bouncing off in the distance, over the hills!

Dai Phillips: It was bloody hard to stay on!

Morgan: What else?

Bryn Mills: When it snowed we used to go up and down the street collecting all the snow, then we'd bring it in a wheelbarrow to one end and pat it all down, so its compacted, and we'd run and slide across it –

Aubrey Jenkins: Aye, and because we had so much snow it went on for about a 'undred meters!

Alban Thomas: And because it was compacted so well, it was so thick –

Dai Phillips: It would still be there in the spring!

Dai Pritchard: Do you remember the gambo?

Dai Phillips: Oh, god! We made one once, didn't we, Butt? *(he asks Gareth, and he slightly smiles back at him)* Once he was old enough, I took the wheels off his pram, and I screwed

them onto a little wooden kart that I made him, with a piece of string tied to one end and I would run down the street dragging him, and push it down the hill, and duw, the speed of those things!

Dai Pritchard: I know! Remember when me and Bryn gave Dai Milk a go on ours, he flew around the corner, hit a lamppost and cracked his head open! *(They laugh)* Nearly killed the poor sod!

Bryn Mills: We'd better go now, Boys.

Dai Pritchard: Aye, it's getting late, now I suppose.

Aubrey Jenkins: We'll see you back at home.

Dai Phillips: Don't be daft! I just walked all way up here, mun! We're staying the night. *(He gave a wide, drunken grin showing all his yellow teeth and red-ruffled cheeks)*

Bryn Mills: We can't stay up here, Dai – let's let the boys be boys. They don't want us here.

Dai Phillips: Well maybe *your* boys don't want *you* here – but I know that mine want me to stay here and have with them a beer or two.

Bryn Mills: Aye, but it looks like you've had enough, Dai – there's no beer left. Let's get you home otherwise you'll never make it in to work tomorrow.

Dai repeated Bryn's words in a mutter under his voice, dropped his half-full can of beer to the ground as he shuffled to beside the fire, where he let himself fall to his knees.

Dai Phillips: You always did talk like a woman, Bryn. If there's no beer left you can go get me some more – or if not, you can go get yourself home and stop worrying about me and my boys. In fact... we're leaving. Now. *(To Gareth and Morgan)* Come. Not sitting here listening to this – and you're not neither!

Dai grabbed his two sons by their shoulders and silently walked them away. The others sat motionless and watched. Then after a long silence the rest of the fathers left the camp and walked back through the bushes and down the steep, black mountain, home to their sleeping wives.



Dreaming deeply in the dingle-woods Dewi and Dylan lay their gazing eyes skyward, watching the stars as they dance about the anthracite sky above, between the moon and the trees and just as far as out of their reach. Their curly-haired sleeping-heads lay tangled in the dirt and dried grass as they lay pillowless beneath the branches of a wheezing oak tree, covered thinly by old, woollen blankets and dimly warmed by the dying fire.

- Them two still asleep? Dylan whispered to Dewi over the twin-sleeping-bodies of Alwyn and Arwyn.
- I think so, Dewi whispered back. I can never tell with them pair, they don't move much even when they're awake. What we gonna do now Morgan's gone? He asked in a sleepy voice. He wanted me to show him where it was.

- We'll have to go without him, we're already here now. You show me now and then we'll show him, together, tomorrow.
- Alright, but if he moans it's your –
- Don't talk so loud! Dylan interrupted. You'll wake *them* up.

And with a grin he rolled out one side of his blanket and slipped carefully in his place an assortment of branches and rocks, so intricately placed that his sleeping body appeared moving beneath the sheet, and a sprig of grass at the head where his hair would be.

Dewi made less of an effort on his own effigy; piling a thin layer of stones onto themselves then dropping his blanket over the top; then surprised to see, with a small gust of wind, how the blanket rose from the ground like a kite and disappeared behind them into the darkness of the woods.

- That's your own fault, that! Dylan said, pointing at Dewi in the darkness. Just leave it; they won't wake up while we're gone.

So the two boys crept by unnoticed and, toes-tipped, they scurried out of their own little village in the trees into the thickly-thorned bramble bushes at their border. The dew brought out from the green a strong, dusty odour of pollen; as they walked along, fighting the dusted rain-leaves, dryly drowning in the backs of their throats, the faint smell of sodden earth was a comfort to them and guided them to where they would come across a faintly trodden path in the grass ahead.

- This way, declared Dewi to Dylan as he pushed his way through the last of the branches and into the small clearing.

The night had turned so far black that it appeared blue, a dark, twilight blue, and the low treeline shone indigo in the glare of the half-moon. The clearing spread half a mile or so about the boys but their searching eyes could only see a few feet ahead of themselves; everywhere else, the sky and the ground and the trees infused as one, dark void and they struggled to find their bearings through the tenebrae.

- Are you sure it's this way? Dylan doubted.
- Yeah, I think so, he hesitated, definitely it is. Over there, behind those trees, he pointed blindly in the black, is a tiny brook. We have to jump it then follow through the forest for a while, passed Top Rock Pond,
- That far! Dylan interrupted.
- Not much further then. We stop at the fairy-ring. The adit is just behind it, down the hill a bit.
- What's a fairy-ring? Dylan asked puzzled.
- It's just a ring, a circle, of old mushrooms in the ground. My dad says fairies used to build them all across Wales and dance around them in the nights whilst the people slept.
- Bollocks! Dylan objected. There's no such thing as fairies.
- I know that! But my dad reckons he saw them once, dancing around a fire, and when he came back in the morning there was a mushroom-ring in that same spot where he saw them.

