

BORDERSANDS: A Novel and Critical Commentary

Thomas Matthew Bird

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Summary

Bordersands is a crime-thriller set in and around the Flintshire lowlands in northeast Wales written in response to M. Wynn Thomas's notion that the region has yet to capture the public and literary imagination. By asking what it means to be from the Flintshire lowlands and the places contained within it – such as Holywell and the Greenfield Valley –, the novel explores notions of place, belonging and displacement. In addition to presenting the Flintshire lowlands as a place with its own distinctive character, it shows that there are multiple notions of a given place, highlighting the complexities of what it means to be both 'inhabitant' and 'visitor.' The critical commentary explores other fictional representations of the Flintshire lowlands, and in relation to *Bordersands* shows how Flintshire-born writers have portrayed place and asks whether such portrayals have been used to raise awareness of the region's local history, geography, cultural identity, and relationship with the Welsh language. Furthermore, it discusses how variations of the Welsh regional novel can provide wider explorations of belonging and place through the crime-thriller genre, and, in relation to my own regional thriller, how this genre can be used to provide both a balanced and authentic sense of place.

Bordersands

*The western tide crept up along the sand,
And o'er the sand,
And round the sand,
As far as eye could see.
The rolling mist came down and hid the land:
And never home came she.*

*They rowed her in across the rolling foam,
The cruel crawling foam,
The cruel hungry foam,
To her grave beside the sea;
But still the boatmen hear her call the cattle home
Across the sands of Dee.*

The Sands of Dee
Charles Kingsley (1819-1875)

PART I

1

THE LONG DRIVE FROM LONDON HADN'T BOTHERED HIM. Now, having reached this northeast corner of Wales, he was anxious, the feeling intensifying as he took a left into the Moor Estate. He parked outside his sister's house, the cold hounding him as he hurried up the path. Before he knocked on the door, he caught sight of her at the window. She glared down at him. Her hair looked grey in the half-light, and her face was pale among the shadows. There was no feeling in Annwen's eyes. She was an unwelcoming ghost.

A light flashed on in the hallway, and then Annwen opened the door. She stood there in silence, staring at him, for what seemed like ages.

'Are you going to let me in then?' he said.

She looked up and down the street, and then motioned him inside.

The house was warm, thick with the smell of drying clothes and the evening's cigarettes. She led him into the living room, placing a finger on her lips before switching on the lights.

'Keep quiet,' she whispered, 'the kids are in bed. It's taken me all bloody night to get them off to sleep.'

He nodded, and then slumped onto the sofa. The living room was how he'd always imagined it: beige walls, beige carpet, plain curtains, and a row of cheap ornaments looking glum on the mantel.

He caught Annwen's glance. 'What's wrong with you? You don't seem very pleased to see me.'

She stared at him for a moment. 'What do you expect me to say, Mab, after all this time?'

'I don't know. I guess welcome home would be a start.'

She strained a smile. 'Never mind welcome home. What were you thinking, just turning up in the middle of the night? Answer me then, what do you want?'

'Seeing as you're being so friendly, a cup of tea would be nice,' he said.

Annwen shook her head. 'A cup of tea, hmm, if only it was that easy.'

She stood up, and Mab followed her into the kitchen.

Annwen looked younger beneath the halogen lights. He hadn't seen her for fifteen years. But standing there, watching the way she handled the spoons and cups, it was as though he'd never left. Even though her skin was more lined, she hadn't changed much. A little thinner perhaps, but she still had lank, shoulder-length hair. The years had been kind, softening the edges of her face. Her nose and chin looked more rounded, making her appear less serious.

He wanted to tell her this. But he said nothing. Instead, he just stood there, listening to the kettle boil, silenced by the kitchen's hum.

Annwen could barely look at him as they drank their tea, and the clock's slow tick accentuated the silence. He picked up the book lying next to him, smiling to himself as he flicked through the *Tale of Two Bad Mice*. 'You know, I read once, in one of Mam's old books, that Beatrix Potter thought the Welsh were a bunch of inbreds.'

She walked over to him and snatched the book from his hand.

'The kids like the pictures,' she said, and then walked over to the window. She pushed her face through the curtains. 'Is that your car out there?'

'Yeah, it is. Why?'

'Bit flash for you isn't it?'

'Not really, it's on its last legs to be honest. It's been playing up for weeks.'

'How can you afford a car like that?'

'A bit of savings, besides it didn't cost that much. Looks can be deceptive - underneath it's a wreck.'

She sighed and turned to face him. 'It still looks a bit flash. I thought the last thing you'd want to do is draw attention to yourself.'

He lit a cigarette, watching her as she sat down in the chair opposite. He glanced at the photographs above the fireplace. 'How are Brian and the kids?'

'Fine.'

'And Dad?'

Annwen dropped her hands onto her lap. 'Not too good I'm afraid, he's been poorly.'

Mab nodded. 'I know. He's on death's door so I heard. That's why I came back to see him. I thought it might be my last chance.'

'Who told you he was ill?'

'Mickey Boyde.'

'And who the hell's Mickey Boyde?'

'One of Dad's old mates, I've known him for years. I work with him down south.'

'What did he say exactly?'

'Just that Dad had a heart attack. He said he was in a bad way. That he was all wired up in the hospital.'

'He was until he discharged himself two days ago. The stupid old sod went straight to the pub, carrying on as if nothing happened.'

'Yeah, Dad was always good at that.'

She placed a cushion on her lap. 'So is that all you came back for?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean, Mab. It's been fifteen bloody years. No one talks about it anymore. I don't want you coming back stirring it all up.'

He didn't answer and they stared at each other in silence.

She breathed deeply. 'So how long are you planning to stay?'

'Don't know, a few days at the most.'

'And where were you planning on staying tonight?'

'I don't know. Here, I suppose.'

She shook her head. 'It's probably for the best, I guess. I don't want you going into town.' She stared into the fire. 'You can use the sofa bed in the parlour.'

Mab nodded, then said, 'Will Brian be all right with that?'

Annwen sighed. 'He'll have to be, I suppose. He's on nights this week, so by the time you get up he'll be in bed, so try not to make too much noise in the morning.'

As Mab lay on the sofa bed, he listened to the rain pattering against the window. He pictured Annwen's children and tried to remember their names. He imagined his sister to be a strict parent, providing that guidance and control that had been so lacking in their childhood. She seemed so settled now, proud of her semi-detached. A house like this was unattainable all those years ago. Even a Council estate had its hierarchy. It started from the bungalows in the top avenues and dwindled down to the cream terraced houses of the jobless. The only thing those houses had in common was

trouble. It was mixed in with the mortar. It was laid with every brick.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but his mind was too active. He could see himself all those years ago, Delwyn Mabon Pryce, following Rhiannon across the sands. She stood tall and tanned, and her hair was bleached like the summer grass. She teased him with her smile, her body taut beneath her orange dress. The image of her face lingered even when he opened his eyes. It was almost as though she was in the room with him, leering at him through the darkness.

Mab sat up and cast such thoughts aside. He was beyond sleep now and got out of bed, switched on the light, and glanced around the room, his eyes resting on the small bookcase in the corner. He walked towards it, stopping when he caught sight of his mother's old books. Seeing them after all these years caught him by surprise. He took a deep breath, the knot in his stomach tightening. After staring at them for a while, he selected a large hardback with a green cover, *The History of the Greenfield Valley*, his mother's favourite. He walked back to the sofa bed, sat down, and rested the book on his lap, picturing his mother's smile as he flicked through the pages.

Just as they had done all those years ago, the photographs caught his attention, pictures of old chimneys, waterwheels, and wooden launders. There was one of a blind man, selling water in the streets, his shoulders stooped by the weight of his bucket. Mab didn't see one smile among all those faces. Everyone looked so stern, especially the children. He remembered when he was about seven or eight years old telling his mother this. She'd laughed, more so when he'd told her they reminded him of some of the kids from the estate.

'Why are their clothes dusty and torn?' he'd asked her. 'And why are their boots a size too big?'

'Because things were harder in those days,' she'd said, and then told him about the old factories. She knew so much about the Greenfield Valley; she was always reading to him, or telling him stories about the old mills, and Thomas Williams, the Copper King. He remembered thinking how clever she was, and whenever he told her this, she would smile, then wink at him and say, 'Of course I am. I've got an 'O' level in history.'

'You like history don't you Mam.'

'Yes, love, I do, especially local stuff.'

'Why?'

‘I just do, love. Your Taid used to tell me stories about the old docks and the Valley. “There’s more to this place than people think,” he used to say, and I’ve been interested in it ever since.’

Mab lay back and closed his eyes, and pictured himself holding his mother’s hand and walking through the Valley woods. He could see the light filtering through the trees, and hear the waterfall, from the old Flour Mill Pool, beyond them. Then his mother chased him down the valley path, tickling him when she caught him up.

At first, he thought he’d woken to his mother’s laughter, the softness of her voice whispering his name. But the musty smell of the duvet reminded him where he was, and as he wiped the sleep from his eyes the voices stopped. He sat up, glancing at his mother’s book lying face down on the carpet. He leaned over the sofa bed and picked the book up, closing it carefully. Then he stood up and placed it back in the bookcase, sighing as he switched off the light.

Mab dressed quickly, and the sky was grey as he pushed back the curtains. His niece and nephew said nothing when he walked into the dining room. They communicated with each other through glances, measuring him with giggles and winks.

‘What have I told you about being polite to people?’ Annwen said, as she joined them at the table. ‘Don’t be so rude. Come on, say hello like I told you, this is your uncle Mab.’

The younger of the two, a pretty thing, blonde and jam-faced, smiled.

‘I’m Ella,’ she whispered, quickly lowering her eyes when she caught sight of her brother frowning.

Mab smiled back at her. ‘How old are you, Ella?’

‘Four,’ she said. She glanced at her brother. ‘Josh is nearly eight.’

Both children looked brighter than their photographs and a little older too. Josh stared at him, the cold glare in his eyes undoubtedly from his mother’s side.

‘Don’t be rude, Josh,’ Annwen snapped. ‘Come on, say hello to your uncle.’

Josh acknowledged him with a wary nod, and then narrowed his eyes as though he were considering his next sentence. ‘Are you a bad man?’ he said.

Annwen began choking on her coffee, and Mab thumped her on the back.

‘Josh,’ she said, finally catching her breath, ‘what have I told you about being rude?’

Now say sorry to your uncle.'

'It's all right,' Mab said. He stood up and lifted Josh from his chair. He carried him to the window, taking the boy's weight as Josh pushed his face against the glass.

'Does that look like the car of a bad man?' Mab asked him.

Josh's eyes widened. 'Is it yours?'

Mab nodded.

'Can we go for a drive?'

'Of course we can, if you want to.'

Annwen rushed over to them. 'Get down now, Josh.' She grabbed hold of Josh's hand as Mab lowered him to the carpet.

'But I want to go for a ride with uncle Mab in his car,' Josh whined. 'He said I could go, please Mam, please.'

'You can go another time perhaps,' she said, and gave Mab a look that begged him not to encourage him.

'Let him go,' Mab said. 'Don't worry; he'll be all right.'

Annwen shook her head. 'No, he won't.'

Mab sensed the children were all too aware of their mother's temper. They knew how far to push it. Their silence telling him that he too was close to its edge. 'Why won't he?' he said.

Annwen walked over to the mantelpiece and picked up her pack of cigarettes. She popped one into her mouth, and then leaned forward as he gave her a light. 'Drop it,' she said. 'I don't want to talk about it.'

'What's your problem?'

She blew the smoke towards the ceiling. 'I haven't seen you for years, Mab, and then you just turn up out of the blue, asking to take my son out in your car. What mother in their right mind would say yes to that?'

'It's not as though I'm a stranger. I'm your brother for Christ's sake.'

'It's not just that.'

'So what's the matter then? Don't you trust me?'

'I just don't want you drawing attention to yourself that's all, and Josh getting caught up in all of it. Besides, we've a lot on today. He's got a party at three.'

'We'll be back long before then.'

Annwen fell silent. She took another drag of her cigarette, her hand shaking.

'Go on, Wen, please. I'm begging you, do this for me. I'm going back in a few days.'

She sighed. 'I don't know. Why's it so important to you?'

'I want to know that you trust me. You're my only family.'

She studied him for a moment. 'No more than an hour and you've got to promise me that you won't get out of the car.'

'You have my word on it,' he said, and then opened his arms as Josh ran towards him.

2

MAB TOOK THE OLD COAST ROAD, CRUISING ALONG AN AISLE OF LEAFLESS TREES. Josh sat up front. He played with the sun visor and rambled on about his latest computer game. After ten minutes into their journey, Mab caught sight of the Duke of Lancaster, its rusty hulk drawing him closer.

'Why are we stopping here?' Josh asked.

'It's a surprise,' Mab said. 'I want to show you something.'

Josh frowned. 'Mam said we weren't allowed to get out of the car.'

'We won't tell her then, will we? It can be our secret.'

Mab parked near the mini-market. All the stalls except one were shut; a red and white striped gazebo, selling yesterday's fruit and veg.

'They used to call this the Fun-Ship,' he said, leading Josh across the car park.

Josh gave the old passenger ship a disapproving look. 'It doesn't look much fun.'

'It was, in its day. It had an indoor market, amusement arcades. It even had a bar and a nightclub too.'

Mab pictured himself all those years ago, perched on the bulwark with Griffon and the Benbows. The sky was so much brighter back then, long idle days, with nothing to fear but the rain.

Josh tugged on Mab's sleeve. 'Can we go now? I don't like it here. I'm bored.'

He held Josh's hand tighter, took one last look and led him back to the car. After leaving the Fun-Ship, Mab followed the signs to Rhyll, speeding along the dual carriageway. A grey sea loomed behind the promenade, and the sky darkened, forcing

the seabirds to hurry inland. He pulled into a parking bay and then helped Josh out of his seatbelt.

‘Are we going to the arcades?’ Josh said, growing more excited.

Mab glanced down at his watch. ‘If you like, but you better not tell your mam, remember we promised her that we wouldn’t get out of the car.’

The air felt cold as they stepped outside, thick with the smell of fried onions. Josh ran ahead of him.

‘Don’t wander off too far.’ Mab shouted. ‘And don’t you dare run across that road.’

Josh waited for him at the lights, the whiz and whir of the machines holding him spellbound. They crossed over into the arcades. Then Mab handed Josh some change, watching his eyes widen.

‘Make sure you stay where I can see you,’ he said, and stepped outside for a cigarette.

He kept Josh in sight, watching his face glow amid flickers of coloured light. As he stood there smoking, he could feel his mood darken. It always took him by surprise, brought on by a casual glance, or someone’s smile. Perhaps, this time, the change of light had triggered it, or those teenage girls laughing from across the street. He drew hard on his cigarette, trying his best to ignore them. It was the blonde girl who brought it all back to him. She reminded him of Rhiannon. Her faded jeans were tight, and her orange blouse was slightly unbuttoned. There was coldness in her eyes and spitefulness in her smile. His heart thumped as the past stirred inside him.

Mab looked away, but all he could think about now was the stranger. The man he had seen all those years ago. He had no memory of the man’s face. He was just a lank silhouette, walking across the marshes. Mab closed his eyes an instant, and then flicked his cigarette onto the road. He looked across at Josh and walked towards him.

Josh glanced up at him. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘We need to go.’

‘But why? We’ve only just got here.’

‘Because I don’t feel very well, so we need to go back.’

‘But uncle Mab, I haven’t finished my game yet.’

‘Never mind, you can finish it another time. Don’t worry we’ll come back in the morning.’

Josh kept moaning and dragging his heels as Mab steered him onto the pavement.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Home.’

‘But why . . . I don’t want to, please; we’ve only just got here. Can we have five more minutes?’

‘No, we can’t. It’s time to go, mate, remember, we promised your mam.’

On the way back to the car, Josh kept moaning for the toilet. He kept stopping every minute or so, until eventually refusing to budge. Mab scoured the shops for an opening, catching sight of a pub on the other side of the street. He knew Annwen would go crazy if she found out. But he had little choice. Josh was bursting.

The Old Bell looked rundown. It was wedged between a pound shop and a boarded up tattooist’s. They crossed the road and Mab hurried Josh inside, holding his hand as he led him into the Gents. The toilet felt cramped, one lockless booth and two stinking urinals.

‘Don’t take all day,’ Mab said.

As Josh paused outside the booth, Mab pointed at it. ‘Go on, don’t worry, you’ll be fine. I’ll wait outside and guard the door for you.’

Josh nodded and stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

When Mab turned to face the wall, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. His short, mousy brown hair looked darker in this light. It was still a handsome face, a Roman nose, square jaw, although the years could have been a little kinder. He was surprised how thin he looked, and there was a hint of sadness in his grey eyes.

He turned away. ‘Are you all right in there, Josh?’ he shouted.

The toilet flushed, and Josh pushed his head around the door. After washing the boy’s hands, Mab led him into the bar. The room was quiet, and the floor creaked. A teenage couple played the fruit machine; bewitched, it seemed, by glimmers of orange light.

Josh tugged at Mab’s sleeve. ‘I don’t like it here. It stinks. How long are we staying for?’

Mab looked down at him and smiled. ‘Not long, mate. Twenty minutes, we’ll just have a little rest.’

‘What can I get ya?’ the barman said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Mab ordered himself a pint, and then a Coke for Josh. The barman kept glancing at him while he poured the drinks. Mab didn't like the man's smile, and there was too much certainty in those piggy eyes.

'Does your son want ice?' the barman asked.

'Please,' Mab said. 'Actually, he's my nephew.'

The barman grinned. 'Aye, that's what they all say.'

'You what?'

'I said that's what they all say. I was just having a joke.'

'That's not very funny,' Mab said, and held the man's stare as he slammed down his change. The barman sighed as Mab slowly counted through the coins. He could sense the man's glare follow him to the table, but chose to ignore it. They sat beside the door. Mab thought about Rhiannon, his hand shaking as he lit a cigarette.

'You can put that out now,' the barman shouted.

When Mab looked up, he saw the barman walking towards him. The man's face was flushed, and his eyes were fixed on the curls of smoke rising through Mab's fingers.

'Sorry, mate,' Mab said, and quickly stubbed out his cigarette.

'What do you think you're doing?'

Mab shrugged. 'I don't know, mate. Sorry, I was bloody miles away.'

The barman shook his head. 'I don't care where you were; just finish your drink and go.'

'Why, because of a simple mistake? Look, mate, I'm sorry. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.'

The barman folded his arms. 'Too right it won't happen again, because you're leaving. Come on, out; don't make me tell you twice.'

Mab stood up and stepped away from the table. 'You've warned me twice already. Let's see what happens when you make it three.'

The barman took a step back. He held Mab's stare with his own. Then his eyes softened. He held up his hands. 'Look, I don't want any trouble,' he said, and glanced down at the carpet.

Mab pushed his face towards him. 'You should have thought about that before, shouldn't you? Who do you think—'

Josh squeezed Mab's hand, and the worry in the boy's eyes held him silent.

3

A BODY LAY ON THE LICHEN-COVERED ROCKS, PALE IN THE HALF-LIGHT. Crows perched on it, squabbling over the spoils that lay bloodied beneath them. The mist from the estuary was rising, smudging the shoreline as it rolled across the rocks. Mab caught sight of him then, a stranger, watching him from the marshes. He was tall and lean, and square-shouldered. As in every dream, when Mab took a step closer, the stranger remained still. His face was obscured by shadow, and his body mottled with greyish light. Mab watched him, his desire to find the truth drawing him closer. The stranger said nothing at first. He just opened his mouth, the fetid stench of his breath flooding Mab's senses. Then the stranger spoke to him.

'Yr wyf yn gwybod eich cyfrinachau,' he said, and then retreated into the night.

4

WHEN MAB WOKE UP, HE COULD STILL SMELL THE STENCH OF THE STRANGER'S BREATH. The taste of it seeped into his throat, and settled across the roof of his mouth.

He opened his eyes as Annwen barged into the room. 'Get up,' she said. 'Come on; get off that bloody bed. Sleeping in the afternoon, come on, hurry up, I haven't got all day. I want to talk to you.'

'I must have dropped off,' he said, watching her as she walked into the hallway. He got up, yawning as he looked through the window. The street remained unchanged: unkempt hedges and smoking chimneys, a pot-holed road littered with cigarettes. A car rattled past, and a dog barked in the distance.

The moment he stepped into the hall, Annwen was in his face. Her breath was warm and smoky. 'I warned you, didn't? You gave me your word; you fucking promised me.'

He was used to her temper; he'd spent his teenage years feeling the brunt of it. In those days, their father had been the cause of it, always coming home pissed and staggering into the house. Annwen would tense up waiting for him, the clock's slow tick testing her patience. Their father used to fill the house with the worst kind of

language, words no man should ever use in front of his children. He would just laugh when Annwen tried to scold him, oblivious to it all as he flaked out on the sofa.

Mab looked into her eyes. 'What's wrong with you for God's sake? What is this all about?'

'Your trip to Rhyl,' she shouted.

He gave her a puzzled look. 'Rhyl, what about it?'

'Josh told me you took him to a bloody pub.'

'It wasn't like that. He was bursting for the toilet. I didn't have a lot of choice. I didn't do anything wrong.'

'You didn't do anything *wrong*? Are you bloody stupid or something? He's only seven. You weren't supposed to get out of the car. And if that isn't bad enough, he said you nearly had a fight. What's wrong with you? Why are you acting like an arse, stirring things up, and bringing attention to yourself?'

Annwen had a point. He could have reacted better. He wanted to tell her that things just got on top of him, the noise of the arcades, Josh's whining, the barman's attitude, and those girls from across the street. But all he could say in his defence was, 'I never meant any harm.'

'Of course you didn't, you never do.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Annwen closed her eyes an instant. 'You just don't get it, do you?'

But he did, every small part of it, every grain of dirt that had marred him since it began. He wiped the sleep from his eyes. 'I'm sorry. Look, I never meant to upset you, but Josh was desperate for the toilet.'

'Sorry never fixes anything,' she said, and then turned her back on him.

Annwen's husband, Brian, called out to her from the living room, 'Wen, Wen, is everything all right, love?'

'I'm fine,' she said. 'We'll be there in a minute, Brian.'

Mab followed her into the living room. Brian was sat by the fire. Mab cast him a glance, noticing how the years had aged him. Brian's face looked grey and thin, and his short mousy hair had started to recede. He sat up in his chair. His eyes fixed on Mab. 'I'm not happy about what you did today,' he said. He kept tapping his foot, the tremble in his voice almost in time with it.

'Why's that then, Bri?' Mab asked.

Annwen glared at Mab as if to warn him.

'Because I'm not,' Brian said. 'I don't think Josh is safe with you.'

'Why isn't he?'

Brian looked away from him. 'You know why.'

'No, I haven't got a clue, Bri, go on enlighten me.'

Brian didn't answer. Instead, he stared into the fire as Annwen stood beside him. She took hold of Brian's hand and squeezed it tight. 'What Brian's trying to say is that it's been hard enough living around here these last fifteen years, and God knows what might happen now you're back . . . The last thing we want is trouble. People around here have long memories, and we don't want Josh or Ella caught up in the middle of it.'

Mab nodded. 'Fair enough, so what do you suggest I do?'

'I know things have been difficult for you,' Brian said, finding his voice at last. 'But even after what happened, Annwen's always spoke up for you.'

Mab forced a laugh. 'Oh aye, I bet she bloody has.'

Annwen let go of Brian's hand. 'You can stay here two more nights, Mab, two more bloody nights and then you need to make other arrangements.'

He watched them for a moment. Then he nodded and threw them each a cigarette. Brian flicked open his lighter, his hand shaking as he offered Mab a light.

'Do the Benbow twins still live around here?' Mab asked him.

'Of course they do,' Annwen said. 'They've got their fingers in bloody everything, and don't you go winding them up. If you've got any sense, you'll keep away from them.'

'And Griffo?'

Annwen glared at him. 'Why? What do you want with him?'

'Nothing.'

'So why are you asking about him then?'

'No reason, I just am that's all. I just wondered what he was up to.'

'He's a sort of minister now,' Brian said, 'the Reverend Martin Griffiths or something, of St. Andrews Spiritualist Church.'

Brian and Mab shared a smile.

'I can think of a lot worse people around here than Martin Griffiths,' Annwen said, her eyes lowering as Mab stared at her.

5

GRIFFO'S CHURCH WAS EASY ENOUGH TO FIND. Mab took his directions from strangers who pointed him to a yellow bungalow. He had hoped to find Griffo alone, but from the cars lining the road, it appeared he had arrived during the evening's service. He pulled up near the fire station, and then made his way along the pavement. A bald man hurried past. 'Bloody weather,' he mumbled, and turned up his collar.

Mab nodded and followed the man up the driveway. It probably wasn't a good idea, but perhaps he'd get a chance to see Griffo alone, and if not, he was happy to wait. The garden path led to the back and tapered off to a large, well-kept lawn. On first impressions, Griffo's church looked more like a pine lodge. It was felt-roofed and elevated on concrete slabs. The more Mab studied it, the more he realised how big it was. It covered the length of the garden and backed into the surrounding wood.

As the rain began to ease, Mab lowered his collar.

When he stepped into the foyer, a man was standing by the entrance, collecting donations. He was tall and smelled of aftershave, his false teeth loosely gleaming. He seemed pleased to see everyone, but lost his smile the moment he saw Mab.

'Is this your first time at the circle?' he said, the whistle of each word daring Mab to mimic him.

Mab nodded, patting his pockets for change as the man rattled his moneybox. He rested a bony hand on Mab's shoulder. 'Follow me, please,' he said.

He led Mab through the foyer and then into a large room. The place was cold, and the air stank of varnish. The man smiled and pointed to the furthest row of chairs.

'I'll sit at the back,' Mab said, 'if that's all right with you?'

'Hmm,' the man said. 'I'd prefer it if you didn't.'

'Why?'

'Mr Griffiths likes us to fill from the front. It causes less disruption should there be any late joiners.'

'Is there any chance I could speak with Mr Griffiths?'

The man shook his head. 'No, not at the moment; he's about to begin the service.'

Mab nodded, and then sat down before the man could say otherwise.

The man's thin lips broke into an exaggerated smile. 'Suit yourself,' he said, and walked away slowly. Mab watched him make his way back to the foyer. He turned around for a second, his tired eyes casting Mab a glance.

Mab waited quietly, watching as more people arrived. Most of them seemed to know each other. They chatted in small groups, their laughter growing louder. A woman in an electric wheelchair waved at Mab from across the room. He smiled at her, his heart sinking as she wheeled towards him. She studied him for a moment. 'I've seen you somewhere before. Where do I know you from?'

Mab shrugged. 'I don't think you do.'

The woman narrowed her eyes, tilted her head. 'I know your face from somewhere. No doubt it will come to me.'

Mab smiled. 'Let's hope so, hey.'

He stayed quiet, gazing at the blue rinse in her hair.

'Mair . . . Mair, come over here,' someone shouted, and to his relief, the woman wheeled herself away.

Most of Griffo's congregation were women. They were a mixture of ages, from grandmothers to middle-aged mums, to world-weary thirty-something's, and giggling teenagers. After another ten minutes or so, the man from the foyer made his way to the pulpit. There was a confidence to his stride, and an assurance to his smile. He clapped his hands and everyone fell silent.

Griffo made his entrance to music. A hymn, Mab thought, a tune he recognised from somewhere. Everyone stood. Then they took hold of their neighbour's hand and started swaying in unison. The woman to his left tried to grab Mab's hand, but the look on his face deterred her.

'It is no secret,' they all sang, 'what God can do. What he's done for others, he'll do for you.'

Griffo had lost a little weight. He still had that round face, which blessed him with a convincing benevolence. His hair was shorter too, and those blonde highlights had been replaced by natural streaks of grey. His voice sounded deeper than Mab remembered, and its low melodic pitch resonated throughout the hall.

It made Mab smile to see Griffo standing there, the telltale of the estate, basking in all his glory. If anyone were destined for the role of reverend or minister, it was Griffo. When they were younger, Griffo became infamous for his stories. Griffo-Jackanory, everyone used to call him, bullshitting his way through the years with his tales of mad monks and midnight devils.

The singing began to fade. Griffo closed his eyes for an instant, and then pressed his hands together as though readying himself for prayer. 'Indeed,' he said. 'God has no secrets.'

Most of the congregation answered with a passionate 'amen,' returning Griffo's smile as he reached out to them.

'Welcome,' he said. 'And if this is your first time here, then thank you for coming.'

He looked about the room. Mab lowered his head as he sensed Griffo's cold, blue eyes wash over him.

'I want you all to join me on a journey,' Griffo said, 'a journey to the world of the spirit.' He shut his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. 'Think of it as the spirits writing you a letter, with you acknowledging step by step what is and what isn't correct, building up the evidence, if you like, as we work our way through it.' He looked to the left side of the room. 'I'm getting the name Robyn. Does that name mean anything to anyone?'

The response was an uncomfortable silence.

'Robert then,' he said. 'Robby, or Bob even?'

A blonde woman in a denim jacket nodded at him shyly.

'Stand up, my love,' Griffo said, and made his way towards her. 'What's your name, love?'

'Sue,' she said, her eyes watering.

'I'm getting drawn to the railway, Sue. Does that mean anything to you?'

Sue stared at him, lowering her eyes when his smile widened.

'No, it's definitely a railway.'

Sue shook her head, and then raised her eyes as though searching for a connection.

Griffo clenched her hand. 'Hold on to that thought for now. It's something for us to come back to later.' He took a deep breath and stared into Sue's eyes. 'He's telling me

he's older. I get the sense that he's a kind of father figure, an uncle, granddad, or an older brother?'

'My dad, perhaps?' Sue said, and then covered her mouth with her hand.

Griffo nodded. 'Yes, that's what I'm getting. His voice is clearer now. Yes, he's telling me he's your father, and does the number seventeen mean anything to you?'

Sue shook her head.

Griffo continued, and started throwing her a sequence of numbers. Sue blushed, refusing every one of them. She looked so relieved when Griffo said 'twenty-seven.'

'It was the number of our old house,' she said.

Griffo beamed. 'Indeed, it took us a while to get there, but we got there in the end. It must be the rain blocking the signal.'

The room became quieter, and those still whispering were silenced by the old man's 'shush.'

Griffo moved closer and rested his hands on Sue's shoulders. 'He's telling me that you're an honest and conscientious person. Am I right?'

Sue nodded.

Griffo raised his hands. 'Yes, he's telling me you're no saint, but you know the importance of being trustworthy. That you're a good mother and wife, and you're a loyal friend.'

Sue's shoulders began to shake, and as the tears rolled down her cheeks, she looked down at the woman next to her.

'Try and relax,' Griffo said. 'I know this must be very emotional for you . . . Have you been drinking lots of water lately?'

Sue shook her head. 'No, not especially.'

'He's telling me that you should. He's also telling me you're a worrier.'

Sue nodded.

'You need to stop worrying, just go with the flow. He's telling me "they're old enough to look after themselves," if that makes any sense?'

Sue kept nodding. 'Yes, it does. Thank you, Martin. Thank you.'

It wasn't Sue's desperation that made Mab laugh, or the countless pairs of eyes widening at Griffo's glory. It was his old friend's smugness that tickled him, and that self-assured smile that had misguided him since childhood. The woman on Mab's left

gave him a disapproving look, whilst the old man on his right shuffled away from him. Griffio stretched his neck and looked to where Mab was seated, losing his smile the moment he saw Mab's face.

'I'm getting pulled towards this side of the room,' he said, his voice trembling.

Griffio stood in front of him. It had been years since Mab had been this close to him, close enough to shout him down, throttle and maim him. Yet for all his plans, all he could do was sit there, as Griffio's blue eyes tried to goad him.

'I'm getting the voice of someone younger,' Griffio said. 'It's a female voice, not a child, but a young woman, probably in her early twenties.'

Mab stood up, his heart thumping. 'Do you have a name?' he asked, finding it hard to believe Griffio was actually saying this, but eager to see how far he'd take it.

Griffio paused. 'No, the voice is weak.'

As Griffio took a step back, Mab could feel the whole room watching them.

Griffio cleared his throat and walked back to the pulpit. He turned to face the congregation. 'There's too much sadness there, and her voice is fading.' He took a deep breath, smiling as he breathed the air out. 'Let's move on,' he said, and briefly closed his eyes. 'I'm getting the name Davey. Does that mean anything to anyone?'

'What else did she say?' Mab shouted.

Griffio tried his best to ignore him, looking for comfort among the multitude of faces. Mab kept on at him, asking the same question, over and over, ignoring all the tutting and the cold reproachful glances.

'Please sit down,' Griffio said. 'She's gone now and there are others waiting.'

As Mab stepped forward, Griffio blanched, and his hand shook as he wiped it across his brow.

Griffio stepped back, looking relieved as two men blocked Mab's path. They were burly types, dressed in patent leather shoes and military crested blazers. They tried to stare him down, their grim faces desperate to frighten.

'I think you better leave,' one of them said, his clammy hands pressing into Mab's shoulders.

Mab shrugged him away. 'Get the fuck off me,' he shouted. He turned his head as he sensed someone behind him. It was the old woman in the wheelchair, staring up at him.

‘Your language is disgusting,’ she said. ‘You want to show some respect, lad. This is a church after all. I know where I’ve seen you now. You’re Glyn Pryce’s lad, from the Moor Estate, the one who hurt that girl all those years ago. I never forget a face me. I remember you from the papers.’

Mab shook his head at her. He started to make his way out, turning to face Griffio as he reached the door. He expected him to say something, some clever remark perhaps. Griffio just kept staring, and for the first time that night, he was speechless.

6

AFTER LEAVING GRIFFIO’S CHURCH, MAB DROVE DOWN THE WELL HILL AND PARKED AT THE OLD DOCKS. As he gazed across the water, it was hard to imagine this was once a thriving harbour, ferrying passengers and goods back and forth to Liverpool. Like everything else here, the shifting sands had got the better of it, spreading until everything had silted up.

As the rain began to ease, he got out of the car and took a walk along the estuary path. The tide was in, a bloated wash of umber that flowed into the Irish Sea. When the path started to recede, he stopped to light a cigarette. He gazed across the ribs of sand, the silt, and the rivulets of water. Seabirds circled above, their mewling cries seeming to mock him from a distance.

The Dee Estuary had always been a place of secrets. It was where things got lost, and no amount of searching could find them. Barely five miles wide, it formed the boundary between the Wirral peninsular and the northeast Wales coast. It was a beautiful, ugly expanse of salt marsh and mudflats. Hidden channels and creeks snaked beneath low waters, and gatherings of birds feasted along the shore.

Even after all these years, he thought the place looked unchanged. He saw Rhiannon’s face even when he closed his eyes. He heard the whisper of her name and the torment of her laughter. He could still see her lying there after all these years, bloodied and half-naked, abandoned beneath the ever-changing light

A train raced past, and then, as the birds erupted from the marshes, he saw her dark silhouette walking along the path. The moon cast her shadow, and her hair gleamed beneath its silvery light. His skin prickled, more so as she drew closer.

All he wanted to do was call out to her. Yet even after all this time, her beauty held him silent. He watched her, searching her eyes for a trace of forgiveness. As she drew closer, Rhiannon's ghost looked changed. She was thinner, and her hair was darker.

She looked up and caught him staring. 'Do you have a problem?' she said, her voice softer, unfamiliar.

He shook his head and smiled.

'What's so funny?' she asked.

'Nothing, it's me, being stupid. Sorry, I thought . . . I thought you were someone else.'

'That's what they all say.' She turned round and started walking towards the car park.

He watched her for a moment, his heart thumping. Then he started making his way back to his car, slowing his pace whenever he got too close. Just as she reached the fence, she stumbled. He ran over to her and held out his hand, offering to help her up.

'I'm fine,' she said, and waved him away.

When she stood, he realized she looked nothing like Rhiannon. She was taller for a start, and her skin was paler. She had a birthmark on the left side of her face too, a port wine splatter that ran to the nape of her neck.

He caught himself staring. 'These stones are slippery,' he said.

She brushed the dust from her clothes. 'I suppose, but it helps to be more careful.'

He nodded and started to walk alongside her. They said little, a restrained conversation with awkward stops and starts.

'Who did you think I was?' she asked him.

'Someone,' he said.

'Someone?'

'A friend, someone I used to know.'

She glanced towards the Wirral shore. 'Are you from round here then?'

'Sort of,' he said. 'I live in London now. I'm visiting relatives.'

'I've been there a few times. I never liked it, though.'

He shook his head. 'No, neither do I.'

'Why do you live there then?'

'It's a case of having to.'

She didn't answer. She just lowered her eyes as Mab caught her glance.

When they reached the car, he offered her a lift.

'No thank you,' she said. 'I like the walk.'

He smiled, watching her until she disappeared from sight. It was colder now, and moonlit clouds drifted across the nighttime sky.

Mab sat in his car for a while, allowing her some distance. After waiting another five minutes, he took a left out of the car park, and then drove towards the Well Hill. As he stopped at the traffic lights, two teenage boys cycled past, their incessant laughter jarring on his nerves.

'Don't call me Scarface,' they kept shouting, their accents typical of these parts, a mix of Welsh, Cheshire, and a Liverpoolian twang.

He saw her then, standing at the entrance of the footpath, the boys tormenting her. When the lights changed Mab drove a little further and then parked up. He got out of the car, slamming the door to draw the boys' attention. The boys fell silent when they saw him walking towards them. One of them stepped closer, the taller of the two.

'All right, la,' he said, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

Mab raised his hand and the boy flinched. 'Nervous aren't you?' he said, and combed his fingers through his hair.

Rhiannon's ghost kept silent, only nodding her head when Mab asked if she was all right.

The boys looked at each other, laughed, and then began mimicking Mab's voice.

'Is that ya missus, mate?' the tall one said. 'A bit desperate aren't you? Can't you do any better than that?'

Mab turned and faced him. 'Why? What the fuck has it got to do with you?'

The boy stared at him, open-mouthed. There was a slight flicker in his eyes, as if he'd just recognized one of his kind. Mab knew that if he'd been an average passer-by, hiding behind the confidence of age, those boys wouldn't have held back, drawing strength from their heightened sense of weakness. They'd have shouted every insult known to them, and shown no fear of retaliation. Perhaps it was something in Mab's voice they recognised, the way he stood, or his eyes' dark intention. Either way, it seemed enough to frighten them.

After the boys had cycled away, Mab walked with the young woman up the path. 'Sorry about the language,' he said.

She smiled. 'It shut them up that's for sure. Do you always have that effect on people?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'Who they are, and what they're up to.'

The path widened, and a three-quarter moon shied behind the trees, gleaming through the branches. They walked slowly, gazing at the Flour Mill Pool. Clouds drifted across the water, and it felt strange looking down on them. Everywhere was hushed, and nothing stirred in the lacquered grass.

'I used to swim here,' he said, 'years ago, when I was a kid. Me and my mates, we used to come down here every summer and bomb-dive off that wooden walkway.'

She looked at him with a half-smile. 'I was never allowed to come here on my own when I was a kid. Didn't someone drown here once?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno.'

'Yeah, I'm sure they did, a boy I think.'

Except for her birthmark, her skin was smooth, pale, almost milky white. She had high cheekbones, and tiny freckles peppered the bridge of her nose. She frowned as she caught him staring, and then covered her neck with her hand.

'I best be off,' she said. She smiled. 'Thanks for your help, tonight, although they would have tired of it eventually, they always do.'

He offered her his hand. 'I'm Mab, Mabon Pryce.'

She looked into his eyes, and he wondered what she saw there.

'I . . . I best be off,' she said.

'Are you heading towards town?'

'Why?'

'I just wondered that's all. If you are then I'll walk with you.'

'What do you want?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Why are you following me? What do you want?'

'I'm not following you. And what makes you think I want anything? I'm just trying to be friendly.'

'It just seems a bit odd that's all.'

'What does?'

'You, the way you looked at me at the estuary, and your convenient appearance on the road.'

'Yeah, I'm sorry about that. But when I stopped just now I was only trying to help you.'

'Well, you've helped me now, so thanks very much.'

She continued up the valley path, and he watched her as she made her way through the woods. Her sudden change of mood shocked him. He considered calling out to her, but thought better of it. Instead, he made his way slowly through the trees, trailing behind her, slowing down whenever he got too close.

It had been years since he'd walked along the valley path, followed its stretch of white stones that meandered to the town. He heard someone cough. Then he caught sight of a man, walking his dog along the adjacent bank. For some reason, the man reminded Mab of his father, the look in his eyes perhaps, full of disapproval. Mab looked away and gazed down the valley, his eyes resting on the old battery works. It stood gutted among the trees. Its huge rusty cogs seemed desperate to tell a story. They were soulless things, he thought, tainted like the water. His mother's first job was in that old factory, although when she started there, it hadn't battered copper for almost a century. During her time there, it manufactured hosiery, churning out cheap clothes until it burned down in the seventies. She spoke about it a lot during her last days at the hospital. She'd ramble on for hours, talking about the history of the place, unable to separate fact from fiction.

The path widened and a fine mist drifted across the road. Instead of walking towards town, Rhiannon's ghost took a left. Mab watched her until she faded into the darkness. Then he carried on along the path, slowing down when he reached the old railway bridge. The dark archways looked unchanged, and the graffitied stones were still dank and uninviting. He'd taken refuge here once, hiding from the police, the town, the past, skulking among the shadows.

THE CLOCK STRUCK TEN AS MAB MADE HIS WAY INTO TOWN. Its age-old chime sounded wistful and haunting. He knew where to look for his father. He'd be drinking in the Black Horse, pleasing the crowd with his endless stories.

He sneaked into the pub by the side entrance, shuffling past a group of smokers. A man sat at the bar. He looked familiar, but Mab couldn't recall his name. He recognised his smile, though. It was a cruel turn of lip, turning uglier the longer he stared at it.

The man turned and looked at him. 'Jesus, this place has gone downhill. I like coming here for a quiet pint. But they'll let anyone in here now.' He glanced around the room as though expecting a round of applause, but all he received was silence.

'Surely that works to your advantage,' Mab said.

The man glowered at him. 'You what?'

'That they'll let anyone in here. It gives the riff-raff somewhere to go, even knobheads like you.'

The man straightened himself, took a deep breath and held in his gut. 'I know who you are. I recognized you straight away. Last time I saw you, you were running scared, a load of us chasing you down the valley woods.'

'I know who you are as well,' Mab said. 'And the last time I saw you, you were sat right there, doing what you always do, talking through your fucking arse.'

The pub fell silent, its sudden hush amplifying every whisper. Mab turned his back on him and looked at the barmaid. 'Sorry about that, a pint of lager, please.'

She stared at him for a moment. 'Mab, isn't it?'

He nodded.

'Sorry,' she said, 'but I can't serve you.'

'Can't or won't?'

The woman frowned. 'I don't want you in here. I imagine half the bloody town know my reasons.'

A deep sigh broke the silence. It was a throaty rasp, perfected by years of disappointment. Mab's father stepped out from the shadows. 'No need to be like that, Jayne, the lad only asked you for a pint.'

The look in Jayne's eyes softened. 'I'm sorry, Glyn, it's nothing against you.'

Glynn smiled, and then looked around the room. 'This is my son. Any shit thrown at him sticks to me as well.'

Jayne glanced down at the floor. 'I knew Rhiannon since she was a little girl. She used to be friends with my Claire.'

Glynn sighed. 'We all knew Rhiannon,' he said, shaking his head as Mab followed him through the door.

They walked through the High Street, taking a left past the World War I memorial. Glynn glanced at the list of names. 'Your great uncle's on that list, Walter Pryce, apparently he's buried somewhere in France.'

He pushed open the black iron gates and Mab followed him into the park. They kept silent, occasionally exchanging glances. They stopped on the embankment, and then sat on a bench that looked out across the bowling green. The moon was clouded. A hint of ashen light brushed across the tops of the trees.

Glynn lit a cigarette. 'Jayne's right, of course, half the town knows why she won't serve you.'

'This town knows fuck all,' Mab said. 'It never has done, and it never will.'

Glynn spat into the grass. 'It knows enough to condemn you. What are you doing back here anyway? I thought you had more sense.'

'I heard you were dying.'

'Who told you that?'

'Mickey Boyde, he said you were on your last legs.'

Glynn smiled and his face looked ten years younger. 'Mickey Boyde has a vivid imagination. All that drink has gone to his head. As you can see, I'm sound. I've had a little heart trouble that's all, but you can go back now. I don't want you bringing trouble to yourself on account of me.'

'That's a bit ungrateful isn't it? It took a lot to come back here.'

'I know, the M1's a bloody nightmare.'

Mab shook his head. 'It's all one big joke to you isn't it?'

'I'm just trying to keep the conversation light that's all. What happened in the pub tonight is just the start of it. People can be nasty you know, especially around here. You need to go back down south, before it gets any worse.'

‘Nah,’ Mab said. ‘I’m here now. I’ve done the hardest part. So I might as well stick around.’

Glynn took a long drag of his cigarette, watching the smoke drift between them. ‘Oh aye, stick around for what exactly?’

‘I don’t know, check out some of my old haunts, old friends . . . enjoy the cultural delights.’

‘You don’t have any friends here anymore, and I hope you’re not planning to see Griffo or the Benbows.’

‘I was actually, especially Griffo. I thought it might be time to give him another chance.’

‘Give him another chance for what?’

‘To tell the truth.’

Glynn flicked his cigarette across the grass. ‘The truth, this town already knows the truth. They decided that years ago, the moment the police charged you.’

‘And what about you, what did you decide was the truth?’

Glynn took a deep breath. ‘Is that what you came back to ask me?’

‘Yeah, I suppose.’

‘I’m going to have to disappoint you, son, dying or not, I’m the last man to ask about the truth.’

8

MAB LEFT HIS DAD SITTING ON THE PARK BENCH. He strolled along the Fron Park Road, gazing at the mock-Tudor houses. When he was a boy, these were the homes of the privileged, places bathed in light, large and unattainable. The gardens were still as he remembered them: striped lawns and perfectly squared hedgerows. On reaching the most majestic, he slowed down, and then crossed the road to get a better view. The large wooden gates were open, and the white gravel driveway blued by shadow. The house was raised on a slope, grandiose as it looked across the meadows. The place felt dreamlike beneath the light, keeping him spellbound as the past took hold of him.

It was from here that he first saw Rhiannon, that summer, all those years ago. She had sat on the fire station wall, watching him as he walked along the pavement. She

looked so beautiful back then, her blonde hair spiralling down to her waist. She reminded him of his mother, before the illness took hold of her.

When he crossed the road, she had called out to him. 'Hey, mate, can you spare us a cig?'

He hesitated at first, and then nodded, his face burning. After giving her a light, he sat next to her, inhaling her citrusy scent.

'So,' she said. 'What have ya been up to?'

'Just walking.' He forced a cough, trying to clear his throat.

'Walking, where exactly?'

'Along the Fron Park Road.'

'Why?'

'Just am that's all. I like to look at the houses.'

'Why do you?'

'I don't know. I just like the look of them I suppose. I always have done, ever since I was a kid.'

She stared up at the road. 'Hmm, they're all right I suppose, but looks can be deceptive you know.' She studied him for a moment, and then shuffled closer.

Her skin was so smooth, and he shivered as she brushed against him. Her eyes were sea-blue, and it took all his resolve not to stare at her.

'I've seen you 'round,' she said. 'Remind me, where do I know you from?'

He shrugged, unable to find a clever answer.

They sat in silence for a while then, gazing up at the road. He glanced up at the houses. 'So, which one's yours then?'

She shook her head. 'I wish,' she mumbled, then stepped onto the pavement. 'None of those I'm afraid . . . not yet anyway. But who knows, stranger things have happened, one day perhaps?'

When she started walking towards town, he followed her. It felt natural to chase after her, as though it were something they'd done for years. She was equally relaxed with it, slowing her pace until he managed to catch her up. She seemed to know

everyone, waving excitedly whenever a car hooted past. She wore the colours of summer: an orange blouse and faded jeans, her spangled shoes glimmering when they caught the light. Mab yearned to impress her, playing the fool and encouraged by her laughter.

'You're funny,' she said. 'Where do I know you from?'

'School?'

'How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'No, I would have remembered you. Who do you hang around with?'

'A lad called Griffio, the Benbows.'

'No, I've never heard of them.'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps you've just seen me 'round.'

She smiled. 'Hmm, perhaps.'

Just as he was about to ask her name, a yellow mini pulled up alongside them. The driver, a young man with red hair, leaned across the passenger seat and wound down the window. 'Where the hell have you been? I've been looking for you for ages.' He opened the passenger door, then scooted back over to his seat. He revved the engine. 'Come on, hurry up.'

'Sorry, I need to go,' she said, then smiled at him one last time before stepping into the car.

On his way home, Mab couldn't stop thinking about her. He pictured her smile, her scent following him through the avenues. He sensed his mother was upset the moment he stepped into the house. She looked so tired, a thin run of dry tears dirtying her face. His father had probably come home pissed again, the slightest cross word turning him into a mad man.

He placed his hand on his mother's shoulder, shocked by the brittleness of her bones. 'Are you all right, Mam?'

'I'm fine,' she whispered. 'Don't you worry about me.'

He took hold of her hand, watching her until she smiled.

'You shouldn't let him get to you know,' he said.

She squeezed his hand. 'It's not all your dad's fault, love; it's just his way of coping.'

She sat down on the sofa, her once curvaceous shape, now spindly and bent. The flesh barely covered her bones, and her skin was sallow and veiny. When she picked up her book and started reading, for a moment, she looked like his mother of old. It seemed to trigger something inside her. There was a flicker behind her eyes, reminiscent of the fire within. He watched her read for a while, her eyes racing across the pages. There would come a time when she would be too weak to do this for herself. He would sit and read to her, reciting someone else's words that meant little to either of them.

'I'll make you a cuppa,' he said, pausing at the door when she motioned him to stop.

'No thanks, love, I've drank enough bloody tea today. Come and sit here and talk to me instead. We haven't had a chat for ages.'

He felt like a giant sitting beside her.

She raked her fingers through his hair. 'You should grow it long again, like you used to have it when you were little.'

'When's your appointment, Mam?'

She sighed. 'Soon enough.'

'How are you getting there?'

'Taxi I suppose.'

'I'll drive you if you like.'

She laughed to herself. 'Since when did you pass your test?'

'That doesn't mean I can't drive.'

She folded her arms and leaned back into the sofa, her blouse tightening around her. He could have counted every rib beneath that thin layer of nylon.

'Besides your dad can take me. It's not as if he's doing anything else.'

She gave Mab a searching look, and he watched his reflection in her eyes. 'Anyway, I thought you'd have better things to do with that gang of yours.'

'I don't have a gang,' he said, and smiled at the thought of it.

'They seem to follow you around everywhere.'

'It's nothing to do with me. They'd follow anyone.'

She stroked the side of his face, her warm breath breezing across his skin. 'You be careful though, hey. Don't let them drag you down.'

‘Don’t worry I won’t. I’ve got plans.’

‘That’s what your dad used to say,’ she whispered, closing her eyes at the mention of his name.

The young woman’s smile haunted him, making him feel guilty as he watched his mother rest. There was a longing in his guts, growing stronger as the room brightened. He sat with his mother until she fell asleep, and then, ridden with guilt, sneaked out through the back door.

When he turned the corner out of the avenue, he caught sight of Griffo trudging up Moor Hill. Griffo kept stopping every few seconds, the steep run of tarmac leaving him breathless. They’d been friends for years.

Ever since Griffo first moved to the estate, he was considered different. He was from the city, Liverpool, the land across the water. Even when he was able to fit in, they treated him as an outsider. It wasn’t a conscious thing. Most of the kids on the estate, Mab included, felt he belonged some place else. There was his accent for a start. His Scouse dialect was so strong that it made their Liverpudlian twang pale by comparison. Griffo would make things worse by exaggerating it too. As though it were something he could cling on to, a remnant of something lost.

In the rules that governed childhood, Griffo’s accent, his weight and girlishness should have been a hindrance. Yet something saved him from the ridicule of his peers. The stories he told, perhaps, each carefully chosen word holding many of the kids silent. Griffo was a natural talker, a gifted storyteller. He had a remarkable eloquence for a boy from the estate, encouraged unashamedly by his mother’s pretention. He would do anything to keep his mother happy. And when she joined the Spiritualist church, he took to reading fortunes. It was the perfect role for his talents. He claimed to have visions, to hear voices. Many of the kids mocked him, but there were many who believed him too. He was always careful about what he said. He kept all his readings positive, managing to hold their attention by spiking it with enough danger.

Mab shouted for him to stop. Griffo did as he was told, slumping against a lamppost as Mab ran towards him.

‘Where ya off to?’ Mab said.

‘Town,’ Griffo said, wheezing.

When they reached the top of the hill, Griffo placed a clammy hand on Mab's shoulder. 'I'm fucking knackered, that hill will be the death of me.'

Mab didn't answer. Instead, he just stared at him, watching the beads of sweat glisten across his brow. Griffo looked relieved as the Benbows' Land Rover pulled up alongside them. He rushed towards it, panting as he swung open the door.

The one thing that always struck Mab about the Benbow twins was the reek of their parents' farm. It followed them like a plague, its earthy stench settling across the roof of his mouth.

'Don't you ever clean this thing?' he said, as he climbed into the back. He wound down the window, urging Griffo to do the same.

Brendan, the elder twin by two minutes, watched them from the mirror. 'We haven't got the time. We're too busy working all day, unlike some lazy bastards.'

Brendan was quick with his answers, unlike his brother Ned who rarely said a word. Ned favoured a quieter menace. He'd sit and brood, his dark eyes watching you. Benbow Senior had kept his boys from school, when they were growing up. He had paid little heed to the fines and warnings, deciding on an alternative education. The twins' mother was no better: Mad Mary, chain-smoking through the hours and cursing every one of them. No one would deny that the Benbow boys were idiots. Even without hearing them speak, you could tell they were different. Mab thought they were the worst kind of fools, dangerous and lacking conscience.

Brendan's driving was as reckless as his talk; a flurry of half sentences that changed subject whenever his mind wandered. 'Let's go to the coast, Prestatyn, or Rhyl. The fair's open.'

Mab sat quietly, staring at the trees, imagining the long branches reaching out to him. 'Nah, let's go to the Greenfield Valley,' he said, sensing there would be little argument.

The afternoon sun was high and golden, colouring the road with whiskers of yellow light. When they reached the Greenfield Valley, Brendan skidded across the car park, hollering like a madman as he covered them with a shower of dust.

'Very funny,' Griffo said, as the twins burst into laughter. Then, as was always the case, Griffo went into one of his sulks, mumbling beneath his breath whilst patting

down his clothes. 'Look at the state of me,' he said. Then he gave Mab a dirty look when he told him it was his own fault for wearing black.

After they had clambered out of the Land Rover, Griffo kept preening himself, checking his hair in the mirror in case anything was out of place.

Mab made his way to the pool, the Benbows trailing behind him. He loved going to the Flour Mill Pool, or the *Flouie* as everyone called it. He felt more alive there, especially in the summer months. He relished the laughter, the manic shouts and the splashes of water. There must have been at least thirty people there that day, an assortment of kids and teenagers, the mid-twenties unemployed, and forty-something alkies. The younger kids were delighted to see him, calling out Mab's name as they dived into the water. The older boys watched in silence, smirking as the Benbows stripped down to their underpants. Griffo would never swim. He refused to get his hair wet - a mop of light auburn that he insisted was strawberry blonde.

At the far side of the pool, parallel to the embankment, was a row of wood-panelled houses. They were the nearest the town had to villas, with lush and exotic gardens, decorated with palm trees and terracotta tiled patios. Mab longed to lie on one of the balconies, him and his mother, gazing across the water, basking beneath the midday sun.

He spotted the young woman immediately, her laughter rising above the shouts. She waved at him, smiling as he strolled towards her.

'Are you stalking me again?' she said, her citrus-scent falling over him.

He was more prepared this time. 'No, I'm not; I always come here, perhaps it's you that's stalking me.'

She laughed, and then just as she was about to say something, Griffo stood between them. 'Aren't you going to introduce me then?' he said, with that annoying grin of his.

'This is?'

'Rhiannon,' she said.

Griffo took hold of her hand, neither he nor Rhiannon seeming embarrassed by it. He started tracing his finger across her palm. 'You've a strong love line,' he said, and then smiled as Rhiannon blushed.

'Sorry,' Mab said. 'You have to make allowances for Griffo, he talks to the dead.'

Griffo gave him one of his looks. 'I talk to the stupid as well.'

Griffo went on to tell Rhiannon nothing but good fortune, his voice sounding more effeminate as he grew more excited. The kids soon huddled around him, tugging at his sleeve and begging to be next. A young man, tall, early twenties, the guy Mab had seen driving the yellow mini, barged his way through. Rhiannon pulled back her hand the moment she saw him.

The young man glared at her. 'What's all this? What the hell are you up to?'

She smiled. 'Nothing, Kev, don't get the wrong idea. He's reading my fortune that's all. We're just having a bit of fun.'

Kev grabbed her arm. 'Whatever. Come on let's get out of here.'

As she pulled away from him, Griffo stood between them. 'Leave her alone, mate, I don't think she wants to go.'

Kev pressed his forehead against Griffo's. 'Watch your mouth. What the fuck has it got to do with you?'

Griffo looked away. Mab remained silent, his eyes on Kev.

Rhiannon folded her arms across her chest, and through gritted teeth said, 'Stop it, Kev. You're overreacting. We weren't doing anything wrong.'

Kev turned to face her. 'No, you never do.'

She sighed. 'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'I'm sick of it,' Kev said. 'There's something all the fucking time, flirting with everyone. You're supposed to be with me.'

By now, everyone was watching, every pair of eyes eager for the spill of blood. Mab kind of understood Kev's frustration. He'd felt the same way, earlier that morning.

Even so, Kev was going about it the wrong way, making things worse as he grabbed Rhiannon's hand and tried to drag her towards the car park.

She pulled away from him. 'Get off, who the hell do you think you are?'

All the shouting had lured the Benbows out of the pool. They dressed quickly, the top halves of their overalls tied loosely around their waists. They leaned against the wall, their thick hands shading their eyes from the sun.

'Is everything all right, Griffo?' Brendan shouted, his grin widening when Kev glared at him.

As Rhiannon broke free from Kev's grip, Mab stood between them. 'Leave her alone now, mate, she's told you that she doesn't want to go.'

Kev stared at him for a moment. He stepped closer. 'Who the fuck are you? I don't remember asking for your opinion.'

When Kev started to shout, the Benbows stepped away from the wall, each idle threat drawing them closer. Mab's father had taught him that only frightened men and fools give you warning. Mab threw only two punches. One of them connected, and the other missed Kev as he fell.

As Kev covered his face with his hands, an older lad rushed between them, slurring his words as he ordered Mab to back off. After a few minutes, some of the younger boys helped Kev up. They kept asking him if he was all right, walking alongside him as he made his way back to his car. Mab felt sorry for him while he watched, ashamed of himself among the Benbows' raucous laughter.

Rhiannon watched in silence, lowering her eyes when Kev looked across at her. 'I suppose I better go to him, see whether he's all right.'

Griffo took hold of her hand. 'I'd leave it for a while if I were you. Wait until he's had a chance to calm down.'

They strolled to the edge of the pool and sat on the wall with their backs to the sun. Rhiannon's hair glowed against the light, and she cast Mab a glance as he lit a cigarette.

'Why were you going out with him anyway?' Griffo asked her.

She shrugged. 'He made me laugh I suppose. I've only known him for a few weeks.'

'A few weeks too long if you ask me,' he said, and both of them burst into laughter.

Hours later, they watched the sun slump behind the trees, glinting across the water. Griffo held Rhiannon's hand, interrupting Mab whenever he spoke. Mab grew tired of it in the end and sloped off towards the car park.

'Are you all right, Mab?' Rhiannon called after him, cutting Griffo off in mid-sentence.

When Mab didn't answer, Rhiannon jumped off the wall and jogged towards him. When she caught up with him, she looped her arm with his and started guiding him back to the pool.

'Thanks for before,' she said, 'for coming to my rescue.'

He blushed, more so when she rested her head against his shoulder.

It was late evening now and the kids had lit a fire, the air smoky, flakes of ash sifting through the trees. Mab watched the smoke rising and listened to the hiss and crack. Griffon leaned against the wall, sighing as Rhiannon placed her arm around Mab's shoulder. Brendan sat near the pool, lobbing stones into the water. Only Ned remained in the shadows, watching Rhiannon's every move, leaning against an old oak.

9

IT WAS RHIANNON'S GHOST WHO DRAGGED MAB FROM HIS MEMORIES, making him aware that he was standing in someone's driveway. She sat in the back of the car, watching as he stepped onto the pavement.

The red Jaguar XJ8 was as big and bold as the man who stepped out from it. It was a fitting car for a man his size, the bulk of him hidden beneath his dark overcoat.

'Can I help you?' he said, with a strong Liverpudlian accent.

Mab shook his head. 'No, sorry, I was miles away.'

The man smiled. 'You best be on your way then. And next time, do your daydreaming in someone else's bloody garden.'