- Bollocks, Dylan repeated softly.
- He says they've all died now from coal-dust in the air, that's why it's bad luck to break the rings. And that's why the shrooms are all poisoned.
- I can't see anything in all this black, Dylan said, tired of Dewi's history lesson.

And just as he complained of the darkness Dylan's eyes were pierced by a harsh, white light from beside him, which softened into an orange glow. He saw Dewi, his face half-lit by the glowing red cherry, as he brought the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled deeply.

- How are you still smoking? Dylan asked. Doesn't she see you when you take them?
- I'm too quick for her old eyes to see, Dewi laughed. Do you want some? He asked, extending his arm to Dylan before waiting for an answer and passing him their tiny torch.
- Just don't tell Polly, okay? He said in a quiet voice.
- No, sir - never Polly, Dewi said mockingly. Too much trouble.

The two boys reached the end of the meadow and their small, orange speck could still be seen clearly on the mountainside, passing from the open into the cover of the forest. Burrowed behind the dusty treeline bathed the babbling brook and bouncing on the balls of their feet the two boys, side-by-side, eyed and eyed the watery gorge waiting for the first to jump. Dylan silently volunteered, and with all the strength he could gather, he cleared the water from bank to bank and fell forward, his face to the ground.

- You didn't even run! Dewi bayed in disbelief. I won't either then, he added and with his cigarette still tightly pressed between his lips he jumped from stand-still straight into the icy water. It's fucking freezing! He howled, slipping, fumbling on the wet rocks as he gracelessly climbed the opposite bank, as Dylan rolled and roared with laughter. It's not funny! He protested, with stormy face. I got no clothes now! No clothes, no blanket... I'll die tonight!
- Shut up, bit of cold won't kill you, Dylan replied, his voice hoarse from laughing. And you dropped your fag! Pointing to the small, white stick floating along the surface of the water, back down into the valley below.

Silently, with squelching shoes and dripping clothes, Dewi walked beside Dylan, dishevelled, dragging his feet along the grass until they came across another clearing in the trees.

- It should be here, Dewi said, breaking his silence.

And on the ground just in front of them, glowing white beneath the treetop-covered moonlight, was the ring, two meters wide with twenty or so golden-grey mushrooms blooming from the earth.

- Just down that hill there, Dewi added, pointing to the other side of the clearing.
- Aye, not too far then, Dylan said mockingly. Just let me know if you spot any fairies. Maybe then I'll believe you.
- How else would it get here? Dewi laughed. Either that or someone comes up here at night and plants them there like that.

The two talking heads wandered on, through the middle of the ring and trees and night and in the silence left behind them, out from darkness and the tranquil, sprung a lonely sprite. He was old and his face was old and wrinkled and hidden beneath a faded beard; his hands were small and at a metre's height he was not much smaller than the two boys. He wore grey cloth and draped around his small shoulders was a pale, woolen blanket, the very same blanket, and the warmth brought a smile to his crooked lips.

- Isn't it cold? Dewi started, looking to Dylan. I'm cold. Wish I had my blanket with me. Are you really not cold?
- Yes, Dewi, it's cold. Yes, of course I'm cold. Please stop going on about it, we both suffer the same.
- Yeah, but later on when we get back you'll have your nice, warm blanket to crawl into. I won't though.
- That's your own fault! Nothing I can do, so stop moaning. Have another cigarette, that'll warm you up. Or shut your mouth at least.
- Shut for now, Dewi mumbled, lighting another. Maybe it won't be, mind, when I next see Polly. Dylan looked at Dewi in silence. So many secrets, Dewi continued, God knows how you keep track of them all. Why've you kept Polly such a secret?
- She asked me to, Dylan answered. She doesn't want her mam to know.
- Ah, that's it then! She's embarrassed of you, is she?
- Don't be daft.
- Who else knows then? Dewi asked, interested.
- I'm sure Morgan knows, he can't be that stupid not to see it.
- Has *she* told anyone?
- She says she hasn't.
- Morgan won't ever tell at least, Dewi said, then followed a pensive silence. Do you think it hurts him to see his dad like that? Angry all the time.
- I know it does, Dylan answered, but it hurts Gareth more, you see it in his eyes. Suppose he's lived it longer. Seen it his whole life.
- Do you think my father really knows that I stole from his cabinet that time? Dewi asked in an anxious voice.
- I'm certain he knows. Didn't you see him earlier? Not so bad though, I guess. They all drink, why can't we?
- Wonder why Morgan wants to come with us tomorrow, he's usually too scared by this sort of thing? What'll his dad say when he knows!?
- That's why it's a secret, Dewi. A strict secret, Dylan repeated.
- Hope you have a plan, Dylan, Dewi laughed. What gift you got him, then?
- Just a picture book; he likes the ponies down the pit, I tried to do them but they're not very good. Made him a card as well.
- He'll like that, Dewi added. He'll laugh when he sees us.

At the foot of the mound, still high above the valley, tunnelling into the earth was the stony opening, an archway five feet wide with rusted, iron tracks which bore into the stone

ground. Their eyes strained to see through the thick blackness, and their little voices echoed through the heart of the mountain.



As the night fell deeper into itself the wooden beams of Eglwys Church would bend and hum in the wind as though they still belonged to the limbs of a living tree. Standing tall and regal beside the sleeping graveyard, and the haunted old pub with its windows barred, the church was the oldest in the village, built in the seclusion of the ancient mountainside. Its ceilings were high and concave and the glass was stained in such vibrant colours that even in the shimmer of twilight the pictures came to life; the beams were decorated with children's carvings of cats and dogs and displayed on the wobbly table in front of the altar were five smiling faces, all encased in golden frames, one for each of the dead.