Mab said nothing; he just nodded, smiled, and then carried on walking. When he turned around the man was still staring at him. He tried to remember if he'd seen him before, but couldn't place him. The man had a harsh look on his face, and his moon-white hair glowed beneath the lights.

10

BRIAN WAS LEAVING FOR HIS NIGHT SHIFT WHEN MAB PULLED UP ALONGSIDE HIM. He pretended not to see the car, and he loitered by the gate, feigning distraction by fumbling with his keys. He kept up the pretence until Mab beeped the car horn, making him jump.

Mab laughed to himself, then stepped out from the car and slammed the door.

'Keep the noise down,' Brian said. 'Wen's just got off to sleep, have some consideration.'

Mab held out his hands. 'Sorry, Bri, what's up with her?'

'She's had a bad night of it, those nerves of hers.'

'What's brought all this on then?'

Brian stared at him. 'Don't try and act all innocent. As if you didn't know.' He shook his head and brushed past him, then got into his car. Mab watched him drive out of the estate, the splutter of the engine accompanying him. The cold night air drew his attention to the sky. The moon hid behind a drift of cloud. He stood beneath the streetlight, looking down at the pavement and staring into his shadow. It was like watching another part of him, a dark persona that he'd abandoned all those years ago. Only its kind could endure the cruelty of these streets, and he welcomed it as he turned towards the door.

The house was quiet when he stepped inside, just the faint murmur of sleep and the distant rattle of pipes. The floor creaked as he crept into the parlour. He undressed quickly, shivering against the cold. He got into bed and lay on his back, watching intermittent streaks of light unfold across the ceiling. There was nothing familiar about the room. Yet something among its shadows gave him a sense of unease, as though it was that night again, years ago, and he was about to relive its nightmare. He tried to think of all those summers gone, the midday sun blasting across his arms and face. He tried to hear his mother's laughter too, his thoughts drifting, as the whisper of her voice washed over him.

An hour or so later, the telephone rang. Mab heard someone shuffling above, and then the sound of footsteps trampled across the landing. An eerie silence settled over the house. He lay still, waiting for Annwen to answer. After a while, he thought it was a wrong number, until the mumble of Annwen's voice told him otherwise. He listened, attentively, trying to decode her whisper. It was no use. Her voice was too faint and lacked inflection. In fact, the constant drone of it soothed him, growing more distant, until it faded into the night.

When he woke up all he could hear was breathing, and then a discontented sigh snaked around him. He sat up, quickly, startled by the figure leaning over him.

'What's the matter - did I scare you?' Annwen said.

'Jesus. What the hell are you doing?' he shouted, and then groped in the darkness for his cigarettes.

Annwen straightened herself, glanced down at him, then sat in the chair in the corner. 'I'm doing what I've always done, keeping a close eye on you.'

He took out a cigarette, keeping her in view as he reached across for his lighter. The flame cast her shadow, a ruffled silhouette, menacing and strange.

He took a drag of his cigarette. 'I always thought you were a bit odd, but this is bloody weird, even for you.'

She waved the smoke away with her hand. 'Never mind trying to be funny, why the hell did you come back?'

He flicked the ash into his palm. 'I've already told you that. I thought Dad was dying. Mickey Boyde told me he was on his last legs.'

'You've never bothered about him before. Why the sudden change of heart? You haven't spoken to him for years.'

'Exactly, that's why I wanted to see him. I thought it might be my last chance.'

'Well, you've seen him now, so you best be on your way.'

He remained silent. He just sat there, smoking his cigarette, waiting for her to say something. Even though he hadn't seen his sister for years, he knew there was more to come.

'Look,' he said, 'if you've got something else to say, then you best say it. I'm tired. We can't sit like this all bloody night.'

She nodded. 'Get dressed then, I'll wait for you in the living room.'

When he walked into the living room, Annwen was sitting by the fireplace. She looked alert, staring at him with her arms folded. At least the room was warm. He slumped onto the sofa and gazed into the remnants of the fire.

Annwen shook her head. 'No matter where you go or what you do, trouble just follows you around.'

He sat up. 'I'm a bit lost to be honest. What the hell are you going on about?'

She unfolded her arms and pulled a cushion from behind her. She placed it on her lap. 'You've been back less than two days, and look at all the trouble you've caused.'

'I've explained that. The barman started on me. We only went to the pub because Josh was desperate for the toilet. Anyway, I never caused a fight.'

'I'm not talking about the bloody pub.'

‘What the hell are you going on about then?’

She closed her eyes for a second. ‘I told you to stay away from Martin’s church. I warned you. Turning up there unexpected, what the hell was all that about? I’ve never heard Martin so upset. You frightened the life out of him.’

Her tone softened at the mention of Griffo’s name. She unclenched her hand and smoothed it across the top of the cushion.

Mab frowned at her. ‘Why are you so bothered about it anyway?’

‘Because you keep upsetting everyone. First the pub, now the church, why do you keep acting like an arse? You’re not doing a very good job of getting people on your side. I go to that church; in fact, I spend a lot of time there. They’ve been very good to me over the years, considering. God knows what they’ll think of me now.’

Of all the people to find religion, he thought Annwen would have been the last. She always mocked their mother’s faith, complaining about her collection of crucifixes and loathing their cheapness.

‘For God’s sake, Annwen, since when did you get in touch with the spirit world? I credited you with more sense.’

‘Things change. It’s been a great comfort over the years.’

He shook his head. ‘So you believe in all that shit then, voices from the grave, Griffo and all his nonsense?’

‘It’s not nonsense. Martin helps a lot of people, which is more than I can say about you.’

‘He messes with people’s lives more like, making up all those stories.’

She stood up and started searching for her cigarettes.

‘Here, have one of mine,’ he said, and threw the pack at her.

The cigarette almost snapped as she fumbled it out, and her hands shook as she cupped them around Mab’s lighter. She drew her face closer, and he saw how tired she looked. Her hair smelled of sleep and warm nylon. She sat back into her chair and took a deep drag of her cigarette. ‘Martin only told the police what he saw,’ she said, a ribbon of smoke unfurling from her mouth.

‘And you still believe that?’

‘We’ve been through all this, Mab, fifteen bloody years ago. Can’t you just move on, even a bit?’

‘How the fuck do you move on from something like that?’

She shrugged. ‘I just thought you might have that’s all. Lots of people find a way.’

Deep in his heart, he knew that staying away would never change the past, although he’d spent years hoping that at least it might fade into a distant memory. ‘Is that what you’ve done then?’ he said. ‘Moved on, found a way?’

She flicked her cigarette into the fire and watched it burn. ‘I’ve had to. I didn’t have much choice. I can’t keep thinking about the past. I’ve got two kids to care about.’

It was a clever answer, and he could find nothing to throw back at it. A lorry vibrated past the window and the front door rattled in its wake.

Annwen rubbed her eyes and yawned. ‘Coming back here after all this time, Mab, chasing after Martin Griffiths, it’s not going to help anyone, least of all you.’

‘Why’s that then?’

‘Because it won’t. Martin didn’t do anything wrong, all he did was make a statement.’

‘He made a statement all right, a false one.’

She placed a finger on her lips, and then ordered him to shush. She looked up at the ceiling. ‘The kids are up early in the morning, so keep your voice down.’

She sat back into her chair, and then stared at him for a moment. ‘What’s done is done,’ she whispered. ‘And you won’t change the past by coming back here and digging it all up.’

‘So what do you suggest I do then?’

‘I thought that was obvious. Just leave us all alone, Mab, and piss off back to where you came from.’

11

AFTER PUTTING HIS BAG IN THE CAR, MAB SLAMMED THE BOOT SHUT. It was his one last act of defiance before making his way back to London. His car didn’t feel right as he drove out of the estate. It kept juddering, struggling whenever he changed gear. He shifted into third, kept it there as the car gained momentum.

He drove down the Well Hill, past the Greenfield Valley, took a right onto the Old Coast Road, and headed east towards Chester. On his left was the Greenfield Business

Park, and beyond it the estuary. In the spaces between the industrial units, he caught glimpses of the river, then stretches of marsh grass and sand whenever the gaps widened.

He'd travelled this road so many times as a boy, sat on a bus with his mother, thinking how the journey would never end. It looked different now he was outside of it. The seventies tower block and the cramped cafes and shops announced the outskirts of Flint High Street. Beyond the Railway Station loomed the ruins of Flint Castle. Its jagged silhouette looked ancient, a monument to another time. An unreachable place that filled him with a sense of loss.

He drove past the town and veered onto the dual carriageway, then took the first exit to Connah's Quay. He glanced over at the Power Station. It was that quiet time of the morning, before the rush hour and the school runs. He loved the peacefulness of it, this moment between darkness and light, the inky blueness of the sky fading. It always filled him with longing. The clouds streaked red as the sun rose slowly above the horizon. Back in London, he'd be making his way to work now, hoping the day would bring a fresh start. It never did. That sense of dread always managed to creep inside him.

The terraced houses glowed with coppery spills of light. Each of them looked the same, narrow and red-bricked, standing inches away from the road. As he entered Shotton High Street, he got caught at a red light and stared over at the George Hotel, a big white pub next to the station. He'd feared the place as a boy, mostly because of the grim-faced men who sat drinking outside it. He drove slowly through the town once the lights changed.

As he approached Deeside, the Clwydian hills, the estuary and the fields were no longer visible. This stretch of road between Greenfield and Queensferry had always felt like an in-between place, an unannounced borderland, somewhere people drove through to get to some place else. In fact, for him, Queensferry didn't even feel like a town. The shops looked out of place: an ASDA supermarket near the ring road, and a KFC near a set of lights. Against the cold-blue iron bridge, the industrial estate, and the motorway beyond it, the bilingual road signs were incongruous.

His car started to judder again, so he took a left at the roundabout, and then pulled into the Greyhound Shopping Centre. He parked facing the Sealand Road, half a mile

from the Welsh-English border. There was no clear divide, just a sign somewhere that read *Croeso i Gymru*. Like most borders, it was an illusory space, telling people where they belonged, insiders and outsiders alike. He got out of the car and opened the bonnet. Everything looked fine, even though he didn't know what he was looking for. He closed the bonnet and sighed. His best option was to head back to town; he didn't fancy risking the motorway. He got back in the car and started her up, then took a right towards Holywell, the town pulling him back like a magnet.

When he got close to town, he turned up the Well Hill, noticing the red Jag he'd seen the other night, behind him. He gained speed, and the Jag caught up. It followed him along the Fron Park Road, and then up past the Moor Estate. A white van overtook the Jag and pulled into the gap between them. Mab seized his chance, and quickly took the next left. He raced towards the tops, the road clear behind him.

His car broke down on the Bryn: a local stretch of grassland, ferny and heather-clad. From where he stopped, he could see the estuary and the sands stretching to the Heswell shore. The sky had started to darken, and as the rain fell across the windscreen, he watched the seabirds hurrying inland.

12

LIKE ALL THE CARS THAT PRECEDED IT, THE RED JAG DIDN'T STOP AS IT PASSED HIM. In fact, it drove closer than the rest, its spray of water seeming more deliberate. As Mab walked, he kept his thumb out, tempted to exchange it for his middle finger.

The rain fell harder as the Jag drove out of sight. He cursed the weather, every cold lash of it. He turned up his collar and kept walking. When he reached the flatlands, the Jag was parked in a lay-by, colouring the grass verge with flashes of yellow light.

The driver beeped his horn and then leaned out the window. 'Do you want a lift? You look a bit wet.'

Mab felt too cold to refuse, so he nodded and motioned to the rear door.

'Sit in the front,' the man said. 'I've just had the back reupholstered.'

Mab made his way around the car; the man's shark eyes fixed on him as he climbed into the front seat.

'You picked the wrong time for a friggin walk,' the man said, his breath fogging the windows.

'I didn't plan to. My car broke down, probably the battery.'

'You want to get yourself something decent then, something more reliable.'

Mab nodded. 'Hmm, a Jag's out of my price range I'm afraid.'

The man watched as Mab fastened the seatbelt. 'I got this for a bargain. It was parked up for years, on some old dear's driveway.'

Mab nodded. 'Good for you, it sounds like you're a lucky man.'

'Luck's got nothing to do with it. I take my time that's all. You'll find it pays to be patient.'

The man offered Mab his hand. 'Eddie . . . Eddie Powell, or Councillor Powell to some.'

'Ma—'

'I know who you are, Mr Pryce.' He squeezed Mab's hand, seeming to hold onto it for ages. Eventually, Powell averted his eyes and loosened his grip. He pressed his foot lightly on the accelerator, looked over his shoulder and then eased the car onto the road.

He cast Mab a glance. 'You look fuck all like your dad.' The car gained momentum. 'You're wiry, taller. You're more like your mam.'

Powell, reminded Mab of no one. His face was stern as he concentrated on his driving. He guessed that Powell was probably in his early sixties, although he looked younger the more he studied him. Powell hadn't avoided age. His skin was lined and his hair snow white. There was something about him, as though his eyes were fired by a younger man's fervour. Even the rain seemed unsure of him, petering out as the town drew closer.

'You can drop me off before town,' Mab said, growing more agitated as Powell carried on driving.

Powell tapped on the steering wheel. 'I'll drop you off when I'm good and ready. I want to have a chat with you first.'

'What do you want to chat about? I don't even know you.'

'Mutual friends, I've heard you've been bothering them.'

'Martin Griffiths you mean?'

'Yeah, he's one of 'em.'

'Who else are you talking about?'

'Rachel.'

'Who the fuck's Rachel?'

'My daughter, the young woman you followed yesterday evening.'

'I never followed anyone.'

'That's not what she told me. Besides, it was you I saw last night?'

'Where?'

'You know where, loitering in my bloody drive.'

'Like I told you before, I was miles away. I didn't mean any harm.'

'No, I don't suppose you did. But I don't care either way. I just want you to stay away from her.'

Mab remained silent, staring through the window as Powell drove past the town. Powell appeared to know everyone. People went out of their way to wave at him, and he, in turn, waved back. Mab didn't like him. His smile unsettled him, something so much darker than its outward appearance. Mab gazed out of the window. The rain had stopped now, but the midday sky was still bruised by its memory.

Powell kept driving, smiling whenever Mab asked him to stop. He took a right down the Well Hill, almost skidding across the bend. As they approached the Holy Well, Powell wound down the window, letting in a gust of air, which was earthy and dank. There was a car park opposite the Well's entrance, motor homes and caravans occupying every bay.

Powell nodded towards the bathing pool. 'Fucking Gypos, they come here by the shit load. Look at them all, bathing in the bloody pool.'

'Perhaps they're cleansing themselves, drowning their sins in holy waters.'

Powell smiled to himself. 'Stealing the coins more like, whilst having their yearly bath.'

Mab thought of his mother's visits to the Well. Every Sunday she would go there, whispering her prayers and lighting her candles. He and Annwen laughed at her at the time, calling her mad as she stood there in her bathing suit. Yet all she did was smile, a glint in her eyes as she stepped into the water.

The road narrowed as they drove past the Well. To the left was a row of houses and on the right the red crumbling walls that led to the Greenfield Valley. The dark suggestion of the trees reminded Mab of the previous night, and he pictured Rhiannon's ghost wandering along the path.

Powell pulled into a driveway. 'Right, you can go now. Just consider yourself told.'

Mab shook his head and sighed. 'You could have dropped me off in town, you know.'

'I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone,' Powell said. 'I've got other things to do.'

'What, like parking outside the old mill?'

'So you remember this place then?'

Mab nodded. 'It's the old paper mill, isn't it?'

'It is indeed, flour, copper, linen, and then paper until they shut it down in seventy-five.'

'Sounds like you miss it.'

'This town used to be something years ago; it was famous throughout Europe.'

'Not like now, hey?'

Powell stared at him. 'No, not like now, fucking arse of the world this place. Do you know what someone from the council said to me the other day?'

Mab shook his head. 'No, I don't.'

'That this place was a dumping ground for English misfits, scroungers living on benefits along the coast. "You know what I mean," he said, "Mancs, Brummies, Scousers and the like." He didn't know where to put himself when I reminded him I was from Liverpool. He went even quieter when I told him we needed to bring in more businesses. We're just throwing money away.' Powell glanced across the road. 'We've spent thousands on bilingual road signs. Hardly any fucker here speaks Welsh.'

'Maybe that's the point,' Mab said. 'That's why it's important to keep the language.'

Powell sucked the air in through his teeth. 'Most people around here don't believe that any more than you do. They just want a good life. Unemployment means the same thing, no matter what fucking language it's written in.'

Powell opened the driver's door, and Mab got out. Powell was quick to follow, slamming the door behind him. He nodded towards the old Mill. 'This used to be the

council's,' he said. 'They put the place up for auction when it became too costly to run as a skill centre.'

Mab threw it a glance. 'Who owns it now?'

Powell smiled. 'I do.'

'That's handy. Did you get a discount?'

Powell stared at him for a moment. 'A discount for what exactly?'

'For this place.'

'And why would they give me a bloody discount?'

Mab shrugged. 'I don't know. You have connections I suppose. They might want to do you a favour, what with you being a Councillor and all.'

Powell walked towards him and placed a hand on Mab's shoulder. 'You want to watch what you're saying, casting aspersions. That mouth of yours will bring you trouble.'

'It already has.'

Powell's eyes narrowed. 'I know that, and if I were you I'd be careful.' He moved his hand away and smiled. 'I'm going to rent this place out as a call centre, seems only fitting, don't you think, to revive the town's industry?'

'I'm surprised you care.'

'What makes you say that?'

Mab looked Powell in the eye. 'I would have thought you'd want to invest more in Liverpool. From what you've told me it seems people don't think you belong here.'

'I've lived here for nearly forty years, which is more than I can say for you.'

Mab ignored the dig at him. 'Did you say this place was also the copper works?'

Powell nodded. 'Glorious days so I believe. I would have loved to be alive then.' He took a deep breath, sighed. 'I tell ya, I'd have given bloody anything to have owned this place in its heyday.'

'What, so you wouldn't have minded making money out of the slave trade?'

Powell stopped smiling, and reached into his pocket and took out a cigar, sniffing it briefly before lighting it. 'They don't always go together you know, profit and morality.'

'That's a good quote,' Mab said. 'Who did you nick that from, the Copper King?'

'I'm not sure I'm following you.'

‘Thomas Williams, the man who founded the *glory days*, that’s what they used to call him, the Copper King.’

Powell spat on the floor. ‘You know a lot about local history then?’

Mab nodded. ‘A little, I get it from my mam.’

Powell grinned. ‘That’s not the only thing you get from her.’

‘What do you mean?’

Powell took a deep drag of his cigar and blew the smoke into Mab’s face. ‘As far as I remember, your mother had a bit of a gob on her as well. Cancer wasn’t it?’

‘Was what?’

‘That finally shut her up.’

Mab stepped towards him.

‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you. The last thing you need is the police bringing more charges, and I don’t imagine that turning out well, especially with your *local history*.’

Mab turned his back on him and started walking down the drive, the smell of cigar smoke chasing after him.

‘And don’t forget what I told you,’ Powell said.

Mab stopped and turned to face him. ‘Told me about what?’

Powell sighed. ‘Don’t try to be clever, my daughter, Rachel.’

‘What about her?’

‘I want you to leave her alone. I love my daughter very much. We’re very close.’ He pointed his finger at Mab. ‘Listen, she’s had a hard time of it of late, and the last thing that woman needs is a good-looking fella like you filling her head with stupid notions.’

‘I didn’t say anything wrong. I just told her she reminded me of someone that’s all.’

‘I know what was said. Just make sure we’ve heard the last of it. And keep away from Saint Andrews Church as well.’

Mab studied him for a moment. ‘Why should you care?’

‘Martin Griffiths is a very good friend of mine. I don’t like seeing him upset.’

‘Scousers-in-arms, hey.’

Powell smiled. ‘I suppose, something like that.’

‘So what has he been telling you?’

Powell shook his head. ‘Enough to know that trouble follows you around, and if I were you I’d clear off before it starts to bring you harm.’

‘That sounds like a threat Councillor?’

‘I’m not threatening anyone, just offering some friendly advice.’

13

AS MAB REACHED THE EDGE OF THE DRIVEWAY, HE COULD STILL SMELL THE REEK OF POWELL’S CIGAR. He decided to look for a garage, took a right and followed the path to the crossroads. The road, a narrow twist of tarmac, had a dry stone wall on either side. The old stones looked ancient. They were cool to the touch, their edges smoothed by the seasons.

Above the road, on a raised embankment, lay a row of terraced cottages. They stood high above the trees, slate-roofed and whitewashed, among the valley’s sad hush. He kept walking and took a left into the valley’s car park. At the far end of it, behind the brambles, was the meadow pool trail. For some reason he walked towards it, treading carefully along a path of sodden grass. The place was full of old memories, and Rhiannon’s presence was strong there. He could hear her laughter, whispering through the trees, and see her eyes in the clouds above.

All that was left of the old mill was the culvert wall, running parallel with the water’s edge. It was about three metres wide, fenced on either side to provide a walkway. He took the grass-covered steps that led up to it, walking a minute or so before resting against the fence. The pool shone like black ice, reflecting the sky and the trees that encircled it.

He didn’t notice the first stone until it skimmed across the water. The second stone hit the far end of the fence, clattering off towards the mill’s foundations. The third breezed past him, scaring off the ducks as it plonked into the water.

When he turned around, he saw the stranger staring at him. He was about six foot tall, with a thick neck and broad shoulders. Something about him looked familiar, more so as he stepped closer. Mab recognised him the moment he smiled. Brendan Benbow’s skin was worn, leathered by the years. His hair, once a thick nest of black curls, was shaved. Its short-crop accentuated his brow.

Brendan grinned. ‘Well, look who it is. You’ve hardly changed at all.’

‘You have,’ Mab said, ‘but at least one thing’s stayed the same.’

'And what's that?'

'You still reek of that bloody farm.'

Brendan laughed. 'I wondered who the hell Mr Powell was going on about at first. A friend of yours, he kept saying, Mr Pryce? Mr Pryce, I said, surely you don't mean Mab?'

'Mr Powell now is it? Who the fuck is he anyway?'

'You remember Eddie Powell?'

Mab shook his head.

'Yes you do, he married that woman whose dad used to run the old post office. Eddie Scouse they used to call him. It was him that opened the Fun-Ship. He sold his half before it went bust. He's fucking loaded, Eddie, connected too.'

'He seemed very anxious to me.'

'He's getting a lot of shit at the moment, some reporter asking questions.'

'Oh aye, what about?'

'Nothing much, just some council stuff, from the seventies.'

'Perhaps I should tell him about that call-centre of his. It might make a good story.'

Brendan shook his head. 'I'd drop that idea if I was you. You're in enough trouble as it is. You don't want to go upsetting Eddie anymore.'

Mab smiled to himself. 'I'm not bothered about him. He seems full of shit if you ask me, driving a Jag, smoking cigars, another gobshite Scouser. He's a bit old to be playing gangsters isn't he? Who the fuck's he trying to kid?'

Brendan sighed, and then cast Mab a glance. 'He's not trying to kid anyone. You take him at his word. Eddie doesn't mess around.'

Mab studied him for a moment. It was strange to see Brendan in a suit. He always remembered him in overalls.

A weathered tan made Brendan's face look unwashed, and his morning stubble was like a thin layer of soot. 'Do you want me to take a look at that car of yours? Eddie said it'd broken down.'

Mab shook his head. 'No thanks, I can sort it out myself.'

Brendan held out his hands. 'Come on, Mab, there's no need to be like that. I thought you'd be glad to see a friendly face.'

'So you're my friend now?'

'I might be.' Brendan nudged him. 'Come on, I've got a charger in the back.'

Mab nodded towards the Land Rover. 'What about him, though? Is he my friend too?'

Brendan frowned. 'Who the hell are you talking about?'

'Ned, of course, your uglier silent-half.'

At the mention of Ned's name, Brendan stopped smiling. 'Do you think we'd still be talking if Ned was here?'

Mab shrugged. 'I don't know, perhaps he'd feel nostalgic.'

Brendan moved towards the pool and rested his hands on the railings. He stared into the water. 'We're keeping him busy for now. Hopefully, you'll be gone before he catches sight of you.'

Brendan spoke about his brother as though he were a dog on a leash.

'So he's still angry then?' Mab asked.

Brendan grinned. 'What do you think? He's reminded of your handiwork every time he catches sight of himself.'

'You don't seem too bothered about it.'

Brendan gazed across the pool. 'Eddie asked me to be nice. Besides, Ned's a big lad. He can take care of himself.'

'And what if he asks for your help, what will you do then?'

Brendan moved away from the railings and rubbed the dirt from his hands. 'You'll be leaving soon. So we don't need to worry about it, do we?'

Mab caught the hint of a smile as Brendan turned his back on him. His old friend walked away slowly as if stiffened by his tight suit. Mab smiled to himself. Even if Brendan had been dressed in a king's robes, he still wouldn't have looked respectable. When he reached the steps, Brendan paused and turned round. He nodded at the Land Rover. Then he beckoned Mab to come closer. The air grew colder as Mab walked towards him, the distant view of the estuary veiled.

'Let's get this car of yours sorted,' Brendan said. 'And with a bit of luck, you can fuck off back to London.'

Mab didn't answer. He just turned up his collar as the sky began to spit.

When they got to the Land Rover, Brendan reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, an odd assortment, a jumble of silver and brass. He unlocked the doors. 'Get in, then.'

The car's interior was a mess, the dashboard cracked, and the black rubber floor mats caked in mud. An oil-stained tea towel covered the passenger seat, Coke bottles and crisp packets piled on top of it.

'Just throw all that shit in the back,' Brendan said.

Mab shoved the rubbish to one side, sat down, and fastened the seatbelt.

Brendan turned the ignition key and started the engine. He reversed out of the parking bay. 'Where did you break down then?'

'Up the tops, near the Bryn.'

'The Bryn, what the hell were you doing all the way up there?'

Before Mab could answer, Brendan pressed his foot down on the accelerator. Oblivious to the oncoming traffic, he took a left out of the car park. The hill grew steeper, and he shifted into third gear. The rain was heavier now, pelting against the window, obscuring the view until Brendan flicked on the wipers. A siren blared in the distance, its piercing cry growing louder. Blue lights flashed over them, and Brendan pulled into a lay-by. Brendan grinned as a police car raced past. 'Bad news travels fast. North Wales's finest; they're probably looking for you.' He shook his head and pulled back onto the road.

Even after all these years Brendan's car still reeked. Mab wound down the window desperate for some air. It must have been something passed down from vehicle to vehicle, he thought, a meld of burnt rubber, cigarette smoke, beer and sweat. He closed his eyes.

14

ALL THOSE YEARS AGO, THE MORNING AFTER MAB HAD BEEN CROWNED AS RHIANNON'S SAVIOUR, THEY HAD SEARCHED FOR HER. The boys had called at his house early, beeping the horn and revving the engine. For some reason, Ned refused to speak to Mab, remaining silent when Mab asked if he could sit up front. At first, Brendan said little when his brother refused to budge. He made a joke of it, taking his

brother's side and trying to coax Mab into the back. Yet Mab was more stubborn than the pair of them, knowing that they would never get close to Rhiannon without him.

'Forget it then,' he said. 'You can please yourselves. I'll go and find her on my own.'

Griffo was the first to break. 'Come on, Ned, it's no big deal. Let Mab sit in the front. He needs to give Brendan directions. Come on, you can sit in the back with me.'

Mab didn't recall exactly what Ned said to Griffo, but it was enough to shut him up. Eventually, Brendan persuaded him, promising his brother free cider, and a drive across the Talacre Dunes.

'Rhiannon will probably bring some mates as well,' Brendan said.

Ned just stared at him, a look of astonishment on his face. As if it were inconceivable to him that he could ever settle for second best.

They cruised along the avenues and streets, the slightest hint of blonde hair filling their hearts with hope. Mab could feel Ned's knees pressing into his back, and he kept sighing whenever Mab laughed or spoke.

As though sensing his brother's anger, Brendan switched on the radio. He turned the volume up full blast, shouting the occasional word as the song reverberated through the dashboard. He kept glancing across at Mab, urging him to join in.

Instead, Mab lit a cigarette, and with every drag he took, Ned's cough grew more exaggerated. He kept waving the smoke away from him, tutting and sighing until Mab wound down the window.

The air was warm that day, and the distant blue of the estuary enticed them out of the estate. None of them knew where to find her. They just drove around aimlessly, the memory of Rhiannon's smile giving them a sense of purpose. They drove back and forth to town, eyeing every inch of the pavement. There wasn't a turn in the road that they didn't check. Every one of them was desperate to catch sight of her.

'Doesn't she live down by the estuary?' Griffo said. 'That row of houses, the red brick ones, you know before the turning to the old docks.'

Brendan sighed. 'Why the hell didn't you say?' He reversed into a driveway, followed the road towards town, and then took a left down the Well Hill. The sun was brighter now, a huge white eye glaring across the windows. Griffo kept asking Brendan to stop, complaining that he felt sick.

'Take a deep breath,' Brendan said, laughing as he moved his foot up and down on the clutch.

As they took a left onto the old Dock Road, it suddenly occurred to Mab that none of them knew Rhiannon's second name.

'I think it's either Jones or Davies,' Brendan said.

'Actually, it's Reece,' Griffo said, in that all knowing voice of his.

Brendan pulled up at the end of the street and switched off the radio. Mab listened to the seabirds in the distance. No one spoke. The car's sudden hush held them silent.

'Which one do you think it is?' Brendan whispered.

At a glance, each house looked the same. On closer inspection, the differences were unmistakable, distinguished by the curtains and the state of the gardens. Mab wanted Rhiannon's house to be the one with the Venetian blinds, or the garden with the striped lawn and hanging baskets. It seemed only fair that she should live in such a place, returning there each night, slowly undressing in the darkness.

'It's the second from the end,' Griffo said, 'number seven.'

Mab stared at him. 'How the hell do you know all this?'

Griffo winked. 'I make it my business to know.'

They climbed out of the car, Griffo staying close to Mab. They stood in silence for a moment, watchful of one another while the air grew warmer. Griffo motioned towards the road. 'I'll go and give her a knock,' he said, frowning when Mab shook his head.

'No. It's best that I go,' Mab said. 'I'm the one who's friends with her.'

Griffo smiled. 'Let's both go,' he said, and turned his back on the Benbows.

There were no flowers in number seven's garden, and flagstones had replaced the lawn. The place was littered with toys, a small plastic slide, and a child's bicycle. The sun fell brightly across the windows, lighting the dirt. One of the glass door panels was smashed, replaced by a small cut of wood. Mab tapped it gently, taking a step back as a dog started barking. It was a deafening sound, reciprocated it seemed by all the other dogs in the neighbourhood.

The woman who opened the door bore a slight resemblance to Rhiannon. She might have looked like her once, twenty years ago. Now, she was little more than a

pale replica. Her hair was dark and lank, greying slightly at the roots. 'What do you want?' she said, raising her voice above the dog's incessant barking.

'Is Rhiannon there?' Mab said.

The woman sighed, shook her head and turned to face the hallway. 'For Christ's sake will somebody shut that bloody dog up?'

A boy trudged down the stairs, cast them a glance and stamped his feet along the hallway. The dog followed him into the kitchen. 'Quiet Ben,' the boy said, before slamming the door behind him.

The woman turned to face them. 'What do you want her for anyway?'

'Nothing,' Mab said, 'I just want to see her that's all.'

She folded her arms. 'I haven't seen you around here before. I suppose he sent you, did he, getting young lads to do his dirty work?'

Confused, Mab shook his head. 'Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.'

Before the woman could answer, Rhiannon came running down the stairs. 'Hiya,' she said. She smiled at them, and Mab couldn't stop thinking how beautiful she looked.

The woman scowled as Rhiannon pushed past her, shaking her head when Rhiannon took hold of Mab's hand.

'Let's get out of here,' Rhiannon said, and led him down the path.

'I think your mam thought we were someone else,' Mab whispered.

Rhiannon glanced over her shoulder. 'That's not my mam. She thinks she is, though. She's just my sister.'

'She didn't seem to like us very much,' Griffo said.

Rhiannon nodded. 'Take no notice of her. She doesn't like any of my friends. She's just a jealous bitch.'

On catching sight of them, the Benbows twins stood up straight. Brendan greeted Rhiannon with a nervous 'hello,' whilst Ned just looked away.

'So, where are you taking me?' Rhiannon asked.

Brendan put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a wad of notes. 'It's up to you. We can go anywhere you like.'

Rhiannon smiled at him, a mischievous look in her eyes.

Griffo took hold of her hand and led her to the car. As Mab motioned towards the back, Ned stepped in front of him.

‘Suddenly changed your mind?’ Ned asked.

‘It’s only fair,’ Mab said. ‘It’s your turn to sit up front.’

Ned grinned, turned round, and climbed into the back seat. Rhiannon sat in the middle, Griffo on her left. After staring at them for a minute, Mab slumped into the front. He mumbled something under his breath and then slammed the door shut in protest.

Brendan revved the engine. ‘Talacre Dunes?’ he hollered, to which everyone except Mab responded with an enthusiastic ‘yes.’

When they reached the coast road, Brendan drove like a lunatic. He weaved in and out of the traffic, Rhiannon’s laughter encouraging him to drive faster. Before taking a right down Station Road, they pulled up at a Spar.

‘What are we all drinking then?’ Brendan said.

‘Cider,’ Griffo and Rhiannon shouted back at him, laughing hysterically because they had said it in unison.

‘Get me some cigs as well,’ Mab said, and handed him some change.

Brendan snatched the money, then motioned towards his brother to join him.

Ned refused to budge. ‘You’ll have to go on your own. I’m all right where I am.’

‘Come on,’ Brendan said. ‘Stop being awkward, someone has to help me.’

Ned shook his head. ‘Nah, not me, I don’t wanna lose my seat.’

Brendan laughed. ‘What are you going on about? Your seat’ll be fine. Rhiannon will look after it.’

Rhiannon smiled at Ned, and something in her eyes seemed to convince him. Ned sighed and opened the car door, throwing Mab one last look before stepping outside.

Mab stayed still, at first, watching the Benbows walk across the forecourt. The moment the twins entered the shop, Mab got out of the car. He jumped into Ned’s seat, sensing that he was watching him from the doorway.

Mab couldn’t care less, and blushed as Rhiannon placed her arm around his shoulder.

‘Do you think it’s a good idea to sit there, Mab?’ Griffo said. ‘It’s just gonna cause trouble; there’s no point winding Ned up.’

Mab didn't answer. He was silenced by Rhiannon's finger, stroking the side of his neck.

'Who cares,' she said, 'if Ned wants to act like a child then let him. I'm sure Mab can take care of himself.'

Griffo mumbled something and turned his face to the window.

'What's the matter with you, misery guts?' Rhiannon asked him. 'Don't you start sulking as well.'

'I'm not,' he mumbled, and pressed his cheek against the glass.

Much to Mab's disappointment, Rhiannon stopped stroking his neck, and began tickling Griffo, saying his name in a babyish voice as he jerked from left to right. Mab felt so relieved when Brendan swung open the door, his heart filling with joy as Griffo almost fell out.

'What the hell are you doin'?' Brendan said. 'We could hear you screaming from inside the shop.' He handed Griffo three carrier bags. 'Hold these.'

Griffo peered inside one of the bags and licked his lips. 'Nice one,' he said. 'They're cold as well.'

Ned opened the front passenger door, threw another three bags onto the seat, and glared at Mab.

Mab was happy to see Ned look so pissed off. Ned had been at him all day, so he took pleasure in taunting him. 'Are you all right, Ned? You look upset mate. Something bothering you?'

Ned pushed his face towards him, holding Mab's stare as he pointed down at the seat. Ned breathed deeply, souring the air with his breath. A rush of blood coloured his cheeks. 'Don't try to be funny, Mab. Just get out of my fucking seat.'

Before Mab could answer, Brendan grabbed Ned's arms and pulled him outside.

'Jesus,' Rhiannon whispered. 'What's his problem?'

Griffo raised his eyes and muttered something under his breath. Mab caught only a few words: 'someone' and 'wind-up', but it was enough for him to understand their meaning. He gazed out of the window, watching Brendan walk his brother up and down the forecourt. Brendan had one arm around Ned's shoulder, gesticulating with the other as he spoke into Ned's ear.

When the two brothers returned to the car, everyone went silent. Ned slumped into the front seat and then slammed the door. As if to kill the tension, Brendan turned on the radio, flicking through the stations until he found something he liked. Brendan grinned; then started rocking from side to side to the Beach Boys' *Wouldn't it be Nice*. He reversed out of the forecourt and took a left onto Station Road.

They parked up near the beach, the noonday sun beating down on them. Except for a few retired couples and the occasional dog walker, they had the Talacre Dunes to themselves. After shuffling out of the car, they made their way across the sands, settling by the old Point-of-Ayr lighthouse. The Benbows stripped to the waist, and then started sharing a bottle of cider.

Griffo started fanning himself down. 'I hate this bloody weather. It's too hot,' he said, and then sloped off to the shade.

Rhiannon opened a bottle of cider, took a mouthful, and passed it to Mab. Their hands touched and for a moment she held his glance. She stood up. 'I'm getting bored now. It's too quiet here. We need music. Come on, Brendan, sort it out, we can't have a drink without some sounds.'

'Not a problem,' he said, and ran towards the car park.

In his brother's absence, Ned began to stare. He placed the tip of the bottle over his lips, eyeing Mab as he gulped down the cider. When he finished drinking, Ned crushed the plastic cider bottle in his hand, let out a huge belch and threw it at the sea. He walked into the shade and took another bottle from one of the bags.

'Can you bring me one, please?' Rhiannon asked him.

Ned shook his head.

'Why?' she said. 'Are you in a mood with me? Have I done something to upset you?'

Ned shook his head again, and stared at Mab as he twisted off the bottle's cap.

Rhiannon patted the sand next to her. 'Come over here, please, Ned . . . come on. Let's be friends, come and sit next to me.'

Ned tried his best to remain aloof, but soon gave in to her coaxing. He picked up one of the bags, grinned at Mab, and then sat down beside her. As Ned handed her a bottle of cider, Mab stood up, lit a cigarette and then slowly walked away. When he glanced back, Rhiannon had already taken hold of Ned's hand.

Mab took a deep drag of his cigarette, the smoke burning through his chest. A few seconds later, Griffo sloped out from the shade and eased himself into Mab's place. Mab watched him take hold of Rhiannon's hand, his heart pounding as Griffo's finger traced the lines on her palm. Then all he could hear was their whispers.

15

WHEN HE OPENED HIS EYES, THE FIRST THING MAB SAW WAS BRENDAN STARING AT HIM.

'You all right there?' he said. 'You were bloody miles away. What were you thinking about?'

Mab shrugged. 'Old times, when me, you and Griffo, used to go drinking down the Dunes.'

Brendan smiled to himself. 'I haven't been there for years.' He turned on the fan, a sudden blast of air hitting them like a furious wave. 'So whereabouts on the Bryn are you parked?'

Mab nodded towards a distant stretch of grassland, pointing at his car as they caught sight of it.

'Not bad,' Brendan said. 'Someone's doing well for themselves.' He pulled up alongside the car. 'So you reckon it's the battery?'

They shuffled out, and Mab followed Brendan around the back, moving aside as he opened the boot. Brendan swung a set of jump leads around his neck. He clapped his hands. 'Right, let's sort this out then. We'll have you out of here in no time.'

Mab turned his collar up to the rain. 'Do you need any help?'

Brendan smiled. 'Opening your bonnet would be a start.'

Mab watched while Brendan examined the battery. Brendan fiddled with the connections, mumbling under his breath. A few minutes later Brendan turned to face him, twirling a ball of white residue between his fingers. 'There you go. That's your problem.'

Mab shrugged.

Brendan shook his head. 'You don't know much about cars do ya?'

'I never said I did.'

'It's not your battery that's the problem. It's the connectors; they're covered in shit. Don't look so worried, a bit of a clean and they'll be as good as new.'

It took Brendan less than fifteen minutes, and true to his word, the car started first time.

Mab climbed into the driver's seat and wound down the window.

Brendan rested on his haunches, looking up at him. 'So you'll be off now then, if you know what's good for you?'

'Off to where exactly?'

'I don't know, wherever it is you call home.'

Mab glanced at the distant stretch of water. 'This used to be my home.'

'Yeah, used to be,' Brendan said.

16

AFTER DRIVING AWAY FROM THE BRYN, MAB EXPECTED BRENDAN TO FOLLOW HIM. He kept checking for him in the rear-view mirror, a sense of unease accompanying him along the road. As he drove, he kept thinking about the Dunes.

He drove past the first roll of hills, and then took a right at the crossroads. The road was quiet, a run of smooth tarmac that cut through the surrounding wood. As the trees tapered off, they revealed an open stretch of grassland. A low mist was rising, and hunched crows watched him through its veil.

He put his foot down on the accelerator and turned onto the Ruthin Road. Here, the land was darker, a range of low hills smothered with brown heather. Above them loomed the faint outline of Moel Famau, the ruins of the Coronation Tower smudged on its peak. The hills looked small beneath it, childlike even, nestling into their mother's breast.

He stopped driving just outside Ruthin Town, pulling into a car park near the river's floodplain. After locking the car, he kept looking back, scouring the land for a familiar face. He took a shortcut, crossing the bridge that ran parallel to the old gaol. The town was built on a huge sandstone hill, and he took a deep breath as he climbed it.

Ruthin Town was a jumble of architectural styles, oak-roofed pubs, and medieval alleyways. All roads led to St Peter's Square, west of it was a church, its tall spire

looking out across the hills. To the east were more shops and cafes, old listed buildings meandering to the river's edge. North of the square was the Castle Hotel. He walked towards it, relishing the warm air as he stepped inside. The walls were a blaze of orange and red, and the soft glow of the lights reflected across the ceiling. The tables and chairs faced the window, and a Persian rug was spread across the floor.

The barmaid's smile took him by surprise. 'Hiya,' she said. 'What can I get you?'

Her hair was blonde, and he caught himself staring.

She blushed, so he quickly ordered a pint. She lowered her eyes as she poured it, her perfume filling the air. Her face and neck were tanned, and her collarbone sheened beneath the light. She handed over his change, the softness of her hands brushing across his skin.

'Do . . . do you have any rooms?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'I'll find out for you now,' she said, and walked over to the restaurant.

He took a seat by the window, watching the rain polish up the street. Ruthin was only ten miles from the Flintshire lowlands, but it always seemed so far away, as though it were another country. This was the safest he'd felt for days, slumped in a leather chair, relaxing in the company of strangers.

The barmaid walked over to his table. 'We've no single rooms, just a double I'm afraid.'

'That's no problem,' he said, and followed her back to the bar.

He checked into the Castle Hotel for four days, although he sensed he would probably be staying longer. After completing the registration form and providing his card details, he sat back at the table, slowly drinking his pint and gazing through the window. The sky was a thin slate of grey, and the rain unrelenting. The people in the square looked for shelter, seeking refuge in the nearest shop. As he watched, a sudden tiredness fell over him. He gulped down the rest of his pint, and then made his way upstairs.

The room made it easy to forget about the rain. The pastel blue walls and the flowered curtains calmed him. An orange throw was spread across the bed, and two small lamps suffused it with yellow light. Mab kicked off his shoes and lay down. He closed his eyes, picturing Rhiannon's smile as he listened to the rain.

AFTER THAT FIRST DAY AT THE TALACRE DUNES, THEY HAD STARTED TO MAKE A HABIT OF IT. They went there each evening after the Benbows finished work. They'd wait for Rhiannon at the end of the street, mainly to avoid her sister. They followed the same routine: waiting for half an hour or so, and then beeping the horn, until she sauntered out of the house. Only Brendan ever complained. Mab never grew tired of it. He was never angry with her. She'd always calm him with her smile.

No matter where he sat, Mab always ensured Rhiannon sat next to him. Whether he was squashed in the back or huddled up front, he always managed to make room for her. It was a game he played, something to torment Griffo and Ned.

The mood was sullen that Friday evening. Clouds filled the sky. The promise of a long, hot summer had been spoiled by a forecast of rain. They waited for Rhiannon in the car, silent among the evening's buzz. Rhiannon was in between boyfriends, and it surprised Mab, how someone so popular should choose to spend her time with them.

'She's just using us until she gets bored,' Brendan often said. 'She likes the attention, free taxi, free cider.'

When she wasn't there, Brendan was always slagging her off. That particular night was no exception. 'Where the hell is she?' he said. 'She gets later every night. She's always doing this, winding everyone up. I'm sure she does it on bloody purpose.'

Mab just stared at him, watching him tap his fingers on the dashboard. While they waited, Mab gazed out of the window, watching the evening sun slump into the horizon. The lampposts cast long shadows, and the pavement glowed with coppery spills of light. Griffo sighed and stepped out from the car.

'Where the hell are you going?' Brendan asked him.

'To see where she is, of course, you're not the only one who's tired of waiting.'

Mab chased after him, with Ned following behind.

When they got to Rhiannon's house the front door was open, the smell of baked beans lingering in the hall. They loitered by the door, hearing Rhiannon and her sister shouting. None of them knew what to do. They were unsure whether to knock or call out to her. The door at the end of the hallway flew open, and a black Labrador-cross hurtled towards them. It barked at them fiercely, growing in confidence as they

stepped back into the garden. Griffo ran down the path and hid behind the hedge. When Ned clapped his hands, the dog came to a stop. It barked at them, before retreating into the hallway. Ned winked at Mab, losing his smile as Rhiannon walked towards them. She was flushed, mascara running down her face.

Seconds later, Rhiannon's sister came chasing after her. 'Don't you dare walk away from me. I haven't finished with you yet.'

Rhiannon glanced at Mab, and then turned to face her sister. 'What do you mean you haven't finished with me yet? I'll do what I bloody well like. You're not my mother. In fact, you're the last person to tell anyone what to do. I've heard it all before. You've got nothing new to say to me.'

Rhiannon's sister placed her hands on her hips. 'Is that right? I suppose you know it all?'

Rhiannon wiped her eyes. 'No, but I know bloody more than you.'

'You know nothing. Look at you. You're just a bit of a kid.'

'And you're really mature.'

'I'm mature enough to know what you're doing is wrong.' She lowered her voice. 'And if you've got any sense you'll stay away from him.'

'Why should I?'

'Because.'

'Because what? Come on. See you don't even know.'

Her sister paused. 'Lots of reasons, he's too old for you for a start, and I don't want you bringing any more trouble here.'

'Who the hell are you to tell me what to do? I'll do what I like.'

'No, you bloody won't, especially if you want to stay in this house.'

'Fine, I'll go and find somewhere else then.'

Rhiannon stepped out onto the pavement. She took hold of Griffo's hand and led him towards the car. Ned and Mab followed, sharing their surprise through the occasional glance.

Mab said nothing when he got into the car, sitting quietly while Brendan drove them to the coast. He'd never seen Rhiannon so upset, and he was unsure what to say to her. He kept glancing back, smiling, and asking whether she was all right.

'She's fine,' Griffo said, 'just give her some space, don't moider her.'

When Mab stared at him, Griffio blushed, and there was a tremble in his voice when he began to read Rhiannon's fortune. Ned sat on Rhiannon's left, his oil-stained hand resting on her thigh. Even when they made their habitual stop for cider, Ned refused to budge. For Rhiannon's sake, Mab didn't argue. Instead, he followed Brendan into the Spar, desperate to get some air. While Brendan joined the queue, Mab waited by the doorway, his heart pounding as he imagined Ned's hands wandering all over her.

Rhiannon seemed a little brighter when they parked up near the Dunes. They sat quietly with her. The air was muggy while they drank. Ned appeared to find strength in her sadness. He grew chattier, nudging up close and kept asking her to smile.

After a while, Mab walked away from them, strolling to the water's edge and watching the threat of the tide. A dozen or so birds had gathered along the shore, breaking into flight before the waves could claim them. Alone, by the sea, he thought about Rhiannon's argument. Stay away from him, her sister had warned her, and he tried to think who it could be. A tattooed twenty-something no doubt, deeply tanned, and pumped-up on steroids. There were so many of them to choose from, driving up and down the coast, or hanging around the Fun-Ship. What drew him from the water's edge was Brendan, calling out his name and waving a bottle of cider. Griffio stood beside him, his face glum as Rhiannon held Ned's hand.

When Ned caught Mab staring at him, he put his arm around Rhiannon's shoulder.

Brendan winked at Mab, then nodded towards them. 'That's a turn-up for the books.'

'What do you mean?' Mab asked.

'Those two, look at them, all nice and snug.'

Mab took a swig of cider. 'It doesn't look like anything to me.'

'You must be blind then.'

'Or you're seeing what isn't there. Rhiannon's just being friendly. That's how she is. She's messing around that's all.'

'If you say so.'

Mab grabbed his bottle of cider and headed towards the car park. He sat down on the steps, the light fading, and the evening's silence taking hold of him. He watched the seagulls fly out, distant white flecks hovering above the sea. He took little notice of Rhiannon's voice at first. Her words were faint, drowned out by the relentless

mewling. As her cries grew louder, he stood up, and sensing something was wrong, started walking towards her.

‘Get off, Ned,’ she said. ‘You’re annoying me now. Stop pissing about.’

Ned ignored her, taking hold of her wrists when she tried to wriggle free. He drew her close, trying to force a kiss.

Griffo tried his best to intervene. ‘That’s enough now. Come on, Ned, leave her alone.’

Ned winked at him. ‘I’m not doing any harm. I’m only messing about.’

Rhiannon squirmed. ‘Get off, Ned, please let me go.’

‘Give us a kiss then,’ he said, but seemed dissatisfied when she pecked him on the cheek.

‘No. A proper kiss,’ he demanded, and pushed his face closer.

Before Rhiannon could move away, Ned’s thick lips slithered across her cheek. She scraped her nails across his face. ‘Get off me, you horrible bastard.’

Before anyone could react, Ned had thrown her onto the sand. ‘You stupid fucking bitch, what did you do that for?’ He wiped his hand across his cheek, stared at the blood on his fingers. When he lunged towards her, Mab stood in front of him. Ned stared at him. ‘And what the hell is your problem?’

Mab took a step closer, his heart thumping. ‘You are.’

Before Ned could say another word, Brendan rushed between them. He placed his hands on Ned’s chest, trying his best to push him back. ‘Come on, Ned. Forget about it, this is stupid. Come on. Stop it now, before it goes too far.’

Ned refused to budge. ‘I’ve done nothing wrong. That fucking slut has been coming on to me all night. Leading me on, you should have heard the things she said to me.’

‘In your dreams more like,’ Rhiannon shouted at him.

‘To be fair, Mab,’ Brendan said, ‘they did look pretty snug.’

Rhiannon folded her arms. ‘I was just having a laugh that’s all. It was harmless fun. I didn’t mean anything by it.’

Brendan glanced at her. ‘Hmm, that sounds familiar.’

‘It’s not Rhiannon’s fault,’ Mab said. ‘It’s Ned. He’s always the same, taking things too far, acting like a fucking prick.’

Ned stepped forward. ‘You’re the last person to call anyone a prick.’

‘Why’s that then?’

‘Look at you, thinking you’re God’s gift, going off in a mood whenever you don’t get any attention.’

‘Is that right, Ned? But at least I know when to take no for an answer, when a girl’s not interested.’

The next thing Mab saw was Ned lunging towards him. He instinctively threw a punch, and Ned’s jaw felt like concrete as it connected with his fist. Ned grabbed him around the waist and threw him to the sand, pressed his knees into his arms and sat on top of him.

Mab could barely breathe beneath his weight, Ned’s warm spittle spraying across his face. He could hear Brendan and Griffio, shouting Ned’s name, begging him to stop. Ned gripped Mab’s throat, a relentless look in his eyes as Mab began to choke.

Mab kept wriggling and pushing against him, desperate for air. Then, somehow, he freed one of his hands. He pushed his thumb into Ned’s eye, pressing harder. At first, it seemed to have no effect on him, but he kept pushing and pushing until Ned’s hands loosened from his throat. Ned slumped to his side, holding his face and writhing in the sand. For a moment, Mab just lay there, gasping for air until Rhiannon helped him up.

Ned knelt into the sand, his hands covering his face. ‘I’m gonna fucking kill you, Mab, you and that slut.’

Brendan knelt into the sand and took hold of Ned’s wrists. ‘Let me see, Ned, move your hands away.’

Ned kept turning away from him, demanding to be left alone. Brendan forced Ned’s hands away from his face. He stared at it for a moment then looked at Mab. ‘See what you’ve done to him. He’s probably lost sight in that eye. All this because of her, look at him, he’s in a right fucking mess.’

Mab forced a laugh. ‘What do you expect me to do? That fucking psycho brother of yours was trying to choke me.’

Brendan helped Ned up, walking him slowly along the beach, blocking Ned’s path whenever he tried to run at Mab.

‘I’m going to fucking kill you,’ Ned kept shouting, ‘you and that cock teasing slut.’

Between his curses, Ned stood still, tilted his head while his brother examined him. Eventually, Brendan coaxed Ned back to the car, one arm around his waist and the

other on his shoulder. Mab watched them, listening to the waves lapping against the shore. Rhiannon took hold of his hand, squeezing it tighter as the Benbows drove away.

18

THE MORNING TRAFFIC WOKE MAB UP, AND WHEN HE OPENED HIS EYES, THE HOTEL ROOM LOOKED BRIGHT. He could hear the whispers of children, and heard their laughter as they hurried downstairs. It sounded as though it were two boys and a girl, and it made him think of when he was a kid, playing with Griffio and Annwen. Back then, Annwen and Griffio were close. It had always been a strained relationship, as though every exchanged glance acknowledged a darker secret.

It started when they were about seven or eight, when Mab, Griffio, and some other boys started hanging around with Annwen and her friend Jean. There were only three years between them, but the girls seemed so much older. They spent their time in the meadows, playing hide and seek, and chasing each other through the grass. Annwen would always catch Griffio, making him blush by pecking him on the cheek. She would make a joke of it, ruffle his hair and then run off laughing. Sometimes Mab would catch her staring at his friend, or walking too close as they trudged through the fields.

During those summers, Griffio and Mab never mentioned it. In their pre-adolescent world, such a relationship was taboo. They were inseparable in those days, wandering around the avenues, mooching in each other's house. They ambled through the gorse, their faces licked by the breeze. They'd set a bush on fire and watch the smoke drifting across the fields. When the weather was hot, they'd spend their time at the Flour Mill Pool, bomb-diving into the water, or bathing for a while, and then drying themselves beneath the sun.

Things started to change when they went to the high school. They were separated, placed in different forms. Mab seemed to cope better in the new school, whereas Griffio only managed to survive by telling stories. They still saw each other in the evenings, spending their time in the valley. That was Mab's idea, mainly to avoid his sister. He did his best to discourage her, mostly because he could. No matter where they went, Annwen always managed to find them. She would appear from nowhere,

calling Griffo's name while she chased them through the trees. Now, when Annwen spoke to them, Griffo took more notice. He complimented her clothes and always laughed at her jokes. Whenever Mab grew tired of Annwen, Griffo would defend her.

'Leave her alone,' he begged. 'She's still your sister.'

Annwen said nothing, grinning at Mab whenever Griffo looked away. Mab tried his best to be devious. He would tell Griffo they were going down the woods, and then change his mind midway through their journey. It worked for a while, until his plans backfired on him. Griffo and Annwen started to meet in secret. Everyone knew about it, except Mab, although he finally got wind of it.

He caught them on a Sunday. He was in the kitchen, fiddling with the radio. His mother was making dinner. Pans simmered on the stove, and the air was thick with the smell of gravy. The sun beamed across the windows, casting sharp shadows. When he grew bored of the radio, he began following his mother around the house.

She tried her best to discourage him, sighing and tutting, ignoring most of his questions. 'For God's sake, Mab, why don't you go and see what Griffo's up to.'

He dragged himself outside, his feet baking beneath the hot tarmac road. Griffo lived in Moorbank, in one of the detached houses. They were built before the Estate and looked misplaced among the shabby avenues.

Griffo's mother answered the door. Her hair tied in a bun, and her plump face powdered. She stood in the doorway, her arms folded. 'And what do you want?'

'Is Griffo in?'

She looked Mab up and down, followed by a moment's pause. 'I thought he was with you. He's been out since this morning.'

'Perhaps he's down the valley,' Mab said, then smiled at her and walked back up the driveway.

Seconds later, she called after him. 'If you find him, tell him his mam said his dinner's ready, and that he needs to get home.'

'No problem.'

'Just make sure you do. I don't want him gallivanting.'

Mab took a shortcut to the valley, sprinting across the meadows. He caught sight of them at the edge of the woods. Griffo was dressed in black, leaning against a tree with Annwen pressed into him. Mab ducked and began snaking through the grass,

pausing whenever they looked his way. The couple would stare at each other for a while, smile momentarily and then kiss. It was an odd mating ritual. If Annwen hadn't been his sister, Mab probably would have burst into laughter. He could hear his every breath, in rhythm with the thump of his heart. Griffo looked startled when Mab stood, and pushed Annwen away. Annwen smiled, her eyes brazen. They watched each other for a moment, the sun beaming through the trees. Then, as Mab turned back towards the fields, Griffo chased after him. He kept pleading for Mab to stop. 'Wait Mab, please, let me explain.'

Mab started to run, Griffo's voice growing fainter. He sprinted back to the estate, stopping before he reached Griffo's house.

Griffo's mother was watching from the window, and hurried to the door the moment she saw him. 'Did you find him?'

He nodded, still panting as he pointed towards the fields. 'Yes, Mrs Griffiths, he's with my sister.'

'What's he doing with her?'

'Kissing, she's his girlfriend.'

Griffo's mother turned pale. 'Girlfriend?' she said, saying the word like it was the worst kind of insult.

Before Mab could answer, she stormed out of the house, barging past him. He followed her, brimming with excitement. She caught sight of Griffo as he stepped onto the pavement. Annwen trailed behind him. Griffo froze when he saw his mother walking towards him. She grabbed hold of his arm and started to shake him. 'Where the hell have you been? What have you been up to?' She swiped him across the head. 'You stay where I can see you from now on, and keep out of those fields.'

She glared at Annwen. 'As for you, my girl, from now on you keep away from him.'

Mrs Griffiths dragged her son up the street. 'You're filthy. Just you wait until I tell your father.'

Mab enjoyed the show, him and some other kids howling with laughter.

Annwen stood motionless, her hand covering her mouth. She stared at Mab for ages, and this time she wasn't smiling. She went on about it for days afterwards. She kept complaining to their mother, telling her that Mab had done it on purpose. The

only thing their mother said was that she'd spoken to Griffo's parents, a bemused look on her face when she told Annwen to stay away from him.

'Besides,' she said, 'I'm sure you can do better than that.'

Mab didn't see Griffo for weeks after that, and when they finally mooched back into each other's lives, there was always an unmentioned distance.

19

THE HOTEL SHOWER GUSHED DOWN ON HIM, THE HOT WATER STEAMING UP THE GLASS. Mab thought about Powell, and then Annwen. But it was the dead that haunted him the most: Rhiannon's smile and his mother's sadness. He could even smell Rhiannon's scent, closing his eyes before it took him to darker places.

After a long breakfast, he headed back to his car. Water gushed from the drains, and the roads were slippery and glossed. He hardly saw a soul, and except for the cars, the place was deserted. Walking past the old buildings was like travelling through another age. The windows had small panes of glass, and their timber frames were fashioned from dark oak. Every other shop was a cafe, signs that read 'Fish and Chips,' and 'All day breakfast'.

After starting the engine, he sat for a while, waiting for the car to warm. He gazed through the glass. The sky was an endless sweep of grey, and a faint smudge of trees marked the horizon. He needed to speak with Griffo, alone this time; it was his only option. He would go back to the church, see if he could find him, and wait until he did. Griffo had every reason to hate him, but it still didn't give him the right to tell lies. He was convinced that Griffo was the man he'd seen at the estuary, all those years ago. The stranger dressed in black, the dark silhouette of his nightmares. The question that haunted him was what was Griffo doing there? What part had he played in Rhiannon's death? Griffo had told the police he'd been out walking. That he'd spoken to Mab near the marshes. He told them Mab had acted strangely. What his definition of strange was, Mab had no idea. But it seemed enough to convince the police to arrest him. Why had Griffo lied? He'd never spoken to Mab by the marshes. They had come across each other by the road, so why say otherwise? Was it for revenge? Or was it connected to something darker? He'd thought about it for years, and now, after finally finding

the strength to comeback, he wasn't going anywhere until Griffo told him the truth.

When Mab pulled onto the road, the traffic was busier than he expected: a slow haul of lorries and old-age drivers. He started to lose patience, more so when he thought of Griffo. He'd make sure that he'd be alone this time, without the protection of his congregation. He pictured Griffo's smile, then took a deep breath as his thoughts drifted to the marshes. He pressed harder on the accelerator, speeding past a line of traffic. The car behind gave him a long contemptuous beep, the driver's face fading as Mab drove faster. He sped along the old A55, and then took a left to the town.