Father Edmund felt the cold of the quarry-stone against his palm as he descended the steep staircase of the tower. He had just woken at the sound of two birds crashing into the window above his head and, finally driven mad by the sound of his own breathing, he had left his sleep to check if either had survived. He found the bronze handle in the darkness in front of him and pushed it open with what little strength he had left in his old shoulders; and through the door he saw the altar, candle-lit orange and gold, and he saw the icy-white aura of a living spectre standing underneath Christ.

"Child," Father Edmund whispered to the man. "Who are you and why are you here? I do not know you."

The ghost was still at the sound of the priest's voice; he stood beside the altar looking down at the photographs, then reached out his withered hand to touch the frames and Father Edmund saw that every bone in his hand had been savagely broken.

"Guilt," The spectre answered slowly. "I am here for guilt." Then he looked over his shoulder to see Father Edmund, still breathing loudly behind him, and he recognised Lloyd's rotting face as he looked deeply into the wide, white eyes of the ghost and he saw the grief in his weary face, already greying from decay.

"What is it that gives you guilt?" The priest asked, fearing he already knew. "It was no fault of yours, or anyone else's what happened. A freak of nature, an act of God."

"I know. But it is not my death that grieves me," the ghost replied, and then Father Edmund understood. "There was never a chance, Father," the ghost wept. "Never the right moment. But now."

"I understand," the priest said, moving to stand beside the ghost. "As you said, you may speak with me now."

"You're not afraid at the sight of me?" The ghost asked mockingly; though his face indeed held enough pain to freeze a man's veins, and the sight of his crippled fingers was enough to bring tears to Father Edmund's eyes, still he replied in his stoic voice:

“God’s ways are not the ways of man. And you are nothing short of a miracle.”

“But I have wronged, Father. I have sinned and now I suffer.”

“And how does a dead man save his fading soul?” The priest asked.

“Not my soul, hers,” he answered, and again the priest understood. “I suffer at her suffering. You must help her. Save her. Beg her my forgiveness”

The priest bowed his head and at that the white of the ghost fell into dust on the floor. Father Edmund left the miraculous ashes in a pile at the altar, where the ghost of Lloyd Lllwellwyn stood, for all the village to see; but instead, they laughed at his ravings and the children threw sticks at him in the street because they had heard their parents whispering to one another all about Father Edmund and his sudden madness.



Haggardly and hesitant, muggy Morgan woke early next morning to see through the fog of his bedroom window that it was darker outside now than it was when he had gone to bed. It was four o’clock in the morning and he had scarcely slept, still shaken from the night before. He had gone to bed half-dressed in case he overslept; the barefooted boy then snuck out from his bed and wandered silently along the floorboards, toes-tipped, with shoes in hand, through the early darkness of his house. His mother was still asleep in her room beside his; she would wake in an hour to walk her walk into town, first to Mrs Evans’ shop; every morning, for her precious boys, she’d wake early enough to buy the first bottle of milk fresh from Mrs Evans, as Evans fresh from Dai. His father had woken before them and left to go to work, as he did so early on Saturday mornings. He felt relieved that his father was not there and as he reached downstairs and saw the mess he had made he was sure his father was still drunk when he left for work. Wet and muddied clothes lay strewn across the sofa and on a cloud of dust before the empty fire sat his father’s mining boots, seemingly forgotten. Morgan left the room exactly as his father had and walked through the kitchen and into the outhouse that extended from the back into the garden. He opened the pantry and, climbing up upon a box of his father’s tools, he reached to the top shelf and retrieved a yellow box of seeds.

Struggling to tread, still barefoot, he walked along his narrow garden path feeling the cold morning in his toes. Built at the bottom, beside his father’s tool shed, stood a large and delicate, wooden aviary filled with bright and beautiful budgies of every colour he knew and of one or two that he didn’t. His father had taken to keeping birds and when Gareth was born he had decided to buy a new budgie for him every year on his birthday. Gareth is fourteen years old and Morgan last counted one hundred and four budgies. He felt it his responsibility to feed the birds every morning, knowing already that his father had forgotten before him and that Gareth had no real interest. Morgan filled the feeder and stepped back with a proud smile as he watched the birds rush over towards him and feed.

Beside the birdcage was a tattered-blue, rotten-wood door. Behind the door were the cold, wet bags of coal. Morgan picked up the heaviest bag and closed the crumbled door with his foot behind him. As he walked back he heard a loud groaning coming from his father's tool shed. Sometimes when his father was renovating the house or the garden he would sleep the night in his shed, but this morning was so cold that Morgan was certain this was not the case. He heard the groaning again and quickly returned to the house.

Leaving the bag of coal at the door for his mother to find, Morgan walked back through the outhouse and into the unlit kitchen. He sat on the old, three-legged stool in the corner, where in the evenings he'd sit silently watching his mother as she prepared dinner for the family. He ran his fingers along the top of the stove and his brain told him it was still hot. He sat awhile in the darkness eating a slice of bread he had buttered, listening to the sound of the wind passing outside; listening too for the sound of his mother's footsteps in her room above the kitchen. All was silent still. Then heaving himself loudly from the silence Morgan tried gently to raise from his stool, watered his plate lightly in the sink, left it dripping in the basin then left the kitchen, and the small table behind him, faintly dusted with breadcrumbs and birdseeds.