As he drove, he could see the estuary. The tide was out. Across the sands, the Wirral shoreline and the fields and rows of houses beyond it were in full view. Ever since he was a boy, he'd always seen it as the *other place*. It was the land beyond the border, a solid, tangible space that reminded him he lived on the other side. When he went on school trips, travelling deeper into North Wales, to Betws-y-Coed and sometimes further west, he felt less Welsh. It was a feeling more than anything. A notion he was too young to articulate. In the gift shops, with the recording of a Welsh male voice choir singing in the background, the trinkets and souvenirs, love spoons, porcelain Welsh dolls, slate coasters, dragon keyrings and mugs, he felt like an imposter.

Yet the estuary, that divide of water, always made him feel he was on the inside, looking out. When he travelled further into Wales, he no longer felt a part of it. It was a strange feeling. He was neither one nor the other. It was like having one foot in the sand, and the other in the water. Now that he was back, he was happy to feel like that. He embraced it. This feeling of being neither English nor Welsh no longer bothered him. He was happy to be in this in-between place. At least he felt part of something.

When he arrived at Griffo's church, the place looked lifeless. All the blinds were shut and the doors locked. He walked slowly up the drive, veering towards a spill of light. A dog's bark startled him, and when he turned round, he stared into its fierce eyes. The Alsatian snapped and snarled, almost breaking free while its master tried to restrain it.

'Easy Rex, easy now,' the man said.

The churchwarden looked frailer in the daylight, and his thin arms struggled as Rex pulled harder.

Mab took a step back. 'You frightened the bloody life out of me. That dog's not safe.'

'Rex is fine, providing you behave yourself.'

'I'm not doing anything wrong. The last thing I want is trouble.'

The man frowned. 'Hmm, you should have told yourself that the other night.'

Mab glanced up at the church. 'So, where's Griff, Mr Griffiths then?'

'He's out at the moment.'

'Do you know when he'll be back?'

The man shrugged. 'Not really, he didn't say. Later on, I suppose, sometime tonight.'

'Any idea what time, exactly?'

The man shook his head. 'Mr Griffiths said you were a persistent sod.'

'Did he now? And what else did he say about me?'

'Oh, this and that, that I was to call the police if you came back causing trouble.'

'There's no need to do that. I'm not doing anything.'

Rex's bark grew fiercer. 'Quiet boy,' the man said, tightening his grip as Rex lunged forward.

Mab walked back down the drive, turning to face them before stepping onto the pavement. 'Can I leave him a message then?'

The man shook his head. 'There's no need. I'll make sure Mr Griffiths knows you've been here.'

Mab decided to wait in the car, watching Rex and his master patrolling the driveway. Occasionally, the man stopped, his eyes unconvincing as he glared across the road. After a while, Mab grew tired of the game. Instead, he started to watch the traffic while listening to the radio.

He didn't recognise her at first. Then something about her seemed familiar, more so at a second glance. In the daylight, Rachel was a poor imitation of Rhiannon's ghost, although her figure was just as striking. Beyond that, there was little similarity. Her hair was dark, to begin with, and her skin fair. He thought how stupid he'd been, the estuary's light playing tricks on him.

Rachel's birthmark was more noticeable too, the colour of port wine, marring the left side of her face. She was no match for Rhiannon's beauty, but there was still something about her.

Mab leaned out of the window. 'Hello again, how are you?'

She ignored him at first and carried on walking. But when he called out her name, she turned towards him.

'How do you know who I am?' she said.

He opened the car door. 'Someone told me.'

'Who?'

He stepped out onto the pavement. 'Someone.'

When he offered her a cigarette, she shook her head. She moved back slightly, as though trying to keep her distance. 'What do you want this time? Are you following me again?'

'I'm not following you, and I wasn't following you before. I just saw you passing that's all. So, I thought I'd take the opportunity to apologise.'

'Apologise for what?'

'At the estuary the other night, I must have given you the wrong idea, given you a fright.'

'Oh that, you must admit it was a bit strange.'

He smiled, and her eyes grew softer.

'Apology accepted,' she said, and covered her neck with her hand.

'Let me buy you coffee,' he said.

Her eyes narrowed. 'What? . . . Why would you want to do that?'

'No particular reason, I just thought it would be nice, that's all.'

She blushed. 'I don't know, another time perhaps.'

He nodded and then lit a cigarette, took a deep drag and blew the smoke towards the road.

Rachel smiled. 'I best be off then.' She turned round and carried on walking along the pavement.

He was about to call out to her, but hesitated. What was to be gained from telling her? he thought. It was nothing to do with her. It was her father's fault. Why take it

out on her? Then he remembered what Powell had said about his mother, and was angered by the ugliness of his words.

'It was your dad,' he shouted.

Rachel stopped and turned. 'What do you mean it was my dad? What on earth are you talking about?'

'It was him who told me your name. You asked me how I knew.'

She studied him for a moment, and then started walking towards him. 'Did he now, and when was he talking to you?'

Mab flicked his cigarette across the road. 'Yesterday . . . yesterday morning.'

'Where?'

'In his car.'

'You were in his car? I'm sorry, but what the hell were you doing there?'

'Mine broke down, I was thumbing a lift to town, and he stopped.'

'Did he now? And wasn't that convenient. So?'

'So what?'

'So what did you both talk about?'

'Oh this and that, he spoke mainly about you.'

'And what about me?'

'Nothing much, only that he was worried about you, said you had a special relationship.'

'Special relationship, are you trying to be funny or something? What the hell do you mean by that?'

'No, I wasn't trying to be funny at all. Okay, they weren't his exact words; he said you were very close.'

'He's been very open with you, considering you're a complete stranger. What else did he say?'

'Nothing much, apart from . . . no, never mind, forget it.'

'Forget what?'

'I don't really want to say.'

'It's a bit late for that now. Go on tell me.'

'He said that you'd had a hard time lately, and asked me to keep away from you. Well, told me more like.'

She nodded. 'We saw you the other night, standing in our drive. He kept asking me if I knew you. So I eventually told him where I'd seen you, just to shut him up.'

'Your dad seems very persistent.'

'Yes . . . so what did he say to you then? Tell you that you weren't good enough for his precious daughter I suppose.'

He looked away. 'Yeah, something like that.'

'What do you mean something like that?'

'It doesn't matter. It's not important.'

'No, go on, tell me. I think I have a right to know.'

He paused for a moment. 'He said . . . he said that he didn't want a good-looking fella like me, giving you false hope.'

She stared at him, her eyes shining.

He held out his hands. 'Listen, I've probably got it all wrong. Perhaps, he just—'

She shook her head. 'No, that's the sort of nasty thing he'd say.'

'So he never mentioned that he saw me then?'

She lowered her eyes. 'No, he never said a word about you.'

'Fair enough.' He clapped his hands. 'Right, I best be off.'

Rachel looked at him, and for a while, he thought she'd never stop staring. 'Is he right about you then?'

'Who?'

'My dad, are you the kind of fella to give a woman false hope?'

Mab looked into her eyes and smiled. 'That would be telling, come for that coffee and you can find out for yourself.'

Rachel kept silent as Mab drove, and each warm blast of the fan filled the air with her perfume. Occasionally, he glanced across at her. She stared ahead, as though her thoughts had wandered to faraway places.

He drove to Caerwys, a small market town. Most of the buildings had been built from local stone, and the place had an old feel to it. Unless you knew it was there, you could easily have driven past. It looked more like a built-up street than a town, and most of its shops were hidden in narrow alleyways. At the centre of the town, the road

widened into a square, with a tree, and a bench marking the spot. He pulled into one of the parking bays and switched off the engine.

Rachel gazed out of the window. 'You know, I haven't been here for years. I don't remember it having any cafes.'

He pointed towards a pub. 'That sign says they do food.'

They walked silently across the square. Rachel kept her distance, as though trying to show the world they were strangers. The pub's heavy door creaked as Mab pushed it open, and the bar was cold and deprived of light. The place was almost empty, except for a middle-aged man playing the fruit machine.

At least the barman was friendly, his rubicund face greeting them with a smile. The barman's head was shaved, and his small eyes seemed to twinkle. 'Sorry about the cold, we've had a lot of problems with the pipes the last few days. What can I get you?'

After ordering two coffees, they found themselves a table. They sat quietly at first, staring at the paintings hanging on the wall opposite. The scenes they depicted were frightening: a mob hungry for blood while three wizened old women burned to death at the stake.

'Caerwys used to be a witch town,' Rachel said, still staring at the pictures.

'How do you know that?'

She turned and looked at him. 'I must have read it somewhere. I can remember something about a trial.'

Mab smiled, then fixed his eyes on the barman as he brought over their drinks.

'There's cream and milk,' the barman said. 'As I can't remember if I asked you.' He leaned over them and switched on the lamps. 'You're sat in the dark there. Let's give you some light.'

Instead of making the room brighter, the lamps gave off an ineffectual glow, an orange glare that lit up the side of Rachel's face. The barman's eyes lingered, then he quickly averted his gaze. 'You can turn them off if they're no use.' He gave Rachel an apologetic smile, blushing as he shuffled off.

Rachel stirred the cream in her cup, the smell of coffee rising. She took a sip, briefly closing her eyes. 'That's better,' she whispered.

'So,' Mab said, 'I scared you the other night?'

'Just a little, I was surprised to see anyone else down there. I usually have the place to myself.'

'I'm sorry about that. I never meant to scare you.'

'You've already apologised. Let's forget about it now.'

She raised the cup to her lips, took a quick sip, and glanced at him. 'Do you still think I look like that woman you mistook me for?'

'No,' he said, a little too quickly.

'I thought so. Is she . . . is she local?'

He reached for his coffee. 'She was . . . I don't want to talk about her. It was a long time ago.'

She nodded. 'So where are you from then?'

'Holywell, I grew up on the Moor Estate. You probably remember me.'

She gazed into her coffee. 'No . . . no, I don't think so. I've never really known anyone around here. Besides, the Moor Estate always looked a bit rough to me. I'd have been too scared to go there.'

'But you've heard my name mentioned, surely?'

She lowered her eyes. 'No . . . No, I haven't.'

'How old are you, Rachel, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Thirty-two.'

Mab smiled, 'same age as me.' He studied her for a moment. 'I don't remember seeing you around, though. What school did you go to?'

'Nowhere local, I went to boarding school, so I spent most of my time away.'

'And the summer holidays?'

'I was always away. I spent most of my summers in Snowdon; we have a cottage there.'

Mab nodded. 'What did you do when you left school?'

'I was ill. I spent a lot of time in hospital.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'That's all right. I got better, and then I went to Birmingham to work away.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'About me getting better or going to Birmingham?'

Mab laughed, 'about getting better of course.' He took a sip of his coffee. 'How long were you away for?'

'Not long, nine months or so. I got homesick.'

Mab nodded. 'So, you're living at your dad's?'

'Yeah, for now, I keep meaning to get a place, but you know how it is.'

'Sure,' he said, and glanced over at the door as two men entered the bar. They wore Barbour jackets; their wellies caked with mud. The shorter of the two, a stocky, grey-bearded man smiled at Rachel. Then he cast Mab a glance before turning to face the bar.

'A friend of yours?' Mab asked.

She shook her head. 'No, I've never seen him before in my life, probably knows my dad.'

'Do you think he'll tell him that he saw you?'

She shrugged. 'I don't care, tell him what he likes.'

'Why do you think your dad never mentioned that he'd spoken to me?'

'Who knows? He doesn't tell me anything.'

'Does he do that a lot?'

'Do what?'

'Warn off any man that talks to you.'

'Not usually, no.'

She placed her cup down on the table and then glanced at her watch. 'I'm sorry, but I have to go. Dad's a bit of a worrier. He'll be wondering where I've got to.'

'It's nothing I've said I hope?'

'No, of course not, I told him I was only popping out for five minutes. I really need to get back.'

They were quiet while they strolled back to the car. Mab opened the door for her, and Rachel got inside.

'Are you sure you're all right?' he asked.

'Honestly, I'm fine.'

The drive back was shorter than he'd hoped. The sky darkening as the town drew closer.

'You're very quiet,' he said. 'Are you sure I haven't said something to upset you?'

She fixed her eyes on the road. 'Why did you ask me out for a coffee?'

'Like I told you, I wanted to apologise.'

She turned her head towards him. 'You're not using me then?'

Mab forced a smile. 'Why would I do that?'

'You don't strike me as the type that likes being told what to do. I don't think you're interested in me at all. You're just using me to get at my dad.'

A sudden feeling of shame took hold of him. 'I was,' he said. He glanced at her. 'But that was before.'

'Before what?'

'Before I got to know you better. Before I started to like you.'

She smiled. 'You shouldn't say that.'

'Why?'

'I might start to believe you.'

'That wouldn't be a bad thing would it?'

She didn't answer. Instead, she fixed her gaze on the road ahead.

As they reached the outskirts of town, she asked him to stop. He nodded, and parked alongside the kerb. She unfastened her seatbelt, and reached for the passenger door. 'Thanks for the coffee. It was very kind of you.'

'No problem, perhaps we can do it again.'

She looked away. 'I don't think so, especially after all this trouble with Dad.'

He took a pen from his pocket and scribbled down his mobile phone number on the back of an old parking slip. He placed it into her hand. 'Take my number anyway, in case you change your mind.'

20

MAB DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG GRIFFO HAD BEEN STANDING BY THE DRIVE. He must have been waiting there for at least ten minutes, watching him watch the road.

Griffo's face was flushed and his exaggerated scowl unconvincing. He stood with his arms folded and his legs slightly apart, the buttons on his black overcoat looking ready to pop.

Mab got out of the car, Griffo watching him as he crossed the road. The night sky

was starless, and a three-quarter moon peered through the clouds.

Griffo drew his hands from his pockets. 'I don't want any trouble. Just to let you know, before you start. I said all I've got to say years ago. I'm only talking to you as a favour.'

Mab smiled to himself. 'So you're doing me favours now?'

'It's not for you, it's for Annwen.'

Mab nodded. Griffo shuffled closer to the drive, his hair glowing against the lights.

Mab stepped towards him. 'I suppose you've waited a long time for this.'

'For what?'

'For me to stand in your shadow.'

Griffo strained a smile. 'You've always got something clever to say haven't you? I suppose that's what helped you in the end.' He walked up the driveway, the gravel scrunching beneath his feet.

Mab followed him to the church, watching, impatiently, as Griffo struggled with the lock. Even when unlocked the door remained stubborn. Griffo budged it open and scraped it across the floor. 'Blasted thing,' he said under his breath

The foyer smelled of varnish, and the pine floorboards were smooth and gleaming. Griffo patted his chest and coughed. 'Through here,' he said, and led Mab into the hall. The brightness of the room made Mab think about his old school, each fluorescent strip reminding him of morning assemblies.

'I'll get us a drink,' Griffo mumbled.

'I'm surprised you keep any in a church.'

'It's a bottle of brandy, been there for years. It was left over from a raffle or something; I keep it out the back.'

Mab put his hands into his pockets. The room was cold. Stacks of empty chairs accentuated the lonely feel of the place. A few minutes later, Griffo returned with a bottle of brandy, and two white plastic cups.

Mab pulled out a chair and sat down. 'This is all very civilised, both of us being nice.'

Griffo handed him a cup, then slumped into the chair opposite. He gave Mab a long look, then unscrewed the top off the bottle. He reached across and poured brandy into Mab's cup, sighing before pouring some into his own.

Mab raised his cup. 'Cheers.'

Griffo nodded and downed his brandy in one. 'So what do you want to talk about?'

'The past.'

Griffo stared at him. 'Why?'

'Come on, Griffo, I thought that was obvious.'

Griffo rubbed his forehead. 'No. What I mean is why now, after all this time?'

Mab took another sip of brandy, its slow burn settling on his chest. 'It just feels right that's all. Besides, I'm tired of all these secrets.'

'Secrets, Mab? There aren't any bloody secrets. You know the story better than anyone.'

'So do you, but you seemed reluctant to tell it the other night.'

Griffo blushed. 'Yes, seeing you came as quite a shock.'

'Is that why you lied about hearing Rhiannon's voice?'

'I never lie about those things. She did speak to me.'

Mab shook his head, then reached into his pocket and took out his pack of cigarettes.

'We don't normally allow smoking in church,' Griffo said. 'But I'll make allowances, just this once.'

'That's very kind of you,' Mab said, then lit a cigarette and blew the smoke up at the ceiling. He looked about the room. Without its silk chancel coverings, flowers, and red carpet floor runner, it looked nothing like a church. It was more like a community centre, or a college hall, with Martin Griffiths as its bullshit-artist in residence. 'You've done well to be fair,' he said. 'How did you wangle all this?'

Griffo frowned. 'What do you mean? I was a Christian Spiritualist before you left.'

'You weren't head of the bloody church.'

'It's just the way things worked out, Eddie Powell's been very supportive.'

Mab nodded. 'Yeah, so I've heard.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Two Scousers sticking together, looking out for each other, brothers in arms so to speak.'

Griffo sighed. 'We've lived round here for years. In fact, both of us have lived here longer than you.'

'I bet this town still makes you feel like an outsider, though.'

Griffo shook his head. 'No, not at all, this is my home. The only outsider here is you.'

Mab took a drag of his cigarette and flicked his ash on the floor.

Griffo muttered something, a wave of colour flushing his cheeks.

'What was that?' Mab asked.

Griffo shook his head. 'Nothing, it's not important.'

'No, go on, I'm interested.'

Griffo poured himself another drink. 'I said that some things never change.'

Mab dropped his cigarette onto the floor and then stubbed it out with his shoe.

Griffo looked down at it and sighed. 'You know someone told me once that you can't truly escape the past. You can take the boy out of the Moor Estate, but you can't take the Moor Estate out of—'

'That old cliché, but I was hardly taken from the estate was I? Driven out more like.'

Before Griffo could answer, a sudden clang came from the back of the room.

'Visitors?' Mab asked.

Griffo shook his head. 'No. It's probably a tray or something.'

In the silence that followed, all Mab could think about was the estuary. He pictured himself all those years ago, lying near the rocks, the seabirds mewling above. It was morning, and he'd felt so alone, cold too. In the moments before he found Rhiannon, he'd caught sight of something, someone, a distant silhouette hurrying across the marshes.

'So,' Griffo said. 'Are you going to sit in a trance all night, or do you want to ask me something else?'

Mab took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. 'Remind me, what were you wearing?'

'You what? What are you going on about?'

'What were you wearing that day at the estuary?'

Griffo took another sip of brandy, struggling to hide his enjoyment. 'What day? You'll have to be a bit more specific than that.'

'Okay, that morning at the docks, where you told the police you saw me.'

Griffo sighed, and rubbed his forehead. 'I don't bloody know. Who the hell would remember something like that? It was fifteen years ago.'

'Who would forget something like that?'

'I would,' he said, and poured more brandy into his cup. 'And if you've got any sense, Mab, so should you.'

Mab leaned forward in his chair. 'Try and remember, for me, for old time's sake.'

Griffo's rheumy eyes stared back at him. He looked older this close. His skin was blotchy, and tiny red veins blotted across his nose.

'Come on,' Mab said. 'Surely you can remember.'

Griffo rubbed his forehead. 'I don't know, a jacket and jeans I suppose.'

'What colour?'

'What?'

'What colour were they?'

'I don't know, blue I guess.'

'You sure they weren't black? It was the only colour you used to wear.'

'All right, they were black then.'

'And you're sure about that now?'

Griffo stood up. 'That's enough. I explained all these things years ago to the police. What's the point in dragging it all up? I did you a big favour in the end, but you seem to have forgotten about that.'

Mab stood up. 'I haven't forgotten a thing. That's why I want to know the truth. And when you finally tell me that, we'll go to the police so you can tell them as well.'

The pine-panelled door that led into the back room shuddered open. Brendan walked towards them, a wedge of bright light casting his shadow. 'No need to raise your voice, Mab, Griffo's answered all your questions.'

Brendan stepped closer, stared at Mab for a moment, and then picked up the bottle of brandy. He unscrewed the top, his eyes closing as he took a swig. 'They mightn't be the answers you want, but they're answers all the same. I think you need to go now, Mab, before things go too far. There's been enough talk for one night.'

Mab watched Brendan place the bottle on the chair. 'I'll go when I'm good and ready.'

Even for a man his size, Brendan's hands were unusually big. His fingers were thick, his nails bitten down to a stub. He closed his right hand into a fist, the knuckles protruding and white.

Instinct told Mab to run at Griffo first; tackling Brendan alone would be easier. Brendan had his brother's strength, but he lacked Ned's callous streak. After a moment's pause, Mab did neither. Instead, he made his way slowly to the door.

Griffo stepped aside as Mab brushed past him.

'I take it we're done now,' Griffo said, with a newfound confidence.

'No,' Mab said, 'not until you answer my question.'

Griffo shook his head. 'You can't do this anymore, you know.'

'Do what exactly?'

'Intrude into people's lives, making threats and acting like you bloody own the place.'

'I asked you a simple question. I think it's the least you owe me.'

'I don't owe you anything. But if you really want to know, it was a blue tracksuit.'

Mab turned before he stepped into the foyer. 'You were right of course.'

'About what?' Griffo asked.

'That some things never change. Take you for instance.'

'What about me?'

'You've still got those bad little habits.'

'What habits?'

'You've done it since we were kids. Always sighing, and rubbing your head when you lie.'

21

THE MORNING AFTER MAB'S FIGHT ON THE TALACRE DUNES, HE'D WOKEN TO NED'S FAMILIAR REEK. It was almost as though he had spent the night with him. To rid himself of Ned's scent, he decided to run a bath. He couldn't remember how many times he washed himself that morning, scrubbing himself down until all he could smell was soap. He dried himself with the door open, watching the steam from the bathroom sweep across the landing.

He'd entered his mother's room to get a clean shirt from the airing cupboard. Since he could remember, he'd always disliked going there, more so in his late teens, because of her illness. He didn't know exactly what it was, the lack of light perhaps, or her Jesus figurines judging him from the dressing table. His mother's nightie was

thrown across the bed, a peach-coloured fold of nylon shed like an unwanted skin.

There was little sign of his father in the room. Unless he was moaning about something, Mab was aware of his father's existence only by the things he left lying around the house: a brown leather belt thrown over a chair, or the smoky smell of his overcoat lingering in the hallway. But their room, his parents' room, showed no sign of him. Not even a hint.

As far as he knew, his parents no longer slept together. It seemed to be a marriage of convenience, more so since his mother's illness. In the rare moments when he saw them alone, they'd communicate through glances, or a sigh of reproach, followed by an endless silence.

It wasn't always the case, and the family photographs confirmed it. There was a time when Mab's father couldn't take his eyes off her. 'She's beautiful your mam,' he'd say, whenever drink got the better of him. 'There isn't a woman for miles that comes close to her.'

Mab knew it was the only thing they agreed on.

That morning, after the bath, when Mab found himself alone in his mother's room, something led him to the window, some invisible allure drawing him closer. He caught sight of Rhiannon the moment he drew back the curtains. She was sitting on the kerb, knees held close to her chest. Her pose made her look younger, more vulnerable even. He opened the window and called down to her.

She smiled up at him. 'I didn't knock because I wasn't sure if this was your house.'

'I'll be down in a minute,' he said, grabbing a shirt before making his way out of the room.

The air was damp that day, and the distant sands lay hidden beneath the mist.

'Is everything all right?' he said, as he sat down beside her.

She smiled unconvincingly. 'Everything's fine. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay that's all, and to say thanks for last night.'

He blushed. 'There's no need to thank me. Ned was out of control. It's been brewing for weeks. Something was bound to happen eventually.'

She nodded. 'So what time did you and Griffio get back then?'

'I don't know, must have been about six o'clock this morning.'

'I suppose you haven't had much sleep?'

He shook his head. 'No, not really, have you?'

'You must be joking. You can't get any rest in that place. It's a bloody madhouse.'

Her voice sounded troubled when she spoke of *that place*, and he studied her face more closely. She looked tired, but he felt too ashamed of the house to invite her in. Instead, he stayed there with her on the kerb, pulling faces at a small girl who watched them from the house opposite.

'Did you have another argument with your sister?' he said.

She nodded, and breathed deeply. 'Yeah, she's gone too far this time. You should have heard the things she said to me this morning.'

'What things?'

'Never mind, I'll tell you another time. All I know is that she's horrible. I tell ya, she's off her bloody head.'

He tried to think of something to say, something that would reassure her. 'It'll probably be all right once you've both had time to calm down.'

Rhiannon placed her arm around him, and Mab felt his skin prickle. 'No it won't,' she whispered. 'There's no going back, not after the things she said.'

Mab was curious, but didn't dare ask for fear of knowing the answer. Since that first day, when he'd seen Rhiannon and her sister argue, he knew there was someone in Rhiannon's life that her family didn't approve of. He was never interested in their reasons. He preferred it to remain hidden, something best left unsaid. Rhiannon would mention it sometimes, and from what little she told him, it seemed clear her sister's jealousy was behind it. He'd asked around about Rhiannon's sister, and her family too. Rhiannon's half-sister, Ceri, had been raised by her father. When he asked who Rhiannon's father was, no one seemed to know. He'd learned that Rhiannon's mother had died young, a few years after Rhiannon was born. She'd a bit of a reputation from what he was told: liked her men, fond of her drink too, Rhiannon's father could have been anyone. Rhiannon had been raised by her grandmother and after her grandmother's death she went to live with her sister.

Except for a faint similarity, it would have been hard to guess that Rhiannon and Ceri were sisters. Ceri had a harsh look about her, her features as sharp as her tongue. Rhiannon just didn't belong there. It was as though she had been left there by mistake, or abandoned at birth.

They must have been sitting on the kerb for two hours when Mab's mother pulled up in a taxi. She looked tired. Her grey face watched them behind a veil of dirty glass. It was as though she was a poor copy of his mother, intruding into their lives.

As Mab helped his mother out of the car, the taxi driver made his way to the back. He was old and stooped, the stub of his cigarette smouldering from the corner of his mouth. When the taxi driver opened the boot, he cast Rhiannon a glance, a crooked smile on his face.

'Get the shopping, Mab,' his mother said. 'There's no need to help me inside. I'm not an invalid yet.'

He took the shopping from the car and put it on the kitchen table.

His mother opened her purse and handed him a five-pound note. 'Here, go and pay for the taxi and don't forget to tip the driver.'

The taxi driver snatched the money from his hand, chuckling to himself when Mab told him to keep the change. Mab glared at him, watching the car until it trundled out of sight. When he sat back down on the kerb, he could sense his mother watching him. He kept turning back towards the house, trying to catch her at the window.

'Your mam looks tired,' Rhiannon said. 'Is she all right?'

'No, not really, she's been ill for ages.'

She gave him a sympathetic smile. 'Has she been to the doctors?'

'She was supposed to go for a chest X-ray, a few weeks ago.'

'What did they say?'

'Nothing, she didn't attend the appointment.'

'Doesn't she want to know what's wrong with her?'

He looked down at the pavement. 'That's the problem, she already does.'

Rhiannon kissed him then, a quick consoling peck on the cheek. He could feel himself blush.

They stayed on the kerb until dark, sitting beneath a streetlight. He couldn't recall exactly what they talked about. He remembered trying to keep her interested, jabbering incessantly, and flitting in and out of the house fetching her cups of tea. It seemed to work, because she stayed with him, occasionally holding his hand and resting her head against his shoulder.

Annwen came home late that day, staring at him as she approached the garden path. She completely ignored Rhiannon, slamming the front door behind her.

'She doesn't look very happy,' Rhiannon said.

Mab nodded. 'No, she doesn't, but there again she never does.'

Rhiannon smiled. 'I take it she's your sister?'

'Yes, unfortunately.'

Rhiannon burst into laughter. 'You don't look too much alike.'

People often made that observation, and Mab was quick to agree with it. He was tall, gangly almost; Annwen was short and broad shouldered. She had a good figure, but it lacked their mother's length and curve. Her skin was less fair than the rest of them, growing darker in the summer months.

Rhiannon sighed. 'I suppose I better go.'

'Are you going back to your sister's?'

She shook her head.

'Where will you go then?'

'I don't know, Griffo is always asking me to stay with him.'

'Griffo?'

She smiled. 'He's all right. Besides, he's supposed to be your mate.'

When she stood up, he grabbed her hand, holding it tight while he led her towards the house.

Annwen was in the kitchen when they stepped inside, stirring her tea and trying her best to ignore them. 'Keep the telly down low,' she said, without looking at them. 'Don't go disturbing Mam; she's only just got off to sleep.'

Mab nodded, waiting until Annwen shuffled off to bed.

'I don't think your sister likes me very much,' Rhiannon whispered.

He didn't answer. He just led Rhiannon into the living room, pressing a finger against his lips to the slow creak coming from the landing. The living room smelled smoky, and the ashtray was full of cigarette stubs. There was a pile of washing dumped on one of the chairs, and an assortment of women's magazines lay spread across the floor. Mab apologised about the state of the place.

Rhiannon remained kind, reassuring him. 'Stop worrying, there's nothing wrong with your house, it's really cosy.'

It was warm at least, he thought, and she looked comfortable stretched out on the sofa. 'Are you sure no one will mind?'

'No, of course they won't, but I don't care if they do.'

'What about your mam, won't she say anything?'

He shook his head and slumped into the chair opposite. 'Don't worry, she'll be fine.'

They watched telly for a while, growing quieter as they drifted into sleep.

It was three days later when Annwen asked Mab how long Rhiannon was planning to stay. His sister followed him around the house, pestering him while he tidied up. 'And why does everything have to be so clean all of a sudden? It never used to bother you.'

'I'm trying to help Mam.'

Annwen raised her eyes. 'Why can't she do it?'

'Mam?'

'No, you idiot, you know who I'm talking about.'

He didn't notice his mother enter the room. She was like a ghost, drifting between them. Her eyes looked sad and deeply set, and her face was grey and drawn. She took a drag of her cigarette, blowing the smoke up at the ceiling. 'Keep the noise down,' she said, taking an ashtray from the table. 'What's the matter with you both anyway? You've been at each other all morning.'

Annwen folded her arms against her chest. 'I was just asking him, how long her ladyship was staying for.'

'So this is your house now is it?' their mother said.

Annwen blushed. 'No, of course it isn't. I still have to bloody live here, though, and I'm sick and tired of her taking the piss.'

'What makes you say that?' Mab said.

Annwen looked at him and smiled. 'For a start, she's never offered us any rent. Not even a couple of quid. She hasn't bought any food either, and she never cleans up after herself. She's got you running around like a right bloody fool.'

Before he could explain that Rhiannon was going through a difficult time, he caught sight of his mother, staring at the kitchen door. None of them knew how long Rhiannon had been standing there, but by the wideness of her smile, he guessed it was only for a moment. She looked radiant, and a thin shaft of light fell across her

face.

'Hiya,' she said. 'You all look very serious. Is everything all right?'

Mab's mother smiled. 'Everything's fine, love.'

'I was just on my way to town,' Rhiannon said, 'to get some shopping, and then halfway down the road I realised I'd forgotten my purse.'

'Shopping?' Mab said.

Rhiannon nodded and fixed her eyes on Mab's mother. 'It's the least I can do, Mrs Pryce. You've been very kind to me these last few days. I don't want you thinking I'm ungrateful.'

Mab looked across at Annwen and smirked. Later that evening, he sat with his mother in the living room. She asked where Rhiannon was. 'I thought she was going to the shops, that was bloody hours ago.'

'I've no idea,' he said, trying to sound casual. 'I'm not her keeper you know.'

'She's your girlfriend, isn't she?'

He blushed. 'She's not my girlfriend. We're just mates that's all.'

His mother looked at him and smiled. 'So how long is your *mate* going to stay?'

'I'm not sure, another week at the most. It won't be that long, though. Rhiannon isn't the type to take advantage.'

His mother looked at him again, still smiling. She took hold of his hand. 'Is that so? But just you be careful though, hey.'

In the days that followed, Mab was more than careful, keeping a close watch as Rhiannon flitted in and out of the house. As much as he craved it, he never really expected her to spend all her time with him. He imagined that they had an unspoken agreement. That Rhiannon being his guest warranted him a certain amount of attention. Yet it seemed sparse compared to the time he was away from her. As much as he wanted to, he never asked what she got up to. He had no need. The remnants of her nights out were enough to let him know. There was always a stale smell of smoke on her clothes and a faint trace of alcohol on her breath.

Sometimes he would mention the Fun-Ship, mostly to see whether she knew his father. So far, he'd been careful to avoid any mention of him, a subject Rhiannon had never cared to ask about. He wasn't sure if her silence was due to lack of interest, or if she sensed that the mention of his name was taboo. Either way, he was happy to

avoid it.

It was on the fourth day that Rhiannon met Mab's father. Mab woke to the sound of laughter, Rhiannon's contagious roar travelling through the house. It was enough to make him jump out of bed, rushing into the kitchen to the smell of toast.

Rhiannon greeted him with a smile. 'Mornin''

Mab's father didn't acknowledge him. Instead, he continued talking, punching at the air and growing more excited.

'I only slapped him with the back of my hand,' he said. 'It was enough to shut him up like, but then—'

Mab's mother walked into the kitchen. 'For God's sake Glynn, don't moider the poor girl with your stories.'

Glynn fell silent, folding his muscular arms across his chest. The gold-brown hues of his skin looked deeper against his wife's paleness. He looked younger too. There was no hint of grey in his hair, and his eyes were mischievous and blue.

Mab's mother poured herself a cup of tea and sat at the kitchen table.

'Carry on, Glynn,' Rhiannon said, eager for him to continue.

In his wife's presence, Glynn seemed unwilling to tell his stories. 'I'll tell you what happened later on. I feel a bit knackered, to tell you the truth.'

His wife glared at him. 'If you came home occasionally, then maybe you'd get some sleep.'

Mab saw more of his father in the days that followed than he'd done for weeks. Glynn started drinking in the house, sharing his cans with Rhiannon as freely as his tales. He stayed up late every night, turning up the television to drown out the sound of his wife's coughing. When Mab complained, Glynn tried to convince her that his mother couldn't hear a thing. 'She'll be all right, stop worrying. She'd sleep through a bloody war that one.'

To make things worse, Rhiannon kept being nice to him. Mab's guess was that she felt she had to. She listened to Glynn's every word, her laughter encouraging him.

Mab sat up with them every night, butting in with the occasional sarcastic remark when Glynn's stories got too much.

Sometimes Annwen would sit with them too. She hardly said a word, and when she

did, it was only to contradict Rhiannon. It amused Mab to watch Annwen compete. Everything Rhiannon had done or was planning to do, Annwen had done it before.

It was the early hours of morning Mab cherished most, when Rhiannon eventually grew tired and retreated to the safety of his room. It was the only time when he had her to himself. He was letting her sleep in his bed, because of Glynn flaking out on the sofa. He felt happy lying next to her on the floor, drifting into sleep beneath the soft, slow, rhythm of her breath.

The day Rhiannon moved out, Mab remembered waking up with the feeling that summer was finally over. The room felt darker, and the clouds were grey. He could hear her laughter, so he pulled on his clothes and followed it downstairs. Rhiannon, sitting at the kitchen table, smiled at him, her lips glazed with margarine. Annwen sat opposite her, sighing whenever Rhiannon spoke.

Glynn seemed preoccupied that day. He kept looking at his watch, tapping the side of his mug as though to rush Rhiannon through her breakfast. When she swallowed her last bite of toast, Glynn stood up from his chair. He clapped his hands. 'Right, now you've had your breakfast, let's be off.'

Mab looked at him. 'Off to where?'

Glynn picked up his coat. 'To see a man about a job.'

'A job, this is the first I've heard about it.'

Glynn smiled. 'We don't have to tell you everything, you know. It's only a bit of bar work in the Black. Rhiannon asked me to find her something.'

At the mention of this Annwen sat up in her chair. 'In the Black Horse, I thought you offered that job to me?'

Glynn frowned. 'Yeah, but you told me you weren't interested.'

Annwen slammed her cup on the table. 'No, Dad, I said I'd think about it.'

Glynn shook his head. 'For Christ's sake, girl, that was weeks ago. You haven't mentioned it since.'

'Only because you never said anything.'

Glynn didn't answer. He just placed his coat back on the chair. 'I don't bloody believe this. So are you interested in the job or not?'

'I might be. I need time to think about it.'

Glynn slammed his fist on the table. 'Don't mess me about girl. I need to know now.'

For once Mab was on Annwen's side, mainly because he didn't like the idea of Rhiannon working in a pub. 'Don't rush her, Dad,' he said. 'You did offer her the job.'

Glynn stared at him. 'You want to watch your mouth, lad. This has got bugger all to do with you.'

Just as Mab was about to answer, his mother barged into the kitchen. She had a fierce look on her face. 'You leave the boy, alone. If anybody needs to watch their mouth in this house, it's you.'

Glynn glared at her. 'Jesus, you've only just walked into the room, and you're bloody starting. You're always at me, taking this lad's side.'

'Don't come here throwing your weight around,' Mab's mother said. 'I'm not frightened of you, save your big-man ways for the pub.'

As Glynn was about to answer, Rhiannon spoke over him. 'I don't want this to cause a row,' she said. 'Let Annwen take her time, I'm more than happy to look for another job.'

Glynn shook his head. 'No, she's had plenty of time. She's just being bloody awkward. This girl needs to learn that she can't mess people about.'

'Is that right?' Annwen said. She looked across at Rhiannon. 'So hopefully that also applies to her.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Rhiannon said.

Annwen smiled. 'Don't try and act all innocent. You know what I'm talking about.'

Rhiannon shook her head. 'No, actually I don't.'

Mab waited for his mother to say something, some harsh comment that would hopefully shut Annwen up. But she just lit a cigarette.

Mab placed a hand on Rhiannon's shoulder. 'Don't pay any attention to her. She's just trying to stir things up.'

Rhiannon shrugged him away. 'No, I want to know what her problem is.'

'You are,' Annwen said. 'I thought that was bloody obvious. I'm sick of you being in this house and outstaying your bloody welcome. You're taking the piss, your stuff lying around everywhere and these two bloody fools, always chasing after you.'

His mother remained silent, and Mab's heart sank.

Rhiannon's eyes widened, then she smiled, a thickness to her voice as she said, 'You should have mentioned it sooner. I've never wanted to be a burden.'

Glynn opened his mouth to say something, but remained silent as his wife glared at him.

Mab touched Rhiannon's arm. 'Don't listen to her. She's jealous of you that's all. Mam, tell Rhiannon it's not a problem.'

Mab's mother looked at Rhiannon. 'It's not about you love. Annwen's not the most tactful when it comes to making a point. But having said that, there just isn't enough space, love, and I need more rest these days.'

'It's not a problem, Mrs Pryce,' Rhiannon said, meeting her eyes. 'I understand, honestly, I do.'

'But where will you go?' Mab asked.

Annwen muttered something under her breath. Mab caught only the gist of it, something about choice and there being plenty of it.

'Your sister's right,' Rhiannon said. 'There are plenty of places where I can stay.'

'Like where?' Mab said.

Rhiannon shrugged. 'I don't know. Martin's, I guess.'

'Martin?'

'Martin Griffiths.' She glanced at Annwen. 'He's always asking me to stay with him.'

Annwen fell silent, the colour draining from her face.

'When did you speak with Griffo?' Mab said.

'Lots of times,' Rhiannon said. She glanced at Annwen again. 'Actually, I've been with him most nights.'

Mab looked at her. 'Have you now? You never said anything to me.'

'I didn't think I had to.'

Annwen stood up and walked out of the room. Rhiannon watched her with a half-smile. Then she looked at Mab. 'Right, I suppose I better pack my things.'

He followed her into his bedroom. 'So you've been hanging around with Griffo then. Didn't you think to ask me?'

She turned to face him. 'Martin said it was best to leave you alone. He said that you were probably staying indoors until things calmed down with the Benbows.'

'That's very considerate of him.'

‘Why are you so upset? We haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘I’m not upset. I’m just a bit surprised that’s all. I didn’t expect you to be spending all your bloody time with him.’

Rhiannon laughed. ‘Don’t be silly. I haven’t been spending all my time with him. I’ve hardly seen him, to be fair.’

‘But you’ve seen him, though.’

‘Sort of.’

‘What do you mean sort of?’

She paused for a moment. ‘He waits for me, walks me home after dark.’

As Mab was about to say something, Glynn interrupted them. ‘Is everything all right, Rhiannon? Do you need a lift anywhere?’

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ she said. ‘Martin’s house is only down the road.’

‘Still, a quick spin in the car won’t do any harm. It’ll save you the trouble of hauling that bag.’

She smiled. ‘If you’re sure it’s no trouble? You don’t mind do you, Mab?’

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘I’ll come with you if you like.’

‘There’s no need for that,’ Glynn said. ‘I’ll be back in a jiff.’

She placed a hand on Mab’s arm. ‘Your dad’s right, just let me get settled, and I’ll call around later.’

Mab watched them drive out of the street from his bedroom window. He waited there for ages, running downstairs when Glynn’s car pulled up alongside the kerb.

Mab caught him as he came through the door. ‘You took your time. That was a bit more than a jiff.’

Glynn looked at him and mumbled something about someone keeping him talking.

‘Talking about what?’

‘Never you mind, I’m not answerable to a kid like you.’

Mab’s mother stood by the kitchen door. ‘Who are you answerable to then?’

Glynn shook his head and sighed. ‘Jesus woman, I’ve only just walked through the bloody door, and you’re starting again.’

‘You know what to do if you don’t like it.’

‘Fine,’ he said, and walked out of the house, slamming the door.

Mab didn’t say a word. His mother was too upset. He took hold of her hand and led

her into the living room. She lay on the sofa and closed her eyes, Mab watching her in silence. He waited in for Rhiannon all evening. He kept a watchful eye over his mother, begging her not to smoke, more so when she started coughing. He kept staring at her handkerchief, at the smears of blood, and at the emaciated hand that held it.

‘Why won’t you go and see the doctor, Mam?’ he asked her.

She gave him a sympathetic smile. ‘I used to say that to my mother, then one day she gave in, and she was dead within a week.’

It was past midnight when he carried his mother to her bed. She felt so light, and it was easy not to wake her. He didn’t stay too long in her room; the cold and the darkness unsettled him. The house was so still, and the smell of Rhiannon’s perfume lingered.

The next morning he was up early, watching the sunrise from his bedroom window. It lit up the distant sands, tinting the water with trickles of orange light. For fear of waking his mother up, he made breakfast quietly, his feet cold as he crept about the house. His plan was simple. He’d make his way to Griffo’s and wait until Rhiannon came out. He would be off with her for a while, but not too long, in case she grew tired of him. Then, after making up, they would spend the day together, somewhere new perhaps, beyond the memories of the Dunes.

After leaving the house, he made his way to Griffo’s and waited outside as planned. After an hour or so, Griffo came out of the house. Mab was surprised to see him up so early, considering he usually slept until noon. Griffo wore his black overcoat, and his hair was gelled back.

Mab called out to him.

Griffo looked surprised at first, and then said, ‘Mab? What the hell are you doing here?’

He stared into Griffo’s eyes. ‘I’m waiting for Rhiannon. Do you have a problem with that?’

‘You’ll have a long wait then. She won’t be up for hours.’

‘That’s all right, I’ve got all day.’

‘There’s no way she’ll be up before twelve. She didn’t go to bed until this morning.’

‘Why? Where was she?’

‘With me, I read her Tarot cards, then we went and bought some cans, and stayed

up all night.'

'Doing what?'

'Having a laugh, talking.'

'It sounds like you had a nice time. Thanks for asking me.'

'Sorry, we didn't think.'

'No, you never do.'

Griffo tried to pass, but Mab blocked his way. 'So where are you going now?'

'To get some milk, so I can make her a cup of tea.'

'You're the proper little errand boy, aren't you?'

'No, not really, no more than you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'That you're no less keen than I am.'

'Rhiannon and I are friends. Everything was fine until you started poking your nose in. I was helping her out, doing her a favour.'

Griffo grinned. 'Doing yourself a favour more like.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing, forget it.'

Mab pushed his face closer. 'No. You can't leave it like that. Come on tell me.'

'From what I've heard, there were other reasons why Rhiannon was keen to leave your house.'

'Such as?'

'I'm sure you know.'

'No, I don't. I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'I was told that you were just as bad as her bloody sister.'

'What do you mean?'

'Everyone knows you're interested in her, Mab, and who could blame you. But you should have made a move, instead of acting like a kid, going about it the wrong way.'

'What are you talking about?'

Griffo raised his eyes. 'Waiting up for her every night, asking her where she'd been.'

'Who told you that?'

Griffo rubbed his forehead and sighed. 'Who do you think?'

'She wouldn't say that. You're a liar.'

‘Why would I lie?’

‘Because that’s what liars do, you jealous little prick. You’ve been after her for ages, ever since we met her. Pushing your nose in, always getting in the bloody way. I’m sick of you. You’ve done nothing but interfere ever since she came to stay with me.’

‘And how have I done that?’

‘Meeting her every night, and moidering her to stay at your house.’

Griffo laughed. ‘You fucking idiot, you’ve got it all wrong. It was the other way around. She kept asking me.’

Mab felt the colour drain from his face, as though someone was bleeding him with a knife. ‘You better watch your mouth.’

‘Or you’ll do what exactly?’

Mab couldn’t remember what went through his mind. All he recalled was watching Griffo fall to the ground, whining like a child, and covering his face with his hands. Mab leapt on him like a madman, trying to move his hands away. He kept slapping the side of his head, punching him harder the more he pleaded. He didn’t know who he was really hitting at that day, Griffo, his father, Annwen’s jealousy, or his mother’s illness. All he knew was that he would have kept on lashing out if someone hadn’t been there to stop him. He’d no memory of who it was, neighbours he guessed, rushing outside as they heard him shouting.

22

BRENDAN ESCORTED MAB FROM THE CHURCH. Griffo remained inside, making some excuse about unfinished paperwork. Mab gazed across the estuary. The lights beyond the water were tremulous and pale.

As he made his way down the drive, Brendan followed.

‘Are you happy now, Mab? Now you’ve asked all your questions?’

When they got to the edge of the driveway, Mab turned to face him, stepping back slightly, so as not to be too close. ‘Not really, no, but I came here to speak with Griffo. I don’t know what it’s got to do with you.’

Brendan took his hands out of his pockets. ‘Griffo wanted me to be around, just in case things got nasty.’

'It seems like everyone wants you around. You're very popular these days.'

'I'm just helping out a friend that's all. Griffo knows what you're like. You can't blame him for being nervous.'

Mab lit a cigarette. 'What about this Eddie Powell then? Is he your friend too?'

Brendan grinned. 'He's no saint. But he's a good man is Eddie, for a Scouser. He bailed our dad out a few years ago, stopped him from losing the farm. Besides, this isn't just about paying back old friends. The longer you stick around it starts to get more personal.'

Mab didn't say anything. He turned his back on him and carried on walking, sensing Brendan's eyes follow him all the way to the car, and even when he pulled away Brendan was still watching him.

It was light when Mab got back to the hotel. The cleaner didn't acknowledge him. She just glanced at her watch, as though to question where Mab had been all night. When he got to his room, he didn't bother to undress. He just collapsed onto the bed and closed his eyes.

It was mid-afternoon when he woke up. He felt groggy, yet thankful that he hadn't had another nightmare. There were three missed calls on his phone. He didn't recognise the number and decided to call it later. He dragged himself out of bed, and then threw back the curtains. The sky was grey, and there was no birdsong, just the distant murmur of passing traffic. He sat on the edge of the bed and thought about Griffo's church. He'd made a mental note of the times of service, going back to the church seemed the only way to speak with him again.

The next service didn't start until six, so he ordered some food at the bar, trying to kill some time. A young man served him, barely out of his teens. Mab was disappointed not to have been served by the barmaid. He enjoyed the brightness of her smile, a rare gift in these parts.

After his third cup of coffee, he began to feel sick. He left the barman a tip, and braving the cold, he stepped outside. He drove around for an hour or so, past Griffo's church and twice past Annwen's house. All he wanted was to be seen, to show them he had no intention of leaving.

Eventually, he drove to the far end of the Greenfield Valley and pulled up in the

tourist car park. He strolled to the old Abbey. He used to play there as a boy, hiding and seeking behind the tumbledown walls. All he'd ever seen of the Abbey's Church was the remains of its foundations, a cross of pale slabs that jutted out across the grassy banks. Facing south towards the estuary were the ruins of the old chapter house, the tower, as they used to call it. A wide, double arch of sandstone that loomed above an ancient oak. At primary school, they were told that the Cistercian monks founded the Abbey. The cleverer kids had written it all down, memorising it, as if each word granted them access to the past. All he could remember was looking out across the estuary, towards the pastel outline of a foreign country. It felt so close, just a brave sprint across the sands. He'd never dared to venture across the border, fearing that once you did, you could never come back.

Mab arrived at St Andrew's Church half an hour before the evening service. He wasn't the first. There were half a dozen cars already parked there. He waited outside, lit a cigarette and leaned against his car. Griffo caught sight of him immediately, glancing at him as he pulled into the driveway. Mab watched him as he got out of the car and made his way into the church. Moments later, the Benbow twins arrived. They parked on the other side of the road, glaring at him through the window.

Time hadn't softened Ned's looks – it had made them worse. His skin looked dry and lined. His head was shaved, and his eyebrows were dark and thick. What struck Mab most was the greyness of Ned's left eye: it looked strange, hawkish and unrelenting. When Ned motioned towards the door, Brendan took hold of his arm. He whispered something into Ned's ear and then tapped his shoulder. Mab acknowledged the twins with a nod, his heart thumping as he climbed back into his car. It was obvious he wouldn't be speaking to Griffo today; he wouldn't even get close.

After driving around for a while, he parked up on the Bryn. He sat quietly, watching the lights across the estuary smoulder. His phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket, saw a text message on the screen. *You need to leave, it read. It's not safe.*

He called the number immediately, and it took a while for someone to answer. He didn't recognise Rachel's voice at first; its low hush was almost inaudible.

'I can't speak too loud,' she whispered. 'My dad's in the other room.'

'You just sent me a text.'

'Yes, I wanted to warn you.'

'Warn me, warn me about what?'

She went silent. 'Look, I can't talk right now. I'll meet you later if you like.'

'All right.'

'Okay, I'll be by the estuary car park, around eight.'

Mab drove slowly to the estuary. The place held too many bad memories, and he was in no rush to go back there. It would have been easier to pick Rachel up. He smiled at the thought of it. It was the last thing she needed, seeing him pull into her driveway. Mab guessed that Powell didn't care about any problems he had with Griffo. All Powell cared about was his precious daughter, and keeping her away from an ex-convict from the Moor Estate.

He arrived at the estuary early. Rhiannon's presence was strong there, forcing him to park with his back to the water. He could still picture her lying there, bloodied and half-naked on the rocks. He tried to distract himself and turned on the radio, flicking through the stations, each sad song taking him to darker places. As the news beeped eight o'clock, he caught sight of Rachel. He switched the headlights to full beam, trying to brighten the path. He opened the door for her, catching a waft of her scent as she stepped inside. She looked beautiful, her hair brushed to one side obscuring the mark on her face.

She didn't say much for the first few minutes, and Mab was surprised how quiet she was. There was something secretive about that. He couldn't make her out. She was the one who had contacted him, a sense of urgency in her voice, suggesting that he was in some kind of danger.

'So,' he said, 'what is it I should be afraid of?'

She looked at him. 'It's not a joke you know.'

He reached into his pocket for a cigarette. 'I never said it was.'

She opened her mouth, hesitated, as if she was trying to find the right words, as though the thing she wanted to say was a small part of a greater burden.

'They're out to get you,' she said, a worried tone to her voice.

'Who?'

‘Those Benbows boys.’

He wound down the window and then lit his cigarette. ‘Is that right, and how would you know that?’

She placed her hand on her neck. ‘I heard them talking about you. This morning, they were up at the house, doing some work for my dad.’

He flicked the ash out of the window, feeling a spit of rain on his hand. He wondered if her father had put her up to it, and the thought nettled him. Why else would she go out of her way to help him? He was nothing to her, just a stranger. A siren blared in the distance, and he frowned at the images they brought back to him. ‘So why are you telling me this?’

She took a deep breath. ‘I just don’t want to see you getting hurt that’s all.’

He turned and looked at her. ‘And why should you care what happens to me.’

Her eyes shone as she looked at him. ‘I don’t know, perhaps I like the look of you.’

He smiled, and then flicked his cigarette out of the window, watching the orange sparks until they faded into the night. ‘I suppose your dad has told you all about me, about what happened all those years ago.’

‘He’s mentioned things,’ she said.

‘What things?’

‘Oh, this and that.’ She fell silent and stared ahead, her eyes fixed on the darkness.

Mab didn’t press it any further. She clearly didn’t want to talk about it. Instead, he tried to change the tone and through a half smile asked, ‘so why do you like the look of me?’

Rachel laughed. ‘You know why. You don’t need me to tell you that.’

‘Maybe, I do.’

‘Why? Are you fishing for compliments?’

‘Not really. It would just be good to hear something nice for once. I haven’t had the warmest of receptions.’

She studied him for a moment. ‘And why is that?’

‘I remind people of things they’d rather forget, especially those with the most to hide.’

‘Martin Griffiths you mean?’

Mab nodded. ‘How do you know that?’

'Like I said before, I heard the Benbows talking.'

'What did they say?'

'I've already told you.'

'Yes, but what were their exact words?'

Rachel sighed. 'I didn't catch all of it, just bits about how you'd been threatening Martin Griffiths, and the one with bad eye—'

'Ned.'

'Saying he's going to settle an old score with you.'

'Hmm,' Mab said. 'Well, he can certainly try.'

'So you're planning to stick around then?'

'Absolutely.'

'And none of this bothers you?'

'Of course it bothers me, but other than liking the look of me, why do you care?'

Rachel smiled. 'Perhaps I feel sorry for you.'

'Why? You don't know anything about me.'

'If you're going to stick around perhaps we could remedy that.'

Then, just as Mab was about to tell her how much he would like that, her phone rang. She fumbled it out of her pocket, then looked down at the word *Dad* flashing across the screen. She hung up. 'I need to go. Otherwise, he'll keep calling me until I answer.'

He started up the engine. 'Okay, I'll drive you home then.'

She placed her hand on his. 'No, I don't think that's a good idea. Just drop me off at the bottom of the hill. I'll walk the rest of the way.'

It was past midnight when he texted her. He thanked her for the warning, said he couldn't stop thinking about her, asking if they could meet again. She replied five minutes later, saying she would like that and suggested they meet at the same time and place tomorrow evening. He held the phone in his hand and stared at it for a moment. He couldn't work her out. He wasn't sure if she was genuinely interested in him, or if she was playing games, a woman bored, and tired of being controlled, using him to get back at her dad.

IT HAD BEEN ALMOST A WEEK NOW AND STILL THERE WAS NO SIGN OF GRIFFO. The church was closed, supposedly for renovations. Mab was happy to wait. He'd extended his stay at the hotel and they'd given him a better rate. He kept his eye on the church from a distance, trying to keep a low profile. He did this mostly for Rachel's sake, as he was spending more time with her. He met her each evening after she finished work. He enjoyed their time together, so much so that sometimes he would forget why he came back. They took long walks through the valley woods. For Mab, being there brought back so many memories. The Valley hadn't changed much. The footpaths were more defined, there were more signposts, and the surrounding woods had fewer trees. Other than that, the smells and sounds were the same. That peaty odour hung in the air, mingling with the scent of grass and wet leaves.

The Valley was even lit the same, the sun filtering through the branches, mottling the track with patches of yellow light. He loved the beauty of the place, Rachel did too, and it felt good having someone to share it with. They'd wander among the ruins of the old factories, sometimes loitering beneath the doorways. Mab even climbed the walls, trying to get a feel of the old place. They'd walk around the courtyard, watching the stream flowing beneath the old iron bridge. Then, like he'd done so many times as a youth, they'd follow the path to the Flour Mill Pool, and watch the swans glide across the water.

Even though he'd only known Rachel for a week, it felt longer.

'Some people just click,' she'd said. 'Some things are meant to be.'

He tried to appear nonchalant at the time, although, secretly, he wanted it to be true. He felt comfortable around her. Her presence calmed him. She made him laugh, too. She had a dry sense of humour, especially when she spoke about things that displeased her, such as her father's friends, annoying relatives, and her job. She worked as a research assistant in the council offices at County Hall. 'Mind-numbing' was how she had described it.

'What do you do there?' Mab had asked her.

'I work in planning,' she'd said, 'filing, minute taking, organising meetings, dealing with enquiries, all the soul-destroying things that the planning officers are too important to do.'

He'd laughed at that, more so when she'd told him, 'Not to mock the afflicted.'

But it wasn't just the laughter that brought them closer. It was the little things too. She reminded him of his mother sometimes. She would fall silent for no reason. Then stare at him with so much sadness in her eyes. Whenever Mab mentioned Powell Rachel would say, 'Please, let's not talk about him. I'm getting sick of him to tell you the truth, especially the way he's been behaving lately.'

Since that evening at the estuary, she'd shown no interest in Mab's past nor did she ask him why he came back. He found her lack of curiosity odd at first, but was happy to encourage it. Besides, there were more interesting things to talk about. There were the places they visited for one, and at any given opportunity Mab tried to impress her with his knowledge of local history. Every time he tried to show off, Rachel would tell him something he'd never heard of, an obscure fact, which coming from her, somehow had more meaning.

This evening was no exception. When he told her that the Holy Well was one of the seven wonders of Wales, all Rachel did was smile, and then look at him unimpressed.

'Is that right?' she said. 'It's not that wonderful, you know. Even our Holy Well has its secrets.'

He frowned. 'That sounds a bit vague. What do you mean by that?'

'Never mind, it's not important.'

'No, go on. Tell me, please, I'm interested.'

'Did you know the water in the Well used to run from the Halkyn Mountains?'

He shook his head. 'No, no, I hadn't a clue.'

'It did, they used to mine there, years ago, until the tunnel collapsed.'

He shrugged. 'So?'

'It flooded the caverns. It dried up the Well.'

He sat up. 'So where's the water been coming from all these years?'

'Local supply I guess.'

'But you can see the spring, bubbling away.'

She smiled. 'I guess that's just a pipe, cleverly hidden, like a lot of things in this

place.'

He remained silent, picturing his mother and her visits to the so-called Holy Well. All those lost wishes, he thought, all those unanswered prayers, and all those wasted candles.

She took hold of his hand. 'Are you okay, Mab? You look upset. What's wrong?'

'It just seems such a lie that's all.'

She nodded, took a deep breath, and then said, 'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

Mab gripped her hand tighter. 'The Holy Well and all those people travelling for miles, they've been coming here for centuries, putting their faith in those waters.' He sighed. 'Some of them used to leave their crutches and sticks here. I remember seeing them when I was in school. That must have meant something, surely. How do you explain that one?'

'I guess it meant something to them. But it's easy enough to explain, anyone could have left them there.'

Mab nodded. 'I suppose. But that still doesn't make it right. They should have told people the truth, not make out it's something that it isn't.'

'I guess so, but what if that made things worse?'

'What do you mean?'

'Perhaps most of us are happier not knowing.' She gazed out of the window. 'Sometimes the truth can do more harm than good. Sometimes the truth just spoils things.'

'It's better than living a lie, though.'

Rachel didn't answer, and they sat quietly, watching the water edge its way inshore. The evening had passed so quickly. It was late now, and the sky was darkening, and the marsh grass and the river slowly fading into the night.

Rachel glanced at her watch. 'I need to get back. I need to be up early in the morning. Besides, Dad will be wondering where I've got to.'

Mab sighed.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing.'

'Yes, there is. Come on, tell me.'

'I know you don't like talking about him, but I sometimes wonder if your dad

realises you're in your thirties.'

'I know what you're saying, and you know my thoughts on that.'

'Why don't you just remind him that you're a grown woman? Tell him that he needs to stop treating you like a kid.'

'Believe me, I've tried, but it always ends up in an argument. Besides, he's a bit touchy at the moment. It isn't a good time to talk to him.'

'Is that because of me?'

She nodded.

Mab wound down the window and then lit a cigarette. 'Do you think he knows about us?'

Rachel shook her head. 'No, definitely not, we wouldn't be sitting here talking if he did.'

Mab took a drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke out of the window. 'You know, I've been meaning to ask you about that.'

'About what?'

'Why my past doesn't bother you. You obviously know why your dad hates me.'

Rachel didn't answer at first. She just closed her eyes for a second, then took a deep breath. 'Of course it bothers me. But you were acquitted weren't you? And, you're innocent, right?'

Mab nodded.

'There you are then.'

'And it's as simple as that?'

'Yes, I believe you. I'm a pretty good judge of character, and now I know you better I've got a good feeling about you.'

'You feel sorry for me more like.'

Rachel smiled. 'There's that as well. I've always been a fool for lost causes.'

Mab flicked his cigarette out of the window and rested his hand on Rachel's lap. 'Is that all I am then, a lost cause?'

She didn't answer. Instead, she leaned closer towards him, closing her eyes as they kissed.

AS WITH MOST EVENINGS, RACHEL DIDN'T DRIVE TO THE ESTUARY AND INSISTED MAB DROPPED HER OFF HALFWAY UP THE WELL HILL. 'It has to look authentic,' she reminded him, 'as though I've been out walking. You never know who might see me.'

He kissed her good night, told her to take care, and then watched her until she walked out of sight. He longed to spend the night with her, holding the thought in his mind as he reversed into a layby and turned the car around. He headed towards the Old Coast Road; he was in no rush to get back to the hotel. A few minutes later, as he waited at the lights, a Land Rover stopped behind him. He didn't take much notice at first until he realised who it was. He watched the Benbows from his rearview mirror. Brendan looked relaxed, the complete opposite to Ned.

The lights changed, and Mab took a left, growing more agitated when the Benbows followed. He pressed down on the accelerator, the Benbows matching his speed and keeping close behind him. Mab shifted into fifth, gaining speed as he joined the dual carriageway. For a brief moment, he managed to gain some distance, but was forced to slow down as the road filtered into one lane. The traffic signs indicated that there were roadworks up ahead, and Mab took a deep breath as he slowed down for the lights. When the car eventually stopped, Mab wound down the window. He looked over his shoulder at the line of traffic, catching sight of the Benbows' Land Rover first, and then the blood-red hues of Powell's Jag. He needed to lose them; following the dual carriageway would take him too far out. When the lights eventually changed he took a left at the next junction and headed for the Denbigh Moors. His car struggled up the country lanes, forcing him to shift into second gear, rattling as the hill grew steeper.

When he reached the brow of the hill, Mab took a right at the crossroads. A low sky loomed above, and blue-grey clouds tainted the distant mountains. All that separated him from the Moors was a fence, a straggle of barbed wire that ran parallel to the road. Mab looked over his shoulder, watching the Benbows' Land Rover trying to overtake. It gained speed, slicing through the surrounding grass. Mab put his foot down, the car almost reaching eighty miles per hour. It wasn't enough, and the Benbows soon caught him up, driving alongside him as Powell's jag tailgated behind.

The moment the Land Rover cut across the road, Mab pushed down on the brakes. The car skidded towards the fence, then stopped and nosed onto the grass. All he could hear was the thump of his heart, and his hands shook as he unfastened the seatbelt. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second, then leaned over to the passenger side to make sure the door was locked. He expected the Benbows to come rushing out of the Land Rover and he was a little surprised when he saw Powell tapping on the driver's window. Mab ignored him at first, but Powell was persistent.

Mab wound down the window and without looking at him asked, 'What do you want?'

Powell sighed. 'I thought that was obvious. You need to keep away from Rachel.'

'I haven't been near her.'

Powell moved his face closer. 'Bullshit and you know it. You were seen. We followed you tonight.'

Mab shook his head and smiled to himself. 'What has Rachel got to say about this?'

'She doesn't need to know, and when you're gone, she'll get over it.'

'It sounds like you've got it all figured out, Councillor.'

Powell sighed and walked over to the passenger door. He tapped on the window, pulling on the handle until Mab released the locks. Before Powell got inside, he looked towards the Land Rover and held out his hand before him as though signalling to someone to stop.

'Keeping Ned on a leash are you?' Mab said, as Powell sat beside him.

Powell closed the passenger door. 'Ned has different ideas about how to deal with you. I'm just trying to keep things friendly.'

Mab took out his pack of cigarettes. 'And this is your idea of friendly is it, chasing after me, almost causing an accident?'

'You brought this onto yourself. I tried to warn you, but you're not listening.'

Mab lit his cigarette, took a drag and then blew the smoke out of the window. 'All right, I'm listening. I'll consider myself told.'

Powell stared at him for a moment. 'This is just one big bloody joke to you, isn't it?'

Mab frowned. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Powell snatched the cigarette from Mab's mouth and crushed it in his hand. 'I'm talking about Rachel.' At the mention of his daughter's name, Powell's face softened.

It was almost as though Rachel was watching him, judging him, scolding him for losing his temper. Powell sighed, then brushed the tobacco from his hands. He glanced over his shoulder, and then looked at Mab. 'Listen, whatever your problem is with Martin Griffiths and these Benbows, I'm not having Rachel caught up in it.'

'Caught up in what exactly?'

'I don't know, whatever it is you're trying to stir up.'

'Like I keep telling everyone, I'm not trying to stir up anything. I'm just trying to find out the truth.'

Powell laughed to himself. 'The truth, you want to leave the past alone. It might tell you things you don't want to know.'

'What's that supposed to mean.'

Powell's eyes fixed on him. 'Perhaps the only truth is that you can't admit what you've done. Clear case so I heard. All right, you did a little time. So fucking what, luck was on your side, you practically got away with it.'

'But I didn't do anything.'

'So you keep saying, perhaps you should try convincing your family.'

'What the fuck do you know about my family?'

'I know your sister doesn't want anything to do with you. She won't even have you in her house.'

Mab stared through the window, his eyes following the beam of a van's headlights as it drove past. 'So you've just made the decision for your daughter. Rachel said you were a control freak.'

'I'm just doing what's best for her. She'll thank me for it later.'

'And you're sure about that?'

'Yes, I am. Me and Rachel have been through a lot. I know her a lot better than you.'

'I'm very pleased for you.'

'You've always got something to say haven't you? You've always got some smart remark.'

'I know. You've told me already. Remember, I get it from my mam.'

Powell shook his head and sighed. 'Did Rachel tell you that she also lost her mam at a young age?'

Mab shook his head. 'No, no she has never mentioned it.'

'Yeah, the poor girl was only eight, broke her bloody heart it did, not that things were that easy for her before, mind. That's why I sent her to a private school.'

'What do you mean?'

Powell sighed. 'Come on, you grew up on the Moor Estate. You know how fucking cruel this place is, especially if you're not from around here.'

Mab nodded.

'Rachel's very precious to me,' Powell said. 'I'll do anything to protect her.'

'But she's a grown woman for Christ's sake. Surely, she can take care of herself?'

'What do you think? You've been spending time with her.'

'Of course she can. She's clever, beautiful—'

'Are you taking the piss?'

'No, I'm not. Why don't you think she's beautiful?'

Powell pushed his face closer. 'Of course I fucking do. She's my daughter, isn't she?' He breathed deeply. 'Look,' he said, his voice quieter. 'If you care for Rachel as much as you say you do then you'll leave her alone. I know she's a grown woman, but she's still vulnerable.'

'What do you mean, vulnerable?'

Powell stared at him. 'She's had her share of problems, just like the rest of us.'

'What problems?'

'She hasn't told you, has she?'

'Told me what?'

Powell took a deep breath. 'That she tried to commit suicide.'

'When?'

Powell looked down at his hands. 'Fifteen years ago, when she was seventeen.' He stared into the night as if searching for something. 'So now you know why I don't want her getting hurt, not again.'

'Who says she will?'

'I do. Rachel takes things to heart. This might be a casual fling for you, but trust me she takes it very seriously.'

'I do too.'

'Maybe you do. But Rachel's not for you. The best thing you can do is to leave

everyone alone and fuck off back to where you came from.'

Powell opened the door and got out.

Mab followed him outside, watching him as he walked towards the Jag. Griffo was sitting in the passenger seat with his head down. As Powell opened the driver's door, Mab said, 'So I've got to go back to London now have I, because the great Eddie Powell says so?'

Powell turned round. 'Yeah, you do. If you know what's good for you.'

Mab stepped forward. 'Problem with you, Councillor, is that you're too used to giving orders, and I always tend to do the opposite, especially when people try telling me what to do.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Powell said. 'I've tried to reason with you, get you to do the right thing. But some people can't be told. That's why they need a little encouragement.'

Powell nodded towards the Land Rover and Ned and Brendan jumped out. Brendan moved the quickest, running at Mab and then grabbing Mab's shoulders. Mab's instincts kicked in. He lowered his head a little and then rested his weight into Brendan, jabbing at his stomach until they tumbled onto the road. As Mab scrambled to his feet, he saw Ned running towards him, wielding an iron bar that he swung into Mab's face.

Mab fell back onto the car.

'I'll fucking kill you,' Ned shouted.

The bar struck Mab's chest and then crashed down on his shoulder, forcing him to the ground. The blood felt warm as it streamed down his face, and the voices grew more distant. Then darkness swallowed the light, and someone grabbed hold of his hair and dragged him across the grass, a peaty reek flooding his senses.

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All he could hear were the crows cawing above the laughter, and the cold wind groaning through the sodden grass. As he opened his eyes he saw the birds watching him from above, their wings outstretched, hovering on the breeze.

He kept trying to move, but his body refused to budge. Occasionally, he'd gaze up at the sky, and at the huge grey clouds drifting over him. He felt the rain on his skin

and caught glimpses of blurred, silvery lights. He'd been left to the mercy of the land, and as the wet and the cold took hold of him, he sensed that it had forsaken him.

He could hear his own heart and each deep gasp for breath. He didn't fear the place. He had a vague recollection of it and had memories of walking these hills as a boy. Even back then, he'd felt part of it. He never needed the language to affirm his Welshness, just a sense of belonging, and an intrinsic connection with the land.

He felt himself drifting further away until he was lying on the estuary shore. The moon shone bright and reflected across the water. The sky had started to clear, revealing pale, blue streaks of light. He looked up at the clouds, staring at the faces he saw within them. What would his mother think of all this, he wondered. The time they'd spent together felt unreal. All those years of love, laughter, and sadness were gone within the blink of an eye. It was almost as though they never happened, something he imagined in a dream. Key moments of his life returned to him in flashes. In his mind's eye, he saw himself as a boy, with his mother chasing him across the sands. He saw the town too, the Abbey, and the Well, and the Greenfield Valley with its endless run of trees. Then he saw Rhiannon, watching him from the rocks.

The strangeness of it all disturbed him. Yet, at the same time, he was glad to see her. He'd been given another chance, almost as though he were blessed. She walked slowly towards him, stopping an inch or so away from his feet. She knelt down and leaned over him, strands of her hair tickling his face and throat. Her breath carried a damp smell, and her eyes were dark and cold. She was more flesh than ghost. Yet the paleness of her skin was unearthly. She leaned closer, her face but a whisper away.

'You left us alone,' she whispered.

He tried to say something, but struggled to get his words out. Then he tried to sit up, but his body remained lifeless.

Panic rushed through his blood, as each sudden burst of anxiety held him breathless. He felt the cold lick of the wind on his face, and the chilled air numbed his fingers and toes.

PART II

WHEN DOCTOR JONES ASKED HIM WHAT HE REMEMBERED, MAB WHISPERED SOMETHING ABOUT THE RAIN. Cold, was how he remembered it, thrashing down on him, seeming to conspire with every ache. He mentioned nothing of Rhiannon. The blur of her shape standing over him, and how he'd called out to her.

Dr Jones read his notes. He studied Mab a moment. 'You've been extremely lucky, Mr Pryce.'

He didn't feel lucky, but he couldn't answer. The tightness in his jaw, and the anxious feeling in his stomach kept him silent.

Dr Jones drew his face closer. 'Yes, if someone hadn't called for an ambulance, you'd probably still be out there, and I dread to think what would have happened then.'

Mab pictured the Moors, and a sudden sense of shame swept over him.

'Just try to get some rest,' the doctor said, his voice softening. 'You've been through a lot.'

In the days that followed, Mab didn't have the strength to do anything but rest. His bed lay adjacent to the window, looking out across the hills. The ward was so warm, and occasional shafts of sunlight fell across the glass. If it hadn't been for that big grey sky out there, he would have convinced himself it was summer.

Every time he tried to move, his body scolded him. His throat felt tight, and each breath of air rattled inside his chest. The smell of the hospital was sickening, a lingering mix of canteen food and antiseptics.

He hated the smell of the place. It reminded him of those sleepless nights when he had held his mother's hand in the darkness.

It seemed Mab's mother had been ill for longer than any of them could remember, yet the day they rushed her into hospital still surprised them. She'd stayed in bed that morning, and Mab had brought her a cup of tea. She looked paler that day, but he took little notice of it at the time. He was more interested in the rain lashing against the window. It was her usual tiredness, he told himself. Another night of endless

coughing had drained the life from her. When he asked her if she needed anything else, she brushed him away with her hand.

‘I’m all right, love,’ she said, ‘so stop worrying. You do your own thing, never mind about me.’

He left her alone, the stale smell of her room following him onto the landing. The house felt so still that day, and the slow tick of the clock accentuated the silence. He remembered looking out of the window, watching the mist unfurl across the water, and then gazing at the distant specks of birds hurrying inland.

When he stepped outside, the drains were overflowing, and a dank reek plagued the avenues. It had been three days since his fight with Griffio, and Annwen kept reminding him that he was thinking of pressing charges.

‘Just keep out of Martin Griffiths’s way for now,’ his mother had warned him. ‘There’s no point making things worse. It’ll settle down, eventually. Apologise when the time’s right.’

Mab had no intention of apologising. He felt little remorse for Griffio at the time. Who needed him, he kept telling himself. For all he cared he could rot in hell with the Benbows. They dragged him down, and he was better off without them.

After leaving the estate, Mab started walking towards Rhiannon’s house. There were rumours that she’d moved back in, and he grew more excited as he made his way there. He took the dirt track through the Greenfield Valley, the air full of the smell of wild garlic. The trees towered over him, twists of ivy polishing them green-black. When he arrived at the house, Rhiannon’s sister was watching from the window. She opened the door before he could knock.

‘Rhi,’ she shouted. ‘Rhi . . . hurry up, there’s someone here to see you.’

Mab heard the whisper of voices, and then a light tread of footsteps coming down the stairs. Rhiannon didn’t smile when she saw him. She glanced down at the carpet and mumbled something under her breath. ‘Oh, it’s you. What do you want?’

She looked stunning, but it wasn’t her beauty that held him silent. It was the coldness in her eyes and the harsh tone of her voice.

He was lost for words at first. Then he said, ‘I’ve come to see how you are. I’ve been wondering about you. I haven’t seen you for ages. Not since—’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, then looked away from him.

All he could do was stare at her. 'So, do you want to do something? We can go for a walk, a drink, anything you like.'

She shook her head. 'No thanks. I've made other plans. You've caught me at a bad time. I was just on my way out.'

'Who with?' he asked, all too quickly. He blushed. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business.'

She nodded, then glanced at her watch. 'Look, I really need to go. I'll speak to you soon, yeah. I promise I'll come and see you or something.'

He wanted to ask her when. And as she edged back into the house, he wanted to loiter in the hallway until she gave him an answer. But he nodded and stepped back onto the path, his heart pounding as she closed the door. Walking slowly down the street, he kept looking back at the house, hoping to catch sight of her watching him from the window. He half expected her to come chasing after him, take hold of his hand and beg for forgiveness.

All morning under that sullen sky, he kept on walking. He'd no idea where he was heading, just a faint murmur of hope driving him forward. He followed the old coast road that ran parallel to the rail track, the sound of each passing train filling him with sadness.

The outdoor market was closed that day, its empty stalls providing shelter for the gulls. He kept walking, taking the path that cut through the meadows. The grass was slippery and thick, and indifferent cows watched him from beneath the trees. When he reached the end of the track, he followed the lane back to the estate. Rhiannon's voice haunted him. It was all Griffo's fault, telling her all those lies, and filling her head with nonsense.

The door was open when he got home, and the contents of his mother's handbag lay strewn across the kitchen table.

He wandered into the hallway. 'Mam . . . Mam, where are you? Mam . . . is everything all right?'

Some of her clothes were scattered across the landing, and a trail of nylon shirts led to her room. The bedroom curtains were open. Shards of ashen light fell across her pillow. He smoothed his hand across the bed, the cotton sheets still warm. Then he heard someone calling his name, her voice growing louder as he walked back to

the landing. It was Edna, his next-door neighbour. She stood at the bottom of the stairs, folding and then unfolding her arms. Her gravy-brown skin was lined, and she looked like she'd been crying.

He walked down the stairs to meet her. 'Bloody hell, Edna, you frightened the life out of me.'

She pushed a hand through her hair, and held it in her fist, revealing the darkness of her roots.

'What's wrong?' he asked her.

'It's your Mam, love. She's been taken poorly.'

'Where is she?'

'She's in the hospital, love, the ambulance came for her half an hour ago.'

'Why? I mean what happened? She didn't seem too bad this morning.'

'Your sister came home and found her sprawled out on the landing. The poor thing was unable to get her breath.'

He brushed past her and started making his way down the path.

'Where are you going?' she shouted after him.

'To the hospital, of course, to see my mam.'

'How the hell are you going to get there?'

'I don't know? I'll thumb a lift I suppose, or get a bus.'

'Wait there, I'll get our Davey to take you.'

All the way to the hospital, Edna's husband, Davey, kept changing the stations on the radio. He kept mumbling to himself and shaking his head apologetically. Every tune was either a love song or a sad melody. The music and words grated on Mab's nerves. As they drew closer to the hospital, he caught sight of the marble church. Its stone gargoyles looked down at him and held his stare all the way to the car park.

His mother was in a private room at the far end of the ward. A nurse showed him the way. 'Your mam's in here, love, with your sister.' She smiled at him, and he blushed.

His mother's nose and mouth were fitted with a respirator, and a set of plastic tubes were connected to her arms. He took hold of her hand and began to stroke it.

'For God's sake leave her rest,' Annwen said.

He said nothing. He just sat down in a leather armchair, watching his mother's heartbeat flash across the monitor.

'So?' Annwen asked him.

'So what?'

'So where the hell were you?'

'I went out for a bit.'

'What for?'

'I had some things to do.'

She shook her head. 'Had some things to do? You were chasing after that slut, more like, when you should have been looking after Mam.'

'How the hell was I supposed to know? She seemed all right this morning. I spoke to her before I went out.'

A nurse came in and checked the readings on the monitor. Annwen kept thanking her, and then asked whether she could speak with the doctor.

'I have mentioned it,' the nurse said. 'But I'll give him another shove. He's not around until tomorrow morning. It's probably better to make an appointment. I'll give you the number of his secretary.' She smiled at them both and then made her way out, her rubber shoes squeaking along the floor.

The moment they were alone, Annwen stopped smiling. Her eyes were red, and a run of dry tears dirtied her face.

'So what happened?' he said, a sudden dryness in his throat.

Annwen looked down at the floor. 'It's her lungs, something's blocking the arteries.'

'A blood clot?'

'I suppose, something like that.'

'But she'll get better, right?'

'We'll have to wait and see. Her heart's taken a lot of damage.'

'Has she had a stroke?'

'I don't bloody know. You'll have to ask them.'

He listened to the hiss of the respirator, watching the rise and fall of his mother's chest. He stood up and took hold of his mother's hand. 'I don't understand. She seemed fine before I left. She smiled at me this morning.'

Annwen walked over to the window, her ashen face reflected in the glass. 'I don't suppose you've seen Dad?'

He shook his head and squeezed his mother's fingers.

They stayed silent for a while, eventually agreeing to watch over their mother in shifts. Annwen put on her coat, her hands trembling while she buttoned it up. 'I'll be here first thing in the morning,' she said. 'Make sure you call me if anything changes.'

He nodded, and then nestled into the armchair. The room felt peaceful after Annwen left. He spent the evening watching the telly. He kept the volume low, flicking through the channels. The night came quickly, the ward settling into a consensual hush. He listened to the distant sound of voices, murmuring beneath the softness of the lights. The car park was almost empty when he gazed out of the window, the fluorescent lamps casting long shadows. He hated hospitals, and the stillness of the ward unsettled him.

In the days that followed, his conversations with Annwen were pretty much the same. They spoke mostly about their mother, and the question of their father's whereabouts. They felt timeless, those nights, and the darkness seemed never-ending. When he and his mother were alone, he would say her name, Seren, he'd whisper, Mother, or Mam. She never responded to any of them. She just drifted between the living and the dead, sometimes asking about the strangers in her room.

The doctor told them that their mother was growing weaker every day. 'It's only a matter of time,' he said. 'The best we can do now is to keep her comfortable.'

No matter how prepared Mab thought he was, the words settled in his guts like lead. Annwen seemed affected by it the most. She would say nothing for hours, and come out with the strangest of notions.

'It wasn't just the cigarettes that broke Mam's heart,' she said to him once, looking into his eyes as if he knew what she was talking about.

Mab spent most nights, sitting with his mother and reading her old books. He began to see the town and the Greenfield Valley in a new light, altered by the things he'd learned. He already knew most of the town's folklore, about Caradoc beheading Winefride, and Meurig the lost monk. He'd been told those stories countless times at school. But now, it was the things they hadn't told him that interested him the most.

Such as the stone cross, positioned in the middle of the High Street. The market cross, one of the books had called it. Those old markets were nothing like the markets now. There used to be at least a dozen stalls selling everything from food to hosiery. There was a cattle market, and an indoor market, too, behind the old town hall.

All that existed today were a few stalls every Thursday and Saturday, selling cheap rugs, toys, replica football shirts, and batteries that never worked.

He'd discovered things about the surrounding fields too. There was the *Level* for one: a hilly tract of grassland where they used to mine for lead. Since he could remember, it had always been just a stretch of land between the Moor Estate and the Greenfield Valley. It was nothing more than a shortcut, narrow pathways that ran through the grass and joined onto a gravelled track.

The things he remembered about the place made more sense now. Years ago, before they were filled in, there were two high-walled pools. They stood near the end of the track, just before it reached the road. They'd always fascinated him. He'd spend hours sitting on the wall and gazing into the dark, mossy water. He found the silence uncanny. There was something strange about the quietness of it all. Its calm unnerved him, as though something lurked among the reeds.

By browsing through his mother's books, he discovered it was a drainage level for the mine, or the boat level as the author had referred to it. There had been canals there too, to carry the lead ore. The mining company that owned it, *Moors United Corporation*, even lent its name to the estate. He didn't like that. Those avenues and lanes were his home. His family and others like them were its history, and he found it difficult to think of it as someone else's place. But he knew it had been, as had the Level, and the mills and the old factories.

When he'd studied an old painting of the Greenfield Valley, it felt like peering into a lost world. There were no ruins among the trees. The buildings stood tall. They were slate-roofed with smoking chimneys. A boy fished in the Flour Mill Pool opposite, as though he didn't have a care in the world, a small dog standing beside him. Yet something about that picture made Mab uncomfortable. He found it difficult to articulate. It was an artist's impression after all, selling a version of his home. It just didn't seem right. The scene was too tranquil. There was no hint of the pain and

struggle that thrived behind those factory walls. There was no hint of any darkness; it was a picture-perfect history.

Normally, Mab kept away from the pubs, but he promised Annwen he would try his best to find their father.

In one of his mother's old books, Daniel Defoe had described the town as nothing more than a collection of pubs, paying it little notice as he travelled along the coast. There were eleven pubs in total, and many more bordering on the outskirts. The Black Horse was the oldest pub in town. It was smoky and low lit. Its nicotine-stained walls were decorated with old photographs. It was just past noon when he arrived there, and the place felt deserted. An old man sat in the corner, rolling himself a cigarette. The barmaid was short and broad shouldered, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and her tight pink top showing too much cleavage. She folded her arms and eyed Mab suspiciously. 'I'm not serving you unless you can prove your age.'

'I'm not drinking,' he said. 'I'm just looking for my dad, that's all.'

'Are you now, and who's he when he's about?'

'Big Glynn.'

She stopped smiling when he mentioned his father's name, and the look in her eyes seemed to pity him. 'I'm sorry to hear about your mam, love. We were in school together, you know. The next time you see her, tell her Jayne's been asking for her.'

He nodded, unsure what to say.

'I haven't seen your dad all week,' she continued. 'But you're not the first to come looking for him.'

'Really,' he said. 'Who else has been asking for him?'

'Oh . . . no one you'd know, love, just some friends of his.'

She smiled, taking a deep breath as he turned towards the door. 'You look washed out,' she said. 'Sit down for five minutes, have a pint on the house.'

She didn't have to ask him twice, and he leaned against the bar, watching the lager bubbling into the glass. Perhaps it was the tiredness or the sudden release of tension, but that first drink was the best he'd ever tasted. His head felt light. A surge of relief ran through his blood. He drank another, and then two more. Whenever he glanced at the mirror, he caught himself smiling. This was no time to be enjoying yourself, he'd

thought, and then a momentary sense of shame would take hold of him. Yet like most of his resolutions, it was short-lived, and after a few more pints, he was jabbering like the rest of them.

By late afternoon, the pub was packed, the usual deviants, a mixture of the unemployed and the unemployable. Mab felt different from the rest of them; his indulgence warranted by personal tragedy. News of his mother had spread as quickly as her illness, each nameless face offering him their condolences.

'You tell her we're asking for her,' most of them said. 'Tell her to get well soon, and that there's a drink for her behind the bar.'

He welcomed them all, revelling in the attention. There he sat, Big Glyn's only son, following in his father's footsteps. By early evening, he was too high to feel ashamed of himself. He was living for the moment, seeking refuge in the company of strangers. Every time the door opened, he hoped it would be Rhiannon. All he wanted was to speak with her, and with that in mind, he decided to go and find her.

He staggered out of the pub, the evening air blasting his senses. The street was almost empty, just the seabirds watching from the rooftops. When he reached the brow of the Well Hill, he slumped against the church wall. The view of the valley held him silent, its run of trees gathering at the water's edge. A warm breeze washed over him, comforting him as he veered onto the valley path. They looked so beautiful those woods, and the evening light filtered through the branches.

The front door was ajar when he got to Rhiannon's house. He knocked gently at first, for fear of pushing it open. Then he stepped inside, the faint hum of the fridge drawing him closer.

'What the hell are you doing in my house?' Rhiannon's sister shouted from the landing. He staggered out into the garden, almost falling over as she raced towards him. She sniffed the air. 'Have you been drinking?'

'I've had a few,' he said. 'My mam's in hospital.'

'What's that got to do with it? It doesn't give you the right to come into people's houses.'

He moved away from her. 'I know that. I came to see Rhiannon.'

'What do you want her for?'

'I need to talk with her.'

'You can't. She's gone out.'

'Where's she gone?'

'I don't know. She's taken the dog somewhere, along the estuary I suppose.'

For a moment, her smile seemed to mimic his own. Then her face grew stern as she tried to compose herself.

'Thanks, Ceri,' he said.

'You don't know me by name, it's Mrs Reece to you.'

He backed away quickly, throwing her an apologetic nod before opening the gate.

The steep tarmac hill that led to the old docks still glistened from the rain. Blackthorn trees nosed through the fence, and dark, jagged leaves covered the pavement. The tide was out, and the cocklers' boats lay abandoned in the silt. Across the sands, he could see the Heswell shore, its outcrop faint beneath the greying light. He watched it awhile, and then followed the seawall path, quickly losing interest when he caught sight of Rhiannon's dog.

Mab stretched out his arms, laughing as the dog bounded towards him. There was no sign of the dog's mistress, so he kept calling out to him, hoping that she would hear. He chased after the dog, following him over the gate. The dog raced along the path, barking and wagging his tail. Then he bolted across the stones, and Mab lost sight of him. He climbed onto the wall, trying to get a better view.

'Here, boy,' he shouted, but there was still no sign of him.

A hush descended over the place, and he heard whispers in the grass. Then he caught sight of the dog. It was chasing something, someone, a figure dressed in black jogging across the marshes.

Mab watched them fade into the distance, his heart pounding. When he turned round, to his surprise, he saw Rhiannon. She was lying in the grass. Her face flushed as she pulled on her jeans. She knew he was there, but didn't acknowledge him. He watched her from the rocks, staring at the lace trim of her underwear.

WHEN THE NURSE TOLD MAB HE HAD A VISITOR, HE IMMEDIATELY THOUGHT OF RACHEL. She had called him a few times, breaking into tears as she told him how sorry she was. She longed to see him, but explained that she didn't want to risk it. She told

him that she had brought him enough harm as it was, and feared for his safety. Mab didn't care; he kept texting her, begging her to come.

'Don't look so bloody disappointed,' Annwen said, as she sat down in the chair opposite. 'I thought you would be pleased to see someone, be grateful for a visitor at least.'

He was in no mood to feel grateful, especially to Annwen. Her presence was an intrusion, the tension stifling the air. What made things worse was that she had that usual sour look on her face, bordering on disgust. She spent the first few minutes shaking her head. 'Look at the state of you,' she kept saying to herself. There was no pity in her voice, not even a trace of it. 'So how are you?' she said, eventually.

'I've felt better.'

'Hmm, I came as soon as I knew.'

'Did you now? That's very kind of you.'

Annwen remained silent.

'So,' he said, 'who told you I was here then?'

'Who do you think told me.'

'Griffo.'

Annwen nodded. 'It was him that called the ambulance.'

'That was very kind of him. The next time you see him tell him that I'm very grateful.'

'You ought to be.'

'You what, I don't believe this. Did he tell you what happened? What him and his mates did?'

'Yes, some of it.'

'And?'

'From what I can make out, it was you that started it. What the hell were you thinking, stirring things up, and messing around with Eddie Powell's daughter?'

'And that gives them the right does it? Look at the bloody state of me.'

'I warned you, Mab.'

'Is that all you can say? Have you no fucking feelings for me at all?'

She stood up. 'If you're going to use that kind of language, then there's no point talking with you.'

‘So how do you expect me to be, my only sister taking Griffo’s side, and believing all his stupid stories.’

‘What are you going on about? Stories, you’re the one for the bloody stories.’

She started to button up her coat, her hands trembling. ‘Besides, Martin had nothing to do with it. Luckily for you, it was him that called the ambulance.’

‘Wasn’t that good of him.’

‘Yes, it bloody was, considering.’

‘Considering what? He and those bastards left me for dead.’

She shook her head. ‘Not Martin, he had no part in it, so don’t you mention him to the police.’

‘Oh, so this is what it’s all about?’

She stared at him. ‘What have you told them?’

‘Nothing, I’m not going to tell them fuckers a thing. They never did me any good.’

‘They must have been talking to you, though.’

‘Oh, they’ve been talking to me all right. I didn’t tell them anything.’

‘You must have said something?’

Mab sighed. ‘I just told them I had an accident. I needed some fresh air and slipped.’

‘And they bought that?’

‘Of course they didn’t, but they don’t give a shit. The bastards even breathalysed me, *recovered* my car.’

‘You’ll get it back, though?’

‘Aye, when I go there and pay them the two hundred quid release fee.’

‘So you’re not pressing charges?’

Mab shook his head. ‘Nah, what’s the point. I’ll sort it out myself.’

Annwen sighed. ‘Don’t start all this again, Mab. Leave it alone now. It’s finished. Okay, so you have a few cuts and bruises, but it could have ended a lot worse. All this stuff about Martin, you’ve got it all wrong. He’s a good man. He’s never done you any harm. He doesn’t deserve the way you’ve been hounding him.’

Mab didn’t answer. He just lay in silence, seething at her nerve. ‘Have you conveniently forgotten everything, the way they hounded *me* all those years ago?’

‘Not Martin, if I remember right, he did you a favour.’

‘And what favour was that?’

'You know what I'm bloody talking about.'

'That wasn't a favour; it was a guilty conscience. It was him that bloody started it.'

'It's over now, and like I said before you shouldn't have come back.'

'Why's that?'

'Look at the bloody state of you for a start, and all the trouble you've caused. I warned you, Mab. I told you it would do no good.'

He kept quiet, biding his time.

'It's no wonder the Benbows have a grudge,' she said. 'Look what you did to that Ned. What did you expect was going to happen? You can't push those sort of people around. They won't bloody take it. You should have kept away. What's done is done, and you've only got yourself to blame.'

'So, I'm to blame am I? I'm the one who told lies about myself to the police all those years ago?'

'Perhaps it's not as you remember it.'

'You what? What the fuck's that supposed to mean?'

She took a deep breath. 'That you're no saint. You seem to have forgotten that you did beat Martin up, and he never harmed a soul.'

The look on Mab's face was incredulous. 'We are talking about the same Martin Griffiths here? The one we grew up with on the Estate? The lying, conniving Scouse bastard who when he wasn't speaking with the dead spent his time spreading his lies, and stealing other people's girlfriends.'

Annwen laughed. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Rhiannon.'

It was the first time he'd mentioned Rhiannon to her since his return. Annwen's face grew pale, as though the very mention of her name had drawn the life from her.

'She was never your girlfriend.'

'She might have been if he hadn't poked his nose in.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I saw them.'

'Where?'

'Together at the estuary, the day Mam . . . the day Mam passed away.'

'And you're sure about that are you?'

'I caught them. She was half dressed, and he was legging it across the marshes.'

'And you're sure it was him? I mean, you got a good look at him?'

'Kind of.'

'*Kind of*, that wasn't bloody Martin, you fool.'

'And how the hell would you know?'

She leaned forward. Her brown eyes were shining. 'Because he was with me in the hospital, he sat with me all day.'

'So who else could it have been then?'

Annwen's laughter was mocking and cold. She gave him a long look, staring at him as though he was the worst kind of fool. 'Take your pick, half the bloody town were sleeping with her.'

'Don't be daft.'

'I'm not the daft one. Why do you think Mam was so keen to get rid of her?'

'As far as I remember, that was your fault; you and your stupid jealous ways.'

Annwen turned towards the door. 'You remember what suits you. That's always been your problem.'

He slammed his fist down on the bed. 'Is that right?'

'Yes,' she said. She glanced at his fist, 'that and your bloody temper.'

He tried to calm down. 'Mam wasn't keen to get rid of her. She was just poorly that's all.'

Annwen smiled. 'Is that another story you keep telling yourself?'

'I'm not with you.'

'Jesus, Mab, do you want me to spell it out for you?'

'It seems you'll have to.'

'Mam knew.'

'About what exactly?'

'Rhiannon and *Dad*.'

'Rhiannon and Dad, what the hell are you talking about?'

'Think about it,' she said. 'Rhiannon got her hooks into Dad the moment she clapped eyes on him. You were too busy running after her to notice. It's the worst thing you ever did to Mam, bringing that conniving little whore into her house.'

ANNWEN'S WORDS HARRIED HIM ALL NIGHT. THEY STIRRED BENEATH HIS SKIN. He didn't get a moment's rest, and getting dressed only made him feel worse. His clothes were dirty and bloodied, redolent of the Moor's dankness.

When he told the Staff Nurse that he was discharging himself from the hospital, she didn't look impressed. 'Can I ask you to reconsider, Mr Pryce? You're still not a hundred percent.'

He watched her eyes scan him with disapproval. 'Look I'm sorry, but I've really got lots to do.'

He kept looking at her, smiling apologetically, until she finally gave in. She motioned him to her desk, refusing to look at him as she handed him a slip of paper. 'You'll have to sign this then, Mr Pryce. It's to free the hospital from responsibility.'

He nodded and scribbled his name across the paper.

As he made his way out, the smell of the ward refused to leave him, following him all the way to reception. The woman behind the information counter wore a badge that read *Volunteer*. Her hair was grey and permed, and he recognised her immediately. Mrs Probert, she was his form teacher during his second year at high school, and his Welsh teacher throughout. The years had been kind, and she was a lot slimmer than he remembered. She still wore those floral cotton dresses and the glasses with the thick lenses.

'Excuse me, do you have any taxi numbers,' he said, wondering if she would place him.

She scanned the blood on his clothes, and then glanced down at the mud on his shoes. She managed a half-smile, and then something registered in those owlish eyes of hers. Her face became stern, and she pointed towards a display board. 'There are some cards over there,' she said, pretending not to know him.

'Thanks,' he said, and turned his back on her.

He sensed her watching him, judging him as she'd done all those years ago. He remembered the time when he was twelve years old. He had struggled with the Welsh language as a child, and Ms Probert had seemed set on making things worse for him. She was always so spiteful, poking fun at him, belittling him at every chance. One day

she had caught him smoking, and had made him stand up in front of the class. She had asked him to explain himself in Welsh, encouraging the class to mock him. *'Yr wyf yn gwybod eich cyfrinachau,'* she had said, before allowing him to sit down. When he looked at her blankly, she had smiled, and then said, 'it means that everyone knows your secrets.'

Mab tore a card off the board and slipped it into his pocket. He turned quickly and caught her staring, hoping she'd challenge him. When she looked away, he made his way outside.

The air felt damp, and the mid-morning sky was an endless stretch of grey. He could feel its dull light fall over him, filling him with dread as he phoned for a taxi. 'Give us fifteen minutes, love,' the operator said. 'It'll be a blue Volvo. He'll be outside the main entrance.'

'I'll wait by the church,' Mab said, the hospital's smell getting the better of him.

He made his way across the road. When he got to the church, he rested against the fence, and then checked his wallet to be sure he could pay the fare. At least the bastards hadn't robbed him, he thought. His hands shook as he counted through the notes. He gazed towards the fields, and then out across the Moors. The place looked so bleak, and a blemish of wild heather quivered in the grass.

When the taxi driver caught sight of him, he tried his best to keep smiling. Mab sat up front.

'All right, mate,' the driver said. 'You look like you're on your way to the hospital, instead of coming from there. Where are we off to?'

'Do you know where the car recovery place is?'

The driver nodded. 'It's not far from here mate; it's just off the A55 near the expressway. What happened, have they clamped you?'

'Something like that,' Mab said, then closed his eyes as they eased onto the dual carriageway. He feigned sleep for most of the journey, only talking when they reached their destination.

To release his car, Mab had to show the necessary ID, his driver's licence and something that displayed his address. Luckily, he had both. His driver's licence was in his wallet, and he had a couple of unopened bank statements in the car. It took him a short while to convince the guys at the pound to let him open one of the letters. But

after he did they seemed happy enough, more so when he paid the release fee. After that, Mab drove back to the hotel to get his stuff. The flow of traffic calmed him, and at times it was almost as though the last few days hadn't happened; each dark event was nothing but a bad dream. If only that were true, he thought, the memory of Annwen's words stirring inside him.

When he arrived back at the hotel, the receptionist looked at him as though he were a ghost. She was wide-eyed, her mouth slightly open. 'Hello, it's Mr Pryce isn't it?'

'Yes, I—'

'Are you all right? What happened to your face?'

'I've been in an accident.'

'What just now?'

'No, it was a few days ago. I've been in hospital.'

There was a look of pity in her eyes. 'I'm very sorry to hear that. We wondered where you'd gone. Your things are still here. We've put everything in your bag.' She paused for a moment. 'We had to charge your card I'm afraid. It's hotel policy.'

Mab forced a smile. 'No problem.'

After collecting his stuff, Mab made his way to the bar, bought himself a pint and then sat in his usual spot by the window. After taking a few long swigs, he sent Rachel a text, telling her he was out. Ten minutes later, she called him back. Her voice sounded frantic at first. She kept saying how sorry she was and asking if Mab was all right.

'I'm fine,' he said, 'although I'd be better if I could see you.'

She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'We can't today; it's too dangerous.' She went silent for a moment. 'I'll finish work early tomorrow. Meet me at three, in Whitford, by the old Celtic cross.'

Mab sighed.

'It's only one day, Mab, please, and then we'll sort things out.' She went silent again, then said, 'Where are you staying tonight?'

Mab glanced around the bar. 'In this hotel, I suppose.'

'Good,' she said, 'and spend the day in Ruthin tomorrow as well. Don't come into Holywell. You need to keep a low profile.'

'I can't do that,' Mab said. 'I need to speak with my dad.'

'Can't it wait?'

'No, not really.'

Rachel breathed deeply, then said, 'Go out of town then, please Mab, promise me.'

'I'll be fine,' Mab said. 'Stop worrying, I know where he'll be. I'll catch him before he gets to town, then drive up to the tops somewhere.'

'Okay,' Rachel whispered, 'but please, Mab, be careful.'

Mab checked into the Castle Hotel for one night. The room was almost identical to the last, a mock summer of tangerine walls and yellow curtains. He felt relieved to finally remove his filthy clothes, their sickly smell reminding him of the hospital. He caught sight of himself in the mirror. He looked terrible, older, tired, and his body was grey and bruised. He touched the scratches on his face, sighed, and then walked into the bathroom.

He stood beneath the shower for ages, relishing its warmth. The water offered a brief respite, as did the cold air when he stepped into it. He dried himself, slowly, every muscle and bone tender to the touch. Then he eased himself onto the bed. The mattress felt soft, and the smell of fresh linen was a welcome distraction. He lay quietly, watching the flecks of light glimmer across the ceiling. They held his attention for a while, keeping him still as he drifted into sleep.

When he woke up, Mab was covered in sweat. He was cold and shivering, his chest tightening with every breath. He hadn't had a nightmare for days now and was starting to believe he was free of them. He sat upright in the bed, his heart thumping against the darkness. Every dream seemed more real than the last, and this one was no exception. He could feel its usual aftertaste, bitterness in the mouth, and that cold dampness. *As always he'd found himself at the estuary, a low sky darkening into night. His vision was limited there, the water and rocks a blur of blue and grey. In the distance, he could see a body. The scavenging crows shrouded it in black. He drew closer. His legs felt heavy as if an invisible weight rested on his shoulders. The crows' dark eyes watched him. A body lay face down. Spirals of blonde hair were twisted around its neck. He sensed immediately who it was. He felt so angry, and the birds*

scattered when he clapped his hands. It was then that he caught sight of it, a tall silhouette staring at him through the mist. The figure's voice drew closer, its low sardonic pitch telling him that he knew his secrets.

29

THE DREAM STAYED WITH HIM ALL MORNING. After breakfast, Mab checked out of the hotel and drove to Holywell. He kept thinking about his father, wondering what to say to him. The Black Horse didn't open until eleven. So he waited in a cafe at the far end of town. Just as he had promised Rachel, he tried his best to keep a low profile. He sat quietly at the back, watching the High Street through the window, comparing it to the old photographs in his mother's books. The town had changed considerably. And although the tower clock was still the centrepiece, its sombre chime striking the hour, it seemed bigger back then, and livelier too.

One photograph reminded him of how it had looked when he was a boy. There was a wide, tarmac road, with slab-stone pavements on either side. It was before the town became pedestrianized, and cars and buses drove through the busy street. Most of the shops had awnings and large hand-painted signs. The men wore suits, fedoras and bowler hats. The town had a classical look about it, like something from a picture postcard. He sighed. There was nothing classical about it now. Only a few shops remained: newsagents, card shops, and empty cafes. The old stone wall outside the bank had disappeared. He'd loitered there as a boy, squatting on the railings, smoking his cigarettes.

Even Woolworths was gone. The building gutted, refurbished, transformed into a Wetherspoons. As a teenager, every Saturday morning, he'd buy a record from there, and then listen to it on his mother's hi-fi. He'd play it over and over until he'd memorized every word.

'The heart finds a special place for the old songs,' his mother had once told him.

Just as Mab had expected, a few minutes before the pubs opened, his father walked into town. It was hard to miss him. Glynn was a big man, with a confident gait. He

seemed to know everyone, returning each greeting with the friendliest of smiles. Mab wondered if they acknowledged his father more from fear than respect.

He walked out of the café and called after him. Glynn turned, losing his smile the moment he saw him. He looked Mab up and down. 'Jesus, look at the bloody state of you. I thought you could take care of yourself.'

Mab smiled, then said, 'I need to talk to you.'

Glynn nodded towards the Black Horse. 'You can buy me a pint if you like.'

'Okay,' Mab said. 'But not in town. We need to go somewhere quieter. Some place up the tops.'

'Cross Foxes then, the place is always dead.' Glynn sighed. 'It's a fair walk, though.'

'Don't worry, I'll drive us there.'

Mab followed the Old Chester Road and turned left into the country lanes. Glynn kept silent, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. It took Mab fifteen minutes to get there, and there were no other cars in the car park. The Cross Foxes looked in need of repair. It was a dingy place, low-roofed and whitewashed. Mab followed Glynn inside. The bar was almost in darkness, just a pale trace of light creeping through the windows. The barman acknowledged them with a disgruntled nod. He was in his mid to late fifties, his grey quiff blending with his shirt and trousers.

'I'll get these,' Glynn said. 'You go and find us a table.'

Mab sat down near the door, staring at a collection of Toby jugs hanging from the wall opposite.

Glynn returned with two pints. 'I bet you've never been here. Do you remember this pub?'

Mab took a look around. 'No, not really, I never used to bother much with pubs, always left that to you.'

Except for Glynn, the barman, and Mab, it was empty. The place looked scarred with neglect, and its tarnished walls complemented the filthy carpet. There was a familiar odour in the air, a beery smell of daytime drinking.

Glynn gulped down half his pint and slammed down his glass. 'It's a good pint here, though. I should come here more often.'

Mab almost agreed with him, averting his gaze when he found himself smiling. A manic whirr blasted from the fruit machine, decorating the tables with flashes of coloured light.

‘So,’ Glynn said. ‘What is it you want to talk about? Do you want me to give you a hand with the Benbows?’

Mab shook his head, trying to keep patient.

‘What is it then?’

‘Who says I want anything?’

‘Why else would you come looking for me?’

‘Perhaps I need some advice.’

Glyn smiled to himself. ‘I already gave you some.’

Mab watched his father take another swig of his pint. ‘How did you know I’d had a run-in with the Benbows?’

Glyn smiled. ‘It’s big news, it’s in all the local papers.’

‘Is that right? I suppose everyone thinks I deserved it.’

Glynn shrugged. ‘Probably, not that they’d say anything to me.’

‘No, you’ve always managed to stay away from it.’

‘Stay away from what?’

‘Trouble, family trouble, I mean.’

Glynn’s stare reminded Mab of how his father used to look all those years ago. In those days, it was enough to silence him, a black mood on the cusp of rage. He welcomed it now, goaded it even, holding his father’s stare with his own to show him those days were over.

Glynn looked down at the table, took hold of his pint and swirled the beer around the glass. ‘So what do you want then? I’ve got things to do, you know.’

‘Oh I know that,’ Mab said. ‘You’ve always been a busy man.’

‘Look, just tell me what you’re after.’

Mab wanted to ask him why he had abandoned them all those years ago. Why had he left their mother alone when she had needed him the most? Why had he spent all his time drinking, stayed out for days, letting his mother worry through the night? All he could manage was one word. ‘Rhiannon,’ he said, his voice trembling.

‘What about her?’ Glynn said.

'Annwen told me you were very close.'

'With who?'

Mab sighed, then, raising his voice said, 'With Rhiannon of course.'

'What do you mean by close?'

Mab sipped his pint, watching the tiny bubbles rise up the glass. 'She said you had an affair with her.'

Glynn stared at him. 'You what? What the hell are you talking about?'

Mab leaned closer. 'You know what I'm talking about. Why pretend otherwise?'

'You shouldn't listen to that sister of yours. She's always had a nasty tongue on her.'

Mab glanced towards the window. The sky was darker now, and small drops of rain pattered against the glass. 'So she's lying then?'

Glynn sighed.

'Well?' Mab said.

Glynn looked down at his hands. 'It just sort of happened; I'm not proud of it?'

'Aren't you?'

'No, I'm not. I just . . . just couldn't help myself.'

Mab shook his head, an incredulous look on his face. 'From what Annwen tells me, you did nothing but.'

Glynn stared at him. 'It wasn't like that, Mab. You of all people should know.'

Mab shivered as he recalled the softness of Rhiannon's touch. As Glynn started to roll a cigarette, Mab stared at his father's hands, picturing them all over her.

Glynn dropped his cigarette onto the table. 'Rhiannon was trouble. I knew that from the moment I saw her.'

'You should have stayed away from her then.'

'I tried to, but you knew what she was like; it was hard to say no to her.'

What did he mean by he knew what she was like? As if his father's dirty little affair could compare to their friendship. 'You should have tried harder then,' Mab said, lowering his voice when the barman stared at him. 'You had a sick wife, and two kids to think about.'

Glynn laughed. 'You weren't kids, besides I helped you the best I could.'

'What, by staying away from us?'

'I suppose so, that and other stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'Telling her to stay clear of you.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Rhiannon, I warned her. I told her not to encourage you.'

'From what exactly?'

'You were chasing after her like a dog with two dicks; the whole fucking town was laughing at you.'

'So what you were doing was all right then, was it? Your wife was dying in hospital, and you were fucking someone young enough to be your daughter.'

'It wasn't like that. It was a mess all right, but it wasn't as you describe it.'

'So what was it then? Love?'

Glynn looked away. He picked up his glass, his hand trembling. He downed the remaining dregs of his pint as though they were his last.

Mab watched the lines across his father's neck. 'I'll get us another drink,' he said, and made his way to the bar. The barman kept silent, ignoring him while he poured two more pints. Mab felt relieved to see a group of lads hurrying into the pub. He relished their noise and welcomed their laughter. When he got back to the table, Glynn didn't look at him. His eyes were fixed on a beer mat that he quietly tore up.

'So you were helping me then?' Mab said.

Glynn pushed the shredded card away from him. He swiped his hand across his forehead. 'You just can't leave it alone, can you?'

Mab shook his head. 'No, I can't.'

The lads from the bar huddled around the fruit machine, smiling and joking.

'You were as mad as them once,' Glynn said. 'Your mam was worried sick about you. Glyn, she said, I'm past caring about what you get up to, but I won't have that slut making a fool of my lad.'

'You're lying. Mam wouldn't say that. Besides, no one was making a fool of me.'

'Jealousy eats you up, son. You were out of control.'

'I was out of control? That's great coming from you.'

'I'm not proud of the things I've done, but I wasn't the one going around like a madman. You nearly put that Griffio in hospital. You were lucky he didn't press charges.'

'Lucky? Everyone seems to have forgotten about the trouble he brought me.'

'He brought you?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Glynn looked down at the table. 'Nothing, all I know is that it's in the past now, and only a fool would dig it up.'

'Is that right? But only a bigger fool would convince himself he wasn't a part of it.'

They sat in silence. Glynn necked the rest of his pint. 'That's me done.' He stood up and walked out the door.

Mab followed him, keeping his distance as Glynn made his way down the lane. 'Hey,' he said. 'Is that all you've got to say about it?'

Glynn turned round. A sureness in his eyes that was all too familiar. 'Look, I've said I'm sorry. What else do you want me to say?'

Mab stared at him, speechless, unable to remind him that being sorry wasn't enough. Glynn stared back, a bemused look on his face.

Mab walked towards him. 'Do you think it's funny?'

Glynn looked surprised, at first, when Mab gripped hold of him. Then his eyes grew more defiant as Mab pushed him towards the trees. He wasn't as strong as Mab thought he'd be. He felt bony and light, his jacket tearing as Mab threw him onto the grass.

'You deserve this,' Mab said, 'for leaving me alone all those years ago. Mam's body wasn't even cold, and half the bloody town were after me.' But it was because of Rhiannon that Mab hated him the most. He'd stolen her from him, enticing her into bed with those big tales of his.

Glynn scrambled to his feet. 'That's a fine way to treat your father. You're like a fucking madman, flaring up over nothing.'

'You think it's all nothing?'

Glynn leaned back against a tree, trying to catch his breath. He took out a cigarette and popped it into his mouth, then cupped his hands around the flame as Mab gave

him a light. He took a deep drag and then exhaled. 'Your mam wouldn't have wanted this,' he said, his voice low, almost yielding.

'And how would you know what she wanted? You didn't even visit her when she was in hospital.'

Glynn took another drag of his cigarette. 'I couldn't face it.'

'Oh, and we could? It was a case of having to.'

'Besides,' Glynn said. 'Your mam didn't want me there, making things worse for her. I'd already disappointed her enough.'

He took one last drag of his cigarette and then flicked it into the grass. 'Is this all you came back for, son? To dig this all up, settle old scores with Griffio and the Benbows?'

'I've already told you why I came back.'

Glynn nodded. 'Oh, that's right, the truth.' He gave Mab a searching look. 'Remind me, are you here to find it or to face it?'

'What the hell's that supposed to mean?'

'You tell me, all I know is that women like Rhiannon get under your skin. They mess around with your head; take you to places where you really shouldn't go.'

'You want to keep your mouth shut.'

Glynn sighed. 'I will don't you worry. Just like I did, all those years ago.'

30

SAINT WINEFRIDE'S WELL WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL. A rusty turnstile allowed access to its gardens. Mab wasn't sure what had led him back there, all that talk of his mother perhaps, or the memory of her voice drawing him to the holy waters.

Like countless others before him, he followed the path to the shrine: a narrow trail of slabs, smoothed by the seasons. The bathing pool shone like a sheet of glass, and gold and silver coins glinted from its base. All those desperate wishes, he thought, almost throwing a coin into the water and making one himself.

He stepped into the shrine and the cool air refreshed him. He used to come here and light a candle in memory of his mother. He pictured that time at the hospital, all those years ago. The night she passed away.

The nurse had seemed reluctant to speak with him at first. Her face was grave, and there was a slight quaver in her voice. 'Has your sister not spoken to you? She left a few hours ago.'

Mab shook his head. 'I've been busy,' he mumbled, too ashamed to tell her that he'd spent the day drinking.

The nurse nodded, then took a deep breath. 'We need to have a chat then.' She pointed down the corridor. 'Let's go to the family room. It'll give us more privacy.'

Mab nodded, listening to the beat of his own heart as he walked alongside her. A blast of warm air greeted them as they stepped into the room. The car park lights shone through the blinds, casting bars of shadow across the floor. Except for the stack of plastic chairs and an old bookcase, the room was empty. The quietness unsettled him, as did the bereavement information poster on the wall. He sat down in one of the chairs and the nurse sat opposite. His mouth felt dry, and he could barely get his words out. 'How's my mam? Is there anything wrong?'

The nurse stared into her hands and then looked up at him. 'It's sad news, love, I'm afraid. Your mam passed away this evening.'

He didn't know what to say to her at the time. All he could think to do was place his hands into his pockets, to stop them from shaking. The nurse's smile was wide and benevolent, and he wondered if the shine in her eyes was a reflection of his own.

'Was she alone?' he asked, the tears welling inside him.

The nurse shook her head. 'No, your sister was beside her. She held her hand as she took her last breath.'

His stomach churned at the abrupt finality of those words, and a persistent ache throbbed inside him. He'd always promised himself that he would be at his mother side. It would be him holding her hand when she took her final breath. But he'd failed her, and he knew it would always haunt him. The thought of it would catch him unaware, and twist into his heart like a knife.

'Would you like to see your mam?' she said.

Without thinking, Mab said he would, although he wasn't quite sure how he'd cope. The nurse scraped back her chair and stood up. She rested a hand on his shoulder. 'I'll

give you a few minutes and then when you're ready, come and tell me, and I'll take you. Don't feel rushed, though. You just take your time.'

'I'm okay,' he said. 'I'll come with you now if that's all right.'

Neither of them spoke as they made their way to his mother's room. He paused outside the door, and the nurse waited until he stepped in. The first thing that struck him was the smell. It was his mother's fragrance. It smelled of her hair, her breath, and the soft, warmth of her skin. She lay motionless on the bed, her mouth open, and her head turned to one side. She looked different, as though she were someone else, a pale, hollow shell. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. 'Rest in peace,' he whispered. Then he kissed her again and pressed his cheek against her own. He held her hand for a while. 'I'll go now,' he mumbled, and the nurse followed him outside.

He walked all the way home from the hospital. It took him hours, and he watched the darkness gradually fading, and the sunrise. When he got to the Holy Well, he waited outside until it opened. The old curator seemed unwilling to let him pass, examining his coin as though it were the greatest of forgeries.

The man was spindly and bent, with a dewdrop on the end of his nose. 'What's a lad of your age doing here at this time of the morning?'

'To light a candle,' he said. 'It's for my mam.'

The man took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it across his nose. 'Why? What's wrong with her?'

'She's just passed away.'

The man blushed. 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said, then smiled as he let him pass.

The smell of the man's cologne followed Mab along the path. The Well was no different back then, forever cold, its mossy stones tinting the water green. He lit more than one candle that day, half a dozen in fact, as though the lighting of each flame could melt away the sadness. In the days that followed, he visited St. Winefride's Well every morning. He felt it was all he could contribute, especially with Annwen controlling all the arrangements. He didn't see his sister for days. She communicated with him through notes, left on the kitchen table.

His mother was buried on a Wednesday, in St James's Parish Church. There were more people there than he expected, although most of them were strangers. Annwen had made all the arrangements and had excluded him throughout. Part of him was

glad in a way. He was too upset, too young, and wouldn't have known what to do. Edna helped as best she could. She even bought him a shirt and a black tie and lent him one of her husband's suits.

In the church, the family sat up front. He was struck by how cold it was, and the brightness of the midday light shining through the stained glass windows. He recognised some of the service from when he was in school. Especially the *Lord's Prayer*, he'd recited it for almost twelve years, every morning in assembly. He knew the hymns, too, and surprised himself how well he sang them.

The Reverend Trevor Morris did his best. He had a soothing air about him and was easy to understand. At one point he asked the congregation to close their eyes and think of a special moment they'd shared with Mab's mother. Mab had so many of them and was surprised by the one he chose. He recalled the time when he and his mother went to the Friday market in Flint High Street. There was a toy stall there, and his mother told him to choose anything he liked. He'd hesitated for some time, unable to decide if he wanted a gun or a pirate set. In the end, he chose nothing, keeping to his decision after his mother had asked him several times. He regretted it the moment they got on the bus. His mother must have known that because she'd looked at him and said. 'Do you want that pirate set?'

When he nodded his head, she smiled, then took hold of his hand, and led him off the bus. What he'd loved about that day was how she never got cross with him. She kept her patience throughout. She loved him and was happy to give him what he wanted. He could remember it so clearly, and pictured her smiling.

Only his family attended the service at his mother's graveside, each of them keeping their distance beneath a greying sky. Later, at the reception, he remembered catching glimpses of his father and the clasp of his hands as he welcomed the comfort of strangers. Annwen said nothing to him that day, the natural sombreness of her face finally put to good purpose. The reception was at the local community centre, a graffitied red brick building, as neglected as the playground behind it. He hated the place and felt that his mother deserved a better remembrance. Her life was worth so more than a few fond words served among warm tea and ham sandwiches.

He continued to grieve for his mother in private, praying for forgiveness in the dark chill of Saint Winefride's. After a while, it became routine. He'd light his candles in the

morning, and then drink all day and night. He started to get a name for himself, a drunken malcontent, with a temper no better than his father's. He'd see Rhiannon sometimes, passing through the half-consciousness of his days. He was desperate to speak with her, but did everything in his power to avoid her. He kept away from her house, and all the pubs she frequented.

Staying away from the estuary was more difficult. Except for the Well, it was his only refuge, a beautiful place with no one from the town there to spoil it. Getting to the estuary took him longer now. He had to cut across the meadows, join the path from the Fun-Ship. Some days the views across the water were magnificent; especially when the tide was out, and all he could see were those golden stretches of sand. He was tempted to walk across on occasions, let the river swallow him if it happened to catch him out.

By now, the days were growing shorter. Whisky became his drink of choice, which still surprised him considering he'd always hated the smell. It was no different on that Saturday when he last saw Rhiannon. As in a dream, he saw her walking towards him. He couldn't believe his luck at first, his body trembling. She didn't answer him when he called out to her. She just raised her hand, barely acknowledging him. He smiled at her, following her gaze as she looked out across the shore.

'I hate this place,' she said, and then turned to face him.

He edged closer. 'You're not on your own.'

She looked tired, lost, and almost childlike. She shivered, her long fingers caressing her shoulders.

'Are you all right?' he said.

'No,' she whispered.

They sat down on the rocks, looking out across the water. He half-expected her to ask how he was, or tell him to take no notice. He wanted her to tell him that whatever it was that was bothering her was nothing compared to his loss. Instead, she remained silent, drawing more into herself.

'It can't be all that bad?' he said.

Rhiannon took a deep breath. 'You don't know the half of it.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'No,' she said, as the tears took hold of her.

He smiled. 'Come, on, it might do you some good.'

'Leave it, Mab. I don't want to talk to anyone. You're just as bad as her.' Rhiannon stood up and looked towards the trees beyond the marshes. She cupped her hands around her mouth. 'Why don't you just piss off,' she shouted. 'Go on, I've got nothing to say to you.'

He looked up at her. 'Who the hell are you talking too?'

She sat back down. 'That stupid bitch over there, she followed me down here.'

He gazed towards the trees, but couldn't see anyone. 'Do you mean your sister?'

Rhiannon stared at him for a moment. 'If you can call her that.'

Rhiannon felt cold when he put his arm around her, so he began to rub her back trying to warm her up. She seemed comforted by it at first and rested her head on his shoulder. The citrus smell of her hair brought it all back to him, and he closed his eyes, taking a deeper breath. All those bad memories seemed to lighten at that moment. As if loosening their grip and sliding into the water. It was meant to be, he thought. All those weeks of pain just a test to make them stronger. For some reason, he pictured his mother, her eyes scolding. He let the image pass, placing his hand near Rhiannon's waist. She took hold of his hand, clenched it before pressing it against her face. She turned and looked at him, then laughed shyly.

That first kiss was all he imagined it to be. He could feel the moistness of her lips, his body tingling as he drew her closer. He pressed against her, cupped her left breast, and then smoothed his other hand across her thigh. He kissed her harder, pushed his tongue into her mouth. At first, he took no notice, believing that trace of objection in her voice to be nothing more than a lover's caution.