The front garden of their home had been neglected for some time, it was a small space, not big enough to fit a car, not that anybody in the village owned a car; wrought iron railings ruined by rust, toys and old shoes forgotten in the overgrowth; theirs was the last house in the row of terraced houses (separated by the alleyway) before Ilan Road. The houses on Ilan Road were the poorest; old, grey, quarry-stone houses with thin windowpanes, bare hardwood floors and loose wires cut from the telephone poles cascading in through the fronts of the windows. Their front doors opened right onto the street and Morgan felt bad for those families who went on without a garden while his father squandered theirs.

Closing the gate behind him, lifting it back onto its hinges, he saw the shy face of his brother approaching along Ilan Road, the houses, identical, quarry-stoned, reflected around him on either side. And so he strolled by, in symmetry, beneath the steady sunrise, until, catching his baby-brother's eye, his face turned crimson and his shoulders tightened.

- What are you doing out here? Gareth asked him, concerned.
- N-nothing, Morgan whimpered, I woke up early is all... to feed the birds.
- Oh, yeah? Then what are you here out the front for, fully dressed with your school-shoes on?
- Well... why are you out here now? Where've you been all night? At this Gareth grabbed his little brother by the collar and pulled him out of view from the window.
- Never you mind where I've been, I'm not twelve years old! Tell me why you're up this early, sneaking around outside. It's not even five in the morning yet! You sneaking out, are you? Running away? What is it?
- I can't say, Morgan said silently, scared, his chin buried into his chest, you'll tell Mam and it's a secret.
- How am I going to tell Mam? I'll be in just as much trouble as you will, Gareth looked around the small, perfectly-placed bush that grew just behind their wall, just

tall enough to half-cover the sitting room window. No lights were on. She's still asleep, really? Did you hear them two last night?

- Yes, Morgan answered, looking down at Gareth's trousers.
- You shouldn't listen, Gareth said stepping further from the house, almost hiding in the alleyway. Just learn to live with it, to ignore it, it's a stupid part of our lives but it's never going to stop. I can't listen to it anymore, I've had it for too long, longer than you have, harder too. They actually like you, Gareth added with resentment.
- Is that why you ran away last night out the outhouse? Morgan interrupted, suddenly remembering that early this morning, as he went to turn the key, carefully returned to its hanging nail, the green-old door of the outhouse had seemingly been left forgot. Where did you go that would get you in as much trouble as me?
- Firstly, I didn't run away, I'm not a child, Gareth strongly crossed his t's as he spoke and stuttered slightly on the *ch*-ild, but because I need to get inside quickly and because I need to know where you're going I'll tell you my secret if you tell me yours, deal? Proposed the elder brother to the younger and they cordially agreed: That way we're both in trouble.
- You tell me first though, Morgan quietly asserted, a slight hoarseness in his voice.
- I, began the elder with reluctance, I have been away, sleeping the night at a friend's house, that's all. No drinking, no fighting, no running away or sleeping on the streets; the only reason I'm back this early is so Mam wouldn't worry, she doesn't know I left. I wanted to be back before they woke up. Dad's still asleep is he? Gareth asked, leaning out from the shade to try to see in through his living room window, the other end of the wall. He can sleep through thunder when he's like that.
- I didn't see him, Morgan said sheepishly, I thought he'd gone to work, he said yesterday that he had to today.
- No way would he have made it into work, not like that, Gareth stepped back out of distance, he was sleeping like a bull on the sofa when I left, he couldn't hear a thing. Mam wouldn't have him in the room with her.
- Well he's not there now, Morgan said, it was empty when I left.
- Well where is he? And where are you going, you still haven't told me.
- I think he'll probably just go in late, he always does, he's probably just getting dressed now, ready to leave –
- Morgan, Gareth stopped smiling.
- You tell me where you were first and then I'll tell you! Morgan's voice rose slightly. Like we agreed!
- I have told you where I was! I was at a friend's house.
- What friend? Morgan asked in a more tepid tone. Was it a girl?
- It was a girl actually, Gareth gave a sideward smile, not that it matters if it was a girl or not.
- You don't think Mam will think it matters if it's a girl?

- It doesn't matter what Mam thinks because Mam's not going to find out. Now tell me where *you're* going.
- What's her name? Morgan heard himself ask, then a cold silence passed between the brothers.
- Caitlin, he hesitated, and I know –
- You know I like her, Morgan muttered through his lips. I know you know I like her.
- I've known her longer than you have, Morgan, since before you were born. It's not her fault and it's not my fault, you're just too young for her. You should find a nice girl your own age. There's nothing wrong with that.
- I'm twelve this year, I'm not too young, Morgan argued.
- Tell me where you're going, Morgan.
- It's a secret, a surprise, you can't ruin it, Morgan began, trying his hardest to hide the contempt he now felt for his brother, and also the fear of what he might say next when he heard: I'm going to meet Dylan and Dewi, they're still up in the woods from last night.
- Why? Gareth's patience had thinned.
- They've found this big cave in the woods, near where we were, it goes all through the mountain, underground, all the way down to the mine, one of the older boys in school says it does, so were going to walk through it and find Dylan's dad at the bottom; the older boy says you go through two doors, then you get to "bottom" that's where all the miners are and that's where we'll find Dylan's dad. Dylan's going to give him his birthday present underground, that way his is the first one he'll get. Made it himself. And a card.
- That's the stupidest, most dangerous thing I've ever heard you say, Gareth barked, angrily at first then slowly breaking into laughter. Who are you trying to impress? Me? Dylan? I know that's why that idiot Dewi is stupid enough to do something like this but why are you? What the fuck do you think will happen to you Morgan when you try to find your way through a working mine? If you even make it there through the empty tunnels. You'll either get lost or get killed! Don't be so fucking stupid, Gareth slapped Morgan on one side of his face with his open palm. Morgan's face turned to stone. The brothers heard a window open behind them; they quickly turned to see their mother standing in her bedroom window then hurried out of sight. Come inside with me, now. I'm not going to let you be so stupid, Gareth said, grabbing Morgan by the arm.
- No, he protested, they'll still go either with or without me. If it's so dangerous I should go and tell them.

Gareth thought for a moment then nodded, he let go of Morgan's arm and slowly crept along the side of their house.

- If you're not back here in thirty minutes I'll tell Dad, then he'll come find you himself! Gareth said in his most menacing voice.

- Don't go in through the front, Morgan shouted after him in a whisper, she'll see you! Go in through the back! And he walked away along the alleyway smiling to himself, suddenly remembering that early this morning he was anxiously sure to turn the key of the old-green outhouse door, and assuredly he had left it locked.

Between Morgan's homeside alleyway on Ilan Road and Cwrddtridwr Colliery on Tan y Parc (where the adit lay safely hidden in the haunted forest, a mile from the colliery gates) gently rests the breathing town in all its wake and morning and through the air the sound rolls near of water gently roaring.

Our lowly traveller, northward bound, ventured westwards first towards the Marble bridge of Thomas Street, where, beneath its graceless arch, the three rivers met in secret confluence and poured trisectedly throughout the valleytown. Onwards too strolled he, over the shallow bridge, pausing a while to lean his shoulders over the edge and see through the frothing white of the water a twinkling treasure trove, lost and lamented, glass and crystal, an endless mine of marble. How easy, he wondered, would it be? Gareth is tall enough now to reach and pull himself back up. Dylan can open both eyes underwater...

The ancient stone of the bridge carried on to the left into a low wall at the end of Windsor Street, just outside the Mill. Morgan passed by with silent footsteps looking as far as he could along the road. He saw Brown the Baker draped in white, unloading a lonely crate of flour; he saw Dai Milk walking lost between the houses; he saw Dai Butcher gazing upwards at Liliwen Dress shouting from her window, a finger in each ear, not his own. The town was slowly stirring.

His shadow and he passed by unnoticed, quickly turning off Thomas Street, round the backs of the gardens, away from prying eyes. He lurked between the terraced houses, not far from his lost beloved's; the fear of being caught, the fear of the shaming look in her eyes hurried him further along the road, passed Dylan's house and then the twins' on Clos Morgan Gruffydd, the final street before the treeline. Keeping the train tracks on his left Morgan retraced the journey to their campsite from the night before and with silent shock and horror was stunned to find the peaceful twins still asleep beside the fire. He floated around their bodies and, finding Dewi's grey blanket hanging like a flag from a branch, proceeded towards him and Dylan.

Eventually he found then, they were waiting for him beside the opening of the tunnel. Morgan's grey trousers were black from the shins and Dewi laughed that he was the only one.

- Funny, Morgan said with little patience. Well I'm here now so are we going or not? He moved to walk passed them, halting as they stayed seated.
- Dewi's too scared to go, Dylan answered, irritated.
- I'm not too scared, protested Dewi. I'm too cold, too wet. I'm going home and getting into bed; I've had enough walking, enough cold for today. I need to sleep. The two boys looked at him in silence.
- Whatever you say, Dylan said, standing up from the ground. We still going? Dylan asked Morgan and he nodded.

- Wait, Dewi called after the two boys, already walking into the tunnel. You're still going?
- Yep, Morgan quickly uttered.
- Why? Dewi asked him. "I mean why are you going? It doesn't mean she'll notice you, you know that don't you?"
- Who? Morgan feigned, but the surprise in his face gave away his lie.
- Come back with me, Morgan, Dewi said softly.
- Shut up, Morgan sniggered and sneered, you go home if you want, wuss, but im going with Dylan. If we get lost we'll just turn back, that's all.
- It's only one way, Dylan added laughing, how hard can it be?

And the two boys walked deep into the tunnel, leaving Dewi, dampened, to dry along with the dew.



God, what'll I have to say to him now? After all's done he can't be shocked what's happened... even still, better now when the girls are out. Wonder where our Caitlin is. Out with one them boys, I suppose. Probably that last one with the flashy trousers; he looks at her right. Better that they're out, not here. Wonder what he'll say, what he'll call me. It could been worse for him! He could have had that rash too. Makes a man sterile at his age. Lucky for him he hasn't so much as touched me since Eryn was born. One child leaves the body and so then does the other; and me, there, deflated and alone. Won't even let me in when he's in the bath, the prude. His own fault. All of it. A person needs to feel loved; life's too short not to feel love. I'll love both our girls till long after they've watched me die but I can't love him another day, not now, not after how Lloyd had loved me and I loved him. Then, he couldn't have loved me really though... not to treat me like that. Not to bother to tell me. Sick. Sick to the pit my stomach. How could a person do that to another? Treat another human like that. I guess that's it... I never could do that to him; not the father of my girls. He's always that at least. I've more respect for myself than that. It's good, I suppose, he won't touch me; I won't ever have to hide it then. He won't so much as ask and then he'll never have to know.... though David knows all about Lloyd and I know he'll have Eilwen know, and Eilwen Dai - Rocks! Bollocks it all. The whole world will know and I'll tell them! Then they'll have nothing to say behind my back. Hang them, the lot, for all that I care, and all their words and their gawdy-eyed children too. No more room for youth in naivety. Lessons learned are lessons lost and nobody knows how to be human anymore or even how to speak to a person without insulting another. And who is *she* to look down her fat nose at me the way she did and judge me like that, in the middle of that hell-hole what she calls a shop, beneath the same flat and that same bed, which the whole world knows all about; and the smell of seasalt still trapped in the bed-linen from that sailor-boy, lost and looking

for directions like a little lamb, and she, red-breasted, led him through her shop and up the staircase to try to find him that map, sure she was she had one somewhere, of the local coastline from when she was a girl in school.