Her protests grew louder. 'No,' she kept saying.

Then, suddenly, he felt the sharp burn of her nails, the pain intensifying as she scraped them across his neck. She gripped hold of his hair, almost pulling it from the roots. 'What the fuck are you doing?' she said, and pushed him away from her.

She stood up and patted down her clothes.

'What's wrong with you?' he said. 'What have I done?'

She looked down at him, her eyes dark and accusing. 'I kept asking you to stop.'

'But I thought—'

'You thought wrong then, didn't you?'

'But I don't understand. I was only trying to comfort you.'

'Yeah, of course you were. That's what they all say.'

'I'm not like the rest of them. I'm your friend. I care too much about you.'

'Care about me . . . Don't make me laugh. You only care about yourself.'

'You shouldn't say that. Have you no idea what I've been through?'

'You're not the only one with problems, Mab.'

'So tell me what's troubling you then, so I can help.'

She laughed. 'You? You can't even help yourself. Look at the bloody state of you.'

He stared at her, listening to the tide murmuring against the silence. He could hear the seabirds too. 'Don't you dare fucking speak to me like that.'

'Or you'll do what?' she said, then turned her back on him.

He hated her at that moment, his hands trembling as he grabbed her shoulders.

31

When Mab arrived at the old Celtic cross, Rachel was already there. She ran towards him the moment he stopped the car. Mab opened the passenger door, catching a waft of her perfume as she got inside. The first thing she did was to take hold of his hands and kiss him. It felt good to have her this close. He'd been thinking about it for days now. She drew back her head, a shocked look on her face. 'What have they done to you?'

He didn't answer. Instead, he squeezed her hand. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'They'll get what's coming to them.'

Rachel lifted Mab's hand to her mouth and kissed it. She kept it there for a moment, and then rested it on her lap. 'No Mab, don't do anything, please, not yet. It's too soon; it's not worth it.'

Mab let go of her hand. 'You can't expect me to leave it at that. This isn't just about you and me. Martin Griffiths lied to the police about me fifteen years ago. And now I'm back he's shitting himself, hiding behind powerful friends, stirring things up with your dad.'

Rachel sighed. 'Believe me, my dad doesn't need any encouragement.'

'What does he have to say about all this?'

‘Pretty much what you’d expect, that you’re this and that, how he tried to reason with you. The thing with my dad is he’s never wrong. No matter what he does, even if it’s bad, it’s always someone else’s fault.’

‘He probably thinks he’s protecting you.’

Rachel closed her eyes for an instant and sighed. ‘Yeah, perhaps, but he’s gone too far this time.’

‘Why? What are you going to do?’

‘Keep seeing you.’ Her eyes met his. ‘That’s if you want to?’

Mab nodded. ‘Yes, of course I do, but I need to get the truth from Griffo—’

‘Let me help you then.’

‘I don’t know, Rachel. Things are bad enough as it is. I don’t want to drag you into this.’

‘But I want to help you.’

‘Why would you want to do that?’

She smoothed her hand across his face. ‘Look at the state of you. None of this would have happened if wasn’t for me. I feel responsible.’

Mab smiled. ‘None of this is your fault. You’re the only person who has been kind to me since I got back.’

Rachel didn’t answer, and Mab was struck by the sadness in her eyes. ‘Hey,’ he said, ‘come on, don’t upset yourself.’

‘Let me help you then.’

‘How?’

‘I think you need to keep a low profile for a while, give yourself time to think.’

Mab grabbed his pack of cigarettes from the dashboard. ‘I’ve had fifteen years to think about it.’ He took out a cigarette and placed it in the corner of his mouth. ‘In fact, I’ve thought of little else.’

‘What was your plan?’

Mab took the cigarette out of his mouth and held it in his hand. ‘I didn’t really have one. I’ve been meaning to come back for years, but I could never face it. Then when I got laid off and heard about my dad, I just came back, didn’t even think about it.’

‘You certainly made an impression,’ Rachel said.

Mab smiled. 'Yeah, I suppose I could have done things better. I won't lie to you, Rachel. I'm no saint. I know that. But coming back and seeing everyone, and all the old places, was all a bit too much. It brought out the worst in me.'

Rachel rested a hand on his shoulder. 'What you need is a bit of distance. Some place where you can think things through.'

'Yeah, you're probably right. But I'm in no mood to go back to London.'

'Go somewhere else then. I'll come with you if you like?'

'Where?'

'Capel Curig, you know, Snowdon.'

'Yeah, I know it. I haven't been there since I was a kid. What made you mention that place?'

Rachel took a deep breath. 'We've got a cottage there, remember, I told you about it before. You can stay there if you like?'

Mab forced a laugh. 'Sure, your Dad's going to love that.'

'He'll never know,' Rachel said. 'And we won't even be there by the time he finds out.'

It didn't take much to convince Mab. Rachel had thought everything through. These days, her family cottage in Snowdon was hardly used. Powell hadn't been there in ages. No one would even know they were there, and it was the last place anyone would go looking for Mab. The plan seemed straightforward. Mab would visit Annwen first, and then tell her he was going back to London. No doubt, Griffon, Powell and the Benbows would get word of it, and everyone would think he'd left. Then he'd drive to Rachel's cottage and let himself in with the spare key. She'd join him the next day after Powell had gone to his conference.

'We'll only stay for a few days,' she said. 'Then, if you like, we'll go to Holyhead and get the ferry to Ireland.'

Mab couldn't wait, growing more excited the longer he thought about it.

Annwen was watching from the window when Mab pulled up outside her house. She didn't look surprised; it was as though she had been expecting him. He got out of the

car and followed her cold stare all the way up the path, and the front door opened before he could knock.

She didn't even look at him as she motioned him inside. She just followed him into the living room. 'I've been wondering where you got to. I rang the hospital. They said you'd discharged yourself.'

'Yeah, I was tired of hanging around. I had stuff to do.'

'Like upsetting Dad, you mean?'

Mab glanced down at the carpet. 'What you told me came as a bit of a shock. I had every right to be upset.'

'You shouldn't have reacted the way you did, though.'

'Perhaps, but it's done now isn't it. And like everyone keeps reminding me, you can't change the past.'

'Finally, seen sense then?'

'I'm going back to London if that's what you mean. I thought I'd say goodbye before I went.'

Annwen beamed, and it was the first time since his return that something he said had pleased her. She walked over to the table and picked up her pack of cigarettes, took one out, and then offered the pack to Mab.

He shook his head. 'No, thanks, you're all right.' He stood in silence as she lit her cigarette, watching her take a deep drag, and blow the smoke from her mouth with triumphant fervour.

'You must know it's for the best, Mab. Not just for you, but for everyone . . . So was it all worth it then?' she asked, a sarcastic tone to her voice. 'Did you find what you came for?'

He ignored her and made his way into the hall.

'Off so soon?' she said. 'You've only been here five minutes.'

'I only came to say goodbye.' He took out his wallet and handed her two twenty pound notes. 'And leave this for the kids.'

'Thanks,' she said, 'I'll keep it for when they go on their holidays.'

She walked with him to the car, keeping quiet, unable to hide the big grin on her face.

'I'll be in touch,' Mab said.

Annwen's smile faded. 'No need. I've got your mobile number. I'll call you if I need to.'

'Fine,' he said, and got into the car, and slammed the door.

32

TY ARDWYN, THE HOUSE ON THE HILL, WAS SITUATED WEST OF MOUNT SNOWDON. It nestled among the low mountains, on the fringes of the Snowdonia Park. Rachel's directions had been clear and Mab had found the place easily enough. There were other cottages in the area, but they were separated by miles. Mab liked that. He was in no mood to meet the neighbours. After parking the car, he let himself in. The place was cold and tainted by a musty smell of neglect. He pushed open the door to his right and walked into the living room. The room looked cosy enough; it had white stone walls and an inglenook fireplace. He set his bag down on a chair and began to look around. The room felt recently deserted. A deck of cards was spread across the table, and a half-drunk cup of mouldy tea was abandoned near an empty glass. Powell's presence was strong there, and Mab felt as though he would burst through the door any minute.

Much to his surprise, there was a good selection of books on the shelves. They belonged to Rachel, he guessed. It was difficult to imagine Powell being a reader. The books were mainly nonfiction, with the occasional romance hidden beneath a magazine. He picked one up, sat down on the sofa, and flicked through the pages. Then he lay it face down; he didn't have the head for reading. After exploring the cottage, he spent the rest of the night on the sofa, flicking through the channels trying to find something on the TV.

He sat in the cold with the windows open in an attempt to get rid of the smell of smoke. He'd texted Rachel a few times, but she hadn't answered. He hoped to God she was all right, his imagination presenting him with all kinds of scenarios. Being here didn't help. He wasn't used to this kind of silence. Every time he looked out of the window, the darkness made him anxious. It felt strange how places could have such an effect on him. But they'd been influencing his mood and actions ever since he came back. He pushed such thoughts aside, telling himself he was tired, lonely. As soon as

Rachel arrived, everything would feel different. She was right of course. His approach was all wrong. He needed a plan – more distance. With that in mind, he closed the windows, got a blanket from upstairs, and then lay on the sofa. He kept the volume of the TV low, closing and then opening his eyes until he drifted into sleep.

Her voice was distant at first. Then it grew louder, calling his name, pulling him slowly out of his dream. When he opened his eyes, Rachel was kneeling beside him, each waft of her perfume nullifying the staleness of the room. Mab sat up and rubbed his eyes. 'I must have dropped off for a few hours. I wasn't expecting you until the morning.'

Rachel smiled. 'It is morning; it's past nine already.'

Mab stretched his arms, yawning as he said, 'I didn't think I was that tired.'

Rachel stood up, walked over to the window and opened the curtains. She turned to face him. 'You're bound to be tired. You're still not a hundred percent.'

Mab didn't answer. He just smiled, thinking how beautiful she looked with her hair bathed in light. He stared at her for a moment, then said, 'So is everything all right?'

'I think so. Dad left for his conference half six this morning. Then I got my things together and came here.'

'And he doesn't suspect anything?'

'Why would he? He doesn't even know I've left, and we'll be in Ireland before he does?'

'And you're sure you want to do this?'

She walked over to him and sat next to him on the sofa. 'I want to help you.'

Mab took hold of her hand. 'That's right, I forgot, you feel responsible.'

'It's not just that,' she said. 'I want to get to know you, see if things work out.'

'And if they don't?'

'Who knows? Let's not think about that until we get there.'

Mab pulled her towards him and kissed her, relishing in her warmth as she pressed against his chest. They remained like this for a few minutes until Mab drew his head back.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

‘Nothing, I just feel a bit groggy that’s all. I could do with a shower first, to be honest with you.’

‘Then what?’

‘We can spend some time together. You can help me to keep my mind off things.’

She pecked him on the cheek, then smiled. ‘I definitely support that idea, especially the shower part. You smell like a guy who has spent the night smoking cigarettes.’

After he’d showered, Rachel insisted that they go out. ‘It’ll help relax us,’ she said. ‘Let’s make the most of the weather while it lasts.’

They took Mab’s car, cruising along the narrow roads. Rachel knew so much about the place. She seemed to know every bit of history, every little tale that was part of a greater story. About fifteen minutes into their journey, Rachel pointed to a cluster of trees at the lower end of the valley. ‘Do you want to take a walk in Gwydir Forest?’ she said.

The wood looked ancient, and the dark suggestion of the trees triggered an unwelcome change in him.

Mab shook his head. ‘No, let’s go somewhere else, to a mountain or something, somewhere with more light.’

She thought about it for a moment. ‘Okay, I’ll take you to Crib Coch.’

As he drove, an immense tiredness fell over him, its effect so strong that he had to open the window.

‘Are you all right?’ she kept asking, her voice growing more agitated.

‘I’m fine,’ he said. ‘It’s probably the last few days starting to get the better of me. I don’t understand it. I slept most of the night.’

‘It’s stress. Perhaps it’s best if I drive.’

It made sense, he thought. At least she knew the area. He pulled up at the side of the road, and they swapped seats. Rachel’s driving was a little shaky at first, but it wasn’t long before she got the feel of it. She drove slowly along the lanes, taking her time with each sudden turn and twist.

Looking out of the window, Mab couldn’t help thinking that he should have felt more overwhelmed, overawed by the endless stretch of hills and peaks receding to the coast. But after catching sight of those trees, for some reason, a feeling of gloom

had crept over him. Rachel seemed quick to notice his change of mood and began pointing out the local sights, trying to distract him. He just nodded, smiling as he tried to feign interest. If only they'd stayed in the cottage, he kept telling himself. Then things might have been different.

After driving around for an hour or so, Rachel decided it was too late to go up Crib Coch. 'Besides,' she said, 'we aren't really dressed for it.'

They settled for the next best thing, a small cafe high up in the mountains. The view was spectacular, a stretch of valleys and meandering lakes, with the volcanic ridge of Crib Coch looming above.

'I don't think that waitress likes us very much,' he said, as they found themselves a table.

'Why do you say that?' Rachel whispered.

'The look on her face when you told her we were Welsh.'

He smiled as he pictured it. The young woman's frown was surly like the landscape.

'She probably doesn't think we're proper-Welsh,' Rachel said. 'You know what it's like. It's because of our accent.'

'Yeah, I know, she probably thinks we're from Liverpool.'

Rachel grinned. 'Worse than that I reckon, she thinks we're a pair of inbreeds, from one of those faraway towns near the border.'

He tried to laugh it off, lowering his voice when the woman brought over their drinks.

Rachel squeezed his hand. 'Don't take any notice.'

They stayed in the cafe until closing time, watching the sun fall slowly behind the mountains. On first impressions, he found Crib Coch to be a bleak, unwelcoming place. Yet, when the sun slumped behind it, the mountain glowed, and a reddish gold hue settled across its ridge.

As they drove back to the cottage, he apologised.

'What are you sorry about?' Rachel asked.

'The mood I've been in today. I don't know what's wrong with me.'

'It's understandable. You've been through a lot. You're not that long out of hospital.' She took a deep breath. 'Listen, I know it's a lot to ask, but try not to think

about stuff, not until you're fully rested anyway. Try to forget about that town for a while, especially my dad and all his cronies.'

'I'll try my best,' he said. 'You have my word on it.'

The first thing they did when they arrived back at the cottage was make a fire. They used logs first and then, when it started burning, built it up with coal. They stared into the flames for ages, huddled together on the carpet. Rachel seemed less relaxed than he expected. She looked pensive almost, pausing between each kiss.

'You looked tired,' Mab said, and then took hold of her hand and led her upstairs to bed.

After they made love, they just lay there, in silence, outside of it all. Set apart from those unwanted memories. Everything felt so right. Their bodies were one, both of them watching the shapes in the darkness. Then, as though triggered by something, she held him tighter. He could feel the ebb and flow of her chest, the warm reassuring breeze of her breath.

She held him tighter. 'Mab, I. . .'

'What? . . Rachel?'

'Nothing, forget it.'

'No, go on.'

'I just want to say that we need to try and move on.'

'I know. That's what we're doing aren't we?'

'Yes,' she said, 'and we can't let the past torment us.'

Her words surprised him, and he didn't really know how to answer. Instead, he kept silent, closed his eyes and listened to the night. A dog barked, and then the sound of a car faded into the distance.

33

AT FIRST, THE DAMP AIR CAUGHT HIS ATTENTION, THEN THE BLACK JAGGED OUTLINE OF THE ROCKS. The sea and sky were almost indistinguishable, just a thin float of mist marking the horizon. He kept walking, slowly to begin with, following the path that meandered through the marshes. Then, from somewhere, he heard a whisper, and

then the sudden caw of crows trespassing through the silence. For some reason, he ran towards them, stricken with guilt as he tried to find her. They looked menacing, those birds, hook-beaked and spiteful. They stared at him, fearless, as he clapped his hands. Then they scattered, peppering the sky like a fall of cinders.

When he saw her, he felt a tightening in his chest. It swelled inside him like a huge blister. Rhiannon looked wretched lying there, more than in any previous nightmare. Her hair was wet and twisted around her neck, gleaming almost against the paleness of her skin. Yet it was the eyes that held him, soulless things, filling his heart with sadness. Even after all this time, he wept at the sight of her, battered and bruised, and so ruthlessly laid to rest.

34

WHEN MAB WOKE, THE SHEET WAS SOAKING, CLINGING TO HIM LIKE A SECOND SKIN.

Rachel stood by the window, and her eyes were full of kindness.

‘You’ve had a bad dream,’ she said, her voice soft.

He sat up. The room was still in the half-light, as though soothed by the wind’s whisper.

‘Do you want a drink of water?’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘No, I’m fine.’

‘But you’re not fine, though, are you?’ She edged closer and settled at the foot of the bed.

He reached for his cigarettes, his hand trembling.

‘Those things will kill you,’ she said.

He smiled. Then he lit his cigarette, watching the smoke curl to the window.

Rachel shuffled closer. ‘Do you want to talk about it? It might help. You know you can tell me anything.’

At first, he just sat there, half-naked, about to confess his sins to a woman he hardly knew. He started from the beginning, telling her how he had met Rhiannon, and about his fight with Ned. He explained how Rhiannon had come to stay with him, her argument with Annwen, and his fight with Griffo. He decided not to tell her about Rhiannon and his father. There was less spirit in him now, and he was in no mood to

think about it. Besides, telling her about his father cast the story in a new light, and darkened it with the old man's shadow. Rachel sat quietly throughout, only talking when Mab got to the part where he had argued with Rhiannon, at the estuary, the night before her death.

'What did she do then?' Rachel asked.

Mab breathed deeply. 'She turned her back on me. I was furious, so I put my hands on her shoulders.'

Rachel's eyes widened.

'I know,' Mab said. 'I didn't know what I was thinking at the time. I thought if I showed how angry I was, Rhiannon would realize how much I cared for her, and she, in return, would care for me.'

'And did it work?'

Mab shook his head. 'No, all it did was make her more decided. "Get your hands off me," she screamed. "Don't you ever touch me again." I couldn't believe it.'

Rachel took hold of his hand. 'So what did you do? Come on, Mab, tell me. I want to know everything.'

Mab told Rachel that all he did was stare. And Rhiannon, instead of heading back to town, stepped up onto the rocks and folded her arms, immovable, like a siren luring the ships from the sea. Then he retreated quickly along the path, settling on a mound of stones that faced towards the shore. The tide was rising, washing over the sands.

When Rhiannon began to undress, all he could see were her shoulders, and then the nape of her neck, tremulous beneath the moonlight. He could hear his own heartbeat. The sky was still, watchful. Even the night seemed transfixed. The air was like a bated breath.

Rhiannon kept close to the rocks, her shadow shifting with the light. She swam in circles, an odd stroke, more like treading water. The current, which twisted beneath her feet, and could easily have pulled her under, for some reason let her be. As he watched, in his mind's eye, he too was out there, his body cold and drifting alongside her.

When Rhiannon rose from the water, he took a step closer. He watched her slink towards the grass. She stepped carefully onto the rocks, her skin glistening. Then he ducked, in case she should see him. She just smiled to herself, her eyes glinting. He knew then that he was there because she wanted him to be. Her allowing him to watch was the closest thing to forgiveness, an apology, of sorts, which acknowledged the bond between them.

She stood naked for a while, her body shivering. No matter how many times he'd envisaged it, the smoothness of her skin still surprised him.

Rhiannon began to dress, and then, partly clothed, sat down on the rocks. Sometimes she'd shake her head as if recalling an old memory. He had no idea how long she would stay there. He didn't care. He was content just to watch, his legs stretched across the grass. He sipped from a can of lager, opening and closing his eyes, until drifting into sleep.

That day, all those years ago, Mab slept until dawn. The air was cold when he woke, frosting over the grass. The sky hung like a dying fire, its muted glow reflected across the water. A low mist unfurled across the marshes, blurring the trees and the fields beyond. He stood up, felt the chill of the land, and listened to the crows cawing.

He no longer had a clear view of Rhiannon from where he stood, just the hint of her shape resting behind the rocks. After a while, her body's stillness unnerved him. Yet he lacked the confidence to call out to her. Instead, he staggered along the path, his mind caught between sleep and wakefulness. The ground felt soggy beneath him, and he trod carefully. Small birds scattered from the brambles, disappearing through the mist. He could see Rhiannon more clearly now. She lay face down, and, surprisingly, was still half-dressed. There was something odd about her posture, the arms raised as if caught in mid-flail. The colour of her skin was the first thing that struck him, an unnatural white, accentuated by her blood.

'Rhiannon,' he shouted, and his legs gave way. He felt he should have done more, said something perhaps, called for help, or tried to revive her. Instead, he just sobbed, shaking his head as he stood over her. Streams of blood ran down her face, and there was nothing in her eyes but the cold grey of morning. The smell of the river took hold of him, and he retched. Then from nowhere, amid the terror of it all, he caught sight of someone, a tall silhouette, watching him from a distance. The stranger started

moving when Mab called out to him, startled almost, his figure growing fainter as he ran across the marshes. The mist was clearing, and the sky was brighter. Soon others would come, he thought, dog walkers and morning joggers. They'd find him alone with Rhiannon's body, and draw their own conclusions. Running away seemed the natural thing for him to do, an act of self-preservation.

The Greenfield Dock was busy that morning. The place bustled with local fishermen, tending to their boats and cursing the morning's coldness. The tide was out. The air was silted and overpowering. Mab looked briefly across the sands, watching the seabirds gather around the pools.

When he reached the bottom of the hill, he saw Griffo crossing the road. He waited for him on the pavement, greeted him with a nod. It was an instinctive reaction, the residue of an old friendship. Griffo said nothing at first, and the look in his eyes made Mab anxious. He wore his black overcoat, with the collar turned up. Mab hadn't seen him since his mother's funeral, and even then they hadn't spoken.

'You look like shit,' Griffo said. 'What the hell have you been up to?'

Mab sensed no sympathy in his voice. In fact, he appeared to gloat. He was surprised Griffo even spoke to him. He wanted to be alone, take some of his mother's pills and retreat into the darkness.

Yet Griffo kept him talking. 'You look rough,' he said. 'What the hell have you been up to?'

Griffo seemed eager for a response that day, and keen, it seemed, for Mab to ask the same questions. The last thing Mab wanted was to encourage him, listen to his stories, designed, no doubt, to rile him. It seemed strange now when Mab thought of it, both of them talking casually while Rhiannon's body lay motionless on the rocks. Then Griffo glanced at his watch. 'I need to go,' he mumbled and continued along the pavement.

Mab watched him for a while, feeling a sense of relief when he turned left and followed the road towards the Fun-Ship. In the days to follow, Griffo would tell his own version of these events, the story changing every time he told it.

The Sunday morning traffic was quiet that day. The walk home was vague, and all he remembered was the rain teeming down on him. The avenues were empty when he got to the estate, and an earthy smell hung in the air. The house felt quiet,

everywhere still, especially the shadows. After taking some of his mother's pills, Mab lay on her bed. He waited for sleep, trying his best not to think of Rhiannon. Sleep came to him at last, and, with it, the first of those nightmares - that figure, faint against the mist, watching him from the marshes.

The police raid came at dawn. Their voices were faint at first, threatening to break the door down. Even after barging into Mab's house, they found it difficult to wake him.

'Get up,' they kept shouting, pulling him out of bed and then dragging him along the carpet. When Mab managed to open his eyes, they'd already cuffed him. Read him his rights whilst marching him down the stairs. They rushed him into the van, throwing him onto the cold leather seats.

An hour or so later, after they'd taken his fingerprints, photograph and removed his belt and shoes, he was taken to the interview room, a soulless place, without windows. They kept him waiting for ages, his head thumping beneath the halogen lights. Two men entered the room, aged mid to early forties, their dark suits fitting them perfectly. Detective Inspector Burriss was the taller of the two. His hair was black and slick. His face tanned, and there was dirt beneath his fingernails.

Looking back at it, after all these years, Mab had no idea why he refused counsel. Fear clouded his judgement perhaps, or something much darker told him he was guilty. He didn't even call Annwen, to tell her about his arrest. Besides, the whole town knew by then.

D I Burriss spoke softly at first, confirming whether Mab knew his rights, and asked him again if he wanted counsel. Detective Gillam watched in silence.

'Okay, Mabon,' Burriss said, 'you're under arrest for the voluntary manslaughter and sexual assault of Rhiannon Elin Reece, which occurred between the hours of midnight and 6:00 am of Sunday morning. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Mab said.

'And you want to waive your right to a solicitor at this present time?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, I'm going to ask you a few questions now, but if you feel that you want to talk to someone or seek legal advice at any point during the conversation, let me know immediately.'

Mab nodded, slowly.

'I'd like to begin by asking you where you were between the hours of midnight, and six am on Sunday morning?'

By then Mab had decided not tell the truth, whatever the truth might be. A natural instinct to survive he guessed, passed down to him by his parents. Besides, the story was far too incriminating.

'I was out,' Mab said.

'That's a bit vague, Mabon. Can you elaborate?'

'I spent some of my time in town and—'

'How much time?'

'I don't know, an hour or so.'

'What were you doing in town at that time of night? Surely all the pubs were shut.'

'Walking.'

'To where?'

'Around.'

'Did anyone see you?'

'Maybe, I don't remember.'

'And where did you go?'

'The Greenfield Valley,' Mab said, his heart pounding.

'So you went to the Greenfield Valley and did what exactly?'

'I sat by the pool, drinking.'

'And then what?'

'I fell asleep.'

'You fell asleep? A bit cold for that, wasn't it? I'm surprised you were able to.'

'It was easy. I'd been drinking all day.'

The two detectives exchanged glances.

'Did you know Rhiannon Reece?' Detective Gillam asked.

'Yes,' Mab said.

'How long have you known her?'

'I'm not sure, about six or eight months.'

'And you were friends?'

'Kind of.'

'What do you mean kind of?'

'We were friends for a while, and then we drifted apart.'

'Why was that?'

'We just did that's all.'

'Nothing you said, or did?'

Mab sighed. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

Detective Gillam didn't answer. He just looked down at his desk and then scribbled on a piece of paper. The room felt smaller, brighter beneath the halogen lights.

'Did you ever fall out with Ms Reece?' Detective Gillam continued.

'Sort of,' Mab said. 'She was staying at my house; there was an argument.'

'About what exactly?'

'It was between her and my sister, something stupid over a job.'

'And you took your sister's side?'

'God no.'

'So why did you fall out with her then?'

'Something else, it happened the next morning.'

'Tell me about that.'

'I had an argument with my mate.'

'Who?'

'Griffo . . . Martin Griffiths.'

'About what?'

'About Rhiannon, things she supposedly said.'

'What things?'

'About me.'

'What about you?'

'That I was too clingy. That she needed more space.'

'And what did you say to that?'

'I said I didn't believe him. That he was always telling stories.'

'And then what happened?'

'We had a scrap. He got the worst of it.'

The two men sat up in their chairs.

'So you've got a quick temper then?' DI Burris said.

When Mab refused to answer, DI Burris's face reddened. 'We know all about you, Mabon,' he said. 'We've been asking around. We know you're always on the piss, and about all the fights you've had. It seems you've got a bit of a reputation for yourself too. Half the town knows about you.'

'We've got a witness as well,' Detective Gillam said, 'willing to testify that they saw you at the estuary, in the early hours of Sunday morning. In the exact spot we found Ms Reece.'

'I wasn't at the estuary,' Mab said. 'I walked as far as the old docks and then back down Dock Road.'

'You told us before you were in the Greenfield Valley.'

'I was, and then I walked to the docks.'

'Odd place to go, isn't it?'

'Not really, I wanted to see the sunrise.'

'Oh aye, so what made you head back then?'

'I felt rough. I wanted to get home.'

'Your father's house?'

'Yeah.'

Mab placed his hands on his lap, trying to keep his face expressionless. What had Griffon really told them, convincing them with his lies, no doubt, and they, in turn, grateful for every word of it. When they asked Mab whether he'd been Rhiannon's boyfriend, he felt a churning in his guts.

'But you wanted to be her boyfriend?' Burris persisted.

'No, not really.'

'I find that hard to believe, Mab. Ms Reece was an extremely attractive young woman. Most lads your age fancied her.'

'It wasn't like that,' Mab said.

'What was it like then?'

'Didn't she feel the same way?' Detective Gillam asked. 'Didn't she like how possessive you were, and how you kept on pestering her?'

'I didn't pester anyone.'

'But you did call at her house . . . Mabon?'

'I just wanted to talk with her that's all.'

'About what, exactly?'

'Things.'

'What things? How you felt? Why she was ignoring you?'

Mab kept silent, taking a deep breath while his body trembled.

'Is that what you spoke with her about on Saturday night? Mabon? Was she angry that you followed her? Did she ask you to leave her alone, not to touch her, and that's why you lost your temper?'

Mab could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks. At that moment, he decided not to cooperate, his mouth dry as he asked to make that phone call.

He was charged and, on the police's recommendation, placed on remand. They held him in Walton jail for nine weeks, and he was segregated for his own protection. That didn't stop the other prisoners from trying to get at him, though. It was shouting mostly, name-calling, and violent threats. During his first week there, he witnessed two attacks: one on an officer, and the other on a fellow prisoner. The prisoner had been badly burnt, scalded with boiling water. Napalming they called it. They laced the water with sugar so that it would stick to the skin and intensify the burn. The prisoner hadn't stopped screaming, his skin hanging from his face.

Mab became more watchful after that, staying awake half the night. He grew wary of buckets, plastic cups, anything filled with hot water. He didn't eat much either. He was choosy about his food, surviving mostly on boiled eggs. One of his father's cronies had once told him that if he ever found himself in prison to never eat anything that dripped. 'You've got to watch those fuckers,' he'd said. 'If they don't like you, they'll put all kinds of shit in your food.'

Mab took his advice and spent most of his time trying to keep his head down. At least he had his own cell, although the noise of the place was unbearable, as was the smell. He kept telling himself that he needed no one, trying his best not to be afraid.

He dreamed of Rhiannon almost every night, saw her watching him from the marshes. He could never decide what was worse, the dreams, or waking to a living nightmare. The only person who visited him was his solicitor, Arwel Thomas, a skinny man with a sheepish grin. The man tried his best, but Mab felt even his own solicitor suspected he was guilty.

On the day of the trial, the key witness, Martin Griffiths didn't show. To add to the police's frustration, it came to light that someone had also messed up the forensics, committing the cardinal sin of disrupting and altering the crime scene. The judge had little choice but to dismiss the charges. Yet his voice was full of regret.

Glyn was waiting for Mab when he arrived home. He was sat in his chair smoking. They watched each other for a moment, thin shafts of light falling between them. The house was how the police had left it, everything turned over, as though a huge wave had swept through the place. A few of his mother's books lay scattered across the carpet, worthless things in the eyes of strangers.

Mab crouched down to pick them up.

'Leave them alone,' Glyn said.

There was anger in his voice, but Mab was too tired to take any notice.

'So you've got nothing to say then?' Glyn said.

Mab stood up. All he felt at the time was a rush of disbelief. Was this all he had to say to him? He could have at least asked him how he was.

'What do you want me to say?' Mab said.

Glynn kept silent at first, an aggrieved look on his face. 'You've got yourself into a right mess. If it wasn't for me, half the fucking town would be after you.'

'So it's about you again,' Mab said. 'I'm supposed to be grateful am I? Where the fuck were you when they arrested me? You didn't even come and visit me. How bad is that? You weren't even in court.'

As Mab turned his back on him, he heard Glynn get out of his chair. Then his cold hand grabbed Mab's shoulder. When Mab turned round, Glynn pushed his face closer. His breath reeked of lager and cigarettes. 'You've been lucky,' he said, 'but that won't last for long. You shouldn't stay around here. If you've got any sense, you'll get your things and get out.' Glynn took out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and shoved it into Mab's hand. 'Here's the address of some building work down south. I'd consider it if I were you.'

'Where down south?'

'London, near the Kilburn High Road, just ask for Mickey Boyde.'

In the days that followed, they spent their time avoiding each other. The town was less forgiving than Mab's father. It seemed as though everyone was convinced of his

guilt, even though the judge had dismissed all charges. The lads his age were the worst. Groups of them started gathering outside the house and threatening him through the letterbox. They found their strength in numbers, the drink fuelling their anger.

Mab kept himself hidden, watching them from the shadows. Whilst he was in prison, Annwen had moved in with her new boyfriend, and wanted nothing more to do with him. Besides, he preferred to be alone, filling his head with books.

He stopped going to town. None of the pubs would serve him. People he'd known for years crossed the road to avoid him. Yet no matter what he did, Rhiannon was always on his mind, and the distant view of the estuary was a constant reminder.

As the boys outside his house grew in confidence, they started to throw the occasional brick through the window. Then one morning on his way out, he saw the word *RAPIST* sprayed across his front door.

It was raining the day he left. The deserted pavements glittered beneath the lights.

The air was damp, and the distant shore lost among the fog. He remembered stopping at the top of the Well Hill and looking up at that old statue of Christ. Its robes were faded, grown shabby like the town. His face looked calm and benign, but when Mab looked into his eyes, they offered no salvation.

When he left town all those years ago, he thumbed a lift to Chester. He'd no idea where the Kilburn High Road was, only that it was down south. He didn't care. All that mattered was London was two hundred miles away. He got the morning train from Chester Station, the 5:45 to Euston. He spent most of the journey hiding in the toilet, trying to avoid the inspector.

London was nothing like he expected. He spent his first day there travelling on the tube, drinking in various pubs, and wandering the streets. The crowds of people accentuated his loneliness, as did the sound of laughter. There was nothing special about him here. No one ever made eye contact, and he felt invisible on those streets. The following day he made his way to the Kilburn High Road, found the building site, and asked for Mickey Boyde.

Boyde was a big man, even taller than Mab's father. His hair was greasy and long, and his brown eyes were piercing.

Mab handed him the note.

Boyde held it close to his face, whispering out each word. He scrunched it up and threw it on the ground. 'You're a bit late aren't you? That job went weeks ago.' He toed the note into a puddle, and then wiped his mouth with his hand. 'I know they're after ground workers. I can probably get you that.'

Mab nodded.

'Where are you staying?' Boyde asked.

Mab shrugged. 'Nowhere, I haven't had a chance to find anything yet.'

Boyde shook his head and smiled. 'Come back here around five, and I'll see if I can get you into my digs.'

In those first few weeks, Mab worked all the hours he could. He wanted the distraction and to protect himself from bad memories. Rhiannon was always at the back of his mind, creeping into his thoughts when he'd least expect it. It was the little things that reminded him of her: the smell of perfume, a young woman's smile. Sometimes even the weather would trigger it: the sunlight across the trees, or the smell of the earth after an evening's rain. Most days he tried to forget, the estuary, the town, Rhiannon's body sprawled across the rocks. He kept to himself as much as he could, just did enough to fit in.

The lads on the building site called him 'Scouse', and he tried to convince them he was Welsh.

'You don't have an accent,' they'd say. 'You sound like you're from Liverpool.'

This troubled him, a feeling that surprised him. Back home, being Welsh was something he never really thought about. And even though England was just across the water, he still felt he was in Wales. There were so many things there to remind him. There were the road signs for one, written in English and Welsh. The land felt different too: the estuary, the Greenfield Valley, the Clwydian Hills and the Halkyn mountains. It was a connection with the land he couldn't explain. All he knew was that he was part of it. But in London, he lacked the accepted Welsh credentials. He possessed neither the accent nor the language. He was compelled to justify himself, explaining to them he lived near the border. He tried to convince them that what sounded like a Liverpool accent was, to the trained ear at least, quite different. He wanted to explain that his Welshness was something different, too. But he failed to

do so because even he wasn't sure what that was. Instead, he focused on the sea and the coast, and talked endlessly about the beauty of the land.

'If it's so great,' they'd say. 'Then why the hell did you leave?'

That's when Boyde usually intervened. 'Because there's no fucking work there,' he'd say. 'That's why we came down south.'

To his credit, Boyde never mentioned a thing, and he never asked Mab any questions. Sometimes he'd say, 'if you ever want to talk to me about anything, then you know where I am.' Then he'd leave it at that and give Mab a knowing look.

Every month Boyde would travel up to Wales. He'd return back to London broke, hung-over, yet eager to tell his stories. Mab would feign disinterest. But secretly, he longed to hear every scrap of news.

'Your dad's been asking for you again,' Boyde would say.

Mab never answered him. He'd either change the subject or pretend to be distracted.

As the months passed, he saved enough money to change digs. It was nothing special, but at least he had his own room. He preferred being alone at night, because of the nightmares. They grew more frequent, and the images became stronger. Sometimes they stayed with him for days. They lingered like a bad taste in the mouth. He was less certain of what had happened that night, and his memories became more blurred the longer he stayed away. He'd see her sometimes, Rhiannon, catching glimpses of her from the corner of his eye. He tried not to think about her, staying clear of things that haunted him. That's why he never managed to go home. He tried, but he'd only get so far. The thought of reliving the nightmare always held him back.

The years went by so fast, and Mab followed Boyde from job to job. He even went to evening classes to fill the gaps in his education. Yet no matter what he did, the past would always find him. Like a rotten tooth, it would strike a nerve and throb inside him. Friends were few, so mostly, he kept his distance. Not that they were real friends. They were just lads from work, people he drank with. Relationships proved the hardest; none of them ever worked out or lived up to his expectations.

He felt he was only partly to blame. Most of the women he met soon grew tired of his mood swings. It was difficult for him. Although he wanted to, he could never share his secrets. So he was happy for them to keep their distance.

Boyde kept him up-to-date with local gossip and news: such as who had died, and who was having an affair. In fact, if it hadn't been for Boyde, Mab would never have known that Annwen was married. Boyde even told him her address and mentioned that she had kids.

Then a few weeks ago, Boyde told him about his father. 'He's in a bad way, so I've heard. You better go back and see him, Mab, before it's too late.'

35

MAB FELT SO EMPTY INSIDE AFTER TELLING RACHEL ALL HIS SECRETS. He'd expected a sense of release, not to be overwhelmed by sadness. He refused to go to sleep; he was afraid of another nightmare. Instead, he lay quietly and waited for the dawn.

At the first sign of light, he got up, put on his clothes, and then stood by the window. The morning was darker than it should have been, and low clouds drifted across the mountains. The land looked cheerless, and a scatter of birds flew across the dull light. He watched the trees battle against the wind. The rain was slight, almost unnoticeable. Then, after one huge solitary splash, it started to pelt against the glass, each sudden gust carrying it west. Rain flurried across the fields and misted the horizon. The garden looked tainted when wet and large puddles quickly spread across the lawn. Water spilled over the roof and clumps of leaves blocked the gutters.

He took a deep breath and Rachel stirred in her bed. 'That was a heavy sigh,' she said.

He turned to face her. 'Sorry, it's the weather, makes you miserable.'

She yawned and stretched her arms above her head. When the sheet fell away from her, he glanced at her nakedness. She seemed untroubled by it at first. Then she folded her arms across her chest. She blushed, and her birthmark looked more inflamed. Not wanting to embarrass her any further, he turned towards the window. The sky was growing darker and showed no sign of easing. The road beyond the cottage sparkled beneath the lights, and a blue car drove out of sight.

'What do you want to do today?' she said, smiling when he turned to face her.

He shrugged, then watched her dress.

'Why don't you make us a fire,' she said. 'And I'll get us some breakfast.'

He nodded. 'If you like.'

Though Rachel smiled, there was something in her eyes that lacked patience. He followed her downstairs and made his way into the living room. The room was cold, and a damp smell lingered. He drew back the curtains and watched the rain for a while. Then he cleared out the grate and made a fire.

By the time he'd finished, Rachel had made breakfast. She called him into the kitchen, and then motioned him to a chair.

'I thought we'd have the full works,' she said. 'Hopefully, it'll cheer you up.'

'Is my mood bothering you?'

'No, not at all, I just don't like to see you like this.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know . . . distressed.'

He looked down at his plate. He'd little appetite and pushed the food around with his fork.

'You don't like it?' she said.

'No, it's lovely. It's just me. I—'

She took hold of his hand. 'It's all right. There's no need to explain.'

'But you believe me, right? About all the things I told you.'

'Of course I do.'

'It's just that—'

'Listen, you've got to try harder, Mab. You can't keep thinking about it. It's doing you no good. It's time to move on.'

'But if it were you, wouldn't you want to know?'

'Know what?'

'The truth, what happened to her, and who was watching me on the marshes.'

'Yes, and we're going to do that. We're going to think it through, form a plan, once you've had some rest.' She sighed. 'But at the moment, it's not the right time. Look what it's doing to you.'

She looked into his eyes. 'Mab . . .'

'What?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing.' Then she stood up and started clearing the table.

After she had finished the washing up, Rachel took hold of his hand and led him into the living room. They sat together on the sofa, his arm wrapped around her waist. The blaze of the fire glowed across the mantle, and the low hum of the flames was soothing. She turned her face towards him. His eyes closed as they kissed, trying to enjoy the moment. Ever since he had told Rachel the full story, all he could think about was Rhiannon. He pictured himself lying with her in the grass, her hair tickling his skin. She pressed against him. Her warm breath curled inside his mouth. He could feel the rise and fall of her chest, and her hands trace over him. She said his name, over and over. He held her tighter, pulling her closer.

‘Rhiannon,’ he almost whispered, then quickly opened his eyes to see no more of her.

‘What’s wrong?’ Rachel said.

‘Nothing.’

She pushed away from him. ‘Yes, there is, I can tell.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘No, you’re not, Mab. You were miles away.’

‘I’m sorry. I . . . I just can’t stop thinking about it.’

She got up from the sofa and stood with her back to the fire, staring at him.

36

MAB EXPECTED RACHEL TO TELL HIM TO SNAP OUT OF IT. Instead, she kept her distance, as if unsure what to say. They spent the rest of the afternoon more or less in silence, smiling whenever they caught each other’s glance. It was a strange way to pass the time. He’d hoped that things would have been different, that staying at the cottage would enable him to see things in a new light. The weather didn’t help. It had changed so quickly.

Sometimes he’d catch Rachel watching him, a troubled look in her eyes. It was more than a look of concern. She seemed frightened.

‘I’m worried about you that’s all,’ she said, whenever he questioned her.

Her tone didn’t convince him. The slight tremor in her voice suggested there was something else.

'Are you sure that's all it is?' he said.

'What else would it be, Mab?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

'There's nothing wrong. You've got to stop believing that everyone's against you.'

'Is that what you think? After everything I've told you?'

She shook her head. 'No, it's not what I meant to say.'

'So what are you trying to say then?'

'I don't know. I just hate to see you like this that's all.'

'Like what?'

'Unhappy, carrying all this stuff around with you.'

'Do you think I enjoy being like this?'

'Of course not, but I don't know what to do to help you.'

He walked over to the mantelpiece and picked up his pack of cigarettes. 'Have you had enough, is that it? Do you want to get rid of me like all the rest of them?'

She walked over to him and took hold of his hand. 'No, that's the last thing I want. All I want is to be with you, and I'll do anything to keep it that way.'

He looked into her eyes, held her stare with his own. 'You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

She looked down at the carpet. 'No, no, of course I don't.'

'I don't want to be like this, you know, up and down, the slightest thing bringing it all back.'

She guided him to the sofa, motioned him to sit down, and then sat beside him. The soft glow of the table lamps did little to brighten the room and the heat from the fire stifled the air. She moved closer. The warmth of her body pressed against him.

She pushed her fingers through his hair and watched him while she swept it back. 'Let's have no more of this silence. We should be enjoying ourselves.' She kissed his neck, his skin prickling beneath the warmth of her breath.

'You're right,' he said. 'But I don't think I'll ever settle until I know the truth.'

She closed her eyes an instant. 'But what would you do with the truth, if you found it?'

He pulled his head away from her and sat up. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing.'

‘Come off it, Rachel. It’s an odd thing to say. You must have meant something.’

‘I didn’t mean anything. I just said it without thinking. I can’t even remember what I said.’

‘You said what would I do with the truth if I found it. It was only a second ago.’

Rachel shrugged. ‘So?’

‘What did you mean?’

‘Nothing, let’s forget about it, Mab. I don’t want us to argue.’

‘No one’s arguing. I’m just asking you a question.’

She sat up and folded her arms across her chest. ‘I suppose . . . I suppose that sometimes the truth isn’t what we want it to be.’

He leaned closer. ‘You’ve said that before. What do you mean?’

‘I don’t mean anything. It’s just sometimes finding the truth . . . well, don’t you think it can do more harm than good?’

‘You think I did it, don’t you?’

She stood up. ‘No, no, of course not.’

‘Then why would you say that?’

‘Mab, stop this. I’m only trying to help you.’

‘Help me, how is telling me that I might not like the truth going to help me?’

‘Calm down, Mab, it’s not what I meant.’

‘Then what the hell did you mean?’

She opened her mouth as if to explain. But after a moment’s pause, she kept silent.

‘Don’t just stand there,’ he said. ‘Answer me, for Christ’s sake.’

She seemed frightened, more so than he’d ever seen her. She kept looking at him as though she wanted to tell him something. He took a deep breath, unclenched his fists and walked to the window. A huge cloud drifted across the sky, swallowing the light and casting the land in shadow. Sheets of rain swept across the horizon, and the silhouettes of birds flew towards the trees. He could feel the weather take hold of him, its coldness creeping through the window. For some reason, he thought about Annwen. He pictured that look on her face when she’d warned him about his temper.

When he turned away from the window, Rachel was staring at the carpet. She looked so lost sitting there, dejected even. He moved slowly towards her and then knelt in front of her.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I don't know what's wrong with me.'

As he took hold of her hand, tears rolled down her cheeks. 'I'm so sorry,' he said.

She remained silent, her body trembling.

When he wrapped his arms around her, Rachel began to sob. It was a pitiful sound, giving voice to the day's sorrow. Her birthmark looked sore, inflamed against her skin. He felt so guilty, stupid. He'd no idea how far he'd pushed her. She was so upset that it took her a while to catch her breath. And when she did, her voice was barely a whisper.

'I'm okay,' she said.

He drew her hands to his mouth and kissed them softly. 'No, I'm sorry. It's my fault.'

'For what?'

'Upsetting you and acting like a prick.'

She laughed. 'You're the last person to be sorry after all the things you've been through.'

'But I'm putting you through it as well.'

'Perhaps I deserve it.'

'You shouldn't talk like that.'

'But you don't understand—'

'No. I do,' he said. 'Our dads are just the same, filling our heads with lies, trying to control us.'

'But it's different—'

He kissed her mouth and held her tight.

They sat together for hours, still in the evening's hush. When the room became too cold, they snuggled in front of the fire. She kept hold of his hand and squeezed it tighter.

THEY DIDN'T MAKE LOVE THAT NIGHT. INSTEAD, THEY HAD HELD EACH OTHER; LOST THEMSELVES IN THE TENDERNESS OF EACH KISS. Mab had been happy just to lie there, Rachel's head resting on his shoulder. He'd stayed awake for hours. Sleep was an

unwanted gift. In fact, he would have been happy to spend most of his nights like this if it meant putting an end to his nightmares.

He listened to the wind gusting through the trees, and the rain hammering against the glass. Then, as though triggered by the dawn, someone knocked on the front door. It was an unnerving sound, reverberating through the house. Mab jumped out of bed and put on his clothes. He walked over to the window and peeped through the curtains. He could see someone standing outside, but he couldn't make out who it was. They knocked again, and when Mab turned towards the bedroom door, Rachel was sitting up.

'Who is it?' she said. 'Who the hell's going to knock on someone's door this time of the morning?'

Mab shrugged. 'God's knows, but I'm going to find out.'

'Don't Mab, please, it could be anyone. Just come back to bed and ignore it.'

For a few seconds, he considered that as an option. Then the knocking continued, growing fiercer, telling him that whoever it was they had no intention of going away.

He threw Rachel a smile in an attempt to reassure her. 'Don't look so worried,' he said. 'It's probably someone lost, a neighbour or something.'

He walked out onto the landing, ignoring Rachel as she called after him. 'Don't worry,' he shouted as he went downstairs, then took a deep breath before opening the front door.

The man who faced him was tall and thin, and dressed in a thick grey overcoat. At first, the man just stood there and stared, his thin, peppered hair flickering in the wind, and the pinched look on his face only breaking into a half-smile when Mab asked, 'Can I help you?'

'Eddie,' the man said, 'can I speak with Eddie?'

From the man's accent, Mab guessed he was local. 'Eddie Powell, you mean?'

The man nodded.

'Sorry,' Mab said, 'he's not here.'

The man gave him a stern look. 'Is that right, and I hope you don't mind me asking, but who are you?'

Mab decided to use his first name. 'Delwyn. I'm a friend of the family.'

The man's eyes narrowed. 'Delwyn . . . No, Eddie's never mentioned you.'

Mab shrugged, and before the man could say another word said, 'But who I am is my business. I should be asking you questions. You're the one knocking on my door first thing in the morning.'

The man straightened his shoulders. 'This is Eddie Powell's cottage, not yours. I look after it for him while he's away.'

Just as Mab was about to answer, he sensed Rachel behind him.

'Let me speak with him,' she whispered, and Mab stepped aside.

The man's face softened when he saw her. 'Rachel isn't it? I haven't seen you for a while . . . I'm Gwilym Ellis, used to own the garage a few miles away. You remember, I used to have a gun dog.'

'Oh, Gwilym,' Rachel said. 'I'd for . . . I haven't seen you in ages.'

Gwilym blushed. 'I'm sorry for the intrusion, but as I was trying to explain to your friend here, your dad pays me to keep an eye on the place.'

'I never knew that.'

'Aye, I have done for years. I check on it every few days or so. I was driving past this morning and noticed the curtains were closed. Then I saw two cars parked in the drive. I know your dad's got a Jag. So I thought I'd see who it was. You can't be too careful.'

Rachel smiled. 'Thanks, Gwilym. That's very considerate of you.'

Gwilym nodded. 'I've got my own key of course, but the door was on the latch.' He blushed again. 'That's why I kept knocking.' He reached into his pocket and took out his key. 'You can have it if you like, give it back to me before you go. I'm only a few miles down the road, remember, Garreg Cottage.'

'No, it's fine,' Rachel said. 'We're only staying for a few days. You hang on to it.'

Gwilym nodded. 'I'll leave you to it then.'

'Thanks,' Rachel said, 'and I'll let Dad know that you're keeping a good eye on the place.'

Gwilym smiled at her, threw Mab a suspicious glance, and then made his way down the path. Mab and Rachel watched him until he was out of sight, then Rachel closed the door, and Mab followed her into the living room. She sat down on the sofa, covering her face with her hands. She took a deep breath, placed her hands on her lap, and then said, 'Gwilym Ellis, I forgot about him . . . knocking the door this time of the morning. He frightened the life out of me.'

Mab smiled. 'He gave us both a scare that's for sure. But he's gone now so I wouldn't worry about it.'

'I'm not so sure.'

'Why?'

'I wouldn't be surprised if he called my dad.'

'Does he have his number?'

'I don't know. He must do, especially if he's looking after the place.'

'But there's no need for him to do that.'

Rachel frowned. 'But he's a nosy old sod. Did you see the look he gave you?'

Mab nodded. 'Yeah, but I played my part in that.' He sat down beside her and took hold of her hand. 'But your dad's at a conference, right?'

She nodded. 'Yeah, in Manchester.'

'When's he back?'

'Sometime tomorrow, I think.'

'Okay, let's leave first thing in the morning then.'

'What if he calls my mobile?'

'Don't answer it, and if he does call, we'll leave straight away.'

While Rachel made breakfast, Mab watched the morning from the shelter of the back porch, smoking a cigarette. A shed stood at the end of the garden, facing the road. He wondered how long it had been since anyone was in there. A bolt and padlock secured the door and, as far as he could see, no one had interfered with it. The longer he stared at it, the more neglected it looked. Mildew blighted the wood, and the metal fittings were covered in rust. There were windows on both sides. Both of them were cracked, reflecting the day's darkness. A crow watched him from the roof, and then scudded off as Mab stubbed out his cigarette and then walked towards it.

Cupping his hands around his eyes, he peered through one of the windows. There wasn't much to see: neglected tools on a workbench, and old tins of paint of various sizes. A large hammer rested on the far side of the bench, and an axe hung above the door. What intrigued him most was a long toolbox. An ancient looking thing placed neatly on a shelf adjacent to the window. It looked at least a hundred years old; its blackened wood decorated with fine carvings. He scanned the shed once more, and

his eyes fixed on a box in the corner. It was full of rubbish - someone else's memories. Shoved between some newspapers was a piece of orange cloth. His heart thumped at the sight of it. It reminded him of a dress Rhiannon used to wear - the pattern and fabric almost identical.

He closed his eyes and pictured her, all those summers ago. Held by her memory, he could hear her laughter, and inhale the sweetness of her scent. He pictured them wandering along the sand - a breath apart. Their fingers almost touching as the water drew them closer, each wave nudging them more inland. A salty breeze washed over them, and seabirds circled above. If only he could preserve this memory, he thought. Recall it whenever she got too close. He opened his eyes, but the memories lingered. He didn't know how long he'd been standing there, trying to forget, paralysed by the darkness. All he knew was that Rhiannon refused to release him, her smile leading him back to the rocks. But her body looked changed, ravaged by sea and time.

A hand rested on his shoulder, and he turned in alarm.

Rachel grinned. 'What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

It took him a moment to settle down, and when he did, he tried to make light of it. 'I'm sorry. I was day dreaming.'

'The weather's getting worse,' she said, then took hold of his hand and led him back to the house.

The smell of eggs and bacon greeted them as they stepped inside, and the glow of the kitchen lights reflected across the windows. Rachel switched the kettle on and then placed two mugs on the table. Mab listened to the water boil, still thinking about Rhiannon's dress. After a few minutes, the kettle clicked and steam billowed across the window. He watched Rachel make the tea, and her hand shook while she poured the water into the cups.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes, I'm fine. Don't worry about me.' She pointed at the table. 'Let's eat.'

They hardly spoke during breakfast. Each of them, smiling occasionally or commenting on the weather as they watched the rain pelt against the window. Mab sensed Rachel was worried and tried his best to reassure her. But he had his own distractions, and he couldn't stop thinking about Rhiannon's dress.

Rachel leaned back in her chair. 'Stupid weather, I thought we could go for a walk today.'

'Never mind,' Mab said. 'There's plenty of time for that.' He studied her for a moment. 'You look tired. Why don't you have a soak in the bath? It'll relax you.'

'What are you going to do?'

Mab shrugged. 'I don't know, probably have a nose in the shed.'

'Why on earth would you want to go in there?'

He pictured Rhiannon's dress, his heart pounding. 'No reason, I just thought it would be something to do, you know, keep my mind off things. I saw a few boxes that looked interesting.'

'It's locked, isn't it?'

'Yeah, I was hoping you'd know where the key was.'

'There's a load of keys in the kitchen drawer, I think, the one closest to the window . . . If you can't find anything there, then I'm afraid I can't help you.'

While Rachel bathed, he pulled out the drawer and tipped it onto the table. There must have been twenty keys there at least, brass and silver ones, of various sizes. Most of them were replicas, and he placed them into groups. The padlock keys were the easiest to identify; they were smaller than the rest, thin and tapered. What remained were several Yale keys. Among them was a small passkey or skeleton key as his mother used to call them. It was smooth and bronze-black. He picked it up and twiddled it between his fingers. It was like being a boy again when he'd found three pound notes hidden in the grass. He stood up, shoved the padlock keys in his pocket, grabbed hold of the skeleton key, and hurried into the garden.

It was getting colder outside, and the rain was turning into sleet. The shed was easy to unlock, and a waft of damp air greeted him as he stepped inside. He leaned over and rummaged through the box, grabbed hold of the piece of fabric, and held it up to the light. It looked different this close up. The colours were paler. He was no longer sure if it was part of Rhiannon's dress, growing less certain the more he studied it. The pattern didn't even look the same. What he thought had been flowers, were in fact circles. It could have been torn from anything: a blouse, a curtain, it might even have been one of Powell's old shirts. He wiped his hands with it and then threw it on the

floor. He felt embarrassed, ashamed of himself. What was wrong with him for Christ's sake? Why had he got so worked up over a cheap cut of polyester?

He shook his head and laughed. Then he glanced around the shed, trying to find something of interest, knowing that it would look better if he returned with something. He reached for the toolbox and carefully, lifted it off the shelf. It felt lighter than he'd expected. It looked longer too. He placed it gently on the bench. On closer inspection, it didn't look like a toolbox. It was more like an artist's case, fastened with two leather straps. Fixed at the centre was a leather handle, and below it, painted in gold, were the initials EP. He unfastened the straps, his heart racing as he placed the passkey into the lock. The key fitted perfectly, although at first the lock wouldn't budge. He pushed harder, pleased with himself when the key turned full-circle. The contents of the case surprised him. He stared at them for a while and then shook his head in disbelief.

The last thing he expected to find was a dismantled shotgun, each section carefully placed into its own compartment. Every piece looked immaculate. The barrel, smooth and black, ran to the length of the case. The stock was made of polished oak, and the silver receiver was engraved. A cleaning kit and a full box of cartridges were placed neatly in the last compartment. So many questions raced through his mind: how long had it been there? Did Rachel know about it? But the main question he kept asking himself was what was Eddie Powell doing with a gun?

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They had spent the day sitting in the living room. Rachel had pretended to read, constantly watching her phone. Mab had spent the hours flicking through the TV channels, trying his best not to smoke too many cigarettes. Initially, Rachel's bath had relaxed her. But it was early evening now, and she seemed to be growing more agitated.

Mab sat back into his chair and scanned the room. The place looked familiar now and had started to lose its charm. He noticed every blotch and scratch, every speck of dust gathering on each surface. The clock ticked tirelessly, and the weather tested his

patience. He sighed and looked at Rachel. She placed the book on her lap, and stared at him, a worried look on her face.

'You all right?' he said.

She shook her head. 'No, I can't settle, and this weather isn't helping.'

He nodded, then stood up and walked over to the window. The sky was gloomy and grey, tainting everything below it. 'The sleet's getting thicker now,' he said, 'starting to stick in parts.'

'Hmm,' Rachel said, 'I hope it's clear in the morning . . . perhaps we should leave now.'

Mab turned to face her. 'It's a bit late isn't it? We don't even know the ferry times. Even if we did leave now, we could be stuck in Holyhead until the morning.'

'I suppose so,' she said, 'but that wouldn't be a bad thing.'

In an attempt to distract her, Mab asked her again about Powell's gun. When Mab had initially brought the gun case into the house, Rachel had shown little interest.

'Oh that old thing,' she'd said. 'I thought he'd sold that years ago.'

She still didn't seem that interested now, and there was a distant look in her eyes as Mab said, 'So this gun of your dad's, what did he used to do with it?'

'He used to go hunting,' she said, 'him and Gwilym, one of his many fads.'

'Hunting what exactly?'

Through a half-smile, Rachel said, 'Rabbits, pheasants, you know that sort of thing.'

Mab walked over to the sofa and sat beside her. 'The gun looks quite old.'

She shrugged. 'It's not an antique or anything. It's Spanish I think. It still works, though.'

'And how would you know?'

'Because I've used it.'

'Yeah, right.'

She stared at him. 'Don't look so sceptical, Mab. I've used it loads of times. What's wrong, don't you believe me?'

'Yeah, I suppose, I'm just . . . I'm just a little surprised that's all.'

'I bet you are. Dad taught me how to use it years ago. When I was a kid, I used to shoot with him all the time.' She stood up. 'Come on, I'll show you.'

He followed her into the kitchen, trying to keep a straight face. She was clearly riled. But it was worth it; at least it was distracting her.

Rachel picked the case up from the chair and placed it on the kitchen table. 'Pay attention,' she said, and then winked at him. 'A shotgun's made up of three parts, the shoulder stock, the barrels and the forestock.'

He nodded, watching her closely. She took out a tube of grease from the smallest compartment and started applying it to the metal pins connected to each piece. After that, she took hold of the shoulder stock and placed it beneath her arm, resting her thumb against the lever. She picked up the barrels, carefully lined up the pins and slotted them into place. Then she slid in the forestock.

'There,' she said, 'piece of cake. Now let's see you try.'

After several attempts, Mab eventually got the hang of it, assembling and disassembling the gun until Rachel seemed satisfied. It was fun while it lasted, something to keep them occupied.

He couldn't stop grinning. 'All I need now is for you to show me how to shoot.'

Rachel frowned. 'Why do you want to know that?'

'No reason, I just thought you could show me.'

She smiled. 'Okay, I'll show you if you like.' She picked up the gun and pressed the stock tight into her shoulder. 'When you're not using it always keep the barrel open.'

She took out an imaginary cartridge and pretended to place it inside. Then she shut the barrel and clicked on the safety latch. After tucking the stock into her shoulder, she leaned into it. She peered down the barrel; her eyes focused.

'Never put your finger near the trigger until you're ready,' she said, and then pretended to shoot.

Reluctantly, she let Mab try, remaining patient while he got used to it. He kept pretending to load and shoot while she watched from the kitchen table.

'What are you doing Mab?'

'Practising,' he said.

'For what?'