Wonder what she meant by what she said? Either she knew it was me not Cait wanted that cream, either that or worse she thought that Cait is me or just as bad, up to God knows what away in the woods somewhere. But what kind of a girl of her age is out there having relations with young boys, probably don't even know what's what or where to put it. They don't see her young as I see her, mind, another's child is nothing to them. And I've no time left for any of their bother, no more life left in me now for them or theirs; Mrs Evans' is just as good, her fruit is rotten but I can always send Gareth over if ever I need, rather him deal with her snide looks and sideways-smile; doubt she will to him though; Mr. Edwards, she calls him: *Hello, Mr. How's the wife, how's the girls? Ah that's great to hear, send her my love, won't you? I haven't seen her, mind. She isn't ill I hope?* The cheek of it. They're all as bad as the last; all they're interested in is what everyone else is up to, or who's fucking who and where and when and who else knows and who shan't we tell? And *ooh, I saw her, dear, in the cafe there, drinking tea alone, and oh, didn't she look deflated?* Not a place to raise young girls. Too many eyes and ears. I know I'm just as weak, we're all weak and wanting, but at least I have some sense, some respect for a person's privacy. What goes on in a woman's bedroom is sacred and holy as any church I've ever been, any Sunday-silences or Roman candles. Even church is a joke to them now. I suppose. Times come where I see myself in them and she in me; she is me; and what it is, it is, a daughter's mother, her future self. Nothing but time and nature and no amount of human wishing can change it. I won't have her stay here the way we did, she should go and find her own way and her own place in the world, she's more than we had at her own age.

Haven't I lost enough already? Hasn't God hurt me enough; isn't it enough, that they have to bury me? My kids, my children, what will they have of them? Of the laughing on the playgrounds and all the boys all thinking they can get at it just 'cus their mother's a whore so too are they.

I could lie it all away, force myself on him and blame him; say it was him give it to me. I know he's had it before. Do it now and get it over with. See to it that he never hears of Lloyd and I never have to hear his filthy name again... would that be so terrible? Would that not save the girls from even more pain - and *me*; save me?

But if anyone ever found out... oh, I couldn't! I couldn't ever. The shame. He would never forgive another woman. And the men! Oh god they'd crucify him! Laugh at him day and night until he'd finally snap and hang himself. They'll see there'll never be another woman again, not with herpes. They'll say it's worse, mind. Syphilis or the clap or whatever they'll come up with this time. Half of *them* have it an' all but just wait and watch their faces drop when they hear all about Molly Edwards and her sinful ways.

The front door of Molly's house opened and in with the wind blew the rain and leaves and a dusty, drunken old man, greyed by dirt. Gareth washed the dust from his face in the kitchen basin and along with the grit and glass he washed away twenty years from his face.

He looked handsome for a moment until he spat thick, green phlegm into the kitchen basin and walked away with his nose in the air. He found Molly in their bedroom upstairs, upright bed-bound, reading a book calmly in her hands.

“What is it?” She asked him, still reading her book. “You look like you’ve been sick. Is the kitchen clean or do I have to go down there?”

“No, no.”

Gareth fell hard onto the foot of the bed beside Molly, crushing her feet. As she rose to reach out to him he forced both hands in his and dug his nails hard into her skin as he forced her arms down.

“They’re laughing at me, Molly,” Gareth started in a quivering tone.

“Who are?” She asked, showing the pain in her eyes. “Them down the pub? Who cares what they think, they’re all a bunch of perverts! What are they laughing at us for now then?”

“Laughing at me, Molly. They’re really laughing at me, because of you.”

“At whoever. Why? Who?” Her arms break free.

“Because they know. They know how long it’s been; you must have told one of your bitch friends and she told them!”

“I haven’t told anyone! Who would I tell?”

“You’ve told someone! Everybody knows. It’s all your fault anyway. I see the way you look at me!” Gareth is shouting now, struggling from the bed and aptly turning to show his gorging waist in the moonlight. “And I hear the way you talk about me to all your friends - their husbands tell me everything you say, you know.”

“It’s all lies,” Molly said, covering her chest with the duvet.

“It doesn’t matter anyway that that’s all lies. I know the truth.”

“What truth?” Molly asked with a desolate voice.

“Myfanwy’s Dai told me. He said what she said; that she saw you with him once off the street, holding and hugging onto each other. Who was he?” Gareth’s voice became stern and confident.

“Who was who? Gar’, there’s no-one else,” Molly’s voice was soft and full of pain, she moved to meet Gareth again and again he forced her to the bed.

“I’m tired of the lies and the talking and everybody else knowing more about my life and my family than me. Alban, even Dai sodding Milk, they all know. I can’t trust you, Molly, not like this.”

“What do I have to do?” She asked, struggling. “There is no-one else – you won’t listen, you’re deluded. Suddenly you’re so interested in sex, suddenly you say it’s me that doesn’t want it – look at you, you’ve barely spoken to me in weeks – is that my fault too? Is that why they’re laughing at you, because of me?”

Wildly, Gareth leant his body over the bed and struck Molly across her face with his open palm; her short hair shook with the sound of smashing glass but she stayed sitting up, her face unmoved and her red lips tightly pursed, staring him coldly.