'For when I meet that person.'

'What person?'

'You know, the one I told you about. The stranger, the one I saw all those years ago, watching me from the marshes.'

Rachel paled. 'What are you going to do, shoot them?'

'I might do.'

'Don't talk like that, Mab. I don't like it. I thought we were going to think things through, make a plan.'

'We are. Listen, I was only jok—'

'Well, it's not funny, and put that gun away please; it's making me nervous.'

Mab felt like a scolded child whose mother had suddenly lost patience. He began to disassemble the gun, and after placing each piece into its compartment, he sat down at the table. A sudden feeling of unease settled over him, so much for this so-called lovers' retreat. He looked around the room and then sighed. No matter how hard he tried to lighten the mood, everything seemed to be working against them: the weather, Gwilym Ellis, and their ever-changing mood. Rachel was right. They should leave. Why take any chances? As he was about to tell her this, Rachel walked over to him, took hold of his hand and squeezed it tight. 'I'm sorry, Mab. I didn't mean to snap. I know how hard you've been trying. That makes me feel bad. It should be me trying to comfort you.'

Mab lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. 'We need to comfort each other.' He glanced around the room. 'So let's get the hell out of here.'

Rachel smiled. 'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, that guy knocking on the door it's obviously worrying you, and to be honest it's bothering me too.'

'Shall I check the ferry times?'

Mab shook his head. 'Nah, we'll check them when we get there. If there are any delays we can always check into a hotel.'

'Where shall we stay when we get to Ireland?'

Mab shrugged. 'You got money, right?'

Rachel nodded.

'I've got a bit as well, so I guess we'll see where the mood takes us.'

She nodded at the window. 'It's coming in, though, so we better get going, just in case it gets any worse.'

‘Let’s go in your car,’ Mab said. ‘I doubt whether mine will get us that far.’

‘Sure’ she said, ‘leave your car here; it’ll be safe in the driveway.’

Mab scraped back his chair, stood up, and put the gun case under his arm. ‘Let’s get going then,’ he said.

Rachel smiled. ‘I’ll grab our stuff.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you a hand in a minute after I’ve put this gun back in the shed.’

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MAB CARRIED THE CASE ON HIS SHOULDER, TREADING CAREFULLY ACROSS THE GRASS. The sleet was thicker now and patches of white dusted over the fields. The wind was blinding, and the cold snapped at his fingers. He shoved open the shed door and stepped inside, catching his breath as the smell of dank wood crept onto his chest. He’d no intention to skulk in the shadows, so he quickly placed the case on the bench. As he motioned towards the door, a crescent of light swept over him. Then a car’s engine revved against the darkness. He ducked, peering through the back window as two cars edged along the road. The first thing that entered his mind when he saw the Benbows’ Land Rover suffuse the hedge with light was that Rachel was right. Gwilym Ellis was a nosy old bastard. He should have listened to her sooner, and his heart beat thickly as he watched Powell’s jag cast a long shadow.

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MAB WATCHED THE CAR DOOR SWING OPEN. Powell stepped into the night, buttoned up his coat, and then pulled on his gloves. White flakes gathered across his shoulders, and he turned his collar up against the sleet. Then Powell grimaced into the headlights and pointed towards the house.

Seconds later, Ned climbed out of the Land Rover, still dressed in his work overalls. He stared up at the shed window and for a moment, Mab was certain that he’d seen him. Ned raked his fingers through his hair then turned to face the cars. The Land Rover’s lights flashed out, and Brendan jumped onto the road. He still looked odd in

his pinstriped suit. His jacket was too short, and his trousers were tucked into his boots.

Ned swaggered over to Powell's car and opened the passenger door. He leaned inside, half his face masked in shadow. Griffo stepped onto the verge, slammed the door behind him, and followed Ned along the road. The four men leaned against the Land Rover. Powell pointed at the cottage windows and the others nodded.

Mab's heart pounded as he listened to them talking and laughing. He took a deep breath and reached over to the workbench, lifted the gun case and placed it beneath his arm. All he wanted was to get back to the house. He sneaked into the garden, creeping across the grass.

When he got inside, Rachel was standing in the kitchen, motionless while Powell hammered against the door. She turned towards him, a frightened look on her face. Mab put the gun case on the table, then took hold of Rachel's hand and guided her into the hall.

'Open the door,' Powell kept shouting. 'Come on, Rachel, I know you're in there.'

Powell's face was a blur of pale flesh, hovering behind the textured glass.

'I'd better answer it,' Rachel whispered.

Mab shook his head and gestured to her to stay put. He trotted back into the kitchen and checked all the doors were locked. He glanced at the gun case, watching its varnished pine gleaming beneath the light.

'Open this bloody door,' Powell shouted. 'I know you're in there. Your cars are parked in the driveway for Christ's sake.'

Powell's voice softened. 'Come on, Rachel, I thought we had an understanding. You promised me, love. I'm not here to cause a scene. All I want is to get him out of my house. That lad's trouble; you know this can never be.'

'Your dad's right,' Griffo said. 'Has Mab told you what he did to me?'

As Mab walked into the hall, Rachel looked at him and then turned to the door.

'Just leave Mab alone,' she said. 'Haven't you hurt him enough?'

There was a brief silence, and then Powell banged against the door. 'Open this door, for Christ's sake, or these lads will kick it in.'

The door was solid oak, with a Yale lock, latch, and three bolts securing it. Mab had no doubt that the Benbows would eventually break in, but it wouldn't be an easy task

for them. At least it gave him time to think, secure all the doors and windows. The back door was the most vulnerable, but to get to that they'd have to reach the garden. When they started kicking the door, Rachel cried out. Mab grabbed her by the shoulders and steered her into the living room. 'Let's try to stay calm. I'm not going to let them in here.'

He ran into the hallway and cleared the ornaments from the cabinet. He started pushing it along the carpet. It weighed a ton, and it took him a while to drag it into place. There was a sudden hush. The front door seemed to be holding them. Then something heavy crashed against the wood, each huge thud resonating through the house.

When Mab dashed into the living room, Rachel was standing by the window.

'I need to put something on top of the cabinet,' he said, 'to secure the door.'

She nodded. 'There's that old chest in the kitchen, we can fill it up with stuff.'

It took both of them to drag the chest into the hallway, and they struggled to lift it. They filled it with what they could find: old books, plants, large pots and pans brimming with water. The heavier stuff was in the shed and Mab considered whether to risk it.

It went quiet again, and the silence unnerved him.

He could hear them talking, their voices little more than a whisper. Then someone trampled across the grass, and a bent shadow scurried behind the curtains.

'I need to secure the back,' Mab whispered. 'Stay here and guard the window.'

Rachel nodded and picked up the poker, then thrashed the air with it.

Mab walked into the kitchen and switched off the lights, listening to the rush of his heart as he stood still in the darkness. A window smashed, and the sound ricocheted through the hallway. When he rushed into the living room, Rachel was standing by the fireplace, staring at the broken glass.

'It's just a small window,' she said, 'otherwise they'd be in.'

The wind ruffled the curtains, and the smell of cigar smoke drifted through the room.

'Let me speak with him,' Rachel whispered.

Mab nodded and slunk into the hallway. He could hear Rachel talking while he crept upstairs. Her voice sounded fearless. He crawled along the landing and peered through a gap in the curtains. Powell was leaning against the door, with the Benbows stood either side of him. Griffo had his back turned, his huge head facing towards the road. He shuffled his feet and dug his hands into his pockets.

‘Stop this, Dad,’ Rachel said, ‘it’s getting bloody ridiculous. Let’s talk it through. Tell the others to go, just me, you and Mab.’

Powell moved away from the door and stubbed out his cigar. ‘Just let us in, love. I promise we won’t hurt him.’

Ned straightened up and sneered at the window.

‘Why not leave it for tonight?’ Rachel said. ‘I’ll come and see you first thing in the morning.’

Powell shook his head. ‘I can’t do that, not for the likes of him.’

‘Do it for me then.’

Powell looked at Ned and then gestured to the road.

Mab ran down the stairs and told Rachel to keep them talking.

‘What’s wrong?’ she whispered.

‘Nothing,’ he mouthed, and pointed at the window.

When Mab reached the kitchen, he opened the gun case, his hands shaking while he fumbled with the straps. After placing each part on the table, he assembled it as quickly as he could, hoping the sight of it would be enough to scare them. With the barrels cocked, he slid in the cartridges; the click of the lever was amplified by the night.

When Mab got to the garden, Ned had already climbed onto the hedge, his huge hands and feet pushing through the branches.

Mab’s stomach felt hollow. Thick flakes of snow feathered against the sky.

Ned slipped and began scrambling through the grass. When he got up, he caught sight of Mab, Ned’s snide glare watching his every move. Ned’s eyes fixed on the gun, his huge shoulders heaving with every breath. He took a step forward and then stopped, standing motionless as Mab closed the barrels.

For a moment, Ned seemed unsure; then he grinned, the doubt fading in his eyes. He put his hands by his sides. ‘What the fuck are you going to do with that?’

Mab looked down the barrels and then leaned into the stock. 'Use it if I have to.'

Ned stepped closer to the shed, the snow swirling around him.

Mab took aim, his heart pounding.

In the distance, Powell was still talking, his voice loud and impatient.

As Ned inched forward, something lodged in Mab's throat, tightening the more he swallowed. 'Stay where the fuck you are, Ned. Don't you come any closer.'

Ned nodded and then slowly raised his hands.

'Get back onto the road,' Mab said, 'quickly, now.'

Ned stayed put, glancing across at the house. 'You know you're trespassing. This is Mr Powell's place.'

Someone stomped along the road, and then dark figures scrambled up the bank.

'You all right, Ned?' Brendan shouted. 'What's going on up there?'

'Mab's got a gun,' Ned shouted. 'Though I doubt he's got the balls to use it.'

Mab could hear Ned's every breath as he watched the snow in the silence. 'Don't come through that hedge,' he said. 'This is your only warning.'

Brendan peered through the branches, his eyes shining as they caught the light. 'Come on, Mab, this is going too far.'

Mab shook his head. 'You should have thought about that before you started kicking down the fucking door, throwing bricks through the window.'

'We were just helping Eddie,' Brendan said. 'We owe him a lot. Besides, this is his house for Christ's sake. He doesn't want you here.'

'Oh, I know that,' Mab said. 'He made that clear on the Denbigh Moors.'

Ned grinned. 'That was me. You can't say you didn't deserve it.'

Mab looked into Ned's eyes. Then Ned grinned and bolted towards him.

Mab pulled the trigger, the stock thumping into his shoulder. The lead shot exploded across the shed, blasting a hole in the side and shattering the panels. Ned was thrown to the ground, splinters of wood jutting from his thigh.

Mab stared down at him, watching him writhe through the grass.

Ned kept shouting for Brendan, whimpering like an injured dog. Mab tried to stay focused. He opened the gun and slid in two more cartridges.

BY THE TIME BRENDAN SCRAMBLED THROUGH THE HEDGE, MAB WAS READY FOR HIM.

Brendan seemed unsure who to run to, his eyes darting between Mab and Ned. The sight of his brother proved too much for him, forcing him to kneel into the grass and throw his arms around Ned's shoulders. Tears streamed down Brendan's face. 'He's fucking shot him,' he shouted.

When Mab turned his head, Rachel was standing beside him. 'Don't talk stupid, Brendan, Mab fired at the shed. It's only a bit of shrapnel.'

Before Brendan could answer, Griffo clambered over the hedge. He took one look at Ned's leg and started to retch. Then he hunched over, his hands pressing into his knees. Mab thought how pathetic he looked, with his pale skin and bile dangling from his mouth.

'What's going on up there?' Powell shouted from the road. His voice was hoarse and faint against Ned's groaning.

'Nothing,' Rachel said, and stepped in front of Mab as Brendan lunged forward. She stopped him in his tracks. 'Taking care of your brother,' she said, 'would be the wisest thing to do.'

Brendan looked down at Ned. 'He's in a bad way. He needs the hospital. We'll have to carry him.'

The last thing Mab needed was the police. He looked at Rachel and shook his head.

'Let's get him into the house first,' she said. 'We can decide what to do once we get a better look at him.' Then she took the gun from Mab's hand and uncocked it slowly.

Ned must have weighed nearly three hundred pounds, and it took three of them to lift him. Griffo and Mab grabbed hold of his arms while Brendan took his legs. They shifted slowly through the grass, the snow thickening. They struggled to keep Ned still, stopping every few seconds while Brendan tried to calm him.

Once inside, they laid him on the table. Ned looked ragged beneath the lights, with his mouth twisted and his eyes scrunched in pain. His voice sounded weak, and his breath rasped. 'You fucking bastard,' he kept cursing.

Rachel dismantled the gun and placed the parts near the window. She walked over to the sink and began rummaging through a drawer. She pulled out a pair of scissors. 'I suppose we'd better look at his wound.'

'What the hell are you going to do to him?' Brendan said.

She shook her head, mumbled something, and then started to cut into Ned's trousers.

As Ned squirmed, Brendan pressed harder on his shoulders. Ned's left thigh was soaked in blood, and small chunks of wood were embedded in his flesh.

'Try and stay calm, Ned,' Brendan whispered. 'We're trying our best to help you.'

'We need to clean the wound,' Rachel said, 'then try to stop the bleeding.'

Griffo watched in silence. He glanced across at Mab and then jumped as Powell hammered against the door.

Mab listened to Powell's muffled shouts and watched the snow flaking across the window. Rachel gestured to the door, and Mab followed her into the hallway.

'I suppose we better let him in,' she said, her voice uncertain.

When Mab shouted Powell's name down the hallway, the banging stopped. He could hear him shuffling outside, and he listened to the heaviness of his breath.

'We'll let you in,' Mab said, 'as long as you promise not to start anything.'

'Of course not,' Powell said, falling silent when Mab called towards the kitchen for help.

Griffo edged shyly into the hallway, nodding when Mab pointed at the chest.

'Help me empty this,' he said, 'you take the pans into the kitchen and try not to spill any water.'

Griffo trod warily along the carpet, as though desperate not to spill a drop. With Griffo's help, shifting the chest and the side cabinet was easy. When they'd finished, Griffo stood behind Mab, watching while he unbolted the door.

Powell stood in the doorway, a crust of snow covering his shoulders. His face was blotched, and his hair was stippled white. 'Are you going to let me in? Or are you going to make me stand here all bloody night?'

Mab stepped aside and watched him traipse along the hallway.

The first thing Powell did was check if Rachel was all right. He offered her his hand, shaking his head when she refused it. He took off his coat and gloves and slung them

across the banister. He swept back his hair and then clapped his hands against the cold.

Powell looked shocked to find Ned sprawled across the kitchen table. When Ned called out to him, he turned away. Then he glared at Brendan. 'This is a right bloody mess. I told you we shouldn't have brought him.'

Brendan took a deep breath and clenched his fists.

'Is that all you've got to say?' Rachel said. 'This is your fault. You're the one who brought them here.'

Powell sighed into his hands. He rubbed his eyes, looked around the room. 'I need a drink,' he said, and shuffled into the hallway.

Rachel grabbed the scissors and started cutting up an old sheet she'd found stuffed under the sink. She wrapped one of the strips around Ned's thigh and tightened it into a knot. Then she pointed at one of the cupboards. 'Brendan, fetch me that bottle of Dettol.'

Brendan did as he was told, his hand shaking as he passed it over. Rachel poured some onto a cloth and used it to clean the wound. The room stank of disinfectant and it reminded Mab of the hospital.

Ned seemed calmer now, more hardened to the pain. He gritted his teeth, his skin glistening.

Powell returned with two bottles of whisky and handed one to Brendan. 'Keep that brother of yours drinking,' he said, 'until I decide what to do with him.'

Brendan unscrewed the top and handed Ned the bottle of whisky.

All eyes fixed on Powell, watching him as he slammed his bottle of whisky on the table. He glanced at Mab and then at Rachel. Then he held out his hands, palms up. 'Do you see what I mean now? Why I don't want you with him? Look what he's capable of.'

'Don't start,' Rachel said. 'None of this would have happened if you hadn't come here.'

'What did you expect me to do? You going behind my back, running off with him. If it hadn't been for Gwilym Ellis, I'd be none the wiser.'

'You could have phoned me, instead of coming up here.'

Powell forced a laugh, 'and warn you I'm coming here, give you time to move on. How much of an idiot do you think I am?' He walked over to the cabinet and took out a glass. He placed it on the table, and then poured himself a drink.

Ned lay on the table grinning, his eyes fighting back sleep. 'All this is because of that whore,' he said, 'the bitch didn't want any of us.'

Powell looked at Brendan. 'You need to tend to that brother of yours. He's starting to get delirious.'

Ned babbled on, laughing to himself. 'I'm glad you killed her, Mab. That fucking whore ruined everything.'

'Shut it, Ned,' Brendan shouted and snatched the bottle away from him.

Powell studied Ned thoughtfully, turned to Brendan and said. 'I think it's time that brother of yours went to the hospital.'

Brendan nodded and took hold of Ned's shoulders. 'Yeah, but someone will have to help me carry him.'

Powell turned to Griffo. 'Once you've helped Ned into the car, I want you to drive him to the hospital.'

Griffo nodded, but Brendan shook his head.

'What the hell's wrong with you?' Powell said.

'I'll take him,' Brendan said, 'He's my brother for Christ's sake.'

Powell gave him a long look. 'But I want to talk to my daughter; I'll need *you* to drive us back.'

'You what? Griffo can drive you for fuck's sake, what's the matter with you?'

Powell's eyes fixed on Brendan. 'What if things get nasty? I'd prefer it to be you.'

'Tough, I'm taking Ned to the hospital.'

Powell sighed. 'If you must, but don't you go telling them anything.'

'What do you want me to say?'

'I don't know, tell them you were shooting game or something, you lost your balance in the snow.'

Ned kept staring at Mab while they carried him to the car. His body was a dead weight and his breath reeked of whisky. Mab kept his eyes on Griffo, his stomach full of loathing. While Brendan lowered the back seats, they rested Ned against the bonnet.

'Does anyone have a smoke?' Ned said.

Mab reached into his pocket, took two cigarettes out of the packet and gave one to Ned. His hand brushed across Mab's skin. His fingers were coarse and cold. Mab flicked open his lighter and leaned towards him. He cupped his hands around it, the yellow flame reflected in Ned's eyes.

With his cigarette lit, Ned took a deep drag and blew the smoke into Mab's face. Then he gave him that dark look of his, his drunken smile telling Mab it wasn't over.

Mab threw his cigarette onto the road and took a step closer. Ned stopped grinning and tried to sit up.

Brendan stood between them. 'What's wrong Mab? Was shooting him not enough?'

Mab looked into Brendan's eyes. 'I didn't start this.'

'Are you sure about that? You were the reason we chased after her.'

'You what? What the hell are you going on about?'

'Rhiannon, I knew what she was up to the moment I clapped eyes on her.'

'Of course you did, you know everything you, and what was that exactly?'

Brendan laughed. 'She was playing all of us.'

'And why would she do that?'

'Because she was a nasty little bitch, and she bloody well enjoyed it.'

'She wasn't like that.'

'Course she fucking was, leading us all on. You of all people should know that.'

Brendan turned round and placed his arm around Ned's shoulder. 'I've no time for this shit. I need to get Ned to the hospital.'

Mab watched as Brendan and Griffo lifted Ned inside.

'Hey, Mab,' Ned said. 'Don't you go thinking it's over.'

Mab looked away, watching Brendan climb into the Land Rover. Brendan slammed the door, and revved up the engine, throwing Mab one last glance. Mab didn't acknowledge him. He just stood there, watching the snow falling across the headlights.

Griffo didn't look at him, he just stared at the driver's window. His hair was wet and flat, and his black overcoat was tight across his shoulders. Brendan nodded to Griffo and then slowly drove away.

WHEN MAB ARRIVED BACK AT THE HOUSE, POWELL AND RACHEL WERE SITTING IN THE LIVING ROOM. Powell sipped from a glass of whisky, content to play dysfunctional families. The lights were dim, and cigar smoke tainted the air. The curtains flapped against the window, and a cold breeze drew up the fire.

Griffo loitered in the hallway, unsure where to place himself.

'Martin,' Powell shouted, 'where the hell are you?'

Griffo stepped into the room, glanced around, and then slumped on the sofa.

Powell glared at him, and Griffo sat up.

'What's the matter with you?' Powell said. 'You've hardly said a bloody word since we got here.'

Mab sensed apathy in Powell's voice, as though everything he said was just to break the silence.

Griffo mumbled something.

'Speak up, for God's sake,' Powell said, 'I can't bloody hear you.'

Griffo cleared his throat, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it across his brow. His eyes were red; his skin was puffy and blotched. 'I don't know what to say,' he said.

Mab stared at him, watching the rise and fall of his chest. 'That's not like you, Griffo, I'm sure you can make up something.'

He sensed Rachel watching him. 'Are you all right, Mab?' she said. 'Why don't you go out to the shed, find us a piece of wood to block the window.'

Mab nodded and made his way into the kitchen. Rachel had removed all trace of Ned and placed everything back on the table. The air smelled of Dettol and bleach, and the taps gleamed beneath the lights. He was reluctant to return to the shed. The thought of it made him anxious. He gazed through the window. The snow had stopped now, and the garden's secrets lay hidden beneath a sheet of white. Mountains spiked the skyline and snow-crested trees nestled like specks of dust. The sky was clearer too. Stars glinted across the darkness.

As he stepped outside the cold air prickled across his skin. There was a pile of wood in front of the shed, strips of old pallets waiting to be used as tinder. He looked down at it and grabbed the biggest piece he could find.

When Mab stepped into the kitchen, he could hear Rachel and Powell arguing. When he entered the living room, Powell was standing in front of the fireplace. His face was flushed, his long finger pointing. When he caught sight of Mab, he broke off in mid-sentence, coughing as he swallowed his words.

Powell took a deep breath. 'All I'm trying to say, Rachel, is this isn't the way to go about it.'

'Go about what?' Mab asked.

'This has got nothing to do with you,' Powell said.

Rachel stood up. 'This is all about him, why pretend otherwise?'

The blood drained from Powell's face. 'You're making a big mistake, Rachel. I wish you'd bloody listen to me.'

Mab knew exactly what Powell meant. It was written all over his face. Powell loathed everything about him. Mab sensed that when Powell looked at him, he was reminded of all the things he hated: graffitied walls and piss-stinking bus stops, mongrel dogs and council estates. He saw gobby wives and idle men in pubs, rattling cars, and druggies in tracksuits. But most of all, Mab had spoiled the thing he shouldn't have touched, kissed the girl who was beyond him.

'Just ignore him, Mab,' Rachel said.

Mab shrugged. 'I'm fine. I don't take any notice of him. What's he still doing here anyway?'

Powell kept silent, watching as Mab walked over to the window.

Mab showed Rachel the piece of wood. 'This is the best I could find.'

Powell shook his head. 'Don't go damaging my house.'

Rachel stared at him. 'You should have thought about that before you let those idiots throw a brick through the window.'

'I forgot the hammer and nails,' Mab said.

Rachel smiled. 'I'll fetch them. It'll give me something to do.' She glanced at Powell. 'Besides, I'm sick of the bloody sight of him.'

Mab slumped into her chair, watching the clock as he found himself alone with them. As he sat there, he thought about all the things that had led him to this place. He'd chased the past through London's streets, followed it hundreds of miles along grey motorways. It had led him across the waters of the Dee, past late night trains and derelict factories. He'd travelled through the Greenfield Valley, beyond that one-street town and the cream terraced houses. He'd been dragged across the Moors, and soiled with blood and shame, and here he sat, with nothing to show for it.

He watched Griffo gaze into his glass. 'Should you be drinking, Griffo?' he said. 'I thought you were driving.'

Powell puffed on his cigar, and then pushed the smoke away from him. 'One glass won't hurt him. Besides, we're in no rush. We'll stay as long as we have to.'

'You're wasting your time,' Mab said. 'Rachel's made it clear to you. Why don't you just leave her alone?'

'To do what exactly?'

Mab grinned. 'We're leaving for Ireland in a bit, as soon the roads are clear. Did she tell you?'

Powell sat down. 'You've haven't got a clue, have you?'

'About what?'

Powell smiled to himself. 'Never mind, but don't go banking on that little trip of yours. Rachel's very changeable. Like I told you before, I know her a lot better than you.'

'Aye, so you said.' Mab looked across at Griffo, trying to restrain himself. A few days ago, Mab would have gladly throttled him. Yet here he was, bound by a promise not to harm him. Everything about Griffo grated on Mab's nerves: the rise and fall of his chest, the slow rub of his hands, and his forehead beaded with sweat. The same old questions rushed inside him.

Rachel came into the room and stood in front of him. 'Are you all right, Mab? You look washed out.'

Powell laughed. 'He's bound to be tired. The lad's had a busy day, trespassing, then shooting an unarmed man.'

Griffo sniggered, causing Mab to get up from his chair and stand in front of him. 'Do you think that's funny, Griffo?'

Rachel placed her hand on Mab's shoulder. 'Leave it; he's not worth it. Remember what we agreed. Take no bloody notice of them.'

Mab rested on his haunches and stared into Griffo's face. 'You think you're clever don't you? You think you're fooling everyone, but I'm tired of your little stories, and your voices from the fucking grave.'

'Leave it, Mab,' Rachel said.

'I can't,' he said. 'Besides, it was him that started it.'

Griffo glanced across at Powell, and then looked at Mab. 'We're not going through this again are we? I've told you all I know. There's nothing else to say.'

'This is what he's like,' Powell said, 'flaring up over nothing. He's like his father, a bloody mad man.'

Griffo looked lost without his church. Where's your congregation now, Mab wondered. Where was blonde-haired Susan with all her desperate hopes?

'I thought you'd have no problem remembering,' Mab said. 'You've got a direct line to the past, haven't you, all those spirits guiding you?'

Griffo shook his head. 'It's not like that, you shouldn't mock it.'

Mab wanted to tell him that he'd made a mockery of everything: the church, Annwen, their so-called friendship. He wanted to tell him about all the damage he'd caused, expose all his lies. He wanted to relate every nightmare, Rhiannon's memory lurking in every shadow. From deserted avenues to not so golden sands, he wanted to remind him of all of it. Instead, he said nothing, and just walked over to the fireplace.

Griffo took a deep breath and started to unbutton his coat. Mab fixed his eyes on him, desperate for him to say something.

'I'll make us some tea,' Rachel said. 'Come on, Mab, you can help me.'

Mab gave Griffo one last look and then followed Rachel into the hallway.

'Try not to let him get to you,' she whispered. 'I told you he's not worth it. A few more hours, Mab, that's all we need, and we'll be free of them.'

He nodded, picturing green hills and strangers in cosy pubs. 'At least it has stopped snowing, though God knows when they'll clear the road.'

'Soon,' she said, 'they'll have to.'

Mab stood in silence, listening to the water gushing from the tap. Then he watched the lights glinting across the draining board. Rachel switched on the kettle and turned to face him.

‘Pass me some cups,’ she said, pointing at the cupboard behind him.

Mab took out the cups and placed them down on the table. Their hands touched. He took hold of Rachel’s fingers and squeezed them.

She looked at him and smiled. ‘Not long now,’ she said, ‘and we’ll be out of here.’

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WHEN MAB WALKED BACK INTO THE LIVING ROOM, POWELL WAS PACING UP AND DOWN. He drew hard on his cigar, a trail of smoke following him along the carpet.

‘I need to speak with my daughter,’ he said and pushed past him.

Griffo had his palm pressed against the piece of wood, trying his best to seal the window. He held a nail between his finger and thumb, and with the hammer in his right hand, he began to tap it in. After nailing the piece of wood onto the window, Griffo stepped back to examine it. ‘That should do it,’ he said, and slumped onto the sofa.

Mab shuffled over to the mantle and started to poke the fire. The cinders were still hot, and the grate was full of dying embers. He kept poking and prodding, watching the dead coals crumble. He could hear the constant wheeze of Griffo’s chest. He kept poking and prodding the fire, sickened by all those memories.

With the poker still in his hand, Mab turned round. He walked over to the chair, pushed it back against the door and sat down.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Griffo said.

‘Giving us some privacy, so we can finish our little chat.’

‘You’d better move that chair, Mab before Eddie gets back.’

Mab smiled to himself. ‘He won’t be back for a while; he’s trying to convince Rachel to go back with him.’

Griffo leaned forward and stared at the poker. ‘Why are you holding that?’

‘No particular reason, I just like the feel of it that’s all.’

Griffo swallowed. ‘This is ridiculous, Mab, don’t you think there’s been enough trouble for one night?’

'Yeah, I do, trouble that you and Powell brought here.'

'I never wanted any of this. I was just doing Eddie a favour.'

'You seem to do him a lot of bloody favours.'

Griffo rubbed his hands. 'I owe him a lot. He's been very good to me in the past.'

'Oh, I bet he has. Is that what you were doing on the Denbigh Moors then, returning a favour?'

'That wasn't me. It was Ned. He was out of bloody control, acting like a madman.'

'You could have tried to stop him.'

'I did.'

'But not enough though, hey?'

'I called an ambulance didn't I? What else do you expect me to do?'

'For a start, you can tell me why you lied, all those years ago.'

Griffo pushed his hands through his hair and then rubbed his eyes with his palms. He slapped them down on his lap. 'Not this again for Christ's sake, how many times do we have to tell you?'

'This can be the last time if you want it to be.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Just tell me the truth.'

'Can't we just leave it alone, Mab? It was bloody years ago.'

'Feels like yesterday to me.'

Griffo took a deep breath. 'So what do you want me to say?'

'I want you to tell me why you lied to the police, and then you can explain what you were doing watching me from the marshes.'

'When?'

'The morning they found her.'

Griffo stood up, and then wiped the sweat from his brow. 'You're talking in riddles, Mab. I don't know what the fuck you're going on about.'

Mab waved the poker in front of him. 'Sit down. You know exactly what I mean. What were you doing there that morning, watching me while I was asleep?'

'Honestly, Mab, I don't know what you're talking about. The only time I saw you was by the road.'

Mab stood up. 'That's not what you told the police.'

'Yeah, it was.'

'No, it wasn't. You told them that you saw me by the estuary. You made a statement.'

'I can't remember what I said, Mab. It was bloody years ago.'

'You seemed clear about it just now.'

Mab threw the poker onto the floor, leaned forward and gripped Griffio by the lapels. 'You had something to do with it.' He pushed him back onto the sofa. 'That's why you lied. It was you, watching me from the marshes.'

'Don't talk fucking daft. Why would I do something like that?'

'Lots of reasons, God knows what goes through that sick head of yours.'

'I'm the sick one?'

Mab slapped Griffio's face. 'Just tell me the truth,' he said and slapped him again, this time harder.

Griffio tried to lift himself up, his face straining against his weight. He looked lost outside his church, without his prayers and his lies, his hymns, and his verses. If they could only see him now. If they could see the fear in his eyes and how the dead had forsaken him.

He pressed his forehead against the bridge of Griffio's nose. 'Come on tell me, what were you doing there?'

Tears filled Griffio's eyes. 'I swear to God, Mab. I wasn't there. I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You told the police you were. You bragged about it around town for weeks.'

Mab punched him in the stomach and then dragged him onto the carpet. 'For Christ's sake Griffio, stop telling lies.' He picked up the poker and shoved it into the fire. 'When that gets hot, you're going to know about it.'

Griffio tried to get up.

'Stay where you fucking are.'

Griffio looked pathetic lying there: his hair ruffled, his shirt hanging out. Mab grabbed him by the shoulders and then looked over at the chair against the door. 'Sit over there.'

Griffio clambered to his feet and staggered to the chair. His lips were red with blood.

'Come on, tell me,' Mab said. 'This is your last chance.'

Griffo took a deep breath and then held up his hands. 'Listen, Mab, I swear to God, I don't know what you're talking about.'

Mab walked over to the fire and pulled out the poker. The tip smouldered, and the handle felt hot.

As Mab approached him, Griffo leaned back into the chair. He placed his hand across Griffo's mouth and pressed his knee into his chest. Griffo tried to push forward, squirming as Mab waved the poker. He could feel the rapid movement of Griffo's lips, and his palm was wet. Griffo kept mumbling, his fat arms flailing.

Mab moved his hand away and wiped it across Griffo's shirt. 'You all right there, Griffo? Do you want to tell me something?'

Griffo nodded and then tried to catch his breath. 'That day at the estuary, it wasn't me on the marshes. I swear to it.'

'So you lied then?'

'Yeah, when I spoke to you by the road that was the only time I saw you.'

'So why did you say otherwise?'

'I was angry. You kicked the shit out of me, Mab. I didn't mean to tell them much. I suppose I got carried away.'

'Carried away, you weren't reading some slag's fortune, Griffo. That was my life you were fucking about with.'

'You were no saint, Mab. Remember you beat me up?'

'It wasn't that bad.'

'Wasn't it? I spent time in hospital.'

Mab sighed. 'I didn't ruin your life, though, did I?'

'It turned out all right in the end, though, didn't it? I'm sorry you did a bit of time, but they threw the case out in the end.'

Mab didn't know whether to laugh or cry, stand there or rip his heart out. 'Did you get carried away afterwards as well, when you started spreading all your lies?'

'It wasn't like that.'

'Fuck off, Griffo; you don't know what it was like.'

'I wasn't even going to go to the police, but they kept going on at me.'

'Who did?'

'People.'

‘What people?’

‘Church people, the Reverend Davies, Eddie mostly.’

‘Powell?’

Griffo Nodded. ‘He was a church elder at the time.’

‘What did he say to you?’

‘I can’t remember, Mab. It was a long time ago.’

Mab waved the poker in front of Griffo’s face. ‘Try your best, hey.’

Griffo breathed deeply. ‘He said I owed it to Rhiannon and her family, to tell the police that I saw you.’

‘You could have told him to fuck off.’

Griffo shook his head. ‘You know what Eddie’s like. Besides he was a church elder then, so was DI Burris, they didn’t give me much choice.’

‘D I Burris?’

Griffo nodded. ‘Him and Eddie were mates.’

‘So was it them who told you to lie about the estuary?’

Griffo nodded.

Mab remained silent, listening to the rattle in Griffo’s chest. He could hear Rachel calling to him from the hallway, and Powell’s fist hammering against the door.

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MAB SAT ON THE SOFA AND WATCHED GRIFFO DRAG BACK THE CHAIR. Then Powell barged into the room, with Rachel following behind him. Mab kept silent through all of it: the idle threats, the endless call of his name.

Powell kept shouting and wagging his finger. ‘What did I tell you, Rachel? I warned you didn’t I. You can’t trust the likes of him. Look at him; he’s a bloody mad man.’

‘Shut up, Dad,’ Rachel shouted. She kneeled beside Mab, the soft warmth of her hands resting on his lap.

Mab remained silent, refusing to answer. He watched as Griffo tucked in his shirt, and then wiped the blood from his mouth. He kept preening himself, flattening and pushing back his hair.

Mab remained still. He caught the breeze of Rachel's scent; the smell of oranges and lemons wafted over him.

'Mab,' she said, 'Mab . . . for God's sake why won't you answer me?'

As she pleaded, her voice sounded childlike. Mab remained silent, Griffo's words still haunting him.

'I want him out of here now,' Powell said. 'Look at him; he's not right in the bloody head. Look what he's just done. It's like I keep telling you, you need to stay clear of him.'

Mab looked up at Powell. 'Does she now, and why's that then?'

Powell studied him a moment. 'Because you're nothing but trouble, and it's for the best.'

'Best for who,' Mab said, 'Rhiannon and her family?'

Powell forced a laugh. 'Have you finally lost it? What the hell are you going on about?'

'I don't know, you tell me.'

Powell and Rachel exchanged a glance. Then Rachel squeezed Mab's hand and tried to pull him up. 'Come on, Mab, it's time to get out of here.'

As Griffo shuffled towards the door, Powell grabbed his arm. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'I need to wash my face,' Griffo said, 'make a few phone calls.'

Mab pictured Annwen waiting up for him. The forgotten girl married to the wrong man. He thought of Brian and her kids, leaf-filled gutters, and overflowing drains. He could even smell the Moor Estate and those smoky grey skies drifting across dank avenues.

Rachel pulled him up from the chair and started leading him by the hand. 'Come on, Mab, please. You're not yourself, let's go. We can talk about anything you like as soon as we're out of here.'

Powell stood in front of them. 'Don't be too hasty, Rachel, remember what I told you. You've been lucky up to now. You've seen what he's capable of. He's only out for himself. I'm begging you, come home with me, please, now, before it's too late.'

She pushed past him. 'No, Dad, we've talked enough.' She took Mab upstairs into the coldness of their room. The bed was unmade, and the outside lamp shone behind the window.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's forget about it all. Let's just get our things and get out of here.'

Mab picked up his bag and dumped it on the bed. Except for a few clothes, he'd little to pack: a bottle of aftershave, a hotel toothbrush. He stared into the open bag, Griffo's words still echoing inside his head. He'd no idea what the truth was, only that it felt closer. Rachel drew back the curtains, colouring the quilt with rectangles of yellow light.

She took the shirt from Mab's hands and started to fold it. 'Do it like this, stop it from getting creased.'

She deftly turned each sleeve. 'We'll take our time on the small roads. We'll be fine once we're on the dual carriageway.'

Mab nodded, not really listening.

Downstairs, Powell and Griffo were talking. Mab edged closer to the door and gazed across the landing.

'Never mind them two,' she said, 'come and help me with these.'

He turned to face her, Griffo's words still echoing inside his head. 'How long has your dad been involved with the church?'

'The church?'

'Yeah, the spiritualist one, you know Griffo's.'

'Oh, that place. Why do you ask?'

'Just something Griffo said, that's all.'

She stopped folding the shirt and held it against her chest. 'Why? What did he say?'

'That your dad was an elder there.'

She placed the shirt in the bag. 'That was years ago, just after my mam died.'

'I'm sorry, I never meant to . . .'

'That's all right.'

She put her hand over her mouth, and Mab could picture the girl from way back, motherless and alone. It made him think of his own mother, and Rhiannon too.

Rachel shut the door, then sat down on the bed and reached out to him. 'Come and sit by me.'

He took hold of her hand and sat beside her. She was trembling. Her fingers were ice-cold. She pushed back a tear, and then rested her head against his shoulder. 'I'm sorry when you mentioned the church it brought it all back.'

Mab stroked her hair. 'Did you used to go there?'

'At first, when I was a little girl, just after my mam's crash. It was Dad's idea. Like everything else, he *persuaded* me.'

'I bet he did. I never imagined him to be the religious type, though.'

'He's not. He just felt guilty.'

'About your mam, you mean?'

'I suppose,' she whispered, 'that and other stuff.'

'What other stuff?'

She took a deep breath. 'This isn't the time, Mab. I don't want to talk about it now.'

He nodded and placed his arm around her shoulder. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it.'

They fell back onto the bed. He listened to the hiss and clank of the pipes, and the distant murmur of voices. Rachel kicked off her shoes and brought her knees up onto the bed, her shoulders loosening as she leaned into him.

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MAB FOUND HIMSELF IN CHURCH, SITTING ON A COLD WOODEN PEW. Sunshine blasted through the windows, dappling the floor with spangles of coloured light. Griffio barked from his pulpit. He spoke in tongues, his words incomprehensible.

The church was packed with the old and not so young. He recognized someone, a man with broad shoulders, sat in front of him.

When it was time to pray, everyone kneeled and bowed their head. Everyone except him, that was, and the man in front, and the woman by the window.

He watched her hair glisten beneath the light. He kept watching her, his fingers crossed, hoping she'd turn around.

When the prayers were over, everyone stood. Everyone except him, that was, and the man in front, and the woman by the window.

Singing filled the room, one harmonious voice praising the gifts of God.

Everyone joined hands.

Everyone except him, that was, and the man in front, and the woman by the window.

He watched them sway in unison; their smiles were blessed; their faces radiated forgiveness.

When the singing stopped, with palms outstretched, Griffio reached out his hands. Mab looked away from him and stared at the flowers along the wall. There were tulips, chrysanthemums and white carnations, all of them pale against the blood red roses.

Griffio maundered on, but all Mab could think about was the man in front and the woman by the window.

He closed his eyes and saw that statue of Christ. A dark angel rested on his shoulders. He held a candle in each hand, both flames burning bright.

When he opened his eyes, the church was empty.

Empty except for him, that was, and the man in front, and the woman by the window.

When he tapped the man's shoulder, he masked his face with his hands. Mab stood and stepped into the aisle. Specks of dust floated across the beams of light, and birds glided across the upper window.

He listened to the tenderness of the woman's breath and watched her shoulders gently rising. She stood, and then turned to face him. There was so much loneliness in his mother's smile, and her eyes were full of sorrow.

'I warned you,' she said, then shook her head at him.

She took hold of his hand and led him down the aisle. They stepped through the archway and went outside. He followed her through the trees, across the meadows, past the road and the derelict factories. They crossed the old railway bridge, and he could see the boats lying belly-up on the sand.

He hunkered down on the rocks and gazed across the estuary. The sun beat down on him. The warm air breezed over his shoulders. Orange light glinted on the mudflats and burned across the surface of the water.

His mother was nowhere to be seen, but someone was calling him.

He stood, blocked the sunlight with his hand, and peered through his fingers.

In the distance, a woman was floating near the water's edge. He quickly undressed and clambered down the rocks. He started running, small stones and shells beneath his feet. His legs felt heavy and sank into the sand. Then he waded into the water, its coldness biting. He started swimming, ever so slowly. Every stroke was cumbersome, unnatural. The harder he swam the further she drifted away. Her hair was long, billowing and golden.

The he reached out and managed to grab her hand, her body weightless as he pulled her closer. She was cold, ever so cold.

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MAB OPENED HIS EYES AND LOOKED AT RACHEL. They were lying in the half-light, cold among the stillness of the house. She slept so deeply, and he listened to the heaviness of her breath. He felt empty inside, as though he'd been robbed of something, but was unsure of what had been stolen.

He crept out of bed and stepped onto the landing. He gazed through the window. The dawn sky was a fire of orange light, and he watched the sun peering through the trees. The snow was melting, the land aged by speckles of grey and white. The clock ticked in the hall, growing louder as he skulked down the stairs. The door to the living room was ajar. The carpet brightened by a spill of light.

Mab pushed open the door and saw Powell. He'd moved the chair against the wall, and sat with his legs stretched across the fireplace. He sipped from his glass of whisky, gazing out of the window.

Mab stepped inside and sat opposite him.

Powell studied him a moment, then raised his glass. 'Do you want a drink?'

'No thanks, I'm driving.'

Powell shook his head, his thin lips almost smiling. The room was cold, and the air stale and reeking of whisky. Powell tipped the last dregs of the bottle into his glass and downed it in one. He pushed himself up from his chair and staggered over to the cabinet. He opened the doors, leaning into them as he tried to balance himself. 'I've

had these bottles for years, Balmenach single malt. I bought them in the early seventies.'

'Is that your fourth bottle?' Mab asked.

Powell laughed. 'Christ no, Brendan took the other two.'

Powell slumped into his chair. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. 'Jesus, I'm not the man I was. This bloody drink is starting to get to me.'

He unscrewed the top of the bottle and filled his glass. 'You sure you won't have a drink? Trust me, you're missing out.'

Mab shook his head and lit a cigarette. Smoke, tinged blue by the morning light, drifted between them.

'Where's Griffo?' Mab asked.

Powell nodded up at the ceiling. 'In the spare bedroom, sleeping like a bloody baby . . . and Rachel?'

'Asleep,' Mab said.

Powell's eyes fixed on him. 'So what time are you off then?'

'In a few hours, as soon as Rachel has had a rest.'

'So she's still keen to go then?'

'More than ever, so don't try getting in her way.'

Powell held up a hand. 'Oh, I won't. I daren't mess with you. You're a dangerous man.'

Mab didn't respond, ignoring the smirk on Powell's face. After a short silence, Mab said, 'I thought that was you. You're the Councillor. Good old Eddie Powell. Everyone doing you favours, especially in that church of yours.'

Powell moved the glass from his mouth. 'You what? What the hell are you going on about?'

'St Andrew's Spiritualist Church, you know, the one on Fron Park Road.'

'I know where it is. What about it?'

'Griffo said you were an elder there.'

Powell finished off his whisky, and then poured himself another glass. 'So, what the fuck has that got to do with anything?'

'Quite a lot, if you ask me.'

Powell's jaw tightened. 'Oh aye, why's that then?'

'Griffo said it was you who encouraged him to go to the police.'

'About what, exactly?'

'About me.'

'When?'

'You know when, all those years ago.'

Powell stared into his glass. 'Martin Griffiths has got a vivid imagination. You know what he's like with those bloody stories of his. He gets carried away, especially when someone's threatening him with a fucking poker.' Powell studied him. 'Your dad was the same, mind.'

'What, for telling stories?'

'No, always losing his temper. He used to work for me, your dad. He used to run the doors when I owned the Fun-Ship. I've known him for years. Mad Glyn they used to call him.'

'I know what they used to call him. But what's that got to do with anything?'

Powell looked up at the ceiling. 'Keep your voice down, or you'll wake up the children . . . Oh aye, I can tell you a few stories about your dad.'

Mab shook his head. 'No thanks, I don't want to talk about him. I'm more interested in you, and that church of yours.'

Powell took a sip of whisky. 'When your dad used to work the doors at the Fun-Ship, there's one night that always sticks out in my mind—'

'Like I just told you, I'm not interested.'

'There was a young lad there,' Powell said, 'just turned eighteen, only a few years younger than your dad. Pissed up he was, celebrating his birthday with his mam. He was acting like a right little twat, spilling drinks, and mouthing off to everyone. Turns out he was a bit backward, a runt, harmless. That didn't stop your dad from throwing him out, though, giving the poor sod a hiding in front of his bloody mam.'

'What's this got to do with anything?'

Powell smiled to himself. 'Plenty, it explains a lot. It's what I've been trying to tell Rachel all along.'

'Tell her what?'

'That you're the fruit of his loins; you're just as bad as him; you're the chip off the old block.'

'Is that right?'

Powell poured himself another glass of whisky. 'You could just leave with me now. Name your price, and we'll drive straight to the bank.'

'What about Rachel?'

'She'll be fine, especially after you've gone. Let me deal with it.'

Mab shook his head. 'No, no I'm not interested.'

Powell smiled. 'Are you going to kid yourself all your life?'

'What do you mean?'

'All this shit about finding the truth. You were the last one to see Rhiannon alive. Pissed up, so I heard. You flaked out didn't you? And when you woke up, there she was, her head smashed against the rocks. It's a done deal if you ask me. Even you would be pressed to call that coincidence.'

'I didn't touch her.'

'But you're not sure though are you?'

'There was someone else there.'

Powell stared at him. 'That's right, all this nonsense about a stranger. You want to count yourself lucky. You could have got life. Instead, you were able to leave. You were given a second chance.'

'Like you're giving me now you mean?'

'Where has all this shit got you, hey? You could have a tidy sum in the bank now. No strings attached, the past behind you, all you've got to do is move on.'

Mab shook his head and listened to the slow tick of the clock. 'I am going to move on, in a few hours, with Rachel.'

The sun filtered through the window, covering the carpet with squares of yellow light. They reminded Mab of all those summers gone. The boy he once was, gazing across the border. He pictured himself running through the fields, across the sands to the land beyond the water.

Powell's shark eyes fixed on him. 'Of course your dad changed when he met your mam, for a while anyway. She calmed him down, I suppose—'

'Shut it, you keep my mam out of this.'

'Touched a nerve, have I? Are we going to see that temper of yours again?'

'Just keep her out of this.'

‘Seren,’ Powell whispered. ‘It means star, you know. Fitting name for her, don’t you think?’

Mab pictured his mother. She was tall and young. Her hair was blonde like the summer grass. They were on a bus, splashes of light dazzling them through the windows.

Powell stared at him. ‘She was beautiful your mam, in her day, leggy and blonde, everyone chasing after her. She always dressed smart, you know. She had a bit a style, your mam, well for town anyway. I asked her out a few times, but she always turned me down.’

Mab shook his head. ‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

Powell grinned. ‘Your mam was quick with her answers as well.’

‘I know, you keep telling me.’

‘She had a good head on her. God knows what she saw in that bloody father of yours.’

‘Obviously more than what she saw in you.’

‘Fuck knows why. He just dragged her down; everyone thought so. No one could match your mam in her day. Not even Rhiannon,’ Powell whispered, ‘that girl lacked your mam’s grace, something inside her was . . .’

Mab stared at him, his heart thumping. ‘Something inside her was what?’

Powell remained silent.

Mab leaned closer. ‘How well did you know her?’

‘Who?’

‘Rhiannon Reece, you were just talking about her.’

‘Was I? Take no notice of me. It’s the drink, I was bloody miles away.’

‘But you were talking like you knew her.’

‘Who?’

‘Rhiannon, you were comparing her to my mam. So how did you know her? I can understand if she was my mam’s age, but you’ve got years on her.’

Powell shrugged. ‘I must have seen her around. Martin was always going on about her.’

‘No, I’m not having that. You knew her. You said her name like it meant something.’

Powell blanched. ‘And why the hell would I do that?’

'I don't know, you tell me . . . Perhaps you had a thing for her.'

'You what?'

'You just said she reminded you of my mam.'

'So?'

'Perhaps you saw it as your second chance, thought you'd go chasing after her.'

Powell stopped smiling. 'I never had to go chasing after her, or her mother before her, neither did half the fucking town come to think of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do you think I fucking mean?'

'No, I don't believe you. I don't think Rhiannon would have chased after you. It was the other way round more like.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Look at the state of you for a start. I know Rhiannon had her faults, but she wasn't desperate.'

'How do you explain it then?'

Mab shrugged. 'She probably thought she was onto a good thing. Rhiannon might have been a lot of things, but she wasn't a fool. She had a good head on her shoulders.' Mab fixed his eyes on Powell's. 'In that respect, she reminds me of Rachel.'

Powell sat up. 'You want to watch your mouth, and keep my daughter out of it.'

'Why?'

'Because I fucking said so that's why.'

Mab stared at him, realising he'd also struck a nerve. 'Rachel's clever, and so was Rhiannon . . . They're very similar, don't you think?' He watched the change in Powell's face. 'Or maybe that's why you chased after her; she gave you a taste of something you could never have.'

Powell threw his glass at him. 'How dare you say that to me, you're sick in the head you are. Rachel is nothing like that little slut. Rhiannon was poison. You haven't got a clue what you're fucking talking about.'

'Why was she poison? Did she say no to you? Was that it? Was she another one who wouldn't let you have your own way?'

'Quite the opposite actually, she couldn't get enough of me.'

'Fuck off, she wouldn't have pissed on you if you were on fire.'

'All over me she was, day and night, following me around, always watching my house.'

'What do you mean watching your house?'

'She used to do it all the time. She'd sit on the fire station wall, watching me from across the road.'

Mab fell silent for a moment, his throat feeling dry as he swallowed. 'I remember seeing her there once, but she wasn't watching your house. No, I don't believe you.'

'You don't wanna believe me.'

Mab leaned forward. 'No, she wasn't like that. She was too clever to do stuff like that . . . She was like Rachel.'

Powell slammed his fist down onto his lap. 'Shut your mouth. I've warned you.'

'About what?'

'About comparing my daughter to her, you've no idea what Rhiannon was like, you ignorant little twat.'

Mab pushed his face closer. 'And you do I suppose? Well come on then, tell me.' He slapped the bottle from Powell's hand. 'Come on, I'm waiting.'

'You don't want to know.'

'Oh but I do.'

'She was an evil lying bitch . . . That's all you need to know.'

'Lying about what?'

Powell kept silent.

Mab poked him in the chest. 'Come on, tell me.' He kept poking him, pushing and prodding.

Then Powell grabbed hold of Mab's hand. 'Lying about me,' he shouted.

'What about you?'

'She kept saying I was her fucking dad—'

'You what?'

'I know, imagine how I felt . . . I can prove it, my sister told me, she said. I'll let the whole town know that Eddie Powell fucked his own daughter. Then she started screaming at me, telling me she wanted this and that. You're disgusting, she said, giving me that same fucking look when I saw her at the estuary.'

47

MAB SAT IN THE ROOM, SILENT AMONG THE LIGHT. For the first time in his life, he saw all the things he could not see. He saw all that was buried in the sand, the fear and the lies, and an old man's hate.

He saw that big neglected house and a girl watching it from the fire station wall. He saw hidden tears and the light across the docks.

He saw twins drinking cider, and a best friend's envy, unholy wells, and churches for the dead.

He saw mothers and sons, and daughters and dads, forbidden lust, and love that should not be.

He saw a girl on the rocks pale and naked, nothing in her eyes but the sky and the sea.

He saw loving mothers and unforgiving sisters, and a boy running scared who now knew their secrets.

48

MAB STOOD UP AND WALKED SLOWLY TO THE DOOR. Powell leaned forward and grabbed his arm. He could feel the heat from Powell's fingers, his sweaty grip getting tighter. He tried to push him away, but Powell clung onto him.

'Where the hell are you going?' he said, trying to pull Mab towards him. Powell's breath reeked of whisky. He squinted into the sunlight, his white hair gleaming.

Mab could hear the birds singing as Powell pulled him closer. 'Get off,' he said, and pushed away from him. He stepped back into the light, standing motionless in a cage of shadow.

Powell pushed himself up from his chair and blocked his way. 'Where the hell do you think you're going?'

'Upstairs, I need to talk with Rachel.'

'About what exactly?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you should leave her out of it.'

'That's where we differ. I think she has a right to know.'

Powell ran his hands down his face. 'To know what exactly, your stupid ideas based on a drunken man's ramblings?'

'No, her father's lies and his filthy little secrets.'

'If you really cared about my daughter you wouldn't say a word.'

'That's where you're wrong again. You might like to control Rachel, keep her away from things, but we tell each other the truth.'

Powell pushed his face closer, his breath all over him. 'You wouldn't know the truth if it slapped you in the face. You've got a warped imagination that's all. All I did is tell you what she said.'

'Yeah, you did. You said you saw her at the estuary, too.'

'So, I saw her there lots of times. It doesn't mean anything. Besides, I was half asleep just now, a bit pissed, I don't know what the fuck I was talking about.'

'Let's see what Rachael has to say about it.'

'You keep her out of this. I don't want you filling her head with malicious stories. You're no better than that lying slut.'

'So, it's not true then?'

Powell glared at him. 'No, it's not.'

'I wonder what that reporter will make of it?'

'What fucking reporter?'

'I don't know his name. Brendan mentioned him. He said he was badgering you about some stuff, council corruption or something back in the seventies.'

Powell sighed. 'I couldn't give a shit about him. He's just another failed hack trying to make a name for himself. You're alike in many ways, troublemakers, vivid imaginations.'

'Maybe I should go and speak with him then. At least he'll get a good story: local councillor fucking his own daughter. It's worth mentioning to the police too, puts things in a new light. They'll probably want to ask you some questions.'

'I'm sick to death of you,' Powell said. 'You want to shut that filthy mouth of yours.'

'So you're not denying it then?'

Powell lunged at him and put his hands around his neck. He gripped tighter and tighter, pressing into Mab's throat.

Mab took hold of Powell's wrists and wrenched his hands away from him. He pushed Powell onto the chair, the back of his head cracking against the wall. Powell's eyes were shut, and his body remained still.

Someone stomped across the landing. Then there was the sound of footsteps hurrying down the stairs.

The door opened, and Rachel rushed inside. She pushed past Mab, looked at Powell for a moment, and then knelt in front of him. She took hold of his hands. 'Dad . . . Dad are you all right?'

Powell's eyes flickered, and he seemed to exaggerate every breath. He drew Rachel's hands to his chest. 'He went crazy, Rachel. I was only talking to him, the next minute he bloody attacked me.'

'Don't listen to him,' Mab said. 'It wasn't like that. We were arguing . . . He grabbed hold of me, so I pushed him.'

Rachel didn't answer. She rested a hand across Powell's forehead, and then pushed it through his hair. Then she moved it away quickly, staring at the blood on her fingers.

Powell looked up at her, his eyes shining. 'I told you about him. You'll never be able to reason with him. He's going to stir things up, bring trouble for all of us.'

Rachel didn't answer; instead, she turned to face Mab. 'Why couldn't you just leave it alone, Mab? Why did you keep on at him?'

'But you don't understand, Rachel. Let me explain. You don't know what this is about.'

She walked towards him. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her hands were trembling. Mab didn't know what to say to her. Part of him was desperate to tell her everything, but something held him silent. All he could do was place his hand on her shoulder.

She shifted away from him. 'Let's just get out of here.'

'But I need . . .'

'No, Mab, I'm sick and tired of it.'

He watched her walk out of the room.

Powell remained hunched in his chair. He stared straight ahead, a forced rhythm to each breath.

The sun glared through the window, and Mab stepped into its beam of light. He heard a stirring from above. It was Griffio, he guessed, turning in his sleep and mumbling with the dead. He raised his eyes to the ceiling, wondering if Griffio shared Powell's secret.

When Mab looked across at the chair, Powell was staring at him. His hair glowed against the light, and it was as though each dark thought passed across his eyes. Mab focused on the blackness of Powell's suit, its cold realisation holding him silent. He pictured Powell as a younger man, watching him while he slept. This was the stranger who knew his secrets, the dark shape wandering through marsh grass and shadow.

Rachel walked back into the room holding a flannel; she leaned over Powell and dabbed it on his forehead, then smoothed it across the blood. She looked like a dutiful daughter. Then Powell touched her hand, and she flinched away from him. He whispered something in her ear. She sighed and looked away.

Powell took hold of her fingers, but she pulled away from him. 'Rachel,' he said, 'He's going to stir things up. He's going to talk to some reporter, go to the police.'

Rachel turned and looked at Mab, staring at him for what seemed like ages. 'Is this true?'

Mab nodded, slowly, and then took a deep breath. 'I—'

'You've got it all wrong,' she said.

'What? What are talking about?'

Powell pushed himself up from his chair. 'Rachel, that's enough now.'

She let out a deep sigh. 'No, Dad, no more lies, no more secrets.' Her eyes glistened. 'We've ruined too many lives. He's every right to go to the police, so he might as well go there with the truth.'

Powell took hold of her wrists. 'He means nothing. He doesn't care about anyone. Please, Rachel, I'm begging you. Just let him go. You'll soon forget him. Then we'll go back to how things used to be when it was just you and me.'

Rachel tried to pull away from him. Yet the harder she tried Powell tightened his grip.

'No,' Powell said, 'I won't let you do this.'

'Let go of me,' she shouted and started screaming.

When Powell let her go, she staggered backwards, almost falling over. Mab reached out to help her, stopping when she waved him away with her hand. She pushed her hair from her eyes, her hand shaking. She looked at Mab, opened her mouth a little, pausing, as if struggling to get her words out.

Mab smiled, trying to comfort her, but all he saw in her eyes was sadness.

'I was in the house that day,' she said.

'What day, Rachel? What are you talking about?'

'When Rhiannon came to see Dad, that morning, all those years ago.'

Mab breathed deeply.

'She was hysterical,' Rachel said. 'I've never heard or seen anyone viler, so much hate, and the things that came out of her mouth.'

'That's enough,' Powell said.

Rachel clenched her fists and glared at him. 'Shut . . . up.' She walked over to the chair, stared at it for a moment, and then sat down, slowly, as if it were the hardest thing to do in the world. She wrapped her arms around herself and started rocking back and forth. Powell kept saying her name. But she kept her eyes fixed on the carpet. It was as though she couldn't hear him.

'I followed her that evening,' she said, 'kept my eye on her all night. Dad was so upset. He didn't even know I'd left the house.'

Powell motioned towards her. 'Stay where you are,' she shouted, stopping him in his tracks.

She glanced up at Mab, a pleading look in her eyes. 'I watched you while you slept, saw her sitting there, so calm, gazing across the water. Then I plucked up enough courage to speak with her, ask her why she was doing this, ruining everyone's life, hoping I could make her see reason.'

Mab sat down on the floor. He stared into the pattern of the carpet, watching the faces he saw there. When he raised his head, tears welled up in his eyes. 'Why?' he whispered.

'I never meant to,' she said, 'all I wanted to do was talk. She just mocked me, said she felt sorry for me.'

'That's enough now,' Powell said.

Rachel glanced across at him. 'She kept laughing at me, pushing me, asking me how I could live with myself. Then she gave me the most scathing look, and told me that she knew.'

'Knew what?' Mab said.

Rachel looked across at Powell, 'that I was also daddy's special girl.'

49

AS MAB STEPPED INTO THE HALLWAY, RACHEL KEPT SHOUTING HIS NAME. Her voice grew louder, her screams chasing after him up the stairs. Now, standing in the coldness of their room, he stared down at his bag. Then he gazed across the bed, his eyes welling up as they rested on the indent in her pillow.

He felt all their promises were lost. All the things they'd said were worthless and forsaken. The room felt bare, everything exposed. The sun hid behind the clouds, making the place void of shadow.

He sensed someone behind him, and when he turned, Rachel was standing by the door. It felt as though they were strangers. There was so much distance between them.

He didn't dare to look at her; he was afraid of what he might see. She kept saying his name, her voice growing softer. When he reached down for his bag, Rachel grabbed hold of his hand. He looked into her eyes, held silent by the sorrow he saw there.

'Where are you going?' she said. 'You can't just leave.'

He tried to pull away, but she refused to let him go.

'Please, Mab.' She pressed into him, trying to push him onto the bed.

He could taste the saltiness of her tears as she forced her lips onto his mouth. 'No, Rachel, no, get away from me.'

She dropped her hands and fell back against the wall. Then, as he motioned towards the door, she blocked his way. He stared at her, thinking of all the things they'd said, all those promises they'd made as they lay together in the darkness.

'You lied to me,' he said.

She slumped onto the carpet and sobbed into her hands. Her cries were muffled, and her body wouldn't stop shaking. 'I know,' she said, over and over.

She scraped her nails down her face, and then sniffed back the last of her tears. She looked different to him now, like on the first night they had met. She wasn't his Rachel anymore. She was the woman with the birthmark, the shadowy figure on the marshes, and the stranger who had watched him on the rocks.

When he stepped towards her, she looked up at him.

'You're just going to walk out,' she said, 'without even giving me a chance to explain?'

He shut his eyes an instant. 'What more is there to say? Everything's been said. You're worse than all of them.'

She looked away from him, unable to meet his eye. 'Of course I'm not.'

'Are you sure about that? Lying, playing games, using me like a fool.'

'You've got it all wrong, Mab. It wasn't like that.'

'So why didn't you just tell me?'

'I was going to. That's why I wanted us to go away so I could do it properly. I never wanted you to find out like this. I tried to tell you lots of times, but it was hard, you know, and you kept stopping me.'

'Oh so it's my fault now, is it, for not giving you the opportunity?'

'I'm not saying that. I was just waiting for the right time.'

'I trusted you, Rachel.'

She lowered her head. 'I know.'

'I shared everything with you, all the darkness in my heart . . . those fucking demons in my head.'

He stopped a moment and wiped the tears from his eyes. 'You could have put an end to all of it. You're my only friend, Rachel . . . We're supposed to be in love.'

'We are,' she said, 'but you're not the only one who's suffered. What do you think it's been like for me? I was only seventeen, Mab. I didn't mean to push her. I couldn't live with myself afterwards. I took an overdose for Christ's sake.'

'But you didn't go to prison though did you? You had your father to protect you. Set up some scumbag from the Moor Estate so his little girl could have a life.'

PART III

AS MAB DROVE, THE SUN SPLINTERED THROUGH THE TREES, AND SPLASHES OF LIGHT FLICKERED ACROSS THE GLASS. A distant moon loitered above the clouds, pale and ineffectual. The sadness in Rachel's eyes haunted him, but he kept driving. Snow coated the hills and fields, and small ridges of slush bordered the carriageway. He kept driving, past the sky-reflected lakes that lay still beneath the mountains. The tall pines began to recede, and the road meandered through the grass.

When he left the cottage, Rachel had kept calling his name. She had begged him to forgive her. He didn't dare to look at her, for fear of turning back.

Rachel's words chased him, forcing him to drive faster.

He gazed across the valley, his eyes flitting past the fields, the birds, and the smoking chimneys. Beyond the mountains, the snow had melted. Droplets of water glistened on the leaves, and black trees sheened beneath the sun.

He kept driving, putting his foot down as he eased onto the dual carriageway.

The lanes bustled with traffic. All he could think about was Rachel, the memory of her voice forcing him to turn on the radio. Every other song was a sad melody. Every stranger's story reminded him of his own sorrow. The sun hung in the sky like the truth, blistering and unrelenting.

When the road dipped, it ran parallel to the coast. The sea was a swell of blue-grey, motionless as the gulls glided over it. He stayed in the left lane, following the seawall, ignoring the signs to Chester. Instead, he took a left, driving along the old coast road. The wall grew larger; the sea faded out of sight. The sky was almost cloudless now, an endless sheet of blue. The road narrowed, the draping branches mottling it with shadow. He kept driving, past the old Fun-Ship and beyond the deserted market. The river beckoned, and he tried his best to resist it. He took a right up the Well Hill. The old factory chimneys loomed in the distance, their bricks pale against the surrounding valley. He kept driving, catching sight of that old statue of Christ. The statue's eyes followed him. Its benevolent smile offered no forgiveness. He drove past the town, the Moor Estate, Griffo's Church, and then parked at the cemetery.

He sat in the car for a while, enjoying the silence.

The dead were buried on this hill. Beneath a huddle of gravestones, they watched over the town and sea. He thought about them as he stepped out of the car and started searching for his mother's grave. He roamed through a maze of headstones, the breeze carrying the smell of the fields, as he listened to the squelch of his feet. Then he found her; her name painted in gold on a black granite headstone. Seren May Pryce, four short lines telling the world: she was a wife and mother; she was loved; she was missed; she would never be forgotten.

He knelt in front of his mother's grave and took out the shrivelled flowers from the vase. He flung them across the grass and then poured out the dirty water. The birds chattered in the trees, and he pictured himself as a boy, dozing on his mother's lap, her sad songs floating over him. Her voice rose and fell, and then, as they did now, his eyes filled with tears. He felt ashamed that he had nothing to offer her, not even a single flower. All he ever gave her was a boy's troubles, and all he brought her now were a grown man's sorrows. Who are more fortunate, he wondered, the living or the dead?

He stood up and gazed across the estuary. The tide had started to recede, revealing stretches of golden sand. The Wirral shore was a haze of yellow light and above it was the soft glow of the fields. The water drew him closer. He looked down at his mother's grave and whispered all his secrets. A dog barked, holding him silent. He watched it scamper between the headstones, its tail wagging as it sniffed the flowers and grass. The dog's master called after it. He was an old man, wearing black leather gloves and a charcoal grey overcoat. His hair was grey and slick, his shirt collar crisp. When the old man caught Mab staring, he acknowledged him with a smile. His face looked kind, his eyes blue and tolerant.

Mab's legs felt weak as the past took hold of him, stirring inside him. He took one last look at his mother's grave and then wandered back to the car. He sat there for a while, watching the land slice through the River Dee.

MAB KEPT DRIVING, SPEEDING PAST THE CHURCH, THE HOLY WELL, AND THE RUINS OF THE ANCIENT ABBEY. Crows perched on the old Chapter House, their eyes shining and their sharp beaks pointing west. He kept driving. The sky was cloudless, and the sun blazed down on him.

He parked at the bottom of the old railway bridge, got out of the car, and sauntered up the Old Dock Rock. The air was warm; ivy-clad trees gleamed beneath the midday light. A train sprinted along the tracks, scattering the birds.

He stepped onto the path, walking close to the wall, smoothing his hand along the stones. He stopped for a moment and gazed through the spiked metal fence. The Waste Water Works was deserted, haunted by shadows and the generator's eerie thrum.

He carried on walking until he reached the old sluice gate bridge. The flushing pool was dried up. The sand baked, and the air was tainted by silt and mud. He gazed down at the beached dinghies and boats, and then at a group of cocklers, waiting patiently for the tide. They watched him as they smoked their cigarettes. He nodded back at them, then trod carefully down the ramp.

They were two men and a boy. He guessed that the men were in their sixties and the boy in his early teens. The men wore sweatshirts and green waders, their faces lined and weathered by the seasons. They said nothing, at first, when Mab asked them about the tide. They just smiled to one another, eyeing his shoes and clothes.

'What about it?' the fat one said, a white fringe straggling from the rim of his cap. He caressed his palm with his thumb and then smoothed it across the back of his fingers.

'How much longer will it be out for?' Mab said.

The man frowned, and then glanced at his mate. 'What do you think, Billy, an hour tops?'

Red-faced Billy pondered the question. He stroked his beard and then sucked in the air through his teeth. 'Yeah, I reckon so.' He gazed across the sand. 'You want to be careful, though, that tide comes in quickly. It seems all right one minute, then suddenly it catches you out.'

'Thanks,' Mab said, and both men stared at him.

The boy fidgeted with his gloves, blushing, as the men watched on in silence. Mab thanked them again and turned round. He could hear them whispering, and sniggering as he climbed back up the ramp. Now at the top, he sensed their eyes burn into him. The sea breeze carried their laughter, and the distant birds seemed to mimic it.

He walked to the seawall path, the sun glinting across the gate. He remembered the track being wider, but it was nothing more than an extended cow path, running through an open field. The seawall was on his right and beyond it the dark, jagged outline of the rocks. He remembered Rhiannon lying there. Then he pictured Rachel's eyes as he turned to face the marshes. Birds foraged in the grass and then skittered across the pools.

All he could think about was the estuary, then the sand and the shore, all of them drawing him closer. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw Rachel's smile. But when he opened them he remembered her secrets. He jogged over to the seawall and clambered to the top, gazing across the ribs of sand. He stepped carefully onto a broken slab of concrete, squatted, and then grabbed the rusty steel rod jutting out of it. He eased himself onto the rocks, their cold dampness seeping into his shoulders. He scrambled down the shingles, feeling them scrape across his skin.

He remembered walking here with his mother, hand in hand, edging along the water. She'd tell him stories about the sea, lost souls and forsaken love. Then they'd make their way past the Fun-Ship, past the old lighthouse, and settle on the Talacre Dunes.

The seabirds screeched above, mocking him as he tiptoed across the mud. The charred remains of the old dock supports spiked across the sand, like relics of a forgotten time. The birds skipped across the shadows, skittered about and then dipped their beaks into the water.

He took off his jacket, then his shoes and socks, and laid them on the sand. The sun's huge eye glared down at him, conspiring with the distant shore, as they tempted him across the water. He could hear their voices now, a lover's lies, and a dead girl's whispers.

He slunk across the sand, feeling it squirm between his toes. Treading carefully, he avoided the pools, the shells, a dead bird's bones. All he wanted to do was reach the other side, sit on the Heswell shore and watch the estuary from a distance.

Rachel's words weighed inside him, and he quickened his pace trying to escape them.

His mind drifted as the coastline grew further.

He kept walking across the sand, detached from it all, enjoying the sun as it licked his neck and face.

He was a boy again, only this time he was fearless.

The birds were nowhere to be seen, silent as the breeze dwindled.

The sand beneath his feet felt warm and slick. He crouched and scooped some into his hand, then let it drip through his fingers. There was a salty tang in the air, the faint reek of silt and the whiff of baked mud. He closed his eyes, letting the smell of the river engulf him. He felt unknown here, faceless, another mother's son.

A distant pool covered the land like a giant's shadow. The sandstone cliffs drew closer, as did the dunes, the scrub grass and the patches of meadow.

Silver runnels glided across the sand, trickling across his toes.

Everywhere was so still, and all he could hear was his breath and the faint rush of water. He kept walking, faster and faster, trying to outrun the tide.

He gazed up at the river, watching as the land darkened. The water rose, splashing over his feet and ankles. He started to run faster, the silt and the sand sliding beneath him.

The river rose higher; the current began to writhe and shift. Water eddied around his waist, its coldness shocking his skin. He waded across the estuary, stumbling as the current rocked him. He thought about Rhiannon, then his mother. Saw Rachel's smile as the cold bit at his fingers.

The water kept rising, speeding over him.

Then he was afloat, like human debris drifting out to sea. He fought against the tide, kicking his legs, his hands grasping at nothing. Water bubbled through his nose and flooded into his mouth. He raised his head, gasping for breath. Each gulp of air was warm and salty. He tried to scramble towards the bank, but the tide was too strong and dragged him further.

The waves broke over him. The current pulled and tugged.

His arms began to tire, and his legs felt numb. The river twisted him over. All he could hear was the sound of raging water, drowning the beat of his heart. Then he was under, blinded by a cold blackness.

He tried to raise his head above the water, his body straightening. His hands grasped at the darkness, his heart pounding, as fear chilled his blood.

He could hold his breath no longer, spluttering as his lungs filled with water. Something burned and tore inside his chest. His mouth opened and closed, gasping for air as the current dragged him under.

Then, he was aware of himself, floating above the sand. He could see all his summers, those winters long gone, the rains, the snow, and season after season. He could see the meadows and the naked trees, and feel the prickle of the gorse and the hedgerows. Birds hovered over the bleached grass, calmed, it seemed, by the silence.

He saw himself as a boy, chasing after his mother's laughter. He followed it through the woods, beyond the rusted gates and the old factories. Then she snared him in her arms, the rhythm of her breath lulling him to sleep.

A sudden calmness washed over him, and his body felt weightless. This was the peace they had searched for, the serenity denied to them for so long.

He was the boy who had crossed the sands and passed beyond the darkness.

Critical Commentary

Introduction: Pitfalls and Possibilities.

As soon as the singing started, all the doors opened all the way down the Hill, and men and women and children came out to fill the road.

I looked at the smooth blue sky and the glowing white roofs, the black road, choked with blacker figures of waving men passing down the Hill between groups of women with children clustered about their skirts, all of them flushed by flickering orange lamplight flooding out from open door-ways, and heard the rich voices rising in many harmonies, borne upward upon the mists which flew from singing mouths, veiling cold-pinchd faces, magnifying the brilliance of hoping eyes, and my heart went tight inside me.¹

The above excerpt, taken from Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, is located in a particular place: the south Wales coalfields and surrounding valleys. Moreover, it aims to provide us with a specific sense of place: a community united through song, a place that is lamp-lit and full of hope. In doing so, it creates an image of Wales, which, since the novel's initial publication, has captured the public's imagination, and, more significantly, shaped notions of Wales and Welsh identity.

Many would argue that this version of Wales, as presented by the novel's narrator Huw Morgan, is a nostalgic, sentimental, and personalized regional view. In fact, Stephen Knight argues that the novel has 'created a stereotype that could be said to have done significant harm to Wales over the years as a land of 'Black and White Taffy minstrels.'²

Arguably, Llewellyn's romanticized view demonstrates some of the pitfalls of the regional novel: adopting such a highly subjective approach not only propagates negative views of the genre, but the stereotypes and inaccuracies it portrays can be 'resented by those who are regarded as residing in a dependent and satellite position to a notional centre.'³

Moreover, as the academic and novelist Raymond Williams argues, Llewellyn's novel provides an 'export version' of the people and places it portrays, resulting in a static cultural view.⁴ One of Williams's responses to this, although not directly, was

¹ Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 23.

² Stephen Knight, 'A New Enormous Music: Industrial Fiction in Wales', in *Welsh Writing in English*, ed. by M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 47-90 (p.74).

³ Neal Alexander & James Moran, eds., *Regional Modernisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 11.

⁴ Knight, 'A New Enormous Music: Industrial Fiction in Wales', p. 73.

through his novel *Border Country* (1960). On one level, Williams uses the novel to counteract such static views, as seen through its main protagonist Matthew Price's growing awareness of his native country's 'internal variedness and plurality'.⁵ However, Williams also uses it to present us with a realistic and 'authentic' sense of place. By adopting a writing style, which Dai Smith describes in his introduction to the novel as 'pared down, almost entirely pruned of similes and metaphors',⁶ Williams tries to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment and nostalgia, as shown in the following excerpt:

Once they were up on the road, Harry and Ellen could look out over the valley and the village in which they had come to live. To the east stood the Holy Mountain, the blue peak with the sudden rockfall on its western scarp. From the mountain to the north ran a ridge of high ground, and along it the grey Marcher castles. To the west, enclosing the valley, ran the Black Mountains: mile after mile of bracken and whin and heather, of black marsh and green springy turf.⁷

One of the more noticeable differences, when comparing this excerpt to the one taken from *How Green Was My Valley*, is that it is narrated in the third-person. The style is also cleaner and more concise. This has the added effect that the scene it describes appears more factual. It restricts itself to representing only what is witnessed. There are no 'implications' and the sense of place it evokes appears less subjective and, as a result, is arguably more 'authentic.'⁸ In addition, Daniel G. Williams argues that *Border Country* 'can be read as a self-conscious, creative meditation on the purpose, practice and possibilities of realism'⁹, and, as the above excerpt has shown, the possibilities of the regional novel, too.

These possibilities and, in some cases, pitfalls of the Welsh regional novel lie at the heart of the themes discussed and explored in this commentary. By asking what it means to be from the Flintshire lowlands in northeast Wales, and the places contained within it – such as Holywell and the Greenfield Valley –, this commentary and the novel that accompanies it, explore notions of place. By discussing fictional representations

⁵ Daniel G. Williams, 'Writing Against the Grain: Raymond Williams's *Border Country* (1960) and the Defence of Realism', in *Mapping the Territory*, ed. by Katie Gramich (Cardigan: Parthian, 2010), pp. 217-243 (p.235).

⁶ Dai Smith, 'Foreword', in *Border Country*, by Raymond Williams (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p. x.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p. 34.

⁸ Jeremy Scott, *The Demotic Voice in Contemporary British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 3-8.

⁹ Williams, 'Mapping Against the Grain', p. 226.

of the Flintshire lowlands, it shows how Flintshire-born writers have portrayed place and asks whether such portrayals have been used to raise awareness of the region's distinctive characteristics such as its local history, geography, cultural identity, and relationship with the Welsh language. Furthermore, this commentary discusses how the Welsh regional novel can provide wider explorations of belonging and place through the crime-thriller genre.

In *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland 1890-1990*, K. D. M. Snell defines the regional novel as:

Fiction that is set in a recognisable region, and which describes features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people. Fiction with a strong sense of local geography, topography or landscape.¹⁰

This definition identifies the key elements of the regional novel as a culture, geography and a sense of place. However, as Snell acknowledges, the regional novel is by no means restricted to this definition. There are exceptions, some of which will be discussed in Chapter three.

The regional novel, like many thrillers, can be used to highlight the conflicts between the periphery and the centre, the rural and urban. This raises an important question: what defines a given text as a regional novel, and more specifically, a Welsh regional novel? It is a difficult question to answer. Regionalism is complex and, arguably, lacks any universally agreed definition. Moreover, Wales finds itself in a precarious position when it comes to defining what is, and what is not, a Welsh regional novel. As argued in the introduction of Riegel and Wylie's *A Sense of Place*:

The image of regionalism, indeed, has been a divided one, especially because regionalism has been largely defined in relation to nationalism sometimes as a centrifugal, even corrosive force undermining the cohesion of the nation-state, sometimes as a more organic alternative to the nation state with its arbitrary borders.¹¹

¹⁰ K.D.M Snell, *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 1.

¹¹ Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie, *Sense of Place – Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing* (Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 1997), p. x.

With this in mind, in post-colonial terms, any Welsh novel viewed from an outside perspective could be seen as a regional novel (By contrast, from a Welsh perspective, any novel centred on or around the country's capital or that uses its region to speak for the country as a whole could be viewed as a national novel.). As we shall discover, the Welsh regional novel takes many forms. Regionalism is so much more than an 'alternative to the nation state', and, as in the case of national and regional identity, it can be 'a complex mix of community, a shared cultural, ethnic and social background, and an attachment to place'.¹²

Place plays a significant role in our lives. Our sense of it, and whether or not we feel 'in' or 'out' of place affects who we are, what we were, whom we might become. When we meet someone for the first time, more often than not, we ask them where they are from. As Edward S. Casey observes, we do this without thinking how 'probing' and 'revealing' and culturally varied the answer to this question might be.¹³

The Flintshire lowlands is a curious amalgam of social and cultural landscapes that has never sat comfortably among common notions of Welsh identity. Why is this? What unique regional characteristics differentiate it from other parts of Wales? As Casey suggests, 'one would still be hard put to list the exact ingredients of such regional identity'.¹⁴ Surely, we need to at least identify some of the key components, or how else are we to determine what makes the Flintshire lowlands unique?

In Chapter One, I endeavour to do this by exploring its cultural, social and industrial history, and focusing on key aspects such as its geography, regional accent, and its relationship with the Welsh language. I also show how writers, both English and Welsh, have portrayed such aspects, which acts as a precursor to the themes discussed in Chapter Two.

Flintshire lies on the border between England and Wales. Diener and Hagen make the point that 'borders are not "natural phenomena"; they exist in the world only to the extent that humans regard them as meaningful.'¹⁵ This is true of course, but meaningful they remain, especially along the Flintshire lowlands. 'The boundary or

¹² Ibid., p. ix.

¹³ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 2nd edn (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. xiv.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.304.

¹⁵ Alexander C. Diener & Joshua Hagen, *Borders – A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

limit of a thing determines its place'¹⁶, and, as explored in Chapter Two, many Flintshire writers are susceptible to this notion. By discussing the work of four Flintshire-born writers, I explore their interpretation of the region. Moreover, by discussing their work in relation to my novel *Bordersands*, I hope to illustrate how such interpretations have influenced and shaped my own exploration of the Flintshire lowlands, such as the importance of local history, notions of exile and exclusion, and how local geographical borders and landmarks influence our sense of place.

Such a discussion also raises the question: how successful are they in providing 'insiders' and 'outsiders' with a recognisable and balanced representation? As Robert T. Tally Jr. argues:

The act of writing itself might be considered a form of mapping or a cartographic activity. Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish.¹⁷

However, which areas writers choose to either include or exclude is highly selective. The literary maps they draw can orientate and disorientate readers, guiding them only to the places the writer wishes them to see. In fact, as I will discuss, the Flintshire lowlands can be seen as a microcosm of Wales as a whole, or as a region with its own distinctive characteristics.

Regional fiction often focuses on a particular place, with an emphasis on local topography, language, dialect, and culture. However, As K. D. M Snell states, the regional novel 'beyond its most predictable forms, [...] may on occasion encompass romance, historical novels, mystery and detective novels.'¹⁸ This crossing of genres also raises the question: can popular genres, such as the crime-thriller, be used to explore, comment on, and place a given region further into the public imagination?

This is discussed in Chapter Three, where I focus on the work of four Welsh writers who explore aspects of regionalism through the crime-thriller genre. By discussing their work in relation to my novel *Bordersands*, I hope to illustrate how the regional thriller can be used to explore notions of place-myth and regional identity. How a

¹⁶ Casey, p. 16.

¹⁷ Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 45.

¹⁸ Snell, p. 4.

sense of place can be achieved through spatial dimensions, social positions, and social relationships. Each writer's approach varies, from hardboiled and noir thrillers used to explore regional ideology and periphery-centre conflicts, to urban and gothic thrillers that examine the dichotomy between 'regional determinism' and 'regional possibilism'. What I mean by this is how geographical, cultural and social landscapes shape and, to some degree, limit our behavior. In contrast to this, we can learn to adapt to such limits. We can embrace and add to it, and as a result form a less restrictive regional consciousness.

Robert Tally argues:

We might liken genre to a guidebook, whereby the writer, in utilizing or specifying the recognizable elements of a given genre provides the reader with a kind of "You are Here".¹⁹

By following these 'recognizable elements' ascribed to both the regional and thriller genres, writers need to find a balance. Readers need to know that they are reading a thriller, and, at the same time, to be presented with a coherent, and balanced sense of place. As Tally argues 'a story lacking essential elements, or in contrast, containing too many inessential ones will fail to deliver the proper "place" to its readers'.²⁰

This notion of presenting the "proper" place is explored throughout this commentary, as is the notion of what it means to be 'in' and 'out' of place. *Bordersands*, like Williams's *Border Country* before it, 'continually juxtaposes different ways of seeing and knowing',²¹ and both novels have clear correlations between them. Geographically, each novel is set along the Welsh/English border (*Border Country* in southeast Wales, and *Bordersands* in the northeast). Each of the novels' main protagonists are returning from a form of exile, exploring and updating, to varying degrees, the theme of the 'returned native'. However, where they differ is that whereas *Border Country's* main protagonist shifts his perspective from 'visitor' back to 'inhabitant'.²² Mab, the main protagonist of *Bordersands*, constantly shifts between feelings of being 'in' and 'out' of place. And as a result, as I hope to show, Mab comes

¹⁹ Tally, p. 56.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

²¹ Williams, 'Writing Against the Grain', p. 227.

²² Ibid., p. 228.

to realise that the definition of both 'inhabitant' and 'visitor' lends itself to multiple interpretations. Moreover, by exploring the themes of belonging and displacement as acquired through memory, geography and local history, I hope to show how *Bordersands*, in relation to the Flintshire lowlands, endeavours to provide a literary portrait of the region, as a place where borders are indistinct, undefined, where multiple local histories exist side-by-side, and juxtaposed against cultural and natural landscapes present the reader with a multifaceted sense of place.

The exploration of such themes lead us into the commentary's conclusion, where I ask if *Bordersands* offers anything new to the perception of the Flintshire lowlands, and does it provide the reader with an "authentic" sense of place?

Chapter One: This “in-between” place

The Flintshire lowlands: as seen through its accent, geography, local history, and relationship with the Welsh language.

With easy access to Chester, Liverpool, and Manchester, northeast Wales is, understandably, the most densely populated area of North Wales. It has a population in excess of 300,000, living in the areas around Wrexham and Deeside. Today, it comprises three counties: Wrexham, Denbighshire, and Flintshire.²³ One of the more visible elements of the border between England and northeast Wales is the Dee Estuary. Extending from the salt marshes of the River Dee in Saltney, the estuary runs along Bagillt, Holywell, Greenfield, and Mostyn, providing a clear divide between the Flintshire lowlands and the Wirral Peninsula.

Geographically, the Flintshire lowlands are markedly Welsh, although arguably, they lack any clear cultural divides, such as language and accent, elements that are often associated with Welsh identity. In fact, in Wales, the Flintshire lowlands can appear more English than Welsh. However, paradoxically, for the English there exists, no matter how minute, a recognisable cultural divide. Arguably, this provides the Flintshire lowlands with one of its distinctive characteristics: it is a blend of countries and cultures, an ‘in-between’ place, which, as I hope to illustrate in the subsequent chapters, is a theme that is central to *Bordersands’s* contribution to, and exploration of the Flintshire lowlands.

As important as they are, the Flintshire lowlands sense of place cannot be solely attributed to geography and regional accent. It is something that has evolved, influenced by its industrial, social and cultural history, and its relationship with the Welsh language. Moreover, it is influenced by how writers and poets have perceived such attributes and how they have used them to place the Flintshire lowlands, and their region, within the public imagination.

²³ Before its dissolution in 1974, Flintshire comprised of Flint, Buckley, Connah’s Quay, Holywell, Mold, Prestatyn and Rhyl, and the rural districts of Holywell, Maelor and St Asaph, and Hawarden. The county was also divided into three districts: Rhuddlan, Delyn, and Alyn and Deeside. These districts were joined with those of Colwyn and Glyndwr to form the county of Clwyd; however, in 1996 Clwyd was dissolved and Flintshire was reestablished, see John Davies and Nigel Jenkins, eds., *The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 291.

The town of Holywell (*Trefynnon*) and the Greenfield Valley (*Dyffryn Maesglas*) have played a pivotal role in defining the Flintshire lowlands' sense of place, and influencing perceived notions of its cultural identity. Holywell started to grow as a town from around 660AD. Taking its name from the Holy Well of St. Winefride (*Gwenffrewi*), the town became a significant place of pilgrimage long before the Norman invasion. Throughout its history, it has seen a steady flow of visitors and migrant workers, from both England and Wales. Most of these workers were drawn to the Greenfield Valley, especially during its industrial prosperity in the mid-late eighteenth century. Just under two miles long, the Greenfield Valley was formed during the ice age. Originally forested with oak, hazel, and ash, in the centuries that followed it underwent mass deforestation.

By constructing the first mills and markets, Basingwerk Abbey (*Abaty Dinas Basing*), founded in 1131 by the Cistercian Order, was instrumental to the Greenfield Valley's industrial development. With its close proximity to the border and accessible routes along the Dee Estuary, by the end of the seventeenth century, Holywell was the largest town in northeast Wales. The abbey mills and markets had continued to prosper long after the abbey's dissolution in 1536; however, it was not until the eighteenth century that Holywell and the Greenfield Valley became truly prosperous.²⁴

The new industrial machines needed power and, with water being the most cost-effective and reliable option, the Greenfield Valley was the ideal choice.

With easy access to the Dee Estuary and the seaports of Liverpool, between the years 1750 – 1800, the area experienced one of the quickest population growths in the UK.²⁵ However, this growth cannot be solely attributed to the industrial revolution; undeniably, it played a significant role, but as John Davies argues, '[t]he association is dubious. [...] The population upsurge was an international phenomenon.'²⁶

There were other contributing factors too, in addition to its variety of industries and burgeoning prosperity Flintshire was the first region of Wales to tackle the

²⁴ K. Davies and C.J. Williams, *The Greenfield Valley – An Introduction to the History and Industrial Archaeology of the Greenfield Valley, Holywell, North Wales* (Denbigh: Gee and Son, 1986), pp. 5-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁶ John Davies, *A History of Wales* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 321.

appalling condition of its roads.²⁷ Better roads led to better links, and as Davies observes, it became connected with ‘Shrewsbury and Chester and thus with the English road network’.²⁸

This linking and, to a degree, extension of Flintshire’s borders supplemented its cultural diversity, and, in conjunction with its local history assisted to anglicize it further. This had a more noticeable effect on the region’s accent. As the Flintshire-born writer, Gee Williams describes is a ‘phonological nightmare melangé of rural Cymraeg, genteel Cheshire and Scouse.’²⁹

As the Flintshire lowlands geographical divides became more blurred, it developed into a hybrid of two nations, which helped to shape it as a place with its own distinctive character – a borderland of Wales and England. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, such notions of cultural hybridity are explored throughout *Bordersands*, as are the geographical landscapes that form this borderland. However, the region’s development into a cultural hybrid of two nations cannot be attributed solely to its geography. There were other factors too, more noticeably, its relationship with the Welsh language, and how this propagated conflicts of national identity, and the region’s cultural segregation from many parts of Wales.

The industrial revolution had diverse and lasting effects, both socially and culturally, upon many communities across England and Wales. One such cultural effect was its impact on the Welsh language. However, I would argue that although the industrial prosperity of the Flintshire lowlands in the eighteenth century served to aid its burgeoning use of English, it was by no means the catalyst. For a deeper understanding of this, we need to look at the language’s history, and its pivotal role, both socially and culturally, in marginalizing the Flintshire lowlands even further.

After the 1536 Act of Union, there were a number of ‘initiatives towards strengthening the language – both in its spoken and printed form’.³⁰ These included the seminal publication of the Welsh language Bible and prayer book (1588), which were part of an abundance of initiatives that proved paramount to the survival of the

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 325–336.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 326.

²⁹ Gee Williams, *Magic & Other Deceptions* (Denbigh: Gee & Son, 2000), p. 7.

³⁰ Gerald H. Jenkins, *The Welsh Language before the Industrial Revolution* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1997), p 1.

Welsh language, and bore 'irrefutable witness to the unwillingness of the Welsh people to lose the principle badge of their identity, namely their language'.³¹

This 'badge of identity' was ubiquitous and 'on the eve of the Industrial Revolution seven out of ten people were still monoglot Welsh speakers'.³²

The Welsh language was mostly affected along the Welsh/English borders, with northeast Wales, especially the Flintshire lowlands showing the most apparent signs of decline.³³ This was due to a combination of factors. Topography played a large part. As we have seen, many parts of Flintshire were easily accessible. Its geography enabled and invited outside influences, whereas other counties (such as Anglesey, Caernarfon, Merioneth, and Cardigan etc.) were protected and 'sealed off by rugged mountains'.³⁴

Other reasons why the Welsh language fell into decline can be attributed to it not being seen as an appropriate language for trade and commerce. This was more apparent in northeast Wales, especially in the industrial parts of the Greenfield Valley and the Greenfield Docks, which had 'stronger commercial and industrial contacts'.³⁵ As Jenkins observes, the 1536 Act of Union 'encouraged the English to disregard and despise Welsh and caused the monoglot Welshman to feel inadequate in his own land'.³⁶

This contributed to deepening the view that the Flintshire lowlands were neither truly Welsh nor English, marginalizing it even further, especially within the Welsh imagination. As Jenkins observes 'the Welsh language was integral to the collective identity of the Welsh people in early modern Wales [...], the mother tongue was inextricably woven into the fabric of society'.³⁷ Therefore, anything that deviated from this collective identity, even in areas that were intrinsically and geographically linked, was viewed as different, detached, and unfamiliar.

So embedded was this view that it was also propagated by northeast Wales', particularly Flintshire's, perception of itself, as seen in the distinction made between the Welsh-speaking Flintshire uplands and the bilingual Flintshire lowlands:

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

In 1770, for instance, the inhabitants of upland Flintshire were still strongly Welsh-speaking and deeply suspicious of English-speaking interlopers, while those who dwelt in the more fertile lowlands were bilingual and so well endowed with 'English manner and customs,' that they could easily be described as 'natives of different countries and climates'.³⁸

However, the late eighteenth century was a period of great prosperity for these so-called 'fertile lowlands' of Flintshire. In 1774, Thomas Williams, a land agent and lawyer, formed a partnership with the Rev Edward Hughes. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, Thomas Williams, the Greenfield Valley, and Holywell became famous throughout Europe. Williams was known as the 'copper king' and until his death in 1802, controlled nearly all of Britain's copper industry. He was reported to be the richest man in Wales. At the time, Holywell was the largest town in Flintshire, with over 5,500 people living in the parish.³⁹

The Flintshire lowland's industrial history, geography, bilingualism, and its relationship with the Welsh language, play a pivotal role in *Bordersands*. As we shall discover in Chapters Two and Three *Bordersands* explores these themes to provide a sense of place, and develop a literary portrait of the region. However, before I discuss this in more depth, it is important to ask how the region's cultural, geographical and historical characteristics have been portrayed by English and Welsh writers? Many such narratives can be found in *A Clwyd Anthology* (1995). It is an eclectic mix, and although many perceptions of the region, as expressed through the book's various articles, poems, and fiction extracts, can also be attributed to Wales and the Welsh in general, there are some specific examples of common cultural themes and concerns.

One such theme is the disparity between the county's cultural identity and perceived notions of Welsh identity. As we have seen, throughout Welsh history the lowlands of Flintshire, for some, are seen as 'an intensely anglicized area and, in comparison with many places at the heart of the county [in terms of a more stereotypical view of Welshness] seem quite un-Welsh'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁹ K. Davies and C.J. Williams, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Dewi Roberts, ed., *A Clwyd Anthology* (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), p. 13.

This feeling of ‘un-Welshness,’ is expressed internally as far back as the fifteenth Century; the south-Walian poet Lewis Glyn Cothi shows his contempt for the town of Flint in his poem *The Saxons of Flint*. The title alone sets Flint apart, making the distinction between them and us. Cothi describes ‘The streets of Flint, an ill-built maze / I wish the whole were in a blaze.’ He goes on to proclaim that ‘A dire mischance I wish indeed / On slavish Flint and its mean breed’.⁴¹

Flintshire-born writers have also explored the county’s cultural contrasts, too. One such writer was the Holywell poet John Jones (1788 – 1858), who as Roberts tell us ‘was one of the very few indigenous poets writing in English about North Wales in the nineteenth century’.⁴²

Jones was very aware of the town’s cultural contradictions, and the perceptions of it in both the national and local imagination, perceptions that he explores, to some degree, in his poem *Native Town*:

[...] And High Street echoes with two different tongues:
The Welsh and English there alternate cry
‘Rhai’n, rhai’n, yw pethau rhad’ – ‘Come buy, come buy!’
[...] Some few with signs their various bargains end,
Some curse the tongue they cannot comprehend.
But such as landlords more perfection reach –
They know each language and converse in each.⁴³

Of course, Jones’s observations could be attributed to many parts of Wales, particularly the industrial south; however, Jones provides a more celebratory view of the town’s bilingualism. He references the ‘echoes’ of the two languages, acknowledging the cultural contrasts and tells us that ‘some curse the tongue they cannot comprehend.’ Jones also suggests that, perhaps, the answer lies in an accepted cultural hybridism – a theme that is explored in more detail in Chapters Two and Three.

However, Jones’s perception of the Flintshire lowlands is not without criticism. As a child, he worked in the Greenfield Valley, as an apprentice in the Holywell cotton

⁴¹ Lewis Glyn Cothi, ‘The Saxons of Flint’, in *A Clwyd Anthology*, ed. by Dewi Roberts (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), pp. 143-145 (p.145).

⁴² Roberts, *A Clwyd Anthology*, p. 24.

⁴³ John Jones, ‘My Native Town’, in *A Clwyd Anthology*, ed. by Dewi Roberts (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), pp. 23-24 (p.24).

mills. As previously discussed, during this period the valley saw great prosperity under the direction of Thomas Williams. Jones reminds us of the hardship that affords such prosperity when he writes, in his *Poems (1856)*.

Well, I remember, how in early years,
I toil'd therein, with unavailing tears ...
No bondage state – no inquisition cell,
Nor scenes yet dearer to the Price of Hell,
Could greater acts of cruelty display
Than yon tall factories on a former day.⁴⁴

Jones provides us with an alternative view. Working in the factories is described as being worse than prison, and crueler than hell. On close reading, it forces us to challenge these so-called industrial ‘glory days,’ and encourages us to rethink and, to some degree, reevaluate the region’s industrial prosperity.

Writers can also enable us to reread a region by highlighting the positive attributes of its places and geographical landscapes. This is demonstrated in Glenda Beagan’s short story ‘Yellow Archangel’. It is a futuristic tale, narrated by an elderly, unnamed, female protagonist who, whilst looking back at her life, tells how most of the world’s population was killed by an unnamed virus. By referencing the Clwydian Range and the ancient hill fort Moel Famau, Beagan references the region and, in doing so, reaffirms the beauty of its landscape:

So here I stay, most of the time, looking out across the Clwydians, with the Berwyns beyond, more aware than ever of the colours in the landscape, how they change with the seasons, the weather and the light. Up there are the Iron Age forts, the familiar shape of Moel Famau.⁴⁵

As previously noted, one of the most distinctive landmarks of the Flintshire lowlands is the Dee Estuary. This geographical border has been a great influence on its culture, regional identity, and marginalization. It has preoccupied the imagination of northeast Wales writers too, as explored in Gladys Mary Coles’s poem ‘Wet Spring Bank Holiday, Dee Estuary’. The poem’s opening stanza reads thus:

⁴⁴ K. Davies and C.J. Williams, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Glenda Beagan, ‘Yellow Archangel’, in *Sing Sorrow Sorrow*, ed. by Gwen Davies (Bridgend: Seren, 2010), pp.199-206 (p. 202).

Most of the view you have to imagine
When grey presents its variations –
the opposite coast ghosting back.
Absent first are the field shapes?
a green collage of hills,
precise definition of copse and farm
the massed browns of Holywell;
next, Mole-y-Parc retracts its long antenna.
Under a gauze of rain, the outlined hills -
curvilinear, cut-off, cauled –
disappear in the drowned distance.⁴⁶

If we are to read the poem in terms of cultural and geographical borders, then from the outset, the poem suggests that, initially, these borders, created by the Dee Estuary, are concealed, a divide we, at first, need to imagine. It is an intangible space and, like the opposite shoreline, veiled by the rain and ‘ghosting back’ at us.

As we look closer, we observe that this body of water does divide something. There is the hint of copses and farms, and the ‘massed browns’ of another place. However, it is a place that remains detached. The Flintshire transmitting station, Moel-y-Parc ‘retracts’, and the land, which is separated by this ‘gauze’ of rain, is somehow ‘cut-off’.⁴⁷

What is also interesting about this opening stanza is that the Dee Estuary divide is viewed from the Wirral shore. It is an English perspective, the outside looking in. And, as the second stanza reminds us, this border space also has an equal effect on the Flintshire lowlands:

From both the estuary’s shores
this same shroud separating
coasts, cliffs, the sprinkling of estates
whose lights at night are fallen galaxies
all dissolve in the vanishing trick.⁴⁸

As we look closer, this border space grows more tangible. The body of water that separates the Flintshire lowlands from northwest England becomes a more defined

⁴⁶ Gladys Mary Coles, *The Glass Island* (London: Duckworth & Co, 1992), p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

space. As the beginning of the third stanza proclaims: 'The metallic Dee divides'. This is a striking image, making this border space more palpable – an actual topographical boundary. However, the very same thing that separates us can also enable us to connect. This metallic divide 'magnetises shore to shore' and as each side of the border 'watch[es] like wildlife in undergrowth' they become both the observer and the observed. However, as the third stanza goes on to remind us, each side of the border is always 'someone else's space.'⁴⁹

We are not always conscious of these border spaces, of course, and sometimes it takes a poem such as Coles's to help us to articulate, and further our understanding of both intangible and real borders. These borders, like the narratives, geographies and local histories of Holywell and the Greenfield Valley are an integral part of its cultural identity. They are also instrumental in shaping and, arguably, marginalizing it within the literary and public imagination. They also act as a precursor, to provide a more in-depth discussion of how *Bordersands* and the work of four Flintshire-born writers have chosen to represent the Flintshire lowlands within Welsh writing in English, and how they approach such notions of 'un-Welshness', 'cultural contrasts' 'local history' and 'geographical and social borders'.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.15.

Chapter Two: Stories on the Fringes

The Flintshire lowlands and notions of place, as portrayed by four Flintshire-born writers.

This section discusses the fiction of four Flintshire-born writers: Emyr Williams, Emyr Humphreys, Glenda Beagan, and Gee Williams, and, in relation to *Bordersands*, examines the social, cultural and geographical landscapes they construct, and how they shape, and position the Flintshire lowlands within the literary and public imagination.

In his book *Internal Difference* (1992), in the chapter entitled 'A Corner of Wales', M. Wynn Thomas makes the following argument:

[...] the North-East of Wales has never captured the public, or the literary imagination. It remains an unknown quantity, an unexplored locality the character of whose Welshness seems undecided, even problematic.⁵⁰

Thomas makes two valid points here: as discussed in Chapter One, notions of Welsh identity within the Flintshire lowlands are both 'problematic' and 'undecided,' and, arguably, northeast Wales has yet to find a place in both the literary and the popular imagination. It is important to note, however, that Thomas published *Internal Difference* in 1992, and since then, in relation to Welsh writing in English, northeast Wales, particularly Flintshire, is by no means 'an unexplored locality.'

One area of Wales that has been particularly successful in capturing and, to some extent, shaping notions of Welsh identity in both the literary and popular imagination is the south – more specifically, the county of Glamorgan, as M. Wynn Thomas notes: 'The contribution made by Glamorgan to the development of a modern Welsh literature in English has been so immense as to be virtually immeasurable'.⁵¹

Writers such as Alun Lewis, Rhys Davies, Gwyn Thomas, Jack Jones, Lewis Jones, Glyn Jones et al., are synonymous with Welsh writing in English, and as M. Wynn

⁵⁰ M. Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Thomas argues, these prominent south-Walian writers are ‘the crucible in which modern Wales could be said to have been fashioned.’⁵²

The era to which Thomas is referring to is, of course, the 1930s, a productive and prosperous time for Welsh industrial fiction, and Welsh writing in English. Stephen Knight attributes the success of the novels and stories not to their working class audience, who were unlikely ‘to provide enough readers for the quite substantial genre of fiction to be a commercial success’,⁵³ but to ‘their concentration in the mid to late 1930s, and access to a sympathetic audience’.⁵⁴ Timing played a crucial role, as this was an era ‘when several commercial London publishers found a market for leftist surveys of life in what were called the ‘regions’’.⁵⁵

Most of these novels and stories focused on the south Wales coalfields, though some explored the slate mining industry of the northwest. However, among the influx of Welsh industrial fiction was Flintshire-born writer Emyln Williams’s play *The Corn is Green* (1938). Set at the outset of the twentieth century, (although Williams is vague as to its actual date) around the area of the Parlwr Du/ Point of Ayr Colliery, the play had that ‘rare status as a fiction connected to, if not in fact delineating, the Flintshire coalfield’.⁵⁶

Written and produced in 1938, *The Corn is Green* is a quasi-autobiographical tale of Morgan Evans, a young illiterate miner. Evans, under the tutelage of English schoolmistress L. C. Moffat (based loosely on Williams’s own Holywell Grammar school teacher, Sarah Grace-Cooke)⁵⁷ wins a scholarship at Oxford University, escaping the confines of the northeast Wales coalfields and eventually graduating with a first-class honours degree. In its time, the play was very successful; it was adapted for Broadway, and in 1945 picked up by Hollywood and made into an Academy award nominated film.⁵⁸

Between the 1930s and 1970s, Emyln Williams was a prolific actor, director, and writer, and it could also be argued that for the postwar generation living along the

⁵² M. Wynn Thomas, ed., *Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 2.

⁵³ Knight, ‘A New Enormous Music: Industrial Fiction in Wales’, p. 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Russell Stephens, *Emyln William: The Making of a Dramatis* (Bridgend: Seren, 2000).

⁵⁸ Internet Movie Database website, ‘The Corn is Green (1945)’, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037614/>> [accessed January 2013].

northeast Wales border, he was Flintshire's prodigal son. Few could deny that *The Corn is Green* contains many egregious Welsh stereotypes. The hymn-singing locals are 'practically barbarians',⁵⁹ the English, the ever-present devil, and the Welsh 'turned out of heaven because they cannot answer Saint Peter when he asks them who they are in English'.⁶⁰ However, how recognizable are the Flintshire cultural, geographical, and social landscapes that Williams constructs?

The Corn is Green places little emphasis on geographical location. The scene descriptions are vague. We are informed that the play is set in 'a small village in a remote Welsh Countryside.' It is 'a sunny afternoon in June, in the later part of the last century'.⁶¹ This, of course, could be any part of Wales, catering for a more popular, idyllic, view of the country.

Even the dialogue spoken by the main protagonist, Morgan, is expressed through a more recognisable, and exaggerated Welsh accent. Such use of language can be equally guilty in propagating regional stereotypes. And the play contains no hint of that Liverpoolian twang, (in the form of directional notes, phonetic speech, and nonstandard spellings) which is such a unique, and fundamental part of the Flintshire vernacular. Instead, when read, and performed (in both the 1945 and 1978 film versions), the play's phonetics and Morgan's accent lean more toward the familiar dialects of the south. Certain words have the vowel sounds stretched and stressed, creating a huge glide from high to low pitch, as illustrated by Morgan's spelling and inferred pronunciation of "Moffat":

MISS MOFFAT "No, Miss Moffat." M, o, double f, a, t.
MORGAN No "v's"?⁶²

And by his constant use of words such as 'iss' and 'wass':

MORGAN 'It iss [*sic*] a bit sudden. It makes me that I... (Hesitating then plunging)
I want to get more clever still.'⁶³

⁵⁹ Emyln Williams, *The Corn is Green* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

With the exception of Emyln Williams's close association with the Flintshire lowlands, *The Corn is Green* does little to provide us with a rounded sense of place. Instead, it reinforces regional stereotypes, sharing the romanticized, and anglocentric view of Wales as seen in Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*.

In his book *Internal Difference* M.Wynn Thomas argues:

Wales is inseparable from Wales's internal differences. [...] The business of the authentically Welsh writer is to honour those differences by taking them seriously, on their own terms – in short by recognizing their significance. [...] Emyln Williams, in *The Corn is Green*, does not.⁶⁴

Thomas makes a strong argument; however, it is important to note that Emyln Williams did have an extensive and perceptive understanding of the Flintshire lowlands and its 'internal differences'. This is demonstrated in his autobiography *George* (1961); and although Thomas recognizes certain episodes of *George* to be both honest and effective, such insights, in his analysis of the text, appear to have been overlooked.

For instance, from the outset of *George*, Williams positions it clearly on the literary map. 'My family tree is the shortest in the wood. [...], for hardly a twig ventures outside Flintshire, the smallest county in Wales, the one in the top right corner next to Chester and Liverpool.'⁶⁵ Williams goes on to provide many vivid accounts of the area. One of the more telling is his description of a train journey taken by his parents, Thomas and Mary. Here, Williams uses the surrounding landscape to highlight geographical and social contrasts, a journey which is still recognisable today:

At Chester they changed to the coast railway to Rhyl, and as the town slid under a grey sky through begrimed near-town after another, her spirits foundered. [...] The scenery was not elevating; to the left the gentle Flintshire hills shrank from the sullen roofs, to the right puddled stretches merged into flat and flooded Cheshire – the Sands of Dee.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Thomas, p. 81.

⁶⁵ Emyln Williams, *George – An Early Autobiography* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 27 – 28.

Like the majority of border writers, Williams found it difficult to avoid and be unaffected by the ubiquitous influences of England. The land was a constant reminder, where across ‘the blue-grey stretches of the estuary [...] you could see across to the Cheshire plain’.⁶⁷ Williams describes it as ‘another country, where Welsh was not spoken and the public houses were open on Sunday’. He was also aware of the social and cultural differences within his own country, particularly Flintshire. It is worth mentioning at this point that Williams’s first language was Welsh. Until he started school, he was a monoglot Welsh speaker and, until he was twelve, resided in the rural villages of Glanarfon, and Berthengam, which were a noticeable contrast to the Point of Ayr colliery on the industrial lowlands. As Williams notes ‘one nestled’ and ‘the other wrestled’. He elaborates on these ‘internal differences’ when describing his early days at Holywell County School, where he had won a scholarship. Here, he gives the outsider a clear insight into the cultural differences of the area, focusing on language, accent and the social identities such variances create:

When we from the inland or the west essayed English, we were so foreign in accent and idiom as to be unintelligible; [...] On the other hand, the pupils from Flint – the east, the direction of Chester and England – mostly children of employees of Courtauld’s Silkworks, were openly derisive of the savages from the interior who clumped to school mouthing an uncouth tongue. It did not occur to us, or them, that their own accent was a Welsh one unrecognizably muddled with Lancashire, Irish and Birmingham.⁶⁸

It is through these observations that Williams provides us with an authentic and considered insight into the cultural, geographical and social landscapes of the Flintshire area. However, as we have seen, *The Corn is Green* fails to do this. If it had, then it might have been both an innovative and seminal contribution to Welsh writing in English.

Twenty years after *The Corn is Green* was written and produced, Flintshire-born writer Emyr Humphreys published his third novel *A Toy Epic* (1958). Well received on its initial publication, this coming-of-age novel, set in the 1930s, tells the story of, and is narrated by, three Flintshire boys of differing backgrounds: Iorwerth, a farmer’s son,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

represents the Welsh-speaking, nonconformist, and the more traditional aspects of Wales. Michael, the son of an Anglican Minister, brought up by his parents' maid, is fluent in Welsh, but is unwilling to speak the language, symbolizing the increasing anglicization of the country both internally and externally. Finally, there is Albie, a working-class, non-Welsh speaking town boy, who lives near the Flintshire lowlands.

Like many of Humphreys's novels, *A Toy Epic* is a border novel. It explores internal and external borders and the conflicts of colonialism. It is also a novel concerned with identity, language, nationalism, and nonconformism, by a writer whose 'Welshness was never simply and unproblematically given,' where 'his Welshness as a cultural condition constantly needing to be as it were won, or redeemed, from Englishness, has been at the heart of virtually everything Humphreys has ever written'.⁶⁹

A Toy Epic opens with the voice of Michael, who tells us: 'I was brought up in a broad valley in one of the four corners of Wales'.⁷⁰ M. Wynn Thomas states that the novel's opening line: 'From the very beginning [...] puts itself firmly on the Welsh map'.⁷¹ What he means, of course, is that Humphreys is emphasizing that 'his' corner of Wales is indeed Welsh and no less Welsh than any other region in Wales. However, I would argue that although *A Toy Epic* does make reference to Rhyl and Chester, without any real 'insider' knowledge this could be any corner of Wales, and any secluded inland valley, and Llanelw, the fictional place where *A Toy Epic* is set, could be any coastal town.

Like many of Humphreys's novels, *A Toy Epic* is so much more than an exploration of northeast Wales. For all its merits, which are many, I would argue that *A Toy Epic* is more successful, as a Flintshire-based novel, when it explores the conflicts of Albie. The narratives of Michael and Iorwerth are as representative of the county as they are of the country; however, it is through Albie that we see more of the Flintshire lowland's distinguishing and recognizable conflicts of identity:

At breakfast Albie's father talked Welsh to me, and seemed to enjoy it, but Mrs Jones said:

"Don't talk Welsh, Dic. Albie doesn't understand".⁷²

⁶⁹ Thomas, p. 78.

⁷⁰ Emyr Humphreys, *A Toy Epic* (Bridgend: Seren, 2008), p. 17.

⁷¹ Thomas, p. 82.

⁷² Humphreys, *A Toy Epic*, p. 56.

These conflicts provide us with a more accurate description of the county's sense of Welshness, which is 'never simply and unproblematically given.' For me, Albie, this 'strange hybrid,' is the closest representation of the Flintshire I know. From a writer's perspective, and in keeping with *A Toy Epic's* exploration of constant change and metamorphosis, Albie is the precursor of another facet of national identity, an embraced hybridism, which today has an equally strong and coherent understanding of Welsh identity and history.

The majority of Humphreys's main protagonists are Welsh speakers, and the non-Welsh speaking interlopers from the Flintshire lowlands are secondary characters, used to emphasize the decline of the Welsh language and the effects of colonialism. In *The Fiction of Emyr Humphreys* (2011), Linden Peach tells us that:

Albie's parents [...] have moved from a Welsh-language culture to one that is distinctly anglicized [...]. Albie lives in Prince Edward Street which mirrors the way in which Rhyl in the 1930s increasingly emulated English Culture [...]. In Humphreys's novel, there is a vivid depiction of how education has not only prioritized English but lead to a prioritization of English in the minds of the community.⁷³

This is all true of course, but it does not provide us with the full picture, and like *A Toy Epic*, it talks of this 1930s anglicization of the Flintshire lowlands as if it were a relatively new phenomenon. As illustrated in Chapter One, the people of the Flintshire lowlands, as far back as the eighteenth century, were described as 'natives of different countries and climates.' *A Toy Epic* chooses not to recognize this and does not explore the industrial and cultural history of the region fully. To provide as Wynn Thomas describes an 'authentic' view, surely it needs to include, no matter how subtle, such variances of culture and accent, and provide a clearer sense of location and local history without the reader requiring any prior knowledge of the region.

My novel *Bordersands* explores this through the main protagonist, Mab's knowledge of the local history of the Greenfield Valley, the Dee Estuary, the Holy Well, Basingwerk Abbey, and the surrounding villages and towns. In doing so, *Bordersands*

⁷³ Linden Peach, *The Fiction of Emyr Humphreys* (Cardiff: University of Wales press, 2011), p. 63.

enables the reader to acquire a deeper understanding of the Flintshire lowlands and demonstrates how, like most places, it is shaped by its cultural and social history. A knowledge of such histories can enable us to either detach from it, or form a closer bond, and broaden our understanding of what it means to be 'in' and 'out' of place. Moreover, we might even acquire a greater sense of place. However, using this approach also has its pitfalls. The recorded histories of a given place are both 'particular' and 'selective', and as a result, influence how we perceive it.⁷⁴ As Cresswell argues: 'for most part places of memory serve to commemorate the winners of history [...] achieved through the exclusion of some 'other'.⁷⁵

Bordersands tries to acknowledge this by endeavouring to inform the reader that the Flintshire lowlands has multiple histories, which influence our sense of place. This is illustrated in the following extract when Mab questions Councillor Powell's notion that the industrial prosperity of the Greenfield Valley is the most impressive part of its history:

Powell's eyes narrowed. 'I know that, and if I were you I'd be careful.' He moved his hand away and smiled. 'I'm going to rent this place out as a call centre, seems only fitting, don't you think, to revive the town's industry?'

'I'm surprised you care.'

'What makes you say that?'

Mab looked Powell in the eye. 'I would have thought you'd want to invest more in Liverpool. From what you've told me it seems people don't think you belong here.'

'I've lived here for nearly forty years, which is more than I can say for you.'

Mab ignored the dig at him. 'Did you say this place was also the copper works?'

Powell nodded. 'Glorious days so I believe. I would have loved to been alive then.' He took a deep breath, sighed. 'I tell ya, I'd have given bloody anything to have owned this place in its heyday.'

'What, so you wouldn't have minded making money out of the slave trade?'

Powell stopped smiling, and reached into his pocket and took out a cigar, sniffing it briefly before lighting it. 'They don't always go together you know, profit and morality.'

'That's a good quote,' Mab said. 'Who did you nick that from, the Copper King?' (*Bordersands*, p. 48)

⁷⁴ Tim Cresswell, *Place* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), p. 85.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Mab is clearly trying to antagonize Powell, but in doing so, he presents the reader with two distinct notions of the same place. Powell's notion is arguably the more recognisable, and celebrated history of the Greenfield Valley's industrial past, which raises an interesting point: that the general notion of a given place is neither 'natural' nor 'obvious' but fashioned by those 'with more power over others'.⁷⁶

In contrast, *A Toy Epic* is less concerned with Flintshire's local history, and instead uses Flintshire to explore the external and internal conflicts of Wales, and it could be argued that as a consequence this simplifies and perhaps 'undersells' the region. When I shared these insights with Professor M. Wynn Thomas, his response was that my arguments were 'sensible and substantive,' and that he 'wouldn't disagree.'⁷⁷ However, he did go on to make an important point that, at the time of writing, Emyr Humphreys 'consciously "read" his region in what nowadays might be called "post-colonial" terms [...]. "His" region is chosen as being as much "representative" of Wales as it is a place with its own distinctive character.'

We must also take into account Humphreys's own views on how faithful a writer should be to the past, and a given place and time, providing us with more insight into his vision and approach to history, particularly as a Flintshire writer:

The world of fiction always floats a few feet above the actual ground, and enjoys a climate and atmosphere of its own [...], there is no authorized version. You scoop water at random from the river of time and suddenly find it's turned solid.⁷⁸

However, one novel that requires less 'inside' knowledge, and is more successful in representing Flintshire, is Humphreys's first novel *The Little Kingdom*. The novel's main protagonist is Owen Richards, a young history lecturer at Aberystwyth University, where Humphreys, for a period of two years, studied history. Owen is a devout Welsh nationalist, and the story focuses on his opposition to his uncle's plans to sell land to make way for a new airfield, juxtaposing nationalist views with those of assimilation.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷⁷ M Wynn Thomas, (M.W.Thomas@swansea.ac.uk). (13.12.2013). *Welsh Writing in English – North East Wales Writers*. E-mail to Math Bird (mathbuk@googlemail.com).

⁷⁸ Emyr Humphreys, *Conversations and Reflections* (Cardiff: University of Wales press, 2002), p. 66.

The novel opens with Owen's uncle, Richard Bloyd, looking out across the Dee Estuary, providing a clear reference to the Flintshire lowlands:

Across the water he saw the Wirral emerge from the early morning mist; become once more a solid and substantial rich-green sea-girt land, speckled with red-roofed houses. The tide was out and down the estuary the mud flats gleamed in the oblique rays of the sun like the backs of enormous slugs resting in the low water.⁷⁹

The novel also references Rhyl and the Vale of Clwyd, giving the 'outsider' more information about the area. Moreover, it provides more insight into the county's conflicts of identity and Welshness, making them more accessible. Owen expresses this when talking to his friend, Rhys, about the planned airfield:

"The people don't care, do they? They don't think it will make any difference. They don't care whether they speak Welsh or English; it doesn't mean anything to them. Culture, tradition, meaningless abstractions, like freedom and patriotism. The rot has gone too far here".⁸⁰

As mentioned previously, such conflicts between nationalism and assimilation are common themes in Humphreys's fiction. Humphreys does not glorify or sentimentalize nationalism. He is equally willing to explore the contradictions and limitations of it, and the challenges it faces in Wales and the Flintshire area. This is demonstrated in Owen's train journey home, where he encounters a close friend of his deceased father, the local Flintshire M.P., Carrog Ellis. When Ellis asks Owen about his politics, Owen tells him that he is a Nationalist, to which Ellis replies:

"But, my dear boy. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but they've no political future at all, and you won't have in that quarter. Due respect to the Nationalists; I know many of them – fine fellows, but academic. [...]. The Nationalists don't understand the people. The people don't understand them. It's quite natural really".⁸¹

⁷⁹ Emyr Humphreys, *The Little Kingdom* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946), p. 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

This nationalistic failure to connect is expressed more fully through Owen's cold nature. Following his uncle's death, he sells his uncle's farm to raise funds for the 'cause,' oblivious to the livelihoods he is affecting – the very same people he aspires to represent.

Like *A Toy Epic*, *The Little Kingdom* uses Flintshire to explore the themes that concern Humphreys about the country as a whole. And although it provides many distinctive regional references, it still requires some 'inside' knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of place. However, with this in mind, it is important to remind ourselves that Humphreys's fiction, in relation to Flintshire, is not overly concerned with providing a sense of place. His region is used as Linden Peach argues to explore 'larger issues of identity and social being'.⁸² He is not concerned with providing us with insights into the distinctive characteristics of the Flintshire lowlands, or the cultural and historical aspects that influenced them. He uses Flintshire as a means to look to other places, and the spaces of interior rooms and buildings are used to explore national, as opposed to regional, 'cultural and social discourses' of the time, such as 'gender and socio-economic relations'.⁸³

One illustration of this can be seen in his novel *Outside the House of Baal* (1965), which is seen by many as his masterpiece, and regarded as 'one of the major English-language Welsh novels of the twentieth century'.⁸⁴ Set mostly in Flintshire, *Outside the House of Baal* is an episodic, modernist novel, which, by skillfully alternating between the past and present, examines the critical moments of the twentieth century through the lives of the Reverend J. T. Miles, and his sister-in-law, Kate. Throughout the novel, she spends most of her life in the family home of Argoed, and from early adolescence she takes on the responsibilities of her deceased mother, running the family home with her sister Lydia, (J. T Miles's future wife) and caring for her brothers and father.