“There will be no more laughing. No more jokes. No more lies, Molly. Hear?” She remained silently watching. “No more laughing at me,” Gareth repeated as he unbuttoned

his wide shirt and removed his belt, moving towards Molly with a meaty grin, “and you, you are my wife.”



“It was early in the morning, sunless, birdless and cold.” Outside the light was low in the purple sky and thin clouds of fog covered the peaks of the brown mountains and the rain fell hard onto the grass and run down the overflowing streams. Starting from opposite her wet house in Graigwen Road they had dug down and torn the surface away and then tearing through into a field opposite where a wide, earth-brown trench had been burrowed along the foot of the mountain, stretching the length of the village. “I don't remember well, it doesn't flow. I just see scattered pictures – one or two faces, none of the names. Everyone was so wet and mad you didn't know who was who. You could only just see the crest above the clouds and for a moment all you could hear was the wind passing through the leaves; the rain looked like burning ash hovering in the air there was so much of it,” she gently inches her thin curtains and looks with one eye out of the window. “And the fog was hundred times worse than it is today; it stretched down and covered all the way to the houses at the bottom of the hills. Do you know how humiliating it is to have half a road outside your home like that? That hideous scar. They're just leaving it right there, as if they didn't come down here with trucks and ploughs and tear it all up – as if it wouldn't hurt us to look at it.” “Why did they do it?” “They were building a sodding railway to transport coal from the pit, trying to expand it next to the other one but separate. But after what happened and now the whoole things shut down they're just forgetting about it and nobody has come to fix their mess and nobody will. Can barely use my own road anymore without risking breaking an ankle or worse! Nobody can get into my street, not that they would – streets have been empty since what's happened,” she closes the curtains. “That morning all the roads were empty; Liliwen was probably awake mind, looking out her window watching Dai Milk walk his rounds or moaning to Dai Butcher 'bout the smell of blood – all you kids used to think he was a murderer, always walking around in that apron covered in blood an' carrying that big knife, I think he enjoyed it – liked to be frightening – but other than them it was empty. It was too early that the kids would be out on their way to school, too early even for the shops to be open. The miners were just finishing their nightshift, five to five they do. Aubrey went down at about four the evening before, mind. He went in early to set a detonation with dynamite, funny that – No, it wasn't the same one! His couple of sticks wouldn't blow the lift up the shaft like that. No, the *big* explosion happened in the morning and when it 'appened we all felt the ground move beneath us, we all heard that horrible crash. They were so close to us, beneath the floors of our own homes and we couldn't save them. The floor nearly fell away, weren't you awake to feel it?” “I was awake or awake *after*, I don't remember – I remember seeing all of the neighbours rushing out of their

'ouses screaming' an' running along the streets, but there was no noise, no nothing, nothing was broken. I thought they were running *away* from something, they had it in their eyes. My mother wouldn't let me go outside; she made me stay in the house by myself and she walked down with them all to try and find my father." "And how's Mother doing? I 'avent seen her since Sunday, is she avoiding little me or just busy? I heard she's helping Bronwyn now and gathering donations for Lil', collecting everyone's old scraps of fabrics for her. Wonder what made her change her mind –" "Was Bronwyn there that morning?" "Ooh, aye, Bronwyn was there; she came knocking on my door right as it happened, she felt the ground move first. We went up on the back of Dai's milk float, those poor ponies pulling all twelve of us near-vertical up the mountain. When we arrived you couldn't see the pit – couldn't even get halfway up the hill! Completely blocked it was. 'Undreds of people covered both the roads up so we had to just get off and walk with them. There was no other way up. And when we got there all the people had crowded around and flooded the grounds of the colliery. The fence had been pulled down to make way for the ambulance and everybody gathered around the shafts and in between all the workhouses waiting to see who they'd bring up. Some of them overflowed onto the hill just behind the headgear - remember watching them all slipping on the wet grass and covered in mud trying to run up it and all their faces cold looking down on us. Waiting and watching. The rain ran right off them, through the soil and washed all the ash and duff downwards into the river, flowing in coal-dyed stillness, even now, from the aftershock and the fish swim upside down on their back. We were there for one hour before the rain started. Everybody who could come came. The flat sound of the hooter was so loud and so desperate that it reached every house in every corner of the valley, even the children came to help. Everyone asked to do something, but *this* morning, this time, there was nothing anybody could do but wait. So we did - we all stood there waiting, hours, days; the rain started, then stopped in the silence, then started again and hasn't stopped since; the rain falling now is the same rain that fell on Dylan's blue cheeks – the same rain that carved the coal beneath the rocks... Of the thousand lonely faces most cold was a poor young thing, brown-fair-haired, droplet-drenched, holding her blanketed baby brother in her naked arms, tight in her chest, away from the sharp rain. She looked so lost and so young. We'd been waiting for four hours now and she was standing on the banking closest to the shaft, she saw first the bodies that they brought to the surface. When it happened I couldn't cope – seeing his face like that ruined me. I don't remember seeing Aubrey being brought up after, only that he was smiling. I don't remember anything else that I saw or heard, not after, not even what I said, or did – although they've told me since. They told me *that* but nobody told me why or even what had happened, nobody knew. I screamed and begged at every person there but nobody knew. Nobody could tell me why my son had died. My husband. Smiling still his purple lips. Must have met Dylan underground, must have been his last moment. Must have died before him though, he wouldn't smile like that to see his son die. Just what I like to think. I couldn't see Dylan's face... most of it burnt away. I couldn't even sit with him in the ambulance, had to lay there alone, the poor child. But I couldn't bare the sight... the wet smell of him. Dylan was brought