The key scenes between Kate and her father take place in the parlour, where he sits in 'his' chair, positioned at the centre of the house, in contrast to the conversations between Kate and Lydia, which often take place in the kitchen, or the laundry. As

⁸² Peach, p. 54.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Peach observes, Kate is 'subject to her father's commands' where even as a young woman she is still ordered to her bedroom. Throughout the novel, Humphreys frequently uses the space of the bedroom to illustrate the male-dominated society of the time and to highlight some of its failings.

As Peach argues, by using these interiors, Humphreys 'excludes certain ideas and people but also locks individuals and certain ideas in together'.⁸⁵ Humphreys's locking of individuals and ideas within the interior spaces of rooms and buildings is explored to great effect through the structure of the family. As Emyr Humphreys elaborates in *Conversations and Reflections*:

[...] the structures of the fiction very much reflect the structures of the family, so that being orphaned, or lost, or exiled from the family is a major theme. The family is one of the major structures of fiction. Now in our time, as we've seen the family to some extent disintegrating, [...].⁸⁶

This notion of being orphaned, lost, or exiled is a common theme throughout *Outside the House of Baal* and is explored through the reflections and reevaluations of its main protagonist, J. T. Miles. Miles, a Calvinistic Methodist preacher, and a conscientious objector has always placed his sense of devotion above all other considerations; caring for the needs of his congregation while his family goes hungry. As Miles looks back over his life, he questions the choices he has made. He feels exiled from the modern world, but more importantly, from his Welsh-speaking heritage, and his family. Arguably, this could also be a reference to Flintshire's own sense of exclusion.

Bordersands explores such themes of exclusion and exile through its main protagonist, Mab, trying to prove his innocence and find the truth concerning Rhiannon Reece's death. By doing so, he hopes to redeem himself. He longs to undo past moral and social transgressions, which, subsequently, will put him back 'in place.' Moreover, by constantly remembering and revisiting the places of his youth, Mab longs to return to a specific place. This notion of being 'in-place' is also, to varying degrees, defined by its opposite. Surely, in order to feel 'in place', we need to have experienced or have an understanding of what it means to be 'out of place.'

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

⁸⁶ Humphreys, *Conversations and Reflections*. p. 7.

The Dee Estuary, which separates the Flintshire lowlands from northwest England, plays an important role in *Bordersands*. Not only is it a significant landmark, but it acts as both a symbolic and geographical border. One of the defining characteristics of borders is that they 'make distinctions between them and us'.⁸⁷ However, in relation to Flintshire, and other parts of northeast Wales, the 'them' and 'us' is slightly more complex.

Such themes are common throughout the work of Flintshire-born writer, Glenda Beagan. Like Humphreys before her, Beagan graduated from Aberystwyth University. She was born in Rhuddlan in 1948, which up until 1996, was still part of Flintshire. Today, Rhuddlan forms part of Denbighshire; however, Beagan still sees herself as a Flintshire writer: 'I still think of myself as a Flintshire girl, even though this is now Denbighshire and has also been Clwyd.'⁸⁸

However, through her short story collections such as *The Medlar Tree* (1992), *Changes & Dreams* (1996), and more recently, *The Great Master of Ecstasy* (2009), Beagan uses notions of family and reevaluation to be more explicit in her references to the county. She explores it in more detail by skillfully interweaving Flintshire's rural and mythical landscapes, with the past and the present, to explore regional and moral borders with notions of personal and national identity. A number of these themes are present in her short story 'Green Eggs and Larches'. Set in the 1950s, and written from the viewpoint of an unnamed child protagonist, the story tells of a girl's visits to her Aunty Ellie's cottage in rural Flintshire. The child lives in an urban district near the town, in 'their house in Pretoria Terrace with only a thin strip at the back for a garden.'⁸⁹ A sharp contrast when compared to her aunt's cottage, which has 'so much space and light.'

The child travels to her aunt's by bus, accompanied by her mother. Beagan uses the journey to skillfully blend in the landscape, using the Dee Estuary to highlight the child's mindset, and foreshadow future events:

⁸⁷ Cresswell, p. 73.

⁸⁸ Wales Online Website, 'I am neither fish nor fowl', <<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/i-am-neither-fish-nor-1882090>> [accessed February 2013].

⁸⁹ Glenda Beagan, *Changes and Dreams* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 35.

Looking down was a good feeling. All the sandbanks in the estuary, the treacherous quicks and whirlpools looked small and tame, the water around them milky, or palest green like an opal. It was a trick of distance and light.⁹⁰

And although not explicitly named, for those with any internal knowledge of the region, we are given glimpses of Holywell, where the girl and her mother wait for their connecting bus:

To pass the time they went to the milk-bar on the corner opposite the bus station. [...] There was a pub on the other corner, The Volunteer, a disreputable place mam said, with pillars and a kind of verandah outside where Teddy Boys stood.⁹¹

During their visit, the girl is asked by her aunt to go to a nearby farm, Y Gladys, to fetch her some 'green eggs'. Curious and excited by the prospect, the girl eagerly agrees. From here on, the darkness of the story unfolds, as do the subtle hints that reveal its place. After collecting six eggs from Mrs Ben Davies, the old woman invites the girl to explore the farm and see if she can find some more. The girl eventually finds some in the hayloft, a scene that also uses a local newspaper to keep the story rooted to Flintshire:

[...] one was warm still. She had a basket to collect them in, a square basket lined with crumpled sheets of the *Flintshire Herald*, and as she was coming down from the loft, backwards, and carefully, on the ladder, Idwal appeared and held the ladder firm for her.⁹²

From that moment on, every time the girl visits her aunt she is sent to fetch green eggs, assisted by Mrs Davies's grown-up son, Idwal:

He would always ask her to sit in the hay with him so she would. She wasn't sure she really liked what he did but he was kind, he must be, finding eggs for her always, and anyway he'd said it was their secret.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁹² Ibid., p. 36-37.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 38.

This use of nature to explore the loss of innocence, and expose the darker, crueler, aspects of the human psyche, is a common theme throughout Beagan's work and is used to great effect in some of her earlier stories such as 'The Sea Book' and 'The Saddist'. It is a theme explored in *Bordersands* too, as illustrated when Mab is chased across the Denbigh Moors by Powell and the Benbows. Where 'blue-grey clouds [...] tainted distant mountains' and the 'peaty reek' of the Moors are juxtaposed against brutal acts of violence among 'the crows cawing above the laughter, and the cold wind groaning through the sodden grass.' (*Bordersands*, pp. 110-114)

Like Humphreys before her, Beagan is a border writer and as a result 'has an ingrained sensitivity to social,' and geographical, 'contrasts'.⁹⁴ This is apparent throughout many of her stories. Her characters constantly pass through real and imagined places, reevaluating their lives and their sense of place whilst travelling between Chester, Shotton, Rhyl and Bangor. England is a constant presence, 'the Wirral shore sharply visible'.⁹⁵ Whereas sometimes it just lingers in the background, posing no threat, the Dee Estuary a 'grey wrinkled calm'.⁹⁶

Beagan consciously positions Flintshire as a place with its own distinctive character. She does this by exploring its cultural duality. As we have seen from an online interview in 2010, she describes herself as 'neither fish nor fowl', questioning what it is to belong, by exploring both English and Welsh cultural identities. Such themes are explored in the title story of her latest collection, *The Great Master of Ecstasy* (2009). Originally, 'The Great Master of Ecstasy' was one of the winning stories in the 1999 Rhys Davies Short Story Competition, and for this collection, it has been extended into a longer piece and spread over fourteen short chapters.

An unnamed female protagonist who, once destitute and homeless, was rescued and subsequently nursed back to health by local urban shaman, Kieran Wood, tells the story, for the most part. The young woman looks up to Kieran. She admires his skills of painting and drawing, is in awe of his calm and poise, and his ability to meditate and 'be wherever [he] want[s] to be'.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Thomas, *Internal Difference*, p. 78.

⁹⁵ Beagan, *Changes and Dreams*, p. 44.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁷ Glenda Beagan, *The Great Master of Ecstasy* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), p. 9.

Others in the community also recognise Kieran's shamanic abilities. They come to him for advice in the room he hires at the Yoga Centre. Then one day, Kieran is attacked outside the Yoga Centre. He is left in a coma and subsequently dies. The story continues by interweaving the past and the present. We get more of an insight into Kieran's life as the young woman tries to unravel her mentor's personal history. We learn that Kieran was born in Liverpool. When he was nine years old, Kieran's alcoholic mother was found dead at the bottom of the stairs. Kieran was adopted by his uncle Bryn and began a new life with his uncle's family on their farm in Flintshire.

It is through Kieran's and his uncle's relationship with the land that Beagan explores the question of what it is to belong. She demonstrates how language and place of birth are not the only factors in determining our sense of national identity, highlighting the tenuous divides of Flintshire's geographical and cultural borders. Bryn has farmed the land all his life, but unlike his urbanized nephew, and his sister before him, he is unable to connect with the land. He envies this, 'connection with the land that he couldn't even begin to imagine'.⁹⁸

Kieran Walsh, who subsequently reinvents himself into the shamanic Kieran Wood, inherits his mother's gifts. He shares her supernatural insight into the land's past, interacting with nature through their spirit guide, the mysterious, Holly King. The young woman visits Kieran's family and discovers more about his past, and the supernatural experiences that made him leave, and brought him close to madness. Beagan uses these interactions to explore the many facets of regional identity. As seen through Mari, Kieran's cousin, when she relates the history of local landmark, Craig Rwlff:

They just took the name for granted. This is a very anglicized area, you see, though less so now, with Welsh schools and everything. That's made a big difference. What I mean is, it's always been borderland, historically. Offa's dyke. Wat's dyke. All that. So it's least as much Saxon as Welsh [...]. With a name like Craig Rwlff, you're reminded. It's a kind of language fusion. It's Wolf rock, really. Sort of Wenglish.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.

This Welshness ‘of the Flintshire variety,’¹⁰⁰ is explored throughout the anthology, in stories such as ‘Birth of an Oxbow’. However, what makes ‘The Great Master of Ecstasy’ slightly more effective is that it uses the genres of fantasy and magical realism to explore internal conflicts of identity. It also gives voice to the outsiders looking in, people from the other side who have crossed over the border. This idea is captured skillfully in the closing paragraphs of the story, where Bryn recalls Kieran’s arrival at the farm:

Do you know what that water is down there? Bryn asked him.
Kieran shook his head.
That’s the River Dee, that is. The estuary where it runs out to the sea. And that land on the other side, d’you know what that is?
Is it England?
Well, yes, it’s part of England. It’s called the Wirral [...]. And what’s the river there?
The Mersey, said Kieran.
And what’s on the other side of the Mersey?
Liverpool.
[...]. So where you come from isn’t far away, is it?
I live here now though, said Kieran.¹⁰¹

This notion of allowing outsiders in is also explored in *Bordersands* and is used to illustrate what it means to be ‘in’ and ‘out’ of place. People, as well as places, contribute to Mab’s burgeoning sense of displacement. Those who Mab once perceived to be on the outside are now very much ‘in’ place. Both Eddie Powell and Griffo are from Liverpool. They are from the other side, the land beyond the water, and as Griffo reminds Mab, both he and Eddie Powell have:

[...]. ‘[L]ived round here for years. In fact, both of us have lived here longer than you.’
‘I bet this town still makes you feel like an outsider, though.’
Griffo shook his head. ‘No, not at all, this is my home. The only outsider here is you.’ (*Bordersands*, p. 82-83)

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

On one level, Griffo's comments are a form of attack, designed to make Mab leave, to emphasize that he no longer belongs here. They also demonstrate that a sense of belonging can be achieved through deliberate attachments, which, as a result, influences our sense of place. As Casey argues:

Persons who live in places – who inhabit or re-inhabit them – come to share features with the local landscape; but equally so they make a difference perhaps indelibly mark, the land in which they dwell.¹⁰²

The dichotomy of what it means to be 'in' and 'out' of place is also explored by Flintshire-born writer Gee Williams in her short story collection *Magic & Other Deceptions* (2000). Placed before the first story is a small section entitled YOU ARE HERE. Williams uses it as a means to place her region, and communicate its history, geography, and its nuances of dialect, and identity – distinctive cultural characteristics which are also designed to provide us with an authentic sense of place:

Flintshire is a Brigadoon county – now you see it now you don't. No wonder most people can't place the area on the map. I was born in it but before I left school it had disappeared, been swallowed up by Greater Clwyd. Then, a couple of years ago, out it pops: [...]. Basically it is still a stretched, leanish, strip of land running along one bank of the Dee. From ditch dredging, boat-building, cattle-rendering Saltney [...], through spit-on-your-hands Shotton and Chemical Flint [...], and on to the peeling painted tarts of Talacre and Prestatyn – the road invites you to keep going [...], till you hit the 'real' Wales [...]. It must be the only district in Britain whose unofficial capital (Chester) is in another country.¹⁰³

The obvious danger of adding this 'you are here' section is that it can appear a little too self-consciously regional, and unless the stories are truly reflective of the areas highlighted, it can also appear to be a little bolted on. I asked Gee Williams about her reasons behind including the 'You Are Here' section, wondering if her motives were to clearly place Flintshire on the map, and the literary imagination, and if so, why include it all? Instead, why not opt to blend the information into the stories, which

¹⁰² Casey, p. 305.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Magic & Other Deceptions*, p. 7.

she does to great effect in her collection *Blood, etc* (2008). Her response was both honest and revealing:

When *Magic* was in the proof stage I could've been struck by the atmosphere at BBC- especially the Manchester studios where I was working on a radio drama. Flintshire as a region didn't seem to exist from only 40 miles away. North Wales meant Snowdonia. Even recording my stories in Llandaff was fraught. Accent - never quite right! Then again I had older memories, influential ones, of going to live in Oxford and being challenged where do you come from, what's your accent? Maybe I wanted to make a strong case for the under-reported otherness of my patch, as I saw it, and that required definition.¹⁰⁴

Williams's concerns are similar to those of Emyr Humphreys, and although not overly nationalistic in their nature, they still express a need to place Flintshire on the map. The difference is that, where Humphreys wants to reaffirm its Welshness, Williams, like Beagan, wants to affirm its distinctive characteristics, providing a sense of place by exploring its accent, geography, local history and dual identity. She does this through a mix of humour and acute observation, as in her short story 'Every word in A Book'. The story is told from the viewpoint of Welsh-born, Wirral based, college lecturer, Mrs Jones, or, as she is referred to by Mr Al Ghamdi, one of her Saudi Arabian students, Mrs Jone.

Mr Ghamdi wishes to take his family skiing and, following the advice of Mrs Jones, plans to take them to Snowdonia. He also has a number of reservations about the trip, the main one being his concerns about the Welsh language:

"Thank-you. But I do not speak the language."

"That's O.K. Neither do I and I was born there."

"Ah, yes, Jone," he mused, "You told us this was the commonest Welsh name although there is no jay in the Welsh language...and you cannot speak it anyway [...]."¹⁰⁵

As we have seen, the county's relationship with the Welsh language is a common theme throughout the work of Flintshire writers, as is the duality of their national

¹⁰⁴ Gee Williams, (geewilliams@gmail.com) (18.2.2014). Re: E-mail to Math Bird (mathbuk@googlemail.com).

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *Magic & Other Deceptions*, p. 28.

identity. However, through this brief, clever, exchange Williams provides us with more insights. We see how it is accepted, casually acknowledged through conversation, and, although unconsciously, the connection between language and nationality comes from the outside, and from the perception of others. The story's ending is equally ironic. Lost among the Snowdonia hills and mountains, Mr Ghamdi and his family are taken in by Mr and Mrs Trefor, a farmer's widow and her son. During his time there, Mr Ghamdi learns to speak Welsh, which he demonstrates, with much enthusiasm, to Mrs Jones on his return:

Oh, Mrs Jone, it is a beautiful language! [...]. 'Roedd hi'n oer ddoe' - it was cold yesterday. 'Ble dych chi'n byw?' - where do you live . . .?"
And on he went. On and on and on.¹⁰⁶

Williams's comedic skills are evident throughout the collection, and as a result, they have the potential of appealing to a wider audience and placing Flintshire a little further in the public imagination. There are stories such as 'Waste Flesh', where photography student Vinny takes photographs of Shotton Steelworks and the northeast Wales coalfield exposing his father's infidelity in the process. In 'Gyroscope' council tenant Carys searches the house for her unemployed husband's recent bet winnings. Through the story's dialogue, Williams also acknowledges and explores the region's accent: 'Na - 'e's down at the Wanderers, trainin'. It'd get nicked if 'e took it there'.¹⁰⁷

Williams's strengths lie in her ability to provide a sense of place through its towns, industrial parks, and council estates. Places and people edging on the river's border, their lives as varied as the local history. This is demonstrated in her Welsh-Book-of-the-Year-shortlisted short story collection *Blood, etc* (2008). The collection lends its title from the opening story, which is told from the viewpoint of thirty-something stay-at-home dad, Alun. Alun spends his day looking after his three-year-old son, Charlie, while his wife, Holly, manages a furniture factory on the outskirts of Chester. All three live at the family home, the aptly named, Carousel, a 1930s townhouse situated at a crossroads along the Old Wrexham Road. We discover that Alun's life is also at a

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

crossroads. Through the morning and evening exchanges between Alun and his wife, we witness the distancing and deterioration of their relationship. Alun begins to question his newfound domesticity. He misses the city, is unable to connect with the locals, and 'the trees in the redundant orchard' make him 'cranky with their sluggard ways'.¹⁰⁸

Alun befriends a young woman, Mel and through their brief exchanges, Williams provides us with an insight into Alun's growing sense of isolation, and Flintshire's regional accent:

It gave him a thrill that voice. Not because it was anything special. Not because of its light, girly tone and easy half-Welsh, half-English border accent. But because it was not the voice of a three-year-old boy – the only other, apart from his own, he heard all day.¹⁰⁹

At the end of the story, Mel's horse is hit by a car and is subsequently 'put down'. When relating the scene to his wife, Alun tells her:

[...] – terrible pain it must have been in. Blood, etc everywhere . . . Sorry, is this too much detail or something?¹¹⁰

This 'blood, etc.' is a theme that runs throughout the collection, not only blood in a literal sense, but blood in terms of family, relatives, places and people, and the ties that bind us. The 'detail' is revealed through Flintshire's rural and urban landscapes. Accent and identity juxtaposed with personal and local history. This is best illustrated in the story, and the anthology's tour de force, 'Morfa'. The story is told from the viewpoint of an unnamed physician who has recently moved from London, to take up practice in Saltney, a small Flintshire village to the west of Chester, and Williams's home village. From the outset, she confirms the story's location:

[...], the traffic out on the Chester road passed with an accompanying, persistent hiss [...]. The wettest year on record for Flintshire – no, no longer for Flintshire anymore, for the whole of north Wales.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Gee Williams, *Blood Etc*, (Cardigan: Parthian, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

We get a sense of place through the protagonist's exchanges with his Italian wife, Rosa. He tells her: 'The rain's what forms the landscape'. We see how these landscapes have made a lasting impression on him. 'I've always had this thing about it – hated it when Mum and Dad moved away. I never want to live far from the sea again. The Saltney Marsh and the Dee estuary – the Welsh call it Morfa – it defeated the Romans'.¹¹²

The doctor finds the village of his birth changed, where the 'terraces and council-owned semis' are now 'circled by modern villas.' The region's social contrasts are apparent throughout. The grander townhouses juxtaposed against the red-bricked terraces of North Street, and their 'multi-troublesome' residents. It is at North Street where the doctor is called to a crime scene, to the murder of a young woman, Mary Talbot, where he assists the police to diagnose the cause of death.

Williams's darker stories are frequently her most successful. 'Morfa' is no exception. Through a seamless mix of crime and literary genres, she skillfully interweaves moral, social and geographical borders.

'Morfa', as much as it is a story of borders and social contrasts, is also a chronological record of a specific place, providing a sense of place by detailing the village's development, its stories, and local history. Williams manages this by exploring the area through the doctor's research of a local painting. Purchased from a Sunday market, 'Star of Bethlehem' is 'an artist's recollection of a shepherd's cottage which once stood at the end of what is now North Street, Saltney Ferry'.¹¹³ Through his findings, we learn that 'a couple of hundred years ago Saltney had not been there – because there was no there.' We discover that 'the wilderness was first incised by Nathaniel Kinderley's Saltney cut.' How parts of the River Dee were 'captured' and 'the pastoral replaced by the profitable' and how a 'whole village,' with 'over two-thousand people' are now 'buoyed up on a barely-wrung out sponge!'¹¹⁴

As the main protagonist keeps reminding us, 'The name for Earth should be Ocean [...]'.¹¹⁵ The phrase is used to explore multiple themes. On one level, it reflects the

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

protagonist's obsession with the physicality of his hometown. He perceives it as being the main catalyst for both his exile and return, showing how geography plays a pivotal role in determining how we live. However, he also uses it as a metaphor to express his growing feelings of instability, as he witnesses life and his own relationships starting to 'deliquesce', as expressed through Mary Talbot's death, and his wife's affair with a young police officer.

I asked Gee Williams about this story, commenting how intense it was, and asking how premeditated were her explorations of geography, borders and the chronological recording of a given place, again her answer was both honest and revealing:

Morfa has always been an important piece for me [...]. It did become a story about borders as well as 'The Border', but during the writing my mind wasn't on geography so much as an attempt to recover the village of my childhood when Saltney was a physically circumscribed but extended-in-time place by my mother's family's presence and their history there.¹¹⁶

The influence of local, geographical landmarks play a central role in *Bordersands* too. Not only does the Dee Estuary physically divide Flintshire from England, but it also marks it as a marginal space, a region along the border. As shown, the Dee Estuary, for many Flintshire-born writers is a constant presence; however, it is used mostly to explore geographical and cultural contrasts as opposed to any phenomenological aspects of it being a place in its own right. However, is this border space an actual place? Cresswell observes that:

Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of.¹¹⁷

In relation to *Bordersands*, Mab does not perceive the sands and waters of the Dee Estuary as just a landscape. He is not detached from it. For him, it is a 'lived' and 'felt' place. A place that provides both reflection and a means to articulate a significant cultural characteristic. The effect of this is twofold: Geographically, the Dee Estuary

¹¹⁶Gee Williams, (geewilliams@gmail.com). (24.2.2014). Re: E-mail to Math Bird (mathbuk@googlemail.com).

¹¹⁷ Cresswell, p. 10.

confirms that Flintshire is in Wales, and therefore markedly Welsh. It is also on the periphery, with regional characteristics, such as accent, and geography that are more recognizably English than any perceived notions of Welsh identity. Not only does *Bordersands* explore how this geographical border makes Mab feel both culturally 'in' and 'out' of place. It also shows how the Dee Estuary, its sands, and body of water, creates and places him, in relation to his cultural identity, in an 'in-between' place, as shown in the following extract:

As he drove, he could see the estuary. The tide was out. Across the sands, the Wirral shoreline and the fields and rows of houses beyond it were in full view. Ever since he was a boy, he'd always seen it as the *other place*. It was the land beyond the border, a solid, tangible space that reminded him he lived on the other side. When he went on school trips, travelling deeper into North Wales, to Betws-y-Coed and sometimes further west, he felt less Welsh. It was a feeling more than anything. A notion he was too young to articulate. [...] Yet the estuary, that divide of water, always made him feel he was on the inside, looking out. When he travelled further into Wales, he no longer felt a part of it. It was a strange feeling. He was neither one nor the other. It was like having one foot in the sand, and the other in the water. Now that he was back, he was happy to feel like that. He embraced it. This feeling of being neither English nor Welsh no longer bothered him. He was happy to be in this in-between place. At least he felt part of something. (*Bordersands*, p. 72)

This 'in-between' place not only enables Mab to express and come to terms with the dichotomy between feeling 'in' and 'out' of place, but it also symbolizes one of Flintshire's distinctive cultural characteristics: its sense of displacement, consciously or subconsciously, from both England and Wales.

However, the question that remains is how else can this 'in-between' place be placed on the literary map and, as a result, be more successful in capturing the public and popular imagination? When asked how long he has regarded himself as a Welsh and European writer, Emyr Humphreys tells us:

I think it's something to do with becoming a commercial failure, because it took a long time for me to realize that the English reading public is not terribly interested in knowing about Wales. They've got far greater interest in Papua New Guinea, or the Solomon Islands, or anywhere. Therefore anybody with

the ambition of being a successful commercial novelist would have to make a choice.¹¹⁸

Humphreys raises an interesting point here, and although his work, especially his 2009 short story collection *The Woman at the Window*, has continental Europe as a significant theme, he does not use it to 'explore' or 'place' his region. Perhaps, as discussed in the next chapter, the answer lies in not only using European and international locations but also using genre, such as crime and thriller novels, to reach a wider audience, exploring various approaches to regionalism to provide us with a 'sense of place'.

¹¹⁸ Humphreys, *Conversations and Reflections*, p. 133.

Chapter Three: Genres of Frontiers

Wider explorations of Welsh regionalism as explored through the crime-thriller genre.

This chapter explores how the south, west, north, and in some part, northeast regions of Wales have been represented in Welsh writing in English through the thriller genre. By discussing four selected novels, in relation to *Bordersands*, it examines each novel's approach to regionalism, illustrating that there are multiple definitions and variations of the Welsh regional novel. Through Raymond Williams's hardboiled, political thriller *The Volunteers* (1978) and Duncan Bush's noir thriller *Glass Shot* (1991), I will discuss how the Welsh regional thriller can be defined in terms of ideology, as opposed to geography, culture, and landscape, and how this approach can be used to explore periphery-centre conflicts, globalization, cultural assimilation, and the disconnected centre. I also hope to demonstrate how the regional thriller can be used to explore regional determinism and, to some degree, the dichotomy between determinism and 'regional possibilism', as shown in Niall Griffiths's crime thriller *Stump* (2003), and Tristan Hughes's modern gothic thriller *Revenant* (2008).

There are, of course, many crime and thriller novels based in, and centred around Wales and its regions, and due to word limitations, this commentary is unable to discuss them all. However, the four novels discussed were chosen to provide a cross-section of the Welsh regions. What these novels share is that they explore their chosen region using aspects of the thriller genre. And although their approach to regionalism varies, they use it, to varying degrees, to explore the characteristics of a place.

The thriller, as a literary form, has developed into many sub-genres: political, crime, noir, hardboiled, gothic, psychological and so on. Defining what these sub-genres share, to qualify them as thrillers, can be a contentious issue. I would argue that one of the common denominators that link these sub-genres (and the thrillers discussed in this chapter) is that they contain and explore crisis situations. A crisis situation as defined by the protagonist's involvement in a crime (murder, physical and sexual violence, or psychological and political threat).

This notion is explored in Ralph Harper's *The World of the Thriller* (1968), written in the late 1960s, but still relevant to thrillers today. Harper, using the terminology of the German existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, describes the thriller as 'the literature of boundary situations'.¹¹⁹ The boundaries to which he refers to are, of course, moral and legal boundaries – as set by society and the law. He observes that thrillers are primarily concerned with 'special situations,' situations, such as crime, murder, greed, fate, jealousy and guilt, which force individuals to cross these moral and legal boundaries. However, when the thriller is coupled with the regional novel, these boundaries can be cultural, geographical, spatial, and ideological, too.

In his book *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976), Raymond Williams makes the following observations on the keyword *Regional*:

There is an evident tension within the word, as between a distinct area and a definite part. Each sense has survived, but it is the latter which carries an important history. Everything depends in the latter sense, on the term of a relation: a part of what?¹²⁰

This tension between a 'distinct area' and 'definite part,' is a theme that runs throughout Williams's political thriller *The Volunteers*, as does the notion of regional assimilation and commodification.

The Volunteers depicts an imagined 1980s set against the backdrop of the striking coalfields of south Wales. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of its main protagonist, Lewis Redfern, a cynical investigative reporter of Welsh extraction. Redfern, a former left-wing political activist, now works for the *Insatel Global News Corporation* as a 'consultant analyst', reporting on the political underground, using 'his knowledge of subversive political groups to point his colleagues towards the juiciest, most lucrative stories'.¹²¹

Redfern has parallels with Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, and Raymond Chandler's 'crusader/knight' Philip Marlowe, and Williams uses the archetypal hardboiled protagonist to good effect. Redfern is an investigator whose sole activity

¹¹⁹ Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Ohio: Cleveland University Press, 1968), p. 51.

¹²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 260.

¹²¹ Raymond Williams, *The Volunteers* (Wales: Parthian, 2011), p. x.

is 'exposure,' who 'not only enquires into entrenched power structures but engages in combat against them'.¹²²

The novel is uncannily accurate in its predictions; with Insatel bearing a close resemblance to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, as Redfern cynically observes 'where better to put other people's money than an international television satellite service'.¹²³

Through Redfern's investigation of this mysterious group of political activists, known only as *The Volunteers*, Williams's exploration of regionalism takes a more ideological approach. He focuses on margin-centre conflicts, the tensions between striking miners and local government. He also views Wales not only as a subset of the United Kingdom but as a region of a much larger, global dominance.

More significantly, he explores how neocolonial forces, such as globalization and mass communication, affect regional identity, and local cultural traditions. As illustrated in the opening chapters, when, following the attempted assassination of a government minister at St. Fagan's folk museum in Cardiff, Redfern is sent to investigate. As he wanders around the museum, he observes:

What this place offered, after all, was a version of the life of a people: a version, characteristically, that attracted official visits. And then what had poured into it, roughly and incongruously, with this lingering shock of surprise, was another version, another practice, of the life of the same people.¹²⁴

What this shows us is that what claims to be the history, stories, and cultural variations of a given region, is, in fact, a conditioned response, a regional narrative that is reshaped by, conforms to, and is decontextualized by the dominant, homogeneous narratives that are purveyed. Williams goes on to explore this further, illustrating how these romanticized snapshots also obscure a region's cultural and historical diversity:

But, first this is an active history only of rural Wales: of farms and cottages, and of the early industries of tanning and weaving. All the later history, of the majority of Welsh people, is simply not seen: the mining townships, the quarrymen's village, the iron and steel works settlements. [...] The idea that

¹²² Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p.24.

¹²³ Williams, *The Volunteers*, p. 4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the museum embodies is of an old Wales, still in part surviving, but with all the modern realities left outside in the car park. [...] That is why it is called a folk museum. Folk is the past: an alternative to People.¹²⁵

Such representations of a given place also contribute to the creation of place-myth. Many places, particularly those centred on tourism, adopt and encourage many of the fictional, romanticized notions of them. Not only can this propagate common misconceptions of regional and national identity, but it can also be instrumental in defining which social and cultural attributes are required for us to feel either 'in' or 'out' of place. This is also illustrated in *Bordersands* through Mab's experience during a school outing to Betws-y-Coed in northwest Wales:

In the gift shops, with the recording of a Welsh male voice choir singing in the background, the trinkets and souvenirs, love spoons, porcelain Welsh dolls, slate coasters, dragon keyrings and mugs, he felt like an imposter. (*Bordersands*, p. 72)

These images evoke perceptions and images of Wales that are reminiscent of both Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* and, more significantly, Emylyn Williams's *The Corn is Green*. It is a place-myth, to some degree, that Mab (and to varying degrees his region) subscribes to, otherwise he would not feel like an imposter, and subsequently displaced. Through a combination of memory, attachments, and stories, we also create our own place-myths, which serve to perpetuate both a collective and an individual sense of place.

However, through the *Volunteers* Williams's notions of displacement are explored through ideological border spaces. What I mean by this is, like his region, Redfern is stranded between the cultural and political affiliations of his past and the disconnected, cynicism of his present situation. Through Redfern's investigation of, and final reckoning with former Labour minister, and leader of the volunteers, Mark Evans, Redfern's political allegiances are questioned. They are revalued, resulting in him crossing back over the 'border' into political activism, and, ironically, becoming a *volunteer*, subsequently forcing him 'to find my own way back'.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Another Cardiff-based novel, which explores centre-margin conflicts, although focusing more on Cardiff and its burgeoning disconnection with the Welsh hinterland beyond it, is Duncan Bush's psychological, noir thriller *Glass Shot*. Set in 1984 against the backdrop of the miners' strike, *Glass Shot* is narrated by its main protagonist, thirty-six-year-old Stew Boyle, a Cardiff-based garage mechanic of Maltese-Irish descent.

Recently separated from his wife and children, Boyle now lives alone. Known locally as Yank, American-movie-obsessed Boyle dresses like a cowboy and drives a 1957 Thunderbird, cruising around the capital and its periphery, where, as Tony Bianchi suggests 'empty space and its open possibilities are always present at the borders of the known'.¹²⁷

Places and interior spaces, in the form of bedrooms, living rooms, the city's alleyways and streets, rural villages, and the Brecon Beacons beyond, are a significant theme throughout the novel. Bush uses them to map out his region and to explore an alternative sense of place. It is 'a sense of place that reflects a gap between the dominant ideological and aesthetic interests and the interests and stories of persons who reside in the locale'.¹²⁸

Bordersands, like *Glass Shot*, also explores its region through spatial dimensions, social positions, social relationships, and the cultural and ideological distances between them. This is illustrated when Mab returns to the Moor Council Estate after a fifteen-year absence, and, while spending the night in his sister's new house, he observes:

A house like this was unattainable all those years ago. Even a Council estate had its hierarchy. It started from the bungalows in the top avenues and dwindled down to the cream terraced houses of the jobless. The only thing those houses had in common was trouble. It was mixed in with the mortar. It was laid with every brick. (*Bordersands*, pp. 6 - 7)

On one level, this is a comment on the social stratification that exists in the Moor Estate. However, as Mab continues to remember past events, particularly the weeks

¹²⁷ Tony Bianchi, 'Aztecs in Troedrhigwair: recent fictions in Wales', in *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood*, ed. by Ian A Bell (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2008), pp. 44-76 (p. 61).

¹²⁸ Marjorie Pryse, 'Writing Out of the Gap', in *A Sense of Place*, ed. by Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1997), pp. 19-34 (p.24).

that led up to Rhiannon's death, we learn that being an active part of such hierarchies allowed him to feel 'in' place. Moreover, years later, when he finds himself socially and culturally excluded, they accentuate his sense of displacement.

Bush also explores themes of displacement as illustrated when Boyle drives to the Brecon Beacons to spy on his ex-wife, travelling to a place that is beyond the centre, still part of Wales, but separated by distance:

[...] one more dirty-looking, Welsh, played-out little village, don't even ask me to pronounce the fucking name of it. Just another place that grew up around a hole in the ground twenty miles from nowhere [...].¹²⁹

Interestingly, when Boyle eventually travels beyond the village, and into the hills and the valley beyond, he imagines it as another place, likening it to Montana and Wyoming; it is 'like a background you'd see in a film. Or some Shangri-La, another mountain land painted on glass'.¹³⁰ Such themes are reflective of the novel's title:

Glass shot. A shot obtained through a glass plate on which part of the scene has been painted. The painting on the glass is photographed along with the action seen through the clear portion of the glass, providing the illusion of a complete setting. This Special Effect can be used to simulate elaborate locations without the need to construct expensive sets.¹³¹

This blending of fantasy and reality works on multiple levels. Firstly, *Glass Shot* is a noir thriller, narrated by a psychologically deranged Stew Boyle. Through intermittent flashbacks we learn of Boyle's violent history and that some of the sexual conquests he lists in his scrapbook are, in fact, his victims. What makes this even more unsettling is how Boyle tries to paint another picture. He justifies his actions, convincing himself that his victims were willing, and grateful participants.

Boyle's disillusionment and his reimagining of social and geographical landscapes work well. Arguably, this works on a regional level, too. Cardiff, like Boyle, focuses in on itself and tries to reimagine itself in relation to a more globalized culture. This positions the regions beyond the periphery of the centre into what Jeanette Leys

¹²⁹ Duncan Bush, *Glass Shot* (London: Mandarin, 1993), p. 56.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

describes as, a 'paradoxical border space'.¹³² The paradox is that, as the social and cultural gaps grow wider, the centre identifies even more with a globalized mass-culture, which, in Boyle's case, is American television and films.

Boyle's blurring of fantasy and reality can also be read in reference to the decontextualizing of regional narratives. Like the exhibition in St. Fagan's museum, Boyle's reimagining of people and places is only a snapshot. As Tony Bianchi observes: 'Boyle sees each of the protagonists as 'thinking' each other – the police 'putting together a picture' of Boyle,' and 'Boyle building a dossier' on his victims. The results of this, in reference to both Boyle's delusions and the centre's perception of what lies beyond its geographical borders, is that: 'there is never a stable, unitary knowledge of reality: never the 'whole picture'.¹³³

As a novel, *Glass Shot* has many parallels with *Bordersands*. Both novels are psychological noir thrillers, using the genre to explore landscapes, themes, and crimes that are 'notably dark, brooding, cynical, [and] complex'.¹³⁴ However, by adopting many of the noir genre's characteristics, both novels may be perceived as being unremittingly bleak. Moreover, in relation to *Bordersands*, maintaining its 'noirish' tone and style runs the risk of creating a regional stereotype that could arguably be perceived as inauthentic as Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*. To address this, *Bordersands* comments on the beauty of the Flintshire lowlands, and as Mab wanders through the Greenfield Valley, we witness a softer side to his nature. This is reflected in his recollections of his mother too. Not only do we see more nuances of his character, but we can also gain a better understanding of the region through aspects of its local history. Both novels also explore the notion of identity, nationhood, although Bush, like Williams, focuses more on the centre's disenfranchisement of, and detachment from, the places beyond its borders.

However, if we look beyond the centre and travel west, we find a more recognisable exploration of regionalism, in Niall Griffiths's crime thriller *Stump*.

Like many of Griffiths's novels, *Stump* uses its main protagonists to explore the contrasts between urban, rural, cultural and geographical landscapes. There is a

¹³² Jeanette Lynes, 'Is Newfoundland Inside that T.V.?', in *A Sense of Place*, ed. by Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1997), pp. 81-94 (p.90).

¹³³ Bianchi, *Peripheral Visions*, p. 62.

¹³⁴ Paul Duncan, *Noir Fiction: Dark Highways* (London: Harpenden Pocket Essentials, 2003), pp. 13-14.

distinct reference to geographical boundaries. Cultural differences are explored through dialect, accent, and the demotic voice.

Griffiths's regionalism is defined more in terms of 'being both realistic and referential [...] to mirror a specific environment to show what real "life" is like in "a limited and peculiar environment"'.¹³⁵

These so-called 'peculiar environments' that Griffiths explores are the Dyfi valley in west Wales, its surrounding forests and villages, and the town of Aberystwyth. Griffiths shows how the environment can influence regional consciousness, and how each character reacts to, and to some degree, is shaped by these settings. However, what is more interesting is that he is less concerned with how these environments affect the local inhabitants, but focuses more on the effect they have on the outsiders travelling through them.

These outsiders are presented through a combination of first and third person narratives. Through a mix of present tense and flashbacks, Griffiths interweaves the story of its main protagonist (a Liverpudlian, one-armed, recovering drug addict who now lives in Aberystwyth) with the story of Darren and Ally (two small-time Liverpudlian criminals who have been sent to find him).

Like the novels *The Volunteers* and *Glass Shot, Stump* uses the thriller genre, and the unfolding of its mystery, as a means of providing a regional map. As Ally and Darren travel from Liverpool to Aberystwyth, Griffiths explores the variations and, to some degree, histories of the northeast, and west Wales regions. They leave behind the 'wide escarpment of council houses, uniformly redbrick'¹³⁶ driving towards the border, where the air is filled by the 'sulphurous stink from Shotton steelworks rising above the flat wide bog on their left, chimneys and towers charred and blackened between marsh and mudflat'.¹³⁷

They drive into Chester, 'through the 'ancient gate through the ancient walls. Grand arch of the conqueror once sprouting heads severed and staked of the conspirative and seditious or just merely the Celt'.¹³⁸ They keep driving, turning 'on to

¹³⁵ Alison Calder, 'Reassessing Prairie Realism', in *A Sense of Place*, ed. by Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1997), pp. 51-60 (p.52).

¹³⁶ Niall Griffiths, *Stump* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 8.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

a bridge, cross the River Dee,' and as they enter northeast Wales, 'Chester gets smaller behind them. Wrexham gets bigger in front'.¹³⁹

As Ally and Darren travel further west, the landscape becomes less familiar. The 'earth swelling, beginning to bulge, [...] into mounds and hills then higher still into mountains, dark shadows streaking across them as the weak sun is gulped by cloud and ancient earthworks'.¹⁴⁰

It is here that Griffiths's exploration of regional determinism is more explicit. For Darren, this is an unforgiving landscape. The wide-open spaces accentuate his sense of detachment. He feels vulnerable; he has less control when compared to the autonomy he feels on the urban, Liverpoolian streets. Again, the crisis situation here is one of identity. This is a land that Darren distrusts, 'a place with this many mountains an lakes an woods, it's just not fuckin right.' This is a land with 'witches n all sorts,' the 'creepiest' place, and the 'Sooner we're outer the fuckin place the better'.¹⁴¹ This alien landscape heightens Darren's sense of inadequacy. He grows more agitated. His predilection towards violence proliferates as the landscape encourages his darker impulses.

The antithesis to Darren's response is illustrated through his, long-suffering, sidekick, Ally. For Ally, the landscape awakens a regional consciousness that, for the majority of his life has been subdued by a more strident, urbanized regional voice. We learn that Ally, as a boy, spent holidays in the valley visiting his Welsh grandparents. The land has a more liberating effect on him, as opposed to the limiting effect it has on Darren. Ally's regional affiliations, albeit briefly, are renewed.

As Ally pictures himself as a boy, reeling in a fish with his grandfather, he too is 'drawn closer to the land'.¹⁴² This is a regional consciousness reawakened by nostalgia. The landscape, coupled with an expression of longing, enables Ally to catch sight of those distinct, and forgotten places, which, like the fish's 'face he recalls most clearly' twenty years later 'still scanned in his dreams'.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 77.

Such themes are also explored in *Bordersands*. Mab longs to undo past moral and social transgressions, which, subsequently, will put him back 'in place.' Moreover, by constantly remembering and revisiting the places of his youth, Mab longs to return to a specific place. In fact, his recollections begin with him being very much 'in' place. He has always lived on the Moor Estate. He has no experience of living anywhere else. Its avenues and streets help to define him. He is the unspoken leader of Griffo and the Benbows. Being in these places provides both an 'individual' and 'tribal' identity, and the places they visit, and in Mab's case revisit, play a significant role 'in the evocation of self and group consciousness'.¹⁴⁴

Arguably, places such as the Moor Estate, Greenfield Valley, and the Dee Estuary, etc., are 'distinct, though unconscious elements of the self.' They allow Mab to feel 'in place', and 'cement' his personality, and regional consciousness through a mix of 'mythology and ceremony'.¹⁴⁵

Griffiths explores the more lasting effects of a renewed regional consciousness through the observations and internal dialogue of *Stump's* one-armed protagonist. As the one-armed stranger hides out in rural Aberystwyth, he spends each morning reflecting on the surrounding countryside and, more specifically, a one-eyed fox:

Sniff, deeply, the fox's left scent, the memory of him; his hot an thick, blade-sharp musk. Think how ace the day will be; one of them clear an crisp spring days, cold but the sun shining, light so honed it will make every leaf, every blade of grass adopt a purely individual shade of green. It will turn the sea into a million mirrors. It will make the stump ache an throb, give me a fuckin migraine in thee elbow. But still.¹⁴⁶

Here, Griffiths blurs the boundaries between landscape and nature. The fox, like the region, has a profound effect on the narrator. His awareness of the landscape is heightened. It is as though the region's presence, like the fox's 'blade-sharp musk', is starting to get under his skin. What is also of interest here is the reference to the narrator's stump. Even though he is deeply affected by the physical environment and climate, his stump still aches and throbs. It is as though the stump of his amputated

¹⁴⁴ Casey, p.36, citing Sheperd, p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹⁴⁶ Griffiths, *Stump*, pp. 6-7.

arm is still a remnant of his illicit past, and the urbanized region from which he has broken away.

In terms of regional determinism, what we can also read from this is, perhaps, no matter how hard each of these ‘outsiders’ tries to reimagine themselves, they can never truly escape the social, cultural and geographical landscapes that have shaped and, in some ways, still bind them. This particular notion of regional determinism is explored in great depth in Tristan Hughes’s modern-day, literary, gothic thriller *Revenant*.

Set in Ynys Mon (Anglesey), *Revenant* is very much concerned with the cultural, psychological, and social influences a local community has over its inhabitants. The effects of such influences are, in many ways, limiting. *Revenant*, like Emyr Humphreys’s *A Toy Epic*, is a polyphonic novel, narrated by its three twenty-something, protagonists Neil, Steph, and Ricky. The novel is set during Easter, 2001, where Steph and Ricky return to their hometown to meet up with Neil, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the death of Del, their childhood ringleader, and friend.

Their old friend haunts Neil, Steph, and Ricky, and in regional terms, Del is very much the embodiment of the local. Her ghost, like the memories and associations they have with Ynys Mon, binds them to specific places. Hughes also uses each character’s memories, fears, past rivalries, jealousies, and secrets, to explore Ynys Mon’s cultural diversity. We learn about the beautiful Steph, the English foreigner, who, having moved to Ynys Mon as a child, feels even more excluded due to her mother’s dissatisfaction with the town and middle-class pretensions.

Hughes uses Del and Steph’s relationship to highlight the dichotomy between local community and the world that resides beyond its borders. Del is described as ‘lumpy,’ wearing clothes ‘that are too big for her.’ She begins to feel threatened by the beautiful Steph, and the wider world she represents.

As observed by Ricky: ‘Steph was always blathering about going to new places, places we’d not really been together, like the mainland’.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Tristan Hughes, *Revenant* (London: Picador, 2008), p. 176.

Del's reaction to these outside influences is to ground herself in the local. She wants to exclude Steph and return to how things used to be when it was just her, Neil, and Ricky. Del makes a point of going to the places they had always been and doing the things they had always done.

One consequence of this is that Steph becomes more aware of the physical and cultural differences between them. Through Steph's observations of Del, Hughes explores the limiting and, to some degree, negative effects a local community can have on those who are not indigenous to the area. Steph describes herself as being outside of the group. She remembers how, under Del's influence, the group 're-established their separateness' and 'closed ranks'.

However, Steph is as equally aware of her own power to influence, observing that:

I know I'm pretty. And I know she's not. [...] Because I know these things and she doesn't. [...] And already there have been intimations that the world we are moving towards favours me.¹⁴⁸

In regional terms, this can also be read as favouring a world of larger, global narratives. Moreover, what is interesting about the dichotomy between Del and Steph is that not only does Hughes use it to bring attention to regional differences in terms of 'geographical borders that contain distinct local artefacts,' but he highlights 'epistemological borders that separate a distinct regional community from the larger society within which it exists'.¹⁴⁹

Hughes also demonstrates the social and moral borders contained within a local community. Through the memories and observations of Ricky, we get glimpses of internal, racial prejudices. We learn how Ricky was ostracized because of his dark skin, and Irish origins, and labeled as a 'Pikey, gyppo, tinker'¹⁵⁰ throughout the town and neighbouring villages. Ricky's mixed ethnic origin places him in a social space that is outside the region's identified and acceptable ethnicity. It also has a limiting effect on him. His social behavior is, to some degree, conditioned by it – a condition that is brought back to the surface when he returns to the town. Once again, Ricky finds

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁴⁹ Lynes, *Sense of Place*, p. 88.

¹⁵⁰ Hughes, *Revenant*, p. 43.

himself humouring the locals, playing the role that is expected of him, and slipping 'back into the old routine'.¹⁵¹

Ricky is as guilty of regional discrimination as the locals who discriminate against him. As Ricky drives through the Welsh border towns, he generalizes that 'people in border towns are moodier, broodier, and just plain sodding meaner'.¹⁵² He describes the Flintshire border towns as: 'neverland more like – never-ever land [...] this semi-Scouse sprawl [...], eyesore of warehouses and factories and slip-roads'.¹⁵³ And by doing so, Ricky stigmatizes these places to the same degree as his hometown stigmatizes him.

Unlike Steph and Ricky, Neil has remained in Ynys Mon. And, as a result, it is Neil who is haunted by Del the most. Neil's memories of Del restrict him. They keep him rooted to the past and, more significantly, to a particular place. Neil is very much one of those characters 'who for whatever reason cannot leave their places' and as a result 'must resign themselves as best they can to its rigors'.¹⁵⁴

Ricky and Steph's return only serves to accentuate Neil's feelings of remorse, regret, and entrapment. And, as the three friends revisit old haunts, these feelings are brought closer to the surface. Through places that are both real and imagined, Hughes uses geography to explore the deterministic effects of place. By mixing folklore with landscape, Hughes's gothic undertones make its influence appear more baleful. For Neil, Del, like the places she represents, is always 'hiding behind the tree trunks. She's flickering around them like candlelight. I wish she wouldn't play hide and seek like this'.¹⁵⁵

However, when Steph, Neil, and Ricky revisit the old, now dilapidated, gatehouse, Steph, unlike Neil, is able to exorcise her ghosts. The old gatehouse, like so many places in Ynys Mon, holds many bad memories for her. It was where, as a teenager, Steph was abandoned by Del, and subsequently raped by the Candyman 'their own bogeyman in their special woods'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁵⁴ Alex Hunt, ed., *The Geographical Imagination of Annie Proulx: Rethinking Regionalism* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, *Revenant*, p. 87.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

If we read this in regional terms, by setting the old gatehouse on fire, Steph's actions offer, perhaps, a more possibilist approach. Burning down the old gatehouse could, arguably, be seen as an act of renewal. Steph is continually trying to adapt, and reinvent herself beyond the limiting boundaries of a particular place. And, as shown in the novel's end reveal, when Del's boat capsized it was Steph who stopped Ricky from trying to help her, telling him to '[l]eave her'.¹⁵⁷

Bordersands, like *Revenant*, shows that there can be multiple perceptions of a given place. When writing *Bordersands*, I was extremely conscious of the fact that there is no definitive, singular sense of the Flintshire lowlands; both a writer's and reader's notion of a given place can be highly selective. It was important that I try to convey this. As Doreen Massey argues: 'Places do not have single unique identities, they are full of internal conflicts'.¹⁵⁸ *Bordersands* explores this through Mab's perception of Rhiannon, and the conflicting perceptions of her (as seen through the novel's central and supporting characters).

As in *Revenant*, where there are various notions of Del, *Bordersands* provides multiple perceptions of Rhiannon, which, through various dialogical exchanges, allows the novel to explore various interpretations of the Flintshire lowlands. Each perception contains an element of truth. However, our memories of people and places are 'subject to fabrication',¹⁵⁹ and by acknowledging this, we may be able to see beyond any falsehoods. We can gain new insights and, by doing so, acquire a deeper understanding of a particular place, as illustrated when Mab learns more about the 'Level's' history:

There was the *Level* for one: a hilly tract of grassland where they used to mine for lead. Since he could remember, it had always been just a stretch of land between the Moor Estate and the Greenfield Valley. It was nothing more than a shortcut, narrow pathways that ran through the grass and joined onto a gravelled track.

The things he remembered about the place made more sense now. Years ago, before they were filled in, there were two high-walled pools. They stood near the end of the track, just before it reached the road. They'd always fascinated him. He'd spend hours sitting on the wall and gazing into the dark,

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁵⁸ Cresswell, p. 36, citing Massey, pp. 59–69.

¹⁵⁹ David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p. 107.

mossy water. He found the silence uncanny. There was something strange about the quietness of it all. Its calm unnerved him, as though something lurked among the reeds.

By browsing through his mother's books, he discovered it was a drainage level for the mine, or the boat level as the author had referred to it. There had been canals there too, to carry the lead ore. The mining company that owned it, *Moors United Corporation*, even lent its name to the estate. He didn't like that. Those avenues and lanes were his home. His family and others like them were its history, and he found it difficult to think of it as someone else's place. (*Bordersands* p. 122)

Not only does this illustrate that places can exist both as one and many things, but it also demonstrates that (like our perceptions of people) our sense and understanding of them evolves. Moreover, to see them in a new light permanently changes our view of them and the feelings they evoke, and although they can remain recognizably the same, we can never truly return to the places that exist in our memories.

In many ways, Mab longs to achieve this. His search for the truth is also a form of 'homecoming' to enable him to get back 'in' place, but his hometown has changed, and it can never be the same again. He finds himself returning to a different place, and as a result remains alienated from it. As Casey argues, for most people 'displacement represents the loss of particular places in which their lives were formerly at home'.¹⁶⁰

Through the genre of the regional thriller, and by exploring such notions of place-myth, local history, memory, social and cultural hierarchies, belonging and displacement, *Bordersands* hopes to convey some of the distinctive social and cultural characteristics of the Flintshire lowlands. And by doing so, it also tries to show that there is no 'singular' sense of place. Like Rhiannon, it is complex. For each of us, places exist as many things, and our notions of them are constantly changing. Perhaps we can only ever acquire a "sense" of a place, and, like our notions of Rhiannon, place is a matter of interpretation.

¹⁶⁰ Casey, p. 35.

Conclusion: Authentic Hybrids

Now that we have explored what it means to be from the Flintshire lowlands, and the places contained within it, two questions should be asked at this concluding juncture. Firstly, does *Bordersands* offer an authentic sense of place? Secondly, does it provide any new perspectives, or explore areas, which have been neglected, or overlooked by the Flintshire writers previously discussed?

To claim that any regional novel provides an authentic sense of place raises the question of its objectivity. Writing about any region will always be, to varying degrees, a place of the writer's imagination. This applies to readers too, and to label a regional novel as authentic 'does not always have an 'objective correlative'; instead, the concept is applied to something we subjectively believe to be true.¹⁶¹ Taking this notion a step further, to argue that *Bordersands* provides an 'authentic' portrayal of the Flintshire lowlands may not necessarily mean that we have gained any new insights about a county that was relatively 'unfamiliar', but that it is in line with our expectations.

This is also influenced by our knowledge and current perception of a place. For those of us living in Wales, or in close proximity to the Flintshire lowlands, we might be more inclined to see *Bordersands* as an authentic representation. Its geography, history, and regional accent are recognisable; however, for those with a more stereotypical view, it might be perceived as inauthentic – as it conflicts with common notions of Welsh identity. Perhaps one of the answers to this is to provide a balanced view. *Bordersands* tries to achieve this by juxtaposing conceived notions of Wales and the Flintshire lowlands alongside alternative views, providing an authentic view of the region through, what Lonergan calls, the 'paradox of recognition and unfamiliarity'.¹⁶²

Lonergan argues that to deem an artwork (in this case a regional novel) authentic, we have to recognise something in it 'that accords with our sense of personal value or truth'. However, at the same time, it must provide an alternative view, and 'something that is outside our ordinary experience'.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Patrick Lonergan, 'J. M. Synge, Authenticity, and the Regional', in *Regional Modernisms*, ed. by Neal Alexander and James Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 65-82 (p.70).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

So how does *Bordersands* try to achieve this? Firstly, as also shown in the work of Emyr Humphreys, Glenda Beagan, and Gee Williams, instead of simply describing landscapes and places, stylistically, it blends them with interior perceptions. What I mean by this is that instead of trying to make places appear factual through overly aestheticized description, as seen in Emyr Williams's *The Corn is Green*, it also explores them through focalized reflection and subjective observation. As illustrated in the following extract where Mab revisits the old Greenfield Docks along the Dee Estuary:

As the rain began to ease, he got out of the car and took a walk along the estuary path. The tide was in, a bloated wash of umber that flowed into the Irish Sea. When the path started to recede, he stopped to light a cigarette. He gazed across the ribs of sand, the silt, and the rivulets of water. Seabirds circled above, their mewling cries seeming to mock him from a distance.

The Dee Estuary had always been a place of secrets. It was where things got lost, and no amount of searching could find them. Barely five miles wide, it formed the boundary between the Wirral peninsular and the northeast Wales coast. It was a beautiful, ugly expanse of salt marsh and mudflats. Hidden channels and creeks snaked beneath low waters, and gatherings of birds feasted along the shore.

Even after all these years, he thought the place looked unchanged. He saw Rhiannon's face even when he closed his eyes (*Bordersands*, P. 22)

What this illustrates is that the Dee Estuary is not simply used as a backdrop but also, as David James argues in his exploration of style, landscape, and perception, it is brought to life. This blending of the factual and the personal, (a synthesis of Richard Llewellyn's subjectivity and Raymond Williams's realism) arguably, makes us more susceptible in believing it to be true, thus heightening its sense of authenticity. Such an approach also allows the writer 'to do justice to the particularity of local places while observing the far-ranging associations that such places evoke'.¹⁶⁴

This raises an interesting question concerning the distinction between the narrator and the protagonist. *Bordersands* is written in the third-person limited, and arguably using a first-person perspective would be as equally as effective in 'blending the factual and the personal' to provide a heightened sense of authenticity. However, I chose the third-person limited because I felt it enabled *Bordersands* to express both the subjective and the personal, but also provided more flexibility to show the region

¹⁶⁴ James, p.164.

from a wider perspective, coupling the 'pared down' style of Raymond Williams with the descriptive and atmospheric characteristics of the noir thriller to explore the 'unfamiliar' and see places in a new light.

With this in mind, does *Bordersands* offer anything 'new' or 'unfamiliar' to our knowledge and perception of the Flintshire lowlands? On one level, it is a regional crime-thriller set specifically in and around Greenfield and Holywell. This in itself offers a new perspective, as there are few if any, regional crime-thrillers which centre on and around this area. In addition, it explores and comments on the Greenfield Valley's local and industrial history, aspects that are overlooked by the four Flintshire-born writers discussed in the previous chapters. However, *Bordersands* does share some common notions and themes, more so with the writers Gee Williams and Glenda Beagan. It focuses on the distinctive characteristics of the Flintshire lowlands such as its bilingualism, regional accent, and its cultural and geographical borders. The Dee Estuary is a significant feature, a constant reminder of that, somewhat tenuous, cultural divide.

Even though *Bordersands* uses this geographical landmark to explore cultural contrasts, what distinguishes it from the Flintshire-based novels previously discussed is that it also uses these border sands to explore the Flintshire lowlands' cultural-hybridity. As we have seen, Glenda Beagan touches on this in her story 'The Great Masters of Ecstasy' where she uses the notion of being 'Wenglish'. However, *Bordersands* explores it in more depth, developing (as previously discussed) the notion of it being an 'in-between' place, possessing like many 'in-between' cultures a 'double consciousness.'

As Marwan M. Kraidy argues 'hybridity is a risky notion. It comes without guarantees. Rather than a single idea or a unitary concept, hybridity is an association of ideas, concepts and themes.'¹⁶⁵ However, like Kraidy, I prefer the term as opposed to some of its equivalents such as "creolization," "metizaje," and "syncretism" because it 'includes diverse intercultural mixes'.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, in relation to

¹⁶⁵ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), p.45.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2.

Bordersands, 'cultural hybridity is a border concept'¹⁶⁷ and as explored through Mab it is a mix of both 'organic' and 'intentional' hybridities.¹⁶⁸

In relation to the Flintshire lowlands, this notion is integral to *Bordersands's* contribution in furthering our understanding of it, and gaining a deeper sense of place. Like many people born or residing along the Flintshire lowlands, Mab is, albeit consciously or subconsciously, aware of the cultural contrasts around him. His sense of Welsh identity is influenced by the social and cultural constructs of his region: its accent; geography; its relationship with the Welsh language; its local cultural and industrial history. Furthermore, he is influenced by both sides of the Welsh-English border. He feels as Glenda Beagan describes 'neither fish nor fowl.' However, Mab's reaction is to embrace it. This 'intentional' hybridity allows him to renegotiate his sense of cultural and national identity, and to some degree, provides a sense of authenticity. Moreover, it enables *Bordersands* to explore the particular cultural hybridity of the Flintshire lowlands, which is one of the distinctive cultural characteristics of the area.

This notion of cultural hybridity is by no means static. As *Bordersands* demonstrates, through Mab's understanding of Rhiannon and his burgeoning sense of place, it is continually evolving. Moreover, as explored through the cultural identities of the antagonists Powell and Griffo it is 'intentional,' 'transgressive,' made up of 'cultural mixings' that can 'challenge normative separations or dominant hegemonies'.¹⁶⁹

Therefore, it is only fitting that as a novel *Bordersands* can also be described as an 'in-between' place. It is a hybrid of genres, mixing the crime-thriller with the regional novel. It endeavours to provide a rounded sense of place through a popular genre and hoping to place the Flintshire lowlands a tiny step further into the public imagination.

¹⁶⁷ Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p.x

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

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