up first but Aubrey died first. That much I know. Then Bryn was brought up and his Bronwyn wept. Or maybe it was Lloyd and Molly next – I don't remember, it was all just wailing around me after my world had already fallen. I wasn't there anymore, not until they brought up Morgan's body. I saw him through the crowd, pale and limp, I heard his mother scream amongst the faces and I knew at once it was all Morgan's fault – he was the only other boy that day and my Dylan would have never gone alone. Furious, I rushed over to his poor mother – I cried and shouted and slapped her and scratched and accused her of God knows what – I was so ashamed, but in that state you can't think, I couldn't even see. Her son Gareth tried to defend her but was drowned out by the noise. Eilwen's face was so foul; I dread to think how savage I looked. Silly thing to worry over. But I feel shame every day – I was wrong to her and that woman suffers for us all. One morning after a little friend of Dylan's came to visit me; I answered the door to his weeping face, the poor boy was shaking-scared so I let him in and sat him in that same chair you're sat in now. I knew his face but not his name, when he told me Dewi I saw his mother in his eyes. *He* told me why it happened. *That* nine year old boy told me more than anybody else could and I owe him my life for it, he gave it back to me. They knew it was Aubrey's birthday, see; Dylan had told them and together they planned it for him. Dewi showed them how to get underground, he's the one led them to a secret adit, idle and overgrown in the woods. They wanted to go underground and surprise him, handmade him a card and gift apparently. But Dewi turned back, too scared – too scared even to talk 'till now – and he left Morgan and Dylan with themselves. It was all an act of God. Of god. The gasses mix together, comes out of the rocks, apparently – and the weather was hot, makes it worse. One in a million. And on his birthday. Has always happened and always will. But my boy was an angel right till the end."



Why are you always drunk? Who's that? Why? You make Mam sad when yew drunk. What? Why do you want to make Mam sad? Morgan, is that you? What are you talking about? Don't you love her? Do you hate her? Of course not. You're too young – where are y – Do you hate Gareth as well as Mam? I don't want to talk about Gareth. You have to – It's your fault he's gone. Who do you think you're talking to? It's your fault he went away. And it's your fault Mam's depressed. That's not why she's depressed. Yes it is. She's hurting because you – you make it worse when you drink. Don't talk to me like that. You do. You make her cry. Don't you ever think about me? Doesn't anybody think about me, or care that I'm sad? No! Because you push us away, you hide from us. What do you mean I push you away? I never said a bad word to you, Morgan! But you do to Mam, and to Gareth. That's why he's gone. You're wrong. I'm not. We loved you; all of us did – so you don't love me now then? Nobody loves me now? No. We're embarrassed now. How dare you speak to me like that! You don't listen to how we talk. You never listen to Mam when she talks to you. Or you're

too drunk to remember, and you wake up and everything's fine and done and pretend you weren't drunk at all and never were and there were no problems. No I don't. You're pushing Mam away, just like you did to Gareth, and she won't stay either. She can't. Your mother won't leave me. Where is Gareth? Mind now, Morgan. Do you even know where he is? He won't talk to me. He won't talk to Mam either now because of you. Why is it always my wrong-doing? She reminds him of you. And he reminds her of you.

Cold, sharp gust blowing from the window. Cold on my toes, hot in my groin... dark inside – and out – streetlamps are on, too early for birds. Rain.... Oh, God. Oh, God... why have I been such a fool? Dai cries loudly Morgan, my poor boy! I'm so sorry. He whispers as he weeps.

Eilwen hears his cries from the other bedroom and now stands in the doorway – What's wrong? She asks hiding her bloodied face from him.

Oh, Eilwen, sit with me please. Crying more now. She sits beside him on the bed and puts her hand on his leg and his weeping face falls into her lap. I'm so sorry, Eilwen, Love, for everything. For who I am. You don't deserve it, you don't. She gets up to leave.

Eilwen! I spoke to Morgan. She turns from him. No, don't, please, I'm not crazy!

You're drunk! – I was before but I'm not now! – much, and I won't be again, never.

I heard his voice, Eilwen, our boy spoke to me again. Please stay. She does.

I'm not as strong as you are; I'm weak. I ruin the things I love because I need them most. I don't know why, I panic, I struggle... Love. Please. I love you. I need you, please forgive me. She slowly walks back into the room, and closes the door behind her.

I heard his voice again. I yearn it now. Morgan.

Don't ever say his name to me again, David. In a cold, clear, iron voice. I'll leave you if you do. If you ever mention him to me again, ever.

What?

He's gone. I understand that now.

What do you mean?

I've burnt every photo we 'ad of him, every single one with his face on it... I burnt all his clothes, his toys, his schoolbooks. He's gone now... so long as so you don't keep dragging him up out of the ground. We can stop with all the unhappiness now, we can stop. He's gone – we can focus on Gareth, finding him and bringing him home. He needs to be home. He's our boy now. She strokes his wet cheek with the back of her hand and nods her head, with tears in her own beautiful eyes. I'm going to stay at my mother's tonight and then we'll think of –

No. Stay with me tonight, Eilwen. Please. I'm afraid to be alone.

So stood she there, a moment in wan hope, downwardly looking onto him and dimly nods her head again. They turn off their dying light and in their bed they lay, arms straight, eyes open beside one other. And all through the passing night she sleeps awake beside him, half-covered by the cream sheets, watching her reflection in the black window as the acid rain falls from her face, down the mountainside